The Name of the Game

by literalsin

Summary

A man from Earth wakes up to find himself stuck in the body of a fictional teenage boy with an ability that turns his life into a video game and foreknowledge of events to come. What could possibly go wrong? A take on the RWBY/Gamer crossover niche with an SI twist, a focus on world and character building, and fleshing out some of the details RT missed.

An unapologetic deconstruction of the RWBY/The Gamer crossover genre, played with the lafftrak turned off; with a focus on world and character building and fleshing out some of the details RT missed.

Tags: SI, semi-AU, crossover, deconstruction, harem.
Welcome to the World (of Remnant)

The Name of the Game

a RWBY/The Gamer crossover, SI.

Arc 1: New Game +

Chapter 1: Welcome to the World (of Remnant)

'Why do I smell a hospital?'

My first thought on waking was that wherever I was smelled like antiseptic and sick people—opening my eyes confirmed my suspicion. Currently, I shared a small hospital room with one other person—blonde, female, probably in her mid-twenties if I had to guess. The girl sat sleeping in a chair at my bedside, dressed in what looked to my eyes like some sort of cosplay—very, very high quality cosplay. She was tall, or would be when she stood, and wore armored greaves, bracers, spaulders, gauntlets, and a breast plate—in addition to a metal head piece of some sort. However, under the armor, were fairly normal street clothes one would expect on a girl her age—jeans, a white hoodie, high-heeled leather boots, and a belt. What was most out of place, however, was the text hovering over her head.

The Eldest Deadly Sister

Divine Aegis

Joan Arc

Level: ???
My eyes darted back and forth between the words, her face, and her armor several times.

Ding!

I froze, eyes going wide as they tracked a sudden obstruction of my view of the girl. The obstruction in question was a box—blue, semi-transparent, with white text.

[Alert: A skill has been created through a special action! Observing someone or something for a prolonged period has created the skill \textbf{Observe}!]

I stared. When it refused to go away, I found the [X] in the upper right hand corner of the window and tapped it. Immediately, another box popped up under the first.

\textbf{Observe}: Level 1. Active. Through continuous observation, a skill to observe objects, situations, and persons was generated allowing the user to quickly gather information. The higher the skill, the greater the data obtained.

Narrowing my eyes, I tapped the close button again and turned my gaze away from Miss Arc. Closing my eyes, I focused inward to think. 'Okay. So. What do we know? Firstly: I'm in a hospital. Secondly: there's a cute cosplayer I don't recognize in my room. Thirdly…'

Ding!

[Alert: A skill has been created through a special action! By turning your focus inward, you have created the skill \textbf{Meditate}!]

\textbf{Meditate}: Level 1. Active. Through continuous inner focus, a skill to sharpen focus, order thoughts, and increase clarity of mind and awareness of body was created. Passive effect: increases VIT, INT, WIS by 20%. Active effect: while meditating, increase HP and MP regeneration rate by 100%.

Sighing quietly, I reached out and closed the boxes before returning to my… meditation.

Ding!
Meditation's skill level has increased by 1!

'Oh for fuck sake! I get it, okay?! Thirdly: somehow, some way, against everything I understand of science, my life has become a video game. There, are you happy?” I fumed. 'Now, the questions I sorely need answered: Where am I, why am I here, what the hell happened, and what next?'

Ding!

[ A quest has been created!]

[Not in Kansas: Gather Information!]

[You've woken to find yourself in a strange place, surrounded by stranger people—it's happened to everyone at least once, but probably not like this. Investigate your surroundings for clues!]

[Reward: 10 0 0 EXP , answers, quest continuation. Failure: confusion, frustration, quest continuation.]

[Accept/Decline]

Rolling my eyes, I tapped the button marked 'Accept' and looked around the room. Immediately, my eyes caught sight of a device in the upper left corner of the room. It looked absolutely nothing like a television, and yet there was a screen broadcasting imagery from somewhere with a person apparently giving some sort of news report. Noticing the sound seemed to be off, I cast around for a remote before finding a box labeled with channel and volume controls hard wired to the bed. Adjusting the volume, I began listening to the report, before an idea occurred. Looking at the girl to my right and making sure she was still asleep, I turned my attention back to the television thing before whispering, “Observe.”

[Telescreen. A two-way communication device similar to a television. This model appears to be set to receive only.]

Closing the information window, I strained to make out the man's words without waking the other occupant of my room.
Ding!

[Alert: A skill has been created through a special action! By trying to focus on a source of sound, you have created the skill \textbf{Listen} !]

[\textbf{Listen} : Level 1. Active. Through focusing on sounds, a skill to pick up distant or quiet sounds, or specific sounds out of a crowd was created. Passive effect: increases basic listening by 50\%. Active effect: increases range and clarity of listening by 150\%.]

“That's going to get real annoying, real fast,” I decided. A quiet snort from the girl drew my gaze, before she sat up slowly and opened her eyes. Bright blue eyes set in a heart shaped face locked with mine and I knew I wouldn't be able to say no to this woman.

“You're awake.” Her voice was soft, either from just having woken or natural inclination, I couldn't tell.

Ding!

[\textit{Quest Not in Kansas: Gather Information, failure! You did not gain enough new information from your surroundings to determine where you are beyond what you had already deduced!}]

[A new quest has been created!]

[\textit{Not in Kansas: Pumping Miss Arc for Information (as opposed to fun)!}]

[\textit{Now that the Eldest Deadly Sister has awoken, perhaps you can get some answers from a human source? Why don't you try asking?}]

[Reward: 100 0 EXP , answers, quest continuation, increased closeness with Joan Arc. Failure: frustration, decreased closeness to Joan Arc, quest continuation.]

“Jaune, are you okay?” she asked, standing from her seat and moving to turn on the room's lights.
“Peachy,” I grumbled, closing windows and suppressing the desire to murder someone.

The lights clicked on and she turned around in time to see me finish a final, vicious stab at the last window. Frowning, she stepped up to the bedside and put a cool hand against my forehead—her hand was calloused, I noticed, but still soft and smooth. “No fever. You look fine, but...”

I shook my head. “I'm not fine.” Seeing her worried expression, I gestured for her to sit back down while I sat up. Thankfully, I wasn't clothed in one of those asinine hospital gowns. Unfortunately, I was clothed in some sort of blue onesie. Frowning at the outfit, I put it aside for the moment to focus on more important matters. “Where are we and why am I here?”

“You don't remember?” she asked, growing visibly more worried. “You went out on your own into the forest to train and some grimm attacked...”

“Wait. What.” I blinked. Joan Arc. The name didn't ring any bells, but Jaune Arc did—and so did grimm. I had thought she somehow knew me, my name being John, but no... Turns out, she knew 'Jaune,' and not 'John.' I would have dismissed it as impossibility except, well, video game interface staring me in the face. “Grimm?” I asked, to be sure.

“Yes. You were attacked by a couple of Beowolves.”

'Oh. Hell. I know where I am.' Palming my face, I quietly asked, “And I got hurt bad enough for a trip to the hospital?”

Joan nodded. “Jun found you and dragged you back herself.”

“Who’s Jun?” I asked, confused. Like Joan, I’d never heard the name. I hoped I was wrong, but 'Grimm' and 'beowolves' were pretty distinct. Not to mention, now that I was aware of it, I realized I recognized the onesie. It was from a web series created by a man who had died earlier in the year... I had only seen the first two seasons and had been waiting for all of volume three to be released before watching it, but to my knowledge Jaune Arc had never been injured by grimm, at least not bad enough for a trip to a hospital. What I did know about Jaune was that he had seven sisters... ''Seven Deadly Sisters' is not just some bad pun, then. But it seems they don't follow the color naming rule. With names like 'Joan,' and 'Jaune,' and 'Jun' there is a pattern... Wait. Did this thing imply boinking Jaune's sister?’
The blonde blinked, before all expression left her face. “Jaune, who made you that onesie?”

I blinked, looking down to take in the monstrosity as I was pulled from my thoughts, before looking back up at the young woman now wearing a stony expression. I honestly had no idea. “You?”

The expression cracked and she sighed, seemingly collapsing in her chair. “How much don't you remember?”

Shit. I was caught. Well, I didn't really expect to be able to fool someone who knew Jaune for more than a few minutes. I had a few options at this point, however. Option one: come clean and tell the truth—that instead of this girl's brother, she's been talking to a thirty year old man this entire time. Yeah, like she'd buy that—and if she did, odds didn't look good for what happened to me. After all, my personality and memories had somehow displaced those of her younger brother—that was not a friendly resolution waiting to happen. In fact, considering my video game themed circumstances, it screamed Bad End all the way around.

Option two: roll for bullshit and lie my ass off. She'd already supplied me with an opening, so I might just be able to pull off the 'amnesia' card. I couldn't just come right out and suggest retrograde amnesia, however. “Honestly?” I asked, and she nodded. “It's hard to say. I honestly don't know who I am, let alone who you or Jun are. I'm sorry.”

Joan shook her head before standing up and heading for a phone mounted on the wall near the door. “It's okay, Jaune. I'm going to call the doctor back and we'll fix this, I promise.”

Ding!

[Alert: A skill has been created through a special action! By successfully lying to Jaune's sister, you have created the skill Bluff!]

[Bluff : Level 1. Active. Through the act of lying, a skill for the creative use of mistruth and misdirection was created. Active effect: increases likelihood of deceiving others, either through words or actions.]

Ding!

[Bluff's level has increased by 1!]
“Jaune? Why are you punching at the air?” Joan asked, and I sighed before gesturing towards the remaining box.

I honestly felt bad lying to her, but I couldn't just tell her that as far as I knew the brother she knew was dead. This, however, I could answer truthfully. Besides, it would distract her from the whole 'amnesia' thing and likely lend credence to it by heaping strangeness atop strangeness. “You can't see that, can you?”

Sending me a confused look, the young woman shook her head. “See what? That's not the first time I've seen you do that since you woke up, either.”

Observant little thing, she was. I nodded before tracing the outline of the window with my finger. “Ever play video games? I have a confirmation dialogue right here.”

Joan frowned. “You remember video games, but you don't remember your family? How does that work?”

“ Weird, right?” I asked, before tapping the button to close the window. “I've been getting notifications since I woke up about skills and such.”

Biting her lip, Joan sent me a conflicted look. “Jaune, I would like to believe you, but without some kind of proof...”

“Oh,” I nodded, thinking it over. If my life was like a video game now, then some basic commands were universal. The observe skill had worked by voice command, so I figured most other things would as well—especially since the alert windows refused to close unless I actively reached out and touched them. “Bag?” Nothing. “Inventory?” A window opened showing a scale model of what I assumed to be my body, surrounded by several individual boxes. The body itself showed 'me' in my current state of dress—or, rather, displayed Jaune Arc wearing his onesie. Below that were rows of more boxes. *If I were an obnoxious game designer with an emphasis on tactile interface use, how would I force the user to use this? Ah!*”

Grabbing my pillow, I picked it up and pushed it at the window. The moment the pillow made contact with the window's surface, the window rippled like water and Joan's eyes went wide. Clearly, she could see *that*. Pushing the pillow the rest of the way in, I let go and was unsurprised to find that there was now an icon in the first box at the bottom of the screen in the shape of a pillow. Tapping it, a small window popped up.
“What does 'L5' mean?”

“Five lien,” Joan muttered, moving so she could look over my shoulder. Seeing nothing, she waved her hand through the air she where had last seen the pillow disappear, to no effect. “Where did it go? Into your… inventory?”

I nodded. “Yeah.” Reaching in, I retrieved the pillow and put it back where I'd gotten it from. “Believe me now?”

Joan leaning closer and wrapping an arm around me to pull me into a hug was not what I had expected—nice though it was, aside from the armor bits. “I do. It seems you've awakened your Semblance.”

I knew what a Semblance was, but for the sake of supporting my alibi I asked, “My what now?”

_Ding!

[Bluff's level has increased by 1!]

I dismissed the box as Joan answered. “A Semblance is a manifestation of a Hunter's innate power, unique to the individual—in most cases, at least. Its nature tends to reflect something of your character… Hmm.”

“What?” I asked, recognizing the considering tone. She had either figured something out or made some leap of logic.

Joan proved me right with her answer. “The Jaune I know… Jaune was driven, absolutely determined to follow in our footsteps and become a Hunter. Our parents, they just wanted a normal life for you—to the point that they refused to train you, and forbid us to either. When you continued trying, I remember them saying that if you did it on your own not only would you have earned the right to decide for yourself, but you would have earned their blessing. It's why they never unlocked your aura, either. You are the only son, and they didn't want to risk you...”
“Aura?”

“Yes,” Joan nodded. “Aura is… the light of our souls. It fuels a Hunter's abilities, including their Semblance. Generally, one's aura is unlocked one of three ways: either through rigorous training, if someone else unlocks it for you, or when your life is in danger. Unlocking someone's aura is a very… intimate act, so teachers at the academy tend not to do so—likewise, you have to possess a minimum level of control over your own aura and a fairly large aura capacity before you can unlock someone else's and a willingness to share that intimacy with them, which is why you don't see many academy students unlocking each others' auras.”

“So you're saying I took the third route, intentionally or not?” It wouldn't surprise me. What did surprise me was that little revelation over just how intimate unlocking someone else's aura was supposed to be. It shed new light on Pyrrha volunteering to unlock Jaune's. Well, I supposed that would make the shippers happy. ‘Wait. Wait a damn minute. Pyrrha has—will have?—a crush on Jaune. I'm Jaune now. Ah, crap. Moral dilemmas abound.’

Ding!

[Wisdom score has increased by 1!]

“So it would appear,” Joan agreed, before asking, “More pop-ups?”

“Mm,” I hummed agreement, before a thought occurred. ‘Universal commands are universal…’ Running through my options, I picked the one that might just tell me the most. “I'm going to try something. Character? No. Stats? Ah ha!”

[Name: J̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̌
“Ow, my brain,” I winced. I tried to focus again on my name or the title, and earned another icepick to my brain for my trouble. Brushing that off as an impossibility at the moment, I focused on my scores. Somehow, I had something modifying my intelligence, wisdom, and charisma scores if I was
reading that correctly. Tapping one of the + icons beside the highest produced detailed results.

[INT: 10 (52): ((10 + 30) + 30%) -]

So, where were the extra points and the bonus percentage coming from? Well, most bonuses tend to come from skills, either active or passive, so the obvious answer would be… “Skills.”

[Gamer's Mind (passive) lvl MAX: Allows the user to calmly and logically think things through. Grants a peaceful state of mind. Grants immunity to psychological status effects.]

[Gamer's Body (passive) lvl MAX: Grants a body that allows for the user to live the real world like a game.]

[Outsider's Perspective (passive) lvl MAX: As an outsider to the world of Remnant, you see and understand things differently than the natives. Grants the title 'The Outsider' and allows the importing of skills, levels, and stats from your previous save data.]

Skimming through the skills, I paused on the last one before rereading it twice to make sure I had understood it. 'Previous save data' my ass. That's my life you're talking about!

“Find anything interesting?” Joan asked, bringing me back to the here and now.

“Yeah,” I groused, closing the Skills window. I was thus surprised to see that the mess that had been where my Title was had resolved itself into 'The Outsider.' My name still hurt my brain to look at, but I could ignore it. Tapping the title brought up details.

[Titles]

[The Outsider: Grants a 30% passive bonus to INT, WIS, and CHA due to experience gained in a previous save. Grants the use of knowledge beyond the world of Remnant.]

“Basically, I have a couple of skills that say, essentially, 'you behave like a video game character.'
'Gamer's body,' would basically mean that like a video game character, I don't take permanent damage. Instead, I have health points or hit points and if I take damage, that number drops. It likely also means I can probably fully heal overnight so long as my HP isn't reduced to zero,” I began, only for Joan to interrupt.

“In which case, you die,” she pointed out, and I held out a hand and waved it back and forth in a so-so gesture.

“I don't want to test that theory, but maybe.” I didn't want to go into details, but that would really depend on the rules this thing was operating by. Most RPGs went by the rule that if your HP hits 0, you die. Other games, like Dungeons and Dragons, went by different rules however—by those rules, in order to die my HP would have to hit -10. Distinguishing between those rule sets wouldn't normally be an issue—you can look at them and tell them difference, just by looking at something as simple as a character sheet or stats page. However, my stats page was different.

Normally, games with a luck score don't also have a charisma score, and vice verse. To have both… well, it opened up possibilities. For instance, in most RPGs—especially the MMORPG variety—you don't generally get the option to lie, steal, bluff or have any real dialogue options effected by your stats, exceptions like Dragon Age notwithstanding. D&D however, was all dialogue and had very little in the way of being able to directly effect your luck—the dice rolled as they may, and made or broke a character. Realistically, it told me that not only could my stats change things about myself, but they could manipulate others, or at least their reactions to me—and if the luck score was anything to go by, possibly causality itself. Not something I wanted to screw with on a good day, so I wouldn't be changing that.

Besides, luck was about the most useless stat to dump points into, in any game, ever. Depending on what sort of character and class a person wanted to roll, they would dump points into the important stats for their class and put a few into others for flavor or to meet prerequisites. For instance, a fighter would want his points in STR and VIT primarily, with INT or DEX as a high-priority second depending on the genre and the rules—an MMO character would want those points in DEX for crit rate while a D&D character would want them in INT, for access to more skills. A rogue rolled primarily off of DEX, with INT and either VIT or CHA as high second choices depending on play style. A skill-whore rogue—that is, a rogue made specifically for a wide range of skills—would want the points in INT, while a silver tongued rogue would want them in CHA, and a survival rogue would want them in VIT.

My stats, however, already leaned towards some sort of magic build—with my bonuses, depending on the rules of the game, I could potentially do some serious damage. With INT as the highest, if I were going by MMORPG rules, then I would be a high damage mage likely with lots of spells and skills to choose from—depending on whether or not skill books existed, or I could create my own skills. Given the fact that new abilities kept just popping up, I was leaning heavily towards being able to create my own skills. A high WIS meant I would likely have a high regen for mana, and somewhere between those two I should have a high defense against magic. The charisma, however, gave me ideas. If it wasn't for use like a sorcerer in D&D, then it was for use as a rogue—lying,
cheating, and stealing. I was okay with that, to be honest—my preferred play style was either rogue or mage, or some combination of the two if at all possible.

“You said 'a couple' of skills? What were the others?” Joan asked, effectively regaining my attention.

“Gamer's mind,' which basically says I'm immune to mental effects—mind control, fear effects, confusion and the like. Also, it allows me to calmly think things through instead of panicking.”

Joan hummed, and while I couldn't see it, I could hear the frown. “Wouldn't all mental effects include things that tampered with your memory?”

I shrugged. “Maybe. You said I was injured. Maybe something got knocked loose?” She raised a finger to make a point and I shook my head. “I know, Gamer's Body should have corrected it if it was physical.”

“Well, I suppose...” Joan began, only for a knock at the door to cut her off.

The door opened and a woman in a lab coat walked in, sending us a smile. “Mr. Arc, it's good to see you're awake and doing much better, I'm Healer White and I'll be overseeing your care. Ms. Arc, you said there was a problem?”

Joan mussed my hair before slipping off the bed. “I'll be right back, okay kiddo?” she asked, taking the healer by the sleeve and leading her outside.

Attempting to hear them through the door, I felt my Listen skill activate—which brought a small sigh of relief from me. It seemed that some common sense skills could be triggered by the act of doing them, as opposed to having to voice-activate everything. If you were trying to sneak around or listen, for instance, you wouldn't want to announce your presence by having to vocalize those acts. Outside, Joan began to detail my condition to Healer White and I split my attention between that and going over my stats in an effort to break them down.

“He says he doesn't remember anything...” The worry was back in Jaune's sister's voice, leaving me feeling like an absolute heel, but there wasn't anything I could do. How the hell was I supposed to give up this kid's body and go back to... where ever I had come from. Where had I come from, come to think of it? I mean, sure, I remember growing up in the country-side, learning skills, going to school, but... but no one really stood out. I couldn't tell you the names of any of my former classmates if I tried. I mean, sure, I graduated high school more than a decade ago, but the same thing
applied to the people I had met in college as well—everyone sort of blurred into one person. Frowning, I tried for more recent stuff. I'd had a few girlfriends, even a fiancee at one point, but memories that I remembered being clear and distinct to the point of being near-photographic simply weren't any more. I could remember things we did, but I couldn't remember their faces, or the way they smelled or tasted…

'Well, maybe this Gamer power decided not to make a liar out of me,' I mused. I'd had a family, parents, a younger brother, a nephew and niece… but I couldn't even remember their names. Worse, I knew I should feel terrible about that—sad, angry, even terrified that something was screwing with my head… But I didn't, and that made it so much worse in a way. I could see the horror, the threat mental manipulation at that level posed, but I just didn't care. It didn't matter, somehow. I was here now, and neither the how nor why nor the things I left behind truly mattered. All that mattered was that I was here, occupying the body of a teenage boy in a world that had been make believe for me just the day before—a world full of heroes, and monsters, both of the supernatural and the human variety. 'Fuck it. I'm here now, and whatever I left behind couldn't have been too important if I can't even remember most of it. There are things that need doing here and now, and with what I know—even as hazy as it is—I can still maybe, possibly make some sort of difference.'

Ding!

[System Alert: Synchronization has passed 50%! Stability achieved! Beginning error correction and debugging…]

I frowned, watching a progress bar slowly work its way across the bottom of the alert window. Finally, it filled and another box popped up.

[Enter Character Name: ]

So, it seems I'll be forced to choose sooner, rather than later. 'Fine. I've made my decision.'

[Jaune Arc]

[You have selected 'Jaune Arc' as your character name. Are you sure?]

Hitting the 'yes' button, I watched the window disappear before a thought occurred. Opening my Stats page, I found that my name no longer induced aneurysms upon looking at it and the extra text, which I assume had been part of my original name, was gone. Going back to my original task, I
attempted to break down my INT stat. With an MP of 620, most of that had to be coming from my ridiculously high INT. Some quick math left me with ten points of MP per point of INT, plus 100. My HP at level one was 100, so I could assume that my MP would be as well. I would have to just wait until next level to find out.

Outside, the conversation ended and the door opened, while at the same time I got an alert telling me how Listen had gone up a level. “Well, Mr. Arc, it seems some tests are in order,” the Healer smiled, stepping up to my bedside as Joan took a position beside the door. She held out a hand and I watched it light up with a soft green glow.

“What's that?”

“Hm? Oh, this?” she asked, her smile widening a bit. “It's a technique used to examine someone for injury and heal them if necessary, using my aura.”

I blinked, looking between her face and the hand resting just above my head. “Is that your Semblance…?”

“Oh, no,” she laughed. “Not at all! While it is a rare skill due to the difficulty in learning it and the requirement for fine aura control, not to mention needing a high level of aura to even use it, it is a teachable skill.”

I hummed, considering the woman before me and the technique itself. With my high INT and WIS, control wouldn't be an issue—at least, not at higher levels. Caster-class characters were great for dishing out damage, but if I was going to be a caster I didn't want to go the full glass-cannon route. With a team backing me yes, I could, however… being able to heal your tank meant keeping the enemy off of you for longer. Of course, there was also the ability to heal oneself that came with that—and heals are good. “Can you teach me?”

Healer White looked pensive as she moved her hand about, humming in indecision. “I don't know…”

Ding!

[A quest has been created!]

[Healing Touch]
'Well. That's a thing. Okay, I can do this. Let's put that higher charisma score to work, shall we? Question is, how should I go about doing this?' Glancing over to Joan, I hummed as a plan came to mind. "Healer, my sister told me that all my life, I've been trying to follow in her footsteps and become a great Hunter like her, and my parents, and the rest of my sisters. I don't remember any of that, but it feels... right, somehow, to continue along that path. Maybe, just maybe... if I pick up where I left off it might jog my memory—shake something loose upstairs, you know? However, I realize now that being a Huntsman isn't all about learning the best place to stab or shoot a creature of grimm. While the grimm may be gone once you've dealt with them, the damage they've left behind remains. Not everyone is as lucky as me, to wake up from a grimm attack in a hospital little the worse for wear. Being a Huntsman isn't just about killing grimm, or giving people hope and security—it's also about making things right and making sure they don't take more lives than they already have. If that means having to study and put in the work to do it, then that's what I'll do—whichever path saves the most lives. Please, will you help give me some idea of where to start?"

As I spoke, I felt something—much in the way I had felt the Listen skill activate silently, I could feel that charisma imbuing every word of my impassioned plea. Honestly, what I'd said made sense and I did agree with it—even if I was channeling my inner Emiya Shiro to do it. And that thought itself gave me pause. 'No problems remembering popular culture references, but ask me to tell you what my parents' names were and I couldn't answer you. That would be sad, under ordinary circumstances. I wonder if this... apathy extends to all emotions, or only those related to my old life. I hope not—otherwise, what's the damn point? To never truly feel again...'

The glow surrounding the healer's hand died down and she sighed, before nodding. “Okay. I think I have some old reference books in my office. It's not much, but it's a start...”

Ding!

[Charisma score increased by 1!]

[Charisma score increased by 1!]
As the healer turned away and lead my sister outside, I grinned. Activating my Listen skill again, I opened my Stats page and looked it over. Charisma was now sitting pretty at 12, which after modifiers was 28.6. In addition, I now had five points to spend however I wanted. I was sorely tempted to do so now, but remembering the skill books to come my way, I thought better of it. Some skills had prerequisites to learn—either other skills, or a minimum number of points required. In most games, that minimum number of points was applied to your base number of points, not your modified point score—meaning that while I had 52 in INT, it didn't mean crap for skill requirements as my base was still at 10.

Closing my Stats page to avoid the temptation of those points burning a hole in my pocket, I decided to try something different. “Settings,” I whispered, and was surprised to find it produced results.

[Settings]

[Interface]

[Commands]

[Sound]

[Difficulty]

Reaching out, I tapped the option for difficulty.

[Difficulty: Legendary]

Almost unsurprisingly, the option was grayed out and couldn't be changed. Well, it's not like I was
expecting to go through life on easy mode anyway. Closing that, I moved on to Sound, where I discovered that I could disable system notification sounds. Finally, that irritating ding would stop! Viciously, I stabbed the option with my finger and smirked upon receiving a confirmation message. Moving on down the list, I found the option for BGM—background music—and enabled it. What most veteran gamers had quickly learned was that a game’s BGM was a sort of barometer for mood, be it for the environment or individuals. For instance, in an open field BGM tended towards lighthearted, airy pieces. Likewise, creepy areas tended to have creepy music, while boss battles were typically announced by a change in music—the level of danger from the boss itself directly correlating to the music. Characters had their own image songs, usually with vocals by the voice actor/actress of the character in question. An easy way to tell an important character from an NPC or minor character was whether or not they got their own image song.

Satisfied with the BGM, which was currently playing muzak as befitted a hospital, I moved on to Commands and immediately felt my jaw drop. 'It's the holy fucking grail.'

Contained in the Commands section were commands—every voice-activated command for every option available at the moment, separated by use. For instance, skills such as Listen and Observe were listed under the 'Skills' section, which was itself a command to bring up the Skills window. Smirking, I skimmed the list for need-to-know information—I could get into the minutiae later. I struck gold immediately with several common commands such as Transparency, Party, Map, and Minimap. Two quick whispered commands later, I had a minimap displayed in the bottom right corner of my field of vision and a larger, more detailed map of my current surroundings—specifically, the floor plan for the hospital, by level.

Checking the map itself, I found drop down menus to change the map view from local to area, switching from the interior of the hospital to the city of Vale. Another selection allowed me to switch from the city to the continent, though at the moment that information was vaguely useless to me. Shrugging, I switched back to the city-wide map and studied things over for a moment before closing it. A look at my minimap showed the interior of the hospital, but as with the full-sized map it could be toggled to show the local area of the city within a few block radius. Another option toggled icons: waypoints, friendly characters, party members, quests, quest-relevant characters, even enemies. I enabled everything except friendly characters after testing it once to see what it did—having NPCs show up all over my minimap would clutter it up if it showed every nearby person.

'Maybe I shouldn't call them NPCs. I mean, yeah, I don't know everyone but they're still people as opposed to mindless automatons or AIs reading off a script. Joan, for instance, is not an NPC,' I mused, before I realized the door had opened and Joan had returned without the healer.

“So, what's the prognosis?” I asked, smiling up at the taller blonde woman—she had to be at least 6'2".

Joan blew a sigh of air upwards, blowing away a couple of strands of hair that had slipped in front of
her eyes. “She doesn't know. Physically, you're healthy as a horse—or ‘fit to return to training,’ as the healer said. Mentally… she's got no idea. They're wanting to set up an appointment to transport you to Atlas and stick you in some Schnee machine and let it scan your brain…”

“Uh huh,” I hummed, before asking, “And how much is that going to cost?”

“Heh,” Joan chuckled, looking sheepish. “Even with insurance, a lot.”

I shook my head. “In that case, forget it. I won't be a burden on you, or our parents, over something that may not work in the first place. I say let's just give it time. Maybe, if I were in a familiar environment doing familiar things it would help. Then again, maybe not. Either way, I meant what I said, earlier.”

Sighing, Joan nodded. “So, I suppose this means you still want to go to Beacon?” she asked, and upon seeing my manufactured look of confusion, clarified with, “Beacon Academy for Hunters. It's like… a finishing school for Huntsmen and Huntresses. Before all of this, you were… let go from Signal Academy. Your grades weren't really good enough to continue, or get into Beacon.”

“Firstly, yes, I think I'd like to try. If it helps, great. If not… we'll go from there,” I shrugged, earning a nod from Joan. “Secondly, if my grades were so bad, how am I getting in?”

Chuckling again, Joan had the good grace to look sheepish. “Well, you see, what had happened was… we sort of pulled some strings, called in some favors, and um… forged your transcript papers.”

“Forged my transcript papers?” I asked, getting a shy nod in answer. “Somebody's been a bad girl.”

“Shush, you!” she hissed, blushing to the roots of her hair. “A-anything… If you still want to go, we've got a month to run you through a crash course of the basics to maybe, hopefully get you up to speed. Think you can hack it, little brother, or was all that talk about hard work just blowing smoke?”

Deciding to play along, I grinned. “Ah, but my dear sister, have you forgotten already? My Semblance makes me the ultimate bullshit character when it comes to that sort of thing. It'll take some testing to figure out its limits, but if it's anything like I expect it to be, catching up shouldn't be a problem.”
The door opened and Healer White returned with a set of paperwork on a clipboard and a pair of thick medical books. “If you'll sign these discharge papers, you'll be free to go home Mr. Arc. And here, these should help you on the path of the healer, so long as you study hard.”

[You've obtained the skill book Beginner Level Aura Healing! Would you like to learn this skill?]

[You've obtained the skill book Beginner Level Aura Examination! Would you like to learn this skill?]

Smiling and thanking Healer White, I waited until her back was turned to tap the 'Decline' button twice. If there was any sort of visual effect or light show, I didn't want to alarm the healer—and if there wasn't, I didn't want her wondering where her books went if they disappeared while they were supposed to be in my possession. Likewise, I refrained from stuffing them into my inventory for the same reason. Beside me, Joan finished signing the paperwork and handed it to me before indicating where I was to sign. For a moment, muscle memory almost had me signing my own name, before I caught myself on the second letter. Turning the 'o' into an 'a,' I finished the signature and handed the clipboard back. “Well, it looks like you're all set, Mr. Arc. If you have any problems, don't hesitate to call me,” the healer smiled, stepping out of the room and closing the door behind her.

“So, ready to go home?” Joan asked, shooting me a smile.

“Absolutely,” I nodded. “Just as soon as I have some pants on.”

Joan blinked, suddenly seeming to realize that I'd been in that ridiculous onesie the entire time, before covering her mouth as her eyes went wide and she stifled a giggle. “I'm sorry, I'll let you get dressed. I put some fresh clothes in the closet there,” she managed to get out before slipping out the door, where her laughter grew noticeably louder.

“Laugh it up, Chuckles,” I groaned, slipping out of bed and opening the closet in question. Finding the clothes, I began stripping out of the onesie before I paused, zipper half open. “Inventory.”

Checking the inventory, I selected the onesie and moved it from its equipped position into the boxes that made up the rest of my inventory as opposed to my equipment. Looking down, I found myself left in a pair of green boxers, which revealed another box on my equipment screen. Out of curiosity, I selected the boxers and moved them from equipment to inventory. The scale model of my body updated accurately and looking down provided the expected results. Shrugging, I re-equipped the boxers and began pulling out clothes and dropping them directly into equipment positions. Pants went into the leg slot, which moved to cover the underwear slot and revealed another slot labeled 'armor.' Humming, I equipped the rest of the clothes—shirt, socks, boots, and hoodie. Closing my
inventory, I reached down and unzipped the hoodie before heading for the door.

“That was quick,” Joan commented, a confused look on her face.

“That's because I didn't get dressed, I equipped my clothes.”

Shaking her head, Joan gestured down the hall. “I'm jealous. Well, come on, let's get going.”

[Quest Not in Kansas: Pumping Miss Arc for Information (as opposed to fun) completed!]

[You gain 1000 EXP!]

The Arc family home was located on the edge of Vale, more than one train ride away from the hospital and a good walk past the last stop. My handy Map showed that it was located on the border of the Residential and Agricultural districts, near the river. While still inside the relative safety of the patrol zone for Hunters around Vale, it was still fairly isolated from the main roads of Vale or any nearby neighbors. The house itself was a large, two-story affair similar enough to those I'd seen in my previous life for me to pay the design little notice beyond its familiarity. The home had a large front and back yard, though I couldn't actually make out anything of the back yard from where we stood at the front door. Faintly, I could hear the hollow thump of wood striking wood from somewhere nearby.

“Well… this is it,” Joan sighed, unlocking the door and gesturing me inside. The first thing I noticed were the framed pictures of the family lining the walls—more than one of which was group shots, where Jaune stuck out like a sore thumb as the only boy amidst a group of six or seven girls depending on the age of the photos. Oddly enough, I noticed three of the children pictured had red hair and green eyes, as opposed to blond hair and blue eyes. While not entirely unheard of, the fact that their faces were all slightly sharper than that of the blonds seemed to me like a good indicator that they had different parentage. It was odd, to say the least. I got my answer when I came to a photo of Jaune's parents by themselves—all three of them.

Joan must have caught me staring because she made that little embarrassed chuckle of hers and gestured towards the picture in question. “I see you've noticed…”

“So, our dad has two wives?” I asked, getting a slow nod in answer. “Sequentially, or at the same time?”
“At the same time,” Joan confirmed quietly.

I hummed in thought before asking, “On a scale of one to ten, how weird is that?”

Looking sheepish, she thought on it before answering with, “About a three. It's not as uncommon as it used to be, any more. You don't remember, but this is actually common knowledge. What you have to understand is that after the great war, women have outnumbered men on average four to one—six to one if you take the Faunus into account. It's actually weird that dad doesn't have three wives, minimum—or at least a mistress or something.”

“And you're okay with the idea of sharing a guy with between one and three other women?” I asked, to which Joan shrugged.

“Pickings are slim and I'm not a stingy person. It's a fact of life we've learned to deal with. The alternative is worse.”

I suppose that made sense. If the alternatives were either seeking company among other women or doing without, sharing wouldn't seem like such a bad option—especially if you were looking to start a family and pass on a lineage of your own as opposed to adopting. Deciding that it didn't particularly matter at the moment, I asked, “So… what now?”

Joan grinned in answer. “Now, the training montage begins. Go get your armor on and meet me out back.”

Nodding in agreement, I turned to head for Jaune's room, only to stop and turn back. “Uh, which room is mine?”

A look of understanding crossed her face. “Upstairs, third door on the left.”

Making my way upstairs as Joan made her way deeper into the house, I opened the door to 'my' bedroom and looked around. It was… an absolute pigsty. Sighing, I palmed my face. “God damnit Jaune,” I grumbled quietly.

[A quest has been created!]
Dealing with the Remnants: Cleaning House

It seems Jaune has left you with some work to do. Clean and sanitize Jaune Arc's bedroom.

Rewards: 500 EXP, increased closeness with the Seven Deadly Sisters, increased closeness with parents, self-respect, the satisfaction of a job well done, quest continuation. Failure: decreased closeness with the Seven Deadly Sisters, decreased closeness with parents, shame, self-loathing, disgust, inability to sleep. Time limit: 10 hours or until you go to bed.

Sighing, I hit the button to accept the quest. 'Damn right I won't be able to sleep. No one could sleep in this mess. Ugh. Teenagers.'

Looking around the room, I found Jaune's closet and waded through the mess on his floor before opening the door and finding his armor, along with what looked like some sort of phone. Hitting it with Observe, I found it to be a device called a Scroll, which was the functional equivalent to a cell phone. Opening my inventory, I threw it inside and quickly vacated the room, noticing in the corner of my eye as a new element was added to my HUD: time and date, and a signal meter that I assumed was for whatever version of cellular or wireless Remnant used. Once downstairs, I made my way out the back door and found Joan outside with another, much younger girl.

The Seventh Deadly Sister

Divine Child

Jun Arc

Level: 8

'Even Jaune's little sister is stronger than him. Me. Us. Damnit, one of those,' I mused before shrugging it off. As soon as she caught sight of me, the girl in question was replaced by some kind of human-shaped guided missile, flying across the lawn at a speed I had trouble tracking and slamming into my midsection with enough force to send me to the ground.

Repeated struggle has caused your VIT to increase by 1!
'I knew she was stronger than me, but isn't that taking things a bit far?' Shaking the thought off, I looked down at the girl. Out of curiosity, I used Observe on her.

[Observe's level has increased by 1!]

I skimmed the background there and quickly closed the window before shaking the girl around my midsection. “Are you going to stay there all day, Jun?”

“But onii-chan just got back from the hospital! You were hurt and there was so much blood!” the girl cried, and I felt her chest shaking against me as she broke down into tears.

I had never been able to stand a crying girl, but I'd never been particularly good with kids. Looking to Joan for help, I found the traitor hiding a laugh again. Okay, fine. “Sweetie, as you can see, I got better. I'm fine, I promise.”

“Really?” she asked, hope audible in her voice.

“Really, really,” I agreed, and the little redhead popped up from my lap, seemingly intent on confirming that for herself.

Finally, she stepped back and beamed a grin. “Ne, ne, onii-chan, you really are okay!”

"Onii-chan? I wasn't hearing things the first time. Seems like someone's been reading too much manga.' With a smile, I stood and dusted off my pants. “Well, mostly okay.”

“Un! Onee-sama said you didn't remember us!” the girl confirmed what I'd suspected, that Joan had gone ahead and told her while I was otherwise occupied.

Looking up over her head, I met eyes with Joan. 'Onee-sama?’ I mouthed silently. That was going to get old, fast.

The elder blonde nodded and sighed. 'Humor her, please,' she mouthed back.
“She also said that being here and doing stuff you're familiar with may help you remember,” the girl continued, and I nodded along. “But what if you never remember us?”

Seeing the girl's sudden shift in mood again, I knelt down to eye level with her. “Well then, I suppose I'll just have to be the best brother I can be. That's a promise, and I don't go back on my word.”

Jun's face lit up in joy and I looked up to see Joan staring at me. She broke eye contact with a blush the moment our eyes locked and I shrugged it off as a side effect of a higher charisma score. Standing, I brushed the grass off my jeans and asked, “So, where do we start?”

“Ah, where's your armor?” Joan asked in return. She rolled her eyes when I called up my inventory and equipped my armor. “Not fair.”

Between us, Jun's eyes went wide. “Wait! Onii-chan found his Semblance?!” When she saw our nods of confirmation, she continued with, “That was an inventory! And you equipped gear! You're a video game character!”

“Well, then… we just need to help onii-chan level up so he can be the strongest!” Pumping a fist in the air, she turned a beaming grin on her eldest sister. “Then I can marry onii-chan!”

I blinked, what she'd said taking a moment to register. When it did, there was only one response available that summed up exactly how I felt. “What?”

[A quest has been created!]

[Romancing Remnant: The Art of Love and War.]

[Scattered across Remnant are lots of lonely women in need of love. Women outnumber men six to one in the world of Remnant (counting Faunus, because a cat (girl) is fine too). Help do your part by romancing six or more lovely ladies.]
[Rewards: EXP to be determined, lifelong love and companionship, more kinky sex than you can shake a stick at. Failure: No EXP, no love, crushing loneliness, no kinky sex.]

Even as I frantically dismissed boxes, Jun turned around with what would have been the most adorable look of determination I'd ever seen—if I hadn't been aware of exactly what it was she was determined to do. “Onii-chan! I promise, I will marry you! And Arcs don't go back on their word—it's our family motto!”

“What?!” Ah crap, she was serious.

[A quest has been updated!]

[Romancing Remnant: The Little Sister Route has been unlocked!]

[Jun has given her word that one day, she will marry you. Help her keep her promise. Alternatively, find some way to let her down gently without breaking her heart.]

[Rewards: EXP to be determined, increased closeness with Jun, increased closeness with the Seven Deadly Sisters, +1 love interest. Failure: decreased closeness with Jun, decreased closeness with the Seven Deadly Sisters, the shame of breaking a young girl's heart.]

“What.”
Training Montage (part I)

The Name of the Game

a RWBY/The Gamer crossover, SI.

Arc 1: New Game +

Chapter 2: Training Montage (part I)

Smack.

Smack.

Smack.

[Repeated struggle has caused your VIT to increase by 1!]

“Onee-sama, how long is onii-chan going to keep doing that?”

Joan sighed, shaking her head. “I don't know, dear.”

Leaning closer to me, she watched as I drove my forehead into the palm of my hand again with a meaty smack. “Did I break him?”

“No, Jun, I think your brother is just being overly dramatic,” she deadpanned, drawing my attention and coincidentally bringing a halt to my self-harm at the prospect of my Semblance setting me up for first class tickets straight to the special hell—the one reserved for child molesters, and people who talk in the theater.
“Ha. Ha ha ha, haaaa. Ha,” I returned, equally deadpan. “You're not the one whose Semblance just ordered them first class tickets to the special hell.”

Joan rolled her eyes. “It can't be that bad.”

Grabbing her arm, I pulled her outside of hearing range from Jun before pulling up the quest details and quietly reading them off. “It's that bad,” I finished.

“Pfft, no,” Joan countered. “Bad would be if there were no out. But right there at the end, it gives you the option to let her down gently. You don't have to do the quest, just because it's there. You can either intentionally fail it, or fulfill the requirements for letting Jun down without breaking her heart.”

I shook my head, gesturing towards the smaller redhead, who was not at all even pretending to not be eavesdropping. “I don't think that's possible. And if it is, I have no idea how to do it before I go to Beacon.”

“Jaune, you don't have to,” she pointed out. When I shot her a confused look, she asked, “Is there a time limit?”

“No...” I admitted, my mind slowly spinning up to turn out ways to deal with the situation. If there was no time limit, the situation may just resolve itself…

Great minds think alike, as Joan finished my thought for me, “Then take some advice from your 'onee-sama,' and ignore it until it sorts itself out. Besides, if she's 'dating' you, she's not out there dating some other boy.”

Despite the fact that until I woke up in Remnant I hadn't even known these people, familial loyalty reared its head—it was something I remember being raised with from a young age. Family means everything. Which made me wonder, why on Earth or Remnant didn't I care that I didn't remember my own family? I had lived on my own for ten years before waking up here, but I recall being close to them… No, I was done worrying about it. If I came across something leading me to figure it out, great. If not, I would have to accept it and move on. My choice was made, after all. “I suppose you're right...” I paused, then shot her a suspicious look. “That is why you all made the onesie, isn't it? Not out of love, but to scare off any potential girlfriends.”

“I'm sure I don't know what you're talking about,” Joan denied, but the sparkle of mischief in her eyes and the way the corners of her lips twitched made me suspect otherwise.
“Fine,” I agreed, heaving out a sigh. “That still leaves the issue of my Semblance thinking incest is an okay thing.” Joan slowly averting her gaze gave me pause and I narrowed my eyes at her. “Joan? It’s not okay, is it?”

With a sigh of her own, she shrugged. “It depends on the circumstances. The twins have already decided they're sharing whoever they end up with and everyone is pretty much okay with this.”

'Did I wake up in bizarro world? I don't remember this in the source material,' I wondered, slowly shaking my head. Then again, Monty made RWBY with things like 'anti-fanservice combat skirts' that didn't properly obey gravity in mind. I had a few options for interpreting this, then. Option one: this wasn't the source world and was, instead, some fringe offshoot loosely connected to it somewhere in the multi-verse. It was entirely possible, given that I was here and I had this screwy Semblance. Option two: this was the source world and the people where I came from… embellished a few details and glossed over others, for the sake of producing something enjoyable for a larger target audience. Option three: some combination of the two. Eh, it's not like it mattered. So long as things stuck close to canon as I knew it, I'd be fine. “You know what? Screw it. Nope. I'm done. Training now, please.”

“Right,” Joan agreed, moving away and picking up a wooden sword and shield before tossing them at me one at a time. A moment later, she tossed two more swords at Jun, who caught both. “Jun. Do your thing.”

“Hai, onee-sama!” the girl shouted. I turned to look in the redhead's direction and bring up my guard and, out of the corner of my eye, she disappeared in a streak of red. In between one moment and the next, something slammed into my midsection and suddenly I was looking at the sky.

[Repeated struggle has caused your VIT to increase by 1!]

[Alert: A skill has been created through a special action! Through the endurance of pain and damage, the skill Physical Endurance has been created!]

[Physical Endurance: Level 1. Passive. A skill that makes the body's durability increase, reducing damage taken. Physical Endurance was obtained by enduring pain and physical attacks. Effect: 3% reduction in damage from physical attacks.]

“Jun! Tone it down, please,” Joan called from the sidelines.
I rolled onto my stomach and forced myself to my knees, the pain in my abdomen disappearing shortly after it registered courtesy of Gamer's Body. “Awe, okay. Sorry, onii-chan!”

“It's okay,” I grumbled, not entirely agreeing. Holding up a hand for her to stop, I decided I might need a visual aid. “Stats. Transparency,” I muttered, quickly adjusting the slider and setting my stats page so that I could see my HP and MP and still see Jun clearly through the window. Currently, my HP was down to 191 from my new maximum of 230. If I assumed that I received the new maximum after damage was taken, then Jun's attack had cost me either 39 HP or 29, or 19 if my HP hadn't filled up after face-palming myself hard enough to gain a point of VIT. Then again, maybe my HP regen had filled that up, but because I was in battle it hadn't yet refilled my current HP? Either way, she hit hard, so I didn't want to be on the receiving end of that again.

Standing, I settled myself into what felt like a good stance for a sword and shield, shield out front held in my left hand and sword down and slightly behind me in my right. 'It worked for Link, anyway,' I reasoned. “Okay, can we try that again at like… one-tenth speed?”

Jun nodded and began to slowly approach before Joan shook her head. “One-quarter speed, Jun. We don't have time to screw around. We have a month to beat the weakness out of him, and if Jaune's body is like a video game character then we have some advantages. Firstly, he should heal if he rests for a while—right?” she asked, and I nodded slowly in confirmation. “Secondly, the greater the difficulty, the greater the rewards.” It seemed that when it came to training, Joan was all business and a graduate of the…

[A quest has been created!]

[Not in Kansas: Obligatory Training Montage, The School of Hard Knocks (part I)]

[Despite her sweet exterior, Joan Arc is a graduate of the School of Hard Knocks and a certified badass. Survive training under her tutelage and unlock your own inner badass, or die trying!]

[Rewards: 4000 EXP, skill(s), title, increased closeness to the Seven Deadly Sisters. Failure: not an option.]

That confirms it: my Semblance has a sense of humor. A crappy sense of humor, but a sense of humor nonetheless. In fact, I might go so far as to say that my Semblance is a troll. Still, troll or not, it was offering up things I wanted—no, needed. If I was going to survive in this new world, I would need every advantage I could get. Whether that meant I had to use every dirty trick in the book and
invent a few of my own, or put in a lot of hard work to get there, then so be it. As had already been proven, I could increase my stats through actions—successful rolls, taking damage, and I was sure physically training would also increase them. In most games, it’s easier to increase those skill points at lower numbers through training than from higher numbers.

Put another way, getting from 10 to 11 was far easier than going from 20 to 21—if I dumped ten points into STR, the training I was doing would be wasted, whereas by doing the training I could theoretically gain between three to five free skill points on average per level, if not more. More points earned through work as opposed to bought through the level reward points was a good thing, as it meant I could save those points for a while and use them when I really needed them. In a game, power is all about who has the bigger numbers, and any option to increase those numbers was worth taking. My Semblance had made my life something of a game, but despite that the real world around us was anything but—and I intended to come out on top.

Accepting the quest, I brought up my guard and focused on Jun before gesturing with my wooden sword in a ‘come hither’ motion. She closed the distance between us in a whisper of motion and my arm rang with the vibration as her right sword smashed into it in a hard slash, threatening to knock the shield-shaped piece of wood from my hand. Gritting my teeth, I clenched my fist tighter around the hand guard and pushed her back, swinging in with my own sword.

[Strenuous activity has caused your STR to increase by 1!]

[Alert: A skill has been created through a special action! By successfully blocking a hit, you have created the skill **Shield Mastery**!]

**Shield Mastery**: Level 1. Passive. Through the act of blocking a sword strike, a skill to block blows with a shield was created. Effect: successfully blocking an attack with a shield will reduce damage received from melee attacks by 75%. Successfully blocking a ranged attack will reduce damage received by 90%, however, your unenhanced **Shield Mastery** is vulnerable to ranged Armor Piercing attacks. Successfully blocking a Dust (magic) attack will reduce the damage taken by a variable amount depending on the type of attack used but will not negate splash damage. The higher **Shield Mastery**’s level, the more damage the skill can absorb, up to 100%.

[Shield Mastery’s level has increased by 1!]

[Alert: A skill has been created through a special action! Attacking with a sword has created the skill **Sword Mastery**!]


[**Sword Mastery** : Level 1. Passive. Through sword training, you have created a skill to freely attack with swords, **Sword Mastery**! Effect: 10% increase in attack damage with swords, 10% increase in attack speed with swords. The higher **Sword Mastery**’s level, the more damage you do with a sword!]

[**Sword Mastery**’s level has increased by 1!]

My blow was parried and pushed aside, leaving me wide open. A small, booted foot came up and planted itself in my chest, knocking me off my feet. I hit the ground but old reflexes from martial arts training kicked in and I found myself rolling backwards and onto my feet.

[Alert: A skill has been created through a special action! By successfully recovering from being knocked off your feet, you have created the skill **Recovery**!]

[**Recovery** : Level 1. Passive. Through the act of recovering from a knock-down blow in battle, you have created a skill to quickly regain your footing, **Recovery**! Effect: roll back to your feet if knocked down. Recovery speed increased by 100%. The higher **Recovery**’s level, the faster you recover. You can even chain attacks into a recovery!]

I held up a hand for Jun to stop, but Joan intervened. “Keep going. Grimm aren’t going to stop attacking because you need to close a window.”

“Fine,” I grunted, blocking another attack and jumping backwards to gain some space. Flipping my sword around into a reverse grip for a moment, I began stabbing my finger at the buttons to close the windows. Taking shameless advantage of my distraction, Jun came in quickly and threaded a three-hit combo of blows into my non-existent defense on my right side. She wasn’t hitting nearly as hard as before, but I still took a combined 25 damage.

Slowing down momentarily as I made ground again, Jun sent an uncertain look towards Joan. “Why isn’t onii-chan using his aura to block?”

“You can do that?” I wondered aloud, before rolling my eyes. “Of course you can do that. Give me a second here.” Focusing inward, and feeling Meditation activate to aid the effort, I quickly drew upon my mana—my Aura—bringing it swiftly into the visible spectrum as a white glow surrounding my body.

[Alert: A skill has been created through a special action! By channeling your aura, the skill **Aura**]
Aura: Level 1. Passive, Active. You have discovered the ability to manifest the light of your soul, allowing you to push your body beyond its limits and light the way in darkness, Aura!

Aura Passive effects: 30% increase to all physical and mental stats, 10% increase to LUK, HP and MP regeneration increased by 100%.

Aura Active effects: additional 30% increase to all physical and mental stats, additional 10% increase to LUK, HP regeneration increased by 100%, 25% damage reduction, allows the caster to use Aura Strike. Cost: 15MP/minute base. Using more MP increases Aura’s bonuses and HP regeneration speed.

Alert: A skill has been unlocked through a special action! By activating Aura you have unlocked Aura Strike!

Aura Strike: Level 1. Active. Aura Strike, an ability to empower your strikes with aura, was unlocked by activating your Aura! Effect: Increase damage dealt by physical melee and ranged strikes by 150%. Cost: 10MP.

My grin may have gone a little feral, if the sudden look of surprise on Jun's face was anything go to by. I had every right to feel a little cocky as I closed windows and watched my HP steadily ticking back up. At a mana cost of 15 per minute, given my current MP I could keep my Aura going for something like 45 minutes. If it came down to a battle of attrition, I had a feeling I would win—so long as I didn't run out of HP first. With my higher MP, based on the skill description, if I focused on my Aura I could dump mana into it to flash heal back up to full HP then drop my mana output back to its base of 15 per minute—meaning, theoretically, unless she one-shot me I would out last her. “Alrighty then. Round two. Bring it, squirt.”

The surprise on the littlest sister's face quickly passed, to be replaced by the same determination I had seen earlier. Instead of talking, she swept in into a quick chain of combos. Where before, the gap between our abilities had been seemingly insurmountable with her stats in STR and DEX being much higher than my own, with my Aura active that gap had closed measurably. I was still working at a handicap, but I could feel my higher INT working to make up for it somehow—namely, in this instance, by breaking down Jun's attack patterns. Jaune's—my—little sister was fast, yes, but she was supposedly moving at a quarter of her true speed and, more importantly, she was predictable. Still, predictable or not, she was stronger than I was. Outright blocking her strikes would see me eating damage at a reduced rate, but gaining STR and/or VIT. However, the smart thing to do would be to avoid damage entirely by parrying…
Six strikes into an impressive combo, I back-stepped and swung my sword up, putting it on an intercept course with her left blade's path. Wood rang against wood and the blow passed harmlessly to my right. On my left, another hard blow swung in and I decided to compromise, bringing my shield up and channeling my Aura into my shield and the rest of my body to brace for the impact before taking the full brunt of the attack.

[Alert: A skill has been created through a special action! By channeling your aura into a tool and/or your body, you have created the skill **Reinforcement**!]

**Reinforcement**: Level 1. Active. **Reinforcement** was created by channeling aura into your body or a tool to absorb a blow with reduced damage. Effect: Using **Reinforcement** on a tool will increase its durability, Aura penetration, and absorb Dust-type damage using your Aura (mana) instead of your HP. Using **Reinforcement** on your body reduces damage taken from all sources by 20%, absorbs damage using your Aura instead of your HP, and increases your physical stats and skills by 20%. Increasing the level of **Reinforcement** will reduce casting cost, mana converted to damage, and further increase your physical stats and damage reduction. At higher levels, **Reinforcement** will even add your INT to your physical stats. Cost: 10MP/minute.]

That was… very useful. Overkill, if I ever leveled it enough to add my INT to pretty much anything. However, as much as I wanted to use it now, I knew that by taking damage now I would be increasing my base physical stats, which Reinforcement would then boost even further. So, as much as I didn't want to, I turned Reinforcement off. Watching my HP drop slightly, I parried another strike and waited. Four strikes later, I smirked as several windows popped up letting me know I'd gained points in STR, VIT, and DEX. I was surprised, however, when a fourth let me know I'd gained a point in WIS. I suppose I'd chosen the wisest course of action, then. The gap between our stats came a few points closer to even.

Feeling bold, I waited for the opportune moment, and it wasn't long before I had one. Parrying another of her left-handed blows hard enough to throw her off balance, I stepped in and swung. “Aura strike!”

The blow connected and I watched Jun's HP drop from 400 to 341—some quick mental math told me that damage calculations rounded down from the nearest decimal, which would likely also apply to stats. Aura Strike's level increased, as did Sword Mastery, and I dismissed the notifications as Jun hopped back to gain distance. “Onii-chan! That hurt! It's gonna leave a bruise!”

“Sweetie, that happens in training,” I reminded gently, though mentally chided myself for forgetting that I was the only one here with a body that wouldn't bruise or scar and would completely recover after either a set time period resting or after sleeping. However, what she'd said reminded me of something important. “But it wouldn't be nice of me to leave my sparring partner all bruised up, now
would it?” I asked, and she shook her head while puffing out her cheeks and huffing out an annoyed breath. “I got a couple of books from the healer earlier. Skill books. I'm pretty sure they'll teach me how to heal. Want to be my… research partner?” I almost said 'test dummy,' but I figured that wouldn't go over well. Improved charisma for the win. I'd never been that tactful in my previous life. Generally I hadn't cared if something I said hurt someone's feelers—people were too sensitive and needed to grow up if a few poorly spoken words hurt their precious feelings. I still didn't care, truthfully—family being the exception—but the difference was that now I actually put in the effort to look like I cared.

“Un!” Jun nodded, suddenly all smiles. “But if you can heal, that means I can go up to half speed, right onee-sama?”

I turned my gaze towards Joan, who was sending us a considering look. Finally, she nodded. “Try it out and see how it goes.”

“Crap,” I grunted, intercepting another series of blows as Jun renewed her attack. Even as I pushed myself to the limit, blows began slipping past my guard again and my HP began steadily falling. As I watched it swiftly hit the 50% mark, I began getting desperate. I needed some way to close the gap again. ‘Come on, think! Sword and shield or no, I'm a caster at heart. Use magic to even the playing field. I need to be faster…’ Focusing my mana on that thought and repeating it like a mantra, I had to contain a shout for joy when what I had been hoping for happened—the system, my Semblance, interpreted my will and provided results.

[ Alert: A skill has been created through a special action! Focusing your aura on increasing your speed has created the skill Haste !]

[Haste : Level 1. Active. Out of a desperate need for speed, the skill Haste was created! Effect: Increase movement and attack speed by 100%. Cost: 10MP/minute.]

That wasn't enough, though. Speed by itself wouldn't be enough to beat an opponent with equal speed but better reflexes or a higher DEX score. Besides, one of the largest dangers of moving at a higher speed was the inability to react to changes in the environment fast enough to avoid or counter them, along with potential tunnel vision—Hatake Kakashi of Naruto fame being the first example that came to mind. What I needed was a way to directly boost my DEX, and consequently my reflexes. Seeing as skill creation had worked intentionally once before, I gave it another try.

[ Alert: A skill has been created through a special action! Focusing your aura on increasing your reflexes has created the skill Reflex !]
Shooting Jun and Joan a grin, I jumped back to gain some momentary space. “Haste! Reflex!”

Jun blinked, suddenly unsure. “Uh oh.”

While her DEX was still higher than mine, it was only barely so—and if I was right, Haste would put me above her current level of speed. Leaning forward, I sprinted into an attack. Lifting my shield and channeling my Aura, I smashed into her hastily thrown up crossed-sword guard, knocking the much smaller redhead off her feet. I ignored the pop-up about creating a skill, Bull Rush, and pressed the advantage while I had it. With Jun temporarily stunned, I came in with a sword combo. Four strikes landed with the flat of my blade, stitching a pattern up her left side and ending with a tap to her head. As I continued to attempt to press my advantage, Jun rolled away and pushed off the ground with an aura-enhanced shove before spinning into a defensive whirl of blades, forcing me to back up or risk eating what looked very much like a skill attack.

Panting, the girl eyed me with an unholy light in her eyes. “Onii-chan, that was awesome!”

“Glad you think so, sweetie,” I chuckled, already planning my next offensive.

“Just for that, I'll show you what I can really do!”

[ BGM Image Song: Rhythm Emotion unlocked!]

’Wait. What? No! I'm just barely keeping up as it is!’ my thoughts turned somewhat frantic. As I watched, the words over her head suddenly changed. Where before, her title had been 'Divine Child,' it now read ’The Red Comet.’ ’Oh, fuck me…’

“Full throttle!” Jun disappeared and once more, I found myself going ass-over-teakettle. This time, I was privy to the feeling of a veritable hailstorm of strikes smacking into my body from seemingly all angles as the girl became some sort of human blender. My HP bar dropped rapidly before settling on a tiny sliver of red as I hit the ground. “Six. HP.” I managed to gasp out, prompting the tiny redhead terror to stop her assault. I promptly ignored the alerts about my VIT, STR, and Physical Resistance leveling. ’Note to self: create some sort of Flash Step technique. As demonstrated, it's useful.’
“Oh no! Don’t die, onii-chan! I still have to marry you!” Jun yelled, accompanied by the clatter of wooden swords and a small body impacting my own as she wrapped around me in a hug.

“Are you okay?” Joan asked, suddenly reverting back to the kind older sister persona.

Eying my HP and watching it quickly beginning to tick upwards under the effects of my Aura as I shunted mana to it, I nodded. “Yeah, but I think this calls for a break.”

Joan nodded. “I agree. You did good, though.”

‘And that was against a level 8. This is going to get rough,’ I mused, nodding absently. A moment later, I received another alert.

[Quest Not in Kansas: Obligatory Training Montage, The School of Hard Knocks (part I) completed!]

[You gain 4000 EXP]

[Your level has increased by 1!]

[By out-thinking your opponent, you have earned the title: The Strategist.]

[Your INT has gone up by 1!]

[Your INT has gone up by 1!]

[Your WIS has gone up by 1!]

[Your WIS has gone up by 1!]
Blinking, I narrowed my eyes as I thought back to the quest rewards offered. Apparently, a quest could grant you rewards in the progress of completing the quest, considering all the skills I'd gained in a single training session. It almost seemed unfair, except I knew that there were mitigating circumstances. For instance, firstly: my higher INT likely helped in the creation of new skills. Secondly, most games tended to create new skills either as you did things or bought them depending on the type of game. It wasn't uncommon to gain or unlock a dozen core skills in the span of a few minutes, then spend the rest of the game leveling those up—Bethesda games were bad about that. Pick up a sword, start leveling sword mastery. Cast a spell with the other hand, start leveling magic. Get hit while doing that, gain physical resistance. And so on, and so forth. Nine skills over the course of a battle with a superior foe was honestly shorting me, by that standard. If Jun hadn't pressed so hard and had given me some time to think and experiment, I could have moved on to creating magical attacks and defenses. I made a mental note to work on that soon. First, I wanted to check out my new title.

[The Strategist: On and off the field of battle, you see the bigger picture and act accordingly. Level 1. Effect: Increases INT and WIS by 15%. Increases rate of INT and WIS gain by 100%. Increases INT and WIS gain in combat situationally.]

More INT and WIS was good, faster points gain was better. With any luck, it would offset the difficulty of gaining those points as I gained them. That last bit, however, took me a minute to work out. My best guess was that if I fought smart instead of simply charging in, the title would reward me with either more points or a much higher rate of point gain. 'Well, this changes things,' I hummed, thinking it over. I would have to rework my combat style a bit. I had planned to anyway, but this forced the issue if I wanted those points. Being a tank-style physical fighter wasn't going to work for me—it wasn't my play style and my character build already leaned towards a caster class. However, having those skills to fall back on if I either ran out of mana (not likely) or an enemy closed into melee range (much more likely) would be the wise choice.

More importantly, I knew magic—my Aura—could directly affect my physical skills, Reinforcement being case in point. I didn't need to be a straight melee tank—I could become a mage tank. I'd seen it done before in games—statting out a mage with a high STR and VIT and throwing them in heavy armor. Alternatively, I had played caster classes that could switch between high-damage caster abilities and tank-like abilities that increased physical stats like defense, dodge, HP, armor and that sort of thing. Becoming a mage tank wasn't my first choice, however—just a very good fall-back in the event something got in close and I couldn't shake it. No, my first choice would be some sort of rogue/mage hybrid. According to pretty much everyone, hybrid builds suck. As far as stats went, I had to agree. However, from what I could tell, the stat system and the skill system were only loosely connected. I could train each independently, at the same time.

For instance, if I trained with my buffs active—Aura, Haste, Reflex, and Reinforcement so far—then just by having them active and using them, their levels would increase. When I ran out of mana, I could rest and meditate thus increasing my mana regen, then quickly go back to training. If I used a sword and shield at the time time, the mastery of those skills would go up as well. However, if I worked in some stealth element somehow, I could create and level some stealth-related skill at the same time. Come to think of it, I had to check the description of Meditate, because with a high level
of mental discipline—which my stats pretty much confirmed I had—I should be able to actively meditate while training, and so further increase my mana regeneration rate and prolong the time I could spend training before having to stop. It was worth looking into. The secret to being a munchkin in any game system where you could use and train multiple skills simultaneously was to use as many as possible at the same time or stack them in such a way that things such a Meditate, which increased mana regen, leveled to the point where its benefits allowed a character to stack even more skills at the time time.

Pulling myself from my thoughts, I turned my attention towards Jun. The small redhead was still recovering from her exertion and now rubbing at a few of the places where I'd hit her. Remembering my earlier agreement, I opened my inventory and removed the first of the two skill books.

[You've obtained the skill book Beginner Level Aura Examination! Would you like to learn this skill?]

Reaching out, I tapped the Yes button.

[You cannot learn this skill! Required INT: 15. Required WIS: 20.]

'Balls,' I groused, closing the window and taking up the other book.

[You've obtained the skill book Beginner Level Aura Healing! Would you like to learn this skill?]

'Yes. Obviously.'

[You cannot learn this skill! Required INT: 20.]

I dropped the books back into my inventory in disgust. I just got a title that would increase my ability to gain points in INT and WIS. Spending what few points I had now to learn these skills would be a complete waste of both the points and the title. Except if I didn't, I'd made myself a liar. That was something I couldn't stand for. I hadn't been lying when I'd told Jun I don't go back on my word—my word is my bond and has always been, it was just a coincidence that the Arc family had taken it as their credo. I couldn't learn the skills from the books yet since I wouldn't throw away points needlessly and I wouldn't break my promise, so that left only one option. "Only those who try will become, 'huh?'"
Moving closer to Jun, I brought up a hand and rested it on her upper arm, over the forming bruise—which was already turning nasty. “I have to ask before I try this, but why don't you use your aura to heal that?”

Jun stuck her tongue out at me in response. “I haven't learned how to do that yet, onii-chan.”

‘Uh huh, right. I call bullshit. My money says she just wants attention. Oh well, it's not like I'm put out here or anything.’ With that in mind, I channeled magic into my hand and focused on trying to heal the little imp.

[ Alert: A skill has been created through a special action! Focusing your aura on healing someone else has created the skill Heal! ]

[ Heal : Level 1. Active. The Heal skill was created to heal others of their wounds. Effect: heals the target for your INT score. The healing effect can be sustained to heal damage equal to your INT/second for increased mana cost. Range: 10 meters. Cost: 15MP/second. Increasing the level of Heal will decrease its mana cost and increase its range. ]

Watching the bruise immediately disappear, I let out a quiet chuckle. Seeing my success so far, I decided to try my luck on creating a heal-over-time skill.

[ Alert: A skill has been created through a special action! Focusing your aura on healing someone else unattended has created the skill Regen! ]

[ Regen : Level 1. Active. The Regen skill was created to heal others of their wounds without attention from the caster. Effect: heals the target for your INT score 10 times over a period of 60 seconds. Range: 10 meters. Cost: 150 MP/60 seconds. Increasing the level of Regen will decrease its mana cost and increase its range. ]

‘Okay, that's it. I'm sitting down and making a list of spells I want based on crap I already know from other sources,’ I decided. Scooting away from Jun, I gestured towards her arm. “There, all better.”

“Thank you, onii-chan, you're the best!” the girl gushed, closing the distance I'd made and latching onto my side like a limpet.
Sighing, I shook my head and checked my stats. I was still down on MP after all of that, so I needed to spend a few minutes meditating to get it back up to full. Looking up at Joan, I asked, “Any other ideas for the day?”

The eldest sister shook her head. “No. After all that, Jun needs a break. Someone needs to work on her stamina.” The youngest sister pouted and I rolled my eyes. “Besides, I know someone has homework, too.”

The pout intensified, if it were possible. “But onee-sama, I want to help onii-chan!”

Joan wasn't having any of it, however, as she displayed complete immunity to Jun's pouting technique. “Your brother can help himself for a while. You need to go do your homework while I work on fixing something for lunch. If you finish your homework and it's correct when I check it, then I'll let you train with Jaune. Now scat, young lady!”

“Fine,” Jun whined, stealing one last hug before trudging towards the house as if the weight of the world were on her shoulders.

I sent Joan a curious look. “Not going to help me train yourself?”

The Eldest Deadly Sister smirked, faintly. “Well, I wouldn't want to break you on accident,” she shrugged nonchalantly. “Besides, I figured you could use some self-study time to figure things out for yourself. We can train you in the physical aspects of things and a few of the finer points of aura manipulation, but it looks like you're already using your Semblance to catch up. Tell me, what level are you? And what level is Jun?”

I knew she was already doing the math to try and figure out how I could do what I could, but I wouldn't lie to her—at least, not directly. “I'm level 3, she's level 7. Because of various stacking bonuses, my HP is pretty close to hers. My STR and DEX are lower than hers, even with bonuses, by a lot. I only caught up there for a bit because she was holding back and wasn't expecting me to suddenly be able to increase my threat level like I did—it won't fool her again. Other than that, most of it was me exploiting my higher INT and WIS scores. Jun's predictable, and so long as I'm even remotely close to her speed it means I can parry or block whatever she throws out. Essentially, I'm using magic—or Aura, whatever—to 'cheat.’” I said cheat, but really, I didn't believe in fair fights to begin with...

“There is no such thing as cheating in battle, because there is no such thing as a fair fight,” Joan put what was on my mind to words and I sent her a nod in agreement. “Honor in a fight for your life means absolutely nothing when you're dead. Oh, sure, everyone could say ‘he fought honorably,’ but
what they’re really saying is ‘he died by being stupid.’ The other guy fought dishonorably, but guess who gets to go home and who gets to go into a pine box. Of course, grimm have no honor, so it’s a moot point…”

“Except when it's not,” I added quietly, and she nodded. It seemed we were on the same page—not every battle would be against the grimm.

“Anyway, yeah, you need to figure out what works for you. If that's being a close-in fighter, great. If that's acting as support for your team, that's fine too. Whatever works best. Play to your strengths,” she advised. Standing, she brushed off her pants. “I'll call you when lunch is ready.”

“Sure you don't want any help?” I asked. I knew my way around a kitchen and hadn't gotten any complaints yet.

Joan blinked, sending me a curious look. “Since when do you know how to cook? Is cooking a skill?”

Shit. I didn't realize Jaune might not know how to cook. Tapping into my higher charisma, I chuckled in what I hoped was a sheepish manner. “Well, yeah. That's kind of a big thing in some games, you know? In fact, I bet if we've got some old cookbooks laying around the kitchen, I could eat those as skill books or recipe books, depending on how the mechanic works.”

Joan hummed then shook her head. “Maybe tonight. I'll see about gathering up a few of the older ones we don't use any more—stuff we've already memorized.”

“Okay then,” I agreed and the elder blonde walked off. Sighing quietly in relief, I shook my head before pulling up my stats and pausing as I was about to focus on my meditation. Despite the intense training we had finished just a few minutes ago, my HP and MP were full. Thinking back and doing some mental math, I knew I should be down something in the neighborhood of 300MP. There were a few possibly causes for that. Firstly, leveling. In most games, when a character levels, their HP and MP are restored to their new maximum. I had abused this mechanic myself a few times during particularly tough boss battles, by setting things up beforehand so that I could level off of adds—that is, additional mobs summoned by a boss to harass a party or character as a DPS and gear check. There was another option, however…

Tapping the part of my stat sheet that displayed my WIS modifier, I found the mana regeneration mechanics. ‘Okay, by default I regen my WIS mod worth of MP per minute. However, the passive effect of Aura increases my regen rate by 100%. Meditation increases that an additional 100% when active… My base WIS is 13, before modifiers. The Outsider title adds 20 points from my previous
save data’ and then 30% on top of that, which makes it 42.9. Aura passively increases that by another 30%, which makes it 55.77. Strategist adds another 15% for 64.136—and at that point, I see the system rounds from the next decimal place. My modified mana regen from just Aura’s passive ability would be 128.272MP/minute. Calculating that without The Outsider… 19.435 base WIS mod and a mana regen of 38.87, which makes sense. No, titles—or at least The Outsider—are… not broken, considering it's MAX level and I have no idea what that level is as a numerical value. Besides, looking at it another way, the description says it allows me to load 'save data' from a previous save—my old life. At age 33, even if I'd gained a level every third year, that would still have put me at 11, multiplied by 5 skill points per level leaves me with 55. I have 'imported' 30 INT, 20 WIS, and 10 CHA, which tells me… that the charisma is a base 'average' score, meaning I only really 'spent' 30 points total there. The rest must have gone to physical stats—probably VIT… No, there were no skill points in my previous life, meaning these numbers have to be a raw interpretation of what I had and could have had given points. If 10 is 'average,' then 30 would have been above average—so, fairly accurate.'
answer: they were local flight paths. For instance, there were flight paths from Beacon Academy to a terminal in every district, each of which also served as a train terminal for the local tram/subway/street car routes. In addition, there were flight paths between each of the terminals—so one could go to the Residential District's terminal and take a flight to a terminal in any other district. The terminal in the Commercial District, however, had several flight paths that lead off the map. If I had to guess, those were international flight paths, leading out of Vale.

In addition to the streets and other means of transit being helpfully labeled, some buildings were as well. For instance, Beacon Academy, the police station in each district, a hospital and several smaller clinics, and most importantly for me at the moment public buildings such as the library. Tapping the building in question set a waypoint and, after a moment of hesitation, a line highlighting the fastest route displayed on both my map and minimap. It looked like this route would send me mostly along the same route we had taken to get here—out to the main road, then from there north across the Residential District to one of the bridges, across the river, then into the eastern section of the Commercial District.

My first stop would be the house, to let Joan know what I was going. I liked her and I felt bad about the situation, me walking around as some imposter taking her brother's place—however, with no way to get the original Jaune back, the least I could do was keep her from worrying needlessly.

Opening the back door, I followed the sounds of quiet conversation towards the kitchen, activating my Listen skill almost as a reflex now. “I don't know, mom. He's just so… different now.”

That caused me to freeze. I was in the hallway leading from the back door of the house to the main living areas, running parallel to the stairs leading up to the next level. At the moment, I was hidden from view and the back door had opened and closed with very little noise, so odds were good she wasn't aware of my presence—if being distracted by her phone conversation didn't keep her from noticing in the first place. It probably made me a horrible person, but I wanted to know what they thought about me—mostly so I could figure out how to avoid suspicion. Slowing my breathing, I slowly leaned against the wall and waited.

[ Alert: A skill has been created through a special action! Sneaking around had created the skill Sneak !]

[Sneak: Level 1. Active. Sneak was created to allow you to sneak, skulk, hide, move silently, and avoid notice while doing morally questionable things! Effect: increases stealth and suppresses the user's Aura signature by 200%, allowing the user to hide or move silently and avoid detection by those sensitive to Aura. In crowded or highly visible areas, allows the user to blend in with a crowd and go unnoticed. While under the effects of Sneak, movement speed is reduced by 200%. Leveling up Sneak will increase its effectiveness and decrease its movement penalty.]

That was useful—I was a rogue and a caster at heart, really. Stealth and magic were my preferred methods of play, especially if I could combine them. Once more, I tried for skill creation, focusing
my magic towards turning invisible.

[Skill Creation failed! Required INT: 100]

[Alert: A skill has been created through a special action! Repeatedly creating skills has made the skill Skill Creation!]

[Skill Creation: Level MAX. Passive. A skill to create more skills was created by failing to create a skill, Skill Creation. Effect: creates new skills based on your INT score. The higher your INT, the more powerful the skill created.]

Okay, so there were limits. Also, it seemed the system had taken what I’d been treating as a hidden skill and made it an overt skill. Hidden Skills were actions a character could perform that didn't show up in their skill list, but were sometimes buried in the manual somewhere. The wording though… it pretty much outright stated that Skill Creation rolled off my INT mod and not my base INT. If that was true… A quick check of my stats confirmed my current INT to be 81.627 without my aura active. If it ran off the modifier as opposed to the base, that meant I could boost my INT mod to meet the prerequisites… It was something to play with later, as Joan was speaking again.

“Well, the healer said she didn't have a clue. She wanted to send us to Atlas to have some Schnee machine poke around in his brain. … Yeah, Jaune and I agreed that was a bad idea too, though he was more worried about the cost than them breaking something important. … He claims he doesn't remember anything about us, and I'll admit his memory seems spotty in places about other things. He was genuinely surprised when he saw the family photos. … Heh, yeah. The look on his face was priceless. Wish I'd had a camera. … No, mother, I'm not saying it's a bad thing but I'm not sure it's a good thing either. Look, I loved Jaune to death, but even I could admit he could be a bit of an… ass at times, not to mention thoughtless, inconsiderate, selfish… What? It's true! I don't really blame him, most teenagers are.”

“Onee-sama, I like onii-chan better this way. He doesn't push me off when I hug him. Can we keep him like this?” Jun asked, clearly sitting in the kitchen with her eldest sister.

Joan sighed. “What? No, mom, Jun just agrees with you—she says she likes him better this way. And I'll admit, the change in attitude is an improvement. But there's more to it than that. He says he doesn't know anything about us, or himself, but despite that he seems absolutely self confident. I swear, it felt like I was dealing with an older brother and not a younger one at times. It… it was actually kind of nice. … Shut up, I am not!”

“Are too!” Jun teased and I rolled my eyes. Yeah, I'd been where Joan was a time or two, with
family that would take relentless advantage of any perceived weakness to tease.

“Look, I'm just saying it's weird. And he's driven, now. Before, it was always this desperate attitude
to live up to the rest of us. … Yeah, it's like he has some kind of goal in mind. No idea what, though.
… No, it wouldn't be bad if he were stuck like this, but we both know that you're not suggesting that
because he's a better person. Jaune's never been good enough for you. … No, you listen. Between
the six of us, before Jaune and Jun were both, we set the bar impossibly high for either of them. You
said it was because he was your only son and you wanted him to carry on the family name, but the
truth is that you, and dad, and Mama Lily all thought that forcing him to do it on his own would
make him stronger. I heard you talking about it, mom. Remember? You said you already had six
butterflies. Well, you were right. Congratulations, Jaune's a moth. It only cost him everything that
made him Jaune. … I'll take whatever tone I damn well please, because you know I'm right. I think
you've already done enough damage. Jaune may be a moth, but he's my moth now. I'm not going to
let your actions, or inactions make this any worse for him than it already is!”

In another way, they had gotten their son killed and they didn't even know it, because I was walking
around in his body. Joan seemed to realize that, even if she didn't realize that I was some sort of body
snatcher, and she had apparently become very defensive—the girl had a case of mama bear
syndrome. Hers just expressed itself differently from the classic ‘protect at all costs’ mentality,
considering she was not just willing to let 'Jaune' become a Hunter but had had transcripts forged for
him to go to Beacon. She wanted him to succeed, to get stronger, and likely surpass their parents'
expectations. It made the guilt I felt at replacing her brother all the worse. If she ever found out, it
would likely break her. 'Then I suppose I'll have to make sure she doesn't.'

Calling up that higher charisma, I stepped into the kitchen and smiled at the sisters, as though I hadn't
just heard the entire conversation. “Hey. So, I had an idea.”

“Oh?” Joan asked, setting a couple of plates with sandwiches on the table and taking a seat.
Taking a seat in front of the third plate, I nodded. “Yeah. Instead of spending my time trying to develop new skills, it would be a lot easier—not to mention faster—if I could find a readily available source of them.”

“Such as…?”

I lifted the sandwich and took a bite, humming in appreciation. It was really good… I paused as I noticed something. Opening the sandwich, I saw that in addition to chicken, it also had tomato and lettuce, and of course some sort of spicy brown mustard. I don't like lettuce, or tomato. At all. They taste horrible. And yet… and yet, Jaune apparently liked them, as it registered as appealing to his taste buds. Shrugging, I put the sandwich back together and took another bite. Swallowing and washing it down with water, I answered her question. “The library.”

“And how were you planning to get there?”

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes. “I have a map, remember? I'll backtrack on the route we took to get out here, then take a train or something.”

Jun looked up from where she'd been eating her own sandwich with one hand and doing what looked like trigonometry with the other. Trig—at her age. “But onii-chan, aren't skill books usually destroyed when they're used?”

“Uh… maybe?” I hedged. I had hoped they wouldn't notice that.

Joan raised an eyebrow. “I'm pretty sure the library would be annoyed if you ate their books. That, and we would have to pay to have them replaced since you wouldn't be able to return them once you checked them out.”

I chuckled softly before quietly clarifying, “I wasn't planning to check them out?”

Joan shot me a deadpan look while Jun laughed. “So that's a skill too! Are you going to level your stealing skill, onii-chan?”

“Yes, 'onii-chan,' were you planning to level your stealing?” Joan asked with an arch look.

In response, I assumed the most affronted look I could. “I'm sure I don't know what you're talking
Joan's lips twitched, fighting a smile. “Uh huh. If you get caught, I'll let you stay in jail.”

“But onee-sama, onii-chan is too pretty for jail! Some Bubba will make onii-chan his prison bitch, and then I can't marry onii-chan!” Jun protested and I damn near drowned on the water I had been sipping.

“Where did you learn that?” I asked at the same time Joan said, “Well then he'd better not get caught.”

I blinked, Joan's words registering as I turned to observe her. Just for the sake of being thorough, I even used Observe on her, which by now was at a high enough level to tell me her emotional state. Joan's emotions were listed as worried, cautious, and hopeful… which didn't tell me much. “You're willing to go along with this?”

“No,” Joan denied. “I'm sure you're just going to go to the library to read up on a few things and then come right back. If you happen to pick up a few skills in the process, then it must be a coincidence.”

I chuckled at the girl who was seven years my junior. ‘So long as you don't know about it, you won't object, huh?’ I mused. Fine, then. I could work with that. Quickly finishing my sandwich, I washed off my plate and left it in the sink. “I'll be back later.”

“Jaune,” Joan called as I made for the front door. Looking back, her crystal blue eyes met mine. “Be careful. And be back by dinner.”

[A quest has been created!]

[Trust Issues: Joan's Request]

[Your sister wants you to come back in time for dinner—and also, not get arrested.]

Rewards: 1000 EXP, increased closeness with Joan. Failure: Decreased closeness with Joan, decreased trust from Joan, increased nagging from Joan, possibly becoming a prison bitch. Time
Of course, nothing was ever easy.
Leaving the house, I closed the door behind me and took off down the driveway at a run.

[Alert: A skill has been created through a special action! Running has created the skill Run!]

[Run: Level 1. Active. A skill for running away from, or towards, danger or more mundane objectives has been created—Run! Effect: increases your movement speed by \(((\text{STR} + \text{DEX}) \times 5)\)% for a number of minutes equal to your VIT score. Resting restores your stamina. Leveling Run will allow you to run faster for longer periods of time before becoming exhausted.]

I pulled up my stats page while continuing my run. With a bit of effort and some help from my clock, I was able to judge my speed at about 25MPH. More mental math left me disgusted at my physical stats holding me back. Even with all my buffs, the fact that my base stats were low meant I wouldn't be outpacing cars without some serious improvements. The good news was though that I could maintain this pace for about twenty minutes before needing to stop to rest. I knew it wasn't good enough. Jun was faster, and Ruby Rose was faster still—seemingly impossibly so, given what I remembered. I would have to do some serious leveling or work on developing some passive skills if I wanted to come even remotely close. That, or use magic to even the playing field... Still, I was making well over a four-minute mile at this pace, so that was an improvement over what I could do back home. It's just... that was a speed well within human limits to achieve and I couldn't help feeling that, with my Semblance and magic, I should be capable of more. It was disappointing.

Nearing the road, I opened up my map and split my attention, before another skill alert popped up, letting me know I must have done something inadvertently. Reading over the description for Perception, I blinked. It read like some sort of catch-all skill for what sounded like a constant Spot check.
[**Perception:** Level 1. Passive. **Perception**, a skill to increase attention to detail, adjust to changes in terrain and environment, increase your overall attention to your surroundings, and detect hidden items, places, people, or enemies, was created while trying to navigate. **Effect:** increases stealth detection by 100%, increase hidden object detection by 100%, increases terrain navigation by 100%, increases combat awareness 100%, adds new points of interest to the map and minimap. Range: 100m.]

I dismissed the alert window and kept running. Vale is actually a pretty large city, one of the largest on Remnant if I remembered correctly. I debated getting on a bus but decided against it in favor of potentially earning skill points. As I ran, I noticed my map changing as details I hadn't known began filling out. While before, it had the full layout of the city and several points of interest, as I neared them other areas were marked on the map. Passing restaurants and convenience stores were marked with a food icon that looked suspiciously like a hamburger, a clothing store got marked down with a tee-shirt icon, a hardware store with a crossed hammer and screwdriver, and a store that sold Dust marked with what looked like a diamond superimposed on a snowflake. Everything within range with a purpose I might want to check out at a later date was added. Things ahead of me, within my field of vision, updated quicker and much further out than things to my sides—which appeared to stick to the 100m detection limit. It made sense, though, as I could actually see the things ahead of me. There wasn't much of note in the Residential District, but once I got into the Commercial District, it seemed like every other building was something potentially useful. Perception was turning out to be even more useful than I thought it had been.

By the time I found the Vale Central Library, my active skills had leveled and STR and VIT had gained a point, as had WIS, which I took to mean that running was the wiser course of action. I stopped my run, glancing at the clock—I had several hours to kill before I needed to be back and I'd even managed to make it before I hit my time limit for Run, if just barely. Leaving the rest of my skills up, I entered the library—though, I found trying to move at a normal pace with Haste active a bit of a challenge, and it required more of my attention than I would have liked to admit.

Walking inside, my map and minimap changed to display the library interior—a multi-story affair with a computer lab, records room, and more. Looking up, I spotted a few cameras and my maps helpfully updated to mark their positions and fields of view. In addition, there was a security guard standing by the door, along with two librarians patrolling the floor ostensibly to help patrons. Already, I could see where the holes were in their security. I suppressed a smirk and turned up the charm as I smiled and waved at the girl working the counter and earned a blush for my efforts, along with an increased point in CHA.

My map updated once more, helpfully telling me which sections were which. From left to right were fiction, which was divided between age categories, non-fiction, general reference, religion, and a section for Hunters further subdivided by subject. Throwing up Sneak, I watched the security guard turn his attention away from me towards someone more interesting as I moved into the Hunters’ section. Quietly opening my inventory, I closed my map but left the minimap up—which still showed the cameras, their fields of view as they turned to sweep the aisle, the librarians on patrol along with the security guard, and their own fields of view. Moving through the section, I began
spamming Observe and taking note of interesting titles. Many of the texts here were reference materials, things like grimm traits and behavioral patterns—lots of things that, while useful to know, wouldn't make skill books by themselves. As one of the cameras passed over me, I selected one of the books on grimm behavior and tucked it under my arm.

Eventually, I came across a text on grimm anatomy, which registered to Observe as a skill book. I waited until the camera shifted and I was out of its line of sight before reaching forward, grabbing the book, and shoving it into my inventory before the camera could pan back to my position. It helped that Haste and the rest of my buffs were still up, increasing my speed and DEX.

[You've obtained the skill book Beginner's Grimm Anatomy! Would you like to learn this skill?]

I dismissed the pop-up about the skill book while another series of boxes popped up. The first was a new skill creation window telling me I had created the skill Sleight of Hand. Reading the description, I found it was similar to Run, in that it combined two scores for a specific effect: in this case, CHA and DEX. Like Perception, Sleight of Hand appeared to be a catch-all skill encompassing several aspects of various sub-skills such as palming and hiding small objects, pickpocketing, shuffling, juggling, throwing and the like. Likewise, it had some synergy with Bluff and likely a few skills I didn't have if I was reading it correctly—meaning that I could combine my Bluff and Sleight of Hand, or other scores, to a greater total effect depending on the circumstances. The next thing to pop up was a quest alert.

[A quest has been created!]

[Path of the Rogue (part I)]

[By engaging in an act of petty larceny, you have taken your first step down the path to becoming a rogue and a thief! Prove you've got what it takes by stealing five or more books from the library without getting caught.]

[Rewards: 2000 EXP + 250 EXP per book over the minimum, skill books, quest continuation. Failure: loss of skill books, potentially be apprehended and go to jail.]

I nearly snorted. Five? I planned to take as many as I could get away with. Really, if they were going to give me experience per book, I'd take more just for the guaranteed experience. I hadn't yet mapped out my EXP progression by level, but if my mental math was right and my Semblance was using a sane experience progression model, then my required experience to next level—or TNL—should increase by 1000 each level. So, from level 1 to 2, I had needed to earn 1000 EXP. To get from 2 to 3, I'd needed to earn 2000. Now, from 3 to 4, I would need to earn 3000 and so forth. Four books
was 1000 EXP. The math was pretty simple from there.

I spent the next several minutes perusing the shelves for things on my wish list before deciding I had enough out of the Hunters' section for the moment—I had met my minimum and then some. Deciding to wander, I turned left and walked a few shelves away with a couple of visible selections tucked under my arm. Turning into a random section, I looked around and hummed when I found myself in the 'Religion' section. Shrugging as I decided that it would be a good way to level Observe, I began perusing while experimenting with subvocalization. I couldn't just think the commands I wanted to use for the voice-activated stuff, unfortunately. Some skills, like Aura, could be activated by performing the action manually without vocalizing the technique, while others, like Listen, could be performed likewise for simple common sense reasons. Perception was my first always-on skill, meaning so long as I was conscious it appeared to be running by default—and while that's how passive skills behaved, Perception seemed to be in a class of its own compared to most passive skills. Most skills, like observe, required some minimum level of intent and volume for activation, however. Whispering worked, thinking failed. Just moving my mouth failed, but speaking below a whisper as a subvocal command seemed to work—I didn't even have to move my lips over much, it seemed.

As I moved through the religion section, I paused as I came across something out of place.

[The Spirits of Remnant: A tale of the first Hunter. When man first discovered Aura and Dust, he beseeched the spirits of the world to aid him in his quest to rid the world of grimm. The light of the soul of the world answered.]

'That's a skill book,' I hummed, looking it over. What was a skill book doing in the religion section? What, did it teach some form of prayer or holy smite ability? Well, considering grimm were likely highly vulnerable to holy damage, I decided it was worth my time to investigate. I swiped the book during a gap in camera coverage and kept walking. Turning into the next row, I found myself in the non-fiction section. Scanning the covers of several books and throwing out the occasional Observe, I found the place to be absolutely full of skill books. Not many of those appeared to be related to hunting down grimm, but they sounded useful nonetheless. For instance, 'Ropes and Knots' looked to be a book on using rope, making knots and so forth. Deciding I needed to prioritize to lower my chances of getting caught or being suspected of being the thief when they found things missing, I began ranking things on a scale of 1 to 5 for usefulness. Rope was damn useful, when you had a need for it, so into the inventory it went.

A book on wilderness survival was somewhat less useful, considering I was already experienced in exactly that—my money said that as soon as I tried it, I'd get some sort of import skill notification. A book on the basics of avionics, on the other hand, went straight into the inventory. A book on proper swim technique was passed over in favor of a book on making basic repairs to clothing, which was something I had never really done before. I swept my eyes over the physical activities section again and nearly continued on before something caught my eye. I had just skimmed over the title at first, seeing the word 'running' and passing it up, but a second look told me I might have just hit pay dirt. 'Running Free' got yanked off the shelf and tossed into inventory.
Moving along, I stopped by the history section and picked out a couple of books that looked interesting—namely, that filled in holes left by what I knew of the plot of RWBY—and moved on to the fiction section. A rare skill book in Historical Fiction stood out and my eyes went slightly wide in surprise when I interpreted what it probably was from the title: 'Morrigan's Folly: the Witch, the Raven, and the Dragon.' Snagging the book and dropping it into inventory, I found something that looked amusing out of the romance section to tease Joan with before deciding I'd had enough larceny for one evening. I made my way up to the front desk and smiled upon sighting the same girl I'd seen coming in. Her blush returned and I pretended I didn't notice as she cleared her throat and looked away momentarily while I put my selections on the counter.

“Uh, do you have your card?” she asked, and I hummed in thought.

That was a good question. I hadn't come across a wallet anywhere, however. “No… can you look my account up by name?” I asked, deciding it was worth a shot.

“Sure, what… um, what's your name?”

“Jaune Arc,” I returned, before a thought occurred. So far, I'd only really found one way to grind my charisma score, and that was to interact with people. Flirting seemed to have better results than anything else, however, so… “What's your name?”

“Candice,” the brunette in question murmured, doing her best to look like she was checking out books while I caught her stealing glances at me out of the corner of her eye.

“Any suggestions on good reading material?” I asked, figuring if she worked here, she probably had an interest in books.

The girl's demeanor changed, relaxing into something more confident as she began talking about a familiar, and it seemed much enjoyed, topic. “Well, the last decent book I read was one of the 'Ninjas of Love' series… oh! I see you already have one.”

“Well, I tend to prefer…” I trailed off. I had read the description and the book sounded like a lengthy series of lemons stitched together by an overarching plot, at least according to Observe.

“Plot with your porn?” she finished, then suddenly seemed to realize what she'd said as her eyes went wide and her blush returned at a higher luminescence.
Laughing quietly, I looked around before leaning forward on the counter. “Just maybe. So… you enjoyed it, huh?”

“Maybe,” she answered sheepishly, also looking around for listeners. Finding none, she finished scanning the last of my books into what passed as a computer on Remnant before hesitating. After a moment of indecision, she reached for a stack of sticky notes on her desk and quickly scrawled out something I couldn't read from my angle. Opening the black cover to the book in question, she stuck the little yellow square to the inside and looked up to meet my blue eyes with her own honey brown and smiled. “You're all done here. I hope you enjoy it.”

Collecting my books, I wished her a good day and made for the exit. As soon as I crossed the threshold, a veritable deluge of notifications popped up.

[Quest Path of the Rogue (part I) completed! 15 additional books collected!]

[You gain 5750 EXP]

[Your level has increased by 1!]

[Your level has increased by 1!]

[Sleight of Hand's level has increased by 1!]

[Sleight of Hand's level has increased by 1!]

[Sleight of Hand's level has increased by 1!]

[Alert: A skill has been created through a special action! Stealing valuable skill books has created the skill Steal!]

[Steal: Level 1. Active. A skill to Steal things that don't belong to you was created. Effect: takes an item that doesn't belong to you from someone else and adds it to your inventory. Combines with]
Sleight of Hand where applicable.

Steal's level has increased by 1!

Steal's level has increased by 1!

Steal's level has increased by 1!

Due to repeated use of skills requiring dexterity, your DEX has gone up by 1!

A quest has been created!

Path of the Rogue (part II)

Now that you've proven your larceny skills, you should learn what to do with goods you're looking to sell. Make contact with the roguish community to advance the quest.

Rewards: 3000 EXP, contacts with the Underworld, unlocks Underworld trading, unlocks Underworld jobs.

Moving to a nearby bench, I sat down and began reading and closing the multitude of messages. So, to tally all of that, I finished the quest, leveled up, gained Steal as a new skill, got three levels each in Steal and Sleight of Hand, gained a point of DEX for practicing those, and potentially set myself up for some sort of villainous employment. Not bad for an afternoon's worth of work. However, my curiosity was eating away at me. Taking up 'Ninjas of Love' from its position sandwiched between two other books, I opened the front cover and read the sticky note.

Give me a call if you want to talk about the book… maybe over coffee?

—Candice

A quest has been updated!
[Romancing Remnant: The Sexy Librarian has been unlocked!]

[You've been propositioned by a sexy librarian to get together for a cup of coffee and a conversation about your shared interests—namely, erotic literature. Read 'Ninjas of Love: Volume I' and set up a date with Candice.]

[Rewards: 1000 EXP, skill(s), potential kinky sex, potential friend with benefits, unlocks special mode. Failure: no EXP, no skill(s), no kinky sex, no friend with benefits. Time limit: 3 days.]

Right. Okay. What kind of person did my Semblance think I was, anyway? I wasn't the kind of guy who went around looking for sex with random women or friends with benefits. And I didn't even like coffee! Sure, I mean, it had been over a year since the last time I'd gotten laid—hell, given the current memory-related circumstances, I couldn't even remember it all that well. Technically, Jaune was a virgin… ‘Actually, you know what? Screw it. Let's give this a try. What I had been doing in my last life didn't seem to be working. I don't think I'll ever be someone who embraces the notion of ‘casual sex,’ that's an oxymoron… so I suppose I'll have to figure something out.’

Knowing better than to stick around the scene of a crime, let alone look over my ill-gotten goods at the scene of said crime, I stood and picked up my books before leaving the premises. As far as anyone in the library watching would know, I just took a seat to check out one of my books—hell, Candice had even given me the perfect alibi if I was ever asked, since I could answer with 100% truthfulness that I'd stopped to see what she'd written. That in mind, I left the note stuck to the inside of the book for now—it might come in handy later for more than dating.

Bringing up my map, I found a small park several blocks away along my path home and set a waypoint, then closed the map. A few minutes later, I walked into the park and looked around. Seeing that it was nothing more than a few trees and some grass, this particular park was practically deserted. Moving off the path, I sat in the shade of one of the trees, out of view of the road. Making sure I wasn't being watched, I stuffed my reading material into my inventory before looking over my new selections. Picking the first one, I pulled it out.

[You've obtained the skill book Beginner's Grimm Anatomy! Would you like to learn this skill?]

Obviously, yes. Tapping the button, the book dissolved into light particles—more like flakes, really—before being absorbed into my body.

[You have learned the skill Favored Enemy: Grimm.]
[**Favored Enemy:** Level 1. Passive. You've learned a skill to give you advantages over a specific type of enemy, **Favored Enemy**. Effect: grants a 20% bonus to attacks and defense against favored enemy. Improve **Favored Enemy**'s level to add new favored enemies and increase its effects.]

Considering I hadn't encountered grimm yet, I'd say this was a boon for when I inevitably did. Increased damage was always good, but the skill didn't specify *damage*—only attacks. Would a debuff could as an attack? Everything I knew of other games said yes. Not that I had any debuffs yet—I'd need to work on that. Later, *after* I devour more books for power.

[You have obtained the skill book Dust and You: Dust for Beginner Hunters! Would you like to learn this skill?] Why yes, yes I would please.

[**Dust Manipulation:** Level 1. Passive. It was the discovery of Dust that allowed man to finally push back the grimm and start reclaiming their lands. Dust—creation itself in crystallized form. Effect: allows the use of 0th through 2nd level Dust to enhance weapons, armor, ammunition, and mana-based attacks. Increases efficiency and effect of Dust and Dust rounds by 25%.]

Oh, yes—that would be useful. The world of RWBY was built around Dust and its usage—if something wasn't done using Aura, it was done using Dust, or by combining the two. About 75% of Weiss's combat style was 'spam Dust at it to find ways to stick the pointy end of my sword in it.' The implications in the description, though… Dust had levels? Thinking back, I realized I'd seen several forms of the stuff in canon—from powdered to different types of crystals. However, in addition to level, there were different colors of dust as well. Red, I knew, tended to deal fire damage. I'd have to do some research to figure out what was what. Supposedly there were four basic primary colors and a multitude of other combinations. I pulled out the next book.

[You've obtained the skill book Kung Pow: Firearms and Martial Arts Synergy! Would you like to learn this skill?] The holy grail of RWBY, you say? You bet your glowy, blue interface I would.

[You cannot learn this skill! Required DEX: 20!] 'Well. That is some bullshit,' I groused, tossing the book back into inventory. It made sense, though. Every character to use that particular fighting style was very, very agile. Of course there would be a
minimum requirement for being able to do it. On the bright side, I didn't even have a firearm or a set fighting style yet. Until I came up with either or both of those, it was a moot point. Still, good to have around—I'd need it sooner, rather than later. Accept it and move on.

[You have obtained the skill book Anything Goes!: Building The Combat Style To Suit Your Needs! Would you like to learn this skill?]

That sounded like exactly what I needed.

[You cannot learn this skill! Required STR: 15! Required DEX: 15!]

“Oh come on!” I growled, dismissing the message and tossing the book back into inventory. Again, those requirements sounded perfectly fair and reasonable… I just didn't meet them, by 4 points. Soon, though. 'If the damn books would give their requirements when I picked them up, at least then I wouldn't be disappointed. Fuck it. Next.'

[You have obtained the skill book Earth, Wind, Fire, Water, and More: Mastering the Elements! Would you like to learn this skill?]

You know damn well I would. Now, the question is, will you let me?

[You cannot learn this skill! Required INT: 15! Required WIS: 15!]

“Fuck. You. That's bullshit and you know it. My title should could towards base stats, not my modified stats,” I argued, though I knew it would do no good. The five books I'd taken to meet the requirement done, I started trying others. The vast majority turned out to be a mixed bag of low but not quite there requirements, like 'Basic Firearms' which required 15 DEX and INT while a few others, like 'Spirits of Remnant' and 'Morrigan's Folly' turned out to have ridiculously high requirements. The firearms thing was especially annoying, because I knew how to use firearms, damnit. I had been training with them for years…

Well, at least the stuff I pulled out of the non-fiction section turned out to be usable—mostly. What I suspected was a book on parkour or freerunning had a DEX and STR requirement to match Anything Goes. Things got a little weird when I ate the avionics book, however—as a box popped up momentarily to tell me it was importing saved data. Instead of learning how to fly a plane specifically, it added the ability to fly aircraft to my Drive skill. In my last life, I'd had experience operating a fairly large variety of vehicles—cars, trucks, motorcycles, ATVs, watercraft, and even an
expired CDL from having to qualify to drive larger vehicles. That experience showed in my skill level.

**[Use Rope: Level MAX. Active. Secure cargo, prisoners, or tie knots that will impress the ladies in bed (assuming they're into that) with Use Rope! Effect: grants proficiency over the various uses of rope.]**

**[Drive: Level 30. Active. Drive allows the user to control motorized vehicles of all sorts—everything that has wheels and a few things that don't! Effect: grants the ability to control vehicles, increases proficiency with vehicles by 250%.]**

**[Crafting: Level 1. Active. Crafting allows the creation of anything the user desires, so long as he has the materials. Find plans to learn to craft new items. Effect: allows the user to craft or repair items, increases proficiency with crafting by 100%. Increase the level of Crafting to create masterwork or even legendary quality items!]**

It seemed that, while not a bust, my library visit hadn't panned out quite how I had hoped. Oh, certainly, I had things to work towards now… but I wanted the skills now, dammit, not in however long it took to raise my points enough to qualify. Shaking my head in disgust, I stood and brushed the dirt and grass off my pants before checking my HUD's clock: 6:45 PM. I guess I'd spent more time sitting here than I'd thought. Hell, my Aura, Haste, Reflex, and Reinforcement skills had all leveled at least twice that I was aware of since leaving home, I'd had them on so long.

Opening my map, I spent a moment looking over the local shops. I didn't really have money for anything nor any way to earn it yet and I didn't want to risk stealing things from places like stores without leveling up a bit first, due to the risk of increased security compared to the library. Setting a waypoint, I took off at a run. I could make it with time to spare. For the sake of filling out my map, I took a different route back through the Commercial District before heading for the bridge that would lead across the water. It took slightly longer, but I was still well within the time limit. Deciding to be nice, I pulled my scroll from my inventory and chuckled when it triggered a loading screen and a skill creation dialogue. Apparently, my skill with Use Computers was ridiculously high—level 65, reflecting my work in my previous life as a systems administrator. With my skill level, somehow I instinctively knew how to use Remnant's technology, despite never having seen it before—such is the power of skills, I suppose. What kind of systems administrator also has a CDL and experience in various other fields? One who spent the better part of a decade bouncing between jobs while studying his ass off to get that systems administrator job.

The line picked up after two rings. “Jaune?” Joan asked, confusion in her voice.

“So… I need you to come bail me out of jail,” I joked.
The young woman on the other end snorted. “Liar. I hear traffic around you. Are you… running?”

“Yeah,” I answered. “I'm about halfway back. Shouldn't take me more than ten minutes or so to get back to the house.”

“Well, dinner isn't ready yet, so you can help your sister with the chores.”

I laughed. “What's that, you say? Slow down and wait a while before coming back?”

I could hear the eye-roll as Joan laughed. “Ass. Get a move on, Jaune.”

“Yeah, yeah, I'm coming. Be there in a few.” Hanging up, I dropped the scroll back into inventory and focused on my run. It happened as I was dismissing an alert about Run leveling up, only a few minutes away from the Arc family home.

[The sun has set and you have been drawn into an Illusion Barrier, a bubble caught between the waking world and the spirit world. Restless spirits of those who died in the Great War are attempting to manifest in the real world as creatures of grimm! You will not be able to leave until you kill them and stop the incursion.]

The world around me seemed normal enough to my eyes, but I could feel an almost electric charge in the air—something I'd come to associate almost unconsciously with magic. Then, the smell hit me. Death, decay, rot. Looking around, I took in my surroundings. Currently, I was in the middle of the road, woods on either side, and I knew the house was just a quarter mile down the road at most. I was tempted to try for the house, but given what the alert said, I didn't think I'd make it. Well, I couldn't just stand here like an idiot. Looking around, I spotted what I was after and took off running. The largest tree near the road was a pine that had to be at least 150 feet tall. The lowest branches were a good twenty feet up, but I had to try. Standing around on the ground was a good way to get killed. Nearing the tree, I focused my aura and jumped.

[Alert: A skill has been created through a special action! Focusing your aura into jumping has created the skill Powered Leap!]

[Powered Leap: Level 1. Active. Through focusing your aura on the act of jumping, the skill Powered Leap was created. Effect: allows the user to use MP to increase their STR for higher and
longer leaps. User can make a standing vertical leap of 10m or more if the user takes a running start—or a horizontal leap of 15m, or more if the user takes a running start. Using more mana for **Powered Leap** increases its range by 1m/3MP, up to a maximum charge of 5 seconds. Level powered leap to reduce its cost and increase its charge time to distance ratio. Cost: 3MP/meter.

Charge time: 1 second/5 meters."

I slammed chest-first into a limb 30 or so feet up, barely managing to catch myself before I fell back down. With a bit of effort and shifting around, I managed to pull myself up onto the limb and into a standing position. I was just in time, it seemed, as I heard a shuffling approaching my position from nearby. Activating Sneak, I waited.

[Alert: A skill has been created through a special action! Sensing potential danger nearby has created the skill **Sense Danger**!]

**Sense Danger**: Level 1. Passive. The ability to **Sense Danger** is a natural survival instinct even the lowliest of animals possesses. Effect: allows the user to sense when the potential for danger is high in any situation and determine where that danger is coming from if applicable.

My new Sense Danger passive told me where the grimm was, even if I hadn't seen it enter the range of my minimap or heard it approaching. As it neared, I cast Observe.

**Beowolf, level 7**

[HP: 900/900 MP: 400/400]

[A restless spirit attempting to return to the land of the living. It knows only hate for the living and a hunger for flesh, especially that of humans.]

Okay, not so bad. Just one, so far. I knew beowolves tended to travel in packs, however, and that they were fast, agile, and strong. I did not want to engage in hand to hand combat with one without a weapon, especially one a level above me. Comparing my own, buffed HP to its I found mine was higher: 6 24 verses its 6 00. I guess titles and skills make up for a lot. 'Okay, what do I have going for me? Armor, skills, stats, and the ability to create new skills on the fly. Against me? No weapon, no idea of enemy numbers of composition, no way to leave without killing an unknown number of enemies, and an hour until I have to be home or fail the quest. Fuck it, let's do this thing. Start one problem at a time. I have no weapon. Okay, as I keep saying, I'm a caster at heart and I have Skill Creation. I want a ranged magical attack.'
Putting thought to deed, I summoned up mana and focused on creating a new skill.

[Alert: A skill has been created through a special action! A skill to attack directly using mana, Mana Bolt, was created!]

[Mana Bolt: Level 1. Active. Mana Bolt was created by channeling your aura to attack directly with magic. Effect: damages the target for 100% of your INT score and explodes on contact. Percentage chance to knock down and stun enemies based on the difference between your INT and their combined VIT and STR. Exceeding the opponent's opposed combined VIT and INT will always result in knock down and stun. Knocked down and stunned enemies are considered Helpless and are vulnerable to Coup de Grace. Level Mana Bolt to increase percentage of damage dealt and knock down chance. Cost: 15MP. Range: 10m. Speed: 10m/s.]

I took a moment to read the skill description and consider my options. I had Sneak up and running, I had the bonus from Favored Enemy… My mental math put the attack around 130 damage. However, there was a very good chance my INT was higher than a level 7 beowolf's combined STR and VIT. Given the wording and the pattern the system interface had followed so far, along with previous experience, Knock Down and Stun were likely status effects, as was Helpless. Coup de Grace was a finishing blow one usually got if their opponent couldn't do a damn thing to stop them because they were helpless…

Sighting down my arm between my thumb and index finger, I took aim at the grimm's head and subvocalized, “Mana Bolt.” Considering the size, shape, color, and effect of the technique I was sorely tempted to pay it the Ranma ½ homage it deserved and rename it.

The bolt of brilliant blue light streaked away from my hand and slammed into the beowolf’s back, telling me I needed to adjust my aim, before promptly exploding and throwing it to the ground. Immediately, several windows popped up at once as I watched its HP drop far more than I'd been expecting.

[Alert: A skill has been created through a special action! A skill to attack while concealed, Sneak Attack, was created!]

[Sneak Attack: Level 1. Active. Because you attacked an enemy while hidden with Sneak, the skill Sneak Attack was created. Effect: increases damage done to unaware enemies by 100%. Increase Sneak Attack's level to increase its damage.]

[Alert: A skill has been created through a special action! By rendering an opponent Helpless, you
have unlocked the skill **Coup de Grace**!

**Coup de Grace**: Level MAX. Active. By rendering an enemy **Helpless**, you unlocked the skill to deal the finishing blow of a mercy killing. **Coup de Grace**. Effect: all attacks against **Helpless** enemies are now considered a **Critical Hit**. If an enemy does not possess a discernible anatomy or is otherwise immune to **crit**, all attacks against it instead do double damage.

**Your WIS has gone up by 1!**

'About a quarter of a grimm’s HP in one shot, for 15MP and two skills unlocked for my trouble—not bad at all. Let’s give Coup de Grace a try, shall we?’ I hummed, charging up and firing another Mana Bolt. The beowolf below promptly exploded into a combination of smoke, bone fragments, and something that looked suspiciously like black blood. I dismissed the alert telling me I’d gained 250 E XP. Squinting, I could make out something on the ground below. Tempted as I was to go down there and see what the grimm had dropped, common sense told me that would be a bad idea—that and Sense Danger and my minimap let me know more enemies were coming to investigate the two explosions. Making sure Sneak was active, I waited. Before long, a trio of beowolves were circling the tree, slowly looking around for the source of the noise. Casting Observe on them, I frowned as I noticed something off—namely, their MP had gone up by 30 points. If their stats were at all like mine, then something had changed their INT modifier.

Looking the trio of new enemies over from my hidden position, I began running through potential strategies. If I hit one with Mana Bolt, the other two would be on me shortly after I finished the first. After that, I would have to make distance and fight them off. However, with what I knew of the world of RWBY, beowolves were buddy aggro—meaning if there were more of them in the immediate vicinity, they would come to the aid of any one I attacked—and they could call for help. So assuming I killed one and engaged the other, the third would start calling for help. 'Fight smarter, not harder,’ I reminded myself. ‘I know how to deal with this.’ Waiting until they stopped moving where the first beowolf had been felled, I helped out my hand and concentrated. 'Go to sleep, go to sleep, all of you sleep damnit!'

**Alert: A skill has been created through a special action! A skill to cause enemies to fall asleep, **Sleep**, was created!**

**Sleep**: Level 1. Active. **Sleep** was created in an effort to render your enemies unconscious. Effect: all enemies within a 3 meter radius must make a will save—their WIS modifier vs. your INT modifier—or they will fall asleep and be made **Helpless** for a duration of 5 minutes per level. Damaging, shaking, or jarring an enemy will wake it but normal noise will not. Leveling **Sleep** will increase its radius, range, and duration. Cost: 15MP/enemy. Range: 10m.'
Three sleeping beowolves lay at my feet and I wondered what to do with them. I needed an attack that was quiet so as to keep from drawing in more grimm, but which would finish each off preferably in one shot—also, I really didn't want to climb down out of my tree. That ruled out using mana to create a dagger for throat slitting or a sword for stabbing, but I kept that idea in mind for later. *Time to get creative,* I grinned, already pulling my mana up for the task. I started with a mana bolt, holding it in my hands for a moment as I examined it and thought it over. Finally, I had to stifle a laugh as I came to an obvious solution. *It worked for Naruto. Let's put some spin on this thing and see what I get...'*

[Alert: A skill has been created through a special action! A skill to damage enemies using a spinning ball of mana was created, *Spinning Mana Bolt!*]

**Spinning Mana Bolt:** Level 1. Active. *Spinning Mana Bolt* was created by channeling your mana into a *Mana Bolt* and then directing the mana to rotate violently. Effect: 20% armor or defense penetration, deals 600% of your INT worth of damage, minimum 4 second spin time but spin time can be increased to 10 seconds for added damage. Cost: 60MP base, 15MP/sec after 4 seconds. Range: 10m.

That... was not what I was looking for, but not entirely unexpected either. It would be getting renamed to 'Rasengan' later, for laughs. Deciding to give it another go, I tried again after allowing the first attempt to dissipate soundlessly, this time attempting to create something with more range and less of an explosive or knock down effect.

[Alert: A skill has been created through a special action! A skill to damage enemies at greater range using mana was created, *Mana Arrow!*]

**Mana Arrow:** Level 1. Active. *Mana Arrow* was created to damage enemies at a greater range than *Mana Bolt*, by hardening mana into an elongated shape. Effect: damages the target for 100% of your INT modifier, piercing, 10x faster than *Mana Bolt*. Cost: 8MP. Range: 20M. Speed: 100m/s.

'Close, but not quite. But I already have the technique active, so let's try adding spin and see what happens...'

[Alert: A skill has been created through a special action! A skill to penetrate enemy defenses at range using mana was created, *Spinning Mana Arrow!*]

**Spinning Mana Arrow:** Level 1. Active. *Spinning Mana Arrow*, a long distance attack skill with
increased penetration power, was created by adding strong spin to a **Mana Arrow**. **Effect:** 20% armor penetration, deals 300% of your INT modifier in damage, 10x faster than **Mana Bolt**. **Cost:** 8MP. **Range:** 20M. **Speed:** 100m/s

Looking over the technique, I hummed. This would work, but I felt like I could do better. 'Smaller, faster, more range...' With those thoughts in mind, I set about condensing the Spinning Mana Arrow.

**[Alert: A skill has been created through a special action! A skill to penetrate enemy defenses at even extreme range using mana was created, Spinning Mana Bullet!]**

**[Spinning Mana Bullet: Level 1. Active. Spinning Mana Bullet, an extreme range attack skill with increased penetration power derived from its condensed exterior layer and increased velocity, was created from Spinning Mana Arrow!]** **Effect:** 50% armor penetration, deals 300% of your INT modifier in damage, 8x faster than Spinning Mana Arrow. **Cost:** 10MP. **Range:** 250M. **Speed:** 800m/s

**[Your INT has increased by 1!]**

Sighting down on the grimm below me and adjusting my aim based on my results from Mana Bolt, I fired. The first beowolf's head exploded into smoke, bone fragments, and blood splatter followed a moment later by the rest of its body. Unfortunately, I hadn't considered just how loud what amounted to a magical .50 BMG round would be. The problem wasn't in the round firing, or hitting its target, it was in the fact that it **broke the sound barrier** in flight—just like a real rifle round. And just like a real shot from a rifle, it would have enemies bearing down on me momentarily. Quickly dispatching the two remaining beowolves and dismissing more EXP gain popups, I threw Sneak up again and waited. My Sense Danger skill went nuts a moment before I saw a red dot come into range on my minimap, followed by another, and another, and another... Ten in total. I knew the moment they spotted me, as one of them let off a howl the others quickly echoed and proceeded to leap at my face.

S pinning up my new favorite attack, I waited until it got nearly into melee range before loosing the attack into its face, and was rewarded by watching the beowolf's head evaporate in a crit. I knew that I hadn't done enough damage for that, so the crit modifier must change situationally somehow... A skill alert popped up and I ignored it in favor of kicking out of the tree with a powered leap, sighting down another target on the ground. This one ate a round to the shoulder and lost the arm, causing it to stumble momentarily, but it refused to fall. Touching down in a hard roll, I took off at a dead run for the road. “Come and get it!”

With my buffs active, my run speed was enough to gain ground on the beowolves, at least momentarily—I had no doubt they would eventually run me down if I didn't start doing something
about them. In between dodging through trees, I quickly read over the skill I’d gotten. Aim appeared to be a rare common sense skill, one that you hardly ever see in an RPG style video game. It allowed me to actually aim at vital points for critical hits. In essence, it was similar to taking a called shot in D&D, but only on the surface. In practice, it was more like a guaranteed critical hit unless you screwed up or the enemy moved wrong—and there were ways to prevent things like that from happening. Despite the fact that my firearms proficiency was missing from my skill list, I still had years of training under my belt—in essence, at the moment, it was like a hidden skill: the ability is there, simply not displayed. At least, I hoped…

However, I knew that trying to aim for crits would wind up getting me killed as soon as the grimm swarmed me. Instead, I had a different plan entirely. Stumbling out of the tree line and onto the road, the first of the beowolves charged out right behind me. I needed to buy time before they got to me, so I began channeling mana as I ran. Counting off second in my head, I slid to a stop and turned to face them at 3 and jumped at 4, letting Powered Leap do its thing. Around sixty feet in the air, I looked down to where the grimm were gathering. As I fell, I took aim and dumped mana into my spell of choice. “Sleep!”

Four beowolves clustered together fell and my mana ticked down by 60. Sighting a group of two more, I had time to repeat the process before landing in a roll. With only four attackers to deal with, I made a short Powered Leap to gain distance and cast Sleep three more times, catching a pair of them together on the last cast.

[Sleep’s level has increased by 1!]

'I’d hope so, after that,' I groused. Charging up Spinning Mana Bullet, I began clearing them out. As the first disintegrated into leftovers, I finally had a chance to see what they’d left behind. A small stack of bills greeted me, along with a purple crystal. The cash turned out to be 50 Lien when I dropped it into inventory while the crystal was something called a Soul Gem. Deciding to figure that out later, I threw it into inventory and moved on to repeating the process with the rest and then backtracking to where I’d killed the first four. I whistled quietly as I took in my earnings: 676 Lien, six soul gems, eight vials of level 0 dust of varying colors, and three health potions. 'Not bad.'

Something impacted my back and I slammed face first into the tree before bouncing off, registering my MP drop by 486. Rolling away, I ignored a skill window telling me I’d gained Detect Bloodlust and frantically searched for what had hit me. Catching sight of it rushing back into the brush, I shouted, “Observe!” When nothing happened, I growled as I realized Observe had failed because I couldn’t clearly see my target. “Okay, asshole, come get you some,” I taunted, preparing to cast Sleep. Some combined synergy between Perception, Sense Danger, and Detect Bloodlust sent me diving to the side as a large paw swept through the space my head had occupied from my blind spot.

I had enough time to catch a glimpse of it before it disappeared into the underbrush again. It looked like an older, stronger, and meaner version of its smaller cousins. Judging by its damage, speed, and
overall intelligence compared to the rest it had to be at least level 10. At that level, I couldn't be
guaranteed a hit with Sleep—especially since I couldn't track its trajectory and had no idea what
speed the spell moved at compared to others, so had no real way to lead my target, assuming I could
get a clear view of it. Likewise, Spinning Mana Bullet was out for pretty much the same reason.
There was no way I was going to hit this thing with it—it wouldn't let me see it long enough to hit it.

Watching my mana tick back up from where Aura had caused my MP to take the damage instead of
my HP, I realized I didn't have any options. It was faster, stronger, and I couldn't kill it if I couldn't
hit it. It was going to sit here and use hit and run tactics to wear me down with Sneak Attacks until I
died. 'Well, fuck that.'

Looking around and spotting a break in the trees, I drew on my aura and took off at a run. The
hidden enemy followed, crashing through the underbrush behind me. As my internal count hit five
seconds, I jumped. 'Have to time this just right...' As I neared the road I began charging up for
another jump and attempting to twist my body in mid-air to change my direction upon landing. As
soon as my feet touched the ground and I bent to absorb the fall, I used Powered Leap again, sending
me off in a different direction. Out of the corner of my eye, I caught sight of a mass of black
highlighted by white bone armor, spikes, and the mask common to all grimm pouncing on the place
where I would have been had I stayed there another second. My jump had given me a slow spin and
I was finally able to tag it with Observe.

[What Prowled in the Dark]

[Beowolf Prowler, level 15]

[HP: 2260/2260 MP: 830/870]

[STR: 76, DEX: 76, VIT: 76, INT: 12, WIS: 10. Status: Enraged: (Damage x2, Speed x2)]

[A grimm formed from the spirits of its dead brethren, the Beowolf Prowler is a grudge spirit
returned to seek vengeance on those who killed its fallen pack. Unlike younger beowolves, the
Prowler has learned from their mistakes and will not simply rush blindly to the slaughter, instead it
will seek to use every advantage at its disposal to kill its prey.]

Yeah, no. I'd be completely boned if I allowed this thing to close range again. Time for some dirty
fighting. “Nap time, fugly. Sleep!”
“Fuck.” I didn't need a calculator to know that this thing's combined STR and VIT would beat out my INT, so Mana Bolt would be useless in this instance. I needed something new, fast, before this 'grudge' tore my face off and wore it like a hat. And by now, I was touching down and forced to roll to bleed off the momentum and avoid damage. Another skill window popped up telling me I had gained the Tumble skill, which did exactly what I had been doing manually for the last several jumps —only it gained bonuses as it leveled and could be used for more than simply recovering from a fall, in addition to having some serious synergy with Recovery. It wouldn't help me kill the Prowler, however.

Now that both of us were out in the open on the road, the Prowler had switched tactics it seemed, as it began charging at my position. An idea quickly forming, I did likewise even as I charged up a Powered Leap. After three seconds, I used Leap, putting myself on what looked like a trajectory to pass over the Prowler's head as it ran beneath me. The Prowler had other ideas as it tracked me and made its own leap, clearly looking to meet me mid-leap and do some serious damage. What it failed to realize, however, was that in going airborne it had forfeited any chance of dodging and with it on a very predictable course set to meet me, I had no trouble whatsoever tracking it. Lining up my arm, I sighted the Prowler between my fingers and loosed a Spinning Mana Bullet. The projectile hit, but the Prowler didn't so much as flinch. I wasn't paying attention to that, however, as I was busy getting another two shots off and preparing for the next phase of my plan. As we neared to within a yard of each other, I went into a tumble, slipping under its two-handed swipe/grab attempt and falling past it. Unable to get off another shot while tumbling, I hit the ground and turned to regard the Prowler as it landed.

The grimm across from me was down to 1288 HP, but if anything instead of looking hurt it just looked even more pissed off. Considering Detect Bloodlust immediately went up another level, I'd have to say it was. That didn't matter, however—it was still in the open and well within my range. Sighting it again, I loosed another Spinning Mana Bullet. To my absolute surprise, it dodged —barely, as the round grazed its shoulder as it dropped down to charge. As it began to close distance again, I tried again —and this time, I figured out how it had pulled off that trick. The damn Prowler was smart enough to figure out that if it moved just before I finished speaking the attack, it would have a better chance of missing.

Unfortunately, it had fallen into the same trap I almost had—lack of information will get you killed. I got off one more shot before it hit the distance I had estimated would be my absolute safe minimum before having to jump again. This one hit home, and I got a level up notification—Spinning Mana Bullet had leveled once when I used it to Coup de Grace the other grimm and now was level 3. With the level notification came another notification that alerted me to the skill being upgraded—from one bullet per attack to two. I jumped to the side, already chanting another attack. Being this close, there was no dodging as both rounds struck it dead center of its chest.

With only around 300 HP left, it turned and lunged at me instead of fleeing. Both attacks hit at the same time, my rounds blowing two holes through the Prowler's chest, both sets of its claws raking
my stomach for 437 damage and sending me crashing into another tree at the side of the road. As I rolled to my feet, several notifications popped up.

[You have defeated Beowolf Prowler!]

[You gain 7000 EXP!]

[Your level has increased by 1!]

[You have defeated a powerful Grudge, but it will return stronger…]

[You have cleared the Illusion Barrier! You gain 5000 EXP! You may now leave at any time, but the Illusion Barrier will collapse in 5 minutes. Anything left inside at that time will be lost forever!]

Dismissing those, I found more. Firstly were three telling me my VIT, INT, and WIS had gone up by 1, followed by notifications for my buffs and Physical Endurance leveling. After going over everything, I decided to see what the Prowler had dropped. Walking up to where it had dissolved, I found a stack of hundred Lien notes, two books, several Dust crystals, and two potions—one the red of a typical health potion, the other a blue I recognized as a mana potion. Opening up my inventory, I dropped in the cash first and the system added it to the rest, leaving me with 10676L—though, seeing as I had no idea what things cost here, I didn’t know what that meant. It could be equivalent to a hundred dollars, a thousand, or exactly the value it was listed as—hell, it could be anything else entirely. If a bottle of water would cost be $1 back home and cost 100L here, then I was essentially counting pennies.

Dismissing my worries over money, I dropped in the potions and dust crystals (4th level dust crystals, I discovered), then picked up the first book.

[You have obtained the skill book Create Illusion Barrier! Would you like to learn it?]

'Here we go again,' I thought, clicking Yes.

[Create ID : Level 1. Active. You have learned a skill to create instant dungeons out of bubbles of space between the real world and the spirit world. Effect: create an Instant Dungeon that will attract restless spirits, which will coalesce in the form of grimm or other creatures. Leveling the skill]
will allow different types of enemies and environments with different properties to be created. Cost: 50MP.

“Haa… wow. Okay. So I can make these things intentionally now? Yeeeeah… I'm going to abuse the shit out of this. Let's see what else you dropped.”

[You have obtained the skill book Destroy Illusion Barrier! Would you like to learn it?]

I had to wonder why it even asked at this point, as I hit the big Yes button.

[Escape ID: Level 1. Active. You have learned a skill to escape or destroy Illusion Barriers. Effect: destroy or escape an Illusion Barrier. Some Illusion Barriers can neither be destroyed nor escapes from if the being or effect that created them is strong enough and must be resolved by destroying or disabling whatever is creating the barrier. Cost: 50MP.]

In other words, unless I leveled up Escape ID, I could be trapped inside an Illusion Barrier until I dealt with whatever was causing it—and even if I did level the skill, it appeared that it wouldn't always work. That was worrying, to say the least. Well, best to start leveling it now, then. Holding up my hand, I willed the Illusion Barrier around me to collapse. “Escape ID.”

The world shattered, glass-like panes of reality falling around my head and dissolving as though they'd never existed in the first place. Looking around at the sight of the battle, I found none of the damage we had done present. I started walking towards the Arc family home, only to stumble a moment as I realized what that meant and began connecting the dots. Checking my inventory, I found the money and items I'd won to be safe and sound, not having also ceased to exist with the Illusion Barrier. That could mean a couple of things. Grimm could be carrying large sums of money on them that they had gotten from anyone they had killed… or, more likely, my Semblance could be circumventing the laws of physics somehow to create something from nothing. But creating real money? I could understand the Dust, potions, even the skill books. Cash, on the other hand… It hurt my head a little to think about.

Still, there was an important bit there I'd need to test as soon as possible. I needed to learn the rules of Illusion Barriers, or clarify them. The way I understood it now was firstly, nothing that happens in an Illusion Barrier changes the real world. Secondly, things inside Illusion Barriers were real, as real as their real-world counterparts, at least until the barrier fell. Instinctively, I understood that thirdly: if you die in an Illusion Barrier, you die for real—death is death, regardless of where it takes place. And fourthly, anything left in an Illusion Barrier when it collapsed was either destroyed or 'lost.' What I needed clarified was pretty simple: if I create an Illusion Barrier, take something from inside it, and then destroy the barrier then is the original item still where it was when the barrier was created and is a duplicate item created? Or, put another way, is item duping possible? If so, I was not above exploiting it for fun and profit.
The house came in sight and I entered through the front door.

[You have entered a Safe Zone! Now that you are aware of Illusion Barriers, you can detect places where grimm fear to tread and Illusion Barriers cannot occur naturally using Perception. Decades of being inhabited by humans with strong auras has left the Arc family home Sanctified and safe from both grimm and Illusion Barriers.]

That… that was useful information to know. It also told me that sleeping in the wilderness was taking my chances with having an Illusion Barrier form around me or grimm attacking me in my sleep. Checking the time, I found it to be 7:30—I'd made it back with time to spare. Walking into the kitchen, I found Joan working on dinner and Jun sitting at the kitchen table, reading a book. “Looks like I made it back on time,” I said by way of greeting.

[Quest Trust Issues: Joan's Request completed!]

[You gain 1000 EXP!]

“Welcome ba—” Joan turned around as she spoke, freezing mid-word. After a full minute's pause, she slowly asked, “Jaune, why do you look like you got into a fight with a grimm?”

I recognized that tone. She was worried and angry—not specifically at me, but I was there, and until she knew better I had done something stupid again. Jaune had, rather. Looking down and taking stock of my clothes, I found what she was talking about—my hoodie and tee-shirt were ripped in several places, especially where the Prowler had managed to tag me with its last hit. There would likely be a matching torn section on the back where it got me the first time.

Still, as much as I liked her, I wasn't going to be bullied by someone the better part of a decade younger than me. Finally, I shot her a grin. “Well, that would be because I did get into a fight with a grimm. Fourteen beowolves and some advanced model called a Beowolf Prowler. And no, before you ask, I did not go looking for trouble—trouble found me. I'm not hurt, my clothes are just a little dinged up. And since I picked up a skill for it, got a needle and thread somewhere I can use to fix them?”

“Jaune,” Joan began, before sighing quietly. “Fine. Okay. I see you're okay, but I won't stop worrying about you. Not until I know you can take care of yourself, at least.”
I smirked, then. “Well, I may have a few ideas about that…”
Training Montage (part II)

The Name of the Game

a RWBY/The Gamer crossover, SI.

Arc 1: New Game +

Chapter 4: Training Montage (part II)

Synchronization at 60%. The system has been updated! Would you like to view the Change Log?

Updates were a normal part of nearly every video game in existence. Updates were not supposed to be a part of real life. Though, I suppose when your Semblance turns your life into a video game, you shouldn't be too surprised when it happens. Sighing wearily from my position in my nice, freshly-made bed on my nice, freshly-laundered sheets I decided, 'Why the hell not?' I say 'my' bed and 'my' sheets since I figured cleaning out the pigsty that was Jaune's room made it distinctly mine as opposed to his. He had no problem living in the mess that typically accompanied teenagers. Me? I couldn't stand it. I cleaned it, it's mine now.

Change Log: The Gamer Semblance v.1.01

1. Borderless windows, enabled repositioning of windows.

2. Merged several message types for less clutter.

3. New skill creation messages will no longer come from the Department of Redundancy Department.

4. Experience gain, level up, skill point gain, and skill level gain now close automatically after a period of 3 seconds by default—adjustable in Options menu. Added points/levels/skills gain log.
5. Added ability to detect nearby Skill Books to **Perception**—this feature is now available at level 5.

6. Added armor and clothing sets to **Inventory**.

Reading it over, I hummed before closing the window. Either there was a developer somewhere working behind the scenes, or my Semblance was… semi-autonomous, perhaps even semi-if not fully-sentient. Then again, given its proven sense of humor and the fact that Joan said one's Semblance is a reflection of themselves, it could very well be pulling things from my own subconscious mind. It didn't matter too much either way, as far as I could tell. If I couldn't directly argue with whoever or whatever was controlling it then I was dealing with a closed system—I couldn't modify the system or force it to change to fit my desires. I wouldn't be opening a terminal window to enable god mode, nor would I be hopping around and manually entering the Konami code. No, instead, I would have to work within the system and abuse every loophole and exploit I could find.

Opening my inventory, I found a new tab above the scale model of my body—currently sans armor and clothing. I absolutely refused to sleep in clothes. Couldn't do it, at all. Selecting the tab, my inventory screen changed to display a drop-down list of selectable empty options. Humming, I selected one and a second window containing my scale model and all the requisite slots for gear popped up to the right side of the current window, along with the rest of my inventory. Well, nearly the rest of it. I noticed the potions and Dust were excluded, while my clothes and armor were sorted by type. Selecting a pair of boxers, I dragged them into the proper slot.

*You have added boxers (forest green) to this clothing set. Would you like to adjust settings now?*

'Settings? For underwear? Okay, I'm curious now. Let's find out.' Clicking Yes, I found three options available: schedule, cleanliness, and durability. Schedule allowed me to set what day(s) of the week I would wear that specific pair of boxers along with the option to randomize the selection. Selecting Randomize, I was asked if I would like to automatically cycle through clothing based on cleanliness. That was a pretty obvious choice—I hated dirty clothes as much as I hated a dirty house. Checking the Cleanliness settings allowed me to set an acceptable level of clean for various items of clothing by percentage and how many days I would wear an item that remained otherwise clean before considering it dirty—in other words, if I set the cleanliness percentage to 50% and went three days without hitting 50% cleanliness, the system would automatically cycle clothes in this set on the fourth day if I told it to. I wouldn't wear clothes more than one day or accept anything under 75% clean unless I was working out in something and happened to get it sweaty or bloody—luckily, there was an option to ignore cleanliness settings during training or battle. Durability allowed me to select how damaged I would tolerate clothes being before the system would no longer automatically shuffle them into this particular clothing set—useful, if I only used the inventory system and didn't really pay attention to wear and tear on my clothes. There was no option for it, so I would just have to remember which ones needed washing at the end of each week or check their statuses individually.
Repeating the process with the rest of my clothes and finding the settings seemed to default to identical across the board unless you adjusted one specifically, I was asked to name my new clothing set once I finished. “Casual.”

*The clothing set 'Casual' has been created and can now be selected from the main *Inventory* screen! To equip this set using voice commands, say 'Equip Clothing Set 1' or 'Equip Casual Set.'*

I spent the next minute repeating the process with my armor before saving it with the entirely original name 'basic armor.' Rolling out of bed, I began experimenting. “Equip casual set.” Satisfied that worked, I tried it with the armor. “Equip armor set 1.” When that worked also, I also made sure removing them the same way worked, by saying 'remove' instead of 'equip.' Making sure I had clothes equipped, I left my bedroom and went downstairs for breakfast. Finding no one in the kitchen, I checked my HUD clock: 6:00 AM. I had never been a morning person, but I needed all the time I could get training.

Before that, though: breakfast. My Simbance did not include an asinine hunger mechanic, thankfully, but I still ate, used the bathroom, and had to shower like any other human being. More importantly, I enjoyed cooking—especially for others. When I had convinced Joan to give me a few of the old family cookbooks they no longer needed, my Simbance had loaded my cooking skill and recipes from my previous life and I was proud to see it sitting pretty at level 38. After that, the rest of the books Joan gave me were consumed for recipes. Now, she couldn't question where I learned to cook—she'd watched me 'learn' the skill from a book herself.

Pulling out ingredients and dishes, I set about making waffles and sliced a few oranges and strawberries up, along with blueberries to go with them. Joan entered the kitchen as I was finishing up and I nearly dropped the plate with the waffles when I turned and spotted her standing there. Unlike me, Jaune's elder sister was still dressed in her night clothes—an oversized tee-shirt and what looked suspiciously like a pair of my, or Jaune's rather, boxers that fit her toned thighs far better than they fit mine and looked better on her than they ever would on me. With her long, blonde hair down and a sleepy look on her face, I realized she was one of the most beautiful women I'd ever met, in either life. It was the kind of beauty that makeup made look better, as opposed to covering up faults—unlike an airbrushed supermodel, she looked appealing even without the makeup. *Jaune's sister is off limits,* I reminded myself, setting the plate where I'd intended.

“You made breakfast,” she observed quietly, yawning as she took a seat.

I shrugged. “It's not fair to make you do everything,” I pointed out. “Where are our parents, anyway? Shouldn't they, you know, be here?”

Joan snorted. “They're absentee parents these days. With four of us graduated and the rest in training, they've started taking jobs again. I can't really blame them—they do important work and they kind of
need the money to pay off bills incurred putting us all through school. It's just… It seems like they're taking a vacation from us and only really showing up once a month or so to check in and for holidays. They keep the bills paid and we four eldest siblings take turns playing 'mom' while the others work. Between the four of us, we wind up spending a week here looking after you and Jun when you're not in school and then three weeks or so out in the field making money while whoever's next in the rotation picks up. Right now, our money is mostly going towards weapon and armor upgrades and savings. High-grade Dust is expensive, not to mention Dust-enhanced ammunition of the same grade."

“I see,” I muttered, taking my own seat and putting a couple of waffles and some fruit on my plate. “I hate to ask, seeing as this should be common sense, but well… amnesia. How does money work?” I'd caught her mid-swallow and she nearly choked laughing. She had a cute laugh, I noticed. “I mean, specifically, I need to know how much money is worth, how much normal things cost, stuff like that.”

Chuckling, she took a drink of her orange juice before answering. “Well, let's start small. A box of thirty standard 5.56mm rounds costs about 7.50 lien, so about 0.25L per round. The government decided they had issues with coinage and preferred simpler math, so they standardized—coins now only come in one-quarter lien values, so you won't get anyone asking for an odd number like 37 cents or something. If something’s uneven like that, round up to the nearest quarter. The price of food is up due to grimm attacks and such, so flour might go for 1L per pound where before it was about 0.50L per pound. A fast food hamburger runs about 8L but you could spend 5L on a pound of ground beef hamburger and another 6L on buns and a few lien on vegetables and come out to roughly 2L per burger for eight homemade hamburgers of superior quality than fast food.”

That sounded about like it did on Earth, really. Nodding as I chewed, I hummed in thought before swallowing and asking, “Okay, what about larger things? What would a sword go for? Or a car?”

Thinking on it while she ate, eventually Joan answered with, “Well, that depends on the sword. A plain slab of sharpened steel will go for about 75L. A decent sword goes for about 300L. A decent rifle, by itself, goes for about 350L. A Hunter's weapon? Well, that depends on the options. The basic gun/sword combo will go for about 1000L. You start throwing in other things like making it lightweight or giving it a more compact carry form and the price goes up. Add in the cost of Dust rounds, because Hunter weapons use Dust propelled rounds as opposed to the smokeless powder standard rounds use and Dust for the actual bullet itself as opposed to lead or something else—quadruple the price of standard rounds and start going up from there for options or higher calibers. But you don't get Hunter weapons or ammo from any old store. There are specialty shops that make that sort of thing and you pay based on a number of factors: quality and amount of materials, options, plus labor…”

“So I just, what, go to one of these shops and tell them I'd like a gun-blade?” I asked, curious to how this worked. After all, I'd have to do it myself soon.
“Pfft. Hardly.” She paused, looking me over with an assessing look, before finally admitting, “I was going to put this off a while, but I suppose I could show you. If you've decided on a specialty, that is?”

I'd given the matter some thought myself last night, after I'd gotten to bed. After the Prowler, I didn't want to be caught without my gear again. Being able to bombard a target with spell fire was great, but I absolutely needed a close range weapon for situations exactly like the one last night. “Well, that's the thing. My ability to use magic is just too useful not to use. However, last night taught me the value of a fallback weapon—something I can train up and rely on in close quarters, or when I don't want to or can't use magic for whatever reason. I was thinking sword and shield, actually. Maybe some sort of rifle-sword, one-handed switchblade sword and battle rifle combo maybe. However, I absolutely need something I can use to boost the effects of my casting—a wand or something similar. Something kind of small, as opposed to a staff.”

“Okay, then. Meet me in my room in ten minutes,” she decided, finishing the last of her waffles and juice and making her way upstairs. A moment later, I heard a banging on one of the doors. “Jun! Get up! Breakfast is getting cold.”

Laughing, I gathered our plates and set about washing them. The soft pitter-patter of small bare feet met my ears and I turned to see Jun in much the same state of dress her eldest sister had been in—oversized tee-shirt and boxers included, though the underwear looked huge on her by comparison. Rubbing the sleep out of her eyes and looking absolutely adorable in the process, she sat down and took in the table. “Onii-chan, you made breakfast?”

“Your sister said the same thing. Don't sound so surprised. I can cook now, remember? Skill books are awesome like that,” I sighed.

Taking a bite and chewing, Jun quickly perked up. “This is good! Skill books are awesome!”

After that, I was treated to the sight of the littlest Arc sister absolutely demolishing her meal. It was the sort of display of no table manners and pure enthusiasm only a child could muster. When she finished the last bite, she actually lifted the plate up and licked the syrup off until the plate looked spotless. Finished with that, she tipped back her glass of juice and drained it in one go—I swear she didn't swallow so much as relax her throat muscles and pour it down her gullet. “Bath time!” she cheered, leaving the table at a run and leaving me to clean up the remains. I didn't complain though as I began scrubbing her plate—it's not like she left much in the way of scraps to clean.

Glancing at my clock, I finished up the dishes and went upstairs. The door apparently wasn't shut properly because knocking had the effect of pushing it open. Our eyes met and she began to blush—and given the fact that I'd caught her changing and topless, I could clearly see it went all the way down. Sighing, I turned around and closed the door before leaning against the wall and waiting.
Once more, I had to remind myself that Jaune's older sister was off limits. Except, well, I wasn't Jaune—I was a thirty-three year old man and she was a very beautiful twenty-seven year old woman, whom it seemed I got along well with. The situation was all kinds of screwed up, considering that yes, I was attracted to her but I absolutely could not be. All joking from my S emblance and its quest system aside, pursuing her would be all kinds of wrong—I was walking around in her dead brother's body for fuck sake. Because let's face it, for all intents and purposes, Jaune Arc died the night he decided to fight grimm by himself and he wasn't coming back. I was just some impost o r trying to fill the kid's shoes.

The door opened and a hand grabbed my arm, pulling me into the room before closing and locking the door behind me. “I'm sorry about earlier,” I began at the same time Joan said, “Sorry about earlier.”

We both paused, registering what the other had said, before chuckling in shared embarrassment. I gestured for her to go first. “It was my mistake, I thought I'd locked the door, then I got distracted and lost track of time.”

“Eh, I should have announced myself first or something,” I began, only for her to shake her head. “No, you couldn't have known the door wasn't shut properly and I'd told you to come up anyway…” After a moment, she made that embarrassed laugh I was coming to recognize was distinctive to her, before adding, “Besides, it's not like we haven't seen each other naked before.” I blinked and she began blushing again. “I mean, like, in the bath.” I blinked again. “When we were little… Yeah, I'll stop talking now.”

Finally, the dots connected. ‘It all makes sense. Canon Jaune Arc gets his perpetual case of foot-in-mouth disease and mannerisms from her,’ I mused, quietly laughing.

“Shut uuuup,” she groaned.

A quest has been updated!

Romancing Remnant: The Eldest Sister Route has been unlocked!

You and Joan have hit it off and seem to just click. She has high expectations of you, so avoid letting her down by becoming a man among men and, in doing so, become the person she can rely on herself. Alternatively, find a way to let her down gently without breaking her heart.
Success: EXP to be determined, increased closeness with Joan, increased closeness with the Seven Deadly Sisters, +1 love interest. Failure: decreased closeness with Joan, decreased closeness with the Seven Deadly Sisters, the shame of failing the first person to accept and believe in you.

“Oh for fu—” I began, before cutting myself off and quickly closing the quest box.

Joan shot me a confused look. “What's wrong?”

I shook my head before gesturing towards her computer. “Trust me, you don't want to know. Let's just… show me what you were going to show me?”

“Okay,” she agreed, seemingly willing to let the subject go without questioning me on it. Sitting down at her desk, she opened up a program that looked vaguely like some cross between photoshop and a 3D design program. Opening a new project, she brought up some basic options. “Let's start with the basics. You want a sword/rifle combo. You want it to fold up, to make it more compact, right?” I nodded and she checked a few options. “You said something about a switchblade? Like a balisong?”

“Exactly,” I agreed. I had a specific weapon in mind, and the closest approximation I had managed to figure out was a combination balisong/rifle. If I was going to make a gun-blade, I'd rip off the one that looked the most likely to work—Lightning’s weapon of choice from Final Fantasy 13.


That was a really good question. If I wound up on Team JNPR, which I was sort of hoping for for the team synergy they and Team RWBY displayed, then I had to look at what we already had. Pyrrha had that M1 Garand, spear, sword combo and her shield. Milo's Garand mode appeared to be only semi-auto, but with a pretty decent range and accuracy. It wasn't Crescent Rose, but then there wasn't much that could compare to Ruby's sniper scythe—I mean, seriously, giving a little girl an anti-tank rifle, sticking a scythe on it, and telling her to have fun? What was Qrow thinking? …He was thinking it'd be awesome, and the results spoke for themselves.

Ren's Stormflower was essentially just a pair of SMGs with blades attached to the bottom. They didn't have as much range as a rifle but their rate of fire was enough to take out most lesser grimm or distract the bigger ones long enough for someone else to finish it off—much like Blake's own little Uzi clone of her weapon's gun form. They weren't meant to one-shot enemies, they were meant to
keep them occupied and hurt while someone else killed them. Someone like Nora. Nora, the insane little Valkyrie, who threw around a war hammer/grenade launcher combo. All together, Team JNPR's ranged weaponry appeared to cover high-accuracy, high rate of fire, and explosions. Team RWBY, on the other hand, had precision anti-armor, high rate of fire, smaller explosions in Yang's gauntlet/shotgun combo, and magic/Dust. I could handle special effects and anti-armor with magic, so as far as a 'mundane' weapon went, it might be better to give us some extra range and fire support…

“Can you put a telescoping barrel on it?” I asked and a couple of clicks later, Joan nodded. “Select-fire, variable-mode rifle: battle rifle, DMR, and sniper.” Seeing her raise an eyebrow, I explained my theory. “Battle rifle in the default, compact rifle mode you would get after switching it over from sword mode. Fire selector for semi, burst, and full auto. Barrel selector/extension and a small scope for DMR mode. Set the barrel to full extension, extend the scope or swap it with a larger one or something—not sure how optics work with this sort of thing—and flip down a bipod for sniper mode. Chamber it in .308.”

“How do you know all that?”

Realizing I'd gotten into some pretty technical terms, I shrugged. “Skill books are awesome.”

“Skill books are bullshit,” Joan concluded, rolling her eyes and selecting options. “Sure you don't want anything else to go with that? Extending handle maybe, or a grenade launcher while I'm at it? Why not a flame thrower, too?”

I smirked. “Put rails on it. I bet money I can buy a grenade launcher attachment. Also, magic— no need for a flame thrower.”


I wasn't entirely certain, to be honest. Eventually, I shrugged. “Eh, just as long as it can fold down into a more compact form and doesn't weigh fifty pounds… Other than that, surprise me. So, what comes after this?”

“After this, I send the designs off to a smith I know who'll cut me a deal 'cause he owes me a favor and he'll get me a quote. I'll let you know when I have something. Now, shoo. Go spar with Jun and train. Or was there anything else?”
Thinking back to my active quests, I considered for a moment before nodding. “Actually, yeah. You wouldn't happen to have any shady underworld contacts, would you?”

Joan rolled her eyes. “No, I got your transcripts forged at a completely legit, not shady forger.”

I was counting on that, in fact. Ignoring the snark, I asked, “Think you can set up a meeting for tonight? I kind of need to see about a quest thing.”

That got her attention, as she turned her desk chair around and locked eyes with me, her expression cooling several degrees. “You don't know what you're getting yourself into, little brother. Once you start down that path, there's no getting out. You can try, but something always pulls you back in. Worse, trouble will follow you home. What is it, exactly, that you're looking to accomplish here? What is this quest offering you that seems worth the risk of becoming some kind of petty criminal? I was willing to overlook the library because you need skills, but this… I can't overlook this.”

“Contacts, like you have,” I pointed out, knowing it was a low blow but taking the shot anyway. Once more, I felt my charisma score going to work. “Potential employment and, most importantly, access to what sounds like the black market. I need someone to assess the value of the crap I got out of the Illusion Barrier last night and if it's valuable, I can farm the barriers for items and sell them without having to resort to becoming a criminal. It also avoids uncomfortable questions I'd rather not answer, like 'where did this come from.' I'm not stupid, Joan. You said it yourself, weapons aren't cheap. And I'm not going to let you pay for my tools for me—I'll earn the money and pay for them myself, through as close to legitimate means as I can manage. And if they have a position open for a job that doesn't sound like it'll get me shot, stabbed, or arrested and can earn cash, then that's more money I can be earning to pay for the tools I need, earned in a way that's difficult but not impossible to trace. If I suddenly start throwing around large quantities of cash, I'm going to need some way of explaining where it came from that doesn't involve going places where grimm spawn.”

“I didn't expect you to have legitimate reasons for it,” she admitted quietly. “I'm sorry. I wasn't really thinking about that sort of thing.”

Reaching out, I put my hand on top of her head and mussed her hair, earning myself a glare in response but she didn't do anything to remove the hand. “You worry, I know. Especially after what happened. But you have to understand that I'm getting to where I can take care of myself now—it's just a matter of numbers and time. You're the oldest and we've always trusted you to look out for us and take care of things for us, right?” She nodded slowly. “Trust me to take care of myself. Hell, one day, I may be the one taking care of you.”

Her eyes slowly broke contact with mine as she first turned her head away, then kicked the chair to spin it around to face the opposite direction. It didn't keep me from noticing the blush, however, seeing as even her ears were red. It seemed the quest details were right—she was looking for
someone responsible, someone she could rely on when everyone else had been relying on her for so long. The pressure on her as the eldest child of a Hunter family with a long and storied history must have been enormous. The pressure on Jaune, as the first son of that family after so many successful older sisters must have been… soul-crushing, really. I could understand why he’d been so desperate to improve, after so many failures, that he had sought out trouble. “I'll make some calls.”

That seemed to be as much as she was going to say on the subject. Sighing quietly, I turned and left the room, closing the door behind me, watching a notification about my charisma going up by one pop up and then close three seconds later. ‘What the hell am I doing?’ I wondered, making my way downstairs. ‘I can't pursue her romantically. Though, it's not like I'm opposed to the idea of fulfilling the prerequisites—so long as becoming a 'man among men' doesn't end up getting me cursed to turn into a girl with the application of cold water.’

Looking around the back yard, I failed to spot Jun and so went back inside to look for her. Checking her room, I found it empty. Remembering she said she wanted to take a bath, I approached the bathroom door and knocked, my irritation at the situation bleeding through in the force of my knock. The door flew open most of the way and for the second time that day, I was 'treated' to the sight of one of the Seven Deadly Sisters in a compromising position. Jun had gotten out of the bath and was in the process of toweling off and I had caught her in the middle of it. Blue eyes met green and I sighed, doing an admirable job at avoiding intentionally looking at anything important, but peripheral vision is what it is and I still got an eyeful. 'Yep. Special hell. First class ticket.'

Palming my face, I grabbed the door knob and shut the door, telling her as I did, “Sparring when you're done.” The door clicked closed and I paused, before opening it again by a couple of inches—enough that she would know I was still at the door and I wouldn't have to raise my voice, but not enough to see anything. “And next time, lock the door would you?”

Reaching inside, I hit the lock on the door and pulled it closed. 'I wonder if this sort of thing is normal? Did Jaune have to deal with exactly this sort of thing in a house full of sisters? …Oh, god, the horror of synchronized periods.'

Sparring with Jun was… unnecessarily brutal, after the bathroom incident—three points of VIT and a couple of levels worth of Physical Endurance brutal. I couldn't help but think I'd upset her somehow. Apologizing for accidentally opening the door on her had only seemed to make her angrier for some reason. My Observe skill was being unhelpfully vague on the details and while I had a whole other life worth of experience to draw on, women—people in generally really, but women especially—were still a mystery at times when it came to their reasons for doing what they did. So, I let her work her frustrations out and earned a few skill points in the process, even a point in DEX after an unexpected Tumble past what had looked like a particularly nasty strike followed by a counter that left her limping and a bit slower after.
She sat and fumed while I healed her when she got too tired to continue, then left in silence when I'd finished. Seeing as it was still morning, I hummed as I considered my own training. Having my buffs on and in constant use was leveling them faster than I'd really expected, which was good since it meant I was getting more powerful independent of my level. Those skills being always on while I was awake, I only really had to worry about training things I needed to cast or use separately—attack spells and the like. “Skills.”

Looking over my list, I began sorting through things I could train now and things that would need special requirements to meet. Steal, for instance, would probably need to be done against other people. Create ID and Escape ID went together, so leveling one should level the other. My attacks were another matter. I needed options, yes, but I also needed to prioritize. For instance, why use Mana Arrow when Spinning Mana Arrow was superior? Likewise, why use that when Spinning Mana Bullet was the better choice? Though, that name… I'd noticed, fighting the Prowler, that chant time was a real issue. 'Spinning Mana Bullet' was six syllables and took two to three seconds to get out in a way that the system would properly interpret. The attack itself took a second, at most, to spin up so any time longer than that spent verbally invoking the attack was time wasted. The name was going to have to change.

Selecting the skill, I thought on how I should describe it. Obviously, I couldn't just call it 'A' or 'one' and be done with it, as tempting as a one-syllable spell sounded—Sleep being case in point. If I just called every spell 'A,' 'B,' 'C,' and so on then eventually there would come a time when I would need something outside my normal rotation and I'd be at a loss trying to remember its name. That was another thing—having a name that wasn't at least partly descriptive would be a good way to get my spells confused and force me to go back and read spell descriptions. So far, every skill I'd created or learned had been exactly what it was named—Mana Bolt was a bolt of mana, Sleep put enemies to sleep, and so forth. I liked that, but I figured there had to be a better way. So, I needed rules for naming conventions.

The first rule was obvious: no names over four syllables. Secondly: names must describe spell effects or properties. Thirdly: homages are fair game. And really, those were about the only rules I needed. So, with that in mind, I set about renaming Spinning Mana Bullet. 'So, what does it do? Well, it's the magical equivalent of a .50 BMG round… I have it.'

“AP Round,” I verbalized, confirming the system dialogue asking if I was certain about the name change. Short, to the point, and exactly what it said on the tin—a magical armor piercing round. Going over the rest, I renamed Spinning Mana Bolt to 'Rasengan' for laughs—the fact that the name was under my four syllable limit was just a bonus. I almost renamed Mana Bolt to Ranma's signature ki attack, but I couldn't remember the English name and the Japanese language version was several syllables over my limit anyway. Besides, while 'rasengan' was amusing for personal reasons, renaming other things to a language I didn't speak seemed like a bad idea for a multitude of reasons—but most importantly, because it would make me look like an idiot in front of other people.

I finished up my perusing and made a list of active skills I would need to practice, after trimming out the redundant skills. Mana Bolt made the cut simply for the knock-down effect. I had no doubt that
later, it would be ineffective against larger creatures unless it was ridiculously high level, but for now it was an instant incapacitation skill for most things, so long as I could tag them with it. Rasengan also made the cut, simply for pure damage potential—if shit hit the fan, that was going to be my go-to skill to pull out and start dumping mana into to over power. AP Round was pretty much a no-brainer at this point—it added an extra round every odd-numbered level and its other properties all went up either on even or odd levels. One high powered magical sniper round blasting down-range was good—more was better, and I aimed to make it a veritable barrage. Sleep made the list as it was too useful not to level, the same with Powered Leap. Lastly, Create ID and Escape ID—since I could use all of those inside an instant dungeon. And since my skill only created empty instant dungeons at the moment, they were safe for me to use and would keep me from damaging anything on the property permanently.

Taking up a position in front of the training dummies, I incanted, “Create ID,” and immediately, the world was different. I couldn't see any visible difference, but as with my first experience in an Illusion Barrier, there was an almost electric tingle in the air. Taking aim at the first dummy, I cast, “Sleep.”

Sleep failed! Sleep can only be used on living targets!

Oh. Well. Damn. That made sense, I supposed. A practice dummy had no stats beyond durability and thus, no Will Save—which is what Sleep was meant to effect. It seemed I'd have to find some other way to level it. If that was the case, I needed to check the rest of my attacks to make sure that using them against training dummies would work. Opening up my skills menu, I selected Mana Bolt. Looking at its current EXP level, I took aim at the first target and fired. The skill gained experience and I grinned. Shifting my aim to a tree, I tried again. The spell blasted a good-sized chunk of bark off the tree and scored it pretty deep, but failed to gain EXP. Test concluded, I set up a rotation for spell usage—create an instant dungeon, use an attack skill and Leap away, then Run towards the next target, use a different attack skill and repeat, then destroy the instant dungeon and repeat.

After the first couple of run-throughs, I looked over my skills again. If I equipped my sword and shield, I could also work in my physical attacks: Aura Strike, Bull Rush, and the newly created Shield Bash, along with my sword and shield masteries. If I did it right, I could get off a shot from range, Bull Rush in (which, by the description, used the Run skill anyway), use Shield Bash and Aura Strike, blast the target with another ranged spell, then Leap away and repeat the process… except, no. I had to have a free hand to cast attacks. I could cast on myself with both hands occupied but not on someone or something else…

Looking over my equipment, I found a sheath that had been in Jaune's closet along with a beat-up practice sword. Equipping the sheath on my side, I sheathed my sword and considered the target. If I changed the order up a bit, I could try to draw my sword and use Aura Strike in the same movement, then use Shield Bash and resheathe the sword in the same movement. If nothing else, it would make for good hand-eye coordination training, which meant more free DEX. Shrugging, I moved back to my starting point and tried my new rotation. I didn't quite get the timing the first time, or the second, but I nailed it the third time… and was rewarded with a skill creation window.
You have created the skill **Iaido**!

**Iaido**: Level 1. Active. **Iaido** is the art of quickly and smoothly drawing a sword, striking an enemy, removing blood from the blade, and returning the blade to its sheath. Effect: 300% combined DEX and STR damage, automatic **crit** on enemies that do not see the attack coming. Synergy with Sleight of Hand—helps disguise sword draw.

'I suppose that was, technically, what I was doing anyway,' I mused. Still, that skill gave me a reason to get STR and DEX up, along with Sleight of Hand. Destroying the Illusion Barrier, I created a new one and went through the rotation again and noticed right off the bat that Iaido was a silent technique—my first truly silent attack beyond a basic melee attack, at any rate. With its synergy with Sleight of Hand and the fact that it was silent, it seemed to me like it was better suited to stealth action than normal combat. Not that I wouldn't use it if I got the chance, I absolutely would, but more that if I ever got into situation where I needed to take someone or something out quietly, Iaido would be a good first choice—especially since the unwritten implication there was that it also had synergy with Sneak Attack.

That reminded me of a pressing need—more than one, really, but one higher than others. Other than my shield, Aura, and Reinforcement I had no real way to defend myself. That is *not* how casters were supposed to fight if things ever devolved to close range combat. I needed a shield spell. However, I wanted more than one magical shielding option. A bubble-type shield that covered me from all angles equally would be absolutely fantastic for defending against sneak attacks, bombardment, or fire from multiple sources. That same shield would be absolute **crap** at defending me from a single, concentrated point of attack. What I needed was a smaller, one-direction shield with all the same power as a bubble shield, condensed into that one area. Those thoughts in mind, I set about channeling mana and hoped my Skill Creation was up to the task.

You have created the skill **Mana Shield**!

**Mana Shield**: Level 1. Active. **Mana Shield** creates a bubble of mana around the caster, absorbing a portion of any attack that would damage the caster or blocking the attack if the damage or force would not be sufficient to penetrate the shield. Effect: reduce damage by 100% of your INT score. Cost: 30MP plus 50MP per minute.

You have created the skill **Mana Barrier**!

**Mana Barrier**: Level 1. Active. **Mana Barrier** created a flat, hexagonal plane of mana in front of the caster that moves according to the caster's will and absorbs a portion of any attack that would damage the caster or blocking the attack if the damage or force would not be sufficient to penetrate.
the barrier. Effect: Reduce damage by 400% of your INT score in an area ¼ of Mana Shield's coverage. Cost: 30MP plus 50MP per minute.

Well, the up side was that I'd gotten two different shield skills that could be layered as needed. Theoretically, if I could see an attack coming, I could put Mana Barrier in front of it and soak most of the damage. If I couldn't see it coming, then Mana Shield should still eat a good portion of the damage. I would have loved to have either of these against the damn Prowler. The down side, however, was that they absolutely drank MP like none of my other skills did. With the two of them running together, by themselves, they overran my current mana regen. Running them with the rest of my buffs up would eventually drain my MP completely—not instantly, not even within ten minutes, but if I ever got into a battle of attrition and couldn't retreat and was forced to turtle behind my barriers, then eventually I'd run out of juice... and then I'd die.

Well, the best way to avoid that was to train and increase my skill points and the levels of those skills so their costs went down. There was one more shield type spell I wanted to attempt to create, in the event I ever ran across something particularly nasty. Given my success with Mana Bolt and its derivatives, I was willing to give it a shot. Calling up my Mana Shield, I willed it to rotate.

You have created the skill Spinning Mana Shield!

Spinning Mana Shield: Level 1. Active. Spinning Mana Shield creates a sphere of spinning mana around the caster to push aside attacks instead of taking them head on, outright deflecting any attack that fails to penetrate it and greatly reducing the potential damage taken from any attack that would manage to pierce it. Add mana to increase the shield's rotation and stop larger or stronger attacks. Effect: 100% damage reduction if an attack fails to penetrate the shield, deflection strength increases based on INT and mana spent. Cost: 40MP plus 60MP or more per minute.

That was about what I expected. It was costly, but a good 'oh shit' spell to hide behind for when shit hit the fan. Good news though was that I could dump mana into it to make it more effective. So long as I didn't run out of mana, it should buy me time to run away—because the truth is, if I ever had to deploy that spell outside of training it was time to get the hell out of Dodge. And with defenses taken care of for the moment, I could resume training... I needed a break soon. I was getting bored and I could almost hear the siren song of that little black book in my inventory calling my name. 'I'll keep this up until I run out of mana, then call it quits and meditate for a while. Note to self: rename Mana Barrier to A.T. Field later, for laughs.'

There was one last test I wanted to make before settling in to practice. Digging into my inventory, I pulled out a skill book—Morrigan's Folly—and promptly ignoring and dismissing the messages I got from holding it. 'Okay, they're books, right? Everyone acknowledges that. You can see them, you can read them. What's stopping me from reading this and gaining the skill?'
Cracking open the book, I was surprised to find text—perfectly legible and not glitched out like my name had been originally. I skimmed the first chapter, finding it to be exactly what I'd expected based on the description provided by Observe. It was a story—an old story, written in prose similar to the Olde English I would expect to find in Shakespeare. Reading the first chapter provided no insights into any sort of technique, however—not that I was expecting much, but I had been hoping for something, maybe some idea of what it would do beyond suspicions based on material from my original world. There was enough bleed-over between the two that I was almost one hundred percent certain what skill the book would teach. “Ugh, damn this is dry,” I grunted, closing the book with an audible thump! “Fuck it, I'll read it later. After I finish Ninjas of Love. Training first, then reading for pleasure, then research.”

And I could already tell it would be research—and I was dreading it, in a way. I had loathed research papers in college. Maybe I would pick another book to try learning skills by reading—from something easier to digest, mentally.

Despite her earlier and continued attitude, Jun brought lunch out to me in the middle of the day, bringing a halt to my reading for a while, after I'd decided to take a short break. Apparently, Candice hadn't been exaggerating—despite it's unoriginal title, 'Ninjas of Love' was actually quite riveting, with genuine character development and realistic relationship dynamics, as opposed to just being a few pieces of dialogue between sex scenes. Oh, there was sex—a lot of very kinky sex. I swear, Remnant was full of deviants if 'Ninjas of Love' was anything to go by… Still, it was good. Plot with porn, as opposed to porn with plot.

Once I'd finished eating, Jun demanded another spar. This time, I simply called up Mana Shield and let her wail on it. She pouted, throwing a small temper tantrum and declaring my use of a magic shield “Totally cheating, damnit!” While she was distracted, I caught her with an Iaido attack, eliciting a screech of fury and resumed hostilities. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the curtains in what looked to be Joan's room move, telling me she'd likely been supervising, surreptitiously. As it turned out, Jun proved my Mana Shield could be breached more than one way—apparently, hitting it in the same place over and over rapid-fire would punch a hole through it under a sustained attack simply by overrunning it with continual damage. She had not been amused when her victory was snatched from her in the form of my A.T. Field being cast as soon as the Mana Shield was breached.

After that, the little girl gave up in disgust, promising to work on her attacks more—and I dreaded what she would come up with, considering she was already a little terror. I was a higher level than her now and the only thing keeping her from spanking me was my magic. Using Mana Shield and the A.T. Field had allowed me to level those in combat, but at the cost of earning VIT points by taking a physical beating. I called active training quits for the day and went back to reading under my tree with my buffs and shields running, occasionally throwing up and dispelling an instant dungeon and stopping only to meditate and regain MP. By the time dusk rolled around, Meditate leveled to the point where I could use it while still reading, with the buffs and shields running. And that is how Joan found me that evening.
Looking up from the page I was reading, I met her eyes and regarded her indifferent expression with a raised eyebrow. Eventually, she sighed and looked away. “It took some convincing, but I set up a meeting—more of an interview, really. Are you ready?”

Rolling to my feet, I dropped ‘Ninjas of Love’ into my inventory and followed as she lead me to the garage. As it turned out, I did have an easier to digest book than Morrigan's Folly in my inventory—Kung Pow. It had taken an hour to read through, but trying to learn a skill that way was like trying to learn a real martial art from a book—it doesn't work instantly. You may gain some insights into how things were supposed to be done, but only time and practice would teach the skill. I could do it, yes—there was absolutely nothing stopping me from learning it naturally. However, by the time I learned it manually—which I estimated at putting several months into learning just the basics—I could have earned the skill points to learn it by eating the book several times over. It was, quite honestly, a waste of time—and that was something I couldn't abide in a book. More than that though, based on what I'd read and my own experience learning martial arts in my original world and comparing that to eating the books I already had... I would learn the information more thoroughly by devouring the book than manually learning it. So not only would I be wasting time, I'd be shorting myself valuable skill knowledge.

Movement caught my eye, pulling me out of my thoughts as Joan rolled up the door and I found myself looking at a red compact car—and Jun, already buckled into the back seat, having entered the garage from inside the house. “You're bringing Jun to somewhere with shady characters?”

Joan didn't like something in my tone as she turned and sent me a scathing look. “You're a trouble magnet, Jaune—I can't send you alone, the risk of you stumbling into another Illusion Barrier is too great. Based on what you told me last night and what I know of how grimm spawn, the kinds of Illusion Barriers that lead to grimm forming only happen at night and while there aren't usually many grimm around the city, there are a few places where they spawn naturally. It's easier for you for me to just drive you—not to mention, easier on my peace of mind. And I can't just leave Jun here to fend for herself, either. So, if you want to go, we all go together.”

“Fair enough,” I agreed, not particularly fond of the idea of leaving Jun home alone myself. Trying to lighten the mood, I asked, “So, I'm driving, right?”

“Pfft. Hardly,” Joan denied. “Mama Lily would hurt us if I let you drive her car and you so much as scratched it.”

I almost mentioned my drive skill, but decided against it—it wasn't worth arguing over and it would blow my cover, besides. Moving around the car, I slid into the front passenger seat and buckled up. Joan started the car and set the radio to a station playing rock. It took a minute before my eyes went slightly wide and I eyed the radio, recognizing the song.
'What. The. Fuck is that doing here?' I wondered. And, almost as important, whose image song? Considering the fact that she was tapping out the beat and mouthing the words, it was probably Joan's. Shaking my head, I dismissed that line of thought and settled into Meditation for the duration of the ride. It didn't take long to pass from the dirt road we lived on to gravel, and shortly after that actual paved road with street lights as we passed further through the Residential District and into the Commercial District with its holographic street lights and neon signs. I kept an eye on my map as we moved, watching it fill out further with more details as we headed northwest. Finally, Joan pulled through a back alley and into a parking lot marked 'Employees Only' on the border of the Commercial District and the Industrial District and shut off the car. Faintly, I could hear and feel a heavy bass line coming from the building we'd parked behind.

Joan and Jun got out first, the eldest sister fishing out her scroll and sending what looked like a text message as I got out myself. “Come on, it's over here,” Joan sighed.

Walking to the back door of the building, Joan gave the steel door a solid knock that rattled it in its frame. A moment later, the door opened, revealing a tall, bearded man wearing a suit and a red tie. “It's good to see you again,” he greeted her after a lengthy pause.

Her tone sounding one part resignation, one part reluctant, familiar nostalgia, Joan returned the greeting. I recognized that tone, it was the same tone my last ex-girlfriend had used any time she'd shown up out of the blue needing a favor... “Hey, Hei.”

The 'Little' Black Bear

Hei “Junior” Xiong

Level: 25
“It's been a while,” Hei Xiong grumbled out, looking the Eldest Deadly Sister over for a moment. His eyes were hidden behind a pair of sun glasses at the moment—which had to be because he thought they made him look cool, since it was dark out—but I recognized the look on his face easily enough. I'd worn it myself more than once, after all.

Hesitantly, Joan nodded. “It has.”

Apparently, this was awkward for the both of them and I had no idea what to do here—Joan was going out on a limb for me and, from what I understood, that meant reaching out to someone she had something of a past with but had apparently broken off contact from. I couldn't interrupt as that could cause problems later, and I needed this to go smoothly… Even if some part of my hind-brain had gone hackles-up the moment he laid eyes on her. Jun, thankfully, had no such compunctions. “Looking kind of grizzly there, man-bear.”

That seemed to break the veritable ice berg worth of ice between the two as Joan cracked a smile and Hei chuckled, rubbing at his beard. “Little lady, you just haven't learned to appreciate a properly manly beard yet. Isn't that right?” he asked, eyes shifting to me as he held out a hand to shake. “We've never been properly introduced, but your sister spoke well of you. I'm Hei, but you can call me 'Junior.'”

“Jaune,” I smiled, shaking the paw he called a hand and idly wondering if I could crush it if I dumped all my points into STR right this second. Nah, wasn't worth the trouble it would cause. Personal feelings aside, Junior—despite being a criminal—was a petty criminal from my understanding. Just a guy trying to make a living. That living was made partly through illegal means, but I couldn't complain since that's exactly what I came here hoping to find—an 'in,' a place to start. I needed an origin that wouldn't draw questions if someone started digging, once I started moving in
opposition to the other forces gathered on the board. Inevitably, someone would connect 'Jaune Arc' to everything I was going to do—I wasn't willing to gamble that I was clever enough to outwit the likes of Ozpin and the resources he could bring to bear. It was a safer bet to plan for the eventuality that I would be found out eventually. I was going to make that as difficult as possible of course, but I also needed a logical explanation for why 'Jaune Arc,' not even a first year Beacon student, would bother getting involved in the first place—and in order to do that, I figured a good place to start would be building a sort of underworld identity for myself. It wasn't the best plan in the world, but it was what I had—and it would obscure the fact that I had knowledge I couldn't possibly possess. When someone did finally confront me on why I was even involved, I could now point to my 'shady past' and say I learned it then—or now, rather.

No, my problem with Hei was somewhat irrational possessiveness towards the Eldest Deadly Sister. This… assclown had likely had his paws on Joan at one point. I was unsure whether that was familial loyalty acting up, or something else entirely. I… was fond of her, yes, I could admit that much. Maybe it was just 'new girl syndrome,' something I'd noticed about myself years ago—it was a weakness I'd yet to overcome. The idea of him being overly familiar with her made me want to introduce him to my fists and spells. Either way, I stowed it to deal with later and put on a friendly face. It was irrational and I was a rational person. “And he's right, Jun. Real men have beards. Pretty boys aren't men.”

Jun hummed, turning to consider me for a moment before shaking her head. “I'm not sure I'd like onii-chan with a beard. I think it'd be scratchy.”

I face-palmed and Junior laughed. “I got a new game system in the office. Why don't you go do me a favor and unlock a few tracks for me?” Junior suggested, and Jun immediately perked up before running past him and into the building, confirming for me that she had been here more than once if she knew her way around that well and telling me that she was relatively safe. If Hei knew Joan as well as I suspected, he likely knew she would level the building if so much as a hair was out of place on her youngest sibling's head by the time the night was over. So, the question was, why would Joan be willing to bring our youngest sibling here, but not me—or Jaune, rather? Did she not trust him, or was she just that overprotective? Was she hiding something? Or maybe she just didn't want Jaune and her ex-boyfriend or whatever he was to her meeting? Which would imply that she had suspected that I, or Jaune at least, may react how I wanted to… The woman's mind was a closed book to me—I didn't have the experience yet to know one way or the other.

As Jun vanished in a streak of red hair, Hei stepped out of the doorway and waved us inside. I exchanged looks with Joan before gesturing her to go first, then closing the door behind me and following after. Hei lead us into the club, around the side of the large dance floor to an empty booth in the back. As I took a seat beside the elder blonde, Junior said, “Your sister tells me you're looking for work to pay for your weapons.”

That was the cover story, anyway—well, one of them. I was running under the premise of Operational Security and levels of separation of information. Joan knew I wanted an 'in' to the criminal elements of the city but the only answer to the 'why' I'd given her was not wanting to be a
burden where the cost of my weapons were concerned. She knew that was bullshit since our parents could afford to pay for them and were likely willing, but she was willing to overlook it for some reason. Hei, on the other hand, just knew I was looking to drum up money to buy the gear I'd need and that I was going to be going to Beacon—since this was obviously Joan's source of papers. When I nodded, there was curiosity in his voice as he asked, “She also said you might have something to sell?”

“Yeah. What do you think something like this goes for?” I asked, reaching down to a pouch I'd equipped on my belt specifically to hold the potions I wanted evaluated so that I wouldn't have to dig them out of my inventory and un-bag that particular cat. Putting the rounded flask on the table, I pushed it forward and Junior picked it up to have a look. Opening the stopper, he sniffed at it a moment before gesturing towards the bar. A moment later, a scantily-clad waitress joined us at the table. “Get me an empty shot glass, would you?”

“Yes, sir,” the waitress agreed, scurrying off and returning a moment later with the request item, before going back to her rounds at Junior's dismissal.

“Let's see what this does,” he murmured, measuring a shot's worth out and downing it. “Tastes like cherry,” he admitted, smacking his lips at the aftertaste before whistling in mild awe. “Well, it's legit. My hangover's gone. This is a genuine healing potion—and they're rare. The formula to make them, along with most of the people involved in the process, was lost a few years back in a grimm attack out near Mistral. These will heal things Aura alone won't, so long as the wound is fresh. Hell, I've heard tale of people reattaching limbs after downing one of these—but those are old stories. These days, you'd be lucky to find one outside of some rich collector's hoard, and if you do it's on the black market. In fact, let me check…”

I blinked in confusion when Junior pulled out his scroll and brought up an app of some kind before typing and swiping in a few things. “Yeah, a single cup of this stuff goes for 10k a pop, which is what those flasks there are.”

That was… surprising. Still, I had to ask, “So, there's an app for that?”

Laughing, Junior nodded and held out his hand. “Gimme your scroll a second.”

Frowning, I looked at Joan before saying, “I left it in the car.”

The blonde sighed, digging out the keys from her purse and handing them over, crystal-blue eyes meeting mine in warning. “Hurry back, and do not go for a joy ride.”
“Just for that, I'm going to leave it parked funny,” I threatened, slipping out of the booth and hurrying back the way we'd come in. Once outside and out of view of anyone, I opened my inventory and dug out my scroll before slipping it into my pants pocket. Eying the car, I considered carrying out my threat before dismissing the idea and heading back inside. As I neared the table, I dug out the scroll and handed it over, retaking my seat and handing Joan the keys back.

As he went through my scroll and added the app in question, Junior told me, “This should take care of everything you need. I'd hire you on, but your sister would kill me. This is the next best thing. With the Underworld app, you can buy, sell, and trade all sorts of goods. There's also an employment section with a variety of jobs that pay pretty decent coin—things the company needs done to keep running, mostly, like package delivery. You can't send some of this stuff through the regular mail, so they hire runners locally to move goods around quick and avoid the cops. You'll be a freelancer and get to choose your own jobs, appropriate to your comfort level. You don't really interact with most of these people face to face, which makes it safer than working for a gang or something. Word of warning, though: if you take a job, complete it or return the goods. If you keep the goods or the cash, well… these people don't play around. They hire assassins to run down people who think it's a good idea.”

“If this thing is so popular amongst the ne'er do 'ells, how come the police haven't caught on yet?” I asked, wondering if they were running some kind of sting operation. This… would require some adjustments to the plan. I'd hoped to get a job working with Junior or someone. Maybe this was better, though? It would give me freedom of movement and the ability to hand-wave some knowledge, maybe. With no real 'boss' or face to face meetings, I could avoid many of the potential pitfalls associated with this sort of thing. I'd at least hear Hei out on what it was and make a decision once I had more information. Still, the fact that there was an app for black market shopping on Remnant left me a bit dumbfounded. Though, really, I suppose it was something like Silk Road—if Silk Road hired people to deliver things to your door and skip the mail service.

“Mostly, it's a word of mouth thing. They don't advertise out in the open. They approach someone in charge of the local 'business' in a town, or an information broker like myself, and make their pitch—their only stipulation is that these people only tell people they can trust about it. Considering the app works and they're reliable, everyone they pitch it to winds up satisfied. Word spreads after that among lieutenants and underlings. The app also has a self-destruct feature tied to your lock code. If someone enters the wrong code three times, the program will delete itself and brick your scroll's OS—this is mostly how it has avoided falling into police hands. That, and a voice-activated duress pass phrase. You'll be asked to set up that phrase as soon as you make an account. Speak the phrase and it deletes itself and bricks your scroll. Word of advice, though—don't go giving it your real name. There are options there for anonymous transactions and such, and the company itself offers a sort of store bank account thing—you get paid, the money is deposited into your Underworld account, and from there you can either spend the money in the shop on goods or services, or you can cash out and have a runner deliver your funds.”

I wanted to ask what was stopping police from simply going undercover, but I already suspected the answer: that the company had some kind of background check policy for those they distributed the
app to. Namely, they made people like Junior responsible for those they told, and people like Junior were likely doing their own background checks and such on their own members, making sure any new hires weren't reporting to the police. Either that, or police in Remnant were either incompetent or operating at a deficiency of fucks to give. I was more willing to lean towards villain competency than police incompetency, as the first meant both were a threat while the second was just wishful thinking. Instead, I asked, “So, how do you know my sister?”

Hei shot Joan a look before shaking his head. “We went to school together. Dated a while…”

“And then reality caught up to us,” Joan interrupted quickly, shooting the older man a small glare, her look causing his mouth to snap shut. It seemed she either really didn't want to talk about it, or didn't want to talk about it in front of me.

We were saved from awkward silence, as silent as a dance club blaring techno music gets at any rate, by a pair of girls walking up. My attention shifted from Junior to the girls—twins, one clad in a white dress, the other in red, both with black hair and green eyes. Above the white-themed girl's head were the words:

S now White

Melanie Malachite

Level: 22

Melanie’s red-themed sister, on the other hand, was labeled as:

Rose Red

Miltiades "Miltia" Malachite

Level: 22

And immediately following the pair joining us, I received a quest notification.
A quest has been updated!

Romancing Remnant: Twins, Basil. Twins! has been unlocked!

The Malachite twins have high standards in men and have yet to find someone capable of meeting them. Balancing each twin's desires, requirements, and personalities will be difficult, but rewarding—if you're up to the task. Prove yourself to be the man the Malachite twins have been waiting for.

Rewards: EXP to be determined, increased closeness to the Malachite twins, +2 love interests, twins. Failure: no twins.

Joan must have seen my twitch, or the tick in the muscles around my eye, because she burst out laughing. The distraction that provided was enough to dismiss the quest notification as the twins turned their focus on her. Hitting them both with Observe, I took note of a few things. The white-clad one was a typical tsundere, emphasis on the tsun. Her sister was the quiet type, but not what I'd call innocent—neither of them were, really, based on their descriptions. Their emotions matched too, for the most part: surprise, mild confusion, jealousy, inferiority, insecurity… Really, I could understand the last three. They were inferior to Joan, at least as far as stats and looks went. I was high enough level now to see Joan’s own level of 63, and it seemed daunting even to me. It wasn’t really a fair comparison, though. Joan was a grown woman and these two were teenagers still filling out, and without the benefit of having gone to a Hunter school. Not to mention, their boss seemed to be more interested in my blonde ‘sister’ than them.

“Who’s the blonde bimbo?” Melanie asked archly, causing Joan’s laughter to taper off as a smile began to spread across her lips—it was not a nice smile.

In his seat across from her, Junior began to sweat. Hesitantly, he answered, “An old friend—”

Joan interrupted, smile widening as she reached across the table and placed a hand atop Junior's. “Don't be modest, Hei—it doesn't suit you and it belittles what we had together, given how intimate we were.”

My jaw clenched for a moment, but no one aside from Joan seemed to notice, and she was too busy taunting the twins to pay it much mind. The twins, on the other hand, looked positively murderous—well, Melanie did. Her twin merely looked upset. It seemed Hei had some tact, however, as he slowly pulled his hand out from under Joan's. Turning to take in the twins and I in the same look, he gestured towards the dance floor. “Why don't you three go get acquainted and give me and my friend some time to catch up? Go have fun.”
It wasn't really a suggestion, and while I could have refused, as a fellow man who had been in similar situations with old exes meeting friends or new girlfriends I'd at least do him the courtesy of not causing a scene in his place of business—I owed him at least that much for the information alone, even as much as I loathed the idea of leaving him alone with Joan for more than five minutes. Maybe I was overreacting—I had no reason to be jealous or irritated, and yet… There was no denying I was.

I slid out of the booth and Hei passed my scroll back. Pocketing the device, I followed the twins as they turned and marched away towards the dance floor. Glancing back, I met Joan's eyes for a moment before she tore her gaze away and sent Hei an apologetic look. That annoyed me more than I liked to admit. Part of me knew I shouldn't really be reacting like this—she wasn't my girlfriend or anything, and there were a number of reasons why I shouldn't go that route. On the other hand, logic and feelings rarely travel the same path. I was only human—a flawed one, at that. I was used to that, though, so I put it aside to deal with later.

“You got a name?” Melanie asked, pulling me from my thoughts as I looked around and found they'd lead me to the middle of the dance floor.

’Looks like they mean to get a little payback, if only by proxy. That one, at least, is going to try and humiliate me in front of everyone here—I can tell already. Well, screw that. Let's see how I can screw with them.’ I thought before answering. “Jaune Arc. And you ladies?”

“Melanie,” the white-clad girl began, followed by her sister introducing herself as “Miltia,” and the pair finishing together with, “Malachite.” They had obviously rehearsed that, at some point.

“The name matches your eyes,” I commented, putting my charisma score to work for me.

It seemed they'd heard that one before, however—that, or Melanie had a one track mind at the moment. The other possibility was that I'd rolled a one on that charisma roll, but I doubted it. Miltia, at least, seemed to appreciate the compliment. She would be the weak link, then. “Do you dance, Jaune Arc? Or do you just stand there and run your mouth?” Putting a finger to her lips in a pretense of thought, she continued, “Or could it be that you're the kind of person who hides behind his sisters' skirts?”

Yeah, she was pissed. I'd heard and delivered better insults, though. “Eh,” I began, unsure as I thought it over. There was no point signing myself up for a battle I couldn't win and I hadn't, really, in my previous life…
You have remembered the skill **Dance**!

**Dance**: Level 70. Active, passive. You've remembered how to **Dance**, something Jaune was taught by and practiced with his seven sisters. Effect: Increases dance ability by 10% per level: currently 700% improvement. **Dance** passively increases your DEX by 1% every other level: currently 35% improvement. **Dance** situationally increases CHA by 1% every other level when in use, currently 35%. **Dance** has **Synergy** with skills such as **Tumble** and certain styles of combat.

Yeah, I knew how to dance—every year since Jaune could walk, his sisters had either spent teaching him how, or later practicing with him partly to keep up their own skills but mostly because they enjoyed it. And I didn't just know the basics or a summary of events, I *remembered* being Jaune, as though *I* had lived those events. Every toe stepped on, every suit they forced me into because they wanted a human-sized dress up doll, every school dance and 'date'... It was disconcerting, slightly, because in addition to the skills and memories of learning them, I got information about and insights into Jaune's sisters.

Maybe, when I had time, I could try and see if I could unlock more of Jaune's memories. I wasn't sure I wanted to, though—assuming they were there. Shaking my head, I focused on the present and the challenge being issued. Melanie wanted to humiliate me and I was entirely too old for the antics and drama of teenagers, especially teenage girls. 'Challenge accepted.'

“So, that's a no?” she huffed.

*A quest has been created!*

**Dance, Dance Rebellion**

*The Malachite Twins are looking to get even with their boss and the Eldest Deadly Sister, and you are their target. You've been challenged and your pride as a man is on the line.*

*Rewards: 1000 EXP, increased closeness with the Malachite Twins, ???, your pride remains undamaged. Failure: decreased closeness with the Malachite Twins, humiliation, emasculation, shame, total annihilation of your pride as a man.*
I put on my best innocent expression as I glanced between the two of them. “Well, there are two of you, that doesn't seem fair…”

Melanie snorted. “Yeah, you don't look like you could handle us both at the same time.”

“We could take turns, if you like?” Miltia suggested, apparently trying to play the peacemaker, even if she had knowingly fed her sister's innuendo.

Sending the red-clad twin an appreciative smile, I shook my head. “That won't be necessary,” I denied, turning my focus back to the bitchy sister. “I meant as in 'there are only two of you,' so it wouldn't be fair to you. Sorry for the confusion.”

Melanie's eyes narrowed before she pointed a gloved finger at me. “You. Stay right there.”

Miltia stepped closer as her sister stormed off towards the DJ's raised platform. “Now you've gone and gotten her stirred up. I won't hear the end of this for a week.”

“Sorry, sweetie,” I apologized, “but there's only one way to deal with women like that. Meet them head on and refuse to back down the entire way, or they'll wind up walking all over you. Question is, is your sister the kind of girl to accept and acknowledge when she's been beaten, or the kind of girl who will continue shit-testing someone looking for excuses to fight?”

“I don't honestly know,” Miltia admitted. “No one's ever really beaten us when it mattered. Are you sure you can?”

Nodding, I watched the other twin arguing with the DJ before eventually raising one of her feet and slamming a heel down dangerously near one of his own feet—and considering she wore bladed footwear, I wasn't surprised when he quickly complied as opposed to risking losing a toe. “I can. Are you okay with that?”

Shifting from my side, she moved to stand in front of me, locking eyes with my own as the music changed to something I didn't recognize while her sister moved to rejoin her. “I think I would like that. I hope you're ready for us.”

I answered with a smirk, wondering if she was doing the innuendo thing on purpose. “I've been ready.”
Melanie huffed out a breath in annoyance as she approached. “I hope you can keep up.”

“Oh, sweetie, this isn't a race. I intend to take my time and enjoy every second of this. That's the problem with kids these days—no patience for the slow build up, no appreciation for anticipation. It's all about seeing who gets there first,” I taunted. In a game of double entendres, I had the upper hand by sheer volume of experience. Judging by her narrowing eyes, she got the message. Shooting a glance at the booth where Junior was still catching up with Joan only reinforced her desire to see me crushed beneath her heel, however. That same glance only reminded me of my own irritation and frustration at the whole 'Joan' situation. I suppose Melanie wasn't the only one here looking to vent their frustration on someone else. We met eyes and, without another word, hostilities commenced.

Individually, each of the Malachite sisters was good—together, their teamwork made them damn near unstoppable. Their moves flowed together into well-practiced forms, showing that they took complete advantage of the club's dance floor whenever they could. Their base physical stats also either met or exceeded mine, especially DEX. I could tell they were also using their Auras, so I knew they'd be getting the bonus from that. However, the thing was, I'd never dropped my buffs. I'd had them up since Joan met me under that tree. And with the new passive and active score modifiers from Dance, combined with Aura's passive and active bonuses, Reinforcement, Reflex, and Haste… I matched them every step of the way—both of them, making sure I split my efforts between them equally.

The first song didn't so much as end as it bled into the next, and the next, and the next… I quickly realized I'd walked into a dance battle of attrition. After a while, the floor began to slowly clear as the pace became too much for the normal clubgoers, people moving off the dance floor and either going to the bar or slowly heading for the exit as the beats per minute steadily increased. It got bad enough that Hei finally realized what had happened and left his seat, and looking absolutely furious, marched up to the DJ for a hushed conversation. From the young man's suddenly pale expression, I could guess the content of the conversation.

People went to a club to drink and dance, and maybe hook up with someone if they were lucky. Club owners made all their money off either the cover or the drinks. It was a DJ's job to manage the flow of the music in such a way as to keep people on the dance floor long enough to get sweaty and thirsty, then give them time to cool down and get drinks… And if no one was dancing, soon no one would be buying drinks and the club lost money. Not just that but if it was bad enough, word of mouth could hurt profits for weeks, potentially months past the original incident. Melanie must have realized this about the time the current song transitioned into something about half the speed, as she turned to glare at the DJ, only to be met with Junior's furious stare—he'd even taken his sun glasses off just to meet her eyes. He didn't need to say anything, his look said it all: 'you're costing me money.'

The white-clad girl slowed, then stopped, before turning to where I was still matching pace with Miltia. Looking between the two of us, she closed her eyes and breathed a short sigh before nodding.
Stalking forward, she grabbed both our arms and proceeded to drag us away from the dance floor and I watched a couple of alerts pop up telling me I'd gained a point each in STR and DEX. I would have to check my stats later to see if I met the prerequisites for some of those scrolls yet. When we got far enough from the music to speak without shouting, she finally said, “Okay, I'll acknowledge that you might have some skill.”

“Melanie,” Miltia deadpanned, elbowing her sister even as we kept walking. “Be nice. He passed.”

“Fine,” the other twin sighed. “If you're sure?”

Looking over, the shorter girl met my eye before sending me a small smile. “I am.”

“So, where are we going anyway?” I asked, looking around. We had wandered into the back, past the storage areas and restrooms, up a flight of stairs and back into the private area. We passed Hei’s office and I glanced inside through the window, spotting Jun currently playing what I swear looked like a MarioKart clone. If her expression was anything to go by, she was winning.

“Somewhere quieter, where we can talk,” Miltia answered and I raised an eyebrow in curiosity.

We approached a room at the end of the hall and Miltia opened the door, walking in and turning on a lamp near the door instead of the overhead lights. Pausing at the threshold, I found what looked like a typical teenage girl's bedroom, if that girl were preferred red, black, and white to pink. I say ‘girl,’ singular, because there was only one bed. Apparently, the twins shared. “You live here?” I asked as a small hand met the middle of my back and pushed me across the threshold and further into the room. Melanie shut and locked the door behind her and I noticed that the room seemed to be soundproofed. It made sense, if they were sleeping here during club hours. The beat from below could still be felt through the floor, but the noise was reduced to barely noticeable. The only real area with no soundproofing was the open bedroom window, letting in a cool breeze that stirred the curtains and allowed in the sounds of traffic and the music pounding through the walls from outside.

“We stay here from time to time when our job requires it,” Melanie answered from behind me in an almost friendly tone.

A confused expression crossing my face, I turned and met her eyes in question. To my surprise, she demurred, lowering her eyes as a blush lit her face. “Hey,” Miltia breathed from right beside my ear, and I was surprised to find I hadn't noticed when she got that close. I turned back to look at her and her hand caught my face, fixing my head in place as she stood on her tiptoes and her lips met mine.
“Wha—” I began, only for the girl to shamelessly press her advantage, her tongue seeking mine out. I found myself responding out of reflex and dismissing a skill import window that told me I'd gained the skill Marital Arts—I knew a play on words when I saw one and I wouldn't give my Semblance the satisfaction of distracting me with a bad pun, even if the imported level was sufficiently high enough to draw my attention. It's kind of humbling to find your skill at all things related to sex reduced to a number—lower than Jaune's Dance skill, but if level 1 was considered an absolute beginner and level 100 was godlike if there was a level cap and it was around 100, then level 42 wasn't bad at all.

“You're sure?” Melanie asked, hitting a dimmer switch on the lamp before moving around to stand beside us, one hand moving up to her twin's shoulder.

“Yeah, dammit. Are you going to help or stand there?” Miltia broke off long enough to answer, before picking up right where she left off. She tasted like cherry, I noted as I let my hands roam. At this point, on the one hand I was frustrated enough to take it out on both of them. On the other hand, it had been a while and I'd missed this sort of thing. The issue of my mental age verses my physical age came up momentarily, before I shrugged it off. The girls were old enough to make their own decisions and I had little to nothing to do with their decision making process. I could refuse, but I didn't want to, and as far as I knew they were legally able to consent on Remnant—though I made a note to look up the age of consent later, to be sure. I had a sneaking suspicion that with the human population slowly recovering, it was probably lower than I was used to—and likely another of those things vaguely alluded to in canon but never explicitly stated. Yang drinking at her age, for instance, was one of those little clues that 'canon' had been doctored in some way to be more palatable to a larger audience.

No, the thing that stood out most was that it was happening at all. Oh, sure, I realized that things like this happened all the time back on Earth… they just never happened to me. I wasn't a “love 'em and leave 'em” kind of guy, so one night stands had never interested me before. Then again, I was probably looking at it too hard. I assumed the twins weren't the kind of girls to pick up random men off the dance floor, but apparently I'd passed some sort of test of theirs. If they wanted to see where that went, maybe I should just stop thinking on it too much and go with the flow for once.

Melanie sighed, removing her gloves before finding the zipper at the back of Miltia's dress. “And here I thought I was the brash one.”

“That is that and this is this,” the other twin denied, kicking off her heels as she went after my hoodie and the shirt under it at the same time. “There can be no hesitation in love and war.”

Now that I had a moment with my mouth unmolested, I decided to do the gentlemanly thing and give them a chance to back out. “So you're both okay with this? We've known each other an hour at most. You don't exactly strike me as the type to sleep with random guys you've just met.”
Melanie snorted. “If we weren't, you wouldn't be here. You proved you could keep up with both of us without favoring one over the other and you didn't immediately hit on us or look at us like slabs of meat. The fact that it'll piss off Junior and your sister is just icing on the cake.”

“What she meant to say,” Miltia corrected, “was that you're the first decent guy we've seen in… ever and as much as we like Junior, we're not screwing him. So, we'd rather take our chances and see what happens than let the opportunity pass us by.”

I knew all about missed opportunities—it seemed like my life was made entirely of them some days. Former life. Maybe, if I was stuck here anyway, I should start taking chances and stop passing up on opportunities. It hadn't worked out well for me the first time, after all. Issues with my age were going to have to be binned, though—otherwise, I'd always be fighting with myself over the subject. I had always said I wasn't the kind of guy to go in for one night stands, but… maybe it wouldn't hurt to bend that rule and see what I'd been missing. Besides, there was one pressing detail here I couldn't forget or pass up: twins. I was a man after all, and there are some things men just can't turn down and still call themselves men. Finally, I shrugged and sent them a smile. “Well then, let's not waste an opportunity.”

“Where did you learn that thing with your tongue…?” one of the twins asked in the dim room.

I turned my head and leaned up enough to see over the twin on my left to their alarm clock, finding it to be after 2A.M.. Laying back down, I shrugged. “Skill book.”

“What?” the other asked, and I looked over to identify which one—Miltia.

“Uh,” I blinked, going back over what I'd said. I had given my default answer to questions about my skills when asked by Joan or Jun. Oops. There goes keeping my lies straight. ’Fuck.’

My hesitation was worse than simply laughing it off, as the twins smelled blood and moved in for the kill. “So, you're going to be a Hunter?”

“I never said that,” I denied, quickly. Too quickly, apparently.

“But your sister is. In fact, you come from a family of Hunters,” Melanie pointed out. “So, what's
I wondered if I should just lie. Though, at this point, I wasn't sure it was possible. The twins were good at reading people and high charisma or not, they were used to sniffing out and sorting through bullshit. That, and they apparently knew who both me and my sisters were… Well, I did introduce myself as 'Jaune Arc.' Maybe the Arc family was a bit more well-known than I'd suspected. “It's hard to describe,” I hedged.

“But it's something that lets you learn skills from books, and in a different way from simply studying given you specified a 'skill book,’” Miltia pointed out, rolling onto her side and pushing herself up onto an elbow to look into my eyes.

Melanie hummed, regarding me before shifting her gaze to her sister, mirroring Miltia's pose on my opposite side and giving me a view most men would have killed for. I was too busy dealing with the twins tearing apart my story to appreciate the view. “Knowledge based Semblance?”

“Maybe,” the nicer twin allowed. “But saying it's 'hard to describe' sounds more like 'I could tell you, but you wouldn't believe me,' than 'I can't find the words to describe it.'”

I sighed before shaking my head. “Why's it so important?”

“So we can decide if you're worth keeping around as more than a good lay,” Melanie deadpanned.

Miltiades sighed, burying her face in my side for a moment before speaking. “What my sister meant to say was that we can be useful for more than just a fling. Believe it or not, this was our first time, so it's not like we have any experience to judge by… but we would really, really like to continue having encounters like this in the future—perhaps more, if we all agree.”

I blinked, parsing that for a moment before asking, “So, you're auditioning for the position of girlfriend?” Not like I expected anyone to, but to have someone come out and say they were… their situation must be a bit worse off than I had guessed, or they were getting lonely and desperate for human companionship not out to screw them as a novelty and leave them.

“No,” Melanie denied, as Miltia confirmed, “Yes.” The twins paused, regarded each other for a moment before nodding in agreement. “Maybe.”
I opened my mouth to tell them exactly what was on my mind, that I was willing to see where things went but I wouldn't be forcing anyone to audition for anything, before Melanie cut me off. “It's not like we're looking for a commitment or anything.”

“And we don't mind sharing, obviously,” Miltia added quickly. “I mean, so long as everyone agrees…”

I face-palmed as they went further down the rabbit hole. “You're saying you don't mind if I date other women?”

“Well, we'll want to meet them, obviously,” Melanie admitted, as though that should be common sense and a given. “To make sure they're good enough to join the group.”

“But the group?” I echoed. 'What? I don't even... It's like I've woken up to find myself in a bad harem anime. Well, I say 'bad,' but Tenchi was actually really good, and there are other good examples…'

“But no pressure or anything!” Miltia quickly assured. “We're not assuming we're automatically 'in.' As I said, we can be useful.”

Focusing on that word, as it was the second time they had used it, I ignored their self-value issues and asked, “What do you mean by 'useful'?”

“We hear things,” Melanie supplied. “People talk. People talk more when they're drunk. They talk a lot to a pretty face, and even more when they're seeing double—and not from the drink.”

Miltia added, “We do most of Junior's information gathering locally. We're the primary enforcers for The Club, so we're just under Junior in the chain of command.”

“But you want out,” I surmised, getting a twin set of nods.

“We don't want to be stuck here our entire lives,” Melanie sighed. “We had wanted to go to Hunter school, but that's just not in the cards—too expensive. Besides, our talents lie elsewhere, outside of just killing grimm for money.”
“How does my Semblance play into this?” I asked, wondering how they’d gotten that notion into their heads.

Sharing a glance, Melanie nodded and Miltia answered, “We saw you take your scroll out of thin air after saying the word 'Inventory.' Our room is right over the parking lot and we were near the window when you came outside.”

I glanced at the open window in question. Beyond it, I could see what looked like the street light in the middle of the rear parking lot. Humans, by nature, tend not to look up… Damn. So, they had **planned** this—all of it, from the moment they’d shown up, most likely. Getting me away from their boss and my sister, the innuendo and psychological wind-up, challenging me to focus my attention on them and 'test' me… 'No, hang on. Maybe I'm misinterpreting or overreacting. Let's hear them out before making a decision. Still, looks like a setup, smells like a setup, probably a setup…'

Melanie continued the explanation. “Then there was the flask of red stuff Junior was fondling like it was worth more than his junk.”

“Ew,” Miltia scrunched up her nose, and I had to agree. I did not want to think about Junior's junk while sandwiched between his nude, twin underlings. “Also, I saw you tap at the air when we showed up and your sister started laughing. Your eyes shifted focus from us to somewhere about here,” she said, holding her hand out into the air in front of her to demonstrate. “And again, when I started kissing you.”

“And what if I don't want to tell you?” I asked, for clarification sake. That would be the deal-breaker—if they demanded information **now**, it was definitely a setup. If not… well, they were definitely opportunistic, but not necessarily manipulative in a bad way.

The twins shared another of those looks before Melanie answered. Gesturing between the three of us, she shot me a flat look. “Trust has to start somewhere. We're not just playing you because we think we can use you. You… passed, as my sister said.”

Well, at least they were aware of what it looked like. I couldn't give an answer right then and there, I would need time to think it over. I had followed this quest looking for contacts. I had thought Hei fit the bill, but honestly, the twins were a better fit… so long as I had their loyalty. **That** was a tricky proposition at best. It could be done, I just had to figure out how to go about doing it. **If** I decided to—and I hadn't yet. The twins were **dangerous**—at least as far as my secrets were concerned, if they were left as loose ends. It was just good to keep my options in mind. Finally, I shook my head. “I'm not saying 'no,' but I can't give you an answer right now. I need some time to think on it. Why don't we trade scroll numbers and I'll let you know something soon?”
“That’s all we can ask for,” Miltia agreed, rolling over and digging a scroll out of her dress while Melanie did likewise from the other side of the bed. I rolled off the bed and began pulling on my own clothes, taking out my scroll as I did and tossing it on the bed within easy reach. If only there were some way to re-equip clothes I’d removed, but there wasn’t—once they were off my person, they were considered outside the inventory system and out of direct control of my Semblance. Besides, the twins were scary smart and I didn’t want to give them any more evidence to use against me and formulate their own conclusions.

“Leaving already?” Melanie asked, an eyebrow raised in question. There was a note of worry there, hidden below the slowly returning tsun exterior—which kind of surprised me and lent credence to this being genuine on their part and not simply them playing me. I couldn’t blame her if it was genuine, really—the twins seemed to be used to being seen as a novelty and I was the one who had passed their test, so to just screw and run would leave them feeling used and pretty much validate all their worries over the issue. However, I had an idea on defusing that particular bomb.

I smirked, deciding to tease her a bit, acting on the assumption that they weren’t trying to screw me over and honestly wanted what they said they wanted. “Well, as much as I know you want to cuddle, if I don’t get going soon Joan is going to come looking for me—at which point, I can’t guarantee your safety. Or mine. Or that of the building.”

“But cuddling is nice,” Miltia whimpered, having already swapped our numbers and gone back under their covers. She sniffed the air once then lifted the sheets to her nose to sniff those. “Going to need fresh sheets.”

Melanie tossed me my scroll back as I finished pulling on my second boot. “And a shower,” she agreed.

I rolled my eyes at their antics. “It’s not that bad.”

Sticking out her tongue, Melanie waved towards the door. “Well, go on. Run along home, Jaune Arc.”

“Trying to bait me into a rematch?” I asked, heading for the door.

“Yes,” Miltia answered bluntly. “Good night.”

“Good night, you two,” I waved, closing the door behind me and heading down the hall. Passing the
office, I found Jun sprawled out on Junior's couch, the video game running in the background as she drooled in her sleep. Quietly opening the door, I walked in and slowly scooped her up into my arms. Immediately, her arms went around my neck and she buried her head in my chest before mumbling something about food and drifting back off. It was an almost obscene level of adorableness, really. I'd never had sisters, but I think Jun was pretty much everything I'd ever want in a little sister—at least, what I'd seen of her so far.

I made my way downstairs, where the music had been turned down from its bone-rattling bass to tolerable and from techno to something approaching a noire jazz style. Slipping inside, I saw that last call had already been made and the last of the patrons at the bar were being directed towards the front door politely, but firmly. Walking across the floor, I found Hei and Joan sitting where I'd left them, plus a couple of drinks. “Joan, I think it's time we get the little one to bed,” I said quietly as they looked up at my arrival.

Joan blinked, frowning at our sister in my arms as if she couldn't believe the other girl was already asleep. “What time is it?”

“About two-thirty,” Hei answered, checking his watch. “He's right, you should get on home. Are you going to be okay to drive?”

Shrugging, Joan stood and grabbed her purse. “Yeah, I'm fine.”

Hei nodded, getting up and showing us to the back door himself. “It was good seeing you again, Joan.”

The eldest blonde sighed, closing her eyes and giving a quiet, mirthless chuckle. “You too, Hei.”

Hei shut and locked the door behind us and we moved towards the car, Joan fumbling with the keys before finally getting the doors open. Putting Jun in a seat woke her up enough to get her own seatbelt on. The little redhead settled in and I moved past Joan and snagged the keys. “Hey, what do you think you're doing?” she asked, narrowing crystal blue eyes and sending me an annoyed look.

“Driving. You're drunk. I'll deal with any fallout over it myself.” Of course, doing that would reveal that I could, but I'd rather that than put someone even mildly drunk behind the wheel. I'd made the mistake once in my previous life and didn't care to repeat it—broken bones tend to be a good deterrent against that sort of thing. I was lucky in that it had only been a low-speed impact.
Joan snorted, rolling her eyes. “I’m not drunk. Only about halfway there. Besides, you don’t have a license.”

“I have the skill and that’s what matters. Are you coming, or not?” I asked, already seated behind the wheel and buckled in.

The Eldest Deadly Sister pouted before letting out a long sigh. “Fine, whatever,” she relented.

Pulling up my map, I set a waypoint for the Arc family home and closed it, following the path laid out on the minimap. As it turned out, the moment I pulled onto the road I found my way highlighted by visible waypoints laid out on the street, meaning I wouldn’t have to constantly look at my minimap. I turned on the radio and set it to the same station that had been playing in The Club with the DJ gone for the night—probably for good, given his screw up. We were barely out of the parking lot when Jun sniffed the air before asking, “What’s that smell?”

Blinking, Joan sniffed the air herself, before her eyes narrowed and her gaze sharpened to bore into the side of my head with laser intensity. If I didn't know better, I'd say she looked jealous. Well, good. Let her deal with confused feelings for a while—it was someone else's turn. Turnabout is fair play. “Yes, Jaune. What is that smell?”

I sniffed the air myself before I hummed, pretending to give it some thought. “That is the smell… of success.”

“Oh, that was awful,” Joan moaned, palming her face.

Jun sniffed again before countering with, “But onii-chan, why does 'success' smell like mama and mama and papa’s room when they come back from hunting grimm?”

To my credit, the car only swerved a little as I broke down laughing. “Ask your sisters when you get older, sweetie.”

“But it smells kind of like their rooms too!” she announced, effectively ratting out her elder sisters in the way of younger siblings everywhere. “Onee-sama’s room smelled like that this morning, after I got out of the bath!”

After she got out of the bath. In other words, after I'd left Joan's room, since it had smelled normal
when I'd been in there before that. I blinked, turning my head enough to keep an eye on the road and fix Joan with a knowing look. “I have no idea what she's talking about,” the eldest sister denied. I almost believed her, except a passing street light gave lie to that as it washed over her blushing face.

“Really, now?” I asked, meeting Jun's eyes in the rearview mirror and getting an emphatic nod. “Well, I'll tell you what, if you find out why that is you let me know, okay?”

“Right!” the girl agreed as, beside me, Joan shot me a mock look of betrayal and mouthed 'traitor.'

The rest of the ride home passed mostly in silence, aside from the radio, as Jun slowly drifted back to sleep. I pulled into the driveway, parking the car in the garage without so much as a scratch. “Jun, why don't you go on up and go to bed?” Joan suggested as we got out, stretching from spending so long seated between Hei's club and the car ride back.

“Okay. Good night, onii-chan. Good night, onee-sama,” she yawned, entering the house through the carport entrance.

Catching my eye, Joan nodded towards the yard. “Let's talk.”

“It never ends well, any time a woman says that to a man,” I commented, making sure the car was locked as I followed her from the garage, around the house, into the back yard.

“No, it tends not to,” Joan agreed, and something in her tone gave me enough warning to get a Mana Shield up before her leg would have impacted my back. Instead, it hit the shield and sent me pinballing across the yard before coming to a sudden stop. The hit hadn't broken my shield, though. Considering our level difference, that meant either this was some spur of the moment training thing, or more likely, a test of some sort—either way, she hadn't been looking to hurt me, just knock me around a little. Still, I wouldn't just take it lying down. Holding my hand out, I cast two spells as fast as I could. “Create ID! AP Round!”

The first spell drew the two of us into an empty Illusion Barrier, which would prevent both potential damage to the house and the littlest sister from hearing. The second sent a trio of magical armor penetrating bullets down range at a speed designed to negate any sort of attempt to counter them in flight. Against an unsuspecting enemy, it would have been enough to make them seriously reconsider their life choices at this point. Against Joan, it turned out to be pretty much useless.

