

Hey all, here is the next King of Champions! Hope you enjoy it. The second chapter of Journey Gone Astray will be up by the end of the month. It's about 2/3rds done.

HP-DG-AP-PN-RG-NR has looked this over for me, and I have even looked at bits of it with Grammarly. Not the entirety though.

#### Chapter 4: Initiation Gone Sideways

Tia marched through the woods, a scowl hidden by the long turtleneck of her Huntress outfit, her sword in one hand, uncaring of the noise she was making as she pushed through the scrub brush of the forest. The woods here were not nearly as dangerous as some of the woods within flying distance of Evig Låga, initiation or not. Tia doubted that she would face an ancient Grimm here, one of the Centinel monsters or a pack full of alpha Beowolves, as her father and mother had at one point. That was the only story they ever told in which they had been forced to cut and run. The two told the story about stringing along the Grimm in a running battle that had been full of ambush and counter-ambush. The Hunter team pushed to their utmost, killing the Alphas in singles or smaller groups rather than face the whole pack at once.

Tia was thinking about that now as she backhanded one Beowolf, hitting it so hard with her fist that the creature was flung up through the foliage of one of the nearby trees and into the air beyond before coming back to earth with a loud 'crunch'. There were a lot of Beowolves around, but she had yet to see a single Alpha.

Pausing, she took a single step to one side, then her sword flashed around, stabbing around the tree she had been about to walk around, killing another Beowolf. A hum of satisfaction came from her then. *The only good Grimm is a dead Grimm.*

Nearby rustling caused Tia to turn, her sword raised as two Creeps came out of the foliage, charging forward. She stared at them, somewhat unenthused, then, with a faint sigh, attacked. Her sword slashed in a wide arc just as they were about to leap towards her.

Tiburon was not made of the same metal that the Arc family blade was. As far as Tia was aware, no weapon was. The sword Harry currently wielded was ancient, well beyond any recorded history the family still had. But it was still a very sharp blade, and it went through the heads of both weak Grimm just as they leaped forward, intercepting their lower jaws where their masks stopped. A sidestep and the already-decomposing bodies collapsed to the ground.

With the two weak Grimm dealt with, Tia turned away, still loosely holding Tiburon in her hand as she looked around before placing the sword on the ground, pommel-down. Grabbing the tip, she twirled it, stepping back quickly. As it finished rotating, the blade fell, pointing in one direction, and with a shrug, Tia picked Tiburon back up and moved in that direction. *It is as good a direction as any. Perhaps I should have taken the time to look over the forest some more and the surrounding terrain when we were on the cliff, but I had more important things to do. And now I don't know which direction Harry flew. I thought my solution was perfectly reasonable, darn it.*

*What if I don't become his partner?*

That thought was painful and annoying, causing Tia's hand around the hilt of Tiburon to clench so tightly that her knuckles turned white. For her part, Tia thought she could get along with Ruby, maybe Yang, and certainly Pyrrha. But Harry was her twin. Not being with him was... **Unnatural**. She knew her brother better than to assume that if Harry got someone else as a partner, he would leave her behind. But even so, everything would be much simpler if the two of them were paired together. *And if either of us is unlucky enough to be paired with someone weak or annoying, that would be irritating.*

It had to be said that for Tia, the word annoying covered a wide gamut of the human condition. Being loud late at night, pouring their milk before the cereal, being a bully, being a racist, looking at her like a piece of meat. All those fell under the same category for Tia Arc.

Two more minor attacks by weak Grimm later, Tia rounded the side of one especially large tree and turned, her sword raised as a loud crashing noise came from a bush to one side. But instead of a Grimm coming out, one of the other initiates stepped out from the bush, kicking some bits of foliage a wave with her foot and cursing to herself as she kicked out of a vinelike creeper, the sight of which made Tia scowl slightly, unseen behind her turtleneck.

"Dammit, I'm a city girl! What the hell is all this green crap!? I thought forests were just trees and grass, not all these brambles and bushes. Thank God for Aura!"

The speaker was a woman who, to Tia's mild surprise, was both taller and broader than she was. She was built along the lines of an Amazon, with sharply defined muscles everywhere, including a six-pack outlined by a diamond-shaped hole cut out of her shirt. The shirt was a garish red and dark blue, standing out even more than Tia's white outfit in the forest. She had what looked like lion ears sticking out of a mane of luxuriant brown hair, almost as brown as her skin, which was perhaps just a shade darker than Tia's own.

The woman was wielding a mace and shield, the mace connected to her hand by a gauntlet, which seemed to merge into a gauntlet. On her other hand, she had a similar gauntlet, which had what looked like a series of barrels sticking out of the outer side. Perhaps slightly smaller caliber than Harry's, Tia assumed these would be a rapid-fire weapon. Her upper chest was also covered with plate armor, although the rest of her outfit implied that, like Tia, the noisy woman's Aura lent itself to defense more than anything else.

As Tia was examining the other woman, the newcomer was examining her in turn. She remembered seeing Tia with the dark-haired boy with brown and dark blue armor. He hadn't seemed anything special, especially not in comparison to the damned Invincible Girl and her entrance. But it had been amusing to see the heavily tanned girl try her trick to be with her brother or boyfriend. The Lion Faunus hadn't been close enough to hear them speak.

Not that that mattered right now. They had other priorities. "So you've been able to survive on your own up to this point alone, which means you must be strong, although I don't see you have any long-range options to speak of."

Tia cocked her head to one side, then pointed her blade up words at an angle. The woman turned, seeing a group of Nevermore darting towards them, followed by several more. "Howl, Tiburon." Tia intoned the first words she had spoken since entering the forest, silence having been something of a blessed relief to Tia after having had to talk so often the day before.

As she spoke, her fingers twitched in a specific manner, her thumb coming up to press a small button on the bottom of her sword's guard. The segment of her sword blade, which had been cut out wasn't empty any longer, as a large Water Dust crystal set into the hilt began to emit energy into this area, flowing forward. When it reached the tip of the sword, a dart of water flashed out, striking with an impressive amount of stopping force. The lead Nevermore lost its head entirely, and then, as Tia kept pressing the small button, she twisted her sword to one side, sending not a bullet of water but a sharp crescent of it towards the next three Nevermore in the air.

The girl whistled in some surprise, shaking her head. "Wow, a Dust Crystal? Those are pretty hard to use, aren't they? I know they're supposed to give out more power over time, but working with them is supposed to be way more finicky than working with Dust in its actual dust form. And it's supposed to take way more Aura to manipulate Dust in crystal form too."

Tia just shrugged that, then turned and continued on her way, seeing no need to brag or explain further. Indeed, she was somewhat depressed at present, the woman's appearance having crushed her hopes of pairing with Harry.

This action startled the girl, who raced to catch up with her. "Hey, wait a minute! We're supposed to be partners now. We made eye contact and everything."

At that, Tia let loose a sigh, audible through the long turtleneck, and the still-unintroduced woman snorted, rolling her eyes. "Sorry you couldn't pair up with your boy toy or whatever. Anyway, maybe we should introduce ourselves? My name is Marigold Rose. Call me Mila... What is that look for?"

*"... Any relation to Ruby?" I don't think so, but then again, Yang and Ruby don't exactly look alike. So maybe their father is just a playboy like Uncle Paul or something.*

"No, I don't even know who that is," Mila responded, looking confused.

Setting aside her amusement at meeting a third girl with the name Rose and another talkative one at that, Tia shrugged, moving on as she introduced herself succinctly. "Tia Arc."

"You're not very talkative, are you?" Mila said, almost tripping over a root as Tia suddenly turned, grabbing her shoulder and pulling her forward.

Her sword came up in the same moment, stabbing deep into the underside of a snake Grimm, a Taijutu that had just sprung out from the branches of a tree its mouth gaping, eager to bite Mila. Instead, it got a mouth full of Tiburon, and once more, Tia activated the Water Dust crystal, sending out a bullet straight into the creature's mouth, which burst out from its neck a second later.

"Okay, not talkative, but observant," Mila said, one hand grasping at her chest, somewhat startled by the attack. "Dammit, I'm used to fighting in a cityscape, or at most a town or village. These trees obscuring my vision and shit!"

Sighing, Tia decided she needed to share a bit more information. "Keep your stance loose, keep your eyes moving from one side to another, and use your Faunus senses as best you can too. Now is not the time to talk about what signs to look for spotting Grimm. Just be more aware of your surroundings." Her lips twitched. "And you'll need to learn what Aura won't stop."

"Wait, what?" Mila blinked. "What gets through Aura?"

Now fully smirking behind her turtleneck, Tia gestured down to the other girl's legs. "Aura's passive. It won't stop things from touching your skin at all. Poison Creeper, for example."

Mila stared at her wide-eyed her hand paused halfway down to her legs, fingers poised to scratch. "Wait, what?"

But Tia had already turned away, knowing there was nothing they could do about it right now. "Just don't scratch."

For a few moments, Mila and Tia just walked through the woods, and this time, Mila concentrated more on the environment than her new partner. She spotted a Creep in a bush, possibly debating whether or not it could take them both and brought her mace down in a brutal strike that almost splattered the Grimm, shattering its Grimm mask with ease. This showed that she was a bit stronger than even Mila's muscles suggest, adding more weight to Tia's earlier thoughts on what her Aura most easily reinforced.

Tia doubted she was as strong as Tia herself, though. Her unique Semblance gave her a prodigious amount of strength even in comparison to her father, even while she wasn't actively using it. Her Semblance had begun to change her body even before she had unlocked her Aura so she could handle its power.

As they slew a group of Beowolves who had leaped over a log towards them, Mila decided to break the silence, asking, "So, the whole Faunus thing doesn't bother you?"

"No." Tia thought that was sufficient but could feel Mila's eyes on her as they continued to the woods and reluctantly decided to elaborate, thankful for the turtleneck of her outfit, which covered her mouth. "You are just people with animal bits."

Blinking, Mila began to laugh at that, shaking her head. It was kind of a childish way of putting it, given all that came with those 'animal bits', but she could understand what Tia was saying and appreciated it. Whatever else, Tia wasn't going to treat her any differently thanks to her Faunus heritage. That was perhaps one of the best responses to her heritage that Mila had ever gotten from a human.

However, her laughter cut off as she heard something in the distance, holding a hand and pointing to her ears. Tia nodded, looking at her questioningly, and the lion Faunus pointed out in one direction. "Someone just screamed in that direction."

Tia nodded instantly and turned in that direction, racing through the woods now. Mila blinked at the other girl's turn of speed but kept up easily. Two of them burst out of the forest into a small clearing, where two other students were fighting off a group of Ursa. One of them moved in a fluid manner that reminded Tia of a few Asiatic students she had seen, focusing heavily on agility and dodging strikes from the Ursa, returning blows with what looked like some kind of fanged gauntlet. It was hard to tell through the tumult of the fight, but Tia could see the gauntlet sprouting what looked like a thin pair of needle-like points right before impact.

And afterward, the Ursa struck seemed to be in quite a bit of pain, bleeding black ichor down their sides and from their legs. The strikes didn't do much damage but looked extremely painful and slowed the creatures down.

Another student, who seemed to have twin pistols and was using them reminiscent of her mother, was also shouting imprecations of the Ursa, shooting the Ursa with his pistols. "Your mother was a badger and your father an inkwell, you couldn't fucking hit the broadside of a barn, and you're so weak, this almost feels like bullying!"

"Please leave off your incessant chatter, fool. These Grimm are surely not intelligent enough to understand your banter. And I use that word loosely to describe your childish taunts," the Asiatic fighter drawled, whirling around a blow from an Ursa and stabbing it in the leg with her strange punch dagger gauntlet hybrids.

"Oh shut up, you highbrow bitch! I know they can't understand me. I'm just having fun!" The dual pistol wielder shouted, a manic grin on his face.

For all his bluster, the prospective Beacon student didn't seem to be doing any more damage than his partner. These were mecha-shift weapons as Tia saw them shift into daggers between one second and the next. But they didn't have much raw stopping power. The Ursa pack was being nibbled to death, a very slow, time-consuming way of dealing with them.

Without a word spoken, Tia and Mila charged forward into the back of the pack of Ursa, several of whom turned to engage them, only to find themselves flung aside, smashed into the ground or cut in two. The Ursa were taken by surprise by this, and Tia could almost imagine their thought processes. They'd gotten used to fighting two hunters who had to dodge and

weave through their blows, and here came two more able to match the Ursa strength for strength.

Her sword cut into the neck of one Ursa as she ducked under a blow from another, a low kick taking one of its legs out from under it, letting a pommel strike crash into its face so hard its mask cracked. Mila followed up, crushing a third Grimm's head with a blow to the side of its unarmored neck, blocking a blow from another, grunting under the impact, then pushing the creature back and onto its hind feet. This opened it up to a thrust from her mace, the tip of which exploded on impact, showing she had some Fire Dust or something similar worked to release on impact.

The other two hunters hadn't been idle. The man, who looked like a deer Faunus with small antlers, leaped forward through the now disorganized Grimm, bouncing around the Grimm, grabbing their attention and opening them up to precise strikes to the back and legs from the other woman. The six remaining Grimm, now crippled, were easy pickings as the deer Faunus, Tia and Mila finished them off quickly.

"My thanks for your aid, strangers, although I would prefer one of you to tell me why there are so many Grimm around. Surely even in an area kept wild for initiation purposes, this close to Beacon and Vale, there shouldn't be this many. Oh, do forgive my manners. I am Sung-Sun Greenscale."

The speaker, the Asiatic-looking woman, was somewhat tall, built along the lines of a sprinter perhaps, with little to no bust to speak of, wearing a long-sleeved Asian-style skirt that hugged her legs but was open at the sides, allowing for a wide range of movement. The woman's gauntlets from the sleeves of her dress could be seen, having peeled back away from her hands and forming into two heavy bracers. When she spoke, her voice was cultured, dulcet, but sharp, with a distinctly southern Mistrali accent. She didn't seem to wear any armor, something Tia was somewhat bemused by. She had long black hair falling down to mid-back, and thin, narrow eyes, almost but not quite reminiscent of a snake.

The woman's partner simply grinned, thumping his chest with one thumb. He was a short man, barely taller than Ruby or Weiss for all his loud brashness, wearing what looked like leather leggings wrapped in war below the knees, an armored chest plate – something Tia was pleased to see – with one built-up pauldron for some reason. He also wore a series of small packs around his waist and had two deer-like horns rising out of short-cropped curly orange hair. "Yo, my name's Apacci Topaz. Don't mind sourpuss. She just can't hack it in this target-rich environment. Woo! I've never had this much fun on a school trip before."

"You are so uncouth. Oh, what did I do to be partnered with a barbarian such as you," Sung-Sun muttered. "You are as bombastic as you are short."

"Hey, you leave my height out of this Flatty!" Apacci shot back. "Why couldn't I be partnered with a hotty like one of these two instead of a cold fish like you?"

