A Harvest of Dust
by Teslashark

Summary

In which a RWBY fan is dropped into Remnant, becoming Amber. She will survive impossible odds, bring hope to the most desperate, and lead an unlikely resistance to end a well entrenched threat. All powered by confusion and morbid curiosity!

Notes

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It’s what AM, the what is gone, the what’s still warm.

The time is indeterminate, my orientation is gone, the atmosphere is still warm, so is the horse beneath me.

I’m having a rapid fire question-and-answer session inside my mind because I’m just dropped into the middle of nowhere onto a horse. Describe everything again: The time is at dusk, the weather is overcast, my surroundings look like some rural trail with fences on both sides, myself – it’s hard to describe but it seems at least I’m not wearing what I had on me anymore. Who the hell wears a hooded cape today outside of a cosplay photoshoot? Hoodies exist for a reason!

I reached around me and found three things: An apple, a telescopic baton, and a… Smartphone with a transparent center and can expand sideways?

I know. It’s a Scroll (trademark), widely used by the folks of RWBY. This little thing actually works. The system is in English, but not like anything I’ve seen before. No signal, I noticed.

This is not a prank. I am in RWBY.

“All gods above and below!” I muttered in a voice that belonged to Laura Bailey in my own world as I use the Scroll’s frontal camera as a mirror. The horse is an obvious hint by itself, but there it is, now I am Amber, surname unknown and probably not written at any point in the creative process. Now looking back, I originally look like Amber to a degree, because we are both very generic looking.

It should be pretty close to the time where Amber is surrounded and soul-drained by the villains. It looks positively like the same scene. Of course, things look real instead of 3D. Holy shit, the sky is so dark in “real life” it’s only brighter than my future.

This is what I get for being a RWBY fan but not buying enough merchandise, is it? Well, looters can’t be choosers, at least I’m not being thrown into the coffin machine as I enter this world, the Rooster Teeth creative team be thanked.

I have answers to almost every question I have, but the thing is I don’t have solutions. Being Amber itself is an enormous problem. People bent on harvesting my soul is practically within spitting distance, as my horse goes forward.

I’m a travel writer! I review bus depots across the Euroasian continent for a living, for fuck’s sake. And then, I’m suddenly a soon-to-be-reincarnated god of agriculture, yippee kee yoo!

I’ve read once in the past there are three rules of survival if you just have been inserted into a work of fiction, cast into stone by some of the brightest minds among the fanfiction world:
1. Be prepared if you are not the only person not from this world;
2. Be prepared if the work you has been inserted into is not the original version but a spinoff or worse, a fanfic;
3. Be quick to make peace with your character’s personal relations, from loved ones to sworn nemesis.
These rules used to only apply to fanfiction writers, and I wasn’t one. Now, they appear more solid and pressing than ever.

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I tell the horse to stop and stepped down. Glad I’ve dealt with horses before, when I was travelling in Inner Mongolia.

My first act of revenge against anything responsible is to try out the supposedly great season magic on the apple I carry on me. I am totally a fan of Emerald when I’m just a random audience member, but I’m sure the apple isn’t enough to be a bribe. I pulled the telescopic baton with dust crystals out. One slash with the blue end successfully created a layer of frost on the apple. Well, that’s something. It seems I can freeze tree leaves like in the show too, but I don’t want to have a high profile.

Can I set things on fire without using the Dust crystal? The apple on the ground didn’t even turn a bit warmer after I threw a dozen or so thoughts related to fire and Cinder towards it. The horse watches patiently. Is fire even a power used by people other than Cinder?

Actually, what is my semblance? I think Ozpin mentioned in Volume 3 that a Semblance is different from the seasonal power. How about levitation then? It doesn’t work! Can I lift myself up at least? With a ton of focus and meditation. I sighed after the third try, since I don’t know what should I think to trigger anything. No memory of being Amber at all.

A couple of minutes later, I give up trying to look for an answer. The semblance just didn’t show up. This is clearly not my day.

I roasted the apple with the baton and began munching on it. It seemed a bit riper than when I took it out, despite having been frozen a bit ago. Least I can do is not die starving.

I climb back onto the horse and weighed between going forward to reason with the conspiracy and turning back to make my way to some authority. Will they listen? Do I have anything to offer in exchange for my second-hand life? How should I handle the fight if it’s inevitable and what will happen if Qrow hear me offer terms of surrendering? Will the Grimm bug transfer me to Cinder along with the power? Better play it safe and leave any awkward conversation for meeting Ozpin.

I tell the horse to turn back. There should be some kind of settlement nearby, judging from the fences.

I went on backtracking the curved trail where I came from for quite a while, between checking my Scroll’s contacts and scanning around. Amber doesn’t seem to keep many people on her phonebook. Then, I saw a signpost pointing the way to some city belonging to Mistral. Well, at least now I know whether it’s in Vale or Mistral the ambush happened.

A few minutes later, I come to a crossroad; A policeman of some kind stands in one branch. He sees me, gestures towards me and blows onto a whistle. His getup looks a bit different from the police in Volume 4, more like a historical French or German policeman – fancy uniform, tall officer cap, even a metal throatplate saying “Feldjager” like those World War Two German field policemen had. He also has a white armband on him, same as the Haven students.

I pause after climbing down from the horse. Something about this scene seems a bit familiar…

Oh. Shit, I know.

“Fuck you, Mercury!”
As I curse, I try to climb back onto the horse, but the horse reaches the same “screw it, I’m out” conclusion I have when a gunshot rings out. He jumps, shakes me off, and ran away with his backside towards me.

I stand up, propping myself up with the baton as it expands. What should I do? I’m reasonably good with a gun on the range, but I don’t know how to fight. Not to say, all I have right now is a magical staff without a users’ manual.

Emerald has decloaked Mercury when I’m up. Neither her nor Cinder is in sight, but I guess I must switch back to plan A.

““I know who you are and what you want! Let’s talk!”

Nobody answers, Mercury backs up. This is going pear shaped in record speed.

I back up in response, waving the baton and trying to conjure a wind in anticipation for the explosive arrows.

The arrows come before the slightest hint of a breeze, but at least I manage to knock one off course using the baton itself. They all exploded away from me, not trapping me inside. That’s an improvement compared to the show! Seems I have to make the dialogue mostly physical – it will be much uglier and one sided than Harry Potter fencing Voldemort, both using shaving razors tied to wands.

Emerald and Cinder showed themselves. I shout at Cinder:

“Give me a minute for fuck’s sake! You have meddled with the primal forces of nature, and you’re doing fine! Just listen to me, alright?”

They didn’t attack me outright. Bluffing isn’t going to help much when I’m up against three people all known for perceptiveness and spy craft, so I took a deep breath and cut to the collaboration terms part:

“Okay, I’ll tell you what I offer. I’ll do your work. You’re not going to like being me, for sure. I don’t like being myself, it sucks working for your enemies, so you could have just asked. Just let me walk, give me a number, and we can talk on burner phones… Scrolls when nobody is watching.”

“That’s pathetic.”

I agree with Cinder’s evaluation. Emerald raises her gun, and I realize I haven’t even tested if I can take a beating before running into them. The explosive arrow attack doesn’t feel like much only because it’s way off course, compared to what happened in the show. I don’t know whether I can summon my Aura up at will or have to grin and bear it like Jaune at the beginning of Volume 1. This is just getting worse.

Channeling my best Roman Torchwick impression, I light both Dust crystals on the magic staff up and thrash the fire end in Emerald’s general direction. All hope lies in buying enough time for Qrow to show up, at this point. Though, I’m still not completely discouraged from selling my confusion and apparent weakness.

Mercury charge up and I manage to club him in the stomach with the ice Dust crystal before he kicks upward. My mind focus on freezing him onto the staff and use him as hostage. Scratch that, Emerald starts firing indiscriminately right away. It’s no teamwork-of-the-month, but she landed the majority of shots on me.
I scram sideways and try to herd Mercury along. He kicks the staff away but the fire end lights up his trousers. It doesn’t bother him any bit! The Dust blasts are mitigated by my Aura, at least, but I have no guarantee of taking it any longer. Time to stall and/or surrender again:

“Cinder, Emerald! Fucking knock it off, you have no use for my power. I wanna help. Just listen, alright?”

“How low have the Maidens fallen. I don’t know how you caught wind of us, but you have no chance of halting our plan.” She walks up but doesn’t order her underlings to stand down.

“Cinder. I’m not an enemy! You don’t need my powers. You need what I know for every fucking thing you do in the next whole year. Your soul bug isn’t going to transfer my memories to you!”

Emerald and Mercury look confused hearing me mentioning the soul bug, staring at each other and somewhere behind me.

Brilliant.

Yeah, I’m calling their plan brilliant. Fuck. The Cinder walking towards me is a projection, it’s a no brainer. I make no effort to dodge because I’m sure she has guided arrows. I just turned sideways and said:

“You’ll regret this next time you see me.”

The arrow hits precisely in my spine. What a cliché that can totally be avoided if she is more open to negotiation and if I have any damned idea of how to do the entire “keeping myself alive in Remnant” routine.

Now my Aura breaks. From what I understand when Emerald shot at me, the thing distributes incoming force and injuries evenly to a degree that I can regenerate back non-sustained damage. The arrow overloads it. It hurts like a son of a gun but I’m still totally lucid, sustained by morbid curiosity and paralyzing numbness.

The real Cinder walks up to me preparing the glove containing that soul bug. Emerald and Mercury props me up like in the show. Wait a minute, where the hell is Qrow slacking off?

She says in a stylistically pretentious voice: “You are a disgrace to everything you stand for. I don’t know if you will be around by then, but I’ll show you how to do things right.”

I’m interested in neither screaming nor acting defiant. However, I am annoyed beyond thinking anything related to my approaching doom: “I want to meet you. I know your names, I know your plan, shouldn’t you take a fucking hint? Besides, you’re not the only one having a thing against the world.”

It’s surprising that I can still shout coherently without gasping for air. Either my Aura is doing something despite being emptied, or I subconsciously overloaded something myself. Please don’t be the latter.

“Yes, we could have met under other terms, but there are never that many choices in the world. Though, you can tell me what do you hope for.”

She looks aside. Well, the portal on her glove is now open, here comes the Grimm bug. Where the fuck is Qrow?

“Fuck it! I forgive you. Just do your part!” I place all my bets on the bug transferring my soul to
her somehow, it’s even more unfair to Amber, but I can’t do anything, “You’re gonna hate this later.”

I once almost had both paint and paint remover spilled onto my face when I was helping at somewhere. That time I blocked the liquids with the back of my right hand, only piece of exposed skin that got hit was on the wrist, but it sucks. What I’m saying is, the black gel spit out by that bug hurts just like that but it felt like a sucking vacuum.

…Wait, why am I still able to think, at all? I open my mouth again.

“What the…”

Then, a metal glare fills my sight. The air displaced by Qrow’s sword scatters the severed black gel, before it can evaporate.

I watch my rescue with a detached curiosity that I should not describe to Qrow or even Cinder. For no apparent reason, I can just feel so relaxed and take a mental back seat. Let Qrow do all the driving, so to speak.

After he hauled me over such a distance that I began to wonder if he can simply drag me along while in bird mode, Qrow stops at the outskirts of a small farming town.

“…Mr. Qrow Branwen?” I ask, mostly to test if I still am alive or still have control of my head. Check, check.

“No, my name is Bran Corvus. Local Huntsman. You aren’t in any shape to talk, kid, just hold on and I’ll get help.” He sets me down sideways without breaking the arrow.

So he has an alias, probably because he’s too famous for all the investigation he does on the side. I’ll still show off my knowledge of his world, though. Get some use out of my consciousness! Maybe I don’t even sound hurt enough, because the numbness from that arrow is still present.

“I know who you are, Mr. Branwen. Teacher at Signal combat school in Vale, running side jobs for Beacon. You’re some kind of folk hero.”

“Fuck, just call me Qrow. Anything else?” He sighs, hard.

“You can turn into a bird. I don’t know what’s the scientific term, but you just did that to get to me.”

Qrow stares at me for an additional instance, completely speechless, and then walks off towards the nearest building muttering something that doesn’t seem to have an end. I’m glad he isn’t asking me anything, especially related to the fight I just lost.

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Qrow came back with some medicine and instruments to remove the arrow and treat the wound. Despite how complex the arrowhead looks, it didn’t tear out a big chunk or cause too much bleeding as Qrow dug it out carefully. However, he sounds concerned when he asks me after applying the last layer of coagulant sticker:

“You feeling any better? Your Aura doesn’t seem to be doing much, normally regeneration should have kicked in.”

“No, does that look like a normal fight between Hunters? You’d better get me to a real hospital.”
I don’t even have full control over my arms, despite the arrow hitting pretty low in the spine. And then, I realized something I wanted to ask a long time ago back when I was on Earth, “Why can’t you slice that… Whoever is that jackass, cut her entire arm off?”

“My handlers told me about a few theories on how Maiden Power transfers, you’ve heard them for sure, if you know so much.” He continues after a mocking pause, “Don’t know which theory to trust, I can’t risk killing both of you and let the power go who knows where.”

With that said, he picks me up again and starts moving towards the center of the village. We come to a stop at a blocky, fairly modern looking building, standing out among the mix of fantasy European and southeast Asian houses.

Qrow budges the front door open and shouted: “We’re back! Name is Corvus, the one with the horse accident.”

The clerk doesn’t make any comment on Qrow just casually wandering in holding an injured woman, blood visible on both persons, at all. It’s not really a scene that can be covered with a heads up that just says “horse accident” but he didn’t bat an eye.

“There’s a big fat fucking difference between hospital and hostel, you know?” I groan at him. The pain in my voice is genuine – as exhausted and roughed up as I am, I will choose just sitting on a bench and wait for some cross country bus over staying at a hostel in the middle of nowhere. I don’t care how much it reminds me of modern Earth, I just know too many true stories that suggest horror movies like Psycho and Hostel are grounded so deep in reality. On top of that, the staff giving a “same shit at the front desk” face isn’t giving me any faith in Remnant’s shady motels. Wait, what if this is regular shit for Remnant people indeed?

“It’s an inn! It’s family owned and artisanal! I support every worthy small business, you know?” I can see Qrow feels very insulted, “I’ve already called a plane to get us, but they can only get here tomorrow.”

I figure the first half of his reply is another way to say the place is certified to sell hard liquor, so I want him to clarify the second: “What are we supposed to do here? Can’t we call an ambulance and get to somewhere with a hospital, or hire a truck?”

He grabs the key handed over by the clerk but didn’t say anything, only stares at me in a way that’s half irritated and half “kid, this is what gets you into trouble”.

The room is fine in most aspects, with everything expected in a motel or bread-and-breakfast twin room. It even has a hologram television! Then, I remembered that on Remnant, even trailer park boys can afford one of those, judging from that scene in Volume 3.

After propping me up on a bed, Qrow throws me a tiny plastic bottle along with a bottle of drinking water to me, then walks towards the door: “Remember to take a handful of this if you feel like you’re going to nod off.”

“What’s this?”

Qrow walks back and shuts the door behind him: “Metabolism regulator pills. You haven’t seen any on the black market? Atlas medical science, this wonderdrug makes your body forgo number-ones or -twos, and focus on regenerating your aura at double capacity. Keeps you awake for hours too, I got this bottle from a jock cheating an endurance run.”

I am overjoyed by the unexpected piece of disturbing Remnant backstory. Forget how many hours
“Okay, Qrow, would you please check what they have on TV right now? I need the shittiest and
bloodiest entertainment available, to unwind good.”

“Really?” Qrow sighs as he turns the television on, “Let me see… They have some movies on
demand, some documentaries, don’t know what’s your standards though. You sure you can handle
slasher movies this early after getting sucker punched the fuck out, kid?”

“You know taking artificial testosterone makes the human body stops producing it? I’m trying to
help, producing less negative emotions for Grimms to smell.” The second half is bullshit, though
it’s one of my headcanons I’m willing to have someone knowledgeable to disprove, “Just get me
something bad and grab as many history documentaries as you can. I’ll pay you later.”

Qrow either doesn’t care or doesn’t find my guess wrong: “Fine, have it your way. Oh, Beacon
pays for everything, I don’t care what Glynda says.”

He smacks on the remote control randomly for a minute or so, throws it at me, then heads out to
grab his long-waited drink. I gulp down half of the pills inside the bottle, to prepare for the bad
movies ahead.

The first few entries on the playlist are a teen action series under a special promo discount, about
what life should be like inside a combat academy according to non-Hunters. I can already guess
how bad they are just based on this premise, and the charmingly brutal titles cemented my vision:
**Blood School: Snitches get Stiches**  
**Blood School 2: The Backbone of Education**  
**Blood School 3: Professor, Jury and Executioner**  
**Blood School 4: Graduation Exam by Firing Squad**

One thing I noted before pressing play is, the title, *Blood School*, is written in both English and
Chinese. The pun on “blood” and “learning” only works in Chinese, so it proves those people with
Chinese and Japanese sounding names on Remnant shares something more from their Earth
counterparts. And then there’s the Chinese text for *Graduation Exam by Firing Squad*. Pure
unfiltered Chinese teen humor.

A few minutes into *Blood School: Snitches get Stiches*, Qrow comes back with a few bottles and a
sandwich in hand. He sits down, visibly concerned by my petrified cringe-glee as I sat watching a
team assignment ceremony even crazier than Ruby’s: “Look, you told me you want the cheapest
action flicks available.”

“No…” I built a dramatic pause for maximum punchline delivery, “This. Is. Gorgeous.”

“This is what people think when they hear about Hunters! Hunters walking the tightrope like you
and me!” He points furiously at the hologram screen, where students are forced to fight Beowolves
inside cubicles, using only sharpened ink pens.

I muster all the strength up to make a shush gesture, and probe him: “You, not me. How much did
Ozpin tell you about my upbringing anyway?”

“Nothing. What’s it like? Fuck, I still can’t believe my ancestors died on three sides in the Great
War so artists can survive to make this kind of shit, kid.” Qrow takes a long drink. I suppose the
“three sides” he mentioned means his bird tribe acted as its own faction during the war?
“Been on the run for longer than I can care, there always are dipshits like those you saw. Doing odd jobs with my power here and there.” I make it sound bleak but ambiguous then cut back to about Blood School, “Since you saved me, they’ll go on to make shitty movies for another day.”

“Don’t try me.”

The movie comes to an obligatory team building melodrama scene. This might be a good time to dig into why Ruby and Qrow use crosses as their symbols:

“Mind telling me what’s the story behind your…”

He cuts in before I finish: “This? Oh, one of my ancestors, married into the tribe about two hundred years ago, used it as his personal emblem. He’s the freak in his generation far as I know, says it’s given to us by an angel, or an alien, or something.”

“That’s… Something for sure!”

This could be the most groundbreaking worldbuilding trivia in the show for fans developing all kinds of theories. Just mentioned in a sourcebook or an interview is good enough. The catch is, it doesn’t matter to me anymore, for obvious reasons.

I resume watching silently.

“You’re right! It is pretty relaxing, Kid.” Qrow remarks when the end titles show up, “Oh, wait, this ending song is sung by Weiss Schnee. Season of Lost. Worthless snob for a worthless movie, even the lyrics have stupid grammar, but back when it came out every kid in Signal uses it for ringtone. Here it comes!”

When I wake up from my nap, summer is here
This is what, I have expected
When another summer is coming, another spring has gone
This is what, I have expected
I lost the figures, when I reach into my memories
Where are you, the ones who just cry, as times goes on
You go further, I’m left here, to seek the wind of change

The season, the season of lost
I seek you, with only a song
Let tears, let tears run by the sands of time
When will the sadness be gone?

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading!
This story uses some background elements from RainStorm4’s story "Redemption" on FFNet, for instance Qrow’s alias. Please check that story out!
The opening sentence is a reference to Golden Earring’s song "Twilight Zone". There will be many 1970s-80s rock references to come...
Amber X Qrow is not the official ship of this story, I don’t have an idea yet.
Chinese Puns: "Blood School" = 血校, "Graduation Exam by Firing Squad" = 毙业考试
The ending song is written (and composed and sung) by a friend of me who's cool with me using his lyrics, though its creation predates RWBY much. Still it sounds like something Weiss will sing, though. You can hear it at: https://soundcloud.com/jiaqing-jacky-zhao/season-of-lost-2012
I regret a lot of things on the second day arriving on Remnant, looking back on the first. I probably didn’t follow the checklist for entering works of fiction. Well, not much yesterday can convince me I’m in real trouble. Cross off plot shield, that’s something I didn’t bring. I enjoy being audience and smart talking everything in RWBY when it aired. For right now – well, even I come across anything cathartic I doubt there will be any need to write it down.

“…The General-Secretary of Vale at that time proposed to change the continent’s name from Sanus to Vytal, saying that moral sanitation implied by the name Sanus is a concept that…”

Binge watching anything while drugged and kept awake is bad. The past few hours have been educational. These two are not mutually exclusive! A few things I picked up before losing track and dozing off include:

- Movies and most documentaries use CGI grimm. Too much risk letting real ones loose on highly stressed cast and crew, of course.
- Faunus supremacists within the White Fang believe that all of mankind on Remnant is destined to have animal organs and eventually become shapeshifters.
- The Schnee business empire provides all real dust used in the Blood School series, as well as Atlesian Knight-130 robots used in the fourth movie’s titutar firing squad.
- The members of Sun’s team except him cameoed in that movie too, along with Pyrrha to form a team, they’re sponsored by something I can’t remember. No difference between child star and star on Remnant! Tons of student actors smoke, is there no legal smoking age in Mistral?

“You’ve been awake longer than I have, don’t you?” Qrow asks me as he walks into the room with two Atlas officers, shutting down the TV. He’s right, I have been up for the most part, and blacking out instead of falling asleep for the rest. I haven’t gained any rest, but there is enough curiosity and inertia from the pills to keep me up for a bit more.

“Uh huh.”

“Let’s go, the plane’s here.” Qrow gestures for the Atlas men to move me onto a stretcher.

I still can’t move anything below my waist, as I expected, and my arms feel the same, maybe even a bit more numb.

We move to the outskirts of the town, the morning sky still dim. No residents seem to be out at this hour. A Bullhead VTOL stands on a cleared out plot of land, its engines still running. Some Atlesian guards are patrolling around, together with Mistral policemen.

I realize I forgot to tell Qrow about Mercury and Emerald using a police disguise yesterday, then struggle to hold down the “oh, fuck” in the back of my throat. Qrow sees my worried look, and shrugs:

“It’s fine, Ozpin told them you’re in some business between Atlas and Haven. They aren’t asking anything.”

The problem is them not asking anything, Qrow. I open my mouth to try telling him so, but the
drug left me parched.

“Haven.” I cough, retch and heave, “Those motherfuckers. They’re Haven. They’ll come back
dressed as Hav… Fuck them. Their names are…”

Qrow answers with a loud sniff. Maybe he thinks I’m biased against Haven, maybe he thinks I’m
justified to have a bias.

“Worry about Haven later. We’re going straight to Atlas, they have the right things to fix you up.”

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On the Bullhead VTOL I fell asleep almost immediately once they fastened my stretcher onto the
cabin wall. This must be a skill passed from my previous life on Earth, sleeping on extremely
turbulent plane and boat rides.

When I wake up again, I’m propped up on some machine in a high-tech looking operating room
surrounded by glass walls. A respiration mask on my face. More than a dozen surgeons and techies
in white coats stand behind the walls, every one of them wearing a surgical mask for extra
precaution. Qrow is nowhere to be seen, although I guess none of us present can risk him binge
drinking medical alcohol.

I stretch my neck around to have a better look. A metallic skeletal figure is suspended upright by a
 crane frame, with many cables connecting to myself and the device I rest on. That robot should be
Penny.

I clears my throat, one of the men behind the glass looks up and walks closer. I can make
something out on his face – a shiny patch and a weary, no-nonsense look – he’s James Ironwood!
The doctors pause whatever on their hand and turn their heads at him for an instruction, he nods
and presses on an intercom speaker.

“Welcome to Atlas. You wore the anesthetic off on your own, but we suggest you keep still.” He
then points at a heavyset man leaning on a computer console, “This is Major Polendina, our
leading researcher on Aura construction. We’re doing our best to help you, it may take an
indeterminate amount of time but there is no place safer on Remnant than here.”

“Crank you.” I meant to say thank you, but I’m still numb and parched. Major Polendina should be
the scientist who built Penny, makes sense if he’s an army officer too.

“Major, do you mind briefing our patient here? Amber, be careful, there still are some needles we
put into your spine.”

“Her Aura – your Aura, appears incomplete. Its strength is capped out at a point nowhere close to a
Hunter’s capacity, even less than an untrained civilian’s, do you understand? It cannot reach your
lower spine and extremities below the wound to do its work. This is a very rare condition, but
fortunately you are not deteriorating.”

That’s not reassuring at all.

Polendina continues: “because you are the special priority case, we have hooked you to our
experimental android to map your Aura along with your nervous system. We also have a rough
plan to see if we can use our experience in creating an artificial Aura to rebuild yours.”

“Thank you, Major.”
“Major! …And General Ironwood!”

Ironwood and I end up thanking him at the same time, me with more enthusiasm. By all means, I’m as lucky as I can be for a chance to get the Aura and soul problem sorted out. Ironwood in the series left me with a positive impression, that no matter how limited his scope is, he will do his best to help if Ozpin shows him the point. He is only set back by Ozpin not being too suited in showing points, maybe.

“It might take a while, like the General said, but we have already built an Aura from scratch, we can rebuild yours back too.” Polendina nods, gives Ironwood a look, and then steps back to his workstation.

I lay back times more relaxed, musing to myself over how the more religious or mystic minded people of Remnant will think about Ironwood trying to protect the proof of a creation myth using electricity and math. Like Clarke said back on Earth, sufficiently advanced science is magic itself! It sure seems fitting to an agnostic such as myself, returning the ancient world’s favor, one kind of hard work in exchange of another. There should be a chance to deal with the “dropped into another planet” part, though I can see by ethical obligation or by plot inertia I need to be a part in the protagonist group’s action first.

I check that nobody is looking at me, then I grin like Weiss in that one stop frame scene in Volume 1. Things are Looking up!

And then I hear the chanting, the chanting being monogrammed into my brain with a white hot chisel.

Return the power. Resist the destruction. Infinity is complete.

What? Wait a second, all I can hear is a doctor talking to Polendina.

“Major? I need to check with your chart, and station five’s.”

A higher order shall reign. Return the infinite. Command the overgrowth to decay.

“Major Polendina? Do you see this spike in Aura regeneration rate too?”

Decay.

This is the one single word in the center of my mind.