There was a bright flash as the trio of rounds splashed off a shield of some sort, temporarily flash-
blinding me. I was already in motion, however, profiling to my right and spamming AP Round in a constant stream of attacks as fast as I could chant it. In between flashes of white, I caught sight of Joan and her technique, and realized why one of her titles labeled her as Divine Aegis. At the same time, I realized with a growing sense of irritation, that I recognized the technique. A seven-petaled flower made of iridescent pinkish-purple light stood between me and the Eldest Deadly Sister, completely unphased by my attacks. 'Rho Aias? Really? That just ain't fair.'

**BGM Battle Theme – EMIYA – Unlocked!**

And of course, as if to underscore the point, it would be that song. Well, fair or not, it was what it was. Maybe I could distract her long enough to come up with a plan. “So what's the game here, Joan?”

Her blouse and hair whipped violently in the power being put off by the technique, though if she even noticed, it didn't show. “Prove you're ready. Hit me.”

“Are you drunk?!” I yelled, trying to provoke a reaction, but mostly in an attempt to buy a moment to formulate some sort of plan. I got a reaction, all right—just not one I wanted.

“A little,” she admitted, shifting her hand and the center of the shield to track me as a pinprick of light swiftly enlarged into something the size of a softball at its center.

'Right, much as it may look like something from Earth, it's not. Okay, planning time's over! Improvise, dammit,’ I thought frantically, taking in her stance and the attack. If it was a ranged attack and had anything less than the absolute speed AP Round possessed, then it could be evaded—I would just have to get the timing right. It was a bit like dealing with the twins—a perpetual dance, trying to stay one step ahead of each other… That idea in mind, I took off running as I began pulling up mana—running towards the crazy, drunken elder sister looking for a fight.

The first shot fired and I got an idea of its speed as it plowed into my hastily cast A.T. Field over top of my Mana Shield, exploding on contact and shattering the field. Casting it again, I began manually charging a Rasengan the moment I finished chanting for A.T. Field. Another ball of death blossomed from her shield, but this time I was ready, taking a Tumble to the left of it the moment her fist clenched—the only real tell for her firing the technique. The ball of death passed harmlessly by, grazing my Mana Shield as I kept running. If I could close the distance… “Inventory,” I muttered, grabbing the window and dragging it to my left and out of my field of view with my free hand. There was only one thing I needed in there at the moment, and I knew exactly where it was stored.

Another Tumble got me past her third shot. The fourth was going to be too close to dodge, so I
pulled the A.T. Field in close in case I screwed up. Our eyes met between our respective barriers, Joan's expression determined as she closed her fist a fifth time. At the same time, I closed my eyes and cast, “Spinning Mana Shield!” Her eyes went wide as I dumped the mana I'd been building up into the technique. This close, it was actually more of an attack than a defense as its energy tore against Joan's Rho Aias knockoff.

Somewhere in the middle, the attack she'd been building detonated. As the flash nearly blinded me even with my eyes closed, I knew she would likely be temporarily blinded at least for a few seconds —add in the fact that the explosion of sound hurt my ears bad enough that I thought it'd ruptured an eardrum before Gamer's Body kicked in and negated the pain, and there was a good chance she was also deafened. It wasn't good enough, though—I knew that. Joan was an experienced Huntress and it wouldn't take her more than a second or two to recover. That's why I'd come prepared.

“Rasengan!” I yelled, raising my hand and firing the technique… into the ground in front of her.

A wave of earth erupted, threatening to bury the Eldest Deadly Sister shield and all and I Tumbled left and forward around the edge of the Rho Aias clone, my left hand sliding into my inventory window and coming out with my practice sword held by its sheath. My right hand met the hilt and I flicked my thumb against the pommel, feeling the proper Iaido technique activate as I came in from her blind spot. There were three hits, one after another, in quick succession—my sword slammed into the barrier of her Aura over her right ass cheek hard enough to penetrate even as it shattered into wood splinters against her denim covered flesh, her right hand came around and flashed through my A.T. Field like it was wet tissue paper to impact against the side of my face, and my body hit the ground thirty yards away hard enough to leave a crater near the same tree where she had met me earlier that evening. My eyes tracked to my HP and MP bars and I laughed—it was a half-hysterical thing as I noticed my mana had just ticked up from zero to 91 and my HP went up from 507 to 547. One good hit had completely depleted my mana, dispelled all my buffs, and taken out a good 300 HP. Much more and I might have had to start making Fort saves or die…

Leaning up on my elbows, I regarded Joan as she dismissed what had to be her Semblance. It took me a minute to recognize the expression on her face as she strode towards me, one hand momentarily rubbing at the area my hit had landed—it was pride, and something else that seemed so out of place on her face I wanted to dismiss it outright. Except my teenaged body's hormone and adrenaline fueled haze knew exactly what it was, even if my older mind tried to deny it. My thoughts were cut short from making a call one way or the other on it when the look passed, replaced by a small smile as she leaned down and offered me a hand up. “You did good. I'm proud of you.”

You have completed a challenge from the Eldest Deadly Sister!

You gain 8500 EXP!
I sighed, shaking my head as I dusted myself off, ignoring the notification for many skill point gains that flashed up after that and quickly disappeared. “What the hell was that about? Ready for what?”

A small, sad smile crossed her face momentarily as she answered, “Beacon. The rest of the world. At this point, you can learn what you need to and improvise the rest—you have the instinct for it. All you need is time.”

“And you thought it was a good idea to test this two days after I got out of the hospital?” Was she insane? More drunk than I thought she was? Just plain stupid, maybe? No, I highly doubted that last one. Joan was canny. Odds were good she knew exactly what she was doing.

She rolled her eyes. “If nothing ever challenges you, you'll never learn what you're truly capable of. And we've already established that your Semblance is bullshit when it comes to physical damage—I don't believe you can be permanently hurt, short of death, any more. All of my attacks were concussive or bashing—non-lethal. Trust me, I know what I'm doing, little brother.”

My patience snapped with an almost audible sound. “No, Joan, I don't believe you do.” Seeing her curious look, I decided to open up with both barrels—one part of it genuine irritation at her, the other anger at myself for not having the heart to end the charade and tell her the truth. Instead, I did the closest thing I could. It would be close enough to the truth for my conscience, I hoped. “The Jaune you know is dead, and I don't know if he's ever coming back. You don't have any idea how I'll react, to anything, because I'm not the person you knew. I may as well be someone else entirely.”

There. I had said it. It was the closest to the truth I could come without outright telling her I came from a place so far from Remnant that I was likely never getting back, and I honestly didn't think I had the capacity to care about that fact any more—and somewhere in the back of my mind it worried me. My thoughts on the matter came and went quickly, I'd noticed. Any time I worried too much about it, I found my focus wandering elsewhere…

That melancholy smile had returned. “You think I don't know that? I know everything about Jaune. I've loved you—him—since the day he was born. I knew him best, better than any of them, and I wasn't blind to his faults—I knew that one day, he would outgrow them and become a man we could be proud of. And you're wrong. There is something of my brother left in there—the best parts, all the parts I love, are still there. It doesn't matter if the rest comes back or not, so long as that stays the same.”

So, because we were similar that was enough for her? No, there had to be more… Oh. Oh. I wasn't
the only one versed in speaking in half-truths, it seemed. “Oh god, I get it now,” I breathed aloud and she hummed in question. I couldn't help it as I answered. “You're fixated! You have a brother complex.”

She flinched but instead of looking away she met my eyes, her expression some mixture of fear, resignation, and hope. “Maybe. Would it be so bad if I did?”

Reaching up, I moved straight past a face palm to grabbing a double fistful of my hair and pulling. “Only for my sanity,” I admitted quietly. I removed my hands from my more messy than usual hair in time to see her roll her eyes at my supposed teen angst. “You have no idea, do you?”

Raising an eyebrow, she shot me a flat, knowing look. “Are you sure about that? What did I just say about knowing you best? Even this version of you.”

My patience, already snapped, went up in flames as I narrowed my eyes at the slightly taller woman. I couldn't deny there was an attraction there—I had been fighting myself on the matter almost since the moment I saw her. I could blame the heat of the moment, or the adrenaline, but the truth was I was tired of lying to myself. Things with Hei had just brought my own internal strife over the matter to a head. My decision regarding the twins just helped things along. I was tired of denying myself everything I wanted for one reason or another, missing or outright ignoring opportunities and possibilities and winding up alone in the end. I was tired of fighting myself. I relented, no longer willing to roll that particular Will Save at the moment.

We were already standing only a pace apart. I closed the distance and grabbed her wrists, pulling her flush against me before pressing my lips to hers, her mouth opening almost reflexively to my probing tongue as she responded instinctively. I kissed her long and hard, more than a bit of my renewed frustration at the situation showing in the force of it—and yet, she offered no complaint, no protest, only acceptance. After a solid minute, I pulled away enough to look her in the eye in the faint, pale light spilling through the leaves of the tree above us from Remnant's mostly whole moon, slowly working its way through its cycle between full and mostly whole to shattered. She whimpered and I could almost see her self-restraint visibly break, like some great weight had been lifted off her shoulders. “I don't see you as a sister,” I began, and she interrupted.

“Good.”

“Not 'good!'” I denied loudly. She still didn't understand. No, I was beginning to suspect she didn't care. I liked her, yes, and yes, I was attracted to her—but I knew damn well it was wrong on so many levels. “Do you have any idea how absolutely fucked up this situation is?! How badly it fucks with my head? For my sanity, and yours apparently, I need to go. Somewhere, anywhere but here—before I do something one of us will regret.”
Joan snorted, reaching out to play with my hair in a gesture I'd used on both her and Jun before. "No. You're mine. You have been since the first time I saw you. There is nothing you could do that I would regret."

"No, I'm not. And you would, because I would not," I protested, truthfully. If I didn't leave, I really would push this to its inevitable conclusion—because as I'd said, regardless of the body I was stuck in, my thirty-odd year old mind didn't see a sibling when I looked at her, only a beautiful young woman with an obvious interest, and it was damn difficult to resist that. This would be the last time I would try—if not for my sake then for hers.

Twisting her wrist still held in my hand and using the edge of her hand in a move I was familiar with, she removed my grip on her wrist with no visible effort whatsoever and brought her other hand back down to lock my own wrists in her hands. "You don't scare me, Jaune—you can't do anything to me that I wouldn't allow," she said, squeezing my wrists gently to illustrate her point. "You are mine. Especially after that. I don't mind sharing you, but you will always be mine first and foremost. I almost lost you once, I won't waste more time pretending I don't feel the way I do when I could lose you for good to the job. It's my condition for you becoming a Hunter. And after that, there's no going back for either of us any more. There's no putting the cat back in the bag."

I shot her a mild glare. "Firstly, you can't just decide something like that for yourself without my input considering I'm the other involved party. Secondly, since when do you get to dictate terms and conditions as to what I do and don't do?!"

She smirked, closing the distance between us slowly as I began backing away. After a few steps, my back pressed into the bark of the tree behind me and I knew I was trapped. "Since you forced my hand. You put everything out in the open, which means you get to accept responsibility for the consequences."

"Consequences, huh?" I asked, going over my options as whatever initial panic I'd had long since fled, allowing me to think it through logically with a clear head. Frankly, I didn't have any options. As a matter of raw numbers, her stats were all better than mine. I could maybe dump points into INT and try casting Sleep, but I had to give Joan more credit than that. She could and would stop me moving a hand to adjust points or speak the moment it looked like I started really fighting back beyond a struggle for dominance between the two of us or token resistance for the sake of doing the 'gentlemanly' thing of offering an out—and this was a particularly volatile situation where her mental health was concerned, if my suspicions were correct...

She had finally gotten out something it seemed like she had been hiding for years. Worse, I appeared to accept that, even return those feelings and couldn't particularly deny that I did. It was just wrong on so many levels to me. If I rejected her now, it would be bad. And even if I did, I didn't know
what sort of modifiers she had—Observe only gave me base stats at the moment, so her WIS or other scores could be damn near double what I could see, depending on how Aura leveled, if not more.

‘Do I really want to stop her, anyway?’ I asked myself, before coming back with a resounding ‘no’ in answer around the moment her lips met mine again.

“I am going to the special hell for this,” I breathed as our lips parted for breath. “Beelzebub has a devil put aside for me…”

Her lips formed a smirk I could feel against mine from their place just barely brushing against my own. “Then I'll be right there beside you.”

I shook my head slightly, still not quite sure whether this was real life or just fantasy. A thought occurred, however—something I'd need an answer to, one way or another, if anything of my conscience was to be salvaged if I allowed this to continue. “And what about you? Are you going to blame this on the alcohol?”

She shook her head. “No. I'm a grown woman, I can take responsibility for my own actions, alcohol or no. I want this. I want you—I always have. That won't ever change.”

Well, if I was already headed for the special hell, then I wasn't going to be an inactive partner here—in for a penny and all that. Shifting my body, I moved my right foot behind her own and pushed my back against the tree as I pulled with my foot and pushed with my hands and upper body. Gravity and leverage took care of the rest as we fell and I landed on top of her, my knee finding its way into the apex of her legs, her body hot against my knee even through our clothes. What started as another kiss devolved into a battle for dominance I was quickly losing—my experience and skill trumped by her own, coupled with her greater strength and sheer determination to have what she'd wanted for so long. She rolled us over and straddled me, pushing me down as she had her way with me. Kisses became interspersed with nips and outright bites and, sure that she had me where she wanted me, she released my hands to roam while hers did the same.

“So tell me, were the twins good?” she murmured against my lips, grinding her pelvis down against me in a slow, easy rhythm.

I smirked, asking, “Are you jealous?”

“Absolutely,” she admitted. “Those harlots got to you first. I wanted to pop your cherry, damnit. Remind me to properly discipline them the next time I see them.”
I refrained from mentioning that I'd lost that years ago, at least in another life. Technically, she was correct—which was the best kind of correct. A thought occurred, however. “That's what brought this on, isn't it?”

With a shrug, she admitted, “Maybe. So? Were they?”

“They were good,” I confirmed. “Enthusiasm makes up for lack of experience in their case. And, you know, twins.”

“What would you know about experience?” she laughed quietly before blinking, a confused look crossing her pretty face. “You mean they aren't fucking Hei?”

“Joan,” I deadpanned, getting her attention. “Please don't talk about your exes while molesting me. It's awkward.”

“Ex, singular,” she clarified. “Are you jealous of Hei?”

I rolled my eyes. I wasn't rising to that bait. “Yes,” I admitted, rising to the bait anyway.

Her face looked entirely too smug for comfort, and I couldn't help think she had been trying to make me jealous. At this point, I wouldn't have put it past her to have planned all of this—or at least planned parts of it, improvised the rest, and decided to see where things went. It's how I would have done it. Maybe we were a bit more alike than I had suspected… Of course, there was also the fact that I was pretty sure she absolutely knew I had a quest just for her and hadn't said anything—it may explain Jun's tattling on her eldest sister about the smell in Joan's bedroom, too. Yeah, evidence and hindsight were leaning further towards the 'planned most of it' option. “Admit it, I'm better than both of them.”

I looked her up and down, my hands running from her thighs, up her sides, to cup her large breasts through her blouse and she practically purred at the attention as her eyes went half-lidded. “Yeah…”

And a bag full of cats crazier, too. I would have to be careful with this one—if not handled carefully, there was every chance that she would take rejection poorly to say the least. She was, if not broken, then damaged in some way and I had no idea what could have done it—distorted, even. Maybe it was just the pressure their parents had put on them—it had broken Jaune, after all. She may have fixated on Jaune at a young age and determined not to let him break from the pressure that had forged her and the other Arc daughters into the Seven Deadly Sisters, and she had failed. You didn't get a title for nothing, after all, and you didn't get a secondary title for anything short of
extraordinary. The only way to really tell would be to look at the others and see if they were
damaged in similar ways since Jun was too young to really tell with.

Or maybe not—maybe this was just how she functioned. Either way, right now was the most
dangerous time for that, but once she felt she had 'won' that danger would likely settle down a bit.
However, I had a feeling that danger would come right back if she ever felt her position was
threatened. I don't think she would ever intentionally hurt me, but the things she might do 'for my
own good' worried me. If 'tsundere' was a proven thing here, then it stood to reason that 'yandere'
was as well—and the Eldest Deadly Sister fit the profile for prime yandere candidacy if not handled
carefully. Then again, she as much as outright said she was willing to let me go and do the Hunter
thing, so long as I came back to her.

It was disturbingly similar to the twins' argument, in a way. I had my suspicions on the matter, but
the short of it was that it probably boiled down to a high-competition environment. Women where I
was from were used to having their pick of any man they wanted in some cases, or at least the pick
of those within their ability to attract. A woman could walk into any bar and ask if anyone wanted to
fuck and she'd have half the patrons volunteering—she would have to be pretty ugly not to get at
least a few takers.

Men, on the other hand… well, that was a good way to get kicked out of a bar. The vast majority of
women wanted a man with good looks and money, and would put up with a lot of bullshit to keep a
man with one or both around—and I'd learned that even the ones who swore they weren't like that
were exactly like that. The concept of loyalty seemed to mean absolutely nothing to so many where I
was from. Here, though, with the six-to-one ratio in effect it appeared they were a lot more willing to
work for a mate than attempt to convince a man to work for them when he could just as easily decide
she wasn't worth the hassle and choose someone else. Hell, I wouldn't be surprised if those same
self-centered women where I was from had been all but bred out here, out of sheer necessity.

And while she said the whole multi-partner relationship thing wasn't uncommon any more, I was
willing to put good money on there being strict rules on that sort of thing—probably something along
the lines of mutual agreements, probably similar to what the twins had asked for. I could almost be
certain that cheating simply didn't happen, because any woman who did could and likely would be
tossed aside as she deserved and earn a reputation as a cheater—which would have much further-
reaching consequences here than it ever did where I was from. A cheater here was likely to be
blackballed—that is, word would spread around and she would be shunned by men and women
alike. There was probably some method of control to ensure men weren't just screwing every woman
willing to spread her legs as well, but I was at a loss as to what that could be. I'd have to do research,
but this didn't seem like the sort of thing that went into educational books. However, there was
another kind of material I could check… A society's entertainment tended to reflect on that society, if
you could sort through the embellishment and occasional bullshit. I had already started, though, with
volume one of Ninjas of Love—it could act as a sort of societal guide for Remnant, so long as I had
someone to help clarify things…

Movement brought me back to the present as Joan ceased her slow frottage from where she had
straddled me in order to hop off. I had a moment to wonder what she was up to as I lay there watching, the thought of escaping having long since stopped being an option. It was wrong, in so many ways, but I would not—could not—back down at this point. As wrong as it may have been, I wanted her more than I'd ever wanted another woman before—in either life. I was, as I'd pointed out, only human—and a lonely one at that. She unbuttoned her jeans and shimmied out of them, kicking off her boots and the jeans before straddling me again. This time, her hands went to work on my belt and zipper. “I don't see a condom anywhere,” I pointed out.

She refused to answer as she freed me from my boxers and scooted up to position herself where she wanted, then slid her panties to the side. Leaning forward, Joan met my eyes and shot me a devious smile. And then my hands on her hips tightened almost against my will as she lowered herself, both of us letting out a mutual sigh at the sensation of oneness “No, you don't. And you never will.”

The expression that crossed my face must have been pretty amusing as she laughed, the crazy thing. Well, I couldn't complain as it was doing very interesting things below the waist for both of us. Her laugh tapered off into a satisfied hum and our eyes met again as she shifted slowly, savoring her long-awaited victory. Her words, low and full of emotion as they were, were still a reminder that she had had her heart broken before… and that she could break me with a thought if I crossed her. She had caught my little reference earlier, apparently.

“Just don't think you can love me and leave me to die.”
'Well. That escalated quickly.'

There was a rock digging into my back, but I ignored it in favor of waiting and watching the woman sprawled across my chest. Around us, the sky had already lightened into pre-dawn and the sun would be coming up soon. My patience was rewarded as her mouth parted in a quiet sigh and her body twitched faintly. Slowly raising a hand, I stroked the bright blonde hair atop her head, whispering, “Sleep.” My eye twitched at the notification that the spell had just leveled—thrice. Well, there was good news at least: I could cast Sleep on targets already asleep, or near to it, and have it succeed. That also implied that sleeping targets didn’t get a Will save. It was something to look into later. Holding the Eldest Deadly Sister closer, I sat up and eased her off me before seeing to getting dressed.

Once I’d finished dressing myself, I looked between the taller blonde and her pants and boots—Sleep spell or no, I didn't want to risk trying to dress her and having her break it. Grabbing her discarded clothes, I stowed them in my inventory before going about reapplying my buffs. It was strange going from having them on full time since I'd created them to having them suddenly drop after getting used to them. It felt like suddenly getting weaker, as opposed to simply going back to normal. I suppose that was one of the few downsides to leaving them on all the time.

Putting the thought aside, I reached down and picked up the beautiful, curvy, utterly mad woman into a bridal carry and began the trek into the house. I was already on the stairs before I realized I was still inside my Instant Dungeon. Whispering the spell to destroy it, I was surprised to find that my location in the real world also corresponded to my location inside the Illusion Barrier. That was useful information to have... later. First, I had a situation to deal with before things spiraled out of control. Any more out of control, that is. 'God damn but I don't see how this could be much more screwed up than it already is.'
Pushing open the door to Joan's room with the toe of my boot, I slipped inside and deposited her on the bed. I hit her with Sleep again, since I figured that the duration for that may be close to running down, and didn't know whether to be annoyed or glad that it leveled again instantly, twice. Of course the level disparity between us would grant absolutely massive experience if the spell succeeded—and since she was unable to fight against it, it succeeded by default. I was almost tempted to spam it on her for levels, but I was worried that if I did, she wouldn't ever wake up.

I spent a few moments getting her out of her blouse and bra, then settling the sheets and blanket over her. I knew I was putting off what I needed to do, but I absolutely didn't want to. I couldn't stay here any more—I knew that. The risk of Jun or one of the others, or their parents finding out was too great if someone happened to come by at the wrong time. I had absolutely no doubt that if I stayed, Joan would take advantage of the situation and take every chance she could get or make to be closer with me. I couldn't say that I wouldn't, either. The sad part was, the idea was appealing on a level I couldn't simply ignore. She had opened up old wounds—things that had been half forgotten were suddenly fresh again, if only for the moment. I didn't know how long that would last, either. The truth was, I was lonely—desperately so. I had gotten so used to ignoring it that I hadn't noticed it being gone the moment I woke up here. Suddenly being surrounded by attention, affection even was not something I knew how to fight against when I knew I had to leave for both our sakes—if not to keep either of us from getting attached, since it was entirely too late for that, then to keep from being found out. While Joan may not care, I did—at least on her behalf. She didn't need her reputation ruined should someone inevitably find out—nor did I want to cause the rift that already stood between her and the Arc siblings' parents to grow any wider.

Pulling her clothes from my inventory, I placed them in the hamper she kept in her room with the rest of her dirty clothes before taking one last look around. With all my clothes in my inventory, along with my money, there was really nothing I even needed to go to 'my' room for. Knowing I could put it off no longer, I moved over to the bed and leaned down, planting a soft kiss on her lips before pulling away and heading for the door. I peeked in on Jun to make sure she was out and then left. My chest hurt as I left the house—my skills must have been malfunctioning, temporarily. Shaking it off, I opened my map and tried to figure out where to go. I could go Junior's, but if Joan woke up and went all yandere because she thought I'd run away from her, that would be the first place she'd look. I would have to call her, later, and explain my reasoning before she got too upset.

I ignored the alert about gaining a point in WIS as my Semblance acting in bad taste. I had gained more than one skill point over the course of the night, really. One each in STR, DEX, and CHA after the little dance off with the twins, another in DEX, VIT, and CHA for what followed that dance off, one each in every field but CHA for completing Joan's challenge, and then another each in STR, DEX, VIT, and CHA by the time Joan and I were finished molesting each other. All told, that was a total of 16 points: 3 STR, 4 DEX, 3 VIT, 1 INT, 1 WIS, 3 CHA, and 1 LUK.

'Is it sad that keeping up with three women over the night registers to my Semblance as being more work than my normal training routine?' I wondered. And it's not like I could argue against it, really—sex done right was hard work. It required flexibility, dexterity, stamina and strength, and not a little charisma. I wasn't complaining, though. Not about the sex by itself, at least. No, it was just the fallout from the emotional cluster fuck Joan had dropped on me—no, I couldn't and wouldn't blame
her for that entirely. I instigated it, after all, and I didn't do anything to stop it—if I even could have. She was perfectly capable of doing whatever she wanted at this point. Well, it wasn't like I was cutting ties with her—just putting distance between us. I could deal with that. The rest... I had made my choice and I was done second-guessing myself. I suppose it was just a bad habit, at this point—something I would have to break if I wanted to actually enjoy being happy.

Unable to decide where to go, I picked a park in the middle of the Commercial District and took off running at a straight shot through the woods. Pulling up mana, five seconds later I Leapt before charging Powered Leap again, hitting the ground and running a few steps to maintain momentum before using Leap again—it was actually faster and simply running by itself, due to synergy between the two skills nearly doubling my ground speed in addition to allowing me a wider view of the surrounding countryside every time I breached the tops of the trees. However, because of the fact that Powered Leap actually acted as a force multiplier, running off a combined STR mod plus MP cost to increase it, my leaps were downright prodigious after all my passive and active bonuses were taken into account and I had to pay attention not to overshoot my targeted landing zone several times. As I ran and leapt, I occasionally touched down on tree limbs and bounced between those when they were close enough—gaining a point of DEX for the act. Seeing the familiar point gain window drew me from my funk and reminded me that I had skill books I could now learn—after that, I could see about digging through my active quest log, because if I wasn't mistaken, there were a few that were either incomplete, on a timer, or incomplete when they should be finished.

As I passed through town, an icon on my minimap caught my eye—the red cross of a medical building, reserved for hospitals, pharmacies, and so forth. The thought crossed my mind that, while the twins had had condoms handy, Joan had not—and would have refused, regardless. I was both too old mentally and too young physically for any pregnancy scare bullshit in this new world, so I decided to swing by and check out my options before there was an avoidable 'oops.' My quests could wait fifteen minutes.

Sure enough, when I made it to the park and sat down to check my quest log, I found Path of the Rogue (Part II) was still open. Frowning, I tried to think of what could have been holding the quest back. It could be that I hadn't answered the Malachite twins yet, but I doubted it. Thinking back, I went over the conversation from the previous night again. 'Hei said something about setting up an account,' I mused, pulling out my scroll and quickly finding the new Underworld app. Opening it, the scroll's screen went black momentarily before gray text popped up. First, it asked for name to associate with my account and Underworld contact email. Humming in thought, I rolled my eyes as I came up with an answer.

'Jaune' meant yellow, I recalled. I wasn't Jaune, however. I ran through several different color variations and names, but it was Joan that gave me the idea—or her Semblance, rather. That Rho Aias clone didn't belong in this world, and yet it was. Likewise, I didn't belong either. We were kind of a match, that way. The protagonist of the source material of that series had been a mage and a fighter, and in so far over his head it was a miracle he didn't die any number of times. I was sorely tempted to use his name, but I had a feeling Fate would be unkind to me if I did. More unkind, rather. 'Shiro' was very close, though, and obeyed the color naming rule as it meant 'white.' And if I used it as a handle for contact within the Underworld, it wouldn't even sound weird compared to
people like Hei, Yang, and so on. Remnant's languages were weird like that in canon, where you had names like Ruby and Blake on the same team as Weiss and Yang—English, German, and Chinese. I highly doubted 'Shiro' would even stand out, amongst that.

My account registered, I entered the self-destruct phrase it would listen for and the app announced that it was finished with setup and asked if I would like an overview of the basic features. Shrugging, I accepted and let it walk me through a demo of various features such as the Market where one could buy, sell, or trade just about anything, along with the Employment section, for those looking for less than legal work for greater than legal pay. When the tutorial ended, I got the quest completion notification for Path of the Rogue (part II), along with 3000 EXP, which bumped me to level 10.

That taken care of, I pulled up my quest log and found the Romancing Remnant tree, before selecting the one I knew was on a timer. Looking it over, I dug through my scroll's address book for the contact I'd added for Candice. Checking the time and finding it approaching 7 A.M., I sent her a text letting her know I'd finished the book and asked if she'd like to talk about it over coffee or food tonight. Not expecting an answer from the librarian for at least a few hours, I dug through my inventory and went over my books, finding several I now met the prerequisites for.

You have obtained the skill book Anything Goes!: Building The Combat Style To Suit Your Needs! Would you like to learn this skill?

I smirked and damn near punched the accept button.

You have learned the skill Martial Arts Mastery!

Importing previous save data.. Import successful!

Martial Arts Mastery: Level 20. Passive. Martial Arts Mastery allows the user to learn various forms of unarmed combat and combine them to suit the situation at hand. Effect: Allows the user to learn martial arts styles from skill books similarly to recipes for cooking or plans for crafting. Anything Goes! allows the user to take the best from these styles and combine them into a single, cohesive style suited to any particular situation. Grants 70% EXP gain towards martial arts. Passively grants 75% bonus to all physical stats and 75% damage bonus to all melee attacks. Bonuses improve 3% per level. Aura Strike now applies to all melee attacks automatically at ¼ cost. Synergy with most forms of armed melee combat.

"Whoa. I know kung fu," I whispered, chuckling quietly. And as had happened before, it had acknowledged that I knew something about the field in question, so I was actually ahead in that field—though I was unamused to find that a second dan black belt—one rank assessment test that would
have taken place in about two months assuming time here ran concurrent to Earth and no time travel bullshit was involved, which would have left me a third dan and, if not a master, then an instructor myself—was only worth twenty levels.

Despite being something of a joke on the internet, Tae Kwon Do was actually a decent martial art assuming you knew a damn thing about it and stuck with it. It was easy to get into for beginners and those looking to learn some self-defense, but the art itself focused on fast, mostly high kicks while having a decent foundation in other forms of attack and slipping out of and employing grabs, joint locks, and throws similarly to judo. Then again, the dojo where I'd studied hadn't exactly taught pure TKD—the co-owner and sensei was a distant elder cousin who collected martial arts styles like some people collect stamps. I remember wishing I could have been half as good as he had been by the time I was his age, but he'd had the advantage of starting much younger than I had. With the skill imported, however, everything I knew seemed to click in a way it hadn't before—and I knew I could build off of it and incorporate other styles or skills as needed. I may not be that good yet, but some day I could.

The bonuses were nice, but the skill was more than the sum of its parts. I could already see that it would have significant synergy with whatever skill the book named Kung Pow gave. In addition, it stacked with things like my sword and shield masteries. As I leveled them together, it should make for a very effective fighting style that wouldn't necessarily be dependent on my constantly casting spells. If I were going the purely physical route, that combination would be ridiculously effective. Even going the caster route, it would still be immensely useful… Still, I had more skills to learn.

*You have obtained the skill book Firearms Basics for the New Hunter! Would you like to learn this skill?*

*You have learned the skill Firearms Mastery!*

*Importing previous save data… Import successful!*

**Firearms Mastery** : Level 40. Passive. *Firearms Mastery* grants the user the ability to use firearms. 
Effect: 13 0 % increase in attack damage with firearms, 13 0 % increase in rate of fire, 13 0 % increase in bullet velocity, 22 0 % increase in accuracy. Level *Firearms Mastery* to increase stats by 3% per level. *Synergy with Aim*.

*You have obtained the skill book Running Free! Would you like to learn this skill?*

*You have learned the skill Free Running!*
**Free Running** : level 1. Passive. **Free Running** is a movement skill that allows the user to navigate uneven terrain without loss of speed, make sudden direction changes, ascend or descend walls, and more. Effect: no loss of speed when navigating obstacles, grants the user move movement options, passively grants the user 10% increase in DEX and speed, increases 1% every level.

I was okay with this. More than okay, really. It wouldn't be changing any of my plans, but if I had to I could play to my strengths. I had been a bit of a gun enthusiast in my previous life, thanks to my parents raising me around firearms since the time I could hold one—and as with Martial Arts Mastery, things just sort of clicked now. There was one last book I had the stats to learn now, however.

**You have obtained the skill book Earth, Wind, Fire, Water, and More: Mastering the Elements! Would you like to learn this skill?**

**You have learned the skill Elemental Manipulation!**

**Elemental Manipulation** : Level 1. Passive. **Elemental Manipulation** allows for the creation of elemental spells and techniques and imbuing skills, spells, weapons, armor, and other objects with an element. Effect: adds elemental skills and spells to **Skill Creation**, increases efficiency and effect of elemental spells and skill by 10%, decreases elemental spell and skill cost by 10%.

Well, that was kind of vague. Still, if I was reading it and interpreting the knowledge dump correctly, I could now manipulate the elements and create elemental effect spells. I already had a few ideas in mind for spells, the problem was that I had that same problem with specialization still. If I made a hundred different techniques, I would have to split my time and attention by that same amount to make any of them effective. Instead, what I needed was a few very effective spells and skills within each category—things that either worked really well either by itself or with other things, or covered some gap in my skill set, or was simply too valuable to pass up. One such spell, I had already tried to create and hadn't bothered repeating the attempt in a few levels and my Skill Creation and INT were now much higher than they had been. Pulling up mana, I focused on what I wanted…

**You have created the skill Invisibility!**

**Invisibility** : Level 1. Active. **Invisibility** renders the caster undetectable to all means of visual detection. Effect: cloaks the user from sight. Decreases chance of detection by 100%. **Invisibility** can be pierced by individuals with a strong enough Aura to negate the effect or grimm capable of disrupting active Aura effects, level **Invisibility** to reduce the chance of detection or spell disruption. Other means of detection such as sound, scent, and others are unaffected. Cost: 50 MP + 25
I hummed in thought as I turned the wording for that over in my head. 'So, I don't reflect visible light, but things can still hear or smell me. Likewise, I bet RADAR or echolocation would still reflect off me. I'd still have mass and weight, so things that detect those would also pick me up. What about infrared or ultraviolet, though? I'd need specialized equipment to test that.' Still, massively useful. It almost felt unfair—except I wasn't in this to be fair, I was in it to win. Winning, in my case, meant survival and the success of my endeavors.

The question was, what exactly was I trying to achieve here? Becoming a Hunter, obviously, because it sounded like my kind of thing—helping people through application of intense firepower. Other than that… I had no real overarching goal for the end game, beyond becoming stronger and maybe finding someone nice to settle down with—and that was an entire other matter I didn't want to get into at the moment. 'Really, when it comes right down to it, I wasted so much time in my previous life on work I hated, dealing with people I couldn't stand just to keep the lights on and pay off debts… I have no debts here. I don't have a place to live, either, unless I go back to the Arc home—but that can't happen. So, basic necessities first. Nice things after that. Other than that, really, I think I just want to enjoy myself. Yeah, I think that's what I'll do.' I had a moment to think on that before remembering that things were supposed to get bad soon, according to canon—bad people doing bad things, to the detriment of everyone. That would kind of cut into my plans for enjoying myself, so they either had to be stopped or they would have to go—one way or another. Besides… I kind of felt obligated to use what I thought I knew of the future to try and make sure things didn't turn out poorly. I had already started, after all—I'd done the whole 'underworld' thing specifically to find a way to fix that before it became a problem. I could decide what I wanted to do after that once I'd actually accomplished that particular goal.

So decided, I found myself at a temporary loss for where to start. I could try taking care of my housing situation, but the twins probably weren't up yet—and if anyone could find me a place to use as a hideout, it was them. I could do it myself, but contacting them for that would give me an excuse to spend time with them and maybe get laid again. That left either playing around with the Underworld app and trying to find a job, or creating an instant dungeon and going hunting. By now, in addition to empty Illusion Barriers, I could create areas that would attract grimm and various other nasties. The way I understood how that worked, the skill created an artificial bubble like the naturally occurring Illusion Barriers and basically acted like a spirit trap, luring in any nasties in the area and collecting them in one place, where I would then slaughter them mercilessly for fun and profit. This also acted to lower the chances of grimm spawning in an area, by destroying anything that could scrape together enough hate and power to become one. Luckily, I could also lock them to prevent other people from just wandering across them and stumbling in.

As much as I wanted to open an Instant Dungeon up and go play with my new skills, I figured it would be more useful to get started with the Underworld stuff. Opening the app, I selected the Employment section and scanned the available jobs. Jobs were sorted by general type into several different categories. Transportation, Wetwork, Asset Procurement, and Information Technology were the ones with the most available jobs, so I started browsing, beginning with the field I had specialized in in my previous life. The Information Technology section contained several different
classes of jobs, but mostly what it boiled down to was the choice between hacking into some business’ or individual’s systems to gather information, or penetration testing to map out vulnerabilities in such systems to either sell to hackers or back to the company in question for large sums of money. Deciding I didn’t want to get into something so close to my own field of work in that other life after all, I selected another option.

Asset Procurement boiled down to two different types of jobs: thief or spy, and while I had some skills that could be useful in that field I didn’t really want to try breaking into anywhere until I got higher level. Wetwork turned out to have the most available positions, but none of them sounded appealing to me. For instance, Cleaner: someone who cleans and sanitizes accidents. Translation: body disposal and evidence removal. No thank you. Or Hitter, which was pretty simple: assassin for hire. A Fixer was more of an all-rounder: leg breaker, bounty hunter, debt collector. I didn’t have the personality for it, since I didn’t particularly enjoy hurting people unless they’d done something to hurt either myself or those I cared about first. They even had positions for bodyguards and Hunters for hire. Still, it all sounded a bit outside my comfort zone at the moment—if someone needed to hire a Hunter on the black market, that meant they couldn’t hire one openly for some reason. There were a few possible reasons for that, none of them good. I wasn’t up to taking on a suicide mission.

The Shipping and Transportation section is where things started sounding more like something I might enjoy—and about what Hei had suggested I try. A Runner was someone who moved goods and/or money between Point A and Point B, while avoiding detection. That, I guessed, would translate to my Semblance as Mirror’s Edge. A Transporter supplied transportation for either moving large amounts of cargo in secret or moving individuals or groups of people. It seemed that the primary difference between the two boiled down to volume of cargo and method of transportation. I didn’t have a vehicle to my name at the moment, so I selected Runner. The app first asked if I had any alternative means of transportation, which was a ‘no,’ and then said it would enter me into the rotation of active Runners and begin assigning me jobs to choose to take or pass on as soon as they became available. The app also provided a handy chart detailing when the most active hours were for jobs—typically between the hours of 5P.M. and 3A.M, which made sense if most of the people associated with the Underworld tended to do business after the end of the typical business day until the early morning hours, under cover of darkness.

A quest has been created!

Path of the Rogue (part III)

You have made contact with the Underworld and taken on employment. Now is the time to build up your skills and reputation and discover the tools of the trade! Complete 10 deliveries to progress.

Success: 3500 EXP, equipment, increased reputation with the Underworld Faction, Lien to be determined. Failure: employment termination, death*. *Choosing to keep items or money belonging to a customer or the Underworld will cause Fixers or Hitters to be dispatched to recover the items
or money and terminate your employment permanently.

Oh, right. Hei had mentioned that. Well, I'd like to think I had enough impulse control not to steal things I was being paid to deliver. Still, it brought up a problem. I had already created a false identity for use with the Underworld, or at least the beginnings of one. Now, I would need a disguise of some sort.

A quest has been created!

You Can't Go As You Are

Needing to keep your civilian and criminal identities separate in order to prevent trouble from following you home, it might be best if you found some way to disguise yourself. Why don't you try reaching out to your contacts to see if they have any tips?

Success: 1000 EXP, skill(s), a secret identity. Failure: blackmail, arrest, death*, blackmail of the Arc family, potential death(s) of one or more members of the Arc family*. *Depending on severity of failures.

I rolled my eyes after reading the quest details. So, in other words, talk to the twins before accepting any jobs or I'll be found out and either blackmailed, my family blackmailed, arrested, etcetera. I kind of wondered if the Underworld even had anyone available who could pose even a remote threat to my impossibly strong family—then I remembered that Jun was the exception. The little redhead was strong, ridiculously so for her age and getting stronger by the day, but she wasn't to the point where I would trust her to be able to handle herself yet. If I intended to do this, I would have to keep my two lives separate as much as possible. Joan was right—trouble would be more than willing to follow me home, if I screwed up.

Well, I had a few hours to kill before I'd feel comfortable waking the twins, or calling Joan, and going out to commit minor crime without a proper disguise was a bad idea. That really left only one option. Opening up my Skills menu, I selected Create ID and looked over my options and details. The range of the Illusion Barrier the skill created went up as the level did, the default being about 500 meters, but the area created could be modified according to the caster's wishes within that range. The skill primarily created Illusion Barriers using my surroundings as a template—or rather, created a copy of the area around me in between the real world and the spirit world. However, there were already options for environment variables and terrain—for instance, I could make an Instant Dungeon where it was raining, or snowing, or in mid-summer regardless of the weather around me. Likewise, I could already create both a generic 'forest' and 'urban' setting, which, according to the details, each attracted different types of monsters in addition to grimm. The default settings would draw in whatever was nearby, however, which would be good enough.
I spent the next five hours or so killing grimm and zombies—one of the few creatures aside from grimm that would form inside my Instant Dungeons. I had destroyed my wooden practice sword in a single, desperate strike against Joan while the shield had been destroyed in her retaliatory blow, breaking in half upon my impact with the ground. I would have to get replacements—preferably real weapons, as opposed to practice weapons—at least until Joan came through with my Hunter-class gear. Until then, I could spend time leveling my core magic skills, martial arts, and experimenting with Elemental Manipulation. So long as I avoided human trouble, I shouldn't need real weapons…but then, thoughts like that had lead to being unarmed when the first Prowler came calling. No, I wouldn't put off getting them for long.

My first experiment with Elemental Manipulation went over well, except for the stench—burning grimm smell horrible, but burning zombies smell even worse. I practiced adding various elements to my magic attacks, trying to find the best combination of effects. For instance, adding wind, fire, or lightning to Rasengan would increase its penetration and damage double or more—it was hard to measure when it one-shot whatever I threw it at, since I hadn't run across any mini-boss or boss level monsters since the Prowler.

AP Round was easier to judge the effects of Elemental Manipulation. Fire caused anything hit with it to burn—actually inflicting a **Burn** and **Panic** status—and do damage over time. Electricity electrocuted and paralyzed enemies, with similarly named status effects. Earth and Water added those elements to the skill as a sort of core to the round that exploded on contact and did fragmentation damage to both the target and surrounding targets. Wind, on the other hand… Wind increased velocity and penetration, allowing my AP Rounds to punch straight through most targets. Sometimes, those rounds detonated in an explosion of wind inside the target, other times they penetrated fully and hit the next target behind the first one before hitting and detonating. Sometimes, if I crit, the rounds would punch through several targets at the same time.

Adding an element to a physical attack had results of varying success. Fire would, again, do burning damage and potentially ignite the target. Lightning still shocked and paralyzed, which was nice for holding something in place and pummeling the crap out of it. Wind increased my attack speed by a lot, which combined with my passive and active bonuses to DEX and Haste… well, it was fast and good for burst damage. Decent for unarmed damage, but with a sword in my hand it would be absolutely lethal. Results with Earth and Water were… odd, to say the least. Unlike Fire, Lightning, or Wind those two actually added physical matter of that element to the attack, either extending reach or coating the part of the limb making the strike. Water attacks could extend my reach a bit while Earth attacks would add the mass and hardness of the earth I pulled up for the attack to the damage and impact and tended to toss opponents around. My jaw had dropped a little the first time I caught a Beowolf in the head with an Earth-elemental spinning roundhouse kick… and its skull had promptly caved in around my foot like it'd been hit with a wrecking ball, or a mace.

There were other elements, I knew—Ice, Metal, Shadow, Gravity, and many, many others. Any element you could create with Dust, you could use with magic. For now, though, I decided to focus on figuring out the most useful and try the others later to see if they added any interesting effects—which meant I would be dropping Water entirely unless it came up situationally, and using Earth
mostly to increase my ranged damage or to physically toss enemies around, or use it to attempt to create some sort of skin-level defense under my shields. Without proper weapons, I was unable to test the effects of adding an element to those attacks, so I was interested to see what would happen—especially with bullets. Multiple-effect Dust rounds may just be a thing with Elemental Manipulation. It was something to test later. Thankfully, raw mana manipulation in the manner I'd been using it all still counted towards leveling the Elemental Manipulation without creating multiple other skills, so even time spent playing with things that may not work was time well spent. It would be annoying if every time I threw a punch or kick, my Semblance decided to add a new, element-specific, skill which only leveled if I used that particular skill.

By the time noon rolled around, I had gone through many grimm and zombies—enough to gain two levels. At 150 EXP per level 10 zombie and 350 EXP per level 10 grimm, I was not surprised to advance that fast. Individually, they weren't worth much experience. However, they tended to come in groups of anywhere from three to ten or more at a time. I'd been 2050 EXP into level 10 from quests to begin with, leaving me with 7950 EXP to next level for a total of 10k EXP to get to level 11. To get from level 11 to level 12 required an additional 11k EXP. At between 150 and 350 experience per monster… I could have killed 127 zombies or 55 beowolves—though, in reality, it was a mixture of both, heavy on the zombies. I didn't mind, though—killing an endless stream of enemies was the sort of zen-level thing I was used to from years spent playing games in another life that allowed me time to decompress, think, and sort through things. The fact that they were real just made it even more fun than mindlessly killing them. There is nothing quite like feeling a punch or kick smash into something and watching it implode under the force of the blow.

A level 10 beowolf had, on average, 1225 HP. Depending on what I was using to kill them, I could easily one-shot one. Unarmed, Aura Strike at level 6 would do 596 damage against a beowolf, less against a zombie due to Favored Enemy: Grimm (level 2, 3 by the time I was finished). However, with Martial Arts, every strike was an Aura Strike, and with Elemental Manipulation like Earth backing my blows up with more than double the damage due to mass and force… Yeah. Head-imploding one-shot hits. Mana Bolt at level 5 would do around 930 damage, plus status effects, to a grimm. Basic Rasengan (level 5) would do about 2219 against anything, or 2884 against grimm—meaning it was an easy one-hit kill. AP Round (level 5) did 1377 damage to everything that wasn't a grimm and 1790 to grimm. However, AP Round added an additional round every other level, so at level 5 (which it had been at against Joan) it had three rounds, each with the same damage.

Another way of putting that would be to say that it effectively tripled my damage, or doubled my base damage for AP Round every other level and gave me the ability to hit more targets per cast if I wanted to split my attacks. So, in reality, AP Round did more like 4131 damage per cast against anything that wasn't a grimm and 5371 against grimm specifically. That wasn't even factoring in what happened when I managed to sneak up on something—with the stacking bonus from Favored Enemy: Grimm and Sneak Attack, AP Round's damage jumped to 11010. Yeah, 11k. I went back and did the math on that to make sure the system wasn't screwing with me. It wasn't. 3670 damage per round, three rounds per cast. And I could cast it as fast as I could chant—about 1.5 seconds per cast to get out “AP Round” in a way the system understood. Throwing Wind manipulation in sent the damage into the ‘unmeasurable against trash mobs’ category, but if it was like Earth manipulation with my physical blows, then the damage was at least doubled.
Destroying my Instant Dungeon after collecting my loot (more potions, 5450 Lien, dust of various grades and colors, and a few other odds and ends including bits and pieces of zombies and grimm), I received a new notification.

You have successfully purged the surrounding area of malignant spirits seeking to enter the world as grimm! Until more enter the area, this area will be hunted out and creating new Instant Dungeons will not draw in more spirits. Move on to a new area to hunt more malignant spirits!

Area Purge Success!

Effects: Grimm will not spawn in this area for a period of 48 hours depending on local negativity, Illusion Barriers will no longer form naturally.

So, if I opened up an Instant Dungeon, I could temporarily clear an area of grimm and other nasties for a while, depending on… local negativity, whatever that meant. For the next two days, this area would be safer for normal people to wander—more so even than Vale's partial Sanctified status granted. This implied a couple of things to me. Firstly, Hunters were responsible for hunting down and killing grimm in an area after they had already spawned, which would keep them cleared up for a while whereas I could kill them before they started causing problems. Secondly, there must be some way to intentionally Sanctify a place to prevent grimm from spawning for longer or at all so long as the sanctification was maintained. Thirdly, if I killed grimm and other things before they made it to the real world, it would take the spirits and concentrated negative emotions that made them longer to gather up and breach the barrier between the spirit world and the real world. And finally, I couldn't just sit in one place and farm all day—once I cleared a place, I'd have to move on to another area.

Opening my map, I noticed some new additions. The city of Vale was now subdivided further, beyond its Districts. Most of the map was overlaid with a faint red tinge. Some areas were less or more red, while a few others were completely blue. Tapping on one of these blue areas showed it to be an area under the effects of a full Sanctify effect, meaning Illusion Barriers would not form naturally there and grimm would not spawn and would tend to avoid wandering into the area. The red areas were those under various percentages of sanctification, the darker the red the less sanctified the area. The area immediately around me for about a city block was a light blue with no red, and tapping the overlay showed a statistic labeled as 'Spirit Density' at 0%. Closing my map, I dug through options and applied the same filters to my minimap, so I could have an idea how safe my immediate surroundings were.

Unable to put it off any longer, I took out my scroll and began making calls. The first was to the twins, to see if they could find me suitable living accommodations. That done, I made the call I had been dreading. The scroll picked up before it had finished ringing the first time.
“You weren't here when I woke up,” Joan deadpanned. Her tone was carefully neutral, neither accusatory nor angry, but I could tell she was not amused.

I chuckled, pulling on my charisma and hoping it carried through over the scroll. “Yeah, about that… I can't stay there any more.”

“What.” I could almost picture the flat, 'you have got to be kidding me,' expression that had to be on her face at the moment.

I rolled my eyes. “Just listen and think about it a minute. What happens if Jun finds out? What about the rest of our siblings? Or our parents?” I paused, letting that sink in a moment, before asking, “On a scale of 1 to 10, how unusual would you say our relationship is compared to others?”

After several moments of silence, almost enough that I thought she wasn't going to answer, she finally sighed. “Seven. You know, I hate it when you're right?”

“I know,” I agreed. “So, if we're going to keep doing whatever this is between us, we're going to have to be kind of circumspect about it—right?”

“For now,” she agreed, quietly. “Are you ashamed of me?”

And insecurity rears its ugly head. With the familiarity of long practice, I set about beating back the beast. “You're asking me if I'm ashamed of the strongest woman I know?”

“You know what I meant,” she denied, though after a moment added, “Though by all means, feel free to continue complimenting me. Praise me, praise me.”

“Yes, well, it's an unfair question and you know it, so I'm not going to justify it with an answer. How about this, instead? I've got money, I can make more pretty easily. I'll get a place here, in town—somewhere I can stay that will keep any heat I pull doing my new job away from you and the others. You can visit whenever you want. How does that sound?”

She hummed, her unease, worry, and anger seeming to evaporate. “I suppose it's the best answer to the problem at hand. I have to be here with Jun when she's home… but she has school between 8A.M. and 3P.M.. I'll be free between those hours…”
That would be fine, but between grinding and the twins, I might not have as much time as she was hoping. “That would be okay, just call first. I'm considering taking the twins up on their offer and I don't think anyone would appreciate being interrupted. Also, I'll be doing some leveling and grinding out skills, which will be taking up a large portion of my time.”

“That's fine,” she allowed. “I've waited this long, after all.” After a moment, her tone changed to something close to teasing. “So, when can I see the new place?”

Laughing, I shook my head, though she wouldn't see it. “After I do. I don't have one yet. I'll let you know when I do.”

“I'll hold you to that.”

My scroll buzzed, saving me from some awkwardness. Exchanging quick goodbyes, I disconnected one call and picked up the other. “Took you long enough to answer.”

“Hello again, Melanie,” I greeted politely, knowing she was trying to get a rise out of me. “Got something already?”

She hemmed quietly before I heard the scroll change hands. “We may have something,” Miltia said, by way of greeting.

“I gathered that much. What's the problem?” I asked, and the twin gave a quiet sigh.

“You're not superstitious, are you?”

I blinked, running that back again to make sure I had parsed it properly. “No… why?”

“I'm sending you directions. Meet us there, say in half an hour?” she asked, apparently reluctant to discuss it over the scroll.

I found myself rolling my eyes again before answering. “Sure, why not? See you soon.”
“This is the master bedroom, with a small walk-in closet and through there is the private bath,” the landlord finished, trying and failing not to appear nervous, even without Observe giving him away.

The apartment was nice—very nice, really, at least for this part of town. It was less of an apartment and more of a penthouse, taking up a full half of the top floor of the apartment building. The square footage was larger than my entire duplex back where I'd come from—far more room than I would ever take up by myself. Situated on the very north western edge of the Residential District, it overlooked the channel that flowed inland from the ocean, which was used primarily for shipping. The view was nice, I'll admit, with large windows looking out over the Commercial District as the room itself faced northward. At night, I imagined the district lit up with all the holographic street lights and neon signs, along with all the boats on the water dividing the two districts. Finally, I asked, “How much?”

“Two thousand,” the landlord opened negotiations, absently licking his parched lips. The man himself was in his fifties, balding, and had gotten a bit wide around the middle. He also reeked like a pack of cigarettes and a case of beer a day.

I called on my charisma and simply looked at him. Stared, really.

A skill has been created through a special action!

**Intimidate**: Level 1. Active. Something about you just seems to unnerve people, animals, and even monsters at times, causing them to become shaken or fearful and cowing them into submission. 
Effect: target must make a Will save against your CHA modifier or be intimidated or Shaken depending on the severity of the intimidation. Intimidated targets are more willing to comply with even unreasonable demands. Shaken targets take penalties to attack, defense, and all saves.
Duration: 5 minutes. Level up Intimidate to increase its effect and duration.

I very carefully did not smirk, laugh, or otherwise give away the game. No, I kept my stare perfectly flat as I regarded the landlord. A moment later, the skill leveled and he stuttered, “F-fifteen hundred?”

“What's wrong with it?” I asked, shooting my gaze to where the twins stood behind him. Thankfully, they took their cue beautifully.

Melanie and Miltia moved around the landlord and came to stand at either side of me. The white-clad twin shot the landlord a flat glare. “It's haunted.”
“If you believe that sort of thing,” Miltia amended, regarding me as opposed to the landlord. “The last tenant was a Huntress who died under… suspect circumstances.”

“Right here, in fact, around this time last year,” Melanie continued. “There are a lot of old superstitions about people dying unclean deaths and coming back as grimm—Hunters, especially.”

“It makes sense when you think about it. After all, Hunters spend their lives fighting grimm—the last thing they would want is to become the thing they've been fighting,” Miltia finished.

Looking between the twins, I shook my head. “Sorry, girls. It just seems too dangerous.”

As we began walking for the door, the landlord’s resolve broke. “Wait! Please. How… how does one thousand… no, eight-fifty sound?”

I ignored him, continuing on in my ‘worrying,’ seemingly oblivious. “In fact, we should probably start looking for somewhere else to move you into. I don’t think the building is safe, any more. We should probably see if we can convince the other residents of the danger as well—wouldn’t want anyone waking up to a grimm in their face…”

“Okay, okay. Five hundred. It's practically giving the place away though,” he grumbled.

I turned to regard him with a flat look. “As it so happens, I'm going to be attending Beacon starting soon. I'm sure we could work something out. I could make sure nothing bad gets in. Girls, how much do Hunters typically get paid for securing an area?”

“Depends on the area,” Melanie hummed.

Miltia did some quick figures before answering, “For a place of this size? About sixteen hundred a month if it's a guaranteed thing. There are wards that have to be laid down using Dust, rituals to empower them with Aura. That would cover cost of materials and time, at least. The biggest problem is in devising the proper ward scheme to keep grimm from forming, or entering the building. Upkeep, after you've empowered it, just takes some Aura and occasional reapplication of Dust.”

“We have those,” the landlord admitted, finally. “The previous tenant left her notes among her
belongings. I... might have kept them, just in case.”

“In case you ever suckered another Hunter in, who was dumb enough not to know how much his services were worth?” Melanie asked, acid dripping from her tone. “And when are you going to fix the water heater?! I'm getting tired of cold showers!”

“I'll lay down new wards over the building and keep them maintained. In exchange...” I trailed off, wanting him to say it.

“I will allow you the use of the apartment in payment for your services,” he finally capitulated.

I nodded. “Get me those books. I'll start work on the wards tonight. And fix the water heater, today. The first cold shower I take, I will find a way to exclude your room from the ward scheme.”

The landlord walked out, grumbling the entire way. Making sure the door was locked behind him, I turned to the twins with a grin. “Well, that was a thing.”

“Did we do good?” Miltia asked, stepping in close and molding herself to my side.

Mussing her hair fondly, I nodded. “You two did great.”

“So, does that mean you've decided?” Melanie asked cautiously.

Sighing, I moved towards the couch I assume was either left over from the previous tenant or had been originally furnished with the apartment. Passing that, I took the arm chair across from it—a thick, overstuffed, leather affair that reclined. Sitting down, I gestured for the twins to take a seat on the couch so I could look at them without having to shift my head back and forth, because they would surely sit one to either side of me if I gave them the opportunity. “I have. But if we do this, there have to be conditions.”

“Name them,” Miltia said, sounding unsurprised as she sat beside her twin.

“First and foremost, I have to have your loyalty—two hundred percent,” I began, getting a pair of nods in agreement. “Not Hei, not anyone else, me.”
“We expected that,” Melanie agreed. “We want the same.”

Nodding, Miltia added, “And support.”

I frowned. I wouldn’t be anyone’s meal ticket, but I’d hear them out. I’d never been religious in my previous life and I was still undecided here, but there was some sense in certain things. You don’t have to be religious to know good sense when you hear it. I’d learned Proverbs 6:26 well: *for by means of a whorish woman, a man is brought to a piece of bread.* The modern-day translation basically read: do not let a woman reduce you into her own personal ATM. Only one had ever tried and that ended poorly, for her. “What kind of support, exactly?”

Seeing where I was going the girls shook their heads. “Not money. We don’t expect you to pay our way for us. Just, well…”

“The kind of support one would normally expect in any relationship. Emotional, moral, physical, and so on,” Miltia clarified for her sister. “Mutually, of course. We’re not selfish. We *are* greedy, but relationships are about give and take. Take support, give support in return.”

I nodded. “That’s kind of an unspoken given in a relationship, but if you want it explicitly in the rules I can agree to that. Secondly, any secrets I confide with you stay between us unless I say otherwise.”

“Understandable,” Miltia agreed, Melanie nodded.

“Likewise,” the white-clad twin added.

“I don’t really have anything else at the moment,” I admitted. “I suppose we can figure things out as we go. Is there anything you two want?”

The twins shared a look before Melanie began. “Veto rights.”

“Rather, we want to meet any other girls who want in and have the right to object without fear of being dropped,” Miltia clarified.
Nodding, Melanie added, “We don’t want someone who doesn’t add anything of value to the group. Either skill, or brains—”

“Or someone lovable or adorable enough to keep around for that,” Miltia finished. “This probably sounds bad, but we don’t like the idea of having… um…”

“Dead weight,” Melanie deadpanned.

The red-clad twin nodded. “Yes. That.”

Palming my face, I regarded the twins with a flat expression. “Just how many women do you think I plan to add to this… whatever?”

The twins turned away and shared a quick, whispered conversation complete with gesticulations. After about a minute, they turned to me and answered simultaneously, “Seven.”

I burst out laughing. I couldn't help it, really. “What kind of person do you take me for? Do I seem the kind of guy who just seeks out women to screw?”

“It's not that,” Miltia denied. “It's just, well…”

It was the more outspoken twin who summed up her sister's thoughts. “You're the kind of guy women seek out.” She ignored my flat 'what' and continued. “Your Aura has been active the entire time we've known you and you don't even seem to notice. In the span of twelve hours, between when we last saw you and now, you've had a twenty-five percent increase in power—at least. That kind of growth in that short a time is almost unheard of.”

“You can tell that?” I asked, frowning.

Miltia nodded. “It's in your Aura. That sort of power tends to draw those sensitive to it in. Power attracts power. You could suppress your Aura—in fact, you should learn how to do so while still using it for stealth—but the moment you let it go again it would be like blood in a tank full of sharks. Any Huntress worth her salt will sense it and if they're unattached, there's nothing stopping them from pursuing you.”
“What if I don't want seven women?” I sighed, at this point beyond the unreal turn the conversation had taken. 'Accept it and move on. Accept it and move on.’

The twins shared another look. “Not seven,” Miltia shook her head.

“Seven more,” Melanie finished.

“Nine.” They nodded. “Women. At the same time. Nine of them.” They nodded again. “No. Nun-uh. Nope. Ain't happening. There is no possible way to juggle that clusterfuck in such a way that someone doesn't get hurt.” I just wanted one! One loyal, loving woman to settle down and maybe start a family with at some point in the far flung future. I was willing to settle on a lot of other things, but those were my two requirements—loyalty and love. Aside from that, there was that old parable of never letting your reach exceed your grasp. And all of that is before going right back into the absolutely fucked up situation that is being in someone else's body. I was wearing someone else's face. I could never tell anyone the entire truth—not only would they not believe me, if they did there was a high likelihood I'd wind up in a lab somewhere or on the business end of another Hunter's weapon. Yes, I was going to have to get over that eventually just like the rest of my hangups, but I didn't see it going anywhere for a while—I was still new to Remnant and there was still the possibility of being able to recover Jaune's memories, somehow, which I had yet to attempt...

“Actually...” Melanie began.

“There is,” Miltia finished.

I rolled my eyes. “Right. And how do you propose I do that?”

The twins frowned and, after another shared glance, Miltia asked, “What school did you go to again?”

Oh. Of course. It would be one of those things I didn't know, not being a native… to Remnant. “Okay, before we go any further down this rabbit hole, there are some things about me you should probably know.” They nodded, gesturing me to continue and I ran a hand through my hair in exasperation before beginning. “Before all this started, I guess I was just a normal guy.

Melanie snorted and I looked up to see her covering her mouth and shaking her head. Miltia, beside her, raised an eyebrow. “Jaune, everyone in Vale has heard of your family. A lot of people outside of Vale know of the Arc family. Your grandfather's statue is in the city center and Beacon. I hate to put
“There was never any hope of 'normal' for you,” Melanie finished.

“Right,” I deadpanned. “As normal as a guy with my background could be.” The twins nodded and I continued. “Two… three days ago I woke up in the hospital. I didn't know who I was, where I was from, and so on. I don't remember classes, or even where I went to class. I've picked up a lot from Joan over the past few days, but there are huge gaps of things I just don't know. My Semblance helps, but not much.”

Melanie frowned, regarding her sister for a moment before slowly admitting, “I want to call bullshit, but… It's possible, maybe. Weirder things have happened.”

“Agreed,” Miltia nodded. “I'm willing to give you the benefit of the doubt and take your word on it. What is your Semblance, anyway?”

There were reasons to keep it under wraps, but at this point the twins would be more useful to me, and me to them, if they were in on it. I was used to playing my campaigns like an overly paranoid bastard looking for betrayal from everyone and ambushes around every corner—and I realized that was bleeding over here. Maybe it would be better to try trusting someone, for a change? Besides, they were probably one slip-up away from figuring it out anyway, given what they'd already logic'd out. I shrugged and answered. “The world around me is a video game. I am a video game character. I have HP and MP, stats, and skills. I have an inventory and objects in it are game items. I take quests, earn experience, and level up. I can create new skills or learn them from skill books. In between when I left you last night and when we met this morning, I gained three levels from level 9 to level 12—one of those from fighting Joan and completing a quest, the other two by creating an Instant Dungeon and killing grimm and other creatures for a few hours.”

The twins blinked, collectively. Sharing another look, they both turned back and responded with, “Bullshit.”

“Inventory,” I said aloud, then reached in and pulled out a potion before tossing it across the distance that separated us, where Melanie caught it.

“Okay, but that doesn't prove—” she began, and I cut her off.

“Party.”
What would you like to name your party?

I smirked. “Absolute bullshit.” Both twins jerked back suddenly at a window appearing before each of them.

_Jaune Arc, 'The Gamer,' has invited you to the party 'absolute bullshit!' Would you like to join this party?

Hesitantly, they reached out and tapped 'yes.' The instant they did, their eyes both focused on the text suddenly visible above my head. “What's it say?”

“The Strategist, Jaune Arc, level 12,” Miltia read off. She turned to her twin at the same time Melanie turned to view her. “Snow White, Melanie Malachite, level 22.”

“Rose Red, Miltiades 'Miltia' Malachite, level 22,” Melanie read off. She turned to regard me with a smirk. “Our numbers are bigger.”

I had already pulled up detailed information on both of them, however, now that I had access to it. “No, they're not,” I denied. “I have more passives. Your level is higher, yes. You've also got more skill points allocated. I have lower base stats but a ridiculous number of passive skills that increase those stats. I could spank you both.”

“Is that a threat?” Melanie baited.

Miltia looked eager as she finished, “Or a promise?”

I palmed my face. “You two, I swear. One track minds,” I sighed. “So, do you believe me now?”

The twins nodded. “Seeing is believing.”

“Dismiss party,” I ordered, and the party dismissed. “So yeah, I don't know shit about the specifics of Remnant. I know some general things, I know things like math, reading, writing, language
obviously. I just… see things differently now.”

The twins hummed and Miltia asked, “You said you spent the morning killing grimm?” I nodded. “If
your life is a video game, did you get any drops?”

I laughed, nodding. “Yeah, drops are a thing. Weirdly enough, grimm drop money. I got about 5000
Lien this morning off of what I killed.”

The twins' eyes went wide. “How fast can you kill them?” Melanie asked.

“Pretty fast,” I admitted. “The problem is, once I clear an area it'll stay hunted out for a while—the
area I hunted this morning will take two days before there are likely to be any more grimm or
anything else there.”

“How many areas are there in Vale?” Miltia asked, and I could see her already running the numbers
in her head.

Opening my map, I gave up counting and simply said, “A lot. It seems to be divided by city blocks,
so the individual territories are uneven, but you get the idea. Some have higher grimm density than
others. I could patrol the city full time and probably not run out of things to kill.”

Sharing yet another look, the twins stated, “We're in.”

“You're in, huh?” They nodded and I shook my head. “There's one more thing. You may change
your minds after you hear. There is already someone I've kind of… made commitments to.” Seeing I
had their attention, I said, “The 'blonde bimbo' you got along so well with last night.”

“Your… sister?” the twins stereoed slowly. “You're going to have to explain,” Melanie demanded.

“It's complicated, but I suppose…” And so, explain I did.

At the end of it, they swapped another look and collectively sighed. “Well, you're right. That's…”
Miltia had no polite way of rephrasing what her more brusque twin wanted to say, and it showed. “Absolutely beyond fucked up. I mean, I understand the situation but it's still weird.”

“I know, right?” I chuckled—a mirthless, self-depreciating thing. “Are you going to be okay with that?”

Melanie slowly palmed her face and nodded, after sharing a long look with Miltia. Some sort of silent conversation passed between them in that moment, but I had no idea what. “It's fucked, but it's none of our business, really. Aside from being bat-crap crazy, she's also terrifyingly strong—so even if we could protest, we wouldn't. It's a matter of being too valuable to waste.”

“Joan is not 'bat-crap crazy,'” I denied, annoyance slipping into my voice. “On a scale of 1 to 10, 1 being normal and 10 being bat-crap crazy, she's a solid 5, maybe a 6—which is 'sack of cats crazy.' It's a functional kind of crazy. Aside from her... fixation she is very much normal, other than being 'terrifyingly strong' as you put it.”

“What my sister meant to say was,” Miltia began, before pausing and sighing, then shaking her head. “No, she said it right. Did you know your siblings and parents are kind of well known in certain circles? Not as popular as, say, Pyrrha Nikos, but around Vale they're some of the highest-ranked Hunters around. There are better, yeah, but not many. So, having the strongest Arc sister on our side—regardless of her level of crazy so long as it's functional—is a good thing. We've known of your sister since before we met Hei—they were on the same team, before he took over The Club and took us on as enforcers. He doesn't keep any photos in his office, or talk about her much—or his team, in general. We'd never seen her before last night, but we've known her reputation for a while.”

“She's kind of a badass,” Melanie admitted, grudgingly.

I hadn't known Hei had gone to a Hunter school, let alone been on a team of any sort. Curious, I asked, “What was the team?”

The twins shrugged. “SHJN—Shogun, supposedly. No idea what happened to the other two team members. Like I said, Hei doesn't talk about them much.”

“That aside,” Melanie dismissed, “We still want in. Do we have a deal?”

I laughed. “Sure. Why not? If you're willing to deal with all of that, I'm not going to stop you.”
“Great!” Miltia cheered, jumping up from the couch and hopping into my lap on my left, joined a moment later by Melanie on my right. “So, does this mean we can break in the bed now?”

*Quest Romancing Remnant: Twins, Basil. Twins! completed!*

*You gain 10000 EXP!*

*You have gained love interests: The Malachite Twins.*

*A quest has been updated!*

*Romancing Remnant: Twins (part deux) has been unlocked!*

*You have gained the Malachite Twins as love interests. Get closer to the twins and become more than just 'love interests.'*

*Success: to be determined. Failure: to be determined. Duration: ongoing.*

*A quest has been updated!*

*Romancing Remnant: The Harem Route had been unlocked!*

Palming my face, I groaned at the quest creation notification and blindly stabbed the 'accept' button until it went away. When I removed my hand, I found both twins regarding me with looks of confusion tinged with amusement. “My Semblance agrees with you. It also tends to have a crappy sense of humor and thinks trolling me is amusing, so I'm going to take what it says with a grain of salt.”

“Agrees about…?” Melanie prompted, one eyebrow arching upwards in question.

I rolled my eyes. Of course they would want to know what they were right about—it was the way of women everywhere. “The number of other women in whatever this thing is.”
Miltia grinned, reaching out and patting my head, clearly teasing. “Yes, I'm sure it will be a great burden to you—having to make love to and produce offspring with so many beautiful women. But you may as well call a spade a spade—it's a harem.”

“Bite me,” I grunted, pointing at her and nearly putting my finger in her face. A moment later, I hissed half in pain, half in pleasure as the girl snatched my arm and latched her lips onto my wrist, and bit—not hard enough to break the skin, but enough that it would have left a mark without my Aura or HP regen. A shiver ran what felt like from head to toe as the other twin latched on similarly to the side of my neck. Locking eyes with Miltia, I resisted the urge to groan as I got out, “I didn't mean literally.”

“Mm?” she hummed, and I felt her lips form into a smirk against my wrist.

Not wanting the twins to keep me on the back foot so to speak, I reached out to her hip with my free hand and used her grip on my other to pull her closer. A twist of my wrist broke her grip and I reached over and repeated the move with Melanie, breaking her lip-lock with my neck with a wet 'pop!' and drawing a startled squeak out of her. My hands rested on their inner left and right thighs respectively where they sat in my lap, enough pressure there to tease as I pointed out, “Keep this up and we're not going to make it to the bed.”

The twins shared a look before turning two pairs of green eyes on me. “We're fine with the chair,” Melanie announced.

“Or the couch,” Miltia agreed.

“Or the floor,” they synced, grinning, as they each took one of my hands in their own and pulled them the rest of the way up their thighs, where my fingers met with their warm, panty-covered flesh. The panties in question were soft cotton and already quite damp, and they grew more so as I set my fingers to exploring, eliciting a pair of quiet sighs from the girls.

You have created the skill *Dual Wield!*

“Oh goddamnit,” I groaned, drawing the twins' attention to where I was glaring at something they couldn't see. “I told you it thinks it's being funny when it does shit like this,” I grumbled at their amused looks. Right. Fuck it. I was not giving it the satisfaction of interrupting again. Dismissing the message, I renewed my teasing exploration of the twins, to enthusiastic sounds on their part.
While the twins enjoyed the petting, I knew the position wasn't great. With one girl on my lap, it wouldn't have been an issue—I would have been free to use either or both hands. Sitting as they were, mostly on top of my upper thighs and facing each other with their legs dangling down and twining together in the space I'd made between my own to give them both room, my hands' range of motion was limited from the front. Moving to rectify that, I removed my hands to whimpers of disappointment from the girls before taking a moment to adjust their skirts for what I had in mind. Once their clothes were situated so they wouldn't get in the way, I slipped both hands down the back of their panties, over and past smooth ass cheeks to stroke their bare flesh directly from behind—my fingers slipping back and forth over their slightly puffy outer lips, now thoroughly soaked from their excitement and my earlier attention, and drawing more sounds of contentment from them.

Parting their outer lips, I sought out their clits and began slowly tracing circles around them with my index fingers while still using my other fingers to stroke what I could reach. Judging by the way the twins squirmed in my lap, I'd say they enjoyed it. A smirk crossed my lips as I enacted phase two of my plan, shifting my thighs to bring them closer together and applying pressure to their lower backs where my forearms were to encourage them to lean forward a bit. They both reacted as I'd hoped, arms snaking out and wrapping around each other as their lips met in what I was coming to realize was a very familiar routine for them as I enjoyed the show. Their hips began grinding against my thighs in a slow rhythm and I decided to escalate things a bit, shifting my hands and spreading their lips enough to slip my index and middle fingers into their tight, wet heat and using my thumb to stroke back and forth over their clits while slowly stroking my fingers inside them.

The reaction was immediate as both Malachite twins moaned into each other's mouth and their hands began roaming. I noticed that their movements seemed oddly mirrored as they kissed and fondled each other, their hands and fingers in the same places on each other and moving in the same way—even their Auras had synced up to the point I couldn't tell them apart any more without my Semblance labeling them. Putting the phenomena aside for later study, I began slowly pumping my fingers in and out, coaxing small, wet sounds out of them with each upward thrust. Their petting of each other became more frantic as hands slipped under dresses and pulled down bras and fingers sought out nipples.

A bit of shifting and reclining on my part brought them both to lean against my chest, where they broke off from kissing each other to trade off exchanging kisses, licks, and nips with me. Melanie's lips met mine, her tongue darting out to explore as my own met hers while, beside her, Miltia interspersed kisses and small nips on my neck. After a moment, I broke the kiss with Melanie and turned to meet Miltia's lips, repeating the process, all the while continuing my stroking and pumping, coaxing an increasing flow of nectar from them. When I felt they were ready and my fingers were thoroughly soaked, I timed my slow pumping in and out to use a third finger on each of them. They latched onto me at that, arms wrapping around my neck and back as they began grinding furiously against my fingers. I could feel them clenching around my fingers and knew they were close to coming. When I felt the time was right, I removed my fingers and began stroking their clits again—circling, rubbing, and squeezing them in a technique I'd had a few years practicing to improve. They buried their heads against my chest, fists clenching my shirt as their grinding broke down into shaking, moaning simultaneous orgasm.
I spent a few moments more slowly rubbing them, letting them down gently as they plateaued, eventually stopping entirely as their slow rocking in my palms came to a halt. Two sets of green eyes looked up from my chest, locking with mine for several long moments—and I almost mistook it for a trick of the light, but no, both sets of eyes were lit faintly by an eerie green light—before they demanded, in one voice, “Take me now.”

I blinked for a moment, idly wondering if I was seeing what I thought I was seeing, before shrugging it off and directing them to get up. They took a moment to strip, during which time I decided on how to pull off what I wanted, before I directed them to the couch with a grin as soon as the last of their clothes had hit the floor. Taking Melanie by the hips, I directed her to kneel on the couch with her legs spread, using the arm of the couch for support. Miltia, I directed to lay face up on the couch and put her head between Melanie’s legs. The twins got the idea immediately, Miltia's hands coming up to take her sister's hips and draw her mound down onto her mouth, which she met with an enthusiastic kiss, setting Melanie to squirming. Kneeling beside the couch, I shifted Miltia's hips and lifted her legs up onto my shoulders, taking a moment to appreciate the beauty in my arms and spread out before me. The twins were lithe and small, young and supple, all flawlessly pale skin and equally bare below the waist.

Their mounds were both shaved smooth, the flesh there neatly symmetrical as opposed to what would be called ‘beef curtains’ on Earth. Even the scent of their arousal and their taste was appealing, compared to what I had dealt with in that other life. With a smug grin I do ve in, my tongue darting out and running along Miltia's outer lips from bottom to top, ending with a long, slow lick that caused her hips to jerk up a bit in my hands before repeating it and applying enough pressure to force my tongue between her lips. I didn't know if it was something they ate or bathed with, some quirk of Aura, or something unique to Remnant but they tasted and smelled like tart, green apples. I couldn't really compare however, seeing as I had yet to sample Joan.

I put my fingers back to work, curling them inside her and as I pumped them slowly, focusing my attention on her clit for a moment with my lips, tongue, and teeth. A muffled gasp sounded from somewhere between Melanie’s thighs, echoed by the more dominant twin herself as Miltia mimicked my actions with her sister. Miltia's hips jerked as she tried to grind herself on my face, but an arm across her waist kept them down and kept her movements manageable. Having already come recently, they were both still primed and it didn't take long to bring Miltia off, drawing a long, low moan from her lips that was echoed by her sister above her. Instead of giving them time to come down, I took a moment to unequip my clothes and took Melanie's hips, pulling her down on top of Miltia so they were lying face to face before lifting her ass enough to get a good angle.

I was just spreading Melanie's lower lips with the head of my cock when the sound of keys caught my attention, drawing my eyes up to the door as the lock slid open and the burly, hairy, stinking form of the landlord took two steps inside before his brain caught up to his eyes, which couldn't decide whether to lock onto mine or Melanie's over the back of the couch. I couldn't decide whether to be mortified or pissed as I blushed. He paused, foot halfway raised for another step, as he began to pale. The trio of Wind element AP Rounds spinning up to a fast orbit in my palm may have had something to do with that as I settled on pissed, or it could have been the twins' Aura bleeding green into the visible spectrum as I heard Melanie and Miltia both growl below me as it seemed they
had as well.

“I’ll just leave this here!” he yelped, throwing the box down and beating a hasty retreat, closing the door behind him.

“That,” Melanie began as their Aura began to die down.

“Cockblock,” Miltia finished, deadpan.
Having someone knock at my front door and proceed to let themselves in when we were in the middle of breaking in the living room furniture was one of the most simultaneously mortifying and frustrating experiences I'd ever had, in either life. Luckily, angles from the door and the couch prevented the landlord from seeing anything and likely keeling over—or getting maimed or blasted, depending on who got an attack off first. Thankfully, he did the sensible thing of dropping the box of books and documents on the floor beside the door and beating a hasty retreat.

“Right, we're changing the locks,” I groaned as the twins and I shared a mortified look.

“Agreed,” they chirped.

Frowning, I looked down to regard the twins. “I'm not the only one suddenly feeling put off by seeing that, right?”

“Nope. He's kind of gross,” Melanie agreed.

From beneath her twin, Miltia nodded. “It's disappointing, but we can always pick up again later.”

It seemed we were all in agreement that the mood had been thoroughly wrecked, for the moment so I went to investigate the box the landlord had brought. Digging through it, I found some particularly interesting material. It seemed that whoever had rented this place out before—a Huntress named Sanguine—had put an emphasis on sealing, warding, and sigils in addition to a specific form of crafting that, near as I could tell, functioned like enchanting by adding Dust to clothing, weapons, armor, and so forth in specific patterns to achieve certain results.
'Sealing' and 'Warding' turned out to be two branches of the same field of magic—well, Dust and Auric manipulation as the people of Remnant would put it. My Semblance treated it like magic and called it as such, however—and maybe what I did really was different enough from the natives to deserve its own name. The act of sealing something was an effort to keep the results contained within some boundary, while the act of warding something was an effort to remove something or prohibit it from within a boundary. My Semblance, however, decided it would be amusing to screw with my head the moment I learned the skills.

**Bounded Field**: Level 1. Active. A type of topographic magecraft that allows the caster to create Wards and Seals with the use of fields of magic bound to an area—otherwise known as a Bounded Field. Effect: create sealing or warding fields using patterns the caster has learned. Allows the learning of patterns similarly to the Craft skill.

I really shouldn't be surprised at what shows up in my Semblance by this point. Once I got the skill, however, I discovered most of the paperwork in the box was patterns and schemes for various wards, seals, sigils, and enchantments—which I immediately ate. Aside from the patterns and skill books was a journal. Skimming it, I found the writing to be terse and mostly in shorthand, but descriptive where needed. Phrases like 'H. almost eaten by Ursa today—the irony. Improve his armor later,' or 'J. spent day training. Wish she would slow down, calves hurt.'

It appeared to be mostly personal things, seemingly a running log of day to day events during her time in school—Beacon, unless I missed my guess. I decided to stow it to peruse later, or return to her family—maybe both. I could probably get her full name out of the landlord and find her family from there. I wondered at the girl's skill with creating new Bounded Field patterns until I found notes in the journal detailing her Semblance: one that let her create new fields on the fly. She had simply made new field patterns with her Semblance and then copied them down to her notes, for use by others. Once I had eaten all of the patterns, however, I gained a new quest.

**A quest has been created!**

**Cleaning House**

Now that you've got a roof over your head, there are still some things that need taking care of before it is truly habitable. Procure the Dust and tools necessary to properly Sanctify the apartment complex in order to turn it into a Safe Zone. Remember to purge the area of malicious spirits before beginning the Sanctification ritual.

**Success**: 2000 EXP, lodging in exchange for Sanctification, a Safe Zone to sleep in. Failure: you pay rent, Illusion Barriers may form naturally in the area at night.
Checking the time and finding it to be just after 2P.M., I decided to go ahead and get the Sanctification ritual taken care of. With the twins in tow, I went looking for a store that sold Dust. It wasn't difficult, considering there were three in the Commercial District alone. The closest turned out to be one that had me laughing the moment I saw the signage—it seemed that From Dust 'till Dawn was a thing. I waved off the twins' inquiries on the matter and instead lead them into the alley.

“Okay, we're going to take a shot at this and see what happens,” I said, drawing their curiosity. I had been thinking on it a while and, quite honestly, I couldn't pass up the potential resources—power in Remnant boiled down to a few factors, but the ones that stood out were personal strength and access to high quality and large quantities of Dust. The first, I was taking care of through training. The second, well… There was a reason all the best players were the ones who found the best ways to cheat without getting caught.

“A shot at what?” Melanie asked, and I grinned.

“Party. For fun and profit,” I said, inviting them and naming the party in the same breath. They accepted and I held out a hand, focusing on the specifics of what I wanted. I needed an Illusion Barrier, or an Instant Dungeon rather, that only covered the area of the shop and was locked from the outside. A moment later, I felt the technique take hold and the very few pedestrians we could see wandering past the mouth of the alley simply disappeared.

Miltia frowned, looking around. “What just happened?”

“I just bought us five minutes, maybe. Come on, clock’s running,” I urged, hurrying out of the alley and looking around. Seeing no one in sight, I ushered them into the store, which was also empty of customers—but not of Dust. “Inventory,” I said, and began grabbing Dust crystals and throwing them in. “We're duplicating items,” I explained as I moved. “Could you fill those tube things over there with that powdered Dust?”

The twins, recognizing a heist when they were in the middle of one, hurried into action. They quickly filled cannisters and passed them off to me, where I dropped them into my inventory in between throwing in Dust crystals. Quickly running to the back while they filled more tubes, I grinned as I came across what I’d expected—the best stock was kept in the back, away from prying eyes. Observe told me everything in the back room was Grade 7 and above—meaning immensely powerful and valuable. The stuff up front was more immediately useful, but a few of these would be handy to have for later. Taking a few of each available, I hurried back to the front and began storing what the girls had collected. “Time?”

“Four minutes,” Miltia answered, glancing at her watch.
Nodding, I ushered them back outside and into the alley. From there, I dropped the Illusion Barrier around the shop and we carefully walked out into the street behind the shop. Moving through another alley to the next street over, I grabbed both twins around the waist and made a Powered Leap onto the nearest rooftop, where we took off running. They were able to make the shorter leaps easily, while we managed to synchronize our timing well enough not to flub the longer or higher leaps with me carrying them.

When we felt like we were far enough away, we descended back to street level into an alleyway and began walking back towards a shop selling the tools required to make semi-permanent bounded fields by writing them out in Dust and add Dust enchantments to clothing, armor, and so forth. As soon as we did, my Semblance apparently decided that was good enough to qualify as a getaway and began assigning levels to Sneak and Steal—apparently, there was a component in there for item value, because both gained several levels more than I was expecting, though most of it was to Steal. Of course, that brought up the question of how Illusion Barriers truly worked, and how I could further exploit them—later, though.

“How much did we get?” Melanie asked quietly during a lull in foot traffic.

I opened up my inventory and gave it a look over. “A lot,” I admitted. “Enough that I won't be buying Dust any time soon.”

“So… we can sell it, right?” she asked and I shook my head.

“No, I'd rather keep it for personal use. It's more valuable to me as it is than as cash. I can use it in other stuff for crafting. Sanguine liked to modify armor and weapons with the stuff and had a lot of effective patterns and combinations that I should be able to duplicate.”

Miltia hummed, then asked, “So, we're going after a bank next?”

I hummed in thought then shook my head. “Too much chance of something going wrong. Let's wait a while before trying anything else like that, too. If someone detected it and figured out what we did, they may be on the lookout for it happening again in the near future. I'd like to have some idea of whether or not it's possible to track detect and track what I did before I do it on a larger scale. Worse, someone may figure out a way to ward against creating Illusion Barriers, in addition to the wards against the natural ones.”

We spent the rest of the trip to the store selling what I thought of as Dust enchanting and inscribing
tools in companionable silence. After picking up a good set of tools, I looked through my quest log and checked the active quest created that morning. “So, you girls wouldn't know anything about disguises, would you?”

The twins shared a look before each taking one of my arms and dragging me off in a specific direction. “You mean for your ‘part time job?’” Miltia asked, and I nodded.

Melanie hummed, a smirk crossing her face. “One where you would likely be running across rooftops in the dead of night to avoid the notice of certain groups of people partial to wearing blue?”

“Yes, that,” I agreed, chuckling.

“We may have some ideas,” Miltia smiled up at me. “Maybe some contacts, some temporary hair dye to disguise that distinctive hair…”

“And keep it from standing out like a neon sign pointing out your location to everyone who cares to look,” Melanie deadpanned. “Some new threads, too. Some light armor, maybe… We know a place.”

The place turned out to be a small clothing and armor boutique that sold primarily to hunters. The clothes they sold were crafted for durability and range of motion. The twins moved about the shop quickly, gathering ordinary clothing in addition to light armor pieces. “What's with all the extra stuff?” I asked Miltia when we were out of earshot of the older woman running the store, being distracted by Melanie at the time.

“It looks less suspicious than buying just the stuff we want. If a guy turns up on the nightly news wearing what we buy here, the shop owner's going to be more likely to remember selling that specific set if it was bought alone than if it was bought with a bunch of other stuff. Normally, we'd part each individual piece out to a few different sources, but we know you're in a hurry and this store sells to Junior so we know they'll keep their mouths shut even if they do suspect something. Right now, it just looks like your girlfriends are helping outfit you for Beacon,” she answered quietly, taking up what looked like a neck gaiter made of thin, stretchy material before holding it up to my face for a moment and nodding.

Sighing and dreading the hit my wallet was going to take over this, I decided to go along with it. Hunters chose outfits differently from normal, everyday people. A Hunter's outfight was supposed to be distinctive and preferably eye-catching, for a couple of reasons. Firstly, so anyone could pick a Hunter out of a crowd or easily identify them in the heat of battle. Secondly, Hunters needed to stand out to more easily draw aggro away from civilians in the event a fight erupted in the middle of the
street. Grimm were notoriously prone to go after bright colors for prey first, mostly because other grimm were dark colored with white and red highlights. Likewise, if Hunters got involved in a crime in progress, then they were more likely to attract fire than civilians. Jaune's normal outfit was barely different from street clothes in that way and only the armor and hoodie were distinctive—his claim to standing out in canon was mostly his heirloom sword and shield, Crocea Mors. Oh, they were custom made of the same sort of durable material the rest of the stuff we were looking at was, but they didn't have that distinctive Hunter look to them.

Having clothes to wear that weren't a Hunter uniform for when I was off duty or attempting to go incognito was a good idea, and with my ability to make clothing sets I could swap gear with a few words so the issue of being caught in civilian clothes when I really needed my Hunter gear would never come up. Also, according to Observe, clothes had stat modifiers. The stuff the girls were picking out for my night job turned out to all have high bonuses to Stealth and a set bonus that would only tell me what it did once I equipped all the pieces. Other clothes, I noticed, had other bonuses. Picking up one shirt with a particularly high CHA modifier, I asked Miltia, “What do you think?”

She hummed, turning a critical eye to the shirt and looking back and forth between it and me. Finally, she asked, “Trying to impress someone?”

“It boosts charisma,” I deadpanned.

The red-clad girl nodded. “Makes sense. It would be good for dating, or impressing girls. I suggest picking up a matching set.”

“Yeah, I thought so too,” I admitted, already moving to grab more things to complete the set. My completionist streak must have kicked in as I set about finding a couple of full sets of stuff I could use for dating, or just for generally boosting my charisma if I ever needed it. I paused, a light blue tie in hand as I went back over that thought. 'Am I honestly getting clothes to pick up women? Why?' A glance back at the twins told me why, and I sighed as I kept digging for decent stuff. 'Because they're the sort who like to dress up and go out, and if I don't match them on that then I'm going to be an embarrassment to them, and myself. Besides, maybe I'll want to dress up and go out for some fun on my own that doesn't involve killing lots of monsters at some point.'

All told, the clothes by themselves cost 1500L, while the armor went for 2500L by itself. I had the money to spend, but it was honestly the most money I'd ever spent on clothes at any one time in either life. I had been more interested in paying off debts and keeping the lights on before, so my clothing choices tended towards practicality: durable, cheap, and easily replaceable. Luckily, my job hadn't required wearing anything fancy—no one cared what someone who didn't deal with customers wore. I could have gone in to work in my underwear and I doubt anyone would have noticed, considering the hours I kept. Graveyard shifts and on-call shifts were a pain in the ass, but worth the extra money.
As we left the boutique and headed for the apartment, I got a text on my scroll. Checking it, I found it to be from Candice, confirming a date for tonight and giving me a place and time to meet her, which subsequently updated that particular quest. The twins were not particularly amused at the idea of me ‘dating’ a civilian, but capitulated when I explained that it had been set up before I’d even met them and the quest reward intrigued me.

When we got to the apartment complex, the twins went to their home to collect a few things while I went up to my new apartment and went about preparing the tools for the ritual. While I had a good grasp of the skill thanks to absorbing the skill books Sanguine had possessed, there were still some fairly detailed notes containing tips and tricks she had either devised or gotten from research elsewhere. My eyes went momentarily wide and I couldn't help but face-palm when I read her notes on Sanctification—apparently, the preferred method by Hunters traveling in a group was an alternative means of empowering the bounded field that would sanctify an area. In reality, the same amount of mana still went in, either way—the effects, however… apparently, the preferred ritual acted as a sort of force multiplier and would extend the duration of any Sanctification several times, in addition to making it easier to renew later.

“You look like someone just told you the worst joke, ever,” Melanie observed, entering the apartment ahead of Miltia and handing me a skill book. I accepted the confirmation dialogue without even bothering to read it, or the skill description beyond finding it was about what I’d expected in that it gave me the Disguise skill. Learning the skill also completed the quest You Can't Go As You Are, giving me 1000 EXP, which I also ignored in favor of turning a poleaxed look on the twins.

“Is it my imagination, or is Remnant just full of perverts?” I finally asked.

They appeared equally confused as Miltia asked, “What do you mean?”

Sighing, I dropped into the recliner I'd claimed earlier. “Did you know there are rituals, like Sanctification, that work better if you fuck on top of it? How does that even work? It makes no goddamn sense.” Judging by the way the twins collapsed against each other in fits of giggles, I could only assume that yes, they knew. “This is one of those common knowledge things, isn't it?”

They shook their heads. “Not really,” Melanie answered. “Not until you get into higher level stuff at places like Beacon. We know it because, well…”

“We did a lot of research before deciding not to become Huntresses,” Miltia answered. “We still do research on the side, because it interests us. It's one of those things that the Hunter community keeps quiet—there are lots of things like that, really. In this case, it's mostly because no one wants to associate the holy rite of Sanctification with a Huntsman and a couple of Huntresses bumping uglies. Well, at least not most people. There was a chapter on that in Volume Four of Ninjas of Love.”
“What is that series, a 'For Dummies' manual for Hunters?”

The twins nodded solemnly. “Pretty much,” they agreed and Melanie continued with, “It's written by a small group of authors who are also Hunters. No one is quite sure who does it, as they all use pseudonyms, but we know there are three—one Huntsman and two Huntresses. The series takes place all over Remnant involving a large cast, and we think the authors even included themselves in the first or second volume, but each volume centers on a different cast of characters except in the few cases where a couple of groups get together, then things get really interesting.”

“We're also pretty sure Ozpin's in there, somewhere—or at least someone based very closely on him, and his assistant/vice principle Glenda Goodwitch,” Miltia added. “Really, you should read it. You'd be surprised how much relevant material you'll find there.”

Sharing a quick smirk with her twin, Melanie asked, “So, when do we want to perform this ritual?”

Sighing, I shot her an unamused look before glancing at my HUD. There were still a few hours until I had to head out to meet Candice. Standing, I motioned them to follow. “Come on, we've got some work to do before we can Sanctify the place. First we need to do an area purge—essentially, destroy anything that could form into a grimm before it can. You're helping.”

“We're fine with that,” Miltia agreed, already pulling on a set of clawed gloves.

Looking at the weapon reminded me I was short a few. “Remind me to pick up a replacement sword later.”

We made our way to the ground floor and I created an Instant Dungeon to encompass the apartment building and the small stretch of land surrounding it. “Ew. What is that?” Melanie asked, pointing at the shambling form of a zombie, level 14.

“We're not technically in reality as you know it at the moment,” I explained. “Think of this like a pocket dimension—a bubble between the real world and the spirit world. That is a malicious spirit looking to enter the world. Grimm are pretty close to the same thing, but typically made up of negative emotional energy that has either become a spirit itself or is being driven by one. Not quite sure how that works.”

I shrugged. “Yeah, why?”

A look of slowly dawning horror spreading across their faces made me realize that I had failed to make a connection somewhere. Melanie voiced the conclusion the two had come to. “So the grimm aren’t just soulless abominations made of hate?”

Oh, right. Right. Yeah, I imagine that would worry anyone from Remnant, finding out that either they were wrong or they had been lied to over the years. “Weren’t you saying, not three hours ago, that people already believed that sort of thing?”

“Yeah, as an old horror story!” Melanie practically shrieked.

Miltia sighed, placing a calming hand on her sister's shoulder, careful of her claws. “Jaune, no one wants to believe that their dead friends and relatives could come back as grimm to kill them.”

“I know that. Look, from what I can tell, it's not all grimm that are like that…”

Miltia sent me a look that said she knew what I was trying to do but it was too late. “Only most.”

After a moment of meeting their combined stare, I nodded. “Only all the ones I've encountered.”

“How does this not bother you?!” the white-clad twin growled.

I almost failed my Will save against laughing as I answered, with as straight a face as I could muster, “I ain't afraid of no ghost.” A look of irritation passed over both their faces and I sighed, reigning in my poor sense of humor. “It doesn't bother me because, until I came into contact with it, I had no ideas as to any sort of afterlife anyway. I'd just kind of assumed that when you die, that that's it—lights out. Done. Electrons burning off as heat and light on a broken filament. Yeah, the idea that I have verifiable proof of at least some sort of potential supernatural potential afterlife is… world changing, but it's not something I'm going to dwell on seeing as I can't confirm anything one way or another yet beyond the fact that there's at least something.”

With a grunt of annoyance, Melanie strode over to the zombie shambling our way and calmly removed its head from its shoulders with her bladed heel. “Let's get this over with.”
There was a moment of confusion over the sight of money and a small crystal dropping onto the ground as the zombie disappeared, before they remembered what I'd said about drops. Being told that it happens and actually seeing it are two entirely different things. After that, things proceeded quickly as we cleared the apartment complex room by room, floor by floor. It wasn't long before I gained a level and shortly after that, a point of INT—I suppose for using INT based skills, as I was spamming my ranged attacks at this point since I didn't want to get into close quarters combat in the cramped confines of the apartment building. We had made it halfway up before we all received a system notification.

Alert! A powerful **Grudge** has been drawn into the Instant Dungeon! Destroy it before it can kill you or escape into the real world!

Success: 9500 EXP, ???. Failure: Death or the **Grudge** escapes.

“What the hell is that?” Melanie asked, rereading the message.

“A grudge usually forms when you've killed a lot of the same type of grimm, from what I've gathered. That said this one had been drawn in, not that it had been created—meaning it was already nearby and pretty much destroying my theory as to how they're created. That, or there are other ways for them to form. Spirits usually breach across into the real world via Illusion Barriers, it makes sense that an artificially created one would work in the same way, allowing them to escape if they're strong enough,” I reasoned. “Come on, we have to hurry—the damn thing could be anywhere and it's not showing up on my map, or if it is it's impossible to tell with the rest of the enemies here.”

“What about the question marks beside where it offers experience?” Miltia asked, sheering the head off yet another zombie with her claws.

I shrugged. “It means that either the system doesn't know or doesn't want me to know. I haven't decided yet. Could be both, for all I know.”

“You talk about your Semblance like someone else is controlling what it does,” Miltia pointed out as she stepped aside so I could send a trio of AP Rounds down range and annihilate a beowolf that had been lurking in one of the apartments.

While Melanie ducked into the room the beowolf had come out of to make sure it was clear, Miltia picked up the dropped potion and Lien and stuffed them into my inventory. We had found that the twins, being in my party at the time, could actually see my windows so long as I dug through the
menu and set them to be visible to party members. With that, they could interact with them to a limited degree. They could read off skill descriptions, navigate menus, and look through options but not change anything. Likewise, they could put things into my inventory but not take them out.

Knocking down a zombie with a Mana Bolt for her to Coup de Grace, I shrugged. “In a way, that's sort of what it's like. It's like there's a front end—the part I control—and a back end—the part someone, or something else controls. If I am in full control of it, then the back end is being controlled by my subconscious mind because I have no direct way to influence it. It's kind of what I'm leaning towards, since it throws me clues all the time about certain things...” I trailed off, not wanting to go into details about popular culture where I was from, because if I did that would lead to questions about where, exactly, I was from.

“Sounds like you've got a secret,” Melanie pointed out, coming back from securing the apartment as we moved on to the next.

I rolled my eyes. Of course the twins has a well honed ability to smell bullshit. I couldn't lie about it, and now that they knew it was there they were curious. Still, maybe they would respect my wish not to talk about it... “I do. I'd really rather not talk about it, though. Maybe one day...” Like never.

Surprisingly, they nodded in agreement. “It's okay, we understand,” Miltia acknowledged.

The rest of the hunt passed mostly in silence as we focused on clearing as fast as we could. We made it up to the top floor, sweeping the other apartment there before moving on to my new place. Opening the door, we found it empty. Checking the rooms proved likewise. “Okay, where is it?” I asked, frowning. I had pulled up my map and, near as I could tell, there was nothing else in the building—which meant that it didn't show up on my map.

“The roof,” the twins synced, quickly leading me out of the apartment and to a set of stairs leading up and out onto the roof.

We got the roof access door open and got out onto the roof just in time to watch a dark blur jump over the side. Rushing over, I caught sight of it kick off the side of the building, aiming for a point across the parking lot. I couldn't make out many details from here, but it looked smaller than a beowolf and its coloration was... odd. Spotted maybe—in shades of black, white and gray. Something about the pattern tugged at my memory, but I didn't have time for that now. Sighting it down and leading my target, I chanted, “AP Round!”

Two of the rounds missed. The third impacted its back, sending it into a tumble. A moment later, the air rippled like water around it and it was gone.
You have failed to kill the Grudge in time and it has escaped into the real world!

“Shit,” I cursed. “Escape ID!”

We went down to the ground floor and looked around for any sign of the grudge. Other than a small splash of quickly evaporating black blood, there was nothing left. I had no way to track it. That was especially annoying because like Firearms Mastery, Martial Arts, Drive, and Cooking, I had actual, real life experience with tracking. I'd have to find a skill book somewhere, seeing as attempting to track the grudge hadn't unlocked the skill. “Well, it wasn't a total bust,” I said finally as we reentered the building and we let the landlord know we were done.

“You're enjoying this far too much,” Melanie grumbled as we took the elevator up to my floor.

I shrugged. “I've decided that I'm going to take what enjoyment I can out of life.” Turning a smirk on the girl, I added, “Besides, I'm looking forward to this next part.”

The twins shared a confused look before it appeared they realized what I was talking about at the same time, identical smirks crossing their own lips. “Right.”

Getting the Sanctification ritual right was a bit more complex than I thought it would be. Drawing out the bounded field pattern was the easy part—we had the Dust (Purity White), we had the tools, after that it was just a matter of following the pattern. The skill's level wasn't so much a matter of success or failure as it was degree of success. So long as you performed the act correctly, it would always succeed—the skill's level just improved its effectiveness. Bounded Field had synergy with Dust Manipulation, so I gained the bonus for that and even leveled Dust Manipulation once I'd finished drawing out the barrier. No, the complex part was in the actual ritual. It was complex enough that, by the time we'd finished, I'd gained another two points to INT, and two to CHA.

I could have just dumped mana into it until it worked, but that would achieve sub-par results according to Sanguine's notes. Choosing to do the ritual meant the three of us had to synchronize both our Auras—which, being an outward manifestation of our souls would bring those in sync—and our bodies. It took a few tries, but the results were... spectacular, to say the least. I even gained a sub-skill for Bounded Field in Sanctification Ritual, which, naturally, had significant synergy with my Marital Arts skill—and the effectiveness of the ritual went up with the levels of those involved. In other words, the twins and I had a combined level of 57. If I brought Joan over and did this next time, the combined level between the two of us would be somewhere in the mid-to-high 70s or low 80s depending on how we trained between now and then. That combined level determined both how long the Sanctification would last and how powerful the monsters it kept out were. Between the twins and I, we could ward off something up to level 57 at the moment—meaning that if something wanted to try to cross over, it would have to create its own Illusion Barrier instead of relying on a
natural one, which wouldn't form here, and then be above level 57 in order to breach my Sanctification. It should dissuade most things from even making the attempt and anything that wanted to cross over would likely pick somewhere else, because an active Sanctification meant Hunters—and things at higher levels tended to be smarter and thus wary of Hunters.

The quest *Cleaning House* announced its completion and granted me 2000 EXP. After everything we’d killed, that put me 4200 EXP from level 14. In addition, even after taking out the Lien I'd spent on clothes, I'd managed to make that back and then some, leaving me with 20130L. At the moment, I was more interested in a shower. Reaching out to cop a quick feel, I stood and helped the twins up off the floor. Below us, a tracery of pure white Dust glowed atop the surface of the floor, undisturbed by our passage as it was now part of the floor. “Come on, let's see about testing out that master bath,” I suggested.

The twins agreed, though when we reached the bathroom, we found it lacking in toiletries. With a weary sigh, the pair got dressed and went downstairs while I waited. They returned a few minutes later bearing toiletries, towels, and a few other odds and ends. “Looks like we need to go on another supply run,” Melanie announced as they stripped and we broke in the shower.

“If you don't mind, I'll give you guys some money and you can go get some things while I'm out,” I suggested, receiving nods in answer.

Looking in the bedroom's full-length mirror, I took in the form looking back at me and frowned. The figure in the mirror had black hair swept back with gel into a more windswept look as opposed to Jaune's usual style, set over red eyes. My Semblance had helpfully added those details as 'accessories' that I could equip from the menu, instead of having to constantly dye and wash my hair. I'm pretty sure that broke physics somehow, but then, I was getting used to that. The thin, black neck gaiter covered my lower face from above the nose down. A tight, dark gray long-sleeve peeked out in places from under my black and gray chest armor. The armor itself was light and worn like a vest, buckling at the sides. There were similar armor pieces over my upper and lower arms, thighs, and shins, with pants in the same color as the shirt showing through in the gaps. A black duty belt hung at my waist with a couple of large pouches, for quick access to items I didn't want to throw into inventory. Dark black and gray combat boots went over my feet, completing the ensemble. All in all, I looked absolutely nothing like Jaune Arc—which was the entire point.

“Stop worrying, it looks good,” Melanie sighed from her place on the bed.

Rolling my eyes, I saved the set under the name 'Stealth' and switched to the clothes I would be wearing for my date. Well, hopefully for only part of the date. “That still amazes me,” Miltia commented from beside her sister, looking my now blond haired and blue eyed form over.
“Yeah, it's kind of awesome,” I admitted. Opening up my inventory, I pulled out a 1000L wad of bills and put it on the foot of the bed. “That should take care of essentials.”

Melanie shook her head. “As if. If we're going to be coming over or spending the night, we want nice things.”

I shot her a flat look. “Necessities first, nice things later.”

Miltia sighed, once more playing the peacemaker. “What Melanie meant to say is that we think you're underestimating the cost of furnishing a place of this size. You've got basic furniture, yes, but that's not enough. Even discounting high-cost purchases like telescreens or game systems, you're still looking at food, utensils, dishes, cleaning supplies, toiletries, sheets, blankets, towels, wash cloths, appliances… you're going to need about double that, at a low guess.”

I didn't know the price of most things here in Vale, to be honest. Where I was from, though, yeah… I could easily see needing $2000 to cover basic necessities. I'd always bought mine over time, as the need came up, but if we were getting them all in one whack, it didn't seem outrageous. Looking around the living room, I hummed before asking, “How much does a telescreen go for?”

“Depends on the size and options,” Miltia hedged.

Melanie had no such compunctions about answering. “For one worth having, between 1500L and 6000L.”

I winced. Still, if I was going to live here and do anything other than read or have adult fun with the twins when I wasn't killing grimm, then I'd need something to keep myself occupied. That, and keep guests occupied. Besides, it's not like I wouldn't be making the money back soon—I just hated the idea of throwing money at a problem until it went away. A lifetime of frugality had taught me the value of every dollar earned. Reaching into my inventory, I pulled out a much larger stack of cash to match what was already on the bed. “You've made your point. That's 10000L.”

“We'll bring back receipts,” Miltia promised.

I nodded, the twins pocketing the cash and following me to the door. “I'll probably see about finishing this date up and then doing a few jobs. If I decide to quit early, I may swing by The Club.” I paused, regarding the door and added, “Also, new locks. I can install them if you'll pick them up.”
That taken care of, I left the building and made my way onto street level. Crossing the west bridge between the Residential District into the Commercial District, I turned east. Following my waypoint for where Candice had told me to meet her, I found myself arriving at a small restaurant that looked like it served some form of Mongolian barbeque—it wasn't called that, since Remnant didn't have a Mongolia, but the food was similar enough. I found her sitting at a table out front playing with her scroll and walked up.

“I didn't keep you waiting, did I?” I asked, checking my HUD and finding I was early.

Shaking her head, she put away her phone and stood. “No, no! I just got here myself. I came early, but I see you did too…”

“Mhmm,” I agreed, taking her by the elbow and leading her inside, going out of my way to get the door for her. Opening doors, pulling out chairs, all those little things like that were things I had grown up being taught was simple politeness. By the time I… left my old world and came here, the world was slowly tilting into some sort of Twilight Zone parody where simple politeness was treated as an insult. Here, at least, it was appreciated.

We were seated and had a minute to look over the menu before giving our orders. Once we were relatively alone again, I asked, “So, how many books are there in that series?”

“Seven,” Candice answered off the top of her head. “I've read them all. There's an eighth due out soon.”

“Really?” I asked, getting a nod in answer. “It's pretty popular, then?”

The brunette nodded, her curls bouncing as she did. “Oh, yes. One of the best selling series not just in Vale but in all of Remnant.” Looking down at the table as a flush crept across her cheeks, she asked, “What was your favorite part?”

It really had been a good book—honestly, as good as anything I'd read in my previous life. Better, in some ways, since they didn't dance around sensitive subjects or try to sugarcoat the world around them. Neither the heroes nor the villains were caricatures of human beings but had actual, real characterization and development. There were no 'evil cisgendered racist Nazi white male oppressors' in Ninjas of Love. The so-called 'social justice warriors' of my old world would have had a shit fit. Everything, from the Hunters' and villains' reasons for doing what they did to the primary protagonist of the volume's reasons for hating Faunus were all treated with excruciating detail. Even the sex was taken with a realistic approach—or as realistic as I was beginning to see things ever got with Hunters.
Finally, I shrugged. “I’d have to say it was the part where the Red Claw leader and the hero get trapped in the partly-collapsed building and wind up mutually raping each other. It was… cathartic.”

Candice looked affronted and for a moment, I wondered if I’d made some sort of social faux pas. “That was totally not rape of any sort!” she denied quietly, but vehemently. “Yes, it was totally a power play or a dominance struggle, but definitely not rape. It’s not rape if both parties want it. Rough, violent, maybe even a little abusive and degrading … but no one complained or cried rape after.”

With a quiet chuckle, I sheepishly rubbed at the back of my head. Right. I’d forgotten, Remnant took a slightly different view on things. My world's concepts of right and wrong had been skewed over time and somewhere along the lines, they had forgotten that if adults consent, then no wrong is committed—except where it suited them, of course. It was common sense like that which had been seemingly lost on my old world. Things like the idea of consent—that one had to maintain ‘continuous, enthusiastic consent’ in order for an encounter not to qualify as rape and that a woman, but not a man, could retroactively retract consent if they felt bad afterwards for whatever reason. That simply didn't happen here, it appeared. Consent was implied on the part of anyone instigating an encounter—which, more often than not, I would wager turned out to be women rather than men. Likewise, if the other party did not object, they consented—as opposed to in my former world, where anyone could claim someone didn't object because they felt pressured and thus the act was rape. It painted everything Joan did in a slightly different light. Where I'd felt it was a bit rapey by old-world standards, it really wasn't by Remnant standards. Aside from that, I really had wanted it, regardless of the danger level involved. In a way, that just made it more of a turn-on for me.

It was one of those things about Remnant being different from what I knew from 'canon' that I would simply have to accept and adapt to. Besides, it's not like I intended to go out and start molesting women on the street. I was a man, a flawed one maybe, but not some base animal that obeyed every whim of its emotions and desires and there had never been a danger of that in the first place—the choices I made were choices, and I would take responsibility for them one way or another. I was not an 'adult child' as I'd come to think of the people from my previous world, who had infantilized themselves to the point that dealing with them was worse than dealing with children.

“Fair point,” I admitted. “What about you?”

The blush returned as she reverted to her more shy persona. “Well, I really enjoyed page 108…”

I blinked, thinking back. “The uh…” I looked around before making a small slapping motion with my hand, to which she nodded. What she was talking about was actually pretty tame—involving a bit of discipline in the form of a spanking. “That’s kind of tame,” I pointed out.
“And page 110,” she added.

I raised an eyebrow. “With the ropes?” When she nodded, I began to realize where this was going. The book had progressively gotten kinkier as it went on, though by the end hadn't really reached truly weird levels. *Question is, is she teasing or escalating?* I wondered. Intending to find out, I asked, “What about… 316 through 340 or so?” The aftermath of the scene I'd referenced earlier, wherein the Hunter's 'partners' rescue him and the leader of the 'Red Claw,' which was essentially the White Fang without the authors coming right out and saying it, and proceed to demand he share his 'spoils,' resulting in group sex—naturally. Because that's how things were done in Ninjas of Love, apparently. And if the twins were right, then it was close to an actual recounting of events as opposed to the authors simply making things up—in a case of reality being stranger than fiction.

“That was, um…” Candice fidgeted in her seat. “Yeah. I liked that.”

That was when our food arrived and we took a break to eat, moving on to small talk not revolving around her favorite book series. Candice was, as it turned out, a Hunter fangirl. I suppose that shouldn't be too terribly surprising, considering most of Remnant idolized Hunters. She turned out to be a surprisingly good source of insights into the world of Remnant itself, as she tended to volunteer information all on her own without me having to ask. It was something I knew most intelligent people did, myself being no exception, but it was particularly useful to my situation. As I'd suspected, working in the field she did, she absolutely devoured books—though not in the literal sense as I did—and was particularly well-read on Hunter lore.

With a few questions on my mind brought up today by the twins, I asked, “So, the grimm. What are they, exactly?”

With a sigh, Candice sipped at her drink before answering, “No one knows. Not for certain. That knowledge was lost well before the Great War. The most accepted explanation is that they're manifestations of all the negative emotions of humanity and Faunus given physical form. The fact that they mostly dissolve when you kill them sort of supports a metaphysical origin—though they do leave behind things. Bone, hair, blood occasionally. Those parts tend to be really, really valuable and useful. For instance, a normal steel sword does a good deal of damage to a grimm, but impregnate the steel with powdered grimm bone and quench it in grimm blood and you have a weapon that seems to have a personal vendetta against grimm the moment you put Aura into it. The more powerful the grimm the parts came from, the more powerful the weapon created. It's how most Hunter weapons are made, really—though, obviously they keep the specifics of how it's done secret.”

“But there are other theories,” I cut in as she took another sip—some fruity orange drink that I recognized as being mildly alcoholic. I was sticking strictly to soda, mostly because it took special occasions for me to drink—things had to be going either particularly well or particularly poorly for me to reach for a bottle. I didn't really like the stuff, to be honest, so I didn't really drink socially. I
didn't need to be drunk or near it to enjoy myself and unlike people seemed to insist, I felt no measure of additional enjoyment to any event by adding alcohol. If enjoyment level were a stat and alcohol supposedly modified that stat, its effect on me would be a cumulative 0 as far as that stat was concerned at any level of intoxication. But again, there were instances where I bent that rule—very bad days, very good days, or very strange days usually.

“There are,” Candice confirmed between sips. “Really old superstition says grimm are the spirits of the fallen—those who died an unclean death—enraged at losing that which was most precious, returned to the world of the living to destroy the living because we have what they can't have anymore. Or something like that. It's what a lot of old horror stories are based off of. There's this really great, old book that tells the story of a wise man and his lover—though, whether they were lovers is up to interpretation, depending on where you're from... Also, sometimes the man is just a wise man, other times he's a wizard, while the woman is either a powerful witch, or the queen of the land. Anyway, the story tells of a woman who died horribly, tragically—so unclean a death that she came back to life. Some say her husband did it to spite the wizard. Again, tellings vary. Some have her resurrecting in her own body, others have her creating an entirely new body. Both, however, have pretty much the same result. She came back as a grimm—the first grimm. More than that though, a human grimm. Can you imagine that?” I shook my head and she continued. “The revenant—which is what the wizard, the wise man, calls her—razed an entire continent to the ground in her fury. Well...”

“Depending on the telling,” I guessed, and she nodded. “Right. Some have it as a 'kingdom,' others as 'the countryside' or similar wording. Either way, this revenant went on a roaring rampage of revenge through Remnant to right the wrongs rendered upon her in life, vowing to wreak havoc amongst the remaining lands as she claims is her right for their remiss in coming to her aid in her time of need. The story ends not with her defeat, but with the wizard tricking her into abandoning the realm of Remnant and then making sure she could never return. Or, another interpretation says the wizard couldn't bear to destroy her, so he exorcised her to the land of the dead and sealed her away—or the spirit realm, depending on your region. The second version lends credence to the version of the story where it's the king who killed her. In that version, she was betrothed to the king from birth but fell in love with the wizard, and her act of confessing that love caused the king to fly into a fit of rage and... do unspeakable things, if it was bad enough that she came back as a grimm. Obviously, people have been raped, murdered, and tortured throughout history and as far as we know there are no real human grimm, so whatever he did would have to have been off the scale horror-wise. Either way, it's a classic tragedy/horror story.”

“It sounds good,” I admitted. “I'll have to read it, at some point. In between work and training...”

Shaking her head, Candice grinned. “No, believe me, I understand. Hunter equipment is expensive, especially when you're just starting out and can't take on the sorts of jobs Hunters can once they've been certified. It's pretty admirable that you're willing to put in the extra effort to buy your own stuff.”
I blinked, frowning as I asked, “What do you mean?”

She had the decency to look sheepish. “Well, you’re an Arc—your parents are well-known hunters, as are most of your siblings. But there you are, doing it on your own, without relying on others to pay your way—as a man should.”

Oh. Of course. Candice was a Hunter fangirl. My family was kind of a local legend. Of bloody course she recognized my name the other day. How could I have been so stupid? No, hang on. Nothing about this seems, in any way, like she's just into me for whatever fame my family has. She's a fangirl, not a groupie. Still, couldn't hurt to ask,’ I mused. “So, what you're saying is, you asked me out 'cause my family's famous?”

“Huh? No! Absolutely not,” she denied. Blushing, she chuckled nervously before adding quietly, “I asked you out because I thought you were an absolute cutie standing there trying to act all suave and hit on an older girl.”

I blinked. “So… pity date?” I asked, confused.

She shrugged. “I haven't been out in a while and I thought we could have a good time—you could tell all your friends at school you got to go out with an older girl and I could feel better about not having gone out with anyone in a while. You've actually impressed me, though. You don't act your age, at all.”

“I get that a lot,” I deadpanned, rolling my eyes. “And here I thought you were going to ask me back to your place to act out pages 108 and 110.”

Biting her bottom lip as her face lit in another blush, she quietly admitted, “Well, the thought had crossed my mind a time or two.”

I stifled a laugh, earning a mild glare for the slip up. “You know I'm sixteen, right?”

She sent me a confused look. “So? That's well within the legal limit for Hunters, Hunters in training, and Apprentice Hunters.”
“It's different for civilians?” I asked, and Candice's look went even more confused.

“Well, yeah. After the Great War—no, even before that given population decline due to grimm, but after the war they made it official—the kingdoms of Remnant decided that anyone who shouldered the burden of protecting the populace from the grimm was to be acknowledged as an adult. There had to be limits in place, obviously, so that limit is the absolute youngest age someone of exceptional talent will be allowed into one of the higher schools, like Beacon. Sixteen is the average, but fourteen is not unheard of. All of your older sisters made it in at fourteen—they're child prodigies, and everyone in Vale knows it. How do you not know this? It's one of the things they go over in training schools like Signal!”

Great, another of those things I should know but don't. “Would you believe I have a legitimate medical condition?”

My answer was an unladylike snort. “What, amnesia?” My blue eyes met her brown in a flat stare. “No way.” After a moment more under my gaze, her look shifted from skeptical to confused. “But… how?”

“According to my eldest sister, I made the dumb mistake of walking into the woods seeking out grimm to fight and found some. Good news: got my Semblance and Aura. Bad news: I don't remember anything before the day I woke up.”

“But… no, amnesia doesn't work that way,” she denied. “I mean, sure, you could be missing a few memories here and there, but if you had total retrograde amnesia you wouldn't even remember how to speak. You don't just take a blow to the head, wake up in the hospital, and then go right back to training sans memories. And you, you're too confident, too self-assured to be an amnesiac! Talking to you is like talking to someone older than me, not a kid who doesn't even know who he is!”

“And yet…” I shrugged.

She took on a poleaxed look momentarily. “Well, you're not faking it—you genuinely don't seem to know things.”

I decided to ease her away from the topic, since it would only lead to more questions I couldn't answer. I really needed a spell to make people forget things. 'Wait. …Okay, yeah, note to self: make a spell to make people forget things later.' Holding on to that thought for later, I asked, “So, legal age for civilians is what, eighteen?”
“Seventeen, between civilians. Sixteen between a Hunter and a civilian,” she corrected absently. “With the population down, it was decided to encourage people to get together earlier to make more babies. You get tax breaks for having within a certain number of children based on a few factors: your and your spouses’ IQs, income, whether or not you’re a Hunter, related to one, or if one of your children becomes one… They aren’t paying lazy idiots to out-breed smart or useful people. They’re actively encouraging intelligent people and those likely to produce Hunter offspring to group up and reproduce.”

“Huh,” I hummed. It made sense, it had the sort of practicality that Remnant seemed to value. “If that’s the case, how come Beacon and the other schools don’t turn into giant baby factories?”

Candice rolled her eyes. “Because Hunters, even Hunters in training, tend to put the job first. There's no doubt that they screw like rabbits and the faculty looks the other way, but the actual incident rate for that sort of thing is surprisingly low. Can't finish the academy and graduate with your team if you've been knocked up, after all. The teams are actually pretty important, typically becoming permanent—most teams stick together for the rest of their careers, partners especially.”

Shrugging, I asked, “So, is it true that Ninjas of Love is pretty much a how-to manual for Hunters?”

Blinking, Candice smiled and held out a hand, waving it back and forth in a so-so gesture. “I can't verify it completely, but supposedly all of the technical aspects they talk about work. The fanbase is pretty sure the authors are Hunters themselves, given the in-depth knowledge and details that go into it. I've um… kind of always wanted to work my way through my favorite scenes, to be honest.”

Pulling my wallet from where I'd stowed it in my pants pocket instead of my inventory for this date, I pulled out enough to cover the tab plus tip before standing and offering her my hand. “Well then, let's go start working on that,” I offered.

She hesitated a moment before accepting my hand and standing, allowing me to take her elbow again and lead her outside. Despite the difference in our ages, Candice was actually short for her age and we were about even in height. As we stepped onto the sidewalk and she began guiding me back towards her place, I asked, “What's your stance on twins?”

Candice blinked, stumbling momentarily before asking, “Twins?” I nodded and she looked confused. “Boys or girls?”

“Girls,” I clarified. “I happen to know a pair…”
Judging by the sudden feel of a hard nipple pressed against my arm through her light dress, I had to guess she liked the thought. “Ah… I wouldn't know? I don't think I'd object, in fact it sounds appealing, but I've never… um… with a group.”

With a shrug, I admitted, “Neither have I. Two at most.” Shooting her a smile, I asked, “Want to find out, some time?”

“I… I think I'd like that,” she quietly confessed, before pulling us towards an apartment building similar to my own, only a few blocks down and a street over from the pseudo-Mongolian place. Leading us up to the fifth floor, she took out her keys and opened her door. “Ah, this is it. Please don't mind the mess.”

My first impression of Candice's room was books. Books everywhere. Books on shelves, books on the tables, books on the couch… So many books, the apartment smelled like a library. I sent her a smile. “Actually, I like it.” It reminded me of… home, back before I left. I couldn't stand a mess, but having books everywhere never really qualified as a ‘mess’ for me. I couldn't really say that, however. And the smell—the smell of paper books has always been one of my favorite things.

Placing her bag and keys on a table beside the door, she locked the door and turned to offer me a shy smile. “So… which page would you like to start with?”

Moving in, I captured one of her wrists in one hand and put the other around her waist to pull her flush against me. “I've always found it works best if you start at the beginning of the book, instead of the middle…”

I dropped onto the roof of the apartment complex after three, opening the roof access and walking down and into the hall, to my apartment. I frowned as I tried my key in the lock, only to have it refuse to budge. “What the hell?” I grumbled, eying the lock. It looked shiny and new, which meant the twins had taken the initiative and changed the locks themselves. I was sorely tempted to simply open an Illusion Barrier, blast the door down, go inside, and then dispel the barrier and was just about to do exactly that when the door opened.

Melanie stood at the door in a white nightie, looking irritable. Seeing me standing there with my work clothes on caused her to blink a couple of times before stepping back and allowing me in. “What happened to you?”

Heaving out a sigh as I switched into casual clothes, I dropped onto the couch and the twins
promptly took that as the invitation it was, dropping down to either side of me. “She got a little…
excitable,” I murmured, stretching out. I still wasn't sleepy even after staying up a solid 36 hours
now, but I was physically drained. Sitting there, I focused on Meditation and healing.

The twins shared a look before each hopping off the couch and taking a hand. I allowed myself to be
lead into the bedroom, where they promptly tossed my slightly larger frame onto the bed. A moment
later, one was at my head pulling off my shirt and hoodie while the other worked on my boots.
“What are you doing?” I mumbled into the pillow under my face. A pair of lithe bodies settling to
either side of me and strong, nimble fingers suddenly digging into my back was my answer, as I
groaned at the sensation. I hadn't had a massage in years back in that other world, let alone a good
one—and the twins were exceptional.

“Being useful,” Melanie deadpanned, digging a heel into my spine and putting enough weight on it
to shift the discs in a satisfying pop.

From her position on my right, Miltia asked, “So, how did it go, aside from 'excitable'?”

“She's smart,” I answered slowly. “Too smart, at times. Pretty much a walking wiki for all things
Hunter, though. Got a couple of new… options, I suppose I should say.”

“Oh?” one of them hummed, and at the moment I was hard pressed to muster the effort to figure out
which.

“Mm,” I confirmed, the sound being drawn out as a particularly stubborn knot was worked loose.
“Yeah. A mood meter, for one. Sort of a generic meter for what sort of mood someone's in—it ties in
with my Observe skill's ability to read emotions.”

“You can do that?”

I nodded. “If I want to. This shows up as bar over someone's head, like HP and MP bars show up in
combat. The other is labeled as 'Dating Mode' and goes with the Mood Meter. If I'm in dating mode,
apparently the mood meter will tell me how 'in the mood' someone is. Apparently, it runs off my
charisma score for a few effects—stuff like adjusting my Aura so I'm more attractive or something, I
didn't read the details. I was a little distracted at the time.”

The twins dropped down to either side of me, pressing themselves into my sides atop the blankets.
“Wait, you mean more attractive than your Aura is by default?” Miltia asked from my right.
“Yeah. It gave me the idea to try creating a charm spell, when I get a minute. Let me put it this way: if I'm attractive by default, apparently this is supposed to move that from 'attractive' to 'panty dropping.'”

“Really?” Melanie hummed, a smirk crossing her face. “Why don't you do it now?”

I turned my head to shoot her a flat look. “Haven't you had enough already for one day?”

“It's the next day,” Miltia argued from the other side.

Seeing as they had actually taken care of most of my physical issues and Meditation had taken care of the rest, I felt pretty much back to normal and ready for action. Aside from that, they did deserve a reward for their initiative, both with the apartment and the massage. Relationships, I had found, worked best with a rewards system in place. Do nice things, or thoughtful things, and earn rewards outside of the normal niceties of being in a relationship with someone. It worked, for the most part—it tended to work better if both parties were interested in going above and beyond the bare minimum of what qualified as things one should do in a relationship. That way, there was a sort of self-perpetuating cycle of reward and good behavior going on. People liked being treated well, people liked being rewarded, people really like being made to feel special—being able to do special things for someone and having that person put in the effort to return the favor was nice, when it worked.

Rolling onto my side, I mentally toggled the ability and watched as Melanie began to shift unconsciously under my gaze, her thighs rubbing together and her breath becoming shorter. I quickly realized the technique wasn't single-target and was actually an area of effect skill when Miltia latched onto me from behind, slinging a leg over mine to straddle me. “Yeah, we like that,” she moaned as her sister joined her and any response I may have made was cut off by a panty-covered crotch easing down over my face.

'The things I do for my girls,' I mused. Positive reinforcement worked best, after all.
Tools of the Trade

The Name of the Game

a RWBY/The Gamer crossover, SI.

Arc 2: Hard Contact

Chapter 8: Tools of the Trade

I left the twins in a tangled mass of limbs under the sheets as I walked across the bedroom floor and pulled my scroll from my pants to find out what the buzzing was about. Opening it, I found a notification waiting from the Underworld app, letting me know a job was available. Hitting the Accept button and receiving a quest notification at the same time—Item Delivery – Repeatable, Rewards: 1000 EXP, 1500L, Time Limit: 2 hours—I almost started pulling my clothes back on before I remembered my Semblance.

“Equip Stealth Set,” I whispered, immediately springing up two inches as my clothes appeared around me and my boots provided a little extra height. Gathering my dirty clothes, I quickly tossed them into a hamper in the bathroom before leaving the bedroom. Looking around, I spotted three sets of keys by the door and snagged one. Testing it in the new locks and finding it worked, I left and locked up behind me before activating Invisibility and heading up to the roof. Setting a waypoint for my pickup, I took off roof hopping towards the bridge, where I would cross over into the Commercial District and then from there to my first stop.

Finding the place several minutes later, I dropped Invisibility and descended into the alley behind the storefront. Knocking on the back door, I waited a few moments before the door opened. Looking up, I found myself looking into a pair of hazel eyes set under dark hair, a set of mutton chops framing the man’s face. Above his head, I caught his name as Tukson and his level as 29. “Package pickup,” I said, holding out a hand.

“They keep getting younger,” Tukson sighed, shaking his head as he handed me a trio of books wrapped in brown paper and twine. “And a good morning to you,” he said by way of goodbye, closing the door to his shop.

Turning away from the door, I stashed the wrapped books in my side pouch and took to the roofs, reapplying Invisibility and setting a waypoint to my second destination. I was well under the time
limit by the time I made it, dropping into another alley and letting Invisibility drop. I knocked and waited. It wasn't long before the door opened, and I had my first look at something I immediately knew I wanted but could never have.

The Red Witch

Cinder Fall

Level: 44

“Well, hello there,” she drawled in greeting as our eyes met, looking down slightly from my height of 6’3” with the boots on, my red contacts meeting her liquid gold eyes evenly. “You're new. Did I scare off another one?”

Just to see what would happen, I activated Dating Mode as I handed over the books. “What do you mean?” I wondered, watching her mood slowly thaw.

Blinking, she eyed me up and down with suddenly narrowed eyes. “Now that is interesting,” she murmured before answering my question with, “As for your question, you're the third runner I've gone through.”

From what I knew of her character, Cinder was a bad, bad girl—however, she hadn't tried to kill me yet... and she was officially the second most beautiful woman I'd met on Remnant. The 'bad girl' thing held a lot of appeal, I suppose—along with that confident, sexy poise and drawl. With my package delivered and no money changing hands, I figured a moment or two of small talk couldn't hurt. “Well, I'm new to all of this, really,” I admitted. “They're not on a rotation?”

She shook her head, setting her long, dark hair to shifting in ways that drew the eye. “No.”

I shrugged. “Maybe you unnerve them. Beauty tends to do that, but beauty and power... well, many a man has been driven to his knees for such a thing.”

A small, smug smile tugged at one corner of her lips and I noticed the meter over her head twitch upward a bit. Yeah, she liked having her ego stroked. “So they have.”

“Then if I'm to be your delivery boy from now on, I suppose I should say 'till next time,’” I mused
aloud before subvocalizing Invisibility. For a moment, her eyes tracked my position as I moved, before I dropped the charisma boost to my Aura and activated Aura Suppression—a skill I had taken the time to create on the way home from Candice's place earlier that night, which did exactly what it said on the tin and hid my active Aura from detection.

“Very interesting,” she mused aloud before returning inside and closing the door behind her. Hearing the deadbolt click home, I made a Powered Leap up onto the roofs and started running. A moment later, my scroll buzzed and I got the quest completion notification. Taking out the scroll, I checked the notification there, which echoed the quest notification but let me know my money had been deposited into my Underworld account. A moment later, another notification popped up, asking me if I would like to take on another delivery. Agreeing, I went on to the next location.

Over the course of the next hour, I completed another nine jobs to finish out the set of ten required to progress Path of the Rogue (part III). I even got the dubious honor of meeting Roman Torchwick, at a small apartment complex it looked as though he and his underlings had taken over. Sadly, the payout for those deliveries was each half what the original had been—apparently, making deliveries to Cinder came with hazard pay. Still, it was an additional 6750L, which put me closer to making up for giving the twins 10kL to spend. Speaking of, I hadn't even checked out the new furnishings before leaving out again. Ah well, the level I'd gained for finishing that quest was worth it. Though, I hadn't gotten the equipment it had promised…

A quest has been created!

Path of the Rogue (part IV)

You have successfully completed your initiation period with the Underworld App. Follow the directions in the text for your reward.

Success: equipment, quest progression. Failure: termination of employment.

'What text message?' I wondered, even as my scroll buzzed. Taking it out, I found a message through the Underworld App from someone with the handle 'BlackPetal' with nothing but a street address and the word 'roof.' Feeding the information into my map, I followed the quest marker across the rooftops before coming to what looked like a business campus of some sort, in the center of which was an absolutely massive tower style skyscraper. Well, I say massive—it wouldn't have been out of place among some of the taller buildings of my old world, but was nowhere near the tallest. It was massive for Remnant, at any rate. Casing the exterior from a distance, I quickly realized there would be no slipping in and taking the elevator up—security was tight here and they had some sort of scanners on the elevators, and seeing how it looked particularly important I was leery of trying to create an Illusion Barrier and going in that way.
Making sure Invisibility was running, I ran across the campus and into the shadow of the building, stopping when I came to the nearest wall. 'Okay, Powered Leap is only going to get me so far here. I need some way of sticking to the wall... Well, it worked for Naruto,' I thought before holding a foot up and pressing it against the wall, then focusing on my Aura.

A skill has been created through a special action!

**Surface Walking**: Level 1. Active. **Surface Walking** grants the user the ability to walk or run on vertical, even inverted, surfaces as though they were level ground. Effect: stick to vertical or inverted surfaces and traverse them normally. Cost: 1MP/minute.

Grinning, I pulled up mana and used a Powered Leap to ascend the side of the building. The moment my momentum tapered off, I called on more mana and activated Surface Walking, running up the side of the building. With practice, I figured I could charge another Powered Leap in the air, stick to walls long enough to Leap, and repeat the process. Even running as I was, it didn't take long to make it to the top of the tower. Cresting the apex, I settled on the roof and looked around, immediately spotting my contact. 'BlackPetal,' as her name implied, wore a lot of black—all black. Black hair, black clothes. The only color visible aside from black was a white half-mask covering the upper portion of her face, above her nose, leaving her nose and lips exposed—along with the skin of her face, which was a pale white. Her lips, however, were of course painted black.

Moving silently behind her, I dropped Invisibility and Aura Suppression. She turned around immediately, one hand moving to a sword poking out over her right shoulder. When she saw me, she froze, hand still warily gripping her sword hilt. “You sure dress the part for someone calling themselves Black Petal,” I pointed out.

“And you do not dress the part for someone calling himself 'Shiro,’” she countered.

“I dress *exactly* the part of someone named 'Shiro,'” I denied. “It should be obvious by the fact that if even my name is an overt lie then tracking me down is going to be a bit difficult.”

She hummed, then nodded. “There's logic there,” she allowed. “I'm to be your 'mentor' for this job. It's supervisor, boss, and trainer all rolled into one until I give the green light for you to run completely solo.”

“I thought the job was supposed to be completely solo and unsupervised,” I asked, confused. Hei
hadn't mentioned working under someone.

Shrugging, the woman moved closer. “It was, until someone fucked up and delivered the wrong package to the wrong address and wound up getting some poor girl killed. Now, we do OJT for a trial period of anywhere between a hundred jobs or a month worth of consecutive working days.”

I mock shuddered. “Sounds like a real job.”

“In a lot of ways, it is,” the girl admitted.

When she went silent and seemed content to simply regard me and wait, likely in an attempt to be intentionally unnerving, I asked, “So, what are we meeting here for? Your message didn't specify. Also, 'Black Petal' is kind of a mouthful.”

The woman laughed softly before reaching into a bag at her side and producing something I couldn't identify, then tossing it to me. The item in question looked like some sort of attachment that fit on the arm, with adjustable straps to allow it to fit over armor—a gauntlet or bracer, of sorts. Putting it on, I received a notification telling me I had received a Line Launcher and completed Path of the Rogue (part IV) and moved on to part V, which basically summed up exactly what she had told me about the job training. “Well, 'Shiro,’” she emphasized my name with a bit of sarcasm there, “you're right. It's only a handle for messaging. As it happens, by complete coincidence and having absolutely nothing to do with my choice in clothing, I go by 'Kuro.' Which, I suppose, makes us a matching pair.”

'Black,' which made sense. “So, what am I supposed to do with this thing?”

“There are three buttons on the grip,” she began. I had found all three already but had been reluctant to try them until she explained its function. “Thumb button to fire, index button to ascend, middle button to descend. Release all three to release from whatever you're currently stuck to. It uses Dust and has a reservoir for two standard vials under the armored top there. Fill the left one with Electric Blue to power the winch, fill the right one with your propellant of choice. I prefer Gunmetal Gray in mine for higher line velocity and longer range, but then I don't use it as a weapon unless I have to, and if I do... well, let's just say mine has a stun-gun function and leave it at that. If you intend to, there are other Dust propellant types that may work better. It's already filled and ready for use.”

“How much line are we talking here?” I asked, looking over the top of the thing. All the mechanisms for firing and spooling wire must be under the hood with the Dust reservoir, as only the tip of what looked like some sort of dart protruded visibly.
“It uses some storage tech to hold something like two klicks worth of monofilament line, along with replacement heads for when you break one. You can get replacements through the App's store, under supplies. You'll never fully deploy that much line at one time, however—or, at least, you shouldn't have to. I once got a klick worth of extension out of Gunmetal, but I have avoided repeating that stunt… Still, it's why I keep that color Dust in it.”

I knew little about the functions of various colors of Dust, beyond what I had gathered from my own tinkering with it. I knew I had Gunmetal in the inventory I'd taken the other day, however, and I would take good advice when I heard it—more range and faster ability to hit your grappling target sounded like good things, especially if you were falling at the time. I could probably survive most falls, but if I didn't have to tank the damage then so much the better. Really, I needed to work out some sort of strategy for emergency landings at some point. But a full kilometer of extension? What had she been doing to warrant that much line?

“Tell me about this training thing?” I asked, putting aside playing with the line launcher for now.

Gesturing towards the eastern edge of the roof, she lead us over to the very edge and sat down, feet kicking off the side of the building in open air. Before us, the sun was just beginning to peek over the horizon. “Here's how this is going to work. I start my nights around 8P.M.. You're going to meet me and shadow me on my runs at some point during the night—your choice when. The only times you get to accept jobs is when I'm with you and I'll be screening them to make sure you don't accept something stupid. I don't care if you do it every night, every other night, or one night a week. Just keep in mind, the sooner you get a handle on things, the sooner you get the training wheels off.”

“Speaking of stupid jobs,” I began turning to regard the woman beside me, “Ever come across a woman in red—”

“Avoid her,” Kuro answered immediately. “She’s trouble.”

I chuckled quietly before admitting, “Too late. It was my first job.”

I watched the masked woman visibly look me over for signs of damage before meeting my eyes. “Well. Shit. This is going to suck. You didn't run away and she didn't set you on fire. After the first three got spooked we kind of thought they'd blacklist her. But apparently not. Did she say anything to you?”

“Yeah,” I answered slowly, drawing the word out. “She called me 'interesting.'”
Palming her face, the black-clad runner shook her head. “Well, you're fucked. She's your problem now.”

“How do you even know all of that?” I asked, since as far as I knew all of this was supposed to be anonymous.

“We talk. There's a message board for employees. You really need to check it out. Here, let me…” she began, digging out her scroll. A few minutes later, she tilted it so I could see. “You're already news and you didn't even know it.”

Reading over the thread, I hummed. Most of it was to the effect that the 'Red Witch' had been assigned a new runner, who she hadn't managed to set on fire or run off yet—naturally, they refused to name her specifically, but everyone was talking about the same Cinder Fall I'd met. There were even running bets on how many encounters I would last before she got bored and I wound up as flambe. “I kind of wish I'd known about this ahead of time,” I lamented.

Still, what was done was done, and the pay was worth it. Besides, it gave me a chance to get close to Cinder and her operations and potentially pick up information I could use to throw a wrench in her plans. I wasn't sure what the outcome of those plans was supposed to be, but I knew it could be nothing good. Maybe, maybe she could be set on a different path. Or maybe I was kidding myself and some people were beyond redemption. I recalled her two accomplices were cold-blooded murderers, however, so there was every chance she and her band were already too far gone to be put off the path. And now that I thought about it, I should probably start digging up information on the White Fang and their goings on, along with Roman Torchwick and his crew. Roman was a big part of Cinder's Vale operations, from what I recalled—and while I knew where he hung his bowler hat now, it wouldn't hurt to have more info. I already had the twins in my pocket, and through them goings on around The Club and Hei—I'd have to ask them to keep an ear to the ground in the near future. If I was remembering my time-frame correctly, things were going to start heating up shortly.

The question, though, was what could I do? A frontal attack was right out, as was a direct assassination attempt on Cinder—even if I wanted to try cutting the head off this snake, and I didn't know that it was necessary yet. No, the level disparity between myself and Cinder was simply too great—and if she was anything to go by, Roman, Neopolitan, Adam Taurus, Mercury, Emerald… they were all outside my level range. For the moment. I would have to do recon and find out. I could make up the difference over time, but I may not have time. So, if I was going to step in and do something about this before they did something to screw up the new life I'd found myself in, I was going to need to cheat. I was a caster, after all—cheating was our bread and butter.

Maybe that was selfish—that my primary reason for wanting to stop them wasn't that they could hurt a lot of people, or kill others, but that their plans would inevitably ruin the things I had come to enjoy
on Remnant… but I didn't honestly care. I had come to realize that I liked it here and I didn't want to go back to the hell I'd come from. I would, if it would mean giving Joan and the rest of the Arcs back their brother and son, but I wouldn't enjoy it and I couldn't say it would be an easy thing to do.

Until that day, if it ever came, I was going to enjoy everything I could about this life. Some of the things I'd seen and done so far in Remnant were so far from what I knew to be 'right' where I came from that, at times, I felt as if I was living some sort of wish-fulfillment fantasy. It was surreal and disorienting at times—I was a stranger in a stranger land and it was everything I could do to adapt without simply throwing my hands up, saying 'fuck it,' and calling it quits some days… and I hadn't been here a full week yet, so I was sure it would only get worse from here. Still, I wouldn't trade it for the world. Literally. I would not trade what I had here for an entire other world, full of people I had known, loved, hated, and everything in between. I would be damned before I would let someone else shit all over the place I was quickly coming to love…

'Too old to fuck around, too young to die. I'm done pissing into the wind.'

“You okay?” Kuro asked, bringing me back to the present. “You looked kind of scary there for a minute.”

“Sorry,” I sighed, shrugging. “Just… coming to some decisions about things. And this is one of them. I was kind of only doing this as a part time job to help pay for equipment…”

Beside me, the woman turned knowing eyes on me under her mask. “Hunter school is expensive—believe me, I understand.”

“Good.” Gesturing between us, I continued. “Between training and other stuff, I'm not sure how much time I'm going to be able to put towards this. So, how about this? Message me like you were intending to and, if I'm not otherwise occupied, I'll swing by and we can make a few runs a night.”

“That's fine,” Kuro agreed. “I don't care how often you do it. So long as you remain active, you're still technically 'employed,' so you'll still have access to a lot more than you would just being a buyer.”

My scroll buzzed and I pulled it out, finding a text message from Joan.

'So… Jun's in school now… When do I get to see the new place?'
Sighing, I typed a quick reply, giving her the address and telling her I'd be there in half an hour or so. There was a chuckle from beside me and Kuro asked, “I recognize that kind of sigh. Girlfriend?”

“Hm?” I asked, looking up to see she had been reading my scroll through the mostly transparent screen. “Something like that.”

The older girl chuckled before rolling backwards onto the roof and from there to her feet. “Duty calls, huh?”

“Yeah,” I agreed mimicking her move. “Thanks, for this. The view was nice, too.”

“I come here every morning, when I get done,” she admitted. “Well, see you around.”

I watched as she took a short run towards the edge of the roof, wondering if she was going to use her own line launcher. There were no other buildings on the campus at or near this height though… My eyes went a bit wide when she instead brought her hands to her side before stretching them out again, a narrow membrane of material stretching out under the arms and between the legs of her outfit and catching the air, allowing her to glide down safely. “Showoff,” I muttered, shaking my head. I would be looking into getting one of those later, though.

Not to be outdone, I took my own run at the edge of the roof, charging Powered Leap. Instead of jumping up, however, I used Surface Walking to run over the side before Leaping, throwing me out from the side of the building. Calling up a Mana Shield, I tucked into a ball and rolled as I neared the ground to bleed off momentum—some instinctive synergy between Martial Arts Mastery and Recovery telling me how to do that—and hit the ground hard. Nearby, the ninja-dressed girl looked between me and the top of the building before shaking her head. “Showoff,” she sighed, taking off running in one direction as I went in the other.

Half an hour of running, Leaping, and using my new line launcher to swing between buildings while under Aura Suppression and Invisibility, I circled the top of the apartment building to have a look over it out of paranoia before dropping down and entering by the roof—my path back had been anything but direct, so there was little chance I’d been followed, assuming someone could somehow track me invisible and with my aura suppressed. And if they could, I highly doubted I could do anything about it. Using the line launcher while roof hopping I found to level my DEX faster than anything I’d done so far, earning me not one but two points in the distance between the tower and the apartment—not to mention running off of and leveling Use Rope—and I made a note to check my skill books again later. I found Joan waiting outside my door at the end of the hall. She looked up as I approached and dropped my stealth abilities, quietly equipping one of my casual clothing sets in between one step and the next. “You looked… different,” she mused aloud.
I rolled my eyes. “That's the point, sister dear,” I snarked.

Raising an eyebrow, she let a small smirk cross her lips. “Don't tell me we're back to playing that game?” She paused a beat before going in for the kill, “Or does the taboo factor do it for you? The whole 'forbidden fruit' thing?”

Shooting her a knowing look as I unlocked the door, I riposted with, “No, that sounds more like you than me. Don't get me wrong, it's kinky and hot in a completely fucked up way that I somehow still enjoy despite the weirdness factor—but it seems to me that that's more your fetish than mine. After all, you're the one who fantasized about an incestuous relationship with your younger brother for years.”

It was true, I did enjoy it. Despite being a madwoman, as I've stated before Joan is a functional kind of crazy—a very specific kind of functional crazy, at that. One I could live with and even enjoy. Even with the weirdness. Joan was less crazy than any three previous girlfriends I could name. Let's see, there was the woman who, after a few months of getting to know her, confessed she was possessed by a demon succubus and that she shouldn't be held responsible for the things she did while 'possessed.' Translation: “give me a free pass to cheat, please.” No thank you. Before that, there was one who claimed to be a reincarnated dragon—that had lasted an entire year before she 'confessed' and then went on another six months while I tried to decide how best to deal with that particular revelation. Turned out, just leaving worked best. Then there was one who was really into her Wicca and by that point I had almost zero tolerance for bullshit, and she was getting really into the whole 'witch' thing and wanting to start a 'coven'… so I hit the door running.

Somehow I always seemed to either find the broken ones or draw the crazy out in them. Either way, compared to that, a woman whose only issue was being attracted to her brother and having a potentially fanatical loyalty thereto barely even charted as far as weird girlfriends went. Oh, it was all kinds of screwed up, I'll admit—but it was something I could live with, considering I didn't actually see her as a sister. I had thirty-odd years of experience in a whole other life telling me I wasn't related to this woman, regardless of whose body I happened to be stuck in, and that she was a healthy, beautiful, and enthusiastically willing member of the opposite sex and I was a damn fool if I turned her away. 'Worst case scenario, don't name any male children 'Joffrey' and we should be okay.'

Following me inside and depositing her handbag on a table by the door, she couldn't resist escalating our verbal sparring, “No? I suppose poor Jun will be disappointed you're not a sister-con then.”

I palmed my face, locking the door and moving deeper into the apartment. “Don't remind me. That is not something I want to deal with. Ever. I am not into little girls.”

The sudden, vulpine grin crossing her lips told me I'd walked into a trap. “So you're saying you prefer a more,” she ran her hands down either side of her body, emphasizing her curves, “mature
woman.”

I had a counter to that, however. When someone throws out obvious bait like that, *cut the line.* “Sounds to me like you're just fishing for compliments.”

“I thought you enjoyed stroking my ego,” she pouted.

Rolling my eyes, I answered, “No, just other parts. So, what you do you think?” I asked, gesturing around the apartment. It wouldn't distract her from our little game for long, but it would give me time to prepare for round two—I wasn't entirely sure who won the first round, anyway.

She hummed, turning a critical eye on the apartment. “Nice. You've had help decorating.”

“I didn't decorate,” I denied. “It was probably the twins. Honestly, between work and grinding, I haven't been in much since I got it and when I have I've been… well, preoccupied.”

She pointed at the circle of softly glowing white designs in the middle of the floor. “They help you with that, too?” When I nodded, she moved closer and examined it more critically. “It's good work. Pretty strong, too… I swear I've seen this layout before though,” she hummed, studying it in thought.

The bedroom door clicked open and one of the twins walked out—Melanie, by the text over her head, and the sheer white nightie. Loosing a yawn, she threw me a wave before freezing like a deer in the head lights as her eyes tracked behind me, to the eldest Arc sister, whose gaze had been pulled from the bounded field inscribed on the floor to the twin across the room. “Well, well. What have we here? You didn't tell me you had guests, Jaune,” Joan accused and I could hear the positively fox-like grin she had to be wearing in her voice.

“Eep!” Melanie squeaked, turning around and ducking back into the bedroom.

“Introduce us,” Joan commanded, putting a hand on my shoulder and pushing me into the bedroom. The sound of the lock turning home in the door knob was somehow ominously louder than it should have been. The twins apparently thought so too, as they had abandoned the bed and were clearly trying to devise some way around us and out the door. I knew damn well that Joan hadn't meant introducing them in the platonic sense, either.

“You know,” I began, turning to regard the Eldest Deadly Sister, “I see where you're going with
“Do you?” she asked, raising an eyebrow. “Do tell.”

I nodded. “I remember what you said last time. There are easier ways of getting the twins into bed than trying to chase them down.”

Humming, she nodded and made a ‘go on’ gesture. “Be my guest.”

Turning on the charisma, literally in my case, I locked eyes with the typically more submissive twin—and the one I knew to be far kinkier than her sister. “Miltiades,” I began, her full name rolling off my tongue in that quietly commanding tone drawing a reaction she managed to suppress visibly to nothing but a twitch—too bad my Semblance gave her away. There was a way to phrase some things towards the twins to greater effect—there was a reason they claimed they didn’t mind sharing, after all. Their situation was not all too terribly different from what Joan and I had, minus several variables and a considerable degree of mixed feelings on the matter. It hadn’t taken long at all to figure that much out—despite their supposed thoughts on my and Joan’s relationship. Unlike Joan and I, however, they weren’t quite as honest with themselves—they tended to think of their twincest as less fornication and more mutual masturbation. Still, it was a highly exploitable vulnerability if used properly—specifically, in convincing them to try new and interesting things. It only took turning one of them to my side, and then she would convince the other—and the most vulnerable to suggestion when it came to bedroom acts was the normally more reserved twin.

“Yes, Jaune?” she asked, biting her lower lip and clearly having a good idea what was coming.

“Miltia, don't listen to him!” Melanie warned from the other side of the bed. “Whatever he says, it can't be worth betraying your only sister!”

I allowed a small smirk to cross my lips before countering, “Miltia, my sister feels that you two have been bad, so she’s taken it upon herself to discipline you.”

Miltia blinked, a blush beginning to dust her face and upper body, visible through her lingerie. “H-how so?”

“Well,” I hummed, seemingly thinking it over before shooting Melanie a glance. Catching on, Miltia followed my gaze momentarily before I waved her closer. There were times when the best approach was to slowly work up to some goal, coaxing a woman’s desire higher bit by bit and letting her
imagination do most of the work for you. However, there were times where a more direct approach worked better. It depended in part on both the woman in question and her mood at the time. I was pretty sure I had the twins figured out, though, and at the moment the direct approach was called for. When she got close enough, I cupped a hand over her ear and whispered, “How does tying you and your sister up, spanking your little asses red, and then screwing both silly 'till you can't walk straight sound?”

Watching the mood meter over her head bury the needle in the red, I knew I'd won, even if her thighs rubbing together and the trail of moisture between them glistening in the dawn light coming in past the blinds hadn't confirmed that. “That sounds… nice,” she allowed.

'She's fishing for more,' I realized.

'Miltia's the submissive twin, so what could she want... Oh. I know. She wants to be told to do it.'

“Miltiades.”

“Y-yes?” she breathed, heart rate and breathing picking up at the tone of my voice. Charisma really wasn't a fair stat, at all, especially when I had played these kinds of games before. Yes, most of my previous girlfriends had been nuts—but it seemed that the level of kink raised proportionately to the level of crazy... And more than one had had daddy issues and were looking for someone to tell them what to do.

The sound of my open palm slapping her ass was loud in the otherwise silent room as the other two occupants watched, waiting to see how this played out—Melanie herself jumping slightly at the sound, as though it had been her receiving the swat. Miltia jumped slightly at the sting, gasping faintly. “Yes what?” I asked, wondering if she would do it, if she would voice what I was betting was running through her mind. Question was, was she that into it? Role playing games had always been entertaining and the submissive types tended to enjoy their wordplay, using titles ranging from 'sir' to...

“Yes, master,” the submissive twin whispered, and through the sheer red nightie I could see her sudden blush went all the way down. Yeah, this one's level of kink was a bit higher than that of her twin. Still, it wasn't entirely unexpected, and now that she'd said it she would expect me to play the role—at least for the time being.

I gestured towards Melanie, drawing Miltia's attention from me to her twin. “Capture your sister for me and I'll let you help.”

That sold it, as the girl gave a quiet affirmative and darted across the room after her twin. “Traitor!
Sell out! Betrayer! What did he offer you?! I'll double it! ” Melanie shrieked as she tried to counter her sister, while Miltia herded her into a corner.

Hands wrapped around me from behind and a head rested itself on my right shoulder. “That was… really good,” Joan complimented, her voice hitting a tone my body recognized on a physical level as need . “Did you get that from Ninjas of Love? Volume… five, perhaps?” she asked, after a pause to remember which book it was from.

I shook my head. “Nope. That was all me ,” I denied, before asking, “Wait. That was in those books?”

“Mm… not verbatim, but very close,” she allowed. “Still, if you didn't get it from a book, where did you learn to do that?”

I rolled my eyes. “A skill named 'Marital Arts' and an unfairly high charisma modifier.” And more than one ex-girlfriend who had enjoyed the submissive role—though, never to the point of delving into truly weird stuff, aside from the would-be 'witch . ’ If one had asked me to walk her around on a leash or something, I might have had to say no. I couldn't exactly tell Joan that, though.

“Skill books are bullshit,” Joan sighed. “Oh! Looks like your assistant won. Ready to go help me teach those two a lesson?”

I nodded. “Sure. Just be kind of gentle, would you? Don't break my twins. They've kind of grown on me.”

Letting me go, Joan began kicking off her boots as she walked across the bedroom, turning to regard me with an affronted look. “Who, me? Why would I break your toys?”

“Firstly, they're not 'toys','” I countered, following. “Secondly, I get the feeling you might have done that when we were kids, if I ever paid any of my 'toys' more attention than you.”

The slightly taller blonde's eyes narrowed. “Pretty accurate guess, for someone who claims to have amnesia.”

“And you're proving my point,” I countered. “Now, are you going to argue as foreplay or get those pants off?”
"I can do both," she grinned, proceeding to do just that.

I took a moment to take in her toned legs and ass as her panties came off as well. Across from us, Melanie's mock struggles ceased for a moment as she and her sister took in the view. Noticing their eyes on her, Joan turned getting the rest of her clothes off into a short strip tease that left both twins wide-eyed and my pants feeling suddenly several sizes too small about the crotch area. "That... that is not fair," Melanie whimpered.

"At all," Miltia agreed quietly.

Joan preened under their combined gazes for a moment. "Yeah, I'm kind of awesome like that."

"Ego," I reminded as I moved past her towards the twins, giving her ass a smack in passing that caused her to jump in surprise. 'Yeah, canon Jaune definitely gets his mannerisms from her,' I mused.

Joan rolled her eyes as she followed. Reaching the twins, she stood before the captured Melanie, who gazed up into the taller woman's eyes in trepidation. The blonde smirked, reaching out and trailing her fingers down the side of white-clad twin's face, to her neck, before coming to a stop at the strap to her nightie. "I have to say, Jaune, you do have good taste." Taking hold of the strap, she pulled it down the shorter girl's shoulder before sliding her thumb under the edge of the nightie. A smirk tugged at Joan's lips and a moment later, there was a ripping sound and a startled squeak from Melanie as the night gown was forcibly ripped from her body. Melanie looked like she was about to protest, but Joan's hands coming up and cupping her small breasts stole the words, and breath, from her as she gasped quietly. "At least they know when not to mouth off."

Watching Joan attempting to goad the more outspoken twin into doing just that, I busied myself getting Miltia out of her own sleep wear, my hands dragging slowly up her flanks as I pulled the nightie up and over her head before discarding it. "M-master, may I.. um..." Miltia breathed, watching Joan molest her sister, unable to tear her gaze away.

"May you what?" I asked, reaching around and tweaking one of her nipples, drawing a squeak and ensuring I had her attention.

Biting her bottom lip, Miltia turned green eyes on me and admitted, "We have... toys." At my raised eyebrow, she lowered her gaze, blushing prettily as she quickly added, "I can get a few, if it pleases you."
Wanting to see just what she would come up with, I nodded. “Get them.”

I wasn't entirely surprised that the twins had brought over at least a few of their personal items—I was beginning to suspect they would be spending their nights here for a while. Not quite at the level of moving in, but in that awkward relationship stage where one or the other involved tends to start sleeping over on a regular basis. What she returned with after digging through one of the dresser drawers off to the side of the bed, however, sent both my eyebrows towards my hairline. The pink thing I mostly ignored as I focused on the other object in her hand. “I'm not surprised at the fact that you two own toys, that was sort of expected. But a riding crop?”

Miltia had the decency to look sheepish, breaking character for a moment as she chuckled. “Well, it works for Glynda Goodwitch.”

“Urk,” a strangled sound drew our attention to where Joan had shifted her attention to us. The blonde's eyes had gone a bit wide as she glanced between the riding crop and the girl holding it. “Do not mention her name. Just… don't.” She turned her gaze on me, suddenly adopting a serious look as she hastened to add, “Avoid her outside of class if you can manage it. You don't want to play her games, Jaune.”

“Oh?” I asked, curiosity creeping up on me as I wondered what could draw a reaction like that out of the Eldest Deadly Sister.

“Just trust me,” she rolled her eyes before reaching out and taking the riding crop from Miltia. “Give me that.” Looking around, she hummed in thought as she asked, “Wouldn't happen to have a tie or something, would you? Something to use as rope.”

Digging into my inventory, I produced a bundle of rope and handed it to Miltia. “Tie up your sister for me,” I grinned and the girl nodded, beaming a smile and turning to Joan before asking, “How would mistress like her prisoner bound?”

“Enthusiastic, isn't she?” the blonde directed at me, before grinning down on Miltia before forcing Melanie's arms out in front of her body. By the time she was satisfied, Melanie was left bound at the arms and legs, holding herself up on her arms and knees from where she was bent over on the bed, leaving her completely exposed and helpless to do anything about it. What was interesting, however, was the fact that the rope wasn't just locking her limbs in place—it crisscrossed Melanie's body in a pattern I recognized, around the chest, over and under the breasts, and at the hips and crotch in a classic shibari pattern. The twins just kept surprising me.
Taking Miltia by the hand, I led her to the opposite side of the bed and pushed her down in front of her sister, so they were nearly face to face across the bed. “You're not going to try to get out of your punishment if I leave you untied, are you Miltia?”

“No, master! Please, punish me how you see fit,” she begged, waving her ass in the air invitingly. After a moment of consideration, she added, “Though, you could, just to be safe and help me avoid the temptation…”

Rolling my eyes, I produced more rope and set about securing the girl so she wouldn't feel left out, but mostly because I knew she wouldn't have suggested it if it wasn't a huge turn-on for her. Across the bed from us, Joan was slowly teasing Miltia, fingers stroking up and down her inner thighs, occasionally brushing over the smaller girl's outer lips without ever stroking her outright—and effectively driving Melanie wild, if her whimpering was anything to go by. Meeting her eyes, I raised my hand and brought it down on a smack on Miltia's ass. Across from me, Joan did the same with the riding crop, a sharp smack and a gasp announcing its contact with the other twin. “So, how many licks were you thinking, for bruising your ego?”

Joan's eyes narrowed as she sent me a mild glare. “If you're not careful, it'll be you getting spanked for being mouthy.”

I met her eyes as she doled out another smack, doing the same to Miltia. “Sounds like that's something you want.” A smirk crossed my lips as I asked, “Would you like to trade places with the twins? I could tie you down, bind up those large breasts of yours, maybe find a paddle…”

“I'd like to see you try,” she challenged, punctuating it with another swat. “But by the look on your twin's face there, I don't think she can take much more. She looks like she's about to come just sitting there.”

I hummed, leaning forward and taking in Miltia's face, flushed as it was. “Possibly,” I agreed, reaching out to stroke her reddening ass.

“You're too gentle with them,” Joan criticized quietly, reaching down and grabbing a handful of Melanie's hair at the back of her head and shaking her head a bit with one hand while she brought the other up to spread Melanie's outer lips, forcing two of her long fingers inside the smaller girl and beginning to pump them in and out quickly, drawing a quiet moan from Melanie's lips.

The lewd, wet sounds of Melanie's snatch being roughly finger fucked were quickly joined by more of the same as I mimicked Joan's pace with Miltia, who buried her face in the blankets and began shaking her head back and forth as I felt her begin contracting around my fingers pretty much the
moment I started—that was all it took to push her over the edge, it seemed. I gave her no respite, no chance to recover, as I leaned in and began sucking and licking at her lips and clit, drawing a muffled squeal from her and stringing her orgasm along a bit longer. Across from me, Joan had traded pulling Melanie's hair for mauling her breasts, squeezing the girl's much smaller breast in her palm while using her fingers to pull, pinch, and roll the nipple. Much like her twin, Melanie had been near the end of her own resistance and was soon quivering in orgasm.

Joan hummed, looking around. “Didn't one of them have another toy?”

I gave Miltia one last teasing nip before pulling back, taking a moment to wipe her dew from my lips and lower jaw before leaning down and picking up the toy in question. The toy in question was neon pink and oddly shaped—one end looked mostly like a phallus, as one would expect from a sex toy, while the other end hooked upwards in a J-shape, the short end of the 'J' ending in a bulbous head. On the under side looked to be a flap which, when I pushed away the material, showed it to be an access port for a standard sized Dust container. 'So, Dust-powered vibrating strapless strap-on?' I wondered, shaking my head and tossing it to Joan along with the remote. Of course the people of Remnant would use Dust in every damn thing, including their sex toys.

“I don't have this model,” the blonde mused aloud. Noticing me watching, she smirked and spread her legs enough to give me a good view as she spread her lips with the fingers of one hand and slowly slid the smaller end into herself, biting her bottom lip as her eyes went half-lidded. “It's not what I want, but it'll do for now,” she sighed, shifting around a bit to settle it how she wanted it before moving into position behind Melanie. “Hurry up over there. I want to watch her face when she comes around your cock.”

Opening my inventory long enough to equip a condom, I sent the elder blonde a smirk as I lined up behind Miltia and ran the head of my cock up and down her slit, collecting the girl's own juices for lube. Neither of the twins had quite regained their senses yet, so they weren't exactly expecting it when we both pushed our hips forward at the same time, each of us sliding hilt-deep into a twin. It didn't take much effort to synchronize our thrusts into a rhythm that worked as the regular, wet slap of our bodies meeting filled the bedroom, along with the gasps, moans, and sighs drawn from the twins. A faint buzzing sound started up and Melanie squeaked before collapsing forward against the bed, each new thrust from Joan now met with a quiet squeal. I met Joan's half-lidded, crystal blue eyes and grinned. “You're getting close, aren't you?”

“Mhmm,” she voiced, nodding and visibly holding herself back.

I called up a little of my Aura, pulling on charisma as her eyes closed momentarily. “Let it go,” I murmured, voice dipping into that tone I knew the twins enjoyed. “Come for me, Joan.”

“Fuck,” she hissed, reaching up and grabbing a fistful of Melanie's hair as she thrust harder, the twin
in her hands loosening a loud, broken moan as the larger blonde pounded her cunt with a force that rocked the bed. Joan's eyes opened wide as she came, biting her lip to keep from screaming as she buried the toy into the twin in her arms, pushing Melanie the rest of the way over the edge. I had been getting close myself and with Melanie's orgasm setting off Miltia, I growled as I lost the last of my own self control as her tight, hot cunt convulsed around my cock, closing my eyes as the world temporarily whited-out.

I took a moment to regain my breath, releasing my grip on Miltia's hips and chuckling quietly as I noticed the visible hand prints there. Rubbing the girl's back, I looked over to find Joan bent over Melanie, who had been pushed down into the blankets, shuddering in aftershocks—or it could have been the vibrator still going, keeping her plateauing. Below her, Melanie pushed herself up as far as she could before meeting my eyes, her own glowing faintly green. Below me, Miltia had also stirred and turned to regard me with a matching set of faintly glowing eyes. “Again, master?” they synced, a smirk mirrored across their faces. A moment later, Miltia's hips ground back into me, drawing a groan from my throat and causing my cock to jump inside her. Across from her, Joan gasped as Melanie mirrored the motion.

The blonde looked up, taking a moment to observe the twins as Miltia locked eyes with her. “That's kind of freaky,” she admitted, then groaned when Melanie thrust back against her again. “Mm, don't care though.” Reaching down, she took hold of the bit of rope keeping the knots in place and gave it a yank, freeing the twin below her. She took a moment to help Melanie get the ropes the rest of the way off before rolling her over and pushing the girl down into the bed in the missionary position.

Unlike Melanie, Miltia's ropes didn't keep me from adjusting her legs and the girl enjoyed having them on anyway, so I left them where they were as I pushed her forward until she lay beside her sister, rolling her over onto her side and straddling one of her legs while I pushed the other up into her chest, which incidentally made her tighter around me and left me free to play with her clit. “You get used to it,” I admitted, having seen the light show a time or two. I wasn't one hundred percent sure what was going on there, but I suspected the twins semblance was either close to activating or already had and they simply hadn't figured out how to use it. I could figure it out later, though. There were more enjoyable things at hand, after all. “You're next, by the way.”

Across from me, Joan grinned. “Good. I was getting kind of jealous.”

“Less talking,” Melanie deadpanned.

Beside her, Miltia finished with, “More fucking.”

Joan and I shared a look before a pair of slaps rang out close enough to be one sound, followed by the twins 'Eep!' at the simultaneous smack.
“So mouthy,” Joan sighed. “You need to train them properly.”

I hummed in agreement. “Any suggestions?”

A smirk stretched across her lips as she nodded. “Oh, yes. Many. Firstly….”

I grinned as Joan went into detail, the twins squirming under us as they listened in rapt attention. Somehow, I got the feeling that Joan’s sexual education trumped my own—then again, as I’d noticed was becoming the trend, Remnant was full of perverts. I supposed I’d fit in fine here, after all.

_The system has been updated! Would you like to view the Change Log?_

'No. Not right now,' I groused, closing the window as I was roused from a very nice post-coital nap sandwiched between the lithe forms of the twins and the curvier, fuller form of the Eldest Deadly Sister. I really wished the system would update to the point where I no longer had biological functions sometimes. Then again, if it did that, I may one day stop being able to enjoy sex—or food. Nope, not worth the risk. I'll take (mostly) human biology and everything that comes with it, thanks. Besides, it already had a bad habit of trying to cockblock me at times. Seriously, nothing throws off your mood like skill point gains in the middle of the act—which it apparently liked to do, seeing as I seem ed to gain points far quicker from sex than just about anything else, so far. I would almost accuse my Semblance of turning my life into an H-game or visual novel, except for the fact that, again, it seemed to try its best to troll me when it did that sort of thing. Well, there was Dating Mode, which pretty much did exactly that, but I wasn't going to give my Semblance the satisfaction of letting it count.

With a yawn and a stretch, I eased my way up out of the tangle of limbs and made my way into the bathroom to take care of necessities. When I finished and washed my hands, I brushed my teeth—because I couldn't stand bad breath, but mostly because I tasted like three different women and it was polite to brush your teeth after that—and checked my HUD, finding it to be nearly 3P.M. I double checked that and resisted the urge to gawk. Six hours. We had been at it for six hours. Well, more like five and a half hours, and then a nap. How…'Aura. It has to be. Candice at least had the excuse of not having been laid in a while, and even then we took breaks… These three took no breaks.'

The twins had given out first, first Melanie and then Miltia passing out before Joan and I decided a nap sounded good and followed their example once we'd finished our last round. Still, knowing she was a much higher level than me, I knew Joan could have outlasted us all. If stats were a thing, then
the only reason I could keep up was the fact that my buffs and passive abilities allowed for a stamina regeneration that most physical tasks wouldn't outstrip—or would, at the very least, take much longer to drain than without. As I've said, sex done right is hard work. Fun, immensely rewarding, and entertaining… but still strenuous.

Approaching the bed, I leaned down and shook Joan's shoulder. “Hey,” I whispered, slowly rousing her out of her nap.

“What?” she slurred, before asking, “What time is it?”

“Nearly three.”

Her eyes snapped open and she rolled out of bed, immediately going for her clothes. “Damnit, Jaune,” she groaned. “I'm going to be late and I'm not going to have time to take a shower.”

“It'll be fine,” I assured her, bending down to pick up her blouse, which I tossed to her the moment she had a free hand. “Jun's a big girl, she can take care of herself for five minutes. You'll only be a little late.”

Hopping on one foot as she pulled on a boot, she whined, “But my shower. I'm going to smell like sex!”

“I saw a few supplies the twins got for themselves in the bathroom. There's bound to be perfume or body spray in there or something, maybe deodorant,” I suggested.

Sighing in resignation, she got the other boot settled and made her way towards the bathroom. “It'll have to do.”

“Stop acting like a big baby,” I teased, “Admit it, you had fun.”

“Yes. I did,” the Eldest Deadly Sister agreed from inside the bathroom. “And now I have to leave and go back to being a mother to my sister…” she trailed off. A moment later, her voice was hesitant and held a combination of remorse and guilt as she added, “I didn't mean that like it sounded.”
She continued, either not having heard me or feeling the need to get it out. “I don't want you—any of you—to ever feel like you were a burden. You are not. You have all been an absolute joy. And I don't want to seem like I'm saying our parents are irresponsible for what they're doing. I see the need of it, and I see the reason in it—we're old enough to look after Jun, and you, and the others… It's just that, well…”

I left the bed and met her in the bathroom, having equipped a clean set of clothes, and pulled her into a hug. “You didn't sign up for this job. I know. It's okay. I'm sure it's been hell on your social life.”

“What social life?” the blonde laughed quietly.

“Exactly what I meant,” I agreed. “But you don't have to take care of me any more, and any time you want some stress relief, you can call me.”

The taller girl nodded, squeezing me a bit tighter. “You're sure you can't just come home and we can be careful?”

Pulling back slightly, I met her blue eyes with my own and asked, “Do you honestly think we'd be able to keep our hands off each other in close proximity?”

Having the good grace to look sheepish, Joan shook her head. “I know, you're right. Still… Friday, my relief should get here. Would you mind if I maybe… stayed here a while? Just for a few days, before I go back in the field?”

I nodded. “It's fine. I'll get you a key made.”

Beaming a smile, the blonde pulled me into a hug that audibly popped joints in my spine before Gamer's Body kicked in. “Okay. I'm late enough as it is. I have to go.”

I walked her to the door and saw her out, where she pulled me into a quick kiss that threatened to turn into a much longer kiss had I not pulled away and ushered her on to pick up our sister. Closing the door, I made my way back into the bedroom. “How much of that were you listening to?”
“Family business is family business,” Melanie answered, sitting up and stretching. I covered a leer forming on my lips with a hand as I eyed the red marks crisscrossing her torso, along with the hickey on her neck.

“Would you like us to leave, Friday? Maybe give you two some alone time over the weekend?” Miltia asked, mirroring her sister's stretch. Looking down, she eyed her own set of markings before shifting her gaze to her sister. “We're going to need to do something about that before work.”

“Let me,” I offered. Holding out a hand pointed at Miltia, I chanted, “Regen,” then switched targets and did it again. Rope marks and hickies alike disappeared, likely hand prints as well. I was mildly disappointed—I supposed I liked the idea of marking the twins up a bit. “As for the weekend… Yeah, a day or two maybe. She needs some time to unwind. You don't mind?”

Melanie rolled her eyes, standing and making her way towards the shower. “We have a place of our own, you know?”

“Even if we really enjoy staying the night here,” Miltia added. “Are you going out for work later?”

“Grinding,” I answered, following them into the bathroom for a shower myself. I needed to eat at some point, too. “I have some things I need to take care of. Speaking of, there's something I need you two to keep an ear out for.”

“Oh?” Melanie asked as I joined them under the spray—it was a tight squeeze, but the twins were small and we weren't shy about sharing space. “What are you after?”

Wondering how best to put it, I hummed in thought before beginning. “I met someone on the job last night. I have reason to suspect she's up to something and she doesn't seem like she's sitting at the kiddie table.”

“Is she strong?” Miltia asked, and I rolled my eyes at where I suspected her thoughts had gone.

“Yeah. Level 44.” The twins perked up in interest and I quickly moved to quash those hopes. “I highly doubt she's going to be interested in 'joining up,' as it were. In fact, you two keep well the hell away from her. I've been told she's trouble and I'm inclined to believe it.”

“How are we supposed to steer clear of her if we don't even know who you're talking about?”
Melanie argued.

Conceding the point, I answered. “About 5’11”, pale complexion, black hair, gold eyes…”

“Red dress with orange-red Dust patterns?” Miltia asked, trading a glance with her sister.

“Yeah…” I drew the word out, eying the twins critically. “Why am I not surprised you’ve met her?”

The pair shrugged. “She comes to The Club occasionally, either to meet up with contacts or let off steam. She's a good dancer,” Melanie answered.

“Drinks her bourbon neat, pretty much ignores everyone around her who she isn't there to see or who doesn't interest her, and no one interests her,” Miltia continued. “Always leaves after she's had one or two and tends to intimidate anyone trying to hit on her.”

Turning to look me in the eye, Melanie asked, “So, what's the big deal?”

“Other than being dangerous and powerful?” I asked, drawing a set of nods. “She rubs me the wrong way.”

“Instinct, then?” Miltia asked, and I shrugged. It was the best I could give without thinking up a way to lie about something my Semblance had told me.

“Just keep an ear to the ground, let me know if anybody is planning anything.” Seeing they looked skeptical, I sighed and phrased it a way they couldn't argue with. “If someone decides to, say, hit a Dust shop or raid a weapons' cache I could get in, steal it out from under them, and they would take the blame for it. Or, you know, just dupe the items.”

Both twins took on a considering look before Melanie asked, “We'll be able to sell whatever you get, right?”

“Maybe,” I hedged. “How about instead of selling it all, especially if it's something I could use, we split it into shares and you can sell your share for profit?”
“How large a share?” Miltia asked, apparently already running the numbers.

Thinking on it, I offered, “Ten percent.”

“Each,” Melanie countered.

Eh, what the hell? It wasn't like I had a personal stake in anything I took from somebody like Roman or the White Fang. I would mostly be stealing things off of them to slow them down. “Deal.”

Surprisingly, we managed to make it out of the shower without going another round and I spent a few minutes after equipping clean clothes gathering laundry and throwing it in the apartment's washer. Taking a seat in my overstuffed chair, I opened up my inventory and dug out my skill books. The first I took out was Kung Pow, since I knew I had the requisite 20 DEX now. Devouring the book did… something. I did not gain a new skill, at least no outright. No, what it did do was bridge the knowledge I already had of my martial skills—Sword, Shield, and Martial Arts Mastery—and my knowledge of Firearms Mastery. Everything just sort of clicked, and suddenly I got how most of the characters of RWBY did the crazy shit they did combining guns and martial arts. It was like a hidden skill, really, in that I couldn't see it on my interface at all, but it was there nonetheless.

The other two that were close were Aura Examination and Aura Healing—both off by only one point of WIS. All it would take was a word and the push of a button and I could have them. The problem was, once I started down the path of adding points I may as well just go ahead and dump the rest, because trying to earn skill points after that would be just that much harder. That one point now could, potentially, cost me ten or more in the future as I was forced to rely on leveling to gain more points. 'No, it's not worth the hassle,' I decided.

Your wisdom has increased by 1!

I blinked, then blinked again before laughing. ‘So, waiting was the wise choice after all.’ Still, now I could learn those two books.

**Aura Examination**: Passive. Level: MAX. You have learned how to scan a patient for status effects by scanning their Aura for abnormalities. Effect: adds the ability to examine Aura for status effects to **Observe**.
Aura Healing: Active. Level 1. You have learned a skill to heal others of harm and remove their ailments through the use of your Aura. Effect: Without soul crystal: heals a patient for 200% of your INT modifier. With soul crystal: removes negative status effects, curses, heals damage to Aura. Add Dust crystals of different types to increase the effectiveness of Aura Healing. Cost: 20 MP, 1 Soul Crystal.

Well, I couldn't level Aura Healing any time soon, unless I got hurt or someone else did… I blinked once, twice, and a slow smile spread over my face. Hopping out of my chair, I hurried into the bedroom, where I found the twins getting ready for the night. “Hey girls, question…” Seeing I had their attention, I asked, “How busy would you say the hospital is? Or full? Do people get sick normally, or does Aura prevent that?”

The twins shared an amused look before Melanie began. “People get sick all the time. While Aura's pretty much a cure-all for Hunters…”

“Not everyone's a Hunter,” Miltia pointed out. “Or even has an active Aura. Someone usually has to awaken your Aura, firstly. Secondly, most people don't have much in the way of Aura capacity.”

Giving me a considering look, Melanie asked, “Why do you ask? You've got that look in your eye that says you've got a plan for something you probably shouldn't be doing.”

“Who, me?” I asked, assuming my most innocent look. Neither twin was buying it at that point. “Okay, fine. I'm going to go down to the hospital later and spam my new skill for completely altruistic purposes, healing the sick and wounded—and if I just so happen to gain levels out of it, so much the better.”

Two identical deadpan looks were their response and I shrugged shamelessly. Finally, Melanie asked, “So you're picking the most convenient and personally profitable method of putting your skills to good use?”

When I nodded, the pair broke into smiles and Miltia added, “We're so proud of you. Next thing you know, you'll actually be stealing stuff for fun and profit as opposed to necessity or to screw over someone else.”

Rolling my eyes, I left the bedroom and made my way into the kitchen. Checking the refrigerator, I found the makings for sandwiches and quickly threw together a couple. The twins joined me a few minutes later, as I was finishing my own. “Sorry I didn't cook—it seems like I haven't really had a chance to be here much recently.”
“It’s fine,” Miltia assured me. “We can cook.”

“Besides, it’s not like we live here full time,” Melanie continued. “If that were the case, we might be upset, but we *can* fend for ourselves.”

I shook my head. “Never said you couldn’t. Everyone likes someone else to cook for them every now and then, though.”

The twins’ answer was non-committal, but I could tell they agreed and were mostly trying *not* to seem pushy or imposing— which was a refreshing change from what had become the norm for me in my old life, where pushy and imposing were standard operating procedures for nearly every woman I’d dated once they made it past the first week, growing progressively worse in a sort of slow creep over time . They still weren’t quite sure how this thing was supposed to work and were stressing over it a bit, in places. To be honest, I wasn't entirely sure myself. I was just kind of going with whatever worked at this point. It would likely take us a few weeks, at least, to figure that out and really adjust to each other—everything was still in that *new* phase. “Hey,” I said, drawing their gazes up to meet mine. “Don't worry about it too much. I'm not going to kick you out or ditch you if you push boundaries a bit. The worst I'm likely to do is say 'no.' I expect the same out of you—if I suggest something that you don't like or that makes you uncomfortable, let me know. Okay?”

“Okay,” the twins synced with a pair of relieved smiles. Miltia added, “You haven't yet, really.”

Melanie sighed, nodding. “As much as I may protest… no, you haven't. We'll let you know if you do.”

“What my sister is *trying* to say,” Miltia smirked, “Is that she likes being pushed down, but she wants to put up a struggle first.”

“Hey!” the white-clad sister protested, slapping her twin on the arm. “Don't go telling my secrets!”

“That's not a secret,” I deadpanned, earning a glare in return. “Well it's *not*.”

“Don't you have some sickly to heal?” the girl pouted. “Go put bandages on orphans or something.”
Standing, I threw a wave over my shoulder as I made for the door. “Yes, ma'am!”

“Smartass!”

Chuckling as the door closed behind me on her cursing, I equipped my stealth set and activated Invisibility before heading for the roof. My plans for the evening were simple. As it was only shortly after 4 P.M., I would head over to the hospital and get a feel for Aura Healing and try it with a few varieties of Dust. After that, I would go open up an Instant Dungeon and grind my other skills while farming soul crystals, then once I cleared an Instant Dungeon I would repeat the process. Getting the first ten or so levels shouldn't take long at all—it was just too bad I couldn't progress it like I could my buff skills. Aura, Reinforcement, Reflex, and Haste were all sitting pretty on an even level 20 after leaving them on constantly through running, fighting, even screwing.

Dumping points into a trait like INT or VIT can raise your HP by a bit—10 points of MP or HP per point of INT or VIT, plus what you got for your level—but the things that truly made RPG-style characters ridiculous at times were the passive bonuses. A system with no level cap to skills meant that I could level skills independently of my character level, making for some truly inflated stats for a 'low level' character. At level 14, after all the numbers were run through my passive and active bonuses from things like Aura, I had 8643 HP and 7271 MP. I had started with bonuses to INT, WIS, and CHA from the Outsider title, but passive and active bonuses to VIT had already surpassed my bonuses and those extra points to INT that had overinflated it for the first few levels. I regenerated almost as much HP as I had with my Aura active, at 7148 HP/minute of regen. With Meditation active, I could regenerate 22876 per minute at level 12 of Meditation.

It took running the numbers through a calculator twice before I accepted that what I was seeing was accurate, and like my stats the bonuses were stacking cumulatively after my other bonuses, as opposed to being added to my other bonuses. In other words, two passives, one for +100% and the other for +200% would not net +300% but rather ((X*100%)+X)=Y after the first and then ((Y*200%)+Y)=Z, where Z was the product after both bonuses were applied as opposed to ((X*300%)+X)=R. Throw a 2 where the X is and solve for Y, Z, and R and you get entirely different outcomes: Z=12 and R=8. MP regen wasn't quite so bad, since Aura being active drained MP... while passively restoring it, which was still producing more than it was spending. Without Meditation, I could regen 1609 MP/minute—with Meditation on, that bumped up to 5149 MP/minute.

The math wasn't the issue, the real issue was the fact that I could create skills on pretty much an as needed basis at times, including passive skills—my Semblance cut out a lot of the middle steps to learning or creating a skill—the trade-off there being that I had to grind those skills up once I had them, because they weren't all that strong by themselves. A 100% bonus wasn't much, when you started off with a 10 in something. No, it was the cumulative effects that really did it—a 100% bonus here, a 150% there, slowly incrementing upwards as I leveled those skills.
I'd noticed, however, that with the last system update that the regen counts actually worked *per second*—so I was regenerating about 26 MP/second. I should go over that at some point and find out what else changed. Changing the way regen ticked was good for me, seeing as I didn't have to wait a full minute between ticks—if I was taking constant damage, or burning a constant stream of mana, then this would work to offset that. More though, if I took a sudden hit to my HP I wouldn't have to wait a full minute for it to tick back up and would be in less danger from a bleeding effect or 'fort save or die' situation since healing tended to negate those kinds of things.

This entire phenomena, with stacking bonuses and such turning an ordinarily weak character into a *ridiculously strong* character for its level was called 'power creep.' At low levels, it could be a real game changer depending on how soon a character got those abilities. At higher levels? I was almost afraid to look at Joan when I leveled Observe to the point where I'd be able to see all her character data—and she wasn't even the biggest fish in this pond, not even remotely. Qrow, Glynda, *Ozpin*… I already knew I'd be looking at levels labeled as '?' when I hit Beacon unless I was level 30 or higher. I suspected Glynda to be in the mid-70s or so. Ozpin? I had *no idea* . Likely 90+ considering he ran the school. That is, again, assuming level 100 as some sort of level cap. It could go up to 255 for all I know, or there may not be an end to it.

Coming in high from the next building over, I let my line spool out with a high drag on it as I approached the hospital, dropping altitude and speed before I released the line from its anchor point and reeled it in as I hit the ground. Watching the front, I waited a moment for someone else walking in and followed behind them so as to not trip any door sensors or raise notice by opening doors—people tended to take note when doors suddenly opened for no apparent reason. Once inside, I peeled off from my 'escort' and found a floor map. Looking it over, I hummed before making my choice. I moved to the stairwell and opened an empty ID on top of the door, quickly passing through and dismissing the pocket of space before making my way up the stairs to the floor where the children were kept—the same floor where I had woken up in this strange new world. Another quick ID got me onto the floor unnoticed and I walked down the hall, picking the first room I came across and immediately getting a quest notification for a repeatable quest to heal the sick and wounded, which would reward me 1000 EXP per patient healed.

While this didn't seem like much, there had to be at least 30 patients on this floor—multiplied by 1000, that would put me at level 17 by the time I finished the floor. As with most games, gaining experience was a quantity over quality thing: if you had the choice between a quest returned 10000 EXP but took twenty minutes to finish, or killing mobs at 500 EXP each and each mob took ten seconds to kill, then killing the mobs by the hundred was the right choice every time. If you could *combine* those two things, usually with quests that required you to kill those mobs, then that was the best possible option. In this case, however, I had a specific skill I needed to grind up which could only gain experience by being used properly—which meant that either way I went, *someone* was going to have to be injured for it to work. With the hospital, I had a ready source of sick and injured people that would benefit from me grinding up my skill on them since *there were no negative effects* to using the skill. The experience gain was just icing on the cake for something I would have done just to level the skill by itself anyway.

Like most hospitals in my old reality, this one left patient doors open unless patients were sleeping,
with family, or requested privacy—this was done mostly so nurses could make the rounds easier. It also made my work here easier, seeing as I wouldn't have to open and close a bunch of doors invisibly or spam Create ID to move around—sure, I'd take the extra experience, but this way was faster. Again, it was a trade-off between time spent and experience gained. Once inside, I took a look at the patient's chart posted at the foot of the bed: some disease I didn't recognize the name of, not terminal. Observe confirmed that, going so far as to give me a rating scale for the severity of the illness: grade 1 out of 5. Taking out a soul crystal, I held it over the girl and subvocalized, “Aura Healing.”

The crystal in my hand went dark and shattered into dust—not Dust, though. A quick pass with Observe showed the girl was healthy. Aura Healing had even leveled. Grinning, I moved on to the next room, my mana already having ticked back up from casting the spell. I managed to clear the floor like that with just the soul crystals in my inventory, though it had actually managed to get dark by the time I finished as some people took multiple castings of the spell. Dust, as I came to find out, worked differently depending on the type of Dust and the type of illness. Blue, water-type Dust tended to be best for generally boosting the effects of Aura Healing if I wasn't fighting something specific. The rest, it was fairly hard to tell with—I would have to see if I could find a manual or something. While I was here, I could perhaps show the healer who had given me the skill books that I had learned the skills and ask for some more help...

That plan in mind, I left to go refill my stock of soul crystals. The hospital was, unsurprisingly, fully Sanctified and Area Purged—and given the amount of death that must go on in a hospital on a daily basis, that had to be a full time job. The surrounding blocks, however, had been neither purged nor Sanctified—and with the hospital so near, turned out to be excellent hunting grounds. It was bad to the point that I encountered a far larger variety of grimm than I'd ever run across before—in addition to beowolves, I also found creeps, stalkers, taijitu, and nevermore. There were none of the giant variety of those, thankfully, and nothing over level 20. Even six levels above me, they weren't much of a challenge individually when I could either Sleep them or kite them. I even went so far as to go ahead and make a poison-based spell in Bio, which wouldn't break Sleep effects. With most things I could hit clusters of monsters with Sleep, apply Bio to each, then watch them die over time while I dealt with other enemies with different skills. It was really almost unfair—but as I've said before, I wasn't in this to be fair, I was in it to win. I would use every cheap advantage I could get or create—and in doing so, level The Strategist for extra bonuses and more INT and WIS points, two points each just for this area. Since INT and WIS were the hardest to train, I would take all the help I could get.

I was maybe halfway through clearing the area, and another two levels higher at level 19, when my scroll buzzed. Running a set of four of AP Rounds through a stalker's head area, I pulled out my scroll and had a look as it dissolved. 'I have an assignment. Why do I have an assignment? And at... 3000L, no less. Ah, crap. She really is my problem now.' Oddly, I didn't even have the ability to refuse this job. My scroll buzzed in my hand, signaling an incoming message.

'Sorry, I tried to filter it and deny the job, but the app wouldn't let me—meaning someone higher ranked than me has pretty much foisted off our problem customer on you. Meet at the pickup location. - BlackPetal.'
“Damnit. Now what have I gotten myself into?”
“You've really fucked up, you know that?”

I hadn't even touched down properly before Kuro started in on me. “What did I do exactly?”

“You know what you did,” she deadpanned. She gestured towards the building below. “Well, come on. Let's get this over with.”

Following her down to street level, I knocked on the door at the pickup location as she took up a position on the wall to the side of the door, out of sight from anyone inside. The door opened and I caught a glimpse of a man standing in the mostly dark interior beyond the door, back-lit by a familiar glow I recognized as coming from computer screens, before a wrapped package found its way into my hands and the door quickly shut. “That was... odd,” I muttered, looking over the wrapped box. It was roughly a foot long and a third of that wide and deep, and whatever was inside it was likely secured with foam or something since it didn't rattle or shift when I turned the package over in my hands.

“Stop trying to figure out what it is,” Kuro chastised and I nodded, stuffing the package in my side pouch before realizing it wasn't going to fit. The older woman rolled her eyes and held out her hand. I handed off the package and she stuck it into the small, black backpack slung across her back. “I suggest getting one of these for bigger packages. That, or springing for a space-expanded pouch—but those things are expensive.”

“Most bags of holding are,” I mused aloud, firing my line launcher and following her into the air. Then again, the pattern for creating a section of folded space had been amongst the things I'd devoured out of Sanguine's collection of notes and patterns. I could just make one myself, if I took
We arrived at Cinder's current base of operations several minutes later and I found myself still marveling at how much time having extra mobility options shaved off of moving around the city. One day, I would have to sit down and work out how to fly under my own power—it had to be possible, somehow. “How do you want to handle this?” I asked as my so-called mentor passed the package back to me.

“How do you want to handle this?” I asked as my so-called mentor passed the package back to me.

“Hand off the package and leave, politely,” she answered shortly.

Shrugging, I dropped to street level, leaving Kuro above to watch. I had barely raised my hand to knock before I found the door opening and the red witch waiting on the other side, a smug little smile already tugging her lips upwards slightly. “Hello again,” she purred.

Handing off the package, I gave a short wave before raising my hand to fire my line launcher and gain altitude. “And a good night to you, miss.”

“Leaving so soon?” she asked, sounding disappointed and I blinked, fingers and thumb on the trigger and buttons that would pull me up and away from this mess before it became any more complicated or dangerous than it already was. This was not the way I wanted to approach Cinder's operations and I wasn't prepared for this, but opportunity was knocking here. “Won't you come in?”

'Don't say yes, don't say yes,’ I thought to myself as my hand fell back to my side. “Well,” I hedged, “there is someone waiting on me…” There, that was a polite enough way of saying I was expected somewhere else already and I had other obligations.

That smug smile became a smug smirk as her eyes tracked upwards, locking on the shadowed form of Kuro above. “I'm sure your partner won't mind. I'd just like a chance to… talk. Perhaps over something to drink?”

I could practically feel Kuro's eyes boring into the back of my skull with laser-like intensity and my own common sense was shouting at me to say 'no,' but… There was really no way I could say no to something that intriguing. The fact that she was ridiculously sexy had absolutely nothing to do with influencing my decision one way or another. It was purely for the mission of disrupting her operations, I told myself. I am a terrible liar, at times. “You know,” I began, pulling up charisma as I did so, “in nature, the more beautiful a thing is, the more deadly it tends to be. Humans, though, tend to ignore that natural instinct in favor of curiosity…”
“Oh?” she asked, arching an eyebrow. “You know what they say about curiosity and cats…”

“Yes, but the end of that little tale everyone seems to leave off is that satisfaction brings the cat back. You seem like a dangerous kind of girl but I’m only human, and a naturally curious one at that. Lead on,” I grinned under my mask, gesturing inside. As she pulled away from the door and went inside, I turned my head to regard Kuro. Tapping my wrist twice, I opened and closed my hand three times to signal her to wait fifteen minutes before doing anything, before moving inside myself and closing the door behind me.

Further inside, I found what looked like an old storefront of some sort converted into living space. Gesturing for me to sit, she moved into what passed for a kitchen where I lost sight of her for a few minutes. The room I'd found myself in seemed to be some sort of combined living room and study. There were a couple of old couches and chairs, tables, and books everywhere. On a wall at the back of the room was some sort of cork board with a map of Remnant, along with individual maps of each of the major cities, several pins of different colors stuck in them along with printed photographs of a lot of people I didn't recognize and a very few I did—Roman Torchwick and Adam Taurus among them. A large table stood a few feet from the cork board, this one with fewer books, but those that were there I could guess were more important than the rest.

None of it really fit any pattern though, at least not in a way that made sense to me at a glance. It was certainly research, and with people like Roman and Adam on that list, I could almost be guaranteed that it was a list of either potential contacts or targets—but the rest I couldn't even begin to guess at. I probably could with time to study it and apply what I knew of canon, but I had the sudden feeling I had been allowed to see this specifically because there were no real conclusions anyone looking at it could draw from anything.

“If we're drawing conclusions of each other, I would say you appreciate a direct approach as opposed to dancing around a subject. So, tell me,” Cinder's voice drew my attention to where she was coming out of the kitchen with two steaming cups. Handing me one, she sat down in the chair across the table from mine and asked, “What do you fight for?”

“Excuse me?” I asked, slowly turning the cup in my hands but making no move to drink—in order to do so, I'd have to remove my mask, and that wasn't happening.

Glancing between the cup and my mask, she smirked in amusement, asking, “What do you get out of what you do?”

I hummed, thinking it over. She was looking for something specific, but I had no idea what. Still, I would have to be careful. I couldn't make any references to Beacon, and I would have to avoid bringing up my Semblance, not to mention anything that would give away my identity or intentions… “Money, mostly. Money, experience, contacts, and employment that doesn't require
either putting myself in needless danger or slaving away for a pittance on a daily basis. Why do you ask?"

“With your Semblance, you could be so much more than a glorified delivery boy.” Pausing to sip her own tea, she continued with, “Invisibility, the ability to suppress your Aura while still being able to use it, and your ability to charm others…”

I blinked, frowning under my mask. I had a feeling I knew what she was talking about, but just to confirm I asked, “What do you mean, ‘charm others?’”

Cinder raised one perfect eyebrow. “You didn't think I didn't notice, did you? Your Aura has a certain effect on others nearby—you don't even have to be aware of their presence for it to work. Or did you not know?”

Yeah, she was talking about Dating Mode. However, that was off at the moment… Just to make sure, I reached for the mental switch to turn it on and off and found… nothing. No switch. I could sense the ability itself, in the same way I could sense all of my active and passive abilities, and while it seemed to be running there didn't seem to be a way to turn it off. That wasn't how it was supposed to work. Dating Mode was, effectively, an active ability—on or off—last time I checked. The fact that it wasn't now meant something had changed… ‘Ah, shit. Of course, the one time I don't read the Change Log it comes back to bite me in the ass.’

Shrugging, I asked, “Are you sure you're not imagining things?”

The red-clad witch chuckled. “Emerald?”

A girl with grass green hair and skin a shade reminiscent of those native to areas of India or perhaps even Southeast Asia on my old world walked in from the direction of the kitchen and I realized I'd been set up—she had been there the entire time. A moment later, I felt a sort of twinge in my head and one of my passive skills go off, though I wasn't sure which. It seemed the greenette was affected worse than me, as she winced, a hand moving to her head. “Ow! What the hell?”

Cinder blinked, her gaze shifting between the two of us for a moment before she laughed. “Even better, he's immune to your charms,” the witch mused.

“Yeah, well, it isn't exactly fun on my end,” Emerald whined. “You try having an ice pick shoved between your eyes and see how you like it.” The girl suddenly winced, looking up to find Cinder's
gold eyes meeting her own red. “Uh… boss.”

Cinder's gaze shifted to meet my own red contacts. “I'm certain I'm not imagining things.”

Shooting her a deadpan look, I asked, “Assuming you're right, what's your point?”

The smirk returned as she got down to business. “How would you like to put those skills of yours to work as something other than a delivery boy?”

“Such as?” I asked, allowing a bit of hesitation to tint my voice for effect, wondering where she was going with this.

“I'd be willing to bet that Semblance of yours makes making friends and earning others' trust much easier, especially those of the opposite sex,” she hummed, seemingly thoughtful. I wasn't buying it for a minute. She had clearly been thinking this over since our last meeting. “And with the ability to become undetectable by sight or Aura sense, that would make getting into and out of places you weren't supposed to be very easy indeed.”

“But boss, what about me?” Emerald asked, suddenly seeming unsure and insecure about something—worried she was going to lose her job, likely.

Cinder shot the greenette a patient look as she answered. “I made you a promise, didn't I? Trust me, Emerald, if you were not useful to me you would not be here. What you have to understand is that it's always a good idea to have a contingency plan— and that sometimes, it's best to recruit outside help.”

“So, you're looking for a thief?” I drawled, drawing her attention back to me, molten gold eyes once more locked onto mine.

With a nod, Cinder added, “Theft, infiltration, espionage… perhaps more, if you're not adverse to getting your hands dirty.”

This would present me with a chance to get closer to the witch and figure out what she was planning… Still, I couldn't appear too eager, otherwise I might raise suspicion later. “Why me? You've only met me twice and you know nothing about me. What makes you think you can trust me? If it's like you say, I could be using my Semblance to make you trust me.”
That's not what Dating Mode did, but it did give me a good idea for an entirely different branch of magic. The 'charm' spell was a thing in most Final Fantasy games, along with other fantasy games and in other media, which essentially made the subject of the spell believe the caster was their most loyal friend, bosom buddy, lover, or other things depending on the source. I had also been meaning to make some sort of memory-wipe spell as well, for emergencies. And if I was going down the road of mental spells, I may as well make one for fear effects, confusion, suggestion or mental domination, and perhaps mind reading while I was at it to complete the set. Sure, most of those things were amoral if used against people but… well, magic is neither nice nor fair by its nature.

Besides, I wasn't some monster who would just run around mind-raping people for fun. A tool is only as evil as the person using it. A gun won't just get up, walk off, and start killing people—its purpose was to kill, yes, but that killing could be done in defense of others just as well as it could be done out of malice. I didn't plan on abusing things like that to take advantage of people—at least, not on a personal level. Charm, for instance, could be useful for convincing people to give up security codes… or it could be abused to convince pretty much any woman on the street to have sex with me. The problem with that second scenario was that I got the feeling that I wouldn't actually need it for unmarried or unattached women on Remnant, the situation being what it was. Either way, I wasn't that kind of person. Between the twins and Joan, I wasn't exactly looking for other women… though, if Cinder offered, I'd have a hard time saying no.

“On the first part, let's call it intuition,” the woman in question answered, a small smile crossing those red lips, bringing me back to the present. “As for the second, I know my own mind well enough to pick out external influences. I know exactly what effect your Aura is having and 'trust' has nothing to do with it.”

Seeing she wasn't going to elaborate, I went back to my 'reticent thief' routine and asked, “How much money are we talking?”

“Enough to never have to work another day, if you don't want to,” Cinder offered. Her tone of voice told me she had made similar offers before and had gotten good at… collecting strays. Good money said Emerald was one such stray.

For the role I was playing, that would be awfully appealing… I smirked under my mask before asking, “So, what's the job?”

Cinder's answer was short and concise, and said in such a matter of fact way that I had to go back and parse it a second time before I fully registered what it was I had heard. As though she were asking me to go down to the corner store and pick up a loaf of bread, she answered, “Break into the Vale Repository and steal the plans for Beacon Academy.”
Public buildings like that tended to have public plans. Which meant either they weren't public, or she was looking for something not on the public maps. Frowning, I asked, “They aren't publicly available?”

Cinder shook her head. “Not all of them—there are certain areas that don't show up on the plans available to the public. The original, however, would contain those details. It is, unfortunately, a hard copy—there have been no digital copies made, according to my sources.”

“And those same sources can't just get it for you,” I pointed out, and she nodded. I needed more information if I was going to agree to this. While going along with this may put me into Cinder's good graces, it wouldn't necessarily tell me anything about her plans, other than that they involved Beacon at some point—specifically, something not on the public plans. I could always just make a copy and compare the two to find out what areas weren't publicly available… “What sort of obstacles am I looking at, going in?”

“Laser trip wires, motion sensors, electronic locks, cameras, armed human guards, dogs, and security death bots waiting for an alarm to go off.” Emerald answered, grinning. It seemed they had been planning this heist out for a while now.

Of course. Palming my face, I asked, “And do we have any floor plans for the target building?”

“Unfortunately, no. The plans for the Repository are kept within the Repository,” Cinder answered with a short sigh, clearly annoyed by that fact herself.

I snorted. “So, breaking in pretty much requires breaking in in the first place.”

“If it were easy, I would have done it already,” the woman countered. “Unfortunately, it requires a delicate touch and a smash and grab operation, even if it succeeded, would draw too many questions.”

Standing, I began to pace as I thought it over. “Do we know anything?”

“The vaults with records and stuff are kept underground, at least three levels down,” Emerald supplied. “Unfortunately, we don't know which vault they're in.”

“So. Underground, in an unknown vault… Past the electronic locks, motion sensors, laser trip wires,
cameras, armed guards, dogs, and their security death bot backup, right?” I deadpanned, earning an embarrassed chuckle and nod from the greenette. Honestly, it wasn't as bad as it sounded—at least for me. With my map and minimap, finding my way wouldn't be an issue—this sort of thing was what RPG characters excelled at, after all. I really could just do reconnaissance as I went—they didn't need to know that, though.

Two sharp knocks at the back door drew everyone's attention that direction and for a moment, I wondered what it was—before I remembered I had signaled Kuro to come after me after fifteen minutes. Shifting to lock eyes with the red witch, I nodded. “Fine. I'll see what I can do. You have a scroll number I can contact you by?”

Taking up a piece of paper and a pen from the table, Cinder wrote down a number and passed it over. She hesitated for just a moment, but it was enough that I caught it, before she murmured, “Good luck. Try to come back in one piece.” Pausing, the witch seemed to realize something, as she asked, “What's your name?”

“It's Shiro. And I make my own luck,” I grinned, heading for the door. There were so many ways this could go bad, I had lost count. And to make matters worse, as soon as I got to the door, I received a quest notification.

A quest has been created!

Operation Infiltration: Steal the Blueprints

You have attracted the attention of Cinder Fall, a particularly dangerous woman who won't hesitate to kill you if you betray her. In order to infiltrate her group and foil whatever plans she has for Vale, you will need to first earn her trust by proving yourself capable and useful to her cause.

Success: 40000 EXP, 25000L, quest progression, increased closeness to Cinder Fall, quest unlock.

Failure: imprisonment or death.

Hitting 'Accept,' I opened the door and met Kuro outside. As the door closed behind me and I made it one step into the alley, she grabbed the front of my armor in one fist and fired her line launcher with the other, dragging us up and away at a speed that I thought might break the thing and send us plummeting to the ground. Instead, we catapulted up and over the side of a building, where she released me to fall to the roof in a heap while she landed nearby on her feet. Picking myself up, I dusted myself off before I began. “Okay, I understand if you're a little annoyed…”
I dodged a cheap shot to the balls and pushed aside the follow up slap. There was something in her movements that struck a chord with me—in the way she moved, the way she attacked. It was almost… familiar. “Annoyed?” she began, balling her fists up and visibly considering taking another shot at me. “What part of ‘don’t get involved’ was hard to understand? That right there, that was getting involved! You were supposed to leave quickly and thereby quietly discourage her from pulling shit in the future! Now? Now you're in the shit!”

“I think you may be overreacting,” I countered gently, though in reality I knew she wasn't really. “All we did was sit and have tea.”

“Bullshit,” the woman growled. “You haven't taken off your mask for me and I highly doubt you would for some stupid tea. What did she offer you?”

Well, she had me there. I wasn't going to concede the point, however. Besides which, considering it wasn't Underworld related, it was none of her business to begin with, so I decided to tell her as much. “Look, even if she did offer me something—which I'm neither confirming nor denying—it wouldn't really be any of your business if it's not related to this thing we have with the Underworld jobs.”

“Not my… not my business?! It's my job to make sure you don't fuck up and get yourself, or someone else, killed while you're doing this! This seems like a pretty big fuck up to me.” By now, she was breathing a bit hard and her face—what I could see of it below the mask—had flushed, either from anger, frustration, or both.

I was getting pretty hot under the collar being preached at like some damn teenager myself, but I understood that it really was her job to do exactly that. The problem was, her job was interfering with my own self-appointed task of putting a monkey wrench in Cinder's plans before they came to fruition, whatever those plans may be. Taking a calming breath, I released my own fists from where they had unconsciously clenched at my sides. “Okay. Fine. I'm going to take a few days off. I'll let you know when I'm back on the clock.”

“So you can do whatever it is she wants?” Kuro sniped and my patience went right back to the point of snapping.

“Yes,” I ground out. “I'm leaving now.”

“Fine, damnit!” the black-clad woman shouted. “Don't call me for help when it goes sideways on you!”
My patience snapped. “I won’t!”

It seemed Kuro’s had as well, however, as she closed the distance between us. “Pigheaded, stubborn little bastard!”

“Fuck you, bitch,” I growled, picking a building off to my left and throwing on Invisibility as I fired my line launcher and set the winch to maximum pull, yanking me off the roof and away before I did something foolish like start a fight—or before she could try another shot to the balls. “What the hell is her problem?” I wondered aloud as I drew close enough to the building to get my feet on it, detached the line, and made a Powered Leap away to change course in case she decided to try following.

I returned to my new hunting grounds around the hospital to blow off steam by killing monsters and to create new spells—though, by the time I got there, I’d found my sudden anger had mostly evaporated, leaving me vaguely frustrated but otherwise clear-headed. While I had a moment, I checked my Skills page and found what I had suspected—Dating Mode had been changed from an active to a passive skill, meaning it was now always on, and not only did it do what it had before it now also passively increased my charisma by 100%, going up 10% per level. That… was ridiculously overpowered, especially if it leveled with no level cap.

Finding the Change Log, I read over it to see what else had been tampered with. Other than UI settings and a note that BGM now triggered correctly in all areas as opposed to just situationally, nothing much had changed. Though, that note about the BGM made sense. I’d set it with the intent of using it for a meter for how screwed I was at any given time, but aside from changes in location or character image songs, it hadn’t really triggered as it should. For instance, that first run in with an Illusion Barrier should have set off all sorts of warnings well ahead of time.

Setting up on a rooftop, I looked down on a milling mob of zombies. A few grimm roamed the streets and I hummed in thought as a plan formed. Picking one of the higher level beowolves out of the group, I focused on what I wanted and felt Skill Creation kick in. “Confuse.”

A skill has been created through a special action!

Confuse: Level 1. Active. To sew chaos and confusion amongst the enemy and turn them against each other, you created the skill Confuse. Effect: target must make a Will save or be afflicted with Confused status for several minutes, time dependent on INT modifier vs the enemy’s WIS modifier. Confused enemies will overlook you or other targets and can even be made to attack targets they otherwise would not. Humans or Faunus under the effect of Confusion are more open to suggestion
and take penalties to Will saves.

That was good, but only half of what I wanted. I had already seen it used once before here, so I knew it was possible. Focusing again, I chanted, “Berserk.”

**A skill has been created through a special action!**

**Berserk**: Level 1. Active. Berserk drives enemies mad with rage, forcing them to seek out enemies and fight unthinkingly, relentlessly until either the enemy or all nearby targets are dead. Effect: target must make a Will save or be afflicted with Berserk status for several minutes, time dependent on INT modifier vs the enemy’s WIS modifier. Berserk enemies will heedlessly attack any enemy that catches their attention, regardless of how injured they become. Berserk enemies are immune to Sleep but more vulnerable to Confuse.

Below, the beowolf I had targeted began tearing through everything around it and I grinned under my mask as my EXP began ticking up with each kill. I wanted to try creating the other mind magic spells, but I had a feeling they wouldn’t work on grimm, zombies, goblins, or other non-humans for the most part—as after all, what does a grimm have to fear? No, I was going to have to create and test those against human targets, which meant actively seeking out unfriendly targets. There was no shortage of them in the various gangs in town, but I hadn’t run across a need for them yet either, so I could put those further down the priority tree for other skills. Cheap, easy spells to disrupt the enemy were more useful at the moment. Debuffs were especially useful, and since I had a few minutes, I went ahead and filled out my list of favorites, adding **Blind**, **Silence**, and **Slow**. Throwing in some elemental manipulation for a mostly solid element like earth, water, or ice netted me a nice AOE root spell in **Bind**, to hold enemies in place using whatever was handy or creating something to hold them if nothing could be pulled from a nearby source by conjuring ice.