“Wh, how dare you, you pervert!” Sung-Sun gasped, covering her chest. “I knew you were looking at me with your lecherous eyes since you first looked at me up on the cliff!”

“Hah, you think I’m a hotty, huh? Well, sorry, But Sung-Sun here was right on the mark when she called ya short. If I stood in front of you, I’d barely be able ta see you,” Mila quickly got in on the teasing, a wicked smirk on her face as she taunted her fellow Faunus.

“Bah, all your nutrients obviously went to your tits, lion girl,” Apacci scoffed. “Don’t flatter yourself. I was mainly talking about your partner. She’s got better looks and less of a mouth, win-win.”

Ignoring their chatter even as Mila Rose started to fan the fire of both sides, Tia pondered the question Sung-Sun had posed before shrugging unconcern. Why there were so many Grimm didn’t matter to her. So long as she was on the same team as her brother, she’d be happy.

With that, she marched off, not noticing this action had garnered a response from all three of her fellow hunters-to-be. They all looked at one another, then Mila Rose shouted, “hey, wait for your partner, Tia!”

She raced after Tia, and Apacci looked at Sung-Sun, who sighed acquiescence. “There is safety in numbers, after all.” With that, the two of them raced after their fellow initiates.

#### Scene break

Tia was not the only one who wanted to pair up with Harry. Yang had been impressed by him the moment she saw him in the locker room, and after speaking to him and seeing him with Tia and Pyrrha, Yang felt Harry seemed a fun guy to hang out with. And if Pyrrha wasn’t going out with him already, then well... he was fair game.

This was not just because she thought Harry was handsome. Yang’s thoughts went a bit deeper than her normal blonde bombshell appearance would suggest. The guy not only had a sense of humor but had gotten Ruby to laugh and calm down. Plus, he just radiated a sort of dependability and a lot of charisma.

*Man, I wish I could figure out a way to hover in midair with Ember Celica. I can change my direction and power my way forward, but hovering takes too much ammunition. If I had tried that, I would have gone through a whole load of shells before even landing. Which would’ve been an issue,* Yang finished ruefully, hopping up into a tree and lashing out at a snake Grimm wrapped around a tree limb. The snake Grimm barely had a moment to hiss before it died under the blow, accompanied by the sound of a shotgun shell going off on impact. A sweeping kick to the other side dumped a Nevermore off of the same branch, and before it could flap its wings, Yang landed on its back with both feet, bearing it to earth and crushing it beneath her.

“As it is, I’m going to have to conserve my ammo anyway. Maybe I shouldn’t have used Ember Celica to fly so far. I still went through half my gauntlet’s rounds” Yang thought about it for a moment, then shook her head. “Nope, it was cooler this way, and I nailed that landing. And I’ve got enough to refill them both three times still. That should be enough.”

Whistling cheerfully at that, Yang moved on, bobbing her head to the beat of a rock song for a moment, although she wasn’t so stupid as to bring headphones along into Grimm-infested territory. That was just asking for a paddling. “I’m just the girl, I’m just the girl, the girl ya want!”

In this manner, Yang moved forward for a time, having taken her bearings while she was in the air and knowing the general direction of the ruins they were supposed to find, only pausing occasionally to deal with smalltime Grimm until two large Ursa came out of the forest ahead of her to bar her path. The fiery pugilist grinned, slamming her gauntlet-covered fists together and getting into a boxer stance. “A new challenger appears! Will this challenger last any longer against the wild mane and Yang!”

“No bet Jim” she went on in a different voice, darting forward. “Large or small, Yang deals with them all!”

Yang was still snickering at how corny she could be as she entered melee range, ducking under a first strike from one of the Ursa, hammering a blow into his chest as the other attacked Yang from the side. She whirled around the strike, lashing out with a kick that sent it stumbling, then brought her hand up and around into a blow that caught that creature on the side of the head. This gave Yang’s first target a bit of a reprieve, and it lunged forward, snarling as it tried to bite at her. But Yang flipped away, getting out of biting range easily even as she lashed out with a mule kick that caught the Grimm in the face.

Now standing well away from the two Grimm, Yang threw her hands out to either side as she grinned at the two Ursa. “Come on, guys, the least you could do is... put... more... feeling into it...” Yang’s voice stumbled to a halt as something caught her eyes, a series of small yellow hair floating in the air before her face, cut off her magnificent locks.

At that site, her eyes turned red, and she crouched down, no longer in the mood to play. “You animals!” She roared, charging forward.

The two Ursa had only a single moment to realize that mistakes had been made before Yang was on them once more. No longer dancing around, she thrashed them, her blows coming fast and furious, so hard and powerful that the click of the shotgun rounds as they crashed into the Grimm was just a side note.

Seconds later, she stood over two decaying bodies, breathing heavily, her eyes slowly turning back to normal.



A shot rang out, causing Yang to turn, watching as a Nevermore collapsed to one side, crashing into the ground from where it had been about to swoop down on her. "Crap, remember Yang, you gotta keep your situational awareness going. Thanks for the save... Blake, right?" She asked, looking in the direction where the shot had come from.

There another initiate stood on a branch, the same initiate that Yang had dragged Ruby over to talk to the night before. The mysterious black-haired beauty nodded, her lips twitching wryly as she looked down at Yang. "Blake hopes that Yang does not speak in the third person all the time. Blake thinks that would be annoying and a sure sign of mental instability."

"I don't do that all the time. Don't worry, that's not my schtick," Yang answered, moving towards her and reaching forward to shake her hand when Blake hopped down to the ground. The two women did so, and Yang smirked at the shorter girl. "Well, if I can't have a handsome one, at least I get a sexy partner."

Having already taken something of a measure of her new acquaintance, Blake let this compliment pass without comment beyond rolling her eyes. "Come on, let's get moving. There might be other Nevermore around."

Yang pointed in the direction she had been going, having kept track of that even during the fight a moment ago. "The relics are in that direction, and why did you have to tempt fate like that?"

Moments later, Blake was apologizing for that as the two of them dodged through a series of aerial attacks. Above them, more than fifteen Nevermore dove down on them from all around them. They weren't Greater Nevermore, thankfully, but the smaller variety were fast and agile, able to dodge through the forest's foliage, close to attack with beak or talon and retreat quickly.

And neither Blake nor Yang were really suited for anti-air work. Blake had an easier time of it, bouncing around the trees and lashing out with her weapon, which she had called Gambol Shroud. The mix of handgun and memory cloth weapon made her a formidable and, above all acrobatic combatant, letting her snag trees with the cloth and shift herself quickly in unpredictable ways.

In contrast, Yang was forced to rely on her shotgun shells, not being fast enough most of the time to catch the Nevermore before they pulled back and away from her strikes if they came from above and behind. Neither girl was that used to working together either and only slowly got into the habit of backing one another up.

Still, their own strikes didn't really matter, and after a few seconds, the two of them were in an area of the forest where the foliage directly above them was too much for the Nevermore to get through. There Yang turned and grinned, launching herself back the way she had come and upwards, lashing out at the Nevermore who were attacking them at that

moment. Needing to come in at a steeper angle meant Yang could get at them this time, and four of them were blasted apart as two more were sliced into pieces by Gambol Shroud.

The surviving members of the cluster, seven or so, Yang wasn't sure, pulled away, cawing and shrieking to one another almost as if they were as alive as the creatures they were made to ape.

Staring up at them, grumbled a bit as she worked her shoulder and side, where she had been struck in the assault a moment before she and Blake had turned the tables on the Nevermore. Her Aura had protected her easily, but even so, she didn't want her huntress outfit to show **too** much and was dismayed at the long cut along one side of her jacket that went up to right under her breast. *Hell, if it was any longer, one of my girls would be showing. Damn Nevermore!* "Well, that wasn't fun. Still, I think we were still moving in the right direction, so at least we've got that going for us."

"Good. I'll admit I'm completely lost here," Blake admitted, falling into step with Yang as she started to walk forward once more. "I'm able to make my way around forests easily enough, but keeping in mind a certain direction during a fight, that's pretty much impossible."

"You bounce around so much, I can see that being an issue," Yang agreed, magnanimously not teasing the girl. In fact, she was frowning, looking up at the sky through the foliage above just in case it thinned out enough for the aerial Grimm to spot them again.

Blake's thoughts were along the same line, and she shook her head, using her eyes and ears to ensure they weren't ambushed again. "What the heck is going on with so many Grimm about?"

#### Scene break

Up on the ridge, Goodwitch was becoming somewhat annoyed by the same thing, although she had allowed Ozpin to cost the first place. "Port has overdone it again. The initiates are really struggling out there. We've had seven of them fire their emergency flares already, and more than a few have already sustained serious injuries. No doubt that number is going to rise."

"No doubt. I just have to hope that when it is finally finished, an even number will have passed," Ozpin answered blandly before taking a sip of his coffee. "We have Oobleck on standby and even one of the senior teams just in case. They won't step in unless the situation truly becomes deadly. Life-and-death struggles are often the harshest but best teachers."

And if there were a few deaths, that was what much of the paperwork the initiates had to fill out was for. Ozpin had always been of the opinion that the hotter the fire, the better the blades. Indeed, were it not for Vale's educational system and Council forcing him to play by their rules, Beacon would not teach anything but combat. Unfortunately, the powers-that-be had to be mollified.

Using his scroll, Ozpin scanned through a series of videos from the hundreds of cameras scattered throughout the forest. Soon enough, he was smiling faintly at some of the teams. *Excellent, the Arcs have been successfully split into two teams. It will be very interesting to see how Tia, in particular, grows now that she cannot lean on her brother. I wonder if she even recognizes that she has already formed a full team. And I am not certain if I feel sorry for Mr. Topaz or not. He certainly seems to have a bit of a mouth on him but being the sole man on a team of three girls is often unpleasant on many levels.*

Clicking on one image, he saw Pyrrha Nikos and Hadrian Arc, moving arm in arm through the forest as if they were on a date almost. If they weren't also scanning the area around them and picking off Grimm the moment they spotted any movement, Ozpin would've been worried. *Given some of my and James' emergency plans and that Pyrrha is one of our candidates for the procedure, I will need to watch that pair carefully. If they are already serious, that divided loyalty is a worrisome sign in a new Maiden and could cause us to choose another. Yet at the same time, I am very eager to learn more about Harry and how far his magic powers go. And where his magic came from in the first place. I know the Arcs are an ancient family. Indeed, their line goes back almost as far as my own memory, but even so...*

For now, Ozpin set that mystery aside. He could savor it later, get to the bottom of it slowly, savoringly. Whatever the reasons behind Harry's power, Ozpin knew Harry would be a magnificent addition to his core cadre. But the best pairing, the one that next grabbed his attention, had equally extreme positives for the future. *Ruby Rose and Weiss Schnee. That is a most intriguing matchup. If they can both awaken the hereditary powers of their families, they would be a true force to be reckoned with.*

He watched for a time as the two of them argued back and forth, frowning as he sipped his coffee again. *If that is, they can get over their childishness. I suppose I should have expected such things from Ruby. After all, she is a young girl despite her admirable willpower and skills. But I had hoped that Ms. Schnee would be more mature.*

He continued to watch, smiling faintly as the two women started to finally work together as they were ambushed by a pack of Beowolves attracted by the noise. The battle almost turned against them when a cluster of Nevermore also became involved, but Ruby, unlike her sister who had faced much the same thing, was excellent at long-range, downing the Nevermore before they could close and then dancing around the Beowolves with her speed-based Semblance.

Weiss also had an easier time of it, using her glyphs to good effect and her own agility. Although by the end of the battle, Weiss was gasping, and Ruby was leaning on her scythe, looking very tired. *I see we will have to work on their endurance. Still, that is easy enough.*

He continued to watch the two of them, ignoring Goodwitch as she ordered Oobleck in to pull some of the teenagers out of the woods. As it became clear to all of the remaining initiates how many Grimm there were in the forest, many of them had begun to feel fear and

anxiety, which would bring in still more Grimm directly onto the initiates. There were now small but intense fights throughout the forest, even as Oobleck moved to the rescue of one particularly beleaguered group.

Occasionally Goodwitch sent her leader glares, but she said nothing even as they had their first actual death. Because Glynda knew he was right. There was a reason why all of the initiates had been forced to sign waivers when they were admitted into the school. Fighting Grimm was deadly business, and the sooner they learned that, the better. It was better to wash out weak links now than have them break and have a disaster occur in the future.

#### Scene break

Deep in the Grimm lands of the fourth, unnamed continent of Remnant was a castle. This castle overlooked a vast volcanic plain across a series of large pools and a few flowing rivers of lava. Each pool was filled with strange black gunk, gleaming in the sun like oil but so pitch black it seemed like tar. And surprisingly, there was also quite a lot of water going through the territory. Or something like water, anyway. Black rivers of whatever was within the pools flowed into and out of the various pools and out into the distance.

The castle itself seemed to fit into the pockmarked, almost blasted landscape, with its lack of green growth, its massive spires of basalt rock. Yet despite the extreme heat, anyone entering it realized the castle itself was quite cold. The castle's interior was also not exactly built for comfort, but a few rooms proved an exception to this rule.

Some of them had been individualized over the past few years, the touches laying somewhat loosely and disconnected on top of the pre-existing rooms. An entire floor was now devoted to technological devices, several laboratories of various types, a machine shop, and a generator. The castle thus had modern running water and electricity.

But even those touches were very obviously recent ones. In the topmost floor of the main spire of the castle was a series of rooms that had been designed to be lived over the course of centuries. Possibly by an immortal packrat.

The design of the rooms differed from one to another, some homey and almost simplistic. The kitchen was one such area, with few but extremely comfortable chairs, well-worn tools, and a bookshelf full of cookbooks. It was clear that whoever lived here enjoyed food, although they didn't enjoy company as much. Another simplistic area was a sitting room, with evidence of a newly installed technology in the form of a wide-screen TV and a laptop.

But other rooms were practically cluttered with riches in the form of various art pieces, urns and paintings, so much so that it looked like that of an excentric royal. Several rows of jewelry were hung up on the wall meticulously alongside mangled weapons, each treated like they were precious. The urns were all works of art, large or small. There were even statues of ages gone by. So many that any museum in the world would have given the firstborn of every person working within them to own even a quarter of what was on display here.

In all of this finery, in pride of place, was the statue of a tall, beautiful blonde woman. It looked made of gold but wasn't. Instead, it was made of some kind of alloy. And it was old, older by far than any other pieces in the area, showing this in a series of pockmarks in various places despite being inside a well-maintained room.

The design of the statue was simple. The woman's hand was raised to the sky either in supplication or exhortation. It was unclear, as were her features. They had been worn away by the erosion of time or perhaps by design. Again, it was unclear.

All of these riches, indeed, everything within showed a side of Salem, Queen of the Grimm, that few people knew about. But in her opinion, keeping such items around was somewhere between counting coup against her enemies and having something to while away the centuries with. After all, while Salem wanted the world to be destroyed and humanity to perish forever so, she too could die, that didn't mean she did not think of her own creature comforts from one day to the next. And every piece here had either sentimental value or had been taken from a dead opponent, a dead human or Faunus who had earned her personal ire.