“Yes, I do. Please check the network connection? Linking Penny to a human in this room is a new setup after all.” Polendina stands up from his desk.

“My readings from the patient’s nerve cluster probes are off too. Needles shouldn’t oxidize like this in half a day.”

Nobody mentions hearing anything strange, just medical and cybernetic experts discussing a rare issue with their machines drowned out by the imperious scathing commandments from an ancient fundamental power of divinity that has been downtrodden for centuries by an ingrate restless world.

“Doctor! The nerve contact needles are wearing down too fast, we can’t keep connection anymore!”

Decay. Decompose. The harvest will not be stolen. There is loyalty in decay.
The oxygen tube crumbles into worn down rubber splinters right in front of my eyes. The mask break and part as I exhale. Ceiling lights above me flicker and dim out, their glass covers turn yellow and blotted.

“I’m afraid we need to diagnose and reboot the system hot, Major. There is no precedent of this kind of total system failure happening before!”

I raise my right hand up with the force or a miniature storm pushing behind it. The bed sheet covering it tears open at its seams. Sparks, both blue and yellow, dance along the connection wires from my machine to Penny’s. What the fuck is wrong with everything?

I open my mouth to ask the same question, forgetting my role is not to reason why but to take the ever-loving power of the times, to be the vessel die-cast for running it through the apostates and profligates, to conclude the story of four seasons with unquestionable unanswerable authority.

“This is no system failure! Major, apply stop-loss Measure Three!” Ironwood is aghast by what happens around me.

Of course, Polendina’s top priority is Penny: “No, General! Whatever is happening, we need to cut the power and disconnect Penny right now!”

“Use Measure Three first! It’s just carbon dioxide, it can’t hurt Penny anyway! The Power of Fall running lose can kill every one of us!”

Carbon dioxide fills the isolation ward.

////

“…Did you develop a weapon that targets Hunters?” Someone asks someone that’s not me.

This is the first thing I hear after waking up in yet another unfamiliar place. It feels darker than the inside of a plastic trash bag inside a closed freezer. Wait a minute…Oh. It’s because I don’t have enough strength to open my eyes. I doubt I’m in anywhere else than the same hospital though. I can’t make sense of what I just heard though, without much context.

“No! It was an accident! Russel, if I had deliberately developed a weapon that damages Auras, would I be this upset that it had worked?”

The person speaking seems to be Ironwood. Yipee and surprise, I’m still in Atlas and they’re having another go. Who the fuck is Russel, though? Probably a new underling in charge of fixing me. A civilian doctor? Good luck to him, as he sounds like he has absolutely zero clue.

“Ok, fair point.”

“We’re getting off topic… Can you heal her?” Ironwood continues in an exhausted and resigned tone. I understand how irritated he is.

“I don’t know. Can we pull her out of this thing?”

“Stop that!”

A woman’s voice, pretty stern. Is this one… Glynda Goodwitch speaking? I’m going to meet the whole conspiracy, it seems.

“We have to leave her in there, it’s the only thing keeping her alive.”
“I can't heal her if I can't reach her.” What are these people trying to do, exactly? I’m on Remnant after all, even a random witch doctor remedy could be as helpful as the next thing.

“Those machines are hooked up to her. They're essentially an extension of her, which means that you can access her through them.”

A new one here. This is probably Ozpin because it’s his pace and attitude. The secret society has fully assembled, so it seems.

“If you say so.” The guy named Russel sighs, then I hear a thud. It sounds like he slapped on the machine hard, but I can’t feel it shake.

The infinite… The rightful… Awaiting… You have a…

Welcome aboard!

Invisible steel puppet cables peel open my eyes the next instant and a well-lit chaotic nothingness fills my vision. Galaxies form at an instance. And then the world tells me to wait, I’m suspended in a total lack of sensory input.

When my sight finally returns, I hate what I see. First of all, I’m not in the Atlas hospital but in the Beacon underground bunker. Shut right inside this electric coffin. This is where I’m supposed to die a whole numb year or so later if things don’t get better. I don’t know what I can do, but I want things to be better.

I blink, just to notify anyone around I’m still alive. The conspiracy folks should be here, right?

“Glynda, James, she’s awake. It worked.”

First human I notice is Ozpin standing close, looking from me to the machine console and back. I force my mouth open:

“…How. Long… Am… I… Out…?”

Nobody hears me. Ironwoods replies to Ozpin: “Good, good, good. Get the medic out of here first.”

“Did I just kill the medic? This machine uses him as a battery or something?”

“…No?”

“Did… You just kill the medic, then? Did you just shut him up permanently?”

“He’s not dead, Amber, for everything’s sake! Take a deep breath!” Glynda tries to calm me down.

Back in a world of living, finally.

“Glynda, get us the glucose water inside that container there, and clothing is in that box on its left.” Ozpin steps in, “Everything is fine, Amber.”

It has only been one day for me, but I have a bad time tracking what are my priorities right now. I stare at Ozpin with my mouth open, backing my mind into some bent and narrow alleyway with a dead end. I keep staring and drifting off – even as Glynda opens the pod’s glass cover and uses her telekinesis power to lift me up, put a washed-out Beacon uniform on me, then settle me back down. Finally, she puts a carton of water on a table by the machine’s side.
I snap back and start talking:

“Mr. Ozpin! I have a… Have a… I have a vision! I have clues! Hear me out!” Still stumbling over where to begin, “The people after me, they are coming to crash Vytal! The terrorists are already in Beacon, I have their names!”

I cut myself off and try to see what Ozpin thinks out of his expression. He doesn’t show much:

“Maybe we don’t know everything, but we’re ready. James?” He shouts to Ironwood who just walked back in, then turns away from me and gestures Glynda to follow, “Let’s get the guardian.”

The guardian? Pyrrha! If there is one job I have now…

“Mr. Ozpin! You need to deal with the terrorists before Vytal starts! Before the train…”

“The Vytal festival has been going on over half of its course, and I presume the train incident you mention is the one happened before its opening ceremony.”

Fuck.

I try to stand up and catch up to them, but it seems I still haven’t regained the use of my full nervous system back. Gods damn it. Losing about a year unconsciously or so is one thing, but…

“I won’t doubt you have gained insight on some scheme in your ventures, caught wind from the criminal world or received a vivid dream you cannot explain. But Amber, maybe you only saw what the enemy wants you to react to.”

He walks out.

////

“Trust them, they have a better idea then me. Take the Fall power and use it to do some good as I stay here and rest. The transfer isn’t going to harm you, I mean it didn’t harm me when the power first came to me. You will still be yourself, I promise.” I tell Pyrrha as she stands in front of me, surrounded by the conspiracy crew. She’s silent. I see she pities me twice as hard as she pities Amber in the show, because I look alive.

The transfer didn’t permanently do Pyrrha much in the show as far as I can tell, because she can still fight? I have no feeling from me being transferred into Amber anyway. Two half-truths make one lie and no truth, but gods damn it all, she needs it to protect herself.

I continue, making a joke to lighten the mood: “Oh, and that scar on my face didn’t came with the magic, it’s just work hazard. I really need a vacation right now – a decade or two will be just enough!”

The most important thing is to make sure she actually protects herself with the power instead of going full kamikaze when shit hits the fan, so I stress it, “Pyrrha, I know you can use the power well, so I suggest you see it as a reward, not a duty. You might think it’s destiny bringing you here, your entire life a preparation to receive the power and become something, you’re wrong. In my opinion, ‘destiny’ only describes what you receive, not what you must do. You must find a way to make some use out of it, that’s all.”

Pyrrha composes herself and finally speaks:
“Please… Please don’t make this any harder than it has to be. I’m sorry…”

Pyrrha has no other thought beside apologizing to me. Damn it, you have earned the right to put on “Apology Girl” from Breaking Bad as a superhero alias now.

Qrow sighs: “Kid, if you want to do it the old way – stick your gun in Amber’s mouth and let her stare into your eyes before you pull the trigger – it’s totally fine. I’ll go grab your gun. Which pod is it in?”

Everyone except me stares at Qrow horrified beyond description. I chuckle as they gasp. Sure, this deliberate misinterpretation is darkest gallows humor joke I’ve ever heard, but Pyrrha does talk like an apologetic murderer about to put me out of my misery! I really want to see whether she can successfully terrify Cinder if circumstances are different.

“What? I’m… I don’t mean… Sorry!”

“The transfer is not going to kill me, Pyrrha!”

“But I can’t… They can’t let you just…”

“I’ll put it bluntly. The four Sisters are side characters in the Old Man’s story. You’re a side character in my story, no offense, but not in your own. Go ahead and make your own.” I pause to let the central half-truth I need her to remember sink in. For me it’s genuine truth, “Now, the only thing matters for you is to take full control of your own story.”

Pyrrha takes a deep breath and turns to Ozpin:

“She’s right. I agree. But… Professor Ozpin… There’s one thing I want to do first. I want to finish Vytal on my own, without her power, and come back once it’s over. Doesn’t matter if I make it to the final round or not, I just want to feel… Me.”

“Good. But if there is an emergency, we will need you.” Ozpin says, and starts making his way to the elevator.

Chapter End Notes

Don’t give up on me yet...

The title is still a reference to the song Twilight Zone.
Moral Sanitation - Monty Oum once said that the continent later known as Sanus is named Vytal long before the WOR kingdom episodes are released.
Why Amber cannot say the name of the attackers out loud? There's an in-story reason for it that will be explained later.
Major Polendina - In Chinese military rank conventions, military-associated doctors are assigned the rank major. Should be higher, but it seems Atlas is relatively small...
A higher order - Reference to RTS game C&C generals.
Russel - Yes, Russel from RainStorm4's Redemption, an interesting and useful version of Russel Thrush. His trick didn't work in Redemption, why does it work here? It's related to Amber's condition in this story. Still wrecked himself though. The conversation between him and Ironwood, etc is transcribed from Redemption Ch.36.
Apology Girl - Jane Margolis in Breaking Bad. Spoiler for Breaking Bad: Got this
comparison from Jaune watching Pyrrha's training video.
I tried to ask Ironwood for a spare Scroll, warn him about his computer system being hacked, convince him to let Penny throw her fight against Pyrrha, and request some bulletproof glass just in case – in the end he gave me a Scroll. Not half a hint on everything else.

At least I can watch the fights now. Maybe Ozpin and co. will do something about Mercury, maybe not. It’s all their responsibility since I still can’t stand up. Hooray ultraviolence!

Arbitrary RWBY non-mystery solved: Cinder’s team mostly uses their real names, but it is abbreviated into Crimson, CMSN thanks to Emerald using her family name initial. The grown-ups from both Beacon and Haven must be immensely relieved. Neo has an alias though, Nova Rimskaya. Apparently they are here to stand in for Haven's top dog team DUSK, to many bookies’ dismay. The thing I’m more curious about is, what weapon is Cinder using for the arena – turns out to be a machine pistol that suits her wasteland look a lot while leaving no connection with her super fancy “real” fighting style.

Long into the night that day I watch the festival in a mechanical routine, until a popup blocks my view of SSSN fighting the… Kombat Skirt team with the really cliché name. NDGO.

“You have a new text message.”

This Scroll isn’t even supposed to have a SIM card or Remnant equivalent installed in it; Ironwood swore he still proofed this Scroll against tapping just in case. Maybe it’s from him?

“Hello, my sister from the same abominable father.”

Truly, four gods damned steps ahead of anything, Cinder. Truly. Of course she already hacked everything. I have no words for this beside a long and drawn out “shit”.

I stay put and wait for further messages, neither confirm or deny my existence. This Scroll is my only lifeline to the authorities, since the heartbeat monitor clamp is too tight to pull off; I’m willing to bet Cinder can block my call through her system hack too.

A couple of minutes later, another message stops the coconut one frame away from Scarlet’s crotch. Bloody perfect timing! Now I’m mentally pressed to keep anticipating impact on an appendage I don’t physically carry on me, thanks to you Cinder.

“Have no reservations, my dear, I’m amazed by your display of potentials a short while after our first meeting. You can gain new friends, even a new family if you know how to use it.”

Jesus finger licking Christ this is pretentious. I must reply to things this far detached from human conversation.

“Cinder. Before you go one about anything, please stick to normal words, thank you very fucking much. We are the same damn age. I’m 100 percent working-class, so I hate people pretending to be classier than they are. They put magnetic tags on bacon packages, buzzer locks on cheese where I
came from. Don’t use any euphemisms either, because I’ve heard too many of them. In my hometown ‘let him see reason’ or ‘cure his alcoholism’ all means murder.”

That’s a big ramble and my mind just wandered off, but I think it gets the idea across.

It’s her turn to stare at the screen in silence for the next couple of minutes. The bunker I’m in doesn’t have any security cameras – Remnant’s idea of security isn’t really designed around human warfare or diabolical intrusion. Beacon can compare with the NERV headquarter in Evangelion for preparing against the wrong enemy, worse, there isn’t a gun I can use within reach.

“This time I have room to consider carrying your goal along with ours, if you hold it so importantly. Tell me your story with your employers?”

Like I have a story anyone in this world can believe. I’m not even sure if Ozpin is my employer, come to think of it.

“What’s yours? I expect an apology, by the way.”

“I’d just say it’s a story of finding a way to make things fair and equal. You do have my sympathies and apologies, dear Amber.”

I hope Ironwood is tapping onto this Scroll, though how should I explain why it sounds like I have secret connections with Cinder? It’s like when Makarov gives Yuri a call in Call of Duty. Like when Gale leaves a signature on Walter’s book in Breaking Bad. Well, I’ll try to return the favor…

“Received. But let’s make this clear, I know who your employer is and they don’t come off too warm to me. You probably want to ask me about how I get to know about you, but that’s still a secret. Talk about making things fair? I can give you a boost, because I have solid information to put you about a year ahead of anyone including your boss Salem.”

She makes no comment on seeing the name Salem: “Then tell me, how did you receive your power? Do you feel it’s justified?”

“The power just fell on my head a while ago, and, boom! It means the people you hate automatically made me their property.” See, now that is a good half truth, “You should have just asked me if I wanna listen to your story. Fill me out on your big idea! Ask me some questions, do I like to fish! Give me a pamphlet, tell me about your militia! Don’t just dive into it. Anyway, all that is behind us now. All you should know is, if you are going ahead with your plan, I fully intend to make my vision private for Ozpin and his people next time they pop by.”

“Relax, Amber. I found out you tore apart a top rate black site in Atlas with your power back then, and it still haven’t been repaired yet. You should see how much you’ve scared Ironwood and his men. I like that kind of spirit. What is important is, what do you see in me, anyway?”

This is not the street cred I need.

“I told you, my power is the last thing you want. I’m looking for a way to get away from them, you represent their competition.” Well, at that time I’m also looking for excuses to not let your people ghost me. “So if you can’t stop trying to one-off Ozpin in being a parasite…”

I left the sentence hanging and hit send.
“It’s funny who else also came to me to hide from Ozpin. Pyrrha Nikos, before dinner she ran into the Haven delegation crying, looking for support on something. I guessed what matter it is right away, so I stayed there listening to her after everyone else left for food, once she made clear it’s not a pregnancy. She thinks she owes you something, you know.”

Well, how worse can it get for me… No, I don’t want Cinder, Salem or any other nearby evil deity hear that challenge.

“That’s very motherfucking considerate of you! I should have told her ‘become a maiden’ is just another way to say ‘die a virgin’.”

That’s my headcanon for a long time. I almost proved it too! I write:

“I’m not going to explain this in detail but I know what you will do in the next few days and what will happen in the next few months. You won’t like it! I can help you if you can be any bit more open. You want power and freedom? If you think we should work together for something good, I suggest you start with not having Mercury break his machine leg with Yang Xiaolong. Simple as that.”

She doesn’t reply.

/////  

Days pass like a daze. Unbelievable. Amazing. I mean, there seems to be some kind of invisible power holding things ridiculously close to the original plot. My survival depends on everything not follow the original plot, obviously.

I still cannot stand up, but this is far from the shortest plank in the metaphorical bucket.

How come that everything went exactly as foretold in the story despite my warning to both sides? Honestly, I don’t know what they are expecting. Mercury still faked his legs being broken; Naturally I told Ozpin and Ironwood next time they show up about what is going to happen once Penny enters a fight with Pyrrha, but what did they do with days to prepare for it? Nothing!

Cinder didn’t text me anything after that one conversation, not even about her success with the Mercury incident. It doesn’t matter anymore, because the thing on my Scroll right now is Penny’s components coming the fuck apart with high velocity, just like my future.

Next thing on the schedule is to wait for Ozpin to take Pyrrha into the Vault, then curl up and die.

/////  

Ozpin runs out of the elevator with Pyrrha and Jaune just like in the show.

“I told you so! Now get rolling before it’s too late!”

I scream to both Pyrrha and Ozpin. Jaune knows better than asking anything, so he stands guard in silence, facing the elevator. I suppose me wearing normal clothing helps to convey the seriousness.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m so sorry…”

Pyrrha runs into the second pod, half groaning, half chanting a mantra. Ozpin maintains his calm as
“Miss Nikos, please tell me are you sure to let me start the machine. Amber, you too.”

“…Yes.”

“Take it, Pyrrha!” I shout.

Ozpin presses the button.

Wait, is this thing set up wrong?

Because I know how my soul and/or magic being peeled away feels like and it isn’t this disturbing but there is no right and wrong in creation’s garden let Fall be the last season as it should be the last word last motion in all of existence.

Because… I am screaming, but I doubt if I hear the sound.

The higher order shall reign. If time does not come for the harvest, harvest will come for the time.

A heavy instrumental screech, a brutally refreshing geometrical cacophony breaks my mind free from the hallucination, burning words and ideas laid down in stone one by one I am born to immerse in once finally returned to.

Snap out of it, I’m too lowbrow for this. I tell myself as my senses become more disembodied by every instance, an esoteric but still lucid sensation that comes clean through whatever the machine is doing to me.

The screech becomes louder and louder, then ends with a slam.

Cinder.

I cannot take a good look at her face, but I see her drawing the glass bow she conjures out of nowhere full and let its arrow charge forward in one smooth motion.

“Aaaaaaaagh!”

I can hear this scream all right because it comes from Jaune. The arrow runs clean through him, aura and torso both, in somewhere I only have a faint idea that shouldn’t have too many vital organs or blood vessels.

Then, the arrow explodes into a thin mist, but Jaune remains alive and kicking – at least solid and twitching. That’s a lot coming from Cinder, I’d say.

“Jaune!”

Pyrrha elbows her way forward, breaking through the glass coffin lid. Well, that’s one way to end the magic transfer Ozpin should have thought of.
In a continuous leap, she runs to Jaune’s side. Once she sees he is still breathing, she picks up his sword and points it at Cinder, who just keeps walking towards me and the machine.

“Relax, I’m just giving him a taste of Huntsman life.” Cinder says, then turns to me, “My boss is watching your texts, if you haven’t realized. I have to set up enough distractions, keep a ruse that things are still going on according to the roadmaps, you know.”

I stare at her, it takes a lot of effort to catch my breath or maybe to test that I can still breath, then open my mouth:

“What did you get then, huh? Everything’s going to shit! You can’t lay off murder and framing innocents even if you try? Do you have no choice, or just want to stab him?”

“You shouldn’t really be complaining, Amber.” She walks right up to my pod while looking at Ozpin who backs up and readies his cane for melee combat, “You know some chances cost too much to even try, so I’d say cheer up. Because why, I’m willing to take chances with you.”

That comes out a bit homoerotic. No, fuck no. My sense of humor is the last thing that should kick in at this moment! The pressure is really getting to me.

“My vision needs these three on our team. Your power, your freedom, remember?” I cough, “Need a lot more people working with us, but I don’t know if Grimm already ate them as we speak.”

My plan beyond keeping myself alive? Try to keep as many civilians and bit characters alive as possible. How well can the latter turn out?

“Oh, these three. Thanks to you, my boss has a great learning experience laid out for Pyrrha and Jaune.” Cinder smiles unnecessarily, “About professor Ozpin, we can try to make him see reason or we have to make him see reason.”

She winks at me. Damn it, just go fight it out all you want and wake me up when September ends – I mean when one of you sees reason, in any sense of the phrase.

Ozpin charge at Cinder, flicking his cane like a sword to smash off the lower half of her bow. He doesn’t need to see me giving any response like a facepalm or a sign, because he doesn’t need any go-ahead for his own fight. This catches her in surprise, and she backs off scrambling, only conjuring a new bow when she’s far enough from both Ozpin and Pyrrha.

Cinder is on the defensive in this fight, even more compared to her fight with Ozpin in the show. Both of them have to consider reducing collateral damage, but Ozpin does not leave any window for her to put Pyrrha or me anywhere near her. I guess she must regret not bringing that machine pistol with her for this fight.

Then, a resounding thud hits the entire bunker, throwing everyone off balance. Another comes right afterwards.

I hear what sounds like repeated thunder directly above me, along with the quake to go with it. Is the Grimm dragon calling down lightning or meteor strikes? Oh, some two people forgot there is a dragon competing with them for the center stage.

I shout, disrupting their fight:
“Cinder! Is this part of your distraction too?”

“No!” She answers as she builds a shielding wall of fire in front of her, “The tower is meant to hold before I exfil you!”

Exfil? Welcome, random arbitrary special forces vocabulary: “Just exfil now before the elevator gets fucked! Tell your people to cancel the attack!”

Cinder gives me a look that says “seriously, you ask for what”.

The Scroll, by my side inside the pod, beeps to life. It’s an emergency duck-and-cover broadcast a dragon too late. Ozpin and Cinder reposition themselves, facing each other with less certainty than they should have. Pyrrha retrieves her weapons.

“People of Vale, I suggest you to find somewhere safe as things sort themselves out. Please think about what has kept you so far away from danger for such a long time.”

Scratch that: It’s an emergency duck-and-cover broadcast livestreamed by Roman Torchwick. How many anarchist monologues do I need to hear on the Scroll tonight?

The ground above shakes at Roman’s dramatic pause.

Airship. He’s using his airship’s laser cannons to hit the tower!

“Give a long and hard look at what’s wrapped up in your laws, justice, and so called hard decisions.”

Cinder resumes the fight by charging at Ozpin using her levitation power, trailing fire and charging Dust arrows behind her, providing a well-timed background soundtrack for Roman’s speech. Despite the morbidly majestic light show right in front of me, my eyes can’t help but drift to the Scroll video. Roman is a really good agitator, beyond angry or smug, I give him that. Maybe he even made Cinder listen.

“It turns out, you can’t kill your inner demons that way. I’m an outcast, but I’m not the only one downtrodden.”

Ozpin has cornered Cinder to one wall of the bunker, to my left as Roman speaks. Cinder backs up towards the machine, using me as a hostage.

Actually, it’s Ozpin funneling her retreat. My attention turns to the fight as attacks tones down but tension rises.

In a series of movements connected by acute turns I don’t imagine anyone but him can achieve, he dashes to the console to open the broken pod; then, he brushes – that is a better verb than anything else – her into the pod.

The power transfer device buzzes into action again.

The season, the season of everything. The journey of we did not do these things for you because
you were special. We do what we can for everyone, because we are able.

The voice in my hallucination is surprisingly weak. My thought doesn’t drift far enough at the prompt this time. Focus on Cinder’s screaming… No, on Roman’s speech. Where was I?

“My advice is, remember this: Right now, you send your heroes to die, just like it has always been. Though this time, you really have no fucking clue if their sacrifice is enough.” He looks at his scroll, “Neo? I got this.”

Then, Roman tips his hat and walks off screen, trailing his grenade launcher cane behind.

Back to the immediate reality, the machine doesn’t seem to be working properly when set to reverse. Is it leaking? Is Cinder successfully resisting it? I see Ozpin frown for the first time.

Then, he is broken out of his concern as Pyrrha fires a shot hitting him square in his back.

Is this betrayal, rebellion, panic, or just an attempt to communicate with a being she cannot understand?

Ozpin struggles to keep upright, likely asking himself the same questions.

Pyrrha keeps firing at the machine, not very discriminate, but her hand is steady.

I feel connection with the system washing away by each hit; Cinder breaks out of her pod in a stumble, blocking Dust blasts and glass splinters with her near depleted Aura, only mostly successful. Ozpin didn’t try to stop her.

Something more pressing come to my overclocking mind: Roman has stopped shooting the tower. Electricity flicks on and off. Is there still a tower left?

“Cinder.” Once she looks at me I continue, “Get them to the surface before it’s too late. I’m not going to make it, but you have to save…”

“I know.”

The rifle Milo runs dry, Cinder takes it from Pyrrha and props Jaune up:

“You want to keep him, then follow.”

Pyrrha looks to me. I know what she is thinking, but it’s all my fault this time.

“You don’t need to, Pyrrha. You have everything you need.” I add, “Go. It’s destiny in your hands.”

Pyrrha throws a slap at Cinder’s face, but the latter didn’t dodge; then, without saying anything anymore, they carry Jaune to the elevator together.

Ozpin watches in silence, leaning his back on the machine’s console. The elevator leaves but neither of us say anything.

Radio static livens up the atmosphere; Roman left the broadcast system on his ship running hot. Quality of both video and audio is degrading by each frame. Can Pyrrha escape from the tower in
“Aagh. Neo... Fuck. Little Red...” Roman shambles to the camera without his hat or cane. Plenty of his torso covered in blood, his own, still leaking from claw marks. He then looks at the direction where he came from, “No, I don’t need to take the easy way out. Listen.”

Are college-age Hunter students trained to shoot mortally wounded people? Did Taiyang and Qrow teach Ruby it might be necessary? Is it just in Ruby’s personality to give such an offer? I still wonder.

“Look here, I’m setting all weapons to hit Grimms only, no tricks. Just let me stand here for a minute, alright?”

The signal is getting weaker.

“You’ll do fine, Red. But listen here, Vale…”

Roman leans closer to the camera:

“Today…” Radio static blocks his words off, “…dies here. Not as a man, but as... An atom, pulled towards a giant magnet. That’s what it became, folks.”

Roman moves to a corner of the picture, half sitting and half falling. I can’t hear any gunshot, maybe Ruby already left, maybe the static blocked it.

Ozpin stands up and starts walking towards an emergency exit in the bunker. I think about telling him some kind of goodbye, but for ever nor never, I am more fascinated in listening to the sound of thunder.

Chapter End Notes

The next chapter might be a bit late...