There were a few new additions I wanted to make to my list of attack spells, however. With Bind, I could hold down a pretty large crowd so long as I wanted to dump mana into it. Once I had them, I needed something big to finish them off. For that, elemental spells always tended to be best. Big, wide-area spells that did a lot of damage to a lot of enemies, especially if they couldn’t fight back—and I had just the thing in mind, too. Swinging down to ground level, I ran past a large group of zombies and goblins, mixed in with various grimm, and ran towards a second group I had spotted on the next block over. As the second group spotted me and turned to engage, the two groups merging into one large group of upwards of 70 monsters averaging level 20 to my level 19, I fired my line launcher and pulled myself up the side of a building, stopping when I felt I was far enough to be safe but still close enough to hold their interest. Sticking to the side of the building with Surface Walking, I chanted, “Bind!” and dumped mana—over 700 points worth and about a tenth of my total available MP—into holding them in place. Focusing on what I needed, I held out a hand and channeled fire elemental magic. “This one's for you, L i na. Fireball!”

**A skill has been created through a special action!**
Fireball: Level 1. Active. Fireball is a spell designed to affect the maximum amount of targets over a wide area and burn them to ash. Effect: Fireball deals 500% + 10%/level INT damage to targets within a 30m radius. Targets hit by fireball will be inflicted with burning status for an additional 500% + 10%/level damage over 10 seconds. Burning targets must make a Will save or will become Panicked and scatter, spreading flames to other targets and potentially structures. Level Fireball to increase its damage, area of effect, burn duration, range, speed, and the number of fireballs per attack in addition to lowering its cost. Cost: 200MP. Range: 100m. Speed: 100m/s.

A flaming ball of mana streaked from my hand and impacted in the center of the group, exploding outwards and setting everything it touched on fire as it streaked up into the sky in a miniature mushroom cloud that reached so high I had to throw up a hasty Mana Barrier to keep from getting cooked myself. Everything caught in the circle of magical fire simply ceased to be as the area went up in flames and cooked off over the next ten seconds. The enemies on the outskirts that had simply caught fire as opposed to being outright cooked panicked and I allowed Bind to drop, letting them spread further into the crowd and set alight more of the gathered enemies. Over the course of a minute, the entire area was suffused in smoke, ash, and the scent of burning tar, hair, flesh, and grimm hung thick and cloying in the air. Below me, the building I had been clinging to caught fire and I beat a hasty retreat to another building, taking me out of the stinging, stinking smoke and ash. Coughing quietly and wiping at my watering eyes, I looked down to observe my handiwork, dismissing a notification about having gained a level and Fireball having leveled, along with a point each in INT and WIS.

Nothing had survived below and the street bubbled and burned as the tar in the asphalt cooked off. Something glittered, catching my eye and I realized that there were drops down there. Sighing as my greed got the better of me, I channeled mana to create an ice spell of the same magnitude to hopefully put out the fire I'd started. Fireball, while not my most powerful attack yet, was damn close to it. A single fireball was stronger than an individual AP Round, but not as powerful as a Rasengan—except that Fireball was an AOE and did that damage to everything in its range, which made it far more effective at crowd control than either of those. Ridiculously expensive, too—but then, I had the mana to burn at this point.

A skill has been created through a special action!

Flash Freeze: Level 1. Active. Flash Freeze is a spell designed to incapacitate and damage the maximum number of targets over a wide area, leaving them frozen in place and vulnerable to attack. Effect: Flash Freeze deals 400% +10%/level INT damage to targets within a 30m radius. Targets within the area of effect of Flash Freeze are frozen in place and take freezing damage over time for an additional 400% +10%/level damage over 15 seconds. Frozen targets are fragile and physical damage or intense shifts in temperature will Shatter them. Level Flash Freeze to increase its damage, area of effect, freeze duration, range, and speed in addition to lowering its cost. Cost: 200MP. Range: 100m. Speed: 100m/s.
Reading the description, I grinned. "Intense changes in temperature,' huh? That pretty much screams 'this combos with Fireball' to me.'

At the moment, however, all I was worried about was my loot sitting in the middle of a newly-created winter wonderland. Dropping down to the ground, I whistled happily as I set about collecting money, soul gems, and potions. There was one more spell I wanted to create, as soon as I found another group of monsters—well, two really, now that I thought about it but only one of those was a battle technique. The first was a simple illusory clone—something which had been put to good effect in various media from games, to anime, to movies and television in one form or another. Coupled with Invisibility, I could create one or more clones to distract enemies while disappearing myself and putting Iaido to good use once the enemy lost track of me. The other was an illusory disguise, to further change my appearance and add another layer of obfuscation between me and anyone looking to identify me. Both I was shamelessly pulling from Naruto, however, as the last place where I'd seen both used at the same time. And why the hell not? It was technically magic, there were no rules against it and even if for whatever reason there were, I wouldn't care to follow them.

I was still in the middle of picking up drops when my scroll rang. I answered it with one hand and kept picking up drops with the other, idly wishing I had a gather spell or something to do this for me. Maybe a minion, or a summon? ‘Hello?’

‘Jaune, where are you?’ one of the twins asked, and I had to look at the caller I.D. to figure out which—Miltia, in this instance.

‘Right now? Currently in an Instant Dungeon… Hang on.’ Turning around, I sighted down an approaching stalker. ‘AP Round. Sorry about that. What did you need?’

I could hear the smile in the girl's voice as she asked, ‘Are you terribly busy, or would you like to know what we heard?’

More grimm had apparently caught my scent, so I grabbed the last of the drops and went invisible, then gained altitude and settled on the roof of a building that wasn't on fire. ‘What did you hear?’

‘There's a job going down, tonight, out on Patch. I didn't get the details, but I heard a couple of Junior's men talking about it. Roman Torchwick hired them to break in and steal something,” she sighed, adding quickly, “No idea what, though. I don't have a clue what a school could possibly hold that's worth sending half a dozen men for.”

Well, if Roman was pulling this job, that meant Cinder had likely given him the order to have it done —especially since this wasn't Roman's normal M.O. of knocking off Dust stores, in canon.
Assuming they weren't taking their cues from Albus Dumbledore and had the common sense not to hide *immensely valuable artifacts* in a *school full of children*, then there were only a few possibilities, really. Either way, it was weird enough to warrant investigation. “When are they leaving?”

Miltia had apparently been expecting me to ask, as she already had an answer. “Soon. They have a Bullhead on a private runway out in the Agricultural District. I'll send the details to your scroll.”

“Thanks, Miltia,” I grinned. “I'll let you know what I find.”

Destroying the Instant Dungeon with Escape ID, subsequently causing the burning building across from me to appear to revert to one that was whole and intact, I waited a moment before my scroll buzzed with a text message from the red-clad twin. Inputting the details to my map, I set out across the city. Across two bridges and three districts, the trip down to the southwest corner of the Agricultural District took half an hour in between using the line launcher and a combination of running and leaping when there were no buildings around to pull myself skyward. A check of my HUD showed it to be after 10P.M. by the time I arrived and crossed the fence designating the property line for the old airfield. It was less an airfield and more of an old, beat up tarmac and a couple of equally old hangars off to the side, along with what looked like a fueling station of some sort.

Hopping the fence, I scanned the area, and finding it to be abandoned I made my way to the first hangar. A quick walk around allowed me to find a set of windows set up high, which let me look inside. Inside the building, I found what Observe told me was a *Duster*—a single engine craft used as a crop duster, created before hover technology became popular and cheap enough to replace them. The Duster wasn't large enough to hold more than two people if they were very intimate, so I moved on to the next hangar, where I found a much newer model Bullhead, which Observe told me was stolen. Climbing to the top of the hangar, I flattened myself out on the roof and watched the road.

Headlights caught my attention over an hour later and I successfully resisted the urge to blast the car coming through the main gate with a fireball for making me waste valuable time. The sedan pulled up outside the hangar, off to one side, and the driver killed the engine and headlights as six men in black suits, white under shirts, and red ties got out. Two proceed to open up the hangar and move inside while three of the others either stood around or leaned against the car and proceeded to light up cigarettes and have a smoke. The last mook pulled out his scroll and placed a call. Activating Listen, I focused my attention below.

“We're here boss. Shouldn't take but an hour to fuel the bird and get out to Patch. You sure that gizmo your guy got can do what he said?” The mook nodded along to something said, bringing up one hand and opening and closing it repeatedly in a 'yap, yap, yap' gesture, setting his buddies to laughing—apparently, Roman liked to get long-winded at times. “Gotcha boss. We'll get back to you once we're back on the ground here.” Hanging up and closing the scroll, he shook his head. “Fuckin' clown thinks he owns us, cause he throws around a little money.”
Engines whirring to life inside the hangar cut off any further conversation as the Bullhead slowly pulled out onto the tarmac before stopping, the side door sliding open and one of the mooks climbing out to start the fueling process. Making sure Invisibility was running, I dropped down to the tarmac and slipped inside the aircraft. I couldn’t risk being sat on, so I hopped up and stuck to the ceiling—once we were in the air and the mooks had settled down, I could take a seat. I wondered idly if Spider-man ever complained about uncomfortable things digging into his back or ass any time he had to do this. Thankfully, fueling the Bullhead didn’t take long, and soon the rest of the mooks had filed in and taken seats on the uncomfortable looking jump seats, which looked more akin to what I’d expect to find in a C-130 than a passenger craft.

The side door slid closed and the whine of the engines audibly increased as the Bullhead began moving forward and gaining altitude. Carefully, I dropped down and took the seat furthest back, pulling up my map and watching as we accelerated out over the water towards the northwest. My map updated, shifting to track our position, and bringing the island of Patch into view several miles off the coast. Thankfully, the flight over the water was short—to the point that it took longer for our pilot to find somewhere out of the way to land. Once we were down, I waited for an opportunity to escape unnoticed and took it in a gap between a couple of the mooks. Slipping off to the side, I waited for them to exit the Bullhead and lead me to their destination, dismissing a notification about Sneak and Aura Suppression both having leveled.

The Bullhead’s engines shut down and the pilot joined the other mooks, pocketing the keys as they all took out flashlights and began moving out of the clearing the pilot had chosen and into the woods separating us from the school. Signal itself was on the southeast section of the island, south of a small town the island was likely named for, which contained the ferry and airport that connected Patch to Vale. Our pilot had chosen a clearing about half a mile inland from the cliffs on the southwest corner of the island, as far across the island from the town as it was possible to get, but only a mile or two through the woods.

I say woods and not forest because these were close, thick, and full of brambles and briars that seemed to reach out and snag passers by when they least expected it. The group of mooks had a hell of a time moving through the dense underbrush while I, on the other hand, simply leapt up onto a tree branch and followed overhead. In the day time, I could have moved circles around a group of this size in this terrain in absolute silence—I had grown up hunting animals that spooked a lot easier than people in woods exactly like this and knew how to move silently and quickly in them. It wasn’t day, however, and I had other options available.

A mile hike that should have taken twenty minutes at most took over twice that and the mooks eventually broke out their weapons, swords and axes, to cut through the brush. I followed along from above at a sedate pace, keeping a lookout for grimm, which were strangely absent at the moment. My map said the entire area should have been infested with them, but they were either busy elsewhere or not interested—I wasn’t sure which.
Eventually, however, the school came into sight. Signal was a large campus—larger than the fact that it was out on an island away from the mainland would tend to suggest. I could spot on-campus housing off to the side, administration buildings, and other buildings that I supposed housed the classrooms themselves. The entire thing was surrounded by green lawns and training grounds, and registered to my Semblance as a Safe Zone. Given the time of year, I suspected Signal had already graduated their newest group of prospective Hunters and was on break—meaning that Cinder or Roman hadn’t timed this little break-in too badly, since the place would likely be mostly empty for a few weeks at the very least.

As we approached the main administration building, the one I’d identified as the head mook spoke up. “Let’s get these doors open, then two of you stay out here and keep watch.”

I stood back and watched as the men used their axes to quickly cut the area around the door locks out and pull open one of the doors—it couldn’t have taken them thirty seconds to get the door open, which told me they had probably done some breaking and entering before. The fact that they were ignoring potential security, such as motion sensors, cameras, and the like told me that something else was up—either Signal had poor security, or the cops wouldn’t be showing up any time soon. I waited until the three going in had moved inside and out of hearing range before I chanted “Confuse.”

A skill has been created through a special action!

**Charm** : Level 1. Active. **Charm** is a spell meant to temporarily convince a target that you are on their side. Effect: target must make a Will save against your CHA modifier or be afflicted with **Charmed** status. **Charmed** humans and Faunus will treat you as a lifelong friend, confidante, comrade, or lover depending on the individual. **Charmed** monsters and grimm will fight as your ally, even against their own kind. Level **Charm** to increase its duration and effectiveness. **Cost:** 15MP. **Range:** 10m.

I resisted the urge to laugh, instead casting Charm again on the second mook before dropping Invisibility out of their sight and walking up. “Sorry I’m late, guys.”

The pair traded looks before one rolled his eyes. “You nearly missed it, man. The others are already inside.”

“Yeah,” I agreed. “This is what happens when you’re in the shitter when the boss calls. So, the boss wasn’t clear on the details… what the fuck are we doing here at a school of all things, taking orders from that assclown Roman for? Aside from the money, I mean.”
The mook on the left sighed, shaking his head. “We're supposed to be using some doodad to hack the school's servers and get information, since the computers with the data aren't networked. Can't just hack in from outside, see? Got to be on site to get it.”

I frowned. “What data could a school have that a thief like Roman would be interested in.”

“The roster for the graduating class, duh,” the mook on the right answered, as though it were obvious. “He wants a list of all the little brats going off to Beacon or one of the other Hunter schools. Fuck if I know why, though—that's above my pay grade.”

“I can think of a few reasons,” I mused aloud. “I’d better go make sure those jokers inside get the right information and don't try to do something stupid, like set up a web-cam in the girls' locker room or something. Could you two do me one more favor?”

“Sure, buddy. Whatcha need?”

I almost felt bad for what I was going to do next. Almost. “Sleep.”

Immediately, the pair dropped to the ground, unconscious. While I had the opportunity, and a couple of targets who couldn't make Will saves to resist, I focused on creating another spell. “Forget.”

A skill has been created through a special action!

**Forget**: Level 1. Active. In order to erase yourself from the memories of those who might look to track you down later, the skill Forget was created. Effect: target must make a Will save against your INT modifier. If the target fails, he, she, or it will be forced to forget details of the caster's choosing—such as forgetting ever seeing the caster, forgetting what they were doing, or forgetting the last few minutes. Forget will wipe 10 minutes worth of time from the target's memory by default, unless otherwise specified. Level Forget to increase its effectiveness and reduce its mana cost. Cost: 15MP. Range: 10m.

I hit the second mook with the spell and set about dragging them several feet away from the entrance. Moving quickly, I entered the school and followed the dots on my map that would lead me to the rest. I found them in the main office, one of them seated at a holographic computer interface with some kind of small piece of equipment on the table that I assumed was some sort of hardware.
interface. The screen displayed what looked like a chess piece, a queen I believed, and a progress bar—likely indicating file transfer. Muttering three quick chants of, “Confuse,” I gave the spell a moment to take effect before hitting them all with Charm, then dropping Invisibility and walking in.

“Sorry I'm late. What'd I miss?” I asked, walking right past the two mooks standing around to the head mook seated at the desk.

The man looked up at my approach before turning back to the holographic interface. “Not much. I kind of expected more security out of a place like Signal, you know? I mean, sure, Roman paid the cops to ignore the alarms, but this is kind of disappointing.”

I snorted. “What, like security death bots? Come on, now. This is a school, not a bank.” Pointing at the device standing on the interface table, I asked, “What's that?”

The mook shrugged. “Some prototype hacking tool. The guy we picked it up from bragged about how it exploited some vulnerability present in pretty much everything more complicated than a toaster oven—said that's what happens when you use the same buggy OS for everything.”

“He sounds like he was pretty proud of that thing,” I pointed out, fishing for information.

“Yeah,” the mook agreed, sitting back in his chair and kicking his feet up on the desk. “He kept on running his mouth, you know? Told us all about how he'd just made a small fortune selling a few of this puppy's bigger, meaner sisters on the black market. I know where I'm heading next—right boys?”

“Damn right!” one of the other two mooks cheered as the trio of stooges broke out laughing.

The other confirmed my suspicions by adding, “Easy score on top of the pay for this job. Even split six ways, that's more than ten thousand lien each.”

I whistled. Whoever had made these things was in for a bad night, unless he got out of Vale soon. A chirp from the computer drew our attention and I looked over to see the file transfer was complete. Reaching out, I took the device before any of the mooks had a chance to object, pocketing it in my side pouch. “Well, fellas, how about we get the hell out of here, head back to Vale for our payday, then hit the nearest bar?”
“Fucking seconded,” the head mook agreed, standing and following the other two as they made their way outside. Focusing on their turned backs, I pulled up mana and concentrated on what I wanted.

A skill has been created through a special action!

**Dominate**: Level 1. Active. The skill Dominate was created in order to control individual enemies or groups of enemies, forcing them to bend to your will. Effect: targets within a 3 meter radius must make a Will save against your combined INT and CHA scores, or have their will Dominated and obey your commands for a period of time dependent on your CHA modifier. Level Dominate to increase its radius, effect, and decrease its mana cost. Cost: 50MP/target. Range: 10m.

The trio of mooks stopped suddenly, freezing in place. The spell was both verbal and mental, so I could issue orders either by speaking or thinking them—in essence, it was an AOE version of the Imperius curse. Lord Voldemort would be proud. “Go outside and wait.” A devious smile crossed my mouth as I added, “And give me the keys to the Bullhead.”

As the group moved off after handing me the keys, I looked around the office—the computers here were all on their own isolated network, as the mook had said. Moving to the door, I turned back and raised my hand. “Fireball.”

Most of the equipment was incinerated by the initial blast. Smoke and heat quickly set off the fire alarms and sprinkler system, but the fires created by Fireball were magical in nature and wouldn't go out with just a little water. I ran outside, finding the three Dominated mooks milling around waiting. Looking them over, I hummed a moment before grinning. Pulling back a fist, I laid into first one, then the rest with punches and kicks—enough to leave some highly visible bruising and cracked ribs. I dragged out the two I’d put to sleep earlier and delivered a similar set of beatings, to round out the set.

“Forget,” I chanted, then repeated it twice more, wiping their memories of everything from the time they got to the school, before slapping them all with another Confuse just to be sure they would take the next part at face value and pass off any inconsistencies when they recounted the tale later. A Powered Leap put me on the building above them. Pulling up mana, I once more focused on Skill Creation, an idea in mind.

A skill has been created through a special action!

**Illusion Disguise**: Level 1. Active. Illusion Disguise was created to disguise the caster, rendering the caster unrecognizable by sight. Effect: Illusion Disguise alters the caster's appearance and clothing using a mana-based semi-solid hologram. Items created using the skill will be solid to the
**touch but Illusion Disguise** cannot physically change the caster, only apply a shell of mana around the caster in the desired shape. Despite its name, Illusion Disguise is not an actual illusion and incurs no Will saves to defeat it, though it may be defeated by Aura disrupting techniques and individuals with a high Perception may spot inconsistencies in the disguise. Cost: 10MP + 1MP/minute upkeep.

Where before I had stood on the rooftop in my Shiro disguise, there now stood a man of my height wearing a similar set of armor in all white. I had added a ragged, white hooded cape to further divorce the image I wanted to present from that of 'Shiro,' along with changing my hair color to bright red and adding a good bit of length, which was visible poking out from under the hood in places. Finally, I added a mask to top it off—styled after the creatures of grimm, the mask resembled a fox, as it was something I had yet to see a grimm analog for. Like the rest of my outfit, however, the mask was color inverted. Where grimm masks were normally white with red markings, mine was black with blue markings.

If these guys just went back to Roman empty-handed, Roman and likely Cinder would be quick to figure out something was up—namely, that there was someone running around with the ability to manipulate memories, at least. If I gave them something to chase, however—some third party to pin the blame on—then that would raise far fewer questions. It would be especially effective since the identity I was making now was effectively a ghost—it hadn't existed before I created it a moment ago and had absolutely no ties to Jaune Arc or Shiro the 'delivery boy.' Focusing my attention on the three men below, I ordered, *Turn around. Look up.* As soon as they had, I dropped Dominate. They blinked a moment, looking around and taking in the building that was quickly catching fire, and me standing there back-lit by flames. The head mook checked his pockets and came up empty both for the keys and the hacking device. “You! You bastard! What the fuck did you do?!”

“Oh, not much—just knocked you out, stole what you came here for right out from under your noses, and then set fire to the only other copy of the data. Tell that Clockwork Orange reject who hired you I said 'hi,' will you?” I called down, grinning under my mask—masks, plural now, I suppose. “Oh, by the way, you'd better get moving if you don't want the cops to find you, since there's no way they're going to ignore a fire in one of the Hunter training academies. You aren't flying and Vale's a long swim from here!”

Char g a Powered Leap, I jumped off the top of the building in the direction of the woods. Behind me, the mooks opened fire with pistols but only managed to hit the ground or trees around me as I landed. Leaping again and hitting the tree line before quickly leaving their field of view—pistols being a poor choice for distance shooting, they would be lucky to hit the broad side of a barn at this range, in the dark. Once I was sure I was out of sight, I threw on Invisibility and made my way quickly back to the field where I knew the Bullhead would be. Approaching the vehicle, a thought occurred—if my Semblance treated the real world like a video game, I had an Inventory and skills, then would it also have a mount or vehicle system? There was only one way to find out, so I moved up to the Bullhead and pressed my hand against its hull. Pulling up mana, I focused on creating the skill I wanted…
A skill has been unlocked!

Claim Vehicle: Level MAX. Active. Claim Vehicle allows the caster to add nearly any vehicle as a summonable mount and unlocks the Vehicles tab under Inventory. Note: vehicles need fuel to operate and will be claimed at their current fuel level. Damaged vehicles will remain damaged until repaired. Effect: adds vehicles to the Inventory to summon and use later. Cost: variable based on the mass of the vehicle claimed. Casting time: 5 seconds.

A skill has been unlocked!

Summon Vehicle: Level MAX. Active. Summon Vehicle allows the caster to summon claimed vehicles from Inventory. Note: vehicles need fuel to operate and will be summoned at their last fuel level. Any damage taken by a vehicle once summoned will not affect the same vehicle if summoned again. Effect: summons a previously collected vehicle from Inventory. Cost: 100MP. Casting time: 3 seconds.

A quest has been created!

Grand Theft Remnant

Now that you've unlocked the ability to Claim and Summon vehicles, see if you can collect at least one of each type of vehicle scattered across Remnant!

Success: EXP to be determined and awarded as you collect vehicles, a veritable fleet of vehicles at your disposal. Failure: no awesome vehicles.

Well, I'd have done that anyway even if my Semblance hadn't given me a quest for it. The 5000 EXP I got for claiming the Bullhead was a little under a quarter of my current TNL count, but I wasn't going to complain about what amounted to free experience. No, the biggest drawback to this was going to be the mana cost. The Bullhead had cost over 1100 mana to eat. It stood to reason that trying to eat a warship or large passenger aircraft would be nearly impossible at the moment. And, unfortunately, being that the skills were maxed out, there was no bringing that cost down—which meant the only way to devour something that large would be to increase my mana by an amount so great that I could probably create one from scratch anyway. Well, it was something to work towards at any rate.

Pulling up my map, I checked to see if any police, Hunters, or the mooks had caught onto my trail
and followed me. I found no little red dots in the vicinity, meaning there were no enemies around—I did, however, find something new. To the southwest, on the edge of the island’s cliffs, was a new icon—a very recognizable stylized rose, in red. *Why the hell not?* I chuckled, deciding to go have a look. Taking off at a run, I leapt into the trees, following the new waypoint on my minimap. The trees began to thin out and the sound of waves hitting the cliffs below became audible as I reached a cleared area several yards back from the cliff face and caught my first sight of the girl destined to become the center of events very shortly.

*BGM* *I mage song – Red Like Roses – unlocked!*

*System Alert!*  

*Strong negative emotions have created a powerful Illusion Barrier! Creatures of Grimm have been attracted by the sorrow of an innocent soul and you will not be able to leave the Illusion Barrier until they have been killed!*

The temperature dropped and it began to snow. *Oh, of bloody course.* Focusing on the girl, I hit her with Observe.

*Rose in Bloom*

*Apprentice Reaper*

*Ruby Rose*

*Level: 31*

I blinked upon reading her level then shook my head and skipped down further, past her biography to the emotional state information: lonely, confused, anxious, sorrowful. Considering she was visiting a grave—that of her mother, no less—I wasn't surprised. No, I was surprised that it was bad enough to *summon an Illusion Barrier full of Beowolves*. She turned and walked away from the grave, seemingly lost in her own world. She passed by under me, not ten feet away and I watched her pass, knowing what was coming. Sense Danger and Detect Bloodlust began going off and I opened my map, watching red dots form and move through the trees. With a quiet sigh, I followed. I knew this was her fight, and I knew she would win—still, I couldn't help feeling a bit worried for her anyway, despite the fact that Ruby was technically stronger than me.
B eowolves are inherently stupid creatures until they get older and craftier. Those surrounding us were between level 30 and 35 and all newly formed, so of course they took the frontal assault option. Taking up a position just on the outside of the clearing she had walked into—the same one we had landed in, in fact—I sat in a crook between two branches and watched as she began to dance. A little girl should not be able to move like that wielding a sniper rifle scythe that had to mass more than she did, Aura or not. It was possibly the most impressive display of combat prowess I'd seen to date — her secondary title had even changed to 'Grimm Reaper.' Once more, I was reminded that I really, really needed to get cracking on creating a Flash Step skill.

A notification popped up and I frowned, closing it and looking around, extending Perception and focusing on my Aura.

A skill has been created through a special action!

**Aura Sense**: Level 1. Active. Aura has helped humanity in more subtle ways since it was first discovered. **Aura Sense** is the ability to sense the world around the user through one's Aura and that of the surrounding environment. Effect: allows the caster to detect and recognize Auras, detect monsters and grim, and detect things otherwise hidden by their Aura or malice. Level **Aura Sense** to increase its range and ability to detect individuals suppressing their Aura.

Of course I picked out Ruby, her Aura shining bright as she worked her way through a horde of beowolves like a human buzz saw. I also picked out the swiftly dying grim around her. And there, slipping out of the tree line and slinking low to the ground was the grudge my Semblance had warned me about—another Beowolf Prowler. It was smart, slowly creeping up on the caped girl's position while she was distracted by its dying brethren, I would give it that. It just had no way of knowing it had been spotted. There were a few ways this could play out from here.

I could watch and wait, refusing to break stealth and let Ruby deal with it. There was a good chance she could… but then, there was a slim chance that it would only need one clean shot to put her down, too. These things fought with stealth and hit and run tactics, and this one was much higher level than the one I'd taken on—level 40. And if I recalled correctly, there was some sort of bonus they got for the number of grimm the person they were fighting had killed recently.

Sitting things out didn't sit well with me, however, which meant I'd be doing something about it—the question was, what? AP Round could kill it—it could also punch straight through and hit Ruby, and that would be bad. Besides, years of training had me cringing at the thought of firing off live rounds near a human target I wasn't intending to kill. Likewise, the rest of my ranged options were out, and it was well outside range of Sleep now, even if it would have worked—which it wouldn't. I didn't have much time left to decide, so whatever I chose had to be now.
Channeling mana, I made a flying Leap up into a ballistic arc over the clearing. Twisting slightly put enough of a tumble on my leap to bring me upside down and give me eyes on the Prowler. Ranged attacks were out, which meant I'd have to close to melee range. A smirk stretched its way across my lips as a thought occurred. ‘Sneak attacks work both ways, fucker.’ Drawing on more mana—wind elemental, this time—I focused on going down.

A skill has been created through a special action!

**Air Walk**: Level 1. Active. Martial Artists and Hunters alike have, on occasion, seemed to walk on the air itself—the skill Air Walk was created to mimic that feat. Effect: allows the caster to create flat surfaces to walk or run on, or rebound off of, in midair. The caster and up to two others in contact with the caster may walk or run up to a 45 degree incline in empty air as though walking on stairs or a platform. Level Air Walk to decrease its mana cost. Cost: 10MP/minute.

‘Close enough,’ I grunted, kicking off in a Leap downwards and accelerating rapidly past normal terminal velocity as I used wind natured mana to reduce drag—effectively turning myself into a human arrow. The problem here was, I was unarmed—and while I could dish out one hell of a beating with my bare hands now, a fist was no replacement for a sword. Then again, I was a caster—I was never unarmed so long as I had mana. Quickly channeling mana into my hand as an orb, I sped through the now familiar process of modifying a spell I already had into something new and deadly. Mana elongated and I ignored the message for new skill creation telling me I had created a Mana Sword. Pouring more mana into the technique, I set it to spinning, creating a Spinning Mana Sword. Blinding light and the sound of a thousand chirping birds filled the air an instant before I drew.

Snow and earth and bits of grimm exploded around me as my Spinning Lightning Sword swung through the space where the Prowler's neck and head joined in a perfect Iaido draw, long enough to dig a trench into the ground below it. I hit the ground hard enough to drive me to my knees, deadly dangerous energy sword held out to the side and well away from where I might accidentally fall on it—which would be both embarrassing and painful.

The red-clad reaper turned, silver eyes going wide and locking with mine beneath my illusory mask as Invisibility faded. I must have struck an intimidating figure, because she immediately leveled Crescent Rose at my face and chambered another round. Opening my hand and dismissing the sword, I stood slowly, still looking down the business end of an anti-material rifle. I needed to defuse the situation and convince her I wasn't a threat. Well, there was the Red Riding Hood comparison begging to be made… “My, what big eyes you have,” I drawled, a grin creeping up on me, “The kind of eyes that drive wolves mad.”

Silver eyes tracked between me and the swiftly disintegrating Prowler before she blinked, head tilting
sideways as a curious look crossed her face. “But are you a wolf?”

“Maybe,” I admitted, drawing the word out. “Though, pretty sure my mask makes me a fox.” Turning around, I picked up the potions and money the Prowler had dropped, along with a skill book—ignoring the rifle and the girl wielding it. Ruby wasn't the kind of person who would shoot someone in the back—at least, not yet. Hopefully not ever.

You've obtained the skill book Physical Conjuration and You: A Beginner's Guide to Conjuring. Would you like to learn this skill?

You bet your shiny blue interface I would… just not in front of Ruby Rose. Pocking the book and the mana potion, I tossed the girl the health potion. “Here.”

“What's this?” she asked, catching it one-handed before popping the cork and sniffing as she lowered the rifle/scythe to a resting position. “Smells like… cherry?” She took a sip and I raised a hand to stop her, but it was too late—she tipped it back and drank the whole damn thing. “Mmm delicious. I feel awesome—kind of like a double shot of espresso and an energy drink, but without the buzzy feeling. I didn't know grimm dropped stuff like this.”

Sighing, I shook my head at her antics. “They don't tend to,” I admitted. Holding out a hand, I murmured, “Escape ID,” and the sky shattered like a million mirrors. Where there had been snow falling and ankle deep, there was now tall grass. “It should be safe now, but I don't think little girls should go walking in these spooky old woods alone.”

The 'little girl' in question glared and puffed out her cheeks, further illustrating my point, before shattering it to dust by hefting that damned oversized sniper scythe and folding it down into its compact form before stowing it at the small of her back. After a moment, a sly look crossed her features and I was suddenly reminded that this was the half sister of Yang Xiao Long—who had been an unrepentant tease and flirt in canon. It made sense that some of that would have rubbed off on Ruby. “I dunno, my sister told me I shouldn't walk home with big bad wolves.”

“I'll keep my sheep suit on,” I deadpanned.

The redhead shrugged, turning on her heel and marching off. I followed, several paces back. “So, I'm curious. That thing about my eyes… was that a pickup line? It's kind of hard to tell, what with the mask and everything. Also… Sorry for not saying it sooner, but uh… thanks for saving my butt back there. That thing totally snuck up on me. What was that awesome sword thingie? Was it like some kind of a saber made of light or something?”
Right. I forgot. Ruby was a bit of a chatterbox when she got nervous. “Well, to answer your questions in order: only if you want it to be, but I think you're a little young for that. You're welcome. An advanced elemental Aura technique. And yeah, it's pretty much a lightsaber.” Or a Raikiri, either way.

“Pfft, please. Young? Did you see that back there? I was totally awesome. I mean, you were pretty cool too, but… yeah. I'm going to be a Hunter, real soon. Technically I'm already my uncle's apprentice, so I'm kind of already an adult by Hunter standards,” she argued as we walked.

I rolled my eyes. “Not even close. You're still jailbait, red. Totally not dating material yet.”

“I am not jailbait! I'm totally dateable!” she returned, turning and shooting me a glare that lacked any real menace.

Drawing even with her, I looked down to meet her eyes and countered, “You do realize you're arguing the merits and legality of dating a masked stranger, right?”

Ruby blinked, then rolled her eyes. “I didn't mean you, specifically. But a boy…” A quiet sigh passed her lips as she added, “Any boy, really.”

I hummed in thought before suggesting, “I'm sure, if you're patient, you'll find one eventually.” Beside me, the redhead looked away with a blush as she muttered something I didn't quite pick up. “Come again?”

Ruby sighed. “I said, 'it's not like anyone notices me when my sister's around, anyway,’” she repeated. So, there was a smidgen of jealousy there—I couldn't really blame her, though. Yang was a couple of years older and more developed, physically. “Sorry, I promise I don't normally just go around talking the ears off of strangers about my problems. It's just…”

“Just?” I asked, curious as to why she was doing exactly that. Sure, in canon Ruby had been open with pretty much anyone willing to talk to her… she had also been a textbook upbeat genki-girl most of the time, with only a few glances at anything beyond that. She still appeared to be fairly upbeat, but in a more realistic way from what I was seeing. She was a person, she had problems, doubts, fears, worries… she wasn't a caricature cut-out for a children's story. I had a feeling the rest of the members of teams RWBY and JNPR were similar.
The shorter girl skipped ahead a few steps and turned to walk backwards, meeting my eyes as she brought a finger to her lips. “Well, there’s something about you that seems… approachable I guess? Friendly? Like you’re exactly the sort of person who doesn’t mind listening to a silly girl’s problems.”

“Well, that so?” I asked, wondering if it was part of the effects of Dating Mode having been changed from an active skill to a passive. That was a mildly disturbing thought, if I was unconsciously manipulating the people around me just by being there… but no, I hadn’t chosen to use it like that and I wasn’t taking advantage of it. My Semblance couldn’t seem to decide if my life was an RPG, H-game, or VN at times and that was likely a consequence of it.

Or maybe I was just blaming things on 'my Semblance' when, if Joan was right, it was my subconscious mind driving the damn thing—and maybe I just didn't want to be alone any more and was tired of wasting time looking for a unicorn. That is, a woman who beat the odds and managed to be smart, decent looking, a given value of sane, loyal, and could put up with my bullshit. My… inability to connect to people had left me without human companionship for a very long time, occasionally broken up by failures of relationships with women who were more akin to adult children than actual adults. I'd wanted a partner—I had not wanted to be 'daddy' to some girl who refused to grow up and face reality. Maybe my Semblance wasn't broken—maybe it was working as intended and answering that unspoken desire the only way it could. Then again, this could all be one big campaign setting for some asshole DM who had decided to play around with the lives of everyone involved. There was no way to know and no point worrying about it.

“Well,” Ruby began hesitantly as we broke through the forest and came upon a log cabin style house. “This is it.” She sounded hopeful as she turned to regard me again. “Will I see you again, Mister Fox?”

I wasn't the only one caught in my own funk, I realized. With a quiet chuckle, I stepped closer and reached out, ruffling her hair before grabbing her hood and pulling it over her eyes. “Hey, that's not nice!” she protested, fixing her hood in time to catch me leaning forward, under mask down and new mask up to expose the bottom part of my face. She froze as I planted a chaste kiss on her forehead. “W-what was that for?” And I swear I felt the heat off her blush from where I stood.

“You are not alone, Ruby Rose—that I promise. Soon, you'll have more friends than you'll know what to do with,” I smiled, quickly fixing my masks and turning away. “Just give it time.”

Invisibility came as second nature at this point as I slipped back into the forest, heading for the clearing. “I need a drink,” I muttered, wondering if the twins were busy. Still, my night wasn’t quite over yet. I had one more stop after this. The thing I had come here for couldn't simply be destroyed—it needed to be handed off to someone who could reverse engineer it and patch the hole it exploited. Unfortunately, I could only really think of one person who would be responsible with both the device and the data on it—aside from myself. And while I would be making a copy of it for study later, I'd feel better if it weren't just me looking it over. I was only one man and I was bound to miss
something important eventually. I wasn't alone in this fight to protect Vale from forces mostly unknown—it was time to stop acting like it.

“Ozpin had better appreciate this.”
The Bullhead was surprisingly easy to control. Aside from the standard pilot's controls one would expect, there was also a point-and-click interface for setting up the autopilot. For instance, I could bring the Bullhead in fast and low to buzz Ozpin's clock-tower, then tell it to gain altitude and circle close by, well within range of my line launcher. Which I did, as I opened the back door and jumped out over the tower in question, firing my line launcher down and snagging the roof, allowing me to swing around lower and come in towards an open window. I caught myself on the window ledge, not quite inside the office—far enough to be safe, if things went poorly. I hoped.

“That was… quite an entrance,” the white-haired headmaster assessed, not having so much as stood from his desk or placed his cup of coffee down—to the point that he actually raised it to his lips and took a sip before continuing, as though guests dropped by like this every day. “Is there something I can help you with?”

“That was…!” a woman's voice called, a door to the side of the office opening and a blonde woman running in. She paused upon catching sight of me crouched on the window sill, drawing and pointing her Dust instrument. In my mind, it said something to the woman's personality and perhaps her sex life that she would choose a riding crop of all things to manipulate magic with. Then again, Joan had warned me off, and if the Eldest Deadly Sister was scared of her… Then again, both their levels were exactly what I'd expected: question marks all the way around.

Ozpin defused any potential imminent violence, his calm voice washing over the room and causing the witch to lower her riding crop. “I know, Glynda. Our guest was just introducing himself.”

The hell I was. I held no doubts that the longer I stayed here, the more danger my identity was in. Digging into my pouch, I pulled out the device I'd gone through the hassle of getting and tossed it to the witch, who happened to be the closer of the two. “There was a break-in at Signal. Someone
wanted to know who would be attending Beacon and the other schools this year. Got that off of them. I suggest not connecting it to a networked computer, by the way.”

“Who are you?” Glynda asked, an expression of incredulity crossing her pretty face.

I grinned. I had decided to distance this disguise from both 'Jaune Arc' and 'Shiro,' and both of those personas were alternately laid back or subdued. Therefore, something a bit over the top was called for here—in other words, a blistering barrage of bullshit to befuddle the beautiful and the bastardly. “Why madame, what exactly do you take me for, besides a rogue and a thief—a scoundrel through and through? You may call me The White Fox. Now, if you'll excuse me…”

“A scoundrel who goes out of his way to protect children?” Ozpin questioned, bringing my exit to a halt for just a moment. It was enough, however, as the man seemed to have gained some measure of the truth behind my misdirection.

I didn't give him the satisfaction of an answer as I sighted in the Bullhead and fired my line launcher, allowing it to haul me up and away from the headmaster's office. Of course, that was likely an answer in and of itself. 'That bastard! It was a mistake coming here. I should have just dead-dropped it or something. Ozpin didn't get to be headmaster by being dumb. If I screw up around him in the future, he's going to start putting pieces together. Well, at least I went in with Aura Suppression on and a double-layered disguise, so there's that. I hope… I'm fucked.'

Climbing into the cockpit, I disabled the autopilot and turned west, for Vale. Crossing the cliffs that separated Beacon from the rest of Vale, I throttled up and dumped altitude. I made a mental note to go after the Duster now that I knew it was there, but for now, I wanted two things—maybe three. I wanted a drink, I wanted time with my twins, and I wanted to get into a fist fight with someone bigger than me. The entire situation had set my teeth on edge and between dealing with Cinder, Kuro, Ruby, and Ozpin I wanted to punch something.

Cinder worried me. The woman was driven and full of conviction, so sure her cause was right that she would wind up killing someone before this was all over. Kuro, on the other hand, alternately confused me and pissed me off. In a way, it was like dealing with a sibling—I knew I had pissed off my own brother more than once by simply trying to look out for him. On the other hand, she had repeatedly stated I was nothing but a job to her. She said one thing, but then turned around and did another and it was getting irritating. Ruby… Ruby was a sweet but lonely girl and talking to her had left me a bit maudlin over the possibility that every friend I had here was potentially due to my Semblance drawing them in, as opposed to earning them on my own merits. And Ozpin… the man was dangerous and canny—a chess-master if there ever was one, and here I was putting myself on his board. He had said barely a handful of words, and yet had managed to pierce at least one of my disguises simply by objectively reasoning through my actions and ignoring the bullshit I had allowed to run freely as a smoke screen. I was not up to playing on that field—nowhere close to it. I never should have tried. What the hell was I thinking? 'Oh, hey, I'll just drop this off personally and be all
like ‘Oh yeah, totally saved your asses, by the way.’ Shit. And here I thought my WIS was improving.’

The Bullhead bumped as it hit a pocket of warmer air over the city, bringing me out of my thoughts. I was nearing the club at this point and I didn't really feel like walking all the way across the city. Standing up from the pilot's seat, I dug into my mana and active spells, finding and dismissing Summon Vehicle. The Bullhead disintegrated into light particles around me, dumping me out into open air over the city and the wind hit me like a full-body slap, moving at a hundred miles an hour. For a moment, I wondered what air traffic control would think, seeing a Bullhead suddenly just disappear with no apparent damage. I was pretty high up but passing one of the taller buildings. Firing my line launcher, I used it to adjust my speed and course, sending myself flying across the city through open air as opposed to in a cockpit. The wind, cooling down with the night as it was, felt wonderful flowing over and through my hair and what parts of my face was exposed—once I'd slowed enough to enjoy it.

Dropping altitude and applying drag on the line, I killed most of my speed and hit the customer parking lot of The Club. Dropping my Illusion Disguise and Invisibility, I walked around the side of the building towards the front doors. There wasn't much of a line at this hour and, upon sighting me, the bouncer gestured me forward—apparently, the twins had been kind enough to spread the word around to the staff to be on the lookout for 'Shiro.'

Bypassing the line and smirking at the sounds of protest from whiners in said line, I moved inside and pulled my mask down. With the place as crowded as it was, I could mostly blend in as I was, and there was little to no need to worry about anyone connecting Jaune to Shiro here. The only people that knew, or suspected, were the twins and Junior—and Hei wasn't going to say anything. Moving around the dance floor, I sidled up to the bar and took a seat. I caught the eye of the bartender and waved him over. “The twins still on shift?”

The man looked me over behind his shades for a moment before nodding. “Yeah, they're on the floor serving drinks. What can I get you?”

“Rum and coke.” There was some irony there—neither the drink nor I belonged in this world, and yet… Somehow, ‘coke’ was a thing. I had noticed other things that shouldn't be here, either. Queen, for instance. Or the fact that Ruby Rose made a Star Wars reference—the geeky little thing. I had a few ideas as to that. In one theory, somehow things from Earth were being transplanted here. In another, this was some alternate-future post-apocalyptic Earth. Of course, there was always the possibility that Earth and Remnant simply shared some superficial similarities—same ideas, different place. Maybe Han Solo was a woman named Hana here, and neither Lucas, Ford, Hamill, nor Fisher had existed. I suppose it was something I would just have to look into later—maybe see if I couldn't find a video store or something. Now there was a thought—renting physical movies from a brick and mortar store, as opposed to Netflix or redbox. Now I had to go looking for one, if only to satisfy my nostalgia.
A smirk crossed the older man's mustachioed face as he asked, “In a glass or a line?”

I palmed my face, shooting him a deadpan look from between my fingers. “In a glass, please.”

I did not need to know that cocaine was on the menu, really. Never had I ever and never would I. Drugs were not my thing. Alcohol? Sure, occasionally—rarely. Very rarely, when the mood struck. I didn’t even smoke. Nor had I ever paid for sex or thrown money away gambling, if I were to be honest on the subject of vices. Somehow, these attributes had all made me boring where I was from, as opposed to being plain common sense. ‘Eh, I'm here now and it's not like it matters.’

A warm, lithe body leaning against the bar to my left and pressing itself nearly flush to my side drew my attention to where Miltia had approached to put in drink orders. “And a hello to you too,” I murmured, reaching out to covertly cup her ass.

The shorter girl shot me a grin and asked, “So, did we do good?”

I nodded, giving her a quick squeeze before drawing my hand back. “Yeah, you did good. Let me know how that plays out in the rumor mill later, would you? Until then, I am going to sit here and enjoy my drink, and hope someone wanders by and gives me a convenient excuse to bust some heads.”

The red-clad twin frowned, glancing around before asking quietly, “That bad?”

“No particularly,” I denied. “It's sort of several things all together. Are you two coming over later?”

“Mhmm,” the girl nodded, her frown replaced by a smug grin. “Wouldn't miss it.” She paused then asked, hesitant, “You're not planning to get blackout drunk or anything, right?”

Rolling my eyes, I shook my head. “No, dear. I never drink that much, firstly. Secondly, to answer the question I noticed you very carefully did not ask, no, I am not a violent or abusive drunk. In fact, I will go ahead and tell you that I will never, ever raise a hand to you outside of sparring or bedroom-related antics.” Thinking on it a moment, as I remembered exactly what it was I had done to the mooks earlier that night, I added, “Or extenuating circumstances. ’ I wouldn't exactly say 'self-defense in the event of enemy mind control' in a crowded bar.

Miltia shot me an annoyed look before retorting with, “I think we've figured out what kind of person
you are by now. I was more worried about whether you could get it up or not than the possibility of you getting punchy. Whiskey dick does us no good.”

Sending her a flat look, I smacked her ass and sent her on her way. “Don't you have customers to abuse?”

“Eep!” She jumped, sending me a look that all but demanded I make good on what I'd just started later, before sauntering off with a switch in her step that drew my eyes to her ass in a way that I wouldn’t have been able to make a Will save to resist even had I wanted to. The twins were fun to tease and rile up—and now, she’d be thinking about getting laid the rest of the night. By the time I got her back to my place, she’d have done half the work for me in working herself up. Hunger is the best spice, they say, but anticipation is the next best thing.

Pulling out my scroll, I opened the Underworld App and began browsing through the listed goods to see what was on offer. I quickly found the section for refills, modifications, and replacement parts for line launchers. There were a whole bunch of options on display for consideration. A set of replacement heads found its way into my cart, followed by a more powerful winch, and an enhanced propellant system tied into a range finder that ran off two Dust chambers and would adjust Dust usage by range to target. I noticed the parts were pretty much modular and so could be mixed and matched how the user saw fit—which was good for me, since that meant I could change it based on my needs. I even found the taser mod Kuro had alluded to, but decided against it for the moment.

Moving on to other things, I found the wing suit Kuro was using, along with several other options for gliding including capes and a few powered options that appeared to be some sort of expensive hover technology. I almost, almost bought a genuine hoverboard, but knowing I would never use it made my choice for me. The wing suit was cheaper and easier for beginners to use—oddly enough, this meant they were less maneuverable than a full cape with its larger air surface, but also faster. It made sense, in a way—you were less likely to crash face first into a building if you were slightly more limited in your turning radius. I made sure to add a manual for the wing suit to my cart as well, thinking with any luck I could just devour it, and if not then I could learn how to use the thing the old fashioned way. The fact that they were faster meant they were the preferred choice for anyone looking to maximize their chances of getting away from someone or some thing trying to catch them. Most grimm were uncommon inside cities, but young nevermore were one of the more common types up high.

Moving on from movement options, I began looking for other tools that might help with my upcoming mission or later on once I made it to Beacon and struck gold almost immediately in the 'optics' section. There, I found what looked like a set of fashionable sun glasses, which were crammed full of more tech than I had seen in one device on Remnant yet. The price tag made me wince and spare a glance at my inventory—I had the money, but damn it would take nearly three quarters of what I had on me. The features, however… if they were as advertised, they would more than make up for it. Telescopic zoom, infrared, ultraviolet, some sort of pulse scan sensor that would highlight electronics and most weapons in addition to passing through most walls, along with an app to control it from a scroll and set it to scan for various things … It would be very useful for breaking
into places and I could think of more than a few uses for them outside of that. Tracking, for instance, or enemy detection.

Adding them to my cart, I went for one more selection. I needed a weapon—something simple to use and relatively cheap, compared to what I knew Joan was having built for me. I had been putting it off for a while, but tonight had shown me that I couldn't really waste time holding off on it any more. At least one person had seen a hint of what sort of tricks I had up my sleeves, and while I highly doubted Ruby would spill the beans on me, I didn't want to be caught without a weapon again. Sifting through the choices, I settled on something relatively simple. I had no need of a gun or gun component to a weapon at the moment, so a simple sword would do. The sword I picked wound up being a katana with an extending blade, for use with my Iaido. They weren't the be-all end-all of swords, but they were good enough—and I wanted something distinctive enough to further separate 'Jaune' from 'Shiro' should anyone ever start comparing the two. A visible difference in weapon choice would help that, just as much as if Ruby did spill the beans and tell everyone the Fox had a lightsaber equivalent.

Besides, I wasn't expecting to get into any protracted sword fights to begin with. If it came down to that, I would rather spam a combination of Sleep and Forget than get into it with some kind of sword master. I was not a sword master—my low level in Sword Mastery even said as much. What I was, on the other hand, was a caster, a rogue, and a survivor when it came to fighting. I was not afraid to apply common sense and magic to my battles. For instance, if you're going up against the world's greatest sword master bring a gun—or anything but a sword. Except, well, people holding the title of 'world's greatest sword master' had a bad habit of being able to cut bullets or other things that should be equally impossible…

I was interrupted from my perusing of illicit goods some time later by a diminutive form taking the stool next to mine and rapping the bar surface with a fist. Even from where I sat, with the heavy thump of techno drowning out everything else, the sound was barely audible. The bartender didn't have a hope in hell of hearing it. Seeming to realize this, the girl raised up a bit in her seat and began to wave at the bartender, who had his back turned. Sipping at my own drink, I gave her a once over—white jacket, black corset, pink blouse, brown pants, gray high heeled boots, light pink, chocolate brown, and vanilla white hair, and when she turned enough to lock eyes with me I found one to be brown and the other white. Something about that twinged my memory, but even if I hadn't remembered her by sight the words over head gave her away as: Neopolitan, Level 33.

The girl beside me shot a glance between my drink and the bartender, before sending me an annoyed look. A small smirk tugged at my lips as I failed my Will save against being a smartass. “What's that, Lassie? Little Timmy fell down the well?”

Fists clenched at her sides and her eyes abruptly shifted colors to both pink as her face flushed. Rearing back she kicked one of those pointed high heel ed boots at my shin. Trapping the leg with my own, I pulled her closer and grinned. “Well, if that's what you wanted, you could have just asked…” She struggled for a moment before I released her, my message delivered. Turning away, I whistled at the bartender, catching his attention and waving him over. “Another for me and…”
something for my friend here.”

Turning to the ice cream themed girl, he asked, “What'll it be?”

She held up a finger and pointed at a list of drinks posted on the wall behind the bartender. Giving a put-upon sigh, the man turned and began reading the list, trying to find her selection. Beside me, the girl's Aura became visible, violently boiling around her as whatever patience she had appeared to have snapped and she began reaching for the umbrella/parasol leaning against the side of the bar. Loosing a sigh very much like that of the man who had been kind enough to bring me my alcohol, I pulled up C harisma and laid a hand atop Neopolitan's left hand, which happened to be the one closest to me. She stopped reaching for the parasol I knew to be a weapon, her Aura smoothing out before dying down as she turned to look at me with a raised eyebrow. I shook my head. “Oi, barkeep. I think she's after something fruity with an umbrella. Sound about right?” I directed that last bit to the girl beside me and received a nod in answer.

“Fruity with an umbrella,' right,” the man grunted, moving away and pulling down bottles to mix.

Turning back to the girl beside me, I asked, “So, Lassie, can't or won't? Talk, that is.”

Shooting me a deadpan look, she took out her scroll and began typing before turning it around so I could see—and suddenly assuming a sheepish look as it appeared she only now remembered she had the thing. 'I can speak perfectly fine, thank you very much. I simply choose not to.'

Reading it over, I looked over the device and locked eyes with her, putting all the sarcasm I could muster into my next words. “Sounds like a great idea, when you're in a club blaring techno at a volume typically reserved for aircraft engines.”

“Ass,” she grunted quietly, taking her scroll back and turning away to pout.

My grin only went that much wider. “And yet, I got you to speak, didn't I?” She sent a halfhearted glare my way and I gave an unrepentant shrug. “So, you look about as pissed as I feel. Want to talk about it? I've been told I'm super approachable, in a totally not creepy kind of way.”

She snorted, propping one hand on the bar and leaning her head against it as she turned to regard me. “You're an ass.”
“I thought we'd established this already, Lassie,” I snarked back. “Either your memory's failing, or you did things backwards—getting drunk before going to a club.”

“My Name Is. Neo,” she ground out and I couldn't really blame the alcohol for failing that particular Will save as I laughed, before abruptly slapping a hand over my mouth and attempting to stifle myself before she tried to kill me. “I think I hate you.”

“Not as much as you hate someone else, if you're here and all moody as opposed to there.” I pointed out as the barkeep arrived with a glass of something pink and smelling of more rum than my rum and coke.

“A strawberry sunrise for the lady,” he pontificated, rolling his eyes.

Neo's hand came back in what was clearly intended to become a backhanded slap and I likely saved the bartender's life from a critical bitch slap by reaching out and taking her hand. “Be nice,” I warned, pointing at the drink as the barkeep moved off. “He technically got your order right, since you were all pissy and refused to say what you wanted. Drink that, and if it's not to your liking I'll get the next one.”

Yanking her hand back, Neo looked for a moment like she was seriously contemplating using it on me, before she sighed and took up the drink. Bringing it to her lips—strawberry pink lips, I noticed distractedly—she sipped it once before smacking her lips and thinking it over. Finally, she shot me a sidelong glance and asked, “If I drink it all and say I don't like it anyway, are you going to keep up your end of our deal?”

“A deal implies mutual agreement of terms and an exchange of goods and/or services between two or more parties,” I countered. “That was less a deal and more of an offer. And yes, I will buy you one drink if you don't like that one. I'm not paying for all of your drinks. I'm not some sucker you can con into buying your drinks for you on the off chance of getting into your pants. I've got better ways of getting into your pants than liquor ing you up.”

Neo snorted softly before downing half of the strawberry pink drink in one long pull. “And how would you do that, exactly?”

“Oh, that's easy,” I chuckled. “I don't have to convince you to let me into your pants. I just have to convince you that having me in your pants would be more entertaining than out of them—after that, it'll be you trying to get into my pants.”
“As if,” Neo denied. However, after a moment of sipping her drink in contemplation, she shot me a sidelong look and asked, “And what is it that you think will convince me that I want in your pants, pray tell?”

I smirked slightly. I had already completed one phase of doing exactly that, by putting the idea in her head. Now that she was thinking about it, curiosity would do much of the work for me—just as Miltia would be stewing in her own juices for the rest of the night. Sometimes, things really were as simple as understanding basic human nature. I’d had a girlfriend or two that had used the tactic to great effect against me—and likely other men, I’d soon figured out—and had swiftly picked up on the trick and turned it to my own uses. Instead of telling her that, however, I downed the rest of my drink and turned to face her.

“Well, first, I’m going to wait for you to finish that,” I said, pointing to the drink in her hand. I was not a master manipulator by any means, but an understanding of the basics and an unfairly high charisma modifier gave me a lot of leeway. This was another of those basics that applied to dealing with people in pretty much any situation—imply a command, convince them to follow it, and they will be more inclined to do so in the future, usually without having to be asked. It helped that, in general, people wanted to be lead.

Neo, despite her brash attitude at the moment, struck me as a follower as opposed to a leader. The twins were, too, to be honest. And there was nothing wrong with that. For most of my life, I had been as well—until I got old enough to mature out of it and go my own way. I still wasn’t a type A personality, but the idea of following orders from someone assuming they were a superior or in a position of command over me grated on my nerves—even more when that assumption lacked any basis in reality. Maybe that was part of why I felt so much resentment every time I compared Remnant to Earth—all the little instances of ‘could-have-been but never-was,’ if only people had just decided to be decent to each other. ‘Remnant, not Earth. Remnant,’ I reminded myself.

Neo’s glass clinked as it returned to the bar, empty. Turning chocolate and vanilla eyes on me, she asked, “And then?”

Standing, I took her hand and pulled her up, off the stool. I had labeled her as diminutive before and that was emphasized as we stood facing each other—she was a foot and a half shorter than me, at 4’9”, to my 6’3” with my boots on. And she was wearing high heels, which had to add at least four inches. She was smaller than Ruby, and Ruby was tiny even compared to the twins. Neo was, as most on Earth would agree, a shortstack. Still, that wasn’t really a bad thing. I wasn’t hung up on height and she had a very nice figure, emphasized by that corset.

“Well,” I grinned, leading her out to the dance floor, “my next step would be to get us in close proximity and engaged in physical activity that would lead to brushing and rubbing up against each other. In other words, foreplay. Or ‘dancing,’ as some call it.”
Biting back a laugh, the smaller girl allowed herself to be lead out onto the dance floor. “And you think your skill on the dance floor is suitably impressive?” she teased, moving in close as we began moving in time with the music.

The twins had tried the same thing when we'd first met, only to have it backfire on them when I discovered that Jaune had actually been a good dancer. In this case, I was putting that skill and the significant boost to charisma it gave when active to good use. It was just a damn shame that 'dancing' to techno music was more akin to a combination of flailing and grinding on each other than actual dancing. Oh, sure, Dance gave me more options than that—which I used to merciless advantage—but I still couldn't think of it as proper dancing. “I do well enough,” I shrugged, but at this point I knew the words would be lost in the thump of heavy bass as we were much closer to the speakers now.

Verbal sparring was put on hold for a while as we danced through several songs. Off to the side of the dance floor, I caught sight of Melanie sending me a questioning look and winked, shooting the smaller girl in front of me a glance before meeting the twin's gaze again. The white-clad twin rolled her eyes and made a 'go ahead' gesture with her hand before returning to her rounds. Seeing that as tacit approval to continue, I kept Neo out for a few more songs before we went back to the bar to sit and have another drink. Seeing my particularly smug look, she rolled her eyes with a sigh and admitted, “Okay, you may have some skill.”

“Just a bit,” I allowed, all false modesty. “And you don't look nearly as pissed as you did.”

“That is true,” Neo admitted slowly, a contemplative look crossing her features as the barkeep returned with another pair of drinks.

I took a moment to sip at my drink before making my next move. I wanted her to open up and start complaining about Roman, if my suspicions were correct and he was in a mood over the failure of the Signal job. Word had to have reached him by now. Logically, the chain of events would have progressed as: I foiled the job, the mooks called Roman, Roman pitched an absolute shit fit, Neo left in disgust before she got stabby. And right now, with her in a foul mood and me a sympathetic ear, it was an exploitable vulnerability in Cinder's operation. Well, in Roman's operation, but through Roman to Cinder. At the very least, I could try pumping her for information. Best case scenario, I might be able to turn her as I had with the twins, depending on how badly Roman had fucked up. Well, his loss, my gain. Finally, I asked, “So, who is this guy that's got you so pissed?” Chocolate and vanilla eyes met my red contacts and I shrugged. “It has to be a guy, otherwise you wouldn't be so hurt by it.”

With a sigh, she nodded agreement and signaled the barkeep for another before downing the one in her hand. “I'm going to need more alcohol for that conversation.”
Shrugging, I held one hand up in a dismissive gesture. “I’m not pushing you to talk about it. If you don’t want to, by all means, tell me to fuck off.”

That was another of those little tricks to getting someone to open up—give them the option not to and they were far more likely to open up, especially if the other person is less likely to judge them for some perceived wrong. The difference between offering a real choice and the illusion of choice is that the risk is greater, but so is the reward—the other person could always simply refuse to open up. On the other hand, most people loved to bitch about their problems—work, dates, boyfriends or girlfriends, traffic… give someone an excuse and they’ll complain for hours over the stupidest things, eagerly dropping all sorts of information they usually don't even realize they're giving away as they get more and more heated over the subject. Neo was no exception to that, it seemed.

“No, it's fine,” she sighed, accepting her fourth or fifth mixed drink of the night—I had lost count. My own count sat at four, where I would endeavor to keep it for a while. My rum and coke had one shot of rum per glass mixed with coke and ice and I was employing a technique one of those old girlfriends liked to use to stave off hangover and avoid getting drunk quickly—I was eating the ice. Ice took up half or more of the volume of the glasses, making them look more full than they were—a common trick used by bars everywhere to swindle customers out of money on mixed drinks or anything other than draft beer. Eating the ice would both provide water to dilute the alcohol and take longer to finish per glass, so I wouldn't be constantly ordering more drinks. I just wished they had pretzels. Neo, on the other hand, was not eating her ice and her drinks were something like three shots of rum and some sort of strawberry fruit juice. She was also drinking to get drunk at this point, while I was not.

Holding her glass in cupped hands, she opened with, “It's my… boss.”

“‘Boss?’ Not ‘partner?’” I asked, projecting equal parts curiosity and skepticism.

Neo snorted, shaking her head and sending chocolate, strawberry, and vanilla hair swishing. “Not partner. Roman doesn’t have partners. He has underlings and employees, and occasionally lieutenants. Well, now he has a boss and he's not adjusting well to the concept of suddenly not running the show any more.”

I rolled my eyes, giving a short, derisive chuckle to imply what I thought of that. “Sounds like a real… class act.”

Shaking her head, she quickly moved to defend him. “He's not always this bad…” I shot her a deadpan look and she glared back. “He's not!”
“Whatever you say. I didn't say a thing.” I waved her off. “So, what did this Roman guy do that was so out of character?” I asked, heavy on the sarcasm on the last part. When she remained silent, I realized that was answer enough. Now, how to play this… “Ah. Okay. You're one of those.”

Neo frowned. “One of those' what?” she asked, tone suspicious.

Instead of answering outright, I pulled up Charisma and began to tell a story. “Had a girlfriend once,” I began, breaking long enough to take a long pull from my own drink, overtly mimicking her earlier actions to make the implication that I would need a drink to tell this story. The easiest stories to tell, and the ones that are most believable, are based on truth—and this one was. This was also another of those ways to approach someone—appear to open up, to show them you trust them enough to let them get close, and they're far more likely to reciprocate. It humanizes you, in their eyes, and makes you more approachable—not to mention a sympathetic character, if they can relate.

The key is to not over do it and to downplay it. As a man, it's expected that you can't let bad shit bother you. Bad things happen, you learn from it and move on, and get stronger for it. If you imply that it truly hurt you, you become damaged goods in the eyes of most people and women don't want damaged goods—they want a rock, someone they can depend on. And regardless of how unfair that seems to force an entire gender to meet those unrealistic expectations, such is life and human nature—we all want someone better than ourselves. Well, at least that's how it went on Earth. Here on Remnant… I suppose we would see.

I wasn't one of the feminized nu-male specimens overly in touch with his feelings that had been cropping up when I… left Earth. I had feelings, yes, but I had learned to keep my own conscience a long time ago—because, as those 'men' were quickly coming to find out, what women say they want and what they actually want are two different things. Though, in the case of those poor bastards, it was probably more of a case of them not knowing what they wanted, then when they were given the thing they said they wanted, as it turns out they didn't want it to begin with and couldn't stand the end result—but for many, pride would never let them admit it. Maybe it was too much coddling—participation trophies, parents unwilling to tell their child 'no,' schools and other institutions preaching equality as opposed to teaching kids the value of loss and how to pick themselves back up again when they've been knocked down and try harder. Or maybe I was just a relic of a bygone age even in my own former world…

'Dwelling, again,' I mused. Some day soon, I would have to stop that. With effort, I pushed it from my mind and focused on the task at hand. Luckily, I hadn't waited so long as to seem overly reticent to tell the story and ruin the effect I was going for.

“She was always a very up or down kind of person, you know?” I asked, and Neo nodded, a look of recognition crossing her face. Seems I'd nailed Roman's character on the head as being manic-
depressive. “When she was up, things were great. Sweetest girl I'd ever met. When she was down, things were… not so great. Stress eventually put her on the downward path permanently, or so it seemed. Embarrassing as it is to admit, she got a bit physical at times and at the time, I didn't really know how to react to that. Was I supposed to defend myself? Was I supposed to just take it? I'm a man, I'm bigger than her—hell, I could have broken her jaw with one good swing. For the longest time, I worried that if I ever retaliated, she would tell everyone I beat on her—and while I'm kind of wiry and don't look like much, she was only a bit bigger than you, so whose word do you think they'd have taken?”

“Hers,” Neo answered softly, and I nodded.

In actual fact, it was only twice. The first time, I really had no idea what the hell I was supposed to do. The second time, a few days of apologies and months of slowly deteriorating back to that point later, I ended it. “Pretty much,” I admitted. “I thought about just leaving, but she apologized and promised she'd never do it again… Well, that's not how that song and dance went. She did do it again, and I kept wondering 'why am I staying with this person?' Eventually, I figured out the answer—it was because I hated being alone. I could put up with a lot of bullshit, as it turned out. Until one day, I couldn't. She got a bit too punchy one day and I broke her nose and left. I packed my shit and left her bleeding and crying on the floor that day. From that day on, I've had a rule. It's a simple rule, real easy to follow: you hit me, I hit back, and we're done. You don't hit the person you're in a relationship with—sparring, training, or bedroom antics being the exceptions to that.” Or mind-control bullshit.

“Well,” Neo hedged, “It was only really once, a long time ago…”

I shot her a deadpan look. “It was only really once. And then it was once more.”

Sighing, the ice cream themed girl took another long pull off her drink. “I don't think I want to talk about this any more.”

“Agreed,” I admitted. I had put the idea in her head, though, and now she would be thinking about it. “Want to go back to dancing?”

Chuckling, she nodded, standing and taking my hand to pull me off my stool. “I think I'd like that.”

We spent the rest of the night dancing, until last call was made and people began to filter out, and it seemed both our moods were much improved by then. I hadn't gotten to punch someone bigger than me in the teeth, but I had gotten to spend the night dancing with a pretty girl. The music changed over from techno to noir jazz as it had the last few times I'd been here and our dance transitioned to
something approaching traditional dancing. “So,” Neo hummed, looking up at me through her lashes and grinning, “Want to maybe… come back to my place?”

I pretended to think about it for a moment, earning a smack on the arm as she laughed and mumbled something that sounded suspiciously like ‘ass.’ “I have a better idea,” I suggested. Seeing I had her attention, I asked, “This Roman guy knows where you live, right?” She nodded, an annoyed look crossing her face at the prospect of being disturbed at home. “How about my place instead?”

Grinning, she nodded. “Works for me. Let me just get my parasol,” she began, starting to pull away only to find the white-clad Melanie at her side, parasol in hand. “Oh!”

From the other side, Miltia had snuck up and placed a hand on the shorter girl's shoulder. “Are we having company?” she asked, drawing the ice cream themed girl's gaze.

As Neo switched between the twins, I shrugged. “I don't know. What do you think, Neo?”

“Uhh...” she began, shaking her head quickly and taking a deep breath, in addition to flaring her Aura a bit to gain some sobriety. “You? And the twins? You know each other?”

“We're…” Miltia began, shooting a look between me and her sister.

Melanie finished with, “Sort of dating?”

Both shared a look between each other and me before concluding together, “We have a thing.”

Looking between the three of us, Neo's eyebrows shot up into her hairline, her eyes cycling between chocolate, vanilla, strawberry, and finally settling on mint green. “Twins…” she murmured, seeming to be weighting the pros and cons of this new development. Finally, she smirked and made an exaggerated shrug. “You know what? Fuck it. Sounds like fun. Let's go!”

I ignored my Semblance awarding me four points of charisma as its bad sense of humor.

The sound of soft snoring filled the bedroom, along with the intermittent sound of slurping. Neo,
flexible, curvy little thing that she was, was sprawled out atop Melanie, and the source of the snoring. Apparently, she drooled in her sleep too. Reaching down to where Miltia was sprawled in my lap, I scratched at the top of her head to get her attention and green eyes shifted up to meet my red contacts—I didn't quite trust Neo with that secret yet. Maybe soon, though… It would be a calculated risk, but the payoff would be worth it assuming it worked. If it did not… well, I had options now. “Can you do me a favor?”

“Hm?” she hummed and I twitched, shooting her a glare as she chuckled.

“Stop that,” I groaned, pulling her up and away, her lips coming away from my cock with a wet 'pop!' “Much as I really enjoy that, there's something I need to go take care of. Can you keep an eye on things here until I get back?”

Miltia pouted. “But… but I'm not finished yet—and neither are you!”

I sighed, nodding in agreement. “Yeah, but we both know our stamina is a wee bit better than your sister's and I need you conscious and sensate for this. I'll make it up to you when I get back.”

With a put-upon sigh, the girl nodded. “Fine. But I'm holding you to that. I even have something special in mind,” she smirked, shooting a look towards Neo.

“I've created a monster,” I teased, getting an enthusiastic nod from the monster in question. Reaching out, I mussed Neo's hair a moment before whispering, “Sleep.” Seeing Miltia's questioning look, I elaborated. “I don't want her waking up until after I get back. She shouldn't, but if she does, call me and keep her occupied.”

“Occupied,' huh? I think we can manage,” the dark haired girl giggled.

“I'm not sure I want to know,” I admitted. Shaking my head, I rolled off the bed and began throwing my discarded stealth armor set into inventory, then re-equipped it. Parts of it would need to be washed, soon. It smelled like smoke. Catching my eye, Miltia gestured me over. When I got close enough, she pulled me down and cupped a hand against my ear, before whispering what it was she had in mind. “So let me get this straight… you want to tie your sister up and force her to watch us to make little miss ice cream sundae a banana split?” Miltia nodded. “You know what? I think I can get behind that.”
Miltia broke out into giggles, then quickly covered her mouth and shot a wide-eyed look towards the sleeping pair. Neo was undisturbed and other than shifting slightly, Melanie didn't seem to have heard. “Shh! Don't spoil this for me by making me laugh at your horrible puns!”

Wagging my eyebrows, I planted a quick kiss on her lips before heading for the door. “That was an excellent pun, I'll have you know.”

“Go!” the awake twin hissed, shooing me away. “And hurry back.”

Well, with an offer like that waiting on me, I would definitely not be dragging ass around in getting back. Either in spite of or because of her normal reticence to talk, Neo made some of the most interesting sounds—and particularly enjoyed having her hair pulled. And I did so enjoy the view from behind… Shaking off the thought for later, I threw on Invisibility and left the apartment. The fact that what Miltia was proposing promised even more skill point gains was a side bonus I was coming to accept as something to ignore at this point.

A quest has been created!

**Operation Infiltration: A Quick Rise and a Short Flash**

You've stumbled onto an opportunity to take advantage of the situation and remove one of the major players from Cinder's machinations. Track down Roman Torchwick and remove him by any means necessary.

*Success: 20000 EXP, lien to be determined, companion quest unlock. Failure: Roman continues to carry out Cinder's orders, Neo remains undecided over who to follow.*

I took a moment to set up a drop for the item delivery for my purchases for later on the apartment roof, because no one attempting to hide would order items for their secret identity to be delivered to the home of their civilian identity—which itself was a bit of reverse psychology to eliminate the apartment complex as somewhere 'Shiro' might live. That done, I made my way across town to where I knew Roman's hideout to be. One of my first few deliveries before Kuro had come around had been to that hideout, in fact. Now, though, I wasn't here to deliver packages.

Instead of dropping in on the ground floor, I came in from the roof, opening up the roof access door and sneaking down. I passed a room with a couple of mooks sitting around a table and playing cards, despite the late hour, but ignored them in favor of finding Roman. The third room I came across was
closed and locked. Knocking, I waited. “I said I didn't want to be disturbed!” a voice called from the other side of the door and I grinned, recognizing it as Roman. He stomped across the room and I stepped back a moment before he threw open the door. “What?!” he began, only to frown in confusion at finding no one there.

“Confuse, Charm, Dominate,” I chanted quickly. Really, I probably could have crushed his will with my higher stats without using that combo, but I needed to be sure it worked, and Confuse lowered the target's resistance against mental effects. With Charm running, he might decide to relent against Dominate. As it was, the redheaded man's will crumpled like a house of cards in a stiff wind and he went slack before standing up loosely. 'Go inside. Gather your valuables—everything you would take with you if you decided to flee and start over elsewhere.'

Turning around, Roman moved back into the room and quickly began to pack a couple of bags. I watched as he pulled up loose floor boards, taking out stacks of lien, Dust, and other things—including a plastic-wrapped brick of a white substance I was fairly sure was cocaine. Most of the volume of the bags he packed was money and Dust, in fact, with only a single change of clothes. He found a briefcase with a combination lock on it, spinning the lock to a specific code, and opened the case before dropping the coke into a secret compartment that Observe told me was lead-lined, before filling the briefcase with manila folders full of paperwork. Quietly, I wondered aloud, “Why the drugs?”

“If I intend to flee a sticky death at the hands of that red witch and start over elsewhere, I'll need a sample of the product in order to secure revenue,” he explained, shooting the general area where my voice had originated a grin.

Taking up his bowler hat and cane, he shouldered the bags and began making his way out. ‘Take a car to the airport.’

I followed him downstairs, where he snapped his fingers at one of the guards stationed in the room just inside the building's front door—a large, brown haired man who looked ex-military, who my Semblance tagged as 'Jim Bean.' “You… what's your name? You know what, doesn't matter. Go bring the car around. We've got places to be.”

The guards, clearly Roman's own men and not men on loan from Junior, were apparently used to exactly this sort of treatment. Roman followed Jim outside and stopped in front of the door, taking out a cigar and lighting it as he waited. Jim didn't take long to bring the car around and Roman got into the back seat. Quickly hitting the driver with Confuse, I climbed into the back seat on the opposite side before hitting him with Forget and dispelling Confuse. Jim shook his head for a moment then put the car in gear and took off.

‘Put your window down, you inconsiderate ass,’ I sent to Roman, and the bastard actually smirked as
he hit the button to do just that. So, it seemed that Dominate didn't make people puppets and they kept enough free will that they still appeared human as opposed to mindless zombies. Instead, it was a bit like being able to issue them orders they could not refuse and would do everything in their power to obey—and the underlying spell itself was essentially an order to obey.

“So, boss, why're we going to the airport?” the henchman up front asked and I weighed the pros and cons of simply using Dominate on him as well. No, I needed someone around to spread word that Roman had run off voluntarily. That in mind, I ordered Roman to make something up.

“Well,” Roman began, taking a drag off his cigar and laying a hand on the bags at his side. “I'm sure you've seen our new employer.”

The driver nodded, sparing a moment to look into the rearview and meet Roman's eyes. “Real scary piece of work, that one is, boss.”

“Right you are,” the redhead nodded. “She doesn't tolerate failure. Which is why I think it best to move my operation some place less... exciting than Vale. I hear Vacuo is nice this time of year.”

With a skeptical look, Jim asked, “You're just going to cut and run?”

“Play with fire, get burned, as the saying goes,” Roman shrugged.

The rest of the ride passed by in silence, aside from the sounds of traffic around us even at this late—or early—hour. The driver pulled into the airport terminal's parking lot and I hit him with Confuse again as soon as he put the car in park, then slipped out and repeated the same thing I had done earlier to make sure he wouldn't remember the car door opening and no one getting out. Tell him to leave and wait for your call, then go inside and purchase a ticket to Vacuo.'

Knocking on the window, Roman waited for it to roll down before telling the driver, “I'll call once I get set up. Go back and tell the others to get ready to start moving men and equipment—and see if you can pick up another Bullhead while you're at it to replace the one those idiots lost.”

Roman didn't wait around the for driver to acknowledge him, turning and heading into the terminal. Following behind him, I watched him buy a ticket on the next red-eye flight out of Vale and then ordered him to go to the restroom. Once inside, I took the bags and opened them, dumping the lien into my inventory and boggling at the amount—Roman had saved up over 120000L in cash, and that was just in his room. I only took half, however—my plans required Roman having a large sum of
money on him for them to be believable. Tossing in half of the Dust as well, I asked, “Is that all of the money?”

“Are you kidding?” he asked, rolling his eyes. “That's just what I kept around in case of an emergency. No, no, no my invisible friend. The rest is in an old hangar on an abandoned air field. I bought the place, see, and it's how we've been getting goods and people in and out of Vale. A Bullhead for moving men and merchandise and an old Duster for moving smaller things quickly. You'd be surprised how much one will hold, when the 'fuel pods' under the wings are being used to house something other than fuel,” he bragged.

A thought occurred and I asked, “Got the deed to the place?”

“That and more,” he admitted, dragging a manila folder out of the briefcase. “I own several small properties across Vale.”

I grinned, holding out a hand for the folder, before a thought occurred—if Roman showed up in Vacuo without his paperwork and no one could find it later, someone would rightly assume it had been stolen. Taking it would poke a pretty big hole in the story I was building here. “You know what? Never mind. Keep them. They'll probably sell for a pretty penny, once you get to Vacuo.”

“Right you are!” Roman agreed, stowing the folder and locking the briefcase. Above us, speakers announced the boarding call for the airship to Vacuo. “Ah, that's my ride.”

“That it is. Come on, we don't want to be late,” I gestured towards the door and Roman lead the way.

Passing through airport security is a lot easier when you're invisible, so I actually had to wait on Roman to pass through before we could make our way out and onto the airship. I wondered how he planned to make it through security with all the Dust and cash, but Roman was a step ahead of me, shaking the baggage agent's hand and in an act of sleight of hand I almost missed, passing him a small wad of bills. We walked up the ramp into the airship and Roman found his seat.

'Buckle in,' I ordered Roman as he stowed his bags and took a seat. For a moment, I wondered if I had what it took to do what came next. Logically, it was the best choice. With Roman out of the way, Neo would be left without a leader and I could fill the vacuum Roman would leave behind if I played my cards right. Really, the fact that Roman had hit her had absolutely nothing to do with my decision here. No, the simple fact was, he was an important cog in Cinder's plans and that alone made him worth removing. Getting Neo was really just a bonus—especially since I'd already prepped her to be predisposed to distrusting Roman. If it seemed as though he had cut and run,
simply abandoned her to her fate, then she would be more likely to turn to a friendly face for help.

Others began trickling in and I knew I had to make my decision now. “Sleep,” I chanted. ‘One more spell. Bio would kill silently, with no apparent cause…’ I mused, observing the man's sleeping form. No, the risk of being found out was greater if he died than he he had simply fled. Leaving him alive would give Cinder one more loose end to tie up and potentially slow her down later, if she wanted to track him down and silence him. “Forget. Confuse.”

‘You decided to leave Vale for Vacuo and start over, because it sounded like a better idea than dealing with Cinder.’ Outside, the engines began to spool up and I could tell the stewardesses were preparing for departure. When the spell settled, my Semblance let me know I had completed the quest it had given to remove him from play, incidentally granting me a level worth of experience. I slipped out of the aircraft before the stewardesses closed the door. I stood there on the tarmac and watched the craft take off into the lighten sky until it was gone, and I knew things would never be quite the same after this. I had made my first big move against the powers that be and all of my future knowledge was now on a countdown clock to expiration.

BGM Image Song – Styx, Renegade – Unlocked!

I wondered if that was for me, or for Roman—if it was for me, well, the contents of Renegade and Bohemian Rhapsody were similar and it would imply Joan and I had more in common that I’d first thought. The question was, if it was for me, was that for letting Roman go or nearly killing him? Or maybe it bespoke of some future events yet to take place—Image Songs were weird like that in other media, at times.

Shaking my head as I’d never get an answer to that question, I made my way into the terminal and began looking for a directory in the back offices—specifically, one with a scroll number or contact information for the authorities of Vacuo. I was halfway into digging through that before a thought occurred. “Must be more tired than I thought, if I missed the obvious,” I grumbled, leaving the offices and backtracking to the security terminal Roman had passed through. Finding the agent he had bribed, I slapped the man with a quick Dominate and began issuing orders. ‘You’ve had an attack of conscience. Go report yourself to your superior and insist he or she phone the authorities in Vacuo. Tell them you suspect the man you accepted money from was carrying drugs in his locked briefcase and you saw a large amount of cash in his carry-on bags.’

That done, I made my way out of the terminal, sighting a passenger Bullhead making the city transit between the local hubs, this particular one bound for the Agricultural District, which would take us right over the section of the Residential District near enough to the apartment that I wouldn’t have to travel far to get there. Firing my line launcher, I snagged the Bullhead and let it pull me up and away, reeling myself in until I could stick to the hull. Once we were over the Residential District, I pushed off from the hull in a Leap and fired at a building that would whip me around and send me towards the apartment.
As I came in for a landing on the apartment roof, I spotted a familiar black-clad form and resisted the urge to roll my eyes. Of course they would assign Kuro to make my deliveries—we were supposed to be working together and having her do it would be more practical than sending someone else for a number of reasons. Touching down into a roll, I watched as her head turned to track the sound and dropped Invisibility. Striding over, she began pulling packages out of her backpack. “Cash up front,” she demanded, all business. Luckily, I had planned for this in advance, and already had the money needed in my side pouch. Pulling it out and handing it over, she took a moment to count it before deciding it was all there. “How much of this is for her job?” she asked, tone carefully neutral.

“Not much,” I admitted.

Sighing, she nodded. “Look, I'm... sorry about earlier. You were right, it's none of my business what you do outside of work hours.”

“No, it's not.” I agreed shortly, picking up my packages and stowing what I could in my side pouch. “But I get it. I appreciate that you're worried. I'll be careful.”

“I suppose that's the best I can hope for,” she allowed. “Make sure you sign that you got the packages on your scroll,” she reminded me before taking off.

Throwing on Invisibility, I waited a few minutes to be sure she was gone before opening an ID on top of the door to the apartment complex, slipping inside, then destroying the ID—that way, even if she was waiting somewhere far enough that I couldn't see or sense her, she wouldn't see the door opening. Entering my apartment, I dropped Invisibility and opened my packages, throwing everything into inventory to deal with later. There was one more thing I needed to take care of before I could consider my alibi truly secure. Moving into the bedroom, I found Miltia reclined on the bed, reading a book on her scroll.

“You're late,” she accused and I nodded.

“Sorry,” I apologized, moving to the side of the bed and taking her scroll to set it aside. Seeing I had her full attention, I asked, “Do you trust me?”

Biting her bottom lip momentarily, she slowly nodded. “We both do.”

“Then hear me out,” I asked, and she gave another nod. Hitting Melanie and Neo both with Sleep to
make sure they wouldn't be waking up for this, I began. “I did something… took care of a problem before it could become one. You and I are the only ones who know anything about it, and while I trust you not to spill my secrets willingly, there's a lot you could give away unwillingly.”

“So what are you suggesting?” she asked, sounding a bit anxious but not really worried.

I pulled my mask down and ran a hand through my hair to buy time to figure out a way to word it, until deciding that being blunt may work best. “I want to put you to sleep and erase your memory of everything after those two passed out,” I said, gesturing towards the pair of Neo and Melanie. “As far as you'll know, we all fell asleep together.”

Humming in thought, Miltia turned it over in her mind before she asked, “Have you ever done this to us before?”

“No. I've never had a need to, before now,” I admitted.

“But you're asking, instead of just doing it,” she pointed out, and I nodded. Smiling, she reached out and took her scroll back from where she'd set it down. Opening what she had been reading, she reversed it by several pages before closing the scroll and putting it down again. On my questioning look she shrugged. “If you're going to make me forget, it would raise questions if I found my book several pages past where I last remembered being.” Taking a deep breath, she nodded. “I'm ready.” I reached out and ran my hand through her hair and she suddenly shot up. “Wait!”

“What?” I asked, wondering if she'd forgotten something else.

No, as it turned out, she had something else in mind. “You're still going to keep your end of our deal, right? What we talked about earlier?”

“Banana split?” I asked with a grin and she nodded. “Yeah.”

Sighing, she flopped back down. “Okay. Good. We're good!”

“Little pervert,” I teased, laughing.
Miltia nodded. “Your pervert, though.”

Rolling my eyes, I cast, “Sleep.” Her eyes fluttered for a moment before she lost the fight and passed out, that small smile still in place on her lips. Focusing on what I needed to remove, I whispered, “Forget.”

The spell took effect and I sighed, opening up my inventory and unequipping my armor and clothes before sliding into bed beside the twin and pulling her against me, where she spooned up and relaxed. I slowly released my active buffs, allowing sleep to come naturally as I went over what else needed to be done. At some point in the coming day, I would need to pull off that job for Cinder. Likely, Neo would leave here shortly after waking and head back to Roman's hideout at some point, where she would discover he was gone. By then, if I was lucky, he would have been arrested and the news may be covering it. Cinder would likely also hear about it at some point in the next twelve hours. With Roman out of the picture, she would still need his resources and gang, and the next in the line of succession there was Neo if I wasn't mistaken—which meant Cinder would likely be summoning Neo to her some time in the coming night or the next night. If I pulled off the heist today, I could potentially arrange to be there at the same time as Neo. From there, I would have to wing it.

'Well, it's not like I haven't been winging it this entire time.'
Sitting invisibly on a building overlooking the Repository, I considered my options. The building was old—solid pre-war construction, three stories above ground and at least that many below, a shade of government-industrial gray that was common to similar buildings on Earth, and built like a bomb shelter. In fact, I was pretty sure it was a bomb shelter—or a shelter of some sort. Probably a grimm shelter, given that this was Remnant. All in all, the thing pretty much screamed 'boring government building, nothing to see here, move along citizen.'

The security had been modernized at some point, what I had been able to find on the history of the building telling me the place had been gutted a couple of years back and much of the old technology replaced—though, obviously there were no specifics on anything below ground. Going in from the top was right out—I wasn't about to try something stupid like squeezing my way through the air ducts. That never worked because, for the most part, air intakes and the ducts carrying air through the building were small enough to discourage grown adults. The fact that Jaune's slim body could maybe fit anyway I firmly put to the side. The side and rear doors were all locked, but I could breach those if it came down to it.

My new glasses, however, allowed me to zoom in on the cargo area and spot something interesting—a freight elevator, currently in use as they were accepting a shipment of some sort. Men dressed in dark blue overalls and boots were unloading crates from the back of a diesel and moving them inside. There were more than a dozen outside, either standing guard or unloading freight. While this appeared to be routine for them, I could tell they weren't the kind of group that tolerated slacking off—every man there was on alert. Still, even as guarded as it was, the way was open and I was currently under Invisibility. It would have to do.

Firing my line launcher, I swung down and into the building through the service entrance, above the heads of the men working there, and stuck to the wall opposite the door as I reeled the line back in. Once I was sure no one had noticed anything like the wind or some sound of my passage, I moved into the service elevator and got settled in on the ceiling to wait, scanning the men around me while I
was at it. All of them were armed with either pistols or SMGs—which was about what I would expect from security guards at a government facility. Well, so long as no one noticed me, I'd be fine.

With nothing else to do until they finished the next load, I allowed my mind to turn back to the events of this morning. The news wasn't showing anything about Roman by the time I'd left, so I had to assume they were keeping it quiet or would release a statement later in the day. The girls hadn't noticed anything amiss and my modification of Miltia's memory of my leaving seemed to have taken with no side effects. Considering the fact that she was particularly eager and energetic the moment I 'suggested' the contents of the promise she had extracted from me before we left, I'd say she was fine. Neo, as it turned out, was more than okay with the idea of a 'banana split,' to the point I wanted to believe she may just have an anal and/or double penetration fetish. She hadn't asked the night before, but the moment the subject had come up, she had pretty much demanded it. I… was not going to complain. At all. It was even more amusing because, while she had apparently put out for Roman, he'd never really risen to her level of kink.

'Poor bastard didn't know what he was missing,' I mused, grinning at the memory of watching myself disappear into the ice cream themed shortstack from behind while she rode Miltia, who had been wearing one of her own phallic toys at the time.

I was brought out of my fond reminiscing by the guards' conversation. “That all of it?”

“Yeah, that's it,” another answered, moving over to the keypad beside the door and tapping something into his scroll. “Huh. That's weird.”

The first guard, who wore a hat where the others were all bare-headed and was likely their foreman—or at least the highest ranking mook present—moved up to the keypad himself. “What's up?”

“Well, the damn thing says we're about a hundred and fifty pounds over the documented weight.”

I blinked. Mental math told me Jaune's body weighed about 130 or so and my gear had to add at least 20 pounds... shit. Of course this thing would have a scale on it. Concentrating, I focused on pulling up elemental mana. 'Come on, gravity,' I thought as I felt my mana respond and I grew lighter.

_A skill has been created through a special action!_

**Manipulate Gravity : Level 1. Active. Manipulate Gravity allows the caster to manipulate his or her**
relative gravity at will. Effect: reduces or increases the caster's weight at will, allows the caster to focus gravity on other surfaces, objects, or other targets and either increase attraction towards or repel from those targets. Level Manipulate Gravity to reduce its mana cost and increase its range and power. Cost: 10MP/minute.

The skill description said a lot less than the information I suddenly had access to. People are innately aware of how gravity, acceleration, and so forth effect them—we just learn to tune it out, until it changes suddenly. I, on the other hand, was now suddenly aware of my own weight, the pull of gravity against my body, and how if I focused I could shift where that pull was coming from so long as I was close enough to something with enough mass—or how I could reduce my weight to a fraction of what it normally was. I was also aware of the people and objects around me, as they entered the sphere of my ability to manipulate gravity. In theory, so long as I paid attention to it, I couldn't really be snuck up on by anything with mass any more. Of course, there were other practical applications as well—such as how it would interact with my line launcher and wing suit, along with my other movement skills like Powered Leap…

Banging from the front of the elevator drew my attention back to the guards. “Damn thing's on the fritz, see? Now it reads as being fifty pounds off. Here, I'll sign off on it and we can go down and start unloading this crap. Log the fault with the building owner later.”

Breathing a silent sigh of relief, I watched six of the guards march in including the one with the hat. The doors closed and we went down three floors before they opened again. The men began moving about their duties quickly, one of them going to retrieve a fork truck to lift the pallet most of the materials were on. Waiting until they were clear of the doors, I dropped down and slipped out. Looking down, I found the floor to be covered in thick, painted stripes similar to certain military installations and the walls a shade of pea soup green that I was absolutely certain someone in HR had recommended after reading a 'study' that certain shades of colors influenced behavior. Nearby, a directory on the pea-soup wall told me what went where as far as the floor markings were concerned. There were three vaults on this level, along with a few restrooms and several offices for human security and storage rooms which were labeled as 'droid storage.'

Following the work crew got me into the first vault, where I quickly found a registry of everything stored there. That registry was a hard copy which was both good and bad—good in that I wouldn't have to try hacking into a foreign computer system and bad in that I could be seen perusing the thing unless I created an Instant Dungeon over the top of it. Good news, however, was that the guy in the hat went straight for the registry and began making new entries. There had to be another option, however, I realized—there was no way that a government building would keep all their records for what was stored here in one hand-written book. Looking around, I spotted a large filing cabinet that it took a moment to recognize as the same type used by libraries for their card catalogs, back before everything went computerized. Seeing as the card catalog was facing away from them, I moved around it and into the field of view of the camera my map had told me would be there.

The camera didn't really matter, however, as I created an Illusion Barrier over the area containing myself and the card catalog and began browsing. I wasn't entirely surprised that I didn't find what I
was looking for. What I did find that caught my interest, however, was a selection of old LP records from before the war—things that had been hidden away to be preserved and replaced with digital copies. Being pre-war and originals, they were more than likely very, very valuable. I just wanted them for my own personal collection. Making a note of their location, I destroyed the ID and made my way over to the shelf where they were stored before creating another ID, dropping the LPs into my inventory, and heading back to the group of guards once I'd destroyed the second Instant Dungeon.

I discovered that all of their deliveries for today were going to all three vaults on this floor, so all I had to do was sit around and wait for them to finish unloading a few packages before moving on to the next vault and then repeating the process. It was boring and seemed to take forever, but it was the safest route. Unfortunately, it was completely unproductive. I wasted two hours before I finally got into the final vault, only to discover that none of these vaults housed the plans for Beacon. It was frustrating, but I didn't have much in the way of options from this point on. I could try to sneak down through the elevator shaft or the ventilation shafts, but odds were very good I would trip some alarm. I had seen the emitters for the laser security grid myself coming in here, after all—highlighted by my new glasses and added to my map and minimap. I'd have to make it down the elevator shaft, into the hall, down the hall, and then into the vault without tripping lasers or motion sensors in the elevator shaft, the alarm that was sure to be on the elevator doors, the lasers, motion sensors, and whatever else in the hall, and then breach the vault door which would also be alarmed. No, there wasn't a chance in hell of me passing all that undetected. I had a better plan.

“Create ID,” I chanted, opening up an Instant Dungeon with a radius that I felt would encompass this room and the one above and below. “Plasma Blade.”

Light and noise filled the room and I lifted the renamed spinning lightning sword and shoved it into the floor, before dumping mana into it and coaxing it to elongate. The technique cost 100MP to cast and 100 MP/minute to keep it running, but in exchange it did 500% plus 10% per level of combined INT and STR damage—which came out to 6738 damage per second at my current stats, before applying Favored Enemy: Grimm or Sneak Attack. Then again, neither of those applied in this situation, being that I was ‘attacking’ an inanimate object. I pushed the sword to extend until I felt it breach the ceiling of the vault below, then turned a slow circle. As soon as the last of the circle beneath me was cut away, the plug of floor I was standing on fell down into the next room, bringing me with it. Alarms were blaring like mad, but I had made the Instant Dungeon too small to include the death bots. In other words, the alarm did not a damn thing at this point, since the place where those robots were stored was not included in the Illusion Barrier.

Digging through another card catalog, I failed to find what I was looking for once more. Reaching out and taking hold of the Illusion Barrier I had created, I dragged its center down to me, effectively moving the bubble through three dimensional space without changing its size. Still holding the Illusion Barrier, I moved to the vault door and shrank the barrier down to only a few feet to either side of me before calling up another Plasma Blade and cutting through the vault door.

A kick unseated the vault door and I moved out into the hall, making sure to pull the Illusion Barrier
in tight around me as I moved. Searching the next two vaults the same way turned up nothing, unfortunately. Going down a floor, however, I struck gold as I found the plans listed. Making my way over to their shelf, I snagged the metal and leather tube they were contained within and dropped it into my inventory. The tube itself had a leather strap, but I'd rather keep it in inventory where it'd be safe.

Having absolutely no plans to fight *murder death bots*, I worked my way back to the elevator and cut it open, then stuck to the wall and followed the shaft up to the top, where I cut open the ceiling and crawled out onto the roof. Rolling over onto my back, I dropped my Illusion Barrier and breathed a sigh of relief as the damage I'd done disappeared as the small pocket of space popped like a soap bubble. “Note to self, if we have to do this again, next time just skip the stealth game option and cut our way straight down,” I groaned quietly, dismissing several notices about how Create ID had leveled.

It was cheating, in the worst way possible here—then again, I was a mage and a rogue, and I had absolutely no compunctions about doing whatever it took to get me into and out of somewhere safely. If that meant going the cheapest route possible, then *so be it*. Considering the fact that I gained *three* points in WIS for that decision, I'd say my Semblance at least agreed that I'd made the *wise* choice. I was still worried about potential consequences of abusing IDs this way, for the same reason I had yet to simply rob a bank with one, but I'd judged the risk worth it this once. Rolling to my feet, I fired my line launcher and pulled myself off the Repository.

With the Repository successfully raided, I decided it was time to collect on Roman's liquid assets before his gang had a chance to get to them. Taking the excuse to familiarize myself with my new wing-suit and the modifications to my line launcher along with Gravity Manipulation, I swung, glided, leaped, and ran across town until I caught sight of a Bullhead heading in the direction of the Agricultural District. The airfield Roman owned was further out than the hub the local air transit used, but the Bullhead would get me close and was high enough that, once I got in the general vicinity, I could drop and glide the rest of the way there. ’*I wonder if this is how Batman feels on a day to day basis?*’ I mused, dropping off the Bullhead at what my map told me was the optimum point and gliding towards Roman's airfield. ’*Sneak in to places, beat people up, use cool toys, alternately run across roofs and glide around using his grappling gun and cape…’*

Dropping into a tumbling landing, I recovered back to my feet quickly and made my way towards the hangar where I knew the Duster was kept. My new glasses helpfully scanned the inside of the building and let me know no one was inside and I took a moment to cut the lock off the door with a Plasma Blade. Hitting the lights, I looked around and found several locked crates stacked at the back of the hangar. The Duster itself was equipped with two 'fuel pods' that turned out to be empty at the moment. I took the time to Claim the plane and moved on to opening up the crates. They were locked, obviously, and I didn't want to accidentally set their contents on fire with a Plasma Blade. I knew better than to try to use my real sword as a pry bar, so I shrugged and went about creating another elemental sword variant using wind—which did about three quarters of the damage as Plasma Blade, but was dead silent and invisible, with none of the telltale glow of my other magical attacks. Perfect for Iaido or sneak attacks, in other words.
“That is a lot of money,” I whistled, peering into the first crate. By volume, it had to be at least five times as much cash as Roman's personal emergency stash. Dropping it into my inventory a double arm-load at a time proved that true—the one box held 500kL by itself, neatly sorted and stacked in lots of 1000L. “Roman, what the hell were you doing sitting on this much money?” I wondered aloud, opening the next box and finding it to be filled to the brim with individual bricks of what looked like cocaine. “Really? What, were you planning to take your money and drugs somewhere tropical and blow it all snorting lines off of hookers?”

Having absolutely no use for the drugs, those crates got moved outside. In addition to drugs and money, however, were also crates of individually packaged and tagged things that turned out to be grimm parts—bone, blood, hair, feathers, stingers, claws, teeth, and so on. Observe told me they were all high-grade crafting and alchemy materials, so they were also thrown into my inventory. The final crates held enough guns and heavy weapons and the Dust rounds for those weapons to equip a small army—or a gang, rather. The Dust rounds I could use at some point and confiscating those would save me from having to buy them in the future. The guns I saw no point in destroying, so those wound up in inventory as well—maybe I could sell them for something later. I should probably just go ahead and admit it—most gamers are pack-rats and will throw pretty much anything into their inventories, and if there's no weight or space limit then we don't see a point in not picking up every shiny thing that catches our eye. I was no exception to magpie syndrome.

Having emptied the hangar, I checked the second hangar just to be thorough and found nothing of value save for a few tools. Leaving those there, I went outside to the refueling station and looked it over. The thing itself used some sort of Dust reservoir and the gauges for the tanks read over 70%. I didn't really need to know how it worked, just that it did, so I didn't bother trying to figure it out. Instead, I summoned first the Bullhead and then the Duster and topped off their tanks. Securing the fuel pump, I climbed into the Duster's cockpit and had a look around. It wasn't difficult to figure out, being a much simpler model of craft than the Bullhead—throttle, stick, foot pedals for flaps, wheel brakes, and things I was already familiar with after having eaten a manual on avionics. Well, I say simpler—the Bullhead was actually easier to fly by simple virtue of having a modern point-and-click interface in addition to regular controls.

The gauges had the Duster's top speed at a little over 150mph and a cruise speed of 135, whereas the Bullhead's top speed was about 130, with a cruise speed of 110. What made the Duster the better choice for most of Roman's operations, however, was her smaller radar profile and greater maneuverability. The Bullhead, being a VTOL craft, could do all sorts of things the Duster could not—however, at speed, the Duster could pull rolls, turns, and loops that would have killed the Bullhead's crew and passengers. I recalled the old Air Force parlance was, “She'll turn inside a virgin swallow.” That would make out-maneuvering airborne grimm easier. Now, if only it had guns…

Firing up the Duster, I taxied off the runway and went about putting her through her paces, climbing hard and fast before tilting back over and sending her into a spin towards the ground, then pulling up into a series of loops. Leveling off, I went through a right and left aileron roll, followed by a couple of barrel rolls—since knowing the difference and being able to do it can save your life. I didn't spend long in the air, however, since I didn't want to attract attention—or worse, get spotted if Roman's goons decided to come check out the airfield while I was playing around. Reigning in my fun for the
time being, I brought the Duster in for a smooth landing and topped off the tank again before dismissing the summon.

To make sure Roman's leaving would have some evidence of a third party being involved, I dug through my skills menu and renamed 'Spinning Wind Sword' to simply Wind Blade before calling one up and setting about carving a calling card into the hangar doors—a simple side-on view of a fox head, teeth bared, and ears back. I made a mental note to make some stencils and get some spray paint later. Having that symbol turn up anywhere Cinder wanted to cause problems and I stopped her would drive her to distraction and set her to wasting time chasing a ghost. With Roman, however, I wanted it to look like my second alter-ego hitting his operation and causing him to screw up with Cinder had driven him out for greener pastures. With that done, I dragged the crate of drugs out away from the hangar and fuel pump. I moved well away and upwind of the crate of drugs before throwing a Fireball at it and setting it alight, then turned and ran in the direction of the Industrial District's public air traffic hub to catch a lift.

Not only do movies, television, books, and video games absolutely fail to mention things like how boring stakeouts are, or how the debonair spy occasionally needs to take a piss in between action scenes—except when they're lampshading that fact—they also fail to talk much about down time. Comic books occasionally throw in a scene of Spider-man or someone doing their laundry for laughs, and we kind of just assume Alfred sprays down the bat suit with a pressure washer from time to time, but you never really see someone sit down and waste something like two and a half hours making sure their costume is clean and doesn't smell like smoke. Because things like that tend to give away the game, if someone paying attention catches wind of it. Honestly, it was a miracle Neo hadn't noticed. Then again, maybe she had and had simply decided not to say anything.

Mostly, they gloss over this fact because it's boring—and I couldn't blame them, seeing as I was living it. The twins were out by the time I'd gotten back, making the rounds for Hei—and subsequently, me as well—to gather information on last night's Signal fire. The fire in question was, by now, all over the news—along with the arrest of one of Hei's own men. Hei himself was doing damage control, according to texts from the twins, and trying to figure out what happened. His own men were pointing the finger at a third party—me—and according to the girls, the police were quietly circulating news that my White Fox persona was wanted for questioning, though thankfully not by that nom de guerre. If they were looking for 'the White Fox' specifically, that would mean Ozpin had told someone, since he and Glynda were the only ones who knew that name. I'm sure the police or the media would put it together based on a description given by the mook that had been caught, however—or once someone found my little calling card.

My scroll buzzed and I pulled it out, finding a text message from Neopolitan waiting on me. *Today sucks ass. Can I just come back to your place and demand a do-over?*

*A quest has been updated!*
Having sampled her before, you've decided you enjoy Neopolitan too much to simply let her go. Finish the job you started by 'removing' her boss and sway Neo over to your side, for good.

Success: EXP to be determined, increased closeness with Neo, +1 love interest. Failure: decreased closeness with Neo, death*. *Depending upon how badly it goes.

I snorted, idly changing the telescreen to another news station as I accepted the quest. An image of a familiar man with red hair and a bowler hat greeted me on the new station, along with video taken at an airport in Vacuo. I un-muted the telescreen and turned the volume up a bit. “…citizen of Vale, Roman Torchwick, was apprehended this morning aboard a flight bound to Vacuo from Vale by police, who were alerted by officers in Vale after review of x-ray footage of his luggage showed some anomalies. Mr. Torchwick is being held for questioning…”

Muting the telescreen again, I sent Neo a reply. 'Sure, that's fine. What's wrong?'

Not a full minute later, I received a reply. 'My boss decided today would be a good day to quit.'

Smirking, I sent, 'Isn't your boss named 'Roman'?'

By the speed of her replies, Neo had to be pretty anxious at the moment. 'Yeah… why?'

Holding up my scroll, I took a picture of the telescreen, where Roman's face, the man being lead away in cuffs, and the pertinent information were all displayed. I attached the photo to a text and sent, 'Because the news says some guy named 'Roman' was arrested earlier today in Vacuo on a flight out of Vale.'

'Fuck. Fuck. Fuckfuckfuckfuckfuckfuck. Mother fucking cocksucker! I'll kill him!!! I will fly to Vacuo and bail him out, just so I can dangle him out the side of a Bullhead.'

I laughed. I should probably feel bad, but I didn't. It looked like Neo was livid at the moment. Now, I just had to play this right… 'Neo, calm down and come over before you get stabby with some poor random pedestrian.'
Standing, I put away my scroll and went to check the laundry. What could be run through the washer and drier was done, while the armor pieces which I'd scrubbed down by hand and sprayed with a bottle of the local equivalent of Febreeze to help with the smell were hanging up in the bathroom nearest the laundry room with the window open to air out a bit before tonight. Taking the clothes out, I set about hanging them up to let them air out as well since I wanted to try and remove artificial scents—I'd even gone out of the way to buy scentless detergent for that set. I didn't want to run the chance of my laundry detergent giving me away to some Faunus with a good nose. I had pointedly ignored my Semblance telling me I'd created a new skill, Clothes Laundering, as yet another example of tasteless humor. Maybe I shouldn't, though—it may come in handy some day in the far future, if I ever have to infiltrate somewhere as a domestic servant. I chuckled, dismissing the idea as just this side of silly. “Nah.”

Moving into the kitchen, I set about preparing lunch. I had no idea what Neo liked, but I kind of doubted she was picky. To be safe, I went with stir fried chicken, orange bell pepper, rice, and a few other things—along with a sweet, spicy sauce the girls had picked out that reminded me of a sweet chili sauce. I was halfway into cooking it when there came a knock at my front door. Turning the heat down I went to open the door, where I found Neo wearing a similar outfit to last night—her hair the same color and eyes currently vanilla and strawberry. Looking up, she met my eyes and blinked in confusion, before the shape of my face registered and her eyes narrowed. Grabbing the front of my shirt, she pushed me inside and kicked the door closed. “You know,” she began in a low, dangerous tone, “It only now occurs to me that I never actually got your name last night. I wasn't quite drunk enough to get those details wrong.”

She was right, of course. I had gone to the door as Jaune as opposed to my Shiro disguise. It was a calculated risk, but allowing her in on one or two of my secrets would go a long way towards gaining her trust—especially with her 'boss' having just abandoned her . “You're not wrong,” I admitted, not doing anything to break her grip on my shirt— it would show I trusted her, at least . “I have a job that requires a different sort of uniform. I was actually ’in uniform' when I was at The Club last night. I'd just come off a job and thought I might be getting another some time soon.”

She blew out an annoyed breath in a 'humph,' releasing my shirt and moving further into the apartment. Taking that as a good sign, I moved back into the kitchen, subsequently causing her to follow. “You still haven't told me your name.”

“It's Jaune,” I answered, stirring what was in the pan to make sure it didn't stick. “Jaune Arc.”

Studying me critically as she took a seat at the bar surrounding the island the stove was built into, she
pointed out, “I've heard of the Arcs. You look a lot younger than I thought.”

“I'm seventeen,” I answered her unspoken question. “I'm actually going to be going to Beacon at the end of the month.”

“Oh huh,” she hummed, leaning her head on her hand and eying me over the stove. “Anything else you'd like to tell me, Jaune Arc?”

I shrugged, focusing on the food in front of me in an effort to appear reticent. “Well, up until a few days ago I was kind of a weakling, apparently. I woke up a couple of days ago in the hospital with no memory of who I was or anything else, but I'd activated my Aura and my Semblance, so I'd call it an even trade. My memory's still spotty in places—bad things, like what I told you last night, are easier to remember than the good, like time spent growing up with my family. I've been told that makes no sense, and I agree. And yet…”

“And you're still going to go to Beacon like that?” she asked, sounding incredulous. When I nodded, she shook her head. “You are an idiot, in addition to being an ass.”

Chuckling, I turned off the stove and began dishing out two bowls. “Maybe,” I admitted. “My sister seems to think getting out and doing Jaune-things like going to Beacon will help jog my memory. Sorry if I'm kind of a letdown, what with not being a total badass and all. But at least I can still cook. You hungry?”

Neo's stomach growling was answer enough as the girl blushed, nodding. “No one's ever really cooked for me,” she admitted quietly as I moved around the island and put her bowl down along with my own, before getting a couple of bottles of tea out of the refrigerator.

“No?” I asked, sounding skeptical. Internally, however, I was grinning ear to ear. Of course Roman wouldn't have tried basic niceties with one of his 'underlings.' “Your boyfriend didn't…”

The ice cream themed girl burst out laughing. “Roman was not my boyfriend. 'Boyfriend' implies a relationship beyond sex. No, I think Roman was honestly incapable of loving anyone other than himself.” Sighing, she quietly added, “Otherwise, he wouldn't have just left me here.”

“It it that bad?” I asked, digging into my stir-fry and cracking open my tea.
Following my example, Neo began eating. The girl's eyes popped open and shifted colors as she slowly chewed, humming a low sound of pleasure in the back of her throat. “This is really good,” she admitted, then continued with, “And yeah, it's that bad. Roman took the money and ran, and now his crazy-dangerous new boss is calling the office and hounding me about some job Roman’s hired lackeys failed to deliver on. I get to go meet the bitch tonight. Maybe, if I'm lucky, I won't wind up with third degree burns.”

Shooting her a confused look, I asked, “What was it you said you did again?”

Neo’s eyes tracked to the side, locking with mine. “I didn't. What was it you said you did?”

Holding up a hand in a warding gesture, I shot her a grin. “Easy there, kitten—put the claws away. I'm pretty sure we're in the same line of work. I'll show you mine if you show me yours?”

I had timed it perfectly, as she choked on her tea, bringing up a hand to her nose as her eyes began watering. “Ass! You did that on purpose,” she accused and I nodded shamelessly. “Besides, I think we're well past that stage by now, don't you?”

“True,” I admitted, drawing the word out. “Show and tell was nice last night... and this morning.” Neopolitan rolled her eyes, but her blush and my Semblance gave her away. “I'm a runner for the black market—or as one of my acquaintances called me, a 'glorified delivery boy.' Coincidentally, I suppose now I'm also a part-time thief for her, too.”

A smirk stretched across her lips as Neo asked, “Have you been a bad boy, Jaune Arc?”

“She's a girl, not a dog,” I corrected. “Kitten, you have no idea,” I chuckled. Hopefully, she never would, either—that would be bad. Could have been worse, though—I could have killed Roman outright. I was kind of glad I hadn't, now—his blood wouldn't be on my hands and I wouldn't have to deal with that guilt while pursuing Neo.

Shooting me a curious look, she asked, “'Kitten?' That is totally not my nickname.”

“You're tiny, adorable, and you've got claws,” I pointed out, dodging a playful swat from the girl in question. “Unless you've got another suggestion? Would you prefer we go back to 'Lassie'?”

Shooting me a glare, she huffed out a breath in mock irritation. “You're lucky you're a good lay. And
a good cook. …And there's twins.”

“Yeah, that's kind of awesome,” I laughed, reaching out and mussing her hair. “So, tell me, what sort of bad things are you into, kitten?”

Neo hissed quietly and I smirked. Sticking her tongue out, she went back to her bowl of stir-fry. After another few bites, she finally answered, “Roman runs… ran a gang. I was his second in command, sort of. I suppose I run things now— assuming there's anything left to run. Half the men deserted, the other half were fighting over who got to take over when I left. Once they find out he's been arrested for smuggling drugs into another country, well… Odds are good one of three things will happen. Either the gang will tear itself apart with infighting, or someone else will move in and take over, or… or I'll get things under control. Either way, he's done and I have to deal with the fallout from Roman's fuckup.”

“When does this boss of his want you there?” I asked, wondering at the best way to get us both there at the same time.

Rolling her eyes, Neo pulled out her scroll and checked before answering, “Eight.”

Finishing my tea, I hummed in thought before taking out my own scroll and sending Cinder a text message letting her know I'd be by tonight, then sent the twins a message letting them know where I'd be. “Well, I can drop off what I picked up for my sort-of second employer around then. I can give you a lift.”

“You have a car?” Neo asked, clearly curious.

I grinned, shaking my head. “More fun than a car. Though, I probably need to get one at some point… maybe a motorcycle, too.” I trailed off, a mental image of a yellow motorcycle and its owner coming to mind. If things went to schedule, Yang should show up at The Club some time later this month. Blake should, theoretically, also do her train job near the end of the month… They were things to look out for, at any rate. Bringing myself back to the present, I took our bowls up and put them in the sink to wash later. “In the meantime, how about I help you blow off some steam?”

“Oh?” the ice cream themed girl asked, a smirk crossing her lips. “Have anything in mind?”

In lieu of a verbal answer I moved around the bar, took her hips in my hands, and lifted her off her chair. Her legs went around my waist and arms around my neck by reflex as I walked us towards the
couch. “I can think of a few things,” I returned her smirk before our lips met. Yeah, I was going to the special hell for this one, too. Still, *worth it*.

I sat down, leaving Neo astride my lap, and let my hands roam, coaxing a soft moan from the normally quiet girl— I knew she was just getting started, as she tended to get *loud* when she got excited. After only a few minutes of petting, however, she captured my hands by locking her fingers with my own. Pulling back from our kiss, she dropped her head into the crook between my neck and shoulder. “What is it you're offering, here?” she asked, hesitantly.

Thinking it over, I asked, “What do you *want*?”

She shifted slightly, pulling back and looking me in the eye. “I don't want to be alone,” she answered honestly, and I felt a twinge of guilty conscience as she mirrored my own feelings. “I want a friend, a confidante, someone… someone to *love* who will love me back. I want a *partner*.”

“Well,” I began, thinking of how to word what I wanted to say and pulling up charisma to back it up. “I can give you the first three and that last one, and I'm willing to work on the other part if you are.” She nodded slowly, opening her mouth to agree before I brought up one set of our joined hands and put a finger to her lips. “It's the same deal I have with the twins. I don't exactly know how this whole 'group' thing works, but I'm pretty sure it starts with everyone being honest with each other about it. Are you going to be okay with that?”

With a quiet laugh, Neo nodded. “Yeah, I think I can deal with the twins. There anyone else I should know about in the woodwork?”

I winced, nodding. “Yep. One more,” I admitted. “I think I'd rather let the twins explain that one, though.”

Humming, the girl shrugged. “Is she hot?”

“*Is that* all you care about?” I asked, laughing. “*Yes* she's hot. *No*, I'm not playing that game where somebody plays favorites. The less hurt feelers we have over stupid shit like that, the better.”

“I wasn't going to ask you to,” Neo denied, rolling her eyes. “Is there anything you want out of this?”
Nodding, I answered as I had with the twins. “All of the above, plus loyalty. If we do this, I need to have yours. All of it. If Roman comes back, I need to know you'll have my back, not go running back with a few platitudes and apologies.”

“Give me what I want and I can agree to that, so long as I have yours. Roman can fuck off for all I care,” Neo agreed quickly, clearly liking the idea of someone who wouldn't betray or abandon her.

Pulling her back to me, I kissed her lips quickly before adding, “I have secrets.”

She returned the kiss with one of her own. “So do I. Is it okay if they stay that way?”

“So long as you're okay with mine staying secret,” I agreed and she nodded against my lips.

She pulled back enough to grab her blouse and pull it over her head. “Shall we seal the deal?” she asked, an impish smile playing across her lips as she reached back and unhooked her bra and dropped it on the floor before unzipping her pants.

I was momentarily captivated by the view, before an idea occurred and a smirk crossed my lips unbidden. Taking her hips, I pulled her off of me and planted her on the couch. “Stay there. I'll be right back.”

Neo shot me a mock-annoyed glare. “This had better be good…”

Rolling my eyes, I made my way back into the kitchen. “Have I disappointed yet?” I asked, shooting her an amused look over my shoulder.

“Not yet, but you're getting real close if you don't get back here soon,” she pouted.

“O ye of little faith.” Opening the refrigerator, I dug out what I'd come for before hiding it out of the girl's view as I walked back. I grinned as she tried to peer around me and see what I was carrying. Dropping back onto the couch, I held out my prize. “How about this?”

Neo's eyes tracked to the light brown bottle in my hand and began color cycling. “You have caramel syrup.”
“Yes, yes I do,” I agreed. “You like?”

Instead of answering, she shifted her mismatched, slowly cycling eyes up to meet my own blue. “You have caramel syrup. Does this mean you have ice cream?”

There was a hopeful, almost desperate tone in her voice—like an addict going through withdrawal suddenly presented with a fix. Placing the bottle on the table, I stood and made my way back into the kitchen. “The twins have a sweet tooth,” I confessed, moving to a cabinet and taking out a large bowl, then digging out a spoon. How they kept their tiny figures with the amount of sugar they consumed on a daily basis was beyond me—I blamed Aura. “My dear Neo, I do not simply have ice cream. I have six different kinds of ice cream.” Casting a glance towards the couch, I saw the ice cream themed girl's eyes had gone slightly glazed. Smirking, I began listing them off. “Mint chocolate chip, which I refuse to touch because it is an unholy abomination from the creamery of hell itself. Cookie dough, though the twins would sooner gnaw my arm off for trying to get into it than share… Rocky road, which has remained untouched as of yet. Plain old vanilla, for me. And, of course…”

I stopped, having scooped a large serving from the pint in question before replacing it in the freezer. Moving back to the couch, I offered the girl the spoon, then sat down and held the bowl out. “Neapolitan.”

Reaching out to take the bowl from my hands, Neo sent me a betrayed look the moment I pulled it back. “Bu-but why…? Please don't tease me like this. That's cruel and unusual punishment!”

“Use your spoon, dear,” I countered, shooting her a patronizing look that earned a raspberry in response.

Darting the spoon out, the ice cream addict snagged a mixed spoonful off the top, which quickly disappeared past her lips with a groan that sounded almost orgasmic. “Mmm…”

“Now, where were we?” I murmured, seemingly thoughtful as I eyed the distracted and delightfully topless girl—once more reminded that while she may be tiny, Neo's proportions were amazing. I put the bowl down long enough to reach over and pull her into my lap, eliciting a startled 'Eep!' before taking the bowl up again in my left hand. Once she was settled and had resumed getting her fix, I waited for the perfect moment to strike. Her spoon went back to the bowl, drew another morsel of frozen deliciousness, and brought it to her lips. As soon as she had it in her mouth, yet another little sigh of pleasure escaping her as she did, I slipped my hand past her unzipped fly and quickly beneath her pink panties. Neo had barely a moment to register the sensation before my seeking fingers found their target.
“Ah!” Squirming in my lap, she panted as I began demonstrating how a high DEX mod applied in real life, my fingers parting her warm lips, already moist with arousal, and circling her clit. “That… that is not fair,” she whimpered.

“What's that, kitten? You'd like me to stop?” I teased, pausing for a moment to illustrate my point. Neo shook her head hard and fast enough to smack me in the face with her hair. “Well? I'm waiting.”

“Waiting for…?” she wondered for a moment, before catching on. The spoon made another return trip between the bowl and her lips and I resumed my ministrations, fingers slowly circling the bundle of nerves, broken by the occasional stroke across it. “I-ah! I could… I could get used to this.”

Humming thoughtfully, I gestured with the bowl. “Hold this, would you?” Quick to comply lest I stop, she took the bowl up, leaving my other hand free. I brought it up and pushed her hair out of the way, exposing the right side of her face and neck. Leaning a bit closer, I began working over her neck and ear with my lips, teeth, and tongue. My free hand, meanwhile, went back around her and found one of the now-erect buds of her nipples and began alternately gently pulling, pinching, and rolling it between my fingers.

“Cold!” she hissed, drawing a quiet laugh from me as I sought out my other target. A sharp intake of breath cued me in and I repeated the light bite I'd made against the side of her neck, behind her ear, getting similar results. Erogenous zones vary from woman to woman for some things and it's occasionally hit and miss… but when they hit, they tend to hit big. Between personal experience and my utterly unfair stats, I'd gotten very good at finding them on my various partners on Remnant. The thing about them is that you don't have to find them all, just a few good ones. After that, things start getting fun…

The door to the apartment opened at the same time Neo began to shudder and mewl around a spoonful of her namesake in my lap, two of my fingers pumping slowly in and out of her tight sheath. The twins stood in the doorway, taking the sight in for a moment before moving inside and closing the door. “Miltia,” Melanie began, an annoyed tone creeping into her voice, “It seems as though we've been left out. Neglected, even.”

Miltia's eyes darted between the caramel syrup on the table, Neo, her bowl of ice cream, and finally locked onto my own eyes. “And food play, at that. What ever shall we do, dear sister?”

Rolling my eyes, I shot the twins an amused look. “Like we'd leave you two out intentionally. No, Neo here decided she wanted in and we were sealing the deal. You are more than welcome to join in. Unless, of course, you'd like to exercise those veto rights?”
The twins shared a brief look before locking the door and making for the couch, doffing clothes along the way, their approval pretty much implicit at that point. I caught Miltia's eyes again and released the nipple I'd been teasing to stick my finger in Neo's now partly melted bowl of her namesake. “Hey! Don't waste it!” the addict whined.

That whine became a sharp intake of breath a moment later as I smeared what I'd taken on the nipple I'd just released. “Oops,” I deadpanned, shooting Miltia a smirk.

Catching on, the twin dove for the couch and got comfortable before going to work cleaning up the mess I'd made with her mouth, drawing a quiet whimper from Neo. Melanie, on the other hand, confiscated the bottle of caramel syrup and made her way into the kitchen. I heard her take a bowl out of the cabinet, and then the microwave running for a few seconds. She came back a moment later with a bowl of warm caramel. Testing its temperature with a finger and apparently finding it satisfactory, she licked the finger clean before turning a wicked grin on the thoroughly trapped Neopolitan. “You know,” she began, sitting on my right, opposite her sister. “I've always preferred eating my ice cream with some kind of syrup on top… I've always wondered how it would taste on neopolitan. Let's find out.”

Warm caramel dripped from the bowl in Melanie's hand and onto the girl in my lap. On my other side, Miltia claimed the bowl of ice cream and mirrored her sister's actions. Neo let out a pitiful whimper that sounded vaguely like, “Wasting my ice cream.” A pair of hot mouths on her flesh seemed to change her mind, however, as she followed it with, “Totally worth it though.”

The twins' hands were not idle, as they made short work of getting Neo's pants the rest of the way open and, seeing what they were going for, I took Neo's hips in both hands and lifted her enough for the twins to pull off her pants and the panties under them. “You too,” Miltia murmured, meeting my eyes and grinning before reaching around and under Neo and undoing my own pants. It took a bit of juggling, but soon I was nude from the waist down with Neo's tiny form equally exposed on my lap.

“Hold her and lean back a bit,” Melanie directed and took the ice cream themed girl's hands and I shifted enough to recline some while the twins lifted her a bit and repositioned us, before bringing her down on my shaft and drawing a long moan from her strawberry lips as she was slowly impaled. Miltia spread Neo's legs and the bowl of caramel made a return as Melanie allowed some to drip from the bowl and onto Neo's bare lips, drawing a whimper of anticipation from her as she gazed down on the twin moving in towards her lap with mismatched eyes.

“Oh, damn,” Neo whimpered as Melanie's tongue teased her lips and occasionally the underside of my cock buried between them, lapping up a bit of warm caramel.
The twin in question looked up and met Neo's eyes a moment, a wicked grin stretching across her lips before Melanie dove in and started eating her with abandon. Miltia, not to be left out, took Neo's hips and guided her into a slow back and forth rhythm on my shaft, enough to cause pleasant friction for the both of us but not enough to disturb her sister's snack. When Neo found her own rhythm, Miltia released her and molded herself against my side, her lips meeting my own as I released one of Neo's hands to pull her closer and begin stroking her wet slit. Of course, Neo's free hand immediately went to Melanie's head, fisting into the hair at the back of her head and pulling her in harder.

Melanie stopped long enough to shoot Miltia and I an annoyed look, eyes shifting between us and the stray hand twice before we got the idea. While I could attest that Melanie enjoyed having her hair pulled—all of the girls did, really—that wasn't what the game was about this time. Miltia took Neo's hand and quickly removed it from her sister's hair, instead bringing it up and latching onto the ice cream themed girl's wrist in what I recognized as a vampire bite where I was from, though I had no idea what it was called on Remnant and didn't particularly care at the moment.

It wasn't long after that, Neo started squirming in my lap and attempting to free her hands as her breathing picked up its pace and I felt her muscles involuntarily clenching around me. “Please! Please let me...” she begged as Melanie held her thighs in place where they'd tried to clamp around her head and redoubled her efforts. Lewd slurping sounds joined Neo's moans and whimpers. Beside me, watching her sister eat out the ice cream themed girl while said girl rode my cock, I could tell Miltia was getting close herself as I felt her tightening on my fingers.

It seemed Neo could take no more, however, as she tipped over the precipice Melanie and I had brought her to—her whimper quickly transitioning into something just short of a scream. Melanie slowed and finally stopped her ministrations, parting from Neo's slit with one last long lick. Her gaze shifted over to her sister, where Miltia looked to be on the verge of coming herself, before turning to the table where the two bowls sat discarded. Taking Neo's hands from us, she pulled the wobbly girl up and off me before pushing her to her knees in front of the couch. Taking up the bowl of Neo's namesake, she sat in front of the ice cream fiend and spread her legs. Neo was still momentarily dazed, but Melanie got her attention quickly enough, waving the bowl of partially melted ice cream under her nose. “Ah?” Neo mouthed eyes tracking the bowl as Melanie brought it to her lap. Dipping a finger in, she brought the digit out covered in neopolitan, smirking as Neo's eyes tracked the mess on her finger. The finger in question drifted down before smearing a swath of ice cream on Neo's inner thigh. Neo's eyes went wide as she lunged in. “Don't waste it!”

Meanwhile, I had pulled Miltia to her feet, leading her around to the side of the couch before pushing her over the arm of the piece of furniture, putting her pert ass and nether lips on full display. “Tired of teasing?” I asked her, doing just that as I played with her slit, running the tip of my cock slowly up and down between her lips.

“Yes,” she groaned, trying and failing to push her ass back enough to force me to penetrate her—the angle and my hand on her back wouldn't allow it, even if I hadn't been expecting it and pulled my hips back enough to prevent it.
Bringing my open palm down in a slap on her ass cheek, I grinned as she squeaked, jerking at the sharp contact. “Tell me what you want.”

Something I had learned quickly was that Miltia liked to get mouthy from time to time—she loved dirty talk, either doing it herself or having it directed at her. Being ordered to do it—to describe, in detail, what she wanted—was even more of a turn-on for the submissive girl. She also enjoyed role-play, especially of the master/slave variety—and, while I may have started that accidentally, she had taken off running with it. She had resisted the urge when we had been tending to Neo, but now… “Fuck me,” she whispered.

That earned her another slap on the ass—which is why she had done it, specifically to bait me into spanking her. “I'm sorry, what was that?”

“Please,” she began, looking over her shoulder meeting my eyes. When she said nothing more, I gave her a look that clearly told her I was losing patience and began raising my hand for another swat. She blushed a deep red and turned away as the words came gushing from her mouth. “Please, master, please fuck your slave's cunt! Split me open with your thick cock and fuck me as hard as you like. Spank my ass if it pleases you, master. Use my pussy as your personal fuck-hole and fill my womb with your come.”

And on that note, I equipped a condom from inventory while Neo was otherwise too distracted to notice. Once it was in place, I lined up and pushed into Miltia's tight, slick heat. Grabbing the hair at the back of her head, I pulled her head back—incidentally forcing her to watch Neo eating and fingering her sister—and gave her what she wanted. I brought my hips forward and slammed into her hard before pulling back and doing it again, working into a steady rhythm of hard thrusts that set her small tits to bouncing and gave off a nice flesh-on-flesh slap every time I slammed home, guaranteeing her ass would be red after this—and I swore I could feel the head of my dick hitting her cervix every time she pushed back to meet my thrusts.

Watching me pound her sister, Melanie spared a moment to rearrange herself and Neo, so that she could lay out on the couch—which put her almost directly under Miltia. Seeing what she wanted, I released my grip on her twin's hair and pushed her down. Miltia was surprised to find a pair of lips meeting her own in an upside down kiss, but she was more surprised when a pair of familiar hands came up to fondle her swaying breasts, experienced fingers capturing her nipples in order to pull, roll, and gently twist them while Neo continued eating her namesake off of Melanie's snatch. Miltia began to tense under our combined efforts and eventually broke her sister's lip lock. “I'm going to come! Come with me—come inside me, master,” she pleaded.

Her sheath clamped down like a vice and I buried myself inside her as her cunt milked my cock, my eyes nearly rolling up in the back of my head momentarily as I groaned in release. A moment later,
she collapsed in a boneless heap atop her twin, spent for the moment. Slowly easing out of her drew a mutual sigh from us both and I disposed of the spent condom. I was far from spent, however—Marital Arts and a high stamina meant I could immediately get to work on Melanie or Neo. Since I had started with Neo, I decided to tackle Melanie first. Reequipping a condom, I tapped Neo's shoulder and eased her out from between Melanie's legs after letting her get the last of the ice cream. Shifting to look down and see what had stopped Neo's snack from under her sister, Melanie met my eyes for a moment before her eyes drifted to where I was already positioning my cock. Throwing me a grin, she went back to fondling/cuddling her twin, who was still shaking in post-coital aftershocks.

Lifting Melanie's legs and squeezing them together, I turned her onto her side so she lay with her legs dangling off the couch before entering her, the position doing nice things for the both of us as it left her exposed to my fingers and allowed me to get deeper penetration—and considering the twins were small and, while not hung like a horse, Jaune's body had a good above-average length of eight inches I was damn near bottoming out at this point and stretching her lips tight around the girth of my cock. It had happened more than once the night before with Neo, as she was even smaller than the twins, but she hadn't complained at all.

A sudden gasp from Miltia drew my attention to the submissive twin, who was writhing in her sister's arms. Looking down, I found a head of chocolate, strawberry, and vanilla hair buried between her legs. Seeing Melanie was distracted by her sister's breathy whimpering, I decided to bring her attention back to me. Reaching down, I cupped her throat and picked up the force of my thrusts to what I'd used on Miltia. There's a trick to the whole choking thing I'd learned from one of those exes whose name I didn't care to remember at the moment—if ever. Putting most of the pressure on a woman's sternum just below the throat will let you find that nice, happy medium of fulfilling someone's strangulation fetish without any actual danger of strangulating them. And you would be surprised just how many of them enjoy a little rough treatment in that way—though most, at least those from Earth, won't admit it outright. And while I couldn't say she had a strangulating fetish, Melanie did enjoy the occasional rough treatment.

Melanie reacted as I'd hoped, tightening around me and growing even wetter, the sound of my hips slamming into hers accompanied by a wet undertone of over-lubrication. My thoughts turned idly to the fact that the couch was leather and would be a bitch to clean, but I couldn't bring myself to care considering the circumstances. Dismissing the thought, I released her long enough to take one of Miltia's hands that had been otherwise occupied holding onto her sister for dear life in between another orgasm. The submissive met my eyes for a moment and a moved her hand down over her sister's thigh to play with Melanie's clit. Getting the idea, Miltia went to work, eliciting a whimper from her twin and I resumed my hold on Melanie's throat with one hand while fisting her hair with the other hand. Having already come to orgasm at least once from Neo's mouth and tongue, it was not long at all before Melanie was screaming my name and clutching her sister for dear life, mirroring Miltia's earlier response to Neo's handiwork. At the same time, Miltia ceased her work with her hands and mirrored her sister, Neo's name slipping past her lips in a quiet cry as the shorter girl got her off again.

Easing Melanie down slowly, I waited a moment for the girls to catch their breath before smirking as an idea occurred. I helped Neo back to her feet and together, we got the twins arranged side by side
on the couch, with a bit of space between them—a space which I quickly filled by pushing Neo
down onto her back on the leather of the couch. The twins latched on to either side of the shorter girl
immediately, mouths going to work on her lips, ears, neck, and breasts as I hefted Neo's short legs up
and draped them to either side of my head as I entered her.

Neo tried to return the twins' affection, but apparently the girls had decided to make a game of seeing
who could distract her the most. Melanie found the spot on Neo's neck I'd been playing with earlier,
drawing a quiet sound from the ice cream themed girl and pulling her attention that direction, where
their lips met in a kiss. On the other side, Miltia shifted up a bit and sucked Neo's ear lobe between
her lips, teeth gently coming down on it, and followed it by running her tongue along the shell of the
other girl's ear. Neo turned her head and met the other twin in another kiss. I watched her bounce
back and forth between the twins as they teased her, taking my time with a stroke that was about half
as forceful or fast as what I'd used on the twins, but which seemed to be driving the girl under me
mad in between the twins.

The twins shared a look across the writhing girl beneath them before a pair of hands slipped down
Neo's thighs. Melanie's hand went down to play with Neo's clit while Miltia's joined it for a moment,
collecting moisture from where my cock split Neo's lips, before running down under the ice cream
themed girl. A moment later, Neo's eyes flew open and she jerked upward, immediately going tighter
around my cock—a feat in and of itself, considering she was even tighter than the twins to begin
with. “Oh, fuck!” she breathed. “Keep doing that!”

The twins shared a smirk before they both moved down and a pair of hot mouths began working
over Neo's breasts before latching onto her nipples. Neo's hands went to the back of the twins' heads,
grabbing two fistfuls of hair and pulling at them desperately, already beginning to shake in the first
tremors of orgasm. “Gonna come! Harder! Fuck me harder!”

I obliged, grabbing her hips and giving her the same treatment I had the twins, feeling my cock
bottom out inside her on every thrust. I felt something press against the bottom of my cock at the
same time Neo's mouth opened in a silent scream, and I realized Miltia had inserted a second finger
and pressed them both up, to the point where she was essentially stroking the bottom of my cock
through Neo. The girl under me clamped down damn near hard enough to push me out, eyes rolling
up in the back of her head as her back lifted off the couch. The twins only intensified their assault,
Melanie pinching Neo's clit and Miltia shifting from slowly stroking her fingers inside Neo's ass to
pumping in and out in a rhythm to match my own thrusts—and if I wasn't mistaken, both of the twins
had chosen that moment to bite down on the nipples in their mouths. Neo gave one last whimper and
went limp.

Slowing my pace to a stop, I prodded the girl a moment before hitting her with a quick Observe and
promptly snorting at the results. “Congratulations, girls. We fucked her unconscious.”

“Oops,” the twins synced, sharing a sheepish look. Their eyes wandered to where I was extricating
myself from the unconscious Neo before sharing another look. “You didn't finish, did you?” Melanie asked, eying my erection.

“Nope,” I admitted. Game mechanics backing me up or no, biology still had a major say in how my body responded to things and behaved. For instance, like any other man, after the first orgasm it always takes longer to hit the ones following it—the only real difference was that my Semblance negated the refractory and recovery period the vast majority of men went through. Back on Earth, it took between two and five minutes before I would have been ready again, and that was with coaxing on the part of whatever woman I was with. Now? I could keep going pretty much indefinitely. And while that was great for dealing with multiple women, I was still subject to certain facts of biology—blue balls, for one. For another, there actually is such a thing as too much sex. I hadn't hit the limit yet, but I knew it was possible.

Sharing a look between themselves, the twins rolled off the couch and took me by the hands, maneuvering us to they could both kneel in front of me. The condom was quickly yanked off and tossed at the nearby trash basket as the pair went to work, alternately kissing, licking, and sucking on my cock. I'd yet to get the twin-blowjob treatment, and I have to say, it lived up to everything I'd thought it would. I was surprised when, as I was nearing completion, Neo groaned and sat up, took in the scene, and joined the twins. Strawberry lips wrapped around the head of my cock before going down to the point that no more would fit in her mouth. Looking up, mint green eyes met my sky blue and she winked, before relaxing her throat and taking the rest of my length in—and then she began to hum. Grabbing a double handful of strawberry, chocolate, and vanilla hair, I groaned as Melanie fondled my balls and Miltia stood and kissed me, her body pressing flush against mine. I lost any shred of control I'd had, emptying myself down Neo's throat and feeling the smaller girl swallow around my cock.

When I had finished, Neo slowly pulled herself off my cock, lips tight around my shaft and her tongue swiping along the underside before it came out clean. “So,” she began, looking up and trading looks with the twins. “Am I in?”

The Malachite twins shared a look between themselves for a moment before turning to me and nodding. “She's got our vote,” they synced in approval.

Looking down, I grinned at the girl still on her knees. “I'd say that's a 'yes,’” I chuckled.

“Great!” Neo beamed. “Now, could someone help me up? I can't feel my legs.”

Neo trembled and I had to catch her by the elbow to steady her and keep her from falling as her knees and thighs threatened to give out. “You okay?” I laughed, a soapy loofah belonging to the
twins in hand going to work on her back. Unfortunately, the master bathroom wasn't big enough for all four of us to squeeze in, so the twins were using the other shower.

“Aside from being raw in places and occasionally still going through aftershocks hard enough to put me on my ass? Peachy,” she deadpanned.

Handing her the loofah, I took up a wash cloth and began scrubbing myself—I honestly preferred the rougher texture to scrub with. “So,” I began, watching her from the corner of my eye and a smile making its way across my lips, “you've got complaints?”

“Pfft yeah,” Neo nodded, an annoyed look crossing her face. “You did this to me before I have to meet someone who will likely try to kill me—and didn't continue doing it long enough to make me too late to go.”

Reaching out, I mussed her hair, eliciting a quiet growl in response. “And here I thought I was being considerate.”

“Considerate would have been making sure I was unconscious when we were done,” she snarked.

“You were,” I deadpanned.

Sighing, she leaned back flush against me and shook her head. “I don't mean to be a bitch, I promise. I'm just nervous.”

Wrapping my arms around her and pulling her closer, I brought my head down to brush my face against the side of hers. “I know.”

“Still, I'm sorry,” she apologized, and I nodded.

“Well, if we're on the subject of apologies, I should probably start,” I began, drawing a curious hum from her throat. “You're right to be worried about meeting with Cinder.”

I felt her tense slightly in my arms before relaxing a moment later. “Why am I not surprised you know that name?”
I gave a quiet, mirthless chuckle and hugged her tighter for a moment. “I met her the other night—my first delivery, actually. She's… dangerous, as I'm sure you know.” Neo nodded and I continued. “Dangerous to the point that I… kind of had the twins dig up info on her. On what she's doing, her operations, who she's working with…”

“I don't like where this is going, but continue,” Neo sighed, her tone reluctant.

Nodding, I planted a small kiss on the side of her lips and continued. “The twins found out that Junior had hired out some men to Roman, who they knew worked with Cinder. They didn't tell me you worked for Roman, in case you're wondering. They did tell me there was a job—at Signal. If she had just had them knocking over a Dust shop or something, I likely wouldn't have bothered. Except… there's nothing of value there, because it's a school. So, you can see why that stands out as weird, right?”

Neo turned around in my arms, looking up into my eyes as she considered. After a moment, she nodded. “You're right. It is suspicious. It's not a typical Roman job, and I didn't know anything about it until after it went sideways. He doesn't tell me everything, though, so that's not too out of place.”

“So, I followed them. Turns out, they were after the list of students—specifically the new graduates, going on to other Hunter academies. Most specifically, the ones applying to Beacon.” I gave her a moment to digest that before adding, “Nothing good could come from someone like Cinder having a list of children, future Hunters or no.”

With a sigh, Neo planted her face against my chest and nodded agreement. “No, it couldn't. So, you're the one that fucked up the Signal job.”

“Yes,” I admitted quietly. “I set fire to the servers on Signal. …And stole Roman's Bullhead, and his Duster, and everything not nailed down on the airfield. Except the drugs—those I burned. Then I went to the bar to have a drink and figure out what to do with the information I'd stolen. And then I met a beautiful, angry girl and we had a few drinks…”

Laughing, the beautiful girl in my arms pulled back and stood on her tiptoes to brush her lips against mine momentarily. “I knew I wasn't drunk enough to imagine smelling smoke on you. You know what's funny? If you hadn't been a goody-two-shoes and interfered in Roman's job, I'd still… I'd still be miserable, lying to myself that he actually cared.”

“Neo,” I sighed, shaking my head. “You're wrong. I'm not a good man. There is absolutely nothing I wouldn't do to keep the people I care about safe. Cinder is the threat here—Roman's operation was
just collateral damage. I didn't count on him running, but that doesn't mean I'm going to ignore the advantage it gives me, either. I'm going to tear apart everything she's trying to build that I can get to, and then I'll give her a chance—*one*—to turn back from whatever it is she has planned. I'm going to make her tell me who's pulling her strings—because there's no way she's the end of it, whatever this is. The alternative… the alternative is leaving her alone and letting her do whatever it is she wants, which is going to put me, my sisters, the twins, and *you* in danger.”

“And you're not just using me to get to her?” Neo asked, justifiable worry in her voice.

I shook my head, pulling her close again. “No, Neo. I'm not just using you to get at Cinder. I can't say I'm not going to use you to get to her, however, if you'll let me. It's dangerous, but I know you're a dangerous kind of girl, so I'm going to ask: will you help me take her down? You don't have to and I would understand if you didn't want to. Honestly, I'm surprised you're even hearing me out.”

Reaching backwards, Neo turned off the shower but made no move to get out yet as she looked into my eyes, searching for something. After a moment, she apparently found whatever it was she was looking for as she smiled. “Why wouldn't I? We just made a promise, didn't we? Partners, right?”

“Right,” I nodded in agreement, allowing some of the relief I felt into my voice.

“So, yeah, I'll help you take her down. How are we going to play this?” she asked, and I noticed she no longer seemed worried or conflicted. She had made up her mind to follow me. I had her loyalty now, and her trust—and one day, I might just *earn* it. It was something to work towards, at any rate.

Reaching out, I smacked her ass lightly, causing her to jump, and pulled the shower curtains back. “How about we start with getting dried off and dressed? We can't exactly go visit the wicked witch like this, now can we?”

Stepping out, Neo hummed in thought as she took a towel and began drying off. “Why not?” she finally asked, drawing my attention. “Get in her good graces, earn her trust, then get close to her… and then divide her loyalties and force her to choose. It could work, maybe. If you're looking for options that don't involve killing her and everyone around her when she shit hits the fan, that's your best bet—because that is the only thing that is going to end everything if she won't listen to reason.”

“Firstly, I don't like the idea of emotionally manipulating someone like that,” I denied, drawing a roll of the eyes from the girl as I took up my own towel. It was true, I absolutely hated lying to Neo—even if she had admitted the outcome was better than if she'd stayed with Roman. “Secondly, that doesn't mean I won't do it if it becomes necessary.” Which is exactly what I'd done with Neo… “Honestly, you're right, it should be my first choice for soft options there—for solving this without
bloodshed.” Well, without more bloodshed than necessary. I knew there would be some to come, one way or another.

“So, let's try that, then. Double-team her,” Neo suggested, and I shook my head.

“I don't think that will work—at least, not at first. She didn't strike me as the type. You're not bothered by the idea of trying to seduce the crazy-dangerous witch?” I asked, wondering why this idea was less bothersome for Neo than simply talking to the fire witch.

Neo snorted. “Crazy-dangerous she may be, she's also really sexy. You don't think she'd go for both of us if we set things up right?”

“Probably not. She seems like the kind of girl who has to warm up to the idea. I have some ideas, though… It'll require stopping by Hei's before we go, however.” I'd need to pick up a bottle of bourbon, for starters. There was something else I recalled seeing that seemed out of place in Cinder's base—an old record player. It was part of what had convinced me to grab the LPs from the Repository.

Cinder was a vain creature and liked having her ego stroked. More than that, she enjoyed success. After Roman's supposed abandonment and arrest, she was likely looking for a way to regain her perceived edge—after all, she couldn't be seen to look weak in front of her subordinates. A successful job pulled off in a timely manner by competent help, some of her alcohol of choice, and an excuse to abuse my charisma modifier by using Dance and maybe… A plan began to take shape. I'd just have to play things by ear and see how they went. I had no delusions of being James Bond, but then I didn't have to be that good.

I just had to be good enough.
Neo squealed as we flew through the air between buildings, going weightless for a moment at the apex of our arc. My line launcher fired, catching another building as we began falling, building momentum into a fast swing. Moving parallel to the building, I shifted our gravity to make the building down for us and latched onto the mirrored glass surface with mana as I ran around the corner and leapt out into open air. Neo's squeal picked up a few decibels and I was pretty sure she could be heard across most of Vale. 'I swear, the girl is an adrenaline junkie,' I mused as I caught sight of our destination, applying drag and flaring gravity to bring us in for a soft landing.

“That was awesome!” Neo cheered, hopping down from my grip and twirling around, umbrella unfolding over her as she twirled it in her hands. I had to admit, the sight of her in a corset and skirt was pretty damn appealing, and I made a mental note to see about keeping her in them the next time we wound up in a bed together, or on a couch. 'Maybe, given how tight that thing is, she has either a corset fetish or a constriction fetish. Something to figure out later.’

Pulling myself from my thoughts since we had business to attend to, I grinned as I asked, “So, you'll want to do that again later, right?”

“Fuck yes!” the ice cream themed girl crowed, beaming me an ear-to-ear grin. Taking a deep breath, she let it out in a long sigh and visibly calmed. “Okay. I'm good. I'm good,” she assured me. “Let's go.”

“Are you sure?” I asked, my tone faintly teasing. I received a raspberry in answer and Neo stepped off the side of the building, her umbrella slowing her descent into the alley behind Cinder's hideout. I dropped down behind her, allowing my Aura to absorb the drop. “Sure you're up for this?”
Neo nodded, taking a steadying breath and raising one gloved hand to knock at the door. “Let's get it over with.”

The door opened a moment later, Emerald's green haired form greeting us from behind the partly closed door, red eyes tracking first to Neo and then behind her, to me. Green eyebrows moved towards Emerald's hairline momentarily before she shrugged, opening the door and moving aside for us to pass. She clearly wanted to say something and just as clearly had been given explicit instructions to keep her mouth shut. I locked eyes with her, red contacts meeting natural red eyes, and smiled under my mask as I actively pulled up charisma. “Hello again.”

“Uh, hi,” she returned, unsure how to respond and a faint blush dusting her cheeks for a moment. Shaking her head, she closed the door and followed us inside, expression shifting back to neutral. “They showed up together,” she said by way of explanation as Cinder's golden gaze found her the moment the red witch came in sight, seated in a leather recliner and reading a book—*The Story of the Seasons*, from the gold-embossed title. Idly, I wondered if it was one of the ones I'd delivered.

The book closed around a piece of paper being used as a bookmark and Cinder placed it on the small table at her side, under the reading lamp she'd been using. “You know each other?”

I chuckled, affecting an embarrassed tone and rubbing at the back of my head in a sheepish gesture. “Actually, we met in a bar the other night,” I answered truthfully. “We met each other on the way here.”

At my side, Neo nodded, back to her silent routine by mutual agreement. Cinder was apparently acquainted with Neo's mannerisms from her time dealing with Roman, so if she was bothered by the silent treatment it didn't show. “To business, then. Please, be seated,” she gestured towards a couple of chairs across a small table from her seat. Once we were seated, she fixed her attention on Neopolitan's mis-matched eyes. “Did you know Roman was intending to run, after his failure?”

Neo shook her head and I sat back and, feigning confused interest, I asked. “Someone I should know?”

Cinder shrugged one slender shoulder, her molten gold gaze shifting to me. “A former business associate. Now arrested, soon to be deceased.”

I blinked, pretending to think it over before snapping my fingers in seeming recognition. “The news this morning said something about some guy named Roman getting arrested on a flight between here and Vacuo. That him?”
“It was,” Cinder admitted, sitting back in her chair and steeping her fingers as she shifted her gaze back to Neo. “Are Roman's operation and assets still intact?”

Neo tilted her lead left and right, waving one hand back and forth in a so-so gesture. Cinder wasn't having any of that, however, as she narrowed her eyes at the ice cream themed girl. “Neopolitan, I do not possess Roman's ability to interpret your body language and lack the patience to try. Speak, now, or I will replace you with someone easier to communicate with.”

Neo made a small, alarmed sound in the back of her throat. “I,” she started, then cleared her throat. “I don't... I don't know. They scattered. It's not my—”

“I don't want excuses,” Cinder frowned, silencing the ice cream themed girl beside me. “You were Roman's second in command. You should know how his operations are run and have the respect or fear of his men. Reclaiming Roman's gang should not be beyond your capabilities.”

“Yes, I know how things were run, but Roman didn't have a second in command. He didn't want anyone stealing the gang out from under him,” Neo admitted quietly. This was something Neo had suggested herself—downplaying her own role in Roman's gang while playing up her reticent/nervous act. “I was eye candy and muscle.”

Cinder glared but kept any reaction beyond that contained. “I'll deal with you later. I need to think on what you've said.” Turning her gaze back to me, she eyed the metal and leather tube on an adjustable sling that I'd worn inside and placed down beside the chair when I sat, alongside my new backpack. “I hope you have better news?”

Picking up the tube, I stood and moved to the largest table. There were more maps here, schematics of equipment including ships and what looked like some sort of robot, even a detailed listing of ships in Atlas's navy. I say navy, but these were all airships—so really, it would be a combined air force and navy. Opening the tube, I pulled out the rolled up schematics for Beacon and began laying them out on the table, using books already there to hold down the edges. “Any other impossible-to-steal stuff you'd like stolen?” I asked, shooting the woman a grin under my mask as she stood and made her way over. From where she had been hanging around out of sight, Emerald made her way to the table as well, looking the plans over.

“How did you get these?” she asked, a reluctant note of impressed awe in her voice. “It hasn't quite been a full day yet since we even asked for them. A job like the Repository should have taken days to plan! It did take days, and we determined it was impossible without either a crew and there was a high probability of getting caught...”
I shrugged, deciding to have a bit of fun. “It wasn't really that hard. I didn't even trip any alarms. You say you spent days planning this? Well, maybe if you'd had more time to research…”

Emerald growled, red eyes narrowing into a glare focused on me before Cinder cut off any retort she may have made, a throaty chuckle passing her lips as she leaned over the plans across from me to study them. My eyes shifted focus as though drawn by a magnet, taking in the sight she'd presented me straight down the front of her dress, showcasing her cleavage nicely—and was that a hint of pink aureole I spied? Was she doing it on purpose?

Molten gold eyes met my red contacts and I realized that's exactly what she'd done as a small smirk crossed her lips. 'Is she flirting?' I wondered, raising an eyebrow and purposefully taking another long look when she did nothing to protest. I had my answer when that small smirk went wider and my Semblance gave her away, her mood creeping slowly upwards into something approaching lukewarm. 'Yeah, I had her pegged right. She likes having her ego stroked and success is a huge turn on for her.'

“This is good,” Cinder purred, those gold eyes boring into my own with an intensity I'd rarely seen from anyone else. “Very good. It seems I chose correctly in trusting you with this.”

Crossing my arms over my chest, I smirked under my mask. “Of course. And my pay?”

“Yes, of course. Emerald, if you would?” Cinder directed, never breaking eye contact with me as she sent Emerald to collect my payment.

Emerald gave a disgruntled sigh as she left the room to head upstairs, returning a few moments later with a black duffel bag, which she dropped onto the table between Cinder and I, breaking our stare down. Looking down I opened the bag and look note of the pile of wrapped stacks of bills. My Semblance announced the completion of the quest Operation Infiltration: Steal the Blueprints, awarding me 40k EXP and bumping me up from level 21 to 23. I'd add the money to inventory later, once I got away from prying eyes.

_A quest has been updated!

_Romancing Remnant: Red Cinderella has been unlocked!

By completing the seemingly impossible task she had set before you, you have garnered the interest_
of Cinder Fall. Get closer to Cinder—gain her confidence, loyalty, and possibly love in order to turn her from the path she has sworn herself to.

Success: 600,000 EXP, increased closeness with Cinder Fall, +1 love interest, quest unlock. Failure: death*, destruction, mayhem, quest unlock. *Time of failure will determine death toll.

I carefully ignored the quest window as I zipped up the duffel bag and moved it beside the chair where I’d been sitting, dismissing the notification while my hands were out of view of the two women at the table. I would have to read over the details later, but the words 'death toll' stood out. Meeting Neo's eyes, I winked before turning back. “So, now what?”

Cinder hummed, standing straight and looking speculatively between Neo and myself for a moment. “I believe I have another job offer for you…”

“Oh?” I asked, sitting on the arm of the chair and gesturing for her to continue. “If it pays as well as this last one, I'm all ears.”

Cinder's smirk returned in force. “Oh, this is a job that will guarantee continued payment for a long time to come, assuming you're up to it and in any way capable.”

Shooting the woman an amused look, I gestured towards the blueprints on the table. “I'd say the evidence of my capability speaks for itself. What's the job?”

“How would you like a promotion?” she asked, a chuckle working its way past her lips. “You've already gone from delivery boy to thief, why not continue that rise and move from thief to gang leader?”

A quest has been created!

Operation Infiltration: Sinner's Row

Cinder Fall would like you to take on another job: become the leader of Roman Torchwick's former gang. Taking over the gang will grant you closer access to Cinder's operations, however, you will be expected to provide results where Roman failed.
Success: 15000 EXP, permanent lien revenue while leader of the faction. Unlocks faction operations. Unlocks faction quests. Unlocks faction takeover campaign. Increased closeness with Cinder Fall, Emerald Sustrai, Neopolitan, and the Malachite Twins. Failure: faction-related options remain unavailable, Neopolitan is forced to assume control of the gang, companion death*. *Should Neopolitan fail to rebuild the gang, she will be executed for her failure by Cinder.

That last bit there was worrying. “What makes you think Roman's little cadre of minions will do my bidding willingly?”

Molten gold eyes locked with mine and a small, vicious little smile tugged at Cinder's lips. “No one said anything about it being willingly.”

Turning around, I locked eyes with Neo and carefully tapped the accept button for the quest. “What do you think?”

Neo's eyes darted between me and Cinder for a moment before she nodded, sitting back in her chair and looking away. “Excellent,” Cinder purred from her place at the table. “Emerald, why don't you and Neopolitan go see to securing the remnants of Roman's little band whilst Shiro and I work out the details?”

Emerald shot an annoyed, upset look between Cinder and myself and it took me a moment to figure out what was going on. Cinder hadn't just secured the thief's loyalty, it seemed. As they were leaving, I called, “Neo?”

The ice cream themed girl turned, regarding me with a curious look. “Yes?”

I knew all of this was part of the plan, but I still wanted to reassure her that I wouldn't leave her alone with Cinder's pet assassin for long—and that I wasn't planning to abandon her. “I'll catch up with you and we can go over everything we need to know to be partners in this later, okay?”

With a nod, Neo followed Emerald out, the door closing behind them. “You seem fond of her,” Cinder pointed out quietly, drawing my attention back to her, where we once more locked eyes. There was no accusation or suspicion in her voice, simply statement of fact.

“She's cute and I don't think this Roman guy knew what he had,” I admitted. Still, it was best to keep her mind off any potential connections between Neo and myself… “But then, I don't think I have to tell you about finding those who have been abandoned by others and giving them a purpose, do I?”
Chuckling, Cinder gave a small nod acknowledging my point as she moved around the table before sitting on the arm of one of her chairs as I had earlier. With her skirt riding up her crossed legs to mid-thigh, she made it look a lot better than I ever would. “No, I don't believe so. It seems we share that in common—the ability to find the best in society's castoffs.”

“So, then,” I grinned, clapping once, “Does this mean I've taken Roman's place as your 'business associate'?”

Cinder hummed, considering the question as she eyed me. “I suppose that depends. Roman had to be coerced into the position. You, on the other hand… You are not afraid of me. Why is that? Part of me wonders if it's simple ignorance or something else.”

“No,” I admitted, digging into the backpack I'd brought. “Just because a thing is dangerous is no reason to fear it. Study it, learn how it works or behaves, and always make sure to show it the proper respect, yes.”

Cinder watched as I pulled out one of the large, square LP sleeves and moved over to her record player. Removing the record from its sleeve, I placed it on the turntable and moved the needle down before flipping it on. Strings and piano filled the room as some jazzy piece I didn't know the name of began playing. “And this is you studying me?” the woman asked, raising one perfect eyebrow in amusement.

“Oh, no,” I denied, moving back to the backpack and digging out the other half of my plan—a very old bottle of bourbon and two glasses. It had cost me a pretty penny, as it had come out of Hei's private stash, but it was worth every lien if it worked. “I've already done that. After all, who wouldn't want to know about their dangerous and powerful new business partner? I know you enjoy good music and take your bourbon straight,” I grinned, pouring a bit into each glass and handing her one before placing the bottle on the table. “Now, the question is, are you the kind of woman who likes to dance to her music?”

“You have done your homework,” Cinder admitted, shooting an amused glance between our glasses and my mask. Pushing herself up from her chair, she stalked over to where I stood leaning against the table, stopping close enough that I could feel the body heat radiating off of her. “However, I barely know anything about you. It's kind of hard to trust someone who wears a mask all the time.”

“Is that all?” I removed the mask and Cinder blinked, studying my face for a moment before laughing—an honest laugh, as opposed to her usual sexy laugh. “What? Have I got something on my face?” I asked, wagging my eyebrows in amusement and drawing another laugh from her before letting Invisibility drop off the bottom half of my face. “How about that? Is that better?”
Getting her laughter under control, Cinder hummed in thought before moving closer, the hand not holding her glass reaching out and cupping my face. She spent a long moment studying my features, committing them to memory. “Yes, I believe so,” she murmured, her eyes going half-lidded as she downed her glass of bourbon in one go. I copied her, placing the glass on the table beside hers. With a single step, she closed the distance between us, her arms going around my shoulders as she began to sway in time to the music. “Tell me, do you know what your Semblance does to women?”

“Beyond what you asked last time I was here?” I asked, wondering where she was going with this. There was a tone I recognized in her voice as something approaching need—and she confirmed it a moment later.

Looking up, molten gold eyes met mine and she gave me an amused look. “Emerald and I compared notes—and I'll bet if we were to ask Neopolitan, she would confirm my theory. After a while, it's like a physical ache—a sensation of emptiness begging to be filled.”

“Is that why she's so annoyed?” I asked, an amused smile playing over my face. “You're saying I blue-balled Emerald?”

Cinder snorted, quietly. “One of many reasons, I fear.”

Raising an eyebrow, I asked, “And what about yourself? Aren't you angry my Aura does that to you?”

Shaking her head, Cinder pulled away long enough to fix herself another glass before picking up where she'd left off. “No, I'm not,” the woman in my arms admitted, smirking up at me. “Mostly because I have a proposition… a mutually beneficial amendment to our working relationship.”

I shook my head, laughing quietly at her wording. “I'm listening.”

“I have needs. You will fulfill them.” I was surprised when Cinder took the initiative and leaned forward, her lips slowly caressing mine, tongue slipping past her lips to steal a taste of my mouth. The kiss itself was slow, languid even, as she took her time exploring and I did the same. My hands slid down her sides, cupping her rear and lifting her a few inches up, her legs going around my waist as I turned around and planted her on the table. She wasn't wearing any panties under that dress, I noticed—in addition to having skipped wearing a bra, as I'd found out earlier.
“Did you plan this?” I pulled back enough to ask, her eyes opening to meet mine.

“Yes,” the woman in my arms admitted. “Though, it seems you've done some planning yourself.”

I grinned, my lips meeting hers momentarily. She had answered bluntly, so I returned the favor. “Yes. Like you said, it seems it's worked out to be mutually beneficial.”

“Well then, what are you waiting for?” she purred, squeezing her thighs around my waist and reaching down to begin undoing my belt and pants.

Reaching into my side pouch, I came out with a square, foil packet. “Came prepared,” I grinned, waving the little square between us. There were more like it where that came from—really, between the twins and Neo I might as well start buying stock in Schnee Medical, since they were the ones who produced the damn things. Observe had told me the girls were all safe—disease free, that is—but we were all justifiably wary of 'accidents' at this point.

Having finished freeing me from the confines of my boxers, Cinder snatched the foil packet from my fingers and eyed it with contempt. “I don't think so,” she murmured, giving the condom a casual flick towards a trash can across the room—her aim, it seemed, was impeccable. That would make Cinder the second woman on Remnant I’d met with an absolute loathing for the things. I wasn't entirely worried—there were other options available, after all. Schnee Medical had even developed a contraceptive for men in addition to those I’d expected to find for women. I’d never had one of the infamous 'pregnancy scare' issues in my previous life and I wasn't intending to have one here, either. After that night with Joan, I had taken the time to stop by a pharmacy and check out my options.

Molten gold eyes met my red contacts and she squeezed her thighs around me again, urging me forward. In the back of my head, I could swear I faintly heard a voice singing, 'Don't stick your dick in crazy.' That voice was promptly ignored. After all, it was entirely too late for that, given the whole situation with Joan. Besides, that rule didn't necessarily apply here. Cinder registered as sane on my sliding scale of crazy, after all. Driven by some purpose or vendetta, certainly, but sane—and all the more dangerous for it. Joan, on the other hand, was not entirely sane but about the safest person to be around.

Any thoughts towards her sanity or lack thereof were driven from my mind as Cinder resumed our kiss and I completed our union, burying my shaft in her wet heat—and she was hot, almost uncomfortably so. What came after was like that first kiss—slow, methodical, and completely thorough as we explored and enjoyed each other. It was also intimate on a level I hadn't expected from her—but then, maybe I shouldn't have been surprised. Cinder seemed like the kind of girl for whom 'trust issues' was an understatement. Her eyes remained open, half-lidded and locked with mine the entire time with the intensity I was coming to expect from her.
I slid my hands under her dress, running them up her thighs and across her flanks as I slowly thrust into her, her hips shifting forward to meet mine and match my pace. Unlike many of the other girls I'd been with, she was not entirely bare—a bush of thick, dark hair sitting neatly trimmed above her slit, while everything below was shaved bare. Her own hands were not idle, as she found the catch for my armor and began working to get it off. Chuckling, I extricated my hands and helped her, tossing it onto the floor, followed by my shirt. Bringing my hands back to her dress, I worked it up and off her, where it joined the small pile of my own clothes, leaving her beautiful, pale flesh on display. Her breasts were a nice size, neither too large nor too small, perky and firm to the touch and capped with small, bright pink nipples that just begged to be played with. So I did.

Cinder sucked in a quiet breath as I captured and softly squeezed her breasts, pressing them together and gently tugging on the nipples at their peaks. Her back arched, pressing her pert breasts more firmly into my palms and changing the angle of my slow thrusts enough to draw a groan from us both. Her hands came up to run along my back and I felt her sharp nails digging small lines into my back. Releasing one of her tits, I reached up and slid my hand beneath her head, fisting a handful of her hair and pulling it tight as I drove into her harder, as she silently urged me on.

Her breath began to come in short gasps and pants and her fingers curled, digging her claws into my back as I felt her growing tighter around me, and even hotter—though at that point it almost seemed impossible she could get any hotter. Her hands came off my back, one grasping a fistful of my hair much as I had hers while the other came around the back of my neck and with both she hauled me down to her lips, where their met mine with a silent hunger I hadn't expected of her. Her eyes lidded and she went rigid, the small convulsions of orgasm rocking her body as she wrapped herself tight around me, her sheath tightening almost painfully and bringing me over the edge as well.

We lay there for several long moments, catching our breath as I felt her slowly clenching around my shaft. Eventually, her fingers unclenched and came free of my hair, bringing a few black strands with them. “That was… nice,” she murmured, a teasing grin stretching across her lips as she attempted to downplay how much she'd enjoyed it.

Having none of that, I rolled my eyes before making my cock jump inside her, promptly drawing a gasp from her lips. “Only 'nice,’ huh?” I asked, making my cock jump again and smirking as she bit her bottom lip. “Well, I suppose I'll just have to keep trying until I manage to actually impress you.”

“That you shall,” she agreed, her hands going to my chest to push me up. “Let's move this to my bedroom. I don't believe the table would survive anything more enthusiastic.”

I pushed myself off and helped her up, letting her lead the way and delivering a quick swat to her ass as she passed me. “I don't know that your bed could survive, either.”
Taking that as a challenge, she took my hand and pulled me towards the stairs. “Let's find out.”

It was early the next morning before I left Cinder's base of operations, the sky over the city just beginning to lighten. Like every other woman of Remnant I'd had the fortune to bed, she was insatiable. I was honestly beginning to suspect it was related to my Semblance—specifically, some synergy between Dating Mode, Marital Arts, and my high charisma mod feeding whatever desire was already there and ramping it up slowly over time.

I would have to ask the twins and Neo, having had the most encounters with those three. I would ask Joan, but given her level and high natural stamina, I had a feeling she'd have responded the same way with or without that synergy in play. Either way, the results seemed to be similar across the board—no one wanted to stop until they physically couldn't continue any longer. It was doing wonders for improving my VIT and STR scores, along with DEX and CHA. I was just a little worried someone was going to hurt something if this kept up—namely, me. Friction burns are not fun. At all.

Coming in for a landing on the apartment roof, my eyes narrowed as I caught a splash of color that shouldn't be there—green. Emerald was posted up on my roof, watching the sky around the apartment from an angle that would put her in the shadow of the roof access door, had I been coming from Cinder's temporary home. It was only my finely honed paranoia that saved me here—I never used the same route twice, always circled around the apartment to scope out the roof before landing, and always traveled under Invisibility. Considering I was trying to avoid exactly this sort of situation by going to those lengths, I'd say it was time well spent.

Applying drag to my line and flaring gravity, I came in for a silent landing and snuck across the roof until I was behind her. “Confuse. Dominate.”

She fought—a lot harder than Roman. I suppose her Semblance gave her some natural resistance to mental attacks. It didn't help her much though, considering I'd cast Confuse specifically to account for any sort of innate resistance. After a short struggle, she relaxed and I felt the spell settle properly. “What are you doing here?” I growled, pulling up charisma, Bluff, and Intimidate and backing them all up with my Aura. I had a proper Batman voice, even.

You have created the skill Intent!

Intent : Level 1. Active. Through synergy between skills, you have learned to psychically project your Intent through your Aura to those around you. Effect: targets within the range of your Intent or the focus of your Intent must make a Will save against your combined CHA and INT or be
swayed by the **Intent** used. Depending upon the type of **Intent** used, this can leave an opponent **Shaken**, under **Fear**, or subject to other mental status effects. Beneficial status effects are also possible if the **Intent** is directed at an ally or party member. Cost: 10MP/minute. Range: 10M radius around caster, 20M within line of sight to a single target.

*Current Intent unlocked: Killing Intent.*

I smirked as I reread that. 'So, essentially, an AOE fear or other effect is, or AOE buffs. It's like... weaponized Dating Mode. In fact, I bet money 'Lustful Intent' is a thing. Happosai would be proud.'

Under the influence of Killing Intent and Dominate, Emerald was swift to answer. “I-I wanted to find out where you lived! I followed Neo after we finished rounding up the rest of Roman's gang. Oh please god, don't kill me!” she whimpered, animal instinct to flee warring with my iron control over her through Dominate.

“Did Cinder order you to do this?!” I yelled, moving closer and allowing Invisibility to drop.

Emerald's red eyes locked onto mine for a moment before being drawn to where I'd rested my left hand on my sword's scabbard. “No! She-she told me not to interfere.”

Stepping closer, until I stood over her to force her to look up to meet my gaze, I ground out, “So you're here on your own initiative?”

“Yes! I just, I wanted to be useful,” she finished lamely, averting her eyes for a moment before I used Dominate to force her to look up and meet my gaze again.

Studying her face for a moment, I asked the question I'd had since she left with Neo that evening. “You love her, don't you?”

For a moment, she found the will to fight back and attempt to resist, before I poured more mana into Dominate. Her eyes narrowed into a glare as she spat out, “*Yes.*”

I wasn't really surprised—whatever Cinder had done to gain her loyalty had worked *marvelously*. Hell, I should probably be taking notes, since that was exactly the sort of loyalty I was going to need from those following me if I wanted to pull this off. The only difference between Cinder and I on
that front was our methods—I intended to *earn* that loyalty, not simply take advantage of people in bad situations. It seemed we had more in common than I'd realized. Out of curiosity, I asked, “And you hate me?” When Emerald nodded, I followed it up with, “Why?”

“She doesn’t look at me that way,” she admitted quietly. A subtle prod towards the spell had her elaborating. “I’m forced to stand there and watch her willingly choose to make this horrible decision, *knowing* it won’t—*can’t*—possibly work out, and it hurts. It hurts to know that she doesn’t trust me enough to *listen*. It hurts that she’s willing to *choose* to make the mistake of trusting you, allowing you into her life, when I know *she’ll never choose me.*”

I snorted quietly, shaking my head. *It’s almost scary, when you think about it—I’m doing the exact same thing in trying to get close to her and convince her not to do whatever it is she has planned. I know damn well this is a mistake, that I’m wasting my time, and yet…*’ Pulling myself from my thoughts, I turned my attention back to the greenette. “Sweetie, sometimes adults *choose* to make decisions they know are bad for them. We *know* it’s stupid, but we do it anyway—because otherwise, there’s a part of us that will always regret *not* making the stupid choice.’ Gods know, I’d made my fair share of those. It’s a human failing—and being wiser now didn’t necessarily mean I wouldn’t do it anyway.

Maybe, though, wisdom was in attempting to trust people anyway, even if you knew they could and likely would disappoint you—because to do otherwise, well… I had tried that, once, after one too many betrayals and heartbreaks. Some of us can live without human interaction for a while, but it *is* psychologically damaging—humans are social animals, after all. You stop really noticing how much it hurts, until you suddenly find yourself no longer alone. Of course, losing that closeness after being alone so long leaves one *desperate* and willing to compromise on a lot of things…

“Well, I hope it was worth it, because I am going to kill you,” Emerald admitted, pulling me from my introspection. It was not a threat, just a simple statement of fact.

I smirked, a devious thought springing to mind. I leaned closer, my masked lips brushing her ear as I spoke—digging into Intent and unlocking Lustful Intent as I’d suspected I would. ‘I’ll keep that in mind. The next time I have Cinder bent over that big table screaming my name, I’ll make sure you’re there. I won’t even have to do anything—I’ll suggest the idea to her and Cinder, with her obsession with power and dominance struggles, will *order you to watch*. If you’re really, *really* lucky, we might just let you join in.”

I pulled back and met her eyes. Her expression was mixed, equal parts desire, rage, and disgust. Grinning, I asked, “And do you know what the best part is?”

“What?” she hissed, once more fighting against Dominate.
“Sleep.”

I caught her before she hit the ground, laying her out on the roof as I began working. “Confuse, Confuse, Confuse, Confuse,” I chanted, overpowering each cast, before hitting her with Observe. Sure she was thoroughly whammied, I moved on to phase three. “Forget.” Feeling the spell take effect, I wiped everything from the point where she and Neo had parted ways. Then I hit her with Forget twice more to be sure. She knew where I lived and had threatened to kill me. I wasn't taking any risks. She was damn lucky I didn't decide to deal with her the way I'd almost dealt with Roman. It was only the fact that Cinder would be annoyed—but more importantly, suspicious—that stayed my hand.

The fact that Emerald could repeatedly fight while under the effects of Dominate told me her Will save was a lot higher than I'd imagined, since I couldn't directly Observe it. No, I intended to abuse the shit out of my spells in this instance. Asleep, she couldn't resist. Confuse would lower any innate resistance to the point that it may as well not be there, especially while under Sleep. Spamming Confuse multiple times was the spell equivalent of forcing someone to get blackout drunk as far as cognizance was concerned. Hitting her with Forget not once but twice would make sure she wouldn't be remembering anything from tonight beyond what I wanted her to. Combined, however? I had no idea. I hoped she would make up a story for herself, but I wasn't planning on Luck working in my favor. Instead, a plan was already forming.

Hefting the small girl in my arms, I took off at top speed for Cinder's base. I hit Emerald with Sleep twice more on the way, to make damn sure she wouldn't be waking up any time soon, as we flew across the city at break-neck speed. Slipping into Cinder's home, I dropped Emerald into Cinder's preferred chair. Looking around, I found the mostly-full bottle of bourbon I'd brought. Moving back to where she was seated, I hummed in thought before casting Dominate again. Surprisingly, the spell took effect—I had thought for sure that being asleep would be a natural defense against it. Shrugging it off as something to study later, I lifted the bottle to her lips and ordered Emerald to drink as I poured the alcohol down her throat. She spluttered and coughed a couple of times, but didn't spill any. Once the bottle was down to less than half of what it'd started with, I had her stop.

Adjusting the greenette in the leather chair, I shifted one of her arms to look as though she had been drinking straight from the bottle until she'd passed out, then dropped it—which left a fairly sizable spill on the floor that I had a feeling would annoy Cinder. That was good, because I needed the red witch good and riled up over this—the angrier she was, the less likely she was to question circumstances. And just to seal the deal, I slipped upstairs to where I'd seen the laundry room in passing. Snagging a pair of Cinder's dirty panties, I peeked in on her as I passed her room, finding her exactly where and how I'd left her—buried under her blankets and a small smile gracing her lips. For a potential murdereress, she looked downright peaceful in her sleep, after a good lay. I almost regretted having to leave—I knew we would have both enjoyed waking up together, even if it would have been a bit awkward. Like me, she was a lonely person—something I suppose I had recognized in her from the start.
Evidence in hand, I went back down and set about finishing up the crime scene. First, I undid the button and zipper on Emerald's tights, then I took her free hand and forced it down her panties. Next, I mussed her shirt and vest so that it looked like she'd been thorough in her fondling of herself. Finally, as the coup de grace, I opened her mouth and stuck the crotch of Cinder's thong inside before gently pressing her jaw closed around the object. “Emerald, it looks like you've been a bad, bad girl. Drinking your boss's booze and masturbating with her panties? For shame,” I murmured, smirking as I dug out my scroll and took a few pictures. Dropping Dominate, I slapped her with one last Confuse, Sleep, Forget combo and threw Charm in for laughs before heading out.

Stopping on the roof adjacent to Cinder's building, I composed a scroll message. 'So... came across something awkward this morning as I was leaving—sorry about that, by the way, but I'm sure you understand. The job calls and all that. Now, I'm sure we've all had one of those nights of getting drunk and passing out fapping in a chair, but I have to ask... are those her panties, or yours? If they're yours, I must say, I approve of your taste in lingerie. Though, it seems Emerald does too... Yeah, that was a horrible pun. Left a bad taste in my mouth.' Attaching the picture I'd taken, I cackled as I sent the message to Cinder. Oh, this was going to be good. It was just a damn shame I wouldn't get to watch the fallout from this in person. Idly, I wondered if Cinder went nuclear, whether or not I'd be able to see the mushroom cloud from my apartment—the windows did face that general direction...

Making my way back across town, I circled around from a different route as I came in for a landing on the roof, where I found Neo waiting. Wondering what she could be doing out there, I dropped Invisibility as I approached. The ice cream themed girl beamed a smile, skipping up and wrapping her arms around me in a hug. “I'm sorry,” she apologized. When I hummed a question, she elaborated, “I didn't realize Emerald had followed me. Our Semblances interact strangely. When we actually worked together, well...” She shrugged. “So, what was all that earlier?”

Sighing, I took her hand and lead her inside. “Are the twins back?”

Neo nodded. “They went to bed a couple of hours ago.”

I nodded, leading her into the apartment and locking the door behind us before switching out of my Shiro disguise. “How much of that did you see?”

“I heard you yelling and came up. I caught most of the end,” the shorter girl admitted.

I thought over my options for a moment before taking her umbrella and dropping it on the couch, then taking her hand and leading her towards the bedroom. “I promise I'll explain and try to answer any questions you have. I probably can't answer everything...”
“That's fine,” Neo agreed quickly. “That was part of our agreement, remember? We're allowed some secrets.”

Making our way into the bedroom, I eyed the master bed, already partly taken up by the twins. Thankfully, we had come to an arrangement to pick sides instead of just sleeping in the middle. Four would have been a bit of a squeeze, but the twins and Neo were tiny. We undressed and climbed in, Neo spooned in my arms and Melanie moving to press against my back the moment I was under the covers, seeking more warmth in her sleep, since the more outspoken twin tended to run cold in her sleep—I didn't complain, mostly because Neo and Miltia ran a bit warm at night. Despite not being tired, I was mentally exhausted—drained, really. I could have gone without sleep, but at this point, I didn't want to. I wanted to enjoy my twins and Neo and sleep for a few hours—especially since I wasn't taking the opportunity to do the same with Cinder. I could deal with other stuff later. I dropped my buffs and slipped into Meditation as I allowed sleep to claim me.

“So, a knowledge-based Semblance that allows you to create new abilities?” Neo asked, glancing between myself and the twins.

Melanie shrugged. “Close enough.”

From my immediate left, Miltia nodded in agreement with her sister. “It's the official story we're running with if asked, at any rate. And even that sounds kind of, well, unfair. Half the stuff his Semblance does, someone likely has as a Semblance all to itself.”

Focusing on me, Neo asked, “And the reality? Cause what I saw… well. I've never seen it done before.”

“What did you see?” Melanie asked, raising an eyebrow, her tone verging on challenging.

When Neo shot me a questioning look, I groaned and palmed my face with both hands as I leaned back on the couch across from her. Running my hands through my hair I wondered how to handle this. “It's times like this, I wish I were a less scrupulous individual. It'd make things easier.”

Neo's face paled slightly, clearly remembering what she'd seen on the roof. She didn't move from her seat or break eye contact with me, however… A quick Observe told me what I needed to know, since the last time I'd leveled it Observe had begun spitting out a loyalty level stat as a percentage in addition to other stats—at least, for Neo and the Malachite twins. I hadn't seen it on anyone else's profile yet, which made me suspect it would only show up under special circumstances—either I'd
have to romance them first, or I'd have to gain their loyalty in order to get that stat to become visible. It made sense—companion loyalty balancing and quests were a time honored tradition in some games, Bioware games especially. Except in real life, you couldn't just give your companions a few gifts to game the system. “You do that a lot,” Neo pointed out, drawing my attention and confusion momentarily, before I realized she'd noticed my subvocalizing.

I knew I likely shouldn't tell them anything—a quick round of Sleep, Confuse, and Forget would see this problem going away, at least until someone caught me doing it again. The problem there was, I really wasn't that unscrupulous. Funny, really—I'd seriously considered killing Roman Torchwick in cold blood, yet I was loathe to tamper with the minds of those who trusted me. I still felt bad about the necessity of doing it to Miltia the one time, and that was with her consent. 'Maybe Loyalty, as a stat, is a two-way street,' I mused, before blinking as the idea really clicked. I'd noticed before that my Semblance had a habit of sometimes manipulating those around me, but why couldn't that apply to myself as well? I'd been toying with the idea pretty much since waking up in Remnant, but I'd always just brushed it off as something not worth worrying with. Could that, in and of itself, be a mental effect as well? 'Something to look into later. Deal with this now.'

“Okay, fuck it. We're all in this together, right?” I asked, getting a trio of nods in answer. “You all trust me, so I should probably trust you a bit more than I have been. Sorry about that, by the way. I've been running under the premise of OpSec—sorry, Operational Security—where I could, but I suppose that won't really work from here out. So, I'll tell you what I can, but there are things I really shouldn't—not now, at least. If you're not okay with that, tell me now.”

The trio exchanged glances before collectively nodding. “Pretty sure we're okay with that,” Melanie confirmed.

Taking in and letting out a long, slow breath to prepare myself, I dove in head first. “Okay. Party, for testing purposes,” I began, directing the command at Neo as I named the group. Mismatched eyes blinked in surprise, focusing on the window in front of her as she reached out to tap the 'Accept' button. “That's my Semblance. It treats reality around me like a video game. Spells, quests, parties, inventory—the whole nine yards. It appears to be pulling stuff from a variety of sources—traditional RPG video games, some elements I know some from tabletop games, dating sims or H-games—maybe both—and so on. After the stuff with Cinder last night, I even got factions and territory control elements. It seems to react to my environment, adding things on the fly as needed. What you saw on the roof? That was me abusing the shit out of spells to cover our asses.”

“How so? What exactly did she see?” Melanie asked, eyes narrowed slightly.

“Better yet,” Miltia cut in, “what happened that put you both up there at the same time? When we came in, you hadn't come in yet and Neo was sitting up waiting. Congrats on the official takeover, by the way.”
The ice cream themed girl groaned quietly. “It was my fault. Jaune was cleaning up my mess,” she admitted. “Emerald followed me here. Our Semblances interact oddly—she has some kind of mind-related Semblance and while I can hide myself in illusions, I can’t tell if she’s there or not when she uses it. I split off a dozen illusory clones to throw her off, but…” she shrugged.

“Having no mind means she can no-sell the technique if her Semblance doesn’t work on them and she gets any sort of feedback on whether it takes or not,” Melanie guessed, frowning in thought. “That could be problematic. Especially if she decides to follow us again later.” Still not to be swayed from her questions, her green eyes turned back to my blue. “Well?”

“I mind-raped her,” I deadpanned, drawing a pair of blinks from the twins but no reaction other than that. “I forced her to answer my questions then put her to sleep and made her forget everything from after parting ways with Neo. Then I took her back to Cinder’s place and forged a crime scene to ruin any credibility she may possibly have with her ‘boss’ if she tries to blame this on me or Neo.” Taking out my scroll, I navigated to the pictures I’d taken before passing it to Miltia.

The girl on my left let out a high squeak of a giggle before covering her mouth, eyes going wide. She quickly passed the scroll to her sister. “Whose panties are those?” Melanie asked, her face looking as though she couldn’t decide whether to be amused or mortified for the greenette.

“Cinder’s,” I smirked as Melanie passed the scroll to Neo, whose grin went positively fox-like. “Emerald has a girl-crush on Cinder something bad. She’s a bit jealous. …To the point that she followed Neo here then promised to kill me.”

“Dangerous and crazy, lovely combination,” Melanie snarked.

Humming, Miltia took on a thoughtful look before a small smirk quickly crossed her lips. “I’m more curious to know more about these spells. What are they? What do they do?”

“How can we use them?” Melanie finished for her twin.

I rolled my eyes. Of course the twins would be looking to turn a profit somehow. “Fine, on the condition that this stays between us.”

“And anyone else,” Miltia was quick to add, drawing a nod from Melanie.
Neo blinked mint-colored eyes, throwing a look between the twins. “Wait, isn’t the count already at four or five?” She turned her attention to me and asked, “Does Cinder even count?”

“Only if I manage to succeed there,” I shrugged. “She's a hard sell and a true believer in whatever cause it is she's fighting for.”

Beside me, Miltia raised her hand slightly to get my attention, taking on a pensive look as she asked, “If she's that much trouble, why not just kill her now and be done with it?”

I debated my answer for a moment before I finally decided how to word it without giving away that I knew a lot more than I was letting on. “Cinder's a threat, yes—no mistake there. But she's an agitator—she's just here to stir shit up. She's not the one pulling the strings. She's got backing, but I have no idea who—and that's the problem. Could be just about anyone from one of the other nations to some powerful individual with an eye for picking out people. Either way, Cinder is the devil we know. We know where she is, we're in a place where we can gather intel and figure out how she's planning to move and then step in when it's needed. Neo, what did she have Roman doing, before?”

Sitting up a little straighter, Neo was quick with an answer. “As it stood last, she had him building up funds through illicit drug trade and black market grimm harvesting—things Roman was already doing, just ramping up onto a larger scale. Roman was looking to outsource men from the Axe Gang to do some B&E work and was making plans to start knocking over Dust shops around Vale.”

“About what I figured,” I murmured, thinking it over. “Screw that. I'm not peddling drugs. Grimm parts, I have no problem trading, though. If we're supposed to be making money, we'll need to find another way.”

Neo hummed, thinking it over. “Roman had a few regular cons running on our territory… Protection, gambling, that sort of thing. We even have a few legitimate businesses, but Roman kept the paperwork for all of that locked away.”

“Where?” I asked, already knowing exactly which paperwork she was referring to.

The ice cream themed girl shrugged. “Not a clue. Odds are good he took it with him when he left.”

Well, then it was a good thing I'd had Roman keep the papers—there was no way I could have used them anyway, considering. Instead, I asked, “What about copies? Think we can get some?”
Neo shrugged, sheepish as she admitted, “I wouldn’t know how to go about doing that.”

“We do,” Melanie supplied. “We’re in the gang though, right?”

I laughed quietly, nodding. “Yes, you’re in.”

“Yes, yes, that’s nice and all,” Miltia agreed, waving a hand dismissively. “Get back to the important part. You got distracted. We can deal with sorting out Roman's shit later. Spells! What do you have, what can they do?”

Reaching out, I mussed the girl's hair, earning a half-annoyed look even as she pushed herself harder into my hand. “Well, I've got a few categories worth of spells at the moment. Breaking them down, I've got passive skills, active skills, buffs, debuffs, direct damage, travel, and a few utility spells and skills.”

The twin under my hand narrowed her eyes further. “You're evading. What did you use on Emerald? What did Neo see?”

Rolling my eyes, I looked over to find Melanie with her arms crossed on my right and an expectant look on her face. Across from me, Neo grinned and looked to be enjoying the show. “Okay, fine. I used a combination of Confuse, Dominate, Sleep, and Forget. The spells do pretty much exactly what it says in the name.”

The twins shared a look between themselves before turning to Neo for confirmation. When they got it, in the form of a nod, they turned back to me. “You can put people to sleep? And make them forget things?”

“Yes,” I deadpanned, wondering idly if Miltia hadn't simply broken the instance of that spell I'd cast on her. “And before any of you asks, no, I haven't used them on you against your will.”

“Well, that's good to—wait a damn minute!” Melanie began, eyes going wide as my wording registered. “What do you mean, 'against our will'? You've made us forget stuff before?”

I locked eyes with the more outspoken twin before answering. “One of you, yes. Voluntarily on her
“Why would we ever—?” Melanie began before Miltia cut her off.

“Operational security, ’right?” Miltia asked, earning a short nod from me in answer. “The old saying 'two can keep a secret if one of them is dead' doesn't really apply when you can just mind-wipe someone. And if questioned, or put under the effect of a mind-altering Semblance, you can truthfully answer that you don't know if someone tries to question you.”

“Or,” Neo spoke up, drawing our attention, “You can avoid killing someone inconvenient by removing their memory of something they shouldn't know—like Emerald. If she turned up dead or disappeared, it would raise too many questions. The way Jaune did it, she'll come off looking crazy if she accuses him of anything because of this.”

“It's called 'gaslighting,”” I clarified. “Essentially, making someone think they're going crazy or making others think that person is going crazy.”

Green eyes shifting between us, Melanie asked, “So instead of just killing the little rat and bringing up uncomfortable questions from the crazy woman holding her leash, you've decided to 'gaslight' her? Do you think this will keep her off our backs?”

“Who knows?” I shrugged, wagging the scroll in front of me for a moment. “With photographic evidence, it's impossible for her to deny what I saw. No idea if the lesson will stick or if she'll need her nose rubbed in it again, though.”

Nodding in acceptance of that, Melanie decided to return to the pursuit of her original inquiry. “Who did you mind-wipe?”

Miltia sighed, rolling her eyes at her sister. “Does it matter, if we agreed to it?” Judging by Melanie's glare, it did to her. “Telling us who volunteered to forget something important pretty much makes the entire point of doing it moot. Even knowing he can do it is a risk. Likewise, a safe word or phrase to let us know it's been done would also be a bad idea. I highly doubt Jaune is the only person out there with a Semblance capable of manipulating the mind, and if someone goes digging around and finds stuff like that then that person will know where to start digging.”

Growling, Melanie threw up her hands. “Fine! You know I hate it when you double-team me,” she grumbled. “And yes, I see the necessity, but that doesn't mean I agree with it!”
Reaching out, I pulled the resisting twin into a hug that she quickly settled in to and returned. “Neither do I. You think I enjoy having to do that?” Blinking, I thought on it a moment before quietly admitting, “Yeah, there’s a pretty big rush knowing you can do whatever you want… but that’s why the spells are so goddamn dangerous. I know the danger is there though and I don’t intend to abuse them.” Even if, technically, I suppose things like Observe, Dating Mode, and even my quest system already did that…

“We trust you not to take advantage,” Neo smiled—and she really did, at least according to my Semblance.

Eying her twin latched onto my side, a small smirk stretched over Miltia's lips as she asked, “So… Confuse, Sleep, Forget… those all sound pretty straightforward. What about ‘Dominate?’ What’s that do?”

“Mind control,” I answered shortly, wondering where she was going with this. “I've got a few others in the same mental spell class, like Charm and Intent…”

“Uh huh, right,” Miltia nodded distractedly. “Why don't you give us a demonstration?”


“Yeah, show us how it works,” the girl encouraged, trying and failing to hide the smirk slowly forming. “I’ll even volunteer.”

Watching her mood creep upwards, I nearly face palmed. “You sure?” I asked, getting a nod in answer that was just shy of enthusiastic. “Okay… Dominate.”

There was absolutely no resistance to the spell as the submissive twin relented. A small grin played across my face as I saw where she was going with this. “Miltia, do you have a mind control fetish?” I teased.

“I do now,” the girl grinned, and I realized I'd made the question an order—or rather, ordered her to answer.

From her place on the chair across from us, Neo sat forward in her seat. “What's it like? Is he in
complete control, or what?”

Miltia shook her head, holding out a hand and tilting it side to side in a so-so gesture. “I'm still here. It's kind of like… being in a car. You're driving along and suddenly, someone's sitting in the passenger seat telling you where to go. I don't mind having a passenger, so I'm not fighting it—then again, Jaune's not really telling me to do anything yet. He's just sort of there. Let's test that.”

I felt the girl begin to resist, to fight back against the spell, but it was absolutely different from every other time I'd used it. Against Roman, there had been no resistance because I'd hit him with both Confuse and Charm. Against the mooks I'd first used it on, there had been no real fight before I'd simply steamrolled over them with my higher stats. Emerald had fought tooth and nail when she could, resenting it and hating me the entire way. Miltiades, however… her 'resistance' was the same sort of resistance she put up in the bedroom—token at best and an excuse to make me force her to do what I wanted, which was exactly the sort of thing that turned her on. Her mood redlining as I pushed a bit more mana into the spell and forced her to submit pretty much proved that—as if her blush wasn't clue enough.

Still, I was gaining valuable insight into how the spell worked. For instance, Miltia could still blush. My will hadn't completely subsumed her own, as she's said, and her body still reacted to subconscious cues. In her car metaphor, I would likely be holding her arm or something to force her to go where I wanted—I wasn't the person behind the wheel. As opposed to convincing Roman he was my friend with Charm and politely asking him to go where I wanted, or reaching over and grabbing the steering wheel with the mooks. …Or putting a gun to Emerald's head and pulling back the hammer and telling her to drive or I would pull the trigger. Continuing with the car metaphor, doing that with Emerald or someone like her capable of resisting hard enough may result in them running the car into a tree intentionally. It was something to keep in mind.

“Yep, he can take control,” Miltia whimpered as I forced her to stand and kneel in front of me. “Totally not doing this on my own—though, I'm not complaining about where it's going.”

I rolled my eyes, reaching out and petting the girl's head as I ordered her to undo my belt and fly. “More like she's loving every second of it.”

“That's…” Neo began, eyes going slightly wide as Miltia went to work enthusiastically, no apparent shame whatsoever about being forced to give a blowjob in front of other people. Then again, considering we'd all done worse with and to each other, I could see why it wouldn't really phase her. “Really hot, actually. I vote we table the discussion for later and move on to team-building exercises.”

“Seconded,” Melanie absently agreed from beside me, watching her sister working for a moment before turning her gaze towards Neo.
That contest of wills lasted all of three seconds before the ice cream themed girl shrugged and moved from her chair to kneel beside Miltia. Reaching out to push the white-clad twin's skirt up, she began removing an equally white set of panties as she pointed out, “We'll never get any work done at this rate, you know?”

“Sure we will,” Melanie denied. “We'll just have to figure out some sort of time management scheme.” She hissed, bringing a hand up to her lips and biting a knuckle as Neo's lips found their mark. “Miltia, you figure it out.”

Green eyes met mine from my lap and the red-clad twin rolled her eyes, grinning around a mouthful before bringing her hand up and making a 'yap-yap-yap' gesture. Shaking my head, I glanced over to where Neo was working over the second twin. ‘Back to work, you. And while you're at it, reach over there and give Neo some attention.’

In spite of what one would think, managing a submissive with a kinky streak a mile wide and expanding is much more work than managing a more dominant girl. With the dominant girl, you have three options: dominate, allow yourself to be dominated, or distract her. With Melanie, I'd found a balance of all three that seemed to keep her happy—push her down when she was in the mood for it, let her have her way occasionally, or sic either Miltia or Neo on her. Subs, conversely, require more input and creativity—especially the more intelligent ones—lest things get boring. And there was no denying that Miltiades was intelligent—she was actually the smarter of the twins, based on stats alone, with Melanie being the wiser. They balanced each other nicely, in that way.

I suppose my Semblance was right—I would be constantly having to balance the twins' wants and needs, sexual and otherwise, if I wanted to keep them around. I wasn't complaining, though, because they were worth it. It was mildly worrying how accurate it was in that regard, but at the moment my worries were miles away and I could at least convincingly lie to myself that they would stay that way for a while. The green-eyed girl in my lap wanted my full attention—and she deserved at least that much. I wasn't stupid—I knew exactly what she'd done, letting me control her like this. Yes, it fulfilled her need for kink, but it would also convince her sister and Neo that while what I could do was dangerous, it wasn't dangerous to them. Lucky for me, she was also completely loyal. I would just have to keep working to earn that sort of loyalty.
Watching Miltia massage the side of her jaw, I resisted the urge to roll my eyes. “Is it that bad?”

“You try keeping your mouth open for that long,” she shot back before a thoughtful look crossed her face. “No, I suppose you do, between the three of us maybe longer.”

Smiling, I reached out and stroked the side of her face, casting a quiet Heal. Almost reflexively, she turned her head slightly to press further into my touch. “Better?”

The red-clad twin nodded. “Much, thank you.”

Turning my attention to Neo, where she sat atop a table in what passed as a meeting room in the lower floor of the building where I'd found Roman, I asked, “You're sure they'll be here?”

Looking up from her scroll, Neo twirled the unfurled parasol/umbrella that was her weapon in one hand. “After the scare Emerald and I gave them? Yeah, they're coming. We've still got an hour or so to go. Just relax, they'll start trickling in soon.”

'Soon' turned out to be five minutes before the deadline as a group of ten men and two women all made their way in at the same time, telling me they had coordinated their arrival. Neo hopped down off her table and I asked her, “Is this it?”
“Everyone that didn’t split and isn’t on loan from Junior,” she agreed with a nod that sent neopolitan colored hair shifting atop her head.

“So, this is the new guy? He doesn’t look tough,” the largest of the mooks asked and my eyes tracked to the top of his head: Jim Bean, level 15—I recognized him as the man who had driven Roman and myself to the airport. The others were between level 8 and 10. It annoyed me that mooks could have a higher level than a Hunter, even a hunter in training, but then I suppose that Aura was all sorts of unfair if it put someone like Jun above them by virtue of being able to use hers even if her level was technically lower. It was like the level difference between grimm and myself—all of the cannon fodder grimm I’d killed to date had been higher level than me, yes, but without special skills they might as well not even put up a fight.

In a way, it was disappointing. In another way, I had the eerie sense of always waiting for the other shoe to drop where grimm were concerned… I realized that, around Vale, other Hunters mostly kept things cleared out. That meant that the grimm I had been killing off recently were nothing but leftover trash or were so new they hadn’t fully crossed over into the real world. How much stronger were grimm that weren’t fresh off the boat, so to speak? ‘Figure it out later. Deal with this now.’

Instead of answering Jim verbally, I pushed off the table I’d been leaning against and moved to stand in front of the big guy. At 6’3”, I was actually slightly taller than him when I stood to my full height— at least, with the boots. By comparison, the man was about twice as wide as me, with the sort of muscle mass I’d expect from a professional boxer—or leg-breaker. My hand streaked out, punching him in the gut and doubling him over my fist. He gasped and sucked air down and I stepped back, waiting. The moment he stood, his fist streaked out and impacted my face—doing exactly five damage to my mana, seeing as I had my buffs running. I blinked, eyes locking with his over my mask. “Good enough?”

The mook grinned, pulling his fist back and offering his hand to shake. “Good enough. The old boss never could take a hit.”

Shaking Jim's hand, I regarded the group gathered before us. “So, as Jimmy here kindly pointed out, I'm the new guy. I'll be taking over where Roman left off. First order of business: no more drugs. We don't need that kind of heat from the cops in the long term.”

“We pay the cops,” another mook pointed out, and I didn't bother reading his name before replying.

“And eventually that stops being enough or someone new comes in who isn't on the payroll. I want it gone. Clean it out and burn it safely. I want no evidence leading back to us on this. Understood?” I asked, getting a round of nods. “Second order of business: in order to make up for the loss in revenue, we're going to be expanding. Girls?”
That was the twins' cue as they took up places to either side of a large map of Vale we'd stuck up on the wall. The map itself was laminated and covered in lines of dry erase marker, delineating territory the girls knew of—which was most of it. Combined with data from my map, which now had color filters for territory, we had been able to make an accurate map of Vale's gang territories. “We are here,” Melanie began, highlighting the section of the map where our current base of operations resided with the laser pointer in her hand. “In the past day, half our territory has become contested with the news of Roman’s arrest as the other gangs attempt to move in. However, as you can see, all of that territory is bordered by territory belonging to the Red Hand—even if it's not all the Red Hand causing trouble.”

“If we take the Red Hand, we can use their numbers and territory as a buffer zone against the other groups. The best course of action is likely going to be a surgical strike, here,” Miltia circled an area in the Residential District, fairly close to our own apartment. “The leader of the Red Hand, 'Akamaru' as he calls himself, makes his home here—it's also his primary offices and, as such, is heavily defended against massed attacks. Like most crime bosses, Akamaru has several former Hunters or people who flunked out of the academies in his employ—but there's only one we really need to worry about.”

Melanie took up where Miltia paused, shifting her pointer to one of the many photographs the twins had collected over the last few hours. This was all new information to me, however, as I had been busily adding what my map told me to the physical map. “Howling Palm is Akamaru's primary enforcer and bodyguard. Unfortunately, we have no photographs of him or even an actual name, though we do have most of the rest of their upper command structure and at least some basics. As the nom de guerre implies, he's a wolf Faunus who specializes in hand-to-hand combat. He's one of the smart ones who realized that being a Hunter was a losing game and decided to join a gang—beyond that, as I said, we don't honestly have much on him.”

“Not that it's going to matter,” I pointed out, to which the twins nodded.

“Okay, so we're cutting the head off the snake. How are we getting in if this place is so well-guarded?” Jimmy asked and the four of us turned our collective gazes on him and the men and women behind him, where his sentiment was echoed. Clearly, they didn't like the idea of a suicide mission, when the numbers weren't on their side. I couldn't say I blamed them, really.

“You're not,” Neo deadpanned. “We are.”

Gesturing towards the map, I continued for her. “Your job is to roll through our territories and secure them one by one. Clean out or run off any assholes trying to move in and move on to the next.” Grinning, I moved over to one of the other tables, this one covered with a sheet, which I pulled off to expose the pile of weapons beneath, courtesy of Roman's stash from the hangar. “The name of the
game here is going to be 'overwhelming force.' Scare the shit out of anyone who doesn't belong, but make sure you let a good number of them take the option to run. The more that run, the further and faster news will spread that we've taken out the big guns and aren't playing around any longer. That should buy time and convince the other gangs it's a bad idea to move in on our turf. Ideally, I'd prefer you not kill anyone. The more people left over, the more of them we'll have to add to our own numbers later when we move into the recruitment phase. However, don't put yourselves at risk needlessly. If they're dug in or something, it may be safer to just wipe them out and move on. Also, try to limit civilian casualties if at all possible."

“This could bring the cops down on us, even worse than the drugs,” Jimmy warned, and I nodded.

“Yeah, it could, in the short term—long term, it'll likely be forgotten by the end of the month. Still, that's why you're going to have air support. One of you is a pilot. Who is it?” I asked, and one of the women there raised her hand—Angel White, level 10. “Okay, good. You're in charge of Bravo team. Take four men, arm up with heavy weapons—machine guns, RPGs, and grenade launchers. Whatever you think it would take to bring down whatever the police could muster against us on short notice. There's a Bullhead parked out back. Strap in and stay on standby. Alpha team will be lead by Big Jim here,” I grinned, gesturing to the man in question. “If you run across something you can’t handle, call for air support or extraction if necessary. It shouldn't be necessary, but I like having contingency plans for when shit hits the fan.”

“The plan sounds good, boss, but what about you? How are you all planning to get into the Red Hand's base without backup?” Jim asked, and I smirked under my mask before subvocalizing for Invisibility.

Slipping up behind the man, I pressed two fingers into the small of his back and dropped Invisibility. “I think we've got that covered.”

“Fair enough,” the large mook nodded and I moved back to rejoin the girls. “When do you want us to start?”

I turned to the twins, who spent a moment checking something on a scroll before answering. “Now, actually. One of our legitimate businesses is being harassed for protection money. They're the dry cleaner's just down the street. The owner's wife sent a text saying her husband is getting beaten with a bat for not agreeing to pay.”

“On it,” Jim acknowledged before turning to his men. “Arm up and grab ammo, we leave in one mike!”
“Former military?” I asked as an aside to Neo, who nodded.

“How’d you know?” she asked, and I shrugged.

“The way he looks, moves, and talks. Aside from that, I suppose it makes sense that we’ve have one or two… let me guess, Angel there is also former military?” I asked, gesturing towards our pilot.

The woman apparently heard as she took several paces closer before dropping into a quick salute before coming to parade rest. “Commander, Atlasian Navy. Honorably discharged, sir. I flew drop ships running black ops for a few years before an incident with grimm got most of my crew killed and earned me a medical discharge. My right leg is artificial, below the knee—that's where I took a Giant Nevermore's pinion.”

I frowned at that, asking, “They don't provide benefits?”

The woman's face took on an annoyed look. “I'm not an invalid, sir. I'd rather be in the air and doing what I love than stuck on the ground for the rest of my life—even if that means working for someone other than the government.”

Jim's group were beginning to pour out the front door. “You'd best go get prepped, then, Commander. We don't want to leave our men without CAS, do we?”

“No, sir,” the woman's grin turned slightly feral as she turned on a heel and stalked out the back for the Bullhead, the crew she'd chosen following behind.

The sounds of cars starting up came from outside, followed shortly by the Bullhead's engines spooling up to idle. Turning to the twins and Neo, I grinned. “We ready?”

Neo smirked, leading us out by the back door. “I asked for them to bring a spare car for us. As much as I loved traveling by line launcher, I didn't think you could carry all of us.”

“Probably not, but more for lack of ability to maneuver than exceeding the hardware's capabilities,” I admitted, climbing into the black sedan, Neo taking the front passenger seat and the twins in the back. “Mm, leather seats,” I hummed in appreciation as the seats conformed to my body. “This doesn't belong to anyone, does it? Or can I eat it, later?”
“I’ll ask,” Neo shrugged. I tilted the rearview and looked in the back seat, finding Melanie and Miltia doing something with their scrolls. Shrugging, I turned on the radio and opened my map, setting a waypoint for a parking garage near the target area.

The ride over was short and spent in companionable silence aside from the radio playing classic rock—from *Earth*. I still wanted to figure out how that got here, at some point. Parking the car, we got out and I drew the girls into a huddle. “Neo, if you would?”

The ice cream themed girl grinned and I felt something settle around us. “We’re veiled.”

“Okay. Just to make doubly sure… Party, for serious business,” I began inviting the girls. Once we were partied, I began applying Invisibility to each of us. With us all in a party together, we could all see each other, or at least a sort of semi-transparent version of each other. “Let’s go.”

The girls followed and we made our way across the street. “Door’s veiled,” Neo announced and we quickly made our way inside the lobby. “And so are the guards.”

“Sleep,” I began, waving my hand and hitting the guards stationed in the lobby. “Where’s the security room?”

“Nineteenth floor, under the penthouse, which is Akamaru’s private quarters,” Melanie answered.

Miltia gestured towards the elevators, “Sensors on the elevator doors and in the stairwells. There are only two security companies in Vale and both of them set things up pretty much the same way.”

Nodding, I moved us to the elevator. “Create ID.” One empty Instant Dungeon later, we were through the elevator doors and looking at the open shaft. “I can hit the roof from here and pull us all up. Grab on.”

The twins latched onto my sides and Neo hopped up onto my back. “And this is why we took the car,” she chuckled against the back of my neck.

“Yeah, I’m definitely getting you three your own line launchers,” I mused aloud, firing a line up to the roof twenty floors above us and taking hold of the Illusion Barrier around us before swinging us out into the elevator shaft. Once we’d stopped swinging, I held down the winch controls and reeled
us up to the entrance to the nineteenth floor. Expanding the Illusion Barrier around the door, we got them open and exited the shaft, dragging the ID with us to the door to the security room. Cutting through the door, we entered and I dropped the ID and quickly hit the three guards on monitor duty with an overpowered Sleep.

Taking a seat at one of the monitor stations, Miltia went to work while I sat at another and set about locating our target using their own security system against them. “The building is isolated. It's about what we thought—they hired someone to set up the gear, but they're doing all the monitoring themselves,” Miltia surmised. “Security is disabled for the time being. Have you found Akamaru?”

“Yeah,” I grinned, gesturing towards one of the monitors split into four camera feeds. “He's in his office. You didn't tell me Howling Palm was a woman.”

The girls blinked, shifting their attention to where the boss had a female Faunus bent over his desk and was pounding away at her. Thankfully, the audio feed was muted. “She looks bored,” Melanie pointed out.

“And his technique sucks,” Neo critiqued at the white-clad twin's side.

Miltia rolled her eyes. “Not everyone can use Aura and not everyone with Aura can keep it up 24/7. Cut the guy some slack for being a normal person.”

Looking between the three, I shook my head. “Do you talk about me like that when I'm not around?” When the trio exchanged guilty looks, I rolled my eyes. “I don't want to know.”

“We don't talk bad about you behind your back,” Miltia assured. “We do talk—about things we enjoy and things we'd like to try.”

Melanie gestured towards the monitor. “Come on, we're wasting an opportunity here. We've got both the boss and the top enforcer with their pants down, in the literal sense. We couldn't catch them more off guard if we'd planned it. Let's not waste the opportunity talking about things that can wait.”

“Agreed,” Neo and Miltia chimed, turning to look at me for confirmation.

I shrugged. “The feed from his office is looped, so if they go over this later all it's going to show is a half-hour loop of them banging away. Let's go.”
With the security disabled, we called the elevator and went up to the penthouse. There were more guards of various levels who looked up in confusion the moment the elevator doors opened. Hitting them with Sleep and Forget, we moved on to the office. “Door?” I asked Neo, and she nodded. Opening the door, we were ’treated’ to the sounds we had missed out on in the security room. “Sleep,” I deadpanned, cutting the sound of frantic sex over a desk off in favor of a pair of bodies hitting the floor.

“Now what?” Neo asked, raising an eyebrow as she observed the pair on the floor.

“Now the mind-fuckery begins.” I grinned before hitting the pair with Confuse, Charm, and Forget, followed by Dominate. Dismissing Sleep, I had them put on clothes before I began the next part. “How many men do you have under your control?”

Compelled to answer as they were, the Faunus woman stepped forward and answered with, “Thirty five capable of mobilizing for combat, including myself.”

“Twenty… three I believe, on the financial side of things,” Akamaru answered after a pause to think it over. “Those are direct employees only, of course. I'm sure many of them have underlings themselves.”

“Where do you keep your financial records?” Miltia asked, already inspecting the desk and its contents. “The real stuff, not the cooked books.”

Akamaru gestured towards a single laptop style computer on top of his desk. “The only copies are kept on my personal computer, which remains disconnected from any networks. There are no physical copies and the data is encrypted and password protected. The laptop case itself is actually a shell containing a GPS tracker and a set of incendiary explosives—should the case leave the building, the unit self-destructs. A little paranoid, certainly, but one can never be too careful in our line of work.” A little mental prodding got him to fork over the passwords and Miltia set to work copying the data off to a removable drive she'd brought along.

“How permanent can you make this?” Melanie asked, gesturing towards the pair.

I honestly didn't have an answer, seeing as I had never tried. “Not sure. I've always had ethical qualms against complete brainwashing.”
From her place at the laptop, Miltia hummed. “It may be worth considering. They're raking in a lot of cash and we could use their resources and men on a more permanent basis.”

I met Neo's eyes and the ice cream themed girl shrugged. “We trust you not to do the same to us, but that doesn't mean you shouldn't use it where it's advantageous. Convincing them they work for us should be enough.”

This was another of those stark reminders that some of my girls had a more flexible morality than I was used to. Thinking it over, I met Akamaru's eyes despite the fact that he couldn't actually see mine—or anyone else, given that Invisibility was still up and running across the board—and asked, “What about you? Would you agree to partner with us, knowing what you do at this moment?”