Nor was Salem herself perhaps the image of what anyone bar a select few would think of when they thought of the term Queen of the Grimm. She seemed very much a human being... at first glance, anyway.

Salem was a tall, regal-looking woman, with long white hair which she wore in various ways. Her skin was alabaster, the same white as a Grimm skull mask, and she greatly resembled Grimm, in both the whiteness of her skin, the redness of her eyes, and the fact that she always wore black. Around her eyes a series of red veins could be seen, occasionally pulsing deeper red, but most of the time being a dark purple color. In the center of her forehead was a diamond shape, almost like a third eye, but with no iris or anything else to speak of. Her chin came to a sharp point, and her lips were somewhat thin, aiding her regal appearance.

Most of that regal air was not in sight at the moment, given that she was sleeping. Despite all of her powers and energy, Salem occasionally needed to sleep. Not so much to keep her body going but her mind. Her mental faculties started to erode if she went for more than a month without sleeping.

Her bed reflected the richness elsewhere. Its upholstery was red silk and black satin. The bed was black wood, which had stayed where it was for so long that it looked almost to have merged with the stone underneath, rising to the ceiling like a Goth version of a traditional princess bed. And Salem lay sprawled across it in repose, sleeping on her side at present.

Sensing movement in her room, Salem's eyes popped open, Salem going from asleep to fully awake within an eyeblink. Turning slowly, she stared at one of her Seers, which hovered in front of her.

This was a new type of Grimm she had only recently developed in the past fifteen years or so. The Seers were not dangerous in terms of physical combat. Instead, they could

communicate between themselves over long distances. It wasn't telepathy or radio signals; instead, it was magic that could share what one Seer saw and let another project it so Salem could see through their eyes. This allowed Salem to see what was going on in the world beyond the Grimm continent without leaving the comfort of her castle. Nor was that the only magic Salem had worked into her Seers.

There weren't many Seers yet. As one of her associates put it, they took quite a while to 'program' . Both to make certain the Seers actually worked correctly and to tell them what to be on the lookout for. A Seer would not be interrupting her sleep if it didn't understand what would interest its mistress.

**"SHOW ME,"** Salem ordered, her tone deep, commanding, yet feminine for all of that.

Instantly, the seer began to play the image she wanted, appearing on the far wall taking up the entire wall with the images it's fellow was sending. And instantly, Salem understood that this was happening near Beacon, the image of the distant clock tower where her old husband-turned-enemy Ozma currently resided visible at one point. She had six Seers in that area.

They were not trying to get into Beacon, that would be foolish, and she did not want Ozma aware of what she was up to, and most particularly the abilities of the Seers. She had never had such before, and showing them now would be a mistake, not until she was ready to strike. To finally break Ozma and his little clique and drown the world in another onslaught of Grimm. The last onslaught of Grimm if Salem had her way.

Most of the time the Seers around Beacon simply took note of the nearby tools that she could have on hand when Salem moved against Ozpin. Or, these days, when her little queen moved forward with the next stage of her plan. Keeping an eye on the Goliaths in particular was a good idea. This seer, however, was set to roam near the forests used by Beacon to sort out the strong from the chaff, scouting out any new blood coming into the school.

Of course, the Seers could not be everywhere at once, and their ability to observe things was much the same as an eagle's eyesight. They couldn't see everything. But this seer had apparently sequestered itself in a Nevermore's nest, and as the video played, Salem watched as a few Hunters she assumed were teachers used sound-based weapons to drive the Grimm in the area in a specific direction.

As the video came to an end, Salem started to smile. **"OZPIN WANTS TO MAKE THIS YEAR'S INITIATION TEST MORE DIFFICULT THAN NORMAL? THEN PERHAPS, IT IS TIME TO TEST OUT THE OTHER ASPECT OF MY NEWEST BATCH OF SEERS."**

With that, she leaned forward, placing a hand on the seer in front of her, directing her will through the connection between it and its distant fellow in Vale. Once her consciousness was within the Seer, she sent it away, using its senses to find a concentration of Grimm that had yet to be rounded up by the sonic-based weapons of the enemy. Those sonic-based weapons

were energy intensive and only really worked on the weaker varieties of Grimm, only when there was no greater Grimm around to direct them.

But despite what the initiates might be thinking now, the area around Beacon was regularly hunted out of Grimm, so no Grimm had long to evolve within the area. Any movement into the area by more dangerous Grimm was also quickly noticed.

However, some Grimm were extremely difficult to find if you did not have the senses of a seer and the intelligence of Salem. Through a series of crevices in a rock of the next valley over from where the initiation was occurring, Salem found what she was looking for: more than a dozen Grimm Centinels, coiled around one another in their nest as such creatures, made to look like giant centipedes, preferred.

They came alive as the Seer entered their territory, their eyes gleaming, their mandible snapping. But the seer did not stop, shooting forward, impacting and then somehow... merging with the largest of the Centinels. The Seer Grimm started to subsume itself into the other Grimm, changing it, making it stronger, faster, and more intelligent. In other words, it evolved the Centinel monster to the next level, a Cenitaur.

As the power of the Seer faded into the other Grimm, so did Salem's connection to it. Salem could not control Grimm she did not personally make, especially over such massive distances. But she could use her Seers to mutate other Grimm like this. And as the seer started to 'die' and become part of the other Grimm, Salem imparted a simple command which would then carry over into the now-evolved Centinel's mind. A very simple one, only one word, coupled with the image of the nearby forest where the initiation was occurring. **"HUNT!"**

With that, Salem's presence was back in her own body, and she smiled thinly as she ordered the seer in front of her to connect to its next nearest fellow. **"HOPEFULLY, IT WILL BE CLOSE ENOUGH TO SEE THE ACTION. BUT IF NOT, IT WARMS MY NONEXISTENT HEART TO KNOW I WILL HAVE CAUSED SOME TROUBLE FOR OZMA AND HIS SYCOPHANTIC FOLLOWERS."**

Scene break

Harry and Pyrrha were possibly alone in not really noticing the irregularity of how many Grimm were around. The reason for this was twofold. One, they were too interested in talking and flirting mildly with one another, and two, they were honestly quite happy at present. Yang, Tia and the other combat junkies were also happy, but that happiness was mixed with flashes of annoyance and anger. But if anyone had been capable of taking a survey, they would have instantly seen a correlation between this and the number of Grimm they were all facing. For as fear drew Grimm in, happiness mildly repelled. They would not turn away from a happy person if they saw or heard the individual with their mundane senses, but they were drawn like bees to honey to someone feeling fear or anger.

Thus the new couple simply killed any of the Grimm who had the misfortune to come across them, barely noticing what they were doing most of the time. Harry was used to the forests near Evig Låga, which were truly wildlands, so given his preoccupation with talking to Pyrrha, the slightly heightened numbers just didn't register. And it never even occurred to Pyrrha to notice, not really having experienced all that many forests, let alone Grimm-infested ones.

Instead, most of their attention was on one another as they talked, sharing some more stories of their youth, a few misadventures they both had that were just too embarrassing to share over the scroll, such as wardrobe malfunctions she'd had over the years before becoming famous, or the time Harry had ignored his mother's advice and eaten a whole Diablo Pepper in one bite. But mainly, they talked about Pyrrha's training and what Harry had been up to with his family.

Pyrrha already knew about the fire dust mine. What she hadn't realized was the full, extremely ambitious scope of that project: that the Arcs and their people wanted to expand Evig Låga out past its borders, that they wanted to create a wide line of farmland, carving it out of Grimm Lands. That was, in a word, crazy. Ever Since the Colors War, there had been no successful attempt to reclaim land from the Grimm or even expand the city-states. Vale had its Mountain Glenn, Mistral the Battle of Red Garden, and Pyrrha was certain Atlas had something similar, although she had yet to study it in school. Reclaiming land was, well it was impossible. But so was Harry's push to have a militia, to have every man and woman within Evig Låga have their Aura unlocked, to treat the Grimm not as monsters but as foes to be defeated.

The plan worked against several known 'rules' of the world, things everyone knew to be the case: Aura was only for Hunters (and criminals), and Grimm Lands were impossible to reclaim. Now, hearing Harry's ambitions and the fact he and his family had convinced a whole town to go along with things, that they were already expanding their population, above and beyond the men needed to work and defend the mine?

That was amazing. Not just what it could mean but also what it told Pyrrha about the people involved. And although he tried to downplay his role in all this, Pyrrha knew Harry was at the center of it all. Indeed, given his work with the mine and its defenses, it was only his Semblance – and whatever secret he was still keeping about it – that had made all this possible.

It told Pyrrha that Harry was not only a friend worth having (and a boyfriend too, something that caused the romantic in her to squeal) but a man worth following. Indeed, the whole thing reminded her of tales of kings of old, like the first Mistrali Autarch, Vacuo's Emperor of Sand and Wave, or Vales Warrior King. People who had, through ambition and charisma, created countries that continued to exist after they died, who had changed the world for the better.

It made Pyrrha want to be a part of it. Thoughts on how she could do so and help Harry began to percolate through her head as the two of them continued to walk through the forest.



For Harry, all this was old news. What wasn't was their relationship, and after around forty minutes of nonstop talking on his part interspersed with questions and even a few suggestions for cardio and calisthenic exercises for the militia he would want to pass on to his father, Harry finally turned the conversation back to the relationship they had begun barely a few hours before.

Soon after, the conversation turned to where Pyrrha would want to go for a date, and Harry was somewhat surprised by the answer. "Huh, I honestly can't see you as being a big fan of Italian food. I thought you said you liked Asian food and spicy stuff at that. Italian is okay, but, and this might just be the restaurants I've gone to, their food is kind of bland."

"That is certainly the restaurants you've gone to. As for why I want to go, I've never been allowed to go to an Italian restaurant. I've only tasted some of their food at various soirées I was forced to go to at practically gunpoint," Pyrrha said, admitting more things with that one line than most would ever hear from her. Harry, however, had heard that and more before.

"Indeed, I wasn't allowed any kind of fatty foods, especially ones that were high on starch or had a lot of bread in them. So unless you can cook me something as you said you would when we met..." She trailed off teasingly, cocking her head to one side.

Harry snorted at that, shaking his head. "I'm certainly willing to cook. Heck, I could cook Italian for you if you wanted."

"We actually don't know if you'll be able to, though. I've seen pictures of the dorms, and none of them have their own little kitchen or anything similar," Pyrrha said apologetically.

That annoyed Harry a bit, but his family had foreseen this. "Tia and I submitted a request to live off campus. There are a few houses available for seniors, students with a lot of allergies and teachers around the campus. If we can do that, our partners will certainly be invited along as a matter of course. Then I can cook for you and Tia both."

Pyrrha smiled at that, leaning up to give him a kiss on the cheek. "Heh, already wanting me to move in with you, Harry? Don't you think that's going a little fast?"

"Hah! Considering it's the school making these arrangements one way or another, no, I don't," Harry retorted, looping an arm around her shoulders. "So dining at home if I can get access to a kitchen, if not, an Italian restaurant with a second story. And discretion, right, darling?" Harry teased.

Pyrrha promptly elbowed him in the side with an armored elbow. Not hard enough to double Harry over, but certainly enough to cause him to raise his arm from her shoulders instead of pulling away.

"So, that would be a no on pet names, then?" Harry guessed.

“Perhaps eventually we can use simple ones like ‘darling’ or ‘love’ or something,” Pyrrha answered, rushing her words a bit as she flushed. “But I’m not really in favor of the whole concept. Especially not shortening my name. That just screams a bit of disdain to me for some reason.” Through her flush, she smiled, winking at Harry. “So unless you want me to call you my super cuddly schnookums, we’ll stick to names.”

“Wow, you escalated that quickly! Calling you darling was the equivalent of ringing your doorbell and running away. Calling me schnookums would be like dropping a bomb on your house. Still, far be it for me to not recognize a hint when it is delivered with a hammer.” He leaned forward, placing his forehead against Pyrrha’s, taking advantage of how close they were. “Forgive me?”

Pyrrha idly raised her spear, which transformed into a rifle. Once it did, she fired to the side, killing a Grimm. She didn’t turn away from looking into Harry’s eyes, mesmerized. “You’re forgiven,” she stated, then closed the intervening distance between them as she tilted her head to the side, letting their lips touch.

The kiss quickly grew into a full make-out session for a few moments, and when they parted, both of them were giggling and happy. Turning away from one another, the pair continued on arm-in-arm, occasionally stopping to flirt, although they didn’t go any farther than kissing.

As they walked, Pyrrha confessed to feeling as if she was being watched. “Trust me, in my life, I have gotten used to that feeling, and I know when there are paparazzi around.”

Harry frowned, looking around thoughtfully. “While I’m good at woodcraft, I’m not certain I would recognize a camouflaged camera unless I’m lucky enough to spot the lens itself. Sorry. Although it would make sense for Ozpin and the other teachers to be watching the initiation, I know I’ve seen a few emergency flares going up in the distance.”

“Oh! I hadn’t even thought of that. Good grief, it is just like being back in the arena.” Scowling, Pyrrha used her powers of polarity.

This didn’t just give her control over metal, it allowed her to become aware of metal around her, and she quickly found something metallic on a nearby tree. “Over there.” The two of them looked at one another, then moved over in that direction, and soon were perched up in a tree, looking at a camera lens.

“Well, on the one hand, that makes me feel better about this whole initiation thing, that they are watching this and actually care if we run into something we can’t handle. But on the hand...”

“On the other hand, there was no mention of recording or observing us of any sort. This is an invasion of privacy!” Pyrrha growled, flustered and off-balance, knowing that her moments with Harry had been observed since they met in the forest.

With a bare thought, Pyrrha used her powers to tear the camera into pieces, each metal bit repelling itself away from its fellows. "I'm not sorry at all!"

Back on the distant cliff, Ozpin blinked as one of his video feeds cut out abruptly, shown by a warning test appearing on his scroll's screen. He hadn't been watching that camera at the time but now switched to a few nearby cameras. He found one just as Pyrrha came into sight, marching towards it with a furious expression on her face. A second later, that video also cut off, and Ozpin sighed. "Oh, dear."

Four cameras later, Harry calmed Pyrrha down enough to turn their attention back to one another and the actual initiation they were supposed to be taking part in. The fact he did so with kisses on her cheek and neck was a very nice bonus in Pyrrha's mind. Now though, Pyrrha became a bit worried. "Oh dear, I hope I don't get in trouble—"

Harry interrupted her again by giving her a kiss on the lips. "None of that. Remember, you're in 'take no shits' mode. If they didn't want their precious cameras destroyed, they shouldn't be spying on us first." *And given their placement out here in the wild, I'd wager they have an allowance for losing those cameras as it is.*

Blushing faintly, Pyrrha kissed Harry back, then turned away, tugging him into moving on with her once more. "You're right. Just realize that I'm not exactly all that effusive in public. And that isn't just part of my public persona either."