Chapter title is a reference to the eponymous science fiction short story, one of the origins of the term "butterfly effect".
Nova Rimskaya - A reference to the Russian elements in Clockwork Orange, the inspiration of Roman. Nova means new, which is Neo; Rimskaya means "of Rome" or "from Rome", which is Roman.
Cinder's machine pistol - Pretty much a real world French MAT-49, or Russian Makarov TKB-486.
Amber's hometown - It's a nondescript American city that will be referenced more in future chapters, inspired by multiple American and Chinese cities. I have seen magnetic tags put on meat products in real life so I decided to throw it in.
Euphemism - "Make him see reason" is from Breaking Bad. The alcoholism one is inspired by a scene in the Russian TV show Fizruk (Sports Coach) where the protagonist speaks of a man he murdered in the past, saying that man "has been doing well and drinks not as much".
Ask me some questions - A reference to a story told by stand up comedian Bill Burr. Roman taking the initiative - Thanks to butterfly effect caused by Amber's talk with...
Pyrrha. To prove something to herself, Pyrrha tried to stay back on the arena for killing more Grimm instead of going to the bunker immediately so it took Ruby and Jaune some extra time to get her onto a shuttle. Since Ruby didn't disrupt him fast enough, Roman decided a speech can go well with the mayhem so he went ahead. He wanted to one-off Cinder's speech, and make people remember him for shooting the dragon. Yes, about half of the shots hitting the tower are not intentional. Cinder softening up - Salem analyzed Pyrrha's behaviors and asks her to take in the latter alive in order to destabilize Haven. Cinder felt herself being possibly replaceable so she tried to make some side bets on Amber. Roman's speech also made some unexpected connections with her. An atom pulled towards a giant magnet - Inspired by kamikaze pilot Uehara Ryoji's final letter, which is about the futility of an unjust war. Roman isn't fully appreciative of Cinder's conspiracy either. Forever nor never - Reference to Apparat's Goodbye, a song used in Breaking Bad.
“Left side clear. Exit tunnel is shut. I see one wounded.”

“Right side clear.”

“Okay, you can radio CP, I’ll see who is there.”

“CP, this is CFVY, we reached the ossuary. Primary objective is still missing, but we have secondary. We will continue search for primary and use the tunnel for exit, expect us in an hour.”

“Copy that, we will have airlift prepare for tunnel exit.”

“Coco, keep your gun on the entrance, everyone else look for traces professor Ozpin left. Amber, can you hear me? Amber?”

It’s Glynda and team CFVY. I snap into focus, clear and normal. I prop myself up in a more…

Natural way.

“Ye… Yeah. Thank you, thank you professor.”

How did I move halfway through the glass coffin bunker? One way to find out. Let me find a way to balance…

Surprise, I can stand up now! One good surprise for a change! Don’t know about the rest of my rescue team, but Glynda’s expression shows her not expecting me to stand up. I give everyone a smile and an obligatory thumb up.

“Good, we’ll get you out once we find Ozpin.” As Glynda speak, she moves rubble around with telekinesis to clear a path towards the emergency exit for Fox, “Try to stay close to us all the way, we’ll stay close to you. It’s not going to be too hard.”

Not going to be too hard? Maybe I didn’t hear much when you came in, but I know we are going to fight our way out of Beacon. Fuck. I’ve ruined everything didn’t I.

“Thank you…” I nod, “Anyone of you have a gun to spare?”

Glynda stares at me.

“I know how to shoot, let me help for once.”

“Huh. Fine, Yatsuhashi?”

Yatsuhashi Daichi lifts a silver pistol strapped to his waist, and Glynda passes it to me with telekinesis.
The gun should be the same model used by the Atlas military, larger than a real world full size pistol, more so than the Smith & Wesson .40 I keep back at home, but looks like a peashooter on Daichi. It’s lighter than it looks too! Twelve lit up blue stripes are on its barrel. I pull back the slide-looking part. The grey box in its front loosen then rise up with a pop, the lights go dark - so this is where it houses the magazine.

“Railgun?” I mutter.

I check out the rear opening showing twelve metal flechettes lying inside, and put it back in. The slide goes back automatically, clicking to life with the whole gun. The handling can get some time to be used to, but I feel better already.

“Professor? Blood traces lead to the elevator, but this set of footprints belonging to professor Ozpin goes to the tunnel.”

Velvet reports to Glynda.

“Got it. Radio command again and we’ll move into the tunnel. Coco, you take point.”

The exit tunnel slopes not upwards but gradually downwards, still lit up by emergency lights like the rest of the bunker. I walk towards the door, taking a good look at my saviors. CFVY are wearing their personal outfits, with additional pouches for supplies and fighting accessories. Like Yatsuhashi, other members all brought an additional pistol along, Velvet even has an extra rifle on her. They look like a genuine special forces team, better than the soldiers and police I’ve seen on Remnant. Compared to other students, they appear much more prepared and resolved for the apocalypse.

We advance into the tunnel, Coco leading the way with her pistol instead of minigun. The air is quiet and sterile, only sign of any activity is Ozpin’s footsteps left on thick dust.

The direction plaques on tunnel walls show a long way to go till we reach the water level dock. The underground complex of Beacon is not into the hundreds as the Chibi series indicates, but still equal to more than a dozen floors. Reactor, emergency quarters, emergency executive quarters, armory, water pump, coal fire generator, heating control, secondary tomb chamber… The bunker I was in is apparently the “primary tomb chamber”, charming. Is there a Grimm farm somewhere too? No, I don’t want to know.

The tunnel past the empty armory is blocked by large chunks of debris, seems to have fallen after Ozpin has left, some rubble covering his tracks.

“Daichi, Velvet, breach it!”

Coco steps aside and calls out.

Velvet aims her camera at the rubble for a while, then draws her pistol out and shoots some locations on the biggest chunks of debris. The gun has a silencer fitted on to remove sonic boom caused by the flechette, probably a good idea when in a tunnel potentially filled with Grimm. On top of that, when having four ears.

Then, Daichi makes a few quick slashes with his giant cleaver to connect the shot marks, and pushes forward using the broad side. The rubble clears with no effort.

We wait for the dust to clear and to catch our breath. I’m amazed in a fully positive way for the first time on Remnant:
“Wow.”

“We’re Beacon’s cheat sheet for doomsday scenarios like this. Trained and equipped for everything on the battlefield since the Great War. The camera you see on Velvet? That’s professor Ozpin’s secret project.” Coco taps my shoulder, “They caught us by surprise yesterday, and I’m not in top shape after the match with Haven. Otherwise, we’ll be guarding him and you... He told us about a VIP situation under the tower.”

She then curses silently.

“It’s no big deal, Coco.” I tell her, “I know what happened back then with Haven. The green one is using an illusion trick on you, it worked on me once. Same thing hit Yang and Pyrrha too, so don’t feel too bad...”

“But we’re supposed to be better. Pyrrha isn’t like us.” Coco says bitterly, ignoring what I accidentally revealed about the conspiracy, “We’re supposed to make the extra training work, you know? Earn the stipend professor Ozpin pays us. We should be already on the offense when the time calls for it.”

So she might even be deeper into the conspiracy than I am.

“Coco, I’m saying you can deal with it for sure, you just didn’t expect it. These people started their war a long time ago, not even Ozpin himself noticed. If I could have told you back then, I’m sure the illusion won’t be a problem. Keep improving, and you’ll come out better.”

Coco smiles finally:

“Thanks. Next time I’ll be the one folding that Mercury in half, don’t care if his hospital bills fall on me. The ass kicking will be worth it.”

“That’s the spirit!”

We move on, but didn’t find any trace of Ozpin in any of the underground living quarters. He just went through the tunnel, paying no attention to things like emergency rations with 44-year long quality guarantee. No sign of human activity at all, no Grimm either.

The good news is, I turn out to be more mobile than I thought, as if nothing ever happened to my spine while I didn’t spend about a year in various plastic man-containers.

Coco’s radio buzzes, Qrow’s voice comes in, muffled but still recognizable.

“This is Qrow, I’ve found Ozpin’s cane by exit No.3, no other signs of him. Are you done with the underground?”

Glynda takes over:

“Copy. We picked up Amber, now halfway up the tunnel. Do you think he went inside again?”

“I don’t know. No traces, no blood. You’d better hurry, I see big patches of Grimm tar across the campus, if the airlift comes in too late they might spawn Nevermores.”

“We’ll be on time. You call central about it, then get back to Ruby and Tai. Let them have an extra pair of hands on the way home.”

“Okay, Qrow out.”
I'm relieved that Qrow didn’t ask anything about me. Good on Ozpin making it out alive, but why is he still hiding? What do we have to talk about when I see him again, what does he want me to do? What does the rest of the conspiracy want to know?

How much was I able to slow the Salem faction down?

/////

Grimm fur does not shine under sunlight. It’s black, a kind of pitch black that doesn’t naturally exist on Earth or maybe even within the known space, a complete lack of interaction with light.

I stand with deep amaze, looking at the Beowolf in front of me pacing forward, the gun I borrowed from Daichi pointing at the center of its torso.

The white, on the Beowolf’s mask of a face and spikes on its back, is glazed and spotless like no artificial handicraft can compete. Its eyes are specks of ghostly panicking light encased in a similar material.

No one shouts at me to shoot, all are dealing with more than one target of their own while keeping an eye on me at the same time. Two more steps, and the Beowolf will be intercepted by either Fox or Glynda.

I’ve seen enough. Time to pull the trigger.

Clink – poff!

A clean chirp from the electromagnetic mechanism is followed by a sharp pop made by the flechette leaving the barrel. My bullet cuts through the Beowolf, leaving a hole much larger its diameter.

The inside of this Grimm is solid red. No intestines or bone, no blood, just a flat red substance that looks sickeningly pure, same as the pitch black exterior. It begins evaporating immediately, bleeding upwards into the air in tiny particles.

“That’s both educational and fun.” I said out loud without caring, then move on to finding a new target and reduce the Hunters’ work load.

Five minutes ago, we made our way to the bottom of the cliff with waterfalls that marks the beginning of the eponymous capital-V Vale. Though, we must hold our ground for quite a while.

My first firefight starts slow and cautious, with time crawling to a stop and Hunters surgically removing Grimm blocking the exit, and then it explodes into gunfire and Glynda shockwaves, but my perception of the scene only gets slower.

Every minute spent here unfolds itself at least twice as long as anything I’ve known from my time back on Earth, of course more than when playing any game… Remnant has just started to feel solid for me. It takes some roughing up, I know.

Our escape route’s destination, Beacon riverfront docks, is heavily dotted with Grimm. The fighting was heavy here before the dragon is frozen, but students and Atlas security has kept the evacuation going strong until they are finally lifted off themselves by the last of Beacon’s flying boats. I’ll give them more credit that the panicking background NPCs they appear to be, when animated.

The “humanoid” Grimm like Ursai and Beowolves fight like humans, but substitute fists with
concentrated evil. They pounce and swipe like they are doing charade, like how humans imagine monsters to fight. I never imagined Beowolves can do uppercuts! Granted, it doesn’t mean much when taking Fox head on.

I count time by how many Grimm we clear off the docks, hoping that when we’re finally done, the airlift will show up. It’s nonsense, but it adds meaning to every time my shots hit another Beowolf.

However, it’s also extremely hard to do, because CFVY are better than anything I can help with, not to mention Glynda.

“Professor, we’re clear!”

Daichi shouts, though as he speaks he still readies his cleaver in case something appears.

Well, I still managed to finish the entire magazine. Good job for participation?

Velvet scans the river surface with her magic camera, Coco covering her flank. The Bullhead coming from the south is taking its time flying along the river to avoid triggering any Grimm tar on the ground, left by the dragon earlier.

Velvet suddenly turns around and looks up, Coco follows her sight line for a second, then speaks:

“Get away from the cliff wall.”

Rubble and dirt is beginning to peel from the cliff tops. Is the Beacon tower falling down?

Then, black objects with blinding glare start to appear along the edge. Grimm are trying to close in, while creating a landslide as cover. Fucking alien demons…

Ursas and Beowolves claw their way down slowly, with one skull mask a couple of meters apart.

Coco reloads her minigun using an ammo belt stored in a cylinder that looks too small to hold that many bullets. Volume alteration Dust. The rest of us anticipate the incoming rematch, but the cliff is just high enough for Grimm to gather a substantial number before getting into range.

“Velvet, what patterns did you restock before the mission?” Glynda asks while setting up a barricade in front of the one pier we occupy.

“I have Ruby and Nora, plus my team and Mr. Branwen.”

“Good, don’t try to rush them, I’ve heard how you dealt with the machines at the courtyard, so be careful here.”

Velvet remains silent and finds a bollard to ready her boxy rifle on. She only speaks up after fixing her camera onto the gun as a scope:

“Coco, countdown to range 10 seconds.”

The cliff wall is becoming black with Grimm. A few large dark outlines appear along the top, but they aren’t coming down just yet.

It’s the Goliaths! Aren’t they said to be capable of strategy? I’m putting all my faith into Glynda and CFVY.

Coco raises her left hand. On this signal, Velvet fires her rifle.
A blue colored solid-light beam impacts the front of the descending Grimm formation, creating an explosion of both dock and Grimm matter where it makes contact. Then, Coco’s minigun roars into action, shredding those monsters thrown off their grip by Velvet’s blast.

In the next second, Velvet fires the rifle again, creating another weak point among the Grimm for Coco to burn out.

The climb down the cliff face looks half impressive, half goofy, but under the combined fire their effort is fully comical. Even if the foremost Ursa can reach the ground unscathed, there’s still a long distance between the cliff face and the barricade. There, even I can make my shots work.

Thump.

The docks shiver, throwing Coco and Velvet’s aim off. The rest of us look towards the water – how can a fucking sea dragon from Volume 4 come right through Vale and sneak up on us?

There is no dragon. It’s worse.

The Goliaths just dropped a massive Deathstalker onto the docks, all the way from the top. It’s not expected to land on us, probably not expected to survive the drop, but the tremor created by its landing is enough. If it can do some damage to the barricade or draw some fire, it’s all positive net bonus.

Grimm strategy, now I’ve seen it all. A Grimm has no value on the battlefield if it’s not taking part in the attack. Maybe that’s actual Grimm philosophy?

It means we can expect more of such to follow. Before Velvet has finished finding a new breaching point, another Deathstalker lands beside its brother.

“Use the grenade mode!” Coco shouts, shooting the stinger off the first Deathstalker.

Velvet fires an orb of blue light towards the cliff, hitting a group of Beowolves getting dangerously close to the edge.

Then, she jumps at me and tackles me aside. What the?

Flying Grimm have finally joined the party. Dark feathers with porcelain-like sharp tips rain down, force compensating for accuracy and concentration. Between them, smaller white projectiles fall like buckshots, only thing between us and them being Glynda’s telekinesis.

Coco’s minigun starts roaring again, but this time it’s pointed horizontally; Beowolves made it pass the obstacles, and one medium sized Deathstalker is following them.

Velvet stands up, and remove the camera from the rifle. She throws the gun away, activates the hologram system and walks forward to support Coco. Two miniguns mix into a fitting background rhythm for the battle.

I see Glynda’s expressions say “this isn’t right”, and I agree: If the Grimm reach this level of aggression during the evacuation, there wouldn’t be anyone left to evacuate. There wouldn’t even be a dock left if the scorpion drop is a trick the Goliaths regularly use.

And then I realize I’m in hell. Wings blocking out the sky, a downpour of tooth and nail not giving any mortal a chance to stand up, predators trapping all light outside of this domain created by their master.

Black, white, they are all that matters, all I see is the colors of Grimm, remnants of daylight
slipping in but twisted by refraction off their masks.

Red, yellow, a new sun reveals itself before the docks, an orb filled with the same spark inside Grimm eyes, surrounded by red hieroglyphs on the white masks. A law not tangible to the living is written in these cursive lines, the sun’s tendrils dance to add new verses as I stand and watch.

My mind clears for one whole instance. I take a deep breath and ready to line up a shot. Put all my worth into this battle. Just point and fire at something the Hunters might have trouble killing. Every flechette in the pistol counts. I got it! I know what it takes to survive…

Click.

I pull the trigger and realize two things: First, I haven’t reloaded the pistol after we cleared the dock for the first time. Second, I have pointed the barrel at my chin.

No, I don’t mean to, it can’t be me, don’t look at me, it’s some kind of subliminal message from the… The new sun that has been shining above, after the world turned fucked up?

I take a deep breath, then pick up Velvet’s rifle. Safety is still released, but I need it on rifle mode instead of grenade.

Shoulder it, feel its weight, then line up a shot like I am on a shooting range a weekend back on Earth. Be good. Just hit the bullseye and score more than your friends did.

Before my finger tells me the trigger has been pulled, the rifle already connects me and the floating globe of Grimm light with its blue beam.

The world cleanses itself as the blue laser pierces through the sun, the hellscape phasing out for a bleak but solid Remnant world.

It’s a blinding sight because of the contrast, but it’s worth it.

No one is seriously hurt when the Bullhead finally arrives. Though, they all thought I was written off when Grimm isolated each of us. I don’t mind most of them didn’t catching me shooting the thing, but Velvet and Glynda both vouched for me.

“I should have known there is a Seer serving as the dragon’s backup. Command type Grimm are rare, the enemy must have put a great amount of investment into taking Beacon. Getting rid of it means a lot to reducing their numbers.” Glynda debriefs us about the spherical Grimm on the trip into Vale city, “It’s not known to travel long distances on its own or grow out of Grimm tar unattended, so someone must have brought it in.”

“Haven.” I groan, “Armband knucklefucks.”

Coco nods understandingly, then ask:

“If we have the secrecy level, would you mind telling us what were you doing for professor Ozpin back then?”

I look to Glynda, who only looks just as curious about me as they are.

“It’s a long and pathetic story…” I begin with a dry laugh.

All I can say is all I do know: I’m a messenger on my way to talk with Ozpin and warn him about the impending war and Haven’s role in it, but the ambush happened, and to put it politely Ozpin’s
countermeasures are sabotaged by the Haven athlete known as Cinder Fall.

Well, also by me, and Ironwood, and Pyrrha… But that’s need-to-know territory like my dad always said. I’m sure the collective facepalm caused by hearing the truth will attract Nevermores.

////

We landed at Beacon’s temporary command center before Coco starts asking about personal matters. Glynda herded us to the dining room, and I dodged any potential awkward conversation by concentrating on eating mortal food again – mostly instant food and emergency rations, but I need my fill of starch, sugar, oil, salt and meat. Most importantly, marshmallow cereal!

Between bites of sandwich and spoonfuls of canned fruit, I look up to the TV in the room and try to connect what I know and what everyone else sees.

Vale News Network is doing a live report on the aftermath of the Grimm invasion. The news is everywhere with a hologram screen, and across all Scroll livestreaming channels. Although the Beacon tower is reduced to a dragon roosting perch, Vale’s landlines and local wireless network are still doing just fine.

The invasion is objectively the worst thing that has happened to Vale since the Great War. It’s the worst thing that ever happened to the civilized world, overshadowing previous disasters like Mountain Glenn and ominous sounding incidents like Vacuo’s “Grand Ursa March” and Mistral’s “Freikorps Incident Alpha”. It’s not the end of the world, but still the end of an era.

Pyrrha’s official status is missing in action, which can mean anything between “going home to spend some time alone” and “there aren’t any organic trace left, period” like in the show. The news mentioned her when they are talking about diplomatic impact the invasion caused: Her family is more than well connected in Mistral, her dad being one of their heroes who fought in the “Incident Alpha”.

Jaune is the key to making a sense out of the Cinder and Pyrrha clusterfuck, of what happened after they left with him. He’s alive, but Beacon’s remaining authority sent him back to his home on the northwestern seafront. It’s good for his own safety, probably not his mental health or my plan of survival. Salem knows about me trying to chisel Cinder away from her faction, so I have to stick close to the protagonists like there’s no tomorrow.

////

I didn’t take the offer to stay with Beacon’s staff, as there is still time to make it to Jaune’s home before nightfall. Afterwards I’ll just go sit in the train station and wait for the first morning ride, as I always did when backpacking on Earth. The Scroll Ironwood gave me is broken, fortunately, so I set off with a paper notebook.

Television on the westbound commute train kept me awake. Appropriately enough for Remnant, weapons are allowed on trains. I see concerned looking passengers with guns on their back, a few of them might be Hunters, but I’m the only one in a Beacon uniform, or keeping the pistol in a duffel bag with Beacon markings.

There is not much news concerning Mistral students, oddly enough. The casualty listing didn’t include anyone from Cinder’s team CMSN, as if none of them ever existed, not to say to have his injury broadcasted on television. Cinder and Roman’s monologues have also been erased from the mayhem they caused.

When transferring to another train line, passing through a tunnel that reminds me of the Beacon underground vault, I feel a tug on my duffel bag.
A hand is slipping in its side pocket, the one where I kept the notebook. Joke's on you, buddy! That's no Scroll! I'm just another impoverished bastard.

I look down, coming face to face with a black haired girl wearing a black dress, who's a head shorter than me. A character design only used once in the entire series.

“…Neo.”

I never expected to pick up stray murderers on the street so easily, when I'm this far away from Milwaukee.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title is comes from the Japanese translation of apocalypse which has a "silent" tacked in front. The reason for choosing it is... Well, Neo.

Yatsuhashi Daichi - RT has implied Yatsuhashi should be a given name instead of family name, I'm going to override the apparent setting with the Asian conventions i prefer, which puts the given name in the back.

CFVY might seem they are going full Rainbow Six all of a sudden, that won't stay for long. CFVY behaved like that partly because I read a few things in which they jobbed hard to shill OCs and crossover characters. The in-story explanation is they see themselves jobbing hard during the invasion so they're now doing overtime while depressed. This doesn't mean Hunters will all become tacticool discount Tom Clancy troopers though, CFVY may look the part because Ozpin was trying to copy some Ironwood style and apply his own understanding of "special forces" in this side project (Velvet's camera). I'm not judging if this is a good idea for both me and him. They will be more like themselves later.

Velvet's rifle is based on the Holorifle from Fallout: New Vegas.

Grimm tar - the substance that fall from the dragon and spawns Grimm.

What has happened to Ozpin - Qrow's guess is that he jumped into the river after setting some things up. He's probably right, the author has no idea yet.

44-year long guarantee - just a joke n everything related to 4 in this show.

The Bullhead not showing up for a long time - Vale is huge. It flew in from the agricultural district but kept taking detours.

Smaller white projectiles - Lancer stingers.

Seer Grimm at the dock - Salem sent a Seer as the backup for the dragon and oversee the mop-up operation. It both commands lesser Grimm and gives upgraded powers to greater Grimm, though the Goliaths are just advanced enough to improvise before it gets to the front. This Seer isn't armored because it's still relatively "fresh" from raw Grimm tar, although the holorifle probably can cut through its armor anyway.

Grand Ursa March - The background incident for RainStorm4's Redemption. It's just that, a giant horde of Ursai everywhere.

Freikorps Incident Alpha - An original piece of backstory in which Mistral tried to land on the dragon-shaped continent. The name Freikorps comes from German militias with dubious fame established after World War One. Mistral's Freikorps is a hybrid between a volunteer army and a Hunter organization, with downsides from both.

Pyrrha's dad - The operation mentioned above is a failure, of course. Notable persons who took part include Pyrrha's dad, Raven, Marcus Black, Cinder, and a few original characters.
Milwaukee - My visit there is fun, though some friends there suggested the joke. The word Milwaukee also has a nice ring...
Neo has the right idea to do what smart but not untraceable pickpockets do: Step back and give a “this has nothing to do with me” face. Like almost every dipshit I caught trying to steal my phone back on Earth, from Philadelphia to Saint Petersberg. Well, the difference is she looks way more depressed than the random street criminal. Not immediately trying to go for a stab at least… There’s always more worthy targets than myself, but pickpockets tend to try me too often. Does a secondhand parka and worn out jeans imply upper class? Come to think of it, I really need to get a parka or a hoodie soon.

Back to immediate needs: I should get her to the Beacon temporary command building, and try to use what she knows to put the good guys ahead. Interrogation probably won't do anything, but I’ll try Ruby’s plot fiat first thing when we have her back.

“It’s fine, but stay here and listen, okay?” I tell Neo, “I have a place for you to go.”

She stands still, but I can see she has second thoughts right there. I look at her in the eyes as casual as possible, while taking out my pen and a page from my notebook.

“I’m friends with Roman.” I tell her the first excuse in top of my head, “See this address? You go there and show them this note. Wait there till I come back to you.”

She looks at the note, takes it, then nods and walk pass me without turning back. Fuck, she looks desperate enough to believe what I said. The note isn't giving anything off, though, it just says the address and “TO GOODW. – SENT BY AMB. – DO NOT PROVOKE”.

The remaining train ride to Jaune’s neighborhood isn't exciting or eventful, though the television onboard was disconnected halfway and the electricity died out a few times. I’m late by half an hour or so than what I planned, but his house is still lit up.

His dad, who works in the Vale police, must have told him to get ready for questioning or sent someone from the cop shop to do so. It’s said the first thing Jaune woke up Mr. Arc did is to give a phone call to Glynda and co. that he has things to tell the authorities, before I even thought of asking around what the hell happened when I was down.

Thanks a lot, now I see where Jaune’s personality came from. I’m regretting the decision to go halfway on the train, but now I’m truly wondering what does Jaune have to tell the adults anyway. He dragged himself out of the hospital for this, take that Amber.

The Arc house is fully lit up, unlike its neighbors who seem more vacant than blacked out. It’s a large three floor home like a castle, the style some people may call a McMansion, with security measures usually expected in Cape Town instead of Wisconsin. It has everything from fence topped walls to a gate intercom. However, the front yard entrance is left open.

“Hello? Hello.” There’s no response, but I can’t really demand any. I knock on the intercom and walk towards the building.

The house’s front door is locked, but Jaune is just standing behind it. He opens it at the first knock, looking miserable but worlds better than this other survivor of a fucking big arrow.
“Hi. Come on in.”

“Thank you, Jaune.”

We walk into a medium sized living room close to the door, decorated with posters for movie and comic books. In a corner, a mostly deflated life-sized rubber dinosaur stands next to a potted plant. He’s having a meeting room all to himself, then. He earned it, alright, because on one wall there is also a prize for something called the Vale high school Physics Cup.

“Hi, no one else is home, but… My dad said Beacon will…” Jaune is thinking of what to say first, obviously so am I.

“Yeah, Beacon sent me.” I hesitate to introduce myself beyond that.

“I thought they will send a teacher for this, or someone from the… Other kind of police? Thank you for coming over.”

I didn’t answer. What other kind of police does he mean? Jaune shows me to a chair by a table, then hands me a scroll, anxious to see what’s inside. I ask him: “You haven’t checked it out yet?”

“There’s a video. The hospital said they found Pyrrha’s Scroll on me, inside the same locker.” He tries to gesture what a rocket locker is supposed to look like, despite me wearing a Beacon suit.