“Yes,” he answered, before quickly adding, “However, you are a threat. Eventually, I would attempt to find a way to either get you under my control or kill you if that proved not to be a viable option.”

Frowning, I asked, “And how would you go about getting me under your control?”

“My first option would be to attempt to uncover your identity and, from there, to approach your family if you had any that we could find. I would have one of them taken hostage and made comfortable here, with the understanding that things would become uncomfortable for them should you refuse to cooperate.”

Listening to this criminal casually talk about how his first option for getting me under his thumb would be going after my family, I was suddenly glad for having put a few layers of separation between myself and the Arc family. It hit me suddenly that I was out in deeper water than I'd thought and one false move, one slip-up, and I would sink and drag down everyone around me. I was a grown damn man with no criminal experience in my previous life and my entire plan for infiltrating the criminal underworld boiled down to either abuse my Semblance or wing it, usually both in combination. It was only my good fortune of having the twins and Neo in my pocket and blind, stupid luck that had kept my family safe so far—that, and what I had thought was an unhealthy level of paranoia.

'God, I should have listened to Joan. These people play for keeps. Why did I ever think I could just stroll into this world with no backup and no plan worth a damn and survive? And I'm too involved to get out easily now. The girls know who I am and I wouldn't abandon them even if I did want out. Cinder knows my face for fuck sake, which means I either have to avoid allowing her and 'Jaune' to come into contact or convince her that I'm not working against her. Can't just mind-wipe her either, like I did with Emerald. And then there's my other alter ego, who needs to start making reappearances soon… And of course, most pressing at the moment, keeping these idiots off my back. What am I going to do about them? Too valuable to throw away, too dangerous to leave them to their own devices.'
Howling Palm was level 25—at the moment, I had no doubt she would be able to ambush and kidnap Jun should the need arise. That thought roused something inside me—a slow-burning anger that I was intimately familiar with, but hadn't felt since waking up in Remnant. My eyes narrowing in a glare as any thoughts of not abusing my powers went up in smoke, I threw an overpowered Confuse and Charm at them, holding the spells until I felt something click. “We're all friends here though, so there won't be any of that, will there?” I asked.

“None at all,” Akamaru agreed, Howling Palm nodding along at his side. What I could sense from Dominate told me they weren't even attempting to fight it—the wonders of Charm at work. I would have to come back in the next day or so and check in on them, but I got the feeling I may have just permanently puppeted them—at least until I dismissed the spells myself. And you know what? I was fine with that, considering they would not have hesitated to do me and mine harm. Realistically, not much about their lives would change—they would still carry on their business, still think and act as they normally would have… except in regards to me and mine, where I had subverted that little place reserved for ‘god’ in their minds. At least, I hoped. Was it distasteful? Yes, undoubtedly. The thing was, I was a better person than these people and their ilk and wouldn't abuse my powers against the innocent or those near and dear to me. Criminals were fair game now, as far as I was concerned. It wasn't just self-righteousness or some sense of moral superiority.

“I think we're good,” I told the girls. “Miltia?”

The red-clad twin disconnected the portable drive and powered down the computer. “Good.”

“Okay,” I nodded. Slapping the pair with a quick Forget, I erased everything from the moment we'd interrupted them while leaving the previous spell effects in place. Waiting a moment for the spell to take effect, I began giving out orders—firstly, to secure their borders and stop allowing members of other gangs through, then to stop harassing our territory, and finally to leave a tithe of money out of their earnings at a dead-drop location weekly on the border of our territory. That done, I had them move into the private bedroom suite and go to bed as they normally would, then hit them with Sleep and Confuse in order to convince them they had simply screwed and then decided to have a nap. If I had layered my spells correctly, they would wake up little different aside from my standing orders and new status as their superior—and it wouldn't even be me in their minds so much as someone, given they wouldn't remember any of this.

“We're good,” I announced to the girls, and we went back down to the security room, where we set about fixing the security system. That done, I woke the guards on watch duty and hit them all with Dominate, before ordering one to go to the lobby via the elevator. We rode down with him and I woke the guards downstairs before hitting them all with Confuse. Finally, I hit the guard who had walked us down with Confuse and Forget, before ordering him to go back to the security room and delete the last few minutes of footage. Once he was in the elevator, we made our way outside the same way we'd come in. Once I'd gotten feedback from Dominate that my last orders had been carried out, I dropped the spell and we made our way to the car, and from there back to the office.
There were still things to do to finish securing our territory even with the coming cessation of hostilities from the Red Hand. Half the battle would be in information—mostly in knowing where our men on the ground were needed most at any one time. With two car-loads of men, they could split up and cover more ground while still having air support on standby, so the twins and Neo set about gathering information and directing the separate groups. The twins placed calls, finding out where trouble was, and relayed the information to Neo who passed it on to our groups in the field.

With the exception of my real-time map telling us which general areas were contested there wasn't much I could do there, so I left the girls to it. Instead, it was decided that I could make better use of my talents elsewhere—specifically, abusing magic to turn the other two rival gangs against each other. With Invisibility and Confuse, along with some of the guns I'd pilfered, I could use my map to locate rival gang patrols on the borders between the other two factions in Vale and stage hit and run attacks—and between those two spells, a single invisible enemy became an unknown number of ghosts, always retreating before the patrols could catch sight of them, or so they supposed. Drawing two such groups from rival factions together and getting them to exchange fire was surprisingly easy that way—even more so if I threw in the occasional Berserk directed at the mooks who appeared to be giving orders.

More importantly, it gave me lots of human targets I wouldn't feel at all bad about experimenting on as far as spell creation went. I'd been meaning to round out my mental spells for a while and playing around with Dominate had given me a couple of ideas for both benign and malicious spells. Read Thoughts allowed me to delve into the target's thoughts and memories, pitting my INT against their Will Save. The problem with that turned out to be too much access to a target's thoughts. I compared it to walking into a library and trying to find something specific with no guide, no references, and no labels. Pulling surface thoughts was useful, but actually attempting to go rooting around in someone's mind turned out to mostly useless by itself—and not just because I had no point of reference.

Forget, by comparison, I could at least direct. Read Thoughts, when used to view memories, seemed to cause the target to actually remember those memories at the same time I attempted to access them—which made sense, from a technical standpoint, if you looked at the brain as a biological computer. Of course reading or writing data from long term storage—a hard disk, in my internal comparison—would show up as you were doing it. And people started suspecting something fishy was up the moment old memories started surfacing for no reason whatsoever, completely outside their ability to control—as in panicked screaming and clawing at the eyeballs. Because mind reading couldn't just be as easy as a Google search, even with my Semblance.

Read Thoughts turned out to be much more manageable when combined with other spells—specifically, Dominate, since that meant I could issue mental orders the target couldn't refuse. In my library metaphor, it was the equivalent of running down a librarian and demanding they bring you the materials you wanted—because they're the ones that organized it in the first place, so they would know where everything was. However, as with Dominate, once I dropped them and whoever I'd used them on came to their senses they tended to panic—well, freak the fuck out, really. Again with the clawing of eyeballs. One had even started firing blindly at everyone around before I slapped him and everyone around him with a quick Forget, erasing the incident from his mind. That meant that if
I wanted to go hunting for anything deeper than surface thoughts, I'd need to mind-wipe whoever I used it on afterwards.

The synergy between Dominate and Read Thoughts gave me an idea for a more benign skill in Telepathy, however—which allowed me to share thoughts, send messages, even share senses with whoever I was connected with over a good distance. Combined with the party system, it would provide for secure communication between teammates and allow for faster reaction times to threats—maybe more. I couldn't really test its limits on enemy mooks, nor did I want to share that sort of connection with them. I made a mental note to test it out with the girls later—it couldn't be used to pry memories out of people, so there was little chance of me slipping up and spilling the beans about Roman to Neo.

Between Read Thoughts and Telepathy, however, I was able to glean the locations of several drug houses, weapons' caches, and storehouses being used to hold stolen goods. The drug houses got burned to the ground, while the weapons were added to my growing stockpile. Of the stolen goods, most of it was primarily high-value items—telescreens, game systems, and the like—that were of little use to me personally. They were, however, of use to the gang—they could be sold to turn a profit, so they were marked for pickup and the twins called with the locations for later. There were a couple of stockpiles of Dust as well and those got thrown into Inventory as soon as I found them. I couldn't get them all, since no one mook knew where all the goods were stored, but it would be enough to convince both of the other gangs that someone was making a move against them—and given how I'd been stirring up trouble along their borders all night, they should naturally suspect each other.

By the time I decided I'd done enough for one night, it was nearly 3A.M., which seemed to be a bit of a pattern I'd fallen into—go out, get things done while the twins worked, get back in shortly after they did assuming we weren't already together. By then, I had received word from the girls that our ground operation clearing out our territory had been successful—and they hadn't even had to call for air support. I had also been exchanging texts with Cinder, when I wasn't exchanging gunfire and spells with mooks. She had been absolutely livid with Emerald's supposed behavior. I had offered to come over for some 'stress relief,' but the red witch had declined citing a need to move on to the next phase of her operation and had left town that morning—which was why she had been out of contact all day. I could read between the lines enough to translate that: Cinder had left and taken Emerald with her to both try to smooth some of Emerald's ruffled feathers and keep from burning something important to the ground.

Officially, I was supposed to be gathering Dust while she was out of town—pretty much taking over where Roman would have originally. I would have to deliver on that or Neo would suffer the consequences, but there was some leeway for causing problems for Cinder's plans. For instance, if I grabbed mostly low-grade junk Dust to take up volume, I could keep the high-grade stuff for myself for the most part. Some would have to go to Cinder, obviously, but I could make sure it was a lot less than she was hoping for. And with some creative crafting, I could even mold low-grade Dust to look like higher grade Dust—meaning I could make up a lot of the volume of those high grade crystals she was expecting with trash forgeries.
In addition, with Sanguine's knowledge of bounded fields, I could do all sorts of nasty things to the larger Dust crystals themselves—things like rigging them to explode if mishandled. The only real way giving her trapped Dust I'd stolen could backfire, aside from being found out, was if she wasn't having it stolen to use but simply as a means of resource denial. The thought had me reconsidering simply stockpiling Dust for my personal use and to keep out of Cinder's hands. If I duped the Dust before I stole the originals, I could have a ready store on hand in the event that it was truly needed, which I could make sure found its way where it needed to go.

Of course, with a convenient excuse from Cinder, that meant I'd have reason to hire some goons out from Junior to perform the actual smash-and-grab thefts in the real world while the girls and I pulled simultaneous heists inside Illusion Barriers. There were a couple of reasons to go the overt route here as opposed to the covert route. It would give 'the Fox' an obvious target to pick a fight with later, to bump him further up Cinder's shit list. With Neo's Semblance, I was pretty sure I could stage some sort of confrontation between Shiro and the Fox that would provide enough evidence to rule out them being the same person to Cinder, and if Ozpin was watching—and I was sure he was—draw his attention to the Dust thefts.

As I neared the apartment, flashing blue and red lights drew my eye and I changed course to swing in for a look. Dropping down onto a building overlooking an alley a couple of blocks down from the apartment, I took in the scene. A police car was parked in the mouth of the alley with its headlights illuminating the scene while a couple of other vehicles were parked along the street. I couldn't quite make things out from this range, so I opened my inventory and equipped my glasses. They immediately focused an zoomed in on the upper half of the body of what looked like a man resting against the wall of the alley. Only the upper half, because the lower half was twenty feet away. Focusing Listen, I was able to make out conversation below as a couple of crime scene techs scurried around photographing everything.

“'It looks like an animal attack,’” one observed to a pair of men who looked like stereotypical detectives—one in a blue suit and navy jacket, the other in a brown slacks, a white button down, and a brown trench coat. I noted their names as Gordon Jones and Harvey Smith, Jones being the younger looking of the two in the blue suit with short, military-style cut blond hair and blue eyes. Smith was the elder of the pair in brown with long, stringy dark red hair run through with gray and brown eyes, and a bit overweight. I was mildly amused to see yet more evidence that the Color Naming Rule seemed to only really apply to Hunters most of the time. “We'll send the photos in for processing, but if I had to guess I'd say this was done by a bear just going by the evidence.”

“What about grimm?” asked Smith, voice rough from years of smoking it sounded like. “Ursa, maybe?”

“It's not an Ursa,” a familiar voice called, drawing their attention to a black clad form that had been slipping up the alley behind them and I had only failed to notice because of the fact that I still had the glasses zoomed in—which pointed out a glaring vulnerability I'd need to keep in mind when using them. Shifting my focus, I found myself looking down on Kuro from above, the masked woman moving around the detectives to kneel near enough to the body to observe the wounds directly.
Pointing at the dead man's right arm, she said, “Ursa's got a longer bite pattern than this and would've taken the arm clean off. And these claw marks across the chest? Too narrow for an Ursa. Not a Beowolf, either—not their style and you don't see lone Beowolves unless they're old, and those avoid cities.”

“But is it a grimm or not?” Smith asked, impatience clearly audible.

“Maybe,” she shrugged. “Shiro, get down here and have a closer look—tell me what you think.”

Shit. She hadn't looked up, so either she spotted me coming in or she sensed my Aura from there. The two detectives and the crime scene tech spared a moment to look around before spotting me as I dropped down. Taking off the glasses, I stowed them in a side pouch before joining Kuro at her side. “They don't know?” I whispered, kneeling beside her to have a closer look.

“We're just Hunters until they can prove otherwise,” she answered, equally quiet, before pointing at the bite mark. “What do you think?”

The angle I had been viewing the scene from earlier had prevented me from seeing the man's face, and now I wished I'd stayed up there. He had no face—the flesh had been stripped down to the bone. The killing blow, however, I would have to speculate as the bite circling the victim's head—whatever it was had put his head in its mouth and killed him with a bite through the skull to the brain, two large fangs doing the work of penetrating the bone there. The rest of the damage... the rest made no sense in the context of a wild animal. Maybe a grimm, but I didn't know enough to say for certain. I wasn't sure they were typically this violent with their prey.

Grimm were killing machines, yes, but other than feeding on fresh kills I didn't think they tended to mutilate them. The skill book I'd eaten to gain Favored Enemy: Grimm hadn't had that information—which gave me an excuse to go later and pick up more skill books and other books on grimm... and actually read the books I'd borrowed from the library. Well, at least this time I had the money to buy them instead of stealing them. I subvocalized Observe and was unsurprised when it couldn't give me a name or other personal details—no Aura, which is what I figured my ability to see names and titles ran off of, and no face to identify it. Observe gave me the full list of the body's injuries and I winced. What did I think? I didn't think it was an animal attack, maybe not even a grimm. I'd need a bit more to prove that, however.

“Can we roll him over?” I asked, curious to see with my own eyes what Observe had told me would be there. The tech looked to the detectives who nodded, then carefully rolled the body over to expose its back, where there were two sets of raking claw marks starting directly between his shoulders and going down near to where the body was severed.
I made my way over to the lower half of the torso and hit that with Observe as well just for the full details, but I don't think I'd have needed to. “Smaller bites and some clawing on the back and sides of the legs.”

“So, what, more than one of these things?” Jones asked, as he and his elder partner moved in to have a look.

I shook my head. “No, same bite radius, just… less of the mouth used. It nipped him.” I shared a glance with Kuro before asking, “Are grimm prone to playing with their food?”

“Not usually,” she answered, shaking her head. “It does look like that's what happened.”

“Maybe,” I mused aloud. “Have you checked to see if this guy has a wallet in his back pocket?”

“Not yet. I can now, if you would like,” the tech offered and we nodded. Pushing the partial body up enough to check, he fished out a leather wallet, handing it over to Jones who'd already held out his hand for it.

Opening the wallet, Jones read off the identification there before grimacing. “I'll run the ID through the database, but the guy's name is Wenge Cunz. Faunus of some kind.”

“Shit.” Smith grumbled, drawing the word out. “Well, let's hope the chief agrees that it was a grimm. Then it stops being my problem.”

“It was a grimm,” I agreed—though I doubted it was a normal stray grimm at this point. On a hunch, I looked around a moment, looking for a blood trail I suspected I'd find before rolling my eyes and putting my glasses back on and taking out my scroll. Connecting the two, I set the glasses to scan for and highlight blood and grinned when all of it became highly visible. As I had suspected, there was a trail leading out of the alley. Following the trail, the blood grew progressively more sparse as it followed a path along the sidewalk and up the street in the direction of the bridge to the Commercial District before finally stopping just shy of the bridge.

“Blood trail ends here,” Kuro sighed at my side. “Those things are cheating, you know.”

I rolled my eyes behind the glasses in question. “Not really. I could have tracked it without them, they just makes it easier.” Looking at the woman beside me, I asked, “So, out of curiosity, what were
you doing here tonight?”

Kuro shot me an annoyed look under her mask. “Like you don't know.”

Frowning, I shook my head. “I wouldn't have asked if I did.”

“Right, and here I thought you were being clever when you arranged for delivery on my roof,” she deadpanned. “I was being polite by ignoring you and not prying into things outside of the job, but since you brought it up, I was going home. Thanks for fixing the sanctification over the building, neighbor. I hadn't had the heart to since Sang… well, for a while now.”

My eyebrows climbed towards my hairline for a moment before I palmed my face. “You live in the other penthouse suite, don't you?”

“Yep.”

I groaned. ‘Great. Who else knows either who I am, what I look like, or where I live that shouldn't?’ I griped silently, asking, “How long have you known?”

A smirk crept up her black painted lips. “Since day one. I hadn't actually seen you yet, or caught you coming or going, but I could sense your Aura. By the way, do me a favor? Either ward your apartment to shield it from Aura or invite me over, because that shit's getting annoying. Like I said, I thought you knew and were doing it on purpose, at least once you asked for delivery on the roof.”

Blinking in confusion, I asked, “Doing what on purpose?”

Kuro frowned, eyes narrowing as she studied me. “You, and those twins, and the other one. All the time.”

Oh. Oh. Of course. If she could sense my Aura normally through the walls, then it must have gotten a bit irritating when Dating Mode was updated to being an always-on passive skill. And with the way Auras interacted during sex, something which rituals like Sanctification took full advantage of, I could see why she'd be a bit annoyed. We'd been blue-balling her the entire time. That could very well explain why she had been pissy lately. A smirk slowly crept across my lips under my mask and I teased, “So is this why you've been irritable here recently?”

“Shut up, smartass,” she groaned. Shaking her head in dismissal, she turned and began following the
pattern back, looking down and attempting to match strides with the occasional partial boot print. “He was running—limping, really. It chased him. No, it toyed with him, like you said.”

“Yeah.” Moving back into the alley, I gestured to a new puddle that trailed partly in the direction of the top half of the torso. “This is where it brought him down. Caught him with both sets of paws in the middle of the back.”

“Pounced, you mean,” she corrected, and I nodded. “So, some sort of great cat?”

“Ye—” I blinked, eyes narrowing in thought. “Yeah.”

Kuro did not miss my hesitation. “Something up?”

I shrugged. “Not sure yet. Maybe. Ran across something I hadn't seen before the other day and it got away before I could kill it, or identify it. Looked kind of like a cat.”

“What, like a puma or something?”

“Could have been, or a lynx maybe. If, you know, it was a grimm,” I admitted. I gestured towards the puddle of drying blood and the way it was smeared over the ground. “Looks like he tried to crawl away here and wound up where he is now—well, most of him.”

Kuro followed the trail before taking another look at the upper torso. “So, the bite marks on the arm? They don't look defensive. It looks like it grabbed his arm and used it to roll him over onto his back. Then it worked over his face before splitting him down the middle and tossing the bottom half. Pretty sure the bite that killed him came after all that. It left his eyes, and based on the bite marks, his last view would have been straight down this thing’s throat before his head went crunch.”

I couldn't disagree, since that was along my own lines of thought. “I don't think it did all this to toy with him. I think it was *terrorizing* him, in the literal sense of the word.”

The older girl shot a look over her shoulder at me that clearly said she didn't like where that line of thought lead. “Let's hope not. That implies intelligence and smart grimm are bad news. Do those fancy glasses of yours have a way to track this thing?”
“No,” I shook my head. “Already tried.”

It was at that time that we were rejoined by the two detectives, Smith looking especially relieved. Around us, the crime scene crew were already packing up and departing. “I am happy to inform you that this is officially not my problem. Do us a favor and let whatever Hunter gets assigned to tracking this thing down know what you found out.”

Kuro nodded while I turned to Jones and asked, “So, anything on this guy?”

The blond man shot me a look that said I shouldn't even have to ask. “Rap sheet a mile long for petty stuff—drug possession, dealing, theft, domestic violence, drunk and disorderly. Real piece of work.” He turned to his partner before adding, “Also suspected of being involved in that mess last year.”

Smith frowned, a look of irritation crossing his face before shooting the body a glance. “Well, it's not related.”

I was missing something here, obviously—and something Kuro apparently knew. “What mess?” At the looks I got from the detectives, I sighed. “I'm new in town.”

“Turf war bullshit,” Smith shrugged. “Some deal went bad and a Huntress got caught up in it and killed. After that… officially, it was a gang war and we—that is, the Vale City Police Department—were ordered not to intervene. Unofficially? The girl's old team got down and dirty with some good old-fashioned vigilante justice and wiped out most of the people involved. I guess a few of the roaches managed to get out from under the boot before it came down. Even if we took an official stance on it, well… Hunters.” That word summed it up in his opinion, judging by the tone.

A dawning realization crept up on me as I shifted my focus to Kuro. “What was her name?”

The black-clad woman looked away, confirming my suspicion before she even answered. “Sanguine.”

I sighed, nodding and putting that aside to ask about later before turning to the pair of detectives who were already heading for their car. “Hey, should we maybe try to run some of these guys down, if they're back in town?”

“What for?” Smith asked, climbing into the car and rolling down the window before closing the
door. “One death isn't even a *coincidence*. Our Mr. Coon was probably just in the wrong place at the wrong time and got the end he deserved.”

“Cunz,” his partner corrected as he dropped into the passenger seat.

“That's what I said. Coons,” the elder detective argued.

“Hey! Argue over how to pronounce it later. Are you sure this isn't something worth following up?” I asked, to which the brown-coated detective laughed.

The car started, nearly drowning out his response, but I made it out over the roar of the engine bouncing off the alley walls. “If you want to try to run down a gang that went into hiding, be my guest! We've got criminals to catch.”

I watched the car back out of the alley, the whole place going dark as their headlights pulled away before I turned to face Kuro. “Were you one of her teammates?”

“No,” the woman sighed. Seeing my expectant look, she rolled her eyes. “If you want the story, I'm going to need a drink for this shit.”

I followed the black-clad woman back to our apartment building, taking a left coming out of the stairs from the roof instead of a right. She opened the door and waved me inside, where I found what was functionally a mirror of my own apartment, save that she had a smaller telescreen. “How much has he got you paying for this place?”

“About two grand,” she admitted.

As I sat in the seat she’d gestured me to, I asked, “So, why not trade services for rent? It's what I wound up negotiating.”

Kuro shot me a deadpan look from her kitchen as she dug through her refrigerator. “Firstly, not everyone is that great at creating bounded fields. Secondly, materials are expensive and it was cheaper to simply kill anything that wandered nearby. Thirdly… it didn't feel right.” I waved off the offered drink as she returned and took her own seat and the shrugged. “More for me.”
“So,” I began, watching her sip at her drink. “What was Sanguine to you? The landlord gave me her notes—that's how I set up the Sanctification—but I don't really know anything else and they're kind of sparse on personal details.”

Sighing out through her nose, the older girl rolled her glass between her palms for a moment before admitting, “We went to school together. I was in the year below her team, but… circumstances made interacting with her on a regular basis unavoidable. We got to talking and she offered to help me with a few things, and we just sort of hit it off. She had a thing for the guy on her team, but his head was so far up my s—his teammate's ass he couldn't see it. She didn't want to cause trouble though, so she refused to admit anything to him—and considering she was a naturally reserved person, it wasn't hard for her. The other girl wasn't horrible about it, though—the opposite, really. She was crafty about trying to set them up, he was just that dense. Long, complicated story short, we had a thing and I kind of figured Sanguine's teammate would get the message across eventually and I didn't really mind the guy myself so wasn't opposed to the idea… Well, family stuff called the guy away and he had to quit being a Hunter and everyone sort of just went their separate ways after graduation. We got together again about two years ago on a particularly nasty hunt and that's about the time I decided I wanted out of the Hunting business. I took up this job, but couldn't pay the rent for a while so Sanguine let me stay with her. Eventually, I made enough to pay for this place and we kind of coexisted for a while.”

Kuro paused, looking up from her glass and meeting my eyes. “Sorry, I shouldn't have said half that shit, just forget it. She was a friend and a bit more than a friend, and that's enough.”

I nodded, willing to let it slide. I'd noted women tended to get loose lipped at times around me after Ruby pointed it out—my Aura at work, I suppose. “So the dead clown is not even a coincidence, like the detective said?”

Kuro nodded. “Wrong place, wrong time. You know what they say: twice is coincidence, thrice is enemy action. This… it's just one body. Yeah, it may stir things up if her old teammates hear about it, but I wouldn't worry about it. Besides, if he was involved in what happened to Sanguine, then that was just karma catching up—justice, really. If not, well, I'm not going to pretend to feel bad about another piece of shit being off the streets for good.”

“Mm,” I hummed agreement, thinking it over before asking, “There was a journal mixed in amongst the notes the landlord brought. Did she have family that would want it?”

The older woman shook her head, finishing off one drink to swap it for the second. “No. She was an orphan and a Faunus so no one cared enough to find them before us, and by the time we knew her… well, I looked, but never found any records. There was a fire a few years back that destroyed the orphanage she grew up in, along with all the hard copy records—and I can't get into the digital copies. Her team and I were the closest thing to family she had. I wouldn't mind having it, neither would her old team, but I don't think I'll find anything too sentimental in it. And if you're using her
bounded field notes, then the journal will probably help—she wrote in the damn thing all the time, so there are likely notes better detailing some things in it.”

“There are,” I confirmed. “Out of curiosity, what kind of Faunus was she?”

Digging through her pockets, Kuro came out with her scroll and began flipping through it. “I'll do you one better. Here.”

Taking the scroll, I took in the photo she'd supplied. The girl in question was on the tan side of the Caucasian spectrum and had short hair a shade of red so dark I initially mistook it for black, similarly to Ruby's own hair, minus the brighter highlights. Perched atop her head were two short, reddish-brown ears with small rosettes, one canted slightly to the side as if a sound had caught her attention. It was her eyes that stood out, however—one a bright coke-bottle green, the other an equally bright electric blue. She was, in a word, beautiful—in a plain sort of way. She made no effort to make herself look good, she just took care of herself and the look came naturally. In the photo, she was curled up on a big leather chair I recognized as the one from my living room, a book in hand an a tolerantly amused expression on her face—clearly humoring the person taking the picture. She was short, but athletically muscled under her clothes—stocky, really. Sitting there as she was, she looked one part woman, one part apex predator at rest—then again, Faunus. That's exactly what she was. “Some kind of cat, then.”

Accepting the scroll as I handed it back, Kuro quickly put it away. “Yeah. Jaguar or something—we were never quite sure. The ears looked right for it, but there are occasionally house cats with that coloration. The only way to really tell domesticated animal type Faunus from wild animal type, if it's not plainly obvious by looking, is over long term study of their behavior or genetic analysis. She didn't want to get gene-sequenced, but the behavior patterns matched for wild cat as opposed to house cat. More territorial, enjoyed swimming, solitary for the most part, crepuscular activity patterns, and most assuredly a stalk-and-ambush predator—and definitely a carnivore.”

“I thought Faunus didn't necessarily act like the animal they were patterned after?” I asked, curious as to how that worked exactly. I needed to do some research on the topic at some point anyway. Eventually, I'd come across Blake at some point…

Kuro rolled her eyes. “Faunus rights groups whine about that as a point of contention, yes. Some don't, some do. Mostly, it comes down to the individual. The instincts are there, either way. Some Faunus go out of their way to avoid or ignore it. Others accept that they're different and use their instincts to their advantage. Sanguine was very much an 'I am what I am' kind of person and didn't really care what people thought either way. She wasn't one of those pushy 'in your face' types, but she didn't back down from a confrontation about it either.”

I chuckled, observing the girl across from me smiling at the memories. “You did your homework.”
“A bit,” she admitted. “So, are you going to go chasing after this thing or leave it to the Hunters?”

Thinking on it, I shrugged. “That depends. If I run across it, sure, but with no way to track it I can't really do anything.” Sighing, I admitted, “I saw something similar the day I Sanctified the building, but I didn't get a good look at it. Maybe they're related, maybe not. If it's the same grimm, then it's my responsibility to take the damn thing out since I let it get away. Yeah, you're right that the guy it killed wasn't the greatest specimen of sentient life and nothing of value was lost with his death, but the next one could be someone a lot less deserving of a sticky end. What about you?”

“I'm not a Hunter any more. Well, officially, I still am—I just avoid most of it. It's not my responsibility any more. Not yours, either. Just let someone else deal with it.” Judging by her tone, there was a story there. Something must have given my curiosity away because she spent a moment studying me before elaborating a bit. “Parents expected too much and I failed my team when they needed me. I didn't show up to a mission they needed me for after Sang died and they went with someone else instead. Can we not talk about depressing shit, please?” She finished by draining the last of her drink and switching to the one she'd poured for me.

“Sure. So…” I began, a smirk creeping up under my mask as I decided to change the subject for her. “Didn't realize you were a voyeur.”

The black-clad girl groaned. “If you keep wasting my batteries, I will come over there and do you harm.” I raised an eyebrow in amusement and she huffed, then threw back the second drink and downed it in one long pull. Sighing, she slammed the glass down on the table beside her chair.

“I'm going to bed.” She stood and made her way towards her bedroom and I shrugged and, figuring the conversation was over, decided to head back to my place for some sleep. I had made it to her front door before she called out, “Wrong way, jackass.”

Blinking, I turned and threw her an amused look. “How do you figure?”

“You owe me, damnit. The better part of a week of lost sleep and frustration.” I could feel the glare she was leveling me under her mask.

Scratching my head, I asked, “So, we just saw some guy gutted like a fish in an alley, then talked about your old flame, and I flirted at you and now you want to screw? How does that work? How are you even in the mood after seeing that?”
The woman across from me snorted. “Compartmentalization. Being able to put away shit to deal with later is an essential skill for a Hunter, so I'd suggest learning it now. So, in or out?”

Seeing that she was dead serious, I chuckled and pulled out my scroll. “You mind if I check in?”

The woman rolled her eyes and shook her head. “No, that's fine. Just don't take too long.”

Watching her sashay into her bedroom, I hit the speed dial for Miltia's number. She picked up on the fourth ring. “H-hello, Jaune. Uh… what's up?” There was a strangled 'eep!' a moment later, followed quickly by her hand covering the phone and a muffled cry of, “Stop that!”

For a moment, I was in another place and time, listening to another voice answering her phone similarly… Anger flared up as my jaws clenched and my lips curled into a silent snarl. The scroll in my hand squeaked in protest under the sudden pressure. 'No. Stop and think,' I shook my head, forcibly pushing away the unwanted memory and snuffing the anger as quickly as it had come. I had their loyalty—my Semblance confirmed that—and this was Remnant, not Earth. Neither the twins nor Neo would fuck around on me. Still, I was new to this world and not entirely sure on either the accuracy of my Semblance where that was concerned or my understanding of the rules of Remnant. 'Trust but verify,' I mused. “Put me on speaker.”


“Give me that,” Melanie's voice sounded and the scroll's audio bumped a moment as it changed hands. A moment later, she said, “Slide your scroll open.”

Raising an eyebrow, I pulled the scroll away from my ear and did as she asked. The scroll in my hands switched to video call mode, giving me a view of the inside of my apartment's bedroom—mostly blocked by Melanie's face, wearing a knowing look. She shifted around a bit on what I assumed was the bed before moving the scroll away and panning it around the room in a full circle, showing it to be empty aside from those on the bed. Holding it further away, she tilted it down so that the video looked down on her from above, and on the two other forms in the bed—Miltia, with Neo's head buried between her legs. “Wave for the camera, Neo.”

Pulling away from Miltia enough to turn her head up and look, her eyes met with mine and she grinned. “Enjoying the view?”

“I am now,” I admitted.
“Sorry, I tried to get her to stop,” Miltia began and I shook my head.

“It's fine.”

Melanie hummed, studying the screen for a moment as she asked, “I know you're in the building, and nearby… the apartment next door with the redhead?”

I hummed, shifting my gaze towards the bedroom—it seemed Melanie had just given away a bit of Kuro's real identity. Well, that was fine, since I didn't intend to use it against her anyway. However, something again tickled at my memory. It took a minute, but I finally realized what it was—the way she moved, the shape of her body and lower face, it all fit closely to what I knew of one of the other Arc sisters. Specifically, the second eldest and one of a set of twins. The thing is, she didn't sound like Jane Arc, nor did she act how my limited memories of her said she should.

Thinking on it, I shook my head in dismissal. There's a few ways to interpret this. In order of most to least likely… Option one: I'm wrong and the odds favoring someone looking similarly to Jane Arc are higher than the odds of moving into an apartment next to one of my sisters and then accidentally seducing her. With as many women as there are in the world, they can't all be related to me. Option two: I'm right and she's like Joan. Option three: I'm right and she hasn't recognized me. I could just ask, but if I'm wrong, that would give away my own identity—and while I could slap her with Forget, there's always the chance she could resist. No, best not to ask. If she's not who I think she is, it doesn't matter and I'm saved running the risk of exposing myself. If she is who I think she is, well… Wouldn't be the first time.'

“Well, we work in the same field, so I can only say it's been black every time I saw her,” I answered, pulling myself from my musings on Kuro's possible identity.

“So, let me guess, she finally got fed up with being exposed to your Aura and demanded attention before she decided to push you down?” she more brusque twin asked as, behind her, Neo and Miltia exchanged knowing looks.

“Pretty much,” I admitted. “Though, it seems kind of hypocritical—”

Miltia cut me off with a laugh. “You called. It's fine. Go for it.” In front of her, Melanie nodded. Shooting the twins an incredulous look, I shifted my gaze to Neo.
“Is she hot?” Neo asked, an impish grin stretching across strawberry lips.

“Oh, yeah,” both twins synced, nodding.

“A bit older,” Miltia added.

Melanie followed it up with, “Bigger breasts and a nice ass, too.”

Nodding, Neo's grin went wider. “I am okay with this. Think you could get her over here?”

“Probably not,” I admitted. I should be used to this by now, but no, it was still very surreal seeing the girls actively encourage me to screw other women and bring them back so they could have fun too.

Neo snorted while the twins broke into giggles. “Your face. Ah, I'll never get tired of seeing that look,” Melanie laughed. “Well, go on! Don't keep her waiting.”

“We want details in the morning,” Miltia added quickly.

“In the meantime, trust us to keep ourselves entertained,” Melanie smirked before disconnecting the call, her message delivered.

I really should learn to trust my girls more. I suppose that was another of those pieces of baggage from my old life I'd need to discard if I wanted to be happy here—but it's very, very hard to put aside what had been common sense on one world in favor of accepting things at face value in another.

“Shiro!” Kuro called, breaking me from that train of thought. “If you're done checking in with your girlfriends, I'm horny and you're keeping me waiting, damnit.”

Dropping my scroll into my side pouch, I grinned under my mask and made my way into her bedroom, pausing to lean against the door frame and take in the scene presented to me—Kuro, laying on her side and facing the door, completely exposed to my eyes save for the mask still over the upper portion of her face. 'Huh, Melanie was right. She is a natural redhead,' I mused, a grin stretching across my lips. I began pulling off my armor as I made my way towards the bed. Reaching up for my mask, she shook her head. “Leave it. It adds a little mystery,” she smirked.
“True,” I nodded, moving onto the bed and pushing her down onto her back. “But there are two problems with that. Firstly, are you sure you wouldn’t rather know who you’re screwing?”

Below me, I saw her eyes roll under her mask—bright green. She hadn’t bothered with contacts as I had. “I know enough. What’s the other hold up?”

“Keeping it on means I can’t really use my mouth on you. Or my tongue,” I pointed out.

Kuro snorted. “Improvise. And on that note,” she slung one leg around my hips and pushed up, rolling us over. “Maybe you’ll shut up if I put my mouth to use.” I had a moment to raise an eyebrow before she moved downwards, fingers trailing over my chest, pausing long enough to drag her nails lightly over my pectorals. “Mm, muscles,” she hummed in appreciation, before I felt the tip of her tongue flick across my shaft.

I smirked, under my mask. When I’d started off, this body had been lanky—tall and thin, with some muscle definition but not much. About what you’d expect from a fairly active teenaged young man who was still growing into his height. Every stat point that had been added to my base STR stat had increased that, but it was the passives that really changed the game. Now, my body was all tightly-packed muscle—exactly the sort of physique you would expect of a martial artist on the small side of the weight class. Not hugely swollen muscles bulging all over, but dense and clearly defined. Honestly, I doubt even the Arc family would recognize me by body alone with my shirt off.

“Shutting up, now,” I groaned as her lips parted and my cock disappeared into her cool mouth, her tongue swirling around my shaft and head as she applied enough suction to make my toes curl.
“You take us on the best dates, Jaune,” Melanie quipped, bending down to pick up a stack of lien and toss it into my Inventory window, currently set to visible for party members.

Miltia hummed, tossing in a couple of potions. “Actually, considering the monetary gain, in addition to the power gain, it really is a nice date. Far more productive than a movie.”

Melanie rolled her eyes. “Yes, yes. Money. Woo. Can’t a girl get a little romance now and then?”

“Feeling neglected?” I asked, only partly teasing, as I helped with picking up drops.

“Yes,” the brusque twin deadpanned.

On my other side, Neo hummed agreement. “Some alone-time would be nice. I mean, your sister’s getting the whole weekend. Seems only fair we would get a day or two each, ourselves.”

“Well, I had been thinking about working out a rotation for that sort of thing. In between grinding, taking care of the gang-related stuff, and so on…” I admitted, shrugging. “Would you two like individual dates or would you prefer to go together?”

The twins shared a look before nodding and turning to answer, syncing, “Individual dates.”
Nodding, I stood and looked around, spotting more mobs heading our way—zombies, as seemed to be the theme inside urban areas. It made sense that the twins would, occasionally, want to do some things separately—they shared many interests, yes, but they liked to be reminded that they were more than a unit and were each special and appreciated individually. Probably just a natural consequence of being twins, made a bit worse being looked at as a novelty in Junior's club. As for Neo, well, we had kind of just jumped head first into this thing with no real foundation to work with. In the short term, it was fun, but even with our mutual promise of partnership it wouldn't work without effort on both our parts—that meant getting to know one another better outside of the bedroom. The problem here was finding a way to choose the order that wouldn't leave someone's feelers hurt. The girls were all more mature than I gave them credit for, especially compared to women on Earth, but those situations could be avoided altogether simply by thoughtful planning and actual communication between parties.

“So,” I began, spinning up a quartet of Wind-element AP Rounds and sending them downrange to destroy half a dozen zombies as one of the rounds crit and punched through two more targets after the first. “To be fair, you can decide the order and times for this amongst yourselves.”

The girls shared a momentary look before Neo suggested, “Melanie brought it up, she can go first.”

Miltia chimed in, adding, “I don't mind going last. Pretty much any day is fine with me.”

Melanie hummed a moment in thought, taking in the remainder of the approaching group of zombies. “Monday night. Take me out somewhere nice to eat and take me dancing.”

Extending the blade on her parasol, Neo grinned. “There's a movie I want to see. Tuesday or Wednesday works for me, depending on how things with the gang go.”

Shifting my gaze to Miltia, I found her readying her claws. Her eyes met mine and she smiled. “Surprise me.”

“Okay, then. Are we ready to get back to grinding?” I asked, gesturing at the cluster of mobs now barely twenty feet away. Zombies were really slow and there was no real danger of them running at us—I had yet to encounter either fast or smart zombies, all of the ones I'd seen to date were classic Romero-style shamblers. It was almost disappointing, not to see rage zombies. Then again, so long as they weren't Resident Evil zombies, I could care less. Fuck those things.

“Let's,” the twins synced, darting off together to hit the group's right flank, Miltia sweeping in low to pull a zombie on the edge of the group off its feet. Beside her, Melanie made a small jump, landing with her bladed heel in the thing's skull before pushing off and twisting in the air into a scissor kick,
decapitating another.

Neo closed in from the other side, three copies of the girl splitting off while the original disappeared, each of the illusions pulling one of their own zombies. As soon as they were clear of the group, a blade materialized at the juncture between spine and skull at the base of one of their necks, Neo's illusion around herself dropping momentarily as she kicked the falling zombie off her blade before cloaking again and repeating the maneuver on the other two zombies.

Lifting my left hand, I took aim and fired, my line launcher spearing a zombie through the chest. Giving it a yank and reversing the winch brought the monster flying towards me, where I met it in the middle with a Flash Step into an iaido draw with my sword, cleanly severing its head from its neck before reeling my line back in and sheathing my sword. Throwing up Invisibility, I stepped into another silent Flash Step, appearing behind another zombie and striking, the monster's head exploding in the direction of my swing under the damage I'd dealt it from various stacking bonuses—wind and fire elemental manipulation for speed and damage, sneak, my buffs, and so forth. After that, it was simply a matter of rinse and repeat to finish off the rest.

I had finally taken the time to create a Flash Step skill that morning. The new skill was silent, meaning it immediately became part of my stealth skill set, and allowed me to instantly cross distances of ten meters in any direction at the moment, its range increasing as it leveled but also allowing me to overcharge it similarly to Powered Leap for further jumps. With proper timing, I could Step continuously, with only a half-second pause between steps—meaning I had a new fast movement form of running. Twenty meters per second averaged out to 44mph as my base speed just using Flash Step at what amounted to a walking pace, but stacking that with Haste and my run speed... I needed to measure it, but I knew it was damn fast. It was a continuous mana drain using it that way, but I had mana to burn really.

The biggest problems were imparted momentum and turning—it was a great technique for getting between point A and point B, but if I had to turn to do it odds were good I was going to fall. With some practice, I could probably figure out how to solve that problem, but until then I'd use it for straight line travel and short bursts only. The good news meant that all that momentum I build up was good for something—namely, dumping damage into something at the end of a run. That technique was pretty much Ruby Rose's bread and butter, with her weapon of choice.

I'd convinced the girls to party up and come grinding with me with the argument that the twins and I could use the levels—pointing out that they were still level 22, while I was level 23 now, and Neo was at level 33. Bringing us all up to around the same level had appealed to the girls, but what really sold it was Miltia reminding them about the drops and the fact that I'd already agreed to split the loot with them. So, we had spent the time between around 10A.M. and 2P.M. killing mobs. The twins had already gained a level and I wasn't far off myself, while Neo didn't seem to be getting much, if any experience—likely due to the level gap between us. The zombies themselves were only level 25, so were no particular challenge. The few grimm we ran across—stalkers and beowolves, mostly—were likewise no challenge by myself so with a full party taking them out was child's play.
With another group dispatched, I checked my map and found we had nearly cleared this block out—Spirit Density was down to 25%. We had decided to start close to the apartment so that we could extend the range of our own safe area, guaranteed free of grimm—and given the gruesome find from last night, the girls were willing and eager to do so, as no one wanted to wind up getting mauled. “We’re nearly done here,” I announced as we gathered more drops. I really needed some way to do that faster, or automatically.

“Are we going to Sanctify the block when we’re through?” Miltia asked, raising a good point.

I nodded. “I think we should. At least get the ones in the immediate vicinity of the apartment. Maybe find a way to tie them into the one at the apartment so they can all run off the one bounded field, that way we don’t have to waste so much Dust. I’ll have to dig through Sanguine’s notes and see if she had any ideas. Purity White is expensive, and rare—and even with a small stockpile I don’t feel like burning through it all trying to cover a larger area than I have to. If we clean out the area around the apartment block, Sanctify that, then keep the area within about a one or two block radius from the edge of that cleared that should create a large enough safe area to discourage most things.”

“Just make sure to get your sister here to renew the wards,” Melanie reminded, and I nodded.

I noticed Neo frown before standing, head tilting off to the side. “Anyone else hear that?”

No one got a chance to confirm one way or another as, below us, the ground started trembling faintly—evidenced by the few potions still on the ground beginning to rattle. Quickly picking them up before they broke, I stood with the others and looked around. “Over there,” Melanie pointed towards the far end of the block, hidden from sight by a couple of buildings.

We quickly ascended to one of the lower buildings and had a look. “What is that?” Miltia asked, a disgusted look crossing her face.

Just down the road, a small horde of zombies were swiftly congregating, all piling on top of each other and the flesh that made them up beginning to meld. “Not sure,” I hummed, equipping my glasses and zooming in. “Never seen them do this before.”

“So, it's new,” Neo summarized, and I nodded. “And new is bad.”

“When it comes to most mobs, yeah. Something like this, I’d say was a setup for a… fuck. It’s a boss
fight,” I realized, my mouth nearly running ahead of my train of thought. It hadn’t completely formed yet, so we had a minute to go over our options. We could flee, yes, but the rewards for killing a boss tended to be well worth the danger of taking them on to begin with. The girls were all close-range fighters, and a boss of the size this one looked to be shaping up as was best fought at range and only in close by a tank or a DD with a high dodge score or DEX modifier. The twins might qualify for the second category, but I wasn't willing to risk them getting squished. ‘Well, why can't they be ranged?’ I mused, looking them over before quickly pulling up stats sheets. ‘Yeah, their INT is high enough, they could all do it…’

“Okay, new strategy!” I announced, grinning. “Miltia, hold out your hands,” I ordered and the girl obeyed without hesitation, as I knew she would. “Focus your Aura into your hands—just imagine compressing it into a ball.”

“What are you doing?” Melanie wondered, watching her sister. A moment later, her eyes went slightly wide as a small sphere of green colored Aura condensed between her twin's palms. “Well, if she can do it…” Melanie hummed, duplicating her twin's actions and drawing Neo in as well, a sphere of pink Aura already beginning to form between the shorter girl's hands.

I had hoped for that, actually—that, upon seeing Miltia make the attempt and succeed, it would convince the other two it could be done without having to argue with them over it. Not that I expected Neo to, but Melanie might. On to phase two. “Now, stretch it out into a tube or bar.”

Once more, Miltia complied, followed a moment later by Neo and Melanie. Shifting my focus showed the boss had nearly finished forming, taking shape as a giant humanoid zombie of some sort with only a few missing pieces. When Miltia moved to follow my gaze, I shook my head. “No, focus on that,” I warned, gesturing towards the incomplete technique in her hands. Phase three. “Spin it. Focus on the mana inside and make it spin as fast as you can.”

The pattern repeated as before and I smirked under my mask, seeing three complete Spinning Mana Arrows. “What now?” Miltia asked, looking up to meet my eyes.

“Now?” I asked, my grin going wider. “Shoot it at that thing,” I gestured off to the side towards the boss, which now showed up as a Horde Zombie, level 35.

Her expression shifting into one of determination, the red-clad twin nodded, stretching out her hands palms out towards the boss. “Ha!”

A spinning green arrow streaked out down the block, striking the Horde Zombie in the lower abdomen and doing a fair chunk of damage—barely one percent of its total HP, but considering it had over 100k HP, that was still around 1k damage. A glance at Miltia's MP bar showed the attack
had cost her 5MP, which was insignificant compared to her total mana pool. Another streak of green and one of strawberry pink flashed out towards the boss with similar results. Melanie's shot struck it in the chest while Neo's struck its head, which garnered an immediate reaction as the Horde Zombie loosed a window-shattering roar. “I think we got its attention,” Neo observed with a bit of trepidation.

“You're fine. You three stay here and spam that attack as fast as you can—try to aim for its head, as that's clearly its weak point. Neo's one hit did like five times the damage because it was a crit—five percent of its HP.”

“What are you going to do?” Melanie asked, worry creeping into her voice.

I grinned. “I'm going to do what I do best—I'ma go piss it off and draw agg.”

“What? Wait!” Miltia began, but it was too late, as I'd already yanked myself off the roof and higher. Pushing off the building I'd grappled onto with a Powered Leap, I sent myself arrowing on an intercept course with the boss and threw on Invisibility. Three more streaks of mana dug into the Horde Zombie's head, further enraging it as it walked swiftly down the block for the building the girls were sniping from. “The fuck you do,” I growled, both hands crossing over my chest as I neared its head at beyond terminal velocity. Mana spun up in my hands and the sound of a thousand chirping birds filled the air as a pair of Plasma Blades spun up, one in either hand. Even if it heard the attack, it couldn't see me and it was too big to dodge.

I twisted in midair, shifting my body to pass over its head instead of plowing into it, swinging both blades down one after the other as I spun over it in a pair of attacks. Stacking bonuses stacked and I smirked as its HP bar promptly evaporated by a third. The difference in damage between myself and the girls was ridiculous as far as magic went, but then that was mostly due to a combination of passive skills and stacking bonuses. I wondered, for a moment, if I couldn't somehow teach those skills as well… ‘I'm almost afraid to see how much damage I could do if I stacked everything available to me. I could probably one-shot this thing, easily.’

The Horde Zombie stumbled, falling to its knees and clutching the top of its head as I stuck to a nearby building slightly behind it, dropping Invisibility so it would have a clear target to focus on. Its head turned, beady, red eyes drawn to the yellow-white glow of my Plasma Blades and locking onto me with a burning hate. “Come on, ugly. Let's play Attack on Titan.”

Quicker than I thought it could, it recovered enough to throw a massive backhanded slap at me, its hand smashing through the building and tearing out the upper floors as I Leapt, the blade in my left hand becoming a spinning disc of plasma as I flung it at the Horde Zombie's head to free up that hand and fired my line launcher. It seemed to be ignoring the now constant bombardment of attacks from the girls, which I noticed were growing progressively stronger— likely leveling from use by
level disparity. I only had a moment to think on that, or the fact that I had inadvertently created the skill **Strike Raid**, as I winched myself across the distance separating me and the boss, flaring gravity around me to speed my flight.

The Plasma Blade I'd sent flying at it had only grazed the right side of its head on the first pass before circling around behind its head and arching back towards my position. The Strike Raid's second blow caught the Horde Zombie down the middle of its left ear as it returned to me. With no hands free, however, I opted to let the blade whip past me and dissipate somewhere behind me. I was more focused on swinging the blade in my right hand at the back of the boss's neck as I passed, striking and dumping more mana into it to force it to dig in deeper as it passed between two vertebra.

As I swung past, a cluster of six of Spinning Mana Arrows punched through the back of the Horde Zombie's head, sending it toppling to the ground. 'Did they dual-cast?' I wondered, in a bit of amazement, not having expected them to get that as quickly as they had. As soon as it hit the ground, it began disintegrating and I received an EXP gain notification.

*Your party has defeated a Field Boss!*

*Your party gains 40,000 EXP! You gain 10,000 EXP!*

*You gain 1 INT, 1 DEX!*

*Your level has increased by 1! Melanie Malachite's level has increased by 1! Miltiades Malachite's level has increased by 1!*

*You have unlocked the title **Field Instructor**!*

"That was awesome!" Neo's voice called from street level and I grinned, dismissing the messages and hopping down to join them. I would check out the title later.

Miltia hummed in thought, looking over the spoils. “Kind of weak for a boss, though.”

“Field boss,” I corrected. “Mob hierarchy goes: trash mob, normal mob, elite mob, dungeon mob, dungeon elite, field boss/mini-boss, boss, then the raid versions of those dungeon variants up through boss. That was low tier and, at level 35, well below the party's CR.”
“Huh?” Neo asked, raising an eyebrow. “Sooo… it was weak only by comparison?”

I nodded. “Pretty much. That seems to be a recurring pattern around Vale—probably because Hunters keep the place cleaned out, for the most part. I bet money if we left Vale, we'd run across something much nastier. Come on, let's see what it dropped.”

What it dropped turned out to a small mountain of red and blue potions, a single florescent pink potion, 50kL, and a skill book for Life Drain. Absently eating the skill book, I Observed the pink potion and my eyes went wide. “Holy. Fuck.”

“What?” the girls chimed, looking at where I cradled the potion reverently in my hands.

“It's an Elixir. It won't remove status effects, but what it will do is completely restore one person to 100% HP and MP. You could be on death's door, hacked to pieces and this would make it better, so long as you could get it down your throat. Well, depending on the version anyway,” I explained, quickly dropping it into Inventory where it wouldn't get damaged. “They're supposed to be super rare. I haven't run across one before now, so I have to assume they are and it was sheer luck that thing dropped one. Considering my luck stat sucks, maybe… Nah. I'm not wasting points in it to increase the odds of shit dropping.”

“So, how much would you say it's worth?” Melanie asked, looking contemplative.

I shot her a deadpan look. “You don't sell Elixirs. They are worth your life, in the literal sense. They are to be jealously hoarded for when they are most needed.”

Melanie frowned at that, but nodded. “Fine, I get it. It would just be kind of useless if something happened and you weren't around with it.”

“Good point,” I admitted, standing and leading us down the block towards the apartment, since we were now done with this block. We slipped into an alley and I dropped the Instant Dungeon before we continued on. “I'll make sure you each have potions to fall back on, but maybe I can do something more. Give me a few days to do some research.”

That seemed to satisfy the girl and I turned my thoughts to solving that particular problem. Supposing one or more of them were incapacitated, then there would be no one around to provide heals—meaning whatever they'd run up against could finish them at its leisure. The girls weren't planning on
becoming Hunters any more, but the reality was that grimm were a threat to everyone, even inside cities like Vale, if they attacked in any real numbers. I needed some way to cast a mostly-permanent regen effect—and permanent effects were what bounded fields were all about. One more reason to check Sanguine's notes.

We made it back to the apartment and I dropped into my preferred chair, observing the girls as they sat. “So, I want to try something. Say 'Stats.'”

Three repetitions of the word followed before Miltia looked up and met my eyes. “We have points to spend. Why do we have points to spend?”

“Neo?” I asked, shooting her a questioning look.

“Nothing here, but then I didn't level,” Neo confirmed, closing her own stats page.

I nodded. “Right. My Semblance breaks reality for other people too, apparently—at least, if you're in my party. Normally, training by lifting weights or something would slowly increase muscle mass—right?” I got nods all around. “Yeah, my Semblance interprets lifting weights as work and grants me a point of STR for that. But when I level, I get stat points independent of training.”

“Five points per level?” Melanie asked, and I nodded. “So, why don't we have a huge pool of points?”

Miltia was ahead of me with an answer. “We do, though. We didn't get to choose them this way, we chose them by training. We both have a high DEX and STR, and that's where the majority of those points are—plus INT and WIS points clearly representative of our education and intellect. Charisma and Luck are the only two that have values that aren't immediately obvious. When you run the numbers, it looks like they were assigned based on how we trained and studied. Or…”

“Or?” I asked, grinning. I'd already figured out where she was going, given my experience dealing with The Outsider and my imported stats.

“Or it's just an assessment and there are no points,” Miltia finished her thought, and I nodded.

Neo hummed, drawing their attention. “Okay, so say it's an assessment and there aren't really any points for anyone but Jaune, normally. But there are points now?” The twins nodded and she asked,
“So, does that mean they won't do anything? Or is Jaune's Semblance granting anyone who parties with him the ability to improve themselves outside of training? And if so, will those benefits stick around if you're not in his party?”

The twins shared a look before grinning. “Let's find out,” Melanie suggested, reaching out and tapping the up arrow beside her INT score. Beside her, her sister dumped the points into WIS. Knowing the difference between them on those two scores was only ten, they would be evenly matched once they’d finished.

They closed their stats windows and nodded, and I dismissed the party. “Feel any different?”

“Not really?” Miltia admitted.

Melanie shrugged. “Is ten points really a noticeable difference?”

“It depends on the stat. If you'd dumped it in STR, you would have definitely noticed. Let's check and see if they're still there. Party, testing purposes.” A quick check proved the points were still there and their stats had adjusted accordingly. I had to assume a ten point jump was simply not enough for them to notice much of a difference in the mental stats. “In the meantime, try to see about practicing Spinning Mana Arrow,” I suggested.

Miltia smiled while Melanie took on a mildly awed look. “I still can't believe we can do that. Your Semblance is bullshit and I'd assumed that was what let you cast Aura like you do. Everyone else needs Dust. That, or you needed to be a caster type of person, trained to do it—someone like Cinder, or Goodwitch, or the Schnee family.”

“Technically, we did train. For like, ten seconds,” Miltia pointed out. “It's a stupid-simple technique. Whatever the basic requirements for projecting Aura as an attack are, we clearly meet them. Jaune's Semblance just sort of acts as a shortcut, I suppose. ...Which means, Jaune, we need to test that theory. If it works, we want skills. Spells. Abilities. Hacks. Soon.” She blinked, eyes going wide as she regarded the other two girls for a moment before adding, “What if it lets us eat skill books? We need to test this now.”

I rolled my eyes and would have offered for her to schedule a time to work on that, if my scroll ringing hadn't interrupted. Checking the display, I found it was Joan and quickly answered. “What's up?”
“Hello to you too, Jaune,” Joan's voice was teasing, but she knew by now I tended to skip pleasantries on calls. “Can you do me a favor? I'm still packing for the next week, and the sooner I get packed the sooner I get to leave, as soon as Jane gets here. Mind picking Jun up from school and bringing her home?”

I shrugged, though I knew she wouldn't see it. “Eh, sure, why not? I haven't seen the squirt in a few days and I kind of miss her.” Funny, that, seeing as I hadn't even known her that long. I paused a moment before remembering I didn't know where she went to school. “Uh, where's her school?”

Joan gave me the details and I turned back to the girls, dropping the scroll back into inventory. “Looks like I'm going to be leaving a bit early, so we won't get to do that testing you wanted,” I began and the girls sent me knowing looks.

“Go pick up your sister,” Melanie ordered imperiously, waving towards the door.

“But first,” Neo popped up from her seat, throwing her arms around my neck and planting a kiss on my lips. “Mm. Better.”

“Me too!” Melanie demanded, joining Neo and leaning over her shoulder for a kiss of her own.

Miltia leaned over Neo's other shoulder and waited patiently for her own kiss. Once she was satisfied, she helped pry Neo's hands off me and dragged her towards the door. “Want to spend the night at our place?”

“Sure, why not? Sounds like fun,” the ice cream themed girl laughed.

The girls left the apartment and, for a moment, it felt strangely empty with them gone. Shaking the sensation off, I made my way up to the roof and across town under Invisibility. I found Jun waiting in front of the school, talking to a couple of other kids milling around as the rest were either being picked up by parents, walking home, or taking buses. Dropping down around the corner from her, I checked to make sure I wasn't being watched before dropping Invisibility and walking up. “Hey there, kiddo.”

“Onii-chan!” Jun squealed, launching herself at Mach 1 to latch onto my waist. “I missed you! Where did you go?!”
“Well, I kind of needed some time to myself to work things out in my head, so I got a place of my own,” I told her, already leading her away. “Want to see it?”

“Yes!” the girl shouted, beaming a grin up at me.

I rolled my eyes. “Well, come here,” I said, picking her up and slinging her up into a piggy-back carry. “Try not to squeal in my ear.”

“What do you mean?” she asked as I threw up Invisibility on both of us. She found out a moment later as I fired my line launcher and pulled us up. “EEE!”

“What did I just say about rupturing my ear drums?” I groaned. And I had promised to take her by the apartment, which would mean even more squealing. Shit. I debated the merits of casting Silence on her, just to preserve my ears. Sure, Gamer's Body would prevent any lasting harm, but in the mean time… the girl could shatter glass.

“That was awesome!” Jun enthused as I opened the door and let her in before me.

Reaching down, I mussed her wind-tussled hair, drawing a small glare for my efforts. “Well, I'm glad you had fun.”

Jun stuck her tongue out before darting off deeper into the house and disappearing around a corner. “Onee-sama! Nee-chan!” she greeted and I blinked, realizing that had been two greetings—and that I sensed another Aura aside from Jun's and Joan's. It was familiar, though… Frowning in confusion, I closed the door behind me and followed Jun's path into the Arc family living room.

I paused at the entrance, taking in the scene before me. Joan sitting on one of the chairs, Jun wrapped around an older redhead's waist. For a moment, my eyes were drawn to the words above her head.

The Second Deadly Sister

Divine Mirror
The redhead's green eyes swung up and locked with mine at the same moment mine came down. "You!" she pointed, eyes going wide in swiftly dawning realization.

"Me?" I asked, pointing at myself in confusion for a moment, before her voice and Aura finally registered. "Kuro?" It seemed I had been right after all. 'Goddamnit. Right, that's it. Everyone gets ID'd at the door from now on.' I groaned quietly, hand coming up to palm my face in exasperation. "Why does this keep happening?"

Was it some facet of Marital Arts, or a result of my high Charisma score? Or was it just bad luck? Or bad Luck, rather? Yeah, I'd suspected, but only really in jest. 'Well, it's not the end of the world, and it isn't the first time it's happened—and hey, at least she's only a half-sister this time, so that's something. Fuck it. I'll get over it, she'll get over it, it'll be okay.'

The redhead's face paled, the hand pointing at me going up mirror my face-palm. "Oh, god. Kill me now."

Joan pushed off from her seat, looking between the two of us with an expression of confusion. "Something I'm missing here?"

"Nee-chan, what's wrong?" Jun asked, releasing her elder sibling—clearly one of Lily's kids, one of the twins I'd seen in the pictures, in fact. The mask and the hair dye, though… Well, there was a good chance I wouldn't have recognized her even without the mask, if my Semblance didn't tag her for me. My imported memories were good enough to know what the sisters looked like, but on a personal level I'd always sucked at facial recognition and that didn't change between bodies. Well, it was worth noting that masks worked here, at least as far as my Semblance was concerned—though maybe now it would label her properly, now that her identity had been confirmed.

Kuro—no, Jane—looked between me and Joan. "I… we… you know," she muttered, shooting a look down at Jun. Covering the girl's ears, she said, "This and that."

Jun's eyes went wide, as she clearly heard anyway. "You did 'this and that' with onii-chan?!"
“Oh, god,” Jane groaned. A smirk spread over Joan's lips and Jane shot her elder sister a glare. “Don't you start! I know about you, dammit. It was an accident!”

“Sure it was,” Joan nodded. “He slipped, you fell and landed on his…”

“Shut uuuup!” the younger of the pair whined pitifully.

Joan turned her gaze on me, mischief plainly evident. “You're not planning to make this a thing, are you?”

I sighed, pulling at my hair momentarily before letting it go and shooting her an annoyed look. “No, Joan. It really was an accident. No, let me rephrase that. Neither of us knew who the other was. I only suspected, but seriously, what are the odds I'd run into one of you and you wouldn't recognize me? It was intentional, but had we known we would not have.” Present company in mind, I turned and shot a look at Jane. “I think.”

“Aren't you supposed to be confined to bed for amnesia or something?” she asked, attempting to change the subject.

Joan wasn't quite willing to drop it yet, however. “So… was it fun?” she asked, a questioning look dancing between Jane and myself.

“Yes,” I admitted at the same time Jane squeaked, “No!”

A moment later, Jane's eyes went wide, shooting me a betrayed look. “Jaune! Stop,” she whimpered.

I couldn't help it. I tried to roll a Will Save, I really did, but it must have rolled a N at ural 1. “That's not what you said last night.”

“Jaune!” Jane whined, apparently feeling quite bullied.

Jun, on the other hand, detached herself from her elder sister and turned to shoot a glare at me. “When will I get to do this and that with onii-chan?! We haven't even gone on a date yet!”
Joan broke down laughing while Jane collapsed into a chair, shaking her head. Seeing as it looked to be up to me to deal with the situation, I turned my focus on the littlest deadly sister. “So, you want a date?” She nodded vehemently, puffing her cheeks out and glaring as she crossed her arms. “Okay.”

Jun stopped glaring, her expression shifting to suspicion. “Just like that? Really?”

“Well, really. Just like that,” I agreed before gesturing towards the stairs. “Go change clothes. You can't go on a date in your school uniform.”

“They do in my manga,” she denied, but quickly hurried upstairs. At the top of the stairs, she paused, turning to shoot me another suspicious look. “You're not going to leave before I get finished changing, are you?”

I shook my head and the girl took off like a shot for her room. Turning my attention towards the elder siblings, I moved over and put my hand on Jane's shoulder. She jerked slightly for a moment before relaxing. “Shit happens. It's okay. Okay?”

“But, but I molested you!” she argued, refusing to meet my eyes.

Running a hand up to tousle her hair, which drew an annoyed look, I smiled down on her. Joan's words our first time came back to me, then, “You couldn't do anything I wouldn't have allowed.” Grinning, I decided to go for a little added mortification, on her part. “Besides, I wasn't an unwilling participant, and if anything we molested each other. Mutual molestation, as it were.”

Across from us, Joan only laughed harder. “Goddamnit you brothercon, shut up already!” Jane hissed, looking up to shoot a glare at her elder sister.

Joan stopped laughing, but her smug look remained. “He knows.”

Jane's expression shifted to confusion for a moment as she processed that, before she looked up to me. “You… know she has a crush on you?”

I nodded and Joan snorted. “And he doesn’t care.”
The redhead rolled her eyes. “Of course not, if he doesn't remember over ninety percent of his life he may as well be a different person.”

“You wore a green dress to your prom and I was the only boy you'd dance with. You stepped on my toes the whole night, when I wasn't dancing with your sister—who wore an identical dress, because I was the only one who could tell you two apart, and you figured using them not being able to tell you apart would be a good bullshit filter for guys,” I deadpanned.

Both girls' eyes went wide. “You remember?” Joan asked, and I tilted my hand back and forth in a so-so gesture.

“Some. Not much. Less than 10%, I'd say,” I admitted with a shrug. “But it's something. Some things come back in fits and starts.” Which was not entirely untrue, just not in the way I'd phrased it.

Jane sent me an incredulous look. “And you're okay with that?”

Joan broke into another momentary giggle fit. “Oh, little sister, we're more than okay with it. In point of fact, I'm planning to spend the weekend getting fucked six ways from Sunday.” She took on a contemplative look, regarding her younger sister. “Though, you know, you're welcome to join…”


Joan and I shared a look before we both rolled our eyes before the eldest sister decided she'd had enough—her tolerance for bullshit apparently having reached its limit. “Oh grow up, you big baby. It's not the end of the world. It happened, you enjoyed it. If you don't want to do it again, don't. It's really that simple. Stop freaking out.”

“So you're going to move?” I asked, remembering the fact that my Aura had certain effects on women in the vicinity, especially during the act and that Jane—Kuro at the time—had been intimately aware of it for the past week, before finally giving in. Jane's eyes went wide as she frantically started waving for me to shut up. It was too late, however, as Joan turned a curious look on me, demanding I elaborate. “She lives next door to me. You know what my Aura does, so yeah…”

Joan's eyes narrowed as she turned a very unamused look on her younger sibling. “That would imply you're in Vale three weeks out of the month, as opposed to out hunting. Now, the question is, what exactly are you doing that you don't want me to know about to the point that you didn't want
me to know where you live when you're not here, that makes a comparable income?"

Jane was granted a stay from having to answer as the rapid-fire pitter-patter of little feet slapping against hardwood announced Jun’s return as she came running down the hall upstairs carrying a pair of shoes, jumped onto the balcony and ran down before performing a flying leap across the room, snagging my neck and swinging around until she had settled against my back again. “I'm ready!”

“Just a second, sweetie,” I told the redhead on my back before turning my attention back to the two elder siblings. “I'll have her back around ten, probably. In the meantime, you two talk. I don't want any trouble when I get back. Joan, stop teasing your sister. Jane, stop freaking out, you'll be fine. Understand?” I had pulled up charisma and Intent for all of that and apparently I had gotten my point across as both girls blushed, refusing to meet my eyes as they nodded. In a way, that was kind of weird—both were higher level than me, older than me as far as they knew, fully trained Huntresses… and yet, reduced to schoolgirls at times. Then again, I'd seen the same thing or close to it back on Earth, just never in response to myself. Some men just had presence—which, I suppose was exactly what Charisma as a stat was, in a way. “Good. We'll be back later.”

“Since when does Jaune do that? He sounded like… well, like dad!” Jane hissed as I left the room. I missed Joan's response, but Jun had thoughts of her own on the matter.

“Onii-chan was super scary,” she murmured, burying her face between my shoulder blades as I carried her outside.

Chuckling, I asked, “How so? I wasn't going for 'scary,' you know. Not in an 'I'm going to kill you' sort of way, anyway.”

“Nn,” the girl denied, shaking her head. “It made me think if they didn't behave, they were going to get a spanking. Daddy gets like that if moms start arguing.”

I turned my snort of laughter into a cough. I did not really need to know that tidbit about the Arc parents' sex lives. “Well, that is an option,” I admitted. My curiosity got the better of me and I asked, “Do they do that often?’

“Uhhuh! It's like they don't learn!”

Yeah, that's about what I'd thought. “Do you think that maybe they do it because they like it?” I suggested, a smile crossing my lips.
The redhead on my back shifted around and poked her head over my shoulder to look me in the eye, an exaggeratedly incredulous look on her face and her green eyes having gone very wide.

“Spankings aren't fun, they're scary!”

I turned away to hide my grin. “Is that so?”

“Un! It is so.” I felt her nod. “I listened at the door once. Mama Lily started a fight over something silly and daddy said she needed to be disciplined, and Mama Iris volunteered to help. It was all 'Eee, no, not that! Anything but that!' Smack! 'Nooo, don't! Smack! I ran away, but... but I know I heard screams from outside! And when everything got quiet again later, Mama Lily was walking funny and couldn't sit down for the rest of the day.” My jaw locked and I fought not to burst out laughing, but silent shaking gave me away. “What's so funny, onii-chan?! It's not funny!”

“I'll tell you when you're older,” I denied. She looked ready to protest, so I needed a distraction.

“Hop down and put your shoes on, I've got a surprise.”

“Is it like the last surprise? 'Cause I wanna do the swinging thing again. When can I get one of those?” she asked, using one arm to slip her shoes on from her position atop my back before dropping down and bouncing on her heels—flat and surprisingly sensible shoes, for a girl. Maybe she hadn't gotten to the high-heeled phase. I'd had a friend whose wife started their daughter on that nonsense when she was eight, so I wouldn't have been surprised. Her outfit was a cream colored one piece sun dress, also surprisingly reserved by Earth standards. There were parents who dressed their daughters like miniature whores and I was thankful the Arcs had the sense to instill some idea of how to dress properly in their children.

“Not as fun as the last surprise, no,” I admitted. “But then, you wouldn't want the wind to ruin all the work you went to getting your hair just right, would you?” She shook her head and I laughed. “As for getting a line launcher... tell you what, I'll get you one as a graduation present and teach you how to use it. Deal?”

“Deal!” she beamed.

Holding a hand out, I focused on my selection and activated Summon Vehicle. A chunk of my mana drained away and where there had been empty driveway, there now sat a black sedan—the very one we'd used just a day or so ago. “A princess should arrive in style, right?”

Jun's eyes had gone a bit wide before she threw her arms around my waist in a momentary hug, then ran around the car and hopped into the front passenger seat. “Ooh, leather,” she grinned, wiggling
I took a minute to open my inventory and equip one of my nicer sets of clothes—black slacks, white button down dress shirt, and different boots because I refused to wear dress shoes—before I slid inside the car and buckled up, watching her bounce on the seat a time or two before putting on her own seatbelt. “So, how's a movie sound?”

“Sounds awesome,” the littlest redhead beamed. “Let's go!”

We had some time to kill before the movie, so we spent it playing air hockey in the theater's small game room. Jun was surprisingly good, though based on the fact that she knew where to look to find a stool to stand on to reach the table properly I got the impression she had been here more than a time or two. To put it simply, she kicked my ass. I wasn't too terribly upset, though, given the way she beamed afterwards. It was hard to stay mad with her, or even annoyed really. She was just so damned earnest and adorable.

A small popcorn and large soda in hand, we went up and grabbed seats on the top row. Well, I chose a seat. Jun jumped up and plopped her bony little ass down on my lap with enough force to bruise my thighs, had I still been an unenhanced human anyway. It still hurt—to the point I'd say she crit and rolled for damage. The movie Jun picked was some magical girl movie adaptation of a series she had been reading, something involving witches and giant robots—it was weird even by my standards for anime, and I'd watched a lot of anime since getting high speed internet and access to torrents. Catchy music, though.

Thankfully, she didn't squirm much, aside from occasionally shifting to grab more popcorn or a drink. I, on the other hand, simply sat back and attempted to follow the plot with no point of reference. Slowly, I came to realize the movie she'd chosen was like some weird fusion between Madoka Magica and Evangelion if someone had added the Grimm element onto the top of it, and about as dark as you'd expect—all vaguely disguised with explosions, bright colors, and cheery theme songs that, when taken in context later, were some of the best fridge horror I'd come across, in either world. Needless to say, it was a very adult movie billed as a kids' movie.

As a project for later, I made a note to look into the possibility of kaiju-class and greater grimm—that being anything in the Huge to Gargantuan size categories, that is, between 15 to 30 feet, or 30 to 50 feet. Daikaiju-class started at 50 feet and went up from there—Colossal, Colossal+, and upwards, depending on your source material. It was a rating system I'd worked out for monsters from various genres, after one too many late night Godzilla reruns. If they were common enough to be thematic in a movie, that could be an issue. I was aware of the Deathstalker and Giant Nevermore lurking about in… I believe it was Forever Fall Forest, where ever Ozpin sent the prospective students for their team assignment exam, anyway. Those couldn't be the only examples, and having killed a kaiju-class
zombie only a few hours previous put the thought in mind.

“You read that?” I asked as we were leaving the theater some two hours later.

“Oh huh,” Jun nodded happily, skipping along beside me. “It's good.”

I hummed, thinking back to the other stuff on offer. There had been another movie, also an anime adaptation, that had looked more kid-friendly. “You sure you wouldn't have enjoyed that other one more? What was it called again?”

Jun rolled her eyes. “Trope-tan. It was good, but they never finished the series, and the writer changed production studios midway through over a disagreement with the original production studio, so quality was kind of off afterwards.”

Eh, I had no room to criticize there—I'd watched worse as a kid. “So, you hungry after all that popcorn?”

A growl from the seat beside me announced her stomach answering the question before her mouth could. “Uh… a little?”

“Do they not feed you at school?” I asked, shooting her an incredulous look as I opened up my map and dug through filters for the one that would show only places to get food. Picking out something that looked like an Italian restaurant, I set a waypoint and set off.

“They do, but it seems like it's never enough. I'm always hungry now,” she admitted. “Onee-sama says it's cause my Aura and Semblance need a lot of fuel.”

I hummed, nodding. It made sense. People who weren't video game characters had to draw their power from somewhere—either externally, from the world around them, or internally somehow, either from converting caloric content to fuel or some other means depending on whether the energy was physical, spiritual, mental or some combination of the three. At least, I guessed—it was enough of a recurring theme in various media that it was likely true here too, but it was worth looking into later to confirm so as to not operate on false assumptions. I knew how to use Aura, but I hadn't the faintest damn idea what it actually was. Yeah, if I was going to go to Beacon I was actually going to need to… study.

I shuddered briefly at the thought. I was a grown man, I had been out of school for years, I didn't
think I could take having to go back to that routine—but it was either that, or try and act outside the course of events as I knew them. Outside Beacon, I was free to act but would be acting at an information deficit in regards to goings on in and around the school, where most of the action would be centered. Inside Beacon, my movements would be restricted inside school hours and possibly even outside of them, but I would be right where I needed to be for most of what was to come. The best compromise I had come up with to date was having the girls acting in my stead for some things outside the school, while I was stuck locked in. Well, I still had time to figure things out for a while yet. I turned my attention back to the girl with me.

“What is your Semblance, anyway?” Jun was silent beside me and after a moment, I turned enough to observe her. She had turned in her seat enough to lock eyes with me. There was a look in her eyes that I couldn't place, which remained even as her face broke into a large smile that I wasn't entirely sure was genuine. I knew that look—I’d worn it enough to recognize it from the outside. I was being judged—though, for what I didn't know.

“It's a secret!” she beamed, turning away and looking out the windshield.

Shrugging, I chuckled quietly. I wouldn't push her for details, but I suspected that whatever it was would be enough to earn her a secondary title, like the rest of her sisters. Then again, I had to wonder at the origins of 'Divine Child' as a title—she wouldn't be a child forever, obviously. 'Divine Aegis' was self-explanatory once I'd seen Joan's Semblance in action. 'Divine Mirror' would likely also be pretty obvious, but I had yet to see Jane put hers to use. Jun’s, I couldn't even guess at, however. I'd assumed it was speed-based or something, but now that I had a better idea how they worked, I had ruled that out—which meant her speed was all her, not her Semblance. Well, it wasn't worth worrying over at the moment, seeing as I wouldn't be getting anywhere with it any time soon.

The restaurant turned out to be an older brick building, delicious scents hanging on the air for a block around the place that set my mouth watering as we walked up after having parked. The interior was filled with the murmur of multiple conversations under soft music and dimly lit enough that the candles at individual tables and booths stood out. We drew a few odd looks from the wait-staff and host and a quick glance around told me the clientele were mostly older couples and a few groups of men conducting business. The host approached and I breathed a quick confuse/charm combo, pulling up Charisma at the same time. The man smiled and greeted us like he had known our family for years—which, technically speaking, given the Arcs' popularity it was very likely they had at least heard of us. Luckily, the wait-staff followed the host's lead and we were quickly seated at a small table.

Jun was surprisingly well-mannered, considering her age—aside from the wide eyes taking everything in with a seemingly perpetual look of amazement. At least it gave me a chance to exercise my own oft neglected manners—opening doors, pulling out chairs, and the like. It was only really novel from the startling difference between Earth and Remnant—and once more, I wondered at how my former home could have gone so wrong in so many ways, out of what had likely started out as simple good intentions being twisted to hurt as many people as possible. 'I suppose the best thing to do here is to simply enjoy it,' I mused.
“So, how’s school going?” I asked after we’d had a chance to look over the menus and order.

The girl across from me hummed, waving her hand back and forth in a so-so gesture. “It's kind of boring. Everyone's so… stupid.”

“How so?” I asked, though considering the age group… 'Wait a minute.' I held up a hand to stall her. “Hang on. I've never asked before, always just sort of assumed. How old are you?”

Apparently that was the wrong thing to say, as the girl shot me a glare and puffed out her cheeks, crossing her arms. “How old do I look, onii-chan?”

“There's no way to answer that without upsetting you, so I'll just be honest. I figured around eight, based on how you act and your size,” I admitted, chuckling. I could have sworn my Semblance had told me the answer at one point, but if there was ever an age field it didn't show up now under Observe. 'Changed with an update? But that wouldn't explain any discrepancy with it saying she was one age and her being another, unless it was wrong. Is that even possible?' It was something to think on. Maybe I could dig around my menus and see if there was a section for biographies.

“I'm just small for my age,” she hissed, though I had to admit I appreciated the fact that she wasn't really making a scene as I'd worried she might. The fact that her gaze drifted down towards her chest and the frown that followed told me she was likely a bit jealous of her older sisters—in that way children tend to get insecure when compared to others. Well, I say children, but I suppose in some ways it's common to everyone regardless of age or gender—women will always be jealous of women they perceive as more beautiful, men will always be jealous another man with a bigger cock or more money. It was made worse on Earth by media portraying things to unrealistic standards or outright lying to their viewers—magazines were notorious for airbrushing and using photoshop on models, the porn industry selected men with larger than average penises or even had them wear prosthetics. And then, there was all the over-sexed programming broadcast twenty-four seven, in an effort to normalize degeneracy and devalue traditional social mores. 'Programming' indeed.

“I'll be twelve come June 6th. Don't forget my birthday, onii-chan,” Jun warned, pulling my mind back to Remnant and out of comparisons between the two worlds that would either wind up pissing me off or emphasize how lucky I was to be out of that shit-hole, though probably both.

Pulling out my scroll, I went ahead and made a note of it. “While we're on the subject, how about giving me the rest of our siblings' birthdays? And our parents. Since, you know, I don't remember.”
That seemed to put a damper on the girl's ire and she began dutifully relaying information—names, important dates, and other interesting little tidbits. She was a veritable well of information on the Arc family and I took complete advantage of the opportunity. Thankfully, my Semblance had enough decorum not to add a quest to 'pump' her for information as it had when I'd first met Joan—I didn't think I'd have been able to keep a straight face, if it had. “So, our dad's name is Jacques and his birthday is January 10th. My mother is Iris and yours is Lily, and their birthdays are July 1st and September 4th, respectively.”

“That's right,” she nodded, sending me an expectant look that said she wanted me to keep going.

“The sisters are Joan, Jane and Jean, Jen,” I began, and Jun shook her head.

Rolling her eyes, the younger girl warned, “Don't let her hear you call her that. She prefers Jennifer, 'cause it makes her sound more mature—even though Mama Iris keeps saying it's 'Jen' on the birth certificate.”

“I'll keep that in mind,” I agreed with a smile. “Continuing on… Jana, Jillian, and Jun. So, I have to ask, whose idea was the naming scheme?”

Jun's mood shifted visible, just a bit, as her smile turned mildly forlorn. “Grandpa and Grandma Arc. I never got to meet them. It's sort of a family tradition that's been around longer than the color naming rule that came about after the war. Joan said Grandpa always said that tradition was more important than silly superstition. Papa and Mamas agree, so we got different names. Then again, Mama Iris and Mama Lily are both named after flowers, so they don't really break the rules—irises can be white and lilies can be red.”

I blinked as something about that niggled at my memory. “White? I know Lily's a redhead, but Iris is blonde in all the photos—and all her kids are.”

“Heh, yeah…” Jun nodded agreement. “That's true. But Mama Iris's sigil is a white iris. Do you know what it means?”

Shooting her a confused look, I asked, “The sigil or the flower?”

“The flower, silly,” she rolled her eyes. I shook my head and she provided the answer. “Purity. Mama Lily's sigil is a red lily—a…”
“Spider lily,” I guessed, drawing a wide grin and a nod. ‘Lycoris radiata.’ She opened her mouth to ask and I shook my head. “I've got a good idea what it means. How important are sigils, on a scale of 1 to 10?”

Jun snorted, sending me an incredulous look. “Ten. It's part of how you identify yourself to other Hunters—aside from huge weapons and flashy clothes. It's also supposed to be really personal and say something about yourself.”

Joan's sigil I knew to be a larkspur, after her Semblance—I think it was also called a doubtful knight's spur, but beyond that I had no idea as to its meaning in the language of flowers and my knowledge of that mostly came from having worked in a greenhouse with my grandmother for a few years as a child, in another world. Of course, there were others I knew off the top of my head—Ruby's rose, Yang's burning heart being the two that came immediately to mind. Jaune's, as I recall, was a pair of crescent moons. Still, we were getting off topic. “Okay, still, that doesn't explain why white and not yellow.”

“Because of her Semblance,” Jun answered, as though the answer should have been obvious. In retrospect, I suppose it should have been. Jun's next words cut off that line of thought. “Her hair goes all white and glowy-glowy when she uses her Semblance. Well, Papa said so, but I've never seen it.”

The wait-staff arrived with our food and conversation was curtailed for a moment as I took the time to savor a forkful of lasagna while, across from me, Jun tore into her stromboli. “So, we got off track. How's school, and why is everyone stupid?”

Jun took a moment to wipe her mouth before sending me an annoyed look. “They all act like little kids.”

“Says the girl who insists on calling her oldest sister 'onee-sama' and her brother 'onii-chan,’” I retorted before my brain-to-mouth filter could kick in. Giving an internal shrug, I decided to run with it.

The diminutive redhead pointed her fork at me threateningly before stabbing into her stromboli. “That is that and this is this.”

“So, in other words, you should get a free pass and others shouldn't? That doesn't sound very mature,” I countered. “Why do you do it, anyway?”
Jun thought on it a moment while she chewed before finally answering. “Because it annoys my sisters, and Papa and Moms. Do I really need a reason beyond that?”

Nodding in understanding, I grinned. “Well, I can understand where you're coming from there. Being the youngest must be tough. But what if I told you it annoyed me, too?”

The little redhead shot me a betrayed look before she broke eye contact, suddenly finding her plate very interesting. “Does it really? I thought, since the hospital, it didn't any more.”

“It was amusing for the first five minutes, and a bit adorable,” I admitted, my words causing her to peek up at be from under her lashes. “However, don't you think you're getting a little too old for that?” She pouted, but I could see I was getting through to her.

“You're a meanie,” she grumbled, quietly going back to her food.

I nodded, digging into my own food. “Maybe, but only because I care. Sometimes, that means humoring someone. Other times, that means telling them the hard truths no one else will because they're too polite or afraid of hurting your feelings. Sometimes, feelings need to be hurt for the message to sink in. If you want me to treat you like a young lady, act like one. If you want me to treat you like a kid, likewise, keep acting like one. It's entirely up to you, but I bet you can guess which I'd prefer.”

Jun sat in silence the rest of the meal, following along quietly back to the car after I'd taken care of the bill. It wasn't until we pulled up to the Arc family home that she decided to break her silence. “If I act more mature, does that mean you'll marry me?”

“No,” I denied, shaking my head. “I'll give you some advice: building a marriage is a bit like building a house—start with a strong foundation and work your way up from there. Get to know someone, become friends with them, build a relationship over time, and only when the thought of being apart from that person, or hurting that person causes you pain should you even consider marriage. And if it doesn't work out, ideally you would remain friends with them after. Of course, real life doesn't always match up to our expectations…”

It never had, in my experience. Then again, my experience was in a world with Tinder and Snapchat and other hookup or cheating apps, and where such behavior was becoming popularized in a push to normalize it—more of that 'programming' that turned otherwise decent people into sorry excuses for human beings, because they felt like they could get away with it. Well, with any luck that movement
would never come about on Remnant. Then again, considering how much they tended to value families and fidelity to the people you were with, somehow despite the obvious push for polygamy, I doubted it would.

She nodded and I killed the car, getting out and opening her door for her as I had for much of the night. She stopped me just before the door to the house, not turning to meet my eyes. “Onii… Jaune,” she began, correcting herself a moment after. The name sounded almost foreign on her lips at this point, coming out a half-syllable shorter than I was used to hearing the pseudo-French pronunciation—to the point I could have sworn she'd said 'John' instead. I put it down to her having not used my name in a while—after all, there was no way anyone on Remnant knew my name as anything other than 'Jaune.' “Can we… would you be my friend?”

Reaching out, I rubbed the top of her head, drawing a momentary annoyed look before I switched from rubbing to scratching her scalp, sending her eyes half-lidded and drawing a contented sound from her lips as she pushed up into my hand—yeah, it seemed that trick was almost universal. “I will,” I agreed, sending her a smile. “Come on, your sisters are probably wondering why we're just standing out here.”

“Let them wonder,” she deadpanned. “Serves them right for doing 'this and that' with onii-chan before me.” She turned green eyes up to meet my blue, beaming a smile. “I wanted to get one more in.”

“I see that,” I chuckled, opening the door and pushing her inside. “Let's go see if your sisters managed to break anything.”

The two eldest deadly sisters appeared to have settled things between themselves by the time we got back—or, at least, had not resorted to violence so far as I could tell. As we entered, they stopped speaking and Joan turned a thoughtful gaze my way for a moment before turning back to Jane. “You okay?”

“Yeah, go ahead. Have… fun,” she sighed, forcing out the last word and sending me a small wave, clearly still not sure where we stood. Well, to be honest, neither was I.

Joan's grin was ear to ear as she hopped up from her chair, grabbed her bag, and took me by the elbow and began pulling me back towards the door. “Oh, I intend to.” She paused long enough to scoop Jun up in a hug. “Be good for your sister, kiddo. I'll see you in few weeks.”
“I will. Stay safe,” the smaller girl returned the hug before being let down, then turning to give me one as well. “I had fun tonight. Can we do it again soon?”

Laughing, I nodded. “Sure, I'll work you into my schedule,” I grinned, half-joking—only half, because at this point I needed a schedule to keep up with everyone.

Joan gave my elbow a tug and I rolled my eyes, following her outside and back to the car. “We've got a few stops to make before we head back to your place, if you don't mind.”

I shrugged, sliding into the car as she threw her bag in the back seat and climbed into the passenger seat as I started the car and pulled out of the driveway, back onto the dirt road into Vale. “Sure. Where to?”

“How much food do you have?” she asked, instead. At my curious look, she rolled her own eyes. “Enough for two people for four meals a day?”

Doing some mental math, I hummed in thought before answering, “Maybe. Why four?”

“If you're not sure, then we'll need to go ahead and stop now. You're looking for high caloric count, high protein—chicken, fish, bread, rice.”

Blinking, I shot her a confused look. “What are you up to?”

“Jane told me you're living in Sang's old apartment,” she began, and I blinked.

“Oh. Oh. Huh,” I hummed. “So, you're her teammate—one of them, anyway. Which means Hei was another.”

Beside me, Joan nodded, turning away and watching the fields roll by in the moonlight as we passed the woods and into farmland. “She told me you found a dead guy,” she added, and I hummed in agreement. “Please, just drop it. It's over and done with. Let the dead rest in peace.”

“Well,” I hemmed, thinking on it a moment. “I could care less that some piece of shit got his face eaten off. Good riddance to bad rubbish. The problem is, I'm pretty sure the thing that did it is only
there because of me. I opened up an Instant Dungeon—an Illusion Barrier—over the apartment to clean it out before we Sanctified it and something got away. I've got a feeling it was the same grimm—especially since it happened so close to the apartment. Theoretically, the wards should have scared any grimm off, so whatever it was either wasn't afraid of them or simply didn't care.”

“Driven off, not scared off. Lesser grimm can't stand to be in the presence of an active Sanctification—it's pretty much antithetical to them. Only the more intelligent ones are aware enough to associate the wards with Hunters, and Hunters with death,” she corrected. “Either way, you're right. A grimm that ignores wards is either strong or ignoring its instincts—which implies intelligence. Which is bad.” Sighing, Joan shook her head. “I suppose I can't stop you from trying to hunt it down. If you need help, ask. But we've gotten off topic. Sanguine had notes, patterns, and so forth—which Jane tells me you ate.”

Chuckling quietly, I nodded. “Yeah, I ate all the patterns. The notes are still in her journal. By the way, how did you not know she lived there?”

Joan turned an amused look my way before asking, “Where does the other girl live—Neopolitan, I believe her name was?”

“I haven't told you about her,” I deadpanned. “You've been talking with the twins.” She nodded and I rolled my eyes. “I suppose you have a point, though, if you're implying it just never came up.”

“It really didn't. She didn't get the place until after graduation, and usually when we got together it was for missions or out in public, never at her home. I never really thought to question it,” Joan admitted. “Why'd it take you so long to put together who she was when you have her journal, hmm?”

I snorted. “The woman wrote in shorthand and abbreviated most names. Some were easy from context: 'Oz,' for instance, is obviously Ozpin. 'J,' 'H,' and 'N,' were not so easy when mixed with other names. And as I said, shorthand. There weren't enough context clues to connect it to you. Why's it matter, anyway?”

Grinning, Joan stuck her tongue out. “I figured if we were playing the 'why didn't you figure this out' game, I should get a turn. And, just to rub it in, how did you not know you were screwing Jane?”

Groaning, I resisted the urge to thump my head against the steering wheel—we were still in motion and that could end poorly. “Fine. Fair enough. Well, now we know and we're all caught up. ...Right?”
“As far as I know,” Joan shrugged. “To get back on topic: there should have been a pattern in there labeled as something like 'enhancement ritual.' Do you know which one I'm talking about?”

I shook my head in the negative. “Not off the top of my head, no. I'll have to dig through my Semblance menus and look for it. What's it do—aside from what's on the tin?”

“It's a temporary enhancement meant to aid in training. I'm not entirely sure on the specifics, but I know it works. I also know it's one of those that the more effort you put into it, the better the results.”

There was a tone in her voice I recognized as a mixture of excitement and anticipation. Shifting my gaze to her for a moment, I asked, “It's one of those from the 'works better if you fuck on top of it' family, isn't it?”

The blonde beside me snorted, rolling her eyes. “The proper term is 'tantric ritual,' but yes, essentially. Except, more that this one falls into the category of 'only works if you fuck on top of it.' It's an Aura blending technique. The thing with this particular ritual is, the more time you put into it, the stronger its effects. In other words…”

I blinked, thinking it over. “Two days of screwing over the top of a seal, stopping only long enough to eat, nap, shower, and for bathroom breaks. The food is because… Aura is part physical, as in your body burns calories for it. An Aura blending ritual must burn through Aura at a phenomenal rate, then.” Well, that partly answered one question, but just brought up more—and further emphasized my need to study.

“Correct. Head of the class,” Joan grinned, shifting in her seat and shooting me an amused look. “Think you can keep up?”

Rolling my eyes, I chuckled. “I'll fuck you dry before I won't be able to keep it up, if that's what you're implying. And on that note, critical, need-to-have item to add to your list: lube. Because friction burns aren't fun for anyone.”

Joan winced, her legs squeezing together instinctively in much the same way mine have in the past at the thought of being kicked in the balls. “Yeah, no. Let's not risk that.” She recovered quickly, however, and turned a sly look towards me. “So, your twins tell me I have you all to myself for the weekend. Did you do that for me?”
“I did,” I admitted, sending a smile her way. “I thought you could use the attention.”

Biting her bottom lip, she turned away, a soft look gracing her face for a moment. “I really appreciate it, Jaune. You don't know how much this means to me. All of this.”

I snorted softly, shaking my head. “I think I do.”

“You don’t,” she denied, turning a look on me that was one part determination, one part something I couldn't readily place. “But you will one day.”

Turning away again, she breathed out a sigh before continuing. “I love you. I know you probably haven't quite wrapped your head around that yet or decided how to handle it—and that while you like me, you don't love me back. Not the way I want, anyway. At least, not yet. Just having you know and accept that is enough for me, for now. That you're willing to actually give me an honest chance is beyond the best outcome I could have imagined. I'm willing to wait a little longer to hear you say it back. I've waited this long, after all.”

She knew me better than I'd thought, I supposed. Or maybe I was just that easy to read. “I'm—”

“Don't,” she cut me off. “Don't apologize for something you can't control. You can't make yourself love me. It'll come with time, or it won't. I just have to believe it will.” Taking a breath, she turned an impish grin on me that left me wondering how long she had been faking her smiles to be so good at it. “Until then, there's no point in not enjoying ourselves. And on that note, how was she?”

Shaking my head, I shot her a confused look. “Who? And pick a mood, damnit! Don't drop heavy shit in my lap and then start flirting right after, it screws with my brain.”

“You'll live,” she deadpanned. “And who do you think? Have you been screwing any other girls I'm not aware of?”

“Kuro? Err, Jane, rather. That's going to take some getting used to. She's like a different person with the mask on,” I sighed. Then again, so was I in some ways—I was just always wearing a mask now.

Nodding from her position in the passenger seat, Joan chuckled. “Is she? I wouldn't know. So, spill. Details!”
I turned and shot her a flat look for a good three seconds before shifting my eyes back to the road. “Let me see if I've got this straight. You want me to describe to you, in detail, how your younger sister and I screwed each other silly over the course of a night?”

“Absolutely.”

I sighed, palming my face. “You're a pervert. One hundred percent pervert.”

A smirk stretched its way across her face. “Not really. What turns me on most is the thought of slow, passionate lovemaking in the missionary position for the sole purpose of procreation. Want to make a baby later?”

I stepped on the brake hard, drawing an angry blast of the horn from the car behind me as I pulled over to the side of the road. I tried to keep a straight face as I turned to level my best flat 'what the fuck' look on her, but I knew I failed the moment she broke down laughing. “Ahh hahaha! Your face! Heh. Ah, hold that pose for a minute so I can get my scroll out.”

“Fuck you, Joan,” I groaned, then rolled my eyes when she nodded enthusiastically. “Right. That's it. I'm double-bagging my shit later.”

The blonde's eyes went wide momentarily before narrowing into a mild glare. “Absolutely not. I forbid it.”

“And how are you going to stop me?” I challenged, meeting her glare with one of my own.

The elder blonde smirked. “So tell me, what level are you now?”

Palming my face, I groaned as I realized that even with my over powered stats, Joan was still stronger by sheer level disparity—and unlike the twins and Neo, she had the passive skills boosting her stats, unless I missed my guess, which meant even my unreal damage output wouldn't scratch her and my mental spells likely would do precisely dick. That was disregarding her Semblance's ability to no-sell damage, period. It kind of put things into perspective, really—and brought up horrible questions about just how terrifyingly strong someone like Ozpin must be. “Fuck.”
“Yep. You are. You enjoy it though,” she teased, and I sighed, nodding agreement. “Well, come on. Let's get going. We're wasting time when we could be setting up the ritual. Speaking of, if you'll dig through your menus and lay it out for us in the bedroom, I'll get food started. We'll get done prep faster that way.”

“Fine,” I grunted, easing the car back into traffic. “Just so you know, I'm on the pill, so don't go getting any bright ideas.”

Peals of laughter came from the passenger seat and I rolled my eyes. “Don't worry, I'm not planning on being a real mom any time soon.” Leaning across the divide between the seats, her lips brushed my ear as she whispered, “I'll let you know when I'm ready, though.”

Looking down on my handiwork, I compared it to what I knew it was supposed to look like. All the lines, circles, and symbols matched in shape, position, and size relative to each other according to how it was displayed in the open tab of my Semblance's crafting menu— with a few tweaks here and there according to the much more detailed notes in the journal now stored in my inventory. Pulling it out, I reread a couple of select passages before closing it with a satisfying thump and storing it again. Kneeling, I touched a finger to the Dust paint on the floor and pulled on my mana. The entire thing lit in a soft white glow momentarily before I felt the wetness against my finger evaporate and the design sank into the floor itself.

Grabbing the frame of the bed from where I'd pushed it into a corner and out of the way, I heaved and hauled the heavy thing across the flood before setting it within the bounds of the design now sealed into the floor. Taking a few moments to center it, I decided it was good enough and left the bedroom, the smell of cooking food hitting me full in the face as I stepped out. The faint sound of a song drifted through the apartment, along with the sound of humming. Making my way towards the kitchen, I paused to lean against the wall and observe the scene before me: Joan, blonde hair pulled back in a high ponytail, swaying slightly as she stepped around my kitchen barefoot while humming along to whatever was playing on the radio. The apron over her front did more to accentuate her womanly curves than hide them. She turned to the oven and bent over to open it and check on its contents and I found my eyes drawn to her ass, where her jeans may as well have been painted on.

Instead of saying what was on my mind, I pushed off the wall and moved up behind her, taking her hips in my hands and pulling her rear against me, letting her feel the obvious bulge in my own jeans. “Mm, hello there,” she purred, taking hold of the handle of the oven door with both hands and rocking back softly against me. “See something you like?”

“Tease,” I groaned softly, sliding my hands under her shirt and softly stroking her flanks. “Are you enjoying putting on a show for me?”
She turned to regard me over one shoulder, a small smirk tugging at the corner of her lips as her eyes met mine. “Absolutely. I don't suppose I need to ask if the domestic image does anything for you, since the proof of that is plainly evident,” she mused, rocking her hips back again.

Leaning forward a bit, I moved my hands up and cupped her bare breasts under her shirt—apparently, she had removed her bra at some point while I'd been busy doing seal work. Finding her nipples, I gave them a soft squeeze and pull, drawing a breathy sigh from her lips. “We keep this up and we won't make it to the bedroom.”

“Your point being?” Joan grinned, pushing off the stove and leaning back into me, tilting her head to the side for a kiss.

Our tongues danced slowly, exploring, teasing and I noted absently that she tasted of vanilla. Grinning against her mouth, I moved one hand down from her breasts to slide down the front of her pants, under her panties, and softly stroke her outer lips—already puffy and hot, and moisture beginning to bead as her arousal grew. Parting her lower lips, I ran two of my fingers back and forth between them, not quite deep enough to penetrate but enough to stroke her clit and spread that moisture seeping from her core to cover her hairless lips. She whimpered into my mouth, her kiss growing a bit more desperate. Pulling back enough to separate our lips, I began slowly stroking her clit as I asked, “So, is this what you wanted? A little play outside the bedroom before we get started?” I slid my fingers inside her, drawing a gasp out of her in the process. “You want me to bend you over and fuck you right here, don't you?”

“Yes,” she moaned, breathless, as she tried to shift her hips and grind against my hand.

I shifted my hand a bit, drawing my fingers inward as I stroked her from the inside. The woman bucked in my arms, reaching out and putting her hands back on the bar on the stove to steady herself as I pumped my fingers slowly in and out of her cunt, slowly increasing the pressure of my strokes over her G-spot. The angle was too awkward to put my thumb to use on her clit as I wanted to, but I didn't need it at this point and she didn't appear to care. My soft pulling and squeezing of her nipple with my left hand grew rougher, turning to pinching and harder pulls, rolling it between my fingers for a few moments before shifting to the other side.

Feeling her muscles beginning to clench around my fingers as she grew tighter, I knew she was close to coming. Releasing her nipple, I moved my hand out from under her shirt to grab her ponytail, wrap it around my fist once, and pulled sharply back—drawing her back against me. Her cunt clamped down hard enough I was sure it would have broken a normal man's fingers as she came, clenching her mouth shut to keep from screaming as the warmth of her nectar began to collect in my palm. I slowed my strokes inside her, easing her down gently as she slowly unwound, the occasional shudder running through her body. A quiet creak drew my attention to where her hands had fisted around the handle of my apartment's oven—where there were now clear impressions where her fingers had clamped down.
I removed my hand from her pants, drawing a whine momentarily before I took hold of them and began working them down her hips. A knock at the door drew our attention and we shared a glance before Joan shook her head. “Ignore it.”

The knocking did not stop—in fact, the knock-er picked up the force of his or her blows, sending the sound echoing through my apartment. Sighing, I released her pants and made for the door. “I may as well see who it is. And if we really do start now, we'll wind up burning the food.”

“Fuck the food,” she grumbled, though I heard her open the oven and check anyway.

Pulling up charisma and Intent, I threw the door open and prepared to level a glare on whoever was on the other side of it that would likely send them running back down the hall if they had even a hint of survival instinct. Instead, I found my annoyance tapering off into confusion as I took in a familiar redhead on the other side of my door. “Jane? Why're you here? Is Jun okay?”

Instead of answering, she bit her lip and asked, “Can I come in?”

Shrugging, I moved aside and gestured her in. “So, what's going on?” I asked again as I closed and locked the door behind the Second Deadly Sister.

Instead of dropping onto my couch, she moved into the kitchen, where Joan shot her a look mirroring my own confusion. “Jun is fine. I called Jean and got her to switch with me for tonight and tomorrow.”

One of Joan's thin, blonde eyebrows crept towards her hairline. “Oh? Why's that?”

A look of annoyance crossed the redhead's face before she shook her head. “You're attempting the enhancement ritual, right?” When the eldest sister nodded, Jane continued. “It works better with three—greater Aura pool. More than four and it gets kind of finicky and you start losing effectiveness, but three is a good, prime number.”

“Who...?” Joan began, then shook her head. “Sanguine and Noir, obviously.”

Jane nodded. “Though, supposedly it works better with a man involved—something about balancing
energies and a more intimate connection. That's about the edge of my theoretical and practical knowledge. I just know it worked better for us with a group of three than just Sang and I.”

A smirk stretched its way across Joan's face and Jane sighed, rolling her eyes and looking away. Instead of the teasing we were both expecting however, she asked, “Are you sure you're up for this? I thought you said never again.”

“Yes, well, that was before I made an interesting discovery earlier,” she grumbled, turning a sour look my way. “Your Aura is evil.”

Shooting her an amused look, I asked, “How so?”

Sighing, the redhead leaned back against the counter top, crossing her arms and pushing her breasts up in a way I wasn't sure was entirely unintentional. “I've spent the last week getting shitty rest, at best. Between the twins, that other one, and Joan you and that damned sex Aura of yours have alternately interrupted my sleep, kept me awake and horny well past when my shifts ended, or gave me wet dreams any time I managed to actually hit REM and you started going at it. After all of that, I've made a horrifying discovery.”

“Let me guess,” Joan began, only for Jane to cut her off.

“I'm telling this story, you be quiet,” she hissed and Joan laughed, nodding and gesturing for her sister to continue. “So there I was, having put Jun to bed, taken a nice, relaxing soak, and curled up in my old bed. 'Peace and quiet, at last,' I thought to myself. Yeah, no. Five minutes after putting my head down, I was too horny to sleep. I burned through the Dust in my vibrator and it did nothing for me. Do you understand my problem now?” she asked, and I shook my head. Jane shot me a flat glare. “A week of conditioning from exposure to your Aura left me unable to get off without it. You are going to take responsibility, damnit.” Tilting her head downwards, she quietly admitted, “And I've never come as hard as I did when I was with you. Ever. This is your fault.”

Joan burst out laughing and I bit my lip to try to fight the spread of a smile, but that was a hopeless battle from the start. “Okay, let me try something,” I chuckled, stepping closer and casting my diagnostic spell. Humming at the results, I muttered a quick 'Observe' and read over the details. “Sorry, but everything I've got here says you're perfectly healthy. Normal. No debuffs, no psychological effects, no biological issues. If you’re having issues, it's in your head. My Aura isn't quite that bad. Yet. Knock wood,” I hastily added, reaching out and tapping the counter top twice.

“So really, either you're having problems because you enjoyed it and it's harder to get off without the extra stimulus… or you're looking for an excuse.” I held up a hand to stop her as she opened her
mouth. “I don't care. You're a big girl, you can make your own decisions. I'm still not entirely comfortable with the whole ‘sibling incest’ thing, but I can't deny it's a turn on. I also can't deny that you're a beautiful young woman and I enjoyed what we had last night. The way I see it, you've got two options. Option one: quit cold turkey and give yourself time to sort of reset—I can seal off the apartment Monday and you won't have to worry about me interrupting your rest again. Option two: I can scratch your itch for you, but that means both of us getting over the ‘squick’ factor. But if you decide to go for the second option, I'm going to have to decline for tonight. I promised Joan a weekend, and you know how that song and dance goes with Arcs and promises.” Turning a questioning look on the eldest sister, I asked, “Unless you don't mind. It's entirely up to you.”

The sisters locked eyes for a moment, crystal blue and brilliant green, before the sound of a timer beeping interrupted their staring contest. Joan grabbed a pair of pot holders and began pulling dishes out of the oven. “I don't mind,” she finally allowed, shooting a glance up towards the redhead. “That is, if that's what you want.”

“Just… just for the weekend,” Jane sighed, closing her eyes. “Once you get the apartments sealed off, I think I can rough it for the rest of the week. Besides, I'll be at the family home for the week anyway.”

Joan shook her head, chuckling quietly. “You think.” Sighing, she gestured towards the dishes atop the stove. “Well, I suppose it's good I made extra. I kind of figured one of your girls might show up, but this works out too. Where do you keep your plates?”

I had to think on that a minute, as I hadn't really spent much time in my own kitchen yet. “Pretty sure they're in the shelf on the far left.”

Joan shot a look at her sister and Jane pushed off the counter and began getting down plates and glasses—this was all apparently old hat for them, deciding who did what. “We'll eat, then get cleaned up. Then, the fun begins!”

“I thought it'd already begun,” I smirked, shooting Joan a knowing look.

The elder blonde tsked, waving her hand dismissively. “Please. That was just foreplay.”

Placing plates within reach of her sister, Jane sent us a confused look before understanding dawned. “Oh. I interrupted something, didn't I?”
“Yes,” the word echoed, unamused and flat, from both myself and Joan.

Jane winced. “I'm sorry. I'll make it up.”

“You'd better,” Joan threatened.

“Girls, play nice,” I grumbled, shooting them both a warning glare.

“Yes daddy,” they chimed, seemingly contrite from their tones but their identical smirks gave them away. They had been waiting to use that.

I facepalmed as both burst into giggles. “Do me a favor. If you want me to be able to get it up again within the next forty-eight hours, never call me that again. This is weird enough as it is.” The pair nodded in agreement, but I could tell I'd be getting teased with that later.

“Well, about the only way it could get worse is if I got a quest to seduce either Iris or Lily,’ I mused, before my eyes went momentarily wide and I paled. I waited several seconds for the other shoe to drop and my quest system to do just that. When nothing happened, I breathed a sigh of relief that earned me amused looks from the sisters. ‘Whew. That was a close one. Need to be more careful in the future not to give it any ideas.’
Date Night

The Name of the Game

a RWBY/The Gamer crossover, SI.

Arc 4: Bad Blood

Chapter 15: Date Night

I lay in bed, in that half-aware state between waking and dream, wondering what had woken me. The room was cold enough to hang meat, exactly how I liked it, so it wasn't that I'd gotten hot. The sound of the air conditioner hummed as a low white noise, but other than that I couldn't really hear anything else. The shades were drawn so the room itself was cast in pitch black, aside from the faint amber glow of my alarm clock. Grunting in annoyance, I rolled over and gave up on figuring it out. Reaching out, I sought out one of the women I knew should have been there. Finding nothing, I frowned and opened my eyes, finding the bed empty aside from myself.

'Well, that's one mystery solved,' I mused. I had grown used to having someone in bed and it was strange to be alone for the first time in over a week. The quiet sounds of someone else sleeping—breathing, shifting, the occasional snore—were all something that sort of blended into background noise but stood out once they were gone. Of course, that begged the question of where the girls were. A glance at the clock showed it to be just after 5AM and something about the time tickled my memory. It came to me after a moment: Joan would be taking a Bullhead out to go on rotation about now. I didn't know whether to feel annoyed or not that she hadn't bothered to wake me up and say goodbye. That didn't really explain Jane being gone, but odds were good she had simply left when her sister had.

Sighing, I flopped back down and stretched out. Something at the field of my vision caught my eye and I turned my head to look, only to have it move with my field of view. Shifting my eyes brought it into focus, however. What I found there was a white exclamation mark glowing softly in the upper left corner of my field of view—though, despite it being completely dark aside from a faint amber glow from my clock lighting everything it fell on, having the little spot of brightness in my view didn't destroy my night vision, which told me that it was part of my Semblance's UI. Focusing on it for a second caused several things to happen all at once—more user interface elements appeared at the edges of my field of view while the exclamation mark disappeared and an alert window popped up front and center. 'This is new.'
New UI elements and what looked like a brand spanking new HUD layout? You bet your shiny new interface I would. Fool me once, shame on me. Fool me twice? Not happening.

**Change Log** : The Gamer Semblance v. 1.5.1

Reading the version number, I frowned. I remembered a few changes, but I didn't realize it had changed that fast. Thinking it over, I came to the conclusion that it must be patching silently in the background and only letting me know of major and minor revisions. Even then, I hadn't seen several minor revisions pop up... Well, there wasn't much I could do about it.

1. Updated UI, added HUD features.
   1.a. Added HP/MP/XP bars visible to player without having to open Stats window. Shields now show up as an outline over HP.
   1.b. Added buff/debuff bar.
   1.c. Added menu bar.
   1.d. Added enemy proximity and direction tracking to HUD, runs off Perception.
   1.e. Added basic compass/waypoint navigation to HUD.

2. Added feature to auto-hide HUD, enable or disable with voice command 'auto-hide enable' or 'auto-hide disable.'
   2.a. Added ability to navigate HUD and menus via focus tracking.

3. Added focus tracking and focus-based commands for allies, objects, enemies, etc. See relevant section Focus Commands.
   3.a. Added several new commands for parties, combat, etc. See relevant sections Party Commands, Combat Commands.

4. Updated quest trigger threshold. Requests such as 'wash the dishes' will no longer trigger quests.

5. Updated skill trigger threshold. Some actions will no longer trigger skill generation automatically and the user must manually create a skill. Example: using our example from number 4, washing...
dishes repeatedly will no longer generate a 'dish washing' skill, and if the user wishes to create such a skill it must be done manually through Skill Creation.

6. Updated/fixed several skills. For full details, see the Skills Menu.

6.a. Percentiles on certain skills now display properly. Example: Sneak now correctly reads as 'reduces speed by half while sneaking' as opposed to '200% speed reduction,' because as written, the player would be walking backwards. Note: this update only clarifies wording, no skill behavior has been affected.

7. Fixed entries for Load/Save menu, they now display properly.

The UI changes were the most obvious. I now had HP, MP, and XP bars in the upper left field of my view, each helpfully labeled with numerical values—meaning I'd no longer have to keep opening my stats page to see my HP. Along the top of my field of vision for a short stretch was a white bar incremented with degrees, showing me to be aligned roughly westward according to the 'W' there near the center. In the upper right corner of my vision, a small icon sat innocuously until I focused on it, a small green box with a white 'A' in the center beside an up arrow.

Aura Enhancement Ritual (Skill)

**Effect:** Increases skill gain by 100%, XP gain by 10%, skill effect by 50% for duration of buff.

**Duration:** 14 days, 20 hours, 33 minutes.

“Huh.” I did some quick mental math. The level disparity between myself and the elder two Arc sisters was about five times, if their levels were combined or around 2.5 times based on average level. Figuring at two weeks worth of buff time, each had been worth about seven days… assuming it worked that way. I had no way of knowing without digging into my Semblance and looking for clues. Sanguine's notes wouldn't help me here—they all dealt with real world theory and there was no telling how my Semblance screwed with that. Either way, the ritual itself was easy enough to set up and complete. If I wanted, I could probably set it up again in the future once I got to Beacon and set up perpetual leveling buffs.

The menu bar turned out to be pretty self-explanatory—it was a bar with a menu, which worked just like every desktop OS I'd ever dealt with, from Windows, to Mac, to Linux. The only real difference was that it was controlled by eye tracking and intent. Shifting my eyes to it did nothing until I wanted it to open, so I wouldn't be accidentally opening it in combat. The first thing I checked was the section on Focus Commands. According to what I found there, I could now do things such as
marking a target for both myself and anyone in a party. Likewise, some things like Observe could be triggered the same way now, so no more having to subvocalize some commands and risk being caught.

Party Commands turned out to be common sense things common to most MMORPGs or FPS games—mostly visual elements for issuing orders similarly to marking a target. Things like 'gather here,' or 'take cover here,' 'defend this area,' 'focus fire on this area,' and so on. Combat Commands were more of the same. The system itself was pretty intuitive from my end and mostly intent based, so there wouldn't be any real confusion about how to use it later once everyone using it got the hang of it—assuming I intended to use it with my team at Beacon. I made a note to test it with the girls before trying it in an actual combat situation.

Checking my skills to see what had been changed, since I remember the last time something had been changed without my knowledge was when Dating Mode went from an active to a passive, I frowned as I went over them. Updated skills were highlighted, so it was easy to tell what was what. There were a few minor things, like changes in how Perception or Listen behaved or wording changes such as with Sneak, but something I considered a major change was a change to Marital Arts. Reading over it, I groaned. The notes said issues had been fixed where bonuses from the skill weren't being applied when it was in use—in other words, every success I'd had using it to date was off my own physical skill from life experience and raw charisma mod, as opposed to also adding the bonuses from the skill itself. It was the difference between being absolutely proficient with a firearm and having the Firearms Mastery skill—one was deadly, the other was overkill. I almost dreaded using it if it was going to get more effective. At level 57, having gone up 15 levels from when I'd first imported it, the bonuses were… ridiculous. I sighed and closed the window, deciding it wasn't worth screwing with at the moment.

Opening the Load/Save menu, I looked it over and frowned. There were multiple save slots available but three were filled already. The top was a mess of scrambled characters that hurt my brain to look at, but I got the gist of it through context—it was Jaune's save data. The original Jaune Arc, that is. The second was similarly corrupted, but more information was available, such as listing a play time of 33 years—clearly my own data. The third slot was listed as 'Jaune Arc' and highlighted in gold, telling me this was the active save slot—if the fact that the play time counter was running upwards from about a week hadn't been enough to clue me in.

'Let's see what happens if I select it,' I thought, immediately putting the thought into action and selecting the second slot containing my own data. I was given four options: Load, Import, Delete, Advanced. I didn't want to load potentially corrupt or old data over what I had now—the implications there were that I could potentially overwrite my memories with old memories, thereby truly giving myself an actual case of amnesia if it worked even remotely like other games—so I avoided the 'Load' option. 'Import' was grayed out, but both 'Delete' and 'Advanced' were available. I didn't want to delete the data, so I selected 'Advanced' and was presented with more options: Merge (grayed out), Check, Export (also grayed out), and Copy. I selected 'Check.'

Would you like to check the data for consistency? Y/N
Thinking it over, I declined the process and went back a level, selecting what I suspected was Jaune's data and finding the Check option. Selecting 'yes,' I was presented with a notification telling me that data checking was now in progress but estimated time of completion was unknown. That was fine, really, since I couldn't do anything with it anyway.

Closing my windows and letting my HUD disappear, I yawned and glanced at the clock again before deciding I wouldn't be getting back to sleep. I rolled out of bed and made my way to the shower, wondering what I should do today. Obviously, I should meet up with the twins and Neo at some point, maybe check in on the gang. There was one thing that was nagging me, though. Seeing it there in my skills menu had reminded me that I was ignoring my second highest level skill and had been since I'd first imported it—partly, I supposed, out of a desire to distance myself from my old life. Still, it was going to waste… I made a mental note to dig through my map and find a book store later. It was time to go hunting for skill books again—though, in this case, I had a good idea of what I was looking for.

I found a surprise waiting for me when I finally made it into the living room. Sitting on my couch, I found a pair of boxes—one a rectangle two feet long, by a foot wide, by six inches deep. The second was a cube-shaped box a foot to a side. Atop the cube, I found an folded piece of paper. Unfolding it, I shook my head as I read.

'I went ahead and had these delivered. You owe me one—three, actually, though the third one isn't quite finished yet. With love, Joan.'

“Damnit, woman,” I grumbled halfheartedly, a bit annoyed but not really surprised that she had gone ahead and picked up the tab for my weapons. I would just have to pay her back when she returned. I dropped the note on a side table and opened the first box. Inside, I found two things—the first was a manual, though it was more of a simple printout stapled together than an actual book, which told me that whoever made the gear also had to make custom instructions for each piece. The second thing I found in the box looked a bit like a targe—a small, round, convex shield. The shield itself was white with a familiar yellow-gold double crescent in its center, glowing faintly. Flipping it over, I found it was a bit more complicated than that, both in physical hardware and the control interface. On the underside of the shield was a flat, circular slab of tech that I couldn't identify, along with a handle jutting from that to where it would sit hidden away under the shield with no apparent way for me to reach it.

Deciding not to risk playing with it and potentially breaking something, I put the shield down on the coffee table and opened the longer box. Inside, I found a second manual and under that, a rectangular slab of steel with a visible handle folded up in it, along with multiple seams, with what looked like a strap or holster to affix it to a belt. I thought I could identify a few parts under it, such as the blade and what looked like a magazine, but as with the shield I didn't want to risk breaking anything. The
weapon itself was silver and black, with red highlights that held the soft glow of inactive Dust.

Putting the sword down beside the shield, I sat down and opened the first manual. I had some time to kill before I figured the girls would be up or any shops opened, so I wasn't in any particular rush. As soon as I opened the manual and began reading, I got a notification.

*You have discovered a manual for a unique piece of equipment! Would you like to import this manual now?*

Shrugging, I hit 'accept' and watched the manual explode into light particles. I immediately followed it by eating the second manual. Oddly enough, I had not gained any new knowledge. Frowning, I opened up my menu and looked around before finding a new tab: Journal. Normally, a game had either a quest log or a 'journal' performing the same function. Having both was a bit odd, however, so I got the impression it had a different purpose than tracking quests. Opening it, I found a tab labeled as 'Manuals,' along with several others I would be looking over later, such as 'Romance' and 'Reputation.' Opening that, I found two new entries: *Blazefire Saber* and *Crescent Shield*.

'So, I can eat manuals, but they aren't all absorbed like skill books. I suppose having a reference manual in my Semblance could come in handy, but it's kind of underwhelming. Eh, they can't all be winners,' I shrugged, opening the manual for the shield and beginning to read. The tool itself was surprisingly easy to operate, considering the number of features crammed into it with space folding tech. The shield would strap onto my forearm, attaching to whatever arm guard I was currently wearing. It was shaped in such a way that I could have it equipped over the top of the line launcher and still operate both—the only real problem came in having to switch between them when I wanted to control one after the other in quick succession. I made a mental note to ask Joan where she had it commissioned—maybe they could see about integrating the line launcher into the shield's design. Until then, I'd just have to figure something out.

The handle with the appropriate buttons and triggers to control the shield's features was recessed beneath the shield itself, but would extend to where I could grab it under a few conditions: shaking it with a certain amount of force, something striking the shield itself, or tapping a button on the underside of the shield with my free hand would all cause the control handle to deploy and, in the instance of striking the shield, for the shield to unfold. The shield itself was currently in a compact form, about a third of the size of the full shield—which I estimated to be roughly around the same size as Pyrrha's shield, once it was fully deployed. It wasn't a kite shield like Jaune's Crocea Mors, but I actually preferred the rounded shield anyway.

In addition to folding down to a more compact form, the maker had incorporated a shotgun into the shield—fed from a magazine that loaded into the round, flat part on the bottom to sit flush inside the mechanism, the top of which I discovered could be unscrewed in order to reveal some of the shield/shotgun's inner workings. I wouldn't need to unscrew the cap to reload, thankfully—it was apparently an access port for performing maintenance and un-jamming stuck shells in the event the
weapon failed to feed or eject. Right now, the magazine was empty but it would hold a total of ten 12ga. shotgun rounds. However, there was space under there and the magazine port was universal—meaning I could replace the ten round box magazine with a larger capacity magazine. The mag itself had to have some sort of space folding tech build in as well, seeing as it was about a quarter of the size that it should be, which told me that space folding magazines were both a thing and something common enough that I could get my hands on a few.

The armorer who had made it had even included several suggestions for alternative uses for the shotgun function, aside from the traditional usage of one for removing grimm. For instance, depending on the Dust load, it could be used to launch enemies off of the shield, or as a launch pad for teammates, or to decelerate or accelerate the user in ways that the hidden skill the Kung Pow book had given me provided all sorts of ideas for. To top it all off, the shield section was detachable from the base and the outer edges were sharpened razor fine—in other words, it pretty much screamed 'throw me!' Well, that, and it just begged to be combined with the force provided by one of those shotgun blasts to turn the whole thing into an improvised ax.

Opening my Inventory, I dug through my selection of ammunition of various caliber until I found the section for shotgun rounds, 12 gauge. There were a few different types of Dust rounds available, but the most common in my stock was Burning Crimson—a red Dust about evenly split between explosive force and fire elemental damage. In other words, rounds meant to knock something back and set it on fire. 'I need some way to make my own rounds. Fuck it, pick up a book on mixing Dust rounds and reloading equipment while we're out later. If I'm going to carry around a shit-ton of Dust, I may as well put it to use.'

That decided, I opened my character tab and equipped my shield in the appropriate slot. It disappeared for a second before reappearing on my arm. I gave it a few tests, deploying and retracting the handle before extending and collapsing the shield. Satisfied, I moved on to reading the second manual. The sword turned out to be pretty straightforward—hold this or that recessed button and move it this way to activate its assisted opening and action it open or closed, or between sword and gun mode. In gun mode, press this button to extend or retract the barrel between lengths. Threaded barrel to equip a suppressor, rails on the left and right sides, top, and under the barrel for attachments. It really was exactly as simple as I'd hoped it would be when I told Joan what I wanted.

Pushing it into the correct slot on my character tab, I felt it reappear strapped to my belt hanging over my ass. Reaching back, I grabbed the handle and pulled, in the same motion holding down the button to switch modes and flicking my wrist as it cleared what passed as a sheath. The weapon snapped twice, unfolding into a single-edged sword with a total length from handle to tip of about three feet—somewhere between a short longsword and a long short sword. Down the length of the blade and along the handle, the red highlights brightened and I felt the sword draw on my mana for a moment.

*Your Blazefire Saber is now Soulbound. If lost or removed, the sword will return to your Inventory within a 24 hour period. You may spend mana to summon the sword to you sooner with a voice command. Would you like to set the command now?*
A smirk tugged at my lips as I hit the accept button and was asked to enter a phrase to recall my weapon. “Summon Saber.” Extending my shield caused it to also sip at my mana before a similar window popped up, and I set the voice command as simply, “Summon Shield.”

Now, the question was, could I get the saber to work with Iaido? I didn’t necessarily need to, but I’d like to have the option. Well, all else fails, I could always equip both swords and use the katana for silent quick-draw techniques if needed. Of course, that was also sort of Shiro’s bread and butter weapon skill, so if it came down to it I’d need to make sure no one saw me doing it as Jaune. No one who wasn’t already in on the secret, at any rate. The sword I used as Shiro wasn’t exactly as distinctive as the Blazefire Saber, but there was no sense in taking needless risks. Besides, as far as Hunter weapons went, Shiro’s sword actually was fairly distinctive simply for its simplicity and the fact that it wasn’t eye catching. It would stand out paradoxically because it did not stand out, or rather was not meant to stand out.

Checking the time, I pulled out my scroll and composed a text message before sending it out as a group message to the twins and Neo, letting them know I would be out for a few hours to see about picking some things up. For a change, I wouldn’t be going out dressed as Shiro in what felt like about a week. I think there had been only two days since I’d been in Remnant that I hadn’t worn one disguise or another. Ah, well, I don’t suppose it mattered much to me either way. Technically, everything was a disguise here, after all.

“Welcome to Tukson’s Book Trade, where we have every book under the sun. Let me know if I can help you find anything,” the large man, Tukson himself, announced from his place at his front counter before burying his nose in a book.

This was not the first shop I had come to, nor was it the second. I had hit up two book stores previously and come away with many books over a couple of subjects, and in doing so had come across a new class of book that my Semblance could absorb. If skill books granted skills, schematics or patterns granted new things to craft, and manuals simply added information for handling and care of a specific piece of equipment that I would need to go over later, then what I had found classed somewhere between the three. The books I had found did not create new skills, but they did add knowledge and ability to an existing skill—not simply the ability to craft a single pattern or schematic, however, but something a bit more general.

I had spent the morning gathering books on computers. Everything related to technology on Remnant that my Semblance recognized as something I could devour, I purchased and did so. Information on hardware, software, coding, networking, and more were eaten and assimilated. At level 65, there wasn’t much my vaguely-named ‘Use Computers’ skill couldn’t understand and put to use—as in, I had yet to run across a book on the subject that I failed to meet the requirements for. From things as simple as basic spreadsheets to as complex as Remnant’s various coding languages,
nothing seemed too complex for it to absorb. That was good, because I had something specific in mind for that skill.

Simply put, Remnant's most popular operating system sucked. Well, I suppose I shouldn't be quite so critical. It was a decent OS, as far as usability went. It was better than Windows, at any rate. The problem was, the thing was everywhere—running on damn near every device more complicated than an abacus—and someone had figured out an exploit that worked across all of those platforms. I had seen the tool in use once before and even had a copy in my Inventory, and I aimed to find out what made it tick. More than that though, I wanted my own equipment to be immune to this particular exploit or anything else the originally named Remnant OS was vulnerable to while still being able to communicate with other machines in Remnant. Once the idea had come up, I hadn't been able to leave it alone—which is why I was scouring every bookstore in Vale for anything that would help me to do what I needed: writing a custom OS and the tools to penetrate the networks of Remnant.

Knowing that I could do it, curiosity wouldn't let me not at least have a peek around and see what was out there. Aside from that, I had a second goal, which could only really be pulled off by having the tools to get into government servers anyway. Somewhere out there, someone had built an android with a genuine artificial intelligence, and I aimed to get my hands on it—and the code that made her tick, if at all possible. With that, I could make my own AI, and I had a few ideas in mind for what to do with one… Besides, I couldn't just leave Penny to go to waste with someone like Ironwood, of all people. Great guy, supposedly, but no sense of humor or concept of 'fun.' The fledgling AI would be psychologically stunted at best with him. ...The fact that she was a powerhouse and a walking engine of mass destruction who could be very useful to my plans had nothing to do with it. Really. I was being completely altruistic here.

'I am so full of shit, my eyes are turning brown,' I mused, taking up another book and adding it to my growing list of things. In addition to books on anything related to computers, I was digging around for things related to crafting—specifically, weapon and equipment modification, mixing Dust, and production of ammunition. I already knew how to reload normal ammo—I'd had a reloading kit, back on Earth—but Dust kind of threw everything off. From what I had eaten so far, Dust rounds weren't too terribly difficult to produce. Crystalline Dust actually had a safe melting point, where the heat wouldn't be enough to cause it to combust… or explode. Dust in its powdered form was far more volatile, however—which was why it was used as propellant. You couldn't safely melt down powdered Dust and cast it into Dust rounds without it either catching fire or discharging its elemental potential. That was fine, however, since I had an entire store's worth of stock of both powdered and crystalline Dust in my Inventory.

There was a problem with taking on both of these projects at the same time that I hadn't quite gotten around to working out. Specifically, both were time-consuming tasks that required one's full attention. Unlike the rest of my training, I couldn't work on coding or crafting ammunition, or tinker with my gear, and also train my combat skills—or grind levels. Oh, sure, I could leave some skills running full time as I had been, but I wouldn't be getting much else done at the same time. And I couldn't both code and craft Dust rounds at the same time, either. *I'm going to have to delegate. Well… depending. Let's see what sort of equipment they have for crafting ammunition first, before
"we make a decision.'

That was my next stop, once I'd finished gathering books and taken a moment to eat them once outside and out of view. Finding a shop that sold weapon accessories and tools wasn't difficult—there was an entire market that ran off Hunting to drive its profits, after all. While I was there, I went ahead and decided to check out my options for things to throw onto my new saber/rifle. There were hundreds of options for scopes, but I eventually settled on optics that used some advanced tech to switch between red dot, ACOG, and an actual scope to cover short, middle, and long range targets. In addition, I made sure to pick up some space-expanded magazines for both my saber and shield, along with a common sense item that I really should have thought of before—a small LED flashlight/strobe to stick on my rails. Yeah, I had the nifty glasses with night vision, but no one else I worked with or would work with did, to my knowledge—and there is something to be said for being able to temporarily blind whatever you intend to shoot so that it can't see to fight back. Rounding out things to modify my weapons with for the moment was a suppressor to attach to the saber's threaded barrel.

Reloading gear turned out to range from cheap and simple to complicated and expensive. There were sets similar to what I knew back on Earth, which were no more complicated than melting down material yourself and pouring it into a mold for the type of round you wanted, then manually measuring out and adding powdered Dust as propellant and combining the bullet, propellant, primer, and casing into a finished product. On the other hand, there were complicated and expensive pieces of equipment that contained everything you needed to turn out a large number of rounds quickly, so long as you provided the proper forms of Dust and empty brass or shell casings depending on the kind of ammunition you were making—with places to socket in standardized tubes of Dust propellant and slots to feed in crystallized Dust to be melted down into bullets or shot. I considered it for a moment as I thought it over. Would something that automated the entire process run off my crafting skill, and thus get subsequent bonuses, or would it just turn out generic rounds? Well, there was only really one way to test that theory.

I bought one of the simpler kits that would allow me to get fairly hands on with the entire process and left, packing everything into the car and driving a few blocks away before parking. Throwing on Invisibility, I went back and slipped inside, finding the more expensive piece of equipment and throwing an ID around it and myself before throwing the one in the ID into my Inventory. I wasn't adverse to spending money if I had it—despite everything, I still had morals enough to feel bad about actual theft. Practicality, however, allowed me to justify simply duplicating Dust—or, in this instance, a piece of hardware that would allow me to mass produce Dust rounds.

Item duplication taken care of, I made my way to my next and final stop for the morning. Finding a shop that sold the computer hardware I was looking for was a bit more difficult than finding somewhere to buy Hunter-related items—after all, not every Hunter had need of a server rack and various other pieces of kit. I managed to find a place selling what I would need, eventually. Instead of simply buying or duplicating the items, however, a thought occurred. I had remembered we had minions now. We had an entire other gang under our control—pretty much the perfect patsies, if things went south. I didn't want to leave any sort of information trail leading back to the purchase of the kind of hardware I was after in the event I screwed up somewhere—at least, not to me. There
There were ways to avoid being discovered online, but good old-fashioned legwork could always turn up something unexpected—in this case, surveillance video of someone purchasing a large amount of hardware prior to any sort of hacking attempt. Even after my encounter with what passed as Vale's homicide division of the local precinct, I would still rather rule on the side of preparing for competence on the part of the police than hoping for incompetence. So, instead of buying the kit myself I used my scroll to take notes and pictures, comparing parts to see what would and would not work.

Once I had a good idea of what I would need, I compiled a list of the specific parts and drove over to the Red Hand's compound for a meeting with their boss as Shiro. Once I was within range, I felt the spells I'd put in place over both Akamaru and Howling Palm click back into place in my awareness, pretty much confirming that those effects were now permanent. Now that I was in range, I could issue orders—which brought up an inconvenience I could deal with now and not have to worry about later. Specifically, the range of those spells was fairly short—a block at most for a target I'd already cast the spells on, as opposed to my much shorter range to actually cast the spells in the first place—and I needed a way to communicate with them and receive feedback that didn't involve coming out here in person every time I needed to use them for something. That was easily handled by getting their scroll numbers, though, and once I had them I sent my list and instructions to Akamaru—parts to order, a secure room to put them in, and to have them assembled and waiting within the week and to contact me when it was finished.

That just left the matter of where to put the rest of my new equipment. The apartment wouldn't do, for a number of reasons—lack of space as it had only two bedrooms and the potential for a Dust-related accident destroying something important chief among them. Thinking it over, I decided the best place to put the reloading gear was our own gang's hideout, that way we could have someone sitting around feeding materials into the automated reloader pretty much full time—and even if it turned out that the ammunition it produced was of poorer quality than what I produced by hand, quantity has a quality all its own. Besides, you don't waste high quality ammunition on target practice—that's what range rounds are for.

Tests with the automated reloader verses the manual reloading equipment, once I'd gotten them set up at the gang's hideout, turned out to be about what I expected. Observe confirmed that the rounds I created by hand were of slightly higher quality and damage than those produced by the auto-reloader using the exact same materials—and that quality improved when I spent enough time making enough rounds to level my crafting and Dust-related skills, so I would want to sink some serious time into it at some point. 'All else fails, I can spend an hour or so a day turning out rounds. The gains will add up over time....And if I'm going to be doing that, then there's no point in not simply leaving the
reloading equipment in Inventory and using the kitchen table for an hour or so a day. It'll mean I won't have to come back here every time I want to craft rounds, and the likelihood of accidents happening while I'm working is slim enough not to worry about since I was mostly worried about leaving it sitting out unattended…'

I unloaded a bit of the Dust I'd stolen/duplicated from my Inventory and put it next to the auto-reloader, then took a minute to flag down one of the gang members and show him how to operate the machine and asked that they babysit the machine for a few hours a day to turn out ammunition for us. I hadn't eaten the manual for it, so I could leave it with them for reference if they had problems. I left instructions to buy containers to store the ammunition in and to replace materials used as needed before heading back to the apartment. I had research to do and the sooner I got it over with, the sooner I could get to work.

An annoying beeping from my scroll drew an irritated noise from my lips as I looked away from my work, pulling out the device and opening it to find an alarm I'd set going off. 'Oh, right. Shit. I almost forgot, I'd promised the girls dates.'

Sighing, I saved my work and locked the computer screen before heading for the shower. The girls had been out all day, and now I had an idea of why—odds were good they had been doing 'girl things' in preparation for Melanie's date and hanging out. I suppose I should be glad that the twins and Neo got along as well as they did—I was not really up to dealing with petty jealousy and in-fighting. So far, things worked for us, and hopefully it would stay that way once I left for Beacon. Well, there was no real way to know for sure until then.

Once I'd finished my shower, I equipped one of my nice sets of clothes and sent a text to Melanie, asking where she'd like to meet up. The answer turned out to be a couple of floors down, at the apartment the twins shared with their mother—where the girls had apparently decided to stay over the weekend. I checked the time on my HUD before taking the elevator down to their floor and finding their door. The door in question swung open almost as soon as I knocked and, seeing the person on the other side of the door, I could have mistaken her for the twins' older sister had Observe not put lie to that.

Melody Malachite was nearly a full head shorter than me, with the same long, dark hair, green eyes, and slender build as her daughters. Her face was a bit sharper, but it was clear where the twins had gotten their looks. If they took after their mother later in life, they would never be what one would call 'full figured,' but that didn't really bother me—they were fine the way they were, and the woman herself was an attractive specimen of adult womanhood. She wore a jade green blouse and a short, black skirt that left much of her well-toned legs exposed and took a little effort on my part not to at least take a good look. Then again, that was what peripheral vision was for.
“So,” she drawled, looking me up and down in a way which left me feeling strangely exposed. “You're the one who has caught my daughters' attention. I can see why.”

“It's a pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Malachite. I'm Jaune,” I smiled, calling up charisma by reflex.

The woman stepped back, gesturing me inside. “Won't you come in, Jaune? The girls are in their room finishing up, so you can wait here. And please, call me Melody. 'Mrs. Malachite' makes me feel old.”

“To be fair,” I grinned, taking a seat on the couch she'd pointed me towards, “I'd initially wondered if I hadn't misheard the twins telling me they didn't have any other siblings.”

“Oh my,” Melody hummed, one hand coming up to hide a smile. “Are you flirting with me?”

I shook my head, chuckling quietly. “No, ma'am. Just stating the truth.”

A small smile stole across her lips—one I recognized by now, having seen the twins wearing it often enough. She was plotting something. “Would you like something to drink?” I shook my head and she sat down on the couch opposite mine, crossing her legs and exposing much of her thighs. Instead of allowing my gaze to be drawn to the marvelously pale and smooth flesh on display, I locked eyes with her. I had played this game before—or had it played on me, rather—more than once, so I knew better than to allow myself to be distracted. No, if anything, the only way to 'win' that particular game was to meet the woman's gaze and force her to look away—another one of those subtle psychological tricks of overt body language that not everyone really does or recognizes on a conscious level. Most people couldn't stand maintaining eye contact for a prolonged period, women especially, as it tended to be unnerving depending on context and other body language. In point of fact, Cinder was the only one I'd met in Remnant who would. “Well, then. Pleasantries out of the way, I'll be blunt. What are your intentions towards my daughters?”

“To put it simply: wait and see,” I answered, sitting back and crossing my arms as I observed the woman before me, digging into the details of her bio. Former Hunter, husband deceased, intensely loyal to her daughters and remaining friends—my Semblance couldn't make up its mind on that detail, as the word oscillated slowly between half a dozen or more choices including 'friends,' 'sisters,' 'wives,' 'mates,' and so forth. I would have said 'sister-wives,' but that sounded distinctly…Mormon, and a bit creepy. Still, it seemed I'd met my first example of that system in the older generation, so whatever information I could glean from her would be useful—perhaps in providing some idea of how this thing was supposed to work, or in the sort of mentality of those involved. “Realistically? I intend to be their friend and see where things go from there.”
Melody shot me an amused look. “A bit more than just ‘friends,’ aren't you?”

“Perhaps,” I allowed. “I’d like to think so.”

“I see,” she hummed. She uncrossed her legs, shifting them to re-cross on the other side, and a flash of skin drew my attention to the fact that she wasn't wearing panties.

I blinked as a memory of something old came to mind—a movie I had seen years ago with one particularly memorable scene. I resisted the urge to laugh, forcing my face into a flat, patiently amused expression. ‘Did she just try that Basic Instinct bullshit on me? As if a flash of her cooch would throw me off.’ Something changed in her details under Observe, and it took a second to find it—her mood. Specifically, it had shifted from 'suspicious' and 'protective' to 'cautiously intrigued.' I thought that over for a second before I realized why that was—namely, because her ploy hadn't worked. I had reacted as the man I was—not the teenager that I appeared to be. ‘Fuck.’

Before I could say anything, or she could continue her interrogation, a door opened further into the apartment and three sets of footsteps approached. Standing, I turned to greet the girls, catching sight of Melanie. She wore a simple, white dress that clung to her form like gossamer, Her hair was pulled up into what I supposed was a partial French braid or something similar, braided at the back of her head and trailing over her shoulder, where it spilled loose near the bottom third. “Well, don't just stand there. How do I look?” she asked, a smirk tugging at her lips, while her sister and Neo stood to either side of her and grinned, apparently finding my temporary stunned silence amusing.

She looked like a miniature version of her mother, to be honest—which was not at all a bad thing. A little makeup, some different clothes, and a different hairstyle gave the illusion of being a bit older than she was—or at least a bit more mature. “You look great,” I finally answered. “I feel under dressed.”

“You're fine,” the girl denied. “Are we ready?”

I nodded and Miltia took a moment to cross the space between us, planting a quick kiss on my lips before leaning in to whisper in my ear. “Go have fun. We'll be here tonight, so you'll have your apartment to yourselves.” She paused, before I felt her smirk where her lips brushed my ear. “Oh, and she's not wearing panties, so feel free to take full advantage.”

“Oh really?” I murmured, getting a nod from the girl as she pulled away, to be replaced by Neo slipping into my arms and standing on her tip-toes to give me her own kiss.
“Are you two done?” Melanie asked, looking amused as opposed to jealous or irritated. “Would you like more time?”

Neo nodded, turning around in my arms to lean against my chest and shoot the better dressed twin a grin. “Yes, please.”

Melanie rolled her eyes, stalking forward and taking my hand to pull me towards the door, incidentally dislodging Neo. “Well, too bad. You've got your own date night coming up, this one is mine.”

“Yeah, yeah,” the ice cream themed girl sighed, dropping into a seat on the couch. “Have fun, you two.”

“Melanie, don't do anything I wouldn't do,” Miltia teased, dropping into a seat beside Neo.

“And what exactly is that, daughter?” Melody asked archly, shooting the unoccupied twin a look that seemed to demand answers.

I didn't catch the rest as Melanie successfully extricated us from the apartment, sighing as the door closed behind us. “Sorry about our mom. She's a little… overprotective, at times and likes to play head games. We're pretty sure she threatened to make a coin purse out of Junior's scrotum if he laid his hands on us.”

“Melanie,” I deadpanned, turning an unamused expression on the twin. “Please refrain from talking about Hei's junk. Or about turning a man's bits into a coin purse.”

The girl blinked, then chuckled sheepishly. “Oops. Sorry, Jaune.”

For dinner, I decided a repeat visit to the Italian place I'd taken Jun wouldn't hurt. It was quiet and cozy, and Melanie loved it. We talked and I dragged out a few more details about her family and home life from her, testing the boundaries of how far she was willing to let me go at the moment while she did the same. Of course, half the things she asked me I couldn't answer for 'amnesia,' which had to be frustrating for her—but she handled it better than I'd expected, honestly. After all, I had yet to meet the Arc parents, and if I started accidentally giving out what few details of my own parents I could remember I was bound to cause problems later.
Melody, as it turned out, was in a 'group' with three other Huntresses and had been since their graduation. The twins saw the other women and their children occasionally, but for the most part they had all agreed to keep their lives mostly separate in spite of their shared husband. I could see the logic in that—it would prevent some issues and allow each family to raise their kids as they saw fit, and trying to squeeze four women and their children into the same home was a bad idea. Two, maybe three at most depending on the women in question—conflicting personalities obviously couldn't be kept under the same roof. And then, of course, came the issue of time and attention. It was something I hadn't quite figured out yet, for a group larger than what I had now. Joan mostly did her own thing while occasionally wanting a day or two to herself—though I could tell she wanted far, far more—and the twins and Neo were all comfortable sharing time for the most part, though the whole 'date night' thing was telling me they all would like individual attention occasionally. Cinder… wasn't worth worrying about as a repeat occurrence, yet—mostly because she was out of town and stirring up trouble elsewhere.

Suppose I eliminated the outliers and focused on those four exclusively—the twins, Neo, and Joan—then that was four nights a week or so where I would be expected to make time. Every other week, if I could convince them to go along with it for the individual date nights. It was still a lot of time. Many more girls and I would run out of nights in the week for each—and the twins has suggested nine women. Unfortunately, I couldn't be in two places… 'Oh for fuck—'

I made a mental note to look into creating a clone technique. I knew for a fact that clone-based semblances were a thing in Remnant, Blake and the blond monkey kid being prime examples. The problem was, those weren't particularly useful. They were like shadow clones of Naruto fame—1 HP soap bubbles, waiting for someone to pop them. Sure, they could potentially be useful for taking the girls out, but the least little thing could disperse them, so you could forget about trying to use one for sex—or at least for anything involving a female that didn't simply starfish. All of the girls tended to use teeth and claws on occasion, and that would certainly destroy a clone—not to mention the sheer physical force involved in sex with someone like Joan when she really got into it. I had taken damage more than once. No, if I was going to create a clone spell, it would have to be solid and have a good HP pool backing it.

It was something to experiment with later, at any rate. And even with a working clone technique, it wouldn't be a magic bullet to solve all the potential complications that were sure to come up later on down the line. 'Well, at least it'll give me some leeway, assuming I can figure it out.'

I found a dance hall downtown, on the river front. Unlike Junior's, it was a place where people actually danced as opposed to flailing wildly and grinding against each other. I kept Melanie out on the dance floor for a few hours and, as her sister had suggested, surreptitiously took advantage of the fact that she wasn't wearing panties when I could get away with it—leaving her a sopping, needy mess of girl flesh by the time she finally had enough and decided to demand I take her back to my apartment.
I allowed Melanie to pull me outside and into the alley between the buildings, towards the parking lot behind the building where we'd parked. She was in the process of shoving me against the wall of the alley and demanding a make-out session right there when my Perception and Sense Danger skills tripped and I caught a flash of motion from the corner of my eye. Grabbing her about the waist, I Leapt, sticking to the wall several feet up as a black and gray blur, almost invisible in the dark alley darted under us and right past where we'd been standing. It paused at the mouth of the alley, turning its head up to regard us momentarily and standing in profile against the stark sodium illumination provided by a street light nearby. It was a familiar profile, but now I was able to get a better look at it, confirming my suspicion that it was based on some sort of great cat. In the dark, its eyes glowed faintly with an inner illumination as its head turned up and its gaze locked with mine.

“What the fuck is that?” Melanie whispered as it turned and disappeared, heading towards the river. I didn't really hear her, as the sight of its eyes glowing in the dark burned itself into my mind…

I only had a moment to decide what to do. Pulling up mana, I jumped the rest of the way up to the roof and set Melanie down. “Stay here.”

“What? Jaune, wait!” she began, but I'd already taken off towards the river, equipping my stealth armor set and glasses along the way. My vision washed green and I began casting about with my other, skill-based senses—Detect Aura, in particular. I spent several minutes looking before finally giving up the ghost—it had disappeared again. With an annoyed sigh, I backtracked to the mouth of the alley and then through it. Beginning around the middle of the alley, my glasses began highlighting rapidly darkening footsteps—paw prints, really—in blood heading out of the alley and across the street. The fact that they got darker as I backtracked along their path meant that whatever or whoever it had killed was close.

A blur of motion in my peripheral vision had my hand on my sword and the weapon half-drawn before I realized it was simply Melanie, dropping down beside me. “What was that? A grimm?”

“Maybe,” I shrugged. ‘Absolutely not. Grimm have certain, universal traits this thing didn't have.’

Melanie hummed, leaning down to get a look at the paw prints. “So, it came from over there somewhere? I take it you didn't find where it went.”

I shook my head, following the trail. “No, it's long gone.”

The prints lead to a building—a small bar, the door standing open and only the sound of a radio coming from inside. There was already enough evidence of my magic associated with my Shiro persona at this point, I figured it might be better to just go ahead and start using an actual ranged
weapon instead of relying on the same skills I used as Jaune. Opening my inventory, I dug out one of
the pistols I'd confiscated from Roman's stash and a holster for it, equipping it in the proper slot on
my right hip and drawing the weapon before I shot Melanie a look beside me. “I suppose it’s
pointless to ask you to wait here?”

“Naturally,” the girl grinned, and I rolled my eyes—she seemed just as enthusiastic over this as she
had at the prospect of dancing. Opening my inventory again, I dug out another pistol and handed it
over.

“Okay then. Do me a favor and watch our backs in case it decides to come back,” I grinned, before
slipping inside.

Stepping into the bar was like walking into a slaughterhouse. The air hung hot and heavy with the
stink of blood, piss, and shit over old alcohol and tobacco. I had hunted for sport a lifetime ago,
before I wound up in Remnant, and the closest thing I could compare the smell to was that of a gut-
shot deer. Suddenly, I was thankful for my mask at least partially helping with the smell and made a
mental note to buy a real filter at some point. Melanie, behind me, was not quit so fortunate. “Oh
god, what is that smell?”

Rounding a blind corner that lead into the bar proper past a small coat room, the main room came
into full view and I had my answer. Snapping out my left hand, I stopped Melanie before she could
round the corner. “Have you ever seen a dead body before?”

“Yes,” she answered hesitantly.

Nodding slowly, I asked, “And what about one that's been dismembered or disemboweled?”

The twin shook her head, looking green around the gills. “No.”

“Go wait at the door. You don't need to see this,” I ordered softly, unable to tear my eyes off the
scene and wishing I hadn't seen it.

I felt her stiffen against my arm. “Jaune,” she began to argue and I turned back to shoot her a glare.

“Would you rather see something I might not be able to make you forget? Please, don't be stubborn
on this. Just trust me.”
She sighed quietly, giving a nod and turning to lean against the wall and watch the door. “Fine. I'll start shooting if it comes back.”

“Thank you,” I murmured, turning back to the scene and wondering where to start. Taking out my scroll, I decided the best bet was to probably start by calling someone who would know.

It was only two rings before the scroll connected. “Jaune?” Jane asked, and I glanced at my HUD clock to find it was after midnight, which would explain why she sounded like I'd woken her. “Is something wrong?”

“Sorry about calling so late. Look, uh… I need your help. Remember that guy, the one who was killed in front of the apartment?”

I heard some rustling and she sounded wide awake when she asked, “There's been another killing?”

“You could say that,” I agreed. “More like several. It nearly ran over us in an alley leaving this place. There are at least eight people dead here, maybe more. It's hard to tell. What the hell am I supposed to do here?”

She groaned quietly. “Call the cops, preferably from a public phone or something. There isn't much they're going to do about it though. Don't be there when they show up.”

I waited for more and when nothing was forthcoming, I asked, “Is that it? What about tracking this thing down?”

“It's not our responsibility, Jaune,” she denied. “Leave it to the Hunters. Just call the cops and leave. At this point, they're going to start getting suspicious if you or I keep turning up where this thing has killed. Cops don't like coincidences like that. Do it now, Jaune.”

I sighed before nodding, though she couldn't see it. “Fine. Thanks. I'll talk to you later.”

Closing the scroll, I shook my head. I couldn't just leave it any more—all of this was my fault. I'd let whatever this particular grudge was into the world by mistake, it was my responsibility to deal with. As soon as I'd decided that, my Semblance popped up a new quest: Investigate the Grudge, and
offered a few helpful suggestions. Switching my scroll to camera mode, I began photographing, careful to avoid stepping in any of the blood or parts—which turned out to be pretty easy when I could just stick to the walls, ceiling, or alter my weight and stand on tables, chairs, or bar stools without tipping them over. I got pictures of all the victims' faces on the bar floor before moving to the bar itself to look for a phone. A small sound caught my ear and my hand went to the pistol at my side before I found the source of the noise—a man and a woman, tucked behind the bar, hiding.

“It's gone, you can come out,” I told them, then asked, “What happened here?”

The pair stood, looked over the scene before them, and the woman promptly fainted while the man grabbed a nearby trashcan and emptied his stomach. I gave him a few moments before prodding his shoulder. He coughed and spat, straightening up and focusing on the floor to keep from looking at the scene around him. “Someone just started screaming and when I looked up, there was a grimm there tearing into one of the men. The others all drew their weapons and started shooting, but it was across the room and attacking someone else before they could get a bead on it. Any time they even got close, it moved—passing through tables, chairs, people… they just couldn't hit it. I grabbed my wife and thought for sure it would take us next, but I guess it left us alone.”

“Who were these guys?”

He shrugged. “Not regulars. They came in and made the rest of my regulars clear out.”

“Shit,” I grunted. There went just being given the names of anyone there. I had a couple of options from here—I could take their photos to Hei and see if could find anything, or I could pull their wallets and check IDs, or I could get the information from the cops somehow. I was wanting to avoid raising unnecessary questions, so taking their wallets out was ruled out, because there was no way I could step into that mess and come out without disturbing it. Likewise, as Jane had said, I couldn't be here when the cops showed up. Turning to the bartender, I slapped him with Confuse, followed by Forget and Dominate as I threw on Invisibility. Absently, I threw a Forget at the woman on the floor. “Call the police, tell them what's happened.”

I moved across the room to Melanie as he picked up a land-line phone and dialed. “Time to go, dear,” I announced, taking hold of her and pulling her towards the door. “Cops will be here shortly.”

“Was there someone alive back there? I thought I heard voices,” she asked, and I nodded as I cast Invisibility on her as well, before we stepped outside.

I dismissed the car and took hold of the twin before getting us airborne with my line launcher, making my way towards the apartment. “Bartender and his wife were left alive. No idea why.”
“Grimm don't do that,” Melanie pointed out, and I hummed in agreement.

“Sorry our date got ruined,” I apologized, and she laughed.

Tucking in closer to me and getting comfortable, she shook her head. “It's fine. It's just bad luck, really.”

I blinked, looking down at the girl in my arms for a moment as I turned those words over. Was it really just bad luck, or was it a bad Luck score? Half the shit I'd done since getting into Remnant was my own fault, seeking out trouble. The other half… could theoretically be attributed to bad luck or coincidence. The problem was, luck as a score in games tended to only affect drop rates and rarity, and sometimes mob spawn rates. On the off chance it didn't, and that it could somehow affect the world around me, I had been unwilling to tamper with it—screw with fate and eventually fate screws back, as the saying goes. And if my luck score was low and bad things were happening around me because of that, that would imply my Semblance was screwing with reality wholesale to manipulate probability and events outside of my favor.

Because that's all luck really was—probability. Which made no goddamn sense, at all. Something like that would take some serious power backing it up, and if my Semblance had that sort of power, why didn't it just bump me up to max level, whatever that was? No, that couldn't be how it worked—there was simply too much evidence to the contrary. The more likely option was simple coincidence, and that Luck as a score only changed things positively when you added points to it. That is, with a Luck score of 10, I should be about as lucky or unlucky as Joe Average on the street, and adding points would only make me more lucky. The other option meant my Semblance would have to go to a whole lot of work to turn things outside of my favor, and what would be the point in that?

Landing on top of the apartment complex, I lead Melanie inside and headed for my kitchen, where I knew Neo had stashed a bottle of the local equivalent of Crown in my freezer. “Would you make me one?” Melanie asked, closing the door behind us and I nodded, getting down a pair of glasses and filling them partway, adding ice and cola to Melanie's. Passing her the glass, I dropped down into my preferred chair, opening my inventory and changing into street clothes. The twin slid into my lap a moment later, sipping at her glass. “That bad?”

“Mm,” I agreed quietly, pulling her tighter against me as I turned over my options and tried to decide what to do next.

“I… don't suppose you're still in the mood?” she suggested, shooting me a glance over her shoulder.
I barked a quiet laugh, shaking my head. “Not particularly. I could be convinced, though.”

“Well then, let me take your mind off of it,” she breathed quietly, sitting her drink aside and shifting around so she could plant a kiss on my neck, which moved to my ear, and then my lips.

I smirked against her lips, pulling back enough to drain my glass and put it away. “Well, if you insist…”

“I do.”

Getting into and out of the police station under Invisibility had been ridiculously easy. Finding the detectives assigned to the case was slightly more difficult, but nothing a few uses of Confuse, Charm, and Dominate couldn't fix. Now that I had copies of the files, I could peruse them at my leisure. However, I had other plans in mind, upon skimming the files and finding some common connections—specifically, all of them were either confirmed or suspected members of a now defunct gang: the Jackals. It sounded more like a sports team to me, but then I didn't even know the name of the gang I now theoretically operated. Of particular interest, the Faunus killed near my apartment was also part of this gang—in other words, the gang I now knew Joan, Hei, and their other teammate had cleared out after they had killed their teammate, Sanguine. 'Sorry Joan, I can't just let it lie.'

It was early in the morning, so odds were good I wouldn't be able to get ahold of Hei yet. While the twins could likely dig up much of the same information, they wouldn't have a vested personal interest in it. From what I knew of him, based on how he'd interacted with my sister, he seemed like the loyal type—which meant he was likely still pissed that his teammate had died and would be more pissed that there were leftovers floating around of the gang that had done it. All of which would likely see him doing everything in his power to see the rest of these cockroaches come under the boot.

I hadn't slept much the night before, and what I'd had had been restless and filled alternately with bodies or a pair of glowing eyes… Shaking it off, I made my way back to the apartment, dropping into a seat at the kitchen table, breaking out my reloading kit and setting about crafting rounds. It was mindless, repetitive work, but it was exactly what I needed to give my hands something to do while I thought things over. My first step needed to be tracking down the remaining members of this gang, for which I needed Hei's experience—moreso than his network of contacts, which the twins had access to. After that, I had to figure out what to do about this thing.

It was plainly obvious what it was after, at this point. Likewise, there was no denying what—who—it was. She was. Once more, the image of a pair of glowing mismatched blue and green eyes came to
mind—not red. Sanguine was back, and she was working her way through the remnants of the gang that had killed her, but what happened after that? She was clearly not a grimm—like a grimm, but not a grimm. Not mindless and entirely too discriminatingly violent for a grimm. She had left survivors, after all—people unrelated to her targets had been ignored.

'I can't tell anyone about this,' I mused, idly filling an empty magazine with fresh ammunition as I finished turning out enough rounds to do so. They wouldn't believe me, and if they did... they'd want to kill her. I'm not convinced I should though, at this point.'

Well, I had to find her first, either way. Hunting her had been fruitless so far, however—she was very good at disappearing when she didn't want to be found. 'What was it Jane called her? A 'stalk and ambush predator?' That's what she's doing here, isn't it? Stalking her prey and ambushing them when and where they least expect it. That bar wasn't exactly the best place for an ambush, but then again there were a lot of them gathered together, and they certainly hadn't expected it... So, if I can't find her, then my only other option is to make her come to me. And for that, I'm going to need bait. And not just any bait. You don't use trash bait to catch the big one, after all...'

So, I would contact Hei later today, figure out where these punks were hiding out, grab a few of them or the one most likely to attract big game, and set a trap. And then what? 'Suppose I'll find out.'

Until then, there was no point dwelling on it when I had work to do. I had an OS and tools to work on, and it wasn't going to write itself. Once it was done, I could start to work figuring out how the copy of the key/exploit tool I'd gotten my hands on ticked and maybe put it to work for my own uses—after all, there was no point to not using it if it was as effective as it seemed, and would significantly cut down on the time it would take to break into whatever servers were holding information on Penny.

There was so much to do before I went to Beacon and so little time in which to get it done. At this point, I was sure I was forgetting something, as well—likely something important. Well, hopefully I was right about Luck and my score wasn't screwing me. Because, with any real luck, I would be able to catch any screw ups before things went so far off the rails that I couldn't predict which way things were going to go. That was the problem with screwing with time or foreknowledge—using it to change things invalidated it. I figured I didn't have much time before many of the little seemingly-minor things that had added up to great effect in what I knew to be 'canon' were pushed off course from what I knew, to unknown effect.

'And this is why time travel and foreknowledge are bullshit. Either you use what you know to change things and things change, or you don't and you've wasted the opportunity.'
Taming the Beast

The Name of the Game

a RWBY/The Gamer crossover, SI.

Arc 4: Bad Blood

Chapter 16: Taming the Beast

The back door to The Club squeaked open and the unshaven, burly form of Hei stared at me through bloodshot eyes. His clothes were rumpled, his shirt hanging closed only by the grace of two buttons and untucked from his slacks, and his jacket was missing entirely. His hair was an unwashed mess and he smelled like liquor, body odor, cheap perfume, and sex.

“You look like shit,” I deadpanned, before wrinkling my nose. “Smell like it, too.”

“Hn,” the man grunted, squinting against the late afternoon light and gesturing me inside. He closed and locked the door behind us then lead me up to the second floor, to his office. Door locked and blinds drawn, Hei collapsed into the leather office chair situated behind his desk. Swiveling the chair, he reached for a steaming pot of fresh coffee and a mug. He shot me a questioning look, waving the pot once, and I shook my head. Different world or not, different taste buds or not, I couldn't stand the stuff—it seemed Jaune and I had that in common. He shrugged, replacing the pot in the machine. Picking up a container, he poured what looked like a cup of sugar into his coffee before stirring it, then proceeded to down half of it in one go before topping the mug off from the pot and adding more sugar.

“Are you living out of your office?” I wondered aloud.

Hei shrugged, cracking a yawn. “I'd say only on days ending in 'y,' but I'd be lying. Weekends, mostly, when this place gets busiest.”

A soft snort drew my attention to a lump laying on the fold out bed tucked away in the corner, strands of blond peaking out from under the blanket. For a moment, I felt a brief flash of jealous anger before tamping it back down. “That wouldn't happen to be my sister under there, would it?”
“Which one?” Hei snarked, sipping at his coffee as his brain-to-mouth filter failed to engage.

I turned an unamused look on him. “Any of them.”

“No,” he drawled. “Those days are long past and not coming back.” He stretched out in his chair, heaving out a tired sigh. “You know, kid, jealousy doesn't get you anywhere in this world.” I threw him a confused look and he rolled his eyes. “Please. I'm an information broker. Have some respect.” When I said nothing after a moment, he added, “Though, to be fair, I've known about your sister’s thing for a few years now. Of anyone you're seeing, she's the least likely to stray—especially for me, of all people.”

“You got that from the twins?” I wondered, sitting back in my chair and crossing my arms as I thought it over.

Hei shook his head. “They've been surprisingly tight-lipped when it comes to goings-on surrounding you. I've let them stay on, keeping access to my network, despite the fact that they really only work for me in name only now, mostly because you and I are not in competition.”

“And because it would annoy me, which would in turn annoy my sister.”

“That, too,” he allowed, taking another long pull from his cup before sitting it down. “So, let's cut the bullshit, shall we? Tell me, what did you drag me out of bed at the ass-crack of three for?”

“Sleep,” I cast, tossing a negligent wave at the bed and feeling the spell settle before reaching into my side pouch and pulling out a folder—specifically, the case files I’d stolen from the police—and dropping it on his desk.

“Nice trick,” Hei grunted, clearly unamused but unwilling to raise a stink over it. He pulled the files over and opened them, flipping through their contents and wincing as he came across the photographs. “Okay, so some street trash got offed by a couple of grimm. So what?”

“Keep reading,” I deadpanned. He shrugged and turned back to the files. Unable to let my curiosity go, I stood and made my way over to the hideaway bed, taking a look at the face of the woman there and causing the text of a name and level to pop up over her head—rather, it had always been there, just hidden by the angle she was laying at. Not Joan, or any other Arc really—no one of any import, aside from the fact that she bore a vague passing resemblance to the Eldest Deadly Sister. ‘Not quite
as over it as you want people to believe,' I mused, my mind now at ease over the subject though I felt some measure of pity for the man.

The self-proclaimed information broker chuckled, the hint of a smirk in his tone. “Told you so. That does tell me something about you, though. You're like me—too curious for your own good. This folder is a pretty good example of that. Have you talked to Joan about this?”

Moving back to my chair, I dropped down in it and rolled my eyes. “What do you think?”

“I think she told you to drop it, and then called me and threatened to put my nuts in a vice if she found out I let you go anywhere near it,” he grinned. “So, why are you so hell bent on this thing?”

“Other than the fact that it'll mean Joan pulping your nuts if she finds out?” I smirked, and he shot me an annoyed look. Sighing, I thought over the best way to answer that without giving away too much information. Finally, I settled on, “Because it's my responsibility. You see the same thing I do, there. The Jackals are moving back into town and something is tracking them down and killing them.”

Shaking his head, Hei flipped another page and continued reading. “Sounds like someone's doing the city a favor.”

Something about the way he said that set off little alarms in my head. “Some thing, you mean?” He shrugged and I stood, leaning over the desk and snatching the papers away to level a glare at him, which he matched with a look of cool indifference. “You know what I'm chasing, then. Who I'm chasing.”

“I don't know what you're talking about, kid,” Hei rumbled in quiet warning, emphasizing the supposed age difference between us—to absolutely no effect, given I was actually older than him. There was grudging respect there for a moment when he realized I wasn't going to back down and he quietly added, “But if I did, I'd urge you to drop it and let the dead rest in peace. There are more things in heaven and earth, Jaune, than dreamt of in your philosophy.”

I blinked, easing back from the desk as I turned that over in my head. That's… Hamlet? The Bard made it to Remnant? That aside to deal with later, if I recall correctly, that scene was after Horatio had just seen a ghost…'

“Kids these days, no respect for the classics,” Hei sighed. “Though, that one's pretty rare… from way, way before the war, so I suppose it's fair if you haven't read it. There are probably all of three
copies of that left in the world, as far as I know.’

It had been a while, but I dredged up the memory. ‘O day and night, but this is wondrous strange. ’ I've read it. Don't remember most of it, but I remember enough. So, Hei, what is a grudge exactly?’

The man across the desk from me jerked slightly in his seat before fixing me with a flat stare. After several long moments, his answer came only reluctantly, “It depends. Sometimes, they're an amalgamation of recently fallen grimm hell bent on killing the Hunter or Hunters that slew them in the first place. Other times, they're a not-quite malicious spirit similar to a grimm, usually bent on revenge. The second type aren't seen often and no one likes talking about them because no one likes the idea that there is a possibility, no matter how slim, that they or their loved ones may potentially not stay dead. The fact that both of these are named the same is not coincidence—it's so that young, impressionable, prospective Hunters don't accidentally discover something that would turn them off of becoming a Hunter. The first type are a fairly well-documented phenomena while the second are not, and mostly taught about by word of mouth—usually on hunts after graduation, where the real cherry popping of Hunter life takes place. Then there's the fact that no one can quite agree on what grimm are exactly, so there's some argument over what a grudge is as well.”

Hei leaned back in his chair, taking a moment to sip his coffee while he seemed to debate whether to add more. Finally, he shrugged and continued. “The argument seems split along religious lines, for the most part: pretty much anyone who believes in something follows the school of thought that they're somehow tied to the dead, while the atheists insist that it isn't the case. As with most arguments between believers and non-believers, lack of information on both sides tends to stalemate the argument. Interestingly enough, it seems to also boil down to an argument between Hunters and civilians—seeing as pretty much anyone with an awakened Aura has a greater sense of the world around us and will tell you that, while they may not believe in one particular pantheon, they know there's something. You'd think that having someone tell you they can feel the world around them would be proof enough of that, but for a lot of people it's an inversion of 'seeing is believing.' They can't see it for themselves, so they can't believe.”

'Yeah, except I've got enough evidence to the contrary to put some pretty big holes in that argument. At least, the Grimm debate.' As Hei had said, being able to sense the world around me had begun calling some things into question. I wasn't about to go attributing explainable phenomena to some invisible, divine cosmic being… but at least here, I couldn't deny the existence of some sort of supernatural or spiritual world, when I interacted with it on a regular basis. I nodded, pacing a short circuit around the chair before asking, “What happens if a grudge of the second type fulfills its task?”

“Depends,” Hei shrugged, turning away to make another cup of coffee and likely give his hands something to do. “Details are sketchy. Sometimes, they become just like any other grimm—a mindless killing machine. Other times… they find peace. Like I said, they're rare and mostly word of mouth, so finding anything concrete is difficult at best. The only reason I know as much as I do is because I went digging, after.”
His tone there clearly said what it was he wanted to happen. I couldn't blame him, considering the creature we were talking about had once been his teammate. “You're suggesting I just let her run around killing people? Even if they are pieces of shit, and I'm not debating that, you've just told me there's a good chance she'll start killing other people once she's done,” I argued, gesturing at the files on the desk. “Look at their bodies, Hei. Look at their faces. Does that look like something capable of finding peace?”

“I would like to think so,” Hei murmured, before adding softly, “She deserves better than this.”

Looking into the eyes of the man across from me, I thought I saw something there—regret, perhaps—but it was gone before I could identify it. I refrained from commenting on it and instead nodded in agreement. “She does, but let's be real here. In an ideal world, she never would've died to begin with—but we don't live in an ideal world. So, the way I see it is you've got a few options for how this plays out. You can let me deal with it and I'll make a judgment call when the time comes. Or, you can call Joan and Noir and deal with it yourselves—but we both know that would break their hearts, and I don't think you could bring yourself to do it either. You couldn't pull the trigger if it turned out she was beyond help. That, and we both know you've lost a step or two since graduation.” I pointed out, and the bear of a man shot me an annoyed glare but didn't refute my point. The level difference between himself and Joan was proof enough of that, at least as far as my Semblance was concerned. “The third option is to ignore it—either she'll stop and find peace, or she won't, and she'll go on to kill innocent people. Those will be on your head, Hei, and mine. And in the end, it'll be some other Hunter who takes her down. So, which is it? Make the call, Hei.”

“You know, I think I am beginning to dislike you,” Hei sighed, but dug out his scroll. “I'll call you when I have something. Now, get lost.”

I turned to leave, and as I did so, I caught him mutter, “Stubborn, just like your sister.”

He couldn't know I'd always been this stubborn—once I set my mind to something, I wouldn't be swayed from seeing it through outside of the situation changing. It was something that had gotten me in trouble for years, but I couldn't see myself stopping now.

I knocked at the door and waited, idly rubbing off the decades old paint that had flecked off and adhered to my knuckles. I heard footsteps approaching and the door opened a crack—enough for me to see the chain lock holding it in place inside. “Yeah, what the fuck do you want?”

“Well, my good sir, I come bearing good news! The day of salvation is at hand and I bring you word of our lord and savior, lady Jenova,” I announced, a smile stretching across my face as I waved a book at the door.
“I don't have time for this bullshit,” the big man grunted, attempting to pull the door closed.

My hand snapped out and I caught the edge of the door. “Now that's not nice.” Giving the door a yank, it flew open, breaking the chain and slamming into the wall of the hallway. I threw the book into his face and planted my booted foot into the large man's sternum, sending him flying back into a group of three of his companions who had risen to see what the fuss was about and sending all three sprawling to the floor. Stepping fully through the doorway, I threw a quick “Sleep” their way before moving through the run down apartment and taking out two others.

“Right, then,” I mused, dragging the other two bodies into the main area. Kicking the largest of them over onto his back, I dismissed Sleep over him and slapped him with a full round of Forget, Confuse, Charm, and Dominate. “Where's your boss? I know he's in town setting up shop again.”

“He's staying over in the Industrial District,” the large mook answered, rattling off the address.

Feeding the address into my map, I grinned when it provided a waypoint. “Okay, here's what you're going to do. Wake up your friends there and tell them the boss wants you to meet him at this address,” I ordered, giving him an address for what I knew to be an old, run down park near the waterfront, near to where the other murders had taken place. “Be there within the hour.”

“Yes, sir,” he agreed, moving to attempt to wake his comrades. Leaving the apartment, I dismissed the Sleep spell over them, hit them with Forget and Confuse, made my way outside, and from there across town.

Junior had been hesitant at first, but the cops' own case file containing all the photos of the dead gangsters had gone a long way towards convincing him, however. It hadn't taken him but a few calls to determine where the Jackals were intending to set up shop again, looking to move into my territory in the wake of Roman's arrest. Hei hadn't been able to get me the leader's location, but he had been able to get me the location of one of the last few lieutenants left alive—and that was all I really needed.

Following my waypoint, I dropped to the ground outside the building it had lead me to—an old, abandoned warehouse. *How cliché is that? Seriously, you may as well advertise.*

Shaking my head, I threw on Invisibility and slipped inside via one of the upper windows. My glasses helpfully highlighted everyone wandering around the large, mostly open space and in the office on the upper floor. It seemed this guy had become paranoid, after so many of his men had
wound up dead—not that I could blame him. It just wasn't going to help him, in this instance. There
were eight men below and two in the office, in addition to a man seated at a desk there whom I
assumed to be the boss. Sighing, I began casting. “Sleep, Sleep, Sleep…”

Eight guards down, I made my way up to the office and kicked in the door, throwing another
instance of Sleep at the trio seated around the desk. Once they went down, I hit the man behind the
desk with a Confuse/Charm/Dominate combo before waking him up. “Are you the boss?”

“That I am.” Jackson Black, 'the Jackal,' level 15 answered. He was a fairly large man, Caucasian,
with unkempt long black hair hanging about his head and a beard—barrel chested and wide, a bit
overweight but still dangerous given all the muscle. Well, dangerous to a civilian, at any rate. There
was a weapon nearby—what looked like some sort of cherry red and black ax/gun/guitar combo—but I doubt he had used it in a while. It was a Hunter's weapon, but he was clearly not a Hunter—even a retired or washed out one. Likely something he'd had built for show, then. “The Jackals are
mine.”

“Great. Are these men all new, or were they with you when you killed that girl here, last year?”

He hummed, thinking it over a moment. “All of the men here are new. There are a few around who
worked for me then, but most of them are dead. Something’s been picking them off.”

“Call them. Send them to the old park on the south end of the Industrial District, now,” I ordered,
then took a seat and waited. Boredom set in quickly, however, so I made my way over and picked
up the weapon before retaking my seat, giving it a look over. It was heavy in my hands, clearly
intended to be wielded with both hands. The guitar portion was a four string electric guitar. I didn't
know a damn thing about playing an instrument, but I'd seen enough music videos to recognize the
design as a fairly common rounded one for electric guitars back on Earth. The ax blade appeared to
be retractable, so the guitar was actual functional and not simply design aesthetics, and the gun
portion seemed to be some sort of select-fire rifle. I had to admit, for being a murderer, the man had
good taste. 'Yeah, I'm keeping this. It's mine now.'

Once he'd finished making calls, I decided my curiosity wouldn't let me get away without asking.
“So, what exactly did you do to that girl? What's the story there?”

“You really want to know?” he asked, and I nodded. Sitting back in his chair, he sighed, shaking his
head. “To be honest, it's something I regret allowing to happen. This life, it changes you. Not
everyone can handle that. When you run a gang like I do, things can spiral out of control quickly.
Sometimes, you're in absolute control. Other times, you have to let the men have their fun or they
will turn on you. I don't know exactly how it happened, but some idiot making a delivery got himself
made good when he attacked that girl. Well, my boys couldn't stand for that. They figured out she
was a Hunter and figured out a way to take her down without getting killed in the process. Did you
know there's stuff out there that will completely screw up your ability to use Aura—to the point where, for a while, even the strongest Hunter would be reduced to being as weak as the rest of us normal humans? There are these little mushrooms that only grow near where grimm make their nests. They're expensive as fuck because obviously no one wants to go around grimm to get them unless they're crazy fuckers. Well, you can buy them dried and crushed on the black market, so apparently someone's making a living out of it. After that, you can use them to make all sorts of tools to take down a Hunter—liquid, gas, smoke. You get the idea. The boys got their hands on some and took her by surprise, then brought her back to our hideout. Well, I couldn't just let her go unpunished—a life for a life, you know? I just didn't think they'd... pass her around like they did, taking turns with her. When I killed that girl, it was a mercy killing. I looked down into her eyes and there was nothing left there. I've killed people, yeah, and I've hurt more than a few. I'd never seen anyone just broken until then.”

“I see,” I murmured, not feeling the need to ask for more detail. My mind could fill in the blanks. He was weak-willed and had barely been holding onto his gang, and any challenges to his authority couldn't be allowed to stand. His men had wanted to get some back for one of their own and he hadn't been able to order them not to without jeopardizing his own position. It didn't change what I was going to do, but it did leave me feeling far less conflicted over it. They were all scum, after all. I ordered him to take his car and head for the park himself before I left, stashing my new toy into Inventory and taking the quick route there. Maybe, when I found some time to play around with it and wasn't quite so busy, I could teach myself how to play it. There were bound to be skill books for that sort of thing. It would be something fun to do in my spare time, assuming I could find some spare time...

I had chosen that particular park for several reasons, but one was more obvious than the rest as I glided down for a landing. The entire thing was barren and flat. There were no trees, no shrubs, no bushes—just wide, open land for half a block on either side. At some point, it had all been cut down. It was just a barren lot now—a park in name only, on city directories. There was no cover, nowhere to hide. Nothing could sneak up without me seeing it coming. It was an absolutely horrible place to set up a counter-ambush against an apex predator—most would see it for the trap it was and avoid it. The difference here was, whatever she was now, Sanguine wasn't a wild animal—there was still intelligence there, and will. She wanted these people dead and here they were, all gathered together in one convenient location. I hoped she wouldn't be able to pass the opportunity up—that she would walk into the trap willingly, if it meant getting to kill everyone she was after in one fell swoop.

Aside from the fact that it pretty much screamed 'trap,' I'd done my best to make it an actual trap on short notice. Even with it as dark as it was, I was mildly surprised none of the mooks present had yet noticed the freshly disturbed earth at their feet, or the piece of plywood covered only by an inch or so of dirt. On the underside of that piece of plywood was scrawled a seal I thought I'd try my hand at—a trap field, armed with a mid-grade Ice Blue Dust crystal. From the description, detonating the trap should freeze everything within its range in place aside from the caster—this was my backup plan, in the event it turned out that what was left of Sanguine decided to make a meal out of me.

As I watched, more cars slowly arrived and parked across from the empty lot the park had become, more men getting out and making their way onto the field. I counted sixteen by the time the boss
pulled up. As he crossed the lot towards the men, who had begun talking amongst themselves and trying to figure out what was going on, I moved close to him and asked, “Is this all of them?”

Jackal stopped and surveyed the bunch before nodding, quietly answering, “All that are not dead.”

“Great,” I muttered, giving him an order to keep them occupied. From here out, it was a waiting game. Glancing at my HUD clock, I sighed before opening my menus and looking around. Since the last update, I hadn't had a chance to go over everything with a fine toothed comb, and with some time to kill I could keep one eye out for Sanguine while I read. Besides, so long as they didn't leave, Jackal's goons should be a decent early warning system. If all else failed, I'd know she was there the moment the screaming started.

A little over two and a half hours of standing around in the dark and listening to Jackal's men bitch passed before anything happened. I noticed it first—or rather, my detection skills did. I followed where they pointed me and spotted a nearly invisible form slowly stalking about the edge of the abandoned park. It circled around, taking in those gathered, mismatched bright blue and green eyes shining in the moonlight. There was a commotion behind me as someone noticed the eyes and alerted the rest, and they began drawing weapons. Shaking my head, I called up mana and cast Bind—earth and grass suddenly sprouting up from below to alternately impale feet, legs, and calves with sharp spikes of rock or bind hands and feet with creeping vines, wound tightly together. I began casting Silence just to shut up the ones screaming and crying over being wounded.

Smelling blood and sensing an opportunity, the creature that had once been a Faunus Huntress stalked closer and I was able to make out more of its form. 'How did I ever mistake you for a grimm?' I wondered, taking her in. She looked like nothing less than an apex predator—lithe, muscle densely packed on her small frame, but with a human level of intelligence behind her eyes. I could see it in the way she took in the spell holding them in place and the way she constantly looked for some hidden threat. She looked like a very darkly colored panther—a jaguar, specifically. Well, if a panther wore a grimm-like mask over its eyes and under its jaws—the only real sign she was anything other than an ordinary great cat. I say grimm-like because it lacked the familiar red markings common to almost all grimm masks.

She stopped several yards away from the bound and silent gang, pacing back and forth restlessly. I waited until she was facing me before dropping Invisibility. She froze, mismatched eyes locking onto me and a quiet growl starting deep in her throat. “Easy there,” I soothed quietly, holding my hands up palms out and keeping still. The creature before me turned and paced away several steps, never taking her eyes off of me as she evaluated me as a threat. “You remember, don't you? When you were still a person? That's you isn't it, Sanguine?”

The pacing and agitated switch to her tail stopped and those eyes locked with mine. “Yeah, I thought so. And I bet you have a good idea who I am, too—you can smell it.” I was taking a calculated risk with that guess—that either Jaune had met her before at some point, or that I smelled enough like
Joan for her to figure it out.

I lowered my hands slowly and when she made no reaction, I carefully crossed the distance between myself and Jackal. I grabbed a fistful of his hair and yanked him down hard, dragging him to his knees—which must have been absolutely excruciating given that he was one of the ones impaled by stone spikes through a foot and a calf. Silenced as he was, I didn't have to listen to any mewling, crying, or begging—I didn't know if I would be able to follow through with this if I could actually hear him. On a personal level, I had no vendetta against these people. They were scum, murderers and rapists, yes—but I wasn't the injured party, nor had I known her personally, so I took no enjoyment from what I planned to do nor did I feel any sort of self-righteous sense of 'justice' at killing bad men. As far as I was concerned, it was something that needed to be done and that was it. Maybe, once it was done, I could go home and tell my sisters that their friend, teammate, and lover was at peace—one way or another.

“This is what kept you around, isn't it? You're angry, and I don't blame you for wanting to kill them for what was done to you. Well,” I gestured around us, towards the men struggling to get free now that they realized what was going on. There was a gunshot from behind me and a red-tinted Dust round spanged off my Aura, briefly illuminating it. I sighed and silently cast A.T. Field behind me. The first round was quickly followed by more as the man firing emptied his magazine into my shield, the gun clicking dry a moment later. “As I was saying. Here they are. All the men still alive who were with the Jackals at the time of your murder, along with the man himself. Yours, to do with as you see fit.”

Removing my hand from Jackal's hair, I gave him one last shove forward and stepped back to wait and watch. The spirit stalked forward, stopping once she was face to face with the kneeling man. I couldn't see his face, but I could tell he was trying to say something as she leaned in closer, sniffing once before opening her mouth. Her jaws unhinged, lower jaw coming to rest under his chin while the two large fangs at her upper jaw settled against the top of his skull. There was a crunch as she flexed her jaw and his flailing stopped as he went mostly still, aside from the occasional twitch. I stood still and watched as she moved on to the next man in line, dragged him down to her level, and did the same before moving on to the next.

There was no violence, no brutality or disfigurement, just a single bite to end it before moving on. I wondered why the first few had been so different. Was it because they fought back? Or was it because I was here, now? Either way, I suspected I'd never have an answer. No, the question gnawing at my mind was, 'what next.' Would she be satisfied with this and… what? Move on? Or would it only make her more powerful, more dangerous, and harder to put down if I had to? Either way, I didn't have long to wait.

The grudge finished with the last man there, one final crunch echoing across the empty lot the park had become, before it turned and stalked back towards me, pausing several feet away. The A.T. Field I'd put up earlier remained behind me, but I was intimately aware of the barrier and ready to put it between us at a moment's notice. Mismatched green and blue eyes regarded me for a long moment before I finally sighed, quietly. “You're not going to just go away, or pass on in peace or whatever,
In answer, the grudge crouched low for a moment before springing forward and sprinting towards me. The hexagonal barrier swung around between us and I laid a hand on my sword in preparation to draw. She closed to within a yard before pouncing up from the ground, front legs extended to bring me down. Below and around us, ice exploded up out of the ground—but instead of being impeded, she used a pair of the many ice spikes rising from the ground as springboards, attempting to get around my shield, which rotated to follow her.

A moment before her paws would hit my A.T. Field, I drew aiming for her neck. To my absolute surprise, she passed through my shield, while the blade of my sword passed harmlessly through the space her neck should have occupied. An instant later, her weight slammed into me and sent me to the ground as the area around us exploded into thick, black smoke and I felt myself covered in black blood and bits of fur—the usual leftovers from any messy grimm kill. The smoke and gore I ignored in favor of feeling something move past my armor and inside me, lodging somewhere in my chest. It wasn't the claws I'd been expecting, however, as I felt a sudden burning cold in my chest, followed by severe lethargy. I felt like I'd just run ten miles back on Earth, before I'd had the sort of stamina I did now.

Catching motion, my eyes tracked to the upper left corner of my HUD, where my MP appeared to be draining rapidly. 'Not an attack,' I realized quickly, already feeling my thoughts becoming sluggish. 'Possession? If so, Gamer's Mind should have kicked in by now. Option three, then.'

Having some idea what might happen next, I quickly drew my scroll and hit speed dial. Two rings later, Neo's voice greeted me. I cut her off before she could say much, however. “Need your help. The old park on the south side of the Industrial District, near the river. You might want to hurry, before someone notices the bodies and calls the cops. I… think I'm going to pass out now.”

“What?! Jaune!”

I watched my MP hit 0 before my knees gave out and I fell over backwards. My hand went slack around the scroll and I let my head loll back against the dry grass, cold as it was now that the ice that had run over it had shattered. The world swam, then went black.

“Who are you?”

My thoughts were fuzzy, hazy in that quality that comes with dreams. The voice was unfamiliar, and
yet somehow it was. It felt close—as close as my own thoughts, even.

“Pull yourself together and focus. I'm borrowing your brain for this since I can barely string two coherent thoughts together by myself at the moment and it's taking a lot of effort, so I would appreciate some sort of response. Who are you?”

There was a sense of desperation there, and urgency, with an undercurrent annoyance and frustration. Sluggishly, I answered, “Jaune Arc.”

“No, you're not. What part of 'I'm in your brain' was difficult to comprehend? I see your thoughts, your memories, I see you. You are not Jaune.”

It took a moment for me to process that, but when I finally did I felt a brief jolt of shock and something like adrenaline, and I became more aware. I knew I was dreaming now, in that state of lucid dreaming so rarely experienced and rarely ever remembered. “If you see all of that, why bother asking? Seems to me like you're wasting your time.” Well, it seemed I was awake enough for snark. “But to answer your question, Sanguine—I assume that's who you are, right?”

“Yes,” she answered, or at least an impression of her voice if she was using my own brain… and wasn't that a disturbing thought?

“John. Though, given current circumstances, it may as well be 'Jaune.'” I thought back on my old life, but couldn't for the life of me remember my last name. That should probably have bothered me, but I was coming to accept those sorts of gaps as normal. I attempted to look around, only now realizing that I appeared to be nowhere—a literal formless void. No ground, no sky, floor, ceiling, light, or dark—I couldn't even perceive my own body.

“Why are you here?” A smirk tugged at the corner of my mouth and she must have sensed my coming answer, as I got the impression of a sigh. “On Remnant, wearing my teammate's little brother's body like a meat suit—or do you know?”

I shrugged, I think—it was hard to tell. “Fuck if I know. I'd tell you to look for yourself while you're poking around in my head, but let me guess, you can't get much in the way of details doing what you're doing can you?”

“No,” she admitted, reluctance clear in her tone.
“Well, let me tell you this, then. I didn't come here intentionally—couldn't have, since as far as I knew before waking up in this crazy place it wasn't possible and this entire world was fictional.” I knew my frustration at not knowing was surely showing through at this point, but I didn't really care. “Nor do I remember what I was really doing before I found myself here—so I've got no idea if I died where I come from and somehow… I don't know, transmigrated or Quantum Leaped or something. For all I know, I could be in a hospital bed in a coma dreaming you up. I've given up on figuring that one out, because as far as I can tell there is no way to answer that question to my satisfaction. I do know that now that I'm here I've grown attached to the place. I like it here and I want to stay, so I'm treating it as real until I get some sort of input to the contrary. I like the people and I want to see them live their lives and be happy, as sappy as that sounds. That answer good enough for you?”

She huffed a quiet chuckle. “Yeah. I can work with that.” She went silent for a moment, seeming to gather her resolve before pressing onward. “I don't want to die again. I know things can never really be like they were, but anything is better than that. And I don't want to become a mindless killing machine, either. It's been there, this whole time, a slowly building anger at everyone, everything, the world itself… I don't want that. When I'm with you, like this, that's not there. I feel almost like a person again. May I stay with you, here? Lend me your strength, help me keep my sanity and what few scraps I have left of something approaching my humanity, and I will fight for you.”

“Humanity? But you were a Faunus,” I pointed out in as innocent a tone as I could muster. I was nitpicking, and she knew it.

I had the sudden impression that if she could swat me, she would have. “I am attempting to be serious here. Please stop being an ass for two minutes.”

I snorted. “Sorry, no can do. It's a permanent state of being. If you're going to be hanging around, you'd best get used to it.”

There was a momentary pause before she asked, voice full of trepidation, “Is that a yes?”

“It's a yes,” I confirmed.

There was relief in her voice when next she spoke. “Then I leave myself in your care. Where you go I shall walk by your side, 'till the day we both die.” She heaved a quiet sigh and I felt something relaxing, though I couldn't tell if the feeling was from me or her. “I won't be able to do this again any time soon, I think. I… I am trusting you to take care of me while I cannot take care of myself. Please don't disappoint me.”

I wanted to tell her that everything would be okay, but I could already feel the dream slipping away
I think I dreamed, but when I finally woke up remembering it was like trying to hold onto smoke. 'Odd. I normally remember my dreams.'

I felt warm and full and content for what felt like the first time in forever. At the same time, I felt exhausted and starving, and somehow colder. A pair of arms squeezed tight around my chest and I realized that I was somehow feeling two sets of senses—the first from my body, the second from a source I couldn't identify. Not feeling particularly inclined to figure it out at the moment, I focused on more immediate needs—specifically, food. Opening my eyes, I looked down to see who it was that currently had me trapped and my Semblance began dutifully playing out notices.

You have completed the hidden quest Taming the Beast! You gain 20,000 EXP!

You have learned the skill Summon Spirit! Spirits you have contracts with appear on the Spirits tab of the Character Menu and Spirits section of the Journal—from there, you can view their stats, alignment, spirit specific quests, equipment, and so forth.

You have unlocked the quest Spirits Within! Seek out and treat with other spirits willing to lend you their aid. Rewards: EXP to be determined per spirit contract, summonable spirits useful in and outside of combat.

You have unlocked the grand quest The Soul of the World. You have learned how to summon lesser spirits, now you must seek out the spirits that embody the elements themselves! Rewards: EXP to be determined per great spirit contracted, the ability to manipulate the elements beyond the capability of Dust and Aura alone.

The system has been updated. Would you like to view the Change Log?

Closing various windows, I hummed in thought as I took it all in. It seemed that chasing down Sanguine had gotten me the ability to contract and summon spirits. Lesser spirits, as opposed to… greater spirits? Elemental spirits? Traditional summons, at any rate. This sounded more like… some games' ability to summon battle pets, really. Maybe a bit more, but that was what it sounded like it boiled down to. Which implied that summoning elemental spirits was a much bigger deal than simply summoning some elemental construct for combat… Well, that would be a nice change from every other game with a summoning mechanic I'd ever played. Aside from that, I had to wonder what had incurred a system update so soon after a major update. I'd learned my lesson the first time, so I
opened the change log.

**Change Log** : *The Gamer Semblance v. 1.5.2*

1. Updated UI to add party member and summon portraits when applicable.

2. Updated UI to add **Spirit Meter**. Check the Help section for details.

3. Updated map to properly display icons for important characters.

3.a. Adjusted threshold for others qualifying as 'important' characters.

4. Updated UI to add mob and character alignment icon beside name.

4.a. Observe now reports karma gains from mobs/characters.

Well, that was… uselessly vague, on the second part. As for the third, I had noticed that neither Cinder nor Emerald had displayed before—was this a correction to that oversight, or was it something else? Would important but unfriendly, even hostile, people show up on my map, or would it hide them from me? I'd kind of assumed that was the case when neither of those two showed up, but now I was not so sure—after all, why would my Semblance hide potential enemies from me, especially important ones? Sure, it happened in video games all the time, but regardless of how my Semblance treated the world, it was not a game.

Sighing in annoyance, I put it aside for a moment to disengage myself from Neo's grip and roll out of bed. I stumbled into the kitchen, flipping on the lights and digging through the cabinets until I found a box of cereal, followed by milk from the fridge. A glance at my HUD clock showed it to be early morning, Thursday—I'd been out for almost a full 24 hours and still felt like I could use eight hours of sleep. With a tired groan, I sat down at the bar and dug into my cereal while pulling up the help section to see what the hell this spirit meter thing was, before it somehow came back to bite me in the ass.

**Spirit Meter** : a meter which provides a numerical value for how much energy the Gamer Semblance has available. Everything from the Quest system, to the HUD, to the ability to absorb skill books and create new skills uses spirit energy. 'Experience points' are nothing but a numerical value given to the amount of this energy harvested from enemies either during combat or after defeating them, or collected from friendly targets upon the completion of quests. Half of all spirit energy collected goes directly to fueling the Gamer Semblance, while the other half is used to increase the player's skill level, stats, and power—the more spirit the player collects, the stronger the
player becomes, the more spirit the player becomes capable of collecting.

Spirits, as the name implies, consist of and subsist on spirit energy. Spirits require spirit energy to exist—without it, they would cease to exist. Where before, the player could have gone weeks, if not months between quests or hunting enemies for spirit without problems, with the addition of summonable spirits draining collected spirit energy the player must now actively hunt enemies or complete quests in order to keep from running out of spirit energy. As spirit energy runs out, the Gamer Semblance will cease to function properly. Should all spirit reserves be exhausted, player death cannot be ruled out. For more details on spirit energy and spirits themselves, check the 'Lore' section of the Journal.

Good news: I had more insight into how my Semblance worked. Bad news: I'd found a new and interesting way to potentially die. I could check my journal later, but for the moment I just wanted to go back to bed. That thought in mind, I finished off the last of my cereal and went to curl up with Neo again. I wondered for a moment where the twins were, and a check of my map showed them to be in the building on a lower floor—downstairs, in their mother's home then. Well, so long as they weren't sitting around the apartment waiting for me to wake up or something. I'd feel kind of guilty if that were the case. Pulling Neo's small, shapely, and nude form into my arms, I closed my eyes and slept.

I finally woke up around noon to the smell of someone using my kitchen to cook something that left my mouth watering. Neo was nowhere in sight, but a check of my minimap showed her and the twins in the kitchen. Slipping out of bed, I made my way into the kitchen after equipping a set of casual clothes—I'd have to see about a shower, at some point. Stepping into the kitchen, I was immediately swamped by the girls and bombarded with questions. 'Well, shit, they were worried about me this whole time.'

“I'm fine now,” I assured them, taking a seat at the table, where a plate quickly appeared in front of me as the girls seated themselves.

“So, what happened? What killed all those people?” asked Neo, curiosity and worry still evident in her expression.

I took a moment to sample the food in front of me—what looked like some kind of pasta dish, with huge meatballs—before answering. “Remember that thing that got away when we cleaned out the apartment complex?” I asked the twins, and they nodded. “Yeah, that.”

The girls listened as I explained what I knew of the situation, leaving out a few of the gorier details here and there that no one really needed to hear. As I finished, I noticed a pall seemed to have fallen over the mood at the table, and it wasn't hard to figure out why. If there had been any doubts before as to the possibility of their loved ones coming back as grimm, or grimm-like creatures, those doubts
had been utterly destroyed given the proof I had. Pushing my empty plate away slightly, I sat back and regarded the trio of girls carefully. Melanie appeared introspective, lost in her thoughts, and more than a little upset. Her sister seemed to accept it, but was likewise not too pleased at the news. Neo… Neo looked up from her thoughts and met my eyes for a moment before shrugging. “It's not something you want to hear, but hey, what can you do about it?”

“Find them,” Melanie spoke up, before I could answer. “Maybe… I mean, obviously you'll need to use this one as a test case to find out what happens and what's possible. Until we know that, the only thing we can really do is put out some feelers and try to track down other cases and get there before the Hunters do. At least then there's a chance they won't necessarily have to be put down, if Jaune can… what did you call it? Contract them—right?”

“Yes, however, there's a problem with that,” I countered softly. “Just taking on Sanguine left me drained. Even if we found one, I don't believe I'd be able to take on another for a while at least. As it stands, I'm going to need to do some serious hunting to get back to where I was according to what my Semblance is telling me. Ideally, if we did try it, I'd want to build up a bit of a surplus of energy beforehand, so that I'm not as wiped out after.”

Nodding from where she sat beside her sister, Miltia sent me a grin. “So, more grinding then. That means you can take the time to try teaching us skills.”

I rolled my eyes, but nodded agreement. “You're really enthusiastic about that.”

“Absolutely,” Miltia agreed. “Who doesn't want more power? Besides, there are some skills we should all probably learn. Shields and healing, for instance. Aura's great for healing our own wounds, but if someone runs out and can't heal themselves…”

“Fair enough. We can start… Monday? What's my schedule looking like?” I jokingly asked.

Humming in thought, Miltia pulled out her scroll and began tapping away for a moment. “Today's Thursday, so… you owe Neo a date tonight or tomorrow?” she asked, directing the question at the ice cream themed girl.

Neo hummed in thought a moment before turning to ask me, “Do you need more time to rest, or will you be okay for tonight?”

“I feel fine,” I assured her, grinning. “Tonight is okay.”
“Okay,” Miltia agreed, noting it down. “You said Cinder wants you to start gathering up Dust and resources. How did you want to go about that?”

“Visibly,” I deadpanned. “I was thinking we could hit the Dust stores in Vale twice over—once in Instant Dungeons and again in the real world, that way we gain a large stockpile for ourselves while at the same time creating visible evidence that we’re doing what she wants. Not just that, but if we use the Red Hand’s men, we could hit multiple targets back to back. Hit one out in the open, move on to the next one and snatch everything covertly while cops and Hunters in the area are still worrying about the first one. If the Red Hand men get apprehended, we’ve lost nothing. Also, what are the rules on that? What sort of legal authority does a Hunter have?”

Miltia and Melanie traded a look before Melanie motioned Miltia to proceed. “It depends on the rank of the Hunter and the situation in question, really. A Hunter in training could legally detain someone in the commission of a crime such as a robbery and it would carry more legal weight than, say, a citizen’s arrest and also testify as a witness and their testimony would likewise carry similar weight to that of a police officer. A full-fledged Hunter can do all of that in addition to investigating and pursuing criminals where ever they may be, so long as they are working in cooperation with local authorities. Local authorities have jurisdiction but Hunters can act anywhere. They have legal authority to hunt fugitives, transport high profile prisoners across national lines, that sort of thing. They're supposed to turn over any criminals they catch to the appropriate authorities, so they have no real power with regards to non-violent suspects beyond apprehension and detainment until the locals take custody.”

“So, federal-level jurisdiction. Sounds similar to the Marshal Service. Or maybe INTERPOL, depending on how you look at it.”

“When it comes to armed conflict, however, every Hunter has the right and responsibility to intervene. Trainees are supposed to fight to subdue hostiles in those situations, but... well, the life of the Hunter comes before the life of the criminal in this instance and no court is going to prosecute a Hunter in training who accidentally killed someone endangering the lives of others. Full-fledged Hunters are pretty much licensed to kill, in that regard. Most will try to subdue someone first, but there are a few who won't bother with that courtesy—and if you manage to hurt or kill a Hunter, all bets are off and a KOS order will be issued. Kill On Sight. In other words, try to avoid them,” Miltia shrugged, and I got the feeling this was something they had long ago come to terms with. She gestured towards her sister, drawing my eyes to Melanie.

“There are seven shops selling Dust in Vale,” Melanie provided, having taken out her own scroll while her sister was explaining. “Wouldn't we be better off hitting a Schnee train carrying a shipment to be distributed?”
I thought about that a minute, going over my options. A train-load of Dust was a hard target to pass up, but more importantly I had an idea of when the next shipment was coming in—next week, unless I missed my guess—and who would be on it. Going to Forever Fall to pull a train job would give me a legitimate excuse to potentially meet Blake, assuming she was still on the train by the time we got there. Still, as far as I knew, there were only two options for taking that train: with Blake and Adam Taurus still on it, along with a small army of Schnee robots... or after Blake had separated the cars, in which case I was unsure whether it still had Dust on it or not. I didn't particularly want to deal with Adam—I had no idea of his level, but unless I missed my guess it was high, and his skill was nothing to scoff at. After Blake separated them, then.

Either way, I didn't have an exact date so I'd need the twins to figure that out. In the meantime, there was no real point in not doing both. At least if I did that, then we'd have something to show for our efforts aside from an empty train. So, I asked, “Why can't we do both? We could start hitting the local shops tomorrow and you can figure out when the next shipment is due to come in and we'll hit it in transit.”

“So, crime tomorrow night,” Miltia surmised, and I nodded.

“Pen yourself in for Saturday night,” I told her, and she beamed a smile.

As she did so, she reminded me of something I had left on the back burner for the last few days, “Also, you're going to have to do something about the White Fox at some point.”

“Right. Yeah, I'll probably need to see about stepping in to foil a few of my own robberies.” Humming in thought, I looked to Neo as an idea formed. “Think you can manage to create an illusion of me that could simulate me fighting someone?”

Neo shrugged, pointing to the table where miniature versions myself and her appeared, and began exchanging blows. “Sure, so long as someone doesn't hit it. Otherwise,” she reached out and flicked the illusion with a finger and they both shattered. “Why?”

I pointed at the illusion on the table—which had reformed and a miniature Neo had hooked a miniature version of myself behind the ankle with her parasol, pulled my mini-me to the ground, and was currently in the process of sitting on his face. “Because I need to be in two places at once. I need to legitimize the Fox as a threat to Cinder's operations so she'll waste energy chasing down that particular ghost, and at the same time I have to prove I'm essentially above suspicion on that front.”

“We would need to practice a bit, so I can accurately mimic the way you fight as each, but that shouldn't be a problem,” Neo agreed, watching her illusion with a slowly widening grin. “We could
do that tonight, if you want. After my movie.”

“Sure,” I chuckled. “Anything else?” There were shakes of the head all around. “Okay then, a few hours every day for leveling and attempting to train skills and we can figure out other stuff as it comes up. In the meantime, I want a shower, and then I need to sit down and finish up my computer work.”

“You're sure about this?” I asked Neo later that night, as we stood on top of a building inside an Instant Dungeon—where I had just finished up a couple of spars with her, as both Shiro and the Fox, so she could get a grasp on my preferred techniques for each disguise.

Below us, the city appeared to sprawl out in all directions, but much changed from the Vale we knew. I had been playing with environmental settings for my Instant Dungeon skill and the changes were more than a little amazing. The air was more humid, thick with the scent of forest and plant matter. The buildings that still stood were crumbling, overgrown with trees, grass, and vines. The streets were choked with tall grass, which swayed in the breeze, disturbed occasionally by the husk of an old car. There were no lights, aside from the occasional light of a fire—which I was certain had not been lit by either humans or faunus. Out in the distance, I could hear animal calls, along with the occasional call of some unseen grimm. All in all, it looked like some moonlit post-apocalyptic scene out of a movie or game.

“Yeah,” Neo agreed, pulling me out of my momentary inspection of our surroundings. “Teach me something easy to get and I can spend a while practicing while you go down there and kill stuff. We both know you need to. Besides, it'll give you a chance to figure out that summoning thing.”

She looked serious and a bit enthusiastic really, so I gave up trying to dissuade her from spending even more of her date night in training. I took a moment to open my menu and equip my new title, Field Instructor, which granted bonuses to teaching others skills and granted a significant experience gain bonus to anyone in my party who was lower level than myself—especially during combat, which seemed kind of counter-intuitive, but if it worked then I wouldn't argue. “Okay, then,” I nodded, sending her a party invite. “Let's start with something useful and easy: passive skills and buffs. Do you know how to meditate?”

The short girl shook her head. “Not really, no.”

“Great, that should actually make this easier, since you won't have to unlearn anything. Close your eyes,” I instructed, wondering how best to explain how to do what I did. “Focus on your breathing—that's the easiest place to start, I suppose. Breathe in slowly, breathe out slowly—find a rhythm that's comfortable for you.” I waited a few moments, watching her under Observe as she visibly calmed.
“You can feel your heartbeat now, can’t you?” She nodded. “Good. Now, what do you hear?”

“My breath and my pulse in my ears. Your voice, the sound of your breathing… It’s slow, very quiet.” She went quiet for a moment, tilting her head slightly before continuing. “Bats above us, flapping, chirping. Bird at… my 10 o’clock, a few yards out. A pack of some kind of canines, about half a kilometer to my 6—don’t think they’re grimm.”

“Coyotes,” I answered the unspoken question. “Now, just listen, relax, and try to focus both on yourself and the world around you. Slowly bring up your Aura a bit and you should start feeling something that feels like another Aura pressing against it from all sides. Breathe in, and when you do let it in. It kind of feels like trying to breathe underwater at first, I know, but you get used to it. When it feels like you can’t hold any more, breathe out and release the excess. After that, it should just be repetition.” I couldn’t really explain it any better. I knew there were alternative methods to meditation, but I really only knew how to teach what I used. The biggest differences came with Aura, and the way it interacted with the world of Remnant. I hadn’t actually done any of the Aura interaction when I’d first created the Meditation skill—no, I figured out that’s what I was doing unconsciously only recently. It accounted for a lot, such as the regen effects, if the person doing the meditating was tapping into the energy of Remnant itself. It didn’t seem to matter that I was unsure how well I’d explained it, however, as after a few minutes Neo’s eyes opened and focused somewhere in the middle distance. “What is it?”

A huge grin stretched across her face and she reached out to tap at the air in front of her—closing a skill creation window, I assumed. She turned and twirled around the roof of the building, spinning her parasol and laughing quietly. “Wow. I feel… stronger, and my mind feels sharper. You feel like this all the time?”

“I’m used to it,” I shrugged. “Was it a 20% bonus, going up 3% per level?”

“Yep,” Neo beamed. “As a passive! And I get 100% regen for HP and MP when it’s active.” A thought occurred and she asked, “Can you use it while you do other stuff?”

Smirking, I nodded. “If you can split your attention, yeah. So if you were to, say, focus on keeping your Aura up full time while meditating you could level both at the same time. Speaking of, for my next trick: activate your Aura and focus on sort of pulling it inward to reinforce your body—make yourself stronger, faster, more durable.” With a nod, Neo closed her eyes and did just that, a bright pink nimbus of Aura glowing around her body. “While you’re doing that, try to focus on picking out individual Aura around you—well, we’re in a barrier so I suppose mine is the only one you should be able to see well inside it. With the way I had you learn Meditation, it should be fairly easy to learn either Perception or Detect Aura, if not both. Anyway, I’m going to go down below now. Are you going to be okay?”
“I’m fine. If you’re worried, set up telepathy and I’ll let you know if something comes along,” she suggested, not opening her eyes. “Once you leave the roof, I’ll even put up a veil so nothing sees me.” She paused for a second, before giggling. “Oh god, I could keep that up all day now. This is so awesome!”

“And as far as I’m aware, leaving it on like that should let you level it,” I pointed out, to which she giggled and threw her arms around me in a hug. I quickly cast Telepathy and placed her back on her feet. “Okay, I’ll be back in a few. If you get the other skills down, why don’t you work on Spinning Mana Arrow for a while?”

“Sure, sure,” she agreed, plopping down into a cross-legged position and smoothing out her skirt. “Go on, shoo!”

I rolled my eyes before turning towards the edge of the roof. Opening my menu, I equipped my glasses and the world washed green with night-vision. I was currently wearing my normal armor, as opposed to my ‘Shiro’ disguise—I needed the practice with my new gear, to be honest. Certainly, my stealth equipment would be better suited to the current environment, but I couldn’t always rely on it —nor could I always rely on Invisibility to get me through situations where I needed to be sneaky. So it was that I hopped off the roof and into a nearby tree, landing in the upper branches and swiftly moving towards a cluster of red dots highlighted on my minimap—visible, but this high up and in the dark odds were good nothing would spot me. The only things that would really give me away were my shield and sword, with their lighted tracery—I’d have to do something about that. I couldn’t have my gear giving me away at a crucial moment. ‘Maybe if I switch Dust types?’ I mused, coming into visual range of my quarry.

Deciding I could figure that out later, I focused on the group of mobs below and allowed my glasses to zoom in. ‘Goblins? And something larger… Troll? Well, I suppose the Mad Max look and the guns are fitting for an overrun urban environment.’

Turning my attention inwards, I found that new place where I was connected to something else—a mind and spirit other than my own. I felt the spell activate and the air on the branch in front of me darkened momentarily before a large, familiar feline form coalesced and on the left side of my HUD, a new portrait appeared displaying Sanguine’s image, HP, and MP below that of Neo. The great cat took a moment to stretch, claws flexing and silently shredding the tree limb under her before she turned a tight circle on the branch and bumped the top of her head into my chest. I was surprised when a quest notification popped up.

> You have unlocked the quest The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly!

Now that you have gained a summonable spirit, you are responsible for its fate. A spirit’s alignment is determined both by that of its summoner and the actions its summoner has it undertake. The more
evil actions you and your spirit companion undertake, the more negative karma your spirit will accrue, the more monstrous it will become. Conversely, the more good actions you and your spirit perform, the more positive karma your spirit will accrue, the more human-like it will become. Unstoppable killing machine or true companion, the choice is yours. Advance your summon through the karmic ranks from its current position of Specter to either Demon or Eidolon. The ranking system goes, from most negative to most positive: Demon, Grudge, Specter, Phantasm, Eidolon. For more details on Karma, check the Journal.