"When it comes to things like romance, I'm pretty private too. I'm fine with there not being any PDA beyond hugs and kisses on the cheek like I do with Tia. None of my other sisters bar Saphron are okay with that kind of thing. Heh, the one time I kissed Arturia on the cheek at Lighthouse, she practically melted in place before kicking me around the training grounds so hard I could barely move for days."

As Pyrrha laughed, Harry tucked Pyrrha into his side, kissing her forehead before smirking a bit. "Just tell me if you feel you're being watched when we get assigned our apartment or whatever."

"Oh ugh," Pyrrha mock-snickered but still nudged into Harry's side, a worried look crossing her face.

The thought that maybe they were going a little too fast occurred to her, but then Pyrrha remembered all of the conversations they'd had via scroll over the past few months, including several which, looking back on them, certainly counted as long-distance dates. *Indeed, even if you take out the ones Tia was there for, I would say at least one out of every three calls we made could be called dates.*

With that knowledge, Pyrrha decided they weren't going all that fast and smiled as Harry told her about what he thought was an ideal date. It wasn't as cliché as going to the movies, but the idea of climbing a mountain, finding a little cave or flat area and staring up at

the nighttime sky as you shared a bottle of wine and some food with your romantic other sounded amazing to Pyrrha. Beyond wanting to try a full Italian meal, Pyrrha wondered about a date on a boat or perhaps a ride on a motorcycle.

Their romantic time ended for a moment as Harry spotted what looked like a cave set into a small rock edifice ahead of them. He glanced at it, frowning at how dark the interior looked, a sign of how deep the cave went, then slowly pulled away from Pyrrha, gesturing with his sword toward it.

Pyrrha looked in that direction, realizing what he was concerned about, and nodded silently. The two of them wordlessly spread out as Milo rose to Pyrrha's shoulder, and she sighted along it into the cave, then around.

Harry moved forward cautiously under her cover, reaching the cave entrance without issue, at which point he gestured Pyrrha to join him. Together, they looked at the carvings marked into the entranceway of the cave, both of them cocking their heads to one side in some confusion.

"That is definitely a kind of Grimm, right?" Pyrrha asked hesitantly. "Er, I mean, I'm no expert on ancient cave markings, but it certainly seems so."

"Almost certainly. I'm wondering why the heck a Grimm-infested cave, especially one that looks to have been here for a long time, would be allowed to remain here once Beacon was established. I suppose these paintings could be much younger than we're assuming they are judging by the style, but..."

"I don't know anything about art either," Pyrrha answered with a laugh. "I was forced to go to an art exhibition once as part of an endorsement deal, but the art on hand was a bit too... deep for me."

"You mean that nouveau stuff, yeah? I've never understood that either." Harry snorted. "Especially that stuff from Leonard of Qurim. That whole 'nail through an ear' thing that's supposed to represent man's need for freedom? Ugh."

The two of them exchanged a grin, and then Pyrrha pointed deeper into the cave with Milo. "I still think we should do something about this. Perhaps this is some kind of hidden test? Extra credit?"

"I don't think it could be extra credit considering this test is entirely pass or fail, but I do agree with the idea of doing something about this." Harry snorted. "But there's no reason we should think about this too deeply."

Pyrrha looked at him in confusion, and Harry wiggled his fingers at her, reminding her of his Semblance. She laughed and asked, "Can you just bring the whole cave down on top of whatever is inside then?"

Nodding, Harry decided to show Pyrrha a bit more of what he could do. “Well, I could, but do you have some Fire Dust?”

Blinking, Pyrrha nodded, pulling out one of the small vials she used in Milo to power her bullets. She then watched in awe as Harry set the vial down and transfigured some ground around it into large mounds of the stuff. “That’s amazing!”

“Yes. Transfiguration will stay transfigured normally, but Dust won’t. I think if I understood more about it on the molecular level, it would be, but as it is, it will last long enough.” Another wave of his hand created glass balls, which the two of them loaded up with the Fire Dust.

Pyrrha then hurled the vials into the cave, where instantly, something began to stir. However, before whatever was within could move in their direction, Harry had turned his attention to the side of the cave entrance while Pyrrha lined up a shot into the cave where she had heard the glass break.

There was a ‘woomph!’ as the fire exploded within the cave while Harry brought the cave down from on high. A shriek of agony followed, abruptly cut off as between the explosion and Harry’s work, the cave caved in, causing both youngsters to back away quickly as dirt and dust followed after them, carried by the displaced air.

The two stood for a moment outside, brushing themselves down before looking at one another. Pyrrha then giggled as Harry said deadpan, “Well, that was easy. But then again, there’s no kill like overkill, right?”

Pyrrha was still laughing as Harry held his hand to her, asking, “Shall we, milady?”

That act and the silliness of acting in such a way directly after having killed the Grimm, and being in a Grimm-infested forest, nearly had Pyrrha’s giggles turning into guffaws. But after recovering, she shook her head and gently took Harry’s hand, squeezing it. “I think we shall.”

While they didn’t fall back into their flirtatiousness of earlier, the two of them did continue holding hands as they moved on, scanning the environment around them, now more aware that there could be true danger nearby than they had been. Several more Grimm found this out to their cost, including an Ursa, three Nevermore, seven creeps, and one lone Beowolf who looked somewhat lost right before a bullet found its neck.

As the Ursa fell to a slice from his sword, Harry straightened up, looking over at Pyrrha as she pulled her spear out from the stomach of one of the Creeps as it began to dissolve. “By the way, going back to the conversation about keeping our romance private, do you want people to know that we are dating? It’s your choice, Pyrrha.”

Pyrrha’s mood darkened slightly as she thought about the actual question. “I am not unhappy with people knowing that we are together, but it would probably get back to my

parents rather quickly, and that, coupled with dealing with my fans here who might have a negative reaction to it, is drama I very much do not want to deal with.”

“I’m very much in favor of no drama either. Although, I will tell Tia about us. Not that it will come as a great surprise. Either that I’m telling Tia or that you and I are dating,” he finished ruefully.

Pyrrha frowned, looking at Harry thoughtfully as she unconsciously tapped the interior of her shield with a knuckle. “Will she be jealous, do you think?” While Pyrrha was very happy to be dating Harry, she didn’t want that to get in the way of the twins’ relationship or her friendship with Tia.

Harry was uncertain on that score and waved one hand this way and that in the air for a second. “I think so long as our being together doesn’t cut into her time with me, I can’t really see Tia becoming jealous. Like I said, the family has seen this coming for a while.”

Blushing faintly at that but quite pleased that Harry’s family apparently approved of her, Pyrrha broached the subject of Harry’s powers again. Harry once more promised to tell her and added that they could talk about it during the date if she wanted, so long as they could find a place where they wouldn’t be observed.

Nodding agreement, Pyrrha looked around, finally realizing something that should have been obvious to her for a while. “Um, do you know where we’re going? I confess I got quite twisted around when I searched for you. And as I told Tia, my woodcraft is next to nonexistent.”

Smirking a little, Harry gestured her close, and when she did as he asked, Harry put an arm around Pyrrha’s waist, ostensibly to steady her. “Going up?”

Pyrrha looked at him in confusion and then whooped as the ground underneath them trembled and shot into the air, Harry having created a pillar of stone and dirt. It rose through the trees, and for several moments, the two of them were busy fighting off Nevermore, who instantly swooped in from all sides. This was the first time the two truly became aware of how many Grimm were now in the woods, but between the two of them, the fifteen Nevermore were dealt with quickly.

Still, more were coming, and the partners quickly took stock of where they were in relation to the distant ruins that was their target. With that, Harry dropped them back towards the ground, with Pyrrha leaping clear just as several more Grimm came into sight around them, attracted by the assault from the Nevermore. She rolled, bringing her rifle up to her shoulder and firing off several quick shots, killing two Creeps, then charging into battle with another Ursa as Harry found himself attacked by four Beowolves and another Ursa.

A series of stone spikes felled the Ursa as his blade took one of the Beowolf through the mask, practically cutting it in two. His shield took a strike from the other Beowolf, and one

grabbed at his leg, gnawing at it before Harry turned, chopping it into pieces as well, the Arc Family Blade cutting through Grimm skin and armor with equal ease.

The last two fell to bullets from Pyrrha, who had dealt with her monsters. As Harry wrung out his leg, a pout on his face for letting the Beowolf get a bite in like that even though it hadn't bothered his massive Aura reserves. She pointed helpfully through the woods. "The ruins are that way."

Harry nodded, and the two of them moved on.

Scene break

Coming out of the woods and seeing what looked like ruins ahead of them was a relief to both Blake and Yang. While neither of them was tired just yet, they were now running low on ammunition. "I mean, I've been training since I could walk, and neither my dad nor my Druncle Qrow ever warned me about needing more ammunition than I could carry," Yang complained. "Warned me about using too much ammo to move myself around, sure, but fighting so often I go through all that I can carry!?"

"Druncle?" Blake echoed, looking at her partner quizzically.

"Drunk uncle. Trust me, if you ever meet him, you'll understand why he's got that name. But what about you? You ever been outside of the kingdoms, seen so many Grimm?"

Blake hesitated, then nodded slowly. "A few times, but not on anti-Grimm learning missions or anything like that. Just with groups of people going from one place to another. But we were always heavily armed and knew to keep our emotions under control, so the Grimm didn't bother us all that much."

Yang nodded at that, noting the little hesitation there and, with a delighted little grin, wondered suddenly if Blake had some past connection to criminal groups. *She does seem to have a certain thief-like quality about her. That could be fun in the future,* Yang thought, though she didn't bring it up just yet. After all, they barely knew one another. *Time enough to get to the bottom of the mystery that is my partner later.*

Instead, she pointed towards the ruins, and the two quickly moved across the open terrain towards them, scanning the skies as they went. Thankfully it seemed the Nevermore had moved off, and they made it to the ruins without being attacked.

The ruins looked like a Neo-Mistrali temple of some kind, something Blake pointed out in confusion. "Pretty elaborate for what amounts to a stage prop for our orientation." Large stone columns had fallen scattered around several still standing, and a sloped roof shattered, its pieces scattered around the area. All in all, it did look pretty impressive.

"Eh, it isn't really a prop. I've seen places like this before. Heck, even back on Patch, there was a set of ruins. No one knows how they got there, although they were newer looking

than this stuff," Yang answered glibly, hoping that Blake wouldn't ask how she knew about them, or if she did, that Blake would believe her typical lie on that score. Yang did not want anyone to know how she nearly got herself, and Ruby was killed when they were younger searching for her mother.

Among the rubble were small plinths, very obviously placed there recently since they were made of a different kind of stone. Upon those plinths, several golden statues rested, each about as large as a man's hand standing upright.

"I guess these are the relics we're supposed to grab?" Yang guessed, looking at them thoughtfully. "Hopefully not all of them are chess pieces. There'd be a lot of partnerships out there with pawns as their symbol."

Blake snorted at that, hoping much the same thing, and not just for that reason. She had always thought of herself as making her own fate, so the idea of being a piece on someone else's board was a little infuriating. "Which do you want?"

"How about a cute little pony?" Yang said, holding up the night piece. "I've never wanted to be a knight in shining armor, never really liked that type, but ponies are cool."

"Ohhh?" Blake drawled, feeling an urge to tease. "Let me guess, you like bad boys."

"Not really," Yang answered, surprising Blake. "I prefer guys who're pun-loving, easy on the eyes, and got good, real smiles. Being able to look after themselves in a fight is a must too. And no pretty boys allowed."

"Why, because you want to make certain you don't have to fight for shower time?" Blake questioned, and the two of them shared a laugh before Blake turned, staring out towards the forest they'd come from.

Wondering what her partner was looking at, Yang turned in that direction. From elsewhere along the edge of the forest from where they had come out, two other people were moving, their forms revolving themselves quickly into that of Pyrrha, the red-haired champion Yang had met, and Harry. "Dammit!"

Blake looked at her quizzically, then back towards the two people coming towards them, and when the two newcomers hailed them, she held up a hand in response.

"Hello!" Pyrrha said as soon as they were within talking distance, smiling at Yang. "Oh dear, I see you weren't able to partner with your sister Yang. Do you have any idea who Ruby found instead?"

"Nope. I lost sight of her after she hit that poor birdie," Yang said, snickering a little at her little sister's misfortune, then looking at the redhead, smirking just a little wider than normal and waggling her eyebrows suggestively as she looked between Pyrrha and Harry. "Whereas I'd wager you are **veeery** happy with your partner, right?"



“That goes both ways,” Harry said, thumping his shoulder against Pyrrha, who smiled and did the same before they moved away from one another. That was enough for both of them at the moment, given their earlier discussion on showing affection in front of other people. “I don’t believe we’ve been introduced. I’m Harry Arc.”

“Blake,” Blake answered, shaking Harry’s hand when he held it out to her, frowning a little as she saw him cocking his head to one side as he looked at her. “Something wrong?” She asked, an edge coming to her voice.

Harry shook his head quickly. “No, nothing’s wrong. It’s just you look a little familiar, that’s all. I don’t suppose you’ve ever been to a small town named Evig Låga or had family members go to a school named Lighthouse?”

“Since I’ve never even heard of those places, no,” Blake answered, shaking her head, then deliberately tried to change the subject, pointing over to the plinths and the relics on top of them. “Those are the things we were supposed to retrieve.”

“...” The two newcomers were silent for a few seconds as they looked at the pieces, then Harry very deliberately moved around the area, saying aloud, “there’s got to be some other kind of pieces around here somewhere, right? We weren’t that slow getting out of the forest.”

“I have to admit to some ambivalence about the chess allusions,” Pyrrha agreed.

“Yeah, I’ve never thought of myself as a chess piece either,” Yang commiserated.

“Well, I suppose all of us are but players on someone’s board,” Harry answered mock-philosophically before being teased by both Pyrrha and Yang, while Blake simply nodded in agreement with the philosophical statement, her earlier anger at that thought coming back to her.

As Harry was still looking around for more relics, Pyrrha had moved over to a few of the chess pieces, examining them closely. Yang had the head of a horse sticking out of a pouch at her side, which left one Knight piece behind. There were also two Rook pieces and two Queen pieces. “While I enjoy the idea of considering myself a defender, I have to admit, Harry, that your Semblance and my adaptability probably imply we are the equivalent of Queens.”

“I suppose so, although I would like to wait until my sister arrives. That way, she and I can be at least on the same team,” Harry replied.

The others all looked at him quizzically, not having made that leap, until Blake suddenly nodded. “Right, one relic per pair and the matching relics from either side get paired into a team. Ugh, that might mean there really were pawn pieces.”

“Exactly, although I doubt that there were pawns here. Kings, bishops, sure, but I’d wager there were other matching sets of things around here. I really doubt pawn pieces would do anything good for morale,” Harry answered dryly. *Ozpin gave me a few Fumblemore vibes,*

*but he is at least a well-respected and good teacher, according to Arturia. Heck, my parents agree with it too, despite how much they don't like Ozpin.*

"Well, I'm all down with waiting. In fact, if any of you think I'm leaving this place until my sister shows up, you better think again," Yang declared firmly.