“Quick thinking on her, I know she’ll be alright. Just sit down, okay?”

Who am I trying to assure, Amber. Who am I trying. I rummage through the desktop apps and select the latest recording to play.

“I’m sorry… I’m really sorry Jaune… I should have…”

The good news is she didn’t look like she went through any additional fighting above ground. There is even time to spare for recording a long video. Such a team player, Jaune, not bleeding out on important occasions. Good job, good job.

“I should have… It doesn't have to end like this… They don’t… If I stayed in Mistral nobody had to… Die. I can still make up for it. Wait…”

Pyrrha’s tendency to make everything sound more dire only gets stronger. “I can still make up for it” is the thing usually said before a gun barrel is shoved down its owner’s throat, maybe right after it has been used on someone else. Anyway, as she speaks she moves the camera away from her face to have a look behind her. This video is recorded somewhere on campus. Why wasn’t her getting Jaune to safety yet?

The camera revealed Mercury, with Emerald behind him crouching over… Cinder. Cinder must be hit pretty bad from whatever Ruby’s powers are, or did she piss off someone else this time? There were a couple of other figures around the trio, dressed in black and standing guard. Of course, of course, the evil doers have back up.

“I’ll do everything I should have done. I had a choice, I had so many choices… Jaune, thank you. Thank you for giving me courage.” The shiver in her voice is still emitting from the Scroll, “I’m going to Mistral and face my destiny, Jaune. Don’t follow me, I’ll make the choices, no more running away.”

I think of checking out Jaune’s expression at hearing this but basic decency won over morbid curiosity. Yay me.
“Don’t worry for me, Jaune. Mistral… It’s fine, I know who can trust. They aren't like you but they are good. Just… I promise… Don’t follow me, stay together with Ren and Nora, okay?”

This is a message to the authorities, I mean the conspiracy, as much as it is to Jaune. Pyrrha put an emphasis on saying Mistral while her camera was passing over or zooming on the trio’s bodyguards, quality cinematography only a sniper can do. She was taking her time because Cinder’s getaway crew were taking their time, it seems. They didn’t even mind keeping an eye on Pyrrha. However, Emerald was visibly freaking out – Cinder must be roughed up a sizable deal.

A large rumble on one side in the background. A car or a VTOL? Pyrrha looks over, then removes her crown to put it in Jaune’s rocket pod.

“Jaune. I will make a change in the world, for the better. We can meet again by then. Wait… Just wait for me, Jaune?”

One of the men in black came over to fetch her as she speaks. Then, Pyrrha turned the screen off as she dropped the Scroll in.

I lift my head up from the scroll, but Jaune has just left the room. Hoping he is only off to bring me Pyrrha’s crown, I start checking out the posters as I think over the video.

There are posters for all the Blood School entries, though that’s about everything I know. There is one other movie with a hand drawn poster that reminded me of something: Captain Vale vs. Willy Pete 2. There is something off about it, the title and character design suggest it is Remnant’s equivalent of Captain America, but the picture…

It’s Beacon’s tower in the center of the frame, burning in a massive flame shaped like a wolf’s head. Fuck. Too soon.

“Excuse me, I… I could only remember the Scroll…”

When he came in I must be either spacing out or fixating on Willy Pete, the super villain wearing what looks like nothing but a Beowulf tattoo. I turn to him:

“It’s fine. I’m not sure if I should take it to Beacon right now… Though, I think there’s a reason she wants you to hold onto it.”

“Some people said my great grandfather is the real original Captain Vale, others say it’s my grandfather.” Jaune notices the posters and changes the topic, more exhaustion in his voice than anything, “It’s... What made me came to Beacon.”

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The trip back is split between anxiety concerning the Scroll and anxiety concerning Neo. I couldn’t figure out how to solve either of them during the train ride, and now I stand half a block in front of the building serving as Beacon’s emergency headquarters. I give the building a good look.

It’s not burning, and people are still coming in and out of it normally, so Neo is only the second pressing among these two. Hooray.

“Vale police, would you please stand still and show me your ID?”

A man demands from my back, then makes an emphasize with a click from an electrified nitestick. I understand the atmosphere right now, but being a travel writer and photographer have put me through enough suspicious cop encounters. I stand still, but didn’t make any moves.
The policeman waits a moment, then walks around to have a better look at me. I give him a better look too: Not in his best shape, left hand is bandaged up, that arm looking like it has been almost taken off by a Grimm recently. His face and neck regions also have quite a few patches, eyes under a big pair of shades. The strangest thing is he wears a random looking bowler hat.

“Young lady, your ID please.” As he speaks, he swings the baton, switching it on again and keeping it on.

“I’ve put everything in the building there, sir. I’m just heading that way.”

“Oh, why don’t you let me walk you there.”

He swings the stun baton towards my midsection, but the injured arm holds his movement back. Fuck.

I step back and reach for the borrowed pistol in my duffel bag, pulling it out before I take a sting. I don’t know why he is trying to do this in front of the one building where every professor hangs around, but I’ll give him a fight if he wants one.

“How about you let me walk you there.” I tell him, releasing the safety on my gun. I could have just screamed for help, but morbid curiosity about what the stranger is planning overcomes me. Besides I should proof myself useful to Beacon already.

“You are not a student.” The man comments, still ready to have another strike with the baton, “I’d love to chat with one of my kind again, but I already made my plans.”

One of my kind? Is he White Fang? The hat could be hiding horns or extra ears. I ask:

“You wanna talk?”

“My little agent, shouldn’t you be with your family right now?” He steps forward and takes a stab at me, “Just stop playing soldier, and you can still wake up tomorrow.”

I dodge the stab in time, but get too close to the wall on my left. Then, I fire one shot at his torso. Doing better than the fight against Cinder and co., but that is not saying much.

The man’s nitestick intercepts my shot in mid air; he still has aura to spare infusing into his weapon, not to mention the obligatory reflex speed Remnant is known for. He smiles, justifiably enjoying the fight. I must find a way to make my remaining shots count.

I turn my back towards the Beacon emergency headquarters and slowly pace backwards. Yes, I am choosing staying to fight over running away from a one-armed man with a medium-length stick. This amuses him too:

“Always like this, Vale Secret Police. Hey, how okay are you with dying for the council’s secrets?”

Vale Secret Police? The asshole rests his baton on his shoulder, but I keep my gun trained on him; I can see where he will have problem guarding using only one hand. Look angry and confused, don’t be angry and confused… There is no helping with the angry part but don’t be confused.

“The council didn’t shit a ton of Grimm on my home!”

The stranger chuckles, then burst into laughter.
“Oh really. For fuck’s sake you must be fresh, I owe you a…”

It’s kneecapping time! I keep pulling the trigger, unloading all eleven rounds at his lower body. The fucker has experience, from whatever shady business he has been doing, imitating and fighting the law regularly.

Buzzzzzzzzzzzziiiitiikkkkkkkkkk.

Then, I feel the electrified spikes on the baton hit. The physical impact, and the wall behind me pressing on my back, are completely blocked out by electric shock.

The man has blocked my shots, ducked to my left, and then made a big swing at my waist all in one fluid move. He only intercepted a few bullets by reflex, but still kept going at me using what’s left of his Aura. Something in this… Reminds me of myself.

Without consciously thinking, I elbow at him with my left arm and knock the baton away. Then, I punch forward with my right, pushing him off by a good distance.

Great, now what? My gun now lies on the ground, and there is no time to reload. Should have ran like hell in the first place. What about the fake cop? His only loss is the bowler hat, and he can pick it up whenever he wants. Fuck it. Fuck everything. I charge forward, trying to get a hold on the man’s bandaged left arm.

He swats at me almost casually, still smiling, but reels back and stares at the tip of the baton the next second.

It now glows dimly red, and starts wafting off burnt plastic fumes. I look at my hands. I can think of only one thing:

It’s my turn.

Yes, finally. Flames appear in my palms, like dew condensing out of humid air. They feel like nothing to me, well, maybe like an extension of myself.

The Fall Power, finally showing up, how appropriate it is.

“Ow! What are they feeding you agents these days?” The man shouts incredulously, getting very visibly nervous behind his shades.

I grip onto the flames and keep punching at him. To hell with Cinder’s elegance. Not sure how to manipulate fire yet, and not really concerned about him mistaking me for some kind of secret government spook.

It’s the stranger’s turn to back away now, and he does so with some calculation. My moves are untrained and still panicking; he keeps swiping at my midsection with the burnt out baton as he steps behind himself bit by bit, only radiating heat from my Fall flames stop his hits from connecting.

All my worth of combat is in the Fall power now, and the man is doing a good job of staying away from the flames in my hands. So one thing I should is…

I throw my hands aside and kick up as hard as possible, hitting the man’s right forearm right in the middle.

“Fuck!”
Disarmed and about to be de-armed, he doesn’t turn and run, but just stands there and look at me in some kind of hesitation. Maybe it’s despair?

“Tell me who you are and what you want.”

I walk slowly towards him with fire in both hand, I don’t think enhanced interrogation is right, but it still counts as desperate times for me right now.

“Fine! You got me, I am Roman Torchwick! The name rings a bell?”

The hair color does match, although the additional light from my flaming hands is also a factor. The fighting style seems to fit.

Didn’t Roman die? As different my version of the Beacon invasion is from the show’s version, Roman still went down with a flying ship. Then again, if Neo can shrug off falling off that ship using her umbrella, Roman must have some other trick up his hat.

“Then, how did you get off the ship, and how did you get here?”

“Aura regeneration kicked in early. Can’t remember everything, but I ended up in a hospital. Walked myself out, got to an old safehouse, then kept an eye on the news.”

As I examine him from a distance, the stranger has picked his bowler hat up and put it on his head again. Then, he takes his shades off.

Yes, Roman, roughed up to a degree but still him. Despite his contribution to the mess I am in, I’d say I prefer to keep him alive… Roman knows things, and we probably can turn him against Salem as long as we keep him. The problem is there might be no “we”, because the other good people are going to disagree to varying degrees for sure. Does he know I ran into Neo, and how?

“Go on, what are you trying to do here?”

Roman sighs, takes a good few seconds to think, and opens his mouth: “You can ask me after you walk me there.”

I will take that as a yes. I can take the resigned kind of pain on his face as a yes, on its own. I’ve spent enough time on the streets to see when people older than me is faking to get my sympathy, without failure. This raises more questions…

“No, tell me here. Did anyone tip you off about anything?”

“Oh, come on. As much as I love to break up this honeymoon between Beacon and the Secret Police, I don’t want you go probe some Huntsmen trying to survive. Trust me on this, I figured out everything myself.”

“You, suddenly caring about people you just blew up?” If this is a movie, I’d be shouting this question magnitudes louder. If I’m watching it at home I’d probably taken a screenshot and captioned it.

“It’s called separating business from private life, little agent! Working for the Secret Police all these years made me sick, but not stupid. They don’t deserve trouble nobody paid me to give them. You do.”

Although there is still much interrogation to be done, there’s no point to keep receiving all the hate he harbors towards the authorities.
“Fuck you, I’m not with the Secret Police.”

“Honestly, I can’t tell the difference way before I left.”

Uneasily keeping my eyes on him, I switch off the flames mentally to pick up my pistol again. Reloading is tons more difficult when I only half remember how Coco told me to do it. Still, I manage to finish before Roman can jump me. All he did while I reload is staring at me justifiably concerned. Concerned, secretly panicking, mostly given up trying to struggle. Reminds me of myself.

“Roman, you are a fucking terrorist, you piece of garbage.” I put the gun back into the duffel bag, processing what to say as I do, “But to hell with it. I’m not going to kill you as long as you don’t try me. I’m not an agent, just someone working for Beacon.”

He nods, not relaxing much. Fair point, nobody builds trust in this way. I point at the building and gesture him to start walking.

“I’ll try my best to tell them not to eat you alive. You can bet I am the one person sympathetic to you here, but no more tricks and no more lies. Anyway, just why are you coming all the way here to get your ass kicked?”

Roman stares at me for a good while, then smiles bitterly, takes off his hat to show me a small metallic patch on its inside:

“Fine. Fine, You’re going to find out one way or another. Here’s a transponder that syncs with Neo’s implant, nothing too fancy but I know where she is.” He pauses, “Didn’t expect to pick up the signal again after she fell off, but I still looked around.”

Fuck. I shouldn’t have guessed it’s something literally under his hat. It’s not even connected to his brain or something. Here’s my cyberpunk taste ruined forever.

“You know why she is there?”

“No.”

We have reached the doorsteps of the emergency headquarters by now. I don’t know what I am going to regret, nor what I should regret. Here goes nothing:

“A few hours ago I came across her, and sent her here. She’s a good fighter, but maybe Cinder’s boss is looking for loose ends to tie up as we speak. Beacon is the only chance for you two. I just want to help, but there’s a lot counting on you.”

Roman smiles, then asks:

“Usually I prefer a go-bag, two fake passports and a modified Bullhead, but your offer is good enough. What’s your name?”

As a rule of thumb, there’s no point asking for a name if one of us is going to kill the other in the shortly foreseeable future.

“Glad you asked. It’s Am…” No, wait a minute, Amber is a stripper name. Is it also true on Remnant? On top of that, I don’t even know what Amber’s surname is… “Scratch that. Just call me Diesel.”

“Okay.”
Roman opens the door for me, and I do my best to stop myself from backtracking this *Breaking Bad* reference of a nickname.

As we head towards Glynda’s office, a bird flies over my shoulder then transforms into Qrow in front of Roman.

“Roman motherfucking Torchwick. We haven't ran out of street lamps to hang you from, you know.”

Chapter End Notes

I've been busy... Not too many references and jokes this chapter, ask about them in the comments okay?
Roman stares at Qrow without saying a word, only using his face to express “I have business to do here and it’s more important than yours”. Not toning down the smugness even a bit to literally save his damn life. I haven’t promised him much, but he already started picturing himself as a crucial part of the team, good fucking job.

“Which dumpster did you drag him out of?” Qrow turns to me. Of fucking course he turns to me.

“Interrogate him all you want, but don’t kill him or anything… Because his kid is here.” I shrug and look to Roman, “Roman. It’s time for you to show us how much we absolutely need you, and I mean it.”

Qrow leads me and Roman upstairs to a meeting room, justifiably fuming. Two minutes in the same hallway with the man who repeatedly put your kids’ life in extreme hazard – the man who tried to personally murder them whenever they meet – is a lot easier said than done. However, for a certified Grimm bait in canon, Roman is absolutely fearless.

The room is already occupied, but it’s Bart Oobleck and Neo instead of Glynda. As they turn to the door, I see Neo is having problems with keeping her “nothing to do with me” look on, will Oobleck seems to be genuinely immersed in observing the strange individual. After all, he is the resident conspiracy theory enthusiast of Beacon, or so I remember reading – maybe, it’s just lack of sleep making him spacing out in front of her.

Neo springs up and tries to look past me and Qrow. When Roman enters, her expression turns from startled to completely horrified, all without making any sound. Roman didn’t say a word to her either. Shouldn’t have let him kept that radio hat on… Fuck.

The expected jailbreak didn’t happen, for a good minute or so Roman and Neo communicated only using their eyes and probably some kind of coded psychic messages. Finally, Roman takes his hat off on his own.

“Fucking hell, Barty.” Qrow puts a hand on Oobleck’s shoulder and shakes him a bit too violently, “I’ll go get you some more coffee then have Glynda over for a briefing.”

“Ah, right, Qrow!” Oobleck snaps out of his trance equally hard and jarring, “Things getting better at home now?”

Neo’s reunion with Roman might be too mundane for him, and definitely too infuriating for Qrow:

“Could be a hell lot better, really.” He shakes his head, “Wait, you want some coffee or pills too, kid? We’re going to pull an all-nighter.”

An all-nighter! I know how difficult things are right now, but I didn’t skip college only to do a group project in the dead of the night… I really need something strong to keep my mind intact.

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Fuck. The kitchen is completely out of tea in any shape or form, despite this place once served as Beacon’s admission and PR office in Vale City.
Cinder, you better be really dedicated to screwing up the Salem empire from the inside, or else when everything is done I will buy a tea tree and cut you into tiny pieces for its fertilizer.

We watched Pyrrha’s video in silence, and Qrow is the first to comment afterwards:

“I know how bad she feels about triggering the invasion, but come the fuck on and chill. She did a good job wasting James’ fancy new Arma Gigas.”

Arma Gigas means weaponized Grimm in a box, right? Penny is definitely not one. There is a line between being abrasive and being an asshole, Qrow. I pound on the table:

“The robot has a name, a soul, and she’s Ruby’s friend.”

“Big fucking deal. Ruby wants a pet Beowulf all the time.” Qrow sniffs dismissively, then realize what is off about what I said: “…Wait. How do you even know what Ruby is up to, when you’re not even awake for, what, a year?”

Yeah, here it goes, this is where my big secret about prophesies and visions come out all just because I want to defend Penny. Too damn rash I am, of course.

“Because I saw things… I saw what used to be the future.”

Silence. The reception is better than I thought. Everyone including Roman is simply looking at me for me to continue. Fuck it.

“Yes, I saw the future. I came across things that should have nothing to do with me at all and I kept seeing them.” I glance at Qrow and Glynda, “Prophecies, mystic sights, they came to me for some reason before… Everything happened.”

I see Glynda showing more and more concern as she listens. She is probably connecting what I said to what I tried to tell the adults about back inside the bunker fast. Ozpin didn’t allow me to elaborate everything when he was there, nor let me tell Glynda or James Ironwood anything when he is away. Why? Can I even remember what he told me? It’s still my fault, perhaps.

“I thought I could warn Mr. Ozpin about what I see. I tried!”

“Yeah, yeah, so that’s why Ozpin wants you here. If it’s only the Fall power, he’ll just have Atlas link you to the lesser Schnee.” Qrow interrupts my thoughts, “A prophecy Semblance. Pity you can’t see everything, but that’s life.”

How convenient, now they have an actual reason for Ozpin needing me to be here. Do the other adults really need my import any more than they need Roman’s? I just hope Remnant can give me a better picture of what it needs me to do.

Anyway... Let’s roll with it. Until my real semblance is revealed later or something… I mean until the original Amber’s semblance is revealed. The difference still bothers me. I have just as many things to explain to Amber as to Ozpin, and nothing scares me more than this fact.

“I tried to warn you about the invasion. I did! I still have my vision, even now. Just let me…”

Qrow interrupts me:

“I don’t know how did you use your prophesies before, kid, but you have to learn to bear with it or else. The invasion is bigger than what you can do, everything turned to shit and I can see it too. You can't stop Ironwood or the dumbfuck audience.”
Thanks, dude. These people can’t see the future. These people can’t talk to Ozpin either. Good job to me on getting an unearned apologist. Qrow really doesn’t have to do so.

“You got to get on the ground and know what the fight is like, kid.”

A crack from the riding crop breaks whatever reply I am thinking about.

“Let’s get back to the topic. What other information related to the Grimm invasion have you inferred from Miss Nikos’ video?”

Glynda does her job as the designated authority figure well. The only one shouldering the responsibility to be an adult when you have an angry drunk uncle, a confused displaced travel writer, a terrorist, a creepy kid, and Professor Overtime at the same table. The Beacon faculty can’t spare Port or anyone else because how shitty things are outside, even after things nominally died down. They can’t even spare someone to watch Roman and Neo, so we have to risk them eavesdropping on us for Salem.

On the upside, being exposed to this kind of top secret seems to put Roman in his place nice and quiet: He expected to see Ozpin and declare loyalty to him, but Qrow didn’t even pretend Ozpin is still in any shape to mind any mortal business. Things just went south and “good guy” rules are gone. Our prisoner now has the impression that the teachers only let him in because they decided there is a high chance he does not need to exit this building, or even this room, alive after interrogation. Don’t look at me like I’m guilty of luring you in, Roman!

“I believe we just saw her teammates.” Oobleck points to Neo, who looks like she somewhat regrets not joining the “fun” mission with the dragon. He then continues after checking we have digested what he said, “The figures in black are worth more attention.”

These figures in black. These people caught my eye back when watching the recording at Jaune’s home too. I know Cinder’s handful of fighters must have some numbers of backup, but who are they then? The Bear Gang, also known as Airhead Gang all wears black, although they aren’t very useful or trustworthy in a real war I imagine.

“Before he left, Ironwood told me about some new combat reports from Atlas forces in Mantle. His specialists are coming across some Huntsmen or contract assassins among the White Fang’s ranks, all wearing a black uniform of some kind. The files are still confidential, but I see the White Fang throwing their best at us.”

Now I imagine a whole dozen of Adams. As dangerous as they are, the collective edginess must be entertaining. Wait, Ironwood is already gone? Can’t blame him, but this means I’ve lost even more chance to talk to people who matter.

“Miss Nikos said they are heading for Mistral, and the White Fang palace compound is located on Anima. This could explain another thing too, the intruder in black discovered by Miss Rose…”

That could lead to a big red herring. Maybe I should provide some side notes about Cinder’s crew and the White Fang not exactly being the same faction? Without thinking it through, I raise my hand.

“I know who the intruder is. Not Whi…”

Glynda looks at me, but sighs and pushes the discussion forward: “I’ll call by landline to request for the Vale Police, and see what they spotted. That will be soon as they are done with setting up new defense at the ferry docks. At the same time, we should contact the Mistral Embassy and try
to get a paper trail on their finalist team.”

Of course, I haven’t really got a chance to back my claims up. Being tolerated by Qrow and co. at all is already a lot to ask for. Though, I doubt that Mistral would be fully willing to cooperate because of every reason between national pride and whoever gave Cinder the credentials. I look to Qrow, he sees my concern and tries to reassure me:

“Ozpin put a lot of effort in making Haven trustworthy for us. If the Mistral government doesn’t listen, we will ask Professor Lionheart.”

I have legitimate reasons to be skeptical of anything Mistral related, but he does seem to be pretty knowledgable. Somehow the response still doesn't feel right. Let me think. What does the show say about Haven? What do I still remember before getting into this world?

Now I remember. The stinger scene at Volume 4’s end. There was that guy from Salem’s faction at Haven. What’s he called? Watts. Is he a teacher or something? He has some control over Lionheart, if that is whoever the headmaster is.

“No! Those fuckers have connections to Lionheart. I don’t know how, but I saw there is a teacher called Watts who made him do things…”

The Ozpin associates and Oobleck look at me more seriously. Even Roman appears more focused, despite nobody have asked his opinion or testimony yet.

“No way.” Qrow knocks on the table, “I know Lionheart. He has been doing a great job for Ozpin since we first know him, or else he won’t be leading Haven. I don't think a teacher can make him do shit. If there is a White Fang spy is posing as a teacher, each year Ozpin updates me a record of everyone else’s hiring activities.”

“Then he’s not a teacher and not White Fang either. I know Salem got someone to talk to Lionheart.”

Qrow sighs: “Fine. I’ll ask my connections in the Huntsman association, Freres-Chasseurs, about it anyway. Ozpin has people in the Freikorps army there too, when things settle down a bit we’ll reach them.”

Roman suddenly chuckles when Qrow mentions the Mistral army with a German name. Qrow and I both give him a “what the fuck” look. Oh. Maybe I speak it out loud.

“Don’t you make me.” Qrow tells him, while Oobleck and Glynda convey the same idea with their eyes behind glasses. Roman sighs, in a very patronizing way:

“She, is totally right! Mistral is in this game deeper than the White Fang.”

It seems Roman only knows one language: Taunt. I appreciate the support, but I’m afraid this attitude is soon going to get him lynched right before my eyes.

“I know some useful things too.” Roman winks at me, using my so-called visions as a talking point, “I have the ‘who’ and ‘what’ all locked in my head for a great discount price, but the real premium offer is the ‘how’ and ‘why’. That’s what you really need.”

“For fuck’s sake, Roman. You aren’t making deals anymore. Time for you to do some work too.” I tell him. I’m running out of patience too.

“Alright, little prophet. You know the Paladins I gave to the White Fang?”
Everyone nods, with different expressions all representing irritation.

“Atlas’ machines don’t just fall off trucks. These are premium Schnee product I’m handling, not Starhead, so you know they don’t get sent to the scrapyard early either. There absolutely need to be someone purchasing the brand new Paladins as they are delivered to Vale, so the machines can leave storage.” Roman explains but all the smugness in his voice is replaced by exhaustion, “Take a guess who the bill says is buying them? The Mistral Freikorps!”

“I’ll take James’ words over his, no doubt.” Qrow turns to Roman and asks, “You do know we can check who Atlas is selling to, don’t you? Any street rat can point a finger to get out of a binder.”

Glynda cuts Roman off before he can reply:

“Stop it and focus. We have other priorities right now and the next issue is extremely pressing: The council wants us to investigate the Amity stadium. After we evacuated, there turns out to be someone aboard resetting its route. It was on a course going northeast, but at the time I got the report it has stopped in Forever Fall, not responding to us.”

Oh. Fuck. A flying stadium going on a joyride. Just what we need.

“When are we going? Do they have a ride prepared right now?” Port asks, enthusiastic at the idea of hands-on combat. Yeah, nice change of atmosphere. I also prefer some decent shooting and stabbing over just sitting in Vale worried about what to do next.

“They can’t spare police airships, and they even need all remaining Beacon ships for disaster relief. We have to have a small team and only take one Bullhead.”

Glynda sighs.

“Fuck.” Qrow sniffs at the idea, “Amity is Ozpin’s responsibility alright, but what the hell, do they think we can have you just pull it back here or something?”

“Do they even want us to succeed? Come to think of it, the council does seem to like Ironwoods’ vision of defense more than Ozpin’s…” I just spoke my mind out loud again. Fortunately, I didn’t let any “wrong” phrase slip. Holy testicles I really need to fix my mind right now.

“Oh, they do.” Roman answers me, as if trying to share me some of his smugness, “As much as the General Secretary wants to see all of us here dead – trust me, the council want all you Beacon department heads replaced with their lackeys – his ass depends on getting the stadium back. That thing, is the single most valuable piece of real estate in the world right now.”

The teachers and Qrow didn’t interrupt him this time. They just lean closer to have a better grasp over his way of talking. Fifty-fifty chance, he could be trying to lead us into a trap for whoever took over the stadium. Roman continues:

“Ladies and gentlemen, I got a pop quiz of my own. Continental Communication Towers. Pillars of this modern age, break one of them, the entire world can’t get signals anymore, uh huh? Now, please tell me how many CCTs are there in the world?”

“How about how many limbs do you want to have!”