I reread that twice before it truly sank in. I would have slammed my finger on the 'accept' button, but there was no button to accept or to decline it—nor was there a fail condition. That likely meant this was going to happen, one way or another, and I couldn't avoid at least some outcome. There is a karmic system. Who judges it? No, not important. Actually important: I can advance spirits through it to make them 'more human-like.'

I cast a look down at the great cat currently regarding me with those luminous, mismatched eyes. “I promise, I will help you get back to something like normal.” The cat nodded, slowly, before turning its eyes on the gathering of mobs below us. I focused on them again, and noticed something new—beside each monster's name was a small blue orb. Triggering Observe showed that killing each mob was worth a small handful of positive karma—between 5 and 10 each.

Dismissing that, I studied the layout of their camp and decided how to best approach it. Taking out my sword, I flipped it open and converted it to rifle mode, extending the barrel and adjusting the scope. Looking at Sanguine, I was about to cast Telepathy, when I realized something like it was already there—had been, the whole time. I had just been tuning it out because I thought the sensations were coming from Neo. Focusing on the feed more fully, I found myself staring down onto the camp in full color, from the tree branch a few feet from me. I could hear someone breathing beside me, along with the rustle and clank of armor down below and quiet grunting that passed as language for the goblins. My field of view turned and I found I was looking at myself.

Shaking my head, I pulled back from the feed and grinned. 'Oh, that could be very handy,' I chuckled. Focusing on what I wanted, I felt Sanguine acknowledge my directions before quietly slipping down from the tree and stalking around to the opposite side of the camp. While she did that, I opened my Inventory and equipped my suppressor onto my rifle's barrel slot, thankful I could just equip it instead of having to take it out and screw it on manually. Sighting in my target, I waited for Sanguine to move into position. Once she was ready, I gave the order and she struck, springing from the bushes and grabbing one of the goblins, dragging him into the dark. While the other goblins were still reacting, I squeezed the trigger and my rifle kicked quietly in my hands. Downrange, the troll's head exploded in a shower of gore and an explosion of fire.
I took two more of the goblins that way before switching over to the shorter barreled configuration and moving up through the trees. While Sanguine dragged them down and tore out throats or opened bellies, I switched my rifle over to burst fire and began emptying rounds into the ones that were beginning to get organized. They began firing wildly into the trees or at Sanguine, but blinded by their fire and muzzle flash as they were they would never see me and Sanguine's leopard form was simply too fast to hit, seeing as she didn't stay still long enough for them to draw a bead on her—that is, when she was in the open. Once she stepped back into the shadows, the great cat's dark form was all but invisible. It was over within a minute and I dropped down to look things over. A check of my HUD showed neither of us had taken damage in the short encounter. Then again, I hadn't gained much in the way of EXP either. I'd noticed that I was swiftly out-leveling the areas inside of Vale, and soon I likely wouldn't get any at all.

Looking around at the scattered drops, I rolled my eyes and folded up my weapon to stow it. “Okay, fuck it. Let's see what I can do about that.”

I focused on the drops on the ground and moving them up through the air towards me, feeling Skill Creation kick in a moment later. I was rewarded with the skill Telekinesis, which allowed me to lift, catch, throw or otherwise manipulate an object or objects within a maximum range of 10 meters, up to a number of pounds equal to my INT modifier—both of which would go up as I leveled the skill. The only real downside was it was relatively MP intensive—MP use going up as I lifted heavier objects. At 10MP/lb/minute, lifting a 100lb object for a minute would cost 1000MP. A glance at my stats and I palmed my face—I could lift over half a ton, at the moment—before I burned through about 80% of my MP.

However, being able to lift massive objects wasn't the be-all/end-all of telekinesis. In fact, it was one of the dumber ways of using it. No, the smarter uses for telekinesis involved putting large amounts of force on tiny objects. For instance, being able to pop blood vessels in someone's brain was pretty much the holy grail of assassination. The problem with that though was that I got the feeling that Aura wouldn't allow it, unless I also overpowered someone's Aura… which would, naturally, alert them that someone was trying to attack them somehow. Another clever application in the small-objects-large-force department was propelling tiny objects at speed. Or, one of the most infamous, the Darth Vader style Force Choke. Given how much force I could apply, it would probably be more like Force Decapitation for grimm, but there was no safe way to test that against humans. 'So many possibilities,' I mused, a smirk crossing my lips as I turned my mind towards all the other uses of the skill I'd seen in various media.

Well, it looked like I had another skill to practice with… though, that did remind me of something important. I had a Conjuration skill I hadn't even used yet, after all. I had eaten the book a while back and never gotten around to playing with it. Shaking my head, I opened my Inventory and directed a stream of drops into it—a few potions, a few thousand Lien, and some older model pre-Dust rifles and ammunition. A look at my map told me where the next group of mobs was, so I moved up into the trees and we moved off towards their location.

A little over an hour later, I flicked the blood off my sword and looked around the carnage around
me—the basement level of what had been a parking garage, filled with an entire tribe of goblins, orcs, and trolls. All dead, now, as small spheres of metal scattered around the room began dissolving into light. Conjuration, as it turned out, was useful. I could create pretty much anything I could imagine, so long as I had mana for it. Of course, there were some limitations, such as duration and materials—Dust, for instance, could not be conjured… though, I had to wonder if that was a limitation on my part or that of my Semblance. Likewise, for some reason, I couldn’t simply conjure gold—which made no damn sense, from a physics standpoint. I’d tried conjuring Lien directly, and while I’d produced a good deal of paper that looked similar to paper Lien, the printed text and images were fuzzy and inconsistent. I supposed I could try producing the other precious metals later, but there was little point—nothing I conjured was permanent, after all.

Combining Conjuration with Telekinesis, however, lead to some interesting results. For instance, if I called up fifty pounds of 00 steel buckshot—nothing more than 53.8 grain spheres of steel—and applied Telekinesis… well. The room around me was a bloody mess and the enemies there, before they dissolved into spirit-stuff, looked like they’d been run through a blender. Sure, I could’ve used something flashy like swords or knives—I could probably emulate half a dozen manga or anime off the top of my head that way—there was no point, here. Trash mobs simply weren’t worth that much effort. The most interesting results had been summoning up shot of different elements on the periodic table—alkali metals, specifically. Pure potassium shot had lead to exploding heads and a few rather nasty bodies, but it was certainly something I would be keeping in mind for later abuse. I couldn’t decide if I was looking forward to or dreading attempting the same with pure cesium or rubidium. It was bound to make a mess. Still, it was nice to know I could abuse some base physics for fun and profit.

Several alerts came up, each letting me know that the buffs I’d had running together full time for a while now—Aura, Reinforcement, Haste, and Reflex—had all just hit level 30. While it was a bit surprising that they had all leveled together like that, I was more surprised when I received a second notification.

_Congratulations, your Aura skill has reached Level 30! You may now select an Aura Specialization._

Reading over the details, I hummed. _‘I think I’ve found another piece of the whole ‘Aura’ puzzle.’_

According to my Semblance, I had a few choices for how I wanted to proceed, which would effect how I leveled from now on. Not only would I receive bonuses to certain stats from Aura Specialization, the skill—or skill evolution, rather, as it was really just a higher level of the Aura skill—would also change how I gained stat points. For instance, if I selected ‘Berserker’ from the list of basic templates, I would gain large percentage bonuses to STR and VIT, and from now on I would earn points in those two stats more easily and more quickly than other stats, whose rate of growth appeared unchanged. _Well, so far I’ve done well with the whole mage-rogue build. INT and CHA have been my most useful stats, with WIS coming in a close third. Skills and spells have made up the difference for the rest. With the right combination of spells and skills, I should be able to negate any real lack in stats. But let’s see what other options there are…’_
With that in mind, I dug through my choices until I found one that was similar to what I was looking for, but not quite there—an option listed simply as 'Caster.' I blinked, going back over my options once more before rolling my eyes. 'Of course, specializations named after the Fate classes.'

However, instead of confirming the choice, I looked over the rest of my options, until I found what I'd hoped for sitting at the bottom: 'Customize…' There, I was presented with a series of tabs: 'Stat Growth,' 'Skill Specialization,' 'Enhancements,' and 'Special Traits.' Under 'Stat Growth,' I found I could adjust how I gained stats manually—I could choose to focus on a single stat, or a few, or I could spread my growth evenly across all stats. At the moment, it seemed that growth was mostly even across the board—meaning, mostly unspecialized. There was some imbalance due to an odd number of stats to points allotted, however. The extra points were each in INT, WIS, and CHA so I theoretically already leaned towards a caster build. 'So I have ten overall points to spend here to determine how future stat points are gained… Ten points, seven stats—makes sense, if each point represents 10% of how stats are gained. Question is, is this points gain on top of what I'm getting, or is it my total skill point gain? If I dumped everything into INT, would nothing else level?'

Going back a level and looking over the templates seemed to lean more towards the first theory—that this was for extra points distribution on top of what I was already getting. Thinking it over, I decided to prioritize INT, dropping five of my available points there. Three points went to CHA while two went to WIS. The way I figured it, I was prioritizing damage, followed by mental skills, followed by MP regen and meeting requirements for things like advanced summoning. That was pretty much what I had been doing so far, anyway. I confirmed that and moved on to the second tab, 'Skill Specialization.' The title itself was somewhat misleading, in that I wasn't picking a single skill to focus on, but rather a category of skills.

Skill categories were divided similarly to how I'd listed them for the girls: Attack, Defense, Healing, Stealth, Mental, Movement, Utility. I noticed there was a pattern there, too—seven stats, seven skill categories. Under each of those were branching options. Attack lead to Melee and Ranged. Below each of those was Single Target and Area of Effect, with more options below each grayed out. I found a small 'Help' section and began to RTFM.

'So, this will specialize skill growth, then. I can still level skills normally, but the family or families I choose will gain levels faster. Later on, I'll be able to choose more advanced options and… holy shit. Skill evolution is an official thing. Max a skill or hit a level threshold and it evolves into a higher level skill. Max out two or more compatible skills, combine them into one skill? Fuck yes! ...But how does that work with Skill Creation, when I could theoretically just create the same skill? Bonuses, maybe? No, wait. I think I get it… This… sort of, kind of backdoors cutting my skills down. So, suppose I max out my 'walking' skills, then I could combine them into one 'walking' skill—that does what, I wonder? How does that help, on the front end? I suppose it would mean, with some things, less things to keep track of and less redundant skills. Beyond that, I'd really need testing to tell. Still, sounds awesome.'

Unlike with skill points, I could only select three fields to truly specialize in here—or focus on one,
to the exclusion of all others. The first selection was obvious: Attack spells got priority—the faster I
could kill things, the more likely I was to live through it. After that, came survivability—which meant
either Healing or Defense. Defense was focused on mitigating damage—as opposed to not being
there in the first place, which was Movement… Healing, on the other hand, was all about keeping
myself and my teammates alive—direct heals, AOE heals, HOTs, health regeneration, and so forth.

Just to be sure I wasn't missing anything important, I went over the other options as well. Most of
them were pretty much exactly what they said on the tin, thankfully. The only real surprise came
with the Utility category, where it seemed Buffs had wound up, in addition to obvious choices like
my detection skills such as Perception, Observe, Listen, and so on, in addition to Skill Creation itself.
That was kind of annoying, but there wasn't much I could do about it. *Priorities being what they
are, Healing ranks higher than Defense, as it'll allow me to keep the people with me alive longer.
Healers being more valuable than tanks, and all that. Also, so does the ability to run the fuck away
from danger. So, Attack, Healing, and Movement."

I moved on to the next tab, 'Enhancements.' Unfortunately, it was grayed out and when I selected it, I
was greeted with a window telling me that this particular feature wouldn't become available until I hit
my second evolution for Aura, at skill level 50. Seeing an opportunity to munchkin, I went back to
Skill Specialization and dug around to figure out where the Aura skill itself was listed. No matter
where I looked, however, I couldn't find it. By its very nature, Aura affected everything I did—every
field of skills depended on Aura itself. Therefore...

'Meta Skills.' I rolled my eyes, leaving my
selections as they were and moving on.

Meta Skills were sort of like Hidden Skills, in that you couldn't always easily modify them or even
see them in most instances. The biggest differences were the fact that meta skills tended to be lore—
as in, it was there in the back story somewhere even if you didn't get a named skill for it —and scale.
They tended to effect everything the character did. For example, a common Mage in World of
Warcraft. That mage would have skill trees and such to progress as a character, and those were
obvious skills—things the character could see and interact with. An example of a meta skill, in this
instance, would be the character's ability to use magic itself— which was all there in the lore,
somewhere—and from which the skill trees themselves were derived. Considering it was a game
however, the practical skill was derived from several places: skill points, specializations, and
available spells… but also the player's own ability to play the character effectively. At least in my
case I could see the Aura skill and its level in my skill menu and could use it outright.

'Special Traits' turned out to be grayed out also—apparently, I would have to level the skill further
and/or meet prerequisites in order to unlock whatever was available there. Unlike the Enhancements
tab, I was offered no clues as to what those prerequisites may be. I shrugged, figuring my Semblance
would likely tell me when I unlocked something there. I confirmed my choices and would have gone
on to dig through my menus and see if anything else had changed…

My mind was drawn to something a bit more distracting, however. Focusing on my Telepathy feed
from Neo, I shuddered momentarily at the sensations coming over the link. 'Really?‘ I sighed, closing
my menus, putting away my sword and following Sanguine as we picked our way back upstairs and
out of the lair. *You know, there are other ways to get my attention aside from masturbating?*

I could feel her smirk as the ice cream themed girl sent me the view from her eyes, looking down as she continued what she was doing. *Yes, but this was so much more amusing. Are you coming?*

*Not yet, but I bet you will soon,*' I deadpanned, cutting that pun off at the knees.

The little menace sent me the impression of her sticking out her tongue. *So, kill anything interesting?*

I snorted, stepping out into the moonlight and turning to look at Sanguine. The great cat evaporated into smoke and I felt that coldness return to my chest—a bit milder than it had been. Firing my line launcher, I lifted myself up and began hopping through the urban jungle towards the roof where I'd left Neo. *Killed a goblin king. He dropped The One Ring and a short sword named Sting. The ring is +2 and grants Invisibility, but you have to roll a Will Save against mental corruption every time you look at it since it's semi-sentient. The sword is +1 and glows bright blue in the presence of orcs.*

*Ha ha. Ass,*' she teased. *Take me home. I want a shower, and I want to make love, and I want to cuddle.*

I didn't bother slowing down as I swooped down across the roof, picking up the short girl with Telekinesis and eliciting a shriek, followed by a shout for joy. It got her hand out of her panties, at least. The Illusion Barrier broke around us and I pulled us up onto one of the taller buildings. *Holy shit! Warn a girl next time you want to take her flying,* Neo panted, her face flushed with excitement. *We were flying, right?*

*Telekinesis,*' I answered, stretching out a hand and levitating her a foot off the ground before setting her back down.

She blinked, frowning as she regarded me. *You do realize that's like one step away from flight, right?*

*Not really,*' I denied, lifting her up again and heading for the apartment. *I could probably throw myself pretty far, yeah, but it's not flight—even if I combined it with other skills. I tried to create a flight skill, turns out my INT isn't high enough yet.* Well, no, that wasn't entirely accurate. My INT could be high enough, if I dumped my points into it, but I was holding off on that. I had gotten along fine without using them so far, after all—better to hold onto them in the event I needed to dump
points into something later to meet requirements if I found myself in a bind.

“Awe, that sucks,” Neo sighed. “Still, this is pretty cool. You can carry us all around now!”

Shooting her an amused look as the wind tossed her hair, I rolled my eyes. “Adrenaline junkie. I think you'd enjoy it more if I just got you your own line launcher.”

Neo shrugged. “I wouldn't complain. It'd be fun, and they're useful. But I enjoy doing things like this with you—and so do the others. Well, okay, they don't enjoy this as much as I do…”

“So, how far did you get with those skills?” I asked, wanting to know how effective the skills would be.

The girl pulled up her Skills page and hummed. “Level 3 Meditation, level 2 Reinforcement, level 1 Aura Detection, Level 2 Perception, level 4 Spinning Mana Arrow. I noticed the buff from your title disappeared once you went out of range—about 50 meters.”

Frowning, I thought it over—it made sense that if I wasn't there, whoever was learning from me wouldn't get any sort of advantages. “So's that why you decided to get my attention?”

Chuckling, Neo nodded. “Well, that and I really do want to go back to your place, have a shower, make love, and cuddle. Also, sleep.”

I spotted the apartment coming up and circled around to sweep the rooftop before bringing us in for a landing. “I'm kind of surprised that this is really all you wanted for your date night.”

Snorting, the girl leaned into my side as we made our way inside the building and into the apartment. “Well, for one thing, I'm not worried about trying to cram everything into one night. We'll have more, obviously. For another, I actually happen to enjoy simple things like this. I've never really dated before, and we're not exactly doing this in the right order anyway.”

I picked the small girl up, her legs going around my waist as I carried her towards the master bath. “You mean you're not supposed to screw someone and then get to know them?”
“Ass,” she rolled her eyes. “Not usually, no. But, hey, I'm not complaining. Now, shower.”

‘Eh, she's right. There's nothing wrong with just going out and having a good time—there's no point trying to turn figuring each other out into an interrogation, and especially not all in one night,’ I admitted. Though, I made a mental note to try to ask things anyway, at some point.
“That is complete bullshit,” Melanie grumbled, looking over the identical pair of weapons in my hands.

Beside her, Miltia hummed, tilting her head thoughtfully as she leaned forward on the couch, looking over the objects scattered across my coffee table. “Not really. There's logic behind it.”

Melanie turned an unamused look on her twin. “Well, please do explain.”

While they bickered, I opened up my Inventory and re-equipped my Blazefire Saber, followed by equipping the copy thereof—one of the joys of a system that allowed one to use multiple weapon slots. Both disappeared, before reappearing holstered to my left and right at my hips, as opposed to my lower back—though, I saw there were options for the weapon slots for placement for various types of weapons. The Sabers were a bit on the large size, so there were only three positions open to them—upper back with access over shoulders, lower back with access to the sides, or hips in a classic twin-blade configuration—or any combination of those three. Other slots it seemed were mostly dependent on weapon size and rigging. For instance, I had belt holsters for pistols, but thigh or shoulder rigs would open up those slots—which meant I would be buying every different type of carry rig I could find to feed to my Semblance.

The way the original Saber was created, it was intended to be opened and used one-handed, at least in saber mode… Humming, I grabbed both sheathed weapons, spun them once and hit the button/trigger combo to switch them into saber mode. I took a couple of test swings before converting them back to their storage mode and stowing them, then testing how they fit, range of motion, and ease of draw from the other positions available to me. Eventually, I settled with having them stored at my lower back, mostly due to ease of drawing them and the fact that it was easier to sit down that way, as opposed to having them ride at my hips. It didn't matter too terribly much,
considering I could save armor sets with them in each position, in the event I needed to move them for whatever reason.

Satisfied, I drew them again and spun them directly to rifle mode. There, I ran into a small problem—namely, that while I could probably use both rifles at the same time for some full-auto spray-and-pray action they were pretty much useless at their primary task as precision weapons. Any sort of precision rifle required both hands to operate properly, after all, and these were not small caliber rifles or SMGs either—.338 was a large round, with a good deal of recoil. With Aura, yeah, I probably could reliably one-hand one or both of the rifles on full-auto but… well, there were other options available to me that would likely work better. 'Besides, it's not like I absolutely have to go that route. Note to self though: buy a couple of laser sights, for that fast draw accuracy issue.'

Another twist of my wrists had both weapons closed up and I stowed the original. Examining the clone, I found the compartment that held the Dust crystal powering most of its features and giving it its distinctive red glow. Instead of opening it physically, however, I focused on the weapon itself and watched as a menu popped up giving me options for slots, stats, and so forth. Before I changed anything else, however, I selected the option to rename the sword, rechristening it as Blazefire Saber Beta—the original, when I got finished, would be renamed to Blazefire Saber Alpha—that way, there would be no confusing them in my menus. Next, I selected the slot for Dust Crystal. Currently, it had a grade 7 Burning Crimson crystal equipped—or as most everyone else would call it, 'Burn, uncut, grade 7.' Burning Crimson was one of the most common and cheapest types of Dust, but super effective at what it did.

Tapping the slot brought up a list of available replacements by color and grade. Humming, I memorized its damage stats and swapped the grade 7 crystal for a grade 8 of the same color. 'Okay, so crystal grade for the crystal powering the weapon changes damage and increases effect for both saber and rifle mode. Good to know, since I'd figure that the thing powering it wouldn't effect the Dust rounds coming out of it, but I guess that just shows what I know. So, things that modify weapon damage: the weapon itself, its attachments, Dust crystals powering it if any, ammunition, skills either passive or active.'

That in mind, I immediately swapped the grade 8 Burning Crimson for a grade 9 Ice Blue. The bright red glow immediately died, replaced by a cool blue. Under the weapon's stats, I grinned as it listed a change to status effects applied per round or strike—where before, on top of whatever my ammo was applying, the grade 7 Burning Crimson would apply a burn effect of that grade, the grade 9 Ice Blue would apply a grade 9 freeze/chill effect. The effect applied to sword strikes and Dust rounds on top of whatever element I happened to be using at the moment—so if I were to channel electricity- elemental Aura into my weapon, I couple apply both freeze and shock effects.

Once I swapped out the grade 7 crystal in my original Saber, I would have a good fire and ice combo going—which would likely be one of those nice physics combos that tended to screw up armor and certain enemies. After all, it worked for two of the AOE skills I already had, so I didn't see why I shouldn't use it here. I really needed to dig up some reference materials for a list of known Dust types, combinations, and their effects. While I was steady leveling my Use Dust skill, that sort of
information would be a great shortcut for figuring out the best combinations and effects without having to use my stock of Dust to test each variation myself—as fun as that sounded, it would cut into my already tight schedule.

In addition to my Blazefire Saber, I had also duplicated the rest of my gear—my normal armor, line launcher, stealth armor and katana, and so forth. It never hurt to have backups, for one—for another, I could always use a spare change of gear in case something got damaged. Mostly, though, I was attempting to test the extent of my ability to duplicate items. The twins had argued that if we were going to be stealing large quantities of Dust, we may as well duplicate as much of it as we could—which, of course, lead to questions as to the limits of that particular hidden skill. Well, I insisted it was a hidden skill and functioning as intended while Melanie argued that it had to be a bug and my Semblance was, as she so delicately put it, 'complete bullshit.' Miltia had finally given things enough thought, apparently, as she grinned at her sister.

“There are rules, based on what we’ve observed. Rule 1: living beings cannot be duplicated. Opening an Illusion Barrier around us doesn't create clones of us. At least, yet—that rule is possibly subject to change depending how that skill levels, right?” she asked turning bright green eyes on me. I hummed, opening my menu and reading over my options there. Create ID was nearly level 30, so if it followed the same pattern as my other skills odds were good I'd get some sort of upgrade to it then, in addition to more types of dungeons available. Maybe I'd finally get some sort of time-dilation dungeon. That would be useful as hell—and not just for squeezing in more training. A dungeon with a 2:1 time dilation rate—where time passed twice as fast inside as outside, or time outside passed half as fast as it did inside depending on how you looked at it—would effectively double the speed of anything crossing it, and I'd already determined that most IDs correlated space inside them with real space outside. Miltia was waiting for an answer, though, so I could drool over the potential abuses for that ability later, if it ever came up.

“I wouldn't rule it out. That, or possibly creating something like artificial people.” On their raised eyebrows, I sighed, realizing I'd worded that poorly. “You have a favorite book or TV series. The main character of that series is kind of a badass. Some games have challenge modes where you fight against replicas of popular characters from other genres, games, series, and so forth. So, one possible evolution for the ability to create Illusion Barriers on the fly would be challenge arenas to test myself against powerful foes. Or against copies of real people that I could go all out against without worrying about killing them.” Though, I couldn't really see how that would work other than game mechanics bullshit—because if it created real people and forced them to fight me, how fucked up would that be? 'Automatons with a reasonable facsimile of life, maybe? Hopefully. Eh, may not even get that ability. Worry about it if it comes up.'

“Makes sense,” Miltia agreed. “So, Rule 1 subject to change, maybe. Rule 2: an object may only be duplicated once. So, you can't infinitely duplicate Dust, unfortunately. Still, two is better than one in this instance. Rule 3: something that came from an Illusion Barrier originally is considered a 'duplicate' for all intents and purposes and cannot be copied—potions, for instance. Annoying, because we could use copies of that one Elixer. Rule 4: all duplicates are perfect copies of the original. This is good and bad. Good, in that there's no degradation between copies. Bad in that things like money all still bear identical serial numbers. Eventually, if you duped enough money,
someone might take notice. Of course, due to rule 3, you can't dupe money that drops from mobs anyway. Rule 5: some objects are treated differently from others. I think it's based on either mass or function, but I don't have enough data to decide that one conclusively. I do know you can't dupe some things, while you can dupe others. Small vehicles appear to be easy, so far, even if you're not claiming them to use with Summon Vehicle. A building, on the other hand, can't be duped—even in parts.”

Melanie frowned, holding up a hand to stop her sister. “Wait. All the other rules make at least some sense, but how'd you figure out that last one?”

“The horde zombie,” Neo guessed, drawing an amused look from Miltia, followed by a nod. “It collapsed part of a building, throwing debris everywhere. What, did you pick some up by accident?”

The red-clad twin shook her head. “Not by accident. I wanted to see if it could be done. I dropped a brick in Jaune's Inventory and carried another small piece out with me in my pocket. I felt the weight disappear the moment the barrier was brought down and when I checked it was gone. And since he hasn't said anything, I assume the piece I shoved into his Inventory never actually showed up. Right, Jaune?”

I shook my head. “I'd have remembered something like that. But just in case I didn't,” I trailed off, opening my Inventory and sorting its contents before scrolling through them. “Nope.”

Miltia nodded. “So, in game terms, things like buildings probably register as terrain, or static as opposed to mobile.” She took on a thoughtful look, eyes flitting over me before she smirked. “I wonder if an airship would qualify as an airship or as terrain.”

I blinked. “There's no way I could claim one as a vehicle. It'd take way too much mana, depending on how big it is. Then again… flying, floating fortress of doom. Damnit. Now I have to find one and try it.”

The red-clad twin smirked. “You're welcome.”

“All that Dust,” Melanie's eyes went slightly glazed for a moment, before she came out of it when I shot her a questioning look. “Do you have any idea how much Dust it takes to power military aircraft?” I shook my head and rolled her eyes. “A lot of very high quality Dust goes into the power plants on those things. Pretty much anything larger than a Bullhead keeps at least a ton or more of Dust on hand as fuel.”
“That's a lot of Dust,” I admitted, thinking it over. “Do you know how to shut down whatever reactor or power plant they use?”

“Uh… no,” the white-clad twin denied. Beside her, Miltia shook her head, and a look towards Neo confirmed she had no idea either.

Shrugging, I grabbed up everything from the top of the coffee table with telekinesis and yanked it into my Inventory. “Well, in that case, we should probably hold off on trying it until we know. I don't want to see what a ton of Dust looks like if it goes critical. Well, no, I take that back. I really, really do. I just don't want to be standing in front of it when it does.”

“Fair enough,” Melanie conceded, wincing at the thought.

Across from her, Neo shifted her gaze to meet mine and asked, “Have the Red Hand reported in yet?”

I checked my HUD and, upon seeing no notifications for my scroll, shook my head. “No new messages.” Fishing out my scroll, I fired off a text message to Howling Palm, asking for a sitrep on the men and equipment we'd be borrowing for the night. The response came quickly, telling me that she and Akamaru were likely still taking my messages as word of God.

'Alpha Squad in the air, Bullhead carrying Bravo Squad fueling now. Move Alpha to primary target now or wait for Bravo?'

“They've got one bird in the air, the other one's fueling now. Go now, or wait?” I asked the ice-cream themed girl.

She hummed in thought before her lips turned up into a grin. “Let's go ahead and move on the first shop. We can go in and start while they're getting into position.”

“Works for me,” I agreed, relaying the instructions and putting my scroll away before turning to the twins. “Sure you two don't want to take off work and come with us?”

The twins shared an amused glance before shaking their heads. “Nah. We're good. Besides, it's not like you need the extra help,” Miltia pointed out.
“Go have fun. See you when we get off work?” Melanie asked, and Neo and I nodded.

Neo made her way towards the door, but I took a moment to dig through my Inventory. “Oh, by the way, I picked these up this morning while you were sleeping.” I grinned, digging out three small packages and tossing them to the girls, who swiftly tore into them. Neo squealed and I felt her latch onto my back in a hug that probably should have broken something, considering the fact that Physical Resistance leveled. Twice.

The twins' reactions were more subdued, but no less grateful as they looked over the new line launchers I'd gotten them. That wasn't all I'd done that morning—I'd taken the time to seal off the apartment, too, before Jane got back and kicked in my door to beat me if I'd forgotten it… well, beat me or demand sex, depending on the situation and/or her mood. She wasn't due back from keeping Jun while the youngest Arc did her summer-school advanced placement thing until the coming weekend, but I'd figured if I didn't take care of it while I was thinking about it I'd get sidetracked and forget. “They're already loaded with Dust and replacement tips, so you should be good for a while.”

The twins hopped up and gave me their own hugs and thanks and I managed to pry Neo's arms out from around me and get us moving again.

“There's something here,” I warned aloud, drawing the attention of my erstwhile sidekick in our current endeavor. Nearby, the short, corset-clad form of Neopolitan stood in front of a powdered Dust dispenser, filling tubes and throwing them unerringly into my Inventory. The rest of the store had already been cleaned out, courtesy of my Telekinesis spell. Neither I nor Neo trusted the skill not to accidentally set off the powdered Dust if I tried to just grab it, and being in a Dust shop at the time… Well, that had seemed a whole lot like a smoker deciding to light up while pumping gas—maybe nothing would happen, or maybe the whole place would go up in a fireball. Some risks just weren't worth taking.

Raising one pink eyebrow, she asked, “What makes you say that?”

Something had caught my attention, but inside an Illusion Barrier as we were, my Perception and detection skills were muddled past the perimeter. It was near the border somewhere and getting closer. “I can sort of feel it brushing up against my senses.”

Neo blinked, shooting me a worried look. “But we're inside a barrier, right? No one can see us, or get in.”
“For the most part,” I agreed. “Grimm can sense them, and I’m pretty sure high-level hunters can as well, but normal people—even people of our own level shouldn’t be able to perceive them. I think.”

That feeling of something brushing against my senses came again and suddenly it felt as though my Illusion Barrier had… budged, somehow—like being inside a giant soap bubble and having someone decide to stick a finger in. A moment later, the bell over the door chimed as the door opened and someone came inside. I realized what had set off my senses the moment I heard the BGM change, but the voice confirmed it—what I had been feeling outside was a familiar Aura. “Hello? Is anyone here?”

Ruby Rose had stumbled into my Illusion Barrier, somehow. I suppose I shouldn’t be too terribly surprised—if my suspicions were correct, she had summoned one on Patch, after all. No, what I had forgotten was a bit of simple cause and effect, which my Semblance seemed to take particular pleasure in pointing out with a new quest: Plucking the Rose. I didn't give it the satisfaction of doing more than skimming it as my mind turned to how badly I'd fucked up. Originally, in what could be called canon as viewed from another world, Ruby had gotten into Beacon by attracting the attention of Glynda, and thus Ozpin, by sticking her nose into a robbery in progress and fighting off Roman and his goons—or maybe some men on loan from Hei, given that I knew Roman had rented muscle from Junior before. I had removed Roman. No Roman, no fight. No fight, no Glynda, no Ozpin, no early invite to Beacon for Ruby Rose—and Team RWBY would never be a thing. Considering a lot of my future knowledge and plans revolved around that particular team, and their little leader specifically, that oversight couldn't be allowed to stand. However, it was only a symptom of a larger problem…

'Fuck me. If I got sidetracked from something as important as that, it's time to admit I have a problem,' I mused. It was true though, I was overwhelmed at this point. Between the girls, the gang, grinding, and everything else going on I had neglected something important. This couldn't happen again. I would have to take the time and write things down, make a rough time-line for everything I knew as opposed to relying on memory. If I had lost track of Ruby of all people—or at least, neglected to account for the situation and circumstances that lead to her getting into Beacon early—what else was I forgetting? I didn't even have the excuse of being mistaken over what got her in in the first place—unlike Weiss, Blake, and Yang, Ruby's entry exam for Beacon had taken place directly as an episode, as opposed to a trailer. Well, at least I had an opportunity to correct that oversight now.

Whispering a quick Invisibility, I grabbed Neo and dragged her down out of sight. We were already in a party, so using Telepathy between us took only a second to pass on a message. *Throw on a veil and head outside. I've got a plan.*

The ice cream themed girl shot me an incredulous look as I sent her the details of said plan, before shrugging and slipping around behind our surprise guest and disappearing into a veil. Outside, the Red Hand men I'd ordered Akamaru to send for the second part of this job would be waiting for our
signal. As soon as she was outside, Neo would be having them move in and begin phase two of the operation—the visible smash-and-grab job that would leave behind evidence, should Cinder bother to look. At this point, I might as well plan on her checking up behind me—it wouldn't cost me anything but some time and effort. So, the first part of my plan for dealing with Ruby would, by necessity, involve buying Neo a moment to get outside and set the mooks in motion, then give them time to complete the robbery.

“This is really freaky. What is this place?” the red-clad reaper whispered.

Standing, I quickly moved over to the Dust dispenser and dragged a cannister of grade 9 powdered Burning Crimson from Inventory, along with a crystal of the same grade and color. Pocketing the crystal, I took the tube in both hands and leaned back against the counter, calling up Charisma and putting up an air of nonchalance. “Well,” I began, allowing Invisibility to drop away in a shimmer, immediately drawing the future Huntress's silver eyes to me as, behind her, Neo took that as her signal to make a quiet exit—not even the bell over the door rang as she left. “That depends on who you ask, really,” I answered softly, eyes on the tube of Dust I was playing with but making sure to keep her in the upper edge of my peripheral vision. As I'd expected to, I found myself facing down the business end of Crescent Rose for the second time since I'd met her. Looking up, red contacts met silver eyes and I grinned under my mask before visibly turning my eyes to look at the weapon in question. “Why, is that a cannon in your pocket or are you just happy to see me?”

The girl winced, a quiet groan slipping past pink lips. “That was worse than Yang,” she quietly lamented, probably for her own ears only, before shaking her head and flipping the rifle up into its more compact assault rifle form. She didn't stow it, however. Instead, she kept it pointed down and to her left, away from me but not so far that she couldn't respond quickly if I did anything fishy, causing my respect for her to tick upwards a notch—she had at least a little common sense, it seemed. “That was a bad pun and you should feel bad,” she deadpanned, an expression between amusement and exasperation crossing her face. Given who her sister was, and her supposed propensity for being punny, I wouldn't be surprised if that was her default reaction by now.

“And yet, I don't. Because it was so bad it looped back around to good,” I countered, earning an eyeroll for the attempt—she'd heard that excuse before, it seemed. Still, as much as I enjoyed silly banter, I had a point to make and some questions of my own. “To answer your question, it's an Illusion Barrier. How did you get in?”

Ruby shot me an incredulous look, asking, “What do you mean, 'how did I get in?' It was kinda hard to miss the big bubble thingie over my favorite Dust store.” She gestured around us, seemingly indicating the perimeter of my ID.

I blinked, parsing that twice to make sure I'd heard correctly before asking, “You can see the barrier?”
“Yup,” she nodded emphatically, rocking back on her heels slightly before tilting her head and asking, “Is that weird?”

“Huh. Maybe.” I muttered, shifting my eyes to the focus icons above her head and idly noting her level as 36—five levels higher than I’d first seen her and twelve levels higher than me. Shrugging off the level growth, I triggered Observe and found something new: a section labeled Special Traits, followed by something called Silver Eyes. There was no description when I selected the trait, but under the 'effects' section was listed the ability to perceive and enter Illusion Barriers. ‘What the hell?’ I wondered. “Silver Eyes?”

“What? What about them?” Ruby asked, suddenly self-conscious, and I shook my head. “Don’t worry about it,” I waved her off, dismissing the window for Observe at the same time. “Getting back on topic… think of this place as a bubble in reality—shouldn't be too hard, really, given that you can see it. Everything here, except us and the things we brought in with us, is a copy of something out there in the real world. Take this, for instance,” I said, flipping her the Dust cannister in a slow underhand pitch.

“Ack!” Ruby squawked, clearly realizing the potential for disaster should that cannister hit the ground. Somehow, she managed to catch the cannister while still holding onto Crescent Rose. “Don’t do that! Someone could have gotten hurt!”

“I had confidence you would catch it,” I countered. And while that was entirely true, she had no way of knowing that I’d had the thing locked with Telekinesis the entire throw and, even if she missed it, I’d have stopped it before it hit the ground—even with the shop mostly cleared out, I wasn't dumb enough to risk carelessly throwing those things around. “That right there is grade 9 Burn, in powdered form. Ready for use in ammunition production or whatever else you set your mind to.”

“So, you're stealing it?” she asked, sounding confused.

“Am I?” Pushing myself off the counter, I grinned when she stowed the cannister in the pouch at her side—space expanded, apparently—and brought her weapon up slightly. “Say you have an item… your weapon, for instance. I like your weapon and decide I want one for myself. Well, taking yours would be impolite—you're using it, after all. Instead, I supply my own time, effort, and materials and produce an exact duplicate. The only thing I've really 'stolen' there is the idea behind that specific weapon, and even then, anyone could have reverse engineered it with time and effort—all I did was cut out the time factor. You get to keep your weapon and I get to have a copy that works just as well. Have I really stolen anything?”
Ruby gave the question a moment of thought before shaking her head. “But you're not making a copy of my weapon, you're copying Dust. The man who owns this shop loses money if you just copy his Dust.”

I shook my head, not entirely surprised that she would take some convincing. Ruby was, in canon, pretty much the definition of Lawful Good. I had a feeling she wasn't quite that naively innocent here in Bizzaro Remnant, given who she was related to. Something of Yang, Qrow, and Taiyang—maybe even Raven, depending on when she bailed—must have rubbed off on her in addition to whatever influence her mother had had on her before her death. Still, convincing someone to do something that may bend the rules of their alignment is what Charisma was all about—and I was not afraid to do exactly that. “Nope. I buy Dust here like everyone else. I just make a copy before I buy it. It's like a two-for-one special.”

“But if everyone just made copies—”

“Everyone can't do what I do,” I chuckled, digging into my pouch and tossing her the crystal. “Have a look.”

“Is… is this…?” Ruby asked, eyes going a little wide.

I nodded. “Grade 9 Burn crystal. Just as good as the original. You couldn't tell it was a copy if you put them side by side. Keep it, and the other.”

“I,” she began, clearly hesitant. “I really shouldn't…”

Rolling my eyes, I gestured around the store. “Why not? Even if I didn't duplicate everything here, I'd still dupe it all when I got home anyway and no one would be the wiser. The only people who know are me and you. And let me guess, you're using ammo supplied by your school, right?”

Biting her lip, Ruby nodded. “Only in school. I mean, I have an allowance to buy practice rounds and ammunition for dealing with Grimm, but…”

“But Dust is expensive. Especially the good stuff,” I finished for her, earning another nod. “Keep it. Make some nice ammo out of it and stick it back for an emergency. You're probably going to need it, sooner or later.”
'Just about done here, Jaune, but there's a Huntress posted up on a nearby roof. She showed up about a minute into the alarm going off,' Neo warned, and I face-palmed.

“Shit.” I grunted, drawing a confused look from Ruby. “Sorry, just got word that we've got an uninvited guest.” I went over my options for a moment before I came up with something I thought might just work. “You're... not in Beacon yet, are you?”

“Uhh, no,” Ruby admitted, rubbing at the back of her head sheepishly. “Only two more years!”

“I see,” I hummed, taking on a thoughtful pose and stroking my chin. I sent to Neo, 'Are they finished?'

The response was quick in coming, tinged with anger. 'Not even close. They've got maybe half the stock. They're dragging ass. We're going to have to talk to Howling Palm about this later.'

'It's fine. It suits my purposes here. Get into position. We're coming out now,' I warned my ice cream themed accomplice. Locking eyes with Ruby, I sent her a grin under my mask, bringing my hands together in a loud clap. 'Time to roll for bullshit,' I mused, hoping she bought it.

“Wait, what?! Now?! I'm not ready!” she yelped, silver eyes going wide in alarm.

“A Huntress must be prepared for combat at all times,” I countered. I focused on the ID I had created and dismissed it, causing the bubble around us to shatter like mirrors as I dropped into Invisibility and ducked into cover. A moment later, all hell broke loose as the Red Hand men opened fire and I heard the sound of Crescent Rose unfolding and returning fire.

In the front of the store, the windows exploded outwards as four men were hurled out by one wide swing of Ruby's weapon, followed by three more as she flew between one and the next inside the store alternately smashing them with the pole of her scythe or slamming tiny little booted feet into their faces, then made for the street herself. I watched as she began making short work of the Red
Hand men I'd borrowed, dancing between them too fast for them to line up for a shot with any real accuracy, which lead to more than one instance of friendly fire on their part. Sighing, I sent to Neo, 'The Bullhead ready yet?'

I received what looked like a view through her eyes of the vehicle in question and the pilot giving a thumbs up. 'Good to go, Jaune. I'm moving into position now. Let me know when you're ready.'

'As soon as I drop Invisibility, get the men out and loaded up. I'll keep her occupied long enough for you to get into the air,' I sent, focusing on the girl's movements as she weaved through the last two men standing. 'Now.'

Stepping out of the store, I was forced to shift to one side as the small girl twisted and brought her rifle-scythe around and fired blind, a bright red Dust round streaking through the area my head had been a moment ago. Her eyes narrowed, shifting down to the broken glass on the ground and I realized what it was that had given me away. Smirking under my mask, I allowed Invisibility to drop and clapped slowly. “My, but you are good, Red.”

I wasn't just talking out of my ass, either. She'd heard the crunch of glass under the sounds of her own movement, that of the men around her, and gunfire and had reacted instinctively—and that was the only thing that could have given me away, seeing as at the time I'd not only been invisible but had Aura Suppression up and running, and still did. Still, I had a part to play here... I had to give the Red Hand men time to get to the Bullhead with what they'd stolen, and I had to provide enough of a challenge to be interesting to the figure watching at the edge of my Aura sense—and a glance at my minimap confirmed that Glynda was indeed posted up on a roof nearby, watching this little drama unfold, right where Neo said she'd be. 'Sorry, Ruby. You'll thank me later.'

“You ready for phase two?” I asked quietly, giving the girl a wink before speaking up so my voice would carry to our observer. “Still, good or not, I can't really let you just beat up those clowns like that—it's not really fair to them, after all. So, sorry it had to come to this, but...”

The redhead shot me a confused look. “Wait, wha—?”

Neo sent me confirmation that the men were out and loaded into the Bullhead, which meant that all the men on the ground were simply illusions and I could now move freely. “Let's you and me fight.”

The men on the ground vanished, shattering like glass as Neo's illusion dissolved. At the same time, I dug deep into Haste and Flash Stepped forward, flipping my sword over so the bladed edge faced away from her and drawing, the weapon's arc about Ruby's chest height. Crescent Rose flashed up into a block, but instead of pressing forward, she used the momentum imparted by my high-impact
strike to spin backwards and level the business end of the rifle at my torso. My mind automatically
drew a line down the length of the barrel, plotting out where the round would go as she pulled the
trigger, and I stepped out of the line of fire, Stepping forward again to close the distance, only to find
Ruby opening more distance herself by using the recoil from the rifle to throw herself backwards and
spin around.

'Shit,' I grunted, intuiting what she intended to do a moment before she slam-fired the weapon and
sent herself spinning forward in a pinwheel of bladed death. She was better than me, in terms of both
skill and level. I needed to put her on the defensive, otherwise this battle would quickly become very
one-sided. Unfortunately, as Shiro, I couldn't be seen throwing around the skills I would be using
later on as Jaune—nor could I really use the same stuff the Fox used either.

So, what did I have available? Stealth and speed, primarily—Invisibility, Flash Step, Iaido, and
maybe some not-so-obvious uses of magic or elemental manipulation. Wind and Gravity, for
instance, had no visible tells for their use. I could likewise use mental spells, but... it was Ruby, and
while the mental branch of spells was really good for stopping a fight entirely, that wasn't really what
was needed here. After all, if I just put her to sleep—assuming I could, which I felt pretty confident
of—then that wouldn't be much of a show for Glynda. 'Hit and run tactics it is.'

Unfortunately, in order to make it look good, I knew I would at least need to take some damage and
let her get a few good hits in. I could have evaded her attack entirely, using a combination of wind
and gravity, but that would defeat the purpose of picking this fight. Instead, I began to pull out at the
last second, hoping that it merely looked as though she'd caught me by surprise. The blade of
Crescent Rose scored a good hit across my chest, scarring the armor there deeply but not managing
to penetrate my armor. What I hadn't been expecting was the sheer force behind the blow, and I
found myself tumbling to land face first on the road hard enough to bounce. Ruby took ruthless
advantage, closing in for a follow-up swing, which missed as I rolled out, bringing my own blade up
into the same defensive recovery spin Jun had once tried against me.

Ruby didn't fall for it, however—apparently coming to a conclusion I'd already made: our weapon
skills were similar enough to cancel each other out, for the most part. She had longer reach and more
power behind her swings, while I had speed and the advantage of not being restricted to mostly
sweeping blows. Still, that didn't stop her from making the attempt anyway. Crescent Rose spun
through the space I'd been occupying a second before as I faded backwards and went invisible,
pulling up wind elemental mana and Gravity Manipulation. A Flash Step had me on the opposite
side of her and I swung, dropping Invisibility at the last second. I didn't have to, but nothing either
Ruby or Glynda had seen so far indicated otherwise, meaning I could both create an artificial
weakness in my technique to later exploit to my advantage if someone saw this later and fought me
expecting to find it there, and at the same time give Ruby a fair chance of defeating it without
having her absolutely kick my ass up one side of the street and down the other.

Silver eyes locked with my red contacts for a moment before Ruby rolled out from under the arc of
my swing, pulling her weapon up and putting it between us before giving it a spin to send the bladed
crescent hooking at my feet. I hopped over the blade, but apparently she had been hoping for that
and the initial swing was a feint and a setup for her next move, flipping the blade over to plant it in the ground, followed by hauling herself atop the shaft of the weapon like a gymnast on a balance beam, flipping once to close distance between us, and planting her booted feet in my face. It hurt a bit, but nothing was broken and my Aura tanked the damage—really, it was more shocking than painful, as I hadn't been expecting it. She followed it up by completing the motion and hauling the weapon out of its anchored position for another swipe at my airborne form. With most opponents, that would have been a perfect one-two combo, ending with someone stunned and on the ground, as I had been earlier. I wasn't most opponents, and I wasn't afraid to cheat.

Gravity and wind spun around me and I pulled back into a roll, outside of the range of Crescent Rose's blade, to land on my feet and resume my hit-and-run tactics. The next hit came from her flank, just inside her blind spot to her left, the back of my blade slapping against her ass cheek as I ran past without stopping, rolling under the retaliatory swing of her scythe and going invisible again. I was able to play out three more exchanges like that, landing solid hits to her legs and arms, before she appeared to have had enough and disappeared in a flash of red cape and a spray of rose petals. She reappeared some distance down the street, reoriented herself on me, and chambered another round. Her battle cry echoed down the street as Crescent Rose fired, launching her back towards me in a burst of speed. 'Get ready,' I sent, firing my line launcher and pulling myself up and out of the line of her attack as she drew near, suddenly thankful for Jane's suggestion for Dust types in my launcher—anything else wouldn't have deployed fast enough. I was up and on the roof a second later, rolling to my feet and turning to face where I figured Ruby would be coming from. She did not disappoint, launching herself up over the roof and leading with a hail of gunfire from the weapon's assault rifle mode, which I dodged away from in a series of Flash Steps as she readjusted her aim every time I reappeared. She landed on the roof with me, spinning her weapon back through its scythe transformation and sending a mild glare my way. “Stand still so I can hit you!”

“Let me think about that,” I hummed, reaching up and stroking my chin though my mask. The sound of the Bullhead's engines picked up and I grinned as Neo let me know she was ready. “Nah.”

“Haa!” Ruby yelled, launching herself at me again with another sweeping swing.

'Jesus, and I thought Yang was the one with anger issues. Get the girl riled up and she gets downright bloodthirsty!' I dropped to the deck, rolling under her swing and coming up on the other side to push away and gain distance, putting her between me and the Bullhead. “What's the matter, Red? Can't hit what you can't see?” I taunted.

'Now!' Muttering a quick “Invisibility,” I disappeared, and a moment later, an illusion of me reappeared to one side of the red-clad reaper, appearing to have just come out of a Flash Step and swinging his sword. I Leapt away, bouncing across a few rooftops and out of Glynda's range and line of sight, dropping into an alleyway and switching into my 'Jaune' outfit. Dropping Aura Suppression, I hauled ass down the street, coming into where I knew Glynda's field of view would
cover and looking around as though I was hunting for the source of the disturbance still ongoing. Ruby gave me an excuse with more gunfire and I ran up the side of the nearest building.

Spotting the fight on the roof across the street, I grinned. ‘Okay. Final phase. Everyone ready?’

'Ready,' Neo sent, along with a view of the inside of the Bullhead, where two men with automatic rifles were on standby.

'Go. And remember, please aim at the shield. Not my face. Or my balls. I need both of those.' Neo's laughter rang in my mind and, on the roof across from me, illusion— Shiro pulled another disappearing act, reappearing in the Bullhead and moving out of sight, as the two Red Hand mooks moved into view, followed by Neo herself— sporting black hair, mint green eyes, a black version of her current outfit and with a grenade launcher in hand. I Leapt across the gap between buildings as she sent me a view down the sights of her launcher, letting me know where the round was going. I got there just in time to nearly get knocked on my ass, as I hadn't engaged any of my magical shields aside from Aura and Reinforcement. *That actually kind of hurt,* I mused, my arm feeling a bit numb from the hit as my shield rang like a struck gong.

I glanced behind me and found myself looking into a pair of silver eyes. I grinned. “Hello.”

“Hi,” she murmured, apparently not quite sure what to say, herself. “Thanks for that.”

“Talk later,” a new voice interrupted, and I looked over to see Glynda Goodwitch had joined us, a purple magical shield springing up as red Dust rounds began pouring out of the Bullhead on our position in two streams of full-auto fire, interspersed with the occasional grenade.

Whipping out my Blazefire Saber Alpha, I flipped it open into rifle mode, thumbing the fire selector up to burst and taking aim at the cockpit while beside me, Ruby had planted Crescent Rose’s blade in the roof and opened fire on the men in the Bullhead. *Time to go, before she swats you out of the air. See you back at the apartment.*

'Right, we're going,' Neo confirmed, emptying the last of her grenade rounds at us before moving towards the cockpit. The whine from the engines picked up a moment later and they shifted forward a bit, the aircraft beginning to gain altitude. The magical shield disappeared and Glynda flicked her riding crop, summoning up an ice storm above the craft, but it was entirely too late for that as the vehicle accelerated up and away.
“Well, that was a thing,” I mused, flipping my weapon around into its compact form and stowing it.

Beside me, Ruby did likewise. She looked to be about to say something, but the smack of leather on flesh from nearby drew our attention to where Glynda had slapped her riding crop into her palm. “You two are coming with me.”

Around us, sirens were beginning to wail and red and blue light reflected up from the street below as the police arrived, finally. “Where?” I asked, for Ruby's benefit.


We made our way to the roof edge and Ruby let out a startled squeak as I hefted her up into a bridal carry and hopped down—force of habit from constantly hauling around the twins and Neo when they were feeling lazy or I was taking jumps they couldn't make. Setting the red-clad reaper back down on her feet, I rubbed at the back of my head in a true show of momentary embarrassment. “Sorry, force of habit,” I apologized quietly.

“I… I didn't mind,” Ruby whispered, face tomato red in a blush I pretended not to notice, but felt was absolutely adorable.

Ruby and I were lead to a patrol car and ushered into the back, where we were driven to the police station. Along the way, Ruby attempted to strike up a conversation. Turning those silver eyes on my blue, she asked, “Sooo… I'm Ruby, Ruby Rose. What's your name?”

“Well, Ruby Ruby Rose, my name is Jaune Jaune Arc. It's nice to meet you,” I chuckled, extending my hand for her to shake.

She did, but only after shooting a pout my way at the teasing. “That's mean,” she whined. After a moment, her pout fell away and she turned a nervous look towards the front of the car and our two police escorts, silent up ’til now. “So, do you think we're in any trouble?”

“Probably not,” I denied, shaking my head. “Otherwise, they'd have confiscated our weapons and put us in cuffs. They're probably just going to take our statements about the incident. Right, officers?”
The officer in the passenger seat turned enough to look me in the eye and smile—blonde, light blue eyes, mid-to-late 20s, with an athletic but still feminine figure. “That's right, Mr. Arc.”

Turning to Ruby, I sent her an I-told-you-so look, before adding. “Also, much as I'd love to, I don't think this is really the place to get to know each other. We're being recorded. Right?” I asked, shifting my eyes back to the blonde, who answered with a nod.

“I'm sorry, but all squad cars come equipped with recording equipment throughout the vehicle. Anything you say can and will be recorded, and we don't really delete the records… Sure, no one's likely to go over a couple of kids talking about things unrelated to the case, but if you say anything embarrassing it could, theoretically, show up in court later. I say theoretically because, with no one apprehended, this case will likely be put on a back burner until we do catch someone, or shelved if we do not,” she clarified. “By the way, my name is Officer Hvit and this surly example of the silent treatment personified is Officer Svart,” she grinned, gesturing towards her companion—a large, tan man with black hair in a crew cut and dark eyes who looked to be in his mid-to-late 30s, with an entirely too serious expression on his clean-shaven face as he navigated traffic.

“It's nice to meet you,” Ruby beamed at the older woman, while I nodded beside her.

“So, much as it pains me Ruby, how about we save the conversation for later? I'm sure getting a statement won’t take long at all. Ten, twenty minutes tops,” I guesstimated, earning another nod from Officer Hvit.

“Awe, okay,” the younger girl sighed, turning and looking out the window at the passing scenery.

When we arrived at the station, I was mildly surprised to find myself separated from Ruby—only mildly, though, as I supposed taking statements separately made sense in that we wouldn't influence each other's story. What I was entirely surprised over, and equally unamused about, was to find myself dumped into a classic interrogation room as opposed to a simple office, where the officer that had lead me there—neither Hvit nor Svart—demanded my scroll. Frowning, I asked, “Do you have the legal right to confiscate my scroll?”

The man, an Officer Green as his name tag called him, nodded and sent me a friendly smile. “Of course. It's just standard procedure and it will be returned to you when you leave.”

Observe put lie to that, however, and I called him on it. “It's not nice to lie like that. My companion is technically still a minor, unless she became a Huntress or apprentice to a Hunter on the car ride over—and I'm pretty sure she didn't. Have you allowed her to contact her family?”
We have,” Green lied, and I frowned. Pushing my chair back, I stood and turned towards the door. Before I made it two steps, I found Green's hand circling most of my upper arm in an iron grip. “Mr. Arc, I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask you to sit down and wait here. Someone will be with you shortly.”

For a moment, I considered removing his hand from my arm, then thought better of it—criminal I may be, he had no way of knowing that, and at the moment I was nothing more than a teenaged hunter-in-training in his mind. I wasn't one of those idiots who made a scene resisting arrest and screeching as officers were forced to hit or taze them into submission. That was a damn good way to get oneself hurt or potentially killed where I was from—because some idiot thought fighting an armed police officer was a good idea. I was raised with more decorum than to pitch a hissy fit because I wasn't getting my way, thankfully.

Besides, it was an all around bad idea, given where I was—even using my usual methods, as opposed to resorting to fisticuffs. Suppose I did put Green out with the usual Sleep/Forget combo—what then? There were bound to be people monitoring the CCTV feeds from these rooms who would surely raise the alarm before I could get to them. I could use Dominate, but it wouldn't take long for someone to figure out that something wasn't right and likewise sound an alarm. Likewise, if I were to disappear into either Invisibility or an Illusion Barrier, alarm. Either way, I had no doubt that if the police couldn't stop someone like me themselves, they wouldn't hesitate to call in Hunters, and then I'd be really screwed.

Still, that didn't mean I'd just meekly roll over. As Green made his way to the door, I shot him a flat look, pulling up Charisma and Killing Intent. He jerked, paling slightly and yanking open the door. “Sure,” I grunted, sitting back down as the door slammed behind Green. 'This shit isn't going to fly. I need to get to Ruby, before she cracks under pressure and spills something she shouldn't.'

A brush against my Aura Sense let me know Glynda was approaching. Turning things over in my head for a moment, I decided on how best to deal with her. Adopting a patiently bored expression, I leaned back in my chair and crossed my arms. The door to the room was behind me and that classic interrogation room staple, a one-way mirror, directly in front of me. The door opened behind me and I caught her reflection. She made to say something, but I cut her off, forcing myself to keep a straight face as I did. “About time. Do me a favor and get me a couple of those donuts I saw in the break room on the way here, and a drink out of the machine.”

I saw the blonde blink in the mirror, so taken aback was she that she actually half turned and took a step back towards the hall before her brain caught up to her body and a flat, unamused look settled on her features. I triggered Observe and read over the pertinent information, specifically her mood: off-balance, confused, flustered, irritated. So, she had come in expecting to intimidate a green teenager, but I had robbed her of the initiative. The question is, what would she need to intimidate me for? 'Does she suspect something?' I wondered, before discarding the notion. If she did, I'd probably be occupying a holding cell as opposed to an interrogation room. Still, it didn't matter. I had
taken the initiative, now I needed to keep it. I pulled up Charisma and met her eyes in the mirror. “A woman with such a pretty face shouldn't frown like that,” I warned, before dropping Charisma and the smile and following it with, “You'll get wrinkles, at your age.”

There was a brief flicker against my Aura Sense, nearby and monumentally powerful—but it lasted only an instant. Still, it had come from the other side of the glass… ‘Ozpin is already here?’ I mused, grinning. He was undoubtedly listening in. Maybe I'd gotten a chuckle, and that was why he’d slipped in his suppression of his own Aura. Calling up Listen and filtering through the background noise, I faintly caught the sound of a quiet coughing chuckle from the next room. ‘Even better. Nearly drowned him on his coffee. Still, that he can hide like that tells me Aura Suppression isn't unique to me, at all. Meaning Cinder was overestimating my skill level based on the fact that I could. …Well, I suppose it's better to be either underestimated or overestimated, than estimated accurately or something like that.’

The sharp clack clack! of Glynda's heels as she closed the door and made her way over to the chair across from me caused me to wince at the sudden volume and drop Listen, pulling my eyes away from where I figured the headmaster was lurking to settle on the woman herself, my blue eyes meeting her bright green briefly. Joan had warned me not to antagonize her, but at the moment I didn't particularly care—she was being a bully. Glynda sat down, straightening her blouse and retrieving a folded down tablet that looked like a larger version of a scroll. On it, the battle progressed on fast forward from Ruby smashing the Red Hand mooks out of From Dust 'till Dawn, through her fight with Shiro, until the video paused on the moment I took a grenade round to the shield.

The frozen video shifted to one corner of the tablet as the focus was taken up by what appeared to be a generic school photo, along with notes and other text too small for me to read. “Jaune Arc, of those Arcs. Age 17. Failed the final tests to progress past intermediate to advanced academy level due to a complete lack of ability to use Aura. And yet, tonight you demonstrated sufficient knowledge and use of Aura to pass those very exams. Of more interest, we received transcripts from your academy recently that, upon review, do not match your school records. Would you care to explain that inconsistency, Mr. Arc?”

“You have CCTV footage, taken from the city's camera network. You also have my official school records. How did you get those, I wonder? I suppose you could have asked the police for access to their surveillance gear. Likewise, you could also have simply put in a request for verification of my records… but if you had, it would follow that I would have been contacted regarding those inconsistencies shortly after they were discovered, as opposed to just now. This would imply that you did not know before now and you have a method of penetrating the networks and servers of both the police and my school remotely,” I stated, suppressing a smirk as her eyes widened fractionally in shock that I'd put that together so quickly, before narrowing in annoyance. “To answer your question, I couldn't really say how it happened. I don't remember much of anything before a week or two ago. Got into a fight with some Grimm and lost,” I began, and her fingers flew across the tablet as new information sprang up.
“Admitted for severe head trauma, lacerations, broken bones… You should have been crippled for life. On top of that, diagnosed with a case of… retrograde amnesia?” She looked up from her tablet, sending an unamused look my way. “You don't behave like an amnesiac.”

“Everyone keeps saying that,” I shrugged, grinning, then pointed to her tablet. “You also have access to my medical records when you really, really shouldn't. Pretty sure that violates more than one law about hospital records. And again, you pulled them on the fly—which, unless you already had prior access, is impossibly fast for a human,” I needled. 'Maybe Ozpin reverse engineered that hacking tool? I mean, the other option is an AI under Ozpin's control... and while it's not entirely out of the question, I don't remember there being but one true AI in the series—Penny. There were supposedly something like VI from Mass Effect, dumb and limited pseudo-AI being used as interface points in places, but VI don't have the creativity to hack things.'

Glynda put down the tablet, clasping her hands together and regarding me with a stern expression I suppose she reserved for students—particularly stubborn, irritating students. “What were you doing downtown tonight, Mr. Arc?”

Simple answers worked best, so I answered with, “Well, I was going to buy some Dust to make myself some more ammunition. I heard fighting, so I came running. By the time I showed up, well, you were there.”

“And so you, a young man who claims to have little to no memory of his life before a couple of weeks ago,” she layered the sarcasm on thick there, “decided to intervene in a robbery in progress. Do you have any idea the danger you were in? You could have been hurt, if not killed outright—”

“I wasn't, though,” I interrupted, drawing a look of irritation from her as I continued. “The fact of the matter is, someone was in very real danger of exactly that, and I had both the power and ability to step in and do something about it, so I did. It's a risk Hunters take on every day they're in the field, and if I'm going to be one—and I am—then I can't hesitate because there may be a risk to myself. In addition, I may not remember much, but sure as hell I know right from wrong. I know that standing by with my thumbs up my ass while someone else is in danger and I have the power to do something about it falls squarely in the 'wrong' category. So, no. You can chew my ass all you like about it, but I regret nothing. Now, since you're clearly not taking our statements, was there a reason you brought us here, separated us, and attempted cheap intimidation tactics? Do you have the legal authority to detain us, or have us detained—and if so, do you have probable cause? Because if you fail to meet any of those requirements, I'm walking and I'm taking my friend with me.”

Before the woman could answer, there came a knock at the door—two quick knocks followed a moment later by a third. Glynda stood and moved to the door, opening it a crack and having a brief conversation with someone on the other side—Ozpin, if I had to guess. With a resigned sigh, she turned away from the door and locked eyes with me in the mirror. For a moment, there was a brief contest of wills between us. When neither of us conceded, she turned and opened the door fully.
“Please come with me.”

I stood and followed her, the clacking of her heels loud even over the murmur of a police station at work—apparently, her frustration was bleeding into her steps a bit. Opening a door several rooms down, she gestured me inside, where I found Ruby Rose waiting in a seat, in a room identical to the one I had just recently vacated. “Oh, hi Jaune!” she greeted, beaming a smile for a moment before a look of apprehension crossed her features. “Umm… what's going on? I thought we were just going to give statements?”

Moving over to the table, I took the only other chair and moved it around to put it beside Ruby and took a seat on it backwards, turning my head to regard her. “Someone's playing games,” I said by way of explanation. “Have you called your parents? Did they try to confiscate your scroll?”

“No, and they did,” Ruby frowned, before her silver eyes went wide. “Oh no! Quick, I have to get to a scroll! If I don't call my sister, there's going to be so much trouble!”

“I am sure it can wait until we are finished, Ms. Rose,” Glynda denied, but she did produce a scroll and pass it to Ruby. “Now, if you would, please explain what you were doing—”

“No,” I cut her off, pointing at her for emphasis. “Ms. Goodwitch, you are on very thin ice right now. Make your pitch but there will be no dressing down, or we leave.”

The door opened behind the Huntress, admitting the silver haired form of Ozpin, carrying a tray of cookies and a cup of what smelled like coffee. I have to admit, I hated the stuff, but it smelled good. “Ruby Rose,” he greeted the girl beside me, golden eyes focusing on her silver in scrutiny for a moment as he leaned in to get a closer look. “You have silver eyes.”

Ruby blinked, a confused expression crossing her face. “Uh… You're the second person to point it out today. Is that important?”

“Perhaps,” Ozpin murmured, setting the plate of cookies in front of her and pulling back, shifting his gaze to regard me. “And Jaune Arc. You shouldn't bully my staff, Mr. Arc—it's not polite for a future student to give one of his teachers a hard time. One would think it especially unwise to give the combat instructor in particular a hard time.”

“I calls 'em as I sees 'em,” I deadpanned. “So, is that an offer?”
The older man raised one silver eyebrow in amusement before taking a sip from his cup. “It is.”

“I accept,” I acknowledged quickly, before he could change his mind. Not that he would. No, if he was making the offer himself then he’d heard or seen something he liked that would cause him to ignore the forged transcripts—and my general attitude towards one of his staff members. But oh damn was that warning foreboding—I’d gone out of my way to piss off Glynda and odds were good she’d take some satisfaction making my classes with her miserable, all in the name of improving a student's skills.

Beside me, I noticed Ruby's attention had shifted focus to the tray of chocolate chip cookies on the table. Slowly, she reached out a hand to take one. Before it got there, however, I reached out and lightly slapped the back of her hand, causing her to jump and let out a squeak of surprise as she yanked her hand back before turning to pout at me. “You're a meanie.”

“Talk first, cookies later,” I countered.

Across from us, Ozpin chuckled quietly before shifting his gaze to where Glynda had brought up the security footage again, this time focusing on Ruby's portion of the battle. “I've only seen one scythe wielder of that caliber before—a dusty old crow.”

“That's my uncle Qrow!” Ruby grinned. “He teaches at Signal, and he taught me. I'm kinda, sorta his apprentice. I was complete garbage before he took me under his wing, but now I'm all like—”

She made to stand up and I gently tugged her back down. “I think he gets the idea, Ruby.”

“Indeed,” the headmaster smiled. “Tell me, what is an adorable girl such as yourself doing at a school designed to train warriors?”

Ruby made to open her mouth and answer, but I quickly covered her mouth with my hand, earning a mild glare from the girl in question. “Ten words or less, no gushing.”

“You're no fun. You're like the anti-fun,” she grumbled, and I shrugged.

Shooting a look between Ozpin and Glynda, I explained, “There's a time for fun and a time for serious talk. This is the latter. If you want to be taken seriously, you have to act accordingly.”
Ruby sighed, nodding. “I get it,” she agreed, before looking up and meeting Ozpin's eyes. Even with my admonition not to gush, her words were no less impassioned as she told him her dream. “I want to become a Huntress, like my parents.” She shot me a glance and I nodded, motioning for her to continue, as I hadn't been entirely serious about the word count. “I have two years of training left at Signal and then I'm going to apply to Beacon. My sister is starting there this year.”

Ozpin hummed, before asking, “Do you know who I am?”

Ruby nodded. “Professor Ozpin. Headmaster at Beacon Academy.”

The older man allowed a small grin to cross his features as he asked, “Would you like to come to my school?”

The red-clad reaper's eyes went a bit wide. “This year?” she asked, and he nodded. “More than anything.”

Ozpin and Glynda traded a look and the woman shot a glance at me, earning her a small smirk from her boss. She rolled her eyes and Ozpin took that as all the confirmation he needed. “Okay. If you'll leave your contact information with her, Glynda will contact you within the week with a list of required materials.” Turning his gaze on me, he smirked. “Oh, and Mr. Arc? I'll handle the paperwork, if you don't mind.”

“I assure you, I have no idea what you're talking about, sir,” I shrugged, putting on my best innocent expression as I pushed my way up out of the chair and offered a hand to Ruby beside me. The shorter girl shot a longing look towards the platter of cookies on the table and I rolled my eyes, giving her a 'go ahead' gesture. The little reaper's face split into a grin as she snagged the cookies off the plate and stacked them in her hands—all of them—before heading out the door ahead of me, already munching away happily.

The door closed behind me and on a hunch, I slowed my pace, activating Listen. “Sir, are you sure this is wise?” Glynda asked, worry obvious in her tone. “Ms. Rose is at the bare minimum age for acceptance of gifted students, and while her skill is not in question, I do not believe she is ready on a psychological level. The psych profile data Signal had is gone with the destruction of their servers, minus that of the graduating class which was on the drive the Fox retrieved, and Mr. Arc did not give me a chance to glean anything from her.”

“You worry too much, Glynda. If she weren't ready, she wouldn't have pushed as hard as she has to

date. However, if you're that concerned, feel free to call the staff at Signal. I'm sure her uncle or father would be willing to answer whatever questions you'd care to ask,” Ozpin countered, before quietly adding, “And you know as well as I do, we don't necessarily have time to wait.”

“I thought trial by fire went out of style years ago, sir,” she admonished, and I could tell it was a long standing matter of contention between them. “I should call them, to be thorough, so we at least know what we're getting… but nothing they say is going to change your mind, is it?” Glynda asked, and a moment later sighed as she got a silent answer, and I heard a scrape of metal against the floor and what I assumed was her dropping into a chair. “Is this the 'smaller soul' you've been looking for?”

There was a hint of a smile in his voice as Ozpin answered, “Perhaps.”

Glynda apparently decided to drop it and move on to a topic of more pressing concern, at least to me. “Fine. And what of Mr. Arc?”

Humming quietly, the Headmaster asked, “What is your opinion of him?”

“He's lying,” Glynda deadpanned. “I don't buy that nonsense in his medical records, for starters. That aside… regardless of whatever his school records say, he's clearly capable of using Aura and has also likely unlocked his Semblance, though I saw no evidence of its usage during the brief time he fought. He didn't hesitate to jump in. I didn't get to see much of what he's capable of, but he has powered movement down better than some second or third year Beacon students and he handles his rifle like he's been doing it for years. He's had training, recently if there's any truth to his medical records, most likely from his sisters… but again, to go from absolutely nothing to potentially in the neighborhood of a Signal graduate within a couple of weeks strains belief. So I return to my original point: either he's lying, or he's some sort of idiot savant, in the classical sense. It's much more likely he's simply lying, though to what end, I couldn't say. Maybe he's always been this good, and he's just been hiding it. Or, perhaps his siblings have been teaching him on the side recently and the events leading to his hospital visit merely provided the impetus to awaken his Aura and Semblance—but if so, why the claim of amnesia? He's a puzzle, Headmaster, and I don't have all the pieces yet.”

'And of course she couldn't just let it lie. No, it's going to eat at her until she has me figured out. Great, just what I needed, more scrutiny,' I rolled my eyes.

“However,” she added, voice turning speculative. “His willingness to come to the defense of a friend seemingly in need of it, even with the relatively short time they've known each other, against someone in a position of authority is… commendable. He is intuitive, cunning, and manipulative—and despite all of that, his actions speak of someone who highly values his comrades. Also, he knew who we were on sight. The moment he saw me, he moved to seize the initiative and put me on the back foot. He won't blindly follow orders like the other students.”
Ozpin chuckled and went quiet a moment, before I heard the sound of ceramic on metal—his coffee cup, I guessed. “If what you're saying is true, we won't need him to. He'll do what he feels is right.”

Catching sight of Ruby turning around to figure out where I'd gotten off to, I dropped Listen and jogged to catch up. “Were you snooping?” she asked, shooting me a suspicious look.

“Of course,” I admitted, grinning. “Want to know what they said about you?”

“Nooo, I couldn't do that. Eavesdropping is rude,” Ruby denied slowly, shaking her head. Several steps later, silver eyes turned to peek up at me before turning back towards our surroundings. “But, you know, I couldn't really stop you if you just started talking…”

Chuckling, I resisted the urge to reach over and muss her hair as I would the twins or Neo, had they said the same. “Well, Glynda's worried you're a bit young—”

“What is it with everyone commenting on my age, lately?! First that weird fox guy and now one of the teachers at Beacon!” she grumbled, eyes narrowing in irritation, crossing her arms and allowing her cloak to mostly cover them. Under her breath, I caught her continue, mumbling, “'Not dating material' my ass. I'll show him dating material. Lousy, no good, stupid fox…”

As we walked through the station towards the exit, I snagged a sheet of paper and a pen off a desk as we passed them, quickly jotting down my name and scroll number and tossing the pen back before the officer at the desk I'd borrowed it from could complain. Folding the paper, I pocketed it, deciding to give her the rest of what Glynda had said about her. “Also,” I interrupted her quiet rant, despite how amusing it was hearing her complain about one of my alter egos under her breath, drawing her eyes back to me, “she wondered if you were ready psychologically—in other words, whether you were mature enough, in addition to age. Apparently, her plan was to bully you a bit and put you under some pressure to see how you'd react, followed by fishing for information as to your character by asking pointed questions about why you stuck your nose where it didn't necessarily belong. I kind of screwed that up for her though, so she was talking about getting in contact with your teachers. Sorry about that, but honestly, I didn't think you deserved getting the third degree like I did just because you were in the wrong place at the right time. You saw something fishy and you acted on your instincts—that sort of thing shouldn't be discouraged, just… Well, I suppose the gist of what she told me applies to you as well: be more careful next time and don't go rushing in without looking.”

“But I didn't just rush in blind,” Ruby sighed, shaking her head.

Raising an eyebrow, I shot her a curious look. “Oh? I wasn't there for most of that, remember? What
started all of it? I was under the impression you were in the store when it was being robbed. That's how it looked from Glynda's security footage.”

“I,” Ruby began, then hesitated, looking around for eavesdroppers. Finally, she shook her head. “Sorry, I probably shouldn't say.”

I shrugged. “Suit yourself.”

We made it outside just in time for the squeal of tires to reach us across the parking lot as a yellow and black motorcycle slammed on its rear brake and slid from the street into a parking spot. Its rider slid off, yanking off a similarly colored helmet to reveal a head of long, faintly glowing blond hair framing a pretty face, set with a pair of blood red eyes.

Burning Heart

Blonde Bombshell, Berserker Brawler

Yang Xiao Long

Level: 34

Nearby, an officer stepped out of a patrol car, eying the girl cautiously. “Ma'am, you can't park there —”

The sound of a pair of weapons chambering rounds echoed across the parking lot as the blonde's yellow and black gauntlets unfolded and she turned irate red eyes on the first person to draw her attention. “I'm going to ask this once and I had better get an answer I like, or I'm going to start busting heads. Where is my sister? Ruby Rose, 5'2”, red and black hair, silver eyes, wears a red cloak. I know she's here because I tracked her scroll here. Take me to her.”

'Apparently she's either never heard that you shouldn't threaten cops or she's beyond the point of caring where her sister's concerned. ...Exploitable weakness. She's going to need to do something about that,' I mused, observing the blonde stalk towards the officer.
Beside me, Ruby winced momentarily before shaking her head, a smile spreading across her lips. “Yang!”

“Ruby?” Yang’s focus shifted, red eyes locking onto her sister standing beside me. A second later, she seemed to sag with relief and almost visibly deflate, her hair losing its faint glow and her eyes shifting to lilac. There was a noise at my side, along with a burst of rose petals, and the two sisters met in a hug. “Ruby! You’re okay!”

“Pff, I’m fine Yang,” Ruby sighed, burying her face in her sister's chest and I turned away to give them a moment and make sure the officer Yang had threatened wasn’t about to call for backup.

“Hey,” I caught the woman's attention, gesturing towards the bike. “Sorry about that. I'll get her to move it in a minute, okay?”

The officer in question shifted her gaze between the sisters and me twice before giving in with a sigh and a nod. “Fine. I suppose I can understand how she feels. No harm, no foul.”

“Thanks,” I murmured as she climbed back into her patrol car and eased out onto the road.

“Sooo,” Yang called from behind me, and I immediately recognized the teasing tone to her voice. “Who’s this?”

I turned around, raising an eyebrow at the blonde before turning my gaze to Ruby. To her credit, the younger sister only hesitated a moment before answering—and while outwardly she looked fine, Observe told me she was worried. Considering I remembered the contents of our first conversation—even if she didn't know it was me at the time—I could see why. She was worried I would ignore her for her sister. I'll admit, Yang was a beauty—given a few years, she could give Joan or Cinder a run for their money in the looks department. Still, I knew how much having a friend of her own would mean to Ruby. “Yang, this is Jaune, Jaune Arc. He, uh, kinda sorta ate a grenade that would've hit me in the face. Jaune, this is my sister, Yang Xiao Long.”

“Nice to meet you, Jaune Jaune Arc,” Yang grinned, holding out one hand for me to shake. “And thanks for not letting my sister eat explosives.” She cast a glance at her sister, grin spreading as she added sotto voce, “They give her upset tummy.”

“Yaaaang!” Ruby whined in that tone most younger siblings took on, that screamed for an older sibling to ’stop embarrassing me.’
I rolled my eyes, taking her hand. “Sorry to leave your face Xiao Long, but that one's been done. It is Yang nice to meet you, though.”

Yang's eyes went slightly wide before she turned a grin on her sister. “He speaks my language!”

“Bad puns' is not a language,” Ruby countered, rolling her eyes.

“Well,” I spoke up, interrupting what looked to be an argument the pair had had often, “I don't know about you two, but it's late and I, for one, would like to get away from this cop shop and into my nice, warm bed.”

“That sounds like a plan,” Yang agreed, a mischievous look crossing her face.

Having a good idea where she was going, I decided to shut her down before she could get there. “Yang, it was nice meeting you. If I ever want to ride something in yellow and black, I'll give you a call… and see about borrowing your bike.” Yang's mouth clicked closed as she adopted a poleaxed look. Turning a grin on Ruby, I handed her the folded up paper with my scroll contact information. “Call me if you're ever in town and you want to hang out or something. Goodnight, you two.”

As I made my way across the parking lot, I heard Yang ask, “Did… did he just…?”

Ruby's answer was lost in a fit of giggles and a covert glance back showed she was doubled over, holding her sides. Beside her, Yang had lost the confused look in exchange for one a bit more thoughtful than her antics would imply she was capable of. Our eyes met for a moment and she smiled before turning away to tease her sister by mussing her hair. “Yaaaang! Stoop!”

I pulled out my scroll and fired off a message to Neo, checking to see if they had managed to hit any other Dust shops. If they had, I would see about duping it in the morning. Until then, I needed to check up on a few projects and spend some quality time with the girls. Unbidden, the image of Yang joining us came to mind, and I nearly groaned. 'Of course she put the thought in my head intentionally. Haven't even spent five minutes with her and she's already screwing with my head. Damn tease.'
My head rang. Not in the sense that I'd been hit, but in an actual ring tone—specifically, This Will Be the Day, one of Ruby's many image songs. Slowly cracking open one eye, I was met by a floating display asking whether I'd like to answer or hang up. 'Oh, right. Scroll in Inventory or equipped means my Semblance can access its functions.'

Cracking a yawn, I focused on the green 'answer' icon. “Mm yellow.”

“Um… Jaune? Hi, sorry, it's Ruby. Ruby Rose. We met yesterday—well, last night really… Uh, did I wake you up?”

'What time is it?' I wondered, glancing at my HUD clock. Noon. Normal people are awake by noon, usually—even teenagers. Remembering that she was expecting an answer, I stifled another yawn and rolled over enough to pull the warm, lithe body next to me closer—Melanie, I think. It didn't particularly matter overmuch, considering both the twins and Neo were there at the moment. “Yes, but that's okay. I was going to get up soon anyway. What's up?”

The girl on the other end chuckled once, sounding almost embarrassed, before she seemed to perk up. “Well, you said if I was in town and wanted to hang out, I could call, sooo… Want to hang out?”

I didn't need Observe to tell me what she was feeling—she was hiding it well, but I could hear the tint of loneliness in her voice. Well, at least she wasn't yet so afraid of rejection that she'd stopped reaching out. Ahh, I knew the whole 'social awkwardness' thing, and its bigger, meaner sibling 'social anxiety.' Stretching out, I felt something pop in my back and let out a quiet sigh. “Sounds fun. Let me get showered and dressed and I'll meet you in an hour.”
“Ah! Wait! You don't know where I am,” she blurted as I was about to hang up.

I snorted once, quietly. I could've just pulled up my map, but I didn't need to. “Want to bet?”

“Okay, then. Where am I?” she asked, her voice taking on a challenging, amused lilt. No, growing up with Yang hadn't made her competitive at all…

“That's easy,” I grinned, closing my eyes and bringing up Listen. “Wind. Traffic sounds quiet… So you're perched on top of a building, but it's your surroundings that give away where you are. You're in the Commercial District, center, just north of the river. The tallest building on that block is a red brick building, two down from a Chinese place. In fact, if you look… behind you, you could probably see my apartment from there.”

“How did you know?” Ruby asked a moment later, curiosity plainly evident.

Chuckling, I could picture the street in my mind. “The Chinese place? They've got their little girl out there during lunch hour, ringing a bell and shouting off the day's lunch special. Today's special: orange chicken.”

There was a long pause, followed by a shuffling sound and the footsteps. After a moment, the footsteps stopped and Ruby hummed. “Huh. I guess you're right. So, an hour?”

“Yep,” I agreed, hanging up. I made to roll over, only to be grabbed from behind.

“So,” Miltia asked from behind me, a grin evident in her voice. “Is she cute?”

I turned enough to shoot her an amused look. Before I could answer, however, Neo beat me to it. “Adorable, really. See for yourself,” the ice cream themed girl answered, holding out her scroll to Miltia as, in front of me, Melanie rolled over to have a look herself.

“Positively saccharine,” Melanie rolled her eyes. “But is she strong.”
I met her eyes and grinned. “Oh, yeah. Ozpin invited her to Beacon himself. Last night. After we had a nice little spar.”

“How much were you holding back?” Neo asked, raising an eyebrow.

I rolled my eyes. “That's not a fair question, really. So, with only the stuff I typically use as Shiro… not much. But then, she was holding back too, for one thing. For another, it was a horrible match-up. Speed verses speed always comes down to a few deciding factors: acceleration, strength, stamina, and reach being the most important. She had me on acceleration and reach, and she hits like a bus… but I've got her by a mile on stamina, and our movement options are opposed. She's straight-line fast but kind of sucks at changing direction quickly over distance, but she's smaller and way more agile than I am. At short range, she can get little bursts of speed but nothing like what I can pull at a moment's notice with Haste and Flash Step, and I'm a little more maneuverable due to various elemental magics at work. Instant short range speed verses instant long range speed. In other words, it turns into a battle to see who misses dodging first, and then who can take the most hits. I've got a good feeling she'll overcome that weakness shortly.”

“So, cute and strong,” Miltia mused aloud before a smirk spread over her lips. “I want to meet her. Tonight. Invite her over.”

Shaking my head, I dug myself out of the pile of bodies and made for the shower. “You're not going to get her into bed like that,” I warned.

I watched the girls exchange an amused look before Miltia continued. “I'm not going to scare her off, Jaune.”

“I never said that,” I denied.

Three eye-rolls were the response to that. “You were thinking it,” Melanie countered.

“Don't worry Jaune,” Neo grinned. “We'll be gentle.”

I ignored the jibe and regarded Miltia. “You want to invite another girl over on your date night? Are you certain?”

“Absolutely,” the twin nodded. “It'll be fun.”
Knowing a losing argument when I saw one, I sighed, nodding in concession. “Fine. Now, I need to shower.”

The three girls traded looks before throwing out their hands. Three shakes later, the results came out as: paper, rock, rock. Miltia smirked, hopping off the bed and taking my hand, dragging me towards the shower. “Well, what are you waiting for? A shower sounds nice right about now.”

I rolled my eyes and allowed myself to be dragged away. Behind us, I heard Neo laugh quietly and Melanie sigh. “I swear she cheats.”

“That is kind of cool,” Ruby admitted, eying my line launcher as I touched down. “Where'd you get it? Or did you make it yourself?”

A small grin pulled at my lips as I answered, “No, I didn't make it myself. My older sister got it for me for work. It just turns out that it's really useful outside of work, too.”

The small girl raised an eyebrow. “You have a job? What do you do?”

“Part-time,” I agreed. “As for what I do, well… I suppose you could say I started out as a glorified delivery boy, but now I co-run a small company. The old owner was kind of a jerk and ran the business into the ground before he skipped town, so we've kind of got our work cut out putting it back together and making it into something Vale can be proud of.”

“Wow,” she blinked, then shook her head. “I thought you were going to be a Hunter. I mean, Professor Ozpin did invite you to Beacon, and you accepted...”

Nodding, I moved across the rooftop and looked down towards the Chinese place, where the girl was just putting away her bell and heading back inside. “I am. There's no rule that says I can't do both. Besides, I trust my partner to keep the place from falling apart while I'm busy. But even if I didn't, Vale's a ten minute Bullhead ride from the academy, at most. I can check in when I need to.” Deciding to change the subject before she made me a liar, I asked, “So! What are we doing?”

The redhead took on an embarrassed look, rubbing at the back of her head as she hemmed, “Uh… I don't know?”
I rolled my eyes. “So, you were bored and wanted company?” She nodded, sheepishly. “Fair enough. Okay, then. Have you had lunch yet?”

“How's Chinese sound? I hear the lunch special today is orange chicken.”

Ruby, despite her tiny size, ate more than I did—by a lot. Three plates of chicken, rice, vegetables, the works. And then the fortune cookies. I have no idea how, but she sweet talked the owner of the store into parting with a bag full of the things when we made to leave. Since Ruby had had no specific plans in mind for the rest of the day beyond 'hang out,' I decided to pick the venue myself. Silently pulling up my map, I flipped through a few filters before finding what I was looking for. Adding the filter for local flight paths, I spotted a marker for a Bullhead heading in the general direction I wanted to go.

“So,” I began as Ruby happily munched away on a fortune cookie, “I've got an idea of what we can do to kill some time.”

The girl paused long enough to discard her small handful of fortunes and asked, “What did you have in mind?”

“It's a secret,” I grinned, glancing at my minimap and seeing the Bullhead coming up. “The ride over should be fun, though. Hold onto your cookies.”

“Wha—?” she began, only to blush as I stepped beside her and wrapped a hand around her waist. “Hey, wait a minute…” Ruby protested, only to cut off in a squeal as I fired my line launcher, snagged the passing Bullhead, and yanked us up over the buildings to dangle just below its underbelly. “Gah! Noo! My cookies!”
Looking down, I spotted the cookies in question tumbling through the air to land in amongst the pedestrians walking by. “I warned you,” I smirked, resisting the urge to laugh.

The girl at my side growled, digging one pointy finger into my ribs. “You owe me cookies, mister!”

“I'll make up for it later,” I promised, watching the markers for our destination on my HUD.

A short flight later found us dropping down in front of a large, domed building in the older sector of the Commercial District. Ruby looked around in curiosity before spotting the sign hanging over the main entrance to the old stadium: **Vale Hunter's Association Proving Grounds – Weapon Range, Dust Experimentation, Combat Arena.** Ruby 'squee'd!' and disappeared in a burst of rose petals, reappearing at the door, bouncing from one foot to another. “Come on, come on, come oooon!”

Smirking, I actually slowed my pace. “Patience, grasshopper,” I teased. A moment later, I found her reappearing in front of me, a small hand wrapped around my own, and the world shifted as she dragged me to the door at speed. “Okay, I suppose patience is too much to ask.”

We made our way inside, quickly finding what looked like the front office. From behind the counter, a receptionist looked up from a pink magazine before stowing it under the desk and beaming a smile our way. “Hello! Welcome to the Proving Grounds! What can I do for you today?”

Stepping up, I eyed the list of goods and services displayed on the wall behind the girl. “Two for the rifle range, first. Tell me, that combat arena, is that for sparring?”

The brunette grinned, shaking her head. “Not just for sparring, sir. While it has all the same functions of stadiums like those used for various official tournaments—having been a venue for such activities in the past for the city of Vale, before being phased out—it can also provide simulated environments and enemies using Dust powered hard light constructs to the user's specifications. If you decide to use that part of the facility, simply sync your scroll with the controls at the door and you can manipulate the settings as you see fit. There are various competitive modes, as well as team modes, and basic practice modes. All environments are procedurally generated, so no two matches will ever be quite the same.”

“That actually sounds kind of cool. What do you think, Ruby?” I asked, turning to look at the girl.

The future Huntress in question had stars in her eyes as she nodded. “Can we?”
“Sure,” I agreed, turning back to the receptionist. “Two for that, as well. Also, we’d like to buy some rounds—call it 1000 rounds of .338 and the same of… Ruby, what’s your weapon chambered in?”

Calling attention to her weapon broke the slight trance the younger girl had been in. “The main rifle is chambered in .50 and the AR is chambered in .308.”

I blinked, looking the weapon over again. “Wait,” I asked, stepping closer and looking it over. “So this thing has three fire modes?”

“You noticed?” Ruby beamed, pulling her weapon into a hug against her chest. “Yeah, I may have went a little overboard. Fully deployed, Crescent Rose is a bolt action sniper rifle—I’ve even got a scope—in addition to a combat scythe. But I’m kind of small so recoil was a problem, until Uncle Qrow suggested I use it to my advantage. So, if I want to fire it in that mode I usually anchor her blade in the ground—otherwise, I can use it to throw myself around… but you saw that on the footage last night. Anyway! The second mode is actually a mid-range, bolt action rifle firing from my .50 caliber magazine and the same barrel, just in its compact form. Here, look,” she put the weapon on the counter and began pointing out features.

“That’s the .50 cal mag well there,” she pointed towards a large magazine situated forward of her scope, under the bolt action. “Bolt action for the .50 there, trigger assembly down here,” she patted the rear of the weapon. “The magazine well for the .308 is here,” she pointed at another section, where I could just see it peeking out. “Ejection port actually doubles as the recessed area for my scope, so if I want to fire her in semi-auto, burst, or automatic I have to flip out the scope. And don’t get me started on how much of a mess it was having to clean my scope every time I fired her and then folded her down into her compact form—it’s why I have built in scope covers now… and I still have to do maintenance and cleaning every time I fire her.” She looked suddenly apologetic, reaching down to pat the weapon. “Not that I mind though…”

Chuckling, I asked, “So, does the barrel for the .50 change bores or something to fire .308?”

“No, absolutely not!” Ruby shook her head vehemently. “That’s entirely too likely to break, especially given the way I swing her around in close quarters.” Sliding the weapon around, she pointed towards the end, where I could see the ends for not one but two barrels, the larger on top and in line with the large bolt action. “Now watch,” she grinned, picking up the weapon and allowing it to expand into its full scythe configuration.

I nodded, looking at the bottom of the scythe where the second blade resided, connected to what I’d assumed was a handle. “So, the second barrel is the lower handle.”
“Yes! Isn’t she awesome?” Ruby gushed, once more pulling her weapon into a hug.

I couldn’t resist this time. Reaching out, I mussed her hair, earning a pout as she began attempting to straighten it. “She’s awesome. How much do you need?”

“Uhh, about 200 in .308 and 800 in .50, please,” Ruby answered, smiling up at the receptionist.

The woman read off a number and Ruby winced and began reaching for her wallet. I shook my head and pulled my own out, pulling out a couple of large denomination bills. Seeing the smaller girl looked ready to say something, I decided to cut her off before she could start feeling guilty. “I chose the place, so don’t worry about it. Besides, these are all fairly low-priced range rounds—likely grade 1, Burn, right?”

“Yes, sir,” the brunette answered with a smile. “We have higher quality rounds if you’d prefer, but firstly, if you wanted anything above grade 1 I would have to ask for your student I.D.s, to make sure you’re authorized for anything above that. Secondly, well…”

I finished for her. “It’s a range, and we’re going to be burning through a large volume of rounds. No point wasting expensive stuff on targets that don’t bleed.” Still, that bit about not being allowed to use certain grades of Dust was news to me. I’d have to ask someone later. I mean, I could see why it would be that way—Dust is dangerous stuff. In all likelihood, prospective Hunters probably gained access to higher grade Dust as they advanced in their schooling or something like that—which meant that I was shortcutting the system by using high-grade Dust, and it was probably illegal to some degree… which would explain both Ruby’s hesitance and eagerness to accept the Dust I’d given her the night before. After all, if she wasn’t technically allowed to use it yet, then getting her hands on some would have been a pretty big thing.

“It’s not fair to you, though. I mean, you paid for lunch, too,” Ruby pointed out, still looking unsure, and drawing me back to the present.

“And?” I rolled my eyes. “It’s just lunch—20 lien ain’t going to break the bank. Now, come on.” Grabbing the two bags of ammunition, I began following the signs for the rifle range. “I want to see what your baby there can do.”

We spent the first ten minutes or so chatting, mostly about Ruby’s time at Signal, while we unloaded a few of our current magazines, stored our normal rounds, and replaced them with the rounds we’d purchased. I had long since grown inured to the mindless, repetitive action of reloading magazines or swapping out ammo to use practice rounds—I’d spent countless hours doing just that on Earth, after all—while for Ruby, it seemed to be just another facet of life. I suppose for someone who had been
in a Hunter school for a couple of years, and who must’ve trained extensively with weapons even before that, it would have been a part of routine life after all.

Once we were done swapping out ammo, we took a few minutes to run a few magazines downrange to make sure everything was still as it should be—that nothing jammed, hung, failed to feed or eject, that our optics were still sighted in properly and hadn’t come lose from some shock, and the like. It took me twice as long, since I had to do the same thing with both my rifles, but Ruby didn’t complain—nor did I, really, given the fact that since they were actually targets, I was gaining experience for my Firearms Mastery and Dust Manipulation skills. I was mildly surprised that I could even gain EXP off of paper targets for Firearms Mastery, but I supposed it could be attributed to the fact that I was still familiarizing myself with the Blazefire Sabers.

After that, we had fun having a few short matches against each other, seeing who could score the highest. Ruby hit dead center every time, as I’d expected, but I was faster to switch targets and didn’t have to manually cycle rounds—the benefits of a smaller rifle with semi-automatic fire, over a larger rifle with a bolt action. Still, speed didn’t mean everything when precision was required, and while a 10% drop in accuracy would be perfectly fine in the field as it would still kill a grimm—and I would be able to kill more than her, in a shorter period of time using rifles alone—it allowed her to kick my ass as far as the score was concerned. I wasn’t too terribly worried, however—I had more options than my rifle to kill grimm, after all, and if I had to use it no one would be complaining about my shots being an inch off of center. Besides, the look on her face at winning was worth the cost of a little pride at being bested by her, and she didn’t go out of her way to rub it in.

“So, what are they named?” Ruby asked, gesturing towards my stowed rifles, as we were taking yet another break to reload.

“Blazefire Saber Alpha and Beta,” I said, tapping each hilt in turn as I named them.

Ruby snorted. “Pfft. That’s not a name,” the girl rolled her eyes. “That’s more like a weapon type designation. It’s not… personal, you know?”

Finished stacking another magazine, I hummed as I thought it over. She was right, really. There was no effort in it—it was the epitome of impersonal. And I’d done the same with my shield. Picking up another magazine, I conceded the point. “You’re right.”

Where she sat, Ruby blushed for a moment before picking up another empty mag. “It's not until we name them that our weapons become something more than just… tools. You really start seeing it as a weapon ages, they take on a life of their own. You could probably say it's due to being exposed to Aura and Dust for years, but I'm not entirely sure that's what it is. Crescent hasn't been around for years and years, and yet she has a personality of her own.”
I raised an eyebrow at that. 'Who am I to say it's not possible? After all I've seen to date, semi-sentient weapons or weapons with spirits of their own isn't really that far fetched.' Finally, I nodded. “Maybe you're right. In that case, I should probably put some thought into naming them.” Seeing that she was finished loading, I slapped in the last few rounds and dropped my last mag into my side pouch before standing and gesturing towards the door. “Come on. I don't know about you, but I'm getting bored with just shooting static targets. Let's go see what that arena area was all about, shall we?”

Following the signs lead us to the large double doors leading into the Combat Arena and I pulled out my scroll as I approached. Holding it to the green circle beside the door, I watched as the word 'SYNCING…' flashed across its screen. A moment later, my eyes narrowed as I got a notification. Several, in fact.

*New hardware detected. Scanning…*

*Updating…*

There was motion at the corner of my vision and my eyes were drawn to my Spirit Meter quickly draining. About a third of it drained away before it stopped.

*Update Complete. Would you like to view the Change Log?*

'An update while I'm conscious? Shit.' Looking at Ruby, I smiled. “Hang on just a minute.”

“Sure,” Ruby shot me a confused look before leaning back against the wall beside me and waiting. Opening my menu, I began to read.

*Change Log: The Gamer Semblance v. 1.5.3*

1. Updated Create ID.

1.a Added Challenge Mode to Create ID. You may now fight solo, with a team, against others, or
as a team against other teams against waves of Grimm. For more details, check the 'Challenges' section of the Journal.

1.b Added Scenario Mode to Create ID. You may now engage in scenarios, either alone or with a team, to complete certain goals and earn rewards. For more details, check the 'Challenges' section of the Journal.

'Okay,' I sighed in quiet relief. 'Nothing too bad. Hell, that may even be fun. I'll have to look into it later though.' Looking at my scroll, I saw that it was waiting for acknowledgment. Clicking the 'Yes' button, I blinked as options appeared on my HUD as opposed to my scroll. Shrugging, I began making selections. ‘Do you prefer any sort of terrain?’

“Nope!” the girl behind me chirped. ‘I’m fine with whatever. Well. Almost whatever. Desert would be boring and hot, and Uncle Qrow says swamps aren’t fun for anyone… Oh, and caves would kind of suck unless they were big, cause close quarters isn’t good for acrobatics.”

Nodding, I began inputting details. ‘Forested area, hills, night, overcast, windy, medium Grimm population: beowolves, ursa, nevermores… I think that’s good enough. Oh, a section for boss-level stuff. Let’s see… Ursa Major and a couple of Beowolf Alphas. That should be fun. Difficulty rating? Uhh…” I glanced at Ruby a moment before checking my options. The choices were listed as: Easy, Normal, Heroic, Legendary, and Mythic. They sounded familiar and, after a moment, I placed them as the typical settings from Halo—though I was fairly sure Mythic was actually not an official thing. Deciding we could handle it, I picked Heroic. Confirming everything, I saw the word ‘LOADING…’ appear on my scroll for a moment, before it disappeared and my scroll reverted to its normal background image. Before me, the doors opened onto a quiet night-scape and I grinned.

“Ready?” I asked of the girl beside me, who had pushed off the wall and stood looking out at the land before us.

Ruby grinned, unsheathing Crescent Rose and shifting it to its scythe mode. “Oh yeah. This is going to be fun. Let’s go!”

I followed after the enthusiastic girl with a chuckle, stepping into the area and looking around as the door closed behind me. A second later, I felt a skill activate of its own volition—Create ID came alive and I felt a draw on my mana, but no Instant Dungeon formed around us. All around us, however, the scenery briefly flickered once. From somewhere above us, I heard something electrical explode and a flash of light washed over the area briefly. I frowned as Perception and Detect Bloodlust pinged and an overall feeling of wrongness settled in the back of my mind. “Ruby,” I said quietly, trying to get her attention without alerting the enemies I could sense and see on my minimap now beginning to circle us. “Ease back towards the door. Something’s wrong. We should leave
“You feel it too?” she asked, equally quiet, and I nodded as I backed up a step until I bumped into the unlit door.

Turning around I attempted to open it, only for nothing to happen. Fishing out my scroll, I held it up to the door with an equally negative result. “Fuck,” I grunted, softly.

“That's bad, right?” Ruby asked, and I nodded.

Above us, speakers crackled to life as a male voice I didn't recognize spoke. “Okay… we're sorry but we are currently experiencing technical difficulties. It seems as thought the door controls have stopped working and we are unable to disengage the projection system. Likewise, the systems controlling enemy deployment and AI are also non-responsive. As it stands, the system is currently stuck running the last scenario programmed into it. We are working to restore these systems now, but considering there are active enemies on the field… well, you have two options. The system was built with player safety in mind, so every field has a hidden safe room accessible via a cave entrance—it's marked with the logo for the Proving Grounds so that you won't mistake it for a Deathstalker nest or something. Unfortunately, with the system non-responsive, I can't just lead you to it. However, it's a fixed point on the map, because it's part of the stadium itself. It should be in the northwest corner of the area. You can make your way to the safe room and sit it out until we fix the system, or you can fight through the scenario you programmed in, which should end the scenario and cause the projectors to shut off leaving you in a bare room. If you make it to the safe room, there should be a small cache of food and water, along with beds, sanitary, and medical facilities.” The man on the other end sighed, before adding, “All I can tell you is we're sorry, and good luck. I'm going to go help where I can.”

Sharing a look with Ruby, I drew the Alpha Saber and spun it around into rifle mode. The glow from the red Dust crystal powering it was irritating for a moment, but after the last time I'd had another read through the manual. As it turned out, the weaponsmith who'd created my weapons wasn't a moron—there was a button to toggle that feature, which I hit now. I reached up the hit the switch for the light attached to the side of the rails that had deployed as well. “There are a few around us,” I whispered, moving to cover Ruby's left side and activating my shield, which threw off a faint white glow of its own until I likewise hit the switch to kill the glow. “Group of five moving in. You ready?”

“Yeah. I just wish I had a light of my own. I'd use my scroll, but I need both hands for this,” she acknowledged.

A moment later, the brush around us erupted with activity as the beowolves that had been circling us decided to attack as a group. Beside me, Ruby blasted away and cleanly bisected one, flowing
through the spin to move onto the next, and that was all the time I had to split my attention. Picking my target, I flipped my fire selector to burst and opened fire. Five glowing red rounds streaked across the distance, punching into the first grimm and setting it on fire, where it dropped to the ground thrashing and howling. The second closed in with a leap, both its arms swinging down to try and drive me down, which I caught with my shield. I hadn't replaced any of my shotgun rounds, so I was using my own stock when I opened fire. There was a brief flash of red and white and the grimm's head disappeared in a spray of black ichor and chunks of flesh and bone and clumps of hair. 'So, that's what Purity White does to grimm if you shoot them with it set as a power crystal.'

Spinning with the momentum imparted by the shotgun blast, I leveled my rifle on the third beowolf, which was already airborne, claws extended and jaws wide open. Trusting my instincts, I sighted it down one-handed and opened fire again, most of the rounds hitting it low but the elemental effect imparted by the grade 9 Burning Crimson crystal instantly causing it to burn. There was just enough momentum from the combined recoil to finish my turn and level my shield at it, allowing it to fall against the barrier. Not wanting to waste shotgun rounds, I shoved it off my shield with a Shield Bash and flipped my rifle around into saber mode, quickly stepping forward into a jab that caught it just under the chin and exited at the back of its head—the fur around the wound catching fire immediately and the wound smoking as it cauterized around my blade.

Yanking my sword back, I winced at the smell as the blood, flesh, and hair on it burned off. “I really need to know how you do that,” Ruby commented, walking up from behind me. “It'd be so cool if I could make Crescent Rose glow like yours was earlier. That, and set things on fire.”

“You can live without the glow, trust me. As for burning things, I can show you later. For now, we have a problem,” I grunted, kneeling down and examining my most recent kill as it dissipated… leaving behind drops. Not just that, but it had a level. Specifically, level 40. “They said these things were hard light constructs, right?” I asked, and Ruby nodded. “Does this look like a hologram to you? Does it smell like a hologram?”

“Ugh. No,” Ruby wrinkled her nose. “So they're real grimm?”

Reaching down, I began collecting drops. “Seems that way.”

A flicker of motion caught my eye as Ruby knelt down, reaching out and snagging a health potion before I could stop her. “I've seen one of these before.”

Resisting the urge to sigh, I asked, “Oh? Where?”

She hummed, eying me sidelong as she stuffed the potion in her pouch. “On Patch.”
“That’s vague,” I teased softly, moving to pick up another batch of drops and wishing I could just open my Inventory and grab it all with Telekinesis.

“Well, there was this guy there,” Ruby added, mirroring my actions in moving to another pile to collect. “He was kind of a jerk. He even burned down part of my school.”

I shot her a raised eyebrow. “Don’t most people cheer when they hear their school has burned down?”

Ruby snorted. “Not when it’s as awesome as Signal. Or when their dad and uncle work there.” I winced and she nodded before continuing her story. “But… he was also kind of cool. He had a lightsaber, can you believe it?! I mean, not an actual lightsaber like in the movies, but close enough!”

“Sounds cool,” I admitted, hiding a grin.

The girl’s head bobbed in a nod. “It was. But yeah, he’s why I was out in Vale last night. Almost every night since it happened, actually,” she admitted, sounding a bit sheepish. “I know he’s still out there, but I think he’s just taking a break, or maybe planning something.”

I shot her an incredulous look, both eyebrows heading for my hairline. “And you thought, what? That you’d just run across him randomly?” Well, technically, she’d been right…

Ruby sighed, but nodded. “Yeah, pretty much. I’ve had no luck, until now,” she grinned, picking up a mana potion and wagging it back and forth. “I am almost positive his Semblance creates these. Do you know what this is?”

Humming, I picked up one of the red potions on the ground and pretended to inspect it while hiding a grin. “Pretty sure it looks like a potion, from a video game.”

“Exactly,” Ruby beamed, standing and dusting her combat skirt off. There was a tone to her voice that I recognized—she was either plotting something or had figured something out. “Say Jaune, have you figured out what your Semblance is yet?”
“Actually, I have,” I admitted. “I think it’s kind of cool.”

“Oh?” She asked, looking curious. “What is it? If you don’t mind telling me, that is. I mean, they are kind of personal and we’ve only really known each other a day or so, so I don’t really expect you to tell me…” Ahh, social anxiety strikes again.

“It’d be easier to show you, but maybe not right now, huh?” I asked, standing up as we finished collecting the last of the drops. Glancing at my minimap, I oriented us on where I figured the door to the safe room was before shooting a glance at Ruby. “What do you want to do? Kill everything or head for the safe room?”

The red-clad reaper shot me a look as if wondering why that was even in question. “We came to kill things, right? So, the doors stopped working and it’s a little creepy ‘cause they’re real grimm now—that doesn’t change much, really. I say we just kill them all and end the program.”

A grin crossed my lips and I nodded. “Sounds like a plan to me. Let’s go hunting.”

Still, as we moved through the artificial forest, I couldn’t help the nagging feeling that I was missing something here. Some detail about the grimm we’d eliminated bothered me, and it wasn’t until we came across another group of them that I figured out what it was. They were weak. Ruby cut through them like butter, but even the ones I fought went down with only a couple of rounds. Even if all of them crit, they should have had more HP than that. I mean, yeah, there are some allowances for bullshit where HP verses damage numbers don’t mean anything—obviously, a bullet to the head kills most things so long as it penetrates deep enough, I’ve seen this before. But those… if this were a dungeon, an actual video game instance, I’d say they were trash mobs—not even regular dungeon mobs.’

As we came across a larger group of beowolves—a pack of ten—I realized I had been right. Beside each of their levels was a small emblem—a silver beowolf head. Checking them over with Observe caused me to wince, and I motioned for Ruby to halt and retreat back the way we came. They have skills. They have passive skills. It’s like the Prowler template, minus the rage and immunities. Grimm Fortitude, Strength and Reflexes gives them 2.5 times the normal amount of STR, DEX, VIT, and HP as a normal mob their level. Grimm Reflexes allows them to make reflex saves against melee attacks for from anywhere from full to half damage if they succeed, which is some serious bullshit…but at least it’s not hit or miss like AC in D&D. And, oh yeah, Grimm Fervor means they all do double damage. What. The. Fuck. I haven’t even seen mobs in Illusion Barriers this strong.’

We came to a stop far enough away to keep the grimm in sight and have a whispered conversation and Ruby asked, “What’s wrong?”
“They're stronger than usual,” I began, watching a couple of them shift around and begin sniffing the air. Odds were good they'd just caught our scent, given that the wind had just changed directions. I only had a minute or so before they started pursuing us, so I had to make this fast. 'More important than the enemies being a little stronger, I'm limited in what I can do here, unless I want to let Ruby in on some things. I was planning to anyway, once we got to Beacon, but… maybe sooner is better. She needs to know at least some anyway, if we're going to be working together, and it would go a long way towards getting her to trust me fully.'

The girl brought up her rifle and planted it, sighting down one of the beowolves that had decided to start coming our way. They weren't charging yet, but they weren't taking their time about it either. “How bad is it? Should we avoid them?”

“No, I think we can take them. Just… don't get hit.” Sighing quietly, I added, “So, I'll make you a deal. I'll show you my Semblance if you promise to hold all questions until we either get out or get to the safe room. Deal?”

“Deal,” she agreed. “But whatever it is you're going to do, you might want to hurry. They're starting to charge.”

Shifting my eyes to the focus icons over her head, I selected the option for Party, which should simply send a party invite and create a generic, unnamed party as in many MMOs as opposed to forcing me to name it. “Hit accept,” I told her, and couldn't suppress a smirk when her eyes went wide. One hand tentatively reached out, tapping the 'Accept' button, and her portrait appeared on my HUD, under my own. She turned an incredulous look my way and I shook my head. “Later. You might want to start firing.”

“Right,” Ruby nodded, sighting down a grimm and opening fire as I did likewise, switching from burst to semi while they were still far enough out to try for precision. Beside me, Crescent Rose spoke and downrange, a grimm head exploded. Not to be outdone, I sighted down my own first pick and opened fire. My first round ran downrange, catching my target in the muzzle as I'd intended. I did not intend for it to shear off the top half of the beowolf's muzzle and cauterize the wound, as opposed to punching straight through to the back of its skull. Frowning in annoyance, I wasted another round finishing it off and moved on to the next. In the time it took them to close, Ruby put down another two with head shots while I put down one more with a round through the eye, and then the remaining five were on top of us.

“Don't get hit, right,” the younger girl muttered, hauling Crescent Rose up and behind her and firing, launching herself forward to intercept the three that had lunged from the front. The first caught the scythe under the neck and bought it instantly as its head came flying off. The second in the line of her swing stopped running and jerked back, the tip of the blade tracing a deep cut across its chest, while the third hit the deck, entirely dodging the tail end of Ruby's initial swing.
I was more worried about the remaining two as they swept around in a pincer attack, intending to hit us from the sides. Spotting me, they decided to let the other three deal with the smaller target and focused on me instead. I caught the one on my left with a Shield Bash as it lunged, stunning it momentarily but not managing to knock it down. Pulling the trigger for my shield's shotgun, I let it eat a round of Purity/Burn double-ought to the face where I saw one of its eyes destroyed and spun to level my shield at the one on my right as I backstepped to put both of them in front of me. The second one came in with a swipe that I caught on my blade. Forcing the weapon up, I used my shield to block its view of my lower body and raised an earth and wind enhanced kick into its crotch. It loose a quiet, high pitched whine and collapsed to its knees. 'So, can't really dodge if the situation wouldn't allow for it, if you don't see it coming, or if you're incapacitated.'

Spinning my saber once, I flicked it down into a Coup de Grace, sending the grimm's head rolling as I stepped past it to finish off the one that had recovered by now. A Flash Step put me directly in front of it, crouched low as I brought my blade up and rammed it home in the beowolf's sternum. “Stop dodging!” Ruby yelled nearby, which was followed by a yelp as I watched her fly past me. A glance at my HUD showed she had taken some damage, but would be fine as it was Aura damage and not HP damage. Shifting my focus to where she had been fighting, I found the problem immediately—right around the time Detect Bloodlust leveled as they noticed me. There were more grimm—a glance at my minimap showed we were surrounded by what had to be a pack of at least forty more, with more streaming in behind them.

“You okay?” I called to the girl as I heard her roll to her feet.

“Peachy,” Ruby called, chambering a round. “This was more fun when half of them didn't dodge and then try to come in from my blind spots. It's like they're coordinating.”

“That's because they are,” I agreed, my eyes on the large pack of grimm now cutting us off from all sides. “Beowolves get smarter the more of them there are. Got any ideas?”

I could have opened up on them with magic, but I wanted to see what she came up with. Ruby did not disappoint, as she took in the numbers around us a moment before grinning. “Maybe one. How much line does that thing have?” she asked, gesturing towards my left arm, where my line launcher sat under my shield.

“Enough,” I answered, having some idea where she was going with this. “Combo attack?”

“Mhmm,” she beamed, nodding. “Give me the end of it and some slack.”
I triggered the release for my launcher, spooling out a few feet of line and flipping it over to Ruby as
the grimm decided to stop wasting time and attack. Spinning my saber around into its rifle mode, I
thumbed the fire selector up to full auto. “Any time now.”

“Got it!” she announced. A moment later, she fired and launched herself at the oncoming mob. The
force as she reached the end of the line I'd given her was nearly enough to pull my arm out of socket,
but I doubled down on Reinforcement and yanked hard to the side, at the same time she fired again.
Ruby's voice went up in a yell as she began firing rapidly, little combat boots impacting grimm faces
and building up speed as I reeled her in slowly and drew the circle she was making closer, meaning
she would be going faster.

I wasn't standing idle while the smaller girl was turning us into a bladed top. Leveling my rifle, I
opened up on the crowd of grimm, shooting and setting fire to those that Ruby either hadn't kicked or
sliced yet or finishing off those she had. My first mag ran dry and I spun the rifle through its
transformation to its storage form, stuffing it back in its holster. At the same time, I unholstered the
one on my left using Telekinesis, holding it in place long enough to eject the current mag and slap in
one of the 100-round drum magazines of my own stock of grade 3 freeze rounds as opposed to the
30-round mags of grade 1 burn range trash I'd been using. The Saber glowed blue and I smirked,
flipping the fire selector to full-auto and holding down the trigger. The difference was noticeable as
the higher grade rounds began punching holes into and through grimm. More than that though, I'd
changed rifles—switching Burn effects for Freeze. Those grimm that weren't frozen outright suffered
frozen limbs, heads, or were chilled and slowed, making them easy fodder for Ruby on her next pass
to alternately shatter or cut down.

Seeing the crowd beginning to thin and back away, I spotted a couple of larger forms in their midst.
Focusing on them, I saw that the silver Beowolf icons beside their names had been replaced with
gold icons of the same, marking them out as bosses—or at least, more advanced than what we were
currently fighting. Triggering another Focus command, I painted them both with a crosshair above
their heads any marksman or anyone who had ever played an MMO would be familiar with and
could interpret on sight. “Ruby, those two!”

Reeling Ruby in closer, I spun hard and flung her upwards, hitting the button to allow line to spool
out since I had no idea how she'd rigged my line launcher to attach to her Crescent Rose. Ruby did
not disappoint, as I heard Crescent Rose go off above me, targeting the Beowolf Alpha to my left
while I picked the one on the right and opened up on it, a stream of full-auto Dust rounds drilling a
hole through the grimm between me and it, freezing some in place and shattering them and freezing
parts of the Alpha.

Ruby stayed up for what seemed like an impossible time, before I realized she had positioned herself
to alternate her shots between targets—a shot at one would produce enough recoil to throw her back
up to the end of her tether, switch targets, and repeat the process. Her own Alpha went down before
mine, but not by much. Once they were both down, we focused on eliminating the rest of the crowd.
One complication came up as Ruby dropped down beside me, flipping Crescent Rose down into her
compact form and opening up with what I recognized as the .308. “I'm down to one .50 magazine!”
she announced, her back pressing up against my own as we took up a defensive formation.

“So, does that mean I should stop holding back?” I asked, a hint of a grin pulling at the corners of my lips.

The shorter girl elbowed me in the ribs. “What do you mean, 'holding back?' You've been holding back?! Yes you should stop holding back!”

“Well, if you insist,” I chuckled. “Un-tie me.”

“I am untied!” the girl all but growled, emptying a burst into a grimm that had gotten too close.

I collapsed my shield, retracted my line, and spun my saber down into its storage mode before dropping it into its sheath. “Pick your targets,” I called, focusing on Telekinesis. While what I had told Neo was the truth, in that I couldn't fly with the skill, I could damn sure hover just fine. Yanking us a good twenty feet up off the ground, I anchored us to a couple of nearby trees. “Flash Freeze, Fireball,” I intoned, tossing off my biggest AOE into the biggest cluster in front of me. Those grimm that weren't instantly frozen to death were alternately immolated and perforated with ice shards and frozen chunks of other grimm as those that had been frozen exploded on contact with Fireball.

“Holy crap!” I heard from behind me and grinned, spinning us around to repeat the combo a second time. For those grimm that hadn't fallen already, I called up AP Round—which, at level 15 now, produced eight rounds—and sent them shooting off individually, each at a separate grimm before repeating the process. We spun in place slowly, allowing us to pick off the survivors. Once we were sure there were none left, I lowered us to the ground. “That was... kind of cool.” She paused, and I swear I heard the mischief in her tone as she added, “Chilling, even.”

“Your sister's a bad influence on you. You should probably cool it with the puns,” I laughed, using Telekinesis to grab up drops and divide them evenly between us.

“Yeah,” she agreed, opening up her side pouch and stuffing in Lien and potions. “Wouldn't want her to give me the cold shoulder if she found out I was better at it.”

Shaking my head, I brought up my map and began scanning the area for red dots. “There are still a few Urase left, otherwise the simulation would've shut down. Reload a few magazines along the way while we track them down.”
By the time we tracked them down, I was getting tired of being stuck there, and with the promise of having to explain things to Ruby looming over my head, I wasn't exactly at my most... patient. To the point that I just stood there and spammed AP Round until they died—which, given how much damage AP Round did at this level, meant that as minor boss level mobs they had considerably more HP than anything I'd run across before. It was almost disappointing, however, in that despite being labeled as 'bosses' and having a large HP pool, they were pretty much like every other mob we'd fought in this simulation. They weren't kaiju class in terms of size, nor were they exceptionally strong. They were more like mini-bosses, really. Their drops were interesting, at least.

“Is that...?” Ruby asked, regarding the lump of cloth I held suspended before her by Telekinesis.

I nodded. “Yeah, it is. Looks like it's meant for you.”

“It could be for you,” she countered, and I shook my head.

“Nah. It's red—clearly it's for you. If it were for me, it'd be white, or blue.” Taking the long scarf in hand, I pushed back the girl's hood and spent a moment settling it around her neck. “See? It looks good, and it matches your cloak.”

Ruby hummed, nodding after a moment. “It does. But we're only just coming into fall, so I won't be able to really use it for a while...”

“And?” I asked, rolling my eyes as the terrain disappeared around us, replaced by an empty white room. “That doesn't mean you shouldn't keep it. Besides, it's not just a clothing accessory, it's a magic item.”

“Eh?” The girl blinked, pulling it off and looking it over. “What's it do?”

Hitting it with Observe, I hummed as I looked it over, before reading off the pertinent details. “Scarlet Scarf, level 40. Passively increases Charisma if it's equipped with matching clothing—which yours do. Also, apparently it doesn't matter if it's summer or not because the description says it always stays just the right temperature.”

Humming, Ruby put it back on and left it. “Okay, you've convinced me. Think they've got the doors open?”
I shrugged, turning and making my way towards the door we'd come from. “If not, I'll have to cut them open.”

“But those doors were like… two feet thick steel. Are you sure you can?” she asked, eying my sabers speculatively as I nodded. The Repository had had thicker walls, doors, floors, and ceilings and was hardened against forced entry attempts, and I'd still cut through it with ease.

As it turned out, the doors had started working again the moment we finished the scenario. Coincidentally, I'm sure, that's when my Create ID skill had disengaged. We made it outside and the owner apologized profusely, issuing me a full refund and promising to look into the source of the malfunction, and should we ever decide to return all future trips would be half off for both activities and ammunition. Considering I was pretty sure it was my Semblance that had broken it to begin with, I almost felt bad letting him agree to all of that… but then again, I was really too annoyed about it to care. My Semblance was screwing with me again and I was not amused.

“So,” Ruby began hesitantly as we left the Proving Grounds, trailing off and looking up at me expectantly, scuffing one foot against the ground under her. Looking up, I saw that we'd gotten out just in time for sunset. Humming, I checked my map and set a waypoint. Beside me, Ruby jumped, looking around momentarily before focusing in the direction the waypoint was pointed. “Is that… a waypoint?”

“Yep,” I agreed, starting off in a jog. “Come on. I know a nice place where we can have our talk uninterrupted.”

The top of the CCT tower, tucked away on its own little campus, provided a nice view out over Vale —and I had to agree with Jane, it was a great place to watch the sun go down. Sitting down on the edge and letting my legs dangle over the side, I patted the spot next to me. A moment later, Ruby dropped down on my right. “Nice view,” she murmured, and I nodded agreement.

We spent a few minutes simply taking it in before I finally broke the silence. “What would you like to know?”

“Everything,” she answered immediately. “But the biggest question I have right now is, why not just tell me? I mean, it's a Semblance. It's not like they're secret or anything. Sure, yours is a little weird, but so what? No one's going to really care.” She hummed, cocking her head to the side before correcting herself. “Well, no, they'll care, but it's not like you'd get locked up in a lab somewhere, right?”
Chuckling, I shook my head. “Maybe, maybe not. I mean, the things my Semblance can do... some of this stuff, individual abilities, other people have as a Semblance by themselves. It's like a... meta-Semblance.”

“Okay, I get that. I mean, if I found out my Semblance was something that strong, I suppose I'd be worried what other people would think too,” she agreed quietly. I could see the insecurity there again—Ruby's 'normal knees' thing.

“It's not that. Not really,” I denied. “It's more... I don't want everyone knowing the full extent of what it's capable of. You never let the enemy know the full extent of your ability, resources, knowledge, and so forth otherwise he will plan to counter all of that. You always keep something in reserve, just in case. A trump card.”

“What enemy?” Ruby turned to send me a confused look. “The grimm? It's not like they talk to each other.”

“That we know of,” I interrupted.

She opened her mouth to deny it, before slowly closing it as a thoughtful expression crossed her face. “Okay, that's a horrible and creepy possibility.”

Nodding, I sighed quietly before admitting, “And no, not just the grimm. Even discounting that possibility, there are still other threats out there. Human threats.” My mind immediately brought up the White Fang and their local leader, and I added, “And Faunus.”

Ruby rolled her eyes, blowing out a breath in exasperation. “Psh. And here I was, worrying if I'd ever get to go on a date now that I'd been accepted to Beacon, because people might think I'm special 'cause I got in early. Little did I know, the fate of the world already rested on our shoulders.”

'It does,' I thought, but dared not tell her. “Ruby?” I asked, catching her eye and deciding to try my hand at helping push her into the self-confident person I knew she would eventually become. “You are special. You just don't see it. Trust me, the rest of us do. I do, I know your sister does, even Ozpin does—otherwise he wouldn't have asked in the first place. There's nothing wrong with special.” She declined to respond so, I shot her a teasing grin. “So, a date, huh? I see where your priorities lie. You've never been on one?”

“Don't change the subject,” she blushed, turning away so I wouldn't see it. “We're talking about
“Oh, no. You opened that can of worms, so you can just bear with me here,” I countered, grinning wider at the opportunity to tease the younger girl. “So, this supposed first date thing you want so bad—what do you imagine it looks like? What sort of things would you want to do on a first date?”

The redhead shot me a mild glare before turning her gaze out towards the city below us, her hands beginning to fidget in her lap. A moment later, she reached back and pulled up her hood, probably to further hide her blush. She seemed to do that a lot, really—more than any other woman I'd met in Remnant to date. “Well, Yang says a good date should start with a guy buying your dinner… and then I guess we'd go catch a movie, or go to a fair or something fun. Then take a walk somewhere nice, like a park with a pond and… and ducks… and just sit and talk for a while. Then he'd walk me home and…” she trailed off, making a little gesture with her hands that I interpreted as 'you know.'

Nodding, I stroked my chin in contemplation, seeing her tilt her head just enough to look at me from the corner of one silver eye. “Is that so?” I asked, and she nodded. “Let's see, then. Orange chicken for lunch, I paid,” I began, holding out a hand and counting it off on one finger. “Took you to a shooting range, since I figured you'd get more out of that than going to some movie,” I added another finger. “Killed a bunch of grimm together,” another finger. “Nice view of the sunset,” I ticked off, gesturing out at the view before us, watching as she turned towards me, eyes getting wider at each point. Looking around, I smirked and pointed off down and to our left. “Pond.” I ticked off another finger before adding, “Also, ducks.”

Ruby spluttered, turning to squint down at the pond I'd pointed out. “I don't see any ducks,” she denied, voice skeptical. She blinked, flinching back slightly when I pushed a pair of sun glasses under her nose—the only pair I owned.

“Put them on and look again.”

The redhead did so, 'Ooh'ing as she looked around with the glasses. After a minute of playing with them, she pulled them off and handed them back, allowing me to put them back into Inventory where I'd gotten them. “Okay. So there's ducks. Still, not a date!”

“No?” I asked, holding up six fingers worth of points I'd ticked off.

She smirked, her look saying she had me beat. “Nope, not a date. You forgot one. A successful date ends in a kiss.” At this point, I knew she was arguing just to argue, because she was having fun…but still, it was too easy to disprove. Besides, the lure of the look on her face was too much to pass up. Reaching forward, I grabbed the front of her hood and pulled it down over her eyes. “Hey, that's you.”
The moment her hood was up out of her eyes, I kissed her forehead, a small smirk crossing my lips as I did so. “Congratulations on the success of your first date. You were saying?”

I pulled back to find the girl's eyes had gone very, very wide. “You…”

“Mhmm,” I nodded.

A second later, her hand stretched out, one finger pointing at me. “You!”

“Me?” I asked, putting on my best innocent look. It was a calculated risk I was taking, but if it paid off, the results would be worth it.

There was a sound I was growing to associate with Ruby's Semblance, or her speed, and a cloud of rose petals exploded in my face. I didn't get a chance to complain as a small body had slammed into my own, pushing me back and away from the edge to land on the roof below. Looking up, I found the smaller girl straddling my chest, her expression shifting between hurt, annoyed, confused, and angry. Her tiny hands wrapped around my throat and squeezed as she began to shake me—not hard enough to hurt, but I could tell she was not amused. “You burned down my school!” she accused.

Humming, I pretended to think it over. “Did I?”

“Yes!” Ruby glared, loosening her grip but not releasing me. “Oh god, you really are him. I mean, I'd suspected, with the whole approachable thing, and the item drops… Why did you burn down my school?! I liked you! Why did you lie to me? I liked that school!”

“I had a good reason,” I began, drawing an incredulous look from the future Huntress.

“A good reason for torching the place where my dad and uncle work, and where I was training to become a Huntress?” She shot me a deadpan look, crossing her arms. “Okay, let's hear it, mister.”

“Well, at least she's willing to listen,’ I mused. Still, I had to resist the urge to laugh at being scolded by a girl two years my junior, at the lowest count possible if I used Jaune's age of 17 and not my
own. I was mostly successful, limiting myself to only a grin. “Remember what I said about human and faunus threats?” She nodded, once. “How to put this…” I murmured, thinking it over a moment. “Okay. A bunch of guys were up to no good there, that night. They’d been ordered by their boss to steal some data from your school. Well, no. They were actually members of one gang, whose boss rented them out to the leader of another gang, who ordered them to steal the data, who himself had been ordered to get it by his new boss, who is up to no good. A couple of friends overheard these plans and sent me a heads’ up. I thought to myself, ’what could a school have worth stealing?’ Data, as it turns out. The woman in charge of it all wanted a list of students graduating from Signal and going on to Beacon this year. There were probably planning thefts at Siren and the other school here in Vale, but as far as I know, getting stopped at the first one put the kibosh on that.”

Humming, Ruby nodded in understanding. “But why burn the school?”

“I set fire to the servers with that data on them. I… did not expect my fire to spread like it did, however,” I admitted. “Thankfully, it was contained to the one building and no one was hurt. And, if you’re wondering, I stole the copy of the data the thieves took and gave it to Ozpin—so it’s not like I was stealing it for myself.”

“So you were, what, stealing for a good cause?” she asked, amused.

Chuckling, I nodded. “Well, I was stealing from bad guys. Stealing it back, to give to someone who would know what to do with it since returning it would just leave it vulnerable to theft again. Assuming it were physical and not, you know, copies of data… You know how they say ‘two wrongs don’t make a right?’ In this instance, I’d say they’re wrong.”

Humming, Ruby held out both hands, seemingly weighing the sides of the argument there, an expression of concentration on her face that I found somewhat adorable for all its intended seriousness. “So, you have the bad guys stealing it, and that’s a negative. And then you steal it, and that’s another negative—but it’s not like a double-negative, so it doesn’t cancel out, it’s more like negative two… then you give it to Ozpin, so count that as a positive, which leaves you at negative one, and then you also burned down my school which is like negative five…” Finally, she tossed up both hands and shrugged. “Eh, the bad guys didn't get what they wanted, so I'll call that a win. Though…” She turned a speculative look my way, narrowing her eyes as she looked me over. Holding up one hand, she blocked her view of the bottom part of my face and squinted, taking on an unamused look after a moment of contemplation. “You're the guy in black too, aren't you?” I blinked, for once genuinely surprised. Something in my expression must have upset her as she asked, “Are you going to lie to me again?”

I shook my head, asking, “How did you make that leap of logic?”

“Well,” she hemmed, “It makes sense when you think about it. You told me you were making copies
of the Dust, last night. Item duplication, especially of money or crafting materials—which Dust is—is a classic RPG exploit, which would fit with your whole 'video game' Semblance. We fought, but I could tell you weren't actually trying to hurt me, even though at the time I just assumed it was part of some test—you liar. It wasn't until I got home and thought about it that I realized you were working with the people stealing the Dust in the first place—otherwise, how would you have even known they were there? Question is, why did you let me beat up your own guys like that? Jaune… what are you doing? Who are you?”

“I never actually lied,” I countered, earning an incredulous look for it. “In fact, I haven't lied to you once. Misdirected, refused to answer, and did a merry little jig around the truth? Certainly. But I've never lied to you.”

“But you've been dishonest,” Ruby pressed, and I nodded. “Why?”

“I have, and I’m sorry. I couldn't just tell you. I mean, what was I going to do, just bring someone I didn't know in on all of… this, because she seemed nice? That goes against everything I know about operational security and information compartmentalization.” She looked disappointed and I felt her shift, moving to get off me. Reaching out, I took one of her hands and held her in place. “But I'm telling you now. So I suppose it'd just be easier if I told you the whole story from the beginning,” I sighed, and the girl nodded. “Fine. It began about two weeks ago…”

And so I told her. I told her about waking up with 'amnesia,' since I couldn't very well tell her I was from another world—and in doing so, told her the only lie I ever had. Mostly, though, I told her about Cinder and my suspicions that she herself was working for someone. And finally, I explained how I was working to figure out who that was and attempt to mitigate anything Cinder attempted before it could get too bad. I did leave out a few details—she didn't need to know the intimate details of my relationships with the girls, or my sister.

By the time I finished, the sun was just barely still peeking over the horizon. Atop me, Ruby had been mostly quite save to ask the occasional question for clarification. When I finished, she sat in silence for several long minutes, taking the time to think it over. I gave her time, knowing it was a lot to process in such a short time.

Finally, without meeting my eyes, she asked, “Why are you trusting me with all of this? What makes you think I won't just tell my dad, or my uncle, or Ozpin?”

“Other than the fact that I could just mind-wipe you?” I asked, rhetorically.

Ruby rolled her eyes, calling my bluff for what it was. “But you won't. Why is that?”

“Ozpin is scouting for talent, that much is clear—otherwise neither you nor I would've made the cut.
You for age and me for forged papers,” I pointed out. Before she could ask what that had to do with me trusting her, I continued. “You deserved to know most of that. No, rather, I should say you need to know. You needed to know that there are threats out there other than the grimm, and that you're going to be put at or near the center of it, because of who you are and what you can do. Ozpin clearly knows your uncle and your dad both—I mean, think about it: Headmaster of Beacon, two teachers at Signal. Yeah, they probably talk officially at least once a year. He's seen what you can do. He sees what I see: you're good. Very good. More than that, you're a good person, a natural team player, and a natural leader. You proved that much today, to me if not to him.

“I trust you not to tell anyone what I'm doing because I believe you can see the value of information security. I have a very short list of everyone who knows everything, and a shorter list of those who know bits and pieces. Everyone on that list, I trust with what they've been told—I know it's not going to leak. Ozpin… I won't say I don't trust him, but he sees himself as a chess master and to him we're all pieces on his board. More than that, I can't guarantee that everyone he would tell is also trustworthy, or that any equipment he uses to record anything I tell him is secure. Besides, if he knew, he'd either worry or interfere, or both. I can operate freely outside of his oversight and get more done, faster, because I'm not constantly having to check in with someone for approval.”

Smiling at the girl, I added, “And those are all good reasons for why I don't believe you'll tell anyone, but they're not why I trust you. You say I'm 'approachable,' I say you're ‘trustworthy.’ It's part of your character, really.” Literally, maybe. “So, are we good?”

“Just answer me one thing,” she began, hesitating a moment before finally meeting my eyes. “Do you like me or not? You're confusing, and it's hard to tell, and you're almost as bad as Yang about flirting…”

Reaching up, I mussed her hair, earning an attempt to swat my arm away. “I think you're very likable—and, yes, dateable. Eventually. I was teasing about that. I'm not going to answer that question, though. Instead, how about we get to know each other better first, as friends, before either of us answers that question?”

“I… I'd like that,” Ruby nodded slowly, taking the hand that had been playing with her hair and holding it briefly, before releasing it. “I suppose we're good, then,” she allowed, hesitantly. “It's still a lot to take in.”

“I know. I'm sorry, but the storm is coming, and you're in it whether you know it or not. If you know, then that opens up several possibilities for me, too. For instance, training—we can help each other get stronger. Moreover, if you know, then I can cut loose and use my best stuff without worrying about being exposed or having to hide it from you. That, and if I need to disappear for a while to take care of something related to Cinder, you can cover for me.” I wouldn’t ask her to help me with Cinder's criminal escapades, but at least she would know what I was doing and we could avoid the whole running and sneaking around behind my friends' backs thing. Almost as an afterthought, I added, “If you don't want to be friends, I understand. I hid the truth from you and there are things I
can't tell you, for your own safety and that of others. Even if you don't, I'll still have your back at
Beacon. It's unavoidable that we're going to have to work together for a while.”

Ruby threw me a deadpan look. “You're kind of a jerk,” she accused, and I nodded. “Still… under
neath the jerkish exterior, you seem like a decent person, trying to do what you think is right—even
if it's not necessarily legal at times. Then again, that pretty much describes uncle Qrow to a 'T,' so
you can't be all bad.” She turned away, though I caught a glimpse of an amused smile on her lips as
she did. “Well, I suppose I wouldn't mind being friends…”

“So,” I decided to change the subject, “How'd your sister take you getting 'arrested'?”

Ruby winced. “Well, she wasn't happy. Neither was my dad, or my uncle. But then I explained what
happened and uncle Qrow made a call—I think he called Professor Ozpin, actually. Then he talked
to my dad and they decided everything was okay again, so Yang wasn't too upset.” Giggling quietly,
she added, “By the way, Yang said your puns were horrible.”

“So bad they looped back around to good, right?” I joked.

Ruby rolled her eyes, nodding. “I think she's just happy someone else plays the same kind of games
she does. Also, what's 'pulling pigtails?' Uncle Qrow laughed when Yang told us what you'd told her
about her bike and called it that, and dad got this sort of mortified look…”

I couldn't help the snort that slipped out as I fought back laughter. “It's when someone intentionally
agonizes someone else, because they're interested in them and don't know how to express it.
Young boys pull the pigtails of the girls they like. It's a good guess on your uncle's part, but it wasn't
intentional. No, I kind of figured with what you said about your sister going to Beacon this year, and
how we both are now as well, we'd probably wind up seeing a lot of each other in the near future. I
thought it'd be a good way to break the ice. Yang seems like a decent girl and if you and I are going
to be spending time together, what are the odds she's going to leave you alone for long? I have six
older sisters and one younger one—trust me, even with the whole 'amnesia' thing I've quickly
discovered, or rediscovered, that the only privacy you get from your siblings is what you take for
yourself. Especially if they're as invested in your personal life as mine are, or as yours seems to be.
And if she's going to be hanging around to make sure I'm not getting handsy with her baby sister, we
may as well make nice and be friendly.”

“Pfft, I don't think Yang's worried about anyone getting handsy.” Under her breath, she added, “Like
I'd ever get that lucky.”

I decided to pretend I hadn't heard that last bit—she'd grow out of it, eventually. Besides, once she
met the twins I had a feeling she wouldn't be quite so self-conscious about her body—the Malachite
twins were nearly the same build, after all, and neither of them lacked for self-confidence. I suppose I
couldn't really count Neo in there, because while she may be tiny, she was also stacked at about Yang's proportions for her size. Reaching up, I poked one finger into her forehead, directly between her eyes, causing her to go momentarily cross-eyed. “All older siblings worry about somebody getting handsy with their younger siblings. It's our prerogative.”

Refocusing her eyes on mine, she nodded. “I guess.” Tucking her head down, she broke eye contact as a small blush crept up on her. “I think… that would be nice.”

I raised an eyebrow, reaching down to tilt her chin up so she would look at me. “What's that?”

“You, and me, and Yang all… friends,” she smiled, though the blush remained, and I raised an eyebrow.

Gears turned in my head and I came to the most obvious conclusion given what I knew of Bizzaro Remnant. 'So, it's like with the twins for Ruby? She wouldn't want to be parted from her sister? … No, this is Ruby we're talking about, not the girls. I must be reading too much into it. Way too much. Besides, she's entirely too young. …And on the off chance I'm not misreading it… well, best to let her figure it out for herself.'

Deciding it wasn't worth asking about and further embarrassing her, or using mental spells to cheat, I asked, “So, she wasn't pissed about the bike thing?”

Ruby took on a confused look, shaking her head. “No, actually. She was smiling the entire time last night. And this morning. It was kind of weird.”

“Eh, who knows?” I shrugged. “So, you ready to go?”

“Are you going to walk me home, too?” she asked, around a giggle.

I put on a thoughtful look. “Well, if that's what you want. I was actually going to say that a friend wanted to meet you. She wanted to spend some time together tonight and didn't really care what we were doing, and when I told her you called she told me to see if you wanted to come over. I figure I'll pick up a couple of movies, stop at the store and get the makings for pizza, and we could spent the night doing a marathon of something old. What do you think?”

“You can cook?” she asked, taking on a somewhat awed look. “Yang is pretty much the only person
in my family that can. Dad doesn’t handle instructions with measurements well, so he tends to use a
tablespoon of salt instead of a teaspoon… and uncle Qrow insists that everything be cooked with
alcohol—which makes for really great grilled steak, or chicken, or burgers but he was banned from
cooking anything that didn't come off the grill. I don't really remember why, but any time someone
brings it up my dad, Yang, and uncle Qrow all kind of laugh so I have an idea or two. And I…
well,” she pushed her fingers together, blushing. “Yang says I get a little too enthusiastic. But it's
cooking and you’re supposed to experiment!”

'Okay, Akane,’ I rolled my eyes. “Sure, you can experiment. Except, if you don't know what each
individual ingredient adds to the whole, then you're going to have variables. Think of cooking like…
math. Most people go with chemistry, but roll with it. You have a sum you want to arrive at. You
have an equation to follow. A amount of B ingredient, plus C amount of D ingredient and so on,
prepared at Y degrees for Z time will give you cake. You change one thing and everything changes.
Some changes are good—you can substitute heavy cream for milk, or whole eggs where it calls for
egg whites, or add cinnamon, brown sugar, or confectioner's sugar to change how it tastes and all of
these things will still give you cake, just a different cake than the recipe told you to make. If you start
making random deviations, however, you get a random result. What I'm saying is, until you know
the recipe by heart and know what each individual ingredient does, you shouldn't be too
adventurous.”

Seeing she looked a bit skeptical, I sighed. “If I suggested taking apart Crescent Rose and replacing
the springs on your firing pins with smaller springs, because I wanted to see what would happen…”

The shorter girl's eyes narrowed and one hand went to her weapon protectively. “I'd hurt you.”

“And it'd screw up your careful plans and calculations, wouldn't it?” I asked, earning a nod in
answer. “There you go. So, are you coming? 'Cause I don't know about you, but I'm getting kind of
hungry.”

Holding the door to the apartment open, I showed Ruby inside and followed after, closing the door.
Turning around, I found that we'd been ambushed as the twins and Neo were waiting for us, all three
standing side by side near to the door—likely, we'd come in as Neo and Melanie were leaving. I
moved up beside her as Ruby cocked her head to the side, shifting her gaze between Neo and the
twins for a moment before her eyes narrowed and Ruby abruptly pointed at Neo. “You!”

“Me?” Neo asked, indicating herself, an amused look crossing her face.

“You're the girl from last night, with the grenade launcher!” Ruby accused, and Neo hummed,
putting one finger to her chin and turning her face up in an overly thoughtful expression.
“Am I?” she wondered aloud, then mimed a look of sudden realization before snapping her fingers. Abruptly, Neo's regular outfit changed to an all-black copy of the same, her hair also going black, and her eyes turning mint green. “I suppose I am.”

I recognized the disguise of course—she'd clearly borrowed the twins' general theme. Though, on the other hand, I'd seen her eyes cycle that color before… “That's where you got it from,” I mused aloud, gesturing between the twins and Neo.

Neo smirked, nodding. “You like?” she asked, and I shrugged. Her smirk went just that much wider and her face shifted to match the twins as she suggested, “I thought we could go for triplets at some point…”

“…Yes,” I managed to get out as the image burned itself into my brain, drawing giggles from the triplets.

Beside me, Ruby sighed, dropping her hand. “You're a meanie,” she muttered, low enough that I could barely hear it standing next to her, followed by something about being ignored I think as she started subvocalizing at that point.

Neo blinked, the illusion around her dissolving. “What's that?”

Ruby flushed red under the sudden scrutiny and I could pretty much see the moment social anxiety won and she panicked. She flailed a moment, flapping her arms once in almost-laughable rage, before throwing her hands up in what I recognized as one of those universal 'fuck it, I give up,' gestures. I say almost-laughable, because while her overreaction would've been amusing under other circumstances—had someone, say, eaten the last of her favorite snacks—it really wasn't here. From her perspective, she had a legitimate grievance.

“ Aren't you going to apologize? For, you know, trying to shoot me with a grenade launcher?!!” She lost a bit of volume control at the end, voice going up high and panicky, and I realized that, oddly enough, the thought of getting shot at didn't bother her as much as being put on the spot—but she was committed now and couldn't back down. I put a hand on her shoulder in a gesture of support and an effort to calm her down a bit.

Humming, Neo traded a look with the twins, who shrugged, before meeting my eyes. “Am I?”
Rolling my eyes, I nodded. “Yes.”

“Okay,” Neo chirped, taking on a mischievous glint to her eyes and turning her attention back to Ruby. “I'm sorry for shooting a grenade launcher loaded with trash grade two rounds at you as part of a plan to solidify Jaune's 'work' and civilian identities as two separate people, at his request, and because we needed to make a fast getaway before Goodwitch could knock us out of the air.”

“You should also apologize for your part in the plan that, incidentally, lead to her being accepted to Beacon early,” Melanie added, with a small smirk.

Ruby's hand dropped, before going back to rub at the back of her head in embarrassment. “Well, when you put it that way…”

Miltia cleared her throat, drawing our collective attention. Turning an unamused look on her sister and Neo, she raised an eyebrow. “Play nice. She's a guest.”

Melanie sighed, taking on a look of contrition. “Fine.” Turning to Ruby, she held out a hand. “Sorry. I'm Melanie Malachite.”

“It… it's okay,” Ruby attempted a smile, accepting the offered handshake. “Ruby Rose.”

Melanie elbowed Neo in the side and Neo turned an unamused look on her, before turning her attention to Ruby. “Neapolitan. I can't apologize for last night and mean it. It was a good plan, it worked, and no one was hurt—and you yourself benefited from it. It would just be empty words.” She spared a look at me for a moment before extending her hand. “But… I apologize for being a bitch about it and jumping down your throat.”

“No,” Ruby shook her head, “It's my fault. I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said that and now I've made a bad impression.”

Neo snorted, rolling her eyes and sending me an amused look. “Is she always this adorkable?”

“Hey—” Ruby began to protest.
I cut her off with a grin. “Pretty much.”

“Hey!” she whined, turning a glare my way.

Miltia cut in again. “Okay, you two, out. Go on. I want my date night.”

Melanie rolled her eyes, briefly hugging her sister. “Fine. Have fun.”

“Date night?” Ruby asked quietly as Melanie disengaged from her sister. “Am I interrupting? I.. I can go, if you want.”

Shaking her head, Miltia pulled the smaller girl to the side, leading her towards the couch and out of my easy hearing range unless I wanted to snoop. Meanwhile, Neo took a moment to stand on tip-toe and give me a peck on the lips. “I have some things I want to take care of, so I'll probably be busy the next few days. If you want me though, feel free to call.”

“I will,” I promised, and the little minx scampered away as Melanie took her place.

“You know,” the girl said, leaning in to whisper in my ear, “Too many more and we're going to need to start double-booking date nights. Scheduling could be an issue.”

I gave her a quick kiss as she pulled away. “You two are the ones who suggested nine. We'll figure something out. Are you working tonight?”

“No, we took the night off. Mom wanted me to help with a few things. I'll tell her you said 'hi,’” she chuckled, following Neo out the door. Somehow, I got the impression there was more to that than she was saying. Though, considering I was dating her daughters, I probably shouldn't be too terribly surprised that Melody Malachite had taken an interest in me in that way most parents do over the people their kids date.

Locking the door behind the pair, I made my way back towards the couch. I caught Miltia's eye and she sighed, turning to send Ruby a smile. “Sorry about that. We're kind of… protective of each other, I suppose you could say. Don't worry, though—you didn't really ruin any first impressions with my sister. Neo…” Miltia shot me a questioning look.
“I'll talk to her, but probably not,” I agreed. Clapping my hands, I grinned as I dug out a couple of DVDs from my Inventory. “So, I'm going to get started cooking if you'll get things set up in here.”

Accepting the boxes, Miltia looked them over and hummed. “Sure. In a few minutes. First, though, if you don't mind I'm going to go drag our new friend off for a chat.”

Raising an eyebrow, I shot the twin a suspicious look. “Really.”

“Girl talk,” Miltia beamed, putting on an expression so innocent I almost bought it—and that's how I knew it was entirely false.

“Uh huh,” I nodded, with a look that clearly said I knew she was full of shit. “Sure. Go ahead.”

Grabbing Ruby by the hand, Miltia dragged her off towards my bedroom. Shaking my head, I moved into the kitchen and began taking ingredients out of my Inventory. I'd been in the mood for pizza and, given that cooking was now a skill—and one I was fairly high-leveled in—I wanted to give it a try and see if it was any better here than it would have been on Earth. Moving about the kitchen as I began preparing things, I activated Listen out of curiosity. “So, wait,” Ruby was saying, “you're his girlfriend?”

“Yes,” Miltia answered matter-of-factly.

I could almost picture the puzzled expression on Ruby's face as she continued. “And your sister?” She paused, and I assumed Miltia nodded as I heard no reply. “At the same time? I mean, I know that sort of thing happens, I'm not dumb or blind… but, it isn't… weird?”

“Wow, you are really blushing,” Miltia teased. “Got something you'd like to share?”

“No!” Ruby denied, in that entirely too quick manner that pretty much announced to the world that she was lying. She sighed and I heard someone get up and start moving about the room—probably pacing. “And the other girl, Neopolitan? She's also…?”

“Neo. And yes, she's also his girlfriend,” the red-clad twin answered.
“Oh,” Ruby murmured, almost too low for Listen to pick up. “So then he's not really…”

“Avaliable?” Miltia suggested. I didn't hear an answer from the little reaper, so it must have been a nod. “Well,” Miltia drawled, and I could almost see the smirk. “I didn’t say that.”

I shut off the skill and rolled my eyes. *That approach isn't going to work,* I thought, shaking my head as I moved on to dicing onion and bell pepper for seasoning. Sure, I could see myself going after her in a few years, but as of right now she seemed too… skittish, which likely came from both her age and obvious social anxiety. Given her history—one mother dead, the other abandoning her family for some unknown reason—the constant fear that any friends she makes would ditch her was understandable. Really, that made all kinds of sense given what I remembered of the series and how she'd occasionally reacted to situations where it looked like she was being ditched. Which is why, personally, I'd rather play the long game there—get to know her while we go to Beacon and see where things go.

'*Of course,*' I hummed, moving on to the dough, *'If Yang ever leaves her for any reason, one of two things will happen: either she'll break and that'll be it, she'll give up and lose the will to go on. Or she'll break the other way... and isolate herself intentionally, in an effort to become 'strong' by not relying on anyone. Both of those are bad in different ways.*'

All I could really do in either case was be there and be her friend—which I intended to do anyway. If Miltia wanted to let her in on the situation then so be it—she'd find out eventually, and it wasn't like I was trying to hide it. At this point, I was coming to accept it as normal, for Remnant. In fact, it was better she knew up front—that way, there could be no accusations that I'd hidden or misrepresented anything. *Actually, yeah, I see what you're doing. Clever girl.*'

And it was brilliant, really—about what I'd come to expect of Miltia's tactical mindset. By letting Ruby in on the 'secret' we had nothing to lose and everything to gain. Not only was everything I'd thought about letting her in on it true, but in doing so, Miltia was putting the idea in her head. Sure, Miltia probably thought there was at least a ten percent chance Ruby may jump at the idea given the information she knew already—but given what I knew of the twin, Miltia was likely banking on the ninety percent chance that after planting the seed of the idea in her mind, Ruby would go home, think it over, and the idea would eventually bloom at some point while we were at Beacon. By what I could guess of Miltia's reckoning, there were really only a few possible outcomes here: either Ruby would jump at the chance and ask to join immediately, or she would think it over and ask to join later, or she would think it over and decide against it entirely. With sixty percent odds in her favor, Miltia's plan was a fairly safe bet. *Damn, even I almost didn't see that for what it was. Smooth. Very smooth,* I shook my head, chuckling quietly as I focused on the task before me—I still had meat to season and cook while I waited for the dough to rise.

That night, I finally got to check something off my list I'd been meaning to for a while now. I'd suspected some things from Earth had found their way to Remnant in various forms, and that night I
got to see what the local version of Star Wars was like. Their local version of Lucas was a woman killed a few years back during a collapse, or so the story went—a collapse being the local term for when a population center gets overrun by grimm and slaughtered down to the last man, woman, and child. I suppose 'collapse' was simply more palatable than 'extermination.' Still, with her death, that was the end of Star Wars. No one wanted to tarnish her legacy by producing any more movies—the fact that Remnant wasn't doing much in the way of movie production notwithstanding. There was maybe one big release a quarter, with the majority of entertainment efforts being focused on smaller, cheaper-to-produce movies (such as anime adaptations), new series, or small, independent projects.

Without Remnant's Lucas around, nothing aside from Episode IV, V, and VI had been created—so no Jar Jar, no teen angst, and none of the idiocy surrounding Episode VII and Rogue One and whatever would have come after that, should I have remained on Earth to see. *And nothing of value was lost,*' I remember thinking, on that front. As for the movies themselves, there were some major and minor changes—some I had expected, others I hadn't really. For instance, Luke was female in the Remnant version. I was, initially, not amused at this development—I'd liked Mark Hamill in that role, after all. Not that it would have been Hamill here anyway, but the point stood. Still, the actress had played the part well. Also, amusingly enough, Han ended up with both Luke and Leia. The twin thing was kind of a big deal in the movies, really—especially the romance angle. And yes, Han shot first.

The pizza was a resounding success, and while Ruby enjoyed the chocolate chip cookies I'd made after that more, when she found the tub of Neo's strawberries in the refrigerator she had practically begged. I couldn't roll high enough to save against that level of cute, so she wound up devouring the rest of them over the course of the night. Some time into the early hours of the morning, the small girl fell asleep curled up on my couch, her head resting on my arm. Miltia had proceeded to take pictures and send them to her sister and Neo, a smirk on her face the entire time. Thankfully, I'd convinced Ruby to call Yang and let her sister know she'd be staying late. I did not, however, think Yang would appreciate her staying the night. Then again, I had sort of thought Ruby would get tired and decide to go home. No, as it turns out, she really was a huge Star Wars nerd and had wanted to stick around through them all.

Once the movie ended, I carefully fished Ruby's scroll out of her belt pouch, unlocked it using the lock code I'd memorized by force of habit when I'd seen her unlock it the first time, and dug through her contacts for her sister. Several rings later, the scroll on the other end picked up. "Ruby?" Yang's sleepy voice asked around a yawn. "It's like 2:30."

"Yeah, sorry about that, Yang," I apologized.

"Jaune? Why are you using my sister's phone?" she asked, and I could hear her beginning to come more awake.

I rolled my eyes and resisted the urge to answer like a smartass. "Well, Ruby didn't quite make it
through all three movies. She passed out and she's currently drooling on my arm here on my couch. Do you want me to bring her to you, or do you want to come get her? Alternately, I have a spare bedroom she could borrow for the night.”

“I don't know,” the elder sibling hedged. “It is really late, and I'd hate to make you run all the way out to Patch and back. Hell, I'd hate to do it myself. Oh, wait,” she yawned again. “Ugh, sorry, still mostly asleep. Ferry service between Vale and Patch has shut down for the night, hasn't it?”

I hummed, pulling up my map and checking the flight paths. I really probably should have thought of that before calling—then again, I didn't know they ever shut down. “I believe so.”

“Well,” Yang drawled, breaking into another yawn mid-way through. “I don't think you're the kind of guy who would molest my sister, so I guess it's okay if she sleeps over and heads back in the morning if she wants. Can you put her on?”

I smirked, this time unable to resist. “Sure.”

Reaching down, I held the scroll to Ruby's ear and brought up Listen. “Hey, Rubes?”

“Mm.. Yang. Strawberries,” she smacked her lips once and promptly went back to snoring.

Taking the scroll back and dropping the skill, I asked, “So, what'd she say?”

“You're a really funny guy, Jaune Jaune,” Yang deadpanned. Sighing, she conceded to the obvious solution. “Fine. Just have her call me in the morning, okay?”

“Sure,” I agreed readily.

She hummed a moment before adding, quietly, “And Jaune? Thanks. For calling. And… for looking out for my sister.”

“You don't have to thank me for something I'd have done anyway, Yang. Ruby's good people. She just… seems like she could use some more friends,” I shrugged, though I knew she wouldn't see it. “Anyway, go get some sleep. Night.”
“Good night, Jaune Jaune,” she laughed, hanging up.

Beside me, Miltia chuckled. “She seems nice.”

I rolled my eyes, already knowing where she was going with that. “She is. And yes, to answer Neo in absentia, she's hot. She's also off limits until and unless Ruby says otherwise.”

Miltia shifted to meet my eyes, raising an eyebrow as she took on a speculative look. “Jealousy issues?”

“Eh, a bit,” I allowed. “Rightfully so, in this case. It's not Yang's fault, exactly, but Ruby told me she's feeling kind of neglected because boys tend to ignore her when her sister's around. Add to that the usual physical insecurities and you get the idea,” I said, using my free hand to motion towards my chest, indicating a pair of large breasts, after which Miltia's expression shifted to one of understanding and she nodded. Calling up Telekinesis, I carefully lifted the girl at my side and stood. “Come help me get her to bed, would you?”

“Sure,” Miltia agreed, moving ahead of me and getting the door, then turning down the covers. I spent a moment relieving Ruby of her boots and cape, while Miltia undid her belt before softly lowering her down and releasing my hold on the spell. The belt and cape found their way onto a chair near the bed, the boots going under the chair. “You know,” the twin began, a thoughtful tone to her quiet words as she watched me pull the covers over the little reaper. “You're really kind of sweet, when you want to be.”

“I have no idea what you're talking about,” I denied, easing her out of the room and closing the door behind us. “I've been no more sweet with her than I have with any of you.”

“Yeah, that's what I mean,” Miltia smiled, and I shot her a questioning look. “You already treat her like one of us, whether you realize it or not.”

I rolled my eyes. “It's called 'being nice,' dear.”

“If you say so,” she shook her head, stepping forward and grabbing me by the front of my shirt. “Come to bed, lover. I want to feel you inside me.”
“Well, I'm not going to argue with that,” I smirked, leaning down a bit to meet her lips as she stood on tiptoe to kiss me. Reaching around her waist, I picked her up and carried her towards the bedroom. “You know you're going to have to be quiet. Don't want to wake our guest.”

Miltia pulled back enough to smirk. “Oh, really? Where's the fun in that? Besides, if she hears something interesting, she might come to investigate…and decide to join in.”

Rolling my eyes, I shook my head, toeing open my bedroom door. “Miltia, behave. Ruby's not that kind of girl.”

“Pfft. That's what you think,” she chortled, looking suddenly very smug in her amusement. “She was sneaking looks at the two of us all night. I don't think she's nearly as innocent as you want to believe she is, mentally. In fact, I'd say she's got us figured out already and was making comparisons. After all she's about Neo's height, with my and Melanie's build as far as assets goes. If anything, she was looking at me and thinking, 'If he would with her, why wouldn't he with me?' Her age is really a non-issue, except to the two of you apparently—and probably not to her, for much longer.”

“A 'non-issue,'” I chuckled. “She's fifteen.”

Miltia rolled her eyes. “And you're seventeen. It's only two years. Besides, she's legal already.” She looked, for a moment, like she wanted to say more but shook her head and instead said, “Eventually, one or both of you will run out of patience and stop circling the issue. In fact, I'd bet on it. Knowing you though, it'll be her that makes the first move.”

“Oh?” I asked, making sure the door was closed before tipping her forward over the bed, my larger body covering hers entirely—not that she seemed to mind, given the way her legs immediately wrapped around my waist. “You're willing to bet on it, huh? What sort of terms?” I'd be a fool to take any bet there, given that I knew Miltia had already set the field to her advantage to start with, but I at least wanted to hear her out.

“If I win, I want to watch you deflower her,” Miltia grinned up at me, lust visible in her eyes.

I nodded, reaching down to undo her dress. “Uhhuh. And if I win?”

She hummed, pretending to think it over. “You can tie me up and make me watch you deflower her, when you eventually get around to it. We both know you will. It's only a matter of when.”
I captured her lips in a kiss for a moment, easing her dress down off her shoulders, before breaking apart to ask, “Somehow, it seems like you get what you want either way that goes. And what if she doesn’t want anyone else there for her first time? She may want it to be special.”

“If by ‘special’ you mean she wants her sister there,” Miltia deadpanned.

Blinking, I pulled back enough to look her in the eyes, my eyebrows climbing towards my hairline. I could see it as being possible, sure, but not entirely likely. Then again, given what I’d heard the two of them talking about and the way the smaller girl behaved, maybe I was wrong. “Really? She told you that, huh?”

“Not in so many words. Trust me—if anyone would be able to see that, it would be me or Melanie. Or should we ask Joan for a second opinion?” she smirked. “As for how, you’ve got mental spells,” Miltia pointed out, arching her back and thrusting her chest up a bit further in a bid to entice me to play with her nipples. “Figure out how to share the memory. Now, less talky talky, more hanky panky.”

Given an invitation like that, I wasn’t going to refuse. Still, I had to get the last word in. “Hanky panky, or spanky spanky?”

“Both!” she growled, grabbing my shirt and pulling my lips down to hers. So much for the last word.
I yawned, glaring balefully at the tarmac underfoot as I stood beside the Duster, topping off the tanks. I'd just spent the past two hours converting the reserve fuel tanks back into fuel tanks, as opposed to smuggling space. Before that, I'd paid a visit to a store selling simple fuel Dust storage cells, along with another selling what amounted to camping gear for Hunters in the field just to make sure I was covering all my bases. My day had begun shortly after 4a.m., when my scroll chimed a priority alarm that had been set to alert me should it receive a message from a specific source. The source in question was the server I'd had the Red Hand set up for me, programmed to penetrate and search networks in search of specific terms and phrases, gather what data it could, and send me a message if it got a hit. It was probably cheap and not really fair, using someone else's exploit to do my dirty work for me… but then, I didn't really care so long as the end result paid off.

Well, it had hit big. I had the location of a 'testing and research facility,' which I interpreted was Atlas code for 'black site.' I also had a date, labeled simply as the 'activation date' in the calendar it'd been pulled from, which wasn't too far off from now. Considering Ironwood and several of his staff had corresponding dates marked in their calendars under various other excuses, odds were very good that this was the day they would turn the key on Penny—officially, at least, seeing as she had to have been activated before at some point for testing. I planned to get there first and see what I could find worth taking.

The pump chimed and the auto-shutoff engaged, drawing me out of my thoughts. Dismissing the Duster, I summoned the Bullhead and set about topping off its tanks as well—just in case. Call me paranoid, but I had gone over my maps. Atlas was an entire other continent from Vale to its north, past the island of Vytal—separated from the tip of Vytal by a few hundred miles of open ocean. My map told me the entire trip, flying a straight line, was just over 1200 miles. As far as distances between landmasses went, it wasn't much compared to some, but that was still a lot of ground to cover—much of it potentially filled with grimm.

At the Duster's base top speed, I was looking at an eight hour trip there, if I flew nonstop. I wasn't
planning to fly non-stop, however. I had already adjusted my flight plan to allow me to pass over Vytal and hopefully map the area, and once I did, find a place to top off the tanks before I made the trip across to Atlas. I wasn’t sure how my skills were going to interact with the Duster, so I was being extra cautious about my fuel levels—I did not want to get stranded in Atlas. More to the point, I absolutely did not under any circumstances want to run out of fuel over open water. Magic and Semblance or no, I still hated water too deep to see the bottom of—even more so now that I was in a world full of giant monsters.

Once the Bullhead was full, I dismissed it and summoned up the Duster again. Climbing in, I went through pre-flight checks to make sure everything was in working order. Now that I had the time to actually sit down and examine it, I could see that Roman had crammed the little plane full of useful tech and tricks. RADAR, LIDAR, a small ECM suite, chaff, flares, smoke… The thing was basically a small AWACS, minus the oversized RADAR dish since it wasn’t all that necessary with Remnant tech. Apparently, he hadn’t liked the idea of someone, or something, slipping up on his plane. Half of that stuff would be great for detecting flying grimm and moving to avoid them while the rest… there was no good use for, except for evading other planes or dealing with ground-based anti-air. That left me wondering just where, exactly, he’d had this thing smuggling stuff from.

Checks completed, I finally turned the engine over and taxied out into place on the tarmac before throttling up and taking off. As I gained altitude, I tilted the plane a bit and leaned over to look out my cockpit window. Below me, the city of Vale stretched out for miles, street lights, headlights, traffic lights, and holograms still visible in the coming twilight of early morning. I sighed, shaking my head before bringing the Duster back to level. I had woken Miltia briefly before I left, explaining where I was going and asking her to make sure Ruby got to the transit hub with flights out to Patch. I’d sent a text to Yang as well, after pulling her number from Ruby’s scroll, explaining that I had an emergency to see to out of town and letting her know when to be at the transit hub to pick up her sister. Sure, Ruby could take care of herself, but it was polite to make sure, even if I couldn’t be there myself.

As soon as I climbed high enough, my radar display told me I’d been painted by ground radar. A moment later, the radio came to life as Vale Air Traffic Control went about their job. “Unidentified aircraft on bearing zero three five, this if Vale Air Traffic Control, please reply with your designation and flight plan. I repeat, unidentified aircraft, this is Vale ATC,” came the call, and I slipped on the headset.

I’d had a chance to read the documentation that had been stuffed under the seat and knew how to answer the challenge, thankfully. “Vale ATC, this is November One Six Seven Delta,” I responded, reading off the tail numbers on my aircraft before giving him my flight plan—Vale to Vytal, essentially. Once I got there and landed, I’d be handed off to Vytal ATC, normally. Considering I planned to fly under the radar ceiling once I left Vytal so that Atlas Military couldn’t track me coming in and on approach to one of their black sites, that wasn’t going to happen. For all intents and purposes, I’d be landing in Vytal, staying a while, refueling and leaving back for Vale. Of course, if they checked back and figured out I’d refueled twice, I might be in a bit of trouble… but that’s why I was going as Shiro anyway, specifically do deal with people on the ground without having Jaune leave Vale.
“Affirmative, November One Six Seven Delta. Advise you climb to Angels Thirteen, current heading is clear. Forecast for the next twenty-four hours looks rough, I advise checking in with Vytal ATC for details once you land, over.”

I adjusted my controls a bit, pulling up into a climb to level off at 13,000 feet. Frowning at that tidbit of information, I asked, “Give me the short version, Vale ATC. Over.”

The reply was a moment in coming, and I guessed he was checking for an update himself. “N167D, there's a large storm tracking west north west from Mistal, moving at an estimated 60 knots. Upper level winds are estimated to be upwards of 70mph and building. The storm looks to make landfall over Vytal in the next twelve hours. Expect airborne grimm to take flight in large numbers prior to landfall, seeking shelter. This will be an extreme hazard to light aircraft, advise being on the ground before then. Over.”

Well, that was a complication I could do without. I'd be in Atlas by then, hopefully already making my return trip—meaning I'd likely be flying face first into the teeth of the damn thing on the way back. And with grimm stirred up around it, no less. “Roger that, Vale ATC. Thanks for the heads up. N167D over and out.”

Slipping off the headset, I pulled out my scroll and sent off a text to the twins and Neo, letting them know I may be delayed in getting back due to bad weather. That done, I turned on its audio player function and set the scroll to playing one of my playlists before putting it on the control panel in front of me where it wouldn't block any of the instruments from my sight. As soon as the plane leveled off, I engaged what passed for an auto-pilot in the Duster—essentially, a locking mechanism to lock the stick, pedals, and so forth into place.

Closing my eyes, I reached out with my Aura and focused on the aircraft around me. As I'd suspected, my Dust Manipulation skill had already kicked in and was lowering the craft's fuel usage while at the same time improving its engine output somewhat. That was great for me, since it meant I would both be saving fuel and leveling that skill for the duration of the trip. Still, I wanted to play around and do more. That in mind, I focused on two things: Gravity Manipulation, to make the Duster lighter, and on wrapping the Duster in Wind elemental Aura, in an effort to streamline it or otherwise eek out some speed and maneuverability.

I noticed the drain on my mana immediately and opened my eyes, watching as the air speed indicator began to climb, topping out at 225 when I found a comfortable place to hold both Aura Manipulation and Gravity Manipulation. Some mental math told me I'd shaved three or more hours off my flight time, and I grinned. Still, a glance at my mana bar showed that holding those two skills up at that level of use had already overrun my mana regen and would slowly eat away at my mana until I ran out. It may take a few hours at its current rate of use, but it would happen eventually. Not wanting to
run out of juice, I let my eyes go half-lidded for a moment and focused on active Meditation. I'd been practicing keeping that skill running for a while now, so I could actually take out a book and spend most of the time catching up on my reading while I let my skills do the heavy lifting for me, sparing the occasional glance at my instruments to make sure I wouldn't run into anything. And it was with that in mind that I flipped my radar and lidar over to active, to make damn sure nothing would be sneaking up on me. Shifting in my seat to get more comfortable, I cracked open Ninjas of Love and settled in to read.

My entire body echoed with a faint sensation of vibration, sense memory from sitting in a cockpit for several hours with an engine and aircraft vibrating around me, the same way the body tends to remember waves if a person has been in a pool or on a boat for long enough. Ignoring it, I stretched out and pulled down my mask, breathing in fresh, cool air as I took a short walk around my plane. Spending a last moment to crack my back, I strolled over to the hangar I'd been directed to park in front of.

The airport I'd landed at was small, much smaller than Vale's own airport, but still larger than my private airfield. It wasn't really all that surprising. Vytal operated as an independent minor nation state to itself and had a smaller population than the larger nations—correspondingly, it would have a smaller economy, which meant less in the way of taxes and thus less in the way of development. Still, what I'd seen of it on the landing approach looked nice. They didn't have the huge holographic displays or holographic street signs of Vale, nor were there nearly as many tall buildings. On the other hand, the entire place had a more 'small town' feel to it. The entire island, or what I had seen coming in at any rate, was absolutely covered alternately in emerald green or gold—the colors of rolling fields of grass, wheat crops, and miles of tracts of trees. Along with that, the place had been dotted with lakes and rivers of all sizes, along with a large amount of mountainous highland terrain.

The bell over the door went off as I entered and a man sitting at a desk looked up from a magazine—what looked like some kind of aviation publication, from where I stood. His hair and beard were red, or had been at one point—though, by now, there was more than a bit of gray in both. His name tag read 'Dearg,' and I had no idea if that was a first or last name—my Semblance was, for a change, completely unhelpful there as it displayed him as a level four, with the single name. “Can I help you?”

“Who do I need to talk to about getting my plane refueled?” I asked, gesturing back behind me towards the tarmac where the Duster sat.

“That'd be me,” he nodded. “How quick do you need it?”

I refrained from rolling my eyes. “I'm not in a big hurry. I figured I'd go grab a bite to eat in town, maybe take in the sights for a bit, and be back in an hour or two.”
He hummed, opening his magazine again and burying his nose in it. “Sure thing. I'll have 'er done by then.” As I turned and made for the door, he added, “There's a burger place 'bout a mile north of here, if you're interested. Best burger on Vytal.”

My stomach rumbled and I felt my mouth water. The one thing I'd forgotten that morning before I left was breakfast, and the prospect of real food was too good to pass up. “Thanks. I'll check it out.”

I caught a ride on one of the ground shuttles going back and forth into town, pulling up my map and giving it a look over as it began to fill out with details. Finding the listing for what I believed to be the hamburger place the guy at the hangar had told me about, I set a waypoint and moved to close my map before something caught my eye as it came into range. Three icons I had never seen on my map before: a diamond in emerald green, a black winged boot, and something that looked like a bird spreading its wings in red—if that bird was drawn in a sort of bad tribal tattoo style. ‘What do we have here?’ I mused, thinking back to what I knew before coming up with the most likely answer of Cinder, Emerald, and Mercury.

They were coming down the street I was on, but were still a few blocks away. Shrugging, I slipped off the street and into an alleyway to move onto a parallel street, not particularly wanting to deal with them at the moment. I hadn't heard much from Cinder since our last exchange of messages—I'd guessed she had either been radio silent intentionally or had simply been out of signal range for the CCT network. I didn't really want her knowing I was here, nor did I want her asking questions as to where I was going. So, I suppose it was just my bad luck that my minimap showed the icons for both Mercury and Emerald break off from Cinder and move to put me in a pincer formation, Mercury taking an alley to put him on the same street I was on while Emerald circled around. Cinder's icon moved over one of the mid-level buildings, meaning she was likely on top of it and moving into a position to observe.

There were two ways I could handle this, really. Option one, go full stealth and evade them. Of course, they already knew I was here—obviously, or Cinder wouldn't have deployed Emerald and Mercury as she had—and outright evasion would look like I had something to hide. Option two, act like nothing was wrong and I hadn't even noticed their presence—and in so doing, find out what the hell was going on. What made my decision for me, though, was the higher probability of the first option blowing my cover, or at least calling it into question. Grumbling obscenities, I pulled my mask up and made sure my weapons were secure.

Taking my scroll out of my pocket, I opened it up and brought up a map of the area, tilting my head down so it looked to anyone looking on that I had my nose buried in a map of the area in search of something, while in reality I alternated my focus between my minimap and my peripheral vision. I moved into an unhurried stroll while they were still out of visual range, going over my options for dealing with them and wondering why I was being targeted. 'Unless I've pissed her off, Cinder believes I'm on her side. Considering she's posted up in a place to observe, odds are good this isn't meant as an assassination attempt... unless she's planning to use them as a distraction and snipe me...'
herself somehow. I don't think I've ever seen her wield a… No, wait. The dance infiltration mission, middle of season… two? A pair of swords and a bow and arrows. Balls.'

Knowledge of one's foe and preparation being half the battle, I could anticipate the potential for a sniper and plan accordingly. Arrows weren't bullets and releasing a bow made a distinctive sound—and so long as I kept an ear open and kept Cinder's position in mind, I could do something about it. Opening my Inventory, I quickly selected the duped copy of Shiro's sword and dragged it into an equipment slot, where it appeared over my right shoulder. After playing around with various draw positions, I'd found that it was more comfortable to draw these particular weapons this way, as opposed to having them both at my hips, which would force me to either cross my arms directly over each other to draw or draw one at a time. With one at my left hip and the other over my right shoulder, I could easily grab and draw both at the same time in a cross-swing maneuver—though, that wasn't what I had in mind for the current situation. Another quick grab and drag had a pistol, what looked like the local equivalent of a Colt 1911 longslide chambered in .45, equipped at my right hip—one I'd taken the time to load with high grade Dust rounds and a space-expanded 30-round magazine, in the event I needed to use it as Shiro. 'Good enough,' I mused, going back to pretending to being distracted.

Ahead of me, I saw Mercury stalk into the side street, hands in his pockets. Triggering Observe, I fought down a vicious grin as my Semblance told me his secrets. 'Mostly hand to hand fighting style highly dependent on fancy footwork that's some bastardized version of TKD, Capoeira, and Muay Thai. Artificial legs doubling as Dust weapons. He'll strike first, from the front in melee to distract me for Emerald, from the rear likely with a ranged weapon since she knows her Semblance does fuck-all against machine. If she misses, and she will, odds are she'll attempt to close and play tag team with Mercury in CQB. That's the smartest approach—an instant attack against an unsuspecting target from multiple fronts. Question is, are you going to join in, Cinder? Let's find out.'

The BGM changed as Mercury drew closer, confirming what I already knew—the trap was closing around me. Perception kicked in and I felt a growing itch on the back of my neck—most likely where Emerald would be trying to put her first shot. Humming aloud as he neared to within a few feet, I forced myself to relax, tension slacking away where anyone else would have been tensing to draw their weapons. Body language, I knew, could mean victory or defeat in a battle—if your opponent read your opening move and those after before you made them, then he could plan around them. So I gave away nothing, frowning down at my map as though it had lead me astray. Mercury walked right past me, shoulder brushing my own. “Excuse me,” I murmured, still not looking up from my scroll. 'Not from the front? Tactically, that makes no sense. What the hell is he doing? He's stepping into Emerald's line of fire. Are they not attacking?'

“Sure,” the boy answered, a smirk in his voice.

My detection skills blared a warning and I dropped to the deck, using Gravity Manipulation to yank me down fast, and rolled out from under the boy's kick. Tucking my scroll away, I rolled to my feet and locked eyes with him. “You sure you want to do this?”
“Mm… pretty sure,” he snarked, and I rolled my eyes. A second later, he lead with a kick that swept up towards my balls. I backstepped and the kick went high, but he had anticipated that and used the momentum from the kick combined with a jump to close range and spin around with his other leg in an axe kick aimed at my left collarbone. Old reflexes kicked in and I stepped into the arc of the kick, my right hand coming up and parrying the blow to my right as I shifted left, forcing him off balance and putting his back to me. I opened up with a fast three-hit combo to his kidneys and spine—all I had time to get in before he rolled out and I was suddenly having to yank my head back as a bladed scythe—some sort of kusarigama—flew through the space my neck had occupied.

“That's not polite,” I grunted, grabbing the chain and giving it a firm yank, using gravity to anchor myself. A yelp preceded Emerald flying out of her hiding place. A second later, she dropped the weapon in her left hand and spun her body, the kusarigama in her right hand flowing into a widening arc intending to drive me back away from Mercury. Instead of moving away, I ducked under the weapon and moved forward, watching her hands as she yanked the weapon back. To my right, Mercury had regained his feet. I heard a weapon sounding like a shotgun go off and the boy leapt forward in a surprising burst of speed, spinning around in a roundhouse kick. Once more, my detection skills warned me of impending danger and this time I jumped, leaping up and back in a flip, the chain scythe flowing under me and Mercury's kick missing. The kusarigama may have missed its owner's intended target, but it did not miss mine, as the chain wrapped around Mercury's extended leg.

Landing on my hands, I grabbed up the discarded kusarigama in one hand and pushed off the ground with the other, spinning the weapon twice to build momentum. At the same time, Mercury landed across from me, off balance as Emerald attempted to reclaim her weapon and he attempted to kick his leg free at the same time, their combined efforts only tightening the chain around his trapped appendage. “Hey Emerald! You dropped this!”

“Crap,” the girl grunted as the second chain scythe spun through the air, the chain catching Mercury about the torso as he attempted to drop out of its path—where, if he hadn't moved it would have caught both his legs and lower torso as I'd aimed a bit low. Both ends spun around him, nearly smacking Emerald in the face as she dropped her other weapon and jumped back.

There was a distant, nearly silent twang! and I stepped back, drawing the sword from my back right handed and sweeping it through the air where I'd been a second ago. A trio of silver arrows clattered to the ground in front of me and I sighed, turning to lock eyes with Cinder, who was now dropping down from her hiding place. “Nice outfit,” I smirked, eying her up and down—boots, form fitting olive pants, what looked like bandage style chest wraps, a brown vest, and brown gloves. “I like the dress better, though.”

“I know, but it kind of stands out,” she practically purred, nocking another arrow and aiming at my heart.
“So, is there any particular reason you've decided to sic these two on me?” I asked, my left hand moving to the hilt of my other sword in preparation to draw. It would be awkward, but I'd needed to draw the first the way I had to take out the arrows.

Cinder chuckled, easing up on the tension on her bow and allowing her stance to relax—apparently satisfied that I wasn't planning to attack unless she did. “A practical demonstration.”

I shifted enough to look behind her, where Emerald chose that moment to 'help' Mercury untangle himself, causing the taller boy to fall on his ass and drag her down on top of him in the process in a tangle of limbs and cursing. “Their teamwork sucks,” I deadpanned, and she nodded subtly, not enough for either of them to really pick it up given that they were otherwise occupied.

Flicking her wrists, she did something to disengage the bow, converting it into a pair of swords and stowing them at the small of her back before retrieving her arrows. “Emerald, Mercury, go wait for me at the airport. I'll be there shortly. Shiro and I have some things to discuss,” Cinder ordered, tossing an unamused look over her shoulder at the pair.

“What? But—” Emerald began, before those gold eyes found her and she sighed, nodding and offering a hand to Mercury.

The silver haired man accepted the hand up, dusting himself off and sending me a thoughtful look. “You're not bad. Still, one on one, we both know I'd win.”

“Any time, any place,” I fired back, giving the sword a spin before sheathing it over my shoulder.

Mercury grinned, nodding. He moved as if to walk away and, as he tilted into what I immediately knew was going to be an attack launching himself at me, Cinder stepped between us. “Now, now. Let's not let this devolve into a dick measuring contest.”

“I'll w—” Mercury began, only for Cinder's lips to curve up into a smirk.

“I will win,” she cut his automatic retort off, earning a wince from the man as he realized the implication there—that she was the boss and he the underling, and her word was law.
As the pair of Mercury and Emerald left, Cinder turned back to me and closed her eyes momentarily, visibly reigning in her self control. Once I was sure the other two were out of sight, I pulled down my mask and took her by the elbow, leading her out of the alley and onto the street. The woman beside me didn't complain, instead adopting an amused look. “What? You wanted to talk,” I pointed out, and she nodded. “I figured, while we talk, I could grab a bite to eat. I forgot to eat breakfast.”

I lead us to the burger place I'd marked on my map, the smell hitting me more than a block away and setting my mouth to watering again. “You want anything?” I asked as we were seated, and she shook her head.

“Just sweet tea.”

As soon as the waitress left, I leaned back in my seat and locked eyes with her. “Trouble in paradise?”

For a long moment, she regarded me with those golden eyes before coming to some sort of decision. “Those two are going to kill me,” Cinder complained, quietly. “That, or I'm going to kill them,” she amended. “Mercury's ego, while well-deserved in some respects given who his father was and his experience, is beginning to grate. As you witnessed, it is not conducive to a team environment.”

I frowned, realizing I was missing critical, need-to-know information. “Why? Who's his daddy, that he's got such a chip on his shoulder?”

“Marcus Black,” Cinder said, in a tone that implied I should have known who that was. The lack of recognition must have shown, because she chuckled quietly and rolled golden eyes at me. “Sometimes, I forget how new to this you are,” she teased. Teased. Not flirted, but teased.

Giving her an amused look, I shrugged. “And yet, I haven't heard any complaints of inexperience out of you, so I must be doing just fine. For the rest, well, fake it 'till you make it as the saying goes.”

“Indeed,” she hummed. “Marcus Black was a man of some renown in certain circles in the underworld. I meant to recruit him.”

She was being intentionally vague, I noted. “Something you couldn't or wouldn't ask either myself or your pet assassin—sorry, thief—to do for you?”
The woman across from me chose not to comment on Emerald's job classification. “I had considered asking you, given your Semblance lends itself well to the job, but you are more useful to me as a seemingly independent third party at the moment and Marcus had experience that couldn't be made up for with natural talent.”

“Makes sense,” I nodded, putting two and two together—she'd wanted an actual hired blade, with experience. “If I needed someone for back alley throat cutting and my choices were between a thief with a gimmick—which pretty much applies equally to both me and Emerald—or a guy who's been doing the job long enough that his kill count is probably higher than a small natural disaster, I know who I'd pick. And yet, no Marcus, and you're talking about him in the past tense.”

The woman gave a small shrug at that, a 'what can you do' look crossing her face. “When I reached the Black household, I found the home on fire and Mercury in poor condition. Mercury and Marcus fought. Mercury survived.”

Leaning forward in my seat, I began ticking off points. “Okay, so Marcus was Billy Badass and Mercury—despite hating the guy—knows his daddy was one of the best at his job. Emerald is difficult to get along with for me, and all I did was sleep with her boss—”

Cinder snorted, quietly. “All you did,' you say.”

I went on as though she hadn't interrupted. “As opposed to the new guy coming in, all swagger and swinging dick, looking to prove he's worth more than ol' pops. I can guess at the rest. Still, I'm surprised you've let it go on this long,” I admitted. She was frustrated and about at the end of her patience—despite keeping much of it concealed beneath her normal mask of sexy confidence. My Semblance gave me an unfair advantage there, allowing me to pry into her mindset. I suppose I could understand where she was coming from—dealing with idiots would make anyone want to strangle someone, and I had dealt with more than my fair share for two life times. And yet, on the other hand, she was an enemy—at least, for as long as she kept going forward with whatever her plan was for Vale. For me, Emerald and Mercury being at each other's throats was a good thing and I made a mental note to try to stir shit up between them later, once they got back to Vale. “I'd have thought you would have stepped in from day one.”

She sighed, shaking her head. “I've been trying to let them settle things between themselves—for the simple fact that I need them to be able to work together without me hovering over their shoulders full time.”

“Sounds like the old 'respect verses fear' argument, whether it's better to be loved, respected, or feared,” I hummed, and she nodded. “Well, I'm not going to tell you how to handle your own people.” She inclined her head in appreciation and I shifted tacts. “That back there, where he stepped into Emerald's line of fire—that was intentional.” I stated more than asked, and received a nod in
confirmation. “So he wanted the first shot at me? Or was it more that he wanted to prove he could take me down solo?”

“Both, I believe,” Cinder agreed. She looked up, meeting my eyes with a speculative look. “You've improved, some. You're faster, now.” I nodded, and she continued with, “Did you know that your little altercation with that Huntress made the news?”

I groaned, quietly, assuming a resting face-palm position. Internally, however, I was smirking like a madman. “Fuck. Well, I suppose it could be worse.”

Cinder sent a pointed look to the torn material across my chest and the armor plate under it, then met my eye and raised one fine eyebrow. “Worse than getting your ass handed to you by a little girl?”

My eyes narrowed in a glare and I sat up in my seat. “Firstly, I didn't get my ass kicked. I let her have a draw, at best.”

“The fact that it even came to that speaks volumes,” Cinder countered, sitting up herself as a smirk played its way across her lips. It seemed she'd found something to distract herself from her own woes, and arguing was one of her ways of flirting. I'd known a woman or two like that. Hell, I enjoyed a good argument myself. That it got the blood flowing and occasionally lead to angry sex after, depending on the woman, was entirely unrelated.

I rolled my eyes. “Of her skill, not mine. She's just a kid. I don't kill kids,” I hissed, going quiet as the waitress came back, dropping the plate with my burger in front of me. As she walked off, I shot the witch across from me another glare before grabbing it with both hands and taking an enormous bite out of it. It was every bit as delicious as had been promised.

Unimpressed, the witch reached out and stole one of the whole-cut fries off my plate, popping it into her mouth. “No, I suppose I can't fault you that,” she allowed, thankfully after swallowing. “It's one of your few redeeming qualities.”

Despite being absolutely ravenous, I still had table manners, so my reply was a moment in coming. “Few? I'll have you know, I have many redeeming qualities. I just happen to be able to demonstrate many of them in the bedroom.”

“Oh? And here we were, just discussing Mercury's ego. I didn't realize we had moved on to your own,” she smirked.
“Yeah, well, at least I can back that up—as you can attest. Unless, you know, you're really good at faking it,” I countered.

One of those fine eyebrows arched towards her hairline. “Perhaps I am and was simply trying to not to damage your fragile pride while enduring your amateurish pawing. It would be a shame if crushing it resulted in lackluster performance outside of bed as well.”

I rolled my eyes. “Ha. Ha ha. Haaa. Okay, I don't want to play that game any more. You fight dirty,” I conceded, and her smirk returned. “Merc there seems to get in his own way, though,” I pointed out, and she shrugged. “Now, before I was interrupted…”

The witch across from me took on an impish look. “I'm an interruption now, am I?”

“Another point in my favor over Mercury: I've got the common sense not to respond to such obvious bait,” I deadpanned. “Now, as I was saying. Secondly, our skills countered each other, as I'm sure you no doubt deduced yourself if you've seen the footage.” I paused for another bite, and the woman nodded. “Thirdly, I did exactly what I set out to do in starting a fight with her. I allowed Neo to collect the men, get them loaded onto the Bullhead, get the bird in the air, and prepare for my own extraction. No one really expected for a Huntress, even a little one, to be in a Dust shop in the middle of the night—and not even I expected to have to deal with the other woman.”

“Mm,” Cinder hummed, stealing another fry before asking, “Why did you do the robbery like you did? I've seen enough of the footage to piece things together and it doesn't fit what I know of you and your style. In fact, it plays completely counter to your Semblance.”

“Right, that. Fourthly: you heard about the robbery and the fight on the news. You did not hear about the other silent break-ins,” I pointed out. “While the cops were busy dealing with the fallout of that one and that blonde chick took those two kids where ever they went after we vacated, Neo and I were busy quietly disabling alarms, slipping into more shops, having the men move the goods, and getting out again before anyone was the wiser. Clamor in the east, attack in the west, as it were.”

“So,” Cinder hummed, smirk turning teasing, “You mean to say you had a plan the entire time and weren't simply making it all up as you went along?”

I sent her another glare over my burger. “You should be nicer to me. I get results.”
The eyebrow went up again, along with a smug look. “You enjoy it.” She adopted a faux thoughtful look, taking on a speculative tone as she added, “In fact, I begin to suspect you're a bit of a masochist.” That familiar smirk crept across her lips and she purred, “That could be… entertaining.”

That was honestly not the first time I'd heard the accusation. “No. Though, if you want to find out who the real masochist between the two of us is, I'm sure we could find somewhere quiet.”

For a moment, a look that seemed composed half of desire, half longing crossed her face before it passed and she shook her head, her face shifting back to its confident mask—Observe told me the truth, however, as her mood read as disappointed and chagrined, likely at herself for feeling disappointed to begin with. “No. Much as I would enjoy it, our flight leaves shortly. If we got involved right now, I would miss my flight—because we both know a quickie would only leave us both frustrated. Though, once we're both back in Vale, I'll have to take you up on the offer. In the meantime, that brings me to the reason I asked to speak with you.”

“And that is?” I asked wondering where exactly she was going next, if not Vale. Maybe to take care of Roman? Or perhaps something to do with the White Fang? I knew they were involved at some point, but I was unsure when she got them under her thumb—or whether or not they were willing accomplices or if she had some sort of leverage over them. Not that I cared too much about the White Fang—they were, or would become, an anti-human terrorist organization bent on eradicating or subjugating humanity and could all die off to a man and I wouldn't shed a tear. The only redeemable ones out of the entire bunch that I knew of were Blake and perhaps Tukson, seeing as they'd left that organization before they really started getting violent. For all I knew, she could have just picked up Mercury since he hadn't been around in Vale before, or she could have had him on a long-term mission and they were only just now extracting him—there was no real way to find out without asking.

“I won't ask why you're here,” she began, and I nodded in appreciation. “However, since you're here and you've clearly got transportation of your own, I have a job for you. I assume you've been enjoying your promotion to gang leader, but I'd like to employ your services as a thief again. I would simply go myself, but hiring you for this task is a convenience I have no reason to pass up.”

“Well, it's a bit of a demotion…” I smirked, earning a roll of those molten gold eyes.

“What do you know of Atlas?”

I shrugged, keeping my face carefully neutral. “Not much. I can read a map, if that's what you're wondering.”
Taking out her scroll, Cinder began tapping and swiping away and a moment later, my own scroll buzzed with an incoming message, which my Semblance displayed for me—though, to keep up appearances, I actually took out the device to look at it. “What is this?” I asked, comparing the coordinates and map data to what I knew of my own map. ‘West about 250 miles from the black site where Penny's being kept.’

“That is a Schnee Dust Company quarry site. The quarry is heavily guarded, but you're not going there to steal Dust—in fact, please refrain from doing so. The longer it takes them to realize there's a problem, the more time we'll have, and missing Dust would put the whole site on lock-down while they go over it with a fine-toothed comb. The information I want is stored on a secure Schnee network, an intranet intentionally separate from the wider internet to prevent external penetration attempts, according to my sources.” Reaching into one of the pouches on her belt, she produced a chess piece—a queen piece I was now intimately familiar with. “So, we're left with internal penetration.”

A moment after the words left her mouth, my lips twitched upwards into a smirk I fought to keep down and she rolled her eyes. Needless to say, I failed that particular Will save. “Thought you weren't up for a quickie.”

“Keep tempting me and I will push you down onto this table and have you here to my heart's content, and damn missing the flight,” she threatened, though it wasn't much of one. “Sneak into the quarry's main office, place this on their interface, babysit it while it works, then when it's finished call me once you're off site and connect it to your scroll with a data cable.”

“You can't just tap it to the scroll's touch interface?” I asked, and she shook her head.

“It doesn't work like that,” Cinder denied, but didn't clarify beyond that. “You'll want to be back in range of the regular CCT network when you send it, preferably back in Vale—otherwise, Atlas will detect the data transmission off their CCT towers and investigate, and potentially warn the SDC about the breach thus rendering the entire operation pointless. To date, I've been very satisfied with your work. Failing in such a manner would displease me greatly.”

It was at that moment that my Semblance made it official, giving me a new quest notification, Operation Infiltration: Steal the Train Schedule, for 5000 EXP, 250,000L, and increased closeness to Cinder along with something marked as three question marks. Taking up the queen piece, I pocketed it and accepted the quest as the server came back with my bill and I dug out cash to pay her. Once she was gone again, I asked, “How quick do you need this?”

Thinking it over, she took out her scroll to check what looked like some notes before answering. “As soon as possible. Call it a three day time limit.”
Humming quietly, I began to reason it through aloud. “So, go to a Dust quarry but don’t steal any Dust. Let this doodad hack the weakest link in the SDC intranet and get it back to Vale ASAP.” Then again, I already had a good idea where this was going given what I knew. “You’ve been having me steal Dust all across Vale proper. The only reason you’d pass up this Dust is if the information were more valuable. Considering it’s the SDC, odds are good what you’re looking for is either A.) something rare, and thus valuable, or B.) a schedule for their shipments—meaning that it could return anywhere from the same amount you’d have gotten in this quarry by itself up to probably ten times that amount. I have to assume Dust from the quarry is raw or unprocessed, whereas anything on a train or airship would be processed and ready for distribution—making it more valuable and far more useful than raw Dust. So, the question then is, am I doing the train job too—I assume it’s a train, anyway, since that would be more feasible than knocking off an airship—or are you handing that off to someone else?”

Her eyes narrowed and met my own, and for a moment we were locked in a contest of wills—the first time I’d actually had her ire directed at me, and something between my Semblance and my life experience told me this woman had more Charisma, cunning, and intelligence than me even with my stats. Something in her past had sharpened Cinder’s mind and will into a weapon, one she had become lethally adept at employing to greatest effect. After a moment that seemed like a small eternity, her intensity softened minutely as her ire dissipated. “You know as much as you need to to complete the job. I will not insult your intelligence by lying to you, however I would appreciate it if you did not ask for more, as a matter of professionalism and courtesy. If another job suited to your particular skill-set comes up, be assured that you will be one of the first on my list of those to call—but silence is just as valuable as competence, if not more so. You have only proven one of those.”

It seemed I’d overreached, a bit. I could still save this and potentially still come away from it without damaging whatever fledgling trust she had of me, however, I just had to tread carefully. “Of course. I understand. OpSec is a thing for a reason,” I agreed with a nod. Still, the response told me more than she’d intended. She likely didn’t have the White Fang in her pocket yet, but a train full of Dust would be a good start towards that if she offered them even part of it in payment for services rendered. On a more personal note, it told me that while we may be bed partners and the desire was clearly there for that to continue on her part, she didn’t yet trust me on the same level as, say, Emerald. And this whole conversation only served to reinforce that theory—she hadn’t really given me any information I couldn’t find out for myself and nothing really relevant to her plans, and the one time I’d gotten close had annoyed her. I had a bad habit of letting my mouth run off ahead of my brain when I should really just shut up and I knew Gamer’s Mind would do nothing to fix that particular problem.

“I’m glad you understand. It’s not…” she trailed off.

“Personal?” I asked, and her eyes snapped back to mine—just as intense as before, though this time the potential for violence was much reduced. “Look, I get it. Just because we screwed once doesn’t mean you should tell me every damn thing about what it is you’re doing, nor do I expect you to. I’m perfectly fine keeping work matters strictly professional—in fact, I’d prefer it. Whatever we happen to do outside of work is completely separate.”
Of course, that itself was a bit of a psychological gambit. After all, almost every 'no strings attached' relationship always winds up becoming exactly what it wasn't meant to be in the first place—just as almost every office romance, where those involved tried to keep their professional and private lives separate almost inevitably blurred the line after a while. In much the same way as telling someone not to do something you _wanted_ them to do, doing so would both put the idea in their head and lead certain personality types that were naturally inclined towards disobeying those sorts of commands to be more likely to do so. Reverse psychology worked best, though, when it didn't _look_ like reverse psychology.

Her gaze turned contemplative, before Cinder chuckled. “You _do_ understand what I want, then.” She glanced at her watch and sighed quietly, before standing. “I have to get back. Our flight leaves soon.”

I stood and followed her as we made our way back into town, towards the shuttle pickup. We had the shuttle to ourselves and, when I took a seat, I raised an eyebrow when I found her sitting down directly beside me, leaning into my side. I hummed, turning red contacts down on her to catch golden eyes peeking up at me through her lashes, an amused tilt to her lips. I refrained from commenting—she'd do as she wanted at this point. As the shuttle started moving, I asked, “You know, you never told me exactly what happened with Emerald, the morning you left. How bad was it?”

“Nothing, sadly. She's too useful to immolate, regardless of much I wanted to. And oh, I _wanted_ to. A good superior does not kill, maim, or needlessly harm her employees and underlings, however… even if it would have been immensely satisfying at the time. There's no use crying over spilled bourbon,” she grumbled, and I could tell she was still pissy about the alcohol going to waste.

“You know,” I drawled, drawing her eyes to me, “It wouldn't be too hard to find a bottle to replace the one she wasted. Let me know when you get back into Vale and we can split it.”

“I suppose I'll have to dissuade Emerald from drinking this bottle. You have a deal,” the woman chuckled softly, one hand reaching out to snag my scarred chest piece and drag me closer, the other hand going up to grasp the hair at the back of my head and pull my head down until our lips met.

“Couldn't wait until you got back to Vale?” I asked, and a moment later I hissed as she bit down on my bottom lip nearly hard enough to draw blood.

“Perhaps I simply wanted to take advantage of the situation,” she suggested, and I rolled my eyes before pulling her back in.
I was vaguely aware of the shuttle stopping a few minutes later. I became much more aware of it when Detect Bloodlust leveled, and I shifted one eye in the direction I'd sensed it from, finding both Emerald and Mercury waiting outside with unamused expressions—Ember was livid while Mercury just looked annoyed and a bit jealous. “You're making them jealous,” I murmured against the witch's lips, and she breathed out a laugh.

“Good.” Pulling away, she sent me another of those sexy smirks and I resisted the urge to roll my eyes. “I believe I have an idea for Emerald's punishment for wasting the last bottle in mind. We'll discuss it more later. Good luck on your mission.”

“I almost pity her. Almost. That bottle was expensive,” I deadpanned, before adding, “You too.” On the other hand, I wished her nothing but bad luck in whatever she was attempting next—good luck for Cinder's plans meant bad for my own, after all.

I spent a moment watching her walk off to lead her little group towards one of the terminals before shaking my head and leaving the shuttle, turning to jog down to the private section, where I found my Duster waiting. “Tanks're all topped off,” the old man said by way of greeting as I approached. “Got your bill here. Also, you should get this thing serviced soon. She's in good condition for her age, but these old birds were always kinda temperamental.

Looking over the bill, I dug into my side pouch and produced the appropriate amount before asking, “How long would it take to service?”

“Bout a week,” Dearg answered, and I nodded.

Shaking my head, I slid the cockpit hatch back and climbed in. “Maybe next time.”

The old-timer shrugged and made his way back into the office as I went through pre-flight again. It wasn't long before I had the plane in the air, nose pointed towards open water off the coast. As I left the coast, I dropped down and settled in at an altitude barely fifty feet over the tops of the waves. It was my understanding, based on the notes I'd found stuffed under the pilot's seat, that Remnant hadn't quite figured out some of the problems of using radar such as clutter and radar shadow and so flying low was still a viable method of avoiding detection. Unfortunately, physics still applied for the most part in Remnant, and flying low meant using more fuel. That in mind, I settled in and focused on my skills again, trying to keep the plane light and reduce drag enough to compensate for being in denser air at this altitude. It was a lot harder this low than it was higher up, but better to be safe than sorry.
The flight over the ocean had passed mostly uneventfully, save for spotting a pod of what I had initially believed to be whales but were, upon closer inspection, whale-like grimm. The great beasts had ignored me as I flew almost directly overhead and I returned the favor by doing likewise—I had no desire to start a fight against an unknown enemy in its home element. Now, however, the scenery below me had changed from ocean to beach, followed by a short stretch of grass and brush, before swiftly becoming densely packed with trees, forcing me to put more attention towards my surroundings so I could skim over the treetops without hitting anything. It was getting colder, as well—as indicated by both my gauges and the land below creeping from green to evergreens and snow. According to my map, I wasn't quite into the mountainous region yet, nor would I be for my trip to the black site—situated as it was in a valley some miles down from the nearest mountains.

The biggest problem I was having so far was that Atlas had picked an excellent location for the black site in question. It was isolated, far from any towns or villages, with no roads for a good hundred miles in any direction—in fact, the only way in or out appeared to be by air. That was going to be an issue, come time to leave. I wasn't worried about landing—I planned to release the summon and glide down, then make my way in on foot. However, my Duster was not a vertical takeoff craft like a Bullhead—I needed a runway to take off. And while, yes, I did have a Bullhead there wasn't really anywhere to take off from except for the facility's own landing pad. Even with an Illusion Barrier, trying that may be a tricky proposition depending on a number of factors: potential anti-air, timing, and how likely they were to shoot first and ask questions never for starters.

'Fuck it, I may just have to hoof it out. It's not going to be fun, though, considering my map lists this as a pretty high-level area,' I mused, watching as the icon for my Duster neared what I'd labeled as the point of no return. If I was going to turn back, it would have to be before I got into what I suspected to be their radar range. 'Well, it's not like I intended to bail on this anyway.'

Opening my Inventory, I equipped my glasses, then cast Invisibility. Focusing on my active skills, I called up my barrier spells a moment before I released the summon for the Duster. Even with my magical shielding up, hitting freezing air at over 200 mph was not fun. I flipped end over end a few times before I stabilized my fall with wind and gravity, then extended the wings on my wingsuit and dumped mana into Gravity Manipulation in an effort to keep myself up as long as possible—the closer I could get to the base before having to drop below the tree tops, the better as far as I was concerned.

When I finally did drop below the tree tops, I switched to using my line launcher and timed leaps through the trees, and wound up keeping that up for a couple of miles before I got a visual on the base through a gap in the trees. I came to a stop in the top of a large pine with a view on the compound and couldn't help the low whistle that escaped my lips. The trees for half a mile around the base had been removed and the ground leveled out flat. There were three lines of barriers surrounding the facility—one just outside the tree line, composed of chain link fence that had to be at least fifty feet tall, half covered at the bottom and topped with loops of concertina wire. The second barrier was similar to the first, except just inside the second fence my glasses highlighted evenly spaced automated turrets with overlapping fields of fire on everything to the tree line if they didn't mind shooting their own fencing. The third barrier was the wall to the compound itself—what looked like a concrete and steel monstrosity, also topped with turrets in addition to artillery and anti-air
emplacements. Also, as an added 'fuck you' to anything that made it past the first two fences, I saw hundreds of outlines highlighted buried just under the surface of the snow between the second and third barriers—a goddamn mine field. Atlas took grimm defense very seriously, it seemed.

'That is some serious hardware,' I thought, frowning as my glasses also pointed out sensors. The auto-turrets primarily ran off of a combination of radar/lidar for motion detection, but I also spotted infrared sensors there. Invisibility would be pretty much useless here. In fact, I would be surprised if someone hadn't already spotted me, even though I'd made sure to stay mostly hidden behind a tree. I couldn't possibly avoid every infrared detector there, so there was bound to be at least one with at least a partial line of sight on me—the only question was in how long it would take them to sound any kind of alarm. Pulling back out of sight, I carefully moved away from the base and began circling around, occasionally slipping back in close enough to get a good view from a different position. Once I was sure I knew where everything was, I began planning.

'A variation of what I did with the Repository should work. Go in inside a small ID, cut my way in, then expand the ID to cover the facility so I can search and destroy any mechs that get sent my way. Find Penny, find their servers, get the data, get the girl, get the hell out.' That decided, I went to work. I created a small sphere of an Illusion Barrier around myself and climbed into the top of the tree I was in. Guesstimating the distance between me and the base, I made a Powered Leap that got me most of the way between the first and second fences. After that, I decided to try out a combo I hadn't had a chance to yet—Air Walk and Flash Step. Results were promising, however.

Stopping in mid-air over the roof of the building, I looked down and found the roof to be covered in pressure sensors, all highlighted by my glasses. Likewise, the door itself was alarmed—as soon as it opened, the fireworks were going to start. From what I could see on my minimap, there were also cameras and other types of sensors lining all of the halls in addition to more pressure sensors. From here on out, I wouldn't really be able to sneak around. I would be fighting a ghost facility trying to keep me out the entire time. 'Well, nothing for it.'

Expanding my Instant Dungeon to cover the whole facility, I dropped Telekinesis and Invisibility. Yanking the door off its hinges and throwing it over my shoulder, I took off at a Flash Step paced run into the building, towards the elevators. Alarms began blaring the moment I touched down and a glance at my minimap showed that the security bots had come online. Ahead of me, several doors opened to either side of the hallway and out stepped human sized and shaped robots—white armor, black face plates, carrying automatic rifles. And of course, above each head was text in red, letting me know that they were:

Prototype A tlesian Knight-200

AK-200
The knights reacted to my presence by opening fire and red-tinted Dust rounds began splashing off my shields. Alarmingly, my shields began draining quickly. ‘What the hell grade of rounds are they using?!’

There was no real cover in the hall unless I decided to fall back into one of the side rooms, but that would allow them to pin me inside—by design, on both fronts, naturally. Instead, I decided to make my own cover. Concentrating, I focused on the ground in front of me and summoned up a four foot tall by four foot wide by a foot thick wall of steel with legs on both sides—portable cover. Ducking behind it, I recast my shields. Humming in thought, I quickly opened my Skills menu and saw that my skill level for those two spells was going up. Grinning, I whipped out my pistol and returned fire—just enough to keep the knights from moving forward and attempting to flank me. It worked, and instead of doing the smart thing and moving around my obstacle, they stood in place and continued to concentrate fire—occasionally switching out magazines as they ran dry.

As I sat there, waiting for them to run out of ammo while returning fire, my scroll began buzzing and my HUD popped up the answer/reject call dialog. The name on the caller ID was familiar and I winced, hitting the ‘accept’ button. “Uh, hi Candice,” I greeted.

“Jaune? Are… are you in the middle of a firefight?” she asked, and I rolled my eyes.

“No, just a heated exchange of words. Hang on, I need to issue a rebuttal,” whipping my pistol around, I shot one that had been moving up in the ‘face,’ forcing it to stumble back into formation. “Get back there, damnit!” I yelled at them before turning my attention back to my scroll call. “Sorry about that.”

“Uh huh,” she hummed in a tone I recognized as one I’d used many a time myself to call ‘bullshit’ on someone making obvious fabrications of the truth. “You never write, you never call… A girl could get the wrong idea, you know?”

“I’m sorry. Things have been—” I popped my arm out long enough to throw out a few rounds and ducked back down again. “Busy.”

The older woman snorted. “‘Busy’ huh? I can tell.” She paused a moment, probably waiting for the gunfire to taper off a bit as the AKs reloaded, before continuing. “Look, I’m not angry, really. This is a bad time, I’ll call you back—”
“It's fine,” I cut her off, digging into my Semblance and finding a flash-bang grenade out of Roman's former stash. “Hold the scroll away from your ear for a moment,” I warned, yanking the pin out and throwing the grenade over my barrier, then covering my ears, closing my eyes, and opening my mouth for the coming overpressure wave. The grenade went off and I picked up where I'd left off. Popping my head up confirmed that the machines had been temporarily flash-blinded. “You were saying?”

The woman giggled and I could almost visualize the eye roll. “I was just calling to let you know that I.. uh… Well, I met this nice guy at the supermarket yesterday and we sort of hit it off. So uh…”

“I get it,” I chuckled. “I'm happy for you. Let me know if he treats you poorly. In the meantime, do you hear that?”

She hummed. “It went quiet?”

“Yeah,” I agreed. “They finally ran out of ammo. I've got to go deal with this. Have fun with your new beau.”

All told, I must have in place for a full five minutes, recasting my shields as they fell and while I talked with Candice, before the prototype knights finally ran out of ammunition. Smirking, I disconnected the call, stood, and looked them over. ‘Well, they've so obligingly lined themselves up in nice little rows for me,’ I hummed, making sure my shields were up again before pulling up lightning elemental Aura and stepping into a Flash step. Reaching the first of them, I drew the sword on my left, electricity running along my blade as I dragged it through the space the Knight's neck occupied at speed. I never slowed as I came in range of the next, drawing my other sword and repeating the process. Flowing with the momentum of the swing, I swung again and again, Stepping from one to the next until I reached the end of the hallway. Looking back, I watched the group of ten AK-200s fall to the ground, severed heads, arms, and legs lying scattered in the hall.

I frowned as I noticed an important detail—I had gained neither EXP nor spirit from any of those kills. It wasn't simply that I out-leveled them, because I did not—in fact, each should have been worth a pretty good chunk of experience, probably somewhere in the neighborhood of one to three percent of my TNL unless I missed my guess. Hitting one with Observe, I hummed as I thought it over. 'They're not alive, nor are they creatures of grimm or spirit. They're programmed to attack intruders, but they may as well be trash bins or furniture—no Spirit, no experience, no Spirit for me to collect. Well, shit. That sucks.'

It seemed I had found one of the hard limits to my Semblance. There was a silver lining, however: both my Dual Wield skill and my shield spells had leveled, meaning I could still train skills off of them—meaning it was about the equivalent of shooting or hitting a target or practice dummy. ‘Well, doesn't matter much I suppose. I'm not here for EXP. And if that's the best Atlas has to offer in the
way of combat robots, I'm going to have to find a way to pay Emerald back for the whole 'death bot' thing.'

After taking a moment to collect their weapons, I moved on. I found the elevators situated in the middle of the building—both a personnel elevator and an elevator for freight, or death bots, depending on how big they were. Figuring the odds were good for what I was looking for being stored on the very bottom floor, I used Telekinesis to force open the cargo elevator doors. Lightning-enhanced normal swords couldn't penetrate the floor, so I switched to my Plasma Blade and made a hole, then stepped off into the abyss. I fell for a long moment before a swiftly brightening glow from the bottom of the shaft drew my eye. For a moment, I saw some sort of red pattern, but that was quickly washed out in favor of brightening white. Recognizing a beam cannon charging when I was staring one in the face, I went over my options.