Whatever answer any of the others might've made that statement beyond Harry's firm nod of agreement, they were interrupted by a commotion near the edge of the forest. Blake had already turned in that direction even before the sound reached the others, but no one noticed as they stared at an orange-haired girl riding a large Ursa like it was a horse. She was perched on its back as it rumbled forward on all four limbs, one hand gripping the back of its neck from behind while the other hand wielded a hammer, smacking the side of the hammer against its rear, forcing the Grimm forward.

"Is, is that girl really riding an Ursa? I am seriously considering whether or not someone in Beacon's cafeteria spiked my tea this morning," Blake mumbled, shaking her head.

"That would be Nora. I met her this morning, and I got the distinct impression that she's a particularly random brand of crazy," Harry murmured, standing between Pyrrha and Blake at the moment. "Now here's hoping that her minder was able to link up with her."

Pyrrha frowned at that while Blake's eyes narrowed dangerously. "Minder? That sounds rather cruel. She isn't an animal after all."

"I didn't mean it negatively," Harry answered, snorting quietly at Pyrrha's confusion. "It's just that I rather doubt that anyone would be able to get along with that girl as well as..." He smiled then as a familiar young man stumbled out of the woods, leaning down onto his knees and gasping for air as he stammered out something between gasps that the people in the ruins couldn't hear. "Her childhood friend."

Raising his hand, Harry shouted, "Ren, over here."

Both Nora and Ren turned, and as the Ursa that Nora had been riding began to dissolve behind her, Nora raced forward, crossing the distance so fast all of the people already within the relics blinked in surprise.

"Hey, breakfast, buddy!" Nora exclaimed, slapping Harry on the back so hard that if he hadn't been used to Tia and his parents, Harry probably would've found himself on his knees. As it was, he simply stumbled a little, rolling his shoulders in annoyance as she kept on slapping him. "So how's it been going, have you and your partner, one of these girls I don't know who you are hi how are you all? Been having fun? We've been having lots of fun. We killed this giant two-headed snake thing, then a few Creeps, a dozen Beowolves. Ren had this awesome super-cool duel going on with a Beowulf Alpha, and then I found my trusty steed!"

"Nora, separate sentences are a thing, as is breathing." Harry drawled, trying hard to follow what she was saying but failing miserably. *Good grief, she's like Rouge on a sugar high.*

But Nora wasn't listening. Instead, she had hopped over, staring between two of the pieces. Grabbing up a rook, Nora balanced it on her nose like a seal taking part in a show. "I'm the queen of the castle, I'm the queen of the castle!"

Ren arrived at that point and began scolding Nora. When he and Nora became quiet for a second, Harry interjected, pointing to Yang and himself, stating that they were going to be waiting around for their siblings, while Yang and Blake introduced themselves, with Yang grinning at Nora. When Nora asked whether or not she liked pancakes answered, "Spiced cinnamon pancakes, baby, that is the way to go!" And instantly making a friend for life with the girl.

Sighing, Ren shook his head, smiling politely at Harry and leaning against the nearby rock. "While Nora is fully capable of racing back to the cliffs and climbing up them like a spider monkey," At that point he was interrupted by Nora shouting 'Super Sloth,' but Ren ignored it, going on smoothly. "I would rather prefer a little bit of rest. So waiting for your sister and Yang's sister..."

"Ruby," Yang supplied as Ren paused.

"Ruby makes much more sense to me."

"Sounds like someone missed his endurance days at the gym too often," Yang teased.

"I can help you with that!" Pyrrha said chirpily, somewhat on cloud nine. Here were three more people who didn't automatically look at her with awe as the invincible girl, just as Yang had proven last night and Harry had proven for months now. Better, they seemed personable and nice. Despite her intentions to own her fame to a certain degree, she very much preferred meeting people who would see Pyrrha for who she was rather than who they assumed she was.

Ren gave her a very deadpan look, then over to Nora, then back again. "Do you honestly think any amount of endurance training would help with that?"

Pyrrha looked to where Nora was now balancing both her own relic and Yang's on her nose, one on top of the other, while Yang edged her on with whoops, the two of them completely ignoring the fact that they were out in the wilds right now in an area where Grimm could come upon them at any time. "I see your point, but surely enough endurance could at least help you a bit?" Pyrrha said.

She ended her sentence in a questioning tone, as if she really wasn't certain of the answer, but before anyone could say anything, Blake stared up at the sky, frowning. "Incoming."

Harry turned in that direction, and then looked over at Pyrrha. "Unless Ren or Nora have a sniper rifle, I think you're the one to start us off."

When both the newcomers shook their heads, Pyrrha shifted Milo to her rifle mode, bringing it up to her shoulder and aiming into the sky at the group of Nevermore coming down towards them. A shot rang out, and one of the flying Grimm fell, causing the others to scatter.

They still came on though, and Harry began to fire at them with his four barreled rifle at the same time Nora's hammer shifted into a grenade launcher. She fiddled with it for a second, then fired up into the sky, where the special canister exploded after reaching a certain height, acting almost like a flak cannon round. This downed several more of the Nevermore.

Some of the survivors now fled, while others, having raced towards the ground rather than back or above the explosion flechettes, continued to try and attack. They were dealt with by Blake as Yang stood there glumly. "Okay, so maybe my sister has a point about me needing a long-range option. I still say she needs to start training without Crescent Rose, though."

"Sounds like you already have a compromise in the making," Harry intoned, shaking his head. "And remember, Beacon is a school. I'd wager you could get one of the teachers to back you up on your point of view, and some help to solve the long range issue too."

"Makes sense." Yang grunted, although she was slumping as she said it, leaning back against the ruins beside her. "Although I'm sooo not looking forward to classes. What does math matter, we're here to learn how to kick ass! I don't need to know the Pythagorean theorem and its numerous uses to know how to put my boot into someone!"

While Nora sympathized and Harry shrugged unconcern, Blake protested this and the two of them had a minor argument, while the others watched the area around them and rested for a bit. As they did, Harry remarked that it looked as if most of the teams had come and gone, making a joke about, "I wonder how many teams were forced to take pawn pieces. And why the heck didn't anyone take those queen pieces? I'd have thought they would be the first ones to be taken."

"How much do you want to bet that there haven't been that many girl – girl pairs and the guys objected to it?" Nora said smirking over at Ren. "You guys, your machismo is so fragile!"

"I resent that remark!": Harry and Ren said as one, causing the others to laugh, as the two of them looked at one another and shrugged. "If I had issues with people thinking of me as girly, I wouldn't have taken up cooking," Ren added.

The conversation then turned to what other students they'd seen in the forest, with Blake and Yang admitting they'd seen a few: a large guy wielding a heavy mace of some kind, paired with a short dude who, in Yang's words, "Looked like a washed out, knockoff version of Ren over there, with cheaper weapons and far less sense of style. I mean the apocalyptic look is so last year, you know?"

When Blake didn't argue with that description, everyone there just shook their heads, while Ren and Nora said he'd seen a bullhead touching down somewhere nearby and lifting off almost immediately after. "I think it was retrieving some students who had sustained heavy injury and thus had dropped out."

From there the discussion naturally segued into a discussion on the various fights they'd all been in. Quickly it came out that Ren was having issues with his ammunition just like Yang and Blake. Nora wasn't, having simply used her Magnhild in hammer form with a certain amount of glee, and already being in the habit of conserving her ammunition. Dust grenades were much more expensive than small caliber bullets, after all.

Harry noticed this, and idly asked everyone about their ammunition, causing Pyrrha to smile mysteriously, remembering the transfiguration skill Harry had shown her earlier. *I know he said Dust doesn't last very long, but Dust bullets wouldn't need to.*

A moment later, Harry asked her to take a lookout position on top of one of the still-standing pillars. She did so, helping her line of sight tremendously. Thus, Pyrrha became the first person to notice the Giant Nevermore high in the sky. "We have a problem! Giant Nevermore incoming."

"Crud." Harry shook his head. "Grimm who have long-range abilities are always annoying to deal with. Everyone prepare to scatter. Pyrrha, if it just stays up there, you're going to be our only real deterrent to it, unless you can fire those flak rounds of yours a lot farther than I think, Nora."

"Nope, sorry. My grenades all travel the same distance."

As the others all took cover scattered away from one another, Blake idly noted that everyone seemed more than willing to follow Harry's lead, including herself. *Given what I've been through I should perhaps not be so quick to follow the orders of someone else like this, but he does seem to have a certain take charge attitude, and also seems to know what he was doing so...* Blake's thoughts cut off, and she stared up at the sky as she began to hear a scream. *Hmmm, that doesn't sound like someone in pain, more shock or a bit of fear maybe?*

Figuring out where the sound was coming from, Blake pointed up into the sky. "Incoming."

Everyone watched on in shock as Ruby fell towards the ground, squealing as she came. "Heads up!"

"Ruby?" Yang mumbled, before shaking her head quickly and making to charge forward. "Ruby!"

Nora had other ideas. "Pyrrha, give me a boost!"

She gleefully leaped up towards where Pyrrha was on the pillar, and understanding what the girl wanted, Pyrrha quickly held Akuo above her head as Nora landed on the front portion of her shield. Pyrrha then pushed hard with her feet, hurling Nora into the air, just as Nora Magnhild, blasting off from Akuo's outer edge thanks to a pointblank shot from her grenade launcher.

Midair, Nora shifted Magnhild into from its launcher form into the long-shafted Warhammer form. Putting her feet on the bottom of the Warhammer's head she let off another round, which sent her flying further upwards in a twirl.

Everyone else watched as Nora grabbed Ruby around the waist with one arm, flipping around in midair, her upwards momentum canceled by the catch. As they began to fall, Nora used another grenade, slowing their descent until she could toss Ruby down to land on her feet, with Nora landing next to her, holding Magnhild above her head like she was posing. "Tada!"

Everyone there bar Yang clapped dutifully, while Yang fussed over her sister and asked where she'd come from, and if she had found a partner yet.

"Yeah, I found a partner, Weiss. She'll be here in a second I guess, although we were supposed to jump together. Party pooper," Ruby answered with a pout.

"The Weiss-cold girl, huh." Yang winced a bit. She didn't exactly make the best first impression, but Yang supposed there had been a few signs of someone real underneath all of that arrogance and haughtiness. "And are you okay with that?" She questioned hesitantly.

Ruby nodded and shrugged at the same time, a very lukewarm response that did nothing for her sister's concerns, and Yang's glare demanded an actual answer. "So, er, well, she can, can fight, and while she's kind of bossy and scary, I think we can get along just fine if we both try?"

"Again, not really filling me with good feelings here, sister," Yang grumbled.

At that point the others became aware that Blake was still staring up into the sky. A second later, a voice from above reached them. "How could you leave me!"

"I told you to jump!" Ruby shouted back, a remarkably loud voice for someone so short.

All of the others there gave the younger girl a deadpan look, before turning their better eyes back up as Weiss made an appearance, falling straight down as Ruby had for a moment. Before Nora could make any moves however, Weiss quickly began to slow her descent using what looked to Harry like magic, causing his jaw to drop. "What are those!?"

"Oh, Weiss calls them her glyphs, they're really damn cool!" Ruby exclaimed.

"Weiss cool, huh?" Yang instantly answered, causing many groans from those around her.

Harry ignored that, staring up at Weiss as she used her rapier to cut glyphs into the air under her. A small area of the air underneath her feet became almost solid as the glyphs appeared. *Hmm... those almost look like runic arrays, almost. More like an entire array in one rune. Wow.* Harry resolved to talk to the girl in the future once they got to know one another better. *My runes don't do jack and shite, but if it's just a language issue rather than an incompatibility, then there is wiggle room in the big fat no I've been getting so far in that direction. I don't think it'll happen, but even so it will be interesting to talk to someone else with such a unique Semblance.*

He heard a grunt of annoyance from nearby, and turned to look at Blake, cocking an eyebrow. "Something wrong?"

Nearby, Weiss had just landed, and was haranguing Ruby in no uncertain terms, calling her a dolt several times in one long winded sentence without seeming to repeat herself beyond use of that term. Yang seemed to also be preparing to beat the shorter girl into the ground, while Pyrrha and Ren started to calm everyone down.

Nora just watched on with a grin, making no effort to interrupt things.

"Not really. Let's just say that Weiss isn't my favorite person in the world." Shaking her head, Blake looked over at Harry. "That just means that we're waiting for your sister, right?"

Harry nodded, and he moved over to stand between Ruby and Weiss. Showing the courage of a young man with seven sisters he ignored their anger, pushing Yang back with a hand on her forehead and a, "Calm down, firecracker. And Miss Weiss, you could be a bit more positive about this. After all, you're about to enter Beacon, the foremost Hunter Academy in the world. And while Ruby's exit plan from Air Nevermore needed a lot of work, it got you where you needed to be."

"Don't encourage her!" Weiss grumbled, but she calmed down a bit, although the stern look on Harry's face caused her to scowl. Still, she backed away while Yang smacked his hand away from her forehead and snorted. But Harry kept on going before she could say anything. "I don't suppose either of you spotted my sister from up there, did you?"

"Nope, and I think I would have, Tia's kind of distinctive, white stands out like a sore thumb out here," Ruby answered shaking her head. Weiss agreed, saying that she'd seen a few other students, all of whom seemed to be having a really rough time of it in the forest. "There were a lot of Grimm around," Ruby agreed with her partner, shaking her head. "I'm down to a quarter of my rounds for Crescent Rose! Why didn't Druncle Qrow or dad tell us we need to figure out a way to carry more ammo than just our waist pouches?"

"I know, right?!" Yang exclaimed, throwing her arms up, her irritation at Weiss disappearing.

The group was attacked by Grimm twice more, both times by creeps, although the second group was much larger and also had a few Ursa within it. But beyond Ren's argument with Nora. "Nora, no you can't have an Ursa as a pet," neither attack really registered as all that interesting. None of them noticed that these attacks come from two separate directions, and only Blake was continuing to become slightly more nervous as she stared out over the forest, then down at the ground, frowning in thought, uncertain what she was sensing, but feeling on for no reason she could discern.

Finally however, a group of four appeared from the forest, having overshot the relics and come back towards them for some reason. Tia was the first out of the woods, and spotting Harry, she instantly moved in his direction, racing ahead of the other three, who included one woman who was even taller and broader in the shoulders than Tia.

"Harry." Tia said, ignoring the others and pulling Harry into a hug, which Harry returned equally tightly.

"Sorry we couldn't be partners Tia," Harry murmured into her ear, causing Tia to pout underneath her turtleneck, something that Harry sensed, as he gave her a kiss on the forehead, and turned slightly to Pyrrha. "But at least my partner's someone you already know and like, right?"

Tia made a hum of agreement under her breath, nodding to Pyrrha now, turning in Harry's arms and looking around at the others.