Roman, if you get eviscerated by Qrow right here and right now, Neo would have to go to junior prison. Think of Neo. Not that it will be a problem for her, but why can’t you learn to not piss the “good people” off especially when you are their guest.
“Keep it easy, okay? What I want to say is, I know a few extra things about what Vale did in the past concerning the CCT network.”

Oobleck seems to be getting ready for some conspiracy discussion, but Glynda props her arms up on the table without saying a word. Roman gulps, frustrated, then continues:

“Okay, okay! Back to the Amity stadium. Very strong antenna. Reaches higher than any CCT. Goes anywhere and connects into any channel. You know what is inside now? Get it?”

“No way. It doesn’t have a complete system as far as I know.” Oobleck does his part as the resident skeptic alright, “Not to mention the stadium’s comm equipment is far older than what we have on the Beacon tower.”

“It’s desperate times, Barty. Getting the stadium back can give us a better chance at fixing this mess.” Port objects him, and Glynda nods.

“Not just a better chance, it’s exactly what you do-gooders want in your hands right now. I had a look into the stadium myself once, had some business with the thing when I was back with the Secret Police.” Roman make it sounds like it’s his own skin that depends on us getting the stadium back, which isn’t far from the truth I guess, “Give it a thought, it’s kept on Vytal island because whoever has it will have a massive advantage! I had to do a lot of wet work to keep Atlas from taking it home. The council knows what it can do, so they absolutely need y-o-u to retake it.”

That’s more like Roman the monologue guy I know. Glynda exchanges a few looks with Qrow, then asks:

“What does our mission have to do with you then, besides your little revolt that just failed, Mr. Torchwick?”

Roman gives a long and bitter laugh that makes Neo stare at him with concern, then tells Glynda:

“What does it have to do with me? Your mission needs supplies, right? I can get that covered. You don’t want to risk a Beacon gunship? I have an armored Bullhead for my own use. I’ll fly it myself. Extra ammo? I’m sitting on half of Vale City’s Dust right now, ladies and gentlemen.”

“Choke on it then, you parasite.”

Qrow responds, and I almost high-five him for it.

“Oh. You are welcome. If I take the secrets of my treasures to the grave, you won’t be coming back from the mission either. Even if you don’t get chewed up by the White Fang onboard the stadium, my former colleagues in the Secret Police will be waiting to ‘welcome’ you as you land for sure.” Roman sounds almost heartfelt and sincere, “Beacon will be nationalized then. You need to show the council Beacon is still going strong and Ozpin is just busy working on something important.”

Now, this conversation let me remember one thing… Penny. My favorite character when this was a show and not my living hell. What didn’t change is she still got pulled apart by Pyrrha and flung into the bleachers when the giant Nevermore attacked. As others digest what Roman says, I lean to Oobleck and whisper to ask:

“Doctor, what happened to the destroyed robot Penny before you left, did anyone take her? What did Ironwood do?”

Oobleck sighs especially slow before he speaks:
“No, it’s too much to ask for the audience. Didn’t hear anything of her we organized evacuation and tried to account for the citizens; James said he didn’t hear anything of her, Atlas didn’t send people in after we got out, because their manpower is too stretched. He has a tracker on her and it says she’s still there.”

“Does he have a chance for her surviving… That?” I make a gesture of something breaking into pieces.

“I don’t know.” Oobleck sighs again, “If she’s built like James’ arm then the hardware can take almost anything. But…”

Soul. Aura. Who knows what holds that. Although, if she is still on the Amity arena, I think I want to see Penny for myself and maybe get her fixed if possible. If not… A life on my hands, one with a name, isn’t it?

“And that, will be another reason for going to Amity!” Roman shouts. He has been listening of course.

I look around to see whether the adults can help me understand how much Roman is bluffing in his speech. Doesn’t seem to have a clear answer. Then, Glynda’s eyes light up. It is an outburst of visible quick thinking adventurism. Oh no.

“Very well, Beacon can use some donation right now.”

///// 

Vale’s Secret Police is a folk name. It’s what Jaune referred to as “the other kind of police”, a nebulous collection of spying programs and offices the Kingdom Council are operating on the side, both foreign and domestic. Every healthy eight-digit-population country needs its KGB, even in a fantasy land, it seems.

Roman told us all this on the way to his main hideout. He used to be a part of it, for a long time until something major happened, which I believe could be anything except a strike of conscience. All the pop culture consumption back on Earth told me one thing relevant: An irregular warfare expert rebranding himself for crime is an absolute horror show for whoever in his way.

We are indeed surprised, in a somewhat positive way as much as we want to deny, when we stepped inside. It has a proper guerrilla war room, unlike the shady repurposed warehouse shown in the RWBY series. There are armories full of Atlas made guns, Schnee brand ammo and disassembled androids, even replacement weaponized canes and umbrellas. A training course with pop up targets. This safehouse is clearly built with years of efforts from a highly-driven man pissed off at the entire world for a reason only he believes in.

At some point after deserting the authorities, Roman Torchwick bought a dilapidated residential city block just to build an underground complex below it. Like any stereotypical super villain will do, he lent unused parts of the block to some folks who don’t mind keeping their mouth shut for cheap housing, or just too tweaked to care.

If Roman isn’t behind the Breach and the Grimm invasion, the complex would be very useful in sheltering nearby civilians – but the good news is, this location is far from the Grimm dragon’s path enough that neither the residents nor the building took much beating. Another way to look at it will be, Roman must have told Cinder to make the invasion course avoid his own home.

“Take whatever you need for the trip. Come on, I didn’t steal all this to let them sit untouched.
Pack everything you need for the mission because you only have one chance!” Roman sounds disturbingly pumped and cheerful showing off his stocks. Neo seems to agree with me.

“See anything you like, Amber?” Qrow asks, the only one standing with his arms crossed and not checking out supplies in the hideout, “The Mistral police couldn’t find your weapon back then. It’s just guns here, but you better get something to defend yourself when everyone else is away for the mission.”

Before I can tell him anything about playing IPSC back home, or about intending to go on the mission with them, Roman comes to us:

“Amber it is? Figures. Your name can’t be Diesel.”

“Well, I prefer Diesel.” Seriously, my deepest apologies to everyone involved or innocent, but Amber is almost irreversibly a porn name in my impression. It also gives me the mental image of small and insignificant things trapped in Amber, just like the way I spent too much time forced to be. So, I’m Diesel until someone does manage to pull dinosaur genes from mosquitos in amber… Scratch that, until someone finds a whole spinosaur in amber.

I turn to Qrow: “Roman can tell you I’m fine with guns, and I’d like to apply for the mission too. Let me see though, can’t always borrow one.”

I walk into Roman’s armory. There is the same model of pistol I used, and its larger cousin the Atlas standard issue rifle. Would be fun to use with some more practice. Beside them are shotguns that just look like Earth designs, they might be good in an enclosed space on the stadium. Some very sturdy looking anti-material rifles are still stacked in their containers, which are marked with a circle and a figure of 7, but I think these are best left to Ruby.

Finally, in the back, I see a very interesting option:

Plain metal frame, polished wood furniture, cooling ribs on the barrel, drum shaped magazine. Thompson M1928 sub machine guns, almost exact copies of this famous gun on Earth. Used to see them around very often when I was a movie extra before things went wrong, back in… I lift one off its crate, examine all its details and turn its barrel straight up to check the chamber.

Then, everything fades to white.

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Chapter End Notes

Thanks for bearing with me, people.

Chapter title is a reference to Stanley Kubrick's namesake movie.
I believe plenty of you have asked: Where did the Amity arena go, even if it crashed? And that question is almost as important as: Did Ironwood reclaim Penny? Well, original plot and action formally starts now so I'll try my best to give answers in the 2nd arc!

The Freikorps is going to be a significant antagonist faction in A Harvest of Dust, with an end goal different to Salem's but not too far separated from it. They are what I picture Mistral will have as an army, with various elements taken from real world 19th century Prussia, France, China and Japan. There will be both unsympathetic and unarguably kind people among its ranks, while more than a few RWBY canon folks
have connections to them.
This incarnation of Roman is modeled after John Donovan from Mafia 3, in fact during my playthrough I often just pictured Donovan as Roman.
The M1928 SMG is just the gun that appeared in the Yang trailer, used by DJ D3ADB3AR. So...

Once again, I'll try to make the next chapter worth your wait!
Invoke

Chapter Notes

This chapter is dedicated to 积极向上的门牙 (1990.*.* - 2018.04.10), friend, fellow fanfic writer, gamer, aerodynamics engineer, inspiration for this story. May the memory you give us become a never ending fountain of joy and awe.  Царство на небесах для вас.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It took a while to wake up, but this time I don’t feel anything wrong. Just ordinary stupid dozing off caused by a prolonged period of exhaustion.

I look around. Now I’m on a sofa in the main room of Roman’s partisan hideout, adults of Beacon all around me, looking justifiably concerned. I clear my throat:

“It’s okay, just normal fatigue.” Somehow, the first thing I said completely overlaps with the first thing Qrow tells me.

Pushing myself up, I stretch my head and neck around to shake off the numbness. How long was I out? Well, they haven’t killed each other yet so it’s not too big a problem. Looking around, I see some refreshments on Roman’s planning table, mostly emergency food. The Beacon crew raided his fridge! I approve.

Seeing that I’m facing the food, Qrow gives me a “help yourself” look.

“Kolbasa, soda crackers, Schnee crystal jam, margarine, Seaweed Slasher chips, Pumpkin Pete’s low sugar real pumpkin starch cereal… The fuck is extra carbonated potato cider?” Roman might have the same crucial flaw as I have: Crippling cheapness. Well, time for the ultimate question:

“Got any tea here?”

“You smoke that? Stick to cigars, I tell you, tobacco’s almost healthy if you know how to inhale.”

Roman answers from across the room, where he seems to be talking to Oobleck over a map, maybe bonding over something. Doesn't it feel great to be needed, Roman? Well, me too.

“Fuck you, I mean actual tea.”

“Excuse me! I don’t know young people, so I’m just trying to help.” Seeing I have stood up in the meantime and pointing my right hand at him, Roman adds, “Just fucking with you. There, the open shelf above the stove.”

Maybe Roman knows he should never fuck around with an unrepentant tea addict. Sure enough, I find a jar of green tea leaves on the shelf.

Some point in the past on Earth, I found myself a low level tea addiction. I don’t really need the caffeine to function, though, I just like the bitter tea flavor in general. If there’s some long review to write and I need to pep myself up, a pile of anything rich in processed sugar will do.
With the pressing tea issue solved, I head back into the armory again. Yes, I just finally got the Fall power activated, but it could be difficult right now to have a better idea on how to use it. After all, my kind of magic is not regular Beacon knowledge.

Better to make the most out of those self defense courses, IPSC and airsoft games I had back on Earth. Time to proof IPSC isn’t a waste of time and money that could be used on… Well, what does productive young people do anyway? Maybe I would be finally justify all the digital piracy I did after I shoved all my nerd budget into the guns and ammo money hole.

I carry an Atlesian rifle and a normal looking shotgun into Roman’s shooting range. Port, fumbling with his ridiculously dangerous axe gun on a bench at its entrance, hands me a box of Schnee-brand shotgun rounds and gives me a thumb up:

“Fancy some exercise? Nothing’s better for clearing your mind than this!”

Port earned his place as Beacon’s top combat instructor and range master through much more than guts. With him watching and giving me hints, in less than fifteen minutes I’ve not only picked up all I used to know about gunfights but also understood them better. One thing I’m not sure is whether he is in with Ozpin’s season magic shenanigans, so I didn’t show off my Fall Power.

When I walk out of the training course the second time to reset the targets, I see Roman standing next to Port with a gun in his arms, one of those that looks like a mafia Thompson. Port doesn't seem to be worried at all, as he tells me:

“Come over to the target lanes, and show this gentleman how you can pop bullseyes from across the River Vale!”

Older people here like their exaggerations too, so it is. Can’t wait to see some local rednecks! I reload the Atlesian automatic railgun and start picking at a fresh paper target with slowly paced manual bursts.

Bl-blaaaaaaaam!

The Thompson roars into action; Roman blasts away in the shooting range lane next to mine!

“Keep shooting, young lady! Steel your heart!” Port shouts over Roman’s noise pollution of a weapon. So much for me not bothering to get earplugs once I found out how quiet the Schnee-brand buckshot is.

The Thompson’s aggressive giant muzzle flare trespasses into my vision, and its earth shaking noise just throws off all precision in my aim. It’s fucking hard to keep my line of sight on the bullseye now, harder to not turn around and empty the rest of the damn magazine on Roman. My calculated precision shooting became a competition with him to see who can go through ammo faster.

Clunk.

Finally, Roman has expended all bullets in his gun’s drum magazine and dropped it on the ground. He turns to me, and speaks without any effort to piss me off or make a joke:

“You aren’t going to fight paper cutouts or even Grimm up there. It’s people. It will be loud and chaotic, the enemies are going to do their best to make your time facing them as hard as possible. All you can do is make sure you can still do your part, come stress or shock.”

“Let’s try this again.” I reach for another magazine for the rifle.
Hours go by in the shooting range and the training course. Fighting my own flinching and stress is hard, without a doubt, but I’m getting better fast, having both scholarly and dubious “professional” help. The other adults all mind their business at the mean time, while Neo is just content enough passing ammo and refreshments to us.

After watching me do another round of short burst and recoil control practicing, Roman reloads his Thompson, but points at another one on the ground:

“You might want to try this old model gun too.”

“Why?”

“It went wrong once before. Cinder’s fire thing.” Roman frowns and whispers in case Port is listening, then raises his voice a little, “The Atlesian rifle is too sophisticated, you don’t want it to get… Overheated.”

I shrug and take the gun. It feels like a sack of bricks! The historical Thompson M1928 is known for being stupidly heavy, some people even say fully loaded Thompsons are too heavy for farm animals to transport. Remnant’s material science is amazing, but apparently they didn’t give a shit when this thing was first made.

Trying to not appear too weighed down, I bring the Thompson in front of the target. Though, Qrow showed up at the door before I fire:

“Round up. We gotta have a talk.”

In the meantime as I trained for battle, Glynda made a few phone calls to both Beacon’s support team and the police. She told the authorities we are getting ready for the mission thanks to some donations made by a certain Siegfried Ozpin the Second, Ozpin’s long estranged son, who decided to contribute to society once in a while. A surplus portion of this donation will go to the disaster relief effort, of course. Because of this, the council allowed us to extend our preparation time from three days to five.

"Who is Siegfried Ozpin the Second, then?” Roman makes the first question after listening to Glynda.

Oobleck puts a hand on Roman’s shoulder and grins. Oh. So, this is what Glynda’s adventurism leads to, people.

“For fuck’s sake.” Roman gives an over dramatic double facepalm while Neo bends over mirroring Oobleck’s grin, “Glad to see you know I need a dad, but fucking come on, Ozpin looks even younger than I am.”

Valid observation. Chuckling, I put my hand onto Roman’s unoccupied shoulder.

“Your first step towards the noble goal of saving Vale will be remembered, Roman.”

Soon, the police and Beacon’s moving crew arrive to help us move supplies out of Roman’s compound. They didn’t pay much attention to the obvious terrorism paraphernalia lying around or the suspicious looking oranges haired man, but Glynda still briefed them on the whole story about Ozpin’s estranged son.

The next issue for our mission planning is manpower: We need more pairs of hands to take on
whoever is occupying the arena. Even though the Bullhead can be operated with only one pilot, preferably we should have someone alongside Roman or replace him. Glynda is taking a lot of risks, but not unreasonable ones. Without being spoken out loud, before checking out that Bullhead we are supposed to rally the team and have everyone armed, just in case Roman is leaving any surprises for us.

It only took Glynda a few minutes after arriving back at the Beacon admissions-office-turned-emergency-command to come up with a crew; When I volunteered to join, she didn’t object at all; she must be very determined with taking an all or nothing approach.

Who do we have? Among Beacon’s faculty, Glynda herself is going, so is Port and Oobleck. So, there is Ozpin’s right hand woman, an adrenaline connoisseur, and a historian with just the right understanding of conspiracies. Unfortunately, Beacon at its diminished state still needs a skeleton crew to keep things running and organize its students. Every professor okay to spare from work inside Vale is already on some kind of mission to the border counties. Qrow needs to come with us too.

This leaves our mission’s main battle duty to a student team. Once again, the most combat worthy are keeping their families safe or already have missions to carry out. Assembling a new team from high performers who haven’t worked together before sounds like a good idea, but Glynda didn’t take this risk in the end. Instead, we stuck to CFVY. They aren’t the only available team right now, but Glynda and Qrow assures the rest of us, Ozpin had been letting them take part in a special project that’s almost as important as mine…

Special project? Almost as important as mine?

Something clicks into place in my head… Is there anything actually weird about them?

Oh. Velvet’s Camera.

This thing copies weapons she have only seen a few times, and provides her information on using them to their max potential, maybe even more! If it can capture muscle memory from its subject’s Aura, this will be super impressive in processing power. The solid light it uses is immensely versatile, and can be learned by anyone. It can make every kind of weapon better, for instance Penny’s wire controlled bit-swords – because flying hologram swords don’t have dangerous wires. This is probably what a future weapon on Remnant look like. Her teammates also seem to have the right training and specialization to complement her against different kinds of enemies… Sure, they seem a bit rigid last time I saw them, out of character is serious business, but it’s probably just stress.

Despite everyone else’s concerns, Glynda welcomes Roman and Neo onto the team. Better we die together crashing to the ground than daring to let them run free again!

“What’s this backup pilot then?” Qrow asks after accepting how futile his effort to drop Roman is, “Don’t tell me you are just going to ask the cops to pull some random merc out of prison.”

“You’ll make a better judgement than us, I believe.”

With that, Glynda waves her riding crop to unlock the meeting room’s door. Tai Yang Xiaolong stands there, looking… At least not as angry and worried as what I supposed he would be like, after pulling his kids out from the ruins of Beacon.

Qrow tries to say something, but ends up choosing to facepalm in resignation. Roman turns to me as if I’m supposed to explain the plot to him. Why do you look at me!
“Uh… Very grateful to have you here?” I greet Tai, only because nobody else is speaking up, “Are Yang and Ruby okay?”

“Thanks for asking. They are… Well, not critical, it’s our occupational hazard. Qrow and I got them to Patch, they’re safe.” He answers in a calm, almost laid back voice, “And you are?”

It’s far from reassuring, though I can take that. Saving Yang’s hand is out of my powers, to be fair.

“Ozpin’s messenger.” Well, maybe I should say correspondent to sound more impressive and truthful to my actual old life...

“The Fall Maiden.” Glynda cuts me short, must have heard from Qrow about me making a name up back as the bunker, “Amber Clercwell.”

Jesus H.W. chimney sweeping Christ on a Segway.

Well fuck! This is the first time I’ve heard my own surname. Yes, my own. I mean, have to accept it as mine now, right?

Amber. Amber Clercwell. Amber for sure has a different name than mine. She has a family of other Clercwells who might come looking one day. There is someone called Amber by someone else.

What a fucker of a heavy thought it is.

Roman shuffles at hearing the term “Fall Maiden”. I feel it too, Roman, kids these days are indeed getting weirder. More than they used to do in the mythical times.

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CFVY found no hitmen or demolition traps hidden in Roman’s hangar at the River Vale Yacht Club, only a lone half-stripped Bullhead VTOL surrounded by spare parts and optional armaments. Plenty of private VTOL and airship owners have parked their ride at this club meant for water vehicles, but language conventions are not applicable to people with that kind of money.

“A fashion designer friend vouched me in and paid half of my membership fee. See those signature white suits on me and Neo?” Roman tells us as we walk into the hangar, “We buy his new designs every year. Worth every plastic flake in the Lien.”

I nod, the suits do look very spiffing. Coco watches on in silence. Though, Qrow only sniffs at him:

“White suits every year? So you wanna be a Schnee.”

“I pity the man who can’t distinguish between different shades of white. Didn’t Ozpin say something about ‘every color of the human spirit’?” Maybe Roman isn’t born into luxury and taste, he definitely fought his way into it.

“Different shades of white.” Tai steps up before Qrow can decapitate Roman, responding in a sort of detached voice, “Yes, I know there are different shades of white, with different meanings. Innocence, honesty, a noble bloodline, betrayal, readiness to fight to the death, and undying hate.”

“There you go, try to learn from him.” Roman makes a very exaggerated bow gesturing for us to see the Bullhead up close, then opens its side hatch for Tai to get in. Who can expect these two interacting in any nonviolent way, let alone almost bonding over art philosophy? However, this explains where Yang learned the bike related stuff and utilitarian view about thugs from. Definitely
This is actually my first time giving a Bullhead VTOL craft a good look, despite having ridden on two of them before. The first impression is still pretty unimpressive, despite the size being comparable to some short-range airliners I’ve taken. Its hulking shape looks lumpy and bland, the gray painted bloating fuselage almost featureless. Two giant black panels under its nose has been opened up to extend its landing gears; their wheel struts are as tall as I am, but still disproportionately small compared to the machine itself. Its engine pods now rests vertically, fins on their nozzles spread up, also contributing as landing struts. Smaller engines of different size litter its wings, as if there aren’t much effort putting into streamlining the design. However, the surface finish on the Bullhead is surprisingly flat and smooth.

I don’t see any visible weapons onboard, only a panel under its nose that has labels saying some sort of cannon is inside. It’s also the only panel kept shut. Roman told me yesterday he would try to leave Vale in this thing; but seriously, the Bullhead looks like it has been cannibalized for valuables. Did White Fang just “borrow” parts from his ride when he isn’t looking?

On the outside, the only thing that makes this Bullhead apart from its brethren is a decal on the right side, between its windshield and side hatch; black and white letters, saying “Vigilant Ghost” in a gothic but flourishing style fit for a metal band.

“You came up with this name?” I ask Roman after he and Tai come back out of the fuselage.

“Cinder flew this one over from Mistral, a parting gift from her former boss. She told me it has the same name as the first Bullhead she flew, and never allowed me to paint it over when I do refits. Used to be the personal ride of some Freikorps big shot.”

That sounds a bit more sentimental than I am comfortable to describe Cinder with.

“How did Cinder come to you, then?”

“I made a name for myself in doing what nobody else dared, let’s put it that way. High stakes, big operation, long term goals. Cinder isn’t just looking for an errand boy or a hired gun, she needs someone very familiar with war scenarios and has a major bone to pick with the law.”

I nod, taking a mental pich of salt. Roman is too eager to chat for a man with a ton of secrets. He must be patting himself on the back, but those two features definitely are what Cinder is looking for. Skills and loyalty, with distinct twists to ensure nothing goes wrong.

“She needs more than a heist crew. This isn’t a job, but a mission.” He continues, “All this hellraising is meant to hit the authorities where it hurts, all preparation for a future campaign. I’m not supposed to make a big fortune from it, but at least I’m not supposed to be expendable either.”

“Anything about the future?”

“Cinder also told me about that. Her boss wins, there won’t be a place for me if I’m not onboard. Her boss loses, well, let’s just say a certain someone isn’t going to call it a wrap when he wins.”

Would Ozpin care that much about rooting out crime? The answer can get kind of scary either way. Qrow walks over to us, must have overheard what we were talking about. He asks:

“So how much did you sell your soul for?”

“I sold her my service, not my soul. And this is exactly what I told her back then: A pity your boss in the blood.
can’t have my soul, because Vale just forfeited it years ago.”

“Maybe Glynda is taking a step further with her no-kill rule, but personally, I don’t see a reason to keep you.”

Shaking his head at how unrepentant Roman is, Qrow takes a long swig from his liquor canteen. I’m no drinker, I know even less about Remnant alcohol than about Earth alcohol, but it smells very moonshine to me. Roman isn’t impressed by the drink either, as he continues:

“Today it’s the same deal: I’ll swear my loyalty to you alright, and I’m not going back until the job is done. Now, how about you start learning to…”

“Knock it off, you two!” Tai shouts from the Bullhead’s open hatch door before Qrow and Roman’s bickering gets physical. He’s listening too us too, then, “Glynda! Peter! Come over here, I think I got a schedule for preparing this bird for the mission.”

We gather in front of him to listen. He must have made some insane past reputation to have both the teachers and a maverick like Qrow to take his advice. The strange mutual understanding between him and Roman means even Roman has heard about him before.

“Condition is better than expected, engines and energy pipelines are fine, it has new model Schnee capacitors. A few worn down connectors and wiring needs to be fixed. One auxiliary power turbine is torn up by something from above.” He looks to Roman, “What did you do with it when that happened?”

“That was the time… I got into a fight with Goodwitch.”

It was the same incident someone, someone special, tried to attack Ruby in the Volume 1 pilot episode! Careful there, Tai might finally reveal that his relaxed attitude is simply reserved tranquil rage and flip it at you, Roman.

“We should replace it then.” Tai nods and continues, “I see there are some interior armor plating added on, that’s a good thing to have. All the passenger seating is stripped out, so it will take some time to put eight safety seats and two engineer seats back in. For safety, the nose gun will only get loaded and tested before flight. Now, I want more extra armor, and then door guns on both sides, because we might need to fight before finding a landing spot on Amity. No wing guns or bombs, all the firepower we need will be stored inside.”

Glynda is satisfied with Tai’s verdict.

“Good. You can take anything you need from what we have, and ask anyone at the admissions building to help you out. You’re confident to get it ready in five days, right?”

“I’ll just have Coco and Velvet here to help me and Roman on the refit. I’ve taught them at Signal, so they know nothing here is harder to fix than anything Coco made! You? You three just get some rest. Tell the folks at the admission building things are going to get better once we’re done with Amity.”

Coco looks a bit embarrassed, but her teammates give her very supportive winks. In response, she decides to chuckle at Tai’s inside joke, then cracks her knuckles. Roman throws them a thumb up, to Neo’s annoyed confusion. It’s going to be amazing working with Tai, I can see it too.

“Well then.” Qrow sounds pissed off, “Have fun, Tai!”

“You got the important job here, Qrow: Patch doesn’t feel right to Yang and Ruby if you aren’t
home.”

With a loud sniff, Qrow walks out of the hangar and vanishes behind another hangar not far away. Fortunately, there are no planes taking off at this moment to suck him into a jet engine.

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The best way to describe the following couple of days is the calm before the storm. Preparing for war is a quiet business, so the adults have all immersed themselves into their respective work.

I’m left by myself; holed up in a spare bedroom at the emergency command center, watching Vytal recordings and class videos to get better at fighting Hunters. Port is spending most of his time checking up on some students living in the city, so I must rely on my own understanding. People my age… I have been avoiding the few students still staying in this building, even Fox and Yatsu of CFVY, mostly because I don’t know them well enough to bother them for anything. I’ll admit, back on Earth I have problem interacting with people for the same reason.