Not particularly wanting to tank an energy weapon to the face, I waited until what I felt was the last second before yanking myself to my right, flipping around so my feet touched the wall of the elevator shaft and I could run down. I moved not a moment too soon, as a flash of white temporarily whitened out my glasses and, above me, I heard something explode and a second later daylight flooded the elevator shaft. The air in the shaft superheated, going parched and dry and a good deal must have simply burnt up if the sudden blast of cold air being sucked in from the top of the shaft was anything to go by as physics kicked in and pressure equalized. Looking up, I found that the cargo elevator and the roof above it had been blasted outward and partially melted by the beam.

'Okay... looks like they just got dangerous. I suppose Emerald wasn't exaggerating about the death bots,' I mused, shifting my gaze back to the bottom of the shaft, where I could now make out the form below in the light now pouring down the shaft, along with the text hovering over its 'head' in red.

Atlesian Spider Tank -150

AS T -150

Level: 30

Sheathing my sword, I sighted down my palm at it. "AP Round," I growled, firing off a salvo of magic projectiles that flew back down the shaft and punched holes in the Spider's armor. It did not go down—in fact, it began coming up, climbing up the shaft and unfolding the massive energy cannon on its back into four smaller energy weapons, which began charging back up. Pulling up more mana, I began spamming AP Round, making sure to give each volley a different elemental charge to see what would have the most effect. Wind had little effect, other than punching more holes in it. Ice had no discernible effect, while gravity nearly caused it to lose its footing. It was when I got to fire and lightning that I struck pay dirt. Lightning elemental rounds caused it to temporarily lock up, losing its grip and falling down to the bottom of the shaft, while fire rounds went in and turned everything they
touched into molten slag, which spread and began to eat through the Spider from inside.

The Spider quickly regained its footing, shifting its canons up and getting off a quartet of shots that were, individually, weaker than the initial blast. My shields held against the first three before exploding as the fourth hit and I continued to pour fire elemental AP Rounds down on it, sparing only a moment to get my shields back up. It lasted a few more seconds and managed to get one more shot off, before I hit something important and it went down in a heap of half-melted slag. Giving it a moment to make sure it wasn't playing possum, I allowed myself to drop the rest of the way down to the bottom level.

“This would suck if I couldn't tell where they were,” I mused aloud. Cutting a me-sized hole in the middle of the doors, I pulled myself back up and out from behind the door before pushing the two slabs of metal I'd cut outwards with Telekinesis and shielding my eyes with one hand on a hunch. An instant later, there was a bone-rattling explosion and my shields flared as molten shrapnel splashed off them. “It's a trap,” I deadpanned.

Holding out my hand, I spun up a fire-elemental Rasengan and began dumping mana into it, causing it to expand from the size of a bowling ball to that of a beach ball. Dropping down, I sighted down the nearest Spider and returned fire. The Rasengan cored the first Spider, dropping it to the floor, and exploded on contact with the second, flash-melting its outer armor to orange, dripping slag. I followed it up with a second Rasengan of similar size, finishing off the second Spider before catching the third and fourth with a volley of lightning AP Rounds, followed by alternating volleys of that between fire and lightning to keep them stun locked while I let their own melting internal components do most of the work of killing them. Was it cheap? Yes. But then, I didn't care—especially since they weren't giving me EXP. They did have something I wanted, however—namely, many of the energy canons were intact, since I had been aiming at the spiders' main bodies and not their weapons. Into the Inventory they went.

‘Any more?’ I wondered, glancing at my map. With the elevators permanently out of service, a swarm of red dots so dense I couldn't count them all occupied what I interpreted as the stairwells leading down. Humming, I made my way through the melted elevator doors to the stairwell exit and waited. A few moments later, I began hearing footsteps echoing down through the door. Picking up the still partly liquid remains of the five Spiders with Telekinesis, I use the skill to tear them down into smaller pieces and arranged them between me and the door.

As soon as the door opened and the first Knight caught sight of me, I impaled its head with a chunk of red hot shrapnel, sending it flying back into the Knights behind it and sending them falling down. Not one to waste an opportunity, I flung the rest of the Spiders' remains in on top of them, cramming the bottom of the stairs with scrap metal or varying temperatures between warm and liquid. They would be a while digging through all of that to get to the door, but just in case, I spun up another elemental sword—fire, this time—and spot-welded the door shut before dropping the technique.
I wondered at the lack of more resistance for a minute as I made my way down the corridor towards what was labeled as a lab, before I came to the most obvious conclusion: over a hundred brand spanking new prototype robot troops on-site, along with five heavy Spider Tanks, should have been overkill so long as they were used as support for the human troops. Without the humans to command and direct them, they fell back on their basic combat VI—since I refused to acknowledge that they were true AI—and protocols. In other words, the things were likely designed to fight grimm as opposed to Hunters. It would explain why the Atlas bots seemed so ineffective against Hunters, while still being mass produced and relied on heavily by the Atlas military. ‘Really, what use would they have for anti-Hunter bots anyway? It’s not like there’s a civil war on between Hunters and the various governments, to my knowledge. Yeah, they could be planning for just such a thing, but if anything they’re just hedging their bets.’

Putting that thought to the side, I found the door to the lab and rolled my eyes when I found it locked. Yanking it off and throwing it back down the hallway with Telekinesis, I made my way inside, stopping a few steps in at what I saw. Glass tubes lined the far wall, thirty in all, and inside each was a human-like figure. Thankfully, the tubes were not of the liquid filled variety and I could actually see inside them. I stepped closer to study one in particular—a small, female form with orange hair and pale synthetic skin, her eyes closed in repose and nude save for a few glowing green lines and tubes here and there, along with much thinner cables that all seemed to lead to her back, which I couldn’t actually see from where I stood. I was surprised to find that she possessed no real outward tells as to her true nature—no doll joints, no visible access ports or hard angles, and she was… anatomically correct, as it were, down to the minutia.

‘I don’t think that was in the series. Bizarro Remnant vs Sanitized Remnant?’ I wondered. Of course, there were all sorts of implications there that could be made. If Bizarro Remnant was actually canon Remnant as I remembered it, then Monty and RT had scrubbed this particular detail for reasons that I was leery of getting into. AI and human-like robots were a lofty goal with so many potential abuses it wasn’t even funny—from Terminators to sex-bot assassins, or just plain sex-bots, and more. With the birth rates as low as they were and humanity as a whole facing the very real potential for extinction within our lifetimes, I kind of doubted the sex-bot angle but I’d long ago learned not to underestimate mankind's capacity for… Honestly, I didn't even know how to classify it, in this instance. Was it perversion? Depravity? Lust for power? General idiocy?

Shaking my head, I turned my gaze on the other subjects— there were simply too many moral arguments surrounding the subject to get tied up in thinking overlong on it. Penny herself was near the end on the far left, with only two other specimens to the left of her. To the right of her, other subjects looked older, less advanced, and less articulated—older models, I supposed. The two to Penny’s left were just as finely detailed as she was, if not more so in some ways, considering both were clearly adult models—one male and one female. Both shared her ‘skin’ tone, and while the male model's hair was the same shade of orange, the female's hair was black. ‘I wonder… is that coincidence, or did they intend to give her a family?’

There was no real way to answer that question just standing there, so I sought out a working terminal. Digging around a bit, I found what I was looking for—their notes, code, compiler, and everything needed to program a working AI. I was almost surprised that they’d keep all of that on
one server, but then I realized it was probably a production server—meaning they were using it to actively produce more AIs, to stick in artificial bodies for testing purposes. Penny wasn’t the first, after all, and no doubt she wouldn’t be the last. It would make no sense not to have everything they needed in one place, given the nature of the testing going on here.

Downloading copies to my scroll, I poked around a bit more, pulling up the specs for the three most recent models. While Penny was almost fully operational—almost, because she apparently had had her personality matrix overwritten and reset to its default state so as to imprint on Ironwood when she was reactivated, according to the notes—the other two bodies were blank slates, having had no AI uploaded to them. In addition, despite what I’d initially thought, none of them had any internal weaponry. Even Penny had no clear way of accessing the blades I knew she used. Some investigation on my part showed that there was an armory, containing weapons designed specifically to be used by these AI shells, including the ‘backpack’ that held Penny’s puppeteered swords/energy weapons.

Humming as I looked the two empty AI bodies over, I shrugged. ‘Waste not, want not.’

Keying in the sequence to open the tubes, I made my way over to Penny, watching as the system automatically disconnected her from the tubes and wires attached to her. When it was finished, I lifted her up with Telekinesis, pulling her clear of the tube and spinning her around once. On her back, I found the only evidence as to her artificial nature—a series of ports that I assumed connected to points along what passed as her spine: nine in total, split evenly into three groups of three between the cervical, thoracic, and lumbar vertebrae. As I watched, her artificial flesh shifted and covered the ports, and after a moment I wouldn’t have been able to tell they were there without having seen them firsthand. If there were seams, I couldn’t find them visibly. Even a quick brush with the tips of my fingers where I’d seen the ports revealed nothing different than what I’d expect on any human female. Definitely more advanced than ‘canon.’

‘Now what?’ I wondered momentarily, before rolling my eyes. There was no point trying to activate her here—a process which I had no idea how long it would take. Instead, I opened my Inventory and pushed her in. I blinked when, the instant she was fully in, my Semblance chimed and popped up an alert.

You have discovered an Epic level piece of gear! Would you like to equip it now?

I reread that twice before shaking my head, closing my eyes, and stifling the urge to burst out laughing aloud. ‘Ooh, there are days I want to strangle my Semblance. And then there are days like this, that make up for it. You bet your shiny new interface I’m going to equip it.’

Focusing on the ‘Accept’ button, I was asked to confirm my choice, on the condition that if I equipped this piece of equipment it would become soulbound. That drew an eyeroll, followed by
hitting the 'Accept' button again, physically this time. I opened my Equipment tab to find a new slot and an entire new tab with an icon that looked like a green sword. Immediately, my Semblance shifted to what looked like some sort of Equipment tab for Penny herself, where several parts were highlighted but one in particular stood out. Her power source was currently listed as a grade 4 electric blue crystal. Humming, I selected the part and found options there—apparently, I could install more than one crystal at a time—up to three—so long as at least one of them was an electric type. Replacing the grade 4 electric blue with a grade 9 of the same, I selected the other two slots and equipped a grade 9 purity white and a grade 9 radioactive green. I wasn't entirely sure what the green would do, as I had yet to test it and neither Observe nor my Use Dust skill could tell me, but it fit her color scheme so I left it. I made a note that I was running out of grade 9 crystals and I needed to get more.

I confirmed my equipment selections and was immediately 'rewarded' with another prompt asking me for a name for my new Combat Gynoid, as Penny was listed—which drew a chuckle as I realized my Semblance bothered to make the distinction between 'android' and 'gynoid.' The name field was already filled in with Penny's actual name, so I just confirmed it. A moment later, text began to scroll along the right side of my HUD, which I swiftly tuned out after reading the first couple of logs and seeing it was about what I'd expected—that being, she would take a bit of time to actually boot up and come online.

> Beginning startup sequence.

> Checking file system integrity...

> Integrity poor, beginning file system check...

> Checking hardware...

Gathering up the other two android bodies, I stored them in Inventory and was moderately surprised when I received no notifications. My only thought on that was that, since they weren't actually fully operational, I couldn't do anything with them yet and likely wouldn't be able to until I installed AIs in them. Shrugging, I made my way towards what my map and the local terminals listed as an armory. Opening the door, I stepped inside and took a look around. 'Armory' was a bit of a misnomer—the room was more like a tech workshop for Hunter-class weapons and gear, mostly full of finished products. A quick search later and I had both Penny's backpack and default outfit, which I tossed into Inventory, only to be asked if I wanted to equip them to my Combat Gynoid. 'Yeah, don't really want her running around naked and unarmed,' I mused, confirming that and going back to searching the room.

There wasn't much else in the way of weapons there, aside from some energy rifles issued to standard AK-200s that had apparently been modified for higher power output. Those made their way...
into Inventory as well, and I moved on to the section of the room housing the armor. What I found there brought a grin to my face as I looked it over. Standing on several racks were suits of eerily familiar armor—power armor, specially, according to Observe. There were only five, but three of them I recognized right off the bat—a black set and a blue set of what was Halo MJOLNIR armor in all but name. ‘Okay. Two empty android bodies. Empty suits of armor, clearly fitted to match each of those bodies. So they’re intended for more than as backup for Hunters and Atlas troops. Still, the similarities there with those two specific sets to RvB is a bit uncanny,’ I decided, throwing the armor sets into Inventory with the rest.

The third set was much smaller than the first two, in black with neon green highlights, and I threw it into Inventory as well assuming it was made specially for Penny. One more set caught my eye, the third I’d recognized right off the bat—a white set with black under armor and bronze trim, with a helmet with a much larger rounded visor in gold. ‘Looks about my size,’ I mused, walking around it to get a better look. ‘Well, it won’t hurt to keep it. If it doesn’t fit, I can either try to modify it, reverse engineer it, or use it for parts.’ Coming around behind it, I spotted an access panel on the back. Not wanting to screw something up, I looked around the armory until I found what looked like a manual for the armor. Eating it with my Semblance, I opened up the relevant section and speed-read until I had a grasp on what I was looking at. ‘Dust powered, obviously. Access panel on the back, recessed under the armor. Takes Grade 4 and up electric-type crystals.’

Digging a couple of the required crystals out of Inventory, I pulled out the suit I assumed to be for Penny and popped in the Dust, seeing a tracery of bright blue run across the armor momentarily before going dark. Dropping the armor back into Inventory, this time I was asked if I wanted to equip it to Penny. Declining that, I powered up what I knew I’d wind up calling the Meta armor, before dropping that into Inventory as well. Asked if I wanted to equip it, I agreed, watching as my Shiro armor set was displaced my the Meta armor set. I found myself a few inches taller, and for a moment my vision was tinted the gold of the helmet before it cleared. The armor fit better than I’d expected—it had been a close match, but I figured it would be loose or pinch in places. Though, games resizing armor wasn’t exactly a new phenomena, so I shrugged it off. I made sure to save the armor set in my Semblance under the name ‘Meta’ before switching back out to my Shiro set.

Looking around to make sure I wasn’t missing anything worth taking, I made my way back out to the lab, and from there to the elevator shaft. The AK-200s were still stuck in the stairwell, attempting to dig their way through if the sounds on the other side of the door were any indication. Grinning, I walked right past them, determined to ignore them since they couldn’t actually get to me and weren’t worth any experience. Sure, I could crush all of them and take their guns while letting them grind my shields up for me, but it really wasn’t worth the hassle of dealing with them at this point. Charging Powered Leap, I aimed for the sky at the end of the elevator shaft and Leapt, with the aid of Gravity Manipulation and Telekinesis. I shot up the shaft and out, hanging in the air for a long moment before redirecting myself towards the landing pad, where I could see several parked vehicles.

Even though I was in plain sight of the automated defenses, their programmers had apparently been thorough in their work and they wouldn’t fire on the building itself—that, or maybe they wouldn’t fire at a human target without authorization. I really had no way to confirm that one way or another. It didn’t really matter to me, though—so long as they wouldn’t open fire when I got close to the
vehicles. I grinned as I looked them over. The first was a Bullhead similar to mine, but an Atlesian Navy model—a military aircraft, with military specs, a military engine, and most importantly military mounted guns. The second was an Atlesian dropship, named a Razorback according to Observe—armed with dual Gatling guns for CAS and capable of carrying slightly more in the way of troops than the Bullhead. Both got claimed and eaten by my Semblance. ‘Angel's going to be happy when she sees what I brought back,’ I chucked, fully realizing my gang’s primary pilot was going to call dibs as soon as she saw one or the other.

With two of the vehicles eaten, I moved on to another of the armed Bullheads and climbed in, going through a quick preflight before starting the engines. It had, thankfully, been refueled and prepped to go in the real world—meaning the ID counterpart I was sitting in was as well. Lifting off, I pointed her south, intending to throw off Atlas tracking once I got far enough away before swinging westward towards my next stop. I dumped mana into Gravity Manipulation and wrapped the craft in wind elemental Aura before ramming the throttle up to the stops, causing the craft to jump forward in the air as the engines tilted into horizontal flight mode almost immediately. I was doing well over 150 and climbing by the time I cleared my Illusion Barrier, allowing it to shatter behind me. As far as those on the ground knew, a Bullhead with an Atlas IFF tag had just appeared out of thin air, accelerating to well over even a military Bullhead's top speed heading southward and out of range of their AA batteries.

The radio squawked as the operators at the black site began demanding identification, and I shut it off, dropping as low as I dared and coaxing more speed out of the craft as I approached what I figured to be the minimum range to slip into their radar blind spot. As soon as I was, I reached out and flipped off the Bullhead's transponder and IFF, then turned on the ECM suite, effectively going dark to local radar—at least, I hoped. There was no real way to tell until they started firing on me. I sat back and watched my map, throttling down to ¾ throttle, wanting to make at least fifty miles before making my turn off this course but not wanting to damage the engines running them at full speed for too long. Text in my field of vision caught my eye momentarily, and I took a moment to read it before going back to my map.

All hardware checks OK.

Automatic file system repair failed: I/O error.

Attempting to load personality matrix...

Loading COMBAT_READY.rpm. ~$.FAIL.

~sudo fsck /dev/penny
Something brushed against my Perception and detection skills and I frowned, looking up from the map towards the clouds ahead of me. Great, black clouds covered the sky to the south, and I frowned in thought before checking the time on my HUD. ‘It's a little early for the storm to be here, isn't it?’

Movement caught my eye and my glasses zoomed in, and suddenly I realized what it was that had set off my senses. There were clouds ahead, alright. Clouds of airborne grimm so thick I had mistaken them for actual cloud cover, blotting out the sun as they moved north and out of the path of the storm. Flying grimm of all size and description filled the air—some I had seen or at least heard of, others I had not. Detect Bloodlust leveled as I drew nearer, showing that those grimm in the lead had seen me and taken an interest. Narrowing my eyes, I pulled back on the stick, pushing to gain altitude. A look out the cockpit showed a significant number of grimm breaking off from the front of the mob to give chase. “Oh for fuck sake,” I growled, taking the throttle in hand again, bringing the craft up to what was known as military speed: maximum recommended engine output plus ten percent, essentially ignoring any safety cutout, governor, or rev limiter put in place to prevent damage to the engine.

I put the Bullhead into a steep climb, watching my radar as the grimm followed but lost ground. There was a problem, however, which I noticed as soon as I leveled off at Angels Fifteen—while an entire cloud of the smaller airborne grimm had driven me higher, another group of much larger grimm had ascended ahead of me, and were now descending on my position.

Update complete.

Loading selected matrices… ~$.SUCCESS

Merging selected matrices with COMBAT_READY.rpm…

Merge successful! Renaming new personality matrix…
I blinked away the sudden rush of text, reaching out and arming the Bullhead's nose-mounted .50 caliber machine guns. “Okay, then. Let's clear the road.”

My finger squeezed the trigger built into the stick, the Bullhead's guns tracked my first target and spoke—a discussion consisting of a single word, repeated five hundred and fifty times per minute, at volume. The first target, still a mile out, jerked as what looked like a solid line of red connected the Bullhead and it momentarily, before falling from the sky. Changing targets, I squeezed off a few more rounds—my intent not to destroy every grimm in sight, but to punch a hole big enough to fly through and warn off anything that didn't die from getting too close. I broke into a smirk, sudden exhilaration of a plan actually working running through me before reality decided to interrupt.

Warning alarms began blaring in the cockpit as the grimm closed around me and, in my inexperience with the control scheme, it took me several moments to find their source. The radar/lidar had detected a target lock and missile launch, in spite of the ECM suite being active. In my effort to climb and evade the grimm, I had put myself back on the black site's radar and I was still well within range of their anti-air missiles, and my Bullhead was a much more interesting target than the grimm around me, given that I'd come flying out of their airspace in an obvious attempt to get away. Of course they wouldn't risk drawing the ire of the entire flock by attacking everything coming towards them indiscriminately, but taking out what looked like a Bullhead piloted by someone with a Semblance that let it sneak over their site, which refused to answer hails and had already committed to evasive maneuvers would likely rank as priority number one for them at the moment. I looked like a thief making a mad dash to get away from their facility with ill-gotten goods, after all.

My eyes went a bit wide as I watched the missile track towards my position on my screen. I reached out and slapped the switches for chaff and flares, though I knew it was entirely too late for that. Missiles were much faster than this craft and we were less than a hundred miles out, so the time between launch and intercept was under half a minute—most of which I'd wasted trying to track down the alarm and respond. The dot for the missile and my Bullhead's position indicator suddenly occupied the same space.

“You cockbites.”

My world disappeared in blinding light, baleful heat, and furious sound.
Smoke and shrapnel swirled around me as I stood in the middle of the swiftly falling remains of my stolen Bullhead, the brightly glowing field my my Spinning Mana Shield—now long since renamed to Kaiten—causing the smoke around me to glow faintly. A glance at my MP bar showed my MP at just over 3000—I'd used a fairly large portion breaking into the black site and throwing around high level spells, then eating two vehicles… but my regen rate had mitigated most of that. The missile, on the other hand, had broken both my Mana Shield and my A.T. Field and it was only by dumping mana into the Kaiten that I'd not taken damage to HP. The sound of the explosion had bypassed my shields and left me temporarily stunned and deafened until Gamer's Body had kicked in. I was down to just under twenty percent of my total MP, in a foreign country, and surrounded by a cloud of grimm so thick they blotted out the sun.

“I feel as though I have been denied critical, need-to-know information,” I ground out, one thought standing out as I cast a glance northward, back towards the black site—a fact that hadn't truly registered until now, as mental math underscored the fact. 'Nearly a hundred miles in under 30 seconds. That's around Mach-15. Atlas has hyper-sonic missile technology. Why, why on Monty's green Remnant does Atlas need hyper-sonic missiles?'

That sort of tech was of little use against your average grimm—hell, it wasn't ideal against the big ones, either, unless they were being used to deliver a large payload warhead very quickly. No, they were put to best use exactly as Atlas had just demonstrated—swatting aircraft out of the sky before they could do anything about it. There was a gap there, though—as far as I knew, Atlas didn't have hyper-sonic craft to need missiles fast enough to catch them but the fact that the tech was there, in use, implied that someone did. There were things going on on the wider stage than I knew about, and I'd just gotten a nasty introduction to the effects of one of them. 'Massive troop transports, large numbers of ground-based mechs to act as filler mixed in with regular soldiers, AI, cybernetics, power armor, I can assume large stockpiles of munitions—Dust, in this instance…' Historically, a nation only really started building up certain technologies and resources when they were preparing for a shooting war or some other drawn out, large-scale conflict. Atlas was preparing for a shooting war.
There was no time to put further thought into it at the moment, however—I had to extricate myself from the current mess first. I dropped the Kaiten and called up my other shields, knowing this moment of respite wouldn't last much longer—as soon as the smoke cleared, the grimm would be on me. First things first—I was too low on mana for comfort. Opening my Inventory, I selected a mana potion, popped the stopper and downed the blueberry tasting potion in one shot. Immediately, my mana regeneration rate shot up and I gained an instant shot of MP straight to the mana bar—going from 3000-odd to over 8000. Not full, but it would give me options. There was a problem, however. As with all good things, there were apparently limits. After downing the mana potion, the first I’d ever used here in Remnant, my Semblance popped up a warning that consuming more than one in an eight hour period could be dangerous. In other words, whatever I was going to do would have to be done without the aid of another mana potion.

‘Okay, I need a plan… Plan A, as in ‘Avoid the enemy.’ Fuck it, let's go the cheap route,’ I thought, reaching for Create ID, intending to create a small bubble around myself and descend. To my absolute surprise, the skill failed to engage and a warning message popped up.

**Warning. Local Spirit Density combined with area level are above recommended safe levels. Empty Instant Dungeons have become temporarily unavailable. Creating an Instant Dungeon will summon a boss or multiple boss-level monsters until local Spirit Density decreases and you will be unable to leave the ID until the bosses are defeated.**

Unlike **Normal Mode** Instant Dungeons, where the player is rendered unconscious and ejected from the ID upon being reduced to 1 HP, in **Challenge Mode**, the player is capable of being reduced to 0 HP, which will result in permanent death.

Would you still like to open a Challenge Mode Instant Dungeon?

I grimaced, shaking my head and swiftly dismissing the message while a fast check of my map confirmed that the entire area was now so dark a red it looked black. If light red, almost pink areas had produced hundreds of mobs around my level and the occasional rare boss, then going into an ID here was suicide. In fact, it was high enough that, as I watched, I noticed several grimm simply drip into being like beads of moisture collecting on glass to form a larger drop. Grimm weren't simply moving with this thing, they were spawning in its path. That had some pretty disturbing implications in and of itself—namely, that even if an area was cleared of grimm and Sanctified, it may still be possible for some things to breach those protections and for new grimm to spawn. I would have to research more to see some more fine details on how Sanctification worked before I made a call one way or another on that.

‘Spirit density wasn't anywhere near this high when I got here which means it changed, and that it can change. Maybe it's like tides, or winds, and it's being pushed ahead of the storm? Is that why my
ID around the black site wouldn't move or resize when I tried to leave? Creating an ID is out, so go invisible and maybe I can descend to the ground, under the trees, and hoof it to the other side of this flock of grimm. Alternately, if that doesn't work, move on to Plan B—as in 'Be somewhere else.' I can try using Air Walk and Flash Step, cutting down whatever gets in my way, and try to force my way through them and outrun them.

Throwing on Invisibility, I dropped Air Walk and allowed myself to fall, dropping through the smoke and hoping nothing noticed me on the way down. Those hopes were dashed like they'd hit the ground below as I caught sight of what was coming up from beneath me—the portion of the flock that had initially chased me upwards had not given up the chase. Even if they couldn't see me, I would never be able to avoid them all, and once I hit one they would all be on me once they figured out I was there. Likewise, the flock covered enough space that I'd never get clear in time if I did decide to run. A storm of small pinions thrown from above and below hailed off my shield, highlighting my position for a moment, making Invisibility all but useless, and made my decision for me as it seemed that even if they couldn't see me they could sense me somehow.

'Looks like there's no getting out of fighting. Shit. Okay, fight tactically.'

Recasting Air Walk, I charged a Powered Leap and jumped. At the apex of my jump, I took off running away from both parts of the flock before stepping into a Flash Step and gaining some distance, timing it so I could Leap, run, and Step to maintain momentum while gaining altitude and distance on them. My plan was pretty simple, really—before, I'd been in a poor position as I was being flanked on two sides, with enemies above me and below. Now, I was attempting to force both groups to converge, to cover the distance I'd made and climb to match my altitude. If I could get them to cluster up tight enough, I could possibly discourage them from continuing pursuit. Maybe.

Looking back, I found my plan had only partly worked—the upper group of larger enemies had technically been closer, being at a higher altitude, and the lead members of that group were now nearly on top of me, while the lower group of smaller grimm was forced to climb up to my level, but weren't slowed nearly as much as I'd thought they would be. In fact, they looked to have accelerated, spurred to greater speed by the thrill of the chase. Turning around, I Leapt backwards and spun up a volley of AP Rounds, letting them fly towards the lead elements of Griffons—level 40, elites by the silver griffon icon beside their names. I hit the first with Observe just to confirm what I'd already seen and winced—they had all the same skills the Beowolves I'd fought with Ruby had and then some.

Still, AP Round was one of my strongest skills for a reason—it tended to punch straight through grimm like these, to dramatic effect, and did an enormous amount of damage compared to my other skills, due to the number of rounds it produced. I'd spread out my shots to take out or at least damage as many targets as possible, I knew that if I focused fire on any one grimm it was going to go down. The problem there was that I wasn't facing one or two grimm, I was facing an entire goddamn swarm that was growing by the second and focusing on any one enemy would give all the others a chance to attack. I'd aimed my first volley in a spread across the nearest of the first group and, while none of them died, most of them dropped several yards on being hit as rounds tore into and through them, some of those that punched through hitting targets behind them while most missed.
Switching elements, I laughed as another group immediately caught fire and panicked upon being hit, falling out of the sky. ‘Right, burn effects cause panic,’ I mused, before my Perception skills warned me of an attack. I had only an instant to look around and try to figure it out before they were on me. The group from below had caught up in the time I’d taken to stop and fight. A living stream of Nevermores and smaller grimm I couldn’t identify slammed into my Mana Shield, claws and beaks and wings slashing against the barrier—the sheer weight of numbers and repeated impacts throwing me skyward and sending me tumbling. Sky and ground changed places repeatedly, but I only caught brief glimpses of them in between the flood of black and white around me.

My shields broke a moment later as something large smashed through them and crashed into my chest, slamming the air from my lungs and drawing a strangled scream from me as two sets of claws buried themselves in either side of my chest as the Griffon that had hit me bore me down through the storm of smaller grimm, which either scored my armor or scraped off my Aura/Reinforcement combo. I managed to get a hand up in time to block the first strike of its beak, but I felt the bones of my right arm snap and my vision momentarily went white with pain. The Griffon pulled its head back for another attempt and for a moment, the pain in my arm vanished along with the break as Gamer’s Body kicked in while the feeling of its claws digging into my lungs remained—a limitation that was obvious in hindsight. Then again, I’d never anticipated anything punching straight through all my shields. It snapped down again and this time I was ready, my arm already outstretched to intercept it. My arm disappeared down its gullet and I felt the bones break higher. I couldn’t concentrate to call up a technique silently, but then I didn’t need to. “Rasengan,” I ground out, feeling blood bubbling at the corners of my lips, and the upper half of the griffon’s body exploded, showering me in gore.

The griffon’s grip went slack and I kicked what remained of its body away. As soon as the claws left me, Gamer’s Body kicked in and the pain vanished—leaving behind only an echo of the agony that having them inside me had been. I ignored the many notifications about Physical Resistance leveling and instead focused on my HP. ‘It did half my HP in damage, through Aura and Reinforcement. So, anything that penetrates my shields, armor, Aura, and Reinforcement does damage to HP directly—that explains the mechanics of penetrating damage. I can’t get hit like that again.’ Of course, I wasn’t going to get much of a break, as the flock of Nevermores and smaller grimm had turned around and was streaming towards me again, while the larger Griffons were stooping in a dive on my position, and I had no doubt they intended to do much the same as the first one. Good news was, they’d finally clustered to my liking and I had an opportunity.

“Fireball,” I growled, sending the spell streaking upwards, where it hit my intended target—not the lead elements, but a Griffon a good twenty meters back from the first, as close to dead center as I could manage. The attack detonated, exploding in their midst. The AOE range on Fireball was thirty meters, spherical—meaning everything within thirty meters of that Griffon got to eat AOE splash damage. It was less damage per enemy than my AP Round was capable of, but every enemy in the range of that AOE took damage—and while none of them died outright, all of them went screaming down towards the ground as they panicked upon being set on fire. Around them, other grimm scattered for a moment, giving me some breathing room.

Calling up my shields again, I cast both my heals on myself, watching my HP shoot back up. Next, I
focused on my buffs. I'd been forced to teach myself how to move and react normally when using the buffs, so that I wouldn't constantly be moving at Haste levels of speed or accidentally breaking things with the boosts from Aura, or Reinforcement. I'd limited myself while using the skills to the point where it was now reflexive to do so. So, I released those limits I'd held myself to—allowing the skills to go back up to their full potential. Before, I'd only upcapped those skills for brief bursts of speed or strength as needed. Now though, I could feel the difference immediately.

I looked around, spotting the grimm regrouping and more from the main flock moving to join them as they sensed the bloodlust building. 'Still got time,' I assessed, turning my focus inward for a moment. I had been loathe to try creating new techniques in battle, because I didn't want to ever have that become a bad habit and I'd rather go into battle with skills I was familiar with, but in this instance I felt it was worth it. I only needed one skill, and I knew which one I wanted—one of the Final Fantasy set I'd yet to get around to making. So, I focused and bent Skill Creation towards creating a new buff. A moment later, I was rewarded with a familiar popup letting me know I'd created the skill Focus, which at the moment would only increase my INT by 25%. I didn't have time to read anything on how the skill grew, but I assumed it was along the lines of the rest of my buffs.

The flock was nearly on top of me by now. Tossing out another Fireball, I dropped into Invisibility and picked my target—a Griffon outside of the exploding AOE. Closing the distance with Flash Step, I spun up a pair of Plasma Blades and drew, aiming at its neck. Stacking bonuses stacked and the Griffon's head parted company from its shoulders in a shower of burned hair and blood. The roar of chirping birds from my blades drowned out the sounds the grimm around me made, drawing their attention my direction—but without being able to see me, they couldn't zero in on my position, and since I had no intention to remain in one place for long it wouldn't matter. Another Step put me above a second Griffon and I repeated the process before moving on to a third and fourth. Landing astride a fifth and decapitating it, I took in my handiwork and almost sighed—for all that I could take out individual targets easily, there were a seemingly limitless number to replace them, and I wasn't making any sort of a dent in their numbers. I was sorely tempted to try using a large scale casting of Bind—I could use Ice to hold them in place since there was no ground or plant life to use up here—but for the fact that I was trying to conserve mana and using Bind on that many creatures at the same time would drain much of what I had left.

I almost didn't hear it over the roar of my blades, but Perception kicking in again gave me the warning I needed. Turning to look up and back, I found another stream of Nevermores bearing down on me. Taking aim and tossing out both Plasma Blades at the stream of enemies in a set of Strike Raids, I followed them with a Fireball. The stream collapsed and, as the swords approached, I grabbed them with Telekinesis, allowing them to orbit me for a moment before I sighted in another target and flung them at a nearby Griffon. The weapons struck, shearing the wings from the grimm and sending it plummeting. Plasma Blades cost too much to keep up full time though, so I allowed the swords to dissipate.

Perception kicked in yet again and I Flash Stepped out of the line of a pair of converging streams of Nevermores. Turning back to look at them, I frowned as the streams slammed into each other and a sphere of concentrated darkness began to form—more seemingly squeezed out of the air itself in drops that looked suspiciously like grimm blood. “The hell?” I wondered as more and more streams...
streaked in and slammed into the sphere, which began to solidify and leak bloodlust. All sorts of warning bells went off in my head as I recognized it for what it was—a boss forming.

Thinking quickly, I spotted another Griffon nearby, heading away from the sphere as fast as its wings could carry it—in fact, all of the Griffons were, as if some animal instinct were telling them a larger predator was coming. Sighting it in, I fired my line launcher and reeled myself in. Slapping it with Dominate, I settled down on its back and ordered it to continue moving away while I turned back to watch, tossing a Fireball over my shoulder at the forming sphere as a matter of course—and I was entirely unsurprised when the spell did exactly fuck all to the sphere itself, while temporarily destroying or setting fire to a few of the grimm streaking into it.

I didn't bother to count the number of Nevermores that disappeared into the black sphere, which had begun to deform into more of an oblong egg shape—it didn't really matter. All that mattered at the moment was getting the hell away from the thing. I had absolutely no desire to fight a boss on my own, especially not one forming outside an Illusion Barrier, where it could chase me down in the real world—hunting one was an entirely different matter from being hunted by one. It didn't seem like that was going to be an option, however, as the 'egg' exploded outwards, an absolutely massive pair of wings unfolding from around a large, narrow body. I was slammed down against my ride as the Griffon I was on was thrown several meters upwards by the force of the air off the boss's wings. As my ride settled down, I managed to get a good look at the boss. 'So, that's a kaiju class grimm,' I mused, wincing as I took in its fifty-foot wingspan. It was larger than I remembered the normal Giant Nevermores being. Then again, it was a boss.

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Level: 50
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I winced, feeling a stab of pain in my brain as I took in its title, noting that the name field was absent, save for what looked like a line struck through the space it should have been. *That can't be good,* I hummed, hitting it with Observe. There was nothing there, save for a single line of eye-stabbing text.

Despite the lack of information, I had two important facts available—its level and the icon beside its level: a Nevermore, in black. I'd never seen one of those in black before, which told me this was a grade or two above what Ruby and I had fought—probably a field raid boss, unless I missed my
guess. Any speculation on that was cut off as a wave of something washed over me as it opened its eyes—four huge, luminous red eyes, two on either side of its head stacked vertically and slightly offset, the higher set slightly further out than the lower set. I could tell the exact moment they focused on me—as my Invisibility failed entirely. “Shit,” I grunted, urging my mount to move faster. I swiftly realized that was futile as the nameless Nevermore's wings beat once, twice, bringing it up above my level and sending it hurtling towards my position.

The brief moment of fear I'd felt washed away under the effects of Gamer's Mind and I took stock of my situation. An idea occurred. It was stupid, and desperate, and might not even work but it was the best thing I had at the moment. Turning my Griffon northward, I sighted the Nevermore in and fired off a volley of fire-elemental AP Rounds. The red-tinted spell streaked across the distance between me and it and impacted upon its breast. Looking at its health bar, I could see I'd done damage, but not much—about one percent or so—and the Burn effect hadn't taken. Still, I had pissed it off—as evidenced by the Nevermore opening its massive beak and loosing a sound my brain couldn't quite interpret. It was a roar, and a screech, and a word all at the same time and the force of the attack slammed into my shields and I barely kept me and my unwilling mount in the air, as around us, other Griffons fell.

Recasting my shields, I began spamming AP Round at the Nevermore, cycling through elements to find something that worked. In between castings, I threw out other spells to see what would stick. After trying for Confuse and getting a failure notice, I made a judgment call that it had high enough mental resists that I wasn't going to just put it to Sleep or Dominate it. Silence and Slow were likewise ineffective, telling me that Blind might be as well. I was getting closer to my destination, but I still had to buy a few minutes, and the damn thing was gaining fast. Going over my options, I spotted a few more Griffons and began casting Charm. Immediately, they peeled off from the main group and powered towards the boss.

The Nevermore ignored them, until the first Griffon stooped and slammed its claws and beak into the boss's masked face, clawing and pecking at the eyes on the left side of its face. Almost faster than I could track, the Nevermore shifted its head, opened its beak, and brought it down on the Griffon—cleanly bisecting it, swallowing half of it before snapping up the other half and swallowing that as well. Its upper left eye was a ruin of gore, but with three more it didn't exactly seem bothered and, as the other Griffons neared, it pulled back into a hover for just long enough to snap each up whole before continuing its pursuit. Below me, I caught sight of my target and grinned. Coaxing my mount on, I turned to throw another AP Round at the Nevermore, only to find it doing something new. New typically meaning bad, I tensed and prepared to evade.

Sucking in huge gulps of air, I watched as the Nevermore's chest expanded to two, then three times its original width before, with another of those sounds my brain didn't want to acknowledge, it spoke—and vomited a stream of black at me. I Leapt, not a moment too soon as my mount evaporated in a mist of black gore. The crack! of something supersonic passing by rocked my ears for a moment before the 'stream' broke apart—into hundreds of smaller Nevermores, which immediately turned and spread their wings, flapping at the same time and throwing a storm of black feathers at me. I Flash Stepped in an effort to avoid it, but many of the feathers punched through my shield and, when I dropped out of Flash Step, I found my armor had been turned into a pincushion. I swept most of the
feathers from my armor where I could reach quickly and took off at my fastest pace.

More feathers cut the air around me, some striking my shields and bouncing off as I closed range with my destination. Behind me, the Nevermore was gaining, and I could feel the steady thump of its wing beats on the air. 'Not going to make it. I need a distraction, something to slow it down,' I decided. Remembering how it had reacted to the Griffons, I quickly sighted one in and snared it with my line launcher, slapping it with Dominate as I got close and ordering it to turn around towards the nameless Nevermore. Digging into my Inventory, I dug out a pair of items and a few feet of paracord—specifically, a grenade that had come from Roman's stash and a grade 6 Dust crystal: Electric Blue. Tying the crystal to the grenade, I then looped the rest of the paracord under the Griffon's neck and tied it tight. Taking hold of the pin, I crouched on the Griffon's back and waited.

Seeing me closing distance with it, the nameless Nevermore poured on the speed and, as I neared, opened its maw wide and jerked its head forward. I Flash Stepped, taking the grenade pin with me, as the Nevermore swallowed the Griffon I'd been riding whole. Summoning up a pair of Plasma Blades, I touched down on the Nevermore's back and stuck, then began running over the bony armor plating there, counting down from five in my head. As I neared its upper back, I flung both Plasma Blades in a pair of Strike Raids, where both stuck just towards the inside of the avian's wings. I hit 'three' and Leapt, and not a moment too soon as the air suddenly grew heavy with the smell of ozone and burning flesh and I heard a great zap! behind me and the hairs on my arms and the back of my neck stood up.

Looking back, I saw the boss was locked in a rictus of silent agony as its muscles locked and its giant wings stopped beating—and, more importantly, it began to fall. “It's not the voltage that kills, it's the amps!” I taunted it, chuckling as I took off running again. That little trick of physics hadn't killed it, but it had sure as shit done more to hurt it than anything I had thrown at it—the Nevermore was down by a quarter of its HP, at least. Hitting it from the inside must have counted as a critical—which made sense, biologically speaking. Armor was meant to protect from external threats, and even if grimm didn't share much in the way of biology with living creatures, odds were good that was one of the few traits they did share.

I had hoped merely to lock its flight muscles—use the charge of my Plasma Blades to direct the current of the exploding Dust crystal inside of it through the grimm to those two swords, hopefully resulting in some arcing between them and some locked muscles, causing it to fall long enough for me to gain some distance away from it and closer to my destination. I suppose I hadn't counted on just how powerful Dust crystals were—which made me wonder why the effects from the grade 9 crystals in my swords wasn't nearly so spectacular. I supposed it could be because they were in the weapons' power slots and not being used as ammunition, but I didn't really have time to figure it out at the moment.

'That trick isn't going to work twice,' I decided, as the sound of the Nevermore's flapping reached my ears again, followed a moment later by a bone-rattling screech of rage. 'Yeah, I think that pissed it off.'
Suddenly, the ground below me cleared out, trees disappearing in a large circle and I stopped, realizing I'd made it. Sighting in another Griffon, I took it over and began forcing it to climb. Below me, the nameless Nevermore reacted aggressively, rapidly catching up as it poured on speed. A few seconds later, the first red tracer rounds caught my eye and I laughed as I heard the Nevermore below me shriek in outrage as, below us, the black site opened up on the largest threat in the area.

Whereas before, they had been content to leave the massive grimm the hell alone because it had been outside the range of everything but their missiles, I'd forced it to follow me into their airspace and they couldn't ignore it as close as it was now. If it stuck around, it would eventually turn its attention to them, and self-preservation was a hell of a motivator. Explosions rocked the air as rockets streaked up from the base and slammed into the Nevermore—apparently, they were too close to use the larger missiles like they'd used against my Bullhead. A glance back, however, showed it was still in pursuit. Its three red eyes met mine and I saw it there—a bottomless rage and hunger, driven by a cruel intellect intent on seeing me broken and devoured. Not liking the look in its eye, I ordered my Griffon to pull back into a roll, then stoop into a dive.

The Nevermore's chest expanded, but it was going for a quick burst as opposed to the larger stream it'd used before, as it released its attack immediately. I pushed off the Griffon as it disintegrated below me, my wingsuit catching air for a moment as I went into a dive straight for the Nevermore. As I neared, I reached forward with my left arm and took aim, my line launcher striking just above its ruined eye, digging into the flesh just under the mask. I allowed the glide wing on my left to collapse while leaving the right open for a moment and pulled the line taunt before releasing the right wing, which had the effect of slamming me around the Nevermore. As I went over its back, I disengaged the line launcher. “Flash Freeze,” I chanted, followed by a second, third and fourth. All of the attacks streaked in towards the joints of its right wing—I only needed to disable one of them to cause it to fall and I'd already proven that even with the level disparity, it wasn't immune to certain hard facts of reality. The first attack struck and I could see the wing go stiff for a moment before the second struck, and the joint froze over. Mass, wind, and velocity did the rest of the work for me and I heard a massive cracking snap, even over the sound of machine guns below, as the Nevermore's wing joint broke and it began falling in a spiral towards the ground.

I was forced to jink to one side as a stream of rounds abruptly shifted their focus and punched a hole through the side of my shield. I caught sight of movement below, my glasses zooming in on some sort of panels spread evenly over the base slid open and recessed weapons moved up to lock into place. ‘What the hell are those?’ I had a moment to wonder, before they opened up as one, more than one of them targeting me once again—telling me they'd figured out what I'd done as far as luring the boss there and weren't too happy about it. Likely, they figured since the thing seemed to have a special hate-on for me, that taking out the focus of its agitation would either cause it to leave or leave it distracted long enough for them to finish it off. Well, screw that. I wasn't sitting around up here long enough to get turned into a fine red mist.

A combination of Air Walk and Powered Leap had me on the ground first, in time to watch the massive beast fall from the sky while still taking damage from the black site's AA batteries as it had come too close for rockets. It struck the ground on its injured wing between the second and third
barriers. I winced as an entire section of the mine field below it exploded into shrapnel and grimm parts, dust and smoke temporarily covering the area. I knew better than to think it was dead—I hadn't gotten any EXP, nor had the red dot on my minimap disappeared.

A second later, the air was rent by the loudest screech yet, and the smoke around it was blown away from the sheer force of the sound. The nameless had rolled over onto its feet. Its right wing was missing entirely and black grimm blood dripped from its right side, most of which was ruined, likely from the mines. Its beak was cracked and chipped, and its mask had been shattered almost completely—only a section on the left side of its face remained. In addition, the eyes on the damaged side of its face were simply gone, leaving it with only its bottom left eye—which immediately focused its baleful gaze on me. A glance at its HP bar showed it to have a little more than a tenth of its health left—which would be plenty enough to do me in, even if it had been weakened.

Pulling back its left wing, the nameless Nevermore flapped it in my direction. The concussive wave of air that picked me up and threw me into the tree line—where I hit a tree hard enough to blow through it and into the one behind that, destroying my shields in the process—was what saved my life. My eyes took a second to refocus as I picked myself up and caught sight of the small forest of pinions the Nevermore had left where I'd been standing—each taller and wider than I was. Pulling its wing in tight against its body for balance, it hopped forward and tore through one fence before it began hopping bird-like through the space between fences. Behind and in front of it, machine guns opened up on it, causing it to jerk minutely as it was riddled with more bullets. Shifting its one-eyed gaze, the Nevermore inhaled and breathed out a stream of smaller members of its kind, obliterating first one machine gun emplacement and then another, repeating the process until no more were left on that side to fire on it while the smaller members of its kind that it had created swarmed over the top of the facility and began harassing who or whatever had been inside the walls but outside of the facility itself.

I hadn't been idle while it was otherwise occupied. Around me, several pieces of iron bar—rebar, specifically—floated in the hold of my Telekinesis. Digging out another grade 6 electric blue crystal, along with the pistol strapped at my side, I locked eyes with the Nevermore for a moment before sending the rebar flying downrange. A few pieces missed, but most of them embedded themselves in its chest. Individually, none of those pieces of rebar were long enough to kill it—but that wasn't what I was after. As if sensing my intent, the Nevermore's eye narrowed and it shifted its good wing into position to use as a shield the moment I flung the Dust crystal at it. Bringing the longslide up, I took aim and fired. The crystal exploded just shy of the Nevermore's wing. Unfortunately for it, I'd planned ahead. Instead of exploding into AOE splash damage, the arcs of electricity were drawn to the rebar sticking out of its chest, through its wing and down through its body to ground, in a repeat of what I'd done to it earlier. This attack didn't do nearly as much damage, certainly not enough to finish it off, but that wasn't my intent. I'd wanted to distract it and hopefully stun it long enough to enact phase two.

'Now!' I sent, at the same time casting, “Bind!” Ice and earth shot up from the ground, stabbing into its feet, circling the Nevermore's ankles, and reaching up as far as its lower body. A moment later, a dark form streaked across the space between me and the Nevermore, through the hole I'd taken the
time to tear in the first fence. Nearly two hundred pounds of great cat slammed into the Nevermore's shielding wing and proceeded to climb, claws digging in as Sanguine scrambled up the numb wing, crested the top, and leaped from the Nevermore's blind spot onto its ruined shoulder, around the back of its neck, before pouncing on her intended target—the Nevermore's remaining eye. Front claws dug into the flesh above the eye under the cracked mask while back claws dug into the eye itself, and like any cat with prey, she kicked—leaving behind a ruin of blood and gore.

The Nevermore shook its head, slinging Sanguine off to land in a roll on the ground at its side. Bounding back to her feet, the spirit streaked around behind the Nevermore and out of my sight. I was more preoccupied with the Nevermore itself at that point, as it regained muscle control and began flapping its one good wing madly, spraying pinions everywhere. I was lucky enough to be in the tree line and shielded from the wind this time. My luck ran out as a sound like cracking glass reached my ears, sudden pain flared in my chest, and I felt like a bus had slammed into my back as my vision swam. Looking down, I found one of those me-sized pinions buried in my gut, pinning me to a pine tree. “F-fu—,” I coughed blood, worry flooding me as my eyes tracked to my HP bar, where about 80% of my HP was just gone and the rest was quickly bleeding out.

I tried grabbing the pinion, but for some reason my arms felt weak and heavy, and I couldn't feel anything below the point where it'd pinned me to a tree—everything below that was completely non-responsive. 'Spine severed, at least one lung ruined and the other probably punctured, didn't get me in the heart but close enough, bleeding out,' I assessed quickly, somehow coldly dispassionate about that as the worry dissipated. They were simply facts—status effects I'd need to deal with before I could heal myself and finish this fight.

I couldn't speak to call it up, but I manged to pull up my Inventory with the proper focus command. Reaching in, I dug out a couple of HP potions. Popping the top on one, I attempted to drink only to nearly drown myself, most of the potion getting coughed back up in an example of real world physics and biology imposing itself in unwanted ways on my video game Semblance granted body—you couldn't really drink with a throat full of blood, after all. I was about to try yanking the pinion out with Telekinesis and trying again when movement caught my eye, drawing my attention to my HUD.

*Executing am_i_a_real_girl*rpm.*

Green light swirled at my side and, a moment later, I heard a familiar voice. “Oh my! Jaune, are you okay?! I'll help!”

Pain twinged in my chest as Penny took hold of the pinion and yanked it out none too gently and dropped it to the side. I fell flat on my face in the snow, only to find myself being rolled over and pulled into a seated position a moment later. Gamer's Body kicked in and my chest spasmed. I turned on my side and coughed up blood and wasted potion as I felt a hand rubbing my back. Quickly grabbing the other potion, I downed it and groaned in relief as the phantom pains vanished and my
HP bar began climbing. Casting my heals, I allowed the shorter gynoid to help me to my feet.

“You just wait right here a minute,” Penny beamed. “I’ll be riïight back.” Something in the way her eyes narrowed in visible anger clued me in to the fact that while canon Penny may have been a bit protective of her friends, this one seemed downright vindictive by comparison.

I wondered for a moment why there hadn't been a follow-up attack where the giant bird took advantage of my situation, but I got my answer when I stumbled out to the edge of the tree-line and caught sight of the Nevermore. Sanguine was latched onto its neck, currently digging out a trench while she held on for dear life as the Nevermore attempted and failed to shake her off again. She hit paydirt a moment later and blood began spewing out of the Nevermore's wound like it'd come from a high-pressure hose.

“Here kitty, kitty, kitty,” Penny called and, to my amusement, the great cat slipped down the Nevermore and stalked quickly over to the gynoid. Its eyes may have been gone, but nothing was wrong with its hearing as the Nevermore shifted its head to focus on Penny, opened its beak, and let out a squawk of rage before it began inhaling again, damaged ribs creaking as its chest swelled. It had to know that its special attack would likely kill it at this point—meaning, if it was as smart as I thought it was, then this was to be a suicide attack. It never got the chance to try.

“I think,” Penny murmured, the backpack on her back opening up as wire controlled swords spilled out of it. Shifting in the air, they folded down and moved in front of the gynoid, where a green glow began to build as the energy weapon spun up. “We've heard about enough out of you!”

A beam of green death momentarily connected the gynoid's weapon and the Nevermore, its focus shifting swiftly down along the weakened boss's body. Blood and bits of gore exploded outwards as everything the beam struck either burned or flash boiled depending on whether it was solid or liquid, two halves of the boss splitting down the middle along the laser's path and falling into a messy heap. I blinked at the EXP and Spirit gain—a smooth 100k experience, bumping me from mid-level 25 to level 28, almost 29. Though I felt a bit better and was back up to full HP, I was still mentally wiped and sore with phantom aches in places. That... that's just not fair. I want a giant frickin' laser beam. Question is, did she start out at a higher level than me or is it because she's 'epic level' gear? Eh, figure it out later. Also, another thing to add to the list of weapon tech Atlas has: lasers. How long before they figure out a working Starwars program, I wonder, and get laser weapons into orbit?’

There was a sound of something crumbling and I winced as one of the guard towers and part of the wall in the beam's path behind the Nevermore collapsed. Penny turned and trekked happily back across the black blood tainted snow, beaming a smile up at me. “Sorry about the mess. You installed the good stuff. I don't know my own strength yet,” she chuckled, one hand trailing up to rub at the back of her orange hair as she scuffed the toe of one shoe in the ground in front of her.
'Oh, right,' I hummed, remembering the three grade 9 crystals I'd installed before activating her. "It's fine, Penny. Stay here a minute, would you?" I asked, and she nodded.

Sighing, I pushed off the tree I'd been leaning on and made my way over to where the boss was swiftly dissolving. Stepping into the mess, I found a clear spot in the middle with a pile of drops. Picking them up with Telekinesis, I funneled them into my Inventory. I stored over 500kL, a small mountain of red potions, an elixir, and a pile of grimm-related crafting ingredients. In addition, there were three items that I quickly stashed without bothering to look at—though, I caught a glimpse that set my curiosity to itching and my Semblance popped up a notification about a quest starting that I would have to look into later—I could look at them after we got away from the black site, which had begun scrambling men and aircraft. They had already noticed me, so I hurriedly made my way back towards the tree-line. Dismissing Sanguine, I mentally issued Penny the same command to dismiss and she turned and shot me an amused look that seemed to say 'are you kidding?'

"I'm sorry Jaune, but I'm not going anywhere until you're back in Vale at the very least," she denied, and I rolled my eyes. I suppose I shouldn't be too terrible surprised that, despite technically being a piece of equipment, the girl had her own will and wasn't simply subordinate to my own will. It was the nice sort of surprise I could live with.

"Fine," I grunted, hopping into the treetops. I hit us both with Invisibility and we made our way away from the black site. The wave of grimm above us was beginning to thin, but I hadn't found a place to summon up a Bullhead yet. Grumbling a curse to myself, I sighted down a Griffon and snagged it with my line launcher, repeating the process from before followed by hitting another nearby Griffon with Dominate as well and sending it down to pick up Penny. Thankfully, the grimm around us paid us no mind—seemingly disinclined to engage with us, given the wide berth they were giving us as we flew on. Once we were both up high enough for my liking and close enough, I wrapped us both in wind and gravity to speed our passage and leaned forward against the beast under me to rest and focus on Meditation for a while. I was tired—damnably so—and I ached in places, phantom pains from my earlier wounds. I turned us westward, following my waypoint, and allowed my eyes to slip closed.

I jerked awake and looked around, shivering as I did. It was dark and the stars were covered by a thick blanket of clouds. Something cold and hard slapped my face and I winced, reaching up and rubbing at the sting, only for it to be followed by another, and another. 'Hail?' I wondered, catching sight of one of the small balls of ice as it stuck to my armor. The hail swiftly picked up in intensity and was joined by a downpour of rain. Equipping my glasses, I could just make out the shine of a river below us in the now occasional flash of lightning, so I ordered our mounts to take us down. Once we were nearer the ground, I could see that there was actually a fairly wide bank along this river, which would be a good place to take off from in the Bullhead. Setting us down, we dismounted and killed both of the Griffons.

"You could have woken me," I shot at Penny, somewhat annoyed and still feeling tired."
The girl shot me an amused look. “I tried. You were snoring so loud I could hear you over the wind.”

Grumbling, I summoned up the unarmed Bullhead, knowing it had a full tank of fuel. Pulling up my map, I checked our position and then hummed as I realized something important—the area around us was no longer red-black with Spirit density. It was still a dark red, but not nearly so bad as it had been. Zooming out, I caught sight of the tail end of what looked like a wave of black stretching across the map, moving slowly preceding the same path the storm was following, confirming my suspicions there. The good news was that while that line of denser Spirit may have been long, it wasn't very wide and it didn't extend into the storm itself. It was an interesting phenomenon to study later, at any rate and I had a number of questions needing answers already. Was it a semi-natural phenomenon, caused by wind currents or something similar? Would similar occurrences happen around other 'natural disaster' level events and acts of weather—tornadoes, earth quakes, brush fires and the like? Was this one way grim could cross into the real world without the aid of an Illusion Barrier? I wouldn't be getting any answers any time soon, but my curiosity was piqued. “Come on, we're still a ways out from the quarry.”

Penny followed me inside, taking the co-pilot's seat beside mine. “I can fly, if you'd like to get some more rest,” she suggested.

I yawned and nodded. There were about a million questions I wanted to ask her, but I just didn't have the energy to at the moment. There was one that was pertinent, however. “You can see the waypoint, right?”

“Of course, silly,” she laughed, already starting the Bullhead. “I'm equipped in your ancula slot. Technically, I'm running a minor version of your Semblance—though, it'd be more accurate to say I have user access to your own Semblance and enough privileges to run some of the basic functions, such as UI, mapping, Inventory, and some skills like Drive or Use Computers. Kind of basic stuff. I could do more, but you'd have to give me access.”

“In my what slot?” I grunted, allowing my eyes to slide closed for a moment, before basic necessities reared their heads. “Hold off on that. Stay on the ground and give me a few minutes,” I sighed, pushing myself out of my seat and going outside, flipping my A.T. Field upwards to use as an improvised umbrella. I took care of biological waste needs, washed my hands in the stream, and went back to the Bullhead as the rain began to come down in sheets. Dropping down into my seat, I dug into my Inventory and pulled out a bottle of water and a ration bar. Looking sidelong at Penny, I waved the bar and the water. “You want some?”

Penny shook her head, killing the interior cockpit lights and bringing the Bullhead up into level flight, keeping us low and fast. She wasn't running with exterior lights and there was no real light
from the stars or moon, so I had to assume she had sensors of some sort built in—as if the green glow to her eyes didn't give her away. “I can eat, and I think I will enjoy doing so. I do not require it as often as a human and I do not think I want my first meal to be that.”

I snorted. “I see.” Tearing into the packaging, I bit into the bar and had to agree with the gynoid—it wasn't the best thing I'd ever eaten. I made a mental note to toss some real food into my Inventory, for emergencies. “But you do require it?”

“I have some functional but non-critical biological components that require everything a person would, but since they only make up a small part of my body, I do not require much in the way of food intake, according to my on-board operating manual,” Penny clarified.

So, my Semblance was right in calling her a gynoid and not a robot—she was a cybernetic organism, not a pure machine. That left me wondering what, exactly, was biological on her. I supposed I could ask later. “What about your power source? You were equipped with a grade 4 Electric Blue when I found you. I didn't screw anything up by installing all grade 9s did I?”

“No,” Penny shook her head. “I should be okay for now. My power core is rated for up to grade 8 output, which is what I used against the creature back there. Having a higher grade installed will not hurt anything unless I attempt to draw too much power. However, given that I am connected to your Semblance now and can gain levels independently, I may gain upgrades that allow me to fully utilize them. I am not certain how leveling will work with me, though.”

“We'll have to test that later,” I agreed. Would she simply gain stats? Would my Semblance fabricate new parts? What about maintenance on her current body—would my Semblance take care of all of that, all those things that I figured would need a full lab like the one we’d left? It was something to figure out later—one more item on a growing list of things put off until some nebulous 'later.' Right now, I wanted details on something she'd mentioned earlier. “What's an 'ancula slot?' No, let me rephrase that: I get that it would be an equipment slot for an ancula, but what exactly is an ancula?”

“Well, the word itself derives from Latin. The closest meaning in English would be ‘manservant' for the masculine word anculus or 'maidservant,' for the feminine ‘ancula' or ‘ancilla,’” she explained, and I hummed.

“It's Latin-derived, so… as in 'ancillary,’” I guessed, and she nodded.

“They are related,” she confirmed. “According to your Semblance I am an 'Ancula Myrmidon,' or in other words, a battle servant.”
I rolled my eyes. “You're mixing your Latin with your Greek, there.”

Penny turned an amused look my way for a moment before returning her eyes to the terrain through the cockpit window, somehow seeing straight through the downpour while my own visibility was in the tens of feet at most. “I am not mixing anything—it is your Semblance. I am just telling you what I see when I open my own menus. It is on my character sheet, under Title. I think anything sufficiently advanced, with its own intelligence, would qualify as an ancula. A regular old puppet would not qualify, but an AI…”

“I get it.” Nodding, I finished off the last of my water and ration bar. “That's enough of that for now. Wake me when we get near the quarry, please?”

Penny nodded and I closed my eyes. I was out what felt like no time later, though I never made it completely into sleep. Over the sound of the wind, rain, and the engines, I think I heard… humming. It was soft and feminine, and just on the edge of my hearing. When I next woke, I found Penny removing her hand from my shoulder, where she’d shaken me. “We are a few miles out. There was nowhere to land, so I have put the Bullhead into hover.”

Nodding, I stood and stretched the kinks out, my back giving a satisfying crack. “I'll be back in a few.” Penny raised one dainty orange eyebrow and I rolled my eyes. “I'm fine. I'll be fine.”

“Pardon me if I am overstepping, but you do not look fine,” she denied.

Sighing, I checked to make sure my equipment was secure, that I had ammo, and that my line launcher had a sufficient amount of Dust. “It's just an infiltration. Slip in under Invisibility, drop Cinder's little hack tool on the right terminal, then get out. Easy peasy.”

“If you are certain,” she hedged, and I nodded. “As you wish. I will wait here for you.”

Opening the Bullhead's side door, I dropped out of the cabin and into the top of a tree. Moving swiftly through the forest, I found the quarry and looked it over, allowing my glasses to tag everything of relevance. A faint glow caught my eye and I focused on a building on the far end of the compound, marked 'Storage.' I couldn't see much of anything from here, aside from the glow, but that was enough. Smirking, I wrapped myself in Invisibility and made my way towards the main office. The office was deserted, but the door was alarmed. With the line of Spirit preceding the storm cleared out now, I wasn't without the ability to use IDs any more so I created a small ID and cut my way inside, then destroyed it. Waking the proper terminal from sleep, I dropped the queen piece on the glowing interface surface. Immediately, a digital representation of the same piece flashed on the screen. Below it, a progress bar propagated and began filling.
Looking around the office, I spotted a safe in the back. Stretching out Telekinesis, I focused down into the mechanism of the lock itself, finding where the tumblers would align and moving things around until everything clicked into place. Inside was a printed out hard copy of what looked like a manifest, along with a set of keys. Pocketing the keys, I picked up the manifest and began to read. I whistled quietly at what I found there. Tons, as in literal tons, of what was known as raw Dust in all colors and grades—boxed into shipping containers and prepared for transport to processing facilities, where they would be cut or ground down into their ground and 'uncut' forms.

Yeah, despite its name, 'uncut' Dust was in fact cut off of a larger chunk of raw—or unshaped, or unprocessed depending on how one wanted to call it—Dust and cut down to specific sizes, weights, and shapes, with the leftover fragments typically being ground up into ground Dust or thrown together into a pile of like Dust crystals and melted down into Dust rounds. Waste not, want not after all. The difference between cut and uncut Dust was that so-called uncut Dust crystals were used to create either cut Dust crystals or Dust rounds—cut Dust crystals typically going in settings for armor, small devices, or any sort of clothing used for Dust casting. As far as my Semblance was concerned, however, the only difference between the two was what size/shape slot they would fit in, potential energy output, and potential duration for output. I didn't have any slots on any of my gear for cut crystals yet, but I was going to remedy that soon—especially after the farce that was today.

Behind me, the terminal chimed and I looked to find the progress bar full. Swiping the piece off the terminal interface, I powered the machine down and left the office the same way I'd gotten in. Making my way to the storage building, I climbed up to the roof level and found the skylight there, having a peek inside for myself. Containers filled with Dust covered the floor of the building in nice, neat little rows. What stood out, however, was the security. Security had been sparse outside. Inside, however, I counted well over thirty armed men along with a contingent of those prototype knights a hundred strong lining the walls. Most of the men seemed to be clustered near one container in particular—the source of the glow I'd seen earlier, as what looked like a scientist type had some sort of equipment set up before the open door to the container and appeared to be monitoring what looked like some sort of energy output.

Unable to resist sneaking a peek for myself, I opened up an ID on top of the skylight, destroyed the skylight and jumped inside, then collapsed the ID behind me—allowing me to fall quietly to the floor without anyone on this side of things being any the wiser. Making my way over to the scientist type, I studied the display over his shoulder. 'Prismatic Dust Core? Sounds important. …And expensive.'

Humming quietly, I shrugged and moved to get a look at the contents of the container. Reaching up, I pulled off my glasses as I took in the sight before me. Inside the box, a Dust crystal floated on its own. I would have estimated it as being about that of a beach ball… until it shrank down to the size of a bowling ball a moment later, then expanded to take up much of the container in the next moment. It had no shape, as it shifted randomly between various geometric patterns, even fractal shapes. The light it produced was almost white, and yet it was also every color of the Dust spectrum, both individually and all at once. Quite honestly, it hurt to look at, in much the same way reading corrupted information hurt my brain. Tensing preemptively, I hit it with Observe. Thankfully, the information there was not corrupt, though it was vague. The description simply read: Prismatic Dust
Core, Grade ???.

That had disturbing implications all by itself. I'd assumed the grades of Dust went up to nine—but this pretty much said they could go higher. The question then was, how high? Each level of Dust was geometrically greater on the power and effect scale than the level below it—likely one of the myriad of reasons why Hunters had to be licensed to buy certain grades of Dust and why they didn't hand out the good stuff to rookie kids. The difference between a grade 1 and grade 2 was noticeable. The difference between a grade 8 and a grade 9 was like comparing the difference between a firecracker and a stick of dynamite, based on what I'd read. Would a grade 10 be in the kiloton range of yield? A grade 11 in the megaton range? What would happen if someone accidentally set off a Dust vein? I didn't even want to know the answer.

More disturbing than its general shifting formlessness and unknown, but presumably god-awfully high grade, was the fact that I could feel it. Something, some heretofore unused aspect of my general Use Dust skill practically sang in its presence. And I didn't just detect its presence—it felt like it was literally calling to me. I didn't think I could use it, yet, but I wanted it—more than that, I felt that I needed it for something. I knew it wasn't a mental effect, since Gamer's Mind hadn't so much as twitched—which meant either I was just being greedy, or more likely, gamer instincts built up over a couple of decades of gaming were telling me I was looking at a key item. Casting a quick look around, I opened up an ID around the box and stepped inside, where I was met with an inexact duplicate of what I had seen outside. That's... strange,' I thought, looking it over. It looked identical to the original but it didn't feel identical. It felt somehow more. 'Like it... Like it has Spirit of its own,' I realized.

Shaking my head, I opened my Inventory and grabbed it with Telekinesis—or, at least I tried to. My Telekinesis slipped right off it, and I frowned. “Well, that's not ominous at all.” I grumbled. Reaching out, I carefully touched the crystal's surface, and it immediately froze—all external movement ceased, though I could see it still shifting shape internally through its translucent exterior, and light still played off its surface. Moving to find a way to get a decent grip on it, I blinked as the whole thing shrank down to a perfect sphere the size of a golf ball in the palm of my hand. Carefully, I pushed it into my Inventory window and released it. Nothing more happened. No notices, no popups, nothing. It simply sat there, taking up a single Inventory slot. I rolled my eyes. “That was anti-climactic. Stupid thing got me all worked up over nothing.”

With a sigh of annoyance, I moved out of my ID and collapsed it behind me. I could still hear the siren-song of the original crystal, but with one already in my Inventory, it was much lessened. Turning my back on it, I debated the merits of tearing into a box of unprocessed Dust under an ID, before deciding against it. I had no way of knowing how volatile it was, for one. For two, I had no way or knowledge of how to process it myself. Instead, I made my way to the door between two of the inactive Knights and left by ID, before trekking my way back across the quarry, through the woods, to where I found the Bullhead still hovering. Pulling myself up by line launcher, the door opened long enough for me to slip inside before closing again, and we were in motion before I'd gotten up to the cockpit.
“How did it go?” Penny asked, turning to regard my soaked, muddied form.

Before I sat down and ruined the seat, I equipped the fresh copy of my Shiro outfit. It did absolutely nothing about drying my wet skin and hair, but at least the clothes weren't soaked through and partly covered in mud or grimm bits that hadn't evaporated. The moisture I took care of with some Water elemental Aura, wicking it away from my body and onto the floor. Dropping down into the leather seat, I loosed a quiet sigh and buckled myself in. “Got the data, and a little something extra. Ever heard of a Dust Core?”

“How… Nope,” Penny denied, shaking her head. “Where to?”

Pulling up my map, I looked over the terrain we'd already passed over before selecting a straight stretch of road to the south, in the middle of nowhere between two towns and setting a waypoint. “There. Then we'll swap over to the Duster. Once we've swapped over, we've got a few hours of flight time before we get to Vytal, where we can stretch our legs and get something to eat, and then it's off to Vale.” Frowning, I shot her a glance as a thought occurred. “Though, we may have a problem. You've got kind of a distinctive look, there.”

Putting a finger up to her lips and tilting her head, Penny hummed, and I had to wonder if it was an affectation or genuine—after all, being an AI running on a mobile platform, surely she could process thoughts and decisions hundreds, if not thousands of times faster than a human mind. It would make sense, though, if she'd been programmed with some basic gestures and mannerisms—like idle animations on a video game character. She shifted her eyes enough to meet mine for a moment and beamed a smile. “Well, you know what that means.” I raised an eyebrow and her smile widened. “Shopping!”

“Sure,” I rolled my eyes. I suppose it wouldn't be too hard to come up with something for her. Some new clothes, maybe some hair dye… She'd said she was running a user session of my Semblance, so theoretically, she may even be able to make use of the inventory and armor system. It was worth looking into. In the meantime, there were other things I should be asking. Leaning back in my seat, I allowed my body to relax and let my eyes drift closed as I slipped half into Meditation. “So, how do you know what you know? From what I understand, the people at the lab wiped your memory prior to General Ironwood showing up.”

“Well,” Penny hemmed, hesitating a moment before she admitted, “You told me. Not in words, obviously. If I had to guess, it was when your Semblance registered me as Soulbound.”

“Makes about as much sense as anything else,” I shrugged. “How much do you know?”
I heard her shift and cracked open one eye to find her looking at me. “About what? You? The situation? The world at large?”

I rolled my eyes. “Little smartass,” I murmured, a small smile spreading on my lips. “How about all of the above, in that order.”

The gynoid hummed quietly. “About you? Little more than a general summary. I know you are not Jaunе Arc, and yet at the same time you are, John. I have a general idea of what you have got planned for the future, and that you know things you should not—but not exactly what you know, though I have to assume that I’m one such example of information you have that you should not. I do not know anything about Remnant that is not in my on-board databases, dictionary, and other resource material—nor do I really know anything about myself, other than that my name is Penny Polendina and the things I have gathered via access to your Semblance. I could connect to the CCT network and explore the internet, but I know you feel that would be a bad idea. What you said about my memories being wiped? I have access to encrypted files on my local storage that look like trash data, but which are not—I think I made a backup copy of my memories. Should I try to decrypt them?”

Turning a look on her, I thought it over a moment before asking, “Do you want to?”

“Y—yes?” she asked, more than answered, as though unsure how I would react to her answer.

There were a few routes I could take here, but really, only one was viable in my opinion. I wanted her to trust me, and that would mean showing her I trusted her as something other than an AI waiting to go rogue. “They’re your files, Penny. I’m not going to tell you you can’t look at them. Just be careful with them. For all you know, they could’ve been planted there and may contain code designed as a kill switch for curious rogue AIs, should you ever decide to disobey,” I pointed out. After all, if someone wanted to make sure an AI they were programming didn’t try to recover its own deleted memories, planting fakes and waiting to see if she accidented herself to death opening them would make for a hell of a loyalty test to ensure she obeyed.

“I will. Thank you, Jaunе. Or John. Which do you prefer?” she asked, and I sighed.

“You know, ‘Jaunе’ has grown on me, and it’s what everyone else uses. You might as well, too,” I chuckled. “Besides, switching back and forth or slipping up would cause problems in the future that I don’t want to deal with.”

Unbuckling, I pushed myself up from my seat. “Wake me when we get there.” I yawned, moving into the back of the Bullhead. Opening my Inventory, I pulled out my sleeping bag and threw it on the floor. Kicking off my boots, I collapsed face first on top of it and let the hum of the engines and
the roar of the wind lull me into the blissful dark.

Once I'd been woken again and we switched to the Duster, the flight passed by in a bit of a blur for me, at least until we got to Vytal and I went about constructing a disguise for Penny. Two things kept playing themselves on repeat in my memory—a Griffon burying its claws in me and being pinned to a tree. Gamer's Mind made sure I wouldn't be going into shock, but it did nothing to stop me from dwelling on it. I had come close to dying—twice, in the span of an hour. It ran through my head as a simple fact: water is wet, fire is hot, I was mortal. Oh, like anyone, I'd lived with the knowledge of my own mortality from the moment I figured it out and had come to grips with it years ago, but not accepted it—never accepted it, because it wasn't something I could accept. Having my nose rubbed in that fact—that even here, with magic and powers only dreamed of where I'd come from I was still just as vulnerable as anyone—really… pissed me off. I was glad, though, in a way—it meant that while Gamer's Mind blunted some things, it couldn't completely screw with my head. I could get truly angry, and likely the rest of the spectrum of human emotion with it. It just wasn't debilitating.

So, instead of simply being lost in anger, I was focused—focused in a way I'd rarely been before. I wanted to enjoy this second chance at life I'd found here in Remnant, and I couldn't do that if I was dead. That lead me to wondering what, exactly, I could do about the situation. As far as preventing my untimely demise by grimm, I could train, obviously. However, now that I really considered it, I didn't particularly feel like keeling over of old age, either. So, I had a new goal, to go along with the first: survive long enough to enjoy the new life I'd been granted and find a way to extend that life indefinitely. Of course, a life without friends and loved ones was a pretty goddamn miserable thing, so I couldn't just find a way to keep myself going and call it a day. I was a caster. I had a Semblance that allowed me to create skills as I needed them, so long as I was strong enough. The solution seemed pretty damn obvious: get strong enough to 'cure' death and age.

That all started as soon as we set foot in Vale again. Well, after I saw the girls and introduced Penny. And explained to Ruby where I'd gone off to and apologized for leaving without saying goodbye. Still, I had spare time to put to use—namely, the time where I'd normally be sleeping. My Semblance negated the need for sleep, to an extent, but not the desire for it. In theory, I had about eight hours extra a day to work on getting stronger, that I hadn't been using. I had never truly put it to the test, however, so this would be a first aside from the occasional all-nighter. No one else could keep that pace, but Penny could. So, that was my plan, once I managed to settle things down after my return.

I'd had a few glaring weaknesses pointed out to me recently, and now I needed to see about rectifying them. First and foremost among them was my physical durability—or, more precisely, my lack thereof. I'd gotten the message after the first near death experience, but having a giant nevermore feather rammed through my guts to pin me to a tree, leaving me mostly helpless to do anything about it had driven the point home. I needed to get stronger. More to the point, I needed to level physical resistance and my shields so that this could never happen again, and if it did, I'd be better able to deal with it. That would be a good first step towards my longterm goals.

It was with that in mind that I recruited Penny to help. As it turned out, all of Penny's weapons were
powered by her internal Dust store—and since those weapons were swords and some sort of laser/beam gun, they didn't run on traditional ammunition. The swords themselves took little energy at all for physical attacks—practically nothing, according to the gynoid. The beam weapons took more, but as Penny had said, I'd given her the good stuff. Ignoring overheating issues, she could have fired a continuous individual beam for years before she ran out of juice—such was the power of a grade 9 crystal being used properly.

So, we trained—though, I don't think most people would call it that. Our training went in phases. The first stage was to open an ID and clear it out, expanding the cleared area around the apartment as we went. The next stage was the most painful—hand to hand martial arts practice, in between allowing Penny to simply wail on me to improve my endurance. All of which was done while under the effects of Gravity Manipulation—not to decrease my weight, but rather the opposite, increasing the weight on my body. As opposed to wearing weighted clothes or working out with weights, doing it that way would give an even distribution of weight across my entire body. The only real issues I could foresee were the effects of a heavy gravity environment on a human body but then, my Gamer's Body wasn't necessarily entirely human any more, and whatever damage was done I could heal.

Good news? It worked, and I gained points in CON and STR in addition to leveling Physical Resistance. Bad news? It hurt. Oh god damn but it hurt. Which was why that phase was in the middle, specifically so I could have a breather afterwards before we moved on to the next area. Phase three involved training my shields by letting Penny burn them down with lasers—all of them, until I ran out of mana and had to sit and meditate to refill it. After which, we would move on to a new area and start all over.

The second glaring weakness I'd noticed was in my movement options. I was fast on the ground, and I could otherwise move well in the city where I had a whole lot of tall buildings to turn into my personal playground, but out in the open I had to rely on Air Walk for the majority of, well, everything if I was above ground level. The skill was useful, but it had its limits. I could only move with a 45 degree inclination or declination, unless I wanted to jump or purposefully fall.

I could use Flash Step and Run, but maneuvering in three dimensions required shifting my body around to create platforms to 'land' on and kick off of with Powered Leap—and while that was amazingly useful over short distances against enemies I intended to fight, it was terrible for long distances against fast enemies I was trying to run the hell away from.

I needed powered flight, desperately. However, I couldn't just create that skill with Skill Creation due to a lack of base stat points in INT, unless I wanted to start dumping saved points into that one stat. Instead, I needed to figure out some way to cheat—to game the system. So, after my bouts with Penny, I spent time testing theory. It was Neo's suggestion that I use Telekinesis that stuck out most, so that was where I focused my efforts—making sure to use the skill as much as possible, in as many ways as possible, to level it quickly to the point where I could even consider making the attempt to abuse it the way I wanted to.

Once I got Telekinesis up to level 10, I began testing. My first few tests were pretty simple affairs, done on a small scale, to at least see if it was possible. First, I created a single flat plane of force, similar to my A.T. Field. After that, I moved on to testing the shape in water to make sure it would retain its form. Once I was certain it would, I began experimenting with different shapes and combinations of shapes in three dimensions—spheres, tubes, eggs, pyramids, and so forth.

My first live test to scale was made in the middle of a long glide, from one of the tallest buildings in downtown Vale. Deploying Telekinesis, I focused on creating a large, triangular plane above me
shaped similarly to a hang glider. The test was both a success and a resounding failure. The construct caught wind and immediately threw my balance off while killing much of my forward air speed, nearly sending me into an uncontrolled tumble for the ground. I'd been expecting that though, so I'd had my line launcher ready and managed to recover quickly. After that, it was back to the drawing board.

Firstly, I needed a shape that would cover the entirety of my body, while still being aerodynamic. That ruled out a bubble or egg and lead to a more tapered shape, more akin to a bullet, stretching from just in front of my head to just beyond my feet. I knew enough about aerodynamics, thanks to my education, a natural curiosity, and my skills to know that I would need some sort of lift surface. I had an entire other world's worth of aviation history to borrow from—or, at least, what I remembered.

A bullet design with short wings at its sides allowed me to glide without the wing-suit, but I quickly noticed the absence of wind inside the construct—I'd sealed it completely, which was a mistake. No wind meant no new breathable air. Making the field porous would be a mistake, so instead I created openings at the nose and tail to allow air to pass through. That still left me with the fact that I was still just gliding with style and had little to no control over the direction I was going. So, focusing on maneuverability first, I worked in areas into the field that would flex and change shape, creating what amounted to flaps.

With gravity manipulation, I was light enough to maneuver, but it was still awkward and without thrust it would continue to be. That in mind, I went to work on the powered part of my flight problem. With wind elemental manipulation, I could easily generate lift and even some thrust, but not in the sort of volume I needed. So, focusing on maneuverability first, I worked in areas into the field that would flex and change shape, creating what amounted to flaps.

My first real success at generating any kind of thrust like I wanted came as sort of an accident. I didn't yet have enough fine control to do what I really wanted—that is, simulate a jet turbine engine using tiny bits of force. Instead, I wound up emulating something more akin to a prop plane or a helicopter, if either of those had mated with a squid and the bastard offspring had made it to adulthood. Reaching out around me with large, shaped blades of force, I could grab air and use it to throw myself forward, essentially swimming through the air. Refining their shape and rotating them allowed me a smoother, more controlled flight, but my speed was still low. In fact, my speed was low enough and the squid construct allowed me enough control at that speed, that I didn't really need the rest of the complicated construct I'd been creating. The bullet shaped streamlining helped, but the wings were all but useless and if I wasn't moving at speed then I didn't really need the outer bullet-shell.

Still, it wasn't anywhere near as fast as I wanted. Both the Duster and the Bullheads could outrun me, and I was nowhere near my top run speed—which I'd finally taken the time to clock, at something like 250mph on a straight shot, using Haste and Flash Step. It would suffice, for the moment, but it looked like I'd hit a major hurdle in the control department—meaning I either needed to level up Telekinesis, or start dumping points in INT, or both if I wanted to truly fly at the speeds I would need to outrun trouble. And if I was going to dump points, then I may as create my own flight skill—and I was still holding out hope that by actually taking the time sitting in Beacon for eight hours a day to study, even if it wasn't necessarily the material they wanted studied, would allow me to gain points in INT. That didn't mean the entire exercise had been useless—far from it. I could now freely maneuver in midair as I saw fit, and combining it with my other movement skills allowed me some options I hadn't had before and a greater ability to dodge attacks while in the air.
My third mistake had been a failure to plan ahead on my part and take advantage of everything available to me. Namely, in this instance, I had been putting off finishing out my list of essential spells—namely, the D&D set. Specifically, buffs. I suppose it was one part wistful thinking and one part hubris, assuming that I'd been thorough enough in my preparation, leveling, and training that I could face what I needed to and run away from what I couldn't kill outright. In another way, I'd... wanted a challenge, as opposed to simply walking up and being able to overkill whatever got in my way. Well, I'd gotten a taste of one, and I didn't like it. At all. My versatility and skill levels created an odd disparity—against other Hunters in my level range, I had enough tricks in my bag that so far I'd yet to fail to come up with something that would allow me to defeat or escape them, and I'd yet to have an excuse to go all out against someone to find out what my limits were there. However, against beings so much more powerful than myself, when most of those tricks—and my favorite ones, no less—failed I came up short. Lethally short. At the moment, I was the epitome of the phrase 'jack of all trades, master of none.'

All I could really do about becoming a master of anything was train—practice, grind, and level until it stopped being an issue. Until then, though, my best bet would be to fill in the holes where I could, abusing the magic systems I knew of to boost my power up far beyond what it should be at this level by using buffs. In other words, more of exactly what I had been doing. Looking at my stats, I hadn't felt I'd truly needed them yet, but level disparity was a bitch and I wasn't keen on falling into that trap again. Though, given what I knew now about the way Aura leveled—at least for me—I suspected others may get a similar boost in power, which would account for different levels in strength in people roughly of the same age and level of training. Aside from that, and I'd been developing bad habits. As with Haste, I'd grown used to holding up the buffs I did have full time and adjusting myself downwards to 'normal,' or close to it. I'd never truly pushed myself to the limit of what I was capable of as things stood—and taking a few cheap shots didn't count.

As far as buffs went, Focus had helped, but there were others I knew of—and what the hell, if I was already on the 'jack of all trades' route, I may as well start filling in my wish list. So, I spent a morning simply going down the list seeing what worked and what didn't. Bull's Strength, Bear's Endurance, Cat's Grace, Owl's Wisdom, Fox's Cunning, and Eagle's Splendor, all came from various incarnations of Dungeons and Dragons and each individually gave me a 20% bonus to six of my seven stats, increasing 1% per level—which, when I did the math on it, sounded about right as far as what the skills had given in their source material. Well, aside from the fact that my skills grew progressively as opposed to having to learn a higher version later. I hadn't yet been able to create one to increase Luck, however, though I didn't mind as I was more focused on stat boosts and defensive spells. And with that in mind, I'd gone out of my way to create Mage Armor as well, granting me another level of magical defense on top of my shields, Reinforcement, and Aura, adding 10% plus 1% per level of damage reduction on top of what I already had.

Some things I either couldn't create yet, or couldn't create at all. For instance, Spell Turning was a complete failure, as was the 'Protection Against X' class of spells. Skill Creation failed to even engage at the idea—meaning I couldn't just turn back Aura, Semblance, or Dust based attacks on their casters or protect myself against generic 'evil.' Time Stop was a bust for the moment, but only for the moment—I hadn't gotten a non-response, rather I'd gotten the same response as when I tried to create flight: skill point level insufficient, essentially. Likewise with most of the Travel Domain stuff. I'd created Locate Object, which did pretty much what it said on the tin—Dimension Door, Teleport, and Phase Door were all beyond me at the moment, however, while Astral Projection...
Well, the answer I'd gotten wasn't a 'not yet' or a non-answer, but rather a 'no.' For the first time, my Semblance had actively refused to create a spell, and that worried me for a variety of reasons.

Oddly, I'd had a harder time creating many of the spells I remembered from that particular genre once I started going down my mental list and actually trying my hand at creating new spells en masse as opposed to just the stuff on my list that I considered most useful to my current situation. Most were either out of reach or received non-answers, though I was beginning to notice a definite pattern. Create Water, for instance was a level 0 spell that created clean, drinkable water from nothing. I couldn't do it. My Semblance refused to budge on it.

On the other hand, if I wanted to create water, I could call up Water elemental Aura and pull water vapor out of the air, moisture out of the ground, trees, grass and so forth until I'd achieved essentially the same result—just without the 'creating something from nothing' thing. Augury, a level 2 Cleric spell, was met with the same result—so I couldn't directly ask the universe itself to fact check me or throw me a bone. I couldn't Detect Undead, nor could I Bless or Curse objects. The rules seemed to be fairly simple, then: spells couldn't create something from nothing, call on divine favor or the universe itself, nor were 'undead' technically a thing—spirits notwithstanding, I suppose. With those things in mind, it was not surprising that most of the stuff that was typically in a Cleric's purview was out of my reach—but it had made the most sense to start there for establishing a baseline on what was possible and what wasn't. Still, I had Wizard, Sorcerer, and Bard to go through at the very least. I wasn't going to get everything in one sitting, however—odds were good I'd miss something like that. So, I made a note to make it a daily thing to try to create at least three new spells and moved on.

The last big issue I'd found had come about before I'd left to go get Penny. It was something I'd pretty much resigned myself to as being inevitable. I'd spent enough time fighting as Shiro, using that style of combat, that fighting as Jaune, without using my more obvious spells, was awkward, by comparison. That one was more easily resolved than figuring out how to fly, thankfully. All I really had to do was get some fighting time in as Jaune, with the weapons I'd be using. So, I modified my routine. Instead of gathering all the mobs in the barriers Penny and I were clearing and nuking them from orbit with Fireball, I gathered them and laid into them with sword, shield, and rifle in an effort to familiarize myself with my equipment.

Using Telekinesis and Conjuration gave me an extra edge and some much needed practice. I was tempted to practice without Flash Step, but honestly, it was simply too useful not to use. True, it was one of the few skills that could tie me to my other identities, but I honestly didn't think anyone would notice. As Shiro, I had a habit of using hit and run tactics or instant kill techniques, using Flash Step to move between multiple opponents quickly. With Jaune, I could become a shield for anyone I could see in the range of my skill, taking blows that would have struck from blind spots and the like. Aside from that, I figured if I had to use Flash Step in my close quarters attack patterns, as long as I didn't go for surprise one-hit kills, no one would really link the two identities. There were simply too many people with incredible speed out there to point at three different people with three different fighting styles and say they were the same person in disguise. Hell, Team RWBY had three people that could pull off the same thing by themselves.

That was, of course, assuming I took a forward position instead of taking on the position of heavy fire support/artillery. Really, of all the teams I knew of from 'canon,' Teams RWBY and JNPR had been the most unbalanced individually. RWBY was best suited as a strike team, plain and simple. On the other hand, JNPR was a good support team, providing heavy defense. Individually, either team had the potential to be good. Together, however, they were great. I'd had the thought before—other
team combinations could work, but those two had Synergy in a way others did not. Then again, that was going off of what I remembered from two seasons of the series. Maybe they introduced new teams later, for all I knew.

The only other teams we'd seen as belonging to Beacon had been CRDL and CFVY, which, come to think of it, followed the same pattern—discounting the rabbit faunus girl, as I had no idea what she did. Maybe that was Ozpin's thing? Maybe he'd intentionally set up four-man teams of different configurations—assault and defense teams—and no four-man cell was meant to work alone. Maybe the canny bastard had always meant for teams to be paired. I had no way of knowing without asking. How hard would it be to aim those spring platforms used during the initiation ceremony and throw two people in the same general direction and see what happened? It would really just boil down to basic math for the angles and force required, and a little probability as to whether or not two people in the same general vicinity would find each other as opposed to taking off in opposite directions, completely unaware of each other. It didn't account for people like Yang sending herself flying down range, but then I think Ozpin would have been aware of that possibility and he was simply hedging his bets by controlling who went where on a general level.

Still, all of that was for later. At the moment, right this second, I stood staring into no less than five unamused sets of female gazes. I'd set us down at the airfield and Penny and I had made our way back to the apartment, after I'd switched to my Jaune clothes. There, we found the twins, Neo, Ruby, and Jane. The last one was a surprise, until I realized what the date was—Jane had switched with one of the other sisters on baby-sitting duty, Jean I believed. “You are in trouble,” Penny pointed out from behind me.

“Quiet, you,” I grumbled, ushering her into the room and closing the door behind me. “So, what's up?”

Everyone spoke at once and I sighed, palming my face. After a moment of that, I whistled sharply, silencing the room. “One at a time,” I admonished, before pointing randomly, ending up on Ruby. “You first.”

“Uhh,” the girl hesitated, put on the spot for a moment, before chuckling and remembering her question. “Who's this?” she asked, gesturing towards Penny.

Penny shot me a questioning look and I nodded. The gynoid held out her hand to the little red-and-black haired reaper. “Penny Polendina. Pleased to meet you.”

“Ruby Rose. Nice to meet you too,” Ruby beamed, accepting the offered hand. A moment later, her smile faltered, shifting into a look of confusion. “That's weird. Your hand feels… um…” she trailed off, sending me a searching look.
I chuckled. I'd discovered that one myself, early on. Penny's pseudo-flesh was warm and soft to the touch, but it was too smooth—there were none of the normal features of regular skin. No pores, no occasional patch of dry or rough skin, no sweat, not even that fine, downy coating of hair pretty much everyone had. "Artificial is the word you're looking for. Penny's a robot. Well, an android. A gynoid, specifically. Atlas made her."

"What?" was the overall consensus at that, before Ruby asked, "How did you convince them to let her come with you?"

"Awe," Melanie chuckled, Miltia giggling beside her. "Isn't that adorable?"

Laughing, Neo nodded. "I know, right?"

Ruby puffed out her cheeks, going red and in the process only making herself more adorable. "What?"

A hand came down on the girl's head, ruffling her hair and drawing a point. "Sweetie," Jane laughed quietly, "I doubt Atlas parted with her willingly."

"Remember that discussion we had in the Dust store?" I asked Ruby, and she nodded, before taking on a look of understanding, mouth forming a small 'o.' "Yeah. Next! You," I pointed at Melanie.

The twin rolled her eyes. "You look like shit."

Beside her, Miltia nodded. "How bad was it?"

Sighing, I moved out of the entryway and into my living room, dropping down into my chair as the girls took seats on the couches. "Honestly? Worse than I was expecting, but better than it could have been. You should see the other guy."

"When I activated, Jaune was pinned to a pine tree with a six foot giant Nevermore pinion through his chest cavity," Penny supplied. "I removed it. And then removed the grimm. With lasers. That isn't counting all the little feathers sticking out of his armor."
“Traitor,” I hissed quietly at her. I hadn't been intending to share that detail.

The gynoid looked confused. “But Jaune, it's true.”

“Show us,” Melanie demanded, and I sighed, stood up out of my comfortable chair, and equipped the set of gear I'd worn during the battle. The pinions were gone, but the armor itself was in a bad state, being that it was full of holes of varying sizes. “You look like someone used you as a pin cushion.”

“Pretty much,” I rolled my eyes and shifted my gaze towards Neo as I swapped gear and dropped back into my chair. “My turn?” she asked, and I nodded. “I was going to ask if you'd stolen anything interesting, but you’ve got that covered,” she grinned, gesturing towards Penny. “On that note though, I thought you said you couldn't dupe people.”

“I am not a human,” Penny answered, before I could respond. “While I produce an Aura while active and I am capable of independent thought, in my inactive state I am as much an inanimate object as a gun, a chair, or a Dust crystal.” Not enough biological material to count as a living being, in other words. Something flickered across her face too fast for me to catch, but it came over clearly through the connection we shared—as clearly as a tangled up knot of someone else's raw emotions could.

'Penny?' I sent, she her eyes met mine. 'What's wrong?'

The gynoid smiled, but it didn't reach her eyes. 'I am simply worried about the original Penny, Jaune. There is nothing you can do about it at the moment, so please do not worry yourself over it.'

'Worried about,' I noted, as opposed to 'worried for.' It didn't take a huge leap of logic to realize she was likely going through her own little existential crisis at the moment. Reaching out, I pulled her into a hug against my side and ran the fingers of one hand through her hair, drawing a surprised look from the ancula. I knew a pointless battle when I saw one—I would never convince her she wasn't simply a copy with words alone, so I wouldn't try. Actions would speak louder than words and that was a fight I could win, though it would take time. In the meantime, she was right in a way—I was currently doing all I was capable of at the moment as far as that problem went and it would be a 'wait and see' situation.

Finally, I turned to Jane, who looked the least amused of all. “Why didn't you tell one of us you were going?”
I blinked, thinking it over. The truth was, it honestly hadn't occurred to me to do so. It was only a short trip and I hadn't been expecting much in the way of trouble. Aside from that, well, there was no point needlessly worrying her, Joan, or any of the rest of the Arcs over it. As I opened my mouth to answer, she sighed and rolled her eyes. “Never mind. I get it.”

“I didn't say anything,” I pointed out.

Jane shot me an amused grin. “You didn't have to. I've seen that look enough to know it anywhere. It didn't even occur to you.” My expression must have been amusing, as she laughed. “Called it.”

“Sorry.” I apologized, and the woman shrugged.

Pushing up off her seat, she stretched and headed for the door. “Well, I'll leave you kids alone.” Shifting her green-eyed gaze to me, she added, “I'm taking the next couple of days off, so come visit, okay?”

“Sure,” I agreed. The door closed behind her and I turned to the others, who had been mostly quiet. Now, they were all—except Penny, seated beside Ruby—sending me expectant looks. “What?”

“Details!” Ruby demanded, to laughter from the others.

I hummed, looking them over. “You want details?” I asked, and they nodded. “I want a glass of something alcoholic.” Neo, being the closest, got up and moved into the kitchen after a glass. “So, I got a message the other night from a project I'd been working on, letting me know it'd found something interesting…” Taking the glass in hand and taking a pull off it as Neo returned to her seat, I settled into my chair and got comfortable. 'It's good to be home.'

As I began retelling the whole escapade, my mind began putting facts together, and several stood out as being of immediate importance. Firstly, I had gotten a scroll call while inside an Atlas black site. Cinder herself had warned me that using my scroll at the SDC quarry would tip them off. How much of a stretch was it to assume that the black site would be going over local transmissions with a fine-toothed comb and would, eventually, come across a call logged as connecting to the nearest tower from the area of the facility, from a scroll that didn't belong to anyone who worked there? Worse, Candice had used my real name—even if just my first name, and I'd used hers. And even if I hadn't answered, there would still be a record of a scroll not on the usual list of those working at the facility connecting to the CCT network. It could be done on Earth, so I had to assume Remnant could as well.
No, it was too great a risk to leave alone and I couldn't put it off. I had at least two things to do before I could consider that dealt with. First, to buy three replacement scrolls. One of those would go to Candice, the other two would stay in Inventory, clearly labeled for separate use as Jaune and Shiro, while both my and Candice's originals were to be destroyed. Secondly, to remote login to my server in the Red Hand's base and have it sift through the CCT towers for the one nearest the black site. I assumed physical access was needed for some things, otherwise Cinder never would've needed to infiltrate the CCT tower at Beacon, but being networked meant there was a whole lot of nasty things I could do to it from afar—potentially even remote-wipe their logs for the last day, or just edit out the entries I wanted removed.

'Wait. The CCT tower for Vale isn't at Beacon. It's on the other side of Vale from Beacon. I'd know, I've been there.' Shaking my head, I put it aside to investigate later—at least I'd planned ahead on that account, when I'd done the Repository job. Pushing up out of my chair, I reequipped my work clothes and made my excuses to the girls, letting them know I'd be back soon, before taking off into the city.

Secondly on my list of Bad Things that had not gone according to plan: Atlas had seen me, or at least Shiro, and had to have video of much of that fight—I could assume everything from the time I kited the nameless back to their base was recorded. Of course, my only other option at the time being 'become grimm chow,' being caught on camera was the lesser of two evils there. No, the part that was worrying was that they had Penny on camera and physical evidence of her presence there, in the form of a section of their wall having been blasted down by the diminutive gynoid. It wouldn't take them long at all to go down and check to see if she was still there, then put two and two together and start wondering where Penny 2.0 came from.

Penny activating when she did had likely saved my life. Odds of me getting that pinion out before I bled out were slim, though I'd never know if I'd have been able to get Telekinesis to work and yank it out. I had a feeling that even trying to cast heals would've failed—you can't just 'heal' having an object physically stuck inside your body. For example, bullets could stay lodged in people for years until they were removed. Hindsight being 20/20, I hadn't had much in the way of options at the time.

Briefly, I wondered if Gamer's Mind or my WIS or INT scores were broken, before shaking off the thought. Thinking clearly in a tense situation, having the intelligence to come up with a plan on the fly, and the wisdom to decide on the best course of action were all well and good—but meant little when there were no good options, only options with varying degrees of negative consequences. In fact, constantly second guessing myself on that front was not just counter-productive but potentially harmful if it lead to a future situation where, instead of making the sort of snap decisions I needed to make to survive, I wasted time trying to find some other means to get out of a situation. Clarity of action and purpose was one of the most useful things someone could have in a battle, whereas hesitation and indecision got people killed.

So, good news was that I was alive. Bad news was that it was at the cost of Atlas seeing a duplicate
of their combat gynoid in action, likely at a level they had never trusted the original with. I could attempt to hack the black site itself using the same exploit I'd be using for the tower, but I got the feeling that wouldn't play out the way I wanted it to. I would try, but I wasn't going to hold my breath. It would be better if I just planned around not being able to simply erase the digital evidence. That in mind, my first step for throwing off any potential pursuers from Atlas would have to be to have Shiro lay low for a while. Maybe take up a new look, or alter my current outfit somehow to call any connection into question. 'Well, it shouldn't be too hard to avoid being seen as Shiro. I'm already pretty paranoid about running around under Invisibility as it is.'

The whole geo-political climate thing with Atlas and their weapons development would have to take a back burner to keeping Shiro and Penny off of Atlas's radar for the immediate future. 'Now there's a buzzword I never thought I'd find myself using un-ironically,' I mused, finding a blind alley to switch outfits so I could buy new scrolls as Jaune, with cash. 'Maybe I can talk Candice into doing some research for me, if she's not too busy necking with her new beau, since this is at least partly her fault with her horrible timing. ...I really, really hope he's not in when I get to her place. That is not a conversation I want to have. “Who's this, honey?” he'll ask. “Oh, just my ex-boyfriend,” she'll answer. And then I'll have to mind-rape him just so I don't have to listen to the whining and/or posturing. Fuck today. Just fuck this day. I demand a do-over, or a re-roll, or even a God-save.'

With no re-rolls or do-overs forthcoming, I valiantly resisted the urge to face-palm and set about doing some fast damage control.
Moving Day

The Name of the Game

a RWBY/The Gamer crossover, SI.

Arc 6: Every Shade of Grey

Chapter 21: Moving Day

'The last camera is down, Jaune,' Penny reported in from the other end of the block.

Pulling out my scroll, I sent a text to Jim consisting of a single word: 'Go.' Putting it away, I dropped Invisibility and made my way into the apartment building, catching a glimpse of headlights rolling down the street as one of our 'company' black sedans drove up and parked. I found Candice's apartment and knocked on the door. I knew it was late, but I also knew she tended to keep late hours so odds of her being awake were good.

Listen picked up the sound of bare feet padding across carpeted floor, coming to a stop in front of the door. I waved at the peephole and, a moment later, the door opened and the woman in question peeked out, clad in a modest nightgown and her hair still damp from a recent bath. "Jaune? What's going on?" A quiet chuckle passed her lips as she added, "This could be interpreted as bad ex-boyfriend behavior, you know?"

I gestured her inside and followed, closing the door behind me. "Go get dressed. Pack an overnight bag with what you think you'll need for a couple of days away. And I need your scroll."

Despite her curiosity, something in how serious I looked had her hurrying to follow my directions, digging her scroll out of her purse and tossing it my direction before hurrying into her bedroom. "What is this about?" she asked through the door, which she hadn't bothered to close behind her.

"Well, let's just say I was somewhere I wasn't supposed to be when you called. I'm covering all my bases. Is there anyone you can stay with for a week or two? Also, you'll want to call in to work sick," I added, quickly transferring the data from her old scroll to the new one. Once that was finished, I entered the key command to factory reset the scroll. Much as it would on Earth, the scroll
would write over its stored data and revert to factory settings, while still retaining the number
assigned to it when she'd purchased it. Once that process was started, I slipped the old one into my
side pouch and moved to lean against the door frame as the librarian went about getting dressed.

“How illegal was it and how much trouble are we in?” she asked, cutting right to the heart of the
matter.

I held out one hand and waved it back and forth in a so-so gesture. “Very, maybe. Or not at all,
depending on how you look at it… but odds are good that Atlas isn't going to see it my way, so I'll
go with 'very.'”

“Atlas? Oh gods, what did you do?” Candice sent me a worried look, pulling a tee-shirt on and
grabbing a small bag to begin filling it with clothes.

I winced. “Probably better if I don't say. As for how much trouble we're in… well, not sure yet. Like
I said, I'm covering my bases. I've got a friend outside who will take you where ever you want to go.
In fact, he's volunteered to host you for a few nights if you don't actually have anywhere.”

It was the older woman's turn to wince at that. “I uh... not really,” she admitted. “Most of my friends
are married with kids, so…”

I nodded in understanding. “What about the new guy?”

Candice rolled her eyes, a look of frustration crossing her face as she answered, “There's not one.”

I raised an eyebrow. “You dump him or he dump you?”

“I dumped him because he was an asshole,” she ground out.

I whistled. “In a day, though? That's got to be some sort of record.”

Fixing me with a glare, Candice was silent for a long moment before adding, “You're an ass, Jaune.”
Shrugging, I grinned. “Unrepentant. So, you done?”

With a sigh, the librarian stood and zipped up the bag. “Yeah. Let me grab my toothbrush and some toiletries.”

Glancing at my HUD clock, I nodded. “Make it fast, our window is going to close soon.”

“Do I even want to know?” she wondered, and I shook my head. “So, who's this guy I'm saying with?”

I thought for a second about how to answer that. “An employee,” I answered vaguely, and she snorted from somewhere in the attached bathroom.

“So, you went from cute, helpless kid who barely knew anything about Vale or the world at large, to having 'employees' in all of two weeks? I don't buy it, Jaune,” she chuckled. “You need to work on your story. One day, someone's going to call bullshit and you're not going to be able to lie your way out of it.”

“So, you were only attracted to me because I was younger. I feel so... so used. Preyed upon to feed an older woman's fetishes,” I teased, only to have to duck a thrown bottle of hand soap. “Have I ever lied to you?” I asked, only to be answered with a laugh.

“Yes!” she giggled. “Jaune, I don't know how you do it, but you lie with the truth.”

Rolling my eyes as she left the bathroom, I lead us out of the apartment. “I think you're just making shit up.”

“Evidence speaks to the contrary,” she countered. “So, how long do you think I'll need to lie low?”

I shrugged. “A few days at least, a couple of months at worst.”

She locked eyes with me, looking immensely annoyed. “I can't just quit my job.”
With a nod, I opened the door leading outside, gesturing her towards the black sedan, with its dark-tinted windows. “I'll think of something. In the meantime,” Jim approached, taking her bag as the trunk popped open. “This is Jim.”

“Sorry for the trouble,” Candice apologized, shaking his hand.

Tossing her bag into the trunk and shutting it, the man grinned. “It's not a bother. My place has been in the family a few generations and I'm the only one living there now. I imagine it'll be nice to have a guest—might make the place not seem quite so big. Now, sir, I believe we're on a tight schedule?”

“Right,” I agreed. “Get going. Call me if you need anything.”

“So, you work for Jaune? What do you do?” Candice asked, slipping into the car. “Ooh, leather.”

“Head of Security,” Jim answered blandly, tossing me a wave as he closed the door behind him. As the car pulled away, I dropped into Invisibility and switched armor sets, taking off to my next stop for the night. I would come back in the morning and clean out Candice's apartment, then convince her former landlord to erase her from his or her records through liberal use of mental spells.

“Could be worse,” I hummed, looking over the video playing on my scroll. On it, two flashes of yellow light danced in a swarm of black. None of the figures were close enough to make out with any sort of detail, even at maximum zoom. Two large streams of black converged on what I knew had been my position and slammed into each other, a sphere of solid black hovering in the air where they met. A flash of red lit up the sphere momentarily—a fireball—and I grinned.

Even knowing what I'd done, I couldn't distinguish it as a Dust effect or my own brand of Aura manipulation. And if I couldn't tell, there was no way in hell someone reviewing this in Atlas would be able to tell. There was only so much a camera could zoom and still retain clarity of picture, and we had been miles out when I was using the flashy stuff. I watched the rest of the video in fast replay, looking for signs of any other slip ups.

The next flashy attack I'd used close enough for them to potentially see had been Flash Freeze. With the grimm between me and their cameras, all they had of that was a flash of light and some visible mist/condensation. Likewise, placement of the Nevermore and myself on the ground, along with the smoke clouding the area from part of their mine field going up during that stage of the fight had obscured their view of my conjuration of some rebar. They had the obvious bright flash of a mid-grade Dust crystal detonating, but not its obvious effects.
Something I found particularly interesting, however, was that their cameras failed entirely to show Sanguine’s presence. Oh, you could certainly see the *effects* of that presence, as in the furrowing around its neck followed by the huge font of black blood gushing therewith when she’d managed to tear into it, but the cameras failed to pick up the spirit. Useful information to have, in the future. It left me wondering if that was a Semblance thing, or a spirit thing.

Penny, on the other hand, was *highly visible*. From the moment she stepped out of the tree line, they had eyes on her. Currently they were exchanging communications with someone higher up the chain of command at a furious rate, all of it heavily encrypted. My guess was they were shitting bricks over that situation. I couldn’t really blame them. The highly classified AI and its cybernetic body had appeared outside their facility and cut down a giant grimm, operating at a power output they’d likely never tested her at if the low level crystals originally installed in her spoke towards their lack of trust for the fledgling AI. Not only that, but it wouldn’t have taken them long at all to go down and check their lab, and find Penny safe and sound there—which meant that somehow, something looking remarkably like their AI’s combat chassis, wielding weapons identical to those created for its use, had shown up outside their facility. If I were in charge of that place, I’d be shitting bricks too.

Of course, there was also the least visible but most telling use of my power that they had also likely picked up on by now. I’d mind-controlled multiple grimm in that encounter, turning them against the Nameless and later riding off with their AI on a couple of them. To anyone not aware of my power set, it looked *very much* like I had some level of control over grimm. The entire fight could be theorized to be a test of that power and later, it getting out of control. That, or an attempted retaliation to their missile attack that got out of hand... and my leading the Nameless to the base didn’t look good on that front.

‘So, good news! Shiro doesn't look like he can use Dust effects without Dust. Bad news: Shiro looks like he can control grimm and duplicated one of the most advanced pieces of hardware in Atlas, or brought a duplicate for some purpose. Also, stealth tech. It's the only thing that would logically explain the Bullhead showing up out of the blue, to anyone who doesn't know what an ID is. So... if I were on their side of the fence, the chain of events goes something like this: an agent is sent to infiltrate one of their secret bases, using stealth tech to do so. Once there, he either somehow made a copy of their AI and its body, or already had one coming in, neither of which looks good and both of which imply a huge information leak. Upon trying to leave, the stealth tech hiding his ship fails so he makes a run for it. They respond with force when he fails to answer hails. He survives the missile and proceeds to attack the nearby grimm, whipping the already agitated grimm into a frenzy. They then combine to produce a large, dangerous grimm that chases him towards their base... while he rides on a griffon. He fights it over their base, uses his copy of their AI to kill it, then leaves on another griffon with said AI. Yeah, that looks bad.’

I couldn’t delete the video—it had been the first thing they’d reviewed and doing so would clue them in to the fact that they had someone sniffing around their networks. Instead, I edited the records for the scroll calls stored on the tower near the facility, replacing the numbers used with two from the base that had frequent calls logged between them during the week. Thankfully, the towers didn’t record conversations—at least, not that I could tell—so I appeared to be safe on that front. Maybe.
There was no way to tell if someone had gotten to the records yet, so it was best not to assume. Which was why I had taken both my and Candice's scrolls and made my way over to the airport. A quick trip under Invisibility and the scrolls would be taking a one-way trip out of town—one to Vacuo, one to Mistral, and both with just enough juice left that they should fail some time mid-flight. It was my hope that, if someone did follow my trail back into Vale, they would follow one or the other of the scrolls right back out of town. I wasn't relying solely on that hope, however—which was why I was moving Candice into Jim's place for a while, and why I would be digging through my Semblance and Sanguine's notes and adding to the wards in the apartment if I could find something worth throwing up.

Before that, however, there was at least one thing left to take care of. Pulling the chess piece from my side pouch and taking a seat on the roof overlooking the airport, I connected it to my new scroll with a data cable and hummed. Before heading to Candice's place, I'd taken the time to both transfer my data to my new scrolls and wipe the old one, along with testing connecting the chess piece to the old, wiped scroll to make sure Cinder hadn't been mistaken about whether or not it would hack something connected to it by data cable—that, or outright lied. Turns out, she'd been honest about at least that much. However, getting Candice moved was time sensitive, so this was the first chance I'd had to take a peek at what was inside.

'Encrypted flash drive, or some sort of storage medium at any rate. Money says the exploit that whoever made these things uses won't break the encryption they use for their own internal storage, but it won't hurt to try,' I mused, before attempting just that, to no result. 'So, I can't look over whatever it is Cinder had me pull. Odds are good it's a train schedule, but... I know her mind well enough to know she wouldn't leave it at that. She'd use the opportunity to take whatever she could get. What else could have been on that network worth taking? Shipment dates, cargo manifests, maybe personnel records... By comparison, the blueprints for Beacon were theoretically more dangerous.' I chuckled, shaking my head as I thought back to that incident. I'd need to go over those things again at some point to see if I could figure out what it was Cinder was after there. I'd had the thought before, but the only thing I recalled of importance there from the two seasons of RWBY I'd watched had been the CCT tower. Except that was in Vale, not on Beacon's grounds.

'I've still got time on that front,' I decided putting the train of thought away for later. That entire event wouldn't happen for months yet, maybe as much as two semesters—I wasn't entirely certain because, if I recalled correctly, RT had never released a definitive timeline for RWBY. There was an unknown amount of time between seasons 1 and 2, anywhere from a couple of weeks to a full semester, and I had no idea how long of a gap there was between seasons 2 and 3, and now never would. That's what I got for not watching it as it aired, and instead just waiting to torrent a blu-ray release... and then letting it sit in my 'Done' pile for months without watching it. It hadn't really seemed important at the time, with work and whatever else had been going on in my life back on Earth. 'Meh, it can't be helped. It's not like things were going to stay entirely the same anyway, with the whole foreknowledge thing. Hell, at this point, I'm fighting just to keep certain events on the rails. Even just making sure Team RWBY and Team JNPR are formed is kind of up in the air at the moment.'

Selecting Cinder's contact information in my 'Shiro' scroll, I composed a quick text. 'Got a new
That sent, I sent the data before I could change my mind and convince myself that telling her the chess piece had joined my scroll in the drink was a good idea. Since I couldn't verify what was on the damn thing, would that make me responsible for whatever she used it for? According to what I knew of the law, yes. Morally, by my own standards? Yes. Still, it was that or tell her I'd failed and dispose of it. With that finished, I turned over everything I'd needed to get done to make sure I wasn't missing anything. 'Scrolls replaced? Check. Candice moved? Check. Moving her stuff tomorrow. Call records altered? Check. Video reviewed, too late to delete it but they don't have much anyway. Got Penny a disguise for moving around town while we were on Vytal. Data sent to Cinder? Check. Am I forgetting anything? Ah! Right, do bounded field research and ward the apartment with more stuff.' Standing, I stretched and popped my back before turning towards the apartment. 'I can go home again. Finally.'

“So…”

I raised an eyebrow, shooting the redhead across from me an amused look as she looked somewhat flustered. “So?”

Rolling her eyes, she visibly fought down her embarrassment. “This is ridiculous,” she grumbled, shaking her head. “Did you ward your apartment?”

Instead of answering, I asked, “Were you home all night last night?” She nodded, and I grinned. “Any uncontrollable urges to jump my bones?”

“Shut up,” she hissed, glaring at me. “That's not an image I need in my head. And no.”

Putting on a surprised look, I carefully resisted the urge to smirk as I asked, “What image? Neo using her Semblance to look like the twins, after which I spent the night entertaining the three of them? Do you have any idea what a blowjob by triplets looks like, from the man's perspective?”


I rolled my eyes. “I promised I'd honor your request and not put out if your willpower broke, 'no matter what you say' as I recall. I said nothing about not teasing you. And it's so easy. I mean, you'd think I was the elder sibling.”
“I have blackmail material,” she threatened.

“Nope,” I denied, shaking my head. “Doesn't count if I don't remember it.”

Leaning back in her chair, Jane smirked. “Photographic evidence.”

With a shrug, I mirrored her pose. “Baby pictures are cute, I'm sure the girls would love to see some. And since it doesn't bother me, I'd come out looking all the better for it on the self-confidence front—and as you well know, women find self-confident men very attractive. So, by all means, please do break out the baby photos.”

The redhead's smirk spread into the shit-eating variety. “Who said they were baby photos? We have photos of you in that wonderful onesie we went through so much trouble to make for you. With the little lion hood up, no less.”

I winced. No amount of self-confidence would get me out of that one—it was simply too embarrassing, too damaging to my image. 'Damn you, Jaune! How could you not have known that was a trap?' I wondered. Quite honestly, if there was any one thing from Jaune's past that could act as my kryptonite as far as my sex life went, it was that thrice-damned onesie—and any and all evidence associated with its existence. She had pulled out her trump card, and now she had me over a barrel. Still, there had to be something I could use... “I wonder what Joan would say about you using that against me like you are.”

Jane snorted. “Ah, my naive little brother, whose idea do you think it was? Who do you think suggested we take pictures? You may not have realized this, but our eldest sister plays the very long game, Jaune. She is a master-level tactician and manipulator. She has one blind spot: family—and you, you're the blind spot in her blind spot. However, she's had her eyes on you since you were born. Do you really think it's outside the realm of possibility that she suggested the onesie for your birthday for the express purpose of driving other women away if they found out about it? She loves you and she wants you to be happy—but above all else, she wants you to be happy with her.”

I frowned, eyes shifting over the results of a silent Observe. 'I can't tell if she's lying. I mean, she's not obviously lying, but there are so many ways to lie using the truth it's not even funny—I'd know. It's not inconceivable that Joan could try to poison the well, so to speak, in the hopes that one day I (or Jaune, rather) would come to her and ask what he was doing wrong, and she, benevolent elder sister that she is, would take up the burden of teaching her younger brother the finer points of seducing and romancing a woman—and in the process, potentially cause him to latch on to her as his first, in an example of reverse wife husbandry. Husband wifery? But that reads like the beginning of a bad eroge or doujin,' I hummed, thinking it over. 'No, she's pulling one of my favorite tricks.
“You're good, I'll give you that. You don't even set off my Semblance,” I told her, grinning. “But you can't bullshit a bullshitter. Even if you're right, it doesn't really matter.” Holding out my hand, palm up, I focused on the spell I'd created that morning. I had considered pulling this one from the D&D source material, but if I recalled correctly, what I wanted was actually a combination of two spells—neither of which I could remember the name of. Instead, I'd fallen back on another genre for reference. I'd wanted something to compliment Neo's own ability with illusions on a small scale, capable of producing both an image and sound—an illusion, or a hologram. What I had gotten had been interesting, to say the least.

It could have been my knowledge of the source material influencing how Skill Creation interpreted what I wanted, but what I had ended up with was what I believed to be a meta-spell, a single spell with multiple purposes encompassing an entire field—Genjutsu. Yeah, 'illusions' as a generic catchall spell category—and, when I went over my skill tree, I'd learned that my illusory disguise spell had been moved there and listed as a specialized technique. At the moment, the spell itself was somewhat limited: I could cast the technique on anything in line of sight, including myself, and effect up to 5 meters around the target. The illusions it created weren't very convincing at the moment—things like grass poking through their feet still happened—but they would only get better as the skill leveled. That, and as my INT grew higher, since the skill was INT-based. And since the entire thing ran off either my imagination or memory, depending on how I used it, I could produce some pretty convincing images even with the limitations placed on it by its low level.

Above my hand, a scene pulled straight from my memory played out—Jane on my bed, on her hands and knees, face twisted in the ecstasy of orgasm as I took her from behind. With a bit of will the image began to play, in living color, complete with sound. “I'll see your photographic evidence and raise you pornographic evidence.”

Hands clenching on the arms of her chair, Jane shifted slightly in her seat and I smirked as her face began to flush. “Okay. You win this round, Jaune. Please turn that off and go away now,” she requested quietly, calmly—too calmly.

I raised an eyebrow, willing the illusion's volume to pick up a few decibels as the redhead on my palm screamed in consecutive orgasm. “Problem?”

“I stopped tempting me and go!” she growled, grabbing a book at her side and throwing it at my head.

Laughing, I caught the book and dropped it in the chair as I hopped up, allowing the illusion to dispel. Grabbing a notepad beside my chair, I scribbled down my new scroll number, tore it out, and tossed it at her head as I made for the door to her apartment. I couldn't resist taking a parting shot,
“Fine, fine. And here I thought I'd help you fulfill that rape fantasy you didn't want anyone to know about.”

Jane's eyes went wide, and I laughed—I had only been guessing, but now… “You ass, I told you not to put thoughts in my head! I swear to god, if my vibrator runs out of batteries again because of you, you're fixing it.”

Opening the door, I looked back at her and shrugged. “At this point, you know what? I think I'm okay with scratching your itch. But you're supposed to be going cold turkey. Have fun wearing that thing down to a nub;” I chuckled, quickly exiting and shutting the door behind me. There was a quiet yell of frustration from inside the apartment and something that sounded like another book slammed into the door behind me, rattling it in its frame. “Heh. Too easy to tease.”

“On— Jaune!” A young voice yelled, and I braced for impact. A moment later, a red-haired missile slammed into my midsection and I spun to bleed off momentum. “What are you doing here? I thought Jeanie was going to pick me up.”

“Well, Jean sent me a text asking me to get you—said she was running late.” I could only assume that Joan or Jane had sent out a mass text to the rest of the Seven Deadly Sisters, since those were the only two Arc sisters I had texted or given the new number. To confirm that, I asked, “Did they message you or anything?”

“Mm!” she nodded, climbing up on my back. “What happened to your old scroll?”

I chuckled. “Well, it got lost. It could be half way across the country by now, for all I know.”

“That sucks. At least you didn't drop it in the toilet,” she giggled, and I nodded.

“Yeah, I've heard that happens from time to time. So, got any homework?” I asked, and I felt her shake her head behind me. “Great. Let's get you back home, then. And what do you say to a spar, when we get back?”

“Yes!” she cheered, bouncing on my back momentarily. “Onward!”

“Want to see a trick?” I asked, and without waiting for a reply, hit us both with Invisibility before taking a standing Leap—thankfully, I'd been using it enough by now that Powered Leap's charge time was down to only a second and a half, which was far more manageable than it had been
initially. Really, it had only leveled once so far since the Atlas incident, so there wasn't a particularly noticeable difference—it was another skill I needed to level to get the charge time down as much as possible, preferably down to instant casting.

Jun squealed in my ear and I winced, and the noise only picked up when I engaged my bastardized telekinetic flight construct. “Holy shit! You can fly?!” she yelled, and I dearly wished I could see her face right then—her expression was probably priceless.

“Kinda-sorta,” I answered, powering us through the city. It was good practice for Telekinesis and some of my elemental manipulation stuff—gravity and wind at least—and she enjoyed it, so I didn't see the harm in it. Besides, it was amazingly fun to be able to fly on my own—even if it was awkward as hell.

I felt her lean up on my back and, a moment later, she asked, “How do you shoot?”

“Huh?” I asked, looking back to see her reaching up and touching the field around us—the solid telekinetic field. I very nearly dropped the technique as I realized what she meant. 'It's strong enough to hold my weight, at least... what are the chances of a Dust round ricocheting against that inside of her, or simply detonating against it? Shit, that could have been bad,' I winced. “Well sweetie, I haven't quite worked out all the kinks,” I admitted. 'Maybe some sort of wings only variant? Try to emulate bird wings or something? There are a few options there. Either large, to catch a lot of air, or small and very, very fast like a hummingbird. The second one would make more noise, and use a lot more energy, but it'd also be more maneuverable over short distances. What if I combined the two? Small and fast for maneuvering, large and a broad lift surface for long flights or high altitude? I'll have to see if I can even do it first.'

I had been so caught up trying to mimic technology I had neglected biology. Sure, my ultimate goal there of creating a telekinetic turbofan may lead to something potentially unmatched as far as speed goes, but I wasn't there yet. There were several intermediary steps I'd need to go through first, and in the meantime there was no reason not to change my design if something else worked better. 'Well, back to the drawing board,' I chuckled. “Thanks for pointing that out, though. You might have just kept your brother from blowing himself up on accident.”

“So…” she began, voice turning speculative and more than a little manipulative, “what do I get out of it? I helped you out, right? That should be worth at least a date.”

I snorted, then shrugged. So long as she didn't expect more out of a 'date' with me than going to see a movie or something, I was okay with that. “Sure. Maybe this weekend, or if not, then next week.”
“That’s fine,” she agreed, and to my amazement, settled down and went quiet for the rest of the trip back to the Arc home. I set us down on the training field behind the house and Jun dropped off my back, running into the house, returning a moment later with practice weapons. I took the wooden sword she tossed me and discarded the wooden shield in favor of my own expanding shield.

“So, you ready for a rematch?” I asked, and she beamed, nodding.

“Ready!” Jun enthused, bouncing on the balls of her feet.

Smirking, I expanded my shield, spun my sword once in the manner I’d grown accustomed to with the Blazefire Sabers, and took up a fairly loose defensive stance. “Well, if you think you can beat me now, give it your best.”

Jun frowned, green eyes narrowing into a small glare. “My best, huh? Okay then.”

BGM Battle Theme – *Rhythm Emotion*

The wood in her hands creaked ominously as her Aura spiked up violently, shifting swiftly into the visible spectrum as a layer of red energy exploding off her with a bright red luminance, looking for all the world like a pillar of light, that reminded me of something I’d seen before. ‘Shit. Looks like she’s learned a trick or two.’ Shooting her an amused look, I asked, “Who decided it’d be a good idea to teach you Kaio-ken?”

“Kaio-what?” she asked, then rolled her eyes. “Very funny, onii-chan. Ha ha HA!”

Battle commenced and she disappeared for a split second, until Haste caught up as I dumped mana into the skill. She came in low and fast, streaking across the ground in front of me and closing the distance between us. When she neared to within a yard, she kicked herself upward, tumbling into a spin that brought both of her swords around in a pair of diagonal swings aimed at the gap between my shield and sword, at the right angle to pass between both and connect with my collar bone. The way her legs both curled up towards her chest as she turned into her spin told me she’d be finishing the move with a double kick to my chest or shield depending on placement.

I took a half step back, allowing the practice swords to pass harmlessly in front of me before stepping into a Shield Bash as she followed through with her kick, the force imparted from both sending her flying backwards where she landed in a controlled roll. I pressed the attack, Stepping into her range and planting a kick in her chest—enough to knock the wind out of her and send her flying upwards,
where I met her with the hilt of my own practice sword in a downward stroke to the middle of her back, sending her crashing back to the ground. To her credit, despite having the wind knocked out of her twice in as many seconds, she executed a roll-out, spinning into a defensive twirl of blades as she kicked herself back and away.

Once she'd regained her feet, she pressed forward into her own assault, leading with a flurry of sword thrusts. My shield rang under the staccato flurry of blows. Even with her increased speed, however, I could still track her movements—more importantly, I could match, even exceed them. *I shouldn't be too surprised. I expected I'd start surpassing them fairly quickly at my rate of growth, and Jun is stuck in school pretty much all day every day. So, in reality, using this as a measuring stick... The Arc sisters are all well ahead of their peers, supposedly, so I might be about where a proper Signal graduate should be, or at least in the neighborhood. My Semblance is kind of hard to measure, though, since there are so many other options I could use.*

Shaking my head, I reached out and struck quickly, knocking her swords back with my shield and stretching my sword out to catch one of her swords in the middle before swiping hard away. The sword left her hand and spun through the air before clattering to the ground several feet away. The sword in her opposite hand met the same fate as she brought it down in a strike and I parried it hard enough to flick it away. “Feel better?” I asked, and she sighed.

“Sorry, oni—Jaune. It sounded like you were underestimating me,” she apologized, and I nodded. “Understandable. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to hurt your feelings. I really did mean for you to give it your best. I want to see what you're capable of, and I wanted to see how much I'd improved—or hadn't—by comparison. You did really good, though. Want to go again?” I asked.

Picking up her weapons, the girl nodded. “Sounds like fun.”

“No, *this* should be fun,” I grinned, collapsing my shield and conjuring a second wooden sword to match the first. “I've been meaning to train my dual-wielding skill.”

By the time Jean got home and came to get us, the sun had set and both of us were sweaty and sore in places. “Sorry I'm late, Jaune,” she apologized, leading us inside, where a couple of pizzas waited on the kitchen table.

Jean shared both a level and a title with her sister, apparently, which left me wondering if that was a coincidence of them keeping up a similar training routine, or if it was something else. The only other twins I had to compare to were also of the same level, though they bore different titles. I had no way to confirm that, so I shrugged it off—it was just a suspicion, and not even a well-founded one.
Remnant was weird, but I didn't think it was quite so weird that I could start picking away at every little coincidence as though they were something more than they really were.

When we'd finished eating, Jean sent Jun up to get a bath and head to bed while we moved into the living room, Jean bringing out a bottle of something clear from the freezer along with a couple of glasses. “So,” she began, pouring two glasses and handing me one before taking a seat. “How are you doing?”

I raised an eyebrow, idly taking a sip of the liquor she'd given me before simply rolling the glass between my hands. It was oddly sweet, though it still burned on the way down. I didn't recognize it as anything I'd had before and it didn't seem to have a particularly high proof—as evidenced by my Resist Poison skill not leveling with every drink, unlike some of the liquors Neo preferred. I had the ice-cream themed girl to blame, or thank, for even having that skill. Then again, as I'd said before, I wasn't an alcohol connoisseur—I tended to keep things simple when I chose to drink. So it could have been some Earth-analog, or it could have been something entirely native to Remnant and I'd have never been able to tell the difference. “In what way? You're going to have to be more specific.”

“All of it,” she deadpanned. “Joan told us what happened—the memory thing, your Semblance. Don't worry, we're keeping it quiet—we aren't telling our parents, either. I mean, how are you adjusting? Have you remembered anything? Are you absolutely sure you're ready to go to Beacon in the state you're in? What's this about you having a girlfriend?”

‘Well, there goes keeping that quiet… but then, I trust Joan, and Joan trusts the rest of her sisters, so I suppose I'm going to have to live with it.' I chuckled quietly at her for a moment before beginning. “In the order you asked them… I think the easiest comparison I could make is this: imagine one day, you wake up in a hospital on an alien planet. Oh, the people are human, they speak language you can understand, breathe air, but a percentage of them are gifted with superpowers. In fact, you later learn you were in the hospital because you had been trying to awaken your own superpowers—it worked, but the trade-off is that you know next nothing about the world around you. Now, toss in monsters, magic, and a school for training future superpowered monster hunters and you've got a recipe for about half of all manga and comic books ever produced. I am stuck looking at this world from an outsider's perspective, and from where I stand everyone is some degree of crazy—and I'm crazy for going along with it. It's like I'm living in a fantasy world, and getting stronger, learning to be a better killer, at times it makes it seem less real—until some grimm decides to try to remove my lungs, or nails me to a tree, and I'm violently reminded that this is real.”

That I was living on a goddamn death world. I was once again reminded of my recent decision regarding priorities and goals for the future. Finding a way not to die on a world where humanity was undergoing its own little extinction event in slow motion was number one on my list of things to work towards. Number two was getting off this dust ball—I'd been brought here from across the ether, so surely there had to be a way to cross that divide again, maybe even go elsewhere, just in a different way from however I got here since I didn't fancy the idea of pulling another Quantum Leap and leaving people behind. Well, it was a thought, at any rate. Something to put right up there beside
'immortality' as a personal quest: exit, stage left, and take as many people as I could stand with me when I went.

Jean winced. “Yeah, I can see how that'd be… jarring.”

“Oh, don't get me wrong. I love it here. I wouldn't trade you guys or my friends for the world. Still, there are days…” I shrugged. “As for your second question: a little. Nothing important. I'm working on it. I haven't really told anyone this, so keep a lid on it if you don't mind?” I asked, and she nodded slowly. “I dug through my Semblance and found something interesting. Name a video game analog to 'memory.'”

She hummed and took a pull of her own drink as she thought on it. “Depending on the game, save files maybe.”

“Bingo,” I agreed. “I found mine, I think. No, let me rephrase that. I found a couple. An active save file, which I assume is me, and an inactive, corrupted one.”

“You, from before?” she asked, and I shrugged.

“Maybe. Possibly. I've got it trying to fix itself now—sort of like checking a file system on a computer, in a way,” I admitted. “When and if it ever finishes, maybe I'll be able to get those memories back. I'm not counting on it, but it's a possibility. That's why I haven't told anyone. I don't want to get their hopes up over something that may or may not happen.” Frowning, I added, “I probably shouldn't have told you, either.”

“Nah, I'm fine,” she chuckled, taking up the bottle and topping her glass off, before waving it at me. Looking down, I blinked as I realized I'd apparently drained the glass during the course of the conversation, and with a shrug I held it out for a refill. “So, keep going.”

“Mmk,” I hummed, wondering for a moment how to answer her other questions. “As for Beacon, well, mentally I'm as ready as I'm going to get. Physically, I could do with some more training, but I should be okay on that front if push comes to shove. I need to start studying things, maybe pick up some books to try and fill in the gaps in my knowledge—but I'm not terribly worried about that. I'll have eight or so hours a day to study… The class schedule at Beacon is eight hours, right?”

Jean chuckled, shaking her head. “Seven hours of study, three hours of mandatory physical training, five days a week.”
I winced. “Ten hour days? Are they insane?”

The redhead shrugged. “Beacon is the best Hunter school in the world. They’ve earned that reputation through hard work. Not only do they teach everything a future Hunter or Huntress needs to know in that line of work, but they also teach a curriculum equivalent to the civilian high schools. By the time you graduate Beacon, even if you choose not to be a Hunter, you’ll be prepared to do just about anything else—or go into higher education, whichever you prefer.” She shook her head, adding, “Not that you have much of a choice after graduating. There’s a mandatory service period, once you graduate and get your license. Usually seven years or so, with deployment rotations at a town or city somewhere—and you don’t really get to pick. You go where they need you, and if things get quiet there and grimm activity dies down, they’ll ship you somewhere else.”

“So, wait,” I frowned, thinking it over. “In addition to Hunter-specific courses they have the usual complement of math, science, history and the like? How do they organize that?” The mandatory service thing was not entirely unexpected. Given what I knew, it was pretty obvious they tried to keep teams together as much as possible—both Jane and Joan had said they’d been with their teams from Beacon. That did make me wonder how Jane had managed to get out early. Had they given her the Remnant equivalent of a Section 8 discharge, when her team died? It would make sense—her friend had died, she took some time off to grieve, the rest of her team had been called up, then they’d died as well… I would not be surprised if they had labeled her as 'mentally unfit for duty' after that. I could ask Hei if he'd been given the same treatment, but I sort of doubted that. If anything, he'd probably bribed his way out or done something a bit shadier—I wouldn't put it past him.

“Amazing scheduling,” Jean sighed, bringing me out of my thoughts. “You'll be assigned a schedule as a team. The first year schedule goes something like: mornings after breakfast everyone has their first exercise period, then three hours of class, then another exercise period, an hour for lunch, then another three hours of class, then you'll get another exercise period and finish out the day with Goodwitch. As for the exact breakdown of those classes, that depends on the day of the week. Some, like math, are only hour-long classes where you're expected to do your work and studying outside of class, and if you have questions there are study groups and older students willing to act as tutors. Others, like history, and Goodwitch's combat class, are two hours—and there's a three hour Dust lab Fridays, assuming things haven't changed since I was a firstie. Once or twice a month, you'll be allowed to take away missions, where you'll leave the school for up to a week—they're scheduled ahead of time, so you don't have to worry about having to make up classwork you'd miss for these and they count as class time anyway.”

“So, in truth, it's more like twelve hour days if you count breakfast and lunch,” I pointed out, and she nodded.

“Plus clubs, which are not mandatory but are encouraged. Students are highly encouraged to engage in training in their spare time, especially team training—to the point where, if you can't turn in homework because you were too busy training the night before, the professors are likely to excuse it
entirely and give you an extra day to turn it in. Except Goodwitch. Goodwitch doesn't give homework, in the classical sense. She'll give you the whole speech the first day, but she only ever gives one homework assignment—considered a permanent assignment: survive. Grow stronger, smarter, wiser, and survive. That is Beacon's combat instructor's primary lesson.”

“Clubs?” I asked, raising an eyebrow. “Such as…?”

“The usual,” Jean shrugged, and when I sent her a deadpan look, had the decency to look sheepish. “Right. Sorry. Let's see... swimming, track and field, martial arts, swordplay, gunplay, tracking, collecting, crafting, literature, and a lot of others I didn't really pay attention to. They're there mostly to prevent burnout and give you some time to yourself, while also providing some practical skill training. There are always fliers posted on the physical message boards and on the school network, with descriptions of each club and usually a list of their members, sometimes with photos or videos of their accomplishments. Similarly, the school network also provides a list of older students who have volunteered as tutors for certain subjects—either one on one, or for groups.

“So really, if you count study time and club time for the average student as around two to three hours a day, you're looking at fifteen hour days. Assuming you actually have study or club time every day and don't use your weekends for that, so as to not exhaust yourself. Aura doesn't exactly fix mental exhaustion after all—burnout's a real problem, especially since once you get into Beacon the only way to drop out is massive physical injury or death, or murdering a classmate or civilian. It's part of the whole 'need more Hunters' thing. The council subsidizes your tuition and dorms, so you're obligated to finish schooling and a mandatory service period after graduation to pay that back. And if you've burned out? You're likely dead before or soon after graduation. In other words: take some time to yourself if you feel like you need it.”

She snapped her fingers as though just remembering something and added, “Oh, right. I should probably warn you about the drills.”

I blinked, sending her a confused look. “Drills as in... fire drills?”

“Something like that. More like invasion drills. Starting some time after your first month, you'll start getting them. Sometimes, they're school-wide, other times they're team specific—or include a few teams. If it's school wide, the sirens will go off along with students' scrolls, followed by an announcement by either Ozpin or Goodwitch broadcast over the scrolls and PA system: 'this is a drill, all students assemble in such-and-such place.' Usually either in the ballroom if it's a simulated invasion of the school, or the landing pads if it's a simulated invasion of Vale. That's for the large-scale stuff, though. For small scale stuff, your scroll will go off—loudly—and one of the professors will tell you to assemble either in the Operations room or directly on the Bullhead platform. For your first year, that's where they end. From your second year onward, you'll be sent on actual missions and if you're called like that outside of normal mission assignments, assume it's always an emergency.
“Drills can and will take place at any time, day or night—before, during, or after class. The first drill of the year is always school-wide and always during class, so the teachers can explain what's going on and hand-hold students about where to go and the like. After that, it's fair game. I made the mistake of getting on Goodwitch's bad side one week. After a week of 3a.m. drills, I finally begged her to stop—it was that, or my team was going to kill me. After that, she switched to trolling me specifically at random—I swear, she had cameras in the dorm room or something, because it was always as soon as I stepped into the shower,” Jean sighed, taking a moment to slug back the last of her glass.

“On that note: don't piss off Goodwitch. Don't let her cool exterior fool you. She's got a low tolerance for bullshit and she's downright vindictive. And regardless of what everyone thinks, she does have a sense of humor—petty, cruel, and vindictive… but a sense of humor it is. You don't want to be her amusement for a few weeks—trust me.”

'Note to self: piss off Glynda. I could use a challenge.' I grinned, already wondering what sort of trouble I could cause the beautiful blonde. I had a few things in mind, and with my Semblance most of them couldn't even be traced directly back to me. I'd have to test, but I believed I may just have found an unorthodox use for conjuration. It was something to keep myself amused with later, at any rate. “I'll keep that in mind.”

Apparently seeing some tell as to my intentions, she snorted. “Your funeral. Now, answer the last one.”

“What one was that?” I asked, scratching at my chin in seeming thought. Jean turned a flat look on me and simply stared. After a full two minutes of this, I finally gave it up as a bad job. “The rumors are true. I have a girlfriend.”

“How'd that happen?” she wondered, a smirk tugging at the corners of her lips. “I mean, you were always so socially awkward…”

“Well,” I began, my voice taking on a solemn tone. “When a man and a woman love each other very much…”

“Ass,” she rolled her eyes, cutting me off with a giggle. “That is not what I meant and you damn well know it.”

I faked a put-upon look. “What's with everyone calling me an ass today?”
Jean's hand twitched towards what looked like a remote control beside her chair before stilling—clearly, she'd just made her Will save not to throw it at my head. "Maybe—and this is just a thought—it's because you're an ass."

"Tautology."

She failed her second Will save and I had to dodge a thrown remote control. "Quit dickering around, Jaune. I know you're trying to distract me. Now, talk."

"Fine," I grunted. "I lied. I don't have a girlfriend. I have..." The twins and Neo made three. I wasn't sure what to count Joan as, but I may as well add her to that count. Candice didn't count any more. Jane... was trying to quit cold turkey, but I gave it till the end of the week at best. I hadn't bedded Ruby, nor did I intend to push things much further than her comfort zones, but it seemed reasonable to assume it would happen at some point. Being her only male friend, and one she was attracted to even if she hadn't said anything about it yet—it was just a matter of time. A year or two, maybe three—that seemed a reasonable amount of time for her to get over her shyness, mature a bit, and to put her into what I'd feel comfortable with having a relationship with, at least compared to the other girls. That was all assuming, of course, that she hadn't found someone else by then.

"Four," I answered. Though, when and if Ruby and I ever got together, given how she felt, Yang would likely not be far behind—assuming she hadn't found someone of her own by then.

"Why did you take so long to count?" Jean asked, a knowing look crossing her face.

"Because it's complicated," I grunted.

Laughing, the woman across from me hopped up from her seat, crossed the distance between us, and plopped down beside me on the couch, making one more round of filling glasses. "Do tell."

I rolled my eyes. I knew her type. She ate up other people's drama like her own personal soap opera. "I don't think so. You're enjoying this too much," I denied, smirking.

"Yeah, I can see why you'd be kind of hesitant to talk about it," she nodded, talking as though I hadn't just shot her attempt at fishing for information down. "After all, you've slept with two of your own sisters. How's that work, by the way?" she asked, and as soon as I opened my mouth, a grin twitching at the corner of my lips, I found her finger over my lips. "No, don't. I walked right into that
one. I meant, specifically, with the memory thing."

"Like I said, it's complicated," I mumbled out around her finger still pressed on my lips, before she removed it.

Jean shrugged. "Fair enough. So... what sort of faces did my sister make?"

I blinked. "What." I realized which sister she meant—she referred to Joan and Jun by name, but Jane was always 'my sister.' 'My twin,' in other words. "Why would you want to know that?"

"It's a long, long story. Very long story very short, we made a bargain and she's failed to hold up on her end," she shrugged.

I very nearly resisted the urge to facepalm. It was a close thing, but in the end I just couldn't help it. 'I swear. This world. Some days. God damnit. And damn you, Monty and RT, for screwing up the series until it was nearly unrecognizable to sanitize it. What else did you bastards change? ...Please tell me it's not some rule 63, gender-bending bullshit. If Ren is a woman when I get to Beacon, I quit. Game over, man, game over.'

Shaking my head, I drained the last of my booze and put the glass on the table, well out of reach of Jean and her watchful gaze. I'd suspected from the start, but now... Yeah, she was trying to get me drunk, and she was working herself up to asking something she figured it would take getting a few drinks in me to ask. In that case, I may as well just cut to the chase. A smirk crossed my lips and I held out my hand, using Genjutsu to conjure the same image as before—that of Jane bent over, quietly wailing in ecstasy as I was keeping the volume on this one down for fear of Jun overhearing. Beside me, Jean was silent. A glance over at her showed her skin flushed and her pupils dilated as they were glued to the image floating over my hand—yeah, she was definitely interested.

I let the memory play out across a change of positions before Joan rejoined us in the image. Beside me, Jean whimpered quietly, squirming against my side where she'd slowly closed the distance between us while watching. Suddenly, I closed my fist, dispelling the image. "Those the kind of faces you wanted to see?"

"Y-yeah," she gulped quietly. Taking a deep breath, she carefully reached forward and put her glass on the coffee table before turning her attention back to me. She shifted, straddling my lap as her hands went to either side of my head and she leaned in, bright red hair settling in a curtain around our faces and green eyes locked on my blue. A nervus chuckle passed her lips before she closed the distance the rest of the way and our lips met. Her tongue darted out and I met her in the middle. 'Well, she is the bolder of the two,' I silently assessed, another smirk working its way onto my lips as
my hands grasped her waist, squeezing gently and pulling her closer, and earning a contented sound of pleasure in the process.

I didn't bother marking how much time passed that way, but we were both out of breath when she pulled back, smirking like the cat that got the canary and washed it down with the cream—a look I'd seen more than once, recently. “So…” she dragged the word out. “I'm bored. Wanna fuck?”

I laughed outright, causing the woman on my lap to break into her own giggles. Little did she know, I was just pulling back to deliver the punchline. Or rather, I had been, until my Semblance decided to remind me of its presence.

*A quest has been updated!*

*Romancing Remnant: Taste the Rainbow has been unlocked!*

*Four of the Seven Deadly Sisters now have shown an interest towards you. Romance the others to collect the full set!*

*Success: increased closeness with the Seven Deadly Sisters, up to +7 additional love interests (depending on how many have already been romanced), title, unknown. Failure: decreased closeness with the Seven Deadly Sisters, loss of up to 7 love interests, title.*

I blinked, then groaned. “What's wrong?” Jean asked, raising an eyebrow.

“My Semblance is acting in bad taste,” I deadpanned, before facepalming as I realized I had likely only encouraged it with that comment.

The redhead rolled her eyes before a leer spread over her face. “I know a way to take your mind off of it…”

“Let me think about it,” I hummed, before my grin returned. “Nope.”

“Great, let's take this to my roo… wait, what?” she asked, her brain catching up to her mouth. “What do you mean, 'nope?'”
Taking her by the waist, I shifted her off me and stood, bending down enough to kiss her nose and earning an annoyed look in the process as she tried to snag my lips with her own and missed. “You're too drunk to sleep with.”

“I am not!” she protested.

“Really?” I asked, holding a hand behind my back and subtly casting an illusion on it before holding it up. “How many fingers am I holding up?”

She blinked, counted them, then blinked again in confusion. “Seven? What…”

“See, told you,” I chuckled. Bending down, I picked her up into a bridal carry. “Come on, let's get you to bed.”

“So you are coming to bed with me?” she asked, and I shook my head.

“No,” I denied. “I'm putting you to bed. There's a difference. One implies I'm staying, the other does not. This is that second one.”

The redhead in my arms pouted. “But… but… Jaune,” she whined. “That's not fair! You slept with my sister! You're just going to blue-ball me like this?!”

I shrugged. “You should have thought about that before you tried to liquor me up. Little did you know, my Semblance thinks being a drunk is degenerate and won't actually let me get anything beyond buzzed any more before it steps in.” It had allowed me to drink Neo under the table before, and the girl could drink like a fish when she had a mind to. It was what had lead to developing Resist Poison, after all. The end result was, after some testing, discovering that getting well and truly drunk was impossible without my Semblance fighting back— and the harder I tried, the further the skill leveled. “Come back when you're sober and then we'll talk.”


I shook my head. “I'm busy tomorrow. I'm busy the rest of this week, really. Today was a rare day off, mostly to recuperate from the past couple of days. You'll be staying in town a while after you're
“Yeah,” she nodded. “My sister promised to get me a key to her place. I’ll probably crash there since, you know, cat’s out of the bag on her not hunting any more. Someone has to make sure she’s not going to do anything stupid while ‘working.’”

“Like her little brother?” I snarked, earning an elbow to the gut. “You’re all so violent.”

“You enjoy it, you masochist,” she countered.

Shrugging, I pushed open her bedroom door with the toe of my boot and made my way across her room, easing her onto the bed before reaching down and removing her shoes. “I’ll lock up on my way out.”

“You're not even going to tuck me in?” she asked innocently—an act if I ever saw one.

“And give you another chance to try to wheedle your way into my pants? Nope.” Rolling my eyes, I headed for the door. The idea was in her head, though—and with the rest of the week to stew in her own juices over the imagery I’d provided, she was sure to try something as soon as she could.

I dodged a pillow thrown at my head, laughing as I made good my escape. “Ass,” I heard her call after me as I shut her door.

'She's going to be fun to play head games with,' I mused, already thinking on how I could get under her skin. Until then, I had problems of my own to deal with. Namely, she’d gotten me riled up and I had some frustration I needed to work off. Well, with three bedmates willing and eager at the apartment, it wouldn't be a problem for much longer tonight.

“So, Jaune, we wanted to talk to you about something,” Melanie began, molding herself to my side in my chair after she and her sister had ambushed me the moment I’d gotten out of the shower, having only just recently finished my day's training with Penny—who had asked to go out on her own for a while. I'd agreed, but that didn't mean I wasn't keeping an eye on her with my map, just in case—I wanted to give her her freedom, but I also knew how much trouble she got into in canon. My thoughts returned to the present as Miltia hummed in agreement and I twitched slightly, glancing down to meet the girl's green eyes at the level of my lap.
'Gee, it's almost like they want something,' I mused, shaking my head. “You know, if you wanted a favor, you could have just asked instead of trying the old 'ask in the middle of a blowjob' routine. Not that I'm complaining about ambush sex,” I chuckled, reaching down to stroke the red-clad twin's head as I felt her smile around my shaft.

“We talked it over with Neo, but she told us to ask you,” Melanie continued, for all the world looking completely oblivious to her sister's actions. “We think the gang is done.”

I blinked, shifting my gaze from Miltia to Melanie, sending her a questioning look. “How so?”

“Without the drug trade, there's barely enough profit to stay afloat—let alone expand. Even having unofficially absorbed the Red Hand and with our expanded territory, we're not doing as well as we'd like,” she admitted.

I shot a glance down to Miltia, but the girl's eyes were closed now as she'd slowed her pace enough for me to listen and concentrate without being entirely distracted. “And you figured this out in the last week or so?”

“Yeah,” Melanie nodded. “Wasn't hard. We had the figures for the last few years to go by as a baseline. If we keep on as we have been, we'll stagnate and start losing money and men.”

“But you two already have an idea, otherwise you wouldn't have ambushed me,” I pointed out, and she nodded.

“We drop the gang shit and go legitimate. We've got men with fighting experience—most of the ones that have stuck around are either Hunter candidate washouts, a couple of former Atlas military, or some who have been in long enough to have experience. On top of that, we've got weapons, vehicles, armor… you get the idea. We think we should sell our services out to the kingdom, as a private militarized force for eliminating grimm or doing guard patrols, that sort of thing.” Digging into a pocket, she pulled out her scroll. “I could show you the projected numbers, if you'd like?”

“I'll take your word for it,” I shook my head. “So, you want to turn the gang into a PMC? I take it the market isn't exactly saturated with similar groups?”

Melanie shook her head. “We did some digging. There are three small groups that operate in the Kingdom of Vale, and a few other groups scattered across the rest of the kingdoms. Most of them are
composed of fewer than one hundred fighting men each, plus support personnel. The kingdoms allow them to operate and take on various contracts. We're still looking at the list of available contracts, but we've worked up a few we could take on as sort of a proof of concept—easy jobs better suited to a larger force, as opposed to the sorts of jobs Hunters are normally assigned to, though there is some overlap where PMCs are used as backup for Hunters.”

“What's wrong with Vale's military, that they aren't doing this sort of thing?” I wondered, and Melanie sent me a confused look.

“What military? The Kingdom of Vale doesn't have a military. They've relied on Atlas since the last war. On the other hand, Vale produces the largest number of Hunters, and our Hunters tend to be of better quality than those from other kingdoms, so it sort of balances out,” she shrugged.

“No, it really doesn't,” I countered. “Even against grimm, Hunters seem more like… a specialized unit you'd send into the field for recon, or quick target elimination. Against armies of grimm you would, ideally, want your own opposing army—preferably with air support and heavy artillery.”

“There aren't enough people for that,” Melanie countered. “Or rather, there aren't enough willing volunteers. We had a military at one point, but service wasn't mandatory and there weren't enough volunteers to keep it operational, so the Kingdom of Vale folded their forces into Atlas, and in exchange Atlas provides military support for Vale.”

I blinked, then palmed my face. “So, in other words, Atlas rules Vale in all but name.”

The twin nodded slowly. “It's not an unfair assessment.”

Humming, I asked, “Who supposedly does rule Vale?”

“An elected council of twenty people, with the headmasters of the Hunter schools and a liaison from the Atlas military serving as advisors. Why?”

“Because,” I murmured, slowly scratching Miltia's head and getting a pleased sound in response, “I want to make sure Atlas isn't going to take some unknown PF group popping up poorly and respond with violence.”

“They shouldn't, but we were planning to look into getting any required licenses needed to operate
inside the Kingdom just in case,” she admitted.

A thought occurred—something I wouldn't have necessarily balked at before all of this, but now that it had gone from theoretical to not just practical, but easy, I was leery of going down that route. Still, it had to be asked. “How well-protected are they? How hard would it be to get to them?”

At my waist, Miltia jumped slightly, while Melanie smirked—also seeing exactly where I was going with that thought. “Not well enough. We could puppet them, if you wanted.”

I shook my head. “Save it as a last resort. I don't mind doing that to scum like the Red Hand, but… Oh, who the fuck am I kidding? How likely is it these councilors are exactly the same sort of scum, just getting away with it legally?”

“Very,” Melanie deadpanned. “So, is that a yes or a no?”

“Have you got a list together of things we'll need?” I asked, and she tilted one hand from side to side in a so-so gesture.

“We have a general idea, but we don't have a lot of the specifics. We know we need a new base, since what we've got isn't going to cut it. We'll also need to recruit some more people—we're thinking around fifty to start with, unless someone has a better idea of what we'll need. We were going to ask our two former military members if they had any ideas on that front,” she admitted.

Well, it would be a good start at any rate. I didn't really see a reason to deny them, either. In fact, having my own private fighting force could come in very handy. And with the Red Hand in my pocket, I could continue to use them for Cinder's gang-related things as an unknowing patsy. That brought up another, obvious problem. “Cinder's going to get suspicious is we suddenly disappear.”


“Yes, it is, dear,” I grumbled. “It'll require a little extra work, but how about this: we move the gang out of Roman's old place. I get the Red Hand to send some men to replace them and have them assume the old gang's duties, and occasionally Neo, you, or myself make an appearance to keep things running smoothly. On the PMC side—which needs a name…” I trailed off, hoping she had a suggestion, but the girl shook her head. “We'll come up with one later. On the PMC side of things, I 'retire' as Shiro so I don't visibly have that identity running the PMC. Maybe hand it over to the Fox. All else fails, could just use mental spells on the old gang members aside from Jim and Angel to
smooth that over. Neo's her own walking disguise, so having her visible as a co-leader wouldn't be a problem. As for you two, you could wear wigs if you're together, or you could just show up one at a time so no one figures out there are two of you.”

“It could work,” the twin admitted.

With a smirk, I nodded. “Okay. Do it. Start by finding us a new base of operations.”

“We already had something in mind,” Melanie purred, her lips meeting mine as her sister resumed her attack, drawing a quiet groan from my lips and sending my eyes rolling up in my head.

I mustered enough focus to pull away from Melanie's lips and ask, “What do you think of a group movie night, tonight or tomorrow?”

Miltia hummed in agreement, causing a full body twitch on my part, and Melanie nodded. “Sounds fun, but we want you to ourselves tonight, so make it tomorrow. Who's coming?”

“Me, soon, if she keeps that up,” I groaned quietly, and the white-clad twin giggled. “You two, Neo, Penny, maybe Ruby and her sister if Yang wants to come.”

“Since Neo isn't around to ask, I'll ask for her: is she hot?”


“Works for me.”

Melanie rolled her eyes. “God, just shut your mouth and fuck us already— or better yet… ” There was a short flurry of motion from the girl as she yanked her dress over her head before leaning forward and pressing one of her small breasts in my face, and I got the idea. I suppose there weren't many better ways of being made to shut up. “Big tits aren't everything,” she moaned quietly as I went to work.
It had been two days since my return to Vale—making it Thursday, day sixteen of my stay in Remnant. Things had mostly settled down for the time being, since the Atlas debacle. I knew it was just a lull in the storm, however. There were still things I needed to do before Beacon, opportunities I could play to my favor, people I could meet and influence… women Neo would probably try to convince me to add to my growing harem. I’d taken the break for what it was worth, but now work called again. That morning found us seeing to the twins’ idea of making the gang into something more.

Standing in the basement of the gang’s soon-to-be former hideout, I hummed as I took in the details and changes. Where before, it had been a poorly lit and cluttered room mostly used to collect junk, now it was a clean, organized armory. Standing racks lined the walls housing a large collection of weapons—assault rifles making up the majority of the volume. That is, military grade rifles capable of full-auto fire—as opposed to the mentality that any gun capable of semi-auto fire, took more than a ‘ten round clip,’ and was black and scary was an ‘assault rifle.’ In addition, there were several larger actual machine guns, shotguns, grenade launchers, and pistols. Each type of weapon had its own set of racks, so there was a good deal of empty space on those racks that needed filling—which I made a note of for later.

In addition to the racks, a stack of organized wooden boxes lined the back wall, each labeled with its contents. Opening one, labeled ‘556,’ I whistled. Inside each box were several plastic tubs, each listed as containing 1,000 rounds. There were twenty tubs to the box, a row of ten stacked two tubs high, meaning each box of that caliber held around 20,000 rounds. I knew that different rounds were different sizes, so of course there would be fewer shotgun rounds present than 556 rounds, and fewer still grenade rounds—still, it was a fairly impressive cache for only a few days worth of work babysitting the auto-reloader.

Along with the weapons and loose rounds, I found a set of lockers, currently unlocked, containing filled magazines for every weapon there. And all of it was cataloged in a small binder, which I took a moment to glance over before shaking my head. “You’ve done good work, Jim,” I handed the binder back to the man.

“Thank you, sir,” Jim acknowledged, stowing the binder on a nail set in the ammunition locker.

“It’s a damn shame I have to tell you to tear it all down and move it.” I turned back towards the stairs, suppressing a chuckle at his expression. Well, starting today, I could honestly tell Ruby I hadn’t been lying about making this gang into something better than it had been—even if it was the twins’ idea.

“Sir?” he asked, with that poleaxed look most subordinates get, when given orders to undo hours if not days of their hard work. I knew it well, having worn it myself more than once, due to the poorly
thought out decisions of upper management. After a moment, his expression shifted to one of contemplation. “This is about the meeting today?”

“Got it in one,” I nodded, boots thumping on stairs that creaked and felt like they would give way and my foot would punch through one at any moment. Sure, I was wearing my full 'Shiro' loadout, adding at least an extra 40 or so pounds to my weight, but still—the floors were rickety and just more proof the building should have been condemned years ago. The place really was just falling apart, and that was part of the reason for what was coming, aside from a need for more space. Taking in the room above and everyone gathered there, I met Neo's eyes. The ice cream themed girl nodded in answer to my unspoken question and I moved to the front of the room. Neo stood to my right, with Jim taking his place to her right, while the twins took their places on my left.

“Okay!” I clapped my hands once, getting their attention and silencing quiet conversations. “Look around. Everyone you see here is what's left after Roman decided he'd prefer the climate elsewhere. We're down to under twenty people who felt we were worth sticking around for and we're headquartered in a run down, rotted out apartment building in one of the shittiest neighborhoods in town. Let's face it, this place could burn to the ground and property values here would only go up.”

There were scattered chuckles and I nodded. “Things can't go on as they have been. We,” I gestured between myself and the girls, “have had some time to go over everything here and we've come to some conclusions. Roman's gang is dead and there's no putting it back together. And that's a good thing. Sticking around here, doing the same things he was, will lead to failure. Adapt or die, as the saying goes. So, first order of business: we're moving out of this shit hole. The Malachite sisters have been kind enough to find us something better suited to our needs, in a better location. Over the course of the next few days, we'll be moving our operations, equipment, and so on to the new location. Jim will be handing out assignments once we're done.” The girls had gone so far to draw up work schedules and had, by now, sent the information to Jim's scroll.

It hadn't been hard at all for the twins to convince me of the merits of this plan—especially given their surprise attack. The new location was based in the Industrial district, away from most of the gangs' turf wars. This would have been counterproductive—given that industrial sectors tended to be a favorite for illicit dealings on Earth—except for a few mitigating factors. Firstly, we weren't going to be a gang any more. Secondly, in Remnant, with space at a premium they couldn't just let viable buildings and plots of land inside the walls sit empty for years on end. The only 'vacant' areas like that tended to be owned by the gangs themselves—Roman owned a number of them himself, in fact. I'd given the twins a list of requirements for the new place and they had done marvelously in meeting them—among those requirements was a large parking lot and a flat roof, preferably one that already had a helipad, with roof access leading below and elevators. Of particular note, I'd requested there either be no skylights or if there were, that we would be sealing them before we finished moving in—because fuck people like me, pulling the Batman infiltration route. When we were done securing the place, I wanted it proof against me as a baseline—nothing short of creating an ID should allow anyone easy access, and I'd be cutting off that route with wards as soon as possible. That, or finding a way to cut off everyone but myself from creating an ID there. It was part of the defensive suite of
wards I was looking into for the apartment, in my renewed paranoia after the Atlas incident. Though, it wasn't paranoia when they really were potentially out to get me.

I'd already showed Angel what I'd collected from Atlas and she was chomping at the bit to get behind the stick of one of the armed craft. Since it cost me no mana to leave a summoned vehicle deployed, I could summon up the armed Bullhead and Razorback and leave them parked in the parking lot and on the roof of the new place—prepped and ready for quick deployment. And, being properly paranoid, I'd made sure to check my new acquisitions for tracking devices, transponders, and the like—since I knew the various military forces of Earth would have kept their own equipment lojacked, there was no reason to assume that that rule had changed upon coming to Remnant. Thankfully, while there was a transponder in each of the vehicles I'd taken from Atlas, they had been disabled—and since I hadn't done it myself, I had to assume it was my Semblance. Some part of the process of eating a vehicle, most likely. So, would n't matter if we were across the city from our assets when, with one call, we could have a team in the air and on-site within five minutes, which was considerably less than our previous response time.

“Secondly: we're going to be recruiting.” Actually, that wasn't entirely true. While I was perfectly willing to take volunteers, at the moment I was more intent on collecting conscripts. I would be going around to the other gangs in town later and pulling the same stunt with them that I had with the Red Hand—that is, brainwashing their higher ups and subverting control of their gangs. From there, I would separate out the good from the bad—useful people who were still decent would wind up being offered jobs in my PMC. The trash that tended to hang around most gangs, on the other hand, would either be pressed into service as cannon fodder or used as disposable ground troops for use on Cinder-related gang activities, depending on whether or not they knew which end of a gun to point at a grimm.

“With Beacon nearby, not to mention Signal, Siren, and so on, Vale doesn't particularly lack for Hunters or prospective Hunters. The problem is, those Hunters can't be everywhere. And, as you no doubt are aware, the kingdom of Vale does not have an armed service—they rely on their Hunters to deal with grimm and, if the situation gets bad enough, call on Atlas. There's a very large gap there, just begging to be filled. What we propose is turning this outfit into a private military company. As a PMC, we can contract out our services to the city, or the nation itself.” There was the possibility that, if we proved not just effective on the battlefield but cost effective, the council of Vale could start using our group as a private police force—slowly replacing their own government contracted police. It wasn't too much of a stretch to imagine, really—our men would already be patrolling the city and surroundings for grimm, so why not give them the authority to make arrests as well, should they happen upon a crime in progress? And after that, why not just go ahead and give them the authority to pursue criminals in other ways typically reserved for police and specialized police units, like SWAT? “We'd be fighting grimm, yes, but we'd be getting paid to do it.”

Taking a look around, I said, “Anyone who doesn't want to be involved, feel free to leave now.” Giving them the choice here was risky, but then, I had a contingency plan in place for anyone who didn't join up—namely, mental spells to make sure they wouldn't be remembering anything about the group if they did decide to quit. It was that, or asking the girls to make a note of the quitters and making sure they got fitted for a pair of cement shoes before they could spill their guts, and I would
rather not kill them if there were other choices. I waited a minute, then turned to the twins. “Girls?”

Melanie drew out a remote control for the portable hologram projector they had set up in front of the room. “These are our figures from last year—both officially and what Roman skimmed for himself.” The hologram clicked on, displaying a spreadsheet and a line graph. “Fifteen percent of the take off the top for himself wasn’t really all that bad, considering most gang leaders tend to take a good deal more. Still, the take itself was... lackluster, to say the least.”

Beside me, Neo snorted softly and, under her breath, commented, “Sums up a lot of parts of Roman’s life.”

I winced at the low blow while Melanie forced down a smile and continued. “It's part of why Roman cut the operation down to the size he did—maximizing profit by reducing the workforce and increasing the workload per individual. Most of that money went into properties across the city—which, while not terrible investments, were not great either.”

Taking the remote from her sister, Miltia flipped to the next slide. “And these are the projected figures we would be pulling in as a PMC.” She advanced the slide again. “Our expenses outfitting ourselves as a PMC: the new headquarters, more weapons, armor, vehicles, Dust, personnel, and training. As you can see, we'll make all of that back and then some within the first year. More, if we get adventurous. If we work with the Hunters, we can help to clear out and secure, even take back areas around Vale that have either fallen to grimm or are currently suffering incursions. Even without Hunters, we can still patrol and clear areas closer to home. Of course, the more risky the mission, the larger the payout. Clearing areas like this, for instance, would net us a tidy profit,” she advanced the slide to a large, detailed map of the kingdom of Vale.

A red dot circled a gold-colored area that had been labeled as taken over by grimm. “This is one of the largest continuous stretches of land in Vale and was, at one time, the breadbasket of the country—producing much of our grain. Clearing this would earn us enough, in one job, to pay for all of that and then some. It can't be done all in one go, simply because of the sheer size of the area. Well, no, that isn't entirely true. It could all be done in one go... with enough high grade fire Dust. The problem is, they want arable farmland when we're done—not a self-lighting, glass parking lot.

“What we can do, however, is put in a bid for a job that just went up. The Vale council is coming up for reelection and someone is getting ambitious and looking to wall the entire area in, then clear out the inside. The job would be to guard work crews working on building the wall—of which, there will be a couple dozen, so we won’t be the only group working on this, but we will be the largest. By the time we get to the third or fourth area, we probably will be the only ones working on it, considering we're planning to buy out the other groups with the money we make initially to rapidly expand our numbers.
“From what plans have been released, they plan to expand the area in hexes. Wall in a hexagonal area spanning a hundred or so miles, clear it, then build another connecting it and so on so that it's more difficult for grimm to move around freely. And for all of this, we will be the only ones on the job, once we've bought out the other groups. This contract isn't scheduled to start until next quarter, so we've got a few months to prepare until then, but it's a large job set to last a few years—with rotation on crews every three months—and we would like to try to take it once we've done a few smaller jobs and gotten some experience under our belts so we know what we're doing. Think about it: money from guarding the building crews, then money from clearing inside the walls, then being paid to check previous hexes on a regular basis as the work progresses forward to ensure flying grimm or tunnelers haven't gotten in and started nesting, and we'll be doing it for long enough that if we find out who is being ambitious to get on or stay on the Council and get in their good books, we could be the sole contractors for a lot of this for years. Assuming we don't screw up somewhere, we could be financially set for a long, long time off this job alone—and we won't be taking just this job, so we should be doing extremely well for ourselves. Then, once it's complete, the other kingdoms are going to look at what's been reclaimed in Vale and they're going to want to start doing their own expansion and reclamation projects—and guess who will be number one on the short list of people with experience doing exactly that.”

“Vale might even have us try to clear out and take back Mountain Glenn, depending on a few factors—how long it takes, how many men we have, and so forth,” Melanie continued as Miltia left off, “Other than that, we'll basically just be offering extra security for Vale. Patrol the city, report grimm sightings, kill them if they get too close, that sort of thing. We would also be expected to respond in the event the city falls under attack by grimm. It shouldn't happen, but if it does, we'd be right on the front lines and helping to secure and protect civilians.”

A hand went up and I found our pilot looking on with an amused look. “Questions?”

“Yeah, boss. I think I speak for everyone here when I say we don't really care what we're doing, so long as it makes money. If it's legitimate and won't get us arrested doing it, that's great. But we didn't really care about the danger of cops before, so do you think we're worried about grimm when we've got air support, a small mountain of weapons and ammo, and license to hose anything that doesn't walk on two legs down with full-auto fire? Yeah, I get that some grimm are immune to bullets but we wouldn't be under orders to throw our lives away against something like that—the tactical retreat is a perfectly valid response to something you can't kill with what you have on hand, and if you're right about expanding this thing as big as you're talking, odds are good we'll have something on hand that will kill that kind of grimm by then. Really, all I want to know is what it's going to pay me—same as everyone else here.”


The pair traded an amused look before Melanie flipped through several slides. “Pay scale based on the job, as a percentage. Having a larger force obviously means less pay to go around, but it also means less risk. We're looking to start out with a force of fifty or so. Half the money goes back into the business. As our only combat pilot at the moment, Angel, you will be expected to select and train
a group of at least three others to pilot, assuming we don't come across anyone else with that skill set. You'll be paid to train new pilots separately from your pay for active duty—which is listed there,” she pointed. “Now, these aren't specific to everyone here and are just for individual ranks and roles, but you get the idea.”

There was some murmuring amongst the group as Angel conferred with the other men. Finally, she said, “Well, it's better than what we were making. What about hazard pay?”

“If you see combat, our contract stipulates that our pay is to be increased based on the number and type of grimm encountered and killed,” Miltia answered. The slide changed again. “And for those of you worried, the contract also stipulates that anyone killed on the job will have all their final expenses taken care of, in addition to a payout to the next of kin.”

There was some more talking amongst the men before Angel, who had apparently become their spokesperson, grinned. “When do we start?”

“Now,” I answered, giving Jim the go-ahead.

“Alright! Work crews. Half of you get to help haul that shit up from the basement and get it moved. The rest, go over the upper floors here for anything of value. We're getting this done today. Hop to it, people,” he yelled, and they began moving.

I made eye contact with Angel and gestured her over. “Sir?”

Beside me, Neo smirked. “You're now in charge of our air force. Congratulations on your promotion. Now, get us a list of what you need.”

“You want a list? Okay. Men, first and foremost. Flight crews—at least three people per bird, then triple that so they can work in shifts, so nine flight crew members per aircraft if you want eight hour shifts round the clock. You could drop a crew, but you'd either have to have each crew run one double shift or sacrifice hours of flight time. Also, we need an experienced aviation mechanic, in addition to another mechanic for our ground vehicles if and when you get them, plus crew for them. My suggestion there is to pick up a couple of surplus APCs and AFVs for moving troops around in large numbers and providing ground support, evacuation, hardened mobile shelter against grimm—that sort of thing. The council probably has some still mothballed somewhere collecting dust from when this kingdom had its own military, that they'd be willing to have taken off their hands. They'd be old, but old doesn't necessarily mean they won't work.” Turning, she whistled at Jim nearby and waved him over. “Weren't you a jarhead?”
Jim nodded. “Yeah, what's up?”

“Think you can put in a few calls? We need a motor pool,” Angel supplied.

“Sure, I'll see what I can find,” he agreed. After a moment, he asked, “Boss, you said you were looking for volunteers, right? I know there's plenty like us who've done their time and left the service, only to get shit on by the government. Civilians don't like hiring us, so things aren't great for them. There's a lot of grunts out there that would gladly jump all over the chance to get back in the field at the kind of pay you're offering.”

I traded a look with Neo and the twins, who nodded agreement. “Make the call.”

“As I was saying,” Angel continued. “Not much of an idea on numbers there, but at a guess, three or four per AFV or APC. I'd hold off on setting anything in stone until we get someone to run our motor pool who actually knows what they're talking about. We need more aircraft, as well. The Bullhead and Razorback are good troop transport and CAS models, but they can only carry between eight and twelve troops. If we're going to be fielding people in a hurry, we need more birds, which means more flight crew, and more ground crew—or larger birds of a different model. Again, all that on top of a few APCs and AFVs to keep on site if we're planning to go out and secure grimmlands. We'll also need somewhere to store the machines and work on them, so a hangar, and an airfield. Don't we have an airfield already?” she asked, and I nodded.

“Yeah, with a couple of hangars. We can convert it to our needs,” I agreed. “Is that a thing for the motor pool, or should we look into getting someone more specialized?”

Humming, Angel added, “Probably need a small engineering corps, sir, for planning and construction of structures like that.”

In other words, at least another half-dozen. The idea of starting small was quickly going out the window, with the sheer number of people required for each job. ‘Well, it'll take as many as it takes if we want it to work.’

“Other than that?” Angel asked, drawing me out of my thoughts. “Modifications for what we have and plans to modify future aircraft. My personal recommendation? Mount at least one .50 BMG behind the sliding doors on the Bullheads, and at least one at the back of the Razorback so it can fire when the tail is open. I'd prefer one Ma Deuce or gatling mounted in each door and one on the tail for each Bullhead, and cutting a couple of slots in the sides of the Razorback so we can add guns
there. It'd mean more flight crew per machine, but it'd provide a hell of a lot more firepower than the nose guns alone could provide. This way, at least, they could do double duty as true CAS gunships and drop-ships. Unless you're planning to acquire purpose-built gunships just for that. Also, if I had a wish list, rockets would be on it. And mortars carried in the APCs. Also, if you can find some, AFVs mounted cannons for taking out swarms of airborne grimm.”

“Well, you wanted more weapons anyway, sir,” Jim shrugged, grinning. “And as the saying goes, there is no such thing as overkill...”

“Only 'Open fire' and 'Is it dead yet,'” I shook my head. “What are your thoughts on laser weapons?”

“Damned expensive,” Jim deadpanned.

Angel nodded, adding, “Useful, if you can get your hands on one. There are beam weapons mounted on the larger ships and they're amazingly effective, especially for pinpoint strikes from a distance—but railguns are preferred. If you were looking to make one of the Bullheads dedicated air support, a beam weapon or two wouldn't go amiss. I'm not going to say no, but you'd need another crewman to run it, something to fuel it, and it'd take up space that could otherwise go towards something that doesn't generate massive amounts of heat when you use it. Atlas equips most of their spider tanks with those, but the AI on those things sucks and they work better if a person is at the helm.”

“I have some spare parts that just so happened to come off a couple of those,” I grinned. “Eh, if we find a use for them, fine. If not, that's fine too.” I turned to the twins. “Do we already know the name of a supplier for all of this?”

Melanie rolled her eyes while Miltia shook her head and said, “No, but we can do some digging. Though, if either of you already know someone, that'd help,” she suggested looking towards the two former members of Atlas armed services.

“Maybe. I'll make some calls and see what I can find out,” Jim agreed, Angel nodding alongside him.

“Sooner the better,” I urged, and the man nodded. Gesturing towards the door outside, I began walking. “Come out back and I'll get you the Razorback, and you can go ahead and move it over. I'll leave the Bullhead behind for when you get back.”
As we stepped outside, there was a small flash of green light particles and Penny appeared at my side, walking in step with me. The Ancula was not wearing her default outfit—instead, she'd substituted the dress for the clothes I'd picked up for her in Vytal: tight black pants in the style my older sisters—at least, the ones I'd met—favored, knee-high black boots, a dark purple long sleeved shirt, a gray tactical-style vest, a neck gaiter matching the shirt to cover her lower face, and red contacts. Her hair had been temporarily dyed the same dark shade of purple as her shirt and pulled up into a different style, but like my Shiro disguise, it appeared to be semi-permanent and reusable given that she could just equip the entire outfit. In all, it was intentionally similar to my work clothes, so that she could travel with me in the open and not stand out while in the city and anyone who saw us would see the obvious resemblance in dress and make their own assumptions. With certain factions having complete, unfettered access to the city-wide CCTV network, I wasn't taking any chances.

I blinked at her sudden appearance, one eyebrow creeping towards my hairline. “So you can summon yourself to me?”

“Yep,” she agreed, popping the 'p.' “Neat, huh?”

“It is,” I admitted, then winced as a thought occurred. Looking around, I spotted the camera overlooking the alley—destroyed, some time ago by the look of it. “Where'd you 'port from?” I asked her, already knowing I wouldn't be that lucky.

“Behind an ice cream shop in the commercial district,” she answered, pulling up the map and tapping the location to set a waypoint, which showed up on my map.

Pulling it up and looking it over, I groaned—it was in view of no less than three cameras. Well, at least the good news was that she was in disguise. “Penny?” I asked, getting a questioning hum in answer. “Would you do me a favor?”

“If it is within my ability, I would be happy to, Jaune,” she beamed.

“Great,” I nodded. “No more summoning yourself to me, unless it's an emergency. I know it's not something Atlas can tie back to you, since it's a Semblance-granted ability, but to be on the safe side, let's not take any chances there, okay? Because if you happen to be wearing your normal clothes and 'port to me when I'm in view of a camera, it'll look really, really bad.”

“Ooh,” she winced, then nodded. “Okay, Jaune. I won't.”
“So, what now?” Melanie asked, as Angel took the Razorback up with a full load of men and equipment to move to the new site and I summoned up the Bullhead.

I turned to look between Neo and the twins. “Leveling?”

The twins shared a look and shrugged. “Sure, why not?” Melanie asked.

“We could use the levels,” Miltia agreed. “Where at?”

“Stuff around here is kind of low,” Melanie pointed out, and I nodded.

Pulling up my map, I zoomed out and looked for somewhere worthwhile. “Penny and I have been running into that problem lately, the last couple of nights. Mobs around here are great for training skills off of, but terrible for grinding levels. I was thinking Forever Fall. Any objections?”

“Actually,” Neo sent me an apologetic look. “I've still got some stuff to take care of, if you don't mind?”

“I don't mind. Do you need some help?” I asked, and the ice cream themed girl hummed, shooting a look at the twins.

Something seemed to pass between the three girls before the twins traded a look between themselves before shifting their gaze back to me. “Actually, we'll help her,” Melanie decided.

“Sorry, Jaune. Another time?” Miltia asked, and I nodded.

“Sure,” I agreed, regarding the trio a moment before asking, “Anything I can help with?”

“Nope!” came three answers simultaneously. “Girl stuff,” Neo grinned.

Melanie nodded. “You'd be bored to death.”
Beside her twin, Miltia shrugged. “Unless you're in the mood to try on clothes for us, or watch us try on clothes?”

“Appealing as that idea is,” I began, earning rolled eyes and a soft snort from the trio in question, “I'll have to decline.” I did not feel particularly inclined towards volunteering myself as a life-sized dress up doll for three girls who made their own clothes and who knew I was down one set of armor, since what I’d worn up to Atlas had been damaged nearly beyond repair. As I understood it, the trio all made their own outfits and only bought pieces from stores to modify, or disassemble and reverse engineer—aside from underwear, apparently. I was not stupid, though. The odds of them actually doing anything related to clothes was slim—they were up to something. However, with my Semblance telling me I had their loyalty, short of doing loyalty missions, I wasn't really worried. I'd jumped to conclusions before, and there came a point where I'd have to trust them outside of my sight—it seemed like the right time, so I wouldn't pry.

Penny, bouncing on the balls of her feet beside me, turned her temporarily red gaze up to meet my eyes and suggested, “We could go find that nice girl you introduced me to the other day and see if she wants to go.”

“Yes, go play with Ruby,” Miltia suggested, making shooing motions with her hand. “We'll catch up with you later.”

Watching the trio walk off towards what I supposed was Neo's apartment, I turned to Penny and shrugged. Well, I say 'supposed,' when the truth was I knew exactly where her apartment was now—I'd gone out of my way to follow her on my map, then swung by her place under concealment just to check afterwards. I justified it as needing to know where Neo lived in the event of an emergency, but really, I'd be lying if I said that had been my primary reason at the time. As I said, I was going to have to start trusting them at some point—they'd done nothing to convince me I shouldn't trust them, so far. “Well, that settles that.” Pulling out my scroll, I put in the call, leaning against the brick wall of our soon-to-be-former hideout as I listened to it ring.

It picked up on the fourth ring and I heard a minor din in the background, something that sounded like video game music. “Uh, Jaune! I didn’t expect you to call. That is, um…” She sighed, just loud enough that I could pick it up over the scroll before it seemed she recovered. “Sorry, you surprised me. What's up?”

As I started to reply, whatever recovery Ruby had managed was blown as a light, male voice in the background asked, “Jaune? Who's that?”

I could hear the teasing grin as Yang answered, loudly, “Oh, nobody important. Just her boyfriend.”
“Oh, her boyfriend. Okay then,” the man in the background acknowledged.

“As I was saying. Want to—” I began, only to have to yanked the scroll away from my ear as the man in the background shouted, “HER WHAT?!"

“Boyfriend,” Yang happily answered.

“Yaaaang!” Ruby whined, and I palmed my face. If she'd meant to deny it, that response had all but guaranteed further teasing. It pretty much screamed 'tease me' to anyone looking to see what sort of reaction they could get out of her.

“My baby girl has a boyfriend? What's his name? Where does he live? Who is his next of kin?” the man, presumably Taiyang asked, and I winced as I realized where that line of questioning was going. Where did I live, so he could come fine me, and who was my next of kin, so he could inform them after he'd killed me. Couldn't say I blamed him, really—I was an older sibling myself, on two worlds, and understood familial loyalty fairly well. I already had plans worked up for terrorizing Jun's future potential suitors, once she matured out of her little crush and started seeing other boys as dateable. That, and looking for plots to bury said potential future boyfriends, should they do something distasteful—or otherwise lay their filthy hands on my sister before she was thirty. Yeah, that seemed like a nice, round number for her to get married at.

“Daaaad! It's not like that!” the little reaper denied, and I rolled my eyes.

“You are so easy to tease,” I mumbled, apparently not quietly enough however.

“Jauuune! You're supposed to be on my side!” the girl whined again, and I had to mute the scroll so she couldn't hear my laughter.

In the background from Ruby's end, I heard Taiyang quietly conversing with his eldest daughter for a moment before suggesting, “Why don't you invite him over, Ruby? I think I'd like to meet him.”

There was a scuffling sound as I assumed Ruby covered her scroll's mic with her hand. “So you can scare him off?”
“Yes,” Taiyang confirmed, and there was a loud smack of flesh on flesh. “Ow! Yang, don't abuse your father,” he chastised. A moment later, he added, “I mean… no? I won't scare him off?” he asked, likely at some sign from Yang herself.

Ruby uncovered the scroll and I heard her groan quietly. “Jaune, would you like to come over and meet my dad?”

“Sure, why not? He sounds like a decent guy,” I chuckled, and she gave a wordless little mewl of a whine.

“You heard all of that?!”

I rolled my eyes, pushing off the wall and summoning up the unarmed Bullhead next to the one waiting for Angel to come get it. “No, I just imagined it up,” I countered.

“Oh ha ha. You think you're funny, but you're not,” the girl denied. “So is that a yes or a no?”

“I'll meet you in twenty or so,” I confirmed, dropping into my seat as Penny started the craft. “I'll put down in the field where we first met, if you want to meet me there.”

“Sure. See you soon,” she agreed, and the call disconnected.

“Outfit change,” I warned Penny some twenty-odd minutes later as she brought the Bullhead in for a landing in a cleared field on the island of Patch, before subvocalizing my own armor change into my 'Jaune' outfit. Looking down, I hummed as I took it in. 'I really need to do something about this outfit. At the very least, replace the jeans with some black BDU-style pants or something.'

Beside me, Penny's own stealth outfit was replaced with her default outfit, as she'd taken my advice on how to use the armor sets to heart. “Why are we changing clothes? I thought I wasn't supposed to wear this in Vale.”

And didn't that bring up another problem? If Penny was going to be following me around—and I had a suspicion that's exactly what she'd be doing—then she'd need more disguises. At least as many as myself, plus one: one for when Penny was in public with 'Shiro,' one for 'Jaune,' and one for the Fox, plus her original. If she decided to show up at Beacon in her Shiro-themed infiltration outfit and started talking to me as Jaune, that could cause problems. No, we were going to need some degrees
of separation between our respective identities. In fact, like my own alternate identities, she would also be needing different weapons and fighting styles to go along with them. I nearly groaned at the prospect of figuring that out, before I realized I didn't necessarily have to—I had at least three women in my life who made their own outfits and would probably love to have Penny as their personal, life-sized doll. The weapons and combat styles, on the other hand—well, I'd ask around. She couldn't use her puppet swords/lasers or her battle armor with her other outfits, so we'd have to figure something out.

“Well, we're technically not in Vale. We're on Patch,” I countered, and she shot me an amused smile. “However, more specifically, there are no cameras here. None. Not a goddamn one outside of Signal's campus and training field. Did some digging after the Roman thing—”

“By which, you mean you asked the twins,” Penny clarified as we exited the Bullhead, leaving it in place so I wouldn't have to summon it again should somebody be watching. Despite the fact that she was being a smartass—I think, because I wasn't entirely sure yet whether she was that way naturally or whether some of my snark had rubbed off on her—she still had a point, even if she didn't know it. If Penny, who had been with me for less than two full days, had picked up on that fact then I was probably using the twins a bit too much for that, they might just get the wrong impression and start thinking I was only using them for intel and sex. I made a mental note to do something nice for them soon.

I continued as though I hadn't heard her, because snark didn't deserve a response and would only encourage further snark, “And I found out that the people of Patch hate the surveillance state the city of Vale has become—not to mention Atlas. They're kind of like Vytal that way: a few years behind because that's how they prefer it. And thirdly, because as far as I know, Ruby's dad has no ties to Atlas so you're relatively safe here. Well, beyond being a teacher at Signal and likely being on speaking terms with Ozpin, but then probably ninety percent of the Hunters in Vale are also on speaking terms with Beacon's headmaster. On the other hand, Yang doesn't know I'm Shiro, so—”

“Jaune! Penny!” Ruby greeted and, a moment later, a small explosion of rose petals announced her presence invading my personal space with a hug, before she quickly detached herself and latched onto Penny the same way. Ruby was adorable and all but melted under the least little show of physical affection, which told me she was a bit starved for touch and/or attention. Of course, at the moment, I was probably still in that area where she wasn't entirely sure what she should do or what she could get away with. I knew better than to push someone like that away unless it truly bothered me, as it would only set back whatever progress had been made with them. That, and to be quite honest, while I wasn't a touchy-feely person by nature, I made exceptions for cute girls.

“So, how're things going?” I asked the girl as she turned and took off towards her family's cabin. Out of habit, I added Ruby to the party Penny insisted on keeping up when she was active—which seemed redundant, since she was technically already in party being that she showed up to my Semblance like Sanguine did, in the battle pet slot, but wasn't really. Being in party meant she had
the same party-level privileges that anyone outside the party leader also had—the ability to invite new party members if I set it to allow it, the ability to mark targets, and so forth—as opposed to being in the battle pet slot, which didn't allow most of that. I also suspected it probably had equal parts to do with her wanting me to see her as more than equipment, and the fact that she craved social interaction more than anyone I'd ever met.

Next, I set up a low-level telepathic link so we could practice using it to pass along information and the like, since it was entirely too useful not to use once we got to Beacon. Telepathy as a spell didn't work on Penny, but it would have been redundant anyway—testing had proved that, similarly to Sanguine, we already had a continuous link so long as she was active. The only downside there was that Penny couldn't initiate or be brought into a link with anyone else—meaning verbal communication only between Penny and Ruby or anyone else, unless I wanted to act as a relay. We had discovered that, while Penny could go inactive in a sort of suspend mode and retreat into my Inventory, she didn't like to—at all. I didn't mind letting her run around and do her own thing instead of just… essentially sticking her in a pokeball. Penny wanted to be her own person and I was happy to let her.

Shooting me a look over her shoulder, Ruby asked, “Can you help me hide a body? It doesn't have to be in one piece.”

“I'm not helping you hide your sister's body,” I denied. “Besides. You think you've got it bad? I've got seven of them.” Well, I didn't have it, per se. There was just the eldest that wanted to have my babies, and the youngest that wanted to be a bride, and the second oldest who was conflicted on the whole thing, and her twin who wanted to even the score and see what all the fuss was about… Okay, not bad for certain uses of the word. I'm sure Jaune, the real Jaune, would've had fits if he knew what I'd gotten up to with his sisters.

“Why would you need to hide your sister's body?” Penny asked. “Has she expired since Jaune spoke with you?”

“Not yet,” Ruby grumbled, and I reached up and poked her in the ribs. “Eek!”

Grinning down at her as silver eyes met my blue, I shrugged. “She only does it to get a rise out of you. It's the privilege of elder siblings to tease their younger siblings mercilessly for entertainment.” Ruby pouted, and I continued, lips twitching up into a smirk. “It is the privilege of younger siblings to retaliate, mercilessly. I suggest a well-played prank or two. Cellophane over the toilet seat, or an irritant in her panties. I'd suggest shaving her head, but I have a feeling she would genuinely kill me if she found out I suggested it and you carried through with it.” My own payback against the Arc sisters for the onesie would be coming, at some point. Maybe I could negotiate them into disposing of the evidence.
“She really would,” Ruby nodded. She hummed, looking at me sideways momentarily before asking, “Have I ever told you how much she loves her hair?”

I resisted the urge to wince. I’d slipped up there, just a little, knowing more than I probably should. ‘Roll for bullshit,’ I mused, thankful that Ruby wasn’t quite so used to the telepathic link yet that she could pick out things as well as I could. Then again, I had stats and a more mature mind aiding me—I should be surprised she could use it as well as she did. “She seems like the type, given how long it is. I’ve known girls who spent hours a day trying to get that look.” I shot her a sidelong glance and hummed.

“What?” she asked, blushing slightly under my scrutiny.

I shrugged. “Just wondering what you’d look like with long hair.”

Her blush increased threefold and she began twiddling her fingers. “Shut up,” she finally mumbled.

Ruby lead us to a path through the woods, though it was more like a trail worn into the ground and underbrush than a real path, and we fell into a comfortable silence as she lead us towards her home. As the woods began to thin as we neared the clearing surrounding the cabin, I asked, “How bad is this going to be?”

“Eh he heh,” Ruby laughed, so obviously forced that I winced. “I don't know. This has never happened before.”

Behind me a pace, Penny hummed. “Surely it will not be as bad as you fear, Jaune? I have observed no untoward actions in your interactions with Ruby and surely her father must be happy that she is making new friends?”

“It's a father's prerogative to make sure the man courting his daughter is worth it and not a creep, degenerate, criminal, or otherwise undesirable,” I informed her, a small smile crossing my lips as I did. And if the father wasn’t available, that duty fell to the oldest child, preferably the oldest male child.

“But Jaune, you are a cri—” Penny began, but was silenced as I reached out and covered her lips with two fingers.

“I tried. I could not find a suitable package,” Penny countered.

“Make one from scratch.” In front of me, Ruby turned around to walk backwards, crossing her arms behind her head as she locked silver eyes with my blue and a knowing smile crossed her features. “Don't you start, either.”


I rolled my eyes, opening my mouth to retort when a flash of motion in the corner of my vision caught my eye and, at the same instant, my detection skills pinged a threat. Between the girls and Penny, I'd spent enough time recently moving in formation without speaking that it was pretty much reflexive on my part to issue orders via a combination of telepathy and the party system. With only a rough direction and speed to work with, I sent the order to Ruby and Penny to spread out and flank the projected point of impact—namely, right where I was standing. My shield came up and expanded as I turned to face the fast moving threat, drawing a saber into place as a shout reached my ears. “DYNAMIC ENTRY!”

'What,' I had an instant to think, before a weight slammed into the center of my shield. 'Oh god, please tell me there isn't a Gai or Lee equivalent on Remnant. I don't think I could handle that.'

Reflex took over where thinking momentarily faltered and I squeezed the trigger on my shield, shoving in a Shield Bash and at the same time swinging my Blazefire Saber out to catch whatever—who ever—had impacted my shield as I forcibly threw them off. The shotgun built into the shield went off, a white-tinted hail of double-aught red Dust pellets erupting out from the center of it as I shoved, my sword coming forward and hitting nothing but air as a large, yellow-and-brown form shoved off my shield and flipped over the sword strike and in the process shoved me back a good foot and off balance. At the same time, I sent the command, 'Cover fire.'

A trio of retorts from Crescent Rose sounded back to back as the world in front of me lit up green with laser fire as I hopped back, spinning my Saber around into rifle mode and taking aim at where the attacker should have been. A low whistle from nearby drew our attention to where a tall blond man with an obvious family resemblance to a certain blonde brawler stood, leaning up against a tree and I got my first good look at him, and his level.

Taiyang Xiao Long
“Kids these days are scary,” he grinned, pushing off the tree and stuffing his hands in his pockets. I almost missed his words as I saw something I hadn't seen before—a title rotating between three selections in a steady, three second interval. I'd seen secondary titles, but I'd never seen someone with a primary title that changed every few seconds. Still, they all told a different story about the man before me.

To my left, Ruby's eyes went wide as she shot a look down at the rifle in her hands, back to where Taiyang had been standing, then to the man himself—realizing that she'd reacted instinctively, with no hesitation whatsoever, and had trusted me to check our target first. “Dad? What? I... uhh…”

Reaching the girl, Taiyang reached out and ruffled her hair. “You did fine, kiddo. That's exactly how you should react to an unknown threat. Though,” he turned raised eyebrows on me, “it looked like you guys were pretty familiar with each other, to anticipate how you'd all react like that.”

“We um… we've been practicing?” Ruby tried, and I chuckled, spinning my saber down and sheathing it while disengaging my shield. Beside me, Penny's marionette swords found their way back into their storage compartment and, following our lead, Ruby put away her own weapon.

“Is that what you call it?” an amused voice asked, and I turned to find Yang poking her head outside from one of the cabin's doors. “Sounds like I'm missing out.”

“Yaaaang!” Ruby cried, shooting a glare at her sister.

I rolled my eyes at the siblings' antics, closing most of the distance between myself and Taiyang. “Jaune Arc. I'm Ruby's friend,” I offered the man my hand, turning an amused look on Yang as I added, “Or boyfriend, depending on who you ask.”

Yang stuck her tongue out and I turned my attention back to Taiyang, who I noticed wasn't attempting to crush my hand into paste as I'd expected him to. My knuckles didn't even pop before he released my hand. “Yeah, so I'd heard,” he chuckled, shooting his eldest daughter an amused look before turning his gaze back to me. “So, how are your parents doing?”
I blinked, shaking my head as I realized the obvious—of course Taiyang Xiao Long would know the Arcs, for a variety of reasons, the least of which included that he'd likely taught a few, if not most of my siblings at Signal. That of course begged the question of why I—or Jaune, rather—hadn't been sent to Signal or Siren, but I could put off answering that until later. Unfortunately, I had no real answer for his question, so I rolled with what had worked so far. “Couldn't really say,” I shrugged. “I don't know if they told you, but there was an accident a couple of weeks ago.”

“Your dad told me,” he confirmed with a nod as he gestured towards the house. “Please, come in.”

The sisters lead the way and I followed them inside, where Taiyang gestured for us to take a seat at their kitchen table. “How bad is it?” the man asked, dropping into a chair.

I shrugged, doing likewise as Penny plopped down beside me. “I'm still figuring some things out. Oh,” I gestured towards the gynoid on my left, “This is Penny.”

“Hello,” the ancula greeted with a smile as Ruby took a seat beside her.

Taiyang Xiao Long, as it turned out, was not what I had been expecting. I had expected, to put it simply, an absentminded buffoon. I should have known better, given what I knew about his former team, his wives, daughters, and brother-in-law. Oh, he was still a bit of a dunce at times, but everything I saw lead me to believe he played that up either for laughs or specifically so people wouldn't take him seriously. He liked to play and joke around, but when it was time to get serious, he was all business—something I got an up close example of after he somehow convinced the sisters and Penny to go play some loud fighting game, without ever really asking them to give us privacy. After that, it was about what I expected from an overprotective father interested in interviewing one of his daughter's male friends—mostly mitigated by the fact that he knew my father, or Jaune's father, rather.

“How are they doing?” I asked, once I was fairly sure he was through with his interrogation. “I haven't heard from them since, well…” I tapped the side of my head.

Taiyang shrugged. “Ah, well, you know,” he began, only to wince when I shook my head. “Right, sorry. They're worried, but at the moment there isn't much they can do. I don't know the specifics, but the assignment they're on is pretty important. What I can say is that I've been friends with them for years and your parents are good people, Jaune. Maybe… not the best parents in the world, but then I don't know your situation so I couldn't say. I know they think the world of you, though.”

“More important than serious, potentially lasting damage to their only son?” I asked, a disbelieving expression crossing my face momentarily. The man across from me winced and I shook my head.
“Sorry. I'm not trying to drag you or anyone else into that mess. I was lead to believe they were just taking a break from us. Though, given the whole 'grimm' thing, you're probably right. It very well could be more important. I'll reserve judgment until I speak to them myself.”

There was a problem there, though. On the one hand, I'd heard Joan arguing with them myself. I knew she, and at least the other two eldest Arc sisters, believed their parents were simply taking a break from their responsibilities for a while. On the other hand, here was a man who had no real reason to lie to me, and a friend of my father's, telling me the Arc parents were actually doing something important. So, a few possibilities existed. It could be that the Arc sisters were mistaken, possibly because the Arc parents had lied to them about what they were doing so they wouldn't worry needlessly. Or, optionally, Taiyang could be lying to cover for Jaune's parents. There was always the possibility my sisters were lying, but I had my doubts—there was simply too much genuine anger there for that. Maybe it was some combination of the possibilities—either way that still wouldn't excuse everything else I knew about their parenting style and general neglect towards their son, based on what I'd heard.

Blowing out a quiet sigh, I put the thoughts away for another time—I didn't have enough information at the moment and even if I did, I couldn't confront them on it if they weren't around to confront. Apparently mistaking my frustration with the situation for frustration at my parents, Taiyang chuckled. “This is why I gave up hunting for the most part and started teaching. I didn't like leaving the girls home alone to worry. Not after… well,” he shrugged. “The world is a dangerous place and I realized my place was at home, making sure my girls were safe from those dangers. Though, maybe with Yang and Ruby both going off to Beacon this year, I could pick up a mission or two…”

“Miss the excitement?” I asked, smirking. If daughter took after father in this instance, and both Yang and Ruby were adrenaline junkies, I could see it.

“Maybe,” the blond nodded. His gaze shifted towards the girls' bedrooms, where we could hear the sounds of their fighting game. “I don't suppose I could ask you to look after them for me, where I can't? Ruby, well, if you've known her more than a day you have a good idea of how she is, and Yang, she acts tough, but…”

“I'd planned to anyway,” I answered, pushing myself up out of my seat. “Speaking of. I'd like to borrow Ruby and see about going out to Forever Fall and killing some grimm. Yang, too, if she wants to go. Also, I was going to invite them over for movie night—sit around, eat pizza, watch a few movies…”

Taiyang nodded. “I expect them back by midnight, Mr. Arc.”

“Midnight tomorrow?” I asked, tossing him a grin as I made my way towards the back of the home where I knew the girls to be.
“Yes, technically,” Taiyang chuckled, and I blinked before realizing what he meant and rolling my eyes.

I found the trio of girls involved over what looked like a Street Fighter clone of some sort. I would have called it a battle, but it would be more accurate to call it a slaughter. Penny had apparently completely dominated both Yang and Ruby, but then, that was almost expected of an AI. Chuckling as Penny finished off Ruby, to the girl's wail of despair, I waved as they finally noticed me. “Yo.”

“So, did dad threaten you with a shotgun wedding?” Yang asked, grinning from ear to ear.

“Nope,” I shook my head. “He approved. In fact, he suggested we should be wed as soon as possible. You and Ruby go put on something pretty and we'll go find somewhere to elope.”

“Wha—?” Yang blinked, lilac eyes going a bit wide, before shifting over to lock onto her little sister as her expression went carefully neutral.

Beside her, Ruby had at first paleed completely white before color returned with a vengeance, as she blushed from the tips of her hair all the way down as far as I could see, silver eyes going wide as they tracked between me and Yang and back twice. Finally, she managed to squeak out a response, though it was so quiet it was almost subvocal. “Okay.”

I blinked, eyebrows climbing towards my hair. “What.” Shaking my head, I palmed my face and sighed. “It was a joke, Ruby.”

“I—I knew that!” she yelped, hands flailing in momentary rage, indignation, and embarrassment.

“Aww. But I wanted to see a wedding,” Penny whined, and I rolled my eyes.

“No, no weddings,” I denied, before turning a grin back on the siblings. “He did tell me I had to have you both home by midnight, though. Growing girls need their sleep, after all, and I wouldn't want to keep you out past your bedtime.”

“Just what are you implying there?” Yang growled, as Ruby spoke over her.
“He said it was okay?” the red-clad reaper asked, and I nodded.

“Whenever you're ready,” I agreed, gesturing towards the console.

The two sisters traded a look before shifting their gaze to Penny, then back to me. I blinked upon seeing matching smirks upon their faces. “How about one more match?” Yang suggested.

“Yes, one more,” Ruby nodded. “Penny, that's okay right?”

“I do not see why it would not be, Ruby,” Penny beamed. “Will you, Jaune?”

My eyes tracked between the ancula, the sisters, and the console for a moment before I shrugged and pushed off the wall, moving to sit down in front of Ruby's telescreen. “So, you want me to pick up a game I've never played before and play against Penny, who beat the both of you—veteran players, who've been playing this game for how long?”

“Six months,” Ruby whimpered, her battered pride speaking for her. “It's not fair.”

“At all,” Yang nodded. “Now, show us what you've got, Jaune Jaune.”

I shrugged, already scrolling through character selection and pulling up moves lists. “Sure, why not?”

'It's essentially no different from any other fighting game. The control scheme is pretty much Playstation standard. Moves are, as with most games, a mixed bag. Really, the choices just boil down to super chain combo high-damage bullshit like Penny's using, or short combo, fast but weak damage characters on the other side of the spectrum. Ruby favored a character in the middle of the range for that, but it didn't work—obviously, because Penny's got the combos memorized and can spam them in pretty much at controller response speed. I'm not going to be able to beat her at that—don't think I could have back in my prime for fighting games, and it's been a few years... Oh well, what's the point of a fair fight anyway?” I grinned, finding a character selection I could work with: female, low damage, high speed and agility, with a few surprises mixed in amongst the combos.

“What. The. Hell,” Yang growled, eyes a beautiful shade of red a little under five minutes later. “I thought you said you'd never played this? How did you beat her?!”
“Soundly,” I deadpanned, powering down the console. “Penny’s got eidetic memory, or close enough, so one look at the combo list and she can stomp you with them all day long. Right?”

The ancula nodded, smiling and apparently not butthurt at all over being beaten like a rug. “Yep!”

“But you can’t chain together a combo if someone else’s character is fast enough to interrupt it. Once you’re in a corner, or stuck in an animation, you’re pretty much at the mercy of the faster player/character combination,” I shrugged. They didn’t need to know that this wasn’t exactly a new thing for me—nor was the way I’d won.

“Button mashing doesn’t count,” Yang grumbled, and I snorted quietly.

“It did better than you, didn’t it?” I snarked. I stood and helped Penny up before turning to Ruby and Yang. “So, we ready? Yang, are you coming or staying?”

Yang’s irritation seemed to vanish instantly as a leer crossed her face. “Well, gee Jaune, when you ask nicely like that I can’t help but want to come for you.”

“Yang,” Ruby sighed, rolling her eyes.

“What?” the blonde asked, putting on an innocent look. “My baby sister can’t handle a little bit of harmless innuendo?”

Pushing herself to her feet, Ruby dusted off the bottom of her skirt and shot an unamused look at her sister. “It’s never harmless with you.”

“I wouldn’t exactly call it little, either,” Yang smirked, bringing her hands up to cup her breasts momentarily to illustrate her point.

“Jaune, are you sure you can’t help me with that thing I asked you about earlier?” Ruby asked, eying her sister as her hands twitched as though imagining themselves around Yang’s neck.
I shook my head. “Sorry, Ruby.”

“Aww,” Yang grinned. “Isn't she just so adorable when she gets angry? So feisty! Like a puppy.”

'Speaking of,' I thought, glancing around and finding a sleeping ball of fur piled up on Ruby's bed. 'How can Zwei sleep through this racket?'

My attention was drawn back from the dog when Ruby smirked. “Yeah, well, so what if they're bigger? Boobs aren't everything.” She may as well have shouted her thoughts, however, as they came through loud and clear momentarily over the link I'd all but forgotten was there, an image of the twins flashing through my mind.

Yang hummed in thought before turning a curious look on me. “Not a boob guy, huh?”

Rolling my eyes, I shook my head. “I never said that. Quite the opposite, in fact.”

“Oh?” Yang asked, jumping on the perceived opening to attempt to rustle my Jimmies. “So, you consider yourself a breast connoisseur?”

“Full member of the FBI,” I countered, and seeing her confused look, grinned. “Female Body Inspectors,” I clarified. “We don't discriminate against breasts of nearly any size.”

“Nearly any?” Ruby, Yang, and Penny all echoed.

“There is such a thing as too much,” I nodded, before gesturing towards the door. “Now, come on. Time's a wasting.”

Yang and Ruby exchanged a look and Yang smirked, tossing over her shoulder as she padded out of the bedroom, “My, someone is in a hurry to get us out alone in the forest, all to himself.”

I opened my mouth to retort, only to pause as I caught sight of the half expectant, half resigned look that flitted across Ruby's face, briefly. More than that though, a thought and the emotions behind it crossed the link I'd set up earlier. I hadn't intended to use it for snooping, but it was almost expected that some unintended things would slip through. *This is the point where he leaves me behind and*
Meeting Ruby's silver eyes, I grinned and nodded towards the door. “We could leave her, if she keeps that up,” I suggested.

Silver eyes blinked and a flood of relief hit me that I knew wasn't my own. “No, that wouldn't really be fair. Let's go.”

“You want me to what?” Ruby asked, looking around the empty field—tall grass going yellow-gold with the coming change of the season and swaying slightly in the breeze—where I'd put us down, out on the outskirts of Forever Fall. Nearby, a gravel road ran into the forest beside a train track, though there was no traffic on it at the moment.

Leaning against the Bullhead, Yang crossed her arms over her chest and asked, “Yeah, could you explain this again? I think I missed something.”

I shot Yang an amused look. “Sorry, I suppose I should start near the beginning. Ruby can see things she shouldn't be able to.”

Yang snorted. “What, like ghosts?”

I turned away, hoping she missed any lapse I may have made that would have given away my thoughts on that matter. Namely, that given what I knew, that was a very real possibility now. Instead, I answered with, “Things that don't belong in the normal world. Have you ever heard of an Illusion Barrier?”

“ Nope,” Yang shook her head. “What is it?”

I sighed, moving away from the sisters and Penny and further into the field. “It'll be easier if I just show you. Ruby, I'm going to make an empty ID around myself. See if you can get in.” To Penny, I sent an order to focus on her surroundings and share her senses—essentially allowing me to see through her eyes in the same way I could with Sanguine. Better, really, given that Sanguine didn't have cybernetically enhanced eyesight and hearing, along with built in infrared and a few other things.
“Okay, Jaune,” the girl nodded, looking on intently.

Focusing on Create ID, I made a field around myself roughly two meters in diameter. From my perspective, the others vanished on the other side of a faintly visible barrier hanging in space in an area describing the ID. From the outside, from Penny's perspective, space in a two-meter wide sphere around me seemed to waver for a moment before I vanished. “Huh. That's something you don't see every day,” Yang commented, pushing off the VTOL and moving over to where I'd been standing a moment ago. She paused just outside where I knew the barrier to be and waved her hand through the air. “That's… odd. Feels kind of like static. Ruby?”

“I see it,” the smaller girl confirmed. “It looks like a sphere-shaped mirror, just sort of sitting there half in the ground. I can't see in, though.” She moved closer and reached out a hand, fingers ghosting across the surface and, from where I stood, leaving ripples against the inside of the bubble. From outside the barrier, Penny's own sensors picked up a distortion in the area where Ruby's fingers played across the barrier but not much further outward.

“I wonder why I cannot see it,” Penny mused aloud, moving closer and running her own hand through the space the barrier occupied. “I can vaguely sense it, but not really do anything with it. Jaune, should I not be able to enter it from the outside, since I am in party?”

Yang blinked, turning to regard the ancula with raised eyebrows. “In party? What do you think this is, some sort of game?”

Ruby, behind her sister, held up one finger to her lips in a shushing motion towards Penny while, at the same time, I did pretty much the same thing over our connection. “Oooh, right. Sorry,” the gynoid winced.

Shooting a look of suspicion between her sister and Penny, Yang asked, “Wait, I was just joking. Is there something going on that I should know about?”

“Oh, heh heh… Nope!” Ruby laughed that fake little laugh, then froze up as Yang's scrutiny suddenly increased ten-fold. “Erk. Right, I was supposed to be trying to get inside!”

“Now you wait just a minute”—“ Yang began, hands going to her hips as she stared down her sister. Ruby, however, had no plans on sticking around as the girl hopped to her right, passed through the barrier with a ripple of space, and disappeared. “Damnit! Get back here, Ruby!” Narrowing her eyes, she rounded on Penny. “You want to tell me what's going on?”
“Why Yang, I have no idea what you mean,” Penny smiled, putting on her best innocent face.

Inside the barrier, I sighed. “Come on, we'd better go bail Penny out before your sister finds a way to convince her to spill.”

Beside me, Ruby raised an eyebrow. “You can't just make her forget?”

“I could,” I shrugged. “I'm not going to. It's your sister, for one thing. For another, I won't do that to friends over things that others already know. Also, we're going to have to tell her once we get to Beacon anyway. May as well do it now, so it's not a surprise.”

“I suppose you're right,” Ruby acknowledged with a small sigh. “I had just thought, maybe…”

“Maybe we'd have a secret just between us?” I asked, and she nodded.

“You know I'm running around as three different people. She doesn't, yet. I'm sure it'll come up eventually—it'll have to—but for now, she needs to know,” I pointed out, and Ruby nodded. “Besides which, you need practice. We're going to figure out the secret of those eyes.”

“My eyes?” Ruby raised an eyebrow and I grinned.

Poking her in the side and drawing an annoyed look, I smirked and gestured towards the barrier around us. “Try to break it. If you can, I'll tell you what I know.”

The little reaper threw me a confused look. “How?”

I rolled my eyes. I was beginning to believe that Ruby was more of a tactile learner—theory would only go so far with her. I knew the type. “Don't worry so much about the how. Just break the damn thing.”