"Aww, that's cute! Seeing siblings get along like that, it makes me want to hug mine!" Before Ruby could protest or get away, Yang pulled her into a bear hug, causing Ruby to wince in pain.

Harry and the others good feelings evaporated as the ground all around them erupted, and Harry's eyes widened in alarm as several centipede-shaped Grimm called burst out. They were large, about as wide across as Ruby, while being far longer than any of the humans there were tall. Their heads were covered with the typical Grimm masks, showing the red marks of age, and their backs were covered by armor. Their legs ended in sharp points, as sharp as any spear.

They instantly attacked, while from the same direction as before several bands of Grimm of all kinds charged out towards the would-be hunters. *Shit! There must be a high-level Grimm around here somewhere directing them, their working together, and coming from so many directions there's no way normal Grimm would be able to do this without a mind directing them.*

"Pull back into the ruins and to the east," Harry shouted, gesturing. "Pyrrha, Ruby, lay down covering fire for those three. Nora, once the Grimm are within range thin the herds coming at us from our right and back flanks. Ren, Blake, target the Centinels. Yang and Tia, go



and meet them halfway. Everyone, don't use all your ammo, keep at least two samples and when you get to that point pull back to me."

Startled by the amount of command Harry was able to instill in his voice, all of them quickly obeyed bar Weiss, who growled out about why he was giving out orders. Blake passed her by, smacking her shoulder hard enough that Weiss might well have ended up on her rear if it had been any harder. "Now isn't a time to let your ego show, dammit! Arc's got a plan, let's work with it."

With that, Blake was leaping up words, bouncing off of one Centinel Grimm's head as it dove down towards her, Gambol Shroud lashing out and around, catching the limb of another Centinel, flinging herself up forward as she fired, then leaving a shadow clone behind her as she skipped away, stabbing down into the back of another Centinel Grimm.

Yang and Tia moved forward, engaging the Centinels between the group and the trio who had been following Tia, shotgun shells and water bullets crashing into them. But the Centinels were decently armored and fast, able to twist and dodge around. One lost a few limbs to Tia's Tiburon, but only one of Yang's blows landed on an unarmored point. The shotgun-assisted blast tore a huge chunk out of the monster, but it kept fighting even as it keened in agony.

Meanwhile, Harry had stomped on the ground and using his magic had created a series of large spikes, which stabbed up into the Grimm Centinel all around them. This also creating a corridor leading to them from the trio, who had turned to face still more Grimm coming up behind them. These Grimm were all Ursa, mixed in with a few Creep, but that meant they were slow, and as Pyrrha and Ruby laid down cover fire, an elegant looking woman barked the command.

The command didn't reach the defenders in the ruins, although the response from her partner, a shout of, "Don't tell me what to do bitch!" Caused Weiss to wince, realizing that while her language had not been nearly as vulgar, her protest against Harry taking over must have sounded just as childish.

She instantly began to use her glyphs, freezing the Centinels in a few places although she couldn't freeze the long-bodied Grimm in their entirety, and then sending several speed glyphs towards the incoming trio, hastening their arrival in the ruins, while the Grimm closed in from all sides. "Great, now we can all die together!" She ground out, looking over at Harry. "Unless you have a plan, Arc?"

Harry nodded, and leaving off firing his weapon into the encroaching Grimm from one side, knelt down on the ground. *For spells of this size, touch seems to help visualize things.*

He slammed his hands into the ground, and suddenly the entire area around the ruins began to rumble and shift. Then the entire area began to rise, leaving behind most of the Grimm. When it finished shifting under the Hunters' feet, Harry had created a butte around two

stories tall, forcing the Grimm on the ground to climb up the sheer sides of the mount to get at them. "Will that do, Princess?"

Weiss gaped at him, staring from him to the ground and out across the vista of the forest laid out around them, shaking her head slowly. "My word, you have an earth manipulation Semblance that powerful? Amazing!"

Harry simply smiled, but his eyes were moving all the time as he strode to the edge of the hill he had created, feeling reverberations below them even now. "Alright ladies and my two fellow gentlemen, we now have a temporary defensive position. Tia, Yang, and the tall lion girl, take up points at a triangle. Stave off any Grimm who gets up here. Ruby, you're the sniper, keep the Nevermore off us best you can."

"I've also got a speed semblance!" Ruby said, even as she fired at a Nevermore and then one of the first Grimm to try scaling the escarpment that had just erupted within the horde.

"Excellent! Then be ready to run to help anyone who needs it. Pyrrha, you're our other troubleshooter, you and Ren help suppress the Nevermore. Nora, switch between helping them and..." Harry paused smashing aside a sword-sharp feather from the Greater Nevermore. "And aim for any large groups of Grimm you can see. The rest of you target any Grimm trying to climb up here."

While most of the other initiates just nodded, agreeing with Harry's orders now, even Weiss, the third young man, the one who had come out of the woods with Tia, protested his taking over. Tia put a halt to that by smacking him upside the head, and growling out, "Do it."

Nora cackled, launching a grenade down into a group of Beowolves just about to reach the foot of the butte. The explosive went off within the group and Nora turned, giving Harry a salute. "You got it, fearless leader!"

Laughing, Harry shook his head, firing up at the Nevermore striking down at them. "I'm not fearless. My Father always said courage doesn't come from being fearless, it comes from conquering fear to keep standing." He then grinned fiercely, looking over and catching his sisters eyes for a moment even as more Grimm began to reach the top of the butte. "Let's show these fuckers what real Hunters can do!"

"OOHRAAAH!" Bar Weiss and Sung-Sun, the hunters all roared in response, and the battle icked up quickly, even as Harry began moving around the escarpment.

When he stopped by each one, he began to transfigure or conjure up extra ammunition. "It won't last long, but it should get us out of this."

"Heh, you're certainly a multi-talented fellow," Yang teased, wishing the battle would let up for a second so that she could flirt more. But there were more Grimm coming up the sides of the butte now than there was a second ago, and she could barely take a second to nod at him.

“Sooo much ammo...” Ruby practically salivated, a sentiment Apacci and Mila Rose both agreed with. Nora simply cackled when it got to be her turn, while Ren just nodded, his pistol machine guns firing one after another.

As he moved, Harry made a note of the weapons everyone used, as well as the names of the trio who had been traveling with Tia. Mila Rose was his twin’s partner, and she used a multi-barreled rifle gauntlet much like Harry’s. Sung-Sun had twin pistols, but they seemed to fire far slower than Ren’s. Her bullets though were much larger, able to punch through weak Grimm armor. Sung-Sun seemed to have little long-range ability, but she and Weiss were working together to slow or even freeze any Centinel they could spot. Whereupon Sung-Sun would finish them off. Only Ruby was armed with a sniper rifle, something Harry was somewhat displeased by given the Greater Nevermore high above the battlefield.

The Centinels quickly began to scale up the size of Harry’s creation, but in doing so, they and the other Grimm were easy pickings for the hunters at the top. However, while their fellows just climbed up the stone, the Centinels also began to tear at the escarpment, while above, more Nevermore began to descend. They were led by the Giant Nevermore that Weiss and Ruby had used as a form of transportation a few moments ago.

This large Nevermore proved smarter than the average Grimm by keeping its distance, bombing hunters from on high. It’s wings could be launched like knives, or rather spears given their size, and renewed themselves automatically in some fashion that none of the would-be hunters below understood. It’s shrieking cries also seemed to galvanize the smaller Nevermore into greater and greater attacks, coming through the fire of the defenders. Even with Nora’s kind grenades the people on anti-air duty weren’t stopping the flying Grimm from closing and they were becoming a problem quickly.

Breaking off from creating ammo for the others, Harry helped beat off some Nevermore, before kneeling, touching the ground beneath them. From the butte, barriers rose, further protecting the Hunters, while stone spikes appeared as they had earlier from the side of the hill. These stabbed into the Grimm as they tried to climb up the butte, but there were more and more Grimm coming towards them.

The Giant Nevermore wings shattered the stone walls occasionally. Several of the defenders took hits from the shattered rocks or the Grimm as they pressed up onto the top of the hill, including the elegant woman, who had introduced herself as Sung-Sun. Struck by a Beowolf’s claws, her leg giving out under her as her knee was struck in the side. Only rolling away saved her from another Nevermore, who died to a blow from Mila Rose as Apacci dealt with the Beowolf and his companions.

“Where are the teachers?! This can’t possibly be normal!” Weiss shouted, lashing out with a glyph and then stabbing her rapier through a Beowolf’s eye as the head of a Centinel was frozen in place. Sung-Sun took the opportunity to slay the creature, before Ruby grabbed both of them and pulled them back away from the edge of the butte for a moment.

Between one second and the next Harry lashed out through the area using stone spikes to slay the Grimm there, before launching several stone spikes up into the air towards the Giant Nevermore, ignoring the fact that he had just shown a bit more than just earth manipulation. The Giant Nevermore dodged, but Harry could still take a moment to stare out past the immediate environments. "I think they're busy!"

That caused Weiss to blink, but through the bodies of several more Nevermore, she saw a bullhead in the distance touching down scattered throughout the forest. "What are they doing over there!? The battle is clearly..."

"It's not just us who are being attacked," Harry explained, before going back to the battle as Tia carved through an Ursa letting him target several Grimm who had just gotten to the lip of the escarpment. "The whole forest is alive with Grimm!"

#### Scene break

Back on the cliff leading toward Beacon, Goodwitch and Ozpin watched in shock and horror as the attack began for a bare second before springing into action. Goodwitch instantly began to order Oobleck to engage, but she was forced to divert him to a last few students still out in the forest who were getting swarmed. Even so two more died before the bullhead even lifted off, their deaths caught on the hidden cameras.

But as Oobleck finally started to move, Goodwitch had to turn her attention to the area around her. Several of the Centinel Grimm had burrowed through the topsoil of the forest to the cliff, and now started to try and climb up the cliff face. Made of far harder stone than the ground Harry was currently using, they weren't able to tear at it, but could climb it even more easily.

Until they came within range of her Semblance anyway. Whereupon the Centinels found themselves pulled away from the cliff and tossed away like so many leaves in a gale. Glynda scoured the edge of the cliff for a few moments, stalking the edge of the cliff, her eyes wild. "Ozpin this is far beyond what we can expect our initiates to handle! Port could not have gathered so many, is this a sign of..."

"Calm yourself Glynda. It is not directed against Beacon and as many Grimm as there are, there aren't nearly enough to be a real threat to the school. Head into the forest and help Oobleck getting the students out. Head straight toward where Ms. Rose and the others are fighting the main thrust of this infestation," Ozpin ordered crisply, his eyes flashing behind his glasses, giving out orders with all the ease of an experienced commander. "I will coordinate with Port and the others.

Glynda looked at him for a moment, then leaped over the edge of the cliff, using her Semblance to slow her descent until she disappeared among the trees while Oobleck's Bullhead raced back towards the school with several wounded students already aboard.

Staring out into the distance, Ozpin saw the Butte that Harry had raised, and found himself almost hesitating on ordering more aide sent into the forest. This level of danger would be an even better test of Harry's magic after all, and a threat of this scale could perhaps push Ruby into activating her Silver Eyes now.

But that was too much, and the hesitation lasted only a millisecond's worth of thought. *Is this sign of a new attack from you Salem? Is it tied into the attack on Amber? Or was there really an ancient Grimm that we didn't notice in the area? Questions abound, and no way to answer any of them blast it!*

Scene break

"Ruby, pull the others back towards the easternmost side of the butte!" Harry shouted, as the butte under them began to rumble. "They're doing too much damage to the butte and I can't concentrate on sustaining it and fighting at the same time. We're going to have to retreat."

"Retreat, hell we just got here!" Apacci barked back and although he was grinning as he fought some of the Beowolves who had been able to scale the cliff, Harry could tell it was fake. All of their morale was starting to crumble on the onslaught despite the high note they had started on, which Harry knew would act as a beacon to pull still more Grimm on to them if he wasn't careful.

"There's a tower over there, it's connected to the rest of the valley by a small bridge and its backed against another cliff. It's a great defensive position!" Ruby suggested, dumping her sister and Mila by the others.

"Great eye Ruby. Everyone, we are moving!"

With that Harry knelt down, ignoring his own defense for a moment. Luckily for him, Tia and Pyrrha both saw this and moved to defend Harry. Tia stood by his side, her sword flashing out along with punches and kicks as she thought about activating her Semblance. Pyrrha on the other hand danced around the two Arcs, using Milo and Akuo to good effect along with her own mobile combat style.

Ignoring the battle around him, Harry began to manipulate the ground underneath them again. As the butte began to collapse, his changes created something of a slide for them all down one side after killing the Grimm there via stone spikes and into the teeth of the Grimm coming from that direction. "Tia, Mila, Yang, bring up the rear. Nora, aim ahead of us and to the side one grenade each, then join Yang on the right flank!"

"Woohoo, have I mentioned how much I love having a cheat code like you around! Give me that mad kill count baby!" Nora whooped, firing several of the grenades that Harry had created for her during the battle. The only ones who hadn't received Harry-made ammunition was Pyrrha, who didn't need it, and Weiss, who used dust canisters instead of actual bullets.

“Ruby, plow the road!” Harry ordered, taking up position at the top of the slide, his rifle firing once more, while Caliburn lashed out, cutting an Ursa’s head clean off. His shots weren’t the most accurate, but they at least caused the next group of Nevermore to back off, at which point he used Caliburn as a focus, lashing out with bits of debris up into the

“Wahooo!” Ruby yelled, then flung herself down the slide, activating her Semblance as she did. By the time she got to the bottom of the slide, she was going even faster than her Semblance would normally allow. Crescent Rose transformed into its scythe form as she flew down, bisecting a group of Creeps at the bottom, then zooming around the battlefield, slicing still more Grimm into pieces. Shooting off Crescent Rose, Ruby used the recoil to bounce around the battlefield, none of her initial speed dissipating until the fourth or fifth time she’d had to change her direction.

At that point she had cleared an area around the bottom of the slide, and a ways out towards the side of the clearing leading towards the tower. “All clear!” she shouted.

“Oh yeah, that’s my sister,” Yang bragged cheerfully, moving to stand shoulder to shoulder with Tia and Mila.

“Going down folks!” Harry caroled, using his magic once more to enlarge the top of the slide until it was directly underneath them all.

“This is so uncouth!” Sung-Sun and Weiss said as one, while the others shrieked and whooped.

At the bottom of the slide, Ruby continued to cover them from the edge of the forest and Yang, Nora, Mila and Tia hurled themselves into the Grimm coming around the now rapidly crumbling butte.

Beowolves were smashed off of their feet, Ursa hurled back, by Mila or dying to powerful strikes by the now red-eyed and furious Yang, while Tia cut and hacked, her own eyes narrowed in concentration, as her teeth were bared behind her turtleneck. Mila fought almost like Yang, using her mace and gauntlet to good effect. She wasn’t nearly as fast on her feet, but used more kicks in her style, and her mace actually did a bit more damage than Yang’s Ember Celica. The few blows that got through to her didn’t seem to matter at all to the large lion Faunus. Whereas with Yang, each blow she took just made her stronger.