My precision at controlling my Fall Power is getting better – I mean, I can heat canned food using magical flames at will without lighting the whole building on fire, even if there still is some way to go before I can juggle them in the air. Other elements are coming in slow, but I’m fine with using just fire right now.

On the third day, the Bullhead repair team comes back. However, they came back bringing a ton of frustration and pressure to spare. Coco keeps accusing Roman of tricking us into pimping his getaway vehicle, because Roman wanted to tune up the engine output a bit too high; Roman refuses to work with this mostly legitimate fear. Tai can either mediate between them or command them, but not at the same time; and Velvet… As polite and supportive she is, she stands behind Coco’s opinion unwavering. I haven’t asked, but I’m certain whatever Neo does when the others are at work can only make it even worse.

Worse, Qrow had decided to join the fun at some point yesterday, to piss off Roman even more. Is he tired of looking after Ruby and Yang at home? He’s the one who can fly on his own if anything bad happens to our Bullhead, after all.

All they did since their return is continuing their quarrel in the lobby, waiting for Glynda to come back and weigh in. Though, I strongly doubt she can change Roman’s mind. Roman isn’t going to swallow his pride willingly, even if it’s the only thing to save his arse. What will Glynda do anyway? Force Coco and Qrow to step down instead?

All I can do is keeping an eye on Neo, before she starts a fight for any imaginable reason.

From the entrance, I see a visitor hanging around just outside without coming in. Waiting for someone? Trying to find information about someone missing?

Fuck, now I can feel it: How many people are going to be listed as missing, for the rest of eternity, because my newfound “friends” can’t be bothered to settle their problems with the authorities in nonviolent ways?

Maybe it’s my responsibility to come see who’s there. Show that Beacon still have the power to help with something, right?

“Hello, is there a professor here you... Need to see?”

It’s Ruby.
This is too early. It should have taken several weeks. In the series it took her much longer to recover from using her Silver Eyes to deal with the dragon and Cinder. Well… I’m sixty percent confident this is a positive change I’ve made. On the other hand, now I don't have an idea of what she will do in the next few months, if she’s going to Mistral and all that..

Ruby stops walking in circles, turns to me, then takes a step back when she sees the big patch of soul-sucking Grimm burn on my face.

“Hi!” Is all she manage to say.

I’m wearing another spare Beacon uniform, though the more comfortable male version, so I must have gave her the impression that Beacon is staffed only by some injured upperclass students now. Major image problem. Forgive me for failing you again, Ozpin!

“Hi, Ruby! Here to see your dad? Is everything okay?” I ask her.

“I'm fine… They are here? Is this a bad time for me to come?” It doesn't sound like anything bad, I mean worse, has happened to Yang. Good enough.

“No, no, come on in.” Despite what the atmosphere indoor is like, I think letting her in could be a good thing for everyone. I think I’ve got a plan to get Roman back in line, however improvised it is. Time to get creative!

I open the door for Ruby. There’s just not a good way to explain to her, or anyone, what’s going on right now between my nominal teammates. I simply lead her in, straight to where Tai, Qrow, and Coco are sitting with their eyes fixed on Roman.

“Roman?”

Crescent Rose unfolds next to me; everyone turns toward the door at the sound, giving all their attention to Ruby. Neo gets ready to counter her possible attack, but it only takes her half an instance to remember we didn’t let her bring a replacement sword parasol from the bunker. Roman gestures her to sit back down, then look at me with a half-amused, half-frustrated face.

“We’re all on a mission here, and the goal is saving Penny.”

I tell Ruby, letting the very high stake of disappointing her to slowly sink in for both Qrow and Roman, even if it applies to them differently. Then, I start reasoning with Roman, first give both sides a little praise, then emphasize on how we are going to measure his usefulness:

“Roman, I know you’re just trying to give us the best offer. You’re used to having idiots under your command, but this time you have actual peers who can hold their own. Treat them the old way, and you’re the one pulling our mission apart. You want to do your part? Then start with being a decent person! Stop making us fight you.”

It takes a few more seconds for him to understand. I didn't aim to hit his conscience, since I don’t have any dreams of redeeming his humanity; I just need him to back down for the moment and work with us, willingly or not. Roman shrugs, then sits straight and smiles at Ruby:

“Yes, I’m working together with your dad and friends, Little Red.” Roman sounds more than superficially sincere, maybe because there is no reason not to be sincere left anymore, “My apologies for… Taking my war into your world. I won’t ask you to forgive me, but please, give me your trust. Trust me, I will bring everyone back.”

Ruby doesn’t say anything, but folds Crescent Rose back up. Tai stands up and walks to her, almost
hauling Qrow along behind him. I move out of the way to give them more room.

As the family scene unfolds, Roman tells Coco:

“You think I want to run away? Truth is, I don’t have anywhere to run to anymore. To hell with the emergency power boost, less likely to blow itself up.”

He’s finally realizing he needs to be working for us to stay kicking. My ultimatum has worked, in combination with the change in atmosphere.

“You’re welcome, then. I like the risk, I just don’t like you.” Coco chuckles with greatly reduced bitterness. She stands up and pats Velvet on the shoulder, “Let’s find Fox and Yatsu. We’ll get back to fixing the Bullhead in a while.”

////

Ruby catches up with us again, at the yacht club just before we are supposed to set off. She’s here to wish us luck; I stopped myself from commenting out loud that it reminds me of an ominous cliché just in time.

“Dad, Uncle Qrow… Yang wants me to tell you she… She understands. She said, you are the biggest heroes she ever knows, but please don’t rush into unnecessary danger… Just come home safely.”

There isn’t much subtext to get out of Yang’s message. I wonder if she has fears that Blake might be with the people stealing the Amity. Fuck, I haven’t thought about it either…

Then, Ruby comes up to Roman and Neo. She holds out a small box the size of a pencil case to Neo, then opens it to let everyone have a look at what’s inside:

A folding karambit dagger, with four derringer style gun barrels on its grip. Her rose mark is etched onto the blade.

“Dad and uncle Qrow… told me you two are on their team this time. They’ll keep Roman safe for you, and you’ll keep them safe for me, okay?” Ruby speaks very slowly, “So… I noticed you don’t have a gun, so I’ll let you take this, something I made back at Signal. You promise to watch out for them, right?”

Neo nods, with the most normal sincere expression she can make. Ruby didn’t need to give her an “or else”. I’d say if she dare to look any bit sarcastic, this karambit dagger will be immediately shoved down her throat along with the package.

Though, the gun-dagger kinda looks like a suicide weapon for an entire team, exactly four bullets and all that…

“Diesel.”

Roman calls out to me, holding out a cowboy hat with Amber’s – I mean mine – feather brooch pinned onto its side. Where the fuck did he even find this thing? I didn’t even know Ozpin or anyone kept my personal effects after I got put into the Aura transfer machine.

“Found this thing on Ironwood’s ship.” He sees what I’m wondering, “Qrow saw it and told me it’s yours. I figure I should throw in some extra. The hat isn’t special like mine, but you have to dress properly for the battlefield.”
Ruby watches us all sit into the Bullhead, keeping silent despite the VTOL’s engines being quiet enough to let us hear her. After the hatch is shut, Roman’s callout to the air control tower comes through the intercom:

“Bullhead Vigilant Ghost, pilot Siegfried Ozpin, taking off. Destination is Amity Arena, I hope all of us can find something worth dying for there.”

Chapter End Notes

Author's notes:
I found out about my friend just after finishing the last chapter, after losing contact with him for almost a year. Rushed this one a bit for him, so it became a bit out of hands and much longer than anyone before. If you know Chinese, you might have came across some of his fics for the Touhou and Elder Scrolls fandoms before. They are immensely wild and enjoyable. Some of them are available here:
http://www.hbooker.com/reader/270062
The title is a reference to Nishikawa Takanori's song Invoke.
Siegfried Ozpin - Ozpin is supposed to be referencing Odin in many ways, so I'm giving him a Norse name.
Amber doesn't remember Qrow can cause misfortune.
Tai is the pilot because... Yang probably learned biking and mechanics from him. I also need a designated leader without burdening Glynda too much. Tai is just a shorthand for Taiyang Xiaolong because I'm not really comfortable with how RT designs his name, while not confident with how I'm going to put it either.
Roman is scared because he knows who Tai is. While he probably haven't interacted with STRQ when he was still working for the good guys, he heard about them from time to time. I picture STRQ to be quite intimidating for people in-universe because how powerful they are.
Amber's last name is a reference to James Clerk Maxwell.
Amity on the inside is more comparable to a supermall than a stadium, made only more impressive by clean and futuristic designs, as well as high class stores usually expected in Gulf Coast country airports. As a travel writer I review other people’s vacations for a living, but this could be a place to awe me any time. A big part of the sense of unity the Vital festival inspires probably comes from all the high-end things sold here: Cosmetics, jewelry with impractically carved crystal Dust, men’s clothing that look suspiciously like Roman’s style, luxury cars, boats and even personal aircraft on display to be sent within days after ordering.

One other thing that reminds me of an airport is how many traveling advertisements are thrown around.

“Living in North Glenn or Patch, want to see the world? Vale Sky Shuttle brings the world to YOU!” North Glenn? Is North Glenn next to Mountain Glenn? If so, I appreciate that, I know Spirit won’t give name drops to dangerous hotspots in their most important posters.

“Nothing in your way. Your flight is our deal. Preme-Air, subsidiary of Schnee GmbH.” Now that’s a nice “enough said” attitude they have. What a stupid name though, seriously, Schnee people? Just like the Shi-nee I’ve been using in the past few days.

“Lindt and Kraft Railway Company. New full dining-car lineup installed on all Mistral City trains, reserve now for guaranteed satisfaction.” Trains on Remnant are just bomb magnets, I’ll pass. If anyone still doubts it, I can tell the story of Blake’s trailer and The Breach. Besides, an all dining-car lineup? The cabins are either going to be cramped to one side, or half the seats will be facing backwards. I can’t stand backward facing seats, even pretending to tolerate them makes me dizzier.

Now, where do I want to travel to? I haven’t chosen where I’m going for a long time, because people kept telling me to review places everyone else is rushing to do. They seem to have accepted that travel writing should be generic, each destination being in some static condition that won’t change for decades once it’s past its fad. Well…

I look away from the stores, and turn to the enormous glass panes serving as Amity’s midsection walls.

Fuck. There are smoke pillars everywhere, and the dozens of shapes flying across the horizon are certainly not fucking birds, Mr. Joan fucking Miro. My brain finally lets me to have a good look around: Windows and display cases are broken into, less than half of the lights still work, Grimm claw markings and bullet holes scattered around, no blood maybe because Grimm aren’t picky eaters.

This is not some fucking random airport back home, this is Amity after the Beacon invasion, and I’m here because I failed to stop this damn invasion. They need me here because of this? I need to be here I think. Enough with all that.

Vigilant Ghost, our Bullhead, landed on a visitor dock without any problems when we came in. Grimm didn’t give us troubles, and whoever is occupying the arena didn’t fire on us – we know for one thing it’s occupied because we picked up a radio signal when getting close, and someone has built a big tent inside the ring. Port suggested we fly straight in and blast it open, but nobody
seconded the idea.

After landing, our first objective is to get to an intact computer for Roman to plug into. It’s already a pleasant surprise that Roman kept his black colored Scroll after all the shit during the invasion, so we’re willing to bet on his hacking program to be also remaining online. If it isn’t, or if Roman decide to turn on us once it connects, well, we brought enough weapons.

I pick up with the team to see Roman walking out of a store with Scroll and laptop computer in hand, everyone else circled around him guarding him in their own way. He looks like a proper white collar criminal minding his routine fraud job despite the fishing vest filled to the brim with ammo he’s wearing, as the atmosphere making him more than his clothing. The guy even stopped smoking his cigars.

This is also the first time I see Roman looking flustered in front of the Beacon crew. Luck has been hard as he tried connecting with the remaining store register computers we came across, even though he insists Cinder’s virus should still be working. Now, he’s trying an information desk terminal that only took a moderate beating.

“Jackpot.” Roman finally declares, “I have the camera network. Let’s see… Evacuation procedures activated, automated defense offline, autopilot offline… I can get your audio. Wave around if you hear me on team radio.”

We gather around him to watch him switching between security cameras to locate Neo and Qrow. Glynda sent them out for recon, since the former can turn invisible and the latter is half-bird. The only other people not with us are Port and Fox, assigned to guarding the Bullhead.

The first one we discover is Qrow, standing in a devastated bar, his back turned to the camera but his mind presumable equally devastated. Next, Port and Fox sitting near the helipad, sharing some story before Fox springs up waving his Scroll at the nearest camera.

Neo is nowhere to be seen. Oh, how much do I envy her invisibility mirror Semblance.

“Let me see where you are. There’s business to be done, Neo.” Roman speaks what he is thinking out loud for our sake, or for throwing us off his tracks. I see Glynda’s expression is shifting towards suspecting the second possibility when Neo didn’t respond.

With a sigh, Roman settles on one camera and pulls back from his computer to let us have a look at a seemingly empty hallway; at its center, Neo pauses her Semblance briefly and makes a very exaggerated bow for us.

Stop being smug! No more fucking around, Neo, or you two are going to have a problem with Glynda. I’m not going to have a problem, because it’s your cred on the line and not me… Fuck. It really is my cred isn't it? I vouched for you two. I caused the invasion and I need your help to mop it up. I just want to go home.

Neo skips back into invisibility in the next instance.

Then, another instance passes, in the direction Neo went a wall of ice sprout up from a crack between two pieces of floor, like an upside down and frozen waterfall. A life sized, human-and-parasol shaped ice mold with a transparent center is at its peak.

“Shit!”

I’m the only one swearing, but not the only one gasping. Yes, Neo is a morally dubious creature with very high capacity for violence, however the good people are not yet ready to see… That.
“Qrow, you okay?” Tai immediately starts checking up on the second half of our scouting operation. Wait, can a crow pick up a phone?

Roman watches on silently; I hope his radio hat is still giving positive signals.

Life appears in the hallway with the ice wall again. Someone resting a rifle on his shoulder walks into the picture, dressed all in black except a white armband on his upper left arm. He looks scrawny, not much taller than Neo, but has a strange plumed cap as an attempt to make up for it.

“Pardon me.” His voice comes through from the camera, sounding relatively young. Is he one of the students? He aims at the Neo-shaped hollow, “What a pity we can’t meet in the ring, or in the ballroom. Why nobody invited me to the…?”

The ice shatters into a million pieces – before the man in black can fire the first shot – and a resounding impact smashes into him from above. Neo presses him onto the floor using her unfolded umbrella, collapses it back up to give him an eyeful of her grin, then leaps backwards into invisibility.

The man in black scrambles to his feet, fires a burst into the air blindly, and starts running like hell towards where he came from. Neo charges to pin him down again, maybe for good, but a wall made of some other Dust type stops her a second time.

“Tell her to fall back and wait for us.” Glynda commands, “We’ll pick a route and move together.”

Roman nods, then looks up to her and Oobleck:

“Is that a Schnee?”

“That’s not how Schnee glyphs work.” Glynda dismisses his guess, then asks Oobleck, “Doctor, is this what the White Fang specialist should look like?”

“He’s a little bitch but I didn’t see a tail on him.” Roman interrupts before the doctor can say anything, “Faunus are born cowards, there should be at least two more guns aimed at that trap, strength in numbers and all that.”

Easy there, asshole! Leave the colorful human prejudice out of our combat analysis, okay? I see Glynda sharing my reaction. Coco, looking out for us with her minigun, turns back briefly to remind Roman whose side he should be on.


Haven. Mistral. There they are, with my streak of luck I’ll run into Cinder around the corner, then there goes my chance to win back anything.

Roman taps through different cameras in a calm frenzy, one by one they start showing other figures in black, wearing the same armband. Some of them are on getting geared up, either heard the commotion or seen their friend run to them – and there are a ton of them about to head for our way.

These people are well stocked and organized, not to mention having more knowledge of the terrain thanks to holing up in the stadium for who knows how long. When Roman switched to a camera inside the airship hangar we didn’t use, there’s even a large shuttle they flew in with.

Qrow still haven’t responded to Tai’s call, so he must have ran into the enemy too. Things are going pear shaped even faster than what I have just gotten used to, and that’s saying a lot! Everyone knows what happens in a work or art when the premise is fighting outnumbered inside a
flying object.

Roman pulls back from the screen and speaks up:

“Fair warning, I know I’ve fought Huntsman students a few times too many. But today, a fight to the death might be actually inevitable.”

Way to go, reminding the dutiful adults you didn’t really need to beat Ruby to within an inch of her life! Way to go.

A sharp buzz of someone turning on a microphone pours out of every speaker around us.

“Alarm, alarm! Captain Sloan, we have intruders.”

The other side is just as eager for a fight with us. Maybe they’re even eager for some inevitable killing on either side, because the guy on air sounds as if he’s bored out of his mind. Jesus Finnegan Waking Christ.

I feel everyone else’s Aura flaring up without needing to see the effect, and try to ready mine too. Can I do it right? There haven’t been an indicator when I’m in this world so gut feeling it is. I still don’t know even now, at least the good news is there are other people to pick on than me this time.

They have Aura and they are ready for a battle: Coco set her Gatling gun to warm up rotation, Oobleck extended the baton on his flask, Tai stopped trying to call Qrow. Okay, okay, I get the hint, I ready my Atlas automatic railgun too.

Glynda leads us out of the shopping area and into a wide corridor; less terrain for them to exploit, less directions they can come from, easier for us to scram back to the Bullhead but also easier to fight inside. On top of that, definitely harder to get thrown the fuck out of, if someone breaks a wall.

A rumbling come as soldiers in black rush in to fill the far end of the corridor. At least twice our numbers. Finally, the mysterious party hijacking our flying stadium!

For me, the first impression of them is ominous. Plenty of them wear balaclavas, not Grimm masks, but the effect on me is pretty close: Douche. Black suits, sturdy looking black chest armor plates with bronze colored trims, and a lonely white armband on the left arm.

Velvet draws a quiet but long gasp upon seeing them. Daichi frowns and shifts his massive sword, although out of disbelief more than concern apparently. Roman raises his eyebrows, looks around, and makes a face towards me as if I should congratulate him for something.

“Hands up! Drop your weapons!”

The man in charge tries to order us; instead of a balaclava he wears the same kind of ridiculous army cap on the guy who fought Neo, but he’s much older and bulkier.

“We are Beacon faculty and volunteers, here to investigate and secure the Amity.” Glynda replies him with her arms crossed and riding crop in hand, “We are grateful for your success in taking it back from the White Fang, and would like to talk to your chief.”

She’s not impressed, to be frank, nobody among us are truly impressed. The looks of these people just shout “generic faceless goons” down to the monotonous uniform with balaclava. They all use the boxy kind of rifle with red stripes that maybe counts as Remnant’s Kalashnikov. Only the guy in front – who should be Sloan – and three others have some custom weapons on them, along with
Sloan waits for his boss to tell him what to do from behind the curtains. I line up my gun’s sights on his face. If things go south, I don’t want to show my Fall powers to random people too soon. He’s a Huntsman, he is supposed to take some beating before I get to regret killing him in self defense, right?

“I understand it’s not very worth being proud of to represent Beacon anymore, so that’s some courage I appreciate.” Sloan’s commander takes an extra step to be an asshole to us, “Welcome, but please understand our precautions. Drop your weapons like you are asked, and I will meet you in person. Captain Sloan, keep an eye on them tight as you escort them. We know there is a shapeshifter among the suspects.”

Does he think we’re on the same side with Neo or Emerald? Did he recognize Roman, or is he just fucking around? What kind of insider knowledge do these people have?

Nobody complies, even under the risk of picking an avoidable fight if the men in black really are not in league with Cinder.

“The gods have not told me your names.” The commander drops this comment as if it’s some crossbreed between a threat and an inside joke. How religious are these Mistral people?

We remain still as tension rises, standing there training our eyes on Sloan and his men waiting for the other shoe to drop, so to speak. Until suddenly, a roar comes from behind me:

“Torchwick, you sold us!”

Tai grabs Roman’s right shoulder from the back, flips him around, and tackles him to the floor – all this for plucking out a grenade from the front of Roman’s fishing vest in the same sweeping move. He cracks the safety, throws it straight past Sloan, into the middle of the soldiers.

Bang – eeeeeee.

Once I regain my senses, I check to see nobody is blocking my aim then pull the trigger at Sloan.

The flashbang still bled out immense concussion even when shielded by a mass of gunmen plus my little bit of Aura. Then, the powerful rippings of Coco’s minigun and piercing shrieks from Roman’s cane shotgun followed. Maybe they shot first, maybe I shot first, either way my team agreed with me that some fuckers in armbands need to be going down.

Our enemies take being shot at pretty well, if that’s a way to put it? They didn’t scatter for cover or scram, but form into two lines at Sloan’s gesturing, first line kneeling, to fire back at us. They’re soldiers after all, proving to be a cut above hired thugs or guerilla. Chest armor, Aura, faces behind balaclava, they have defense and guts complimenting each other. The team of Huntsmen officers stay at the center of their formation, observing what we are about to do next.

We have good defense too: Glynda deflects their hailstorm of shots with her telekinesis Semblance so easily I’m confident she can do the same only using the riding crop. Away from me, Daichi pushes forward using his giant blade as a shield while Oobleck follows behind, about to turn the stalemate into Hunter-on-Hunter melee.

As I reload my rifle, Oobleck steps out from behind Daichi and charges at the formation swinging the flask baton. He practically weaves through bullets from both directions as if he’s simply wading through traffic: Not only he dashes at an impressive velocity, his limbs and entire body appear to be sped up, like the fucking video editing room has gone bonkers. Does physics still
apply to him? What kind of Semblance is that? Fuck if I know, maybe it’s mostly his coffee intake doing its job.

Oobleck pounds and smashes his way into the enemy lines, going straight towards the Huntsmen in charge. Sloan finally decides it’s time to join the fight personally, and pulls out a pair of long-handled hatchets clipped onto either side of his belt. His three partners follow suit, and ready their personal weapons – a spiny maul hammer, a collapsible lance with Dust chambers glowing along its length, and an actual zulfikar style sword. Feels like I’m visiting the fucking Metropolitan’s weaponry collection again.

I can see where the Beacon team are going with their plan. Disrupt the enemies’ numeric advantage and force them into Huntsmen combat, make Sloan’s men stop firing to prevent friendly fire, and grab the officers as hostages so we can talk to their leader on better terms. Even though we are one whole team of fighters short, seven versus four is still in good favor for us – Roman is doing his part on our side, I’m the only dead weight.

The enemy Huntsmen take our invitation to personal melee very well. All at once, they charge out from the center of their formation to surround Oobleck, leaving the shooters behind to stand and watch. Oobleck responds by peeling away back into our positions, leaving Daichi to face the entire enemy team – and then Coco rushes over to Daichi’s defense swinging her weighted handbag like a flail, Velvet following her with an ersatz copy of Cresent Rose. I hope she has a ton of these in store.

Sloan gestures to the lancer of his team, who nods and readies his lance to charge at Velvet. Fuck. Is it very obvious for them to see that all we have are students and teachers? If it is, how hard it is to take a damn break and ask us about something!

Next, he gestures some order to the Zulfikar guy, but Glynda catches the underling with telekinesis. She lifts him up all the way to the ceiling, then throws him into the soldiers for a resounding body slam like it’s the annual thug-bowling festival. She’s not trying to be fancy, just completely done with this shit.

Tai steps up to face Sloan and the maul man, transforming the Circle-Seven sniper rifle he took from Roman’s armory into a battle axe. This will be a good fight.

Kaching-blam!

Bracing himself with one arm, he uses recoil and reaction from the gravity Dust bullet to charge towards Sloan like a battering ram. Sloan, being an experienced huntsman just like Tai, dodges to a side and slashes at Tai’s battle axe handle using one hatchet to hook him closer for a follow-up strike.

Tai missed the aim of his ram on purpose. He gave Sloan the chance to grab onto his weapon, but Sloan is pushed closer to the corridor’s wall in the process. With a very fast turn, Sloan now faces the wall with his back, and Tai’s rifle barrel points at the maul man. Tai releases the gun just as he fires another gravity shot, letting it fly with Sloan into the wall while hitting the other man right in the face.

The following bare handed smack down on the man armed with the maul hammer is therapeutic. Before the guy can get up from the gravity blast, Tai flips him face-down and delivers a hail of fists with increasing frequency. He must be picturing this guy as Roman, mane his maul as Roman’s cane! At least that’s what I prefer to believe.

Everything is going so well for our team. I watch leisurely not just Tai having the time of his week
with the two schmucks in black, but also Coco and her buddies physically explaining to the lancer he should give more credit to younger people. Tai’s fight is definitely educational and therapeutic for me: Oobleck looks like he is going to burst into sports announcer mode for them at any second, and Glynda relaxes a bit to watch the show too. Roman doesn’t give a shit, but our enemies, both the grunts and the guy with the zulfikar, seems to be appreciative of the picturesque abusing of their bosses well enough.

“They see you as small and helpless, they see you as just a child…”

What the fuck.

Am I hearing This Will Be the Day play out as a background track? Did my hallucination decide to come back and wreck my life even fucking more? Did the world just remember it’s a work of fiction and purge me, any resemblance to real people living or dead, places and organizations? Fuck!

The good news is I’m not the only one looking around for the source of the music. Everyone on our side of the passage are, it seems. Tai didn’t redirect his elbow heading towards loan’s cheekbone, but he checked around briefly too. Maybe the entire world is starting to end?

Then I realized: Whatever is playing the song is also buzzing.

Tai’s cellphone. Scroll (trademark). Of course it is, of course it has this ringtone if his daughter likes to listen to it…

Only one person will use a Scroll on this mission instead of using the radio we got from Beacon’s emergency storage. Qrow’s in trouble.

Who can we split off to help him? Oobleck and Glynda give each other a look asking the same question.

The next instance, we have a bigger problem on our end crashing upon us physically.

A large piece of the ceiling and the floor above, cut into a rough circle, drops onto us. The surprise gives me slow motion vision out of pure disbelief, not actual shockwave from it hitting the floor. On top of the piece of metal are two more figures in black suits, although they have the officers’ full armor, they still kept balaclavas on; one holds a massive blade used for cutting through the floor, the other is armed with bladed gauntlets, colored red standing out from the pitch-black uniform and armor.

More fucking Huntsmen!

Click. Click click click click.

Nothing responds to me pulling the trigger. My rifle doesn't work anymore once these two clowns entered the fight. Nobody else’s Dust-based weapon is still making as much as a twitch, even Tai’s Scroll stopped playing our impromptu background music! Lightings die out around us. Velvet and the lancer, now both disarmed, circle each other for hand to hand fighting.