“Do or do not,’ huh?” Ruby chuckled. “Okay then!” Reaching under her cape, she unholstered Crescent Rose and allowed it to unfold. Pulling back, she yelled and swung at the barrier. Along the path her blade traversed space itself was rent, visible from both inside and outside the bubble, which collapsed entirely a split second later. “That was… actually really cool.”
“Yeah,” I admitted.

We were immediately set upon by Yang while Penny threw me a helpless look. “I am sorry Jaune, I tried to stop her.”

I shook my head as Ruby dodged back away from her sister. “It's not your fault, Penny. Yang's hardheaded.”

“Hey! I resemble that remark!” Yang growled in my general direction.

“Yep,” I nodded before asking, “So, what's got your panties in a twist?”

“Ha ha,” Yang huffed. “Joke's on you, I'm not wearing any.”


The blonde shrugged. “I'm not the one who decided a 'combat skirt' was a good idea,” she countered her sister before a sinister smirk stole across her face. Reaching over to Ruby, she quickly flipped the edge of her skirt up.

“Gah! YANG!” Ruby screamed, quickly snapping her skirt back into place with a blush that went all the way down. “Not in front of Jaune,” she mewled.

“Plain white with little dogs? Gee, Rubes, that's so mature. Risqué, even,” Yang snarked before focusing lilac eyes on me. “So. Spill, mister.”

I shook my head, successfully resisting the urge to palm my face over their antics. 'She has nice thighs, though,' I admitted—they were at least on par with the twins. I shook my head, pushing away the mental image. 'Gah! Ruby. This is Ruby. I'm not supposed to perv on Ruby. …I blame the twins, conditioning me to liking girls of that build.' Putting that can of worms aside, just because I planned to tell Yang didn't mean I had to make it easy. “Spill… what, exactly?”

Yang shot a look between me, her sister, and Penny. “Let's start with her,” she pointed at Penny.
“Who is she, where'd she come from?”

“But Yang, I have already been introduced to you. Did you forget?” Penny asked and Yang rolled her eyes.

“You gave me a name,” the blonde pointed out. “And that was about it. But I can tell, Ruby already knows.”

There was something wrong with this picture, but I couldn't quite put my finger on it. Frowning, I hit Yang with Observe and went straight to the emotional state information: confused, worried, anxious. It wasn't anything that I couldn't see already. I considered hitting her with Read Thoughts, but that was dangerously close to crossing that line I'd self-imposed about abusing that particular class of spells. Yang being flaky wasn't grounds to cross that line—I'd have to make do, like a normal person. “Okay,” I said, drawing Yang's attention back to me. “I'll make you a deal. I'll tell you. I'll even answer some questions if you want. But you've got to answer one for me. What are you so worried about?”

Yang's mouth opened and closed, lilac eyes suddenly finding the ground very interesting as she lost her usual bluster. It took her several attempts to get out something approaching words, but it came out as less than a whisper that died before it left her mouth. Stepping closer, I asked, “What was that?”

The blonde brawler's hands clenched into fists, but her usual burning anger was missing. Taking a deep breath, she closed the distance between us, her lips brushing my ear in interesting ways as she whispered, “I don't want to be replaced.”

“Well, what did she say?” Ruby asked from nearby.

My eyes tracked from Ruby to her sister, where they locked with Yang's, and the pleading expression there that I didn't need fancy mental spells to read the thought behind it: 'Please don't tell her.'

I paced away from Yang, heaving an exasperated sigh and running a hand through my hair in frustration. Six words was all it took to call into question everything I thought I knew about Yang Xiao Long. 'Really? It's the twins all over again—both sets—except these two haven't figured it out. Well, no, I take that back. They have, individually. They just haven't told each other. Okay. I can work with this, I think. Still, is it something in the water? No, these two really do have reason to have latched onto each other so hard. Then again, so do the Malachite twins. If I recall correctly, the Arc twins are the only ones who just decided they were going to share a husband some day. This

"
A sharp gesture at the ground and a flexing of Conjuration summoned up a metal folding chair and I dropped into it. “Okay. I think I get it now.” Another gesture and three more chairs joined the first in a small circle. The girls needed no further prompting on that front and I met eyes with Ruby. “Don't worry about it.”

Ruby shot a curious look at her sister before shrugging. “Okay.”

“Penny’s from Atlas,” I began, and lilac eyes focused on my own blue. “She’s a friend. If you want to know anything beyond that, ask Penny. If she wants to tell you, she will, but I shouldn't be giving out her secrets—it's not fair to her.”

Shooting a look between the gynoid and myself, Yang nodded. “Okay, I suppose that's fair,” she allowed. “What about the rest?”

“Party,” I deadpanned, at the same time triggering the focus command to invite Yang.

“What the hell?!” Yang jumped, knocking over her chair and falling on her ass in the tall grass. “What the hell is this?”

“Gee, Yang, I didn't realize Signal would let you graduate if you couldn't read,” Ruby teased, giggling.

Sitting up, Yang eyed me for a moment before reaching out and tapping the 'Yes' button, and an instant later her profile picture appeared under Ruby's. She seemed to recover some of her usual attitude as she smirked. “Now it's a party.”

“Yang,” Ruby sighed, rolling her eyes.

“So, that's your Semblance?” Yang asked, ignoring her sister. On my nod, she hummed. “Not bad. So, it works like an RPG or something? Levels, skills, spells, all that jazz?” I nodded again and she continued, asking, “And we get some kind of benefit from being in your party?”
“EXP, levels, skill points, skills. Permanent as far as we can tell,” I confirmed.

Yang pumped a fist, bouncing up onto her feet—which did interesting things for her chest area, I'll admit. “Sweet! Count me in.” She blinked twice before a sly look crossed her face. “So, this is your plan for when we get to Beacon, huh? Are you angling to get us all on the same team? Is Penny our fourth member?”

“No,” I denied, shaking my head for emphasis. “Ideally, I was going to let nature take its course and hope things fall as they may but that leaves too much to chance.” And even as I said it, I realized it was true and not just a natural roll for bullshit. Doing that really would leave too much to chance. I couldn't rely on the whims of 'fate' and a certain headmaster to see the teams I wanted assembled. Hell, there was no telling who Jaune would have wound up with in canon if not for Pyrrha taking an interest. “As for Penny, she's not going to Beacon.”

“It would be bad,” Penny confirmed with a nod.

“Why?” Yang asked, and Penny looked to me for confirmation.

I shrugged. “Yours to tell, Penny, not mine. I don't own you.”

For a moment, the chagrined look the gynoid sent me made me think she'd like to debate the finer points of that argument, but she apparently decided against it. “Yang, if Atlas found out I was in Vale, they would surely stop at nothing to recover me. As I understand things, the headmaster of Beacon is on friendly terms with people highly placed in the Atlesian chain of command. It would not be long before my existence was discovered.”

“Okay. 'Atlas bad,' I get it,” Yang nodded, and Penny and I shook our heads.

“Not necessarily,” I countered. “Just in this instance, more trouble than we want.”

After a moment considering it, the blonde shrugged. “You don't want to tell me, that's fine. So, Beacon. What's up with that? You don't want to be on a team with all of this?” she smirked, hands running up her sides from her waist to her breasts, emphasizing those features.

Ruby snorted and I sent the younger girl an amused look. Yang saw, however, and nodded—taking on a sage expression. “Oh, I see how it is. So, how long have you guys been screwing?”
I rolled my eyes. Ruby, on the other hand, immediately paled and then blushed darkly. “W-w-we… we're not— We haven't… I'm still a…” Her hood came up, hiding her face as she turned away.

“That was mean,” I sighed, turning a light glare on the blonde. “She's going to be like that the rest of the day.”

“Totally worth it, though,” Yang countered, looking entirely too smug. “She'll snap out of it in a minute.”

A tug on my shirt sleeve drew my attention to Penny, who quietly asked, “Jaune? What is 'screwing' in this context?”

Yang's eyes went wide, obviously having heard the gynoid and I held up a hand to forestall any reply on her end while simultaneously palming my face. 'Oh gods, no. Please, please tell me I'm not going to have to have 'the talk' with Penny. That's just too much.'

Well, there was no way of handling this delicately, so I may as well be blunt. “Coitus. Sexual relations. Synonyms include: screwing, banging, fucking, and a list of others a mile long that you're just going to have to pick up over time.”

“Ooh,” Penny nodded. “I see. That is what you were doing with the Malachite siblings and Neopolitan,” she said. Across from us, Yang's expression shifted to something approaching poleaxed.

“Wait, what? Siblings, and another girl?” she asked, and I sighed quietly before nodding—there was no sense denying it, and honesty had served me well so far. “At the same time?” she continued, and I shot her an amused look.


“Huh,” she hummed, her eyes taking a long, assessing look up and down my form for a moment. “I suppose I could see it,” she murmured, almost too low for me to hear. For an instant, her gaze shifted to her sister and an expression I couldn't place crossed her face, then she shook it off and sent me a smirk. “So, are they hot?”
I considered not justifying that with an answer, but Penny derailed my train of thought before I could come up with something sufficiently snarky. Penny had been studying myself and Ruby, turning her gaze back and forth between us as though trying to work something out, before she finally asked, “Why are you not ‘screwing?’ Ruby is a healthy, pretty young girl entering her reproductive prime —”

I struck quickly, covering the ancula’s mouth with my hand. “Penny. Shush. Look at what you’ve done,” I pointed at Ruby, who looked to be having a small fit, and Yang who was having fits of her own—of laughter. “Tact. Learn it. Use it. Please.”

“Okay, Jaune,” she nodded, looking abashed. “Ruby, I apologize if my words have caused you discomfort.”

“No, it… it’s okay, Penny. Really. I understand,” Ruby mewled, still sounding rather pitiful to my ears.

The gynoid nodded, though Ruby couldn’t see her with her head hidden in her scarf, hood, and cape as it was. Turning to me, Penny took it upon herself to announce to me, and everyone present given that she hadn’t continued at the same conversational volume as before, “Also, Jaune, I feel I should inform you that I am also fully functional in that manner.”

“Fully functional?” Yang echoed, her laughter dying down as she eyed the gynoid speculatively. “Heh. I’ve never heard a girl proposition someone like that before,” she chuckled. “So, why wouldn’t you be?”

Ignoring Yang for the moment, I blinked, a confused look crossing my face as I turned to meet Penny’s eyes. I at least had the tact to try to keep our conversation quiet, as I leaned forward to whisper, “Wait, you mean… you can reproduce?”

“That is correct,” Penny confirmed.

“So, your biological components…” I trailed off, and she nodded, understanding my implied question. This time, I did face-palm. “Penny… why? Why?”

“Based on what I have managed to decrypt of my backup memories, Dr. Polendina felt it would help me become more human,” she took the cue and whispered.
I sighed, shaking my head. “I'll have to get you to tell me more later.” Turning to the pair of Yang and Ruby, I asked, “You two done yet?”

“Sure, Jaune Jaune,” Yang grinned, apparently having decided to drop her line of questioning. Her gaze shifted between Penny and Ruby again before she broke down into laughter once more. “BAHAHahaha!”

“Yaaaang!” Ruby yelled, mortification nearing critical levels apparently.

“Right,” I groaned, deciding to pick up where I'd left off anyway. “I asked around—some of my sisters went to Beacon, so I didn't really have to go far on that front. Turns out, Beacon assigns teams through trial by combat. The headmaster and headmistress launch prospective students off a cliff into the Emerald Forest on the other side of Beacon from Vale, where students are given some sort of task to complete that will determine how teams are formed. The initiation changes every year, but Ozpin's only got four or five variations he uses. This year, it'll probably be retrieving chess pieces… though, I should back up a step. Whoever you first meet eyes with in the forest will be your partner, so that's half your four-man squad right there. The other half is determined by the trial—in this case, probably by picking like chess pieces.” That much, I really had taken the time to confirm—it would have been bad if I'd gone in expecting to gather chess pieces and had, instead, been met with something I wasn't expecting. 'At least it's not a bell test.'

Yang had, by then, stopped laughing and righted her chair and sat back down. Her expression was all business as she said, “So, then we just make sure Ruby and I are the first ones we see. You find a partner, then meet up with us and we'll pick out matching chess pieces.”

“That could work. Yang and I can use our weapons to choose where we want to land,” Ruby nodded, hood back down and scarf pulled away from her face, slipping easily back into the conversation now that she was no longer in immediate danger of being teased to the point of unconsciousness—or, knowing Ruby, exploding in a small fit.

“No,” I denied. “I think you're missing the point.”

The sisters traded a look and Ruby asked, “What is the point, then?”

I smirked. “The point is, we have almost a whole day to figure out who we want to be partnered with. The initiation starts the day after we get there and lasts as long as it takes. The night before, the new students will make camp in the ballroom.”
“So, what? A giant sleep-over?” Yang asked, and I nodded.

“Make sure you bring your jammies,” I grinned, and the blonde laughed.

A smirk crossing her lips, she asked, “What if I sleep naked?”

I rolled my eyes at the same time Ruby nodded. “She really does.”

“Well,” I shrugged, “Then I'm sure everyone there will enjoy getting an eye full.”

Yang opened her mouth to retort, only to close it slowly. “No, I don't think I'd like that. Damn. Point, Jaune.”

“I think the point Jaune meant to make was that you would have most of the day and that night to scout out partners and teammates,” Penny chimed in, and I nodded.

“Bingo. Make friends, scout out the talent, figure out who seems like the best fit. Though, to be fair, you may still wind up being partnered with someone else,” I added. “There's that 'luck' factor you can't really account for. What you should keep in mind though is that you shouldn't limit your search to a total of four people. With eight, we've got two full teams. Ruby and Yang, you could be on the same team together with two others who compliment your style, while I find my own team. With eight, we could potentially cover more of our individual weaknesses, have a wider variety of skills available, and of course have more options for cross training between teams.”

Yang frowned as a thought occurred and she asked, “How many people can you party?”

That was actually a really good question, and one I didn't have an answer to— I hadn't had occasion to test for an upper limit yet. So far, the most I'd tried was four including myself. I needed to figure that out soon. “Not sure. Four at least. Eight wouldn't be unreasonable, depending on the system in question. Full raid groups can go for hundreds of people, but I'm not actually sure that's possible. We'd have to test at some point.” Standing up, I dismissed my chair and stretched. “In the meantime, back to what we came here for. Ruby, try creating an ID.”

“A what?” the red-clad reaper asked, standing as well as I dismissed the rest of the chairs. “Oh, you mean the uh…” she gestured vaguely and I rolled my eyes.
“Illusion Barrier. My Semblance calls it an Instant Dungeon, or ID, but only because I can decide what's inside of one I think,” I clarified. “So, I suppose you'd actually be creating a generic Illusion Barrier if you couldn't decide what you wanted in it. Either way, go ahead.”

“Where?” she asked, and I shot her an amused look. “Right. 'Do or do not' again.”

“So, what's this going to do?” Yang asked me, watching her sister's face scrunch up in concentration as she closed her eyes.

“Not sure,” I admitted. “Ruby, eyes open.”

“Wha—?” the girl asked, opening her eyes and turning to look at me. However, the moment her eyes opened, my detection skills pinged and for a moment I saw a sphere roughly twenty meters across form directly in front of the girl before it disappeared—invisible to the naked eye. Or at least to mine, as Ruby's gaze immediately shifted to the place where I'd seen the barrier form. “Wow. I did that?”

“You did,” I agreed, moving towards the sphere with my hand extended. I felt static brush my fingers and my Semblance popped up an alert telling me it had detected an unlocked Illusion Barrier. “Awesome. It worked. Congratulations, Ruby.”

“Thank you,” the girl blushed, toeing the ground with one foot. “Oh! I got a popup for it, too!”

I blinked, turning to meet her eyes and asked, “What did it say?”

Silver eyes tilted up as she remembered. “That I'd unlocked the skill Create ID. Also, that my 'Silver Eyes' trait had been unlocked and is level one.”

“Uh… do this,” I began, opening my menu and directing her to set her own menu visible so I could read it and interact with it. Once she did, I tapped through her menus until I found the Skills section and selected the Silver Eyes trait. 'Still vague, but it has updated. So, she can 'see the unseen,' which I take it to mean see anything Spirit related like Illusion Barriers, enter Illusion Barriers, and now create and destroy them. It really is like a damn dojutsu,' I thought, then went about setting Ruby's menus back to being visible only to her. “So, I said I'd tell you what I know. That right there was about the gist of it. You've got some special power related to your eyes that lets you see things you shouldn't and manipulate Illusion Barriers. No idea what else it can do, but I suppose we'll find out together as you level it. And speaking of, now destroy it,” I continued, and she shot me a confused
“Look. ‘Break it, make another, and repeat until you get the hang of it. We’ll spend a few minutes doing that, then we’ll move into the woods and see about finding something to kill for some EXP. Maybe work on some skills, while we’re at it.’”

“Like what?” Yang asked, and I smirked as I met her eyes.

“For you? Meditation,” I chuckled, before adding, “Actually, both of you.”

Lilac eyes narrowed and Yang’s hands went to her hips. “Are you trying to tell me something?”

“Yeah,” I agreed. “Meditation gives passive and active bonuses you’re going to want. It’s honestly one of my most useful skills, just for the stat boosts.” A thought occurred, and I allowed a smirk to creep across my lips. “There’s just the matter of payment, for services rendered.”

One golden eyebrow went up and Yang took on a suddenly seductive air. “Oh?” she asked, drawing the word out a bit.

“Yeah. I’m thinking something in yellow and black to ride,” I nodded, and the blonde actually blushed for a moment, before she regained her balance. “Your bike.”

Yang’s seductive expression faltered, before falling entirely flat. “What.”

I screamed down the streets of Vale on Bumblebee 2.0 with a hot blonde molded against me, acutely aware of two firm, warm, soft globes of flesh pressing into me through only a couple of layers of clothing. Yang squeezed tighter as I took a sharp corner, looping us back around towards the airfield where Ruby and Penny waited. It hadn’t taken much convincing to get Yang to load up her precious bike into my Bullhead for transport. Convincing her to let Ruby ride with me, however, was another story—and the reason why I currently had the busty blonde pressing her tits into my back. Coming to a stop, I dropped the kickstand and killed the engine. “So?” I asked, shooting a smirk at the blonde over my shoulder.

Yang slipped off the bike, a little weak in the knees as her legs trembled. “I came,” she breathed quietly, likely not for my ears as she shook her head before meeting my eyes with a grin.
I took the opportunity to shoot down any plans she may have had of simply playing that off. “I told you I knew what I was doing.”

“Okay, yeah, I suppose so,” she admitted, then blinked as she realized what I’d meant, even as my smirk widened. “Walked right into that one,” she muttered, rubbing sheepishly at the back of her head and blushing. “What? I like my bike, okay?!”

“You sure it wasn't the company?” I teased, and she shot me a glare.

“Anyway, I guess I won't worry you're going to get her killed if I let Ruby ride with you,” she forced out, trying her best to fight her blush down and mostly succeeding.

Rolling my eyes, I popped my back and nodded towards Ruby and Penny—Penny showing up as only to us, given that I'd hit her with Invisibility before we'd landed since I'd yet to get her another outfit. “So, who's riding where?” I asked, and Yang snorted quietly—I had a feeling I knew exactly where her mind had gone.

“I'm with Jaune!” Ruby declared, disappearing in a spray of rose petals and reappearing at my side, already in the process of slinging herself over the seat behind me.

Penny—having changed outfits again on the Bullhead, despite knowing she wouldn't be seen anyway—pouted, before moving towards Yang. “I am disappointed, but I will ride with Yang.”

“I'm sorry Penny,” Ruby apologized, but that did nothing to convince her to unlatch herself from around my back. “Maybe next time?”

The gynoid nodded and Yang slipped on the bike in front of her. “So,” Yang asked, “where's this place we're going?”

“North end of the Residential District, on the river,” I told her, starting the bike under me. “Just follow me.” Calling up my map, I selected the apartment and closed it, watching as my HUD laid out a blue path along the road in front of me towards my waypoint. Reaching down, I turned on the radio.

*BMG Image song – Johnny Cash, Ghost Riders in the Sky – Unlocked!*
“Works for me,” I chuckled quietly. The first strains of guitar poured out of the speakers and I slipped on my glasses, gunning the engine and peeling out off the airstrip, Yang following close behind.

At my back, Ruby squeezed tighter and hung her head over my shoulder to see. “I think I like this better than riding with Yang,” she admitted quietly, barely audible over the wind, radio, and whine of the engine. With our link still up, it wasn't hard at all to tell what she meant—her thoughts had turned down decidedly more mature avenues, and mildly disturbing for me, the moment I'd taken off. There was a reason girls loved bikes, after all. And on that note, I made an effort to suppress the link without actively shutting it down—I didn't need to know she was thinking those sorts of thoughts.

Yang pulled up alongside me and I heard Penny cheering even over the rest of the noise. “Someone's having a blast,” I chuckled. Yang’s eyes met mine and she grinned, before pulling ahead. I rolled my eyes, reaching out with my Aura and redirecting the wind around us into a more streamlined shape, then lightened the bike with gravity. Throttling up a bit, I waved as I blew past the blonde, leaving her in our dust, Ruby laughing in my ear the entire time.

It wasn't a particularly long drive back to the apartment, and while it wasn't as fast as going as the crow flies, it was just as fun—and a nice change of pace, from my Batman/Spider-man routine of swinging, gliding, and parkour. Ruby started squirming less than halfway into the drive and I had a quiet laugh over her predicament—she'd need a change of panties at this rate. 'Well, she's about the same waist size as the twins—she could always borrow some of theirs,'

We pulled into the apartment's underground parking garage and I found a place for Yang to park. Killing the engine, I slid off the bike and offered Ruby a hand down. I had to catch her when her feet hit the ground, as they nearly gave out under her. Beside us, Yang chuckled. “Problem, sis?”

“No!” Ruby hissed, and made to walk for the elevator only to cringe slightly and shift around before adopting a less than casual gait.

“That was mean,” I chastised the blonde, who shrugged.

“She's got to grow up some time,” she quietly countered, before continuing. “I'd hoped it wouldn't be for a year or two, but it seems that's not the case. I suppose it's time.”

My copy of her bike disappeared into light particles as I dismissed it and followed after the red-clad reaper. “She'll be fine.”
Lilac eyes met mine in a sidelong glance as Penny hurried past Yang to join up with Ruby, holding the elevator open. “I like you, Jaune. I’d hate to have to hurt you, if you hurt her.”

“Furthest thing from my mind,” I denied. A teasing smirk crept up my lips as I asked, “So, you like me, huh?”

“Eh, you’ve got a decent ass,” she shrugged dismissively, though I noticed a bit of color creeping up on her cheeks.

We joined Ruby and Penny in the elevator and I hit the button for the top floor. A short ride later, I handed Penny my keys and waved them towards the apartment, while I headed the opposite direction. Knocking on Jane’s door, I leaned against the door frame and waited. A few moments later, the redhead—clad in a tank top and shorts, and barefoot—answered the door. “Movie night with the girls. I’m cooking. You in?”

The slightly shorter woman chuckled, a smile crossing her lips. “Sure, why not?”

Stepping into a set of house shoes, Jane grabbed her keys and locked up, then followed me across the hall. Opening my apartment door, I found Yang, with Ruby and Penny to either side of her, facing off against Neo and the Malachite siblings. Well, 'facing off' was a bit strong. More, there was an obvious air of awkward silence. Thankfully, it seemed to break the moment the door opened. Observing the six girls, I shook my head. “Right, introductions. Yang, these are Melanie and Miltia Malachite, Neopolitan—though she prefers Neo—and my sister, Jane. Girls, this is Ruby's elder sister, Yang. So! Taking votes on food now. All in favor of pizza, say 'aye.’”

“Aye!” Ruby cheered, followed by the twins and Neo.

“All in favor of hamburgers?”

Yang and Jane both gave an 'Aye,' followed by another vote by Ruby. Turning to the little redhead, I raised an eyebrow. “I don't know how it works where you're from, but generally you only get one vote.”

“Weeell, I'm changing my vote!” she countered, grinning.
I sighed. “Seems we have a tie. Penny?” I asked, and the gynoid shook her head.

“I am not sure about either,” she admitted. I thought she'd stop there, but she continued with, “Having never had food until recently, I can not say I have a preference, Jaune.”

I palmed my face as Yang turned her attention on the gynoid and made to ask the obvious. “Don't bother. At this rate, she'll likely just tell you anyway, if she keeps saying things like that,” I sighed. ‘Well, there was probably a good reason she was kept isolated in canon—namely, she's not ready for interaction with the outside world. Though, I have to admit, she's learning.’

“Well, with Penny abstaining, we still have a tie. My house, my rules, we'll decide by coin toss,” I shrugged, digging into my pocket and conjuring a quarter. Pulling it out, I flipped it and caught it. I looked to Jane, as the safest option there. “Call it.”

“Tails,” she shrugged.

Checking the coin, I dropped it in my pocket and made my way towards the kitchen. “Tails it is. We can do pizza next time. Since team Hamburger won the coin toss, team Pizza picks the movie. That work for everyone?”

There was a small chorus of affirmatives and I nodded. “Great. Now, out of my kitchen. Except you,” I caught Miltia's eye. When the others had left, I moved close enough to speak without being overheard. “Mind doing me a favor? Well, it's really a favor for Ruby,” I asked, she Miltia shook her head. “She might need a change of clothes. You're about the same size, so I figured…”

Miltia raised an eyebrow, turning to shoot a questioning look at the little reaper. “She looks fine to me.”

“Panties,” I deadpanned, quietly, and her mouth formed a small 'o' in understanding, before shifting into a wicked smirk a second later.

“Why Jaune, what did you do?” she questioned, and I rolled my eyes.

“Wasn't my fault. Not directly,” I mumbled. “Motorcycle. Apparently, she and her sister share that trait.”
“Huh,” she hummed quietly. “Well, that is interesting…” She shifted her gaze between me and the younger girl momentarily, then smiled. “Okay,” she nodded, walking away and catching Ruby by the elbow, quietly leading her out of the room to my bedroom—though, given how much time the girls spent there, there were days I may as well say ‘our,’ since both the twins and Neo had clothing stored there on a semi-permanent basis.

That taken care of, I was left alone with my thoughts for the moment. My mind turned back to the scene I'd walked in on. *Well, it could have been worse. A little awkward, but it's not like a fistfight broke out. Question is, how am I supposed to manage female friends without the girls thinking I'm looking for replacements?* I wondered, then chuckled as I realized something. *Right. Remnant. I should be more worried about Neo and/or the twins trying to convince women to 'join up' than them getting snippy about me spending time with other women.* I opened my refrigerator and started taking out ingredients, shifting aside slightly as a slightly shorter form reached over me and began helping. Looking over, I saw Jane smirking at me.

“Trouble in paradise, little brother?” she asked quietly, moving over to the cutting board with vegetables—onion, lettuce, and tomato.

Digging out an orange bell pepper, I passed that to her and moved for the spice rack to dig out my spices. “Dice that, please,” I told her, my mind returning to the subject of the Malachite siblings, before adding, “Not really, but while I've got you here I may as well pick your brain. Any suggestions for managing a multiple-partner relationship? I'm worried the twins may be feeling a bit like I'm just using them for sex and job related things.”

“Are you?” she asked, and I shook my head.

“I wouldn't say so,” I denied. “But feelings and reality are two different things.”

Jane snorted softly, which quickly became a giggle. “Well, realizing that is half the battle done. Find some way to show them you care. I don't really know them well enough to offer suggestions, sorry. Other than that, you could always try reading Ninjas of Love.”

“Ha ha. Smartass. I'll have you know, I've finished the first book and moved on to the second, and have yet to see anything about that—the original protagonist and his two lady friends already seemed to be in a stable, settled relationship,” I countered. “And 'do something nice for them' was already Plan A, as it were.”
The sound of fast strokes of a knife passing through vegetable matter sounded from the cutting board. “Yeah. Try book three or four. Only the first two are really true sequels. The rest are set in the same universe, and occasionally the author brings all the casts together, but they can pretty much be read in any order beyond that. And if you'd already come to that solution, then do something about it. Aside from that, I don't really know. Sorry I can't help more. My luck with relationships hasn't exactly been the best in the world, as you know. But if you need someone to talk to…”


She hummed softly. “What are sisters for?” A smirk stretched across my lips and she quickly added. “Not that, you ass.”
Looking down into a frying pan filled with meat, I frowned. 'It's just not the same. I'm going to have to get a grill at some point.'

The problem with that was that I didn't know if the landlord would allow it. Oh, I was sure I could probably bully him into it, but my second concern there was that the small patio outside the apartment wasn't big enough. I'd never really taken the time to step out onto it and measure it for myself, but given my experience with outdoor cooking on Earth and the sort of setup I had in mind, it didn't look to have enough room from where I stood. Turning the meat, I rolled my eyes. 'Well, I suppose it's inevitable that I'd get settled in and start to think of this place as 'home.' Not that it's a bad thing. Though, at the rate I have 'guests' over, I may want to look into getting something larger at some point. I won't be using it much soon anyway, with Beacon coming… what, week after next? Since I'll technically be living in the dorms and only coming back by here to visit Neo, Milia, and Melanie I could put off getting a new place at least a little while. Then again, what if I decide to come back and I've got two teams worth of tagalongs? Damnit, I liked this place. It's pretty much in the middle of the map and I've already got bounded fields set up. Oh well, it's not like I don't have the money for something bigger, and a new place could be warded from the ground up. Well, I suppose it wouldn't hurt to look into later.'

And that reminded me of a couple of other facts I needed to deal with. Blake should be arriving some time this week or next, so I'd need to keep an eye out for that. Also, Yang had yet to sucker Hei into a fight in his bar looking for information on her mom. I didn't want her wrecking the place—the twins would get annoyed, and I'd catch an earful from Hei… 'Wait a goddamn minute,' I blinked, shooting a look at Yang—more specifically, her level, then shifting my gaze to the information over Jane's head. 'Okay, so knowing the full story now, Hei's team graduated—and had been full hunters at least a year before Sanguine died, because Jane had also graduated by then. Meaning somebody lied to me about Hei 'dropping out,' and I'm pretty sure it was Jane.'

Humming, I plated the burgers I'd finished and moved on to the next batch, moving pretty much on
auto-pilot at this point as I thought the issue over. 'So, she lied. Why? Obvious answer: Hei's her
dead friend's crush, her older sister's teammate and former boyfriend. On the other hand, she told
me as Kuro to Shiro—when she didn't know I was Jaune. Well, I can straighten that shit out now.'

Shooting a glance at the living room, I saw Yang, Neo, and Melanie crowded together trying to
decide what to watch, while Miltia had yet to return with Ruby. Jane was currently sat on the couch,
having a quiet conversation with Penny. Catching her eye, I gestured towards the kitchen. She
excused herself from Penny and hopped up, padding into the kitchen on bare feet, having since
ditched her house shoes. “What's up?”

Observing her leaning against my counter nearby, I met her green eyes for a moment before turning
back to watching the food. “You lied to me.”

“You're going to have to be more specific, Jaune. I've lied to a lot of people, about a lot of things,”
she shrugged.

“About Hei. And you. You don't just quit being a Hunter after you graduate,” I pointed out,
watching her from the corner of my eye to see how she'd react.

Jane blinked, frowning as she thought back, then sighed and nodded. “Ah, that,” she murmured. “I
didn't lie to you.” I turned to face her with a raised eyebrow and she chuckled. “'Kuro' lied to 'Shiro.'
I didn't know who you were at the time and a lot of that stuff was personal. I couldn't tell entirely if
you bought it or not either, but I figured you got the message that I didn't want to give specifics and
were at least willing to not ask more questions than you did. What brought this on? And you look
like you were expecting that answer.”

I rolled my eyes. “Because it's how I would've answered,” I deadpanned. Another thing in common
with another Arc sister—our ability to spin a line of bullshit and justify it to ourselves. “I'm not mad,
if you're wondering. I get it—we were both 'on the job' so to speak. But I'd like to know. And what
brought it on was a quest.” I went for my default excuse.

“If we're talking about lies,” she trailed off with a small grin. “You could just say you don't want to
answer and I'd be okay with that.”

“I was thinking about the level difference between you, the girls, and remembered Hei seemed low,”
I clarified. It was truth, but not the whole truth.
Jane nodded, shifting her gaze out to the others in the living room. “Hei and I were classified Section 8—mentally unsound, leading to a medical discharge. Joan and Noire were as well, but they both fought it. They're still technically on probation, and will be until they finish out their mandatory service time. Initially, I fought it too. I took some time off to grieve, and that's when the thing with my team happened. I was too stuck in my own rut to help them when they needed it, and then that just made it worse. After that, I quit fighting it. I lied to… well, pretty much everyone, but especially the family. I mean, come on, an Arc just giving up being a Hunter because I couldn't handle my shit? It was humiliating. Still, really. I hid myself away in Sang's old apartment until my savings started running low, then hit up Hei to see if he could get me a job when I could face coming out again. I knew he had inherited some stuff from his family and had The Club by then, so I figured I could offer to be a bouncer or something. Hei did me one better. He'd gotten involved in some pretty shady stuff by that time and he knew what my Semblance did, so he asked me to do a job for him. I couldn't really turn down the money at that point, so I agreed. It worked out well, so I did a few more. Before I knew it, it had become my work. Just as much of a thrill as Hunting at times, with less of the danger and no team depending on me. Which is why, when I got stuck with you, what you were doing with that woman pissed me off so much—I let it become personal.”

She went quiet, apparently finished, and I took a moment to drain the grease from the pan and plate the last of the burgers before turning to meet her eyes. “Thank you for telling me,” I quietly told her, and she shrugged. It cleared some things up and filled in some holes in the story I knew, but there were still some details I wasn't sure on and may never be—things like, who the idiot was that got Sanguine killed if it wasn't Jane, seeing as she didn't start that job until after Sanguine had been murdered. Also, whether Hei had started up his club in his spare time in between deployments with his team, or if that had come after he'd been declared Section 8. I supposed neither of those truly mattered, but my innate curiosity still left me wanting to figure it out at some point. Still, it didn't answer the most important question. “So, Hei's not just sitting on his ass in his club.”

Jane shrugged. “We train every now and then and he whines about how Joan never stops by unless she wants something—or at least, that's what he was whining about last time,” she shot me a deadpan look and I realized he'd told her about Joan bringing me by, probably before I'd even met her. “But no, Hei hasn't put himself out to pasture. He's still kind of a badass. I honestly think he's holding back on me some days. He could kick your ass, if you're wondering. He told me you've got a habit of running your mouth,” she grinned. “One of these days, your mouth is going to write a check your ass can't cash, little brother.”

“But he's level twenty-something.” I denied, and she snorted, before laughing outright.

“Your Semblance told you that?” she asked, and I nodded. “It lied to you.” Chuckling quietly, Jane shook her head. “That, or it was confused.”

I shot her a mild glare, but conceded the point—it had been wrong before, after all. “Okay, how would it be confused?”
Jane shot me an incredulous look, then rolled her eyes. “Hei graduated with Joan and you didn't think that having a level lower than the Signal students you know was weird?”

“I thought he'd just lost a step or two,” I retorted. “From what I've seen, all the man does is sit in his club, drink, and fuck girls with a passing resemblance to Joan because he can't nut up and get over it—and maybe, some days, act as an information broker and wannabe gangster.”

“No, Jaune. It's aura suppression,” she deadpanned. “It's fourth-year material at Beacon, and I know the other schools teach it in their final year as well. What you have to understand is that there are different levels of Aura. There's Resting Aura Level—your Aura level when you're sleeping, because it drops with your sleep cycle. After that is Default Aura Level—your Aura level when you're awake, but not doing anything. Active Aura Level is when you're actively using Aura for something—training, running, that sort of thing. Then there's Combat Aura Level, which is pretty self-explanatory—your adrenaline gets pumping, your body senses danger, it responds by naturally raising your Aura. The problem there is that Hunters have a lot of Aura, and it only grows as they age—unless you stop training entirely, that is. So, a Hunter with ten years or so under his or her belt may have a Default Aura Level higher than a first year student's Combat Aura Level. In case you didn't know, Aura attracts younger grimm that haven't figured out that Aura means death for them—so strong Hunters can't just walk around all day with their metaphorical dicks hanging out. They suppress their Aura in populated areas to keep from drawing in grimm, and in the field as a matter of necessity unless they're trying to clear an area of grimm—but only the young ones are stupid enough to jump on obvious bait like that. Well, the young ones, or the ones smart enough to know it's bait and strong enough not to care—those are trouble.”

'So why was Cinder impressed I could suppress my Aura, if it's common?' I wondered, frowning. “And everyone does this?”

The redhead nodded. “Pretty much. Though, I'd never seen someone go down to zero Aura output until I saw you do it.” I blinked, and she raised an eyebrow. “You can't tell me you didn't know that's what you were doing.”

“No, I knew that's what I was doing. That's the entire point of Aura Suppression as a skill—to hide my Aura,” I pointed out. “Zero aura output is the only way it would be hidden.”

Jane snorted softly. “Yeah, no. No one can do that. Not without a Semblance geared towards stealth, and I have yet to see one. Doesn't mean they're not out there, you're living proof of that. Normal people like me have to make do with pushing it down as far as it'll go and hoping that's enough.”

Well, that explained Cinder, then. It still didn't explain my Semblance. Well, no, it did—I just didn't like the answer, because that meant my Semblance could be lied to or otherwise confused, outside of mental effects. Thinking of its ability to measure level in terms of technology, if it were a device that
measured energy output then the most obvious way to fool it would be to decrease energy output. 'But then, that would mean,' my thoughts skittered to a halt as I eyed Jane's level again as realization hit, followed by something I would almost classify as dread. 'Jane, Jean, and Joan—that's the level my Semblance estimates them at because that is as far as they can suppress their Aura Level. Son of a bitch. And I may as well add Cinder to that list, too. And that's not even counting people like Ozpin, Glynda, and Taiyang with the infamous triple question marks over their heads.'

A second, equally unwelcome realization came swiftly on the heels of the first. 'I've used Aura Suppression as Shiro, in Cinder's presence, to the point that she commented on it. Likewise, I've used it as the Fox in front of Ozpin and Glynda—and some mooks, but they don't count. It's not like Bob The Mook is going to connect the dots between two different guys running around with no Aura. No, I just have to worry about Cinder figuring it out, if she ever sees me using it as the Fox or Jaune. Or Ozpin, likewise for Shiro and Jaune.' Pulling up my skill window, I took a quick look at Aura Suppression and found it was level 27. 'Okay, let's get it up to 30 and see if maybe I get the option to choose what level I want to suppress my Aura to. I got advanced options when Aura itself hit 30, so maybe that's some sort of second tier point for abilities. Then again, that could have just been for Aura by itself. If it's not I'll have to think of something. Either way, I need to double-down on the training and try to bring everyone up quickly. I'd thought I could just focus on increasing skills without increasing levels to the point where I out-leveled the others at Beacon but given what I know now, it may just be better to use that level disparity—if there is one—to light a fire under their asses to get them caught up. Guess that means we're going to need to see about going as a big group into Forever Fall and clearing out some grimm.'

“You okay? You look kind of worried,” Jane asked quietly, and I shook my head.

“Oh, I'm fine. Just realizing exactly how outclassed I am,” my gaze shot towards the girls in the living room. “We all are.”

Jane shrugged. “Kind of humbling, isn't it?” she asked, and I nodded. “Yeah, I felt that way too, the first time I saw a Huntress stop hiding her power and open up on something. It was... pants-pissingly terrifying.” She shot me a grin, then, and added, “But hey, if you want to get into a pissing match with Goodwitch, by all means, be my guest. Let me know how that turns out. Jean and I have a bet running. She bet Glynda would be giving you constant drills. I bet you'd be constantly drilling Glynda by the end of the year.”

“Either way, somebody's getting drilled. Wow, that was Yang-level bad, as far as puns go. But why can't it be both?” I grinned, then caught sight of my bedroom door opening and Ruby and Miltia making their way out. Ruby had hidden herself in her cloak and scarf, so I couldn't read her facial expression, but the gist I got from our link told me she was mortified and... excited? Thrilled? It was one of those emotions I couldn't quite pin down without Observe, which marked it as both. Miltia, on the other hand, looked smugly amused.
Catching my eyes, the red-clad twin strutted into the kitchen and leaned against my side, standing up on tip-toes to whisper in my ear. “I convinced her to wear that lacy red set you liked seeing on me,” she breathed into my ear.

The words evoked an immediate mental image pulled straight from memory—Melanie had a matching set in white, and Neo in pink. My mental image of Miltia wearing that particular set found itself replaced by Ruby in the same pair, and I palmed my face and forced the thought away. Apparently, the Telepathy spell linking us interpreted 'away' as 'towards Ruby,' if her embarrassed cry of “Jauuune!” was any indication. “That was evil,” I shot a mild glare at Miltia, who merely shrugged. “She's too young.”

The girl at my side laughed quietly, while beside me Jane rolled her eyes. “Tell her that,” the Arc twin countered.

Miltia nodded. “Ruby's the one that picked them out—she just need some encouragement to actually wear them. I think something her sister said or did got under her skin, because she was muttering about Yang and you seeing her as a kid right before she did it.”

'Direct result of Yang flipping her skirt up, followed by subsequent teasing. Ruby does not take teasing well,' I noted, resisting the urge to again palm my face—I was doing that entirely too much lately. On the one hand, it was a bit mean. On the other hand, if it pushed Ruby into being more self-confident and potentially trying to act more mature, it wasn't necessarily a bad thing. Tough love on Yang's part, as it were.

“Anyway, we're getting hungry. Those things done yet?”

“Yeah,” I nodded, turning to the living room and calling, “Food's ready.”

Plates collected, we made our way back into the living room and Neo started the movie—some martial arts flick with some amazing visuals, as far as the scenery went. According to the ice cream themed girl, it had been filmed in Menagerie—which had made little sense to me, given what I thought I knew about the place as the supposed 'faunus dumping ground.' I put the question aside to research later and turned my attention to the movie—at least until Neo spotted that I'd finished eating and decided to relocate from the couch to my lap.

“I tried to argue for something with a bit more action, if you know what I mean,” Neo murmured, leaning back against my chest and shifting her ass teasingly over my crotch. “I thought it might encourage the blonde to loosen up a bit.”
I rolled my eyes, hands going around her waist automatically. “Behave. You and the twins,” I warned, quietly. Neo turned enough to meet my eye, raising an eyebrow in question. “Ruby's too young and I'm not going to lay a hand on her sister, because that would pretty much break her at this point. If you want to talk her into your bed, by all means—but I won't be there.”

“But it's no fun for me if you're not playing too,” Neo pouted, and I shrugged. “And what do you mean, she's too young? She's going to Beacon, isn't she?”

“Ruby's only fifteen. And she's not a Huntress yet. And even if she were, I'd feel like a pedo,” I admitted. “I figure we'll go to Beacon and I'll be the friend she needs; and if, in a few years, something happens, then it happens. If it doesn't, then it doesn't. Either way, Yang's off limits because turning down Ruby to date her sister would be a huge betrayal, given what I know of the situation.”

“It's only two years.” Shifting against my growing erection, the girl on my lap hummed. “You could just have them both, you know?”

“I know,” I deadpanned. It probably wouldn't even be that hard, given what I thought I knew of them and what I had observed, in addition to my unfair stats. I could see at least one possible course of action to take on that front with a good chance of success—but I wasn't going to take advantage of them like that and again, Ruby's age was a sore spot with me. Between my age of 33 and Jaune's of 17, we had an average age of 25—which still left Ruby well outside the half-plus-seven rule. Then again, I've made exceptions for the Malachite twins and Neo,' I mused. It was an argument I'd had with myself more than once, and it always boiled down to the same answer: wait and see, and if something happened in a couple of years then I'd probably be okay with it. Wait, how old is Neo?’ I couldn't recall asking her age, but given her looks she could pass for anywhere between 17 and 25 or so. I made a mental note to ask later.

“You realize you're just going to wind up hurting her worse if you turn her down, when she eventually asks before passing whatever age you've got in mind dividing 'pedo' and 'dateable.' And in the meantime, her older, hot, sexy as hell sister is going to get progressively more frustrated,” Neo pointed out, then smirked. “Not to say that sexually frustrating blondie is a bad thing. Spend a while getting her stirred up and when she finally either snaps or you decide to pop her cork…I really want to be there for that. The fireworks should be amazing. Speaking of frustrating,” she grumbled, and an illusion snapped into place around us as she reached for my fly. “Clothes are pretty frustrating right about now.”

“You can't expect to do this in front of everyone,” I murmured into her ear, half tempted to create an ID around us.

“They're not paying attention,” Neo countered, already shifting her panties aside as she successfully
extracted my shaft from my boxers. It was true—I noticed Miltia had moved to Ruby's side and was keeping the girl occupied in between little exclamations over the movie. With Yang likewise occupied by Melanie, I realized that the girls had planned this. Jane and Penny keeping each other's attention, with the gynoid asking my sister quiet questions and the redhead providing answers, was just a happy coincidence. The ice cream themed girl in my lap grinned, then lowered herself onto my shaft with a quiet sigh, and my train of thought ground to a halt.

The rest of the movie passed as an agonizingly welcome blur as Neo slowly rode me, both of us doing our best to drag it out while at the same time, keeping things as quiet as possible. When it finally ended, a few minutes after Neo and I had finished, Jane shot up out of her chair and made for the door. “Okay, it's been fun, but I've got work tomorrow,” she lied, making her way quickly for the door. As she passed me, green eyes locked with mine and she shot me an annoyed look. “Remember what I told you,” she hissed in warning.

“No matter what,” I called after her, a blatantly teasing tone to my voice. “Have a good night.”

Turning to the others, I gestured towards Ruby and Yang. “Your dad made me promise to get you home at a decent hour, so we should probably head for the airfield.”

“Oh, yeah,” Yang murmured, shifting in her seat.

“You okay?” I asked, raising an eyebrow. Of course, I knew what Neo had done, and I couldn't quite decide whether I should be amused or annoyed at her intentionally exposing them to my 'sex aura,' as Jane had called it. On the one hand, Yang looked ridiculously hot with her skin flushed and a few beads of sweat visible, as she resisted the urge to squirm in her chair. On the other hand, Ruby mirrored her sister and I knew I should probably feel bad for that. *Then again, she didn't exactly complain about the bike ride either,* I mused, and decided to ignore it and treat it as a 'no harm, no foul' situation unless she said something. I would be having words with the girls later, though.

“Ah hah haa, I'm fine, Jaune,” Yang laughed quietly, so obviously fake I almost felt sorry for her.

“Jaune,” Penny whimpered from nearby, drawing my attention. “Jaune, I believe I have had a malfunction!”

The room's collective gazes turned on the gynoid as I asked, “What sort of malfunction?” At the same time, I caught Yang mouthing the word with a confused look on her face.
“I,” Penny began, sounding more distraught than I'd ever heard her, “I believe I have sprung a leak.”

The sound of flesh smacking flesh echoed through the apartment and I briefly registered an impact against the side of my face. It took me a moment to realize that I'd actually facepalmed hard enough to do damage. “Neo,” I addressed the girl, who had the decency to look sheepish. “You broke it, you fix it.” Moving to Penny's side, I took her by the elbow and lead her into my bedroom, followed by the ice cream themed thief, who closed the door behind us. “Penny, I'm going to let Neo explain a few things while I run Ruby and Yang home. I promise you're not broken, but another girl might be able to explain it better than me. Is that okay?”

Penny visibly thought it over for a moment. “I would feel much better if you were here,” she finally admitted.

“I know, and I understand,” I nodded, easing her to sit down on the bed and dropping to a knee in front of her. “But part of being out in the real world and being a person is learning to trust other people. You can't always rely solely on me. Neo's a good person, and I trust her. She wouldn't intentionally do anything to hurt you or steer you wrong.” I shot a sidelong glance at the shorter girl, who fidgeted under my gaze. “Another part of 'growing up' I suppose is taking responsibility for your actions. Neo was a bad girl earlier and, while I wouldn't necessarily say she made a mistake, she did do something that had unintended consequences for you—so it's her responsibility to explain those consequences. Do you understand?”

Penny nodded and behind me, I heard Neo grumble, “It takes two to tango.”

Standing, I took her in my arms and grinned. “Yes, but I didn't initiate the dance and I distinctly recall attempting to turn off the music.”

“Fair point,” she acknowledged, rolling her eyes. “Fine.”

“I'm not mad at you,” I murmured, catching her chin and tilting her face up so her gaze met mine. “Just a bit annoyed. I get what you were planning, but it's entirely too soon for that. Okay?” The shorter girl nodded, and I planted a brief kiss on her lips. “Great. Try to use kid gloves with Penny, would you?” Casting a glance at the gynoid watching us and thinking back to her sometimes very literal interpretation of things, I shook my head and added, “But don't be afraid to be absolutely blunt if you feel the need.”

I made my way back into the living room, closing the bedroom door to give Penny's conversation some privacy. “We ready to go?”
“Any time,” Yang shot me a lecherous grin, and I rolled my eyes.

Ruby turned to Miltia and blushed. “I uh.. I'll return the...”

Miltia was having none of that however, as she stepped in and wrapped the little reaper in a hug. “Keep them.” She leaned in and Listen caught her whisper, “Jaune likes them.” Ruby gave a plaintive whine in her arms and Miltia chuckled. “Come by to visit next time you're in town.”

“I suppose you're kind of fun to have around, so I guess we wouldn't mind having you here again,” Melanie was addressing Yang, and the blonde chuckled.

“Don't encourage her,” Ruby deadpanned, pulling away from Miltia.

“Too late for that,” Yang returned, and Ruby rolled her eyes, muttering something that sounded suspiciously like, 'Years too late.'

Ushering the sisters towards the front door, I threw a wave over my shoulder towards the twins. “I'll be back in an hour or so.”

“We'll be waiting,” Melanie promised, a suggestive tone to her voice that I instantly recognized.

Yang and Ruby were quiet as we stepped into the elevator, but that seemed to be about as long as Yang could go without speaking. “So. They were nice.”

“Yep,” Ruby agreed, shifting from foot to foot.

“And you're dating them?” Yang asked, lilac eyes locking with my blue.

I nodded. “I am. I never denied that or tried to hide it,” I pointed out.

“Not saying you did,” Yang shrugged. “Does it bother you, Ruby?”
The little redhead snorted softly, turning an amused gaze up at her sister. “Not really. I like to think of it as... new friends that you get to share something special with.” Glancing at me, she quickly added, “Even though, you know, we're not really dating or anything. Just... just friends. Right Jaune?”

Reaching out, I mussed her hair, earning a pout. “I'll be just about anything you want me to be,” I admitted quietly, then followed it up with, “But I think what you need right now is a good friend.”

“Friends are nice. I like friends,” Ruby nodded, shifting her head slightly under my hand and encouraging me to scratch. “Ooh, scratchies. Now I know why Zwei loves this.”

“You're such a kid,” Yang laughed, drawing my gaze and sending me a smile, before her look turned contemplative. “So, Jaune,” she began, and I raised an eyebrow in question, gesturing for her to continue when she hesitated. “Your sisters are Hunters, right?”

“Four have graduated and the other three are in school,” I clarified. “Why?”

“I... kind of hit a brick wall recently and could use some help. Do you think you could maybe ask one of them to help me run down someone, or see if they know someone who's good at that sort of thing?”

I hummed, thinking it over. Odds were good she was talking about her mother, and I knew she went to Hei originally, though I had no idea who she went through to find him. I was also fairly sure he hadn't told her anything significant, which could have been because she pissed him off and wrecked his club. Well, it was worth a shot. “I know a guy. Send the info to my scroll and I'll ask him next time I see him.”

“You'd do that for me?” she asked, and I nodded.

“Sure. What're friends for?”

The blonde shot me a small smile before turning away. “Thanks,” she murmured, already digging out her scroll and swiping away at it and I got an email a moment later.

A quest has been created! A Favor for Yang.
Yang has asked you to ask around and see if you can dig up any information on the whereabouts of her estranged mother, Raven Branwen. Reach out to your contacts and see what you can find.

Rewards: 10000 EXP, increased closeness with Yang, increased closeness with Ruby.

Failure: decreased closeness with Yang.

The ding of the elevator hitting the parking garage and opening broke the small moment between us. Yang took out her scroll again as she made her way to her bike, using it to start Bumblebee after checking the time. “Looks like we've got a little while before the shuttles stop running. As nice as having a private Bullhead is, I think someone upstairs wants your attention more than we do at the moment. We'll take the shuttle and save you a trip out to Patch tonight. That sound good?”

“If that's okay with you,” I shrugged. “What do you say to meeting in the morning and doing some training?”

“Yes!” Ruby cheered, and Yang nodded.

“It's a date,” the blonde agreed, then laughed as Ruby shot her a look. “I'm up for a double date. How about you, sis?”

“Yaaaang,” the little redhead whimpered. “Stop teasing me.”

“But you make it so easy!” Yang protested.

I nodded. “That, and she makes the most amusing embarrassed faces.”

Yang grinned, blonde hair bobbing with her nod. “Yeah, it's kind of priceless. My sister's so adorkable.”


“Night, then,” I waved, turning for the elevator.
A small pair of arms wrapped around my waist and I found myself wrapped in a hug. “We had fun tonight, Jaune. Thank you,” Ruby murmured, her face buried in my back. She gave me one last squeeze and let go, hopping onto Bumblebee behind her sister, and a moment later the bike screeched tires as they left.

'Not a bad night,' I mused, a grin crossing my lips as I rode the elevator up. I took out my scroll and forwarded Yang's email to Hei, adding a quick note that I'd be willing to pay for information. I would hold off on asking my sisters or Miltia and Melanie until Hei let me know something. In the meantime, I still had things to do tonight—satisfying the twins and Neo being the top of my list, then training with Penny. At some point though, I was going to have to sit down and design a new weapon for my 'Shiro' identity. In order to support the story the video from Atlas told, I would need a dustcaster. Thankfully, I already had some ideas in mind. In order to get a Dust weapon with multiple Dust abilities, I would have to design something similar to Weiss's Myrtenaster—that is, a weapon with multiple Dust chambers that could switch between them on the fly.

'Well, there's no reason to stick to the katana style,' I admitted. Yeah, it was sort of Shiro's thing, but there were other weapons I could use that would work well as Dust weapons. For instance, I could get something longer than the base form of my swords. I had never actually used the extending feature with them, but a weapon that was longer by default could prove useful. Something with some reach would be nice. 'A polearm, maybe? I think there are zanbatou designs that are essentially 'sword on a pole' weapons.'

And with a polearm as a base, I could employ more of those previous life imported martial arts skills—I had some fairly high level training using a bo staff, after all. Not just that, but a polearm would give me more in the way to work with as far as Dust went. With a detachable weapon, I could have a naginata, a bo, a couple of short staves, and a zanbatou all in the same weapon—and each of them could, theoretically, have their own set of Dust chambers. Son's staff/lever action shotgun combo came to mind as an example, except instead of shotguns mine would be straight dustcasters, and instead of chains I'd likely use the same monofilament that was in my line launcher. In fact, with some modification, I could probably use the thing as a line launcher or grapple type weapon. Though, on further thought, I realized I shouldn't disregard adding a gun of some kind to it instead of going with only dustcasters—guns were useful for more than ranged weapons, namely for the kind of crazy shit Ruby, Yang, and others pulled off without batting an eye, like throwing themselves around using recoil. 'There's a lot of possibilities there. And Shiro could stop being a one trick pony, with iaido and speed. Look into it later. For now, girls.'

“How much?” I asked, making sure not to break eye contact with the woman behind the counter—red contacts boring into her bronze eyes. She looked to be in her mid-30s, taller than me, and muscular—and a faunus of some sort, though I was having a hard time picking out what. She had a reddish skin tone and straight, black hair. She was moderately attractive, but I'd never really had a thing for overly muscular or masculine women. Not my type. My Semblance identified her name as Terra Ferrum, level 20.
“How fast you need it?” she countered, crossing her arms under a fairly unimpressive bust—though, I suppose that could have just been the unflattering coveralls and thick, leather smock. She worked as a weaponsmith after all, and those didn't exactly dress like Huntresses.

“How fast can you have it done?” I inquired, mirroring her pose.

That turned out to be a mistake, as she immediately asked, “How much you got to spend?”

Chuckling, I shook my head and conceded the game. “We're arguing in circles. If I asked for it by Monday, is that doable and what sort of price am I looking at?”

“It's doable, pricey though.” Terra allowed. “Half a mil up front, the other half upon delivery.” I winced, letting out a low whistle.

'God damn,’ I silently cursed. That was going to take a bite out of my funds.

Before I could get a word in edgewise, she explained. “Cost of materials. Cost of labor. Priority rush fee. This ain't a simple gun-blade just anyone can pick up and use. You're asking for a multidustcaster on top of a dual shotgun and a sword—and for all of them to integrate. I'm the best in Vale, and I guarantee you'll be getting what you pay for. You could do it yourself, but with something like this, workmanship counts for a lot. You've done good with the designs—I can tell that at a glance. It's not often I'm forced to admit that I can't see many ways to improve on something obvious.”

“Yeah, I get it,” I agreed. I opened my side pouch and dug inside, willing stacks of bills to appear. Connected as it was to my Semblance and Inventory, I could just dig out stacks of whatever I needed—or set a selection of things to be available to grab in case I was in a hurry.

“Space expanded storage, nice,” the woman nodded approvingly as I continued stacking wrapped bundles of bills on her counter and she counted them. “You want my suggestion?”

“What's that?” I asked, not looking up from my task.

“For an extra hundred-fifty thousand, I can make you a sheath so you don't have to have the entire
assembly strapped to your armor,” she gestured at my current setup as Shiro—katana at my left hip and right shoulder, and longslide pistol on my right hip. “You're right handed, and even with space expansion and weight reduction, this thing is going to take up some room. I'd recommend replacing the sword at your left hip. You could still quick-draw this one without any real loss in draw speed or maneuverability.”

I frowned, shooting her a glance as I shook my head. “The sword on that doesn't give me a non-lethal option.” Like my katanas, the blade was curved—but that's about where the similarities ended. Instead of being smooth, the back of the blade was sharpened from the tip up the first foot for easier stabbing penetration, then serrated the rest of the way down, to do more damage on the way out depending on how I pulled the blade. It was not made for non-lethal combat—it was a weapon designed to maim and kill. Grimm, preferably, but I knew that wouldn't always be the case. Especially not if I was using it as Shiro.

While the outer edges of the blade were steel, the core would be composed of Dust—specifically, grade 9 Colorless Dust. Clear as glass, uncut Colorless Dust—otherwise known as Neutral Dust—held the unique property of taking on the properties of whatever color Dust it came into contact with, but only so long as the other Dust remained in contact, and limited to the average grade of the two. By itself, Colorless Dust would do nothing and was entirely non-reactive—it did not possess any special affinities, nor did it even combust properly when processed into ground Dust. What it did, however, made up for that deficiency. Namely, it allowed those using Dust in things like bounded fields or enchanting for clothing to use it as a substitute for whatever color Dust was needed in larger quantities.

For instance, using it with Purity White would allow me to cover a much larger area for far less money. On the other hand, in a weapon, it could be made to turn a regular blade into a Dust-infused blade. Dust crystals didn't combust like ground Dust upon use , so I couldn't use it as a ranged dustcaster. On the other hand, I wouldn't need to, seeing as with the right element I could do things like set the blade on fire, or coat it in electricity, or frost, and so forth. In other words, I'd found a way to cover for my own Semblance's ability to manipulate elements. And with an actual dustcaster built into the hilt, it wouldn't matter if I couldn't cast with the blade anyway.

“Well,” the weaponsmith murmured, drawing me from my thoughts, “that's the problem with trying to juggle multiple blades. Personally, I'd ditch the two katanas and the pistol and focus on this thing. But if you're really worried about it, I think I have an idea.” She began tapping away at one of the computers behind the counter before a large telescreen mounted on the wall to my right came to life, displaying output from her computer. On it, my design for the weapon was displayed in wireframe. A moment later, a cylindrical object appeared alongside the weapon. The program was smart enough by itself to make suggestions, such as basic hilt designs, but she appeared to be ignoring those for something of her own.

“Okay. So, you want a lethal and a non-lethal blade. Instead of carrying two swords, carry two blades,” Terra said. On the screen, the tube shifted to a cross-section view. “The sword itself sits in the middle, here,” she moved her cursor about on the screen, indicating there the sword would be
Sheathed. “Slide it in and the hilt locks into place. Add an internal chamber for blade storage,” the display changed again, adding a storage area. “You want the selector switch on the hilt or the sheath?”

“Sheath,” I answered immediately. “Don't want to damage it or trigger it in combat.”

She nodded. “So, hit the selector switch and the hilt unlocks from the blade, the current blade retracts into the tube, and the next blade cycles in. Shouldn't take more than a couple of seconds. The constituent parts of the pole are stored in the tube around the blade storage and rotate into place as you eject them. This way, you'd have a weapon that could be switched from less-lethal to full-lethal, in addition to having your secondary weapon available to draw from the same hand, or simply drawing the hilt itself to use just the dustcaster.”

I recognized the design—it was similar to the weapon Yang's mom used, with the same general length and width as the tube-style sheath if I recalled correctly. “How many alternate blades could this store?”

Looking at the design, Terra shrugged. “Not many without space expansion. Four or five. You could keep spares, or go with five different designs—that's up to you.”

Humming, I removed the sword off my left hip, sheath and all. “Think you can use this blade? It's an extending blade and I'd hate to waste it.”

Carefully unsheathing the weapon, Terra inspected the blade and hummed. “Not bad workmanship, and I can see you've treated her well. You do know these things have one serious flaw, right?” she asked, and I shook my head. “They're great for clearing out weak grimm, don't get me wrong. But if you extend this thing and someone blocks with another blade, or something with any sort of fine edge, this thing is going to snap at the point of impact unless you're reinforcing it with Aura, and even then odds are even on it breaking depending on how long it is at the time. The longer you make it, the weaker it gets. Full extension on these is something like five meters—and I can guarantee that if you've got it out that far and someone blocks right, it's going to snap. Hitting armored grimm with it is a bad idea, for the same reason.”

“Well. That's… handy to know,” I sighed. I hadn't used the extension feature on the blades yet, but I could see what she said made sense, where physics was concerned. You couldn't add extra mass from nowhere, so in order to lengthen the blade you would have to expand the mass currently there—reducing its tensile strength at the same time.

“Want me to do it anyway? I'm not saying it's useless, just that you should be aware of what it is
you're using.”

After a moment of consideration, I nodded. “Yeah, go ahead. Will this still be done by Monday?”

“Yeah. Give me your scroll number and I'll call you when it's finished,” the large woman nodded.

Fishing out my Shiro scroll, I wrote down the number and left the shop with a wave. It was early morning, but I figured Ruby and Yang should be awake by now. With that in mind, I took off for the airfield. I would be training with Ruby, Yang, and Penny for the first part of the day, then switching over to Neo and the twins while the others took a break—not that Penny needed it though, so she may just wind up doing both sessions with me, in addition to her nightly training with me and Sanguine. Speaking of Penny, I needed to find some time to sit down and design her some new weapons—three identities worth. She also needed outfits for those identities. I already had some ideas in mind, though—I just needed to run them by Penny. And I should probably ask her how her power levels were looking and whether she'd need new Dust any time soon, since I didn't want her running out.

'So, Default!Penny uses her marionette laser swords... Keeping in theme with my identities, Shiro uses swords and now the pole-sword. The Fox uses Dust casting with no real weapon, or at least that's his story if asked. Jaune uses sword, shield, and rifle—or dual swords. At least for Fox!Penny, I could go with dustcasters—or dust blades, or both. She'd need some way to manipulate them without the strings and backpack, though. Atlas has anti-grav tech. How hard would it be to rig up something she could control wirelessly? Hell, that and a couple of those lasers from the Spider-bots would make a hell of a weapon too—maybe some sort of portable shield generator to add to it. Angel can do without lasers on her birds. I would need to talk it over with Penny, but I wasn't in a huge hurry at the moment.

Red eyes locked with mine as Yang descended on me wreathed in flames, looking for all the world like a meteor, with one fist cocked back and clearly intending to flatten me and everything around me when she hit. At the last instant, a hexagonal barrier sprang up separating my face and her fist, white and putting off a faint aura of steam in the warm air. The A.T. field rang like a gong as Yang threw everything she had into the punch, fire billowing out from the point of impact followed an instant later by a red dust round from Ember Celica going off. The barrier, despite being an energy construct, shattered like ice and a small hail of frost rained down around me, but it had done its job by canceling out her fire elemental attack with ice and eating the physical force behind the blow. What she had not expected was the second barrier behind it—one of the benefits of leveling shields, I'd found, was that I could now cast each in layers.

Before she could recover, I Leapt, planting a boot between her breasts and kicking her skyward. Drawing my Blazefire Saber, it lit up with a tracery of white-blue as I spun it around into saber mode
and struck, drawing a trio of slices across her abdomen before she got her hands up into a crossed guard position. “Rrragh!” Her yell preceded her Aura exploding outwards, once more alight with fire that I countered by hastily shifting my own Aura to ice elemental—I couldn't really blame her for being annoyed, seeing as I'd likely bruised her tits with that kick. The force was enough to push me away and separate us and she used that to her advantage, launching into a barrage of shots from Ember Celica. My shield came up, catching the majority of the Dust rounds, save the few that went wide.

The shots were just a distraction, however, as I felt an intense heat building and looked up to see a fireball coalescing between her hands as she fed her Aura into it. With a heave and a blast from her weapon, the spell came hurling at me at a speed greater than I'd ever managed with my own—but then, Yang was the sort of intuitive fighter that would make the connection between fire spells and fire-type Dust rounds, even if it had been entirely by accident the first time.

I had picked up some tricks of my own in the past few days we'd been practicing, however. Telekinesis spun me around to build momentum and I swung my Saber wide, dumping Aura into the weapon—more specifically, into the Dust crystal powering it—I'd found out what those were good for, aside from adding on a bit of damage and elemental effects to bullets fired from it. A line of white-blue tinted Aura, razor sharp, arced out from the edge of my sword. Near as I could tell, what I'd discovered was an advanced use for Aura Strike—when using a weapon that used Dust for anything beyond ammunition, I could project Aura Strike as a ranged attack in a line along the path my blade followed, with the effect and damage of whatever Dust crystal I'd had equipped. I vaguely recalled Blake doing similarly in canon, without Dust, but also without the elemental effect. The sword skill streaked across the distance separating us faster than Yang's own fireball, catching it dead center. Instead of the explosion I had been expecting, both techniques simply fizzled—opposing elements canceling each other out entirely. ‘Switch!’

A small explosion of motes of green light announced Penny's arrival, preceding a hail of laser fire leading a barrage of steel that Yang was forced to dodge away from, dropping into a roll as she landed. I didn't have time to follow that fight as my detection skills pinged. My feet touched the ground and I had an instant to turn and bring my shield up before something heavy slammed into it and the ring of steel-on-steel announced Ruby's arrival. She didn't sit still, however, as Crescent Rose went off above me and the redhead disappeared, reappearing two feet to my left, in the middle of a wind-up for a spinning slash. I Flash Stepped in, shield up and hitting the trigger, firing a low-grade round in her face to make her flinch or dodge. Instead, she disappeared again, reappearing behind me without the tell-tale explosion of roses. The back of her scythe slammed into my back and I rolled forward with the impact to mitigate the damage.

My roll out didn't help as Ruby once more Flash Stepped, this time swinging the massive weapon up into my face. I felt my nose crunch as my course abruptly reversed, sending me flipping ass-over-teakettle. I landed on the ground in a small explosion of dust kicked up around me, even as Gamer's Body un-broke my nose. “Okay,” I grunted, rolling over and getting to my feet. “That's enough of that bullshit.”

“Can't keep up, Jaune?” Ruby teased, beaming a smile my way before disappearing again.
I dumped mana into Haste and the world slowed to a crawl. Where I hadn't been able to track Ruby's speed a second ago, I could now clearly see her mid-Step, aiming for my left flank. Where Yang had forced me to develop a reliable method of countering elemental techniques on the fly, once I'd made the mistake of teaching Ruby Flash Step, she'd forced me to develop a counter to that as well. It turned out that I'd already had one—it just took leveling Haste up over 30 and unlocking its second tier ability, namely perception at Haste speed. Before, I'd been able to do a sort of bastardized version of it simply by dumping mana into the technique and speeding myself up, now I could directly speed my perception separate from my overall movement speed. I'd found I could alter the time-dilation effect it produced by moderating how much mana I put into the technique, but even if I could see it coming I couldn't quite react fast enough to get distance from her since the skill wasn't quite there yet. The best I could do was anticipate her moves and counter them, then wait for an opening. *She's going to be a real terror once I teach her Haste,* I mused, a grin slipping onto my face.

Flicking my left wrist, my shield collapsed and I drew my second Saber, spinning it around and parrying Ruby's opening strike in a glowing red blur. The strike I sent in with my other Saber met its own counter as Ruby spun with the momentum of her parried blow, the staff that made up much of Crescent Rose's body catching the blade and shoving it away with raw weight of force. Crescent Rose went off and the saber was torn from my grip, spinning away to clatter to the ground nearby. Needing to make room, I hit the smaller girl with a telekinetic shove, sending her flying while at the same time, grabbing my fallen sword with the same spell and setting it into a rotating orbit around me. Sighting down my hand at her, I incanted, "AP Round."

Ruby was gone by the time the second syllable left my mouth. The technique spun up, spheres of mana streaking out, only to be caught by my active Telekinesis and set to whipping around me into a more active defense. I repeated the technique as Ruby backed off to the far edge of our training field, sending all the rounds down range, where she spared a moment to Step out of the path. Ruby crouched, flipping Crescent Rose around behind her, and I knew what was coming. I called up my A.T. Field again. With two Fields per cast, I could hold up to four of them if I cast my maximum of two simultaneous castings at the moment. Combined with Mana Barrier's own double barrier, I was effectively turtling in anticipation of her next attack.

Ruby didn't disappoint. My eyes caught some sort of visible distortion around her as her Aura flared. Chambering a round, she launched herself in a spray of rose petals. There was another crack of her rifle firing and she dropped into Flash Step, and even my new perception lost track of her. *This is going to suck,* I had time to think before swinging all four A.T. Fields into the path of her attack. There was an almost musical quality to it as the Fields screamed in protest before shattering one after another, Crescent Rose cutting through the first three like tissue paper, bulling through the next, before slamming into and lodging in my Mana Barrier and sending cracks scattering through both layers of it. She hung there in mid-air for a moment, cutting a pretty impressive figure I had to admit, with her cape, skirt, and scarf swirling around her as our eyes locked. That distraction cost her, as a dark form rose from where it had been crouched in the high grass nearby and slammed into her back, dragging her to the ground. One heavy paw planted itself in the middle of Ruby's back and the girl went stiff as the great cat's growl registered against the back of her neck.

“Situational awareness,” I chided, allowing my barriers to drop. Sanguine shifted off the smaller girl
and I helped Ruby up, in time for her to see the cat dissipate as I dismissed her. “You get tunnel vision at that speed.”

“If you’d teach me Haste, it wouldn’t be a problem,” Ruby countered, dusting herself off.

I rolled my eyes. “I realize this. Fine, it’s next on the list. After buffs.”

“But Haste is a buff!” Ruby argued.

'Yeah, and if I teach you Haste now, I won't even be a challenge for you.' I shook my head, knowing I'd have to find a way to up my own speed again soon. In the two days since introducing Ruby and Yang to Neo and the twins, we had been busy. The sisters had picked up some new tricks, but both were still getting used to using them in conjunction to their normal skills. Case in point, Ruby had yet to quite adapt to the enhanced speed, which was another reason I was putting off teaching her Haste. “And if you come to over rely on your speed, something will eventually come along and catch you by surprise. Work on rounding out your skills before focusing on more speed.” Ruby pouted, but nodded. “And remember—”

“I can't use them at Beacon, until after we're on teams, unless it's an emergency,” the little reaper sighed. “I know, I know. But it's just that we're getting awesome skills and we can't even use them! Why?” She looked to Penny and hummed, before asking, “Is this an 'Atlas bad' thing, because of the thing with Penny? Are you worried they'll figure out you're here if we start using the same stuff you're using?”

“No, but that's a good point, and another good reason to be careful with what I'm teaching you. No, the main reason is,” reaching out, I poked her forehead, drawing a cross-eyed glare in response, “what have I told you about trump cards?”

The girl nodded. It was becoming a familiar argument, but I knew she would listen. The sound of gun and laser fire had stopped by now, and I looked over to see Yang and Penny heading our way. “And you,” I pointed at Yang, “Try something other than fire every once in a while.”

“But fire is fun,” Yang countered, and I rolled my eyes.

“Yes, yes, I get it you pyromaniac. But if you keep it up, you're going to wind up as a one-trick pony.” Yang made to counter, likely with either innuendo and/or a pun, and I cut her off. “None of that. You wanted something cool, I taught you something cool, but you're wasting it as is.”
The blonde huffed out a sigh and nodded. “Fine, fine. Any suggestions?”

“Wind, gravity, or electricity,” I named off the top of my head. “The first two you can't really see when they're in use, the last one is a nasty surprise for anyone who gets into CQB with you. Wind will make you faster though, and gravity will let you do all sorts of neat stuff as far as maneuverability goes.”

“Well, can't go wrong with more speed,” Yang hummed, shooting a look at her sister, who grinned. “I'll give it a try. Flash Step next?”

“After you get buffs down and can show me at least one more element,” I countered, and the blonde winced, then nodded.

‘An entire team of speedsters. What was I thinking?’ I wondered, before sighing. I knew damn well what I was thinking at the time—the same thing a certain someone had been thinking when he handed a little girl an anti-material rifle/scythe combo and told her to go have fun. 'It'll be awesome. I was thinking it would be awesome.'

Yang closed her eyes and I watched her Aura flare up around her, swiftly going from her normal golden glow to fire-elemental. The blonde frowned, powering down and trying it again. I set Ruby to trying to generate Reflex as a spell/skill and sat down to watch the blonde. 'She shouldn't be having this much trouble,' I decided, after several minutes. “What element are you trying?”

“Wind,” Yang nearly growled, and when her eyes opened I saw they were red with anger. She blinked, her eyes shifting back to lilac and focusing on the middle distance—a sure sign she was reading something generated by my Semblance, or at least the minor version of it those in my party ran. “What does 'insufficient elemental affinity' mean?”

I blinked, then groaned quietly. “Okay. Try focusing on ice, just for shits and giggles.” Yang shrugged, closing her eyes. “Eyes open.”

“Ah, right,” she chuckled. A look of concentration fixed itself on her face and her Aura exploded outward again, before slowly shifting once more to fire. This time, she immediately stopped. “Now it says 'incompatible Aura alignment.'”

“Motherfucker,” I growled, resisting the sudden urge to destroy something. Taking a deep breath, I
forcibly calmed myself before Gamer's Mind could kick in. “Okay. Okay. We can work with this. This isn't a complete train wreck.” Turning towards the redhead seated several yards away, I called, “Ruby!”

“Yes, Jaune?” she asked, silver eyes shifting to meet mine.

“Call up your Aura and focus on an element. Let's say fire,” I instructed. The girl nodded and, a moment later, her Aura sprang to life around her in red. A few seconds later, her eyes unfocused. “Insufficient elemental affinity,” she answered my unspoken question. “Want me to try something else?”

“Wind,” I nodded.

It took several minutes, with Yang and I watching her Aura fluctuate up and down as the younger girl tried, but eventually I felt the change in the air around us. “It worked!”

“I don't get it,” Yang muttered, crossing her arms under her bust as Ruby proceeded to play with her new technique.

“I think I do,” I sighed, shifting my gaze to her for a moment before turning back to watch Ruby. “It's probably like stat points. I bet money I'll get an update tonight and a few new menus for it, in fact. So, think of it this way. A character that starts out at level one and gains levels gains points per level. Suppose that person also gains a number of points to put towards an elemental affinity. Put points in element, get the ability to use it.”

“With you so far,” Yang nodded. “But I didn't start at level zero.”

“No, you didn't. Neither did Ruby, or the others. My best guess is that your level is just my Semblance giving an assessment of your overall potential power based on what it can detect—which doesn't necessarily include an assessment of your skill, because skill levels independently of character level. Since you never had the ability to have points for it before now, anything you have now is just an assessment of your natural ability. Meaning that naturally, you lean towards fire as an element. Ruby took way longer to get wind than you took to get fire, so odds are good she's neutrally aligned or leans towards some esoteric bullshit element I haven't run across or bothered to try to use yet, that shouldn't even qualify as a true element. Like 'speed.' Or 'swords.'” A look of annoyance crossed my face before I shook my head.

“The thing is though that if you're naturally inclined towards one element, you tend not to be able to
use its opposite at all, and other unrelated elements tend to be harder—and that's all depending on source material, so your mileage may vary. In a classic RPG, it shouldn't fucking matter—which is what has me so pissed about this. By classic RPG rules, you should be able to learn whatever you try so long as you have the INT for it. Maybe it's a Remnant thing, or maybe it's a Semblance thing—I don't know. The only thing we can do is branch out your training and see what you can learn, and determine your limits from there. If all else fails, once you start leveling we can see if you get any sort of 'elemental points' or something and go from there. If not, well…” I shrugged.

“Work with what I've got,” Yang grinned, and I nodded. We turned to watch Ruby, who had by now begun attempting to combine her new Aura element with her other techniques, and had managed to face-plant twice. I was going to have to teach her Haste soon, after all—because otherwise, she had more speed than she had perception to keep up with.

“One more thing,” I caught Yang's attention, shooting her an annoyed look. “Stop telegraphing. Seriously. Stop. And you're particularly bad about leading with that right hand.”

The blond rolled her eyes and nodded. “Yeah, yeah. So, who's ready to kill some grimm?” Yang grinned, bashing her fists together.

“That would be most…” Penny trailed off, shifting her gaze to me as my eyes tracked into the middle distance. “Jaune?”

A quest has been created! From Shadows: Forever Fall from Grace.

Blake Belladonna has abandoned the White Fang in disgust at what they have become. Alone, cut off from all her former ties, and sitting on a train full of Dust passing through Forever Fall, she seeks to start a new life, separate from the old one full of misery and bloodshed. Find her and show her there is a future for her in Vale.

Success: Blake stays in Vale and enrolls in Beacon, quest unlock, quest continuation, 25,000 EXP.

Failure: Blake leaves Vale and will not enroll in Beacon, team RWBY will never come to be, quests exclusive to Blake will become unavailable, death*, destruction*, mayhem*. *Depending on severity of failure.

Time limit: 24 hours.
I read the details and a smirk stretched across my lips. Holding out a hand, I summoned up the unarmed Bullhead. “Penny, would you get Ruby and Yang home for me? Something just came up.”

The gynoid nodded, even as the sisters shot me confused looks. “What's going on?” Yang asked, and I shook my head.

“I got a quest. I'll explain later, if it pans out. I'll catch up with you guys later, okay?” I asked, and the sisters nodded. Moving away, I summoned the armed Bullhead. Setting a waypoint, I hopped in and took off.

Sitting in the Bullhead's cockpit, I watched the station in the valley below as a train swiftly came to a stop while I ate lunch. While the SDC trains used the same primary tracks as every other train, there were several little rail spurs like this one that branched off from the main track, used much as they were in my old world to place train cars temporarily, or allow a train to move out of the way of another, or in this instance to provide a facility for an SDC train carrying Dust to offload its cargo for temporary secure storage. My glasses zoomed in and I took a quick count. Thirteen cars, though the last one looks blasted to hell. Wonder what happened there. Eh, it doesn't matter much. Twelve box cars full of Dust is more than zero. I wonder if those Atlas droids will be there. If so, I'm definitely taking those things and reprogramming them. Hell, Penny may be able to puppet them herself for all I know. Either way, my PMC just got a huge boost in equipment. Though, it'll look suspicious if we just start using those and Atlas has no record of selling a batch to us, so I'll have to see if we can put in an order to buy a few units, then use them to take up space on mission deployments. So long as we don't deploy them all at the same time and keep them in storage for when we need them, they probably won’t realize just how many we have.'

I'd flown in low to stay out of sight of the station and parked the Bullhead in a clearing a few miles up the track, out side of what I believed to be the range of their droids and any other detection equipment they had . The clearing itself was situated on a rise, overlooking the valley the facility was located in, giving me an excellent view of the area below. My map had told me all the cameras in the station were pointed inward and the Bullhead hadn't alerted me to being painted by radar, so for the moment I assumed they probably weren't aware of my presence.

What I found most off about the whole thing was that there were no people at the station itself—as though no one was aware of the attempted hijacking. I supposed that if the train was automated and if the White Fang had disabled their means of communication with the CCT network, there was the possibility that the SDC really wasn't yet aware of the attempt. It could simply be the logic that having armed guards on-site would announce to anyone looking that this was where a shipment would be coming in. Or it could be that the entire facility was automated, so that trains could dump their cargo and then trucks or other vehicles could pull in and collect.
As the train pulled in and came fully to a halt, machinery began to move along the track and scan the train itself. When it passed the last car and found nothing, a light lit up on my Bullhead's dash. Frowning, I tapped the interface and watched as it displayed an alert message. It seemed that even if the facility was automated, it was smart enough to figure out if a train came in with fewer cars than was on the manifest. And, upon detecting such a discrepancy, the station immediately sent out an alert on the local Atlas Military and SDC priority CCT channel, sending up the alarm to everyone in range with the clearance or gear to pick it up. *Well. Fuck. That just made things harder.* I had been intending to deal with Blake, then come back and dupe the Dust and droids later in the day—and now, the base would be on alert and potentially swarming with guards by the time I got back. *Going to have to come in under stealth as Shiro and Sleep the guards. Destroy or disable the surveillance first, along with their transmitter so they can't call home with another of those emergency band messages.*

Movement drew my attention to my link with Sanguine, the spirit's gaze focused on a dark-clad form slipping through the trees and circling the Bullhead. I knew damn well that unless the White Fang had arranged for pickup—and considering I had yet to see anyone else, I was going to say no—then me sitting here with the side doors open looked very much like a trap. However, I had two things going for me there. Firstly, even if she ran, she had been in range of my map for miles and I could track her into and through Vale. My Semblance wasn't all-knowing, but it did have a rough guesstimate of certain events based on my foreknowledge and a maximum detection range. Blake crossing into that range was what had triggered the quest in the first place. Secondly, I was banking on her natural curiosity to get the better of her. Curiosity had that odd habit of occasionally overriding common sense, and if what I'd seen of her from my world was in any way accurate—something I was coming to doubt by the day, about a multitude of subjects and people—then some aspects of her personality simply couldn't be ignored. I was again reminded of the old saw about curiosity and cats. If she ignored it and kept going, good for her—it meant she wasn't a barely fleshed out cat pun. If she failed her Will Save against curiosity... well, given how similar-but-different both Ruby and Yang were to what I'd been expecting, I may be in for a surprise or two.

I watched through Sanguine's eyes as Blake slipped up along the side of the Bullhead opposite me, crossed around the back, and found the left sliding door opened. She disappeared inside and I dismissed the summon as I heard soft-bottom shoes pad up behind me softly before stopping. The scent of gun oil reached my nose a moment before I heard the sound of a weapon being leveled at the back of my head. What I did not hear, however, was the click of a safety being flipped to the 'off' position. It was fifty-fifty odds that the safety was on and she was bluffing. "Stand up slowly, hands up," a calm female voice ordered.

My lips twitched into a smile as I slowly set my lunch on the console, raising my hands and standing. As my hands came up, I grabbed the bottom of my neck gaiter and pulled it up. I was actually doing this meeting as the Fox, as opposed to Shiro, for a couple of reasons. On the top of that list though was the fact that if anyone happened to see us together, or if I screwed up terribly, no one could point the finger at Shiro for betraying Cinder. To that end, I had taken the time to flesh out my Fox costume by conjuring up a mask in the proper colors—a mask which was currently sitting on the seat off to my side, though unlike the original illusory mask this one was in white, with red highlights, simply because I'd decided I hadn't liked the inverted color look using black and blue. Also unlike the original, this one was far more detailed, having actual contours and textures to it that I hadn't been able to pull off with the original illusion. Not wearing the mask was a calculated risk on my part—
subconsciously giving the impression that she'd caught me with my pants down, so to speak, and then later if I didn't put it on again implying some level of trust or desire to be trusted. Which was true—I wanted to trust her, and I wanted her to trust me... I just had no compunctions against using a little psychological warfare to make it happen.

There was a rustle of cloth and, in the reflection of the cockpit window, I caught Blake raising her gun hand for a butt stroke—that is, a strike with the butt of the weapon. Even with the safety on and her going for a non-lethal strike, I couldn't take the risk that she'd actually manage to knock me out. I fell back on old training, instead: disarm, disable, subdue. Turning swiftly, I caught her arm and pulled her hard against me, locking her hands to her sides. She attempted to knee me in the groin and I trapped her knee with my legs. “Let go!” she growled, pulling back and trying to head butt me.

“Damnit, that shit hurts,” I hissed in pain as I caught the blow on the nose, my eyes watering momentarily before Gamer's Body kicked in and un-broke my nose.

“Good!” she growled, throwing her weight around before trying again—unsuccessfully this time. In spite of real life martial arts training, or perhaps because of it, I hadn't been expecting the first one—no one with sense uses a head butt. The move has as much of a chance of damaging the user as the target, if they get unlucky and hit teeth or something. Then again, desperation causes people to do dumb things at times. Dumb things sometimes work.

The struggling was not entirely to my favor, as we both fell in a heap to the floor of the Bullhead and rolled, Blake working her hands free enough to strike my chest and stomach—both of which were armored, so her strikes did no good, but she hadn't gone for more damaging areas either, like my ears, eyes, or throat. Using superior mass and weight, I rolled her onto her back, straddled her waist, and grabbed her hands by the wrists, yanking them up above her head and going still. Despite how short the struggle had been, we were both panting for breath at the exertion. Golden eyes glared into my green contacts, and for a moment I was reminded of another woman with similar features. Of course, around this time, Cinder would have been spreading her legs and encouraging me to continue whereas Blake looked like she couldn't decide if it was worth it to try and bite me. After a moment to regain my breath, I said, “I'm not going to hurt you.”

“All right?” she demanded, and I shook my head.

“Not until you hear me out,” I denied. In response, she flexed beneath me and attempted to grab my neck with her legs.

At the unexpected shift to potential lethality, my eyes went wide and I reflexively dumped mana into Haste, the world slowing down around me momentarily. I shifted from straddling her to laying on top of her, pinning her legs with my own and applying a bit of Gravity Manipulation to cheat before dropping Haste. “Listen, damnit!” I snapped, my voice rising to a yell as I pulled up Charisma and
Intent. She had actually managed to piss me off, and I took a moment to calm down while the woman below me froze, pupils dilating as she flushed and her breath caught in her throat, the small black ears I could see atop her head flattening against her hair. Apparently, she wasn't wearing her iconic bow—and likely wouldn't until she decided to try to blend in at Beacon. *Well, she did just leave what amounts to a 'mutant and proud' terrorist cell. Then again, it could very well have gotten lost in the fight on the train, or dirty before that. Doesn't really matter either way.*

God damn but I suddenly wished I was a Marvel fanboy—the entire 'faunus' situation smacked of the Marvel Universe's mutant thing and I could have used the inspiration for dealing with this shit. Instead, I'd just have to wing it and hope I could convince her I really was on her side. It wasn't going to be easy though, I knew that—not the least of which was because I held my own opinions on the subject. “Your name is Blake,” I told her, and her golden eyes went momentarily wide as she started to struggle again, until I hit her with another slap from Intent and instinct kicked in again, causing her to once more freeze in place with the same sudden sharp intake of breath and pupillary response. “Blake Belladonna. White Fang.”

“Not any more,” she quietly denied.

I nodded. “I know. Tell me about Cinder Fall.” The woman below me sent me a confused look and I clarified. “Black hair, gold eyes, scary as hell, and traveling with a boy and a girl.” It was an assumption on my part, that Cinder had already made one approach on the Fang, and Blake confirmed it for me.

“Her,” Blake grunted, and I nodded. “She came into our—into the White Fang's camp last night. She tried to recruit the leader for something.”

“Adam Taurus,” I named him, and her eyes narrowed in a glare before she nodded.

“How do you know that? He's only officially been the leader for a few weeks—even most of the White Fang doesn't know,” she asked, and I grinned under my mask.

“The same way I knew you'd be here. So, what did she say she wanted them for?”

“Revolution,” Blake whispered.

“Which the White Fang was already plotting,” I deadpanned. “Be more specific.”
Eying me suspiciously, she added, “She offered Adam the train, in exchange for his services.” Chuckling quietly, a smirk crept up the faunus girl's lips as she added, “Adam already knew about the shipment, so it didn't go as she'd expected. Then again, ” she looked just slightly smug, “It didn't go as he expected, either.”

Frowning, I asked, “How did he know about the shipment? He shouldn't have known.”

Golden eyes shifted away, and a look of shame crossed her features. “I shouldn't—”

I shifted my grip on her wrists, transferring both of them to my left hand before reaching down with my right and taking hold of her chin, tilting her head back to meet my gaze. “Tell me.”

Blake glared for a moment before wilting under my stare. “There was a job, a day ago, to the north of Forever Fall. He wouldn't say where he got it from, but when she showed up this Cinder woman made it pretty clear it came from her. It was supposed to be a simple in and out thing—break in, steal the weapons, get out. They were SDC, so Adam didn't hold back—he slaughtered those people and the others helped. Some of them were taken prisoner and the White Fang interrogated them. That's how Adam knew about the train—the facility we were stealing from was set to load a shipment of Atlas robots onto the train with the Dust, for transport to Vale and distribution. When he was done, he forced the SDC employees to send whatever confirmation was needed to convince them to continue the shipment on schedule. Then we made camp last night and Cinder walked into our camp and offered Adam the train job.”

I closed my eyes, thinking back to what I knew. So, Cinder had made her offer and failed, and that was after she had already extended him a freebie job as a show of trust —was that because I had taken too long getting her the information? Or was it her own fault, for giving him a source of information leading to taking the train out of the equation as a bargaining chip? I knew I'd been well within her time limit, but then she'd given me that limit, not the quest system—so if anyone was mistaken there, it was her. Did this change anything? Would she be without the White Fang now, or did she still have another move left to play there—some other way to leverage Adam onto her side?

I knew enough of Cinder's mind and personality to assume that yes, she likely would try again with some contingency plan. She had tried the carrot—she would move on to the stick, next. Which likely meant using those ridiculously powerful fire attacks I had seen neither hide nor hair of yet. ‘Wait. Was that part of her Semblance, or granted by the Dust in her clothes? Or did her clothes amplify her Semblance's ability to do them? Actually, yeah, it's probably that second one.’

If Adam were lucky, there would be a carrot tied to the stick when she beat him over the head with it — money, Dust, or something else of value to him. If he refused her a second time, well, odds were good she'd kill him and move on to the next person down in his chain of command, until she found someone more cooperative. And on the other side of the coin, was the freebie job only made possible
because I gave Cinder the data? Was I indirectly responsible for those deaths? 'Magic 8-ball says 'all signs point to yes,'" I mused. 'I suspected something like this when I gave it to her.'

“Who are you?” Blake asked below me, drawing me from my thoughts. “A Hunter? No. In order to know about the meeting, about the train, you would have to be close to one side or the other. You're not White Fang and you asked about Cinder, so you're after her.”

“That is some fine deductive reasoning,” I complimented, grinning as I blatantly ignored her question in favor of asking, “But what if I'm with a third side? I could be with the government, for all you know.”

Blake snorted, softly. “Not likely. They can't find their ass with both hands and a map when it comes to faunus—any of them.”

I shrugged. “Tell me, Blake. Why did you leave the White Fang?”

Her answer was a moment in coming, her gaze sliding away from mine when she finally did. “I didn't like what they were becoming. People speak of 'revolution' while ignoring every history book ever written on the subject. There is no such thing as a bloodless revolution. People will die, on both sides… And I don't want to be part of it.” There was something unspoken in her tone there, an almost audible 'not anymore' hanging in the air.

“So you're just going to what, quit?” I asked, and the girl under me fixed me with a glare. “Or, as an alternative plan, you could join a school for Hunters, like Beacon. Become a Huntress, rise through the ranks, gain renown as a faunus Huntress and set an example for your people to look up to as an alternative to the Fang, and maybe even one day become Headmistress. In a world where personal strength matters as much as political, showing you can stand as equals with humans on the battlefield would go a long way towards convincing other faunus that there are options.”

“It's not that easy,” she denied, and I shot her an unamused look.

“How do you know it's not, if you haven't even tried yet?” She broke eye contact again and I knew I'd made my point. She would at least be seriously considering Beacon now, if she hadn't been before. “You want peace?” I asked, and she nodded. “You want to save the most lives possible, right?”

“Yes.”
I nodded, meeting her eyes again. “Cinder would see Vale burn to the ground with a smile on her face with all of us in it—human, faunus, doesn't matter—and her little pets will go right along with. The White Fang are just a means to an end, to her. Whatever she's got planned, it obviously isn't good.” I did not share my suspicions that she wasn't the one pulling the strings. I had met Cinder—she didn't strike me as a 'watch the world burn' sort of person. Maybe it was one of the other kingdoms, trying to attack Atlas through Vale—it's the best guess I had, given the tech I'd seen and the buildup of troops and materials. Cinder potentially being an agent of Mistral or Vacuo was the most logical conclusion available with the information I had. Either way, cut off from her backer, Cinder would be… well, she'd still be immensely dangerous and personally powerful, ruthless, cunning, intelligent, and drop dead sexy but at least I wouldn't have to worry about someone else directing her.

Pulling myself out of that thought, I admitted, “The problem is, I can't do this alone and I can't turn to Ozpin and his network for help.”

The woman below me blinked, slowly, before one dark eyebrow went towards her hairline and her upper set of ears flicked. “You're asking for my help?” She turned her head to look up to where I held her arms pinned, then shifted her gaze down along our bodies. “You have an interesting way of doing it.”

“You attacked me first,” I pointed out, and she frowned before nodding as sentient to the point. Releasing her hands, I stood and offered her a hand up.

Blake took a moment to rub her wrists before accepting the hand and allowing herself to be hauled to her feet. “Why should I work with you?”

I gestured towards the co-pilot's seat of the Bullhead and she eyed me warily before taking up my mask and dropping into the seat, while I dropped into the pilot's seat. A growl from beside me drew my attention to where the girl had spotted my lunch, her eyes locked on the box as she sniffed the air—her stomach having betrayed her. Realizing what she'd done, she blushed and turned her head away to look out the window, offering me the mask. Smirking, I took up the small box and offered it to her. Her eyes cut sideways, meeting mine momentarily before she accepted the box, trading me for the mask, and took up the chopsticks sitting on top of it. She ignored the rice and instead went straight for the sushi, popping a bit into her mouth and chewing slowly. If she was bothered at all that I'd been eating from it before she got there, it didn't show. A sigh escaped her lips and her eyes rolled back ever so slightly and I swear she shuddered from head to toe. “Good?” I asked, and she nodded, an affirmative noise escaping her lips.

I started the Bullhead and got us airborne. “You should work with me for three reasons. Firstly, we can help each other. Secondly, because our goals are aligned. Thirdly, because I can pay.”
“Hmph,” the girl huffed quietly, swallowing another morsel before countering with, “You'll have to do better than that.”

“You left the White Fang because you didn't want to be a killer any more,” I pointed out, and her chopsticks froze in place an inch from her mouth.

“H-how—” she began, eying me in something akin to panic.

I rolled my eyes and pointed at her chopsticks. “You're going to lose your sushi.” The girl's eyes narrowed and she calmed somewhat, popping the fish into her mouth and waiting. “I'll tell you how if you agree. Suffice it to say, I know more than I should—about you, your past, you get the idea. Same way I knew to be here, same way I knew about Adam.”

“This is not how one typically goes about asking for a favor,” Blake deadpanned, and I shrugged. “You'll tell me and I'll withhold judgment on whether to help you until after I've heard.”

“I'm not asking for a favor. I'm asking for,” I sought out the right word for a moment, then smiled. “An alliance.”

“You have a funny way of showing it.”

I frowned, then shook my head. “Table that for now. We both want something approaching the same thing.”

“So, you want equality between humans and faunus as well?” she asked, shooting me an amused look.

I shrugged. “That is an entirely different kettle of fish unrelated to the current mess, and won't be solved in a few months or even years, and certainly not by the likes of you and I.”

Her eyes narrowing, she jabbed the chopsticks at me. “That did not answer the question.”

“No,” I agreed. “It did not.”
She nodded. “Then I'll be more direct. What are your thoughts on faunus?”

I met her eyes for a long moment, before the Bullhead bumped as it hit a rough patch of air and I turned my attention back to flying. “I've only met three. One of them is decent enough. One of them is dead. The last of them is currently being obstinate.”

There was a soft noise somewhere between a snort and a laugh. “Is that so?”

“Very obstinate,” I confirmed, and her lips twitched up into something that could have been a smile.

“I won't work with you until you answer,” she finally decided, and I sighed.

“Fine. You want this argument now? Okay, then,” I agreed, some of my annoyance at her forcing the issue slipping into my tone. “I did some digging. Census data, crime stats, and so forth. People lie, numbers don't. Taken as a subset of the general population, when lumped in with caucasians, asians, and other races faunus are responsible for a larger percentage of crime than the others individually, despite their being a lower percentage of the population than any other group—”

“That's only because we're treated like second class citizens and forced to live in squalor most of the time! Most Faunus need to steal to eat,” she interrupted, and I shot her an annoyed look.

“I'll get to that in a minute,” I sighed, having heard the same argument before, parroted endlessly in a different world, because it was all some people knew. 'Socioeconomics my ass. Then again, Remnant. At least some of the faunus really may have had to steal to eat. As opposed to stealing to pay for Jordans.' I shook my head—it wasn't pertinent to the current thread of conversation and I hated being interrupted in the middle of a train of thought. “As I was saying, however, faunus aren't a race of humans—you're a sub-species, with its own races mirroring humanity, and present in about the same percentages.”

The girl beside me blinked, frowning as she said, “So, you're saying we should be judged separately because we're different?”

“Yes,” I nodded. “Unless you're going to tell me that biological differences aren't real and race is,” I rolled my eyes, “a 'social construct?'''
One eyebrow went up towards her hairline. “I’m not so delusional as to deny basic biology. Still, we know what we are. What does that have to do with anything?”

“Everything. On the whole, you're no better or worse than humanity, in terms of propensity for doing evil,” I clarified, and she nodded assent. I went silent, wondering if she’d leave it at that.

Unfortunately, no, she did not seem inclined to let it lie. Now that she'd gotten started, it seemed like she didn't want to stop. My Semblance told me she was feeling worried, frustrated, and defensive—but beyond that, it couldn’t tell me anything. “You were going somewhere with that, other than, 'because we're different we should be judged by our own standards?’”

'Oh for fuck sake,' I nearly groaned. “It's when you get into biology that we have a problem.”

“Oh?” she hummed, putting the empty lunch box away and leaning forward. “How so?”

I shot her an amused look. “Simply put, your species and mine are in competition. You are a threat, biologically speaking.”

“We're not,” she denied. “We just want to be allowed to live in peace—to work and live our lives as something other than second class citizens.”

Shaking my head, I said, “Take people out of it and look at it from a purely animal standpoint. You have a native animal population. Someone introduces a new, foreign species—or in this case, modifies part of the original species into its own, distinct sub-species. For the sake of keeping with the animal comparison, we’ll say it's selective breeding. The invasive species competes for resources with the native species and one of three outcomes occurs: A.) they both die off because they use all the resources because there was no population control, or from disease or other natural selection pressure, B.) if capable of interbreeding a cross-breed species comes about and typically ousts one or both or we go back to option A, or C.) if not capable of interbreeding, one species kills or drives out the other. There is no magical fourth option where both of these species live in peace, together—and that's just cold, hard fact of nature. There is no such thing as 'equality' in nature—it's a man-made concept.”

She frowned. “You're saying there is only survival of the fittest.”

“You're putting words in my mouth,” I denied. “But I won't deny the thought hasn't crossed my mind.”
By now, the city of Vale stretched out below us as I put us on a course for the airfield as a matter of habit. Sighing, Blake nodded. “I see.” In a blur of movement, her Semblance engaged and there were two of her, one in the co-pilot's seat and one streaking towards the rear of the Bullhead even as the one she'd left behind dissolved into smoke. Rolling my eyes, I flipped the door control before she got there and the door slid open. There was no point chasing her now and if she felt trapped, she wouldn't listen. So, I let her go, diving out of a moving aircraft, the sound of Gambol Shroud firing echoing up into the Bullhead momentarily.

Pulling up my map, I watched her icon and moved the Bullhead out of sight from her position. I was not entirely surprised by her destination—I knew Tukson was former White Fang or would be soon, so it made sense that she'd get into contact with him. Still, I needed to give her time to cool off before I tried again. Glancing at my HUD's clock, I wondered what I was going to do. I couldn't, and wouldn't lie to her. 'Seems like we could both use some time to think,' I mused, turning the Bullhead back onto a return path for the automated depot. There was a train full of Dust back there, unguarded until Atlas could scramble some troops to respond to that alert, and I wasn't going to let it go to waste.

A little more than two hours had passed by the time I made it back into Vale City, finding Blake's icon on my map where I'd last seen it. I came to a stop on the ground outside Tukson's Book Trade, looking around to make sure I wasn't being observed before dropping Invisibility and slipping inside. “Welcome to Tukson's Book Trade, home to every book under… the sun. That is an interesting mask. How may I help you?” the man himself greeted from behind the counter. Nearby, Blake's gold eyes locked onto mine under the fox mask and her posture abruptly went stiff as her eyes narrowed. Sensing the latent hostility there, the large man asked, “Is there a problem?”

Before Blake could speak, I shook my head. “Nope. Why don't you take a nap?” I asked, subvocalizing a Sleep/Forget combo and catching him with Telekinesis as he fell, dropping him into a comfortable-looking chair situated behind the counter, beside a small table with a small mountain of books, a single glass, and a bottle of something a dark amber color.

“What did you do?!” Blake asked, eyes going wide as she drew Gambol Shroud.

“Tukson is sleeping. When he wakes up, he won't remember I was here and as far as he's concerned, everything will be right as rain. What I did not do is kill him or otherwise harm him,” I answered, taking off my fox mask again so she could see at least part of my face. “You didn't let me finish, earlier.”

“What, sit and listen to the same rhetoric that convinced me to leave the Fang, just from the other side? No, thank you,” she hissed.
Nodding, I slowly stepped out from between her and the door, giving her clear line of sight on the easiest line of escape. “I was going to say, before you left, that survival of the fittest works for animals—but you and I, we're thinking, reasoning, sentient beings. We are still animals, no doubt about that, and the same rules still apply—biology is what it is. But we can think for ourselves—that's what separates us from the rest of the animal kingdom: that we can, if we so choose, rise above our baser natures. However, equality, rights—these aren't things others give to you. You have to take them and, once you have them, defend them—with force, if need be. Adam's revolution is inevitable, if left unchecked. If not today, with him and Cinder, then tomorrow with someone else. At least if we shut down Cinder and Adam, odds are good that the next revolution won't end in one side trying to genocide the other. Yes, either way, there will be casualties on both sides until the situation is resolved permanently, one way or another—but that's almost unavoidable, so at this point the goal is to aim for the least number of deaths. Cinder and Adam together are the greater of two evils there. I'm trying to shut her down before she gets people killed. Before she helps Adam make an honest attempt at wiping out and/or enslaving humanity. But I can't do it alone, and sure as shit I'll have a harder time of it if she ties her cause to the White Fang. You know the Fang, inside and out—and you know Adam. You know how they operate and how he thinks. If you're looking for redemption, this is your chance. You could make a difference.”

“Choose a side or die once the fighting breaks out?” she asked, and I shrugged.

“There's nothing wrong with living for something you believe in. Dying for it is stupid. It's smarter to make the other guy die for his cause. That, or keep running. Running is, in a lot of situations, the best thing you could do. I'm not above running from trouble when I can, myself. The problem with running is, eventually you run out of places to run to. Eventually, you have to stop running and stand up for what you believe in—even if it means going against the flow. Question is, when you do decide to stop running and make a stand, will there be anyone left willing to stand with you, or will you have left them all behind?”

Gold eyes met the green of my contacts for a long moment before she asked, “And how do you know those so-called comrades won't leave you, when you make your stand? Or stab you in the back?”

“Trust and mutual self- and group-interest,” I shrugged. “So, how would you go about achieving your goal of equality for everyone? What would you accept as a good first step?”

She was silent for a long moment as she thought it over, before answering, “Equal pay for faunus.”

“Okay,” I nodded. “Thing is, most places already have equal pay laws on the books—Vale being one of them, as you likely already know,” I pointed out.

“And yet, the SDC is taking advantage of faunus workers in their quarries in every kingdom, paying
them cents on the Lien compared to human workers,” Blake countered.

Tired of standing, I gestured and conjured up a pair of chairs and dropped into one. Across from me, Blake shot a look between me and the chair beside her and raised an eyebrow before taking a seat, right on the edge. The barrel of her weapon never tracked away from me as she laid Gambol across her lap, though I did notice the safety was still on. “Okay,” I acknowledged, “that's a good starting point. How would you go about fixing that? The Schnee Dust Company is pretty much an entity unto itself, producing an annual profit that looks more like what you’d expect of the GPD of a kingdom unto itself. They set their own wages. I'm not entirely clear on the details, but weren't the current wages for faunus set under arbitration after a series of strikes, a few years back?” I asked, and Blake nodded in answer. “Historically, strikes don't work. The SDC still needs living hands to handle Dust, because their automatons don’t quite have the fine motor control required. They're getting there, though—I'd say they're probably five years off of mass production, ten at most.” Penny was testament enough to that. “What then? The faunus working for the SDC strike, and instead of being replaced by scabs, their jobs will be automated.”

“I don't know,” Blake admitted, and I nodded.

“Looking at it another way, I could argue that faunus willing to work for those low wages are stealing jobs from humans who would otherwise work them for a fair wage, if those faunus would refuse to accept working for that set wage. Many of them would lose their jobs, yes, but in the end things would be better off for a few members of both groups. So, which is better—a hundred faunus workers making one Lien an hour, or ten overworked human and faunus workers making ten Lien an hour? You're not going to get an outcome better than that, because that's how most companies do math. Set X value as the total amount of money you want to put into paying for a task, divide it by Y workers, then divide that by the maximum legal amount of hours they can demand an employee work a day, Z.”

Shifting in her seat, the woman across from me shook her head. “That's just blaming the victim! Don't you think that if they had other options, that if they could look elsewhere for work, that they would? You said yourself strikes don't work. Most of those people are living hand-to-mouth—if they don't work, they don't eat.”

“It's not victim blaming,” I denied. “Did you think convincing people to change would be easy? Change requires sacrifice. If they won't sacrifice for the change they want to see, then at that point they're only victims of their own inability to commit to a cause and unwillingness to stand up for themselves. It's waiting on someone to come and fix their problems instead of doing something to fix them themselves.”

“A commitment like joining the White Fang?” Blake deadpanned, and I shrugged.
“I’m not saying I disagree with their initial goals. It's their current shift from the goal of equality to superiority and the subjugation or eradication of humans that I disagree with—the very reason you left,” I pointed out, and Blake nodded. “Alright. What about Dust? You buy Dust, you use it—”

“I’ve heard that argument before,” Blake cut me off. “Pay the workers more, the price of Dust goes up. Hunters and the various armed services, being the primary consumers of Dust, are strained that much further in their services protecting us all from grimm. Hunters have to demand more money to cover expenses. Governments tax the people more to cover the cost of Dust for their armed forces and to pay for Hunter contracts. Farmers use a lot of Dust based equipment to farm what little land we've recovered from the grimm, so the price of food goes up. Price of fuel for vehicles goes up—for personal vehicles, transport for food, transport for Dust, and so forth. Even basic services like electricity go up. Wages do not go up to meet the rate of inflation, because people like the SDC are looking out for their bottom line. Those workers that got those raises now can no longer afford food, fuel, and taxes and wind up in worse straits financially than they were before. Everyone suffers. I get economics. I understand that money doesn't just appear in a vacuum. I also understand that communalism—communism, socialism, and so forth—have been tried before and do not work, so I won't suggest just having the government fix all of our problems by throwing money at them. Governments don't fix problems, they tend to make other, larger problems and call them solutions. Things like rounding up all the faunus and dumping them onto an island whose former inhabitants were mostly eradicated by grimm and telling them to fend for themselves, back when all of this first started.”

'Money doesn't appear in a vacuum for most people,' I corrected silently, resisting the urge to smirk. Still, it was good that she understood the pitfalls involved—I'd hate to have to explain why free money is a bad idea to someone who desperately wants free money for everyone. An entire generation on Earth was poisoned with that bullshit about how only those who want to work should do so, creating an entire group of overly entitled underachievers who didn't understand basic economics and outright ignored every single historical failure of the economic model they wanted by claiming that ‘it had never been tried,’ because it didn't fit their world-view. In other words, every failure was a non-attempt, as opposed to a failed attempt. In reality, that phrase should have been: 'it's never been tried and worked,' because it could not work. Not to say that capitalism was the be-all-end-all of economic systems—it just worked better than all the others.

Humming in thought, I asked, “So, seems to me like you need both more knowledge on the SDC’s inner workings and, if possible, some sort of contact within the company—right?”

Blake blinked, thinking it over and nodding a moment later. “In the short term, that could be useful. Don't tell me you have a contact within the SDC?”

This time, I did smirk. “Better, even.”

Rolling her eyes, she sighed. “How?”
“Same way I knew about you,” I grinned, and she shot me a mild glare. “Would that convince you to help me? And that I want to help you?”

Shaking her head, she met my eyes and said, “No. It would help, but I won't work with someone I can't trust. I don't know you.”

“Is that just an excuse to run away again?” I asked, raising an eyebrow and earning another glare in answer. “You can't work with someone you don't know, and that's fine. I can't work with someone whose loyalty is constantly in question and who will bolt at the first sign of trouble. Is that who you are, Blake Belladonna? Too afraid to commit, too afraid of being trapped, too afraid of being hurt again to allow anyone close enough to call friend—let alone stand up for what you believe in?”

Her jaws and knuckles flexed as she ground her teeth, fingers popping around her weapon. Despite her anger, her voice was calm as she asked, “And what about you? I don't even know your name. All you've done is point out my flaws and make empty promises.”

I closed my eyes, biting back my first response and nodded. She was right, words were meaningless in some instances. Space warped in a three meter sphere centered around us as I created an ID, an extra layer of security to keep us from being overheard. Across from me, Blake's eyes immediately tracked to where Tukson had seemingly disappeared. “What just happened?” she asked, standing and looking outside the front window. “Where did the pedestrians go?”

“They didn't go anywhere, we did. I created an Illusion Barrier. Think of it as a bubble in space. We're in here, they can't see or hear us, we can't see or hear them.” I pulled down my neck gaiter. “My name is Jaune Arc. Though, I go by 'the White Fox' when I'm dressed for work like I am now. Or just 'Fox,' for short.”

“How do you know the things you do, Jaune Arc?” she asked, testing my name on her lips.

“My Semblance,” and I wasn't even lying, at least by technicality, if one included myself and my knowledge as part of my Semblance.

The woman across from me raised an eyebrow, before turning her gaze pointedly towards where Tukson would be sleeping away behind his counter on the other side of my ID and back. “Uh huh.”

Rolling my eyes, I grumbled, “Party, just click yes.”
The faunus girl's eyes went wide, tracking into the middle distance. “That… huh,” she hummed, losing the wide-eyed look and clicking yes. She went silent and I watched as she began digging through menus. “I rarely ever had a chance to play games as a child, but this sort of reminds me of parts of the older-style RPGs, when you get down to its core elements.”

“Pretty much,” I admitted. “There's a mixed bag of elements pulled from more sources than I'm bothering to count at the moment, but yeah, at its core it's an RPG.”

Looking up, she met my eyes and asked, “Do you get quests?” On my nod of confirmation, she shifted her gaze back to her menus. “That's how you knew where to find me, isn't it?”

There was no point in lying about it, now. “Yes. I was actually nearby and the quest to meet you popped when you got into range.”

Humming in thought, she didn't look up as she asked, “Is that all this is to you? A game?”

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes. “What do you think?”

“I don't know what to think,” Blake admitted. “On the one hand, you sound sincere. On the other hand, you're an opinionated ass.”

“I've heard that before. You get used to it,” I deadpanned, and this time I did roll my eyes. “I did try to warn you that I didn't want to have that argument. You solicited this ass's opinion. If you don't like hearing it, that sounds like a personal problem. Not every opposing opinion or viewpoint is a personal attack. Aside from that, I'd rather be labeled an asshole than have to change my opinion to suit what others think it should be.” Despite not having any particular fondness for him, Churchill said it best: 'You have enemies? Good. That means you've stood up for something, sometime in your life.' ‘And, most importantly, talking about this stuff doesn't bother me—I don't get butthurt about it, as you can see. I enjoy a good debate, or a good argument.’

She humphed, closing the menu and meeting my eyes with an unamused look. “I realize that,” she allowed, before adding, “And yet, while you've filled the air with a great many words, you have still failed to give your own opinion on the matter. You talk a lot, you even manage to say a lot, but it's a smoke screen you hide behind.”

'Clever girl,' I mused, debating where to proceed from here. Truth would cause fewer problems.
down the line. “Individually, I don't particularly care. Faunus, human, doesn't really matter—if they're not friends, family, or loved ones then I'm not going to waste time worrying about them. Oh, as a Hunter I'll do my duty and help those in need, and I'm not going to screw over people just because I don't know them—but beyond that, their lives aren't any concern of mine, just as mine should be no concern of theirs.”

“Live and let live?” she asked, and I nodded.

“On the other hand, as a group, as I said before—faunus are an existential threat to humanity unless both groups can come together and work something out. That something isn't going to be holding hands and singing until the problem goes away. Whatever it is, it's likely going to suck for both sides—but then, that's how negotiations are supposed to end: with both sides equally unhappy, but willing to agree that they've found the best solution each can agree on. I don't have a case of pathological altruism forcing me to put the needs of another group before that of my own—if something’s going to be done about it, it can't all be to the benefit of one side. I want humanity to survive—not be wiped out or subjugated for revenge as Adam wants, or bred out. I'm sure you want pretty much the same thing. I'm sure you find the idea of humanity being eradicated just as distasteful as I find the idea of genociding the faunus. Peace and a mutually beneficial working relationship is in both our best interests. It's a starting point. If you want to talk about it more later, we can, but it's not exactly germane to the current situation.” Seeing as she wasn't attempting to flee, I asked. “So. In or out?”

Blake snorted, quietly. “So, to sum it up: stop the bitch, save Vale, and put down an armed uprising to prevent a war. That's about what you want my help for?”

“Pretty much,” I admitted. “Simple, right?”

“Sure. So, what's your plan for that? How exactly were you planning to do all of that without leaving a lot of bodies piled up?” she asked, crossing her arms and looking somewhat amused.

I shrugged. “I'll deal with Cinder my own way. Putting down the Fang without killing them, that is a problem—the one I need your help with, actually.” Humming, I quietly added, “Well, there is one way. Cut the head off the snake and the body will follow.”

“Kill Adam, you mean,” she deadpanned, and I shrugged.

“Kill him and have a viable replacement step in. It's not my first choice, but at this point? It's on the table,” I admitted. “Does that bother you?”
Golden eyes shifted away and she nodded. “I would prefer it if there were another way.”

“I see,” I murmured. “Well. It's not something that we'll have to deal with today, at any rate. We may think of something before it comes to that.” Sending her a smile, I asked, “So. Is it a 'we,' or is it a 'me?'”

She frowned, meeting my eyes again as she asked, “Why me?”

“Other than my Semblance pointing out that having you in on this would be really, really helpful?” I deadpanned, and she rolled her eyes. “You were considering enrolling in Beacon, right?”

“Another detail your Semblance gave you?” On my nod, she shrugged. “I had considered it. What you said earlier, about rising up through the ranks… I think I like that idea.”

“I'll be there,” I told her, and one fine black eyebrow went up. “If I had someone else on the inside in the know on most of the details, it would help things. I already have one, but she's not part of this world. Not like you and I are,” I allowed a small smile to cross my lips. Ruby was not ready for the things Shiro or the Fox needed to do.

Blake stood, put away Gambol Shroud, and made her way towards the back of the store. “I'll think about it.”

“Fair enough,” I allowed, making my way towards the door. “I'll come find you later.”

The dark haired girl snorted softly. “Assuming you can find me.”

Turning back to her, I met her eyes and smirked. “I can. There is nowhere you can hide from me.”

“That's very reassuring,” she snarked, and I shrugged, pulling on my masks and dropping the ID. Throwing on Invisibility and Aura Suppression, I took a look at the minimap to check for watchers before exiting the store via the back door.

Pulling up my map, I went over my options. The twins were in the Industrial District, in the building that was to become the headquarters of my new PMC. Penny was off the map of the city of Vale.
Zooming out, I found her icon on Patch. Humming, I focused on my connection to her and asked, ‘Penny? Are you still with Ruby and Yang?’

‘Yes, Jaune,’ she returned a moment later. ‘Ruby would like me to stay for a 'sleep over' tonight. Is that okay?’

I smiled, shaking my head. ‘It's fine, Penny. I'm glad you're making friends. Let me know if you need anything.’

‘Okay, Jaune,’ she chirped, and I chuckled. It was good to see her being sociable with someone other than myself.

Neo's icon I found at her apartment, and I recalled she had been elusive as to what she was doing there for a while now. It seemed like half the time she was trying to subtly invite me over, while at others—such as with the twins the other day—it seemed like they were trying to keep me away. My mind made up, I closed my map and Leapt, making my way through the city to wards the Residential District under Invisibility. Finding her building, I made my way inside and upstairs, stopping in front of her door and knocking. I spared a look around to check for cameras and, seeing none, switched gear and dropped Invisibility. I heard the sound of footsteps from the other side of the door before it cracked open and one strawberry colored eye peeked out.

“Jaune?” Neo blinked, “What are you doing here?” she asked, sliding the chain lock off and opening the door fully, waving me inside.

“Thought I'd come by and see what you're up to,” I grinned, stepping inside and locking the door behind me before snatching her up. Neo squealed, laughing as her legs went around my waist. “You've been acting kind of funny, lately.”

“Have I?” she murmured, draping her arms over my shoulders and leaning in to nip at my lips as I nodded. “You really want to know?”

“Well, if you don't want to tell me,” I trailed off with a shrug.

Neo sighed, taking on a solemn look. “Okay,” she whispered, tilting her head downward so her bangs hid her eyes. “I'm pregnant.”

“Bullshit,” I deadpanned.
The girl in my arms snorted. “Your Semblance is a real killjoy at times, you know that right?” she chuckled. “Fine. Put me down.” I did so and she turned, taking my arm and leading me towards the back of the apartment. There were two bedrooms there and, as she opened one, I saw it had been converted into a workshop of sorts—a sewing room, really. Gesturing towards the room, she grinned. “Here it is.”

Stepping inside, I took a look around and hummed. A table to one side caught my eye, where a bundle of white cloth lay folded up. Neo followed me inside, moving to the table and taking up the bundle. With a flick of her wrists, she unfolded it revealing what looked to my eyes to be a coat of some sort. “What is it?”

Neo rolled her eyes. “A surprise, or at least it was supposed to be, until we realized we couldn't finish it without your help on some things anyway—namely, bounded field stuff. It's a coat. I was going to make this for you anyway, but after the Atlas thing the twins and I talked it over, and we decided it'd be a good idea to add a few things. We're going to add plate carriers around the torso, then attach some straps on the outside to strap on an outer layer of armor over it.”

“Won't that be heavy?” I asked, and she shrugged.

“That was something we'd wondered about, actually. The twins looked all over the apartment for that book of yours because we were trying not to have to ask you for help, but they couldn't find it,” Neo admitted, and I frowned a minute before realizing what book they meant. Opening my Inventory, I dug out the book of Sanguine's notes. “I told them you had it.”

“You're looking for a pattern in here?” I asked, and she nodded. “The patterns aren't actually in the book any more—just notes referencing them and a few half-drawn ones. I ate the patterns.”

“Oh,” she blinked, chuckling and looking sheepish. “Damn. Well, uh, shit. In that case, think you can dig me out a few?”

“What do you need?” I asked, and Neo grinned.

“Weight reduction, for starters. Temperature control, for another. Also, space expansion.”

Frowning in thought, I looked around the room and found a notebook and pen. Taking them both, I took a seat at the work table before opening up my Skills menu and digging through my patterns.
Neo folded the unfinished coat and dropped it on the table, before hopping up and planting her small ass on the table's surface beside me. Finding what I was looking for, I began drawing the first pattern out. “So, weight reduction so you can add armor plates without it adding a hundred extra pounds.”

“Internal and external plates,” she corrected. “More like two hundred. By the time I'm finished, you should be able to shrug off shots like the one that punched through your armor—without your shields.”

“I doubt it,” I denied, not looking up. “It went through two layers of shielding, my Aura, and Reinforcement. Without all of that, it would have been through-and-through—and given its size, that would have cut me in half.” There was a quiet breath above me, and I looked up to find Neo quickly smothering a worried gaze.

“We didn't realize,” she murmured, looking away. “You lied to us.”

I gave her an embarrassed smile. “I didn't lie. I downplayed it. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to make you worry. I'll take whatever armor I can get, but I'd rather not test it like that again.”

Green eyes turned back to lock with my blue, slowly shifting through colors before settling on bloody red—a shade I hadn't ever seen on her before. “Please don't. But I realize it's probably going to happen anyway, so we're going to do what we can to help.”

“I appreciate it,” I admitted quietly, looking back to my drawing and adding, “Everything you do, really. You and the twins. So, at some point in the near future, I was thinking about doing something nice for you.”

“Let me tell you a secret, Jaune,” the girl murmured, drawing my eyes back up to hers. “We're all pretty easy to please. Pay us attention, take us somewhere nice, do something fun with us—we don't care what, really, so long as it's with you. I'm sure Miltia and Melanie would love a night out dancing or something. Me? Well, if having a threesome with Yang is off the table for now, then I suppose I could settle for something else. Surprise me.”

“Surprise you, huh? Okay.” I decided a slight change in topic was in order. “Won't adding internal plates make it bulky, in addition to heavy?”

“Space expansion,” Neo countered. “I've heard it's a trick some Hunters use to cheat on that. Sew in plate carriers, add space expansion to the pockets, drop in your plates and only the surface of the
plate sits in 'real' space. You need a pretty strong power source, but you've got Dust for days now so that won't be an issue. As for weight, that's what weight reduction is for. By the time I'm finished, it should weigh no more than a couple of pounds. There are a few other things you could add—durability, for one. What that does is, when it detects an impact, it causes the force around the area of impact to spread over the whole surface of whatever it's attached to."

“So, it converts piercing damage to bludgeoning,” I surmised, eyes still on my work, but making a note to add that to the list. 'Well, it worked for Harry Dresden.'

“If you wanted to get really crazy, there are people who sew in patterns to allow them to use Dust offensively with it. You've met one, actually,” she mused, and I looked up to see her frowning. “That pretty little red number Cinder wears is so full of Dust it glows, and it lets her Dust-cast like a weapon. I know you've got your Semblance to do the same thing, but there are probably other ways you could use it.”

I nodded, thinking it over. I was sure if I put my mind to it I could think of a few effects I could use with it—gravity, for instance, to help with my own gravity manipulation. Though, what she had said about Cinder's outfit brought up an interesting point. “Speaking of glowing, won't this?”

Neo's smirk returned and she shook her head. “Not if I sew the patterns in on the under side, then sew in a liner. Of course, I'll probably double up some of the patterns on the liner, too…” She hummed in thought and asked, “See if you've got a water resistance pattern in there somewhere. I know there's about a dozen ways to get that effect, but using Dust would be the most effective—you wouldn't even get wet at that point. On that note, hood? No hood? Detachable hood?”

I looked up at the folded coat for a moment, remembering how it had looked when she'd held it out for me to inspect. It was a white duster, mid-shin length, split up the back to about the waist, that looked to be made of the same material all the rest of the combat specific clothing I'd seen here was made of. There was something odd about the way it was cut in front, and I would have to try it on to be sure, but if I had to guess, knowing Neo she had made sure I would be able to move and fight in it so it was probably cut to allow more freedom of leg movement—possibly at the sacrifice of protection there, but I would rather be mobile and partly protected than fully protected but unable to move. There was a folded down collar that looked like it would come up to about the middle of my ears if I unfolded it, and so should provide some protection from the elements—or an added layer of physical protection around my neck, face, and ears. I tried imagining a hood attached to it in various ways, then shook my head—the image looked ridiculous, unless I went full Assassin's Creed with it. I recalled Kenway had a decent looking one in Black Flag. Debating it, I shrugged. “Detachable hood,” I finally decided. Holding out a hand, I summoned up an image from memory using Genjutsu to cycle through the various assassin outfits I could remember. “Something like that.”

“Ill talk to the twins and we'll see what we can do,” Neo nodded, quickly constructing a copy of the Kenway illusion just to make sure she'd gotten the image right and dismissing it when I nodded, after
confirming its accuracy.

I finished the second drawing and moved on to the third. “Why white?”

The girl above me chuckled, one bare foot stretching out to trail up and down my arm not occupied with a pen. “It's your color. Whoever decided on that hoodie and jeans combo as your Hunter outfit was an imbecile,” she laughed. “I mean, seriously. It was a bad idea. Sure, it looks okay for civilian clothing but it's not supposed to be civvie clothes. And what good is only a chest piece, as far as armor goes?”

“It'll protect my chest?” I snarked, and the foot trailing my arm snapped up to my chin, pushing my face up to meet her gaze, and at the same time providing me with an amazing view up her toned leg and thigh.

“Smartass,” she chastised, eyes half-lidded.

I shot her a completely deadpan look, my voice flat as I said, “Gee, it's almost like you're just figuring this out.” She rolled her eyes, her foot moving down to rest on my chest. “I was thinking about replacing the pants anyway. Any suggestions?”

“Black,” she answered immediately. “It will contrast nicely with the coat. Get something that already has loops on it for armor and add some armor at your shins—maybe also thighs, if you want. You'll probably want something to replace the hoodie, if you're leaving the duster open. I'd suggest a long sleeved shirt and a vest of some kind—you can keep the chest piece on top of that, but move the shoulder and upper arm armor pieces to the outside of the duster. Or wear the chest piece over the duster and keep it closed—your choice. It would look sort of like those outfits you showed me, that way. As for colors… dark blue, not quite navy for the shirt. Either black or charcoal for the vest.”

“The under side is starting to look like my Shiro outfit,” I warned.

Neo shrugged. “Yeah, but the duster throws that entire image out the window. You could wear the entire Shiro outfit under that thing and you'd wind up looking like you just shop at the same store. Your blond hair and the white from the duster makes that big a difference. Add to that the fact that Shiro is a stealth sort of guy, and that the duster screams 'here I am,' and no one who didn't already know would suspect you were the same person.”

I nodded, then grinned as I countered, “Yeah, but then it starts looking like my Fox outfit.”
Neo rolled her eyes. “Show me.”

I shrugged, focusing on Genjutsu, and cast a life-sized illusion of myself in that outfit standing to my side. “See?”

Neo hummed, walking around the illusion and taking in the details. “No, it's fine. The Fox wears red. You wear blue. Shiro wears gray. People notice little details like that and get hung up on them—it's part of the whole 'Hunter' thing. By wearing something distinctive, you actually wind up blending in. In this case, the little differences set you apart. Red hair, verses black or blond—all in different styles. Red as a secondary color, verses gray or blue. Full mask, verses half mask, verses no mask. Hooded cloak, no hood or cloak, duster. Green eyes, red eyes, blue eyes. People notice these things. As far as looks go, you're three different people as far as anyone else is concerned. I should know,” she smirked, giving a short twirl as her hair shifted to black, eyes to green, and her outfit changed entirely to something that looked like a full-body catsuit. A moment later, she made the same motion, only to be replaced by a redhead with white eyes and a skirt. She shifted through a few other changes—her takes on Ruby, Yang, the Malachite twins, even Joan.

“Okay, miss master of disguise, I get it,” I chuckled, and she hopped back up on the table, closer this time. “I concede that you know what you're talking about.”

“Good. Now, please hurry with that. I'm about tired of foreplay,” she smirked, and I rolled my eyes.

“You call this foreplay?” I asked, and she nodded.

“I don't know, something about us working together on something like this just turns me on—and I mean, beyond the damn sex aura. Maybe I just enjoy the attention,” Neo shrugged. “Either way, you'd better be done with that soon.”

“Well,” I drew the word out, a teasing grin crossing my lips, “I should really take my time and make sure I'm doing this right. Who knows what might happen if I mess up?”

One of her dainty feet planted itself on my chest again, before trailing lower, towards my crotch. “You've got five minutes. After that, I'm going to my bedroom, and if you're not right behind me when I go I will be very annoyed.”

Blinking, I looked up from the drawing to meet her eyes, once more shifting colors. “So, what you're
saying is that you want me to take my time, so you have an excuse for angry sex.”

“Who said I needed an excuse?” she smirked. “Four minutes.”

I looked down at the paper, comparing it to the model displayed by my Semblance, then shrugged and tossed it on the table. “It can wait.”

“I knew you’d see things my way,” the tiny girl beamed.

'It's a nice night,' I mused, a small grin tugging at the corners of my lips as I held Neo's small, warm body against me. The apartment briefly lit for a moment, imprinting a flash of unfamiliar surroundings on my eyes, before going dark again as thunder rumbled overhead. Neo shifted in her sleep, snorting quietly and burying her face deeper in my chest as rain continued to beat against the window in a sound that had nearly lulled me to sleep.

Leaning down, I kissed her lips before hitting her with Sleep to make sure I wouldn't wake her, then slipped out of bed. I still had things to do tonight. Top of my list was Blake. Opening my map, I looked for her icon and frowned when I found it. I'd assumed she would be staying with Tukson, or he would set her up with a place. Instead, I found her icon in an 'abandoned' building in the Industrial District—one of Roman's, coincidentally enough.

'Actually,' I mused, glancing at the sleeping Neo, 'I still have something to do here, too.'

Padding on bare feet into Neo's sewing room, I took up the drawing tablet and dropped into the chair I'd used earlier. Taking up the pen, I set about completing the drawing I'd been working on before we got distracted. When it was finished, I flipped through the completed drawings to make sure they were accurate. 'Weight reduction, damage conversion, temperature control... Oh right, need to add waterproofing. Is there anything else I want with this?' I wondered, humming and digging through my list of patterns. 'Gravity manipulation outside of weight reduction could be useful and might boost my own skill at it to something outstanding. And I did say I needed to settle on a 'public' Semblance for school. Using gravity and telekinesis, I could have a pretty nice combo going to back up my sword, shield, and rifle style. I'm a little sad I can't just go full caster mode in Beacon, but that's the Fox's sh*tick and I can't have us connected. Likewise, I'm not going to be able to use Shiro's Iaido and Invisibility, or full Aura Suppression. Well, I know Joan was supposed to have ordered a third weapon to cover dustcasting and it hasn't come in yet, so at least we'll have that gap in our team covered. Yeah, fuck it, I'll help enchant the coat into a dustcaster like Cinder's dress. As a gravity-based dustcaster, I may even be able to do some sort of gravity lensing thing and bend light to get invisibility another way. I wonder how hard it would be to add another element, though. With Ice, I could have a ready counter for Cinder's fire-based techniques. No, that's getting on into territory that looks too advanced for a student with some money to spend on gear.'
That decided, I finished up the last few sketches before changing into my Fox outfit, then I left Neo's apartment and locked up before heading out under stealth. I was not sure if I would be back that night by the time she woke up, though, depending on how things went with Blake. Lightning flashed and thunder popped around me, and I took a moment to find a high perch and simply appreciate the view. I'd always loved storms, ever since I could remember. Still, I was getting distracted—even if I wasn't getting wet or cold, using my Mana Shield and telekinesis to keep the rain off. Shaking my head, I resumed my trip across town and touched down lightly on the roof of the building my Semblance told me Blake had occupied. Creating an ID, I cut open the roof access door and raised an eyebrow under my mask as I heard glass clatter to the floor. Stepping inside, I dropped the ID and looked back at the door—where a glass bottle sat perched on top of the door knob, taped in place just enough that it wouldn't fall unless someone turned the knob.

'Clever,' I chuckled, equipping my glasses before I moved downstairs. Even realizing what sort of level of paranoia I was dealing with—namely, one to rival my own—I was still impressed at the number of tripwires she had managed to string up. Most were attached to things like empty beer or coke cans with rocks in the bottom, or glass bottles, though I counted at least three attached to liv e flashbang grenades. Broken glass filled an entire hallway on the level where my glasses highlighted Blake's heat signature, and I shook my head before taking to w alking up and then along the wall. I made it five feet before I felt the drywall sag and I had to rely on gravity and wind to lighten my weight enough to keep from breaking it—along with Telekinesis to distribute my weight against the opposite wall.

F inally, I made my way into the room she had claimed as her own—this one trapped with another bottle in addition to what looked like a smoke grenade, once I'd ID'd my way through the door. The room was bare and relatively clean, if you didn't mind the lingering stench of piss, body odor, cigarettes, and mildew that pervaded the entire building. I didn't see Blake. I did see a lump under a blanket, on top of some cardboard boxes. 'This… this is goddamn ridiculous.'

Stepping quietly, I crossed the room and crouched down in front of her. Her nose twitched, followed by her upper set of ears, before her eyes opened. Gold eyes focused on my mask and her body went still, before relaxing slightly as she recognized me. “You.”

“Me,” I agreed.

“This is…” she sat up, looked around, and refused to meet my gaze. “Exactly what it looks like, I suppose.”

“Really?” I asked, a teasing tone slipping into my voice causing her to shoot a mild glare my way. “Because it looks like you could use a friend.”
This time, the glare was replaced by an amused but knowing look. “I'm not going to say yes because you tracked me down and found me sleeping in an abandoned building.”

“I never said you had to,” I countered. “Regardless of what you decide, I really do want to help you. It's not because you look like you deserve help, or because I'm a decent guy or anything. No, it's for my own selfish reasons. Namely, you're hot.”

Blake snorted softly. “You're full of shit.”

“See? You've barely known me a day and already you understand me so well,” I chuckled. Standing, I offered her a hand up. “I have a spare bedroom, and a shower, and food if you're interested.”

“No strings?” Blake asked, and I shrugged.

“There are always strings. In this case, I want to get to know you better—and let you get to know me. In that way, we'll grow to trust one another and you may just decide I'm a human worth being friends with.” Seeing she was still debating it, I rolled my eyes, bent down, and scooped her into my arms.

“What are you doing?” she asked cautiously.

“Carrying you,” I answered, heading for the door. “What are you doing?”

“Wondering how a woman could put up with you, let alone more than one,” she snarked, and I grinned under my masks.

“Well, I've been told my amazing skill in the bedroom makes up for my personality deficiency.” I blinked, shifting my gaze back down to meet her eyes. “How did you know there was more than one.”

Blake rolled her eyes, then apparently decided she liked where she was as she shifted until she was comfortable and relaxed. “Lucky guess,” she dismissed, and my built-in bullshit detector red-lined.
Thinking about it though, it was fairly obvious what had happened. I had worried before about faunus picking up my scent if I used specific detergents to wash my clothes, or wore cologne or any kind of other scent. I hadn't showered before leaving Neo's home, I'd slept with the twins last night, and I'd been around Yang, Ruby, and Penny most of the day. I smelled like at least two different women up close, three considering the twins smelt just slightly different if you knew what to look for. 'Note to self: develop a damn scent removal spell of some sort to add to my stealth set. I got lucky this time.'

Her next question pulled me out of my thoughts, however. “You said you had a shower?”

“And food,” I agreed, nodding as we made it onto the roof and my shields snapped into place.

She hummed, thinking it over as I launched us across to the next rooftop and plotted a course that would take us to the apartment unseen. “I suppose one night wouldn't hurt. But very soon, you and I will have to sit down and talk about the things you know, the things you can do, and how we can help each other.”

The rest of the run was spent in companionable silence, neither of us particularly feeling the need to break it as I moved us across the city. Coming in for a landing on the door, I ID'd the door and let us in before heading for my front door. “You can put me down now,” Blake pointed out, and I grinned.

“Are you sure? Not going to run the moment I do?” I asked, and she rolled her eyes and shook her head. Putting her on her feet, I opened the door and gestured her inside, then followed. Once the door was locked, I switched over to my Jaune outfit and headed for the kitchen. “Hungry?”

“Starving,” she admitted, quietly.

Digging through the cabinet, I found a can of tuna—likely belonging to the twins, since I wouldn't touch the stuff. I was just finishing toasting bread when the twins came out of our bedroom in matching, nearly see-through night gowns. “Did we wake you?”

“No, it's fine,” Melanie yawned.

“Who's this?” Miltia asked, turning green eyes to my guest.

“Melanie, Miltia, this is Blake. She's going to be borrowing the guest bedroom for the night.”
Finished assembling the sandwich, I set it down on a plate in front of the cat-girl, along with a glass of water. “Blake, these are Miltia and Melanie.”

“Two of the girlfriends?” she asked, arching an eyebrow. I caught her golden gaze trailing over the twins for a long moment before she bit into her sandwich, a quiet moan escaping her lips as she did. “Mm, tuna.”

The twins shot me a questioning look and I nodded, barely resisting the urge to roll my eyes. “Apparently, I smell like you and Neo,” I deadpanned. That, and I realized what it was she was doing now—pointing out that she knew more about me than I'd intentionally revealed, likely in a not-so-subtle dig for coming at her with what I knew of her. Oh, it had cost her one of her own secrets—that she had a pretty sharp nose—but the information she'd gained, and the point she was making, were worth more than what she'd traded for it. I shifted my gaze to meet her eyes and shot her an unamused look, and she simply smirked around her sandwich.

“We are,” they synced, not missing the byplay but choosing to keep silent for the moment—likely to ask me later, knowing them. “Do you need anything?” Miltia continued.

Blake shook her head. “Just a shower, then sleep.”

I pointed to the guest bedroom. “There's an attached bathroom. Should be fresh towels and a couple of bath robes if you need one. If you want to do your laundry, the laundry room is over there,” I gestured across to the room in question. “If you need anything, let us know.”

“Okay,” the girl nodded, finishing up her sandwich and putting her dishes in the kitchen sink, before slinking off towards the guest bedroom. Pausing just inside the doorway, she turned gold eyes on me for a moment before smiling, faintly. “Thank you, Jaune.”

“Any time, Blake,” I nodded as she shut the door. I gestured the twins towards my own bedroom.

By mutual agreement, we waited until we heard the water running before anyone spoke. “Good find,” Melanie complimented, a smirk stretching across her lips. “With a little cleaning up, she should be a magnificent addition.”

I snorted, rolling my eyes, and Miltia giggled. “What my sister meant to say was, we think she's hot and won't mind if she sticks around for a while.”
“And as a reward for such a good find,” Melanie began, and I laughed out loud at that.

“‘Reward,’ huh?” I asked, only to get a smack on the arm for my sarcasm. Sarcasm or no, I couldn’t deny that I wouldn’t mind adding Blake to the group—she was very easy on the eyes, after all.

“You spent the evening with Neo. We want attention before we send you back to her,” Miltia admitted, and I nodded.

“And I’ll be happy to give it.” Humming, I asked, “What do you think about going out somewhere nice soon? Dinner, dancing, you know. Something fun.” The twins shot me an amused and expectant look, and I rolled my eyes and admitted, “I wanted to do something nice for you and convince you I'm not just using you for your connections, brains, and sex.”

The twins shared a look before Melanie began, “We don’t feel that way, Jaune.”

Melanie grinned, her sister mirroring the look, and added, “But by all means, please, do continue doing nice things for us. We enjoy the attention.”

“And on that note,” Melanie interrupted, dropping her robe. “Tell us about the stray cat-girl using our other shower.”
A Good End to a Very Long Day

The Name of the Game

a RWBY/The Gamer crossover, SI.

Arc 6: Every Shade of Grey

Chapter 23: A Good End to a Very Long Day

**Synchronization** at 85%. The Semblance has been updated. Would you like to view the Change Log?

Stretching out, I let out a contented sigh as I felt something pop. Yawning, I selected ‘yes.’ Curled against my chest, I felt Neo shift closer for a moment before growing still again.

**Change Log**: The Gamer Semblance v. 1.6.1

1. Added **Elemental Affinity** tab to the Stats page. Check your Stats page or the Journal for details.

2. Party members may now access the **Elemental Affinity** tab in their respective character Stats pages.

3. Added **Guild** functionality. Open the **Guild Menu** to manage your **Guild**. Check the Help section for details.

4. Party members may now access Gamer Semblance granted User Interface options via scrolls, in addition to standard HUD-style UI access.

5. Guild members may access **Guild** features, restricted by access level, via scroll.
'Well, that's helpfully vague,' I mused, closing the change log and digging through my menus until I found the relevant section. The first item on my list was the Elemental Affinity tab. Navigating through my menus, I found the correct one and hummed in curiosity upon reading it. Several menus and a round chart of some sort dropped down beside my character model—but it was the character model that drew my attention. The image of myself, or rather myself as Jaune Arc, stood nude on a black field with an annoyed look on his face, eyes glaring directly into my own. Stretching a hand out, he pointed at the menu while the other hand covered his crotch and I watched as my menus responded, moving to the Equipment section. Reaching out to the side, the model stuck its hand into the box bearing underwear, followed by pants and a shirt, before it turned away and proceeded to dress itself. When it was done, it turned back and crossed its arms, shooting me another unamused look before making a swishing gesture with his finger and sending the menu flipping back to the Elemental Affinity tab.

'That's... new.' I shrugged it off as a quirk of character model animations, seeing as the 'Jaune' on the screen was currently sitting idly and looking at the options available, while a quick check showed I hadn't actually been dressed, only the character model.

To the right of the character model, I saw a circular chart with an odd shape in the middle, before I recognized it as a typical point breakdown chart. Currently, I had only a few elements listed there, most of which were pretty basic stuff, and all things I'd used before: psionic, gravity, wind, force, electricity, fire, ice, spirit, water, earth, and wood in descending order of experience. 'So, I use an element and like any skill, gain experience with it, and that's how it measures 'affinity' for me. Wonder how it works in party. I assume mental skills qualify as psionic, which is why that one is listed as my highest skill level. And how the hell did I get wood? I've never... oh, right. Bind uses whatever's nearby at times, and I've seen it make grass and plants grow up and hold something in place. I suppose that counts enough to qualify for having used that element, by that logic.'

Spotting a button labeled as 'Available Elements,' I selected it and a new window popped up. I blinked, seeing a fairly long list there, but much of it was blurred out. Frowning, I selected the option to sort by availability and the list reorganized from Alphabetical, putting the elements I knew on the upper left of the list, with grayed out but visible elements below them, then column after column of grayed out and blurred text. Starting at the first of the ones I didn't have yet, I began reading. 'Aether, animation, aura—as an element? But then why don't I have it already?—beams, breath, crystal, destruction, energy, entropy, explosion, flesh, light, mass, metal, nuclear, quintessence, shadow, space, speed, swords—god damnit, what the fuck is this shit? Those two are not elements! I refuse to accept it—time, void. Some of these make sense as they seem pretty name-on-tin-ish, aside from the obvious bullshit ones, but what the hell are the others? More importantly, how do I get them? Just create a spell using one of those elements? I assume that's how I got 'force' as an element, by creating Telekinesis.'

I couldn't do much else with it at the moment, but I'd be playing with it later for sure. Until then, I'd have to settle for checking out the Guild-related stuff.
Before I could select anything, a dialog box popped up, asking if I'd like to run the tutorial. *I probably should.* That decided, I hit the confirmation and allowed it to step me through a few things. The menu immediately moved to 'Command Structure,' which was laid out in tree format, with a portrait of the Fox at the top in the spot marked 'Guild Leader' with the slots under my alter-ego being empty. Below 'Guild Leader,' the slot marked 'Vice-Leader' highlighted then opened, and a drop-down list of personnel profiles popped up out to the side, sorted by qualification for the position, and a dialog message popped up asking me to choose a person for that position. Unsurprisingly, Neo was at the top of the list, with the twins right under her. Just to test, I attempted to select all three girls for that position, to no result.

'So, one leader, one Vice-Leader.' Shrugging, I selected Neo for the job and moved on to the next—I would wind up asking the girls later if they wanted to make changes. I didn't want it to look like I was playing favorites, but on the other side of the coin Neo *did* have previous experience managing Roman's gang in practice if not in name.
Below 'Vice-Leader' was listed several other positions—more than I really had qualified people for, at the moment. I did take the time to go ahead and add the twins and Penny as the next rank under Vice-Leader, Senior Officer, before confirming my selections. Below Senior Officers were Officers, Veterans, Members, and Recruits. I noticed that, unlike the rest, 'Recruits' seemed to include everyone not specifically assigned to a higher rank within the guild.

The guide moved on to 'Divisions' next, and I blinked upon seeing the suggested layout. *That is pretty much cut and pasted straight out of MGSV,* I mused, then grinned. *Well, at least it's something I'm familiar with. And it even gives rankings, letting me know who would go best where. Very nice.*

Having made the connection there, I allowed the tutorial to step me through what was becoming increasingly familiar territory, for the most part. There were some advanced options I found that filled in several holes between a video game and a real world military group—things like squad rotations, which allowed me to rotate my combat squads out between combat deployment, base security, a grayed out option for city patrols, and on break; in addition to being able to schedule how long or how many consecutive missions a soldier or group should be deployed for before being rotated into lighter duty to prevent burnout. I didn't have enough people to assign to squads for missions yet, but I did have enough to assign a few to basic security on the base, so I went ahead and did so. I tabbed to the 'Intelligence' tab and checked to see who was in charge of that section. Finding no one, I made to select the twins, only to find that their profiles within the PMC were different from the one on the Guild side of things—namely, they had been merged into one profile, with a blank name field. 'Something they're working on, I guess,' I mused, remembering we had discussed having the twins wear a disguise and trade places around the base, so no one associated the Malachite twins with the Fox. I went ahead and assigned their joint profile to the position of head of Intelligence—they could finish filling it out later.

Under 'Personnel,' I found that there were several people listed under the 'Recruitment' tab, waiting to be approved and assigned to a division. *Jim and Angel have been busy.* 'I approved and assigned the recruits, then blinked in surprise as I got a quest alert.

*A quest has been created! Beans, Bullets, and Band-aids.*

An army marches on its stomach, as the saying goes. Speak to your contacts within your new guild in order to find and recruit the following: a Logistics officer, a Quartermaster, and a Medic. These individuals will fill the positions of heads of the Supply, Support, and Medical divisions respectively.

*Success: increased closeness with the Malachite twins and Neopolitan, quest continuation, +3 Guild members, Guild reputation increases, Operations become available for Supply, Support, and Medical divisions.*
Closing the quest window, I continued on with the tutorial, but I couldn't help but think that three days didn't seem long enough to find three people to fill those slots, unless my contacts already knew people as the quest implied. Additionally under the Personnel tab were the tabs 'PMC Rank Chart' and 'Pay Grades.' Selecting the rank chart, I found the option to set what style of ranking system I wanted to use for my PMC, apparently based on what I assumed to be United States armed services ranks, seeing as they matched what I roughly remembered, having taken a passing interest when a friend had joined up after high school.

Seeing as it was set for 'Navy' style by default, I left it alone—though I did note that I was technically listed as an admiral, O-10, with two promotions available above my current position but grayed out. Likewise, Neo and the twins' combined profile were ranked as a Rear Admiral, O-7. Angel and Jim were both listed as O-3, Lieutenant. I wasn't entirely certain if that was a promotion or a demotion for those two. 'So, I guess that means we have official ranks as officers to use when interacting with various military forces, such as Atlas, but that while I lead this band of misfits it's not large enough for me to qualify for the higher ranks yet. That, or special conditions have to be met.'

Additionally, it seemed that ranks within the Rank Chart were separate from ranks within the guild Command Structure. I made a note to read the Help section later, but unless I missed my guess, that meant that people recruited into the PMC would be automatically recruited into the Guild at the lowest level—Recruits to the Guild itself, but probably having no Guild-specific privileges typically associated with guild management in MMOs, such as recruiting or dismissing people, promotions and demotions within the Guild's Command Structure, and whatever else was available. *That would also imply that I could invite Ruby, for instance, and have her within the Guild's Command Structure but not actually a member of the PMC part of the guild—granting whatever bonuses being in a guild allows. I need to look that up. Still, it's basically divided into something like 'leadership' and a 'raid group' from what I've seen so far. Which brings up the question of raids. Something else to investigate soon.*

Moving on to 'Equipment,' I found it subdivided into a few tabs: 'Vehicles,' 'Weapons,' 'Dust,' 'Armor,' and 'Tools.' The tutorial picked the first tab and I was given a list of vehicles available to my Guild, sorted by type. I saw the Razorback listed but not the armed Bullheads. *Right, I used that one picking Blake up. I guess I'll have to put it back in order for it to become available,* I reasoned, deciding to test the theory later, since I would obviously be swinging by the new base at some point. As it was, I could assign crew to the Razorback, but the only person with experience I had that could fill a slot was Angel herself, as the pilot. Confirming that, I found the other tabs to be pretty self-explanatory. 'Weapons' listed weaponry available to my Guild, which I could tell came from the stash I'd liberated from Roman—and likewise for Dust. There was nothing listed under 'Armor' or
'Tools' for the moment, and the options were grayed out—so I assumed they would open up once I got a Quartermaster.

'Operations' turned out to have one operation marked as In Progress, and I rolled my eyes upon seeing it was 'Bullets, Beans, and Band-aids,' with myself assigned to it. Apparently, my own quests could be counted as operations, so long as it was related to the PMC. Below that, however, was an operation marked as Available, 'Hunter Transport and Support. Repeatable.' Selecting the option, I read over the details. 'So, I can deploy Angel with the Razorback to ferry around Hunters and get paid to do it? Nifty.' However, upon reading further, I found the most important details: Operation Payout and Deployment Cost. The payout for this mission—to transport a Hunter team from Beacon to a village on the north edge of Forever Fall—was listed as 2,000L. If I deployed just Angel with the Razorback, the base deployment cost was calculated as 200L in fuel, 300L payment for Angel, and 500L set aside for maintenance costs on the Razorback—meaning a net profit of just 1000L.

On the up side, the fuel costs were the only thing I was paying up front—the money for Angel's payment would be marked in our books to be paid out with whatever else she earned at the end of the pay period based on her pay grade, while the money for maintenance was set aside in a separate account for that purpose and would be saved until the Razorback needed it. Additionally, there was a section listed as 'Support,' under which was listed 'Ammunition,' and 'Combat Bonus.' I assumed that if Angel was engaged in combat, we would have to pay to replace the ammunition expended, but we would be reimbursed with a combat bonus. I left it alone for now, until I got a chance to talk to Angel again. Besides, it was the sort of shitty, low-ranked, low paying job that should be beneath us given what we were trying to establish ourselves as. Starting out as a glorified taxi service would not send the right impression. However, if a mission came up with a team requesting air support or emergency evacuation, I wouldn't be passing it up—having a reputation for being the first people to respond to an emergency would build up a lot of good will amongst certain circles and endear us to the population. 'Never underestimate the value of being well liked by the civilians when it comes time to deal with those who depend on those very civilians to keep them in office.'

'Contracts' was grayed out, as was 'Upgrades,' but 'Customization' was not. The tutorial opened that next, and I chuckled quietly at what I found there, causing Neo to stir momentarily before settling down again. The tabs I found there were 'Current Settings,' 'Guild Emblem,' 'Personal Emblem,' 'Unit Emblems,' 'Fatigues,' and 'Dress Uniform.' The default open tab was 'Current Settings,' which gave a summary of what I could find on the other tabs. Right at the top, I found the section for Guild Name listed as 'Fox Hunt.'

'I didn't even get a say in the name.' I wondered for a moment who had decided on it, before shrugging—it didn't really matter and it was a decent name, so I wasn't going to complain; but at a guess, the twins were likely responsible. What had drawn my laughter though were the Guild and Personal emblems. The current Guild Emblem was a black, circular field with a white border, an image of an oversized fox in white with a limp Beowolf held in its mouth by the neck—in full Grimm colors and with its neck quite obviously broken, though there was only room in the emblem field for the head and upper chest of the Beowolf and head and shoulders of the fox. To the left and right of the fox and its Grimm prey were the words 'FOX' and 'HUNT' in all caps, also in white. My personal emblem was set as another black circular field bordered in white, with the fox head image
I'd carved into Roman's hangar—and while the damage had since been repaired, the image had been painted onto the side of the building. Under the fox head were the words 'WHITE FOX,' also all caps, also white along with the fox head itself. I'm beginning to see a pattern. I wonder if emblems are like sigils. If I had to guess, probably similar but a different thing. This is more like a unit patch than a personal sigil, like my double crescent or Ruby's rose. Or maybe I'm wrong and it's a more detailed sigil. It doesn't really matter, from a practical standpoint.

There was only one current Unit emblem—an image of a Razorback from the front on in steel gray, with a pair of Gatling guns highly prominent under the nose, the words 'Mama CAS' set above the cockpit. 'I suspect I know who this belongs to,' I mused, flipping back through the menus until I came to Angel's profile, where I found her unit emblem alongside her own personal patch—that of a winged woman in a Roman style toga cut off at mid-thigh, wearing armor and carrying a rifle with bayonet affixed in her lap, seated on top of a Razorback which obviously wasn't drawn to scale, the words 'Angel On Your Shoulder' circling the emblem along the bottom.

An idea struck and I went back to the guild emblem, digging into the settings and finding the proper font and color for what I wanted then bumped the image of the fox and Grimm up enough to add text under them. Curving along the top and bottom of the logo, above and below the fox and Grimm, I added the phrase, 'SI VIS PACEM PARA BELLUM,' the latter half of the phrase on the bottom. I had been tempted to use 'In hoc signo vinces,' but I felt that 'If you seek peace, prepare for war,' fit better than 'In this sign, you shall conquer.'

Once I was done, I okayed the current settings and moved on. I found the 'Fatigues' and 'Dress Uniform' options to be grayed out, so the tutorial moved on to 'Statistics,' where I found exactly what it said on the tin. The stats page listed the number of personnel (64), the number of completed operations (0), current contracts (0), vehicles (1 Razorback), available weapons, Dust, funds (350,000 Lien), and reputation (0). Thankfully, I had always enjoyed exactly this sort of empire building, so the low numbers didn't exactly bother me. Then again, I pretty much owned the map of Vale as Shiro after I'd taken a few hours to take down and properly mind-control the leaders of the other three gang factions in town. 'I should probably go and gut those some time in the next couple of days to use them as warm bodies for Fox Hunt.'

Glancing at my HUD clock and seeing it tick over to 8 a.m., I stretched again before going about waking Neo. Despite my original intentions to skip sleep and train all night with Penny, and getting away with it for all of two nights, the twins and Neo had outright vetoed that plan—instead, demanding I spend at least a few hours a night in bed with them for purposes other than sex. I didn't mind, and I saw their point—leaving in the middle of the night and not coming back to get them up could leave them feeling like a one-night stand or something similar, and I had to admit that I did enjoy simply spending the time to be close to them. So, we had come to a compromise—the girls didn't care if I went out late to train through most of the night, so long as I was there when they went to sleep and woke up. And since I did enjoy my sleep, I wound up only staying out around an additional four hours a night—splitting what would normally be eight hours of sleep into four of training and four of sleeping.
“It's Sunday. Can't we sleep in?” Neo whined.

“Not if we want to all go out and level as a group,” I reminded, and the girl took a moment to process that before shambling out of her bed and moving towards her bathroom. I followed, turning on the shower as she went about relieving herself, either ignoring or uncaring of the fact that I was in the bathroom with her. ‘Or it could be she's just gotten that comfortable around me.’

We took a few minutes for a shared shower, though Neo was still so out of it that I wound up doing most of her scrubbing for her—not that I minded. I would have accused her of wanting to get some action first thing, if not for the fact that I knew she wasn't a morning person. She was still half asleep by the time we finished and dried off, and I watched her shambling zombie-like over to her dresser and beginning the process of getting dressed. Seeing the smaller girl stumble trying to get her panties on, I rolled my eyes and moved to help. “Come here.”

Once she was dressed, we went downstairs and into her apartment complex's underground parking area. Checking for cameras and finding none on my map, I summoned up Bumblebee 2.0 and we left the building, heading for my apartment to get the twins. ‘I need to see about getting this thing repainted. Maybe Akira red. Or black. Can't go wrong with a black bike.’

“I can see why Ruby needed fresh panties,” Neo commented on the elevator ride up to my apartment, tossing me a grin—the ride over having apparently woken her up. “Want to hit the emergency stop for a quickie?”

“You're insatiable,” I deadpanned, and she nodded shamelessly.

“Absolutely,” the girl agreed.

Thinking it over, I shook my head. “No, we'd better not. I've already sent a text to Angel and Jim, so they're waiting for us. We've got to swing by the base for a while before we head to Patch and pick up Ruby, Penny, and Yang.”

Neo pouted, but nodded as the doors opened and we made our way into my apartment. “I'll go wake the twins, if you'll make breakfast,” she offered, and I shrugged. I had a better idea, but I'd wait to spring it on the girls once they were awake.

Remembering my guest, I made my way to the guest bedroom and knocked. Upon hearing no answer, I tried the door and found it locked. Frowning, I called up Telekinesis and focused on the
I put a hand on her shoulder and gave her a gentle shake. The reaction was instant as golden eyes flew open and I heard the click of a safety flipping off from under the pillow. “Easy, Blake. It’s okay,” I murmured, not making any sudden movements as her eyes flitted around the room before locking onto mine. After a moment of staring, a look of recognition crossed her face and she relaxed, the tension leaving her body as she collapsed back against the pillow. A second click told me she’d safetied Gambol Shroud again.

“Sorry,” she apologized quietly. “It took me a minute to remember where I was. I… don't usually sleep so deeply,” the girl admitted.

“No harm, no foul,” I waved her concern off. “What are your plans for today?”

“I don't know,” she admitted. “I was thinking about just taking some time to sit and process things. Maybe get some reading in.”

I nodded, knowing the feeling. I also knew that, if she was anything like me, once I decided to do that I wouldn't be moved from my spot for hours—if not days, depending on how stubborn I was being in my brooding. I hadn't really done it since getting to Remnant, but it was a bad habit I had been actively avoiding falling into here—especially as, at times, it seemed I had more to do in a day here than in a week on Earth. “You could do that,” I agreed. “Or you could get dressed and come with us.”

Raising one fine black eyebrow, the catgirl asked, “Where?”

“Well, we've got a couple of stops to make. We need to go take care of some business first, then we were planning to meet up with a few friends and going into Forever Fall to kill Grimm for fun and profit. Also, at some point, you need to go take the Beacon entrance exam if you're planning on going?” I was pretty sure she was planning to go, but it wouldn't hurt to ask.

“I should do that,” Blake agreed. “It's Sunday though, so they will probably put it off until tomorrow even if I get in contact with them today.” After a moment of thought, she added, “‘Fun and profit?”
I smirked. “Well, there are some benefits to having me as a friend.”

It only took her a moment of thought before she put the pieces together. “You ‘partied’ me yesterday—that’s what you mean, isn’t it?”

Nodding, I sat on the edge of the bed. “Tell you what. Come along with us today while we’re training and I’ll show you one of the ways I can help you. After that, you can decide what you want to do. Deal?”

“For now,” she agreed.

“Great,” I nodded, pushing myself up off the bed. “We’ll be waiting outside when you’re ready.”

As I got to the door, I heard her call out for me to wait. Turning to see what she wanted, I raised an eyebrow at her self-conscious expression. “Uh… could you get my clothes out of the drier for me?”

Chuckling, I nodded and went to retrieve them. By the time I’d finished handing them over and closing the door to give her some privacy, I found Neo had roused the twins and gotten them dressed and ready for the day. “What were we thinking when we agreed to change our sleep schedule?” Melanie griped, heading for my refrigerator and taking out a carton of juice. I rolled my eyes as the white-clad twin drank straight from the carton, then passed it to her sister, who did likewise.

“You were thinking it’d be nice to hang out with everyone all together while we worked on leveling,” I reminded and she frowned.

“I was promised there would be breakfast,” Miltia pointed out, turning her green-eyed gaze on me.

I rolled my eyes. “And there will. But I'm not cooking this morning. I found a bakery in the commercial district the other day that I want to try.” They had cinnamon rolls on the menu, and I would gladly kill for an actual Cinnabon, since I had yet to find a Remnant parallel. I was hoping this place might have what I was looking for.

The guest bedroom opened and Blake exited, stretching her arms above her head in a way that did absolutely amazing things for her taut stomach and breasts. Idly, I noted she was wearing the bow now, but that was a background detail to the interesting things that stretch was doing for her body. I
found I wasn't the only one caught staring when she turned her golden gaze on us, flicking from the twins, to Neo, before settling on me—the girls were just as guilty as I was on that one. Not that I could blame them. “The third girlfriend, I take it?”

“I'm as many girlfriends as he wants,” Neo grinned, a lascivious smirk stretching her lips as she cycled through several different appearances, each new one progressively more provocative and less clothed than the last before settling back on her default look, and I rolled my eyes.

“Ignore miss libido over there. She's still worked up from the bike ride over,” I deadpanned, throwing Neo an amused look. “Neo, Blake. Blake, Neo. So, are we ready?” I asked, and upon receiving a round of confirmations lead us down to the parking garage after locking up. Summoning up the sedan, I slid into the front seat. One of Roman's better investments had been the adjustable tint windows, which could effectively cut the car off from the outside world.

The twins and Neo took the back, while offering the position of shotgun to Blake, who merely shrugged before dropping into her own seat. “Mm, leather,” she hummed, shifting in her seat and getting comfortable.

A little over an hour later, we pulled into the underground parking garage for Fox Hunt's base and I equipped my Fox outfit before we left the car. I turned to look at Neo and the twins and grinned under my masks. “We should really get you some uniforms or something,” I mused aloud. “New outfits for when you're hanging out here, anyway—since I know you two are going to be playing at being one person,” I grinned at the twins. “And I'm sure you already have your own disguise in mind, Neo. Actually, now that I think about it, something a bit more damage resistant than the dresses might be useful.”

“I like my dress,” Neo deadpanned, and the twins nodded in agreement.

“Oh, I do too, but as far as practicality goes how well is it going to stand up to a Grimm?” I asked, and they looked away, knowing I had a point. “At least agree to let me help you add some damage resistance seals.”

The girls traded a look and nodded. “That would be nice,” Melanie agreed.

Blake raised an eyebrow. “Another Semblance thing?”

I shook my head. “Anyone can make or use bounded fields. Imbuing clothes with Dust is a bit
harder, but doable, and worth it on every level.” I paused to think on it before offering, “You could consider it part of your signing bonus.”

“Uh huh,” the girl hummed, walking in step with us as we headed for the elevator. “So, what is this place.”

I traded a look with the other girls, and by mutual agreement Neo answered. “Our base.”

“We're founding a Private Military Company operating within the borders of Vale,” Melanie added.

Miltia continued with, “If things go according to plan, by the end of the year, Fox Hunt will be the largest PMC in Vale, if not the largest in any kingdom—hopefully with contracts spanning every kingdom of Remnant. Though, no plan survives contact with the enemy, so maybe by the end of the fiscal year.”

“As far as my Semblance is concerned though, it's my guild,” I supplied, before turning a look to Neo and the twins. “You three should have some guild-specific features available via scroll if you want to play with those later. I've also gone ahead and assigned you ranks within the PMC itself, but beyond specifying a pay-grade and making sure we all have military ranks I'm not sure it does much.”

The elevators opened and we made our way into a conference room, where we found Angel and Jim seated, sipping at coffee. “So,” I began, dropping into the seat at the head of the table, Neo and Blake to my right, the twins to my left. “Let's get right to it.”

“That went well,” Neo chirped from behind me as we lifted off from the roof of the base in the unarmed Bullhead, having left the armed version in Angel's care for the moment. “With any luck, we'll have some new people by the end of the day and we can start getting this thing rolling.”

“Do you want us to start designing a uniform, Jaune?” Melanie asked, and I nodded, taking a moment to switch outfits now that we were out of range of anyone seeing us.

“Between the four of us we should be able to come up with something nice. Though, I'm thinking we can just use a generic design for fatigues. Really, only the base uniform and dress uniform need to be really special.” Turning my head to catch her eye momentarily, I saw her grin. “I don't know about you, but I kind of want to see if we can show up Atlas.”
“Atlas prefers white with blue trim for their uniforms,” Neo noted, and I blinked as a scroll was shoved in between myself and Blake as the shorter girl leaned against the back of my seat. “I'm thinking black with white trim. Except it doesn't really fit with the rest of the theme, unfortunately.”

“White with black trim,” both twins countered.

I nodded in agreement as Neo shifted back into her seat. “That's your best bet.”

“What about long coats?” Blake supplied, and I shifted my gaze to her. “Black uniform with white trim under a white dress coat.”

“It contrasts nicely,” Miltia admitted.

I turned in my seat enough to throw a grin at Neo. “And it looks like my new 'Jaune' gear.”

Melanie hummed, flipping through her own scroll. “Yes, but typically, that style of uniform is reserved for officers.”

Shifting across the back of the Bullhead, Neo and Miltia both looked over the other twin's shoulder before Neo shrugged. “Why not do both? White with black trim for the grunts, black with white trim and a white long coat for officers.”

“Can female officers have an option for skirts?” Miltia asked, to which the other two hummed and nodded.

Blake had turned around in her seat by then, bringing a finger to her lips as she thought on it. “I prefer tights.”

“What about very high boots?” Neo supplied, holding out a hand and conjuring up a set of images for each option.

I turned back to the flight controls as the four girls discussed the merits of skirts versus tights—
personally, I'd always been a skirts and stockings kind of guy, but then I blamed that on too much anime and knowing what 'absolute territory' was. I doubted they wanted to hear my suggestion of thigh-high stockings and a micro-skirt. *Twins in twin-tails, micro-skirts, and stockings. Mm,*' I grinned, catching sight of Patch coming up below us. There was a giggle from somewhere behind me and I cast a brief glance back, finding the twins looking suspiciously innocent. *I sent that, didn't I?* Oh well—the worst that would happen was ambush sex, probably.

A s had become habit, I brought the Bullhead in for a landing in the field nearest to the Xiao Long home and glanced at my map. I counted four icons before blinking and looking them over again. *'Penny, Ruby, Yang, and an unknown fourth. Not Taiyang. Though, given the fact that it's a stylized crow, my money's on it being Ruby's uncle.'*

I killed the engines and hit the door controls as the others stood and began filing out. I was the last out, and the moment my feet hit the ground I was slapped in the stomach by a red blur, followed by a flurry of rose petals. “Jaune!”

“Ruby!” I yelled back, grinning and mussing her hair. “Yang, too,” I deadpanned. Seeing the sudden poleaxed look on her face at the change in greeting, I grinned and sent the blonde with a wave to let her know I was pulling her leg as her sister pulled away from my waist and went about collecting hugs from the twins and Neo. As a matter of habit, I began tossing out party invites to everyone who wasn't already in party and then set up links and cross-links between everyone. The moment I had all eight of us partied, my Semblance asked how I'd like to structure the teams and who I wanted to designate as Second Party Leader. Grinning, I assigned Ruby as the second leader, with Penny, Yang, and Blake under her.

*Congratulations! You have created a party containing 8 or more players! Would you like to activate Raid Party Mode and designate a Raid Leader?*

Humming in thought, I selected 'Yes' and made myself Raid Leader.

*You have formed a Raid Party! Enemies encountered within Instant Dungeons will be stronger, though in lower Spirit Density areas may be fewer in number. Boss spawn rate within Instant Dungeons has increased.*

That was interesting. I made a note to test it soon before turning to Penny. “So Penny, did you have fun last night?”

“Oh, very much so, Jaune,” Penny nodded, beaming a smile. “We did our hair, and our nails, and played video games, and talked about boys —”

Beside the ancula, Yang rolled her eyes. “I think he gets it,” she chuckled before turning lilac eyes
on the resident catgirl. “So, who's the hottie?”

“I know, right?” Neo chimed in, tossing a leer Blake's way.

“Oh god, there's two of them,” Ruby sighed, palming her face and pretty much mirroring my own thoughts on that front.


“It is very nice to make your acquaintance, Blake Belladonna,” Penny chirped.

Blake ’s bow flicked slightly and she tossed out a hesitant wave. “Hello.” Turning gold eyes to my blue, she gestured between the three newcomers and myself and quietly asked, “Are they…?”

I shook my head and made to explain, but was cut off as a tall man clad in a white, gray, and black shirt, black pants, and a red cape stepped out of the woods nearby. Below the cape was what looked to be a sword in the same position I preferred to keep my Sabers. My eyes were immediately drawn to the area over his head.

Dusty Old Crow

Qrow Branwen

Level: ???

He had a confident swagger to his gait as he approached, and I turned to send Yang a questioning look before I caught movement from the corner of my eye, as his right hand trailed back and gripped the hilt of the sword sheathed there. He disappeared and I reacted on instinct, dumping mana into Haste and bringing him back into range of my perception. My shield came up as I drew my own Saber, spinning it around into sword-mode and I Stepped past Ruby, who was between myself and Qrow and turned to face the twins, thus looking away from her uncle, to get the shield up. At the same time, I passed her an order and she disappeared as she went from zero to her top speed in a sudden gust of wind and rose petals.
My shield rang as Qrow dropped to a standstill for a moment, a mildly impressed look crossing his face as I held the blow off. He calmly held out his other hand, palm open, and caught the shaft of Crescent Rose as Ruby dropped out of Flash Step, hanging from her weapon in mid-swing. Despite the mass of the weapon and the speed-imparted force behind the weapon, he hadn't so much as twitched as it smacked into his palm. “Not bad, kid. Not bad at all,” he commented, pulling the sword away and stowing it as he stepped back and gave the red scythe in his hand a shake to dislodge Ruby.

I stepped back out of my guard position, my shield collapsing as I spun the Saber back down into its storage form and sheathed it. “I see where she gets it from.”

“Uncle Qrow!” Ruby whined as the man held the weapon just out of the girl's reach, lowering it enough to entice her to jump for it, then raising it just out of reach again.

Shooting a look at Yang, I asked, “So is that a normal thing in your family? Randomly attacking your friends, that is.”

“Pretty much,” Yang confirmed. “Dad and Uncle Qrow are both teachers at Signal, so they always use the excuse that you should always be prepared for battle—”

“It's not an excuse,” Qrow deadpanned. “Besides, it taught you to dodge, didn't it?”

“You should have seen it,” Ruby chimed in. “Dad or Uncle Qrow would drop in from nowhere, yell 'dodge,' and smack Yang her first year in Signal.”

Yang shot an unamused look at her sister. “I seem to recall I wasn't the only one getting dodgy training.”

“Yeah, but it was funnier when it was happening to you,” Ruby countered, sending a teasing grin at her sister and stashing her weapon away as Qrow finally parted with it. Seeming to remember herself, she turned back to her uncle. “Uncle Qrow, this is Jaune, the boy I told you about. Jaune, this is my Uncle Qrow.”

We shook and, unlike with Taiyang, Qrow actually made an effort to crush my hand. I poured some Aura into it and ignored the attempt—it was pretty much expected, and showing any sign of discomfort would mean I'd lost the silent challenge of wills and strength. “So. You're the guy.”
"You can't prove anything. There's no evidence. I have an alibi," I countered with a grin, drawing a chuckle from the man as he stopped trying to crush my hand into paste.

"Well, we'd love to stick around and chat, but we should really get going," Yang called, and I noticed the other girls had already begun moving into the Bullhead, carrying on their own conversation. "See you later, Uncle Qrow."

"Uh huh," he rolled his eyes. "I see how it is. You get some new friends and suddenly I'm not cool enough to hang out with any more. No, no, it's okay. It doesn't bother me. I'll just go home and spend the rest of the day drinking."

"But Uncle Qrow, you do that anyway," Ruby pointed out guilelessly.

"You drive me to drink," he nodded before giving Ruby a push towards the Bullhead. "Okay, fine. Go have fun." He turned red eyes on me and I resisted the urge to flinch under the sudden intensity—it took a moment, but I realized I was seeing Killing Intent from the other side. Detect Bloodlust immediately leveling kind of clued me in. Except, thanks to Gamer's Mind, I was immune to the negative effects. In other words, it was a bit like sticking a gloved hand in water—you could feel the water, feel the pressure and temperature of it around your hand, but wouldn't get wet. It seemed I had found a class of mental abilities that Gamer's Mind didn't entirely no-sell and simply ping an alert or something like it had with Emerald. Being able to sense an intensity, range, and direction for that sort of thing, without the negative effects, was more useful than simply getting an alert by my reasoning. "Anything happens to them, I'm holding you responsible."

I nodded. "Understood."

The man turned and made his way towards the trail leading back to the Xiao Long house, tossing a wave over his shoulder as he went. Ruby moved past me, heading for the Bullhead while Yang moved into step with me as I followed the little reaper. "Well, that was awkward," she murmured, and I shrugged.

"He's just looking out for you," I pointed out and the blonde shrugged. Grinning, I asked, "You sure he's not Ruby's dad? I mean, they look a lot alike and he's got the overprotective streak going."

I let out a strangled 'urk!' as Yang grabbed my arm and yanked me off to the side, out of sight of the interior of the Bullhead. "Shh!" she hissed, shooting me a glare before looking to make sure we weren't being observed. "Look, it's… complicated."
I shot her an incredulous look. “What?! I was joking! You're serious?”

Yang sighed, quietly. “I've wondered for a while. I mean, yeah, she looks a lot like her mom but almost nothing like dad…” After a moment of thought, she added, “I don't know. I don't want to think that about mom—about Summer, I mean. But…”

“Hey, look,” I murmured, tilting her chin up to force her to look at me. “It's probably nothing. I doubt Ruby's mom would do that and your dad doesn't seem like the kind of guy who would let someone who'd screwed his wife hang around.”

“But what if he doesn't know?” Yang asked, and I realized she'd had a while to stew over this particular issue. “Dad's been kind of… not himself since Ruby's mom died and my mom left. Maybe he didn't want to know.”

“There's not much you can do about it now, right?” I asked, earning a nod in answer. I took her hand and pulled her towards the doors to the Bullhead. “Come on, let's get going. We can talk about it later if you want.”

Yang shrugged. “Sure.”

I made my way through the gaggle of girls in the back of the aircraft as Yang took a seat beside Blake, then dropped into the pilot's seat, finding Ruby waiting in the co-pilot's seat. “Looks like you got shotgun.”

Ruby snorted softly, glancing back towards her sister. “With Yang, that game is a full-contact sport. I figured I would take advantage while she was distracted. So, what's 'Fox Hunt?'”

I blinked, shooting the girl a questioning look as I went through the startup sequence and the engines spooled up. Her eyes trailed upwards, and I realized she was looking over my head. “Huh. So I've got an addition to my nameplate?” I asked, and she nodded.


Nodding, I grinned. “Yep. I didn't see it displayed for the twins and Neo, so I guess it's something they have to turn on, whereas since I'm the leader it's on by default for me.” I would have to turn that
off at some point. Yang hadn’t mentioned it, but she was a smart girl and probably would eventually—and until I knew I had her loyalty I wouldn't be making any offers to join the guild. That, and there was the off chance she could use it to figure out at least one of my alter-egos. I wasn't ready to tell her about those yet—again, not until I had her loyalty and knew she wouldn't do something regrettable. Then again, Ruby knowing might help on that front. If her sister trusted me, Yang was more likely to as well.

Humming, Ruby shot me a curious look before asking, “So, what's it do?”

I shrugged. “I haven't gotten to really play with it much, and I don't have enough people recruited to open up most of the features… but in the future, it'll let me send members out on missions and stuff.”

“That sounds kinda cool,” the girl admitted, kicking back in her seat and propping her boots on the dash. “What are you thinking about doing with it?”

“Well,” I hummed, casting her a sidelong glance before tossing a look over my shoulder to check on the girls in the back. Yang and Blake appeared to be involved in their own conversation—Yang having taken the initiative in approaching the faunus girl—currently 'disguised' in her iconic bow—while the twins and Neo had congregated around Penny with their scrolls out and an illusion of Penny wearing various outfits hovering between them. “We've formed a PMC—private military company. I aim to use it to clean up Vale and the surrounding areas. Kill some Grimm, make some money, stand ready to defend the city should the worst come to pass—that sort of thing. Vale, the kingdom that is, doesn't really have its own armed services—mostly relying on Hunters and Atlas. Over relying.”

“And over relying on only one or two things is bad,” Ruby repeated the lesson I'd been attempting to drill into her head, and I nodded, gesturing for her to finish it. “Because if it breaks, or you don't have it, then you're…” she blushed as I raised an eyebrow, before muttering, “Shit out of luck.”

“Because when you need it and don't have it, you sing a different tune,” I smirked.

“I've always preferred, 'enough resolve will conquer all, if we believe,’” she admitted, pausing before a small, mischievous smile crept up on her lips. “Buuuuut I think resolve and a whole lot of really big guns probably works better.”

Snorting a quiet laugh, I shot her an amused look. “Yeah, guns tend to work better against Grimm.” I glanced at my map for a moment before asking, “So, that was the uncle who trained you, huh?”

“Yup!” she nodded. “He's kind of awesome. But don't tell him that. Dad says Uncle Qrow gets kind
of full of himself sometimes.”

“Oh, so it’s a family trait.”

Ruby nodded. “Yep, it totally—hey! It is not! You jerk!”

“Well, I was talking about Yang,” I sent her a grin.

“I—err.. that is…” The girl beside me crossed her arms and pouted. “I walked right into that one, didn't I?”

I laughed, reaching over and grabbing her hood before flipping it over her head. “So, have you given any thought to modifying your weapon?” I asked, knowing the surest way to distract her, or otherwise cheer her up, was to get her talking about her 'baby.'

I listened as she began telling me her plans for Crescent Rose—how she was thinking of either replacing the current blade or modifying it to add a Dust-blade, in addition to a few other minor modifications to the bits that allowed it to shift modes and compact down. By the time the Bullhead touched down again, she had already gone over three weapons worth of ideas—and it was at this point I realized I should probably have asked Ruby for ideas on my own new weapon for Shiro. Shaking my head, I hit the door controls and we filed out onto the same grassy field off the side of the road we'd been using for a while now.

“So,” Yang began, looking around at our gathered group. “What now?”

“Sparring?” Neo asked, twirling her parasol, while the twins winced.

Miltia tugged on her bladed gloves, whereas Melanie had already been wearing her own bladed heels. “We would prefer not to.”

“How about killing Grimm, instead?” Melanie supplied.

I shot the pair a questioning look before realizing what the problem was. Yang was a Signal graduate, Ruby had been apprenticed to her uncle, Blake had years of experience under her belt as a
member of the White Fang, and all three of them carried themselves with the sort of surety that only came from knowing exactly what your skills were and how to apply them to greatest effect. While outside of combat Ruby may have had self-confidence issues, once things truly kicked off she handled herself as well as, if not better than, her sister. Yang's confidence came from being the top graduating student in her class, and from years of tutelage under her father. And while I had yet to see Blake fight beyond grappling her myself, my otherworldly knowledge gave me a pretty good idea what she was capable of.

On the other hand, Neo and the twins were all self-taught. Neo was good, amazingly good at what she did to the point where she would probably have been labeled as a prodigy had she had formal schooling—and like Blake, she had real-world experience. Otherworldly knowledge meant that I knew for a fact that she could go toe to toe with Yang and win hands down — in a pure skill versus power matchup, as had been presented in canon, Neo was the better of the two. Or at least she could have, before I had started teaching Yang and Neo both new tricks. Despite being a level lower than Yang, I was pretty sure Neo would still win — but then, that's what sparring was for. The twins did not have that sort of experience, however. From what I understood, they'd had Hei helping to train them and a bit of natural talent, but no formal schooling and not much in the way of real-world experience. Despite that, I had been training with them myself. I knew they were good, and I knew they could be a whole lot better. They just needed a little encouragement.

“I've got a better idea. Neo, Yang, Penny, and Ruby—go play,” I directed, waving them towards the center of the field. “You three,” I gestured to the twins and Blake, “Come with me.”

Turning, I walked away from the parked Bullhead towards the other side of the field to give the other four girls room to fight. Finding a nice spot, I dug into my Inventory and came up with a thick blanket—one I'd begun bringing with me for training, when we wanted to sit on something other than grass. Spreading it out, I dropped down on one corner with a line of sight on the fight and waited as Blake, Miltia, and Melanie each took a seat themselves—Blake opposite me, Miltia to my right, Melanie to my left.

“Okay, before we begin, I need to go over some ground rules. These are the same rules I've given everyone else. Blake, most of the things I'm going to teach you you can't use at Beacon, or out in Vale. Not casually, anyway. Some things, passive skills, active buffs, and spells that don't have any visual effect are okay for the most part. Tossing around fireballs,” I shot a glance towards where Yang was doing just that, the explosion causing Blake to flinch, “and other flashy techniques is strictly off limits. I'm not stupid, though. If your life or someone else's is in danger and it's the only way you're going to get out of that situation, then do so. There's no point to having a trump card if you don't use it when you need it—but only when you need it. Otherwise, only use them either when we're in an ID or like now, when there's no one around and no cameras to observe us. Understand?”

“Only use non-visible skills in public, no flashy spells,” Blake repeated, and I nodded. “Define 'flashy.'”

“Anything that can't be explained away as part of your Semblance or Dustcasting, or natural skill.
Flash Step borders damn close to that line, which is why I've banned Ruby from using it in school. Fire elemental Aura and tossing around fireballs are likewise off limits, and Yang is aware of that,” I explained. *Though, that may change later, if we can pass it off as a natural evolution of her Semblance. If Aura is the light of the soul, and Semblances are an outwards manifestation of the soul, then as a person changes over time it stands to reason that their soul, and thus their Semblance, would grow and change as well. I'll reconsider some time after the first semester or so and maybe let Ruby and Yang start using some of those skills.*

Blake shot me an amused look. “You seem so certain I'm going to Beacon. What if I've changed my mind?”

I smirked. “Quest completed on the Bullhead. I'm guessing you emailed the school a request to take the entrance exam and were given the go ahead.”

Frowning, the faunus girl asked, “Does that ever get annoying for anyone else, or is it just me?”

“It's very annoying at times,” Melanie admitted.

“But its usefulness outweighs the annoyance of Jaune acting like a know-it-all at times,” Miltia sent a smile my direction.

“Yes, well, bite me,” I grumbled.

“Gladly,” Melanie nodded, and beside her Miltia's smile went wider to show teeth as she asked, “Any preference on location?”

I rolled my eyes. “Moving on. Since I don't have access to your skill menus, remind me what skills I've taught you two.”

“Reinforcement, Meditation, Reflex, Focus, the stat buff set including Eagle's Splendor, Bull's Strength, and so forth, and Spinning Mana Arrow and its lower variants,” Miltia supplied.

When Melanie nodded in confirmation to her twin's list, I hummed in thought. “Just call it the D&D set. Okay, I'll get to skills in a moment. Do me a favor and open up your character sheet. There should be an Elemental Affinity tab. Read me off what it says.”
The twins and Blake all dug through their menus before Miltia began. “I have a few elements, but they’re all grayed out—with a lot more grayed out and scrambled text.”

“Same here,” Melanie confirmed.

“I have shadow available, with a good deal of experience in it,” Blake answered slowly. “But the other elements I can read are grayed out.”

So, Blake had an element usable already but the twins did not. They had elements available, but not unlocked. “Select one and see what it says.”

“Fire: insufficient elemental affinity,” Melanie read off. “But...” She trailed off and I watched as her eyes began flicking rapidly in the middle distance. “If we increase INT and WIS, we can absorb Dust to unlock an alignment, according to this.”

“Very nifty,” I hummed. “So, focus on what you have for now and we’ll work towards it for later.”

“What does ‘incompatible Aura alignment’ mean?” Blake asked, and I shot her a raised eyebrow. “It said that when I selected light.”

“Well, if you’re shadow naturally like Yang is fire, then it probably means light as an element is diametrically opposed. You can’t use it,” I guessed.

“So, no elemental skills today?” Miltia asked, and I shook my head.

“We’re going for something a bit more defensive today. Let’s try for shields. Mana Shield first, then A.T. Field. For Mana Shield, imagine a bubble of mana surrounding you, protecting you from attacks. For A.T. Field, do the same, except imagine concentrating everything from Mana Shield into a flat plane in front of you—it’s easier to do that way, since one builds off the other. Really, that should be all the imagery you need,” I instructed before turning to Blake. “Know anything about meditation?”

“Yes,” she nodded.

“Great,” I grinned. “Do whatever works for you. Just keep your eyes open when you do it. Let me
Blake's eyes unfocused, shifting into the middle distance as she asked, “This… this is permanent?”

I blinked and the twins laughed quietly at the poleaxed look that crossed my face. I fully realized being able to shift into a meditative state on a whim couldn't have been something unique to me, but I'd never seen another person do it—and I hadn't expected her to get the skill for it that quickly. “Say 'stats,' then read me off your numbers.”

“Stats,” Blake repeated, then began to read.

‘So, more STR than Ruby but less than Yang. More DEX than Yang but less than Ruby. Crappy VIT but then she's not a tank. At 55 points, she has more base INT than with the bonuses from The Outsider, but not my buffs. Less WIS than I was expecting but then… well, that explains some things about what I know of her from 'canon.' Mediocre CHA, really. No real LUK to speak of. So, she’s… what the hell kind of build is that? I mean, it's obviously a high-damage build, but her choice in weapons means she lacks penetration or brute force,’ I assessed, then shook my head. “Right. Fuck it. We'll try to get you Reinforcement. Pull up your Aura and meditate on reinforcing your body with it—try to compress it down into your body and imagine it making you tougher. That's about the mental imagery that worked for Neo. Let me know when you've got it. And remember, eyes open so you can see menus.”

“We've got the techniques,” Melanie announced a while later, and I glanced at my HUD clock. Barely ten minutes had passed in between telling them how and them getting the technique.

‘Damn I love high-INT types,’ I grinned. “Okay, you don't have Haste yet, so use the same imagery as for Reinforcement but focus on getting faster this time,” I directed. Ruby was going to be annoyed, but I wasn't worried about the twins relying on it too much and I was still worried that when I taught it to her, Ruby would outclass us all by sheer speed. 'Maybe I should just trust her to use her own judgment on that. She understands that she needs to practice things other than speed, so if I tell her not to use it, odds are good she'll listen.'

“I have Reinforcement and Haste,” Blake announced a couple of minutes later.

“What?” I deadpanned, feeling my mouth drop open slightly.

Blake shrugged. “I did both back to back,” she admitted. “Haste was faster to get, since I'd just done Reinforcement.”
'Okay. Okay, I can work with this. Assume I'm dealing with someone with my own learning speed and ability to split my focus,' I mused. "Okay. Same as before, but go for becoming more agile. Likewise, more intelligent."

"In other words, focus on improving my strength, dexterity, vitality, intelligence, wisdom, and charisma," she said, and I held out a hand and waved it back and forth.

"Kind of. There are a few variations. I've got like three different ways to increase strength, for instance. On the other hand, try it and see if it works for you, and we'll get you the other two after. But the most basic ones work with the imagery for Reinforcement," I shrugged. "Take a break if you run out of Aura. It should stop being a problem soon, though, because there are some cheats there. For instance, raising your WIS will increase your Mana—or Aura—Regen rate, so the one for wisdom pays for itself if you keep it up full time. If you can meditate and focus on a task at the same time, you can expend way more Aura than normal as it'll regen faster, and once you level Meditation high enough you'll actually be able to do all of that at the same time and actually have a net positive return on Aura regen. Or you could slip into Meditation for short bursts to recover HP and MP. Let me know when you've got those." I turned towards the twins. "Let me know when you get Haste and we'll move on to something else. We'll have to get some actual training and studying in at some point, since that is pretty much free skill points. And if you do that while you've got buffs running, you'll level them all faster."

Turning to face away from the girls and the still ongoing fight, I focused on a spot several meters away and conjured a standing target in the rough shape of a Beowolf. 'Let's see what I can do about making a skill-set for Beacon. Glynda already assessed my ability at powered movement fairly high. Having a gravity-based Semblance would explain a lot of that simply by saying I made myself lighter, or can attract myself to surfaces, things like that. I need some offensive uses of it, though.'

That thought in mind, I cupped my hands in my lap and began the familiar process of modifying my most basic mana attack, Mana Bolt. The glowing sphere of mana formed in my hands and I focused on making it Gravity elementally aligned. With a little focus, the bright blue ball took on a blue-purple corona to it giving it the vague appearance that it had caught fire. A grin crossed my lips as I realized I recognized the spell effect from a different source—Mass Effect. Still, amusing or not, I hadn't gotten a new technique out of it. Shrugging, I fired the gravity-aligned Mana Bolt off at the target, where it struck and sent the mock Grimm spiraling off into the air for a good hundred feet before it hit the ground again. 'So, all the knock-back effect of a normal Mana Bolt, plus a zero gravity effect. Could be useful for disorienting or distracting enemies, but not what I'm looking for. Let's try just the element this time.'

I had already made a few element-only techniques that didn't start off as a modification to Mana Bolt—Fireball was one of them, as was Flash Freeze—so it wasn't like I was delving into uncharted territory. I conjured up another Grimm and cupped my hands in my lap. Pulling on gravity and focusing it in my palms, I watched as the area in between my hands swiftly darkened into a black
sphere, surrounded by the same corona as before. My Semblance announced the creation of a new technique and asked if I'd like to name it. 'Let's see what it does, first,' I hummed, before shifting it to one hand and firing it at the Grimm target. The sphere of dark energy exploded on contact, sending the target to the ground while coating it and the area around it with a corona of the same color as the attack for a few seconds before fading away, leaving it visibly damaged, but not destroyed, and the ground around it ruined. What had once been a flat patch of grass was now pockmarked with depressions—some patches of grass had been ripped up and grass was bent at angles from the conflicting gravity fields that had been summoned into the area and clashed against each other briefly.

'So, it's Warp,' I decided, naming the technique. A glance at my skill menu confirmed about what I'd been expecting for the technique: 100% INT damage, gravity elemental explosive with a 5m AoE range, minor knock-back effect with the same range, minor damage over time effect, but overall inferior to Mana Bolt given that the knock-back effect was much lower and the DoT effect didn't make up for the loss in power. Most of the damage there appeared to come from my INT, with only a 50% INT bonus and the attack wasn't particularly fast either. Its only redeeming feature was that it supposedly shredded shields—leaving me to wonder if that meant natural Aura fields around people, or force fields, or both. Given the potential danger, I wasn't going to test it on a friendly target to find out. Still, though, it leveled with the same sort of progression as Mana Bolt or comparable skills, so getting up to doing decent damage by raising the INT bonus shouldn't take too terribly long.

'Well, I've got one so I may as well go for the others.' So deciding, I repeated the skill generation process, this time focusing on the image of a singularity lifting targets and pulling them in. The resultant spell, Singularity, did much the same damage as Warp, save that it pulled enemies in and did not have a temporary DoT effect after it went off. Combining it with Warp resulted in a nice explosion that actually destroyed the conjured Grimm target.

I knew what the problem here was—and, annoyingly, it was one I'd harped on Ruby about recently. Over reliance. Specifically, I'd relied too heavily on a few techniques and now that I was making things outside of those, because I didn't want to tie myself to one of my alter egos by accident, I was stuck with low tier skills unless I started leveling or modifying them—and modifying them would lead to problems and questions later. Namely, about the extent of my power. I was used to punching way, way above my level in terms of damage due in part to my inflated stats and because the skills I created tended to be geared towards doing maximum damage.

AP Round, for instance, was around what I'd consider a Tier 4 spell—meaning, it was three steps past the technique that originated it. There were other classification systems for spells, I knew, but at this point I was going to have to just make my own to cover everything. Elemental AP Round would therefore be a Tier 5 spell, while I'd say Fireball was a Tier 3 or 4—despite not having a preceding technique, its area effect, damage output, DoT, and the fact that it was elemental in nature raised it up a few pegs on the ranking chart. To compare, Warp and Singularity were clearly Tier 2 by that measuring stick: elemental, with a few effects and a bit of damage behind them, but otherwise fairly basic damage spells.
'Okay, Tier 0: basic mana attack. Tier 1: basic mana attack plus an effect or two. Tier 2: basic mana manipulation plus elemental and/or an effect or two. Tier 3: greater than 100% INT damage, an effect or two, and/or some minor elemental stuff. Tier 4: greater than 300% damage, elemental and effects optional, probably AoE. Tier 5: all that and a bag of chips.'

With that in mind, I began looking at what I knew of the others, and rolled my eyes. *I'm just whining because I'm not doing stupid-high damage. I'm doing damage on par with people around my level with these. And that was the point: not standing out in front of people like Ozpin, Glynda, Cinder, groups like Atlas, and so on. With my team, I can always go back to my preferred style if I want to. Well, good news is, if I ever decide to stop hiding and actually go all out, I should surprise whoever I spring it on. Besides, it's not like leveling them won't increase their damage.*

I couldn't just leave myself potentially vulnerable with no immediate high-damage techniques, though, so I decided one or two wouldn't hurt. Once again, I created a black sphere in my hands with that blue-purple corona around it. Focusing on modifying the technique like with many of my others, I caused the mana inside to spin and condense, causing the softball sized sphere to shrink down to the size of a golf ball. Pouring in more mana, I concentrated my will on what I wanted it to do. Sighting down my arm at the Grimm target twenty or so yards away, I fired.

There was a crack of sound as the sphere went supersonic as it ran downrange, nearly the speed of my AP Round, leaving behind a clear path where the tall grass and some of the earth under it had been ripped up. Hitting the Grimm target dead center, it ate a hole out of the middle almost instantly and kept going, dragging the target with it at bullet velocity, enveloped in an obvious anti-gravity effect. Around two hundred yards away, the Grimm target collapsed inwards as the spell collapsed, then detonated in a burning blue-purple explosion, sending pieces of the target, grass, and ground flying everywhere.

“Holy shit!” a voice yelped behind me, followed swiftly on its heels by a series of similar sounds of surprise. I noticed the sounds of fighting had also stopped and sighed, before turning around to see the others staring.

“What?” I asked, raising an eyebrow in question.

Standing, Blake squinted at the site of the explosion before turning her attention on me. “That was about a grade 5 or 6 Dust effect. Without the Dust.”

I shrugged. I'd honestly pegged that one as Tier 4 on my new ranking system—300% INT damage, 40% penetration, 400 meters/second speed, with an anti-gravity effect for anything that it passed within 5m of, and an explosion with a 5m radius doing an additional 200% INT damage to anything caught by it, followed by a DoT effect over the next 5 seconds doing another 100% INT damage. Realistically, it was like a gravity-only version of AP Round, with a DoT and AoE thrown in for
fun. Unlike AP Round, the spell growth looked to be more along the lines of Fireball—slow, but worth leveling. Like Rasengan, however, it did have a charge time—two seconds, decreasing as the skill leveled. The technique was named **Gravity Round** by default and, given that I couldn't chant it at speed with its charge time, I left the name alone for the moment.

“I have a few of those,” I admitted. “Did you finish making those skills?” I asked, and she shook her head. At my continued expectant stare, she sighed and moved back to her seat. Catching my drift, Melanie and Militia went back to doing likewise as they hadn't gotten Haste yet. Shifting my gaze to the quartet who had stopped fighting, I asked, “You ready for a break?”

The girls traded looks before shrugging. “Sure, I could use a break,” Yang agreed, sauntering over with Neo, her sister, and Penny trailing.

Digging into Inventory, I dug out a second blanket and tossed it to her. “Work on finishing out stat buffs, since I know you've got a few more to go,” I told her, shifting my gaze to Ruby and adding, “You too.”

“Aww, okay,” Ruby pouted, plopping down on the new blanket cross legged at the corner nearest me.

“Ask if you need help,” I reminded, and they nodded. Turning my attention to Neo, I asked, “How're your buffs coming along?”

The ice cream themed girl shrugged. “Fairly well. I've been kind of busy lately, though, and we haven't had much time to just sit and focus on that. Not that I don’t appreciate getting a chance to improve my combat skills…”

“No, it's fine. We should've taken a day or two and done this a while ago. Try to round out the rest and we'll move on to Haste. Ruby, you too. That should give you some incentive to hurry things along,” I grinned at the girl. Turning to Penny, I hummed in thought. “Penny, what do you want to do?”

“I am enjoying myself simply 'hanging out' with my new friends, Jaune. Would you like me to attempt to create more buffs as well?” she asked, and I nodded.

“Yeah, give it another try,” I acknowledged. Penny had managed a handful of buffs while we'd spent the last few nights training, but honestly, they were kind of overkill. She was the same
character level as me, but being 'epic gear' her stats were ridiculous. When Penny leveled, she didn't gain stat points—though she did have them. Instead, she got options to improve her combat chassis—little things so far, but I could see that changing in the future. Buffs worked on her, but I thought that was kind of bullshit as it essentially boiled down to focusing her Aura a certain way to get a certain effect. We had mostly been focusing on other aspects of her training recently—two skills in particular, but she hadn't really had call to use either of them yet.

The biggest problem we'd had was visualization—Penny had an amazing mind, but she tended to take things literally or, in some instances, took things the entirely opposite direction I would have expected. Speculative fiction always pictured AI as being limited in scope as far as imagination went—the opposite was true with Penny. The girl had entirely too much imagination at times and tended to go down the rabbit hole, so to speak. We had yet to find a nice, happy medium where I could describe a process as I did it and have her pick it up in anything under an hour. “We'll focus on getting you some other spells once you've got those down.”

Pushing off the blanket, I stretched and popped my back before moving a few yards away and conjuring another Beowolf target. 'So, Singularity is okay for getting multiple targets off their feet, but what if I don't want to do damage with it?’ I wondered. I could think of a few instances where a non-lethal anti-gravity technique would come in handy—especially if I could use it in combination with other things. Sure, I could hold someone up with Telekinesis, but that required attention—something I could fire and forget would be more useful. Then again, I wasn't even through the full list of biotic abilities that I could plausibly pass off as being part of a gravity-based Semblance. 'Okay, let's see. Warp, Singularity, Lift, Pull, Throw, Slam, Shockwave, Stasis, Barrier, and I think there was some kind of biotic slash in ME3's multiplayer but fuck if I can remember what it was called. That game was a steaming pile of shit.'

I had played Mass Effect 2 into the ground, but 3 I'd written off as a loss upon discovering the ending boiled down to a choice of what color explosion the player wanted to see and how they wanted to make Shepherd die. 'It's kind of irritating that I can remember hating that thing so much when there are things I'd rather remember that I can't.'

Holding my hand out towards the target, I focused on Skill Creation and gravity manipulation. It took a few seconds, but I eventually felt Skill Creation kick in. A mostly transparent sphere of blue-purple energy surrounded the target and it immediately floated a few feet off the ground. Ten seconds later, the spell wore off and the target fell back to the ground, though I mostly ignored it as I read the spell description, beyond the name Lift. The technique itself was single target, with a duration of 10 seconds, a weight limit of 1 ton, and a cost of 10MP—and the only thing it did was create a bubble of zero gravity around the target. With that one created, I took a moment to play with making the others on my short list, turning out Pull, Throw, Slam, Shockwave, and Barrier in quick succession—I had the visualization for it, after all, having played the games so all I was really doing was recreating what I had already seen.

With a hum of thought, I pointed at the target and incanted, “Lift.”
As soon as it rose into the air, I reared back and punted it, sending the Grimm target flying. Drawing my right Blazefire Saber, I spun it around into rifle mode and took aim, carefully leading my slowly falling target before opening up on it. The target, made mostly of concrete, chipped and broke in places, breaking off in others as I squeezed off short bursts. The spell wore off and the target fell the last twenty feet to the ground, where it landed with a muffled thump.

Holstering my sword, I conjured another target before drawing again, this time spinning the weapon around into Saber mode. As my blade connected, I subvocalized the incantation and watched as the target was sent spinning off to the side. Grabbing it with Pull, I yanked it back over and smacked it again, this time sending it straight up. I followed with a gravity assisted Leap, holding it with Telekinesis as I tore into it with a combination of blows, interspersing the occasional Aura Strike in until the target shattered and the spell failed, leaving it to fall as a rain of concrete debris to the ground below. ‘Okay, that’s useful,’ I grinned.

Creating another target, I called up a gravity field around myself similar to the one I’d used to lift myself and Ruby a little over a week ago, hit the target with Lift, then launched myself at it. Latching onto the target with gravity, I pulled it in close as I struck it, launching into another combo as we rolled across the field for several yards, the two gravity bubbles having combined to form one larger bubble of zero-g and allowing me to maneuver about the target by alternately anchoring myself to or pushing off of it or the ground using a combination of gravity and force from Telekinesis. When the bubble remained after ten seconds, I hummed in thought and stopped attacking. Maneuvering myself away from the target, I stopped feeding mana into the bubble around us and it immediately failed, dropping me to my feet and the mangled target to the ground.

‘I see. It just combined and ran off my mana until I dropped it,’ I assessed, moving back to my starting point. ‘So, gravity is amazing in CQB but kind of mediocre at range so far, until I get into the higher-tier spells.’

Conjuring three targets this time, I hit them all with Lift, pausing a moment before jumping into the middle of them. ‘No, that will just scatter them, then I’ll have to chase them down. I need a way to force them to stick together.’ Thinking on it a moment, I grinned. ‘Well, why the hell not? No one said I had to stick to one source material for gravity effects. I remember Kingdom Hearts had a nice Magnet spell that had a comparable range to Lift and Singularity, except it was a non-lethal AoE.’

By itself, the resultant spell yanked the three targets off the ground and dragged them up several feet off the ground, into a circling group before dropping them after ten seconds. Like Lift, Magnet was non-lethal by itself, but excellent for crowd control. It could only affect a five meter radius at the moment—except for targets under the effects of Lift or Singularity, where the range was doubled—but the number of targets it could affect was really only limited by the space they took up. Because of the way Magnet interacted with the gravity fields around Lifted targets, their effective ranges were combined: a Magnet cast on a Lifted target could draw in another Lifted target from ten meters away, but still only worked against non-Lifted targets from five meters. The nearest thing I could compare it
to was an actual magnet—place one near a piece of iron and it has one range for attraction, but place it near a second magnet and both would be drawn to the other. Neither of those spells were going to work on anything Huge or Gargantuan size-category or above though, so they were only really useful for dealing with people and people-sized Grimm—though that was mostly due to my estimates as to weight for those creatures. And that was fine—I had other options for dealing with larger enemies.

I spent a bit longer playing with Lift and Magnet, getting my timing down so I could apply them as touch attacks if I wanted in order to hit an enemy with both effects and then kick it into a group of other enemies, thus locking them all up temporarily. 'Okay, what if the enemy has a weapon? A gun, or a Dustcaster?'

Hitting another target with Lift, I followed it up with Bind, focusing on using gravity and force to hold it in place. Unfortunately, seeing as the target was immobile and inanimate to begin with, I had no way of knowing it it would work beyond knowing the spell had engaged—the only visual effect was a slight glow around the target in the usual Mass Effect color. Humming, I called, “Hey Penny, could you help me with something for a second?”

“Certainly, Jaune!” the ancula chirped happily, bouncing up from her seat and coming to stand in front of me. “How may I be of help?”

“I'm going to test a spell. Don't resist, okay?” I asked, and she nodded. “Bind,” I incanted, and immediately her arms and legs snapped into place against her body and she teetered over. I grabbed her with Telekinesis to make sure she wouldn't fall then suggested, “Now try to break out.”

Penny frowned slightly and flexed, and I felt the spell snap a moment later. “That was much harder than I thought it would be,” she admitted.

“Huh. I see,” I murmured, gently putting her back down. That could have meant a couple of things, really. Either it wasn't very useful, because of how quickly she'd broken out of it… or, more likely, Penny's inflated stats made it possible, and her admitting it had been difficult could mean normal people or Grimm would have a much more difficult time escaping the technique. Results were inconclusive and I'd have to test more later. “Thank you, Penny.”

“You are very welcome, Jaune,” she beamed, moving back over to sit beside Ruby.

'So, it's essentially Stasis without making a separate spell for it—which is nice, because Bind is already decently leveled.' I turned back and found most of the girls were taking a break, and a glance at their icons off to the side of my HUD gave me a good idea why—they were running into the same problem I had initially, that is running out of mana before regen could cover what the spells they were using cost. “Okay, how about a break?” I asked, grinning as Neo raised a hand to flip me off.
“About time, you slave driver,” she accused, and I shrugged.

“You'll thank me later.” Dropping down onto a blanket I laid back and crossed my hands behind my head, and simply watched the clouds pass overhead while the girls rested. It wasn’t long before I found the twins scooting over and dropping their heads on my stomach. Neo joined them a moment later, followed by Ruby. “What is this, use Jaune as a pillow day?”

“Sounds like a plan to me,” Yang laughed, moving over and dropping in beside her sister. I saw a black-clad form move around on the edge of my field of vision and Blake dropped down and made herself comfortable, apparently at least partly on top of Yang. “Oh, what's this?” the blonde hummed, tilting her head down to regard the catgirl.

“What?” Blake asked. “You make a good pillow.”

“She really does,” Ruby nodded. “It's the boobs. They're useful for something.”

“Ha ha ha,” Yang huffed.

A diminutive form moved into my field of view and I watched Penny carefully step over, between, and through the tangle of limbs before carefully plopping down on my chest. I wheezed a breath as I felt Reinforcement kick in to keep my ribs from being crushed. “Penny. Can't. Breathe,” I managed to gasp out. 'God damn, she has to weigh at least four hundred pounds.'

“What? What do you mean? She's tiny,” Yang asked, and I refrained from answering.

“Aww,” the girl pouted, and I rolled my eyes.

Grabbing her with Telekinesis, I removed most of her weight from my chest before remembering the spells I’d been working on. Humming in thought, I focused on creating another. The girl was surrounded by a faint nimbus of the Mass Effect color and I released her from my telekinetic hold. She dropped down onto my chest, weighing only a fraction of her actual weight. 'Naming that one ‘Lighten,’ ” I decided.

“Nap time,” Blake declared, to the sound of agreement from the others.
A smirk crept up on my lips and I asked, “What if I have to pee?”

More than one female voice answered, in deadpan stereo, “Hold it.”

“Well, that's just plain mean,” I grumbled, though I was smiling regardless.

I yawned and cracked my eyes open, checking my HUD to find it was after 1 p.m. Shifting, I began waking the girls around me. “Come on, that's enough lazing around,” I called, sitting up and stretching. The growl of a stomach echoed from somewhere in the pile of bodies and was met with more than one answering growl. “Okay, maybe lunch first.”

I'd started making a habit of packing picnic lunches in my Inventory, specifically for when we were out training and didn't want to run into town to get food. Digging out a couple, I opened one of the boxes and began passing out sandwiches. “Turkey, chicken, chicken, turkey,” Neo, the twins, and Ruby, “ham for the ham,” Yang.

“Hey!” Yang whined, but accepted the sandwich anyway.

“Tuna,” Blake, “and… Penny?”

“Whatever you are having is fine by me,” she smiled.

“Chicken,” I nodded, handing her one of the pre-labeled sandwiches. Putting the box of sandwiches back, I took out an ice chest and opened it. “Your choice of drinks,” I offered, digging out a cola for myself and cracking the can open. 'Ah, the joys of Inventory space. Food stays hot, drinks stay cold, nothing goes stale.'

“So, what next?” Miltia asked, and I took in the group around me.

Thinking on it a moment, I went over our options. We could keep working on buffs, or do more sparring, but what they really needed was experience—namely, time fighting real enemies to level those skills and work them into their repertoire. Honestly, I could use some myself, so I could start
getting used to limiting myself to the 'public' Semblance I would be using as Jaune while at Beacon.

“How about we go find some Grimm and work off our lunch?”

“Yes!” Yang cheered, tossing one fist into the air.

“Can we cut loose?” Ruby asked, and I nodded. “Yes!”

“Try to practice formation fighting,” I suggested, drawing their gazes. “We don't want to be tripping all over each other.”

The twins exchanged a look and nodded. “Partner formations?” Melanie asked, and I nodded.

“You two have the most experience working with each other, so that one's obvious, but at some point in the future we need to work on different partners so everyone's familiar with everyone else,” I pointed out and the twins nodded agreement. “Neo, with me. Ruby and Penny, you're together.” Ruby and Penny both cheered. “And that leaves Yang with Blake.”

“What can you do?” Blake asked, turning a curious look on Yang.

The blonde leered. “You want to find out?”

“Ignore her. She flirts with everyone and can't turn it off. It's reflexive,” I deadpanned.

“So I noticed,” Blake returned, equally deadpan. “I've been hit on more in the last twelve hours than in my entire life.”