As for Nora, she was strangely enough a mix between power strikes and mobility. She danced around her opponents, but when her hammer struck, the Grimm were either splattered or flung away.

While Yang, Nora and Mila were all about brute force and power, Tia supplied an equal amount of power, coupling it with the sharp edge of her blade, reinforced still furthered by a sheen of water, creating a cutting edge that was able to go through most of the armor the Grimm around her had. It was only stopped by the armor of an Ursa Major, which pushed

through its lesser brethren. Hitting its shoulder, Tia's sword stuck, embedding itself there as the beast howled, pulling away.

But Tia was the stronger and far from losing her grip on her weapon, she pulled down, dragging the creature to its knees. There, Tia's knee came up into its face with such strength that it was sent staggering backwards, its mask shattered.

Moving forward with the others Pyrrha grunted as a blow crashed into her shield, lashing out with Milo in xiphos form at the same time, before shifting Milo into javelin mode, stabbing another Grimm as it leaped towards her. Before it even began to dissolve, Milo was shifted back into a sword, and she whirled around, taking the legs out from under another Grimm, rising into a blow with her shield that sent it backwards into another Grimm, and then stabbing down into both ending them. Twisting around, the four time champion duck underneath another strike, this time from a second Ursa Major.

But while Pyrrha and the four bruisers were seemingly having fun, Apacci, Sung-Sun, Blake, Ren and Weiss were being overwhelmed. Harry helped as best he could, lashing out with transfiguration, Caliburn and bullets from his rifle. Any Grimm who came near him found itself cut into pieces by an edge that sneered at even the best armor the Grimm could produce. Many of the Grimm around them, even the Centinels, found themselves slogging through mud or dealing with the ground raising up to grab at them like a living thing.

"Weiss, speed glyphs!" Harry ordered.

The next second all twelve of the initiates were speeding through the hole Ruby had made in the Grimm, pulling away from them even as the Grimm tried desperately to reform a circle around them.

As they ran, Ruby and Apacci stopped very briefly to grab up relics, before hurrying along with the others. "Heck yeah, speed rules!" Ruby shouted, holding out a hand to Apacci.

Apacci snorted, but high-fived the younger girl, and the two of them joined Ren, Blake and Sung-Sun holding the rear of the column.

The running battle continued until they were at the bridge leading to the small tower Ruby had spotted over a canyon, its faces as sheer as the escarpment Harry had created. Far, far below them the canyon ended in a river.

As they ran across the bridge, with Harry and Pyrrha turning there; Harry used his magic once again to create a wall between them and the charging Grimm, while Ruby led the way across up into the tower. Above them, the Greater Nevermore circled once more lashing downward with its pinions. Pyrrha and Blake redirected them all, Gambol Shroud having proven it could at least knock the feathers off target before this.

“Any of you have a plan to deal with that Giant Nevermore?” Harry asked, while Pyrrha leaped up onto the wall, firing over the heads of their fellows into the charging Grimm. “Only, I doubt that big bugger is going to let us alone.”

“I’ve got one!” Ruby shouted raising her hand and waving wildly in the air as if they were in class, a wide, innocent smile on her face as if they weren’t in a fight for their lives.

“Whatever you need, do it!” Harry grunted, under the impact of a feather from said Giant Nevermore which had gotten past Pyrrha and Blake. Others were peppering the area as the rest of the would-be hunters raced across the bridge. It’s feathers tore chunks out of the bridge, but thankfully, the rest of it was still standing for now.

Nodding resolutely, Ruby turned to Weiss, and Blake, asking them to come with her. “Yang, you get over here too!”

Deciding to leave the Giant Nevermore to Ruby, Harry ordered Apacci and the others to provide suppressive fire on the Nevermore diving down on them. Thankfully, the fight up to this point had seemingly thinned the local population of the flying Grimm, so there weren’t many of them left. Indeed, on its own, the Giant Nevermore was much more dangerous than the remnants of its smaller brethren.

The same could not be said for the ground Grimm. While most of the Centinels had died by this point, there were still a few of them left, and a lot of Creeps, although the local Beowolf population had seemingly been wiped out, and there were only a few Ursa and Stingers – the younger version of the feared deathstalkers – in the horde. Or perhaps the remaining Beowolves were elsewhere within the forest. Busy as they had been, Harry had no idea what was going on elsewhere in the forest.

Now the last three Centinels came on almost as living battering rams, zigzagging through the defensive fire of the would-be hunters, smashing into the wall Harry had erected, and then almost crawling over one another to get within range of their mandibles and stabbing feet while behind them came still more grim.

But the wall and Pyrrha’s precise shots had done their work, slowing the front of the horde just enough for the hunters to gain some more distance. And when they had all crossed the bridge, Harry slammed Caliburn’s point down onto the stone, and it came alive, reaching up for the first Grimm who had reached the bridge, grabbing at them with hands, feet and claws.

“You’re becoming more imaginative with that, I see,” Pyrrha said almost teasingly, as she fired the last of her rifle rounds at the Grimm across the bridge. “And I’m almost out of bullets.”

“All right, I will admit that my normal method is to go for a blunt force approach, rather than an imaginative one. Sue me,” Harry grumbled, as the bridge, transfigured and thus weakened, collapsed under the weight of the Grimm. This sent the majority of them tumbling



down, but several of the Centinels were able to pull themselves back, their bodies not entirely on the bridge although they took still more damage from the initiates firing at them from across the bridge.

But just as the young men and women began to hope that they had won through, another Centinel burst out from below them on the opposite side of the bridge. But this Centinel was different from any of the others they had seen. For one thing, its thorax was not the normal black or white of a Grimm, instead it looked distended and very green. For another it was a little larger and had scythe like arms that were far larger than the normal legs its lesser brethren had. And lastly, all of its arms and backs were covered with thick, red-veined armor.

“Oh fuck, that’s a Cenitaur!” Mila Rose shouted. “I’ve seen pictures of it before, watch out FOFUCCCK!”

At that point the Cenitaur spat a series of green blobs up towards and only Mila’s shouted warning saved Apacci and Nora from being hit as they dodged wildly along with the others. Because when the bits of green landed, it began to eat into the stone and ground underneath, shocking the rest of the defenders.

“What the hell!” Apacci barked. “Since when do the Grimm have acid?”

“Since now!” Harry shouted, while the enemy Grimm realizing it wasn’t any longer taking long-range fire, started to simply toss chunks of acid at them from below scattering the defenders and forcing them back into the tower complex.

“Dammit!” Growling, Harry created a grapnel one hand, once more ignoring the fact that this was showing quite a bit more than ‘earth manipulation’. *I’ll probably come clean about most of my abilities to my team anyway, just not where they came from.* He tossed the end of the rope to Tia, who caught it, as Harry charged out and leaped down towards the incoming Grimm. “Get back across and pull the Grimm away from the tower! If it figures it out, it can just bring the whole thing down with all of you in it!”

“Harry!?” Pyrrha shrieked, watching in horror as he descended, only to watch as he landed on the back of the Grimm right behind its head.

Harry skidded downward a bit, his first blow skittering off its heavy armor, but a second later the Cenitaur squealed and bucked as Caliburn stabbed into its back. Harry couldn’t find a spot on it that crippled the creature, but it allowed him to hang on, and the Grimm twitched backward, all its attention now on getting rid of the small human with the nasty bite on its back.

As it bucked and tried to heave back against the side of the canyon, Harry used something he had learned from Arturia, bringing out his Aura and pushing it out past his skin to create a shield around himself. With that, he grimaced only lightly at the impact against the stone, before using a modified Leviosa to wrap segments of the creature in the grapnel, shoving it in between two armor plates on its back.

He hung on determinedly, as Nora and Pyrrha boosted Tia back across the crevice on to the other side. A swift swing of her swords and a punch that seemingly lifted an Ursa Major off of its feet and exploded its head at the same time cleared the area around the Arc girl, but also caused Mila to blink in shock. “What the heck? For a moment there, it looked like Tia was wearing armor.”

But then she was charging forward, with Pyrrha boosting her across and following after quickly. Nora and Sung-Sun followed. Apacci and Ren stayed where they were, giving cover fire to both groups of their allies.

As he fired his slower, but heavier handguns up at a Nevermore, Apacci had a moment to shake his head, muttering about how crazy Harry was. “Great planner and everything, but crazy. Seriously, jumping across like that? We could have figured out another way to deal with the Cenitaur.”

“Before or after it realized it could simply retreat and use it’s acid to undermine the tower, possibly sending us all to our deaths?” Ren inquired politely, his tone even despite the horrid circumstances he had just described.

To this Apacci had no response, and Ren went on, pointing to one side with Storm flower. “And besides, if you want to look at crazy, look over there.”

Turning, Apacci watched Blake use Gambol Shroud to whirl Yang up into the face of the Giant Nevermore as it dove down at the top of the tower. Moments later, the distant shout of ‘I hope you’re hungry’ gave Ren’s words added weight.

Apacci watched for a second then turned his attention back to the fight going on across the ridge, firing into the mass of Creep still swarming forward.

For her part, Pyrrha fought like a mad woman, her eyes ablaze with determination as she fought back the horde of Grimm. Her xiphos sliced, her javelin stabbed, Milo shifting from one to the other in a breath under her fingers as Akuo hammered out crushing bones or knocking Grimm aside, all of her training coming together to turn her into a whirling dervish of death against the Grimm around them.

Given that her combat style was somewhat like Ren’s, Sung-Sun and Nora worked together very well, keeping the tide of Creeps. The two legged Grimm with the very big overbite (Harry thought they looked like miniature T-rexes minus the tiny arms) seemed to be the only Grimm still left in any numbers, at bay.

Meanwhile the Cenitaur was pulled out of the canyon by Tia and Mila hauling on the rope Harry had conjured moments before.

The Grimm spat acid in every direction, but it couldn’t aim and then the creature was crashing back. Harry landed then, and as the giant Cenitaur tossed both Mila and Tia aside, charged towards it, with Pyrrha following instantly.

“Aim for its eyes!” Harry shouted, tossing up a few bullets for Pyrrha’s rifle, knowing she would see them.

She did, and a quick grab with her polarity powers pulled them towards her. By the time they arrived she had Milo’s magazine chamber open, and the bullets slotted in perfectly. A moment later she fired, and four of the Cenitaur’s eyes exploded just as it lined up a shot at Harry in turn. The creatures screamed, convulsing, but did not stop its attack, having several pairs of eyes it could afford to lose a few, and unlike a normal animal, a Grimm did not care about pain so long as it could kill.

Harry flashed a hand forward, a glass wall appearing in front of him for a second, taking the acid as he stood there. “Made you look, you ugly fuck!”

Pyrrha dodged to one side, closing as Tia did the other, Mila Rose pulling off to engage the last pair of Ursa on the battlefield. The two would-be huntresses closed, with Tia slicing off several pairs of legs with a series of strikes from Tiburon. Pyrrha cut through several more, dodging around and landing precise strikes at the joints unlike her temporary partner, who simply cut at everything she could reach.

The glass wall shattered, and Harry thrust out his hand, sending the pieces upwards, at the Cenitaur’s face. They did nothing against the heavily reinforced Grimm chitin, but a few did strike the gaping wounds Pyrrha’s earlier shots had caused.

The Cenitaur raised itself up and lashed out with its longer arms. One arm caught Tia, sending her flying to land several feet back, but doing no damage thanks to her Aura.

Pyrrha on the other hand, dodged, and then used her polarity powers once more. She reached out with it at the grapnel still stuck between two of the Cenitaur’s back plates. The grapnel twisted and pulled causing the Grimm to twitch its head backwards to look down its length.

This proved to be the final mistake the creature made. Harry closed the last few feet, then as Pyrrha watched launched himself upward with another stone bluff. The next instant, Caliburn stabbed into the Cenitaur’s thorax right under its head.

Any other blade on the field would have been stopped by that armor. But not the King’s Disposition. Caliburn stabbed deep into the creature, and then Harry was flinging himself sideways shouting out, “Watch out for the acid!”

Pyrrha and Tia saw what he meant instantly as acid burst out from the wound spraying everywhere even as Harry retreated, leaving Caliburn stabbed into the thing. He rolled out of the way until Nora reached down and hauled him to his feet, staring at the ancient Grimm as its convulsions finally began to end. “Ooh, nice going Leader Man, pity about your sword though.”

“Heh, don’t worry about Caliburn. Some acid isn’t going to bother it at all,” Harry quipped, looking around the battlefield

The Cenitaur's death seemed to break the host of Grimm still attacking them. The remaining Grimm began to retreat, falling back into the forest fleeing the hunters, just as above them, a Bullhead arrived, laying down fire.

Mila began to whoop, Yang and Apacci joining in from the other side of the canyon. Closer to hand Nora began leaping about and flinging her hammer around her head, catching Magnhild as it came down practically dancing with it. "Did you see that! Did you see that! That was freaking awesome!"

Across the way, Yang had landed beside Sung-Sun and Ren, and was watching her little sister standing on top of the cliff high above them, and across at Harry and the others. Out of the corner of her mouth she saw Ren looking across at Nora and the others, a faint smile on his face. Seeing that, Yang smirked, throwing an arm around his shoulders. "Ya look happy there, man."

"I am. We all performed amazingly well. I could not be prouder of Nora or the rest of our performances," Ren answered simply.

"Heh, weeell, ya wanta join them?"

Ren looked at her askance, but Yang's arm was already around his shoulders, and he sighed, knowing how this was going to go. *Best to conserve my energy as much as I can*, he thought resignedly as Yang twirled in place, his feet leaving the ground as Yang built up centrifugal force.

A second later, Ren was tossed across the canyon by Yang. "Hey Nora, you got a special delivery!"

"Renny!" a moment later, he was caught by Nora, who pulled him into a hug. Mila joined in, grabbing Tia and pulling her into the group hug before they fell back onto the ground with a laugh of mixed amazement and exhaustion.

All of them knew what they had just accomplished together should have been impossible. The sheer multitude of Grimm, no matter how individually weak, should have killed them all. Instead, thanks to Harry's Semblance, their disparate fighting abilities and his leadership they had not only fought them off, but shattered the horde. It was an amazing achievement to start their hunting career.

Above them, the bullhead moved to the slowly crumbling tower, taking off Weiss, Blake, Yang and Sung-Sun before heading upwards to pick up Ruby.

Chuckling at the hug pile and seeing the bullhead's arrival as a sign the action was over, Harry moved towards Caliburn where it had fallen point first as the Cenitaur dissolved. A wave of his hand created a splash of mud which he used to wipe the acid off Caliburn. When he removed the mud, the acid came with it, and sword remained stuck in the ground gleaming now in the noonday sun.

As Tia moved to stand by Harry, Pyrrha could not tear her eyes away from him, watching as he stared out into the distance at the few retreating Grimm who had survived the bullhead's strafing run.