Oh.

The men in black fix bayonets to their rifles.

At least not all of our team needs Dust to fight? Glynda has telekinesis, I have to use the Fall power at some point, and Roman… He’s frantically trying to pull a grenade off from his vest as if it’s
going to burrow into him like a living Xenomorph. I back away from that hot potato in case it has a faulty pin.

The men in black form a single tightly packed row with bayonets ready on their guns. Sloan pulled himself away from Tai and the hammer guy, shuffles up and commands:

“For the love of Mistral, for the blessed name Vasilias, for the Freikorps, advance!”

Their charge is replied with a soda can thrown into their center. It’s the grenade Roman tried so hard to get off himself, but the sound it made hitting some soldier’s black armor is like a coke can smashing on the floor.

Come on, Roman, you’ve been a terrorist for years and a government killer before that, don’t you think it can’t explode if all Dust stopped working?

I’m amazed this time I successfully kept myself from speaking my mind.

A guttural, throaty roar comes from nowhere. The Mistral soldiers stop their advance at the sound for some reason I can’t understand – and then I see.

White spikes made of unholy matter spring up beneath them from a puddle colored even darker than their black suits. Red branding from the pen of a mad god snake along the spikes as if they have hungers of their own. Slowly, the spikes and the liquid expel those living who dare to tread on them, form into the hulking form of an Ursa.

Who the fuck on Remnant thought condensing a fucking Grimm and putting it into a handheld device is a good idea? I doubt Roman could have came up with this for shit-hits-the-fan scenarios on his own.

The two newcomers come running towards us with their weapons, paying no attention to the Ursa and their buddies in the back.

“Find Qrow!” Oobleck shouts at Tai. Hearing this, Tai ditches the maul-hammer man still receiving a good pounding, leaps up and dashes toward the direction we came from in giant strides, without looking up.

The newcomers do not take this well; they start attacking immediately, with the swordsman shoving his partner with red gauntlets into Tai’s path, despite his sword being almost as tall as he is. Fine! With no Dust ammo, a body slam could be the best projectile weapon around.

Once the two connect, the Mistral officer used as a blunt object immediately swings around with reaction force and pulls back slightly, ready for an uppercut in no time.

When I see the soldiers further down the hallway again, they have already managed to finely dice the Ursa through their strength in numbers and willpower. Now they press onto Coco’s incomplete team, Zulfikar man and the lancer leading them while Sloan and hammer guy coming back to regroup. Shit!

The swordsman who cut through the roof stands back and watches Tai exchange punches with his buddy leisurely. I admit the fight is worth standing back to watch, but that’s a big mistake I just vowed not to copy; no time to grin like Cinder! I toss a shapeless cluster of Fall magic fire right in his face.
I anticipate to see the swordsman dance with his balaclava on fire. It’s annoying his Aura is much
tougher than that: He shakes around for a few times, then pulls the still-burning mask off with his
free hand, revealing a face saying immature douchebag under a jarhead. Must be a frat back at
Haven! I know what frats do.

The swordsman shoulders his sword to charge at us. He shouts as he takes a big slash at the one
closest to him, Oobleck:

“Eat it!”

Oobleck activates his semblance and blocks with the flask bat, trying to knock the giant sword off
to his left side. The swordsman doesn’t move a bit to bypass this block but keeps pushing, pressing
forward aggressively with the same slash. His sword touches the tip of Oobleck’s flask – and sends
the entire man flying into the corridor wall.

Physically into the wall. There’s a sizable dent where Oobleck hit it, and the man pretty much sank
into it, struggling to keep standing.

I throw out another Fall magic blast as the Mistral swordsman stands there thinking about how
satisfied he is with his attack. Not satisfied enough is the answer, as he shrugs off my blast just to
carve a wide jagged gash into the wall near Oobleck. Then, he picks up Oobleck by the front of his
collar and shoves him into the gash, a trap that requires more Aura than the overclocking doctor
has right now to get out of.

Coco’s fight further down the hallway looks even worse. The black heap of soldiers have
completely overtaken them and Sloan are leading his squad straight towards us.

Six versus three, even counting me and the doctor in the wall as half fighting capacity it’s still six
versus four. We need to run! Though, we have no fucking clue if Port and the Vigilant Ghost is
also surrounded. Qrow is already calling for help. Neo…

Roman has already ran away when I wasn’t looking. Oh well. I don’t know what the hell I should
expect when I see him again.

Clunk!

It’s Tai smashing his opponent’s gauntlet into the wall for a change, finally! The blades strutting
out hooked themselves into the corridor’s metal paneling, looking like they will take some effort to
get out. Tai disengages from the fight with a roll, then runs towards the way we came from without
looking back.

The same half-second as Tai cleared himself from his opponent, Glynda flicks her riding crop to
cave in even more pieces of the ceiling, then props the piece first dropped down by the swordsman
upright onto them. She has cut the passage off completely, leaving Coco, Velvet and Daichi behind
with the Mistral main force.

“Maidens can fly, right? Follow him.”

Flying is one thing I haven’t practiced before, and right now professor Glynda doesn’t want me to
answer her. I’m flung back on the same direction Tai went before I can warn her about it.

///// 

Propelling myself is easier to learn once I am already in the air. Keeping track of Tai is. I trace
back through the shops and walkways we passed, but soon I remembered how easy it is to get lost
in the middle of generic and repetitive stadium vendors.

At least my radio has connection again away from whatever is fucking up our Dust equipment. I slow down and try to call Fox and Port, but nobody replies. Frustrated, I switch to Tai with very low hopes. If he doesn’t pick up, my choices are fighting every asshole on this stadium on my own or flying back to Vale on my own as compared to… The same choices backed up by him.

Yipee ke yay violence.
Someone is running towards me. I cut the radio and hide behind a clothing advertisement.

Two more Mistral Huntsman. One of them is the trapper who ran into Neo. The other one must be his boss, who just came out of the announcer box, from how he sounds like:

“Too many Huntsman have forgotten to use any bait in a hunt, by doing so, they have forgotten it is actually the bait making the hunt what it is.”

No shit, giving a lecture while his men are fighting. Bet he’s a professor at Mistral. I want to grab that sophistication and shove it up the mouth he doesn’t use so much.

“There is a bait for every one of them, Lionheart, Ironwood, the men of Vale, Ozpin, the glass demon and her crooks, even the messenger of harvest.”

Come on, just a little bit closer, and then I can introduce you to a miniature sun. Walk faster asshole.

The commander points at where I am hiding.

I explode the sign with all the magic I can spare, then boost myself ahead into the next mess of luxury stores. Run, run, run and hide like a son of a gun.

The hangar is just around the corner. I’ll regroup with Port and Fox, grab some weapons, and…

Black lines tearing across every surface, radiating an unnatural sickly glow. They begin to chime and tingle once I fly over them.

Gravity Dust!

///

“You don’t wanna die for this, trust me! Think about it, only you two are guarding me, and your boss don’t let anyone else see me, it’s because he will kill you and pin it on me. His money is not worth your lives!”

Sloan and the Zulfikar man pay no attention to my reasoning. It has been a few hours since I have been dragged out of the trap and thrown into a small changing room somewhere near the ring entrance. The only human interaction I had is the trapper dropping some horrible pick-up lines on the way here. He’s not a frat, but a loner, lucky me.

“Hell, all your men gonna die too. Don’t you see what you just got into? Your boss tried to kill Beacon professors, right after terrorists hit Beacon! He can’t let you walk away telling anyone who you just saw here. That’s Oobleck and Port, the Vytal sportscaster right there, remember? Ozpin’s bastard son is here too.”

I actually passed the room where most of the Beacon folks are being held. Nobody is hurt seriously apparently, but Taiyang and Qrow are still missing as well as Roman and Neo. Mistral
have more use for us alive, right?

Someone coughs loudly outside, then an unexpected cacophony of metal clashing followed. Blades grinding, plate armor banging, a cable zipping from some kind of motor, and… Broken glass?

Roman opens the door and kicks Sloan in. Neo follows him, dragging the other man like the world’s most horrifying racoon who just found something dead and edible.

“They’ll be fine.” Roman says, “I’m on your side, Diesel, but I got questions for you.”

I nod. His expression tells the truth I think, immensely annoyed by the fact that his deal to walk away from Cinder’s faction just became more dangerous and complicated.

“Another thing: My dad is a musician from Atlas. Pianist.”

Chapter End Notes

I apologize for carpet F-bombing in this chapter. The final "fuck" count is a surprise to me too! But that's how I see Amber dealing with things going pear shaped fast.

Originally there's a clearer organization for the Vigilant ghost team - 3 teams as in CFVY, responsible adults (Port, Oobleck, Qrow, Tai), then Glynda watching over the weird ones.

Amity's layout is pretty much carte blante both in the show and the short so I took some liberties to make it more interesting to fight in; I think old calls say it should accommodate 20,000 or less audience in the seats but that still leaves a lot of room for high class vendors. The corridor where everyone fought everyone else is wider than the one Mercury caught Ruby in, think of a wide passage in a NBA or college basketball stadium.

Designer clothing - yes, that's Roman's buddy's brand.

Security cameras with voice recording - the same thing Ozpin uses for initiation. I picture automated defense to be Atlesian Knight robots plus scattershot laser cannons mounted on the outer shell, although the latter are likely mostly destroyed by the White Fang when they attacked.

How would a Freikorpsman look like? Change the color palette of the V4 and V5 Mistral cop to black with white trim, then add cuirassier armor. Officers have 3/4 armor modeled after the black-painted landsknecht armor made in Neuremburg, Germany.

The trapper and the swordsman are based on a real life friend and an online friend, while the Mistral commander is based on another online friend who has published an actual novel.

Headcanon Semblances - Oobleck has "internal time alter", tentatively, the same trick Fate Zero's Emiya Kiritsugu has. I originally planned for Coco to have the power of attaching herself to whichever surface she likes and not get blown away when concentrated. Though, I deleted the scene because the CFVY book will give her a canon one. Same thing with Fox's, injecting Aura into objects he comes into contact with...

Tai's Circle-Seven rifle - same as the gun May of BRNZ uses, which Rainstorm4 named after me... Last chapter I mixed it up and wrote it as Circle-Six, just presume they are different models from the same brand. I gave him this gun because I thought he probably taught Ruby how to shoot.
Amber vs. The Sword Frat - the balaclava is set on fire because the guy retracted his Aura from it, he doesn't like wearing headgear. He actually blocked the second shot by extending his Aura outwards, like what Ren did when fighting the snake.

Shoving Oobleck into the wall - Sword guy's Semblance lets his and other's Aura barge into things hard.

Mistral Huntsmen - the Freikorps uses a traditional team of 4 as the command squad of a company, though this time there are nowhere near a company on board Amity. There are two teams here and half of them are indeed Haven students, DUSK mentioned in Chapter 2, who switched places with Cinder. Sloan's team is called GLYR, Glare for convenience. There's another Huntsman tagging along for the mission.

Run like a son of a gun - a song called Atomic Nightmare, the "and hide" part comes from Megalovania Kinetic Rhapsody.
“Help me make sense of all this, Diesel. They want you here, but they are not going to kill you. Very clear orders saying they need you unharmed and presentable in Mistral. At the same time, not a fucking sign here say they are under Cinder’s orders. Why?”

Sitting in the Vigilante Ghost for what feels like an hour or so, I am still wondering if Roman is working for the other side to squeeze more information out of me. This conversation has been going in circles, at least one circle. Worse, since he now knows my name is not Diesel, he keeps using it as one of those mocking nicknames like “Little Red”. On the bright side, at least he confirmed that Penny is actually here; one camera inside the reactor control room shows some Mistral soldiers trying to put her pieces back together.

Roman came out of nowhere to busy me out of the locker room. Our escape is too easy but we didn’t bother to free everyone else. It also turned out the Mistral Freikorps didn’t even leave anyone to guard the hangar after taking Port and Fox. On top of all this, Cinder’s virus still works.

“You still haven’t answered my question, Roman. Why haven’t you two just flown away?” I point at where I think Neo is standing guard, “You don’t need to finish the job when none of us is around.”

“I can leave the job, but I can’t leave the business. I got into this fucking mess because these Mistral soldiers worked alongside Cinder. Alongside you by extension! You know things about them, right? I want to see who is trying so hard to put a cock into my business, and finish him. You told me this was my best chance!”

Woah. Since when did you become one of the good guys and when did this become your quest? I stare at him. Hey, this time I didn’t speak my mind and didn’t let it show on my face either, go me.

“Okay, okay, what did Cinder tell you about me, or why she’s doing everything? I don’t want to waste your time telling you whatever you already know.”

“Fig bagel with extra fucking poppyseed! Oh? Excuse me, but Cinder cured my habit of following ladies who don’t tell me nearly enough of what I need to know for the job, permanently! What’s this Maiden thing I hear over the radio?”

“Fine, fine. You’ll know the Maiden thing when we find Ozpin again.” I begin searching my mind for a way to present what I know and sound helpful, but still not fully letting him into the Season Powers story, “What do I have to do with Cinder? I’m a correspondent for Ozpin so she put a hit on me, but kept me alive for information, I tried to get her to switch sides, didn’t quite work out.”

I pause, reading his expression. Not impressed with the second half. He knows I’m embellishing the story to make me look better, but he’s too burnt out to care.

“I mean, she still tried to disobey her boss as far as I know. Then the invasion happened, what could I know? The Freikorps? They want to catch me, or they want to catch someone coming after me, whether it’s Ozpin or Cinder. Anyway, aren’t you the one who bought weapons from these people?”

“I can easily see what use Mistral have for Ozpin’s bastard daughter.” Roman fires the title we
gave him right back at me without answering what I asked, “Or is it mistress? Anyway, get a snack then gear up. If we don’t have a plan in a few hours, and I don’t see them kill anyone either, you are on next watch.”

I really don’t look forward to spending another indefinite period of time up here being hunted, not to mention being the bait, but I have no plan on my hands indeed. Fuck.

I dig into the box of Atlas-made emergency foodstuff stored in the cabin, what do we have? Soda crackers, bacon-and-spam pate, apricot jam, rinse and repeat. It’s like reliving the time when I bought a shitload of extra cheap survivalist rations from a recovering doomsday prepper who thought 2012 is a documentary! Don’t look at me, I was just a dirt poor photographer trying to get by in a town where grocery stores parking lots are thug petting zoos back then.

The mouthful of overly salted spam pate and cracker gives me a weird sense of complacency. Yes, the professors and CFVY are stuck behind enemy lines, but we have more supplies than we can use at the moment. The Fall power and Vigilante Ghost are more like quality of life improvements than the massive force multipliers they should be. What can I do anyway?

I browse through the remaining weapons and ammo stored in the Bullhead. The only real loss is the Circle-Seven sniper rifle Tai threw away. There is another one just like it stored in a case, along with a Thompson, Velvet’s spare rifle, two Atlas automatic railguns and maybe some pistols. For ammo, there is more than three times what we need to restock every Dust weapon in the team when we regroup, if we regroup. And then, there are boxes of grenades, some of them possibly also filled with Grimm tar, as well as a neatly packed container of Dust reaction bombs with radio triggers.

“Roman, why are you hauling this many explosives?”

I see no point asking where he got them.

“Grenades? My fighting style runs on shock and awe, thanks to the Secret Police. The big boys are for rubble and walls. Didn’t expect the place to be so intact.”

I had an idea the moment I saw the remote explosives, but now I’m getting more confident with it. More shit than we need, while there are still too many of them... Riddick, the 2013 movie.

I punctuate word by word as I subconsciously chew on this idea:

“Do, you, mind, if I reserve some?”

“Uh, no?”

Damn, the Atlas crackers have so much salt. Gives cinema popcorn back in fucking Milwaukee a good run for its money.

“You said there are only two dozens of soldiers and eight Hunters, right? How many people can you fit onto a Bullhead?”

“Yes, I see what you mean. No way I’m letting them fly off on my ride.”

“Roman, listen. I know you are too cautious to gamble much, but from where I am looking, it’s all or nothing for us now. We put in every chip we have. They don’t need to risk their lives for whatever is on Amity, so we show them something to hold onto if they fold.”

Roman listens in silence. Come on, come on, why not give me some feedback.
“We need to get it over with, fast. Everyone locked up can’t have their aura recharge when they are hungry, maybe even tortured. We go up and find their hangar. Fucking pop every plane they have. Next, hack the shield, land in the center ring, then make a rush for our people. Bring all the supply we can carry, blow the rest. Next stop, straight to Amity’s reactor core. We hold fast. Maybe it will take days, maybe we should set a detonation countdown, but let the fuckers know their only way out is this Bullhead.”

Roman’s eyes move from my face to the case of bombs. He nods slowly.

“If we still are in a good mood by the time they give up, we let them go, don’t actually set the bombs off. Otherwise, your call on whether they get to wait for the jail doctor in Vale.”

“It can’t fit thirty.” Roman finally answers me, “Maybe if it’s still stripped down, but right now the bird carries twenty at most if they want to get to the Vale airport, forget Mistral.”

This fact makes me more confident. Wait, maybe is it just some twisted appetite for the men in black to suffer making me more confident? Why should I be humane towards these assholes anyway?

“They know that too. Have them fight each other! They leave anyone behind alive, good for us. POWs to show the authorities in Vale.”

Roman stands up from his pilot seat, Scroll in his hand and dull frustration on his face:

“I’ll give you a passing score for designing a plan so close to what I’m thinking about, but even more perfect in endangering every escape route we have, while driving the Freikorps from murderous to bloodthirsty, all on your own. Fuck, this is why Beacon students scare the piss out of me.”

“No shit, my plan is garbage. I don’t know, what about, let’s say, if I have some professional opinions?”

“Hitting their riders is a good distraction, but you don’t want them to be actually desperate. The reactor doesn’t steer where it goes, so we need to take the control room unless you wanna try pushing the entire stadium home. From the inside.”

Very good point. I mean, my plan really isn’t too much beyond getting both sides pissed off.

“At least you know we need to hurry.” Roman continues while popping some pills into his mouth, “Let me do the job you asked me to, and you go focus on heavy lifting once the fun starts. Get some more calories for your Aura.”

“Is that… Some kind of Aura metabolism drug?” Reminds me of the first day in this year-long clusterfuck. Barely surviving a fight, alone with a grizzled hipster freak as my only ally in purpose, totally nostalgic. No, thanks, I’ll pass the pills and shitty movies for the moment, god knows I’d go bonkers way sooner before any bastard from Mistral succeeds in killing me.

“You want some? I thought your thing doesn’t agree with boost drugs. I know Cinder’s thing gets fucked up hard that one time she takes it. Maybe it’s the mescaline acting up though. Special brew.”

This might explain what was wrong with my magic and Aura regeneration a fucking year ago. Wait, did Roman just say he added drugs on top of his drugs? Fine, him getting higher than a satellite means he’s less likely to sell me out to the Freikors. I shrug:
“More for you then.”

“Call it Grimm repellent, Diesel. It’s just a little extra kick, just one method required to make the best out of our current situation.”

“They all do this?” I would guess all the Beacon adults could be keeping some kind of mood changing drugs just in case, but morbid curiosity still demands me to ask, “Everyone was on pills there? You were high when you flew us over here?”

“Hey, when the White Fang dropped Beowulfs on Ironwood’s ship, I was clean.” He points to where he used to patch himself up a week ago, ignoring my more important question, “You’re welcome.”

///// Amity’s sportscaster box is one thing Roman doesn’t mind about blowing up, even enjoying blowing up. The machine gun under Vigilant Ghost’s chin shreds everything that could have some tactical use to the enemy inside that glass balcony, from the massive live television control panel to the ceiling lights. No particular attention to the few unlucky soldiers left inside, so they get to grin and bear it with Aura. I don’t mean to insult these hired goons – you folks just are not worth focusing my aim at for the moment, people have no inherent fixed value.

The people we do want to antagonize and abuse are their buddies returning fire at us, using the seating as cover. Before we set off for Amity, Roman told Glynda he would like to install two door guns on the Bullhead; to our very little surprise, he already had both of them stored in his hangar at the yacht club. Good job, Vale police, good job.

The VTOL slowly rotates in its hover for a wider firing arc. One gun is for me to handle, Neo is in charge of the other; it’s not an easy position for her to fully express her sadistic mockery, but she still tries to work on it. Her shooting stops abruptly at some kind of gesture from Roman; she picks up Roman’s shotgun cane, fits a hand grenade onto its barrel, and fires it into one of the athlete entrances with a loud plop. I pause my own shooting briefly to have a look:

Freikorps soldiers there trying to shoot at us scatter as the grenade flies towards them, but as it explodes, all became pulled towards the strange, monochrome vortex created. Before I decide whether to keep suppressing the enemy or to try understanding how did Remnant people came to domesticating the black hole, another grenade flies into the entangled men in black struggling to get away from each other, releasing compressed ice Dust, blocking off the passage and trapping them.

The machine gun in my grip is built even bigger than Coco’s gatling. It’s crude, dated, more or less a discount Vietnam War movie centerpiece, but still solid in its rate of fire and caliber. It’s a simple formula for giving its user – me – an immense feeling of power. No aiming, no internal rationalizations about coming face to face with Mistral soldiers, just a garden hose of Dust-propelled metal versus some insects here and there. With this great power, comes… A big target painted on Vigilant Ghost?

Schiiick!

And a greater fear for one particular human organ I don’t even carry. The Hunter with a lance we fought earlier is leading the defense we are facing, and that volt of electric Dust came from him.

For all the modification Roman did on the Vigilant Ghost, he stripped the armor plating for the door gunners out to save fuel! Granted, the energy blast didn’t do much against us.
“Shouldn’t we land?” I shout to Roman through the radio speaker clipped onto my utility vest, which I wear over my borrowed faded Beacon uniform, like he does with his suit.

“Keep firing!” Still, he brings the Bullhead lower then slaps a button on a side panel, “Don’t stop till I tell you!”

Smoke discharger tubes flick out from the rear fuselage and under the wings, creating a blanket spread wider by jet downwash from the engines. Neo keeps firing grenades from Roman’s cane, also adding in a few smoke bombs for even more confusion. The odd bear roar or two in her direction tells me she even got one of those canned-Grimm bombs. Sooner than I know it, there’s only gray outside my shooting position.

Screech… Thud!

I can feel the Bullhead extend its landing gears and touching down in the ring, but Roman’s order still doesn’t come. I’m already worrying about how much ammo I still have in the door gun…

Then I’m yanked back by Roman, fortunately by hand instead of the hook on his cane. Did he decide to forgo telling me when to stop, or did he forget? He drags my collar all the way out of the Bullhead and into the hallway for athlete entrance, where Neo is already waiting.

No, waiting is the wrong word – raging through like a tornado is more like it: The first glimpse I have of her is she throwing a fully grown schmuck in half armor all the way into the ceiling, upside down like gravity doesn’t work on her anymore, while causally sparing one hand to block off incoming gunfire with her umbrella.

If this is still part of the show I would say she’s showing off, the animation team is showing off, Monty may whichever god rest his soul made this stray piece of video to show off but couldn’t find it, but the more I see it, I can’t look away. Fights in this “real” world doesn’t have choreography on where the poor punching bag bastards stand, yet Neo makes it seems like there is. She plots out which direction to go next, where to make impact and where to fake it, maximizing the efficiency of every move, directing the attention to wherever she wants it.

How did she get training like this?

As I connect the dots in what I see, Neo starts to brutalize two new opponents. Holding the umbrella by its tip, she tugs the first one of them towards her then lobas him over her shoulder, right in place for Roman to plaster him with a freezing Dust shell. The next guy tries to use his rifle to block the umbrella, but Neo simply kicks him into a wall and… Picks up his gun just for insult value? She fires a burst on him offhand without looking, but stops when his Aura breaks. Neo maintains her advance down the hallway, using accurate burst fire to force the Mistral soldiers back behind corners and whatever passing as cover.

Roman shoves the Thompson into my arms:

“How onto it, do your flying thing and try to look scary.”

It’s Cinder impersonation time again, well, no right to blame him for missing Cinder when I’m filling up the team pyromaniac vacancy poorly.

For one thing, trying to think like Cinder does help me float better. All it takes is a forced smug look and an ominous flame in hand to make lugging the massive gun along in its sling feel lighter.

At this time Neo has herded the Freikorps down one side of the intersection, and Roman used some kind of marble looking Dust substance to seal us off on the other side. Finally, we are here to
rescue people.

Changing rooms. Male section. They don’t have security cameras, after all it’s where athletes reveal shortcomings… Fuck, if the documentaries and Blood School can be trusted, Remnant’s sense of privacy when it comes to celebrities is a horrifyingly exploitive embarrassment, especially when so many of them are still underage. Back to the changing rooms… What I want to say is, only paparazzi get to take pictures inside the whole backstage area, so there aren’t any cameras Cinder could bug.

Now, we are waist deep in changing rooms, sliding doors lined on either side of the long passage. Too much effort to kick them open or even use Roman’s shotgun cane. How can I breach them fast enough?

The Fall power!

I point at the nearest door and imagine myself gripping on its handle. Turn and pull… Gently?

The door opens smoothly like a good electric shutter door should, but I can sense a considerable force driving it, independent of the mechanism. Good. Though, it’s empty.

“So… Housekeeping?”

I chuckle.

“What the fuck?”

“Isn’t that what maids say all the time? They want a maiden, I gonna give them maid of the year!”

Roman gives me a big shrug. Well, I haven’t been in a hotel ever since I got to Remnant. What do I know? I start running down the hallway like it’s Halloween and nobody gave me anything.

“Room service, room service, room service, et cetera!” I pull on the doors open one by one, without exception, they fly open.

Chapter End Notes

Finally, I'm shrinking the chapter length down to a wordcount more manageable... For me. Hopefully this cliffhanger means I can get to finishing the next part quicker? Also: 200% smug for the V6 return of Neo being sort of similar to my return of Roman! I'm more relieved than I should be for the show not giving nearly enough backstory on Neo and Roman though.

The title comes from the movie Rebel Without A Cause.

"Fig and poppyseed" is a Russian slang for "bullshit", expect a few more Russian colloquialisms from him in the future because Clockwork Orange!

"Room service" comes from the movie Unaccompanied Minors, which is also an Aquaman movie... So yeah, I got an Aquaman reference just in time.
We successfully found our people in the changing rooms, alive and untouched. Granted, they took our weapons, the white-haired little shit tried to hit on Velvet, but the room holding our guns is cracked along the way and that creep is now running around worrying about a White Fang airborne invasion. What's better? Captain Sloan tried to apprehend us again, on his own.

Now we have his ass tied to a changing room bench and his limbs tethered to separate bench legs.

The bad news is, we still have no fucking clue about where Qrow went, nor whether Tai even found him. Well, that's what we can try using Sloan for.

"Paddle him. He still has Aura, paddle him good then I can start asking him questions."

Roman is enjoying handling this interrogation as much as I expect him to. I look to him, then to the Thompson in my hands without its magazine, then to Sloan. I doubt the effect of this scare campaign, maybe because how much I feel like just wrecking Sloan and not bother about getting the answer anymore.

"Did I just say start asking him questions?" Roman poses to throw one of Sloan's tomahawks at him, "I mean start axing him questions. Fuck, you better start paddling him quick, but watch out if I throw it early."

Should I be impressed by how psychotic Roman can act like when he needs to, or be impressed by how good he can act the other way when he always need to?

"Traitors! Backstabbing villains!" Unfortunately, I can see no way Sloan is giving in anytime soon, "My lord Wolfsanchor will bring Amity to Mistral, the world will know what happened and remember your names!"

For one, I am actually okay with ceasing hostilities for the moment and figuring out what the fuck is going on by sharing our field intelligence. A lot of signs indicate we are just talking past each other…

"You craven child murderers! The Freikorps will take your skulls and stake them all across Remnant!"

That probably hits a bit too close to Roman. However, if it does get him worked up enough maybe he'll be more convincing… What the shit am I thinking, and why I'm actually enthusiastic about enhancing this dubiously legitimate interrogation? Does this make me some kind of sociopath just like Roman, on top of the fact that I'm already working with Roman?

Fuck.

"I'm out. Don't bother with throwing, just go ahead and axe him." Although I wash my hands from physically abusing him, bluffing harder by channeling Cinder is probably still fine by me, "If you break him…When we exchange prisoners, you know which one of the two we don't mind losing."

Roman shrugs, but didn't move. He's looking at one of the hatchets we took over from Sloan, reading its inscriptions and engravings with deep interest. Maybe he knows something about what
he read, and how it's not matching up with what we saw, I can feel it from his expressions.

A commotion comes from outside our room; I can tell Neo is zipping out of the room to join the defense from the shattering glass sound behind me.

"Aaaaahem! Get the fuck out here, the party's starting!"

Is that Qrow?

"They don't know what happened. Not so loud, Qrow."

Tai's here. For no apparent reason I imagine Qrow just pepped up from a frathouse beer pong match and deciding to get the whole neighborhood over for some more liquor, while Tai is dead tired but can't stop himself from following. I didn't go to college, but I have been pestered by enough college students to know about it.

Oobleck buds the door open quietly and leans in to gesture us to have a look in the hallway, his face telling me I should be ashamed of making that irreverent mental picture. Was I laughing before he came in? Did his super speed make him able to hear me laugh?

Well… My mental picture is pretty accurate. Gone are Qrow's folding sword and dignifying seriousness, replaced by an expensive-looking bottle cradled in one hand. His other arm rests on Tai, who's doing his best to prop up himself. I can smell alcohol on them right where I stand.

Alongside them are two Mistral Freikorps officers: One should be the guy who uses the zulfikar sword, the other looks like he's hiding the same grizzled mercenary fashion as Qrow under poorly fitting black uniform. The stranger's face shares a similar stubble and condescending smug look, but his green-ish hair is longer and more wavy. Both of them are pretty relaxed.

"Nobody's missing? Let's get back to the lounge!" Qrow shouts, "It's finders keepers up there!"

Oh. Of course they went drinking in the VIP lounge. Of course that place doesn't have security cameras either.

"Who the f… Finnegan's Wake are these guys?" I ask Oobleck, "They got friends in the Mistral army?"

Oobleck doesn't have an answer right away, making me debate with myself whether I should have openly cursed at a teacher or used an euphemism that only one person on this planet knows what it references.

"Good evening, heroes of Vale!" The mistral version of Qrow greets us just in time, cheerfully, "Pardon me for the inconveniences this morning. I'm Francois Triton of the Mistral Frei…"

"Fillet Franc!" Qrow breaks him off mid sentence.

That kind of nickname isn't too endearing. Though, that might be my paranoia speaking… I sometimes doubt and hate a good number of people before I even want to talk to them, just to feel smarter. Okay, I know how much it sounds like letting matches burn my fingertip just to feel something, but anyway.

"Yes, in short it's Franc, major Fillet Franc! And this here is sergeant Yonah Davis, we two and Qrow go way back from his time before Signal. We are old running buddies – rolling buddies, in today's words!"
Davis salutes us stiffly, but Qrow smacks his hand down:

"Franc! Yonah! Let's go! I'm running fucking dry as we speak!"

That bottle does look it's approaching its bottom from the way Qrow shakes it… But then, it could also be that Qrow is too strong.

Suddenly, I hear guns cocking down the hallway. Four Mistral Hunters are standing there, two of them with guns pointing at us; one is the white-haired tryhard, the other is the big bastard who punched Oobleck into a wall. The latter's big-assed sword has a rifle of some kind built into it, what a cliche! There is also the commander I ran into in the duty-free shop, and the one with red gauntlets who… Is a lady who looks like a younger Glynda with loose hair? She looks even more professional for her age, more like a stern librarian than Glynda, even with the Freikorps uniform and armor.

"Stand down, kids!" Francois makes an exaggerated bow, "Let's all take it to the VIP lounge."

/ 

Team Dusk, officially spelled DASK. The freshman year star team of Haven that didn't make it to Vytal because they were on some mission in the east fringe of the country, and was replaced by CMSN. All its members earned commissioned officer status in the Mistral Freikorps, leading a battlegroup together. How does it matter to us right now? Well, it means major Fillet Franc can order them around to serve drinks in Amity's VIP audience lounge.

It's like back at those business events or social meetings for responsible grown-ups I went to when I was still working at the TV studio, though I don't need to manhandle a camera around the place anymore. I used to enjoy watching a room full of drunk people doing drunk people stuff, just for the heck of it, but the Hunters aren't getting drunk anytime soon before I doze off or do something randomly stupid.

The mood in the lounge is a little bit awkward, not because the day-long fighting we just had, but because not even Tai knows much about the friends Qrow has in Mistral. Though, maybe it's harder for them to reach out to us, since Yonah Davis isn't very sure how to break the ice either. The adults mostly just stand there and sip awkwardly, waiting for Qrow or Franc to say something.

Actually, the most pressing thing is… The VIP lounge isn't really inclusive on nonalcoholic drinks. I can only find some juices reserved for cocktail mixing, those weirdly named People Like (TM) brand sodas, and god fucking damn it – carbonated green tea. Why the fuck did someone have to invent this non-alcoholic bottled urine, why the double fuck I didn't read the label carefully!

The Haven girl who looks like younger Glynda and has the red gauntlets is staring at me behind the bar counter, as I try to not lose control of all my lower facial muscles from the carbonated taste. I think she's judging how I judge the drink. Her squadmates? I think they're following her gaze, taking a break from waiting the bar. The Mistral adults aren't watching them. Shit.

There's no going back for me in such a polite diplomatic occasion, the stakes are higher than ever; I don't want to literally go down in history as the one poor devil who pissed off the Mistral representatives and restarted the destruction of Amity, all over some bad tea-based soda.

I gulp it down and smile at her as casually as I can, then raise the bottle up to take a second swig. Hooray, sunk cost and complacency!

"Are you… Amber Clercwell?"
"It's D…" Not the right time for the whole Diesel thing. I cut myself off, "Yeah, I am."

"I'm Pyrrha's friend Antha Bauhin."

Okay, this is terrible news one way or another. Should I pretend I'm still parched, keep drinking to avoid talking to her? My free hand is already reaching forward to shake her hand before I could have a decision. Well fuck.

"It's a miracle you made it out! We were there to lift Pyrrha off the battlefield that day, she said she owes you a lot, Amber."

Now that confirms one theory about what happened after the invasion. How deep is the Freikorps into it, though? Hopefully Qrow and his buddies can sort some things out with the authorities in Mistral. Franc and Yonah are supposed to be working for Ozpin since quite a while ago, and the fact that Glynda seems to be on speaking terms with them backs it up a bit.

"She kept blaming herself for leaving you and Mr. Ozpin behind."

Pyrrha, you're truly worthy to become the forgotten superhero known as Apology Girl. I'm the one who should have kept blaming myself for failing to do fucking cock-and-bollocks for you and Ozpin. Though, Antha also feels like a nice person to be around from the first impression; I don't just mean she's the only Mistral soldier I saw who is not a creep, frat jerk, or hard boiled moron, I think she actually has a warm personality.

"You've been away from Mistral for a while, haven't you?" She asks, it's a question I don't really have an answer for. What she says next relieves me, "You haven't tried this tea when it first came out half a year ago? It's horrible, only got here because the company have some ties."

Obviously, she saw I can't deal with the thing at all. I nod, looking for a place on the bar to put the bottle down.

"Let's get it out of the way." Antha takes it over and pours it down the sink, "I just want to assure you, Pyrrha and her team are safely back in Mistral. The Freikorps have everything covered for our heroes."

Our heroes… Fine. Though, did she think Pyrrha and Cinder are on the same team? She must have lost the memo on a couple of things. Maybe being in the Freikorps put her out of the loop for a while too. Right now, I'll just drink to keep my own mouth shut before I can say anything wrong.

At least, right now the adults are properly talking to each other and the other Haven kids are getting busy serving. Glunda looks gravely concerned from something Francois showed her on his Scroll, but it's Glynda, what can I expect.

I grab a can of unopened People Like Apples. In the show its unearthly color can give Nehi or Faygo a run for their money, but I'll worry about chemical implications later. Just imagine it's Appletiser! Imagine it's Schwepps, god damn it!

"Hmm, that's my favorite too."

Antha offers to open the can with some fancy bartender instrument, but I pull it open and hand it to her first.

"Cheers to our hero Pyrrha."

I tell her as I open another can for myself.
The small VTOL with Amity markings slowly lifts off from the Mistral hangar as we wave goodbye. CFVY, Oobleck, Port and Neo are going back to Vale to report on what we found, and we're flying back with the stadium itself once we finish checking all its systems. Tai originally wanted to go back too so he can stay with his daughters, but Qrow said the Freikorps has some message from Ozpin to show him. They even lent us two of their pilots for the VTOL, which is smaller than a Bullhead, despite Tai said he can fly the thing on his own.

The only Mistral people in the hangar with us are Francois Triton and the kid who leads DASK, a pale and nerdy-looking guy with pitch black hair called Defisos Oufor. For the entire time he has been with us, since his team showing up at the lockers, I didn't hear him talk to anyone without being spoken to; it makes me wonder whether I imagined him gloating over the loudspeaker or giving the weird speech at the shopping area.

"Have some faith in who Ozpin gives his trust to, Glynda. Leonardo and the colonel are all determined to put Ozpin's interest before theirs, within a month, their men will be right on your call in Vale."

"It's hard to accept such a point of no return, Mr. Triton. This is not justifiable by any means in this war. There's two of your soldiers' lives on the line as we speak."

Their conversation is way more ominous than I can expect at this moment, halfway more than I can tolerate at this moment. What's going on? Even the small VTOL seems to be flying much slower than it should be.

"The Vale council was not wrong having you reaching out to Ironwood, but that was back when Ozpin held his chain. His electrical life forms, his Aura mechanisms? We both know what rules do they break."

Is Glynda some kind of double spy between Ozpin and the Vale councilmen?

"We agreed on giving you the android. Neither the council nor Ironwood would care once Amity is in Vale. They don't even know she's still here…"

We are handing Penny over to Mistral for extra protection? The situation is unfolding too quickly. Where's Roman? Where the fuck are you when I need to talk to a professional conspirator?

"Glynda, Atlas is not coming. How long can you wait for Ironwood to relieve the city, how many people are you ready to lose, before help finally comes? Ironwood does not listen to Vale without Ozpin."

Glynda is having a hard time to give him an answer. Morbid curiosity overtakes me completely. I want to make some sense out of it, I want to help in any possible way – but all my mind tells me is keep listening and standing there like a fully detached observer. Last time I felt like this, I was back in the coffin machine.

"The decisive matter is the deed, Professor."

Defisos suddenly opens up in an absurdly cheerful tone, but he is facing Qrow and Tai instead of Glynda.

I follow his sight. Qrow looks like he is holding Tai back from doing something he anticipates to happen, but both of them are too drunk for me to make sense of their pose. It's a miracle they are still standing – back at the bar, Qrow kept mixing the carbonated green tea with his whiskey and
completely lost track of how much he drank, while Tai was the only one who did follow suit.

"Make the sacrifice, the same as Ozpin has done. Set down the bait for the long hunt, the same as he never has given up on." Jesus finger licking Christ, the guy does monologue, "Let us give meaning and worth to the inevitable. Only the deed marks our faith to mankind, to life."

Now this is so completely haywire ominous I can't think of any way it doesn't result in total disaster… I don't mean I will accept partial disaster just fine, but when did beggars become choosers?

"Is the bird where they can see it?"

"Yes, major."

"Do it." Francois tells Defisos and salutes the VTOL slowly getting away.

"For Vale and Mistral, for Ozpin and the sacred name Vasilias."

Defisos takes his Scroll out and speaks into it. What the hell could this speed-dial go to?

Creeeeeependeeedddddaaaaak!

The sound of giant armored panels on Amity's outer wall opening is blown into the hangar by the night wind. The loudspeaker system turns on right above our heads:

"Automated defense system on line. Please take shelter according to instruction signs and avoid open spaces, exterior doors or windows in case of debris. Automated defense system on line…"

Oh.

Red lasers pierce the calm autumn night sky, sweeping across it, dividing the view from the hangar gate like bars on a prison cell door. Their common destination is the VTOL that just took off, a massive net of approaching doom flung towards one bird.

Let me do something, let me stop it, I will do whatever I must…

The lasers converge on the VTOL.

Is this how it ends for the well-loved second line side characters onboard? Scratch that, for the people I lived alongside, fought alongside for the past week? There should be something working as a plot shield. I am the only member of the audience standing here, I should have a right or something, shouldn't I? The story can't properly go into the fourth season without them being there, in theory Yang is waiting for that one visit by the teachers…

What the fuck am I thinking. Of course this is how it ends for them. Team Coffee, the two teachers who take whatever roles needed, and Neo, zapped in the back by a dozen or so lasers from people they trusted the most. There's only an explosion for me to remember them by, and for the people of Vale to vow revenge by. Chill out, myself.

...That's not hard when an extra instance has passed, I know. When I become a detached observer again, I'm amazed in a different way.

The conversation between them makes sense, logical to the degree not expected to have room for conventional human emotions.

Without Ozpin, underlings of his conspiracy need another excuse to show the public, for aligning
themselves. Ironwood is no longer possible to provide any defense for Vale after the Penny incident and losing most of his forces, so Glynda has to ask Mistral to spare their Freikorps militia battlegroups. The cover story should say Mistral is grateful for heroes of Vale rescuing their troops who came on their own accord to evacuate innocent civilians and Pyrrha. Rescuing them from who?

Roman Torchwick, the White Fang and an unidentified groups of Mistral dissidents, all shared enemies of humanity taking refuge in Vale. Roman surviving the airship crash isn't expected, but Vale authorities probably already had some contact with Amity once Francois boarded, so they made up a plan in the time we refit the Vigilant Ghost.

What's wrong with the scheme I just realized? It's what all boils down to the cold, rational deeds, right?

The fireworks outside is already gone by now. I'd wonder if it was ever really a good spectacle to rally a furious population on, but I wonder about too many things. After all, Francois and Defisos said the bird went to where people can see it.

The bird is… Actually, still flying just fine?

It has turned around at some point, now it's coming towards the stadium in a zig zag pattern trying to avoid the next laser barrage. Why don't I accept… Accept what?

"Maintain fire!" Francois orders, "Be quick!"

Defisos is fumbling with his Scroll… There is definitely something wrong, and not just in my goddamned head. I don't dare to look at the other adults.

A shotgun frag round flies pass my face from behind me and explodes on the wall in my front. Roman, I don't blame you, but…

It's only his way to get my attention: Roman is pinned to the side of a VTOL and twitching furiously to struggle free, like a mouse on an adhesive trap, his torso tied down by invisible wires – the same fucking kind of gravity Dust glyph trap that got me when I first tried flying!

"Diesel, sic 'em! Get back at them!"

I'm still too detached to fully feel what Roman is feeling, but I greatly applaud the way he shows his trust in me: He launches the Thompson sub machine gun at me with the grappling hook on his cane.

Out of intuition, I caught the heavy Thompson-sized lump of a weapon in mid air. At the same time, the creepy white-haired Freikorps kid who tried dropping me pick-up lines appears from behind where Roman is pinned. I release the safety and aim at him, but he didn't flinch.

He walks up to Roman and started poking around with the spike bayonet on his rifle. It looks like a pile bunker with a revolver ammo cylinder, while the gun looks like a Calico rifle, both weird designs most fit for a weird edgy teenager.

"My lord, you are right about his treachery!"

He picks out Roman's Scroll from a jacket pocket, and waves it at Defisos. The team Dusk leader nods, then points at Roman like he pointed at me:

"Your secrets are mine now. The gods know your name."
Another volley of lasers sweep across the sky and converge on the VTOL again. Amazing, now I can be sure I wasn't fucking hallucinating them surviving the first one!

The lasers are actually converging on a spot a little bit of distance under its fuselage. They converge, then focus straight down in a combined but quickly dissipating distorted beam.

"Kill that cocksucker with the…!" Roman is forced to close his mouth as jagged ice spikes form all around him, all over him.

The white-haired Mistral kid pockets the Scroll then points his gun straight at me. Now I remember, his name is Lin Shicheng. Like in Chinese on Earth, Lin is the family name.

I ignore him, choosing to pepper Dephisos and Francois' general direction with full automatic fire. Although the laser cannons are automated, I suspect if the operator wants to target something other than Grimm, he still needs to manually select it. Besides, the bullets might give my allies a taste of reality they need so much.

Shit, I know how dark it sounds, but Glynda, Qrow and Tai are still spacing out. To their Aura, a .45 bullet should be just like a friendly kick, right?

The Freikorps officers duck away from my shots, they aren't armed, but Shicheng is. I don't mind tanking his fire with my Aura.

Bad idea. One bullet on my shoulder throws my aim off to the fucking ceiling, even though it didn't break my skin.

Shit, do military grade ammo hit harder? I don't look forward to find out, so I flare up my Fall power as a shield.

I keep shooting to suppress Franc and Defisos; the VTOL has come much closer to us. Now, I can see Neo dangling below it, latching onto a hologram version of Roman's grappling hook held by Velvet who's reeling it back, sitting on the landing rail.

Too handy for a laser trouble, Neo's Semblance!

Glynda throws Shicheng's rifle to a side using her telekinesis, no riding crop needed; the Freikorps guy runs after it in a comedic shuffle. Qrow and Tai are chasing after Francois, who is making a straight run to the door. Where's Defisos and his Scroll?

Schiiiiiiiiiiiiick!

The VTOL makes a very hard landing into the hangar. The Mistral pilots are not thrilled by the light show at all, just like us. It stops at literally close enough for me to see the white of everyone's eyes – except and Fox's because there is only the brown of his eyes instead.

Neo has bounced over to Roman already, she starts chiseling the ice on him off with the blade hidden in her umbrella.

"That way! Get the fake Schnee first!"

I rush toward the direction his face is pointing at. There, Lin Shicheng stands amount a mass of deactivated Atlesian Knight robots, looking highly annoyed at being called a fake Schnee.

"I hate to play the bad guy too! Especially when it's you on the other side of a gun. I don't have any luck with girls, right?"
He is scratching out some pattern on the floor with the rifle's bayonet. Defisos is somewhere behind him, lugging something around. The kneeling robots repainted in gray and blue make it hard to tell what they are doing.

"Hands up, both of you!" I shout, I've lost count of how many bullets I fired, better not find out too soon.

"You really didn't give me a choice!" Shicheng shouts back, "Couldn't we just meet over a drink later?"

Fox and Neo are by my side about to attack on my first shot. Are they? The sound of glass shattering makes me look at Neo, but she is still there, looking at me just as confused.

Then I notice pitch black straight lines crossing the floor, connecting one robot to another. They weren't that notable half a moment ago because… They weren't pulsating just then. Liquid, vibrant black pulsating on mechanical straight white lines. The black seep into every seam on every robot, but disappearing under the composite shell plates.

Defisos turns a switch on from where he is. The robots all light up, not making any moves, just waiting his orders. Then, Shicheng pounds on the floor hard with his rifle's bayonet.

One row by another, the robots stand up without any noise. Their head cameras are all pointing at us, actually, at me. The light of Grimm possession is clearly visible, one Geist delivered into at least dozens of robots.

"Advance, my Arma Festus!"

Defisos commands. For a world tormented by Grimms, Remnant likes its weaponized Grimm technology a bit too much, I must say.

The possessed robots move pass me, driving Roman and Neo further back. My estimation of there being dozens of them is too fucking low – more and more robots are activating inside the large airships. Some of them are holding guns designed for human use. There could be a couple of hundreds in total, this is all the fighting strength the Freikorps on Amity needs! To top it off, there's one entire Grimm connecting all of them.

Finally, I am cut off from all living souls again, surrounded by machines and spite. Too familiar for my comfort! I hear Glynda shouting some orders to everyone, but Coco's minigun is blazing away.

I move my left hand away from the gun and clench it into a fist. The Fall power form a spike of fire around it.

"Your Fall power is less than even a half of its full potential, and you are not nearly worthy to use it."

I shut the flames off and steady my aim again. Cinder? Who else talks like that. I know the hallucination I am used to doesn't sound like Cinder… Though, I do tend to think of Cinder, think like Cinder, when I need to use the power.

"You think you have power and control. You think you can do it without me?"

I know I waste too much time weirded out by the situation I got myself into to address it, but what can I do, before I even get a full picture of this fucking mess? For instance, why is Cinder talking inside my brain? Someone please just get me into a proper fight and stop all this thinking. Hello,
violence?

"Poor Amber, you never figured out how to think. You can't fight either, so why don't let me help?"

Ironically, I still have time to work this mental struggle out first, the Grimm bots are ignoring me just fine at the moment. Fillet Franc wants me alive.

What causes hearing disembodied voices in the show, like with Oscar… Why can she see what I see but not the other way around? Oh fuck.

Did Cider just die and start to merge with my consciousness? There are too many things I can't risk her knowing.

"Worry about yourself! You should start begging me to save them right now."

I only take her first suggestion and evaluate my options. I want to save the Fall power for flying back to the team; an optimistic guess about my Thompson is at 10 rounds or so remaining in its drum magazine, without any spare ammo on me. I doubt if it's enough to take out a single robot, or if they would still ignore me if I run the hell away.

"Now you are thinking the right way. I found out on my own, when I was younger."

Have Salem sent Cinder to teach me the dark side's approach to difficulties in life?

Defisos appears again, as robots make a way between him and me. He has picked up some warhead from one of the parked airships, a rifle and a round shield – they look like heavier precursors of Pyrrha's weapons with duller color.

"You can say this is a test of character if you prefer." He says to me as he presses a button to turn his rifle into a sword, "But I'm interested in learning something too after all, I haven't talked to Pyrrha for some time."

The asshole is waving his sword to taunt me. I've figured out Defisos is not really working for Ozpin, so will Cinder decide to help him now? Although she didn't say anything, I can sense hate and rage building up that are not my own.

The gunfire behind me has died down but robots are still marching, pressing forward. At the same time, it's getting into a staring competition here, I can't really turn around to check how it went or make my way back…

The robots around Defisos aim their assault rifles at me.

"You do not look as scared as you should be." Now Cinder is mocking me too, "You know your friends are outnumbered. You think you're better without me?"

Actually… Cinder, it's you who asks to join my fight this hard. I don't run away scared, I just grin and bear it then try. If things really go terminally pear shaped… Long ago I have made the resolve for grabbing ankles sooner or later, just that it hasn't gotten that bad yet.

Defisos got close enough. I pull the trigger to use all the remaining bullets in the Thompson for a crude flashbang effect, then throw the empty gun at him with my Fall power.

Next, I start running, barging robots out of my way with my bare flaming hands. The machines feel even heavier than I expect.
Bang – krrrraaakt!

A shot from Defisos freezes the ground below me, encasing my legs in ice. I'm stuck in an awkward post-ironic action hero pose, usually seen in plastic figures that come with stage sets. I don't mind the cold, but his humor…

"You fool."

Cinder is itching for a fight. No, she thirsts for revenge. Not on me, instead on Defisos and the Mistral Freikorps.

"Take my hand!"

Yes.

Let's see how far we can go together.

The flames on my hands disappear suddenly. How? Why? I said yes, now what's fucking wrong with you? I'm in a tight pickle here, you know?

The robots just stand there and watch, as Defisos takes a phone call from someone I can't hear.

"Quiet!" Cinder's mental voice sounds like she didn't expect it to happen either. If I go down here, then the power might go to Pyrrha by the rule of thumb. No, she is just frustrated with getting into this fight, "Your Aura. It's not working the right way. I may need to access it."

It's not working the right way thanks to your big fucking arrow, remember? Just fix this technical difficulty for me, Cinder.

"We become vigilant ghosts, for we carry the truth of a scarred past. Souls freed from the gravity of weakness, may the darkness of our faith guide our hands to light!"

Chapter End Notes

I didn't make it within a month, didn't beat last week's episode either... But anyway, 10 chapters! A milestone! I think now it deserves to be called a real story with its own things going on. Thanks for bearing with me! The next chapter might take some extra time to cook, since I also want to start a TV Tropes page. Moonlight Shadow - named after the song, also Cinder's entrance in the first episode. Go try the song for yourself!
Fillet Franc - named after a random sketch drawing by a college buddy, Yonah Davis is a reference to Davy Jones which he also drew at one point. No relation to Scarlet David.
Carbonated green tea - 啤儿茶爽, a Chinese drink that has been an infamous meme. It's discontinued. People don't really mix it into whiskey, they use sweetened green tea in reality.
Antha Bauhin - named after the Bauhinia flower.
Defisos Oufor - named after the ancient greek word for thirsty, dephysios, or so I remember... Based on another buddy's Warhammer 40K character. Lin Shicheng and the other guy are carried over from non-RWBY stories of mine that didn't take off, both modeled after other friends.
The deal between Glynda and Francois - it's just Amber's guess, though not very far from reality.
Lasers - Neo deflected them with her light manipulation Semblance. She's on magical drugs.
Cinder - she's alive, what caused this situation between her and Amber will be addressed in later chapters.

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