Harry turned back to her, a smile on his face and in his eyes, as he looked at Pyrrha and Tia, throwing an arm around Tia's shoulders even as he hefted Caliburn into his other hand.

*He's like a king out of legend. A prince carving a niche out of the wild of the Grimm.* She thought, her mind going back to their earlier conversation about what the Arcs and Evig Låga were doing of later. And as she thought that, a slow smile began to appear on her own face as she moved towards her partner. *And what does every good king need, but a shield?*

When she reached Harry, she barely registered his words of, "well, I wasn't expecting this for initiation were you?" or his arm around Tia's shoulders, hers around his waist. Without pause, Pyrrha knelt down in front of Harry, her shield's edge thunking down to one side, as she placed Milo in front of her. And when she spoke, Pyrrha did so in Mistrali, a language that would have been called Greek back in Harry's old world, the cadence formal, but Harry easily understood it.

*"/I, Pyrrha of House Nikos do ask to become thy órkos aspídas {Sworn Shield}, Lord Arc. I have seen your strength and declare it good. I will give of my own and defend what you deem precious. I have seen your leadership and declare it good. As your shield, I will become your strength and will protect thee and thine. I have seen your humanity and declare it good. I vow to stand beside you as long as you have me, to go into the future together./"*

Stunned, Harry stared at Pyrrha, not understanding the import of the words she was saying, or the term in Greek she used for the word he translated to 'shield'. But he understood this was something extremely important, something with historical influence perhaps.

Whatever it was, it was obviously momentous, something they would have to talk about later. Right now though, he had to respond, and putting his lessons at Lighthouse in Greek, he spoke in the same language, knowing that was the right choice as Pyrrha jade eyes lit up in delight. He laid the Arc blade flat against one shoulder and then the other like a king knighting someone in front of his court as he spoke, conscious of Tia still standing at his side, the only real witness to what was going on.

Although he was fumbling, Harry had two lifetimes of reading novels to fall back on, and tried to make his response both formal and personal. Judging by the smile that matched her eyes in delight it seemed to work for Pyrrha, especially when he used the same term she had. *"/And I, Hadrian Arc, do accept thy oath as my órkos aspídas. For your service, you have my loyalty. For giving me your strength you may call upon mine. For binding your future to me, for taking my cause as your own, I swear it will always be just and honorable. Let us together become a wall to shield those who come after."*

With that, Harry pulled Caliburn back (and was it just him, or was it gleaming a bit more than it should be in the sun's light?) and slid the sword into its scabbard, winking at Pyrrha. "Now get up, Pyrrha. And when we have time, we're going to be talking about this."

Smiling happily, Pyrrha pushed to her feet, staring into Harry's eyes. "I look forward to the grand things we will do together, my king." She then moved to his side, smacking her hip against his. "And we can talk about that on our date too."

From one side, Tia watched on, somewhat amused by this. She wasn't jealous or thinking of doing the same thing as Pyrrha of course. Why would she need to give an oath like that? After all, she would always be with with her brother by his side. An oath to that effect would be silly. Although the way Harry was smiling at Pyrrha made Tia a bit uncomfortable, like a roiling in her stomach for some reason.

Pyrrha's voice hadn't carried, thankfully, and when Nora shouted at them to come over and join the hug pile, the moment ended. Harry flung an arm over Pyrrha's shoulders, and the three of them moved to join the others as the bullhead came down towards them.

scene break

The teens caught up in the near-disaster were returned to Beacon. Those who had lived through it had, perforce, passed initiation, which was made clear to them during a brief group meeting with Goodwitch and Ozpin. They both also apologized for the slow response to the fight that the twelve teens had been involved in, having prioritized saving the other students in trouble.

What wasn't forthcoming from either was an apology for the sheer number of Grimm or an explanation of where they came from. In Ozpin's words the first was actually a very good lesson. "As Hunters, you must always be aware that the Grimm can swarm at any time, and that some are intelligent enough to gather hordes to themselves if they so desire. This Cenitaur was one such, and you defeated it with minimal help from others. Take that accomplishment to heart and this initiation as a learning experience and become stronger for it."

Harry noticed the lack of explanation of where the Grimm had come from with some annoyance. After all, he doubted the Grimm were so numerous around Beacon, or else Ozpin and the rest of the staff were very obviously not doing their job right. Still, when Goodwitch announced they and the other initiates would be allowed a shower and a small meal, all thoughts of pressing Ozpin on that score exited his mind as every girl there cheered to the rafters.

What they weren't allowed was time to get some real naps in. Well, bar Ren, who Harry had to rouse out of the shower stall where he'd fallen asleep. But not an hour after returning to Beacon the twelve teens who had fought together were back in the auditorium. There, they joined the rest of the incoming freshman class, another twenty-four students. Many of them

looked battered and a few had casts or other signs of injuries, while one or two were still suffering from aftershocks from the danger they had faced.

“How many aren’t here?” Harry murmured to Pyrrha and Ren, the two who he assumed would have noticed the number of initiates the night before.

Looking around, Ren answered. “We’re missing fourteen, maybe sixteen. And I saw a few caskets waiting by the cliff. Not that many though, I would assume most were just too injured to continue their Hunting career at present.”

“Does that make it any better?” Harry scoffed.

“No,” Ren and Pyrrha said in unison before Ren went on. “Still, to be a Hunter is to walk with death. If they did not realize that journey started now, then they were not ready for it in the first place.”

That was a harsh assessment, but Harry could see Ren’s point. He didn’t agree with it, but he could understand it, and fell silent, sitting down next to Tia as Pyrrha took the chair on his other side, separating him from the other man. Instantly Tia leaned her head on his shoulders, saying nothing but closing her eyes, yawning mightily.

It had been a very long day, yet Harry could not help but think that this whole thing could have been handled better. *This and your initial speech makes me want to give you a strike one, Ozpin. Hopefully Goodwitch and the rest of this school will start redeeming itself soon, or else I might pull me and Tia... and Pyrrha now, out and ask Arturia if that apprenticeship offer is still open.*

Leaning his head against the top of his twin’s head, Harry watched the ceremony, tuning out Ozpin’s speech for the most part, until it came to announce teams. One group of four after another, Ozpin called the initiates up, formally announcing their team creation and who the leader was each time. Thankfully Harry’s initial thoughts on the relics had been right: there weren’t any pawn relics. Indeed, most were nonsensical things: twin socks, vinyl record albums and so forth.

Unfortunately, also as Harry had predicted, the chess pieces did indeed directly correspond to what teams they would be on. Apacci had taken both queen pieces, while Ruby had grabbed up a pony as she put it. This meant Ruby was on a team with her sister, Blake, and Weiss.

“Schnee? What is one of those upright so-and-so’s doing here?” Harry questioned.

“From what she and I spoke of before you showed up, I rather think she is here to get away from her family’s image,” Pyrrha whispered in his ear. Her breath against his ear made her in turn shivering a little, as he surreptitiously reached beside him, and tapped her thigh with his fingers. She smiled at the touch, pleased with it and the fact Harry had been so discrete.

But Harry's attention came back to the stage as Yang and Blake were called up. *Belladonna?! What the hell? What is, you know what, never mind I don't want to know. No wonder she looks like Ghira though. That will be interesting to tell Dad about. Who knew I'd be meeting the daughter of the guy who helped us get those weapons from Vacuo here in Beacon?*

Harry continued to watch as team RWBY was named and Ruby made the leader, Weiss did not look at all happy, something Harry could identify with. *I'll be the first to say that Ruby did great out there, especially leading her team against the Greater Nevermore. But she's two years younger than her teammates, and leadership isn't just for during combat. You need to be able to ride herd on your team during classes, make certain they are keeping up their school work, and be aware of any social issues they might be facing. I don't see Ruby as being able to do much of that.*

When it became their turn to be called up, Harry, Pyrrha Ren and Nora marched up to the stage, with Harry sighing as he looked back over to his sister. After his shower, Harry had tried to exchange his peace with that of Tia, Mila having been given one of Apacci's queen pieces.

But Ozpin and Goodwitch both said that was impossible. If they allowed the two siblings to do that kind of thing, they would have to open up the opportunity for everyone, which would lead to far too much confusion and paperwork. "And besides Mister Arc, do recall that part of being a Hunter or Huntress is the ability to work with other people regardless of background or who you might wish to work with. Tia in particular I feel needs quite a bit of education in working with other people besides yourself," Ozpin said at the time, and Harry wished he could have disagreed with him, but he couldn't.

*Still, I'll wager if we're forced to spend too much time away from one another, one or both of us is going to start showing withdrawal issues,* Harry thought ruefully while Tia simply stared back at him from her chair, ignoring Mila's attempts to get her attention.

The fact that he was named the leader of team ANVL (Anvil) barely registered to Harry, having anticipated that. The slap on his back from Pyrrha brought him back to reality, and Harry turned, winking at Pyrrha, and exchanging a fist bump with Ren, while Nora, who had no sense of propriety whatsoever, pulled both boys into a hug as they left the stage. "Woo yeah this worked out perfectly. I've got my bestest buddy Ren, and our new best bud Harry and the awesome Pyrrha. That should be our team name, Team Awesome. Who cares that it doesn't have any of our initials in it! Well besides yours Harry, but A is such an easy letter to use."

Harry and Ren worked together to quiet her down and get her moving back to their chairs while Pyrrha giggled in the background. All of them were ignoring the looks they were getting from the rest of the freshman class as they sat back down, with Pyrrha very firmly taking the same seat as before to Harry's right. Those looks contained a multitude of thoughts and rumors, and right now, none of them cared enough to try and decode it all.



Sitting back down, the quartet watched as Tia, her partner and the odd duo of Apacci and Sung-Sun were called up. "Sung-sun Greenscale, Apache Topaz, Mila Rose, Tia Arc. You all retrieved the Queen pieces, and will be formed into team ARGT (Argent). Led by... Tia Arc."

While the others congratulated her, Tia simply stared at Ozpin, shook her head once, then turning away, uncaring of his suddenly nonplussed look or the audience as she returned to her own seat next to Harry. She then leaned against his shoulder, her eyes closing as she once again ignored the rest of the group around them.

Chuckling quietly Harry put in arm around her shoulders, kissing her on the forehead once more, as he whispered, "Don't worry, we'll talk about it later." Harry knew that Tia had no desire whatsoever to be a leader, she left that up to Arturia and Harry, and their parents of course. But mainly Harry. And she had no desire to change that.

Even as he comforted his sister, Harry watched the rest of the freshman being paired up into teams. There were only a few other mixed teams, mostly teams were all boys or girls, with only two other teams having one boy each beyond his team and Tia's. One team had one girl, who looked quite apprehensive about things, but Harry was appeased by the small nod Goodwitch gave her, indicating that Goodwitch would speak to her later.

After the ceremony finished, Harry was not surprised to find that the three teams who'd fought together against the massive Grimm swarm almost automatically joined together as they left the auditorium. He could see that many of them were stumbling in their places, and moved over, helping Weiss along with one hand, and Sung-Sun with the other. Yang was already carrying a nearly comatose Ruby, who had crashed the instant they had left the stage, all of the adrenaline and anxiety having built up within her leaving Ruby all at once.

Looking around at them all, Harry suggested, "I suggest we all get to sleep right now. None of us are at our best right now. We can put off any serious talk about our teams or anything else, and to my mind, that includes the whole leadership thing." Nora made to protest, but Harry held up a hand. "I'm not speaking of our team in particular Nora, but I know Tia isn't comfortable in the leadership role. And who knows, maybe one of her teammates has already been trained as a leader or is willing to try. The same could go for RWBY."

The elegant woman that Harry was leading by a hand on her shoulder mumbled something at that, but several loud yawns from the rest of the group overrode whatever she was going to say. Weiss however was also nodding firmly, while Ruby looked both apprehensive, but determined under her exhaustion. From her place on Yang's back, which obviously wasn't doing her leadership credentials any good.

"Now, does everyone have the room assignments?" When they all mumbled agreement, Harry led the way across the campus towards the dormitories, grimacing slightly at the fact that they were heading towards dorms rather than houses as he and Tia had requested. *Still, maybe*

*they'll be nice, and maybe we'll be able to move into one of the houses in a few days once we get the rest of our teams to agree.*

Mila and the rest of Team Argent broke off first, but Tia ignored her partner and the other two, continuing after Harry. So tired were they the rest of the group didn't notice. Soon after that, team RWBY splitting off to one side of the hall, and team Anvil entering the other with Tia entering directly after them.

Ren moved towards one bed, falling into it and grasping the pillow to his head as if it was a long lost friend. He was snoring within seconds, not even having bothered to change. Nora moved quickly as well as Harry became aware of Tia's presence, claiming the bed nearest Ren, darting in and out of the bathroom so fast it looked as if she had borrowed Ruby's Semblance for a second. That meant the bed nearest the windows was Harry's, and he moved towards it, with Tia alongside him, pulling the blinds closed.

For her part, the implications of sharing a room with Harry had caused Pyrrha's brain functions to shut down for a moment, and she entered the bathroom, changing automatically. Coming back her eyes widened as Tia, who had seemingly changed along with Harry into their bed cloths, entered the same bed as Harry, getting underneath the covers and pulling Harry to her side.

Harry's arms went around her automatically, and he shrugged his shoulders when Pyrrha stared at him. "We told you several times over the scroll that Tia liked to sleep in the same bed with me occasionally. After two days of not seeing one another and in a new place, I figure it is allowed right now."

Pyrrha's lips quirked that, and she poked Tia in the cheek. "Just so long as you realize there will be times when you're not allowed to do this, okay?" She leaned in and then whispered, "I'm not going to argue that you and Harry can spend time together, I'm not going to be an overbearing girlfriend like that. But I do demand some cuddle time of my own, okay?"

Tia looked up at her, then with a shrug, pulled open the covers. "Join us?"

That caused Pyrrha to blush almost as red as her hair, while Harry's eyes widened in shock, his own flush visible. Shaking her head Pyrrha hastily moved to the other bed nearby. "T, that would be quite a few steps too far right now, but um, thank you for the invitation. J, just remember that for the future, Tia."

"Your loss," Tia answered, then closed her eyes and leaned her head against Harry's shoulder. Harry shrugged apologetically as he looked over her at Pyrrha, then held up a fist in the air. "Rock paper scissors to who has to shut off the light?"

His question was answered by Pyrrha who unerringly launching a small metal ballpoint pen at the light fixture, hitting it and dousing the room into darkness. Harry laughed at that quietly, as he leaned back, closing his eyes and hugging Tia to his side, his hand stroking her

sleepwear down to the small of her back as his eyes closed. Today had been a very long day, and tomorrow they would start lessons in Beacon. *I wonder what they're going to be like...*

### **End Chapter**

I tried something a bit different here, not giving as many details about the fighting but the overall feel/tactics. I felt with Harry using his magic sparingly and with the need in the future to show sparring scenes in Goodwitch's class, there was no need to give a blow by blow. Hope you enjoyed it nonetheless.