Yang opened her mouth to deny the accusation, only to take on a thoughtful look and shrug. “I got nothing.”

“Well,” I began, a teasing lilt to my voice, “you didn't really help your case when you stuck your head in her boobs and declared 'nap time.'”

It was Blake's turn to look flustered, opening and closing her mouth once before turning away. “It
was comfortable,” she muttered under her breath, and I was pretty sure it wasn't meant for anyone's ears but her own given that it took Listen to pick it up.

We finished up eating and I stowed our blankets and trash before we began moving for the forest. Pulling up my map, I hummed as I looked over the local spirit density. Picking an area about a mile to the northwest with a decent concentration, I set a waypoint and closed my map. Turning to the others, I pondered for a moment before asking, “So, want to try something?”

“Try what?” Neo asked, and I grinned.

Pointing at her, I cast, “Lighten.”

Neo’s lips twitched, fighting a smile as she asked, “Are you saying I’m fat, Jaune?”

Laughter erupted from the group and I rolled my eyes. “Yeah, yeah. I walked right into that one. Laugh it up.” I gave them a moment to settle before saying, “Jump.”

Neo shrugged, bent at the knee, and leapt upwards. “Waa!” she yelped, a good twenty feet up as she began to descend, looking like what I recalled of astronauts on the moon. Popping her parasol open, she drifted down to a landing and shot me a grin. “Okay, I wasn't expecting that. What is that, half gravity?”

“One quarter,” I corrected. “Think you can move like that?”

Neo rolled her eyes. Folding her parasol, she took off running for the tree line and took a small hop before landing in the top of the nearest tree. “What are you waiting for?” she called.

“Everyone have their buffs on?” I asked, receiving a round of nods all around. “Let me know if you start getting low on Aura and we'll stop.”

I quickly hit the others with the same spell and we took off, all of them taking a few moments to get used to the change before gradually picking up the pace. As we hit the tree-line and caught up to Neo, I began giving orders. ‘Ruby, Blake, 11 and 1 o'clock. I'll take point. Melanie, Milia, 9 and 3. Penny, Neo in the middle. Yang, on our 6.’

The group fanned out as I'd directed and I quickly moved up into the 12 o'clock position, following my waypoint and casting the occasional glance at my minimap. We began coming across Grimm as we progressed—Nevermores in the trees and the occasional Boarbatusk on the ground. I took out the Nevermores in the trees ahead of us using Warp, since it was fairly quiet and I needed the practice. It
technically qualified as a sneak attack, any time I caught them off guard—which was most of the time. Those that I couldn't get off guard, I snagged with Pull and finished off with my sword. Occasionally, Blake or Ruby would wind up getting one off to our sides, but for the most part there weren't all that many.

That changed the deeper we got, as we started seeing Beowolves prowling around below. Holding up a fist, I came to a stop and waited for the others to do so as well. *This looks like a good place to start,* I sent, receiving confirmations all around. *How do we want to play this? Half on the ground, half up here for fire support?*

*That sounds good. We could switch out with the next group,* Ruby agreed, falling into the leadership roll easier than I'd expected she would. *My team will take this group. Yang, clear us out a place to land. Penny and I will take the survivors and we'll work our way out from there. Ready?*

Yang shot me an amused look just for a moment, before nodding. Cupping her hands, fire blossomed between them and she took aim. “HA!”

Ember Celica went off, a red Dust round carrying the fireball down into the middle of the pack of Beowolves. The ones in the immediate center were incinerated and I watched as Penny and Ruby dropped, Crescent Rose and Penny's swords cutting a wide swath around the point of impact and taking out several wounded, flaming, shrieking Beowolves. Blake and Yang followed, launching into their own attacks as Neo, the twins, and I began taking pot-shots at the otherwise occupied Beowolves. I grinned, watching EXP and Spirit tick away as they died. “So,” I called to the girls in the trees with me, drawing their attention. “Make a Spinning Mana Arrow, then condense it and will it to be faster. That should net you AP Round. Give it a try,” I instructed, demonstrating by spinning up the technique and firing off one at a Beowolf leaping towards Penny's blind spot and punching through its head.

It took a couple of minutes, but eventually AP Rounds began raining down from all four of us as we sniped Grimm, and I started throwing out my new skills since I needed the practice. Spam Lift on a group of targets, rotate through using Slam on each, then Pull followed immediately by Throw, then Magnet to draw them all together again, throw a Singularity out into the middle of them to catch as many of the clustered up enemies as possible, and finish by dropping a Warp to detonate the Singularity followed by a Shockwave to take out any survivors. It was a long chain, but with Lift and Magnet holding them in place the Grimm couldn't do anything to get out of it.

As the Beowolves fell, the Boarbatusks we had passed along the way charged into the small clearing, drawn by the noise and Aura. I sent a view through my eyes to Ruby and the others, alerting them to the coming threat and summoned Sanguine, the spirit immediately diving off the tree and snapping up one of the hog-like Grimm by the back of the neck before shaking it like a rag doll and snapping its neck. Pulling out both my Blazefire Sabers, I spun them around into rifle mode and flipped the selector switches to full-auto. A grin crossed my lips as I opened up on the targets below
—my first pass with the weapon in my right hand coating a large number of them with ice, while the second pass with the left weapon sprayed down fire, shattering most of those I'd iced. Those that I missed were easy prey for the girls below as they began tearing into them—without the advantage of being able to rely on their armor and maneuverability, the normally tough Grimm were rendered slow and vulnerable.

As soon as the area was cleared, and my map confirmed we weren't in for any surprises, the four of us still taking up sniping positions dropped down and surveyed the damage. A sudden spray of rose petals announced Ruby's arrival, and I found myself thrown to the ground as the girl wrapped herself around me. “Wha—?”

My ribs creaked and I felt Reinforcement kick in as she squeezed with every limb available and proceeded to gush, at volume. “YOU’RE THE BESTEST EVER!”

“Uhh. What?” I asked, shooting an incredulous look at Yang, who shrugged. Reaching down, I poked her in the head. “Not that I'm going to argue, but what'd I do?”

“I had to dial back on the caliber and grade of propellant for Crescent Rose when I made her, because my body couldn't take the recoil with what I could do with my own Aura. And now I have Reinforcement and buffs and that leveled like ten times in this fight alone, and I can barely feel Crescent's kick any more with everything running, and that means I can make her a larger caliber and use higher grade propellant and pretty much completely redesign everything about how she fires. I'll still have to use the blade to anchor her for sniping, since, you know, physics—but that's okay. This is the best and you're the best for making it so I can do this! Thank you thank you thank you!” And then she proceeded to squee—an honest to deity-of-choice, “Squee!”

I blinked, knowing I must have looked pretty pole-axed at the moment, but I couldn't be bothered to care. No, I was doing some mental math and coming up 'WTF.' 'Wait. Wait a goddamn minute here. That wasn't the largest force output that rifle could have had? But that thing fucking throws her when she fires it, to the point she's incorporated it in her fighting style!' And I knew damn well she was already using .50BMG rounds. 'What's next? A t-rex round? .700 Nitro Express? 20MM? Shit.'

“You're welcome?” I tried, before something she'd said registered and I asked, “So, wait, you can still use it to launch yourself, right?”

Ruby nodded. “Yeah, that hasn't changed. I just handle it better and recoil doesn't throw off my aim.”

Thinking it over, I frowned as I came to what seemed like an obvious conclusion. “You realize
stronger propellant means more recoil, which means you're going to be throwing yourself around further, faster, and harder right? Won't that throw off pretty much your entire combat style?"

“Pfft duh,” Ruby rolled her eyes. “I'll adjust my style to take advantage of it.”

I hummed, thinking over my list of skills. I had one that might work, actually. “Do you want to be able to fire her without launching yourself or having to anchor her?”

“You can do that?! Yes!” she nodded, head bobbing hard enough to send her short hair flying.

Ruby's nodding tapered off as her eyes trailed down, seemingly only now fully taking in our position. She went stiff momentarily before slowly tilting her head up enough to look me in the eye, silver eyes having gone wide as she blushed. “Uh. Er…”

“So,” Yang called, and Ruby winced at the teasing tone that was plainly obvious there. “Can I join in on this or are you going to make me watch?”

And just like that, Ruby vanished in another spray of rose petals. “Yaaaaang!” she whined, reappearing in front of her sister and beating her fists against the taller girl's chest.

“Ow! My boobs!” Yang yelped, but it was obvious Ruby wasn't putting any real force in the blows.

The twins stood over me, a hand from each offered to help me up. Shrugging, I took the offered hands and hauled myself to my feet. “Remember our bet,” Miltia murmured, and I rolled my eyes.

The sound of a weapon firing reached my ears, at the same time Sanguine started sending 'danger' signals. My head whipped towards the source of the noise while, at the same time, I pulled on the view through the spirit's eyes. Both were of the same sight from two different angles—Blake, Gambol drawn and eyes wide as she fired at the spirit, from where Sanguine had slipped up behind the faunus. “What is that!?"

“Cease fire!” I yelled, giving it the force of an order through the party system. Blake froze, eyes tracking as Sanguine bounded over to my side. Turning my gaze down to the summon, I asked, “Did you just ninja the ninja-girl?”

The great cat plopped down on her ass at my feet and sent me a look, along with the emotions
behind it: smug amusement. Sighing, I reached down to scratch between her ears as I explained. “Blake, this is the ninth member of our party. Sanguine. She… has a screwy sense of humor, some days.”

“It’s a Grimm,” the girl deadpanned, but holstered her weapon.

“Nope,” Miltia shook her head, Melanie doing likewise as she added, “Not a Grimm.”

“But I don't think we should have that conversation today,” Neo added, shooting me a look that said it wouldn't be the brightest idea in the world. 'You've known her for like two days.'

I shrugged. “The short answer is, she's a summon.”

Blake looked around, taking in the fact that no one else seemed to be bothered by the summon's presence, and took on a sheepish look. “Sorry.”

“No, it's fine. Just check your HUD next time. Her portrait should be right below mine,” I pointed out, and I watched as gold eyes tracked to her left before she winced and nodded. “Like I said, no harm, no foul. On that note, why don't we take a short break and you all can meditate a while to regen Aura while I see what we got,” I murmured, calling up Telekinesis and lifting everything the Grimm had dropped within my range. Moving back to the first batch we'd killed, I collected all of those as well and brought them in close, separating them by item. “Penny, what do we have?” I asked, knowing the AI could track and count everything there with pretty much no conscious thought on her part, given her sensor suite.

“I count exactly one hundred thousand two hundred and thirty lien, thirty-five red potions, twenty one blue potions, two books, fifty six Boarbatusk tusks, one hundred and thirteen Beowolf claws, and a piece of fur,” she announced, and I hummed in thought. “Divided by eight, that should be twelve thousand five hundred and twenty-eight point seven five lien each.”

I saw Blake go very, very still as her golden eyes tracked between Penny and myself, before taking in the rest of the group and the utterly blasé way they had taken in the numbers. Finally, she relaxed. “You get drops.”

“Yup. Like I said, fun and profit,” I agreed, dumping the money into Inventory before digging into my side pouch and requesting a couple of stacks of bills, totaling the amount Blake was due and rounding up to the nearest lien. One large wrapped stack of 10k and a folded stack of the rest came
out and I passed them to her. “That's yours.”

Once she had the cash in hand, I repeated the process with Yang and Ruby, who quickly stuffed theirs in their belt pouches. Ruby accepted her stack almost reverently, eyes going somewhat wide as she looked it over and then pocketed it. “This is going to buy so many parts for my baby.”

“Eh, it'll cover my insurance for Bumblebee for the next year or so,” Yang sighed, and I recognized the expression as one I'd worn more than once—knowing the money was spent as soon as it was in hand, and on something I couldn't avoid paying. “At least dad won't have to pay for that while I'm in school.”

“It's real,” Neo's voice drew my attention and I turned to see Blake had been examining the bills from her share closely—apparently going so far as to check to see if the serial numbers repeated.

“This is more money than I've ever had to my name,” Blake murmured.

I raised an eyebrow at that. I knew the Fang stole supplies, Dust, weapons, and money… but then I suppose Blake was the kind of person who would take only what she needed and give the rest to those she was trying to help. “It's yours. You've earned it. Do whatever you like with it.”

She sent me a look I couldn't read, but Observe told me she was 'conflicted' and 'calculating.' I gave her a minute to think it over. “Okay,” she finally agreed, stuffing the wad of cash into her bag.

Drawing the potions to me, I separated out seven HP and seven MP potions and distributed them to the girls, before dumping the remainder into Inventory. I had more potions than I knew what to do with now. Well, more than I had known what to do with. Now that I had a guild and would be sending people out in the field, it wouldn't hurt to issue my people potions to make sure they came back alive. Maybe make up some sort of standard field kid—a space-expanded bag with ammunition, a couple of potions, and some ration bars. It would take some work—I had no idea how to sew, but I was willing to learn, since I didn't want to foist all the crafting off on Melanie, Miltia, and Neo. Speaking of which, I had a few questions about that that I would need to get them to answer later. If making Dust-infused cloth was anything like making Dust rounds, there was probably machinery we could purchase to help do the job.

The two books floated over and I had a look at them, grinning as I did. The first was titled **Boar's Hide**, and would grant the user a passive skill by the same name that increased durability and damage reduction each by 10%. The second was a book called **Wolf's Awareness**, which granted the user a passive skill that increased one's sense of smell and hearing to be on par with that of the average wolf—or Beowolf, in this case—and the instinctive knowledge that came with it for
distinguishing scents and dampening them or tuning them out when they weren't needed at that level. I didn't particularly fancy catching a whiff of raw sewage. Unfortunately, hearing wasn't so easily ignored or dampened—I didn't have the requisite biology to fold my ears down.

“Not sure I can teach these,” I told the others, but after some discussion it was decided that I should eat the books anyway, because if anyone could teach the skills without a book, it would be me. Eating the first, I didn't notice all that much of a change—though I did get a notification that I had collected one of a set of an unknown number of related skills. That reminded me, I needed to check my Quest Log and Journal later—I'd gotten a quest I hadn't read when I'd finished off the Nameless, along with a few items I should examine and play with.

After eating the second, however, the world seemed to open up to me—suddenly, I was aware of every scent on the wind around us and every little sound as though I'd had Listen running. Humming, I activated Listen and grinned when the skills stacked and I started picking out sounds that must have come from miles away—if the sound of a vehicle rumbling down the road through the forest to our east was any indication. Shutting off Listen, I dumped the crafting mats into Inventory before I brought up the last piece for inspection. “Well?” one of the twins asked nearby, and I shrugged.

“It's a crafting mat. A bolt of cloth, sort of. It's a bolt of Beowolf fur—twenty yards long by sixty inches wide. It looks like it's for melee DPS gear, since it gives bonuses to STR, DEX, movement and attack speed, and a little durability and Damage Reduction,” I answered, stowing the bolt in Inventory with the rest.

Neo frowned, gaze trailing over us as she did some mental math. “That's enough for all of us, with some left over depending on how we use it. Is there any sort of difference based on how much you use?”

I nodded. “Yeah. The more you use, the higher the bonuses. You couldn't exactly wrap yourself in it and get 100% DR, because apparently it only goes up to 15% max.”

Neo exchanged a look with the twins, who were grinning widely. “I know what we're doing when we get home,” Melanie suggested, and the other two nodded agreement.

“What's that?” Yang asked, curiosity obviously roused.

“Clothes,” Militia answered simply, drawing more than one female gaze at the word.
“You can sew?” Ruby asked, perking up. “I can sew too! I made my dress.”

Neo looked her up and down and her grin widened. “And a very nice dress it is,” she complimented. “Want to trade notes, later?”

“Yes!” the little reaper nodded.

I rolled my eyes and opened my map. “So, we've got a project for later. I had a few questions anyway, but it can wait. Let's see what else we can find to kill. Looks like there's another group about half a mile to our northeast.”

Recasting the Lighten spell on the group, we assumed the same formation as before and took off. As we came across the next group of Grimm, I frowned as I realized they appeared to be in pursuit of something, or otherwise in a damn big hurry to get somewhere. Opening my map, I saw a group of green icons nearby, not too far from the road—and remembered the vehicle I'd heard driving by earlier. 'Change of plans. These things are going after people. Stop them hard and fast,' I ordered, already dropping down into the path of the nearest Beowolf.

I spun into a kick, casting Lift as it connected, and sending the Beowolf tumbling back into those behind it. Drawing my Sabers, I spun both around into rifle mode and flipped the selector switches over to burst fire, then released both and grabbed them with Telekinesis. Two green laser sights illuminated points on Grimm and the rifles began firing as I deployed my shield and flung it into another Grimm getting too close, backing the throw up with Telekinesis, and the bladed edge punched through its skull before I yanked it out and set it to orbiting around me, then began chaining casts of my new spells. The twins dropped down to either side of me, Neo taking position behind me and we began carving a path through the pack in formation. AP Rounds went flying away from the twins and Neo danced between and skewered anything that got past them with the retractable blade of her parasol.

Out of the corner of my eye on my right, I saw Ruby leap out of the tree she'd occupied, Crescent Rose fully deployed behind her as she fired and spun into a group of four, sheering them clean in half. Penny landed beside her, following a hail of laser fire that cleared the area immediately surrounding Ruby. The pair took off ahead on our right flank, cutting a swath through the pack. On my left, Yang came down in a fiery explosion, sending Grimm pieces scattering. Blocking a lunging swipe from one that had jumped in on the heels of her attack, she grabbed it by the paw and yanked it off balance, before shifting around it and grabbing it by the hind paw. Grinning like a loon, she hefted it up and proceeded to smash it full force into the next Beowolf to get close—a wet crack signaling the demise of both.

A black blur announced Blake's arrival, landing to Yang's left and sliding Gambol's blade up under the jaw of a Beowolf that had been attempting to flank the blonde brawler. Dragging the sword out
through the side of its neck, her Semblance went off and she launched herself off a clone and into the air to intercept another Beowolf attempting to jump on her. I turned my attention back to the front, where the largest concentration of the pack was, with an Alpha sitting dead center. The Alpha roared, spurring the Beowolves around it to action as they charged with renewed hostility. Three strides into its run, the Alpha hit the ground hard as Sanguine's lithe form dropped onto it from above, clamped her jaws around its neck, and proceeded to behave like the great cat she appeared to be by hauling its struggling form—easily half-again her size—up the nearest tree while doing her best to chew through its neck.

Seeing their pack leader snatched up and dealt with so easily broke the pack's ranks, many of them turning to run, showing a surprising amount of awareness for young grimm—I'd honestly expected them to keep attacking, regardless of their leader's demise. Not particularly in the mood to allow them to retreat, I focused and cast Magnet in their rear ranks, followed by Singularity. “Fire in the hole!” I called, sending the order to clear the area via the party system. A blue-purple ball of energy spun up in my hand and I sighted down the Singularity. There was a crack of sound as the Gravity Bullet fired, blasting away from me and ripping up several Beowolves in between me and my target. Upon impact, the whole mess went up in a blue-tinted explosion, destroying those Grimm unfortunate enough to have been yanked up by gravity effects and spreading to those nearby that had been within the blast radius. Their ranks broke and they turned to run, only to be cut down by Ruby and her temporary team, as they'd circled around to put the pack into a pincer attack between our two groups.

“Well, that was fun,” Yang grinned, and I glanced at my minimap.

“Not over yet,” I warned, and a roar preceded a black and white form rushing into the clearing, hauling one paw back and swinging for the blonde brawler, who fired her gauntlets and launched herself out of its path. It stood on its hind legs and roared a challenge, and my eyes tracked up to the nameplate over its head.

Boo Boo

The Ranger Didn't Like This

Level: 55

The bear-like Grimm stood just over ten feet tall, roughly half that wide, and was bristling in armor plating and spines jutting out of its back. The icon beside its level was an Ursa, in gold—another color I had yet to see, but if I had to guess I'd put it between silver and black on the threat scale, meaning it was probably a boss-level creature. Hitting it with Observe told me it only had one special attack: Roar, which would call for help.
“That's a big Ursa,” Blake muttered.

“I've seen bigger,” Yang countered.

Ruby shot her sister an annoyed look. “Not the time, Yang. Jaune?”

“Lift,” I incanted.

“Oorgh?” the beast grunted, taking on what must have been the most confused expression an Ursa had ever made as it lifted off the ground and hung mid-air, flailing about in panic.

“Flash Freeze,” I followed up the first cast, as we were all well outside the AoE range. With civilians nearby, I didn't want to chance this thing getting away and going for them— and with them out of line of sight, we wouldn't have to hide skills and fight it at a handicap. “Ranged attacks only. Fire elemental damage will hurt it the most for now. Open fire.”

That was all the urging the others needed as Dust rounds, lasers, fireballs, and other spell-fire began streaking away from our group to slam into the boss, its HP rapidly depleting as frozen chunks broke off or shattered outright. Renewing Lift on it to keep it disabled, I swapped magazines as my Sabers ran dry and opened up with spell-fire of my own, repeated castings of Warp streaking downrange and exploding on contact, interspersed with Slam and Shockwave to generally bash it into submission. The freeze effect wore off and the Ursa immediately began screeching in agony, before one last round from Crescent Rose punched through its skull and put it out of its misery.

Taking a moment to reload Ember Celica, emulating everyone else who had burned through their Dust rounds, Yang tossed me a grin. “Well, that was easy.”

“God damnit Yang, stop tempting Murphy,” I groaned, my enhanced hearing already picking up the crash and thump of something large pounding through the woods. “Get ready for round three!”

As the pounding got closer, I began casting Mana Shield and A.T. Field on myself and the others. A moment later, a gigantic form crashed through the trees, knocking two aside as it barreled into the clearing and slid to a stop. As I took in its details, I groaned quietly.
The Ursa icon beside its level was gold and, below its nameplate, perched upon its head and seemingly stuck to its fur with matted blood was a green cap of some sort—possibly belonging to the ranger in question from Booboo’s title. Hitting it with Observe, I resisted the urge to curse. It had three specials: Swipe, Stomp, and Roar. Swipe appeared to be some sort of attack that allowed it to extend its claws by several feet. Stomp had an AoE knock-down and stun effect. Roar, unlike Boo Boo’s version, was an actual sonic weapon on top of calling for help.

Spotting the very dead form of the previous Ursa, the new one stood and roared, causing me to wince at the volume—an obvious downside to enhanced hearing, but one I could deal with since Gamer’s Body meant I couldn’t be deafened. A glance towards our resident faunus—the only other one besides myself and Penny with enhanced hearing—showed her wincing and shaking her head, but otherwise unharmed, having been outside the immediate AoE range. The woods were filled with the sounds of crashing as my minimap detected more Grimm coming into range—lots more. Yogi seemed content to simply stand there and wait for the moment, red eyes glaring at us from under its mask. *Twenty feet tall. Probably weighs a ton and a half.* I cast Lift to give it a try, watching as the gravity bubble materialized around the Grimm’s midsection, but did nothing otherwise.

*’Nope. I’m not going to be able to Lift this thing,’* I assessed, going over my options as I dispelled the failed Lift. Ursai poured into the edge of the clearing, circling us as we shifted back to back.

“We should leave,” Blake suggested quietly.


I shook my head. “Fuck leaving. That thing’s a boss, there’s a dead boss on the ground, and there’s another boss beside it,” I pointed out, where a third over-large Ursa had shown up—this one also a named mob, level 56, Cindy, with the title ‘Mama Ursa.’ *‘There’s more EXP and Spirit gathered here than I’ve seen since killing the Nameless—not to mention whatever else they’re going to drop.’*

“So, do we have a plan?” Ruby asked, and I nodded.

“Yeah. Cheat,” I smirked. “Penny, with me. Everyone else, try to kill off the trash as fast as you can,” I explained, then focused on the spell I wanted. “Bind!” I yelled, pointing at a section of the gathered Ursas. Tree roots and earth shot up, wrapping around Grimm and stabbing into legs and feet. Tossing out a Magnet and letting it draw more in, I threw another Bind on them before switching
targets, forcing more to cluster and then binding them.

Penny shot out from beside me, intercepting Yogi as he made to charge, her raw strength—boosted up by buffs—enough to send it stumbling off to the side into Cindy and distract them for the moment. The other girls spread out and began attacking downed targets, going for cheap, easy-kill shots to heads, necks, and other vulnerable areas as I finished Binding the last of them. I didn't have time to watch the others, though, as there were still two bosses to deal with. Turning my attention back to Yogi, I saw Sanguine had leaped onto Cindy's back and was harassing the smaller of the two Ursai, while Penny was alternately dodging or parrying Yogi's swipes while battering it with slashes and laser blasts from her swords.

Yogi reared back and roared in the ancula's face—who appeared entirely unphased by the point-blank sonic attack. I'd have to ask later, but I suspected the people who'd built her had made sure to put in some precautions to keep things like that from breaking her sensitive equipment. Realizing what it had done, I checked my minimap, only to find no more Ursai on the way. 'So you can't just summon adds out of thin air. Good to know,' I assessed. Stepping up beside the gynoid, I fixed the Urs with a glare and pulled up Killing Intent, before rearing back with it and slamming it in the face with a metaphorical hammer blow from the technique, while at the same time returning its roar with one of my own—and surprising myself as my Semblance popped up a skill creation window for the skill Taunt.

The effect was immediate as Yogi fell to the ground, slamming both front paws into the ground and sending a shockwave radiating outwards that sent dirt spraying up. "Jump!" I yelled, suiting word to deed and hopping over the shockwave as the Ursa stood again.

Sending Penny the order to help Sanguine keep Cindy busy, I caught the shield whipping around me and reattached it at my left forearm. One of the Blazefire Sabers orbiting me spun down into Saber mode and I caught it, while the other shifted to put the green bead of a laser sight on Yogi's eyes, causing the Ursa to flinch. Recognizing a potential weakness when I saw one, I used Telekinesis to squeeze off a burst at its eyes. The right one popped and it stumbled backwards with a pained roar, bringing a paw up to shield its other eye while swiping its right paw at me. Its claws extended and I created a gravity bubble around myself, leaning to the side while bringing my shield up to deflect the lower part of the arm and allowing the arm to pass mostly over me. As it did, I snagged it with gravity and Telekinesis, allowing it to haul me along with the arm.

Sticking to the back of the arm, I got to my feet and hurried the few feet up it as Yogi reared back and tried to dislodge me. It tried to swat me with its other paw, but a burst from my second Saber reminded it that I was going for its eyes, and it thought better of leaving its remaining eye unguarded. Instead, its great maw opened and it sucked in a breath. Seeing an opportunity, I charged up a Gravity Bullet and fired down its gullet. Yogi aborted the attack as the spell detonated, sending it tumbling over on its ass and puking up Grimm blood as the air it'd inhaled came harmlessly back up. A gravity and wind assisted Powered Leap sent me flying up above it and I collapsed the shield as the second Saber spun down into sword form. Catching it in my left hand, I swung with the right one and launched a blue-tinted ranged Aura strike, cutting a deep gouge in the Ursa's vulnerable belly. I followed it up with the same from the other Saber, that one tinted the red of fire elemental as I
I landed on its upper chest, releasing the ice elemental Saber to float nearby and taking the fire elemental one in both hands, before driving them down into Yogi's unarmored throat. The Ursae's remaining eye went wide and it brought both paws up in an attempt to smash me flat. My own eyes narrowed as I rearranged my A.T. Fields, two to either side of me to intercept the paws, and dumped mana into both them and my Mana Shield. My shields flared brightly but held as I pulled the Saber out and hit it again, getting penetration this time as it drove a foot down into Yogi's neck. Below me, the Ursae thrashed, and I responded by drawing on the gravity around us—the ground indenting slightly beneath us as our relative weight doubled, then tripled.

Opening its yap again to suck down a breath and roar, I shoved my compressed shield into its mouth before expanding it, forcing the Ursae's jaws open wide, beyond the point where they hinged, and effectively rendering its mouth useless for biting for the foreseeable future. Not that it was going to live more than the next minute, as I focused on the sword in my hand and dumped mana into it—more specifically, into the *Grade 9 Uncut Burn* crystal powering it, initiating an over powered Aura Strike. The tracery I could see on the sword flared bright red and an ominous red glow refracted off my shield in Yogi's mouth as I poured fire down its throat. Yogi's thrashing increased as its HP bar rapidly depleted, before ceasing altogether as it hit 0.

Cutting the mana flow to my Saber, I yanked it out of Yogi's new throat hole and wrinkled my nose at the stench of cooked and burned Ursae. The blade itself was still orange with heat, and I let go of it, allowing Telekinesis to grab it and keep it away from me as I hit the switch to compress my shield, which was also uncomfortably warm, then turned to survey the others. I was forced to look away as a blinding green light flashed as Penny opened up at her current full power, burning a hole through Cindy and several hundred yards worth of forest behind the Ursae.

“This doesn't seem fair,” Blake announced from nearby, casually driving her blade into the ear of another Ursae and sending it twitching to the ground in death throes.

“There is no such thing as a fair fight,” Ruby quoted immediately, and I shot the girl a grin—she had been listening.

As the girls finished off the last of the Ursae, I began scooping up drops with Telekinesis. Shooting a look to Penny, she answered, “One million, seven hundred and seventy thousand, six hundred and five lien. Or two hundred twenty one thousand, three hundred and twenty five point six two five lien each.”

“It may be easier to keep that in Inventory until we get back to town, then I can divide it up there. That okay with everyone?” I asked, and received nods from Ruby, Yang, Penny, and Blake—I already knew the twins and Neo didn't mind, since they were pretty much treating my Inventory like
a shared bank account at times. Some quick mental math told me that was between 300 and 400k each for the three bosses—probably more like 300k each for Boo Boo and Cindy and 400k for Yogi—plus around 700k for the mob of Ursai and Beowolves. “What else?”

“Sixty red potions, forty blue. Two hundred and six claws, unknown whether they are from Ursai or Beowolves. Two bolts of cloth like the first one we found. One skill book, one potential weapon.”

Funneling potions and materials into my Inventory, I paused on the cloth. “Another bolt of Beowolf fur. One bolt of Ursa fur. This one looks like tank gear: adds STR and VIT, along with durability and Damage Reduction—a lot more than the Beowolf fur. Looks like 30% base DR against physical attacks. That's not bad, at all. Going to have to see if it stacks.” Dropping them into Inventory, I had a look at the skill book next. Bear's Hide looked to be the third in the set of Grimm-based buffs, and would increase durability and DR by 10%, along with increasing HP regen rate by 10%. Absently eating the skill, I pulled what Penny suspected was a weapon to me.

'Bear Claws. Fist weapon, grants extendable claws from fingers, passively increases STR by 10%, attacks have a 20% chance to inflict Bleed per claw. Limited shape-shift ability to disguise itself as gloves.'

I tossed the weapons to Miltia, who raised an eyebrow as she looked over them. “For me?”

“Yep,” I agreed. “Try them on.”

Shrugging, she pulled off and stored her own bladed weapons before slipping on the new ones. As she tugged the second one on, both shifted and compressed down, conforming to her slender arms, hands, and fingers and taking on the appearance of elbow-length black silk gloves with a black fur lining along the top and Miltia's personal sigil on the back of them in green. “Not bad looking, but it doesn't really go with the dress. We can fix that later,” Melanie suggested. “Now, what do they do?”

Moving over to a tree, Miltia swiped her hand at it and five razor sharp claws extended from the backs of her fingers, somewhere between the first and second knuckle when counted from the tips to the palms. They tore a set of deep gouges in the tree and the red-clad twin hummed, pulling her hand away and flexing her fingers, testing her dexterity to make sure none of the claws would get in each other's way. When they didn't, she retracted them and beamed a smile at me. “Thank you, Jaune.”

“You're welcome,” I chuckled, then pointed down to her dress, which was looking a bit worse for wear—rips and tears were scattered across both dresses, though there were no visible injuries that I could see and all of the damage looked superficial. Considering much of that damage just managed to show off their thighs, stomachs, and bustline I wondered for a moment if my Semblance hadn’t
decided to try for the Negima effect—that is, damage that destroys clothes, and only clothes, in such a way as to leave a female more indecent than if she'd simply been nude. A glance at Melanie confirmed she was in much the same state. Yang and Ruby seemed okay, but then I kind of expected that much. Blake and Neo both looked a little cut up, but nothing a few stitches wouldn't fix. I'd still want to look into durability seals for them as well, regardless. “Let me guess,” I shot an amused look at Miltia, “didn't hold up too well to Grimm?”

The twins shot each other a look before turning equally unamused expressions on me. “Shut up, Jaune,” they synced.

“At least fitting the gloves to the dress won’t be much of a problem any more. You can make a new dress,” I pointed out, and they rolled their eyes.

I frowned as my perception skills pinged. Glancing at my minimap showed the green dots representing people had moved closer, one dot in particular in the lead. Turning, I spotted what had set off my detection skills and allowed a rueful grin to spread across my lips. A large man clad in a red coat, with a large walrus moustache, brown pants, and hiking boots strolled out of the woods and took in the slowly dissolving bodies of Yogi, Cindy, and Boo Boo. “My word!” he exclaimed, and I raised an eyebrow as he turned to take our group in. “Did you take these three beasts down?”

“Yes, sir,” I answered automatically, my eyes tracking to his nameplate. “That we did.”

Big Game Hunter

Professor Peter Port

Level: ???

“Well done! Magnificent work, I say! I recognize these three from the bounty board. They've been wandering out of Forever Fall and terrorizing nearby villages. I had no idea they were in the area though— their usual territory is several miles to the northwest. Hmm,” he hummed, reaching up to stroke his mustache before muttering, “I'll have to move today's excursion further away, if the Grimm population is this great here.”

“Who's this guy?” Yang asked, shooting me a confused look. I knew that, being in my party, they could all see nameplates and levels just as I could, but I could forgive her for not recognizing Port—he was a teacher at Beacon and probably not someone she had dealt with while at Signal. Still, I
made a mental note to talk to the girls going to Beacon about researching their school beforehand—especially their professors. I should probably start by practicing what I preached and do my own research before coming to them about it, though—because while I knew of some of the teachers, I did not know them all.

Port perked up. “Who am I, my dear? Why, I am the greatest hunter of big game in all of Vale and an instructor at the illustrious Beacon Academy! My name is Professor Peter Port! And who might you be? You look to be around the age to be Beacon students, but I don't recognize any of you. Except for you, Mister Arc,” he pointed in my direction. I raised an eyebrow and he asked, “How is your father doing, these days? And your sisters? Why, I remember when your eldest sister first came to Beacon, how she… well, that's a story for another time. Perhaps you would like to hear it later, once school starts?”

I shrugged. “Wouldn't know about my dad, Professor. My sisters are doing fine. Joan's off on rotation right now, actually.” Thinking over his offer, I grinned. “And sure, I'll have to take you up on that some time. I'd love to get some blackmail—I mean stories—about Joan.” Something he'd said earlier tickled my curiosity and I asked, “Professor, you said something about a bounty?”

“What a bounty?”

“Why yes, Mister Arc. Bounties are quite the boon to the Hunter strapped for cash,” he nodded.

Gesturing towards the corpses, I asked, “How's that work?”

“Well, normally you would pick up the bounty from either one of the local bounty boards, or using your scroll once you've become a Hunter. Once the grimm in question has been put down, simply take a picture of its body with your scroll and submit it to the bounty system. But as you are not a Hunter yet, you will have to photograph the grimm in question and travel to any bounty office in the country the bounty originated from. There is one such office in downtown Vale, in fact,” Port explained.

Taking out my scroll, I moved up and quickly snapped pictures of the downed grimm while they were still recognizable. I would go tomorrow and turn it in. I had no idea how much bounties went for, but hopefully it would be a pretty good chunk of change. “Thank you, Professor.”

“Professor, what are you doing out this far into Forever Fall?” Ruby asked, and Port winced, turning to cast a look towards where I knew the other people to be.

“Ahh, I was tracking down an elusive Grimm, Miss…?”
“Ruby Rose!” Ruby offered. “What kind of Grimm?”

“Well, Miss Rose, you see,” Port began, and I hit him with Observe.

‘Nervous, distracted, worried. Obviously hiding something. Probably has to do with those people back in the woods.’ Reasoning it out, the conclusion seemed fairly simple: Port was a teacher. I didn’t know what sort of salary being a teacher at Beacon paid, but like any school the teachers had a good deal of downtime during the summer breaks. On Earth, those I knew tended to either enjoy their time off and live off their savings, or those who needed the money would offer their services as tutors or for summer school.

“He’s probably tutoring some kids for a few extra bucks,” Neo got there about the same time I did, and I nodded.

“Seems reasonable. He’s a teacher, they’re off for the summer. Makes sense that some may want to make some cash on the side as tutors,” I added. ‘Doesn’t explain why he’s worried, though, or what he’d be hiding exactly.’

Port nodded, chuckling quietly. “Yes, you’ve found me out,” he ‘admitted,’ and I blinked as my Semblance registered that as a lie while my own finely honed bullshit detector pegged the needle in the red. “Ahem,” he coughed into his hand, breaking the silence. “Well. If you’ll excuse me, I must get back to my students. I don’t believe the Grimm activity in this area is safe for such a group. Do be careful yourselves, on your way out. Mister Arc, Miss Rose, it was very nice meeting you and your friends. I wish you all a good day.”

Port turned and quick-marched back into the trees, headed for his group and I exchanged looks with the others. “He’s hiding something,” Melanie pointed out.

“Definitely,” Blake agreed.

I shrugged. “Well, so are we, and Port did us the courtesy of not asking how exactly we took down those three,” I gestured towards the mostly-dissolved pile of dead grim, “or about that,” I pointed out the trail of destruction Penny had left in the wake of her attack. The gynoid looked suddenly sheepish, rubbing the back of her head and scuffing the toe of her shoe in the dirt.

“So, what now?” Ruby asked, and I glanced at my HUD clock.
"It's getting late. How about we head back?" I suggested, beginning the process of casting Lighten on the others. "So, did anyone level?"

Every hand went up, and I chuckled. "Nice. We'll sort it out later. For now, let's get the hell out of here before more trouble comes along. Or my Semblance decides killing off three bosses and a few trash mobs is a waste of Raid Party mode and tries to rectify that oversight."

We were loaded into the Bullhead and halfway to Fox Hunt's landing zone when my scroll rang. My HUD snapped out onto the windshield of the Bullhead and Jun's picture popped up as Rhythm Emotion poured over the Bullhead's speakers. I took out my scroll and answered the call, taking it off speaker. "What's up, squirt?"

"Well, it's Sunday and I was just calling to remind you that you promised me a date," the girl answered, and I winced. "You didn't forget, did you?"

"No," I lied. "Actually, I was just on my way to pick you up."

"Uh huh," the girl huffed in disbelief. "That doesn't sound like a car engine. That sounds like a Bullhead."

"Maybe?" I tried, glancing at the girls in the back, where they were talking about clothes. Sighing, I told her, "Put on some normal clothes and we'll go see a movie. Sound good?"

"Sure," she agreed. "When will you be here?"

Opening my map, I set a waypoint for the Arc home and adjusted my course. "Shortly, so make it quick."

"Okay!" Jun chirped, and I rolled my eyes as she hung up.

"We're making a detour," I announced, drawing the girls' attention. "And apparently I forgot a promise I made to one of my sisters, so I'll be out of pocket for a few hours, but I can catch up with you all later."
They exchanged looks and shrugs before Neo answered, “That's fine, Jaune. Could you leave the bolts of cloth for us to play with?”

Chuckling, I nodded. “Sure. Just remember, don't drop party or you won't get skill creation stuff if you're going to do any crafting.” Thinking things over a moment, I added, “Also, Neo, Penny, I'm going to need the two of you for something later tonight. It shouldn't take long.”

“Okay Jaune!” Penny chirped and Neo nodded as they went back to their conversation.

I turned my attention back to my instruments and the view out the window, turning on the radio, setting it to scan through stations until I found something I liked. It wasn't long before I came up on my waypoint and throttled back, kicking the Bullhead into hover before bringing it in for a landing on the Arc family's back yard/training area. Killing the engines, I hit the door controls and made my way out. A voice from nearby calling my name drew my attention to Jun, who became a red blur and slammed into my midsection. “Hey, kiddo.”

Behind me, I heard Ruby call, “Jun?”

I blinked as Jun looked up, going wide-eyed and pulling away from me. Shifting to look around me, I turned and watched as she yelled, “Sempai!”

“Kohai!” Ruby called, disappearing in a spray of rose petals as Jun became a red blur. The pair met in the middle and I winced at the audible smack sound as they collided and tumbled to the ground laughing.

Shooting a confused look at Yang, who was grinning wide, I asked, “They know each other, I take it?”

“You didn't know?” she asked, then made an 'oh' of realization. “Right, amnesia. Yeah, they made friends last year at Signal. Your sister's kind of a dork, though—but that's fine, because mine is too.”

“Speak for yourself, Yang Xiao Long,” a voice called from the back door of the Arc home, and I turned to see a blonde girl bearing a strong resemblance to Joan leaning against the door frame.
I wasn't fooled this time—I damn well knew better. ‘Level 60 my ass,’ I grumbled internally. I took a moment to observe the girl, and observe her as well. Long, straight blonde hair trailing down to mid-back, her bangs cut straight over blue eyes, shorts and tee-shirt showing off her well-toned form and impressive bust—not quite on Joan's level, but larger than her other two elder twin sisters. They weren't standing side by side, but I'd say they were proportionally slightly larger than Yang's own impressive set. I probably should feel bad that her breasts stood out more than some other feature, but honestly, I'm a man, we noticed and assessed these things by instinct. Besides, it wasn't like I was staring. That's what peripheral vision was for. She met my gaze calmly, and I couldn't read anything from her stance or expression—it was as flat as my own had ever been when I was trying. Neither cold nor warm, the epitome of neutral, indifferent curiosity.

“Stop staring,” Jean deadpanned from behind the slightly shorter girl, giving her a light shove to get her out of the doorway. “Jaune, be polite and introduce us.” She turned her gaze on Jun and Ruby, still latched onto each other and gabbing away as they caught up on things. “Looks like they may be a minute.”

“Sorry Jean, we're on a schedule,” I denied, hitting both smaller girls with Telekinesis and hauling them into the air. “Come on, you two.” Turning a grin on Jean, I winked as I lead them back into the Bullhead. “Catch you later.”

“Ass!” Jean called, and I tossed a wave over my shoulder.

Closing the sliding doors behind us, I deposited the two younger girls on seats. “That was mean,” Neo pointed out. “Amusing, but mean.”

“Yeah, but I'm trying to get under her skin,” I admitted.

“Onii-chan! You didn't tell me you were dating Sempai!” Jun yelled, pointing an accusing finger my way as I dropped into the pilot's seat and spooled up the engines.
“Jun, what did I tell you about that?” I asked, then added, “And we're not dating.”

“We're just friends,” Ruby agreed from beside her.

We lifted off and I set a course for the base, before taking out my scroll and sending Jim a text, asking him to bring a couple of cars to meet us there.

Jun bounced up from the back and dropped into the co-pilot's seat. “Why aren't you dating sempai? Is she not good enough for you?!”

I shot the tiny girl an amused look. “Why do you ask?”

Jun shot me an annoyed glare as I deflected the question, crossing her arms over her chest. After a long moment, she answered quietly, “Because I love sempai, and I love you, and if you're together with sempai that's even better.”

“You've got some weird ideas, you know? You should stop reading so much manga,” I shook my head. “A man is allowed female friends he's not dating.”

Jun shot me an incredulous look before snorting softly. “You're not that kind of character. You, my naive elder brother, are the male protagonist in a harem anime. Or maybe one of Jen's H-game dating sims, but don't tell her I said that. She'd hurt me if she knew I played through her stash.”

“I'm really not,” I denied, if only on general principle. “The male protag in a harem series is almost always clueless, can't seem to get a date, and the harem is—nine times out of ten—only implied. It's the illusion of choice on his part, but he's typically either friendzoned himself, or is blind to it, or either can't or won't due to some sort of previous commitment. For instance, an arranged marriage, or his duty to the realm that will require some sort of heroic sacrifice, or something along those lines that winds up keeping the women around him in a perpetual state of limbo. The men in most H-games, not that I've played any, to my knowledge are in much the same boat—except the women in those tend to wind up throwing themselves at the guy anyway. And what, pray tell, are you doing playing adult games? You're eleven.”

“Twelve soon,” the little redhead grumbled under her breath. “And it's because I got bored when I ran out of manga one day. After that, I just sort of kept playing them. But we're not talking about me, we're talking about you, and your inability to commit to sempai! You say you're not like the leads in
those stories, then prove it! Date my sempai!"

“You're not the boss of me,” I retorted, resorting to the ultimate counterargument to all childish arguments. “You can’t force people to see each other just because it’d be convenient for you.” Seeing her pout, I sighed and quietly added, “But if something happens naturally in the future, I’ll let you know. Maybe. If I’m feeling generous,” I smirked, seeing the swiftly growing hope in her green eyes. “Now, go keep your ’sempai’ company for me.”

“Hai, hai,” she nodded, hopping up and making her way back.

“What have I told you about that?” I called after her, rolling my eyes. ‘Little weeb,’ I chuckled.

Seeing the base’s landing pad light up green in the twilight, I brought the Bullhead in for a soft landing and cut the engines, hitting the door controls on the way to the back. We piled out of the aircraft and found Jim waiting. “Two cars with drivers waiting in the garage, sir,” he reported.

“Thanks, Jim,” I nodded, signaling him to wait a minute. “So, where are you guys heading?” I asked, digging into Inventory and taking the bolts of cloth, passing them to Neo and the twins. Once that was done, I began divvying out the cash owed to Blake, Yang, and Ruby.

“Actually,” Melanie hummed, shooting a look at Jim. “Would it be any trouble to have some of the living quarters to ourselves?”

Jim shook his head. “No, ma’am. We’ve got a couple of hired work crews converting one of the buildings to barracks.”

“Buildings? Plural?” I asked, shooting the twins a questioning look.

“We kind of expanded our initial purchase,” Melanie admitted.

Beside her, Miltia nodded, before casting a glance at Yang who was listening in nearby. “Could you give us a minute?”

Yang rolled her eyes. “Fine,” she grumbled, moving out of ear-shot but keeping her eyes on us.
Seeing the blonde was far enough away, Miltia continued in a low voice, “They were fairly cheap, considering, and we don't technically own most of them—they're owned by the other gangs and they're being 'donated' to us, since they can't exactly say no at this point. The ones we do own, we'll be paying for them over the next five years, assuming we don't pay them off sooner.”

“Huh. Good work,” I told them, earning a pair of smiles. I gestured for Jim to continue.

“They already have two floors worth of space converted. We were actually wondering if we should go ahead and set aside quarters for ranking staff staying on base. If you'd like, we can mark off the top two floors for your use.”

The twins and Neo exchanged a look with me and I nodded. “Yeah, go ahead and do that. You want to try to furnish this tonight, or later?”

“If we could borrow some men, tonight,” Miltia suggested, and Jim nodded.

“It's doable, sir,” he agreed.

“Okay, get it done. Any luck on those recruits, by the way?” I asked, thinking of the quest I had gotten that morning, and he nodded.

“Yes, sir. As we discussed. They've all agreed to start tomorrow. We've also got a lead on some other men to start filling out various departments, flight crews, and the like.”

I grinned. “Great. Let me know how things go.” I turned back to the other girls. “So, Jim and his men are your pack mules for the night. Sorry, Jim.”

“Apology not accepted, sir,” he chuckled as the twins grabbed him by the arms and lead him towards the elevator, with the others, minus Yang and Ruby.

“Would you like some help?” Penny asked, trailing along with the twins, while Yang wandered back over now that it seemed the twins were done with our semi-private conversation.

“Absolutely,” Neo agreed. “You can help us move stuff out of my sewing room, then pick out
furniture for the new place. You want a room of your own, right?”

Penny turned a wide-eyed look on the ice cream themed girl and nodded slowly. “I believe I would like that.”

“Jaune, I think we'll be needing that money from earlier for this,” Neo suggested, and I nodded, handing her her share before passing Penny her own as well, then giving them the twins' shares as well just in case they needed it. “Great. Thanks, Jaune,” she turned and headed for the twins and handing over their share of the cash.

Melanie turned enough to send me a questioning look before gesturing towards Blake, and I shrugged. “Hey Blake?” I called and the faunus girl turned gold eyes on me.

“You going back to the apartment or tagging along with the others?” I asked.

Blake shifted golden eyes between me and the others and gave a faint smile. “If it's all the same, I think I’ll go back to the apartment and catch up on my reading. I know you've got things to do here and I'm not exactly 'in,’” she pointed out. I raised an eyebrow and she returned it with an amused but knowing look.

Digging into my pocket, I fished out my apartment keys and tossed them to her. “We'll probably be in later.”

The girl nodded, turning her attention to Jim and asking, “Would it be too much trouble to ask for a ride?”

“It's fine,” Melanie rolled her eyes, snagging Blake by the sleeve and dragging her along.

Yang's gaze moved back and forth between me and Jim and I raised an eyebrow in question. “Sir? So, you've got guys working for you now? And what is this place? And what's 'Fox Hunt?’ And also, what'd Blake mean by 'in?’” Though, judging by her questions, she'd heard enough.

“That's a lot of questions,” I pointed out with a chuckle. Shooting a glance towards the other girls waiting by the elevator, I hummed as I considered the questions. “You really want to know?” I asked, and she nodded. “Then wait. I'll tell you when I'm ready.”
One golden eyebrow went up and she put a hand on her hip as she asked, “When will that be?”

“When we've both shown we can trust each other,” I answered simply. “I like you, Yang. You seem like a decent enough girl and you're fun to hang around with. But I don't think we're quite to the point where you're ready to hear all my secrets. Is that going to be a problem?”

Yang turned lilac eyes on her sister, who looked away to study the floor. “No,” she answered after a moment of thought. “I can wait. And I'll keep my mouth shut.”

“Good,” I grinned, before gesturing towards where Neo, the twins, Penny, and Blake were waiting at the elevator with Jim. “Go on, they're getting impatient.”

“Yeah, yeah,” the blonde grumbled, tossing a wave over her shoulder as she made her way towards the elevators. “Ruby, I'll meet you at home.”

“I'll be back in a few hours,” I called after them as the doors to the elevator close behind them. “Jun?” I asked, and the smaller redhead took Ruby's hand and pulled her along. “Eh?” I asked, shooting them a questioning look. I'd thought Ruby just wanted to tell me good-night or something separate from the others, but now I saw I had been mistaken on that assumption.

“We thought it'd be fun if sempai came along,” Jun explained, and I rolled my eyes.

Sending Ruby a smile, I asked, “Do you want to come?”

“A movie sounds nice,” she agreed.

“It's a double date!” Jun cheered, and Ruby blushed, before reaching out and mussing the smaller girl's hair in a move I recognized—having used it on Ruby more than once.

I shot Jun a mild glare and asked Ruby, “Do you want it to be a date?”

The little reaper blushed harder, pulling her hood over her head, but nodded and quietly said, “I'd like that, Jaune.”
“Okay then,” I agreed, leading them to the elevator. “A date it is.” If they wanted to call it that, I was fine with it—as far as I was concerned, it was just a movie and maybe dinner with my little sister and a friend. Completely innocent.

When we made it to the garage, in time to watch two cars pull out, I hummed and looked over the vehicles. The motorcycle could hold all three of us, but it'd be cramped—and there were other issues I didn’t want to deal with, so I shook my head and summoned up the sedan. “So you've got a secret base and minions now, oni—Jaune?”

Starting the car as the two girls got in, I chuckled. “I suppose you could say that. Don't tell your sisters.”

“Hello again,” I waved to the blonde sister with the flat expression as Jun slid out of my car, hugged me, and sleepily made her way inside.

Jen hummed softly, watching Jun walk inside. “Come by and speak with me soon,” she finally said, turning and entering the house, then closing the door behind herself.

Rolling my eyes, I went back to the car and found Ruby had passed out in the back seat, snoring softly. Smiling, I turned the radio on low and took us back through the city to my guild base. She stirred briefly as I lifted her out of the back seat and dismissed the sedan, just enough to throw her arms around my neck and snuggle into my chest. I headed up to the landing area, finding Yang leaning against a Bullhead waiting for us. “That looks comfy,” she grinned. “When are you going to sweep me off my feet?”

“When Ruby asks me to,” I deadpanned, hoping to burst her bubble.

The blonde simply grinned wider. “That can be arranged.” She opened the door and took a seat, strapping in and holding out her hands. “Gimme.”

I passed the younger girl over and Yang pulled her mostly into her lap. “How can she sleep through that?”

Yang shrugged. “She does this from time to time.”
“So, what're you doing here, anyway?” I asked, throwing her a curious look. “Thought you were going home.”

Yang rolled her eyes. “I was, but the others decided there wasn't much of a point in it when you'd have to take Ruby home later anyway. That, and there wasn't much I shouldn't see in a mostly-unfinished building.”

“I suppose they're right, there,” I admitted.

Grinning, she asked, “Think it'd annoy my dad and uncle to buzz the house on the way over?”

“Absolutely,” I nodded.

“Do it,” she laughed. “I've always wanted to jump out of a moving aircraft.”

I shot her a mildly horrified look. “I refuse to jump out of a perfectly good aircraft for fun. But hey, if you want to make a crater, by all means.” Well, at least, I had refused prior to coming to Remnant. Now? I'd done it more than once already. It wasn't exactly on my top ten list of things to repeat in the future, but it wasn't nearly so bad when I had the power to keep myself from going 'splat,' as opposed to relying on a parachute that may or may not work.

“Shows what you know. Making a crater is the best way not to go 'splat.' I do it all the time, just not from moving aircraft,” she blonde argued as I got us moving. The sound of the engines filled the cabin and I hit the radio as I turned us towards Patch.

As Yang requested, I opened the doors and buzzed her dad's house, as she hopped out the side, Ruby in hand and squealing as the smaller girl woke up mid-fall. “Oh, she is going to be annoyed with me,” I laughed, closing up the Bullhead and heading back into the city. *Neo, Penny, are you two ready?*

*’We're moving into position now. The men are already in place and waiting on you. Are you sure about this?’* Neo sent in return.

*’Yeah. Penny?’*
The ancula sent me an image of a Dust shop in the middle of the Commercial District, highly trafficked, but closed for the night—and the largest Dust shop in town. I'd actually been putting off hitting this one because it was such obvious bait. As if to emphasize that point, Penny's gaze trailed down to a car parked in an alley across from the Dust shop, sensors switching to infrared and pointing out two heat signatures. 'Ready, Jaune. As you predicted, they took the bait.'

The 'they' in question were a reporter and cameraman for one of the local news stations, following the trail of the Dust robberies. Penny had sent in an anonymous tip, using my wording, suggesting that this particular store would be hit tonight. The plan was a simple one: create an alibi for two of my alter egos, namely Shiro and the Fox, and give some legitimacy for the Fox being a valid threat to Cinder. The problem came in faking it well enough that she couldn't tell the difference and in timing—now, while she was out of town, was the best time I was going to get.

Setting the Bullhead down on the landing area, I threw on Invisibility and left the base, finding a blind alley with no cameras to switch into my Shiro outfit before continuing to the site of the soon-to-be robbery. Finding Neo, I asked, “Got the security system?”

“Yeah. Illusions over the motion sensors and cameras,” she grinned. “Door alarm and physical phone lines are dealt with. Local CCT signal's jammed. They aren't going to be phoning home.”

I blinked, shooting her a raised eyebrow. “Your illusions work on motion sensors? How?”

“Because they're just solid enough to register as there to various means of detection for physical presence. Kind-of, sort-of but not really like hard-light holograms,” she explained. “It's how we used to do stuff like this, before you took over.”

“This is a lot harder when I can't just ID my way in,” I grumbled, and the petite girl rolled mismatched eyes.

“Thankfully for you, you've got someone with some actual criminal experience under her belt on your side,” she deadpanned.

“And you're great,” I told her. “Let's go.” I dropped down into the alley behind the store with our men. Dropping into Invisibility, I ID'd the building and made my way inside, grabbing everything not nailed down with Telekinesis and shoving it into Inventory, including tube after tube of Dust propellant in addition to the cut and uncut crystals. Once the place was barren, I walked back out and dropped the ID, followed by Invisibility.
“Ready,” I told her. Neo gestured towards the door and I rolled my eyes, before pulling out my sword and running electricity down the blade, then whipping it through the door around the locks. Driving my boot into the door sent the door flying inside to bang against the wall and we moved in after it. Since we were already planning to have this particular robbery foiled, I didn’t particularly care if these guys collected anything or not. It would be nice if they did, and we had men outside to take filled bags back to a car parked nearby, but I was anticipating about half the usual haul from one of these.

“Go out front and get the stock there,” I ordered a couple of men we’d commandeered from the Red Hand—men of the expendable sort, as opposed to the kind I’d want to bring into Fox Hunt—as I helped fill a duffel bag. I shot a look to Neo, who nodded and slipped outside, throwing a veil around herself as she took up her position. I glanced at my HUD clock and waited as the men cleared the front, moving bags to the back to be moved to the car as they were filled. When the clock reached five minutes past when we’d taken out the door, I decided that was long enough.

‘Now, Penny.’

She sent us the view through her eyes as she dropped down from the building across the street, Neo having covered her with an illusion the moment she’d caught sight of her on the roof. The Fox stood up from a small impact crater in the asphalt where Penny had landed, then moved to the store’s front door. The Fox grabbed the door, yanking it clear off its hinges and sending it flying across the road. A view from Neo’s perspective showed that the pair of reporters had slipped out of their car and were carefully rushing up the alley with camera in hand.

“Oh shit! What the hell is he doing here?!” one of the men up front called, and the sound of glass breaking met my ears as he was thrown out the front window, followed shortly by another crash as the second man followed his fate. I almost felt sorry for them, realizing that was safety glass and not plate glass by the sound it made as it broke—it would have taken much more force to be flung through one of those display windows and that was bound to have broken something.

“What are you waiting for?” I asked the three inside with me, nodding towards the front. “Go help them.”

They ran out with guns drawn, only for several muffled thumps and the sound of men getting beaten to a pulp to resound through the store before Penny tossed them out onto the street with the first group. ‘Get ready,’ I signaled her and Neo, then made my way into the front in a Flash Step and kicked the Fox out the front window as Neo reinforced the illusion around Penny to keep it from breaking.

The Fox rolled on the ground out front and I Stepped outside, already drawing for a slice at ‘his’ neck, while making sure to broadcast my view to Penny. The sound of chirping birds filled the air
and the whole street lit up with white light as a Plasma Blade spun up in the Fox's hand, intercepting my sword on the down stroke. That was one of the two techniques Penny and I had drilled with almost non-stop over the last several days, and then followed it up with the second technique we had worked to get her to master, disappearing into a Flash Step and planting a booted foot in my back, sending me smashing into the asphalt several yards away.

Neo's illusions were good, but Penny, with her perfect memory, could mimic my basic fighting style as the Fox better than Neo could ever dream to—and with her power source, she could keep the Plasma Blade and Flash Step going all night if she had to as her current Dust crystals weren't even one tenth of the way depleted since I'd installed them. *That hurt,* I grunted, rolling to my feet and throwing on Invisibility before dropping into Flash Step again, attempting to make good an escape against a superior foe—or at least, that's the image I was going for.

'Sorry, Jaune! You told me to hurt you and make it look convincing,' Penny apologized, also dropping into Flash Step as her natural enhanced perceptions allowed her to keep track of me without the need for Haste, while being in party and more than one set of sensors allowed her to see through my Invisibility. The Fox intercepted my invisible flight from the battle, slamming a foot into my chest and sending me slamming into and bouncing off of the side of a building. Turning the momentum into a roll out, I threw on Invisibility again and made to Step away, only for the Fox to swing his sword through the space my head had occupied before I'd ducked, the blade tearing a line through the side of the building and spraying us both with concrete dust—and outlining my invisible form enough that the skill was rendered temporarily useless. I dropped the skill and counter attacked.

We clashed several more times, bright flashes lighting up the street as lightning seemingly danced between the buildings at the speed we were moving, before Penny removed one of her physical swords out of view of the camera, Neo putting an illusion on it to make it look like a second Plasma Blade. Our next clash was to be our last as I made as though to break away and leave the area, and the Fox reappeared in front of me in the middle of a swing from both blades. The real Plasma Blade hit my sword as I got it up to guard. The metal—damaged, overheated, and fragile now that Penny had spent the fight carefully hitting it in the same place, or near enough, over and over again—broke in my hand, the blade sheering off at the point of impact as the Plasma Blade cut through it like it wasn't even there. The second, physical sword under illusion caught me in the chest, seemingly destroying much of the armor over my chest in another of Neo's illusions as it sent me spinning away to slam into another building and land face first on the ground—down for the count, as far as anyone watching should be able to tell.

Penny stowed the physical sword and stalked towards my downed form, raising the real Plasma Blade above her head. *Now,* Neo instructed, and I rolled backwards as she veiled us both while I hit us with Invisibility and we ran silently down the alley. Behind us, the Fox swung through the space my neck should have occupied, shattering Neo's illusion of my body and digging a melted furrow out of the asphalt—one of many carved into the ground and surrounding buildings during our fight. "Slippery fucker," 'he' growled, Penny doing a damn good job of emulating my imitation Batman-voice from under my masks, before Leaping onto the roof and away as the Plasma Blade dissipated.
The ancula dropped down on the other side of the building, falling into step with us as Neo veiled her and I hit her with Invisibility, and we ran for the base. As we ran, I took a moment to create two new spells to add to my stealth set: Muffle and Scentless, the first of which nullified all sound coming from the target while the second did the same for scents. Unlike Silence, Muffle wasn’t actually an offensive spell—Silence being a debuff specifically to stop someone from talking, whereas Muffle silenced footsteps, breathing, the rustle of clothes, devices, and any other sound the person under its effects made through direct body contact with something—up to and including thrown or fired objects, according to the skill description. Thankfully, much like Invisibility, being in party meant we could still hear each other.

“How does it look?” I asked Penny as we ran, and the gynoid smiled.

“You will have to see for yourself, but I believe it should prove convincing.”

I nodded frowning as something niggled at my senses, my detection skills pinging faintly. ‘I feel like I’m being watched. Neo, veil’s still up, right?’

Neo shot me a worried look and nodded. 'Are you sure? Where is it coming from?’

I frowned carefully looking around as we ran and seeing nothing—nor could I pinpoint where the feeling was coming from. 'Not sure. I thought it was just those two reporters, since it started about the time our fight did, but it hasn’t stopped. Penny, anything on your sensors?’

'No, Jaune. There are many humans within range, but none with line of sight on us, and nothing else unusual that I can detect,’ she denied.

Humming, I directed us deeper into the Commercial District. Finding a mall there, I pulled us into a small ID and grabbed its center, bringing it with us as we made our way towards the restrooms, pulling us into a small service closet near them. “Outfit change,” I told them, and switched to my Jaune clothes. Penny switched to an outfit with blue eyes and blonde hair pulled back in a severe bun and held in place by a clip that looked like a set of crossed keyboards, her clothes consisting of a loose white hoodie, a pair of black pants, and boots. “Where did you get that?” I asked, and she smiled up at me.

“The Malachite twins helped me pick out clothing. I have lots in Inventory now, set to randomize every day,” she admitted. “Do you like it?”
“It's good,” I admitted. “Looks relatively normal. It looks like civilian wear, as opposed to Hunter clothes, I mean.”

“Got anything for me in there?” Neo asked, and Penny nodded, drawing out a plain white sun dress and sandals. “Well, beggars can't be choosers,” Neo grumbled, stripping out of her corset and dress and slipping the new clothes on over her head. “Why couldn't I use my Semblance for this?”

“Because I'm worried something can see through both your illusions and my Invisibility,” I admitted, then winced. “And damn if that isn't a scary thought.”

Neo sighed. “Okay, fair enough,” she admitted. She blinked and I watched as her hair shifted to brown and her eyes to a matching shade. She ran her hand through her hair and pulled out a couple of hair accessories, before shaking the whole thing out so it fell in a different style. I must have stared, as she frowned and asked, “What?”

“I thought the heterochromia was natural,” I admitted.

Neo rolled chocolate-colored eyes and latched onto my arm. “No, it's not, Jaune.”

I shrugged. “You're still sexy,” I told her, tilting her lips up and planting a kiss on them. “Ready, Penny?”

“Yes!” she announced, and I dropped the ID. I cracked the door open and peeked outside, spotting a few people walking down the hall, but the feeling of being watched had vanished.

“We're clear,” I murmured, leading the pair out—Neo on my arm and Penny hovering nearby.

We slowly made our way through the mall, looking in stores and taking the time to act like a normal group on a night out. Spotting an ice cream vendor, I stopped and bought cones for all of us and we made our way outside, mixed in with the rest of the crowd. 'Clear so far,' I sent.

As we reached the street in front of the mall, a black sedan pulled up to the curb and stopped, and the passenger side window rolled down to reveal Jim's concerned face. “I sent a text for a pickup,” Neo admitted, and I gave her a thankful smile.
Knowing what Penny could do to a car's suspension, I carefully cast Lighten on her and directed her to slip into the front seat while Neo and I took the rear. Jim pulled away slowly, heading for the Residential District. “What was that about being followed, sir?”

I frowned, not sensing the twinge of my detection skills going off any more. “Not sure. Maybe it was a fluke.”

“You could just be getting paranoid in your old age,” Neo deadpanned.

“Jaune is not old. He is only thi—”

“Penny.” I cut her off, causing the gynoid to wince and Neo to raise an eyebrow. Jim appeared to have gone temporarily deaf, if his expression and focus on the road were any indication.

‘Penny, I'm sorry I snapped at you,’ I apologized. ‘But you have to be more careful. Okay?’

‘O-okay Jaune. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to—’

‘It's okay,’ I sent, casting a glance at Neo, who was clearly aware of our silent conversation but choosing not to comment. ‘Just be more careful in the future.’

‘I will! I promise!’

Sighing, I met Neo's eyes and wondered what to tell her. Like this, without her normal illusions and bluster, she looked surprisingly vulnerable. She winced and turned away. “We all have our secrets, right?”

I turned my gaze to the streets passing outside as Jim took us on a winding route back to the base, only the sound of the radio and traffic to break up the silence that had pervaded the car. I broke the links that hadn't already been broken by distance, making sure I was keeping my thoughts to myself, but left the party up in case the twins were crafting or something. ‘What the fuck am I supposed to do about this? Should I ask her to let me make her forget? Miltia trusted me enough to do it weeks ago, so I'm pretty sure Neo will as well. Everything I told them about mental Semblances prying my secrets out of them is still true.’
The sad thing was, at this point I believed I almost trusted Neo, Miltia, and Melanie enough to tell them at least some of my secrets. But the risk of someone like me coming after them was… 

‘Overstated,’ I admitted to myself. ‘To my knowledge, of the people the girls are most likely to interact with, Emerald and I are the only ones with mental Semblances. I could be wrong—maybe they added some characters in Season 3 that I’m simply not aware of. Or maybe there’s some kind of Dust that could emulate the effect.’ I almost immediately dismissed that thought. ‘No, Dustcasting, from what I’ve seen, is anything but a delicate art. It’s all about nature’s wrath and none of the subtlety required to dig into someone’s brain.’

Then again, Bounded Fields were a thing. They filled in those gaps where ’delicate’ was required, which Dust alone couldn’t do. It wasn’t entirely out of the question for them to be capable of things like mind reading, or bending a person’s will to another’s. However, unlike Dust, I wasn't aware of a way to mentally control Bounded Fields once they were deployed. It was the difference between doing something by hand, with Dust, or programming a machine to perform the same task, using Bounded Fields. Enchantments, or rather Dustweaving, seemed like the obvious exception to that rule, however, as I knew there were offensive enchantments that were mentally controlled—putting them somewhere in the middle between Dustcasting and Bounded Fields as far as control over the outcome went. ‘By that logic, it’s not out of the question that I could use bounded fields to secure someone’s mind against mental effects. I mean, sealing one’s thoughts into one’s mind and warding outside influence away would sort of fall within the purview of seals and wards.’

Well, I did have Sanguine’s notes. Better still, I had the woman herself—or, at least most of her. My Semblance did say she could be restored to human form, so that was one more reason to help her along with that—not that I hadn’t been doing exactly that, by bringing her along every time we went to kill off Grimm. ‘So, study the notes and restore Sanguine, and see about developing some sort of fuck-your-mental-spells pattern. No problem. Except that’s months, maybe years down the line. That’s not going to help us right this minute.’

My eyes were drawn to the sudden change in scenery as the car went down the ramp leading into our underground parking garage and the door closed behind us. Jim parked the sedan and I stepped out, sending Neo a glance as I did. “Hey Jim, take the rest of the night off. Go home and get some sleep.”

“You're sure?” he asked, and I nodded.

“Yeah. No hairs standing up on the back of my neck any more. We'll get in touch with someone if we need something,” I told him, and the shorter man shrugged, tossing out a quick salute and climbing back in the car as we made our way towards the stairs.

“So,” I began, following Neo as she lead us outside and across the way to another building—what I assumed was to house our barracks and quarters, as opposed to the office building with the parking garage under it where we'd held our meeting that morning. “How far along did you guys get with the
“Officer’s Quarters,” Neo corrected, throwing me a smile. “There are some men moving my stuff from my apartment over to my new quarters—we're using the old crew from Roman's gang who already know about the twins so there are no accidents; and I suggest giving them all promotions, to show we're willing to trust them a bit more than any new recruits. That, and the increased pay, will go a long way towards ensuring their silence without resorting to your spells.”

I grinned, nodding. “Because things work better when loyalty is rewarded.”

“Bingo,” the ice cream themed girl agreed. “The twins and I agreed to set up a joint workshop for sewing projects. The room we picked is huge compared to the spare bedroom my old workshop was set up in. We were going to take the liberty of painting out a Sanctification ward, but we knew you said something about adding other stuff besides that and how you'd like to do it all from the ground up. When's the last time you cleared the area?”

“Night before last?” I asked, shrugging. “It was before I picked up Blake. The map says it's still clear enough to Sanctify, so it should be safe to sleep in for the night if we're not going back to the apartment. We can hold off setting up a bounded field scheme as a project for tomorrow.”

The elevator let us off on the top floor and she lead us in. “Well, there's only two beds right now, so we'll probably be better off sleeping at the apartment for another day or two—at least until we get everything moved over.”

“I'd kind of wanted to keep the apartment,” I whined, and she rolled her eyes.

“That's fine. But the three of us—Miltia, Melanie, and myself—will be moving most of our stuff here. It's more secure than the apartment, it's bigger, and you're the boss so we can do what the hell we want here and no one can say anything. That, and we agreed that we like the idea of putting a bunch of guys armed to the teeth and willing to take out anything threatening us in between us and those kinds of threats,” she pointed out, and I nodded. She opened a nearby door and gestured inside. “My bedroom,” she grinned, and I looked around before casting ID and dragging her and Penny inside, shutting the door behind us. “Jaune?”

Sitting down on the edge of the bed, I patted the spot beside me and waited until she took a seat. “You trust me?”

Neo sent me an amused look before layering on the sarcasm thick enough to deflect bullets. “No, I've just been hanging around because the sex is good.”
I hadn't gotten any sort of loyalty quest for her yet, but then again my Semblance told me she was just as loyal as the twins—numerically, 100%. It was about as good as I was going to get, without a loyalty quest. “Where do I begin?” I wondered aloud, and when Neo and Penny both opened their mouths to answer, I held up a hand. “Yes, yes. Left myself wide open for that one.”

“Aww,” Penny pouted.

“Fuck it,” I grumbled, after a minute of thinking on where to start. “I'm not from Remnant.”

Neo raised an eyebrow, a skeptical look crossing her face as she turned to Penny, only for the ancula to nod, causing the ice cream themed girl to frown. “I'm listening.”

“What I told you about waking up with amnesia? Not entirely truth. More like half truth,” I winced. “I don’t remember anything about Remnant, because I'm not from Remnant. Well, I say anything, but that's not exactly… pertinent at the moment. Later.”

“So, how is that any different from what you've told us?” she asked, clearly confused.

Running a hand through my hair, I bit the bullet and told her the truth. “Because I remember things just fine. An entire life's worth of memories and experiences. Just not from Remnant. I lived on a planet called Earth, which bore some similarities to Remnant, but there was no Dust, no Aura, no Semblances, no Grimm. The moon was whole. We had cars, computers, movies, music, art, literature, all the things Remnant seems to have—just different. Different landmasses, some different cultures from what I can tell though it's kind of weird that we share a lot of similarities on that front, a larger population and a different racial makeup of that population from what census data I've been able to get my hands on. I had family. Friends, I think. I had a name—John, but I couldn't tell you what my last name was for the life of me,” I shrugged. “Not all of my memories made the trip, or my Semblance is screwing with my mind to keep me docile. I've been toying with the thought and cataloging how it reacts—it's subtle as a brick to the head about some things, while with others it's fairly fucking devious.”

Thinking it over, she hummed before asking, “You're not actually Jaune, then?”

I held out a hand and wagged it back and forth in a so-so gesture. “Kind of sort of, yes, but not really. Maybe. Jaune got himself hurt pretty bad.” I tapped the side of my head. “I've got what I think are his memories, maybe more, up here—in my Semblance as a save file. My Semblance is trying to fix it, but I've got no idea when that'll finish. I've been in control since I woke up,” I chuckled,
adding, “Wearing a 'Jaune suit,' I suppose you could say.” It was a morbid thought, but one I'd had more than once and was slowly coming to terms with. I had stopped being surprised when I looked in the mirror and saw a face I hadn't been expecting, at least.

“But it's you we've been dealing with this whole time?” Neo asked, and I nodded. After some thought, she shrugged. “So what?”

I blinked once, then again. Penny snorted nearby, before bursting into laughter. I shot her a look and she covered her mouth. “Your face,” she explained.

I facepalmed, turning my gaze back to Neo. “This doesn't bother you?”

“Not really,” Neo denied. “You came from a place with nothing…”

She trailed off, looking for a word, and I obliged. “Supernatural. Outside the natural order—at least on Earth.”

“And there was really none of that, right?” she asked, and I nodded. “It's weird that something so normal here wouldn't even exist somewhere else. So how do you think you got here?”

“No fucking clue,” I deadpanned.

Shaking her head, Neo murmured, “You're thinking of it in terms of… a door, in the wall separating here and there. Open it on one side, step through, and you're on the other side. There's no door on your side, so somebody must have opened the door on this side, right?” she asked, and I nodded. “That's one possibility. But you don't remember getting here—or am I wrong?”

“You're not wrong.”

Taking a breath, Neo began her own take on what she believed had happened. “So, bear with me here. Jaune—the original Jaune—got himself hurt. Coma. Clinical brain death for a while. Vacancy sign comes on upstairs, but his Semblance wakes up and takes action. We've all seen that thing do some weird shit before, but you love abusing the most obvious means of breaking reality.”

“Illusion Barriers,” I muttered, turning the thought over as she nodded. It wasn't… implausible. An Illusion Barrier was a bubble in reality—a bridge between this world and the Spirit world of Remnant. The space between those places was a metaphorical purgatory where spirits congregated,
potentially before passing over to the other side. I'd never tried to cross that bridge, only ever stood on it. Every attempt I'd made to create spells that would cross planes failed, as did every spell that called on any sort of divine being, or that would eject my soul from my body like Astral Projection.

Neo continued, pulling me from my thoughts. “You didn't get here in your old body. Jaune checks out on Remnant and his Semblance goes hunting for a new tenant. John checks out on Earth, Jaune's Semblance snags him, John checks in on Remnant and the vacancy light turns off.”

“Being dead would make moving a soul easier,” I agreed. “Assuming a few things, such as memory being somehow tied to the soul. Can't really argue against the existence of one any more, since I have proof they exist. I don't remember dying, though. Then again, Swiss cheese memory in places.”

“What's a 'Swiss?' And I assume you mean cheese with holes.”

“Switzerland. Where Swiss people came from, before the EU fucked them and most of Europe, last I knew. And yeah, it's cheese full of holes,” I supplied.

Raising an eyebrow, the ice cream themed girl asked, “You're going to explain what those things are, right?”

“We can sit down one day and you can ask me whatever you want,” I agreed. “Me being some thirty year old dead guy from another world doesn't bother you?”

Neo scrunched up her nose in mock disgust. “Thirty? Ew. You're past your expiration date, old man.”

“Thirty three,” I deadpanned, and she made a face. “I didn't hear you complaining when I was putting that experience to use.”

“Even worse!” she whined, blatantly ignoring my comment on bedroom skills. “That's almost a decade older than me.” I raised an eyebrow and she smirked. “You never asked, you ass. I'm twenty four. Bet you feel like a heel now for not asking when my birthday is.”

“A bit,” I admitted. “So when is it?”

“January first,” Neo chuckled. “Think you can remember it?”
“I think so,” I smiled, adding it to my calendar. I opened my mouth to ask another question and Neo held up a hand, interrupting me.

“Look. The way I see it, it’s always been you. You're the only Jaune Arc I’ve known—and like it or not, you're filling the shoes now, so you're Jaune.” Her eyes went wide. “Your—Jaune's—sisters don't know, right?”

I made another so-so gesture. “I tried to explain it to Joan once. She did not want to hear it and trying again might break her—more than she already is. I think she understands and just doesn’t want to accept it. Jun understands, in her own way, that I'm not the brother she had, but then for her that's not necessarily a bad thing since apparently I'm a better big brother to her than original Jaune ever was. The rest I've met have been sort of withholding judgment or it hasn't really sunk in, or maybe they’re hoping my memory will come back and I'll go back to being the brother they knew again. Not really sure there.”

“You've slept with two of them,” she pointed out, a small smile stretching across her lips. “I could see why that wouldn't bother you.”

“It did more than you'd think, for a while. Still does, in some ways, but Joan's a big girl and can make her own decisions. Jane, on the other hand, is just too hot not to. And really fun to tease, afterwards,” I admitted.

Casting a look at Penny, Neo asked, “She knows?”

“Penny registered to my Semblance as equipment and it loaded her with some basic background data about me—probably about what you'd get if you could read my Journal,” I confirmed, and the ancula nodded.

“Ancula Myrmidons, Penny Polendina, at your service,” Penny supplied with a small smile, pointing towards the text floating over her head along with her level, which mirrored my own at the moment but I knew was technically inaccurate by virtue of the Dust powering her.

“I see,” Neo murmured, before swiftly moving to straddle my lap. “Penny, you mind giving us some time?”

“Aww,” the gynoid pouted, looking disappointed. Penny stood from where she'd been sitting on the floor. “I will go see Miltia and Melanie,” she announced, before stepping out of the ID with a small
Neo's sultry look dropped away as her face went completely serious. “You're still hiding something.” It was not a question. I nodded confirmation anyway. “Something you feel is more important than being some random guy from another world.”

“Yeah,” I agreed.

“Something that you're very, very worried someone with a mental-type Semblance will dig out of our heads,” she continued, and I gave her another nod. “On a scale of one to ten, how dangerous is it?”

Thinking on what I knew and what would happen if certain people got ahold of that knowledge, I hummed before answering, “Twelve, depending on whose ears it got around to.”

“A certain sexy thing in a little red number?”

“Yeah, that one,” I agreed. “Or a meddlesome old bastard who likes to think he's Dumbledore.”

“Who?” Neo asked, raising an eyebrow.

I sighed, rubbing my eyes with the palm of one hand. “It's a book series where I came from. You've never heard of Harry Potter, I take it?” I asked, and she shook her head. “How do you have Star Wars and not Harry Potter? Remind me to tell you the whole story at some point. It's pretty interesting, all things considered—even if the author did make some questionable decisions. Imagine Headmaster Ozpin as an older war hero using his students as pawns in a chess game.”

“That sounds kind of bad,” she pointed out, and I nodded.

“Pretty much. It didn't end well for Harry. Here's hoping Ozpin isn't that bad.” I didn't think he was, but I didn't believe I could take the chance on finding out. Enough of my future knowledge could still be relevant to cause serious problems if either he or Cinder ever found out—assuming it was accurate in the first place, given the differences between Remnant as part of a series on Earth and what I'd come to call Bizarro-Remnant.
Closing her eyes, Neo bit her lip and nodded. “Okay. Okay. I'm going to stop asking questions I don't need to know the answers to—can't know.” She opened her eyes again, chocolate eyes meeting my blue. “You trust me now? Fully?”

“Yeah,” I murmured.

Neo chuckled. “Good. Stop being an idiot and tell the twins soon. They deserve to know. I suggest tonight—that way there will be no potential questions of favoritism because you told me before them.”

“I've been trying to avoid that, yes.” And with something this big, it would only hurt them all the more if I didn't bring them in on it soon, now that Neo knew. “So, want to go tell them now?”

Biting her lip, Neo shook her head. “On second thought, it can wait until morning.” She frowned before adding, “You're going to have to tell the others at some point. And by that, I mean your group going to Beacon, once you bring them in. Maybe not Joan or the rest of your sisters, but that one’s your call. We won’t tell anyone, and we'll try to make sure Penny doesn't make any more slips like tonight. How Yang hasn't figured out what she is, I have no idea. It's amusing to watch from the outside though. Far less amusing when it's your secrets and not hers.”

“That's pretty much my thought on that.” I would have said more, but the small girl's lips sought out mine—gentle, but firm as she shifted her weight and brought us down to lie on the bed.

“Stop talking, John,” she broke our kiss long enough to murmur in my ear, before reaching for the zipper on my hoodie. I knew how to take a hint by now.
I yawned as I woke up. An attempt to roll over was hampered by a small, warm body currently lying mostly flush atop my own, straddling my waist. I took a moment to simply lay there and enjoy the feeling. 'Last night turned out better than expected,' I thought, my mind turning back to my explanation to Neo and subsequent retelling to the twins. That was after I'd convinced Neo to get out of bed and help me tell the twins, as I didn't feel up to letting it wait until morning. Also after we had relocated to the apartment as I didn't feel comfortable sleeping in an unsanctified area, even if it had been cleared. Melanie and Miltia had been surprisingly open-minded about it—though, in retrospect, I probably shouldn't be too terribly surprised given Neo's own reaction.

I cracked open one eye to find familiar update text floating in my field of vision.

_The system has been updated! Would you like to view the Change Log?_

_Change Log : The Gamer Semblance v. 1. 7 . 1_

1. **Gamer's Mind** can now be toggled. This feature is accessible via the **Skills** menu.

2. Party members now have access to their own personal **Inventory** space, accessible via menu, scroll, or equipped bags while in **Party**.

2.a. Party members now have limited **Inventory** and **Equipment** menus available via scroll even when not partied.
3. All kills made by Guild members or former Party members now collect Spirit, which will be stored until the next time they are partied, whereupon they will be granted the levels, stat points, and skill progression they would have been awarded if in Party.

4. Added menu options for Bounties in player and Guild menus. You may now take Bounties directly or assign them to your Guild.

I hummed quietly, careful not to disturb any of the three girls currently sleeping beside me—or in Neo’s case, atop me like some sort of human blanket. A human blanket that happened to be drooling on my chest. *That can't be comfortable for her.*

Opening my skills menu, I found the entry for Gamer's Mind and selected it. *Okay, so it's toggleable now. Three modes—on, defensive, and off. It's on by default, operating as normal. Defensive mode disables everything but it sits in the background, waiting for mental attacks and only acts when it detects one—but no forced calm. If I want that, I'll probably have to toggle it on. And off is, of course, fully off—no automatic mental defenses, no forced calm, nothing. That's kind of... broken.*

Giving the mental equivalent of a shrug, I toggled the skill to its defensive setting. *Not really noticing a difference here,* I mused, examining my mental state. Nothing had really changed, as far as I could tell. *Maybe it takes some time to kick in?*

I rolled my eyes and shifted my attention to the guild menu. Seeing a few people awaiting approval to join, I scanned through their profiles and accepted them, placing them into departments by their specialization and skill levels. *Going to need to consult with the new department heads today and get an idea of what I need.*

Checking the bounty board section, I smiled as I saw that not only did it list priority targets such as unique Grimm like the Ursa trio I'd taken out yesterday, but it listed lower bounties for a number of Grimm killed in an area. *A thousand lien per head for some of these really isn't bad. Send in some guys with a load of ammo, lure in groups, and hose down the area, then repeat as needed. I need to figure out how the Guild system works for that, though. If they count as members of my raid party, do they level? Will items drop? Going to need to test that. And since I've got a ready excuse in one of those 'eliminate a large number of Grimm' bounties, I could load up Angel and a few people, take the twins and Neo along, and we can go make a short test to see what it does. Also, need to swing by the bounty office later and turn in the one for Yogi, Boo Boo, and Cindy. Thirty thousand for each of those isn't bad, and we kind of need the money.*

Movement from one of the girls drew my attention away from my menus and I shifted my gaze downwards, finding Miltia's green eyes studying my face—from the look of things, she had been
awake a few minutes. I smiled down at her and she smiled back, and I felt my heart skip a beat. Miltia raised an eyebrow, her smile going a bit wider. “What?” I asked.

“You're blushing.”

“I am not,” I denied, but I knew that was a lie the moment it left my lips. 'Blushing? Check. Heart aflutter? Check. Sudden feeling of giddy euphoria? Fucking check. Yeah, I think Gamer's Mind is off, now,' I assessed, and fought down my blush by sheer force of will.

'God damn this is embarrassing. It's like being a teenager again, with all the hormones that came along with it.' I blinked, before realization set in. 'Right. Teenaged body, adult mind. Without Gamer's Mind keeping things steady, my brain's free to play merry hell with endorphins and such. Oh fuck me. Why did I think turning that off was a good idea?'

“Jaune, are you okay?” Miltia murmured, drawing me out of my thoughts.

I cleared my throat, fighting down most of my body's reactions—like panic, that was one I hadn't felt over a woman in years—through dint of experience. “Yeah, I think I am, now.”

The lithe brunette pushed herself up on her arms—giving me an amazing view of her body, from the curve of her neck, over her modest breasts, to the shape of her ass under the sheets, in the process. She crawled up enough to meet my lips in a kiss that seemed to stretch out for an age. “Mm, morning,” she practically purred.

“Good morning,” I returned with a grin I knew probably looked a little stupid, but I was having problems controlling it at the moment.

A hand snaked out from atop me and I felt Neo shift as she took Miltia's chin in hand and drew her in for her own good morning kiss, before shifting her attention to me. Under the sheets, I felt my cock brush against her wet lips and the tiny girl shifted downwards to rub against me, drawing a groan from both of us. “Yeah, definitely enjoy waking up to this.”

Turning an amused look on Neo, I asked, “So you're only this perky in the morning if there's the potential for sex involved?”

Neo shrugged, doing very interesting things to her breasts and drawing my eyes to where they

Neo found herself dragged into a kiss from the opposite side as Melanie joined in and I looked on in interest for a moment before the more direct twin switched her attentions to me. After a moment, she pulled back and hummed in thought before shooting a look at her sister and Neo. “He seems different this morning.”

“I'm not complaining.” Neo leered, shifting against my cock again.

I resisted the urge to groan and instead fixed the twin on my right with an amused look. “Imagine waking up one morning to find you've regressed to the throes of hormone-induced idiocy that is puberty.”

Neo winced. “That's got to suck. What did you do?”

“Got an update this morning that let me toggle Gamer's Mind. Apparently, its forced calm also meant I was exempt from dealing with the ups and downs of teenaged life. I'm getting it back under control, but it may take a day or two. Speaking of uncomfortable,” I gestured towards Neo's breasts, “how can you stand sleeping on top of me like that? Having them mashed like that can't have been comfortable.”

Neo rolled her eyes and shifted her hips a bit. “Jaune, I enjoy wearing corsets. Sleeping on my boobs doesn't bother me.” A small smirk crept across her lips as she added, “It's downright titillating.”

“Okay, Yang,” I rolled my eyes. The woman astride me raised one fine brown eyebrow, before her body shimmered. Brown hair and eyebrows were replaced by blonde in an all-too-familiar style, brown eyes became lilac, and a glance down showed the carpet now matched the drapes. Staring up into Yang's face, I groaned quietly. “That's not fair.”

“Too bad,” Neo shrugged, and my cock twitched as I realized she had even gotten Yang's voice down. The girls exchanged grins. “So, in the meantime, you're just as vulnerable and pliable as any other teenager?” Neo lead, and I waved my hand back and forth in a so-so gesture.

“Adult mind, teenaged body,” I reminded. I was tempted to protest—to tell her she shouldn't wear a friend's body, but I would have been lying if I said I didn't enjoy Neo occasionally taking liberties like this. And considering Neo herself loved doing it, I didn't think I really had much of a say anyway. For the sake of our sex life, I kept my mouth shut.

I didn't exactly try to fight back as I found myself attacked by the twins. In the background, I noted the sound of the shower in the guest bedroom turning on. I ignored it as my attention found itself dragged back to the girls in bed with me. “Ooh! Idea!” Neo smirked above me, leaning over and flailing for the night stand while trying to avoid dislodging me from her, her long, blonde hair tickling my chest as she did. “Can't. Reach. Miltia, would you get my scroll?”

The twins shared a look, their faces suddenly lighting up in wicked grins that were enough to pull my attention away from the beautiful pseudo-blonde writhing on top of me and set off all the warning bells in my head. Miltia took out Neo's scroll and handed it to the temporary blonde while Melanie grabbed her own scroll. “Are you planning what we think you're planning?” she asked, and Neo nodded.

“If you're thinking I'm planning to record Jaune fucking me six ways from Sunday while looking like Yang and then surprising her with it later, then yes—I'm planning what you think I'm planning. Would you mind filming?” Neo asked, handing the scroll back now that it was unlocked.

The twins hopped off the bed, moving into a good position, and I shot Neo an unamused look, which just got a saucy wink and my hands grabbed and brought up to her breasts. “Neo, this is a horrible idea. The potential for lulz is exceeded by the potential for drama if Ruby ever sees it,” I ground out, having significant problems focusing enough to carry on a conversation with Neo's tight heat wrapped around me as she slowly shifted back and forth in my lap—not to mention the visual distraction of her wearing Yang's body. I seriously considered reaching for the mental 'on' switch to Gamer's Mind—this would be a lot easier with that skill on again.

“Eh, it'll be fine,” Neo waved my concern off as she rolled her hips. “We'll be careful. Besides, it's not like you couldn't convince her of the truth.”

“And in the process wind up hurting her,” I growled, pulling my hands off her breasts and grabbing her hips, bringing her slow, rolling gyrations to a halt long enough to think straight.

It was Melanie who countered that. “Or maybe it'll provide the kick in the ass she needs.”

I shot the twin on the left an annoyed look as I sat up, my legs folding to lock Neo's ass in place as she fought to move again, much to her own annoyance. “Too. Young.”
“Says you,” Miltia shrugged. “I say let her decide. And until then, Yang’s fair game for a little harmless teasing. Neo?”

Lilac eyes met my blue and I gave her one last warning. “Fine. I'll go along with this, but under protest. You break it, you fix it.”

Neo hummed, considering it for a moment as she tilted her head to the side, blonde hair just long enough to pool on the bed when she did so. A smirk that looked entirely too at home on her borrowed face spread across her lips. “Only if you call me Yang the whole way through.”

Narrowing my eyes at the temporarily blonde girl, I'll admit hormones may have had a hand in my decision making process as I ground out, “Fine.”

“Deal!” Neo grinned, and with that, she lifted herself off my shaft and pushed me back onto my back. She moved down, her golden hair falling around her face as she brought her mouth to my cock, lilac eyes trailing to the side where the twins were watching with scrolls in hand, and asked, “Got a good view?”

“Hmm. Pull your hair up a bit, so it hides your face. Don't want to make it completely obvious right off the bat,” Melanie suggested.

I looked down to see Neo adjusting as directed and sighed. 'The things I do for my girls.'

By the time we'd finished getting our fun in for the morning a good hour and a half later, I was seriously feeling the need for a shower to wash the sweat and other bodily fluids off. I couldn't decide whether I wanted to do that or lay in bed basking in the afterglow with the girls for a while longer—but being comfortable with the girls won out. I idly noted the shower in the guest bathroom cut off. 'I guess Blake really likes long showers in the morning,' I mused, idly activating Listen on top of my enhanced hearing and picking up the sound of her moving about the bathroom. 'Note to self: soundproofing. At least the bedrooms of the new place, along with the dorm rooms once I get to Beacon. If I set it up right, I think I can keep sounds inside from being heard outside, while still being able to hear sounds from outside. On the other hand, cutting off a room from outside noise sounds nice, especially in a dormitory, which is bound to be noisy since it'll be filled with teenagers. I suppose it's a question of security versus comfort.'

Some minutes later I sat up with a yawn and regarded the girls around me. I blinked as something I should have noticed much earlier clicked in my mind, and I felt myself pale. “Neo?” I turned to where she was stretching out on the bed, Melanie curled into her side. “You're on the pill, right?”
Neo giggled as Melanie and Miltia turned their gazes on me, identical smug little smirks on their faces as they too came to the same conclusion I had. “Yes, Jaune. We’re fine. No more condoms, though. Fuck those things. We all know everyone here is clean and they only get in the way.”

I palmed my face, unsure whether I should feel relieved, angry, or happy—that last one because I’d always hated the things myself. Finally, I sighed and shook my head. “You break it, you fix it,” I repeated.

Neo tossed a wave in the general direction of the bathroom. “Stop worrying and go shower.”

Miltia rolled off the bed to my right and offered me a hand up. Accepting the help, I moved into the bathroom and turned on the shower. I tested the water and frowned as my hand was met with a spray of piss-warm water as opposed to the steaming spray I preferred. I shot an annoyed glare at the wall, where I knew the guest bathroom mirrored mine on the other side.

“Someone ran out all the hot water,” I grumbled to Miltia, wrapping a towel around myself and exiting the bathroom. I moved through the apartment and found the closet with the hot water heater. Placing my hand on it, I focused on channeling fire elemental mana into the water on the other side of the metal. Within a few seconds, I could feel warmth radiating away from the water heater and grinned, closing up the closet and heading back the way I’d come. ‘Magic really does solve most problems,’ I chuckled quietly. As I neared my bedroom door, the door to the spare bedroom opened and, for a moment, Blake and I danced around each other as we nearly collided.

Looking down, I took in the sight of her and froze. Like me, she was clad in a towel, though hers was wrapped under her armpits and above her breasts. Long, black hair still damp from her shower draped down to her shoulders. Two small, triangular ears atop her head flicked to track me. Her pale skin was still somewhat red from the heat and beads of moisture ran down her neck to the top of her breasts. Her toned thighs and legs were mostly exposed since the towel just barely left her decent. Golden eyes set in a heart-shaped face tracked upwards, taking in my own towel-clad form, dragging slowly over my exposed torso and arms, pausing long enough to take in and pass over the scars this body had acquired before I’d gotten to Remnant, before they locked with my own eyes. And then her scent hit me like a physical blow—light, clean, and with a faint musky hint of lingering arousal, which swiftly grew stronger as we regarded each other, even as her body flushed darker and her pupils dilated. Her own nose twitched and she glanced down, eyes going wide as I remembered I wasn’t exactly wearing pants at the moment and the proof of my interest was plainly visible for anyone to see. Her own reaction was equally visible, as I caught sight of her nipples growing stiff under her towel.

I cleared my throat, breaking the spell. “Excuse me.” Blake shuddered minutely at the sound of my voice, closing her eyes and nodding slowly as she bit her bottom lip. “You okay?”
One pale hand slowly pulled away from her towel, shaking slightly as her fingers came into contact with my chest. “No.” The word came out as one part whimper, one part whisper. Her hand unconsciously clenched slightly and digging her nails in a bit.

I took her hand and it took all of my willpower to resist the urge to pull her against me, let our towels drop, and kiss her where she stood. Instead, I slowly lifted it off my chest, causing her eyes to open again and lock with mine for a moment. I smiled faintly, offering her an out. “I should get a shower.”

“Right. Sorry. I just… need my clothes,” she muttered, slipping into the laundry room and digging out her clothing, before going back into the guest bedroom and closing the door behind her, her face bright red with a blush that I could see went down at least as far as her towel.

Neo poked her head out of the bedroom door, looking between myself and where Blake had disappeared. “Damnit,” she whined, moving aside so I could pass. “This close!”

“It won’t be that easy,” Melanie rolled her eyes as I passed by. “Poor thing’s going to rub herself raw at this rate. Well, that, or damage that shower head. Our water bill is going to suck.”

“Don’t need to hear that,” I grumbled, moving into the bathroom and closing the door behind me. “Problem solved,” I announced, turning on the faucet and sighing as I stepped into the downpour of steaming liquid.

“Our hero,” Miltia teased, slipping in behind me.

I had fully intended on hurrying through just a quick shower—after all, I’d taken showers with women off and on for years. Those plans went down in flames as we began washing each other off, and I found I couldn't keep my hands off her—and given the little scene with Blake in the hallway, I didn't want to. A quick ie in the shower with Miltia turned into more, however, as Neo and Melanie quickly made their way in to take their own turns with me. Eventually, we did manage to leave the shower, however. I equipped clothes and surrendered the bedroom to the girls as they got dressed and I made my way to the kitchen to see about making breakfast. ‘Need to do laundry again,’ I decided, after taking a look at my Inventory. Remembering the update that morning, I poked my head back into the bedroom long enough to tell them that they could now use the Inventory and equipment features—which prompted an immediate rush for dressers and closets as the girls began throwing clothes into Inventory.

The door to the guest room opened as I was putting the finishing touches on pancakes. Blake sat
down at the table and I put a plate in front of her, receiving a golden eyed glare in response. “Problem?” I asked, raising an eyebrow at the girl's apparent foul mood.

“I'm fine,” she hissed.

Hitting her with Observe, I resisted the urge to smirk. She wasn't angry, at all. She was, according to my Semblance, flustered, embarrassed, frustrated, and aroused. Considering I could still smell her, it made sense. 'I must have blue balled her pretty bad, and now she's trying to play it off as being irritable. I can have fun with that.'

I set places for the others and dropped into my own chair, grabbing butter and syrup. I decided to play dumb on our earlier encounter, or at least as much as was required to tease her a bit. “Hey, look. I know it's kind of personal, but if you've got cramps,” her eyes narrowed in silent threat, “I can probably help. I've got more than one healing spell, and I could probably come up with a pain relief spell.”

For a moment, the faunus girl lost the annoyed look as her eyes went slightly wide. “You can cure cramps? You can't buy the pills that stop menstruation without a prescription and a valid Hunter's identification.”

I blinked at that—I had not been aware there was such a thing. Filing that away to investigate later, I shook my head. “No. Not cure. It's a natural biological process—same reason Aura can't cure them. I can probably relieve most of the symptoms, at least temporarily. So, want me to?” I asked, and she shook her head.

“It's not cramps. Though… I'll keep that in mind, for later,” she mumbled.

Shooting her a confused look as I chewed a mouthful of pancake, I swallowed and washed it down with orange juice before asking, “So if you're not mensing, what's the problem?” Inwardly, I was resisting the urge to smirk. I'd blue balled her pretty bad, it seemed.

Blake's glare returned, but she decided against a reply as Neo and the twins made their way out of the bedroom, fully dressed. Instead of their usual thematic clothes, the twins and Neo were all wearing identical, dark green dresses, with black stockings and long opera-length gloves—though I noticed Miltia's set was actually her new weapon. Neo was not quite in full triplet mode, she was wearing her own face but her hair and eyes now matched the twins. Blake and I both stared for a long moment before the faunus girl shook her head, breaking the spell. “It's nothing.”

I shrugged. “If you say so.” I turned my attention to the twins, sending them a grin. “New outfits?”
Melanie shot me an annoyed look. “Yes. Since ours were damaged, we'll have to make do with 'normal' clothes for a few days, until we can repair ours and make new ones. And on that note, Jaune, you're taking us shopping for replacement materials later.”

“Yes, ma'am,” I smiled as they took their own seats and dug in. “The dresses look good. They go well with your eyes.” I turned an amused grin on Neo. “Neo, your eyes go well with that dress.”

The twins exchanged a look before turning identical smiles on me and saying, “Thank you.” At the same time, Neo giggled out, “Thank you, Jaune.”

“That reminds me. Miltia, your gloves?” I asked, and she passed them over. A quick, small ID duplicated the gloves and I passed Miltia her set and Melanie another. “Now, we just need to get you matching boots.”

“Weren't you supposed to take the entrance exam for Beacon today?” Neo asked of Blake.

Blake's bow twitched and she dug out her scroll, flipping through it for a few moments before answering. “It's at 10. I have some time.” She trailed off and I saw a flash of gold—what looked to be a contact icon of Yang's head, similar to that in my own scroll—on her screen as she hummed. “Yang offered to go with me last night. She's checking to see when I plan to meet her.”

“Did she?” I asked, an amused smile tugging at my lips as I noticed the others sharing similar looks.

“What?” Blake asked, stabbing her pancakes with a bit more force than was absolutely necessary.

“She may be trying to see if you'd make a good partner,” Miltia answered, drawing the faunus girl's golden gaze.

Interpreting Blake's raised eyebrow as a request for clarification, Melanie added, “According to Jaune, you can theoretically pick your partner and team for your time at Beacon, depending on a few factors. There's a test, but the headmaster supposedly only uses like five variations, and Jaune's pretty sure he knows what this year's test is.”

Neo sighed quietly, sending me an amused look. “Kind of wish I was going, now.”
“Ditto,” the twins echoed.

I shot a look at the twins. “I thought you two were against becoming Hunters in the first place.”

The sisters exchanged a look and rolled their eyes. Melanie lead with, “Yes, initially, it seemed like a good way to get ourselves killed.”

“But you're going to be there,” Miltia finished.

“We know someone needs to stay behind and keep things running while you're stuck in classes, though,” Melanie admitted. “Are you sure you really need to go?”

“You'd have more freedom of movement if you didn't go,” Miltia pointed out. “At school, you're going to be stuck there for more than half the day, doing class-related stuff, practicing with a team, and so on. You could do most of that out here, and then some—without being tied to a classroom for hours a day.”

Melanie nodded. “And you can go out and level whenever you want, outside of school. Once you're there, you're not going to be able to do that nearly as often.”

“And then there's the other ventures to think of,” Neo chimed in, getting in on the act.

I sent a long look between the trio before sighing and pushing my plate away. “You three have given this some thought,” I pointed out, and they nodded. I shifted my gaze to Blake, blue eyes meeting gold, and asked, “You mind giving us a few?”

Blake shook her head. “No, it's fine. I should start heading towards the transit hub to Beacon anyway.”

Seeing an opportunity, I couldn't resist taking it. “You seem to have mellowed in the last few minutes.”

Golden eyes once more pinned me with a glare. “You are an ass, Jaune Arc.”
“He knows,” the twins synced.

Neo snorted softly. “More like he enjoys doing it.”

“Yes I do, as you three are well aware,” I grinned at the girls before turning back to Blake. “Good luck. Send me a text and let me know how you did, once you're done,” I told her, and she nodded, pushing herself up from the table. “Tell Yang I said 'hi,' too.”

“Sure,” she agreed, seeming to have given up on feigning anger as she made her way to the guest bedroom, presumably to get her weapon.

“Where's Penny?” Melanie asked a moment later, and I sent her an amused look.

“I'll give you three guesses.”

The twins exchanged a look before smiling. “She probably left early and went to hang out with Ruby.”

“Bingo,” I nodded, having checked that as soon as I noticed she wasn't in the apartment this morning. “Which means Yang's been in town for a couple of hours, waiting on Blake.”

“Crap,” the faunus girl muttered, picking up her pace as she hurried from the guest room with her weapon.

“Take the stairs to your right after leaving the apartment. They lead up to the roof. You should be able to tag the next building over with Gambol and that'll put you in line to swing across the bridge over the river,” I told her, and she nodded as she left.

Neo opened her mouth to continue and I held up a hand, waiting. A moment later, we heard the sound of Gambol going off on the roof and I nodded. “This is about the other thing, isn't it? The one you can't talk about.”

I shrugged. “I couldn't confirm it if it were,” I warned her, and she nodded. “Aside from that, being in Beacon gives me more contacts. It's pretty much the information hub for Vale. Students go out on
missions all the time. If I want to know what's going on elsewhere, that's one of the best ways to find out.”

“Our guild has an Intelligence division, which we're the head of,” Melanie pointed out. “Sure, it's kind of under-developed at the moment, but we do have one.”

“We do,” I agreed. “But nothing is wrong with more intelligence. Aside from that, Cinder's plans involve Beacon at some point—otherwise she'd have never asked for these.” I opened my Inventory and dug out a familiar brown leather tube case. From it, I withdrew a set of rolled up set of papers, dropping them in an empty chair and grabbing everything off the table's surface with Telekinesis, moving the dishes to the kitchen and then spreading the blueprints I'd swiped on the table.

Neo frowned, looking down at the blueprints and shooting me a curious look. “You gave these to Cinder,” she pointed out, and I nodded. “And the originals are in the Repository.”

“They are,” I agreed with a grin.

“He thinks he's been clever,” Melanie rolled her eyes. “Otherwise he wouldn't look so smug. So, go on then. Tell us, how did you do it?”

I shot her an annoyed look. “Spoil all my fun,” I grumbled. The girls giggled and I sighed, knowing when I was beaten. “Do you have any idea how hard it is to find a place in Vale with a working plotter?”

“A what?” Miltia asked, trading questioning looks with her sister and Neo, who shrugged.

My grin returned. “It's a very large printer—usually high quality inkjet. They're used to print things like movie posters, or blueprints. Working on one is a bit like working on a small car, and about as fun as you'd imagine. As it turns out, there's only one place in town with a plotter that has a scanner attachment for copying large stuff.”

“So you broke in, ID'd the plotter, and copied the blueprints before you handed them over,” Neo surmised, and I nodded. “Did you take a copy of the plotter?”

I rolled my eyes. “Come on, remember who're you talking to. What did I say about gamers and taking anything not nailed down?”
“Yeah, but an industrial printer is a pretty random thing to make a copy of,” Miltia pointed out.

“Says you. Those things are expensive and useful. And I can find a use for it,” I countered.

“Okay, yeah, that's pretty clever,” Neo admitted. “So, what are we looking for?”

“Fuck if I know,” I admitted, gesturing towards the first page. “I haven't really had a chance to go over these. We've been busy. Whatever it is, it's not on the publicly accessible blueprints.”

“So, we compare the two,” Melanie suggested, and I nodded.

“It'd be the easiest thing,” I agreed, pulling out my scroll as the others did likewise. A quick search was all it took to find the public records, and I brought up the public blueprints and began comparing the two sets.

“So, any other reasons you'd like to share as to why you need to go to Beacon in person and can't just keep in contact with Ruby and the others?” Miltia asked.

I started to answer but Neo beat me to it. “It's them,” she guessed, and I looked up from my scroll to meet her eyes with a raised eyebrow. “Ruby, Yang, Blake. Miss P rodigy, the strongest Signal grad, and a former White Fang member—yeah, that one wasn't hard to figure out, either. You've already said you know how the teams are going to be made this year. You're angling to get those three on a team. Why? And with who?” Her eyes slid to the side for a moment before she murmured, “Y ou're not trying to get them on your own team. Conventional naming schemes use the letters from the members' names. Ruby, Yang, Blake, Jaune. There's nowhere for a 'J' to go there. No, it's Ruby, Blake, Yang. R, B, Y. Team RUBY. Who's their 'U'?”

“W' or 'V' would also work,” Melanie pointed out.

“Assuming you're correct about organizing teams before we get to Beacon, who's to say I don't intend to have them spread across multiple teams? That's enough people for anywhere from two teams to four teams, if I include myself,” I pointed out, and Neo rolled her eyes.

“Because it's exactly the sort of simplistic, color-themed name the academies tend to favor,” the ice-
cream themed girl pointed out. “And you specifically went after both Ruby and Blake, and seem to be trying very hard to keep Yang at just the right distance to not upset her sister while still leaving the possibility for something later.”

“Playing team matchmaker and getting new members for the group aside,” Melanie interrupted, “are those it?”

I nodded and the girls shared a look, before Miltia asked, “And you feel it's more important to be there than out here, with us?”

“I don't know, is being alive important to you?” I asked, not nearly as much sarcasm lacing my words as I felt it deserved—but then, I was filtering myself there to spare their feelings. I could admit I felt a bit guilty, knowing I would be spending a lot of time away from them—they were probably feeling insecure and were worried I'd leave them. It wasn't an unreasonable fear on their part, and it hurt knowing I was the reason they were worried. On the other hand, I knew that sometimes, you had to make sacrifices to keep the things you value most close to you in the long run—and these three had very quickly become exactly that, for me.

With that in mind, I pressed on. “Because keeping you that way is pretty important to me. And if that means I have to spend a lot of time elsewhere, then so be it. We know where Cinder will be—she wouldn't want the blueprints otherwise. Cinder doesn't waste time and resources on things she's not invested in long term. Events are centered around Beacon because of that. She's going to be there in person, because it's how she operates—either due to ego, or inability to trust her underlings, or because the plan calls for it. Being there means I can respond to whatever she intends to do faster than if I were in Vale. You are safer with me there, countering her.”

The girls went quiet, not willing to meet my eyes after that and I sighed softly, going back to digging through the blueprints. After several long minutes, Neo broke the silence. “Found something.”

“What?” I asked, and she gestured towards one of the pages off to the side.

“The old CCT tower isn't in the public blueprints.”

I blinked, moving over and having a look at our copy of the blueprints. “Old CCT tower?”

“Yeah. Originally, Vale's CCT tower was stationed in Beacon. In fact, all the academies have one. Later, it was decided to build new towers in the seats of the kingdoms. Here, ours is in Vale city, on
its own campus. But the originals weren't destroyed. I mean, why would they be? The equipment is kept functional and up to date, in the event of a catastrophic failure of the primary tower,” she explained.

Well, that explained why I couldn't reconcile the fact that I'd been to the CCT tower with what I knew from 'canon.' There were two towers. “So, it's a backup tower,” I surmised, and Neo nodded. “With all the same tech as the primary tower, but I'm guessing it's like any disaster recovery center and is unmanned most of the time?” If so, it was probably only really brought up to full working load a few times a year, to make sure everything worked and possibly to handle the load while maintenance was done on the primary tower—just to prevent calls from dropping, or a temporary communications blackout across Vale. That would be bad—not catastrophic, but potentially bad. *It's not like taking out one tower would domino the whole network, though. No one would be brain dead stupid enough to design it that way.*

“Probably,” Melanie agreed. “We can find out.”

“There's also a sub-basement,” Miltia cut in, and we turned to where she had separated another sheet. “No idea what's in it, but like the CCT tower, it's not on the public blueprints.”

Looking it over, I hummed. “That's big. Really fucking big.” I muttered, taking in the scale of the thing. The elevator from the surface opened onto a main entrance hall of some sort with a high, arched ceiling and pillars. Branching off to the sides were doors leading to other rooms, and the entire thing seemed to span the grounds of the academy and occupy at least two levels by itself.

“Look,” Miltia pointed at a set of lines on the sheet, “It has its own air and water connections and circulation, water storage, purification plant. Kitchen, cafeteria, security room, sleeping areas. Large, multi-story open area below all of it. It's a bunker.”

“A bunker the size of Beacon,” Neo pointed out. “It takes up the entire campus and goes all the way to the bottom of the cliffs. What do you want to bet that those empty lower floors can easily be converted between housing and indoor farming?”

“There are other surface connections,” Melanie noted, pointing at one in particular. “These rooms here are attached to what look like barracks or sleeping quarters for teams, and are equipped with vertical tunnels straight to the surface.” She frowned, reading something on one of the notations. “Anti-gravity launch and receiving platforms?” she read aloud.

Realizing what I was looking at, I laughed quietly. “Yeah. Launch tunnels. Look,” I pulled out the top sheet, detailing the campus itself, and began pointing out specific areas on the map. “Here,” I
pointed at a fountain, “And here,” a large piece of statuary, “Here too,” another area that corresponded with surface decorations. “Disguised surface entrances.” I ran a finger over one of the long, straight tunnels leading up to the surface, “And armored barriers in the tunnels themselves. This is for getting people outside in a hurry, and then giving them a way back in where they can't be followed.”

I had seen something similar in the past, actually. Though Beacon was smaller in scale than Tokyo-3, and the launch platforms were designed to launch Hunters as opposed to massive Evangelions, the concept was the same: an underground bunker capable of deploying troops quickly to the surface to deal with a threat in any part of the area above the bunker. *And this has been here for years. Likely from day one. A hidden bunker—a last fallback area on campus to rally, should the campus fall to Grimm.*

“Vehicle entrances in the cliffs,” Miltia pointed out. “It's not just for the school. It looks like this entire compound is a command and control bunker for Vale itself, for coordinating an emergency response. I can see why the original CCT tower would have been built on top of this.”

Neo frowned, shooting me an uncertain look. “Cinder has this? She's got Beacon by the balls. Forget the backup CCT tower, with this she could move around the campus freely if she ever got in, or move troops where ever she wanted. *Can* she get in?”

“With the hack tool? Possibly,” I admitted. I pulled up my map, looking over Vale for familiar icons. *Ruby, Penny, Yang, and Blake moving as a group along a flight path to Beacon. Me, Neo, Miltia, and Melanie in the apartment. No sign of anyone else my Semblance gives their own icon. Specifically, no sign of Cinder, Emerald, or Mercury.*

Humming, I felt a smile twitch at my lips as a plan formed. “Okay, I think I have an idea.”

“What?” Melanie asked, frowning as she took in my expression. “And why do I feel like I should feel sorry for Cinder?”

I smirked. “Because she's about to become homeless.” I began rolling up the blueprints and stuffing them in their carry tube. “So, we've got things to do this morning. If we split up, we can get a lot of them done at the same time. One of us needs to go gather crafting mats. The cloth and whatever else you think you'll need for us to start working on our gear.”

“But Jaune, you said you'd go with us for that,” Miltia pouted, and I rolled my eyes, seeing it for what it was—and only that through years of experience. Even then, my hormone-addled brain almost fell for it.
“I could, but we'd get more done if we split up and have more of the day later to do other things. Like setting up the bounded fields over the new place,” I suggested, and they perked up, knowing that would likely involve getting the Sanctification up and running—which meant more fun for all of us. “Besides, I'm going to need to go off on my own for a while to see if I can't piss off Cinder before she gets back into town. I just wish I could be there to see her face when she comes home to find I've burned the place to the ground.”

Melanie sighed as she and her sister nodded acquiescence. “Okay, fine. But you're going to be making it up to us later. You'd better be extra thorough setting up the fields.”

“Deal. I'll take my sweet time,” I agreed. “We also need the equipment to do Dustweaving. Any idea what that involves?”

“Yeah,” Neo agreed, nodding. “It takes some fairly specialized equipment, but it's not outside our price range. I know where it's sold.”

Sending her a questioning look, I asked, “What does that involve exactly?”

Neo shrugged. “It's a lot like making Dust rounds, really. You buy a machine to melt Dust crystals, it makes individual fibers, then spins them into thread with selectable thickness—sort of like how wiring is made, really. There are other machines that make Dust-impregnated cloth. You feed in a bolt of cloth of your choice, load in Dust crystals of your choosing, and it'll combine the two. Additionally, I'd like a programmable sewing machine that can sew patterns by itself.”

“I see,” I murmured. “Okay. In addition to that, we also need someone to head over to the guild HQ and organize a staff meeting to get an idea of what sort of stuff we need there, approve new construction, equipment purchases, and so forth. While that's going on, I've got a few stops of my own to make. Though, if we want to cut that down a bit, someone could run to the bounty office for me and turn in the bounty for the three Ursa yesterday.”

“Well, we're still in party from last night. Set up links and we can coordinate and communicate as we go,” Neo suggested, and I sent her a grin as I began doing just that. “This is so much easier than using a scroll.”

“I can pick up our materials,” Melanie volunteered, and Neo and Miltia nodded.
Neo hummed. “It'll probably go over faster if I go to Fox Hunt myself.”

“Then I'll take the bounty office. Jaune should be the one picking up our equipment—that way he can just dupe everything and we'll have multiple copies,” Miltia suggested, then turned to me with an amused look. “While you're at it, swing by the store where you picked up that machine that makes Dust rounds and pick up a few more of those, would you?”

I rolled my eyes. “I might as well just go and duplicate their stock at this point. And the other place.”

“Pretty much,” Neo agreed. “Especially since a lot of that is going towards the guild.”

“Actually,” I shot a look between the three, “We could probably start turning out enchanted items and selling them for profit. How much would a space-expanded handbag go for?”

The girls traded amused looks. “Jaune, no one sells those. Hunters make them themselves.”

I blinked. “Wait. You mean you can't just go out and buy stuff that already has basic enchantments like waterproofing, climate control, and space expansion?”

All three shook their heads. “I don't know if it's even taught to civilians,” Melanie shrugged. “We know Bounded Fields are rare, as is Dustweaving. It may be one of those things where it's either too time consuming, resource or labor intensive, or simply too difficult for most people to bother with.”

I palmed my face. “So you're telling me there's an entire untapped market here, ripe for the taking?”

“Seems that way,” Miltia agreed, a slow grin spreading across her face, which her sister and Neo matched as they followed my line of thought. “It's ours now, right?”

“Oh, yes,” I nodded, mirroring their grins. “So, we'll test it out and see how hard it is to make the basic stuff, and if it's not that hard we can see about allocating men and resources to producing simple things full time, then turn around and sell them. Also, we need to see if it's possible to patent unique bounded field creations. If so, we'll need to get that filed quickly.”

Melanie hummed, drawing my attention. “Actually, Jaune, with the Vytal festival coming up this
year, that may be a good time to unveil some of those things. We're already working on the PMC thing. What if we were to buy space at the festival and set up a few stands to sell stuff? Under a different company name, obviously. We could make a couple of batches of things to distribute to our men to test with, spend a few weeks improving designs, then sell the improved models at the festival. After that, if it takes off, we could launch it as a separate business. The problem with going from hand-making a few test models to moving to full production is a lack of manpower—it would be a waste to use people in our PMC for that. We really would need to start an entirely new company.”

“Well, why not?” Neo asked. “Actually, why not go to full production for the guild anyway? The four of us could make some test models, get input from the men, modify the design, then hand it off to be mass produced for our men. It's worth the investment in manpower and equipment for the ability to equip our people alone. Having it make money in the civvie and Hunter markets is just a bonus.”

“Not a bad idea,” I agreed. “It's something to play with later. In the meantime, we've got shit to do today.”

My eyes roved over the street ahead of me, taking in every detail of the small, morning crowd and looking for anything that didn't belong as a matter of habit. 'I feel naked,' I frowned, stuffing my hands in the pockets of my light, gray jacket as I made my way towards the weapon shop I had visited the previous week. I was only technically in my Shiro disguise—I had the hair and the contacts, but I'd ditched the mask, armor, and weapons save for the longslide holstered under my jacket in favor of a more civilian set of clothes. With my first set ruined by the Nameless and my second set of armor ruined thanks to Penny recreating the damage that had supposedly been done to it for authenticity, and physical evidence should I need it, I didn't exactly have anything to wear for that disguise at the moment anyway. There was also the fact that the local news had begun airing the footage of last night's battle first thing this morning. If I intended to go out as Shiro any time soon, I'd need to do it at night or under Invisibility.

The sound of a circular saw drew my attention to a shop as I passed—a little place that sold armor and clothing accessories. Two women and a young man were in the alley beside the building, working on something between a pair of saw horses—their names and looks marking them as a mother and two teenaged children. The saw passed through a two-by-four, taking the end off, and one of the women affixed it to what looked like a wooden frame, taking a power drill and running a couple of screws in to hold it in place. Curious, I walked over and asked, “What's all this for?”

One of the women, an older one with black hair, looked up and smiled. “Vytal Festival preparations. Our old stand got left outside and dry rotted,” she shot a glare at the younger man holding the saw, who took on a chagrined look.
I nodded. “Say, I'm new in town, but I could've sworn the Festival wasn't for months yet. Was I wrong?”

“Well, the City Council decided that local businesses should start assembling and putting out decorations now—mostly because the locals get preferential treatment over booth spaces if they need them. The second semester is when students and visitors from all over the Kingdoms will start gathering and that's when it officially kicks off. The Festival itself will last the full semester, concluding when the tournament ends at the end of the school year.”

“Nearly four months?” I asked, and she nodded.

“Aye, that it is. You've never attended one?” she asked, confused.

I chuckled quietly, rubbing at the back of my neck and looking sheepish. “I grew up out in the boonies.” She nodded, a knowing look crossing her face, and I waved as I started back onto the road. “Anyway, thanks for the info. Good day, ma'am.”

“And a good day to you as well,” she returned, turning her attention back to the pair. “Stop slacking and get back to work!”

I allowed my mind to wander to the festival and let my feet carry me to my destination pretty much on auto-pilot, making a mental note to come back here later in the day while I was doing errands and pick up replacement armor. ‘So, we've got a semester to prepare before the Festival officially kicks off. Handy to know.’

The bell over the door chimed as I made my way inside and, a moment later, Terra stuck her head out of what must have been her work room in the back. “You got my message, then.”

“I did,” I agreed, moving to the counter and leaning against it.

“Give me just a minute,” she said, and slipped back into the back room. A few minutes later, she returned with a cylindrical tube, a handle jutting out from its center and the straps of a belt wrapped around it. “Try it on, tell me what you think.”

I took the offered weapon, surprised by its light weight until I remembered that had weight reduction seals incorporated in its design. Strapping it on at my left side, I turned this way and that, adjusting
the belt and the fit the way I liked it, until I could move with it and not feel awkward. My hand resting on the sheath, I found a couple of buttons I wasn't expecting on the sheath's upper handle, along with a pair of trigger switches. “What do these do?” I asked, pointing towards the unexpected features.

“Well, I figured you may want some sort of assisted drawing feature.” Terra reached into a drawer under the counter and came out with a hand bound book. “Read the manual before you go to playing with it, though.”

Nodding, I asked, “How much do I owe you?”

A few taps at her terminal brought up a number on the see-through screen and I winced, before digging into my side pouch for money. “I know I was expecting it, but god damn seeing that still feels like a kick in the nuts.”

The taller woman chuckled. “They do get pricier,” she warned.

“I figured,” I nodded, handing over the cash and watching as she counted it out, then stuck it in a small safe under the counter. When she popped back up, I subvocalized “Confuse, Charm,” followed by, “Dominate.” Feeling the spells settle in, I asked, “One more thing. You wouldn't mind deleting your records of me being here, including the blueprints for my weapon, would you? And your security footage, obviously—and make sure to shut it off for the next ten minutes or so. Also, your scroll logs and text messages to and from me, just to be thorough.”

“Sure, I can do that,” she agreed, already working on destroying the records at her terminal. “What about the discrepancy in my available supplies, and the money? Also, what if I tell someone you've made me delete my files?”

I shook my head. “I appreciate the suggestion, but just erasing the records should be good enough to foil a cursory examination. And we won't need to worry about that last bit in a minute.”

“Well, if you're sure,” she hemmed, then shrugged. “All done.”

“Great. Thank you, Terra. One last thing. Do you take naps on the job?” I asked, and the woman chuckled.

“Yeah, occasionally.”
Nodding, I gestured her towards the back room. “Why don't you show me where?” I asked, and followed as she lead me into the back. There was a forge and several pieces of equipment I couldn't name further back in the room, but right behind the door was what looked to be a small break room, with a table, chairs, and a telescreen. “Have a seat.”

She sat down and I hit her with Sleep, followed by Forget to erase her memory of anything associated with me, then Confuse again before dispelling Dominate and Charm. With any luck, she would wake up and make up a story to explain what had happened herself. And if not, there wouldn't be much she could find even if she went digging. “Sorry,” I murmured, leaving by the back door and slipping into Vale's back alleys for a few blocks before rejoining the crowd, but not before digging the new manual out of Inventory and eating it.

Yesterday, I would have done that and barely blinked at this point. Now? I'd done it, and I'd do it again if needed, but I felt genuine remorse about having to take an innocent civilian's memories just to protect my secrets. Not that I hadn't under Gamer's Mind—the sensation had just been muted and passed more swiftly. Nor could I blame the skill for making me do it—I knew it was a necessary evil and I would have done it either way. This 'guilt' thing sucks balls.'

My first stop taken care of, I walked several blocks before finding a side street that was mostly a blind spot in the camera coverage. Strolling nonchalantly out of the crowd, I moved out of view before throwing on Invisibility and switching to my Fox outfit. I moved quickly across town, following a waypoint to a familiar building. Touching down on the roof and checking my map to make sure no one was inside the building, I ID'd the door and cut it open with a wind blade, then slipped inside and down the stairs after closing the ID. Though I'd seen it before, Cinder's bedroom was surprisingly normal for a supposed criminal mastermind—even a bit untidy, really. Shaking my head at the sight of a pair of panties hanging off the back of a chair, I took the opportunity to rifle through her things, looking for clues or anything useful.

Her room turned out to be a bust, I soon realized. Beyond clothes there were no personal possessions, no hints as to where she’d come from, which nation she was working for, or what her next move was. 'She just uses it for sleeping,' I assessed, leaving the room and moving on to the next in my search. Most of the rooms were empty, but I did run across something surprisingly familiar—a room that looked much the same as Neo's sewing room in her old apartment. 'So, she made that little red number herself.'

Picking up what looked to be a copy of the red dress in question, I rubbed the material between my gloved fingers and smirked as I took in the details. It had been sitting beside the sewing machine, unfinished, but the patterns were clearly there and ready to complete the process of adding Dust-infused thread. It went into my Inventory. 'I'll have to see if I can reverse engineer the pattern later. As for the rest of this... waste not, want not.' I ID'd the room, snagging everything in it with Telekinesis before funneling it into my Inventory window. Destroying the ID, I repeated the process in the real world, leaving behind a bare room and leaving me with two copies of everything Cinder had there, including her preferred materials to work with and her Dustweaving equipment.
Emerald's room turned out to be just as barren as Cinder's, with one exception—the thief liked to collect trinkets, and had hidden a good number of them under a loose floorboard. They weren't worth taking, so I left them in place and moved downstairs. Moving into the living room area Cinder had converted into a sort of war room, I spotted the old record player and the records I'd grabbed from the Repository, along with Cinder's own collection.

“Oh, I'm taking you home with me,” I muttered, ID-ing her record player and the stack of old records beside it before snatching up the real one as well, then turned my attention to the rest of the room. 'I can have one of these at Fox Hunt and the other in my apartment or something.'

Like the last time I had seen it, there were documents and stacks of papers on the table and a board with pictures of various individuals—though there were some recent additions, as I noticed a photo of myself as Shiro off to the side, along with Neo, Miltia, Melanie, and Junior. 'Is she trying to figure out where I came from?' I wondered, humming as I tried to discern her logic there. 'Could just be known associates.'

Taking out my scroll, I took pictures of the room in its present state from multiple angles, including from the ceiling, before lifting the documents, board, books, and everything that looked important and securing them in my Inventory. A familiar brown tube floating through the air caught my eye, and I brought it forward and opened it, unrolling the blueprints and checking to make sure everything was there before rolling them back up and sending them to Inventory as well. 'What are the odds that she took a picture of them?' I wondered, before shaking my head. I couldn't do anything about it if she had. Taking her copy was the best I could do.

Looking around to make sure I wasn't leaving anything important, and in the process raiding Cinder's collection of expensive alcohol, I checked my map again to make sure there was no one around. Once I was sure, I cast a Fireball in the middle of the room, then went upstairs and repeated the process. Leaving by the roof, dropped to the ground floor. I spun up a wind blade and etched my fox head calling card into the side of the building beside the back door. After that, I made a quick getaway, knowing from experience that the fire wasn't going to be put out easily—but should burn hot and fast enough to destroy everything inside the building, hopefully without spreading to neighboring buildings.

As I was leaving, I felt the hairs on the back of my neck stand up and my detection skills pinged—I was being watched again. A glance at my minimap showed no one in the immediate vicinity and I frowned, dropping down into an alley and turning a blind corner. The feeling followed, seeming to come from my 6 o'clock high, but I knew nothing was there. Annoyed, I made my way across town with the feeling of someone breathing down my neck making my skin crawl, before finding a mall and ducking inside. Opening a small ID inside the men's room, I changed into my 'Jaune' clothes in a stall and dropped the ID and Invisibility, then followed another man outside. The feeling was still there, but it was fainter, somehow. 'Like someone knows I'm in the crowd and is looking for me, but can't seem to pinpoint me,' I assessed, blending with the crowd and making my way outside.
'Question is, if I am being shadowed somehow, did someone figure out I’m both the Fox and Shiro, or are they just following both of us? Or was the fire interesting enough that they took notice and spotted me? Actually, how did they spot the fire this quickly—it hasn't been going a full minute! Also, how the fuck did they spot me under Invisibility, with Aura Suppression running?'

The feeling finally went away after several minutes and I made my way across town again after checking my HUD clock, towards one of the bases belonging to the 'rival' gangs in town. I had already sent orders ahead by text, so all I would really be doing was sorting the men and women there into groups, offering those people who were worth anything the opportunity to join Fox Hunt while conscripting the filth into joining up as front-line disposable fighters for the PMC. I had yet to find any sort of upper limit to the number of people I could Charm or Dominate, but at this rate if there was one, I would find it soon. For today, though, I would only be doing one of those gangs—I could spread out collecting the rest over the next week or so. 'No,' I thought, shaking my head, 'I'll need to be careful for this. I can't disappear them all. Take the best and the worst of them and leave the rest as filler. Disappear a few at a time, use Confuse to make the others think they just quit. If the cops got wind of sudden disappearances, that could be bad. Not to mention, Cinder may have her fingers in the gangs, and she'd definitely take notice if they all just disappeared one day. So, a few today. Pick out the most human of the lot, and the most expendable, and use them to both beef up my numbers with good people and as throw-away front line soldiers.'

I would be changing back into my Fox outfit for this one, but considering I was going to be invisible the entire time and playing 'god' for those in charge who had been hit with a permanent Dominate, it wouldn't really matter. Once I was done there, I would be moving on to our other errands for the morning—like picking up new temporary armor for my Shiro disguise, because I was tired of feeling naked without it. I could replace it with custom gear later. Checking in with the girls before I went inside, I grinned as Neo gave me confirmation that she had already arranged an excursion with some of our men to go and test guild-related stuff in the field.

“Two minutes to hot zone,” Angel's voice warned over the Bullhead's comms—a headphone and mic setup I had seen back on Earth used in helicopters, and while the Bullhead wasn't nearly as loud as a helicopter it still helped everyone communicate.

“Roger that,” I acknowledged, shifting out of my seat and hitting the door controls, sending the Bullhead's sliding doors actioning open in their tracks as I grabbed one of the grab-bars, stuck myself to the floor, and leaned out to have a look around. The force of the wind blew my white hood back, sending my temporarily red hair flying about my head as I turned my gaze on the field below us, the midday sun heating the field below us and an uncomfortable reminder that summer wasn't quite over yet in this part of Remnant. ‘Temperature control enchantments soon. Goddamn that's probably going to be the most useful thing on my gear.’

We were outside of Vale, in the area of operations that was designated to be cleared so it could later be walled off and reclaimed as farmland. Right now, that project was in its beginning stages, wherein the Kingdom of Vale had begun paying anyone willing to come into the area and start thinning the Grimm out. This was before any of the first contracts were drawn up, so that groups like mine, or
Hunters, could actually come in and set up a base camp to establish themselves before they brought in the engineers who would be building the wall.

Behind me, Melanie asked, “How's it look?”

“That depends,” I hummed, pulling up my map and checking local spirit density. *High, but not horrible.* Closing the map, I pointed out to our east. “Pack of the big ones out there, but it looks like they’ve spotted us and are moving out of the area.” I didn't remember what the elephant-looking Grimm were called, and with my Fox mask on I couldn't exactly equip my glasses. *Note to self: do something about that. Maybe see about duplicating them, then integrating a set into the mask somehow. Of course, I'd need to make a permanent mask for that, instead of just conjuring one.*

“Goliaths,” Miltia supplied, peeking out the side door. “Generally, they avoid humans. Looks like they're moving further east.”

“As long as they don't come back into the area behind us, I don't care where they go,” Melanie shook her head.

Neo moved to my side, taking hold of the other grab bar, before asking, “Why are we letting them go in the first place? They're land-bound Grimm. We've got a Bullhead and a Razorback, both armed to the teeth. Fuck it, I say we go take them out.”

“You're sure they don't have anything that can reach us up here?” I asked, and she shook her head.

“Besides,” Neo’s grin turned avaricious. “Those have to be level what? Sixty? Seventy? Just imagine what they'll drop. Not to mention, there's a bounty specifically for those things, at 100k a head. There are like twenty there.”

“Angel,” I caught the pilot's attention, “Change course. Radio Foxtrot-two, inform them of our new flight plan.”

“Roger that, boss,” she agreed, swinging the Bullhead around and switching channels to radio our second pilot—a new recruit Angel had vouched for.

As we neared the Goliaths, I hit them with Observe and winced. “All between level 65 and 70. All gold boss-level,” I announced. “Angel, open up on one with the guns and we'll see how that does.”
A high pitched whine sounded from somewhere under the craft as the minigun mounted on its nose spun up, then there came the deafening roar of full-auto fire. “Not getting much penetration,” Angel announced, and I took a look at our target's HP bar. It had gone down about a hundredth of the way after a good five second burst.

“That would have taken out a tank, on Earth,’ I groused, until a thought occurred. 'No, with depleted uranium rounds it would have turned that thing into a puddle. It has to be something else.’

“Angel, what does this thing fire?”

“30MM grade 7 burn, boss,” she answered automatically.

Frowning, I asked, “That's not armor penetrating is it?”

“No, sir. Typically, they're used against smaller Grimm for thinning crowds, not for punching through the big ones.”

I nodded, shooting a look at Neo, who looked annoyed at the results. Spinning up an AP Round, I sent a volley of them downrange, where they impacted on the Goliath and got penetration, but didn't do much in the way of damage—and by now, the herd had picked up the pace of their escape into a stampede. Doing some quick math in my head, I finally shook my head at her. “It's no good. We could probably wear one down and kill it, but it'd take forever. Fuel and ammo cost would outweigh whatever we got from it, most likely. Penny could possibly punch a hole in it, but she's not here and I wouldn't want to risk damaging something on her. We can come back and find them later, once we've leveled some and gotten some proper armor penetrating rounds for the big guns, okay?”

“Fine,” Neo grumbled, disappointed but willing to accept there wasn't much we could do about it.

“Angel, get us back on course, if you would,” I ordered as Neo dropped into her seat beside Melanie, a pout on her pretty face. “Do we have a final count?” I asked the twins, who had been studying their maps and counting.

“More than four hundred and fifty lesser Grimm, unknown species, plus twenty four Goliaths leaving the area,” Miltia announced.
“Alright, you know the plan,” I grinned under my mask.

“It's a bad plan,” Miltia frowned, and beside her Melanie shook her head. “No, what my sister meant to say is it's a stupid plan,” she deadpanned.

Neo shot the two an amused look before turning back to me and shrugging. “I don't like it, but I won't say it's not viable.”

“I thought it was a brilliant plan,” I rolled my eyes. The plan was simple, really. Angel would fly low over the field, drop me and Sanguine off, and then she and our other pilot would pull back to an overwatch position. Below them, I would be flaring my Aura, essentially ringing the dinner bell for anything in the area stupid enough to listen—Grimm other than Goliaths, in other words. Once they got close, I could lay into them with high damage techniques while Angel and our second pilot in the Razorback would provide CAS. With the Bullhead doors open, the girls could provide fire support where needed—either with skills or with the grenade launchers we'd brought along for that purpose. Likewise, the men in the Razorback were similarly armed with grenade launchers and machine guns, and would be targeting pockets of clustered Grimm that I missed, or finishing off the ones we wounded. The girls would be safe a couple hundred feet in the air, and if worse came to worst, I could always dismiss Sanguine and use my line launcher to snag one of the aircraft and haul myself out of harm's way.

“And why can't all of us sit up here and shoot Grimm? Why does anyone need to be on the ground?” Melanie asked.

“Because a proper trap needs real bait,” I grinned. “Even the stupid ones aren't stupid enough to fall for it if there's nothing on the ground for them to chase.” Though, on that note, Penny was an artificial being with her own Aura. Being able to create Aura, or at least a close approximation, was obviously a part of her development process. I had the majority of those files. How hard would it be to build a simple Aura emitter, put it on something that looked tasty to Grimm, then sit back and bombard the area? ‘Yeah, I'm building one of those later.’

“Worst plan ever,” Miltia grumbled and I laughed as Angel gave the go-ahead and I dropped out of the Bullhead, landing in the tall, swaying grass below. I watched the aircraft pull back a good distance and, when Angel radioed they were ready, I summoned Sanguine and then focused on my mana, trying to intentionally waste it by releasing a large amount in a continuous surge outwards from my body. White light poured off of my body, at first looking like some sort of glowing field simply surrounding my body, before it began leaking out of my control and took on an appearance that made me laugh quietly. ‘I've gone Super Saiyan. Note to self: show Yang at some point so she can laugh. On the other hand, maybe not. Jun didn't know what Kaio-ken was, so DBZ may not be a thing here. I'm going to have to check. And then try to copy Goku's power set, because why the fuck not. Maybe it'll get me flight easier than dumping all my points in INT.’
I interestingly enough, I gained a new skill after only a few minutes of this. The skill was pretty
obvious, based on my intent: **Lure**, which did exactly what it said on the tin and attracted Grimm in
the area to me. I was disappointed that the glow effect appeared to be only for show, but I supposed
they couldn't all be winners. 'Maybe I'll get something nifty later, when I get Aura to the next tier, at
50 I think.' I shook my head, returning my focus on the task at hand—namely, the swarm of Grimm
barreling down on my position.

'Boarbatusks and Great Boarbatusks, Beowolves, Ursai, Stalkers and a couple of Death Stalkers, I
think I even see some Creeps down there—at least, I think they're Creeps, except those are supposed
to be mostly subterranean,' Neo warned, sending me her view of the area. 'You want us to open fire
yet?'

'Wait for it,' I sent, casting my shields and letting Lure drop—they knew I was here now, so there
was no point in continuing to ring the dinner bell. A pair of Plasma Blades spun up in my hands and
I released them, snagging them with Telekinesis and whipping them into an orbit around me, swiftly
joining them with like elemental blades of fire, air, gravity, ice, and force —eight being about my
maximum at the moment if I didn't want to burn through my Mana too quickly, I went with seven.
Leaving six different-colored Spinning Mana Blades orbiting me, I took one of the Plasma Blades in
hand and waited.

'Any time, Jaune,' Melanie sent, her tone clearly worried.

I rolled my eyes. 'Wait for it.'

'Damnit Jaune! Stop screwing around!' Miltia nearly shouted, and I shot an amused look at the
Bullhead above.

“Foxtrot-one, Foxtrot-two, commence fire support on the enemy's rear. Drive them to me,” I ordered
over the radio, and the two airships began circling in, main guns opening up and spurring the already
running swarm of Grimm into a stampede.

Multiple blades flew out in sequence in a series of Strike Raids, targeted at specific Grimm or clusters
of them—ice, followed by fire, freezing a path through the Grimm between myself and one of the
boss-level Greater Boarbatusks, as the frozen Grimm in the first blade's wake exploded on contact
with the fire blade that followed. The gravity blade whipped out, sticking into one of the larger
Grimm and exploding into a large Lift effect, followed by a Plasma Blade cutting those trapped in
the effect down. Wind and force didn't do much together, but swapping the combination around to
ice and force as one set and fire and wind as another allowed me to freeze and blow apart Grimm,
while the wind blade did an excellent job spreading and feeding the flames from the Fire blade and
finishing off anything hit with a Burn effect.

I began throwing out Flash Freeze and Fireball combinations as the swarm got closer, slowing them down and destroying or damaging large swaths of them, followed by spamming AP Round into their ranks with various elemental effects attached. Above me, grenades began streaking out of the two aircraft, targeting clusters of the monsters further away from me and helping to break up their charge. A sound at my back drew my attention to my mostly silent guardian, dragging down a Beowolf that had gotten too close. “Thank you, sweetie,” I chuckled at the Spirit, before switching to Conjuration —foot long darts of steel, long holes in their sides exposing a cesium core flying out propelled by force natured Aura and exploding after burying themselves into the soft flesh of their targets upon contact with Grimm blood, messily splattering those they hit in a gory explosion and mowing down or outright killing the Grimm unfortunate enough to be standing next to those hit.

'This is actually a bit of a workout,' I admitted to the girls, glancing at my Mana bar to see I'd depleted the majority of my reserves. 'I'm just kind of annoyed I can't practice most of my 'Jaune' set.'

'You haven't even moved from that spot,' Melanie deadpanned.

I shrugged, but I doubt they saw it from their current position. 'Well, I should probably fix that.'

Dropping into Flash Step, I rematerialized standing on the mask of a Greater Boarbatusk, my Plasma Blade buried in its eye. It opened its mouth to squeal and an AP Round punched through the other eye and out the back of its head before it dropped limply to the ground. 'I do love it when crit-targets are obvious.'

Honestly, I was having a blast finally being able to mostly cut loose. The return of endorphins meant that was even more fun than killing hordes of mobs had been. I'd always been a bit of a gun and explosives enthusiast back on Earth, but being able to fling spells around and wipe out hordes of enemies was so much more satisfying than shooting paper targets. I did not quite have a kill-boner, but it was a close thing. And, if given the chance, I'd almost definitely fall to the allure of post-fight sex. Or 'we're all still alive' sex. Really, any of those fight-related highs leading to sexy situations. It was a good thing we were planning to Sanctify the base later, because now I'd actually gotten the idea stuck in my head.

The mobs here were only in the mid-40s and I was fast enough they couldn't really touch me. The only real danger for me here was getting hit by something I couldn't see that made it through my shields, or running out of Mana. 'How are we looking?' I sent.

A view through Neo's eyes answered, and she added, 'Mostly finished. We're picking off the
stragglers now. Finish that group around you and get back up here.'

'Yes, ma'am,' I sent back, adding a heavy layer of snark for good measure.

After that, cleanup was easy, and it honestly took longer to collect the drops than the entire fight had lasted. "So, what'd we get?" Neo asked when I re-boarded the Bullhead and we began making our way back to Vale, Miltia across the aisle with her scroll out, reporting mission completion for the company.

"We have a company bank account?" I asked, and the twins nodded. I shrugged, turning my attention to answering Neo. "I didn't bother counting the potions. Over three million lien—but there was more than one boss mixed in with that group. That's good though, since that money can go straight to buying Fox Hunt new equipment and paying for construction. Some more cloth and other mats—bone, blood, that sort of thing. No skill books, unfortunately, but I didn't really expect any.

Also, at some point, we need to publish some sort of SOP manual, letting the grunts know to pick up and turn in drops—explain it as Semblance interactions and leave it at that. Not sure if I want to have them turn over the cash or just divide it evenly amongst themselves so long as they turn in items. Did you all level?"

There were nods all around and I nodded, having leveled three times myself, and I was now sitting pretty at level 35. "What about the others? Angel?" I asked, clicking my mic on and bringing her into the discussion. "Did you level?"

"Seven times, sir," she answered. "Also picked up a couple of skills, according to what popped up on the Bullhead's HUD. Pilot, Use Dust, Armed Aircraft Proficiency as an advanced form of Pilot I think."

I frowned as she went over that list. I had imported Drive early on in my stay in Remnant and it had covered every sort of craft I had tried to use so far. I also didn't have any sort of advanced skills or evolutions for it. The best I could figure was Angel was a trained military pilot and that real-world skill made all the difference. I toggled Angel back out of the conversation. "Okay. We'll sit down with the squad when we get back and go over points distribution. Think we can sell it as some sort of means of tracking progress and advancing through the company?" I asked.

"Makes sense," Melanie nodded slowly. "We could say their scrolls track their kills and treat the whole thing like a game."

"We'll see how it works with this group, first," Miltia agreed.
Neo hummed, shifting and bumping lightly into my side. “Does it awaken Aura?”

I blinked, then shrugged. “No idea. It’s a theory worth testing. I don’t see how it couldn’t, though—at least to some extent. Any ideas on spec builds?”

“High DEX, sub focus on STR or VIT,” Miltia supplied, tapping away at her scroll. “That’s your basic ‘rifleman’ build, if I had to guess. You could always add INT or WIS for more Aura, if that’s possible for these guys, but my best guess is they’re going to want to focus on stats that get their accuracy, speed, and endurance up. Other than that, well, why not leave it up to their discretion and see what comes of it? If someone wants to dump points in STR and DEX, we may get Hunter-level melee fighters out of it. Of course, that’s all on top of whatever points they gain while using their weapons, training, lugging around gear, and so forth. Odds are good at least a few are going to gain more than just physical points from daily life.” A thought occurred and she asked, “Jaune, don’t you gain muscle mass and definition when you add points to strength?”

I shrugged. “I wouldn’t know, I’ve never dumped points there—only gained them through training. Though, considering how I looked when I woke up versus how I look now? Yeah. I see where you’re going with that. We’ll have to make sure they don’t hoard points. If it does happen… well, we’ll probably have to give some of the truth and say it’s because of Semblance interactions.”

Eying her sister, Melanie asked, “Why not have some try to go for an INT/WIS build to see if we can build casters? If Jaune’s Semblance awakens Aura, or gives Aura—or Mana—to people who otherwise don’t or can’t use it, then it’d make sense to take advantage. Think about it: if we could get even a few, we could have healers or magical artillery independent of Dust. We know from the few tests Jaune’s run that magic and Dust go well together—Dust tends to amplify its effects—so even if we only taught people one or two spells each, if we equipped them with Dustweave gear or Dustcasters, we could have people throwing fireballs or whatever that can easily burn down large swaths of Grimm. At some point, Jaune, you should try combining both of those to see what happens—see if Dustweave gear and purpose-build Dustcasters stack.”

“Yeah, that sounds like something I should get on sooner rather than later,” I agreed. I hadn’t really had a chance to test a Dustcaster yet, myself. The one Joan had ordered me was due in soon, and I now had a few with my new weapon, but I’d yet to be able to test those. Still, if it worked anything like most other magic systems, then combining one focus with another should stack and amplify the overall effect of the spell used. “Neo?”

“It’s up to you, Jaune,” Neo shrugged. “I like the idea, but then I’m all about more ability to blow shit up. I can see it potentially causing problems though, if word got out. But if we’re careful… well, we might be able to build up our forces to the point where it wouldn’t be worth trying to provoke us about it.”
Humming quietly, I nodded. “Okay, you have access to everyone's stats in your scrolls from your guild menu, right?” I asked, and received nods in answer. “Start small. Pick one or two of our smartest—highest INT for skill creation—for special training and we'll see what we can do. If we can get a couple of people trained up decently, we'll expand the project. Try and screen for elemental affinities: fire, ice, that sort of thing. Things it'd be real easy to disguise as Dust effects. Also, Loyalty to the guild should be visible, so make sure they're not going to turn on us the first time someone waves around money.”

“You can see loyalty as a stat?” Miltia asked with a raised eyebrow, and I nodded. “What's mine?”

“All three of you are at one hundred percent,” I answered, feeling somewhat worried about the implications of that question, before asking, “Does that bother you?”

The girls exchanged looks before Melanie shrugged. “A little, but I can admit it's too useful not to have and use. We know you aren't taking advantage of us with it, but the thought that something could somehow discern that is kind of disturbing.”

Before I could continue the conversation, my interface pinged and a text box popped up, my eyes tracking to it and finding a message from Blake. I ignored it for a moment, locking eyes with each of the girls in turn for a moment before saying, “I trust you, and I wouldn't game you like that. You all mean more to me than that. But actions count more than words, so I'm hoping I can convince you of that through my actions.”

“You already have,” Neo murmured, before she shrugged, a pleased look crossing her face momentarily before shifting into a leer. “But hey, I'm all for more convincing. So, who's the message from?”

I allowed the deflection, turning my attention back to the message on my HUD. Reading its contents, I grinned. “Blakely passed her test,” I told the girls, shooting off a quick congratulatory text. “Seems Yang offered to take her out to celebrate tonight, and somehow managed to actually convince her to put down her smut and go have fun.”

“Aww, damnit. I was hoping for congratulatory sex,” Neo pouted, and I rolled my eyes.

“You're not going to be able to rush that one, dear,” I warned, and the ice cream themed girl stuck out her tongue.

“I don't know. I think she's pretty close to cracking,” Melanie smirked across from me, and I shook my head.
“She's too skittish and she has way more self-control than you give her credit for. Besides, we've barely spoken,” I pointed out.

Miltia shot me an amused look. “Then this should provide a good opportunity. Go forth and seduce the cat-girl into our bed.”

“Twins,” I warned, shooting the pair an unamused look—most of which was lost under the mask. “I distinctly recall neither of you like being reduced to that. Pretty sure reducing Blake to a fetish would be one of the fastest ways imaginable to turn her off.” They began to protest and I held up a hand to stop them. “I know that's not what you were doing. What you have to understand is that Blake's got thin skin when it comes to certain subjects. She'll get butthurt over innocuous comments because she automatically assumes the worst.”

“She's going to have to grow the fuck out of that. Sexy as hell or not, no whiners,” Melanie crossed her arms and huffed, an annoyed look crossing her face.

Miltia sighed, mirroring her sister's position if not her expression. “While not as tactful as I would have put it, Melanie's right. We don't need that sort of drama in our group.”

“Jaune, if that's what we're getting here, I'll veto her right now. We're not willing to risk screwing things up over someone who sees everything as an attack or sees insults where there are none,” Neo warned, and I shook my head.

“It's not that bad. I'm not saying walk on eggshells, I'm saying give her time. She'll grow out of it.” I hoped, at any rate. “What she needs most right now is acceptance and inclusion—to feel like she's wanted as an integral part of something and accepted for who, and what, she is. That does not mean, in any way, shape, form, or fashion, indulging in her selective blindness regarding her people. Don't antagonize, but don't hesitate to call her out on her bullshit if you see her doing it. I don't want that shit coming back to bite us in the ass later.”

“Is that you talking out of your ass, or something else?” Melanie asked, raising one fine eyebrow.

I sighed quietly, palming my masked face. “It's what I've read off her so far, between my Semblance and experience. If it were also 'something else,' I couldn't confirm that.”

“ If you know it could become a problem later, why bother?” Neo asked, meeting my eyes with a knowing look.
“That thing I can't tell you? Stop picking at it,” I countered, and she turned away, leaning back as much as she could in the Bullhead’s jump seats and taking on an entirely too smug look. Shifting my gaze across the twins, I said, “If you want to veto, now’s your chance. I’ll handle taking care of whatever needs to be taken care of.”

Miltia and Melanie shared a long, silent look before turning to me and syncing, “Abstain.”

“Neo?” I asked, turning my focus to the girl beside me.

The girl in question sighed, shooting me an apologetic look. “There’s no point in calling it now, Jaune. We’ve known her less than a week. There’s little harm in giving her a chance.” Turning to the twins, they apparently shared a quick conversation I wasn’t privy to across our links, before she turned back and continued with, “We weren’t trying to upset you—”

I rolled my eyes. “You didn’t,” I interrupted. “I’d tell you if you had.”

Neo nodded. “We just want you to know that we are willing to defend whatever this is we have together. We can’t have someone causing needless drama—and I know you agree. This is already complicated enough without infighting.”

“Yes,” I nodded agreement. “Okay, I get it. Like I said, we're taking a wait-and-see approach with this one.” Neo's wording did not go unnoticed, however, and I made a mental note to sit the girls down soon and talk the relationship thing through to figure out where we all stood and where to go from there.

The girls nodded in silent agreement and I settled back into my seat, wondering if the faunus girl was really worth the effort. She was an integral part of Team RWBY, but that didn't necessarily mean she had to be more than that—especially if it turned out that the idealistic tendencies I'd seen of her in what passed for canon were true here. I couldn't have her betraying us to go off and rejoin the Fang, or running off on her own to investigate them. Almost as bad, I couldn't have her ignoring the faults of her people while lambasting those of ours—it was divisive and would serve no purpose, except to drive our group apart along ideological lines, at best. I didn't tolerate SJWs on Earth and sure as fuck wouldn't on Remnant. Willful ignorance, moving the goalposts, making special exceptions for one group in particular, cherry picking examples or arguments—all of those things had been done on Earth in the name of 'equality,' as though oppressing one group was somehow okay as long as that group was the supposed 'oppressor' themselves. I was willing to give her a chance because I hadn't seen her do it yet, and because she didn't seem particularly intellectually dishonest from the one conversation we'd had on the topic.
I spent the rest of the ride back to the new base thinking it over before being jolted from my thoughts as we touched down. Neo put a veil over Miltía and hit Melanie with an illusion to change her hair to a fetching shade of bright red and shift her green dress to white with silver trim, while Neo's own hair shifted to strawberry pink and her dress to white with gold trim a moment after. I conjured a couple of masks like my own and passed them to Melanie and Neo and we made our way inside, where we were greeted with salutes by a small group of soldiers on duty, along with Jim. “Welcome back, sir,” he greeted.

“Melanie, would you please see about showing them the points system?” I asked, and the girl turned on her heel and hurried back out to the landing pad where the group was still disembarking. “Jim, do we have some kind of secure storage set up yet?”

“We have an armory and Dust storage,” he answered.

“How big is our Dust storage room?” I asked, and he shrugged.

“Four hundred square foot room, or there about.”

Opening my Inventory and taking in just how much Dust I had, I shook my head. There was a lot, all in different colors and grades—enough that I wouldn't be going over it all at a glance. What I could discern quickly though was that, even after the cut I'd have to pass to Cinder, there was way more than a room that small would hold. “That's not going to cut it.”

“What did you have in mind, sir?” Jim asked, bringing out his scroll.

“We're going to need something a bit bigger than that. A lot bigger, really. Secured room, preferably underground, at least two thousand square feet and ten to fifteen feet worth of vertical space—though if we can make it larger, you won't hear me complaining. Guarded at all times. We'll need storage racks for crystals and canisters. Also, we need a separate room, near the armory probably, for storage of these.” I fished out a red potion from my side pouch connected to Inventory and passed it over for him to inspect. “I'm thinking we can put together field packs and include a couple of those for everyone per mission, then everyone would return the unused ones and they could go back into storage. They're kind of valuable, so I don't want anyone getting the bright idea to try to sell them.”

Neo leaned up and cupped a hand to my ear. “What about cash?”
“Good point,” I agreed. “Think you can get ahold of a couple of old bank safes?”

“Excuse me? Bank safes?” he asked, eyebrows twitching upwards in confusion.

“For money,” I explained. “Maybe just a vault, instead. Whatever works. Something we can store cash for expenses. Maybe give our members the option to keep their own earnings here.” I turned to Neo and sent, 'Do banks generally charge interest for keeping an account open, or do they pay interest? Or neither.'

'You pay to keep an account open,' she answered, and I frowned at that.

“I think that may be a hit with the men, sir,” Jim smiled. “I wouldn't mind closing my account and using cash for everything myself, if it meant not paying bank fees to keep the damn account open.”

“Let's do that, then. Maybe security boxes or something,” I shrugged.

With a nod, Jim asked, “Anything else?” I traded a look with Neo, who shook her head.

“I think that covers it, Jim,” I nodded.

Beside me, Neo sighed softly. “Sorry this didn't come up in the staff meeting earlier. We're kind of bringing things up as they're needed at times.”

Jim simply shrugged. “We'll get it done, sir, ma'am. I'm sure our other department heads would appreciate if things like this were brought up at meetings, but everyone knows we're still getting set up here. Most of us are former military, so we understand that new orders come in as the situation changes. If something else comes up, don't hesitate to let one of us know.”

“How's Candice settling in?” I asked, and he winced. “Not well?”

The older man frowned, shaking his head. “She went back to work.”

Frowning, I asked, “Really? Did you explain why that was a bad idea?”
“I did,” he agreed. “She disagreed. I’ve got a couple men watching her.”

“I’ll try to talk to her later,” I grumbled. “Maybe talk some sense into her.”

Jim snorted. “Good luck, sir.”

A finger poked me in the back and I turned to see Melanie coming back. “Right, well, let me know if anything comes up. We’ll be on base for a while, working on some things.”

“Sir,” he saluted, turning and heading off, presumably to find someone to talk to about new construction.

“Okay, let’s go see about making some new gear, and then getting the bounded fields up, since I know that’s what you three are waiting for,” I grinned at the girls, and the four of us made our way out of the admin office to the barracks.

“You got everything?” Neo asked, and I nodded.

“Everything you wanted and then some,” I bragged. The girls exchanged wide grins.

We made our way into what had been marked off as our quarters in the barracks. Stepping out of the elevator, we found the first room from the elevator converted into a guard post and a steel door separating the elevator and guard post from the rest of the rooms. The soldier on duty stood to attention and saluted. “Sirs.”

“At ease,” I ordered, and she dropped the salute, before opening the door to the guard post and taking a clipboard off a desk, along with a set of badges on lanyards.

Handing the clipboard over, she dropped into an at-ease stance. “Sir, guards have been stationed here and on the floor above. Access to the VIP quarters is granted by electronic lock, keyed to your badges and combinations you will be asked to set upon first use. On the suggestion of our Intelligence Chief, the locks are not tied to scrolls and the computers controlling them are on an isolated network.”
I turned a look to Melanie and the currently invisible Miltia, who simply grinned. I rolled my eyes and passed Neo and Melanie their badges. “Anything else we should be aware of?”

The woman gestured towards the clipboard. “It's all on there, sir.”

“Thank you, Private.” Having a look at the clipboard, I passed it off to Neo so I could go ahead and register my badge and password. The door locks had a full QWERTY keyboard, as opposed to a number pad, and the keyboard itself was an actual pushbutton model, as opposed to the holographic interfaces seen just about everywhere. Once we were done with that, we passed through what I realized was a sally port, locking it behind us and making our way to the new crafting room.

“Looks like they finished moving everything in,” Miltia assessed as she regained visibility.

Sighing softly, I swapped into my Jaune gear and dropped into a chair. “I kind of wish they'd have warned me before adding the sally port and guard station. I'll have to adjust the bounded field scheme to exclude it from the Aura Isolation seal, when we set that up.” I flipped through the clipboard's contents. “Looks like we're the only ones with full authorization up here. The guards, Jim, and Angel can get in in an emergency at the moment. We'll probably want to add Ruby, Blake, and Yang to the guest list if we're going to be having them over.

“We can decide on that later. When are we doing the Sanctification?” Melanie asked from nearby, inspecting a project they had apparently been working on earlier—what looked like new dresses for the twins, along with a couple of uniform dresses.

“Do we want to do it right now, or later?” I asked, opening my skill menu and going over the patterns I would need.

“Later. We can take our time with it, then get cleaned up and go out,” Neo suggested, and I nodded. “Crafting first, or we'll get distracted having fun and it won't get done. Or worse, it might feel rushed.”

“Agreed,” I nodded, knowing exactly how distracting the girls could be. Opening my Inventory, I reached in and dug out a bolt of cloth, dropping it onto an available table. “We should start with this,” I told them, drawing their attention to the desk. The cloth itself was thinner than either the Ursa or Beowolf fur bolts and appeared to be covered in black feathers. Also unlike the Ursa and Beowolf cloth, this particular cloth couldn't be Observed—when I tried to use the skill, it returned no results. No stats, no special abilities, not even a description. Then again, being able to no-sell Observe like that was pretty much an ability in and of itself. It's part of what excited me about trying this thing out—both the unknown factor and the implied potential there.
“What is it?” Miltia asked, and I grinned.

“This dropped from that thing up in Atlas. The Nameless,” I answered. “Along with a very large talon and something I’m not entirely sure about.” On their curious looks, I rolled my eyes and dug out the third item—a small face mask, white with red lines, and four red eye holes. When worn, the mask would cover the eyes before tapering down to a point at the chin. Hitting it with Observe, I read off the description. “The Raven’s Mask. Epic level. Allows the wearer to see through illusions and disguises, grants protection from negative mind-altering effects, grants the user a Fear effect mental attack, can see Aura, and—get this—discern the truth. Sounds like a built in bullshit detector.”

“Sounds pretty nice. What’s the catch?” Melanie asked.

“Bind on equip. Not soulbind, oddly enough. Becomes bloodline bound on equip. I’ve never seen that before, though, so the best guess I can give as to what it does is that it would only allow family members—members of the bloodline of whoever it’s bound to—to use it. Siblings, parents, children, maybe even further relatives.” Though, that was all speculative until someone actually put it on.

Something about that particular power set niggled at the back of my mind, and it wasn’t long before a memory shook loose and I resisted the urge to sigh. ‘Give it a few tomoe in each eye and it's like having a Sharingan in your pocket. Hell, with the raven theme, it'd fit Itachi to a T.’ I know that the Nameless used at least four of those abilities against me while I was trying to run. Saw through my Invisibility, no-sold my mental spells, tracked me in that swarm of Grimm using my Aura, and had a persistent Fear effect that Gamer’s Mind protected me from.’

“The thing is, while being able to see through illusions like Neo’s would be great, the rest of those effects are pretty redundant for me. Gamer’s Mind already protects me from mind-altering effects and my Semblance points out people on my map, so I may as well see Aura—and if I needed to, I’m sure I could create a spell that would do it. I might be able to make one to penetrate veils and the like as well. And mental spells are kind of my thing, so I don't exactly need an item that gives me a Fear effect when I have Intent.”

Sitting down on the table beside me, Neo regarded the mask in my hands thoughtfully before turning to give the twins a look. “That seems like something the head of our Intelligence Division should have.” Shifting mint green eyes on me, she smirked. “Imagine what this could do for internal security. I mean, sure, you’ve got your Semblance, but even with Guild functions we don’t get a tenth of the options you do for spotting infiltrators and the like. Whoever wears this could screen people and detect lies just as well as you could.”
“Did you already duplicate it?” Miltia asked, and I nodded.

“That, but not the cloth or the talon. I was unsure if we'd want to dupe the mats or the finished products,” I admitted. “What could we even use the talon for?”

Melanie raised an eyebrow, asking, “How big a talon?”

“Four feet long, a foot wide at its widest, tapering down to a point and razor sharp on the inside,” I shrugged.

“Well, going with Neo's suggestion, suppose Miltia and I use one mask, shared between us. That will give us one more to keep for someone else to use, if it's needed. We've both got a copy of Miltia's new claws, so why not cut the talon down into a set and make it part of a new boot weapon and then duplicate it so we both have one? Use part of the bolt of cloth to make a cloak and we've got a disguise,” Melanie suggested.

“It's pretty thematic,” Miltia nodded in agreement with her sister. “We've been trading off weapons for years so we each know how to use the other's gear—so the person we would be pretending to be would be about equally skilled with both.”

“That leaves me kind of jealous that I don't get a cool mask,” Neo pouted. “Sure, I could use the spare Raven's Mask, but if that's iconic for you two, I'd rather have something of my own. Jaune's already got a fox, or I'd go with that—foxes being all about illusions and tricks in legend, at least in Menagerie, before it was wiped out and... made into Menagerie.”

I rolled my eyes. “Shit like that is part of why I kind of need to go to Beacon. I don't know the culture, or the history, beyond the very basics. I actually need to study. And if you want a mask badly enough, I'm sure we can find or make you one. Speaking of making one, I need to. My Semblance treats the one I conjured to replace the illusory mask as permanent or re-conjures it every time I equip the Fox set, but I don't want to have it destroyed in combat. Later, though. For now, do we want to make a cloak and dupe that, or dupe the bolts and make a cloak and something else? Then again, I'm not one hundred percent sure I'll be able to dupe whatever we make, whereas I'm pretty sure we should be able to duplicate the cloth by itself. And with that in mind, we should consider asking the same question about the talon as well.”

Examining the bolt of cloth, Neo hummed. “There's enough here for at least two pieces of equipment. I say dupe the cloth, then make a couple of cloaks from one and hold onto the rest for later. I'd rather not risk not being able to dupe a cloak once we're done if it's something that can't be duplicated for whatever reason. Same with the talon.”
“Agreed,” the twins synced.

Nodding, I made a small ID and duped the cloth and talon, tossing the new items back into Inventory before destroying the ID. “And done. Since it’s for you, what did you have in mind for a design?” I asked the twins.

The pair exchanged a look and shrugged. “We’ll do that part. You worry about picking out a decent set of enchantments.”

“Okay, then,” I agreed, handing them the bolt and taking out pen and paper as the three girls began talking over what sort of design to use. Digging through my menus, I found my list of available patterns and hummed in thought as I looked them over. ‘Durability is a must. I know it's Grimm hide and pretty durable on its own, but I might want to give it a bit more in the way of protection to keep it from getting destroyed.’ Marking that down as a possibility, I began looking through the rest for interesting things. Nearby, the girls had spread out the cloth and were already sectioning the material in half.

A few quick adjustments allowed me to display only patterns I had the Dust to use, narrowing things down a bit, but not by much—I was honestly surprised at exactly how wide a variety of Dust I seemed to have on hand. Drawing out Sanguine’s notes, I flipped to the section on Dustweaving—specifically, I was trying to figure out how these things were supposed to be powered. As it turned out, there were a few ways.

Option one: if you used enough Dust in a pattern, the pattern would power itself—which was, I suspected, how Cinder's dress worked, seeing as the lines on that were pretty thick. The downside was, once the Dust lost its power, the user would have to go back and either replace the Dust thread used, or replace the entire garment if that wasn't feasible.

Option two: the most cost-effective method was to use thinner threads and lines for the enchantment pattern and connect them all to a central point, where one would attach a shaped metal button-like slot to fit a cut Dust crystal. There were machines that, like Dust rounds, melted down Dust crystals and poured them into molds. Once it cooled, the resultant 'cut' Dust would fit one of these universally sized slots. There were a few different sizes to choose from, between shirt-button sized slots and crystals up to an inch wide. Smaller crystals would not last as long as larger crystals, but would produce the same grade of continuous effect. Crystallized Dust was like using a liquid fuel source—a gallon of gasoline had the same effect in a car’s tank as an ounce, it just lasted longer. Also like the gallon vs ounce comparison, if you detonated one of the smaller crystals, it would have a lesser effect than detonating the larger crystal.
Option three: depending on the type of enchantment or bounded field, it was sometimes better to actually seal the Dust powering the desired pattern into a storage seal of sorts, similar to the space expansion seals we would be using to store armor plates. It wasn't very cost effective, but it was far safer than having Dust crystals out in the open where they could potentially be set off.

The notes also gave me a soft limit to the number of patterns I could have on a garment. Due to space requirements for most enchantments, it was hard to add more than a few to a single piece of cloth. A glove might be able to hold one, perhaps two enchantments, while something like a shirt could hold more because there was more space to work with. That was where the notes suggested layering and careful placement of patterns. For instance, on my new jacket, I would have things like durability, damage conversion, and weather resistance patterns on the outer layer of cloth, while the liner could hold temperature control and more. With the cloak, however, it looked like the girls weren't going to be using a secondary inner layer or lining, so my choices there would be limited.

'Well,' I thought, shooting a glance at where the girls were taking scissors to the cloth, 'it's supposed to be a stealth piece, similar to my Shiro set of spells. I think I can manage something similar here. I could throw on this Noise Suppression enchantment and it'll silence their movements. And the Aura Containment ward doesn't actually have to go on a room. On a piece of gear, it should have the same effect as my Aura Suppression—that is, reducing Aura output to zero.'

That decided, I picked out the Dust needed: Silent Silver, White, and Colorless. I decided to hold off on durability for the moment, until after we'd gotten the thing put together and the first two enchantments on it. Picking out the appropriate machines, I set them to spitting out cut crystals for Silent Silver and White, and had thread spun from colorless. While that was going on, I began the task of transposing the patterns I'd eaten from my Semblance onto paper. “When the Colorless finishes, go ahead and use it to sew up the edges, and sew on three or four sockets for cut crystals. It's up to you on what size you want,” I instructed. The second option for powering the enchantments was going to be my best bet with these things, until or unless I came up with something better.

“How many colors are we going to be using?” Miltia asked as she moved to take the completed spool of thread.

“At least two, possibly as many as four. It's going to depend on whether or not you want a durability enchantment on it,” I answered distractedly.

Melanie hummed, digging out the required sockets, and sending me a questioning look. “Are these enchantments always on or should we be able to turn them on and off? Because there's two types of socket here.”

After a moment of thought, I said, “They should probably be toggleable.”
“So, if we're using the cut crystals for this, and twist-to-toggle sockets, why not double up on them?” Neo asked, and I looked up to send her a questioning look. “These things are basically batteries, right?”

I resisted the urge to facepalm at the obviousness of what she was suggesting. “Yeah, I don't see why you couldn't use them in sequence. Or, if I know where you're going, as backups. Have one on, and when it runs out, you've already got a spare to turn on until you replace the spent one. Okay, let's do that. We're using the highest grades of this stuff that I've got available, but there's no reason not to take precautions.”

I went back to my drawing as the girls worked. After a few minutes, I felt a pair of breasts pressing against the back of my neck as Neo draped herself over my shoulders and watched me work. Soft lips found my ear and I shuddered briefly, drawing a chuckle from the girl at my back. “This is nice,” she murmured, and I nodded. She immediately went back to teasing my ear, before her lips trailed down to my neck.

My restraint snapped—not that I was fighting all that hard in the first place. I growled and reached back, threading my fingers through the hair at the back of her head, and pulled her down hard—my lips crushing against hers as I kissed her soundly, nearly dragging her into my lap in the process. Several long minutes later, I pulled back and looked her in the eyes—vanilla and strawberry, and having gone very wide. Her breath came in short pants and her skin was flushed, her lips slightly swollen and red. Taking a slow breath, I gathered the tattered remains of my self-control and clamped down on the urge to simply take her there.

“Down, girl. Save it for later. We're going to be breaking the living room in shortly, remember?” I reminded, and she nodded, moving to nuzzle her nose into the place where my neck and shoulder joined.

It took a few minutes, but I finished transposing the patterns and handed them to Neo. “Here you go. You've got the higher sewing skill, and putting these on run off of that as opposed to Enchanting. And since you're using colorless Dust, try not to get the patterns crossed, or it'll be bad.” I would have to level my sewing skill soon, so I could do my own enchanting without fucking it up—I wouldn't be able to rely on Neo or the twins for fast modifications in Beacon, after all.

The ice cream themed girl rolled her eyes, an amused lilt to her voice as she asked, “Anything else?”

“Not really. This array should let us expand on it in the future and give room for at least one more enchantment, maybe more,” I shrugged, standing and making my way over to watch her work. Melanie vacated her seat at one sewing machine while Miltia held out her hand for one of the sheets.
“It'll go faster if we each do one, then switch,” she suggested, and Neo passed her the second pattern.

While they worked, I opened my Inventory and took out the oversized talon, placing it on top of an unoccupied table. “What do you think?”

Melanie hummed, looking it over. Running a finger down the smooth back side of it, she hummed. “We're not weaponsmiths, so I've got no idea how to work this. We had our weapons built for us. Didn't Ruby and Yang build their own at Signal? Not sure about Blake, but hers seems pretty customized as well.”

“They did, but I don't think Ruby's ever worked with something like this before. I do know of a good weaponsmith, but I kind of mind-wiped her, though,” I admitted. “I had her construct my new weapon for my Shiro disguise.”

“It wouldn't hurt to check,” Melanie shrugged, and I sent the usually white-clad a text with the relevant information.

“I need to buy my uniforms, soon, so I can alter them,” I mused aloud, watching Neo and Miltia work.

Turning green eyes on me, Melanie asked, “You wouldn't rather make them from scratch?”

“No,” I shook my head. “It'd be too much trouble. And before you ask, no I wouldn't just ask you all to help when there are more important things you could be working on. I can buy a few made from combat grade material in a uniform shop and add enchantments to them here, and it'll be good enough.”

“What the fuck?!” Neo hissed, jerking back from her chair. Beside her, Miltia likewise nearly fell off her own chair in her haste to scramble back.

Reaay a spell on my lips, motion caught my eye from both tables. The cloth, which had previously been inert, had begun writhing—looking for all the world like animals trapped under their respective sewing machines. Grabbing one, I yanked it out and threw it on top of the nearest table, where it stilled. Behind me, Melanie had done likewise with the second cloth, and it likewise went limp. Frowning, I hit the first one with Observe. “I think you're done,” I told them, chuckling quietly at what I found there. “So, it's a cloak. It doesn't have a name. It does have a description that reads,
"Nameless Here For Evermore."

“What do they do?” Neo asked, pushing herself up off the floor as Melanie helped her sister.

“Well, a few things.” I picked it up, rubbing it between my fingers. The outside was all feathers facing downward, giving it the same coloration as a common raven—black, with a faint dark blue undertone, giving it a vaguely inky look. The inside was soft and supple like leather, and the whole thing was faintly warm to the touch and hugged the flesh of my fingers—in a literal sense, as the thing seemed to be trying to grab my hand. The only reason I didn't try to shake it off was because, while it was a bit weird, it didn't seem to be trying to do anything malicious. The enchantment patterns were visible on the underside of the cloak, dark since their power sources had yet to be installed. The buttons that would hold those Dust crystals were actually on the inside of the collar, to prevent the glow from them from being seen, while on the opposite side of the material was a small metal button, dark in color, that could be twisted—I assumed to bring the Dust on the other side into contact with the rest and close the circuit.

I handed the cloak to Melanie. “Put it on. I think it'll be better to show you.”

“It's safe, right?” she asked, regarding it doubtfully.

Shooting her an unamused look, I asked, “Do you really think I'd hand you something that wasn't?”

Sighing, Melanie shook her head. “Fair point,” she muttered. Taking it in hand, she made a face as it grabbed her back. “If this thing eats me, I'm haunting you.”

“Oh, just put the damn cloak on, you big baby,” Miltia hissed to her side, and Melanie stuck her tongue out at her sister.

“Fine, then,” Melanie grumbled, before twirling it around and allowing it to settle around her, the hood settling over her head and the rest falling about her body, hiding her from view. The whole thing twitched, before shifting to conform to her body, and her face disappeared into suddenly unnaturally dark shadows within the hood. Above her head, I watched as her nameplate changed. Her name disappeared, replaced by a line that looked like someone had taken a pen and stricken through that field. Her title likewise changed, shifting to display, 'Nameless Here For Evermore.' Her level, however, remained the same.

Then things got weird, as the cloak tensed then contracted, pulling flush against her skin. Melanie
went limp and fell, her knees giving out. Reacting quickly, I caught her with Telekinesis as worry flooded my mind. Movement from the corner of my eye drew my attention to Miltia, who had doubled over and fallen to her knees, Neo having kept her from smash-}

“Jaune, what’s happening?!” the shorter girl cried, and I shook my head.

“I don’t know.” I got out, hitting both with Observe as I flipped the mental toggle switch for Gamer’s Mind back on so I could think and act without panic and worry gnawing at my mind. ‘Worry later, fix this now.’

Observe failed entirely on Melanie, while on Miltia it latched on for a moment before failing there as well. Their HP and Aura bars in my HUD’s party menu ticked downwards slowly, as did my Spirit meter. Melanie convulsed in my arms as the cloak seemed to burrow into her flesh, slowly disappearing into her body. A glance to my right saw an inky blue-black substance slowly exuding from Miltia’s visible skin, and I realized what was going on. “I think I get it. I think they’re okay. In a lot of pain, but okay. Give it a minute,” I murmured, casting diagnostic spells and throwing out a heal DOT just to make sure. The continuous heal was more than enough to match the slow drain on their HP. ‘Okay, now to stop their Aura from bottoming out.’

I’d never tried any sort of Aura transfer, but now seemed like a pretty good time. Wrapping a hand around Melanie’s wrist, I focused on pouring Aura into her and was rewarded with a Skill Creation notification. I dismissed the window, only reading it long enough to note the skill name as Aura Transfusion, and watched the readout on my HUD. Melanie’s Aura ticked back up to full and I reached out and put a hand on Miltia before recasting the technique.

“So, they’re not dying?” Neo asked, and I shook my head.

“No,” I answered distractedly, still watching their gauges on my HUD.

After what must have been ten minutes, but felt more like a small lifetime even with Gamer’s Mind on, the twins relaxed and stopped losing HP and Aura. A glance showed Miltia now completely covered by a copy of the cloak Melanie had equipped. The twin in my arms stirred and drew my attention, and I saw that her nameplate and Observe readout were back to normal. An Observe at Miltia proved ineffective, as her nameplate now appeared as Melanie’s had before. “Ooh, that sucked,” Melanie whimpered. “You lied, Jaune.”

“Not intentionally,” I denied. “How the hell was I supposed to know it’d do that? I’m sorry you were hurt, though. How do you feel?”
“Achy all over,” Melanie sighed, and I helped her to her feet. “It’s getting better quickly though. Miltia?”

“Oww,” Miltia whimpered, and I raised an eyebrow at her voice. “That was weird.” She paused, then tried again.

“What the hell?” Melanie asked.

Miltia stretched a hand to her throat. “That's not my voice.”

I hummed, shooting a look between the two. “That's kind of nifty.”

Shooting a look between the twins, Neo asked, “Okay, Jaune, what the hell happened? Are they okay?”

“We're fine,” the twins synced.

“I have a theory,” I admitted. “The description said they were 'bloodline bound.' I'd assumed that meant only blood relatives could use it. I think it's a bit more literal than that. Miltia pretty much bled—or sweat—out a copy of the cloak after Melanie put it on, while it burrowed into Melanie. There are no obvious wounds, no signs of damage. I think it may have changed you both—become a part of you, on a genetic level. As in, having a cloak of living material with supernatural powers is part of your DNA.”

“Is that a guess…” Miltia began.

Melanie finished with, “Or something else?”

I shrugged. “Something else. The concept is not new, but it was mostly popularized in recent memory on Earth by one particular manga. My Semblance has a bad habit of pulling concepts from odd places at times. Or it could be something specific to the Nameless, or some combination of the two. The 'why' isn't testable without another Nameless-style Grimm encounter, and I don't want one of those any time soon. The 'how,' on the other hand, is testable—but we can look into that later. Long explanation short, those sort of inheritable traits are called a 'bloodline limit,' in the source material. The mask is also bloodline bound, so whoever puts that on is liable to go through much the
same as with the cloak.”

Melanie and Miltia exchanged a look, half of which was hidden under the cloak, before Melanie asked, “So this could be passed down to our children?”

I nodded. “Or up, to your mother. Might want to text her and ask if anything weird happened. If not, then it probably only applies to people in party. Second thoughts about the mask?” I asked, and the girls shrugged.

“Okay, so, the cloak disguises whoever wears it?” Neo asked, and I nodded.

“That, and more. We only know it's Miltia because we watched it come out of her, we know she has it, and she's in party. It's more than a disguise—it's actually a mental effect. I can tell, because Gamer's Mind engaged the moment she put it on. The description is accurate: whoever wears the cloak is nameless—literally unidentifiable.” Reaching over, I attempted to flip the hood back, only to find it refused to budge.

“There's something else,” Miltia hummed, and a moment later the whole thing shifted into a different style—going from a long cloak that stretched down to her ankles and covered her front, to a small hood and cape, which stretched down to just beneath her shoulders. A moment after that, it shifted again into a jacket, and then a dress, before she pulled the hood back and the whole thing shifted down to drape over her shoulders and upper chest like a shawl. “Okay, that's awesome.”

“So, hood up, Nameless effect on. Hood down, Nameless effect off. Even her voice is back to normal,” Melanie pointed out. “And I know it's the same garment, but it's like my brain doesn't entirely want to make the connection. It… itches.”

“Yeah,” Neo agreed. “It's weird. If the effect is complete, that probably means that it'll attempt to protect your identity even when it's not fully active. Like a little suggestion constantly telling people, 'this can't possibly be the same person.'”

Melanie frowned, crossing her arms as a look of concentration came over her face. “I can kind of feel it, in the back of my head. It's like a switch, waiting for me to press it. I think we can both use the cloak at the same time.”

“Which would confirm my theory of it being a bloodline limit style trait,” I murmured. “Flip it.”
Blue-black ink flowed out of Melanie's skin for a moment before solidifying into a cloak matching the one her sister was wearing. “Looks like you were right,” she confirmed. “And no pain this time, yay! Cause having it hurt every time we used it would suck.”

“Well, good news is, I can ditch the durability enchantment,” I grinned, drawing questioning looks from the girls. “It's living cloth. It self-repairs. Unless you destroy part of it, like by fire, then even if part of it is cut off it'll seek to rejoin the rest. Watch.” Taking out one of my sabers, I cut a strip off the end of it, holding it up for the others to see. The section of cloth writhed in my hand, jerking towards the rest of the cloak as I held on to it. Letting go, it jumped off my hand and flew through the air before reconnecting with the rest of the cloak. When it settled, I couldn't even tell it had ever been cut. “I'm pretty sure that even if it did get destroyed, you could just sweat out another.”

“So, what's this mean for adding that last enchantment?” Neo asked, and I shrugged.

“It'll probably let Melanie or Miltia do it,” I pointed out. “It's bloodline bound—so odds are good, it's not going to fight either of them trying to modify it by adding new patterns or treat it like damage and try to 'heal' it.” I took the mask they were going to use off the table, while throwing the second cloak into Inventory. Passing Melanie the mask, I grinned. “Try it on.”

The girl sighed and took the mask, flipping it over and examining both sides. The back side was smooth, with no string of any kind to hold it in place. “Wait!” I called, turning to Miltia. “Both of you, will your cloaks off or something, then Miltia needs to drop party.”

“Okay,” the girls nodded, and the cloaks both shifted into shawls. A moment later, Miltia dropped from party. “So, testing to see if it's a party-only thing?”

“Right,” I nodded, turning back to Melanie. “Whenever you're ready.”

“This is going to suck,” the girl whined.

“I know, and I'm sorry,” I agreed.

“Well, here goes nothing.” Shrugging, she held it up to her face. When the mask was less than an inch from touching her skin, the whole thing jumped, latching onto her face.

“Shit!” Neo yelped, jerking back, along with Miltia. “That is freaky as fuck.”
Pulling the twin into my arms, I cast the same spells as before and monitored her health while I watched the mask bond to her. The eye holes all immediately closed, as the beak opened and Melanie let out a moan of pain. The edges of the mask seemed to gain a slimy consistency, rather than the bone it was previously, as it oozed around her head, covering her ears and over to the back of her skull. Long, blue-black hair slowly pushed itself out from the surface of the mask, replacing what it had covered. As the mask hardened again, the empty eye holes reopened, bulges of flesh swiftly swelling outwards before shifting and rotating, resolving into a set of what looked like four real eyes. The eyes peering out from the mask were all a bright shade of red, as opposed to Melanie's green. After a few moments, Melanie settled down, panting in my arms.


Leaning down, I kissed her cheek, murmuring an apology where her ear should be before straightening back up. “What was it like?” Miltia asked.

Melanie shuddered. “About as pleasant as something crawling into your face through your eyes and nose can be expected to be.”

“Oh. Shit. And nothing happened to me, so I'm probably going to get it as soon as I rejoin party, huh?” she asked, and I nodded. “Oh, that's going to suck.”

The twin in my arms chuckled softly. “And there you were, calling me a big baby earlier.”

“Alright, that's enough sniping,” I intervened, releasing Melanie to stand on her own. “Melanie, why don't you put the cloak back on.”

Melanie rolled her eyes—all four of them—and the shawl shifted again, crawling up and draping the oversized hood over her head while the material filled out to cover her from head to toe in something close to its original full cloak configuration. Where before, the interior of the hood had been empty of everything but shadows, now we should see the white and red mask, with four glowing red eyes burning within it. Only the mask showed up, while not a hint of her face was visible. “That's actually really fucking cool,” I sighed, a bit jealous I wasn't going to be wearing it myself. “Toggle the enchantments, would you?”

Shrugging, Melanie reached up and turned two of the buttons at her neck on the outside of the cloak. Once more, her nameplate changed, as her level disappeared—not question marks, not a strike through, but no numerical value or level field. Opening my map, I found her icon had gone
transparent. “Well, even my Semblance says that works. You don't have a level any more, and my map doesn't want to acknowledge you're there. Let me test something.” Dropping her from party, her icon faded completely from the map. “Yeah, I can't even track you if you're not in party.”

The cloaked form brought its hand up, switching the second button down over to the 'off' position. “Can't talk with this on. I can hear myself, so radio or scrolls will probably work, but you obviously didn't hear anything.”

“Not a peep,” Neo agreed.

The cloak shifted again and Melanie pulled off the mask, handing it to Miltia, and I noticed that her eyes were still green under the mask. “Your turn.”

I blinked, reaching out and taking the mask before Miltia could put it on. Hitting it with Observe, I frowned. “It's inert.”

The twins blinked in confusion as Neo asked, “What?”

“It's just a mask,” I shrugged, holding it up for her to see. The mask had reverted to its hollow eyed configuration. Putting it up to my face, it did absolutely nothing—it had all the life of a piece of ceramic, or old bone. “Melanie, got any more of those mental switches?”

The brusque twin frowned, then nodded slowly. “Yeah, give me a—ah, there it goes,” she grinned. Seeing no obvious changes, I hit her with Observe, and saw nothing in the description that would indicate anything had changed. She continued, drawing my attention from my menus. “I can see Aura again. And Neo's hair and eyes look funny. They're brown, but I can see what looks like a sort of transparent shell of Aura over them. It's kind of really cool.”

Neo hummed. “I get it. It's part of her. She can toggle the abilities without calling up the mask itself. But what about the mask? Is it like the cloak, and you get a new mask if you want one, or do you just get the abilities? Also, can you use the cloak's abilities without the cloak active?”

“Well, there are switches,” Melanie admitted, and a moment later white and red flowed out from the corners of her eyes—her tear ducts—swiftly expanding to cover her face. “Ugh, that feels funny. Like crying out a gallon of water all at once.” The cloak joined the mask again as she brought them both out, then both disappeared the way they'd come. A moment after her cloak had disappeared, her nameplate changed, then reverted back to normal. “Yeah, the cloak abilities work independent of having the cloak out or not.” Turning to Miltia, she grinned. “Your turn.”

Nodding, I pulled her into my arms and sent a party invite. As I’d suspected, she began convulsing a moment later and I started casting. Watching the process in reverse on Miltia, as the mask bled out of her tear ducts the first time to cover her face, was no less disturbing than it had been the first time with her sister. Thankfully, it was over quickly. Once it was finished, both twins began practicing using both their new items, creating new garments with their cloaks and bringing their masks out and back in again.

Beside me, Neo shook her head. “I don’t know if I could do it. Sure, the abilities are awesome, but the thought of something inside me like that…” she shuddered, and I nodded.

“All right, that’s enough playing for now. We’ve got one or two more enchantments to add. I’ve made a list of stuff, so have a look,” I said, passing over the notebook with the list of enchantments and effects. “They’re arranged by effect strength and the amount of space each pattern takes. Near as I can tell, I have access to three distinct grades of stuff at the moment. Minor enchantments are small things and take up little room when you make one. Moderate enchantments take up roughly twice the size of minor enchantments and tend to be pretty decent effects. Silencing and space expansion are moderate enchantments, for example. Major enchantments are the largest, twice the size of moderate—or four times the size of minor enchantments. Aura Containment is a major enchantment—usually something you’d put on a building, or room. Technically, it’s one that would normally only be used for bounded fields—along with Sanctification.”

The twins took the list, looking it over as they carried on a silent conversation. A moment later, they came back and pointed out two in particular. “These two.”

I blinked, looking over the enchantments they wanted. “Veil of Shadows and Fog?” I asked, raising an eyebrow. The first had a cool name, but wasn’t actually all that useful in most situations. Veil of Shadows acted sort of like active camouflage, using any shadows the user happened to be in. They would grow darker and cling to the user, making that person more difficult, but not impossible, to spot. Even under full light, the target would still be partially obscured—but that was actually a negative, depending on the situation. An area of unnatural shadow in the daylight tended to draw attention. For a stealth build, it wouldn’t be terrible, and I could see how it could have some pretty dramatic visual effects. The second pattern, aptly named ’Fog,’ did exactly as it said on the tin: it collected water vapor in the air and created fog. It could fill a closed room almost instantly, making it more difficult to see, or partially obscure someone using it in the open. Combined with Veil of Shadows, it would make them difficult to spot, at least at night. During the day, inexplicable fog may tip people off. I took a moment to explain all of that, and the twins nodded.

“It’ll be good for breaking line of sight and getting to where we can actually throw on Invisibility
without someone seeing us do it,” Miltia explained.

“Once you teach us Invisibility,” Melanie hinted, and I rolled my eyes and nodded.

“Fine, fine. I'm leaving the rest of the other cloak's slots empty for now, though. That way, if something comes up and we need to add something different for whoever gets it, we can,” I warned, and they nodded in agreement.

Neo sidled up to me as I started drawing out the two new patterns. “So, we've got a spare cloak and the cloth to make two more. Who do you think they should go to?”

I shrugged. “Not sure yet,” I admitted. “If you want one…”

Neo hummed, then shook her head. “I'll hold off. It may be a good idea to give one to one of the girls at Beacon, though. It seems more Blake's style, but honestly, it'd be more useful for Ruby. She doesn't exactly seem like the stealthy type, so she could kind of use all the help she could get.” She hummed quietly, before adding, “If Ruby ate one of the cloaks, do you think Yang would get it as well, being only a half-sister?”

“That's a good question,” I admitted. “No idea. As for giving one to her… we'll see.” I did not particularly want to bring Ruby into this side of things, but if it became absolutely necessary, I would. “We'll do the bounded field array for this place next. Sanctification, Aura Containment, Silencing, and some skill enhancement buffs to begin with. Once we've got those laid into the array, the whole upper two floors should count for being within the field for tantric rituals. Well, everything inside the boundary described by the Dust I'll be marking out the area with. I'll exclude everything from this side of the sally port outwards, so the guards won't be affected.”

Chuckling, Neo ran a hand through my hair, dragging her nails gently along my scalp. Shivering slightly, I remembered that I'd toggled Gamer's Mind back on and flipped it back to Defensive mode. “In other words, any time we fuck here, we'll be renewing those buffs.”

“Well, any time anyone does. You could also just apply enough Aura to it to receive the buff, but it's far less effective and you waste Aura doing it that way,” I explained. “I plan to do the same thing in the dorm rooms, once I get to Beacon.”

“I'm sure they'll appreciate it,” Neo hummed, and I rolled my eyes.
“Behave. I am not trying to seduce Ruby, Yang, or Blake,” I denied, and she snorted.

“Pull the other one. It's got bells on.”

I sighed quietly, refusing to rise to the bait. “You're incorrigible.”

Neo nodded her agreement. “Absolutely. You wouldn't have me any other way. Now, hurry up. We're getting antsy.”

“Yeah, watching your verbal foreplay over there is kind of a turn-on,” Melanie smirked.

"Please won't you hurry, Jaune?” Miltia asked, a grin twitching at the edges of her lips.

The girls burst into giggles, and I knew I'd lost. 'In loss, victory?’ I wondered, a smile playing across my own lips. Yeah, I couldn't exactly consider it a loss, given that these three were already planning an afternoon of adult fun and games for the four of us.

“Not that I mind,” I lied, glancing around at our surroundings. Shitty electronic or techno music blared in a way that caused my newly heightened senses to make me want to cover my ears and the acrid scent of smoke hung in the air from smoke machines. Lasers and strobes pulsed to the beat as bodies ground against each other on the nearby dance floor and the stink of a hundred bodies worth of sweat and arousal hung as a faint aftertaste under the artificial smoke. Before, I hadn't minded it too much. Now, I minded it a lot, because the place had become offensive to the senses—but the girls liked it for some reason, so I tolerated it. I would seriously have to create a 'suppress senses' spell or something in the near future though. Something like that could come in handy for more than just saving my poor nose and ears in places like this. “But what was so important you had to do this face to face?”

Across from me, Hei watched the crowd. We were seated in the booth furthest back in the corner of the club, pressed up against the wall, and Hei sat facing the door. It made my paranoia itch, so I had shifted so I could look out over most of the floor and had a view of the door to my right. “She's here.”

My red contacts met his sunglasses and I raised an eyebrow. “Going to have to be more specific.”
“That request you made. Your target.”

I stilled, eyes shifting over the crowd as a mild sense of panic set in. I didn't know much about Raven Branwen, other than some basic facts as presented in what passed as 'canon' for the RWBY universe on Earth. She was Yang’s mom, Qrow’s sister, had been on a team with Qrow, Taiyang, and Summer Rose, and was enough of a badass that Neo had—at the end of Season 2—known enough to run. I’d asked her, but my Neo had no knowledge of the woman, so whether it was something she had learned later or simply an instant assessment of Raven’s threat level didn't particularly matter so much as the fact that I knew that she’d run. Also, there was the fact that the woman could somehow make fucking portals with a Dust sword. I had no idea how that worked—whether it was a Semblance granted power or if it was some type of Dust, but I didn't want to find out. I had absolutely no desire whatsoever to cross blades with Raven Branwen. Tai and Qrow trying their hand were bad enough, I didn't need the mysterious swordswoman giving me a go too.

“Here?” I hissed, still scanning the crowd.


I blinked, throwing him a curious look. “What was she doing?”

Hei rubbed at the back of his neck, looking suddenly unsure of himself. “Buying milk, if you believe that. Not dressed like a Huntress, but I've put the word out so they have her picture, and that face is pretty recognizable. Woman like that, you don't tend to forget or mistake for someone else.”

I palmed my face. “I want to call bullshit on that so hard, but… well, even Hunters have to eat. And actually, put a blonde wig and some purple contacts on her and she'd pass for her daughter.”

“Familial resemblances aside,” Hei shrugged.

“So, your guy didn't happen to get an address?”

Hei shook his head. “Nah. She pulled a disappearing act.”

“Anything more useful? You know, like what the fuck she's doing here? I mean, I suppose she could just be in town to check up on her kid, who she hasn't bothered to check in on for going on a decade, or her estranged husband, likewise on the time-frame.”
“Seems unlikely,” Hei admitted. “If she'd taken any official Hunter contracts through the usual channels, I'd know, and she hasn't. So either she's here on personal business, or she's here for work through unofficial channels.”

“Government, in other words,” I deadpanned, and Hei shrugged.

“There's any number of possibilities. Old Oz likes to keep in contact with his former students. Could be she's running an errand for him.”

I sighed quietly, running a hand through my temporarily dark hair. “I appreciate the heads up. If you can get me anything else, it'd be appreciated. My friend isn't exactly going to take 'she's in town' as an answer and be able to leave it at that.”

“Fair enough,” Hei rumbled, leaning back in his seat.

I tossed Hei a wave and left the booth, moving across the floor to where the twins and Neo were enjoying themselves. “What's the news?” Melanie asked, somehow having won their short debate over who'd get to dance with me first. The girl had pulled herself tight against my chest as she swayed, mostly ignoring the beat in order to talk. Miltia and Neo danced beside us, if the frottage they were engaging in could be considered dancing—though, I didn't mind too terribly much, considering they were providing me with a nice show. Mostly, I was annoyed that it wasn't a private showing. Then again, I couldn't really decide if I should be watching Neo and Miltia, or the twin pressed up against me. ‘Damn hormones! I have more self-control than that, damnit.’

“Yang's mom is in town but Hei has no idea where she is, or why she's here. He didn't exactly say why, but he's scared of her.” I shrugged, but the movement was mostly lost in the press of bodies and ebb and flow of what was loosely called 'dancing' in this place.

Around us, the music change, and I frowned as something niggled at my memory. “I know that song,” I muttered quietly as the rhythm changed and the movement of the crowd changed with it. 'It's some techno remix of Red Like Roses—'

“Hey Jaune,” Neo murmured in my ear, sidling up to my side and effectively distracting me for a moment as I found my eyes drawn to her corset-clad bust and the nice view down her cleavage she was providing. ‘Did Blake say where Yang was taking her earlier?’
“No,” I denied, dragging the word out as I shook off my distraction and realized why she had asked. I turned towards the door, at the same time catching sight of familiar icons on my minimap. I caught a flash of golden hair as the crowd parted enough for me to get line of sight on the door and my Semblance picked that moment to announce her arrival.

*BGM Image Song – I Burn (Yellow Trailer) – Unlocked*

I turned my facepalm into pulling up my mask. “Eh, I'm sure it'll be fine,” I shrugged, watching as the blonde moved onto the dance floor before catching sight of us. Her lilac eyes locked with my red contacts for a moment, then took in the twins and Neo near me, Melanie still holding on to me and Neo pressed into my side and not visibly bothered by the fact that I had a view down her top. Lilac flashed to bloody red and golden Aura exploded off the blonde. “I stand corrected. Not going to be fine.”

“She's glowing,” Miltia deadpanned as the crowd took notice. “And looking right at us.”

“She looks *really* pissed, for some reason,” Melanie added.

Neo turned and looked, and a small smirk stretched across her lips. “She's really, really hot when she's pissed though.”

Beside her was Blake, whose gold eyes locked with my red contacts for a moment before she frowned. A step behind and to one side were the third and fourth in their group—Ruby and Penny side by side. Silver eyes met mine before shifting to Yang and back, and she winced. I rolled my eyes and tossed Ruby a party invite and a link, and Penny an invite.

‘*She looks pissed,*’ I pointed out. ‘*Ruby, why does Yang look like she wants to tear us several new assholes?*’

‘*I don't know!*’ Ruby's worry came through clearly over the link. ‘*She saw you guys and went all glowy-glowy. I mean, she doesn't know you're Shiro, so that could be it.*’

‘Okay, try and pull Blake and Penny back. Let it play out. *I can't blow my cover here,*’ I sent, and the girl quickly moved to do as I'd requested.

While I was directing Ruby, Yang had stormed over, dancers between us taking notice of her
burning gaze and parting before her, scrambling to clear a path. She stopped just outside of reach, blood red gaze shifting between the twins and Neo. “You've got some nerve.”

Yang, from what I thought I knew, was the sort of hothead that didn't tend to banter once she got pissed—let alone reason. This was not that. What I was seeing was burning anger, yes, but it was tightly leashed, yoked and pointed one direction—and entirely under her control. “This is…” Miltia began, wincing.

Melanie finished with an annoyed look, “Not what it looks like.”

“Really?” Yang hissed. “What is it, then? Because it looks a hell of a lot like you're cheating on one of the few decent men I've met, who happens to be my friend.”

“We're not,” Neo deadpanned. “Shiro is a business associate. I assure you, Jaune knows exactly where we are and who we're with.”

Blood red eyes shifted to the ice cream themed girl and narrowed into a glare. “Uh huh. So, you won't mind if I call him, right?” she grinned, digging out her scroll.

I winced and stepped in, my gloved hand coming down atop hers over her scroll. “Let's not do that.” Yang's lips curled into a silent snarl, but I didn't remove my hand. Meeting her eyes, I continued calmly, “Girls, we were pretty much done here tonight. Why don't you go on home?”

'You're sure?' Neo sent, and I sent the mental impression of a nod in answer.

'Yeah, we're fine,' I agreed. At level 35, I was a level above Yang still, while Neo was on the low side of 37, and the twins had hit 33 recently—I wasn't too terribly worried about Yang being able to hurt us. I was more worried about blowing my cover. I turned my attention back to Yang. “Problem solved, right?”

“No,” the blonde denied. “Don't think I don't know who you are.”

I blinked, raising an eyebrow. 'This should be interesting,' I mused. “Who am I?”
Yang's eyes narrowed and she yanked her hand back. "You've been on the news twice now. First you tricked my sister into helping you rob a Dust shop, then you got your ass handed to you by that fox masked guy last night. How's that healing, by the way?" she taunted.

“Oh, you're little red's big sister,” I hummed, eying her up and smirking under my mask at her renewed glare. I really couldn't help needling her as I added, “Don't see the resemblance.”

“Well, I was going to tell you to take your own advice and leave, but you know what? I think, after the beating you got, I can take you,” she smirked, twitching her wrists and deploying Ember Celica.

I took a moment to take a long, exaggerated look around us, taking in the other patrons giving us a wide berth, but not exactly running away. “Okay, you want a fight? Fine. Two things first, though. Firstly,” I gestured vaguely towards the ceiling, indicating the speakers above us, and in general the music—specifically, how the song was approaching what I knew to be the point where it stopped being remixes of the three before it and became 'I Burn.' ‘This shit has got to go.’ I fucking knew better than to fight her with her own theme music playing. The re were rules about that kind of thing.

I turned and made my way towards where the DJ was currently doing his thing and pushed him aside. “Hey, you can't—”

“Take it up with Junior,” I growled in his direction, and the man wearing an oversized bear head cleared off. “Now, let's see,” I murmured, digging through his selection before coming across something I couldn't pass up. I had been looking for something that would be fun to fight to, but what I found fit entirely too well not to use. Queuing it up on a thirty second delay, I hopped down and strolled over to the blonde. “Secondly,” I continued as though I hadn't just walked away, “We're taking this outside.”

Yang rolled her eyes and made to follow me as we left the club. We hit the street and the pounding beat of 'I Burn' stopped. The blonde frowned as I turned back to her and grinned. The grin immediately fell off my face as the feeling of being watched by someone hidden returned.

_BGM – Sweet, The Ballroom Blitz – unlocked!_

The sound of drums rolled over the street from the open door and I bobbed my head to the tune for a moment before I held out a hand, gesturing her forward and shrugging off the feeling of being watched. “Are you ready?”
Yang hummed, head tilting to one side as she listened, then rolled her eyes. I couldn't help the way my eyes were drawn to the sway of her hips as she stalked forward, and promptly pulled back to smash my face in. About that time, I realized I should probably re-engage Gamer's Mind, but honestly I was having entirely too much fun for that. My left hand came up, fingers catching her wrist and pushing the fist to the side of my head, following the parry up with an open-palmed strike. The blonde parried my parry and we began trading blows. I blocked a cheap shot at my balls and shot her a glare. “Hey, I need those!”

She ignored me, a hand sweeping in low and I moved to intercept, only for her weapon to go off as she rolled with the momentum, spinning around and bringing one of those muscular legs up in some sort of spinning axe kick that threatened to make a nail out of me. I backstepped and the pavement exploded outwards as her foot hit the ground, and then she was on me, launching herself with both gauntlets into a blur of punches and shots as I dug deep into Haste and met her attack head on and unarmed, using the speed boost and perception dilation effects to stay a step ahead of her and counter everything she threw at me. She grew progressively more frustrated as I continued to stymie her efforts to land a solid hit, and I smirked under my mask as her movements began to grow sloppy.

As we danced and weaved between each other’s strikes, Ember Celica's Dust rounds streaked out, hitting the street, lamp posts, and the front of the building. Eventually, a one-two combo of those rounds that had been intended for my face slammed into the club's door and blew it off its hinges, the second round streaking inside to screams from the patrols, who started pouring out by the emergency exits. The music skipped, and stopped.

I held up a hand to the blonde bombshell, turning to check and make sure no one had been hurt. Surprisingly, Yang did not take advantage of my distraction to lay into me. That was good, seeing as we had apparently drawn Hei’s ire. Junior stalked out of the club, bat in hand, followed by his hired thugs with their blades and axes. He turned an unamused glare on me, before pointing at the door. “That is going on your tab.”

“Ha ha!” Yang laughed behind me.

“Shut up, blondie,” I hissed. “This is your fault.”

“Right. Play time's over,” Junior growled. “Everyone attack!”

The music started back up where it'd left off and I nearly groaned. 'Never should have chosen this song. It's a fucking curse.'

Yang and I caught the first of them at the same time, fists streaking out and breaking noses, sending
two men to the pavement. “This is not your fight,” I warned them.

“Boss said it is!” one of them countered, and apparently decided I’d made myself a viable target by attacking one of their own.

“God damnit Junior, I'm going to put my boot in your ass for this!” I threatened, punting the nearest henchman in the balls. Backhanding one of his thugs into unconsciousness, I remembered one important fact about the man-bear I’d learned recently: he was hiding his power level and could probably stomp a mudhole in me and walk it dry. Well, the fact that he hadn't stopped suppressing his own Aura probably meant he wasn't going to fight—for which I was grateful. ’Correction. I'm going to get Joan to break her foot off in his ass for this.’

My detection skills blared a warning and I ducked backwards, dodging a gauntleted punch that would have struck the left side of my head. Instead, Yang followed through by firing her gauntlet, putting a Dust round in a henchman's face to my right and sending him sprawling to the ground. I was not entirely sure if the guy had an active Aura or not, because he went down and did not get up again, and I didn't exactly have time to check or fucks to give for someone who'd tried to stab me in the back in the literal sense.

“Thank you,” I called at the blonde as I righted myself.

“I wasn't trying to help you!” she yelled back

Reaching down, I snagged one of the dropped axes the henchmen carried, flipped it around, and hurled it at Yang's head. “Dodge!” Pavlovian reflexes kicked in and Yang ducked, the blade sailing over her head and smashing the last of the henchmen standing in the face with the blunt side. “You're welcome.”

The blonde turned a glare on me. “I didn't ask for your help!”

“Why do I pay you incompetent shits,” Junior lamented, throwing his hands up. “Blondie, you break it, you bought it.”

“Just put it on his tab,” Yang countered, winking at the bear of a man, who gave an annoyed sigh and turned to go back inside.
“Huh,” I mused aloud, as the DJ tried to leave by the side exit, only to get his over-sized bear head stuck. “There goes what passes for the band. And I think that guy you shot in the face just stopped breathing.”

Yang’s eyes narrowed and she turned her attention back to me, punting the man in question towards the front of the building, where the rest were quickly pulling their comrades inside. A glance that direction showed he had started breathing again. She launched herself towards me in a flurry of blows, punches and kicks streaking in like lightning, and for a moment I was genuinely afraid I’d incited her to murder, before we resumed our dance.

“Stop,” she growled as I deflected a fist away from my nose.

“Fucking,” another fist, aimed at my solar plexus, her weapon going off as I side stepped just enough to put my body out of the path, but not enough that my new armor escaped unscathed. ‘Damnit, I just replaced that this morning!’

“Around!” her Aura exploded into a fiery conflagration, singing my clothes and hair and forcing me back. The asphalt under her feet steamed and began to bubble as the tar in it cooked off, and I winced. I would have to talk to her about that later—this was not what I would consider an emergency.

Blood red eyes met contacts red as the sun, and I smirked. “God damn you're beautiful when you're angry.”

“Shut up, shut up, shut UP!” Yang yelled, and I laughed.

“You want me to take you seriously?” I asked, my left hand drifting down to the case for my new weapon—which I needed to name at some point. My thumb found the selector and I counted out clicks until the blade cycled to the one I wanted—the one less-lethal blade in my small arsenal at the moment. My right hand came down and grasped the hilt as I held a trigger on the handle of the tube case, pulling my wrist back and flipping the blade upside down in its sheath. “Okay then. Hit me with your best shot.”

The blonde smirked, then launched herself into the air, drawing back her right arm in what was sure to be a punch that would blast a hole straight through me if it connected. ‘If: But it's not going to,’ I thought, eyes focused on the fist in question as she seemed to float down in slow motion. ‘Sorry, Yang, but I warned you about this shit.’
I stepped forward, hitting the assisted draw on my weapon. A small explosion sounded from the sheath and I drew, the blade streaking out in an arc and intercepting her arm just below the gauntlet. There was a brief look of confusion on her face as she fell, passing out of my sight as I dropped out of Flash Step behind her, having moved all of three feet. Yang hit the ground like a sack of potatoes. To her credit, the blonde didn’t scream or pass out. She did freeze, however, cradling her clearly broken arm to her chest and gritting her teeth in pain. I moved around her, the tip of my sword scraping the pavement as I moved, drawing her attention—her eyes, having shifted back to lilac, meeting mine again as I lifted the blade from the ground and tapped the side of her jaw with the flat of it. That feeling of being watched, which had intensified the moment I took my Iaido stance, suddenly felt as though someone were breathing down my neck. I could almost imagine the feeling of a blade brushing the back of my neck, waiting. I ignored it—looking around for an invisible presence would break character, not to mention make me look crazy.

“Look at it,” I told her, and her eyes slowly tracked to the blade resting against her flesh. “That was the back of the blade. I don’t have a quarrel with you, or your sister. Even that Fox bastard is just a consequence of doing business in this town—nothing personal. Don’t make it personal, Blondie, or next time it won’t be the back of the blade. Fools rush in.”

I pulled the blade away, spun it once out of habit, and slipped it back into its sheath. The feeling of imminent death passed, and my unseen watcher’s vigilance returned to what I’d come to associate as its normal level. When I turned away, I was surprised to find Ruby nearby, along with Neo. Then again, I’d had all of my focus on Yang and staying just far enough ahead of her to frustrate her. “Hello again, Red. Neo, I thought you were going home to your boyfriend.”

“Yeah, well,” Neo sighed, casting a look down at Yang, “Yang’s a friend of a friend.”

“Well then, you should see to her. We take care of our friends. Good night.” I started walking away and blinked as a skill creation window popped up, letting me know I’d successfully created the skill Acting. ‘So, I can now officially bullshit people and have it count as something beyond lying.’

I threw on Invisibility, Aura Suppression, and dropped into Flash Step. The feeling of being watched followed. There was no detectable Aura, no killing intent, nothing at all that would give away a human presence—or there had not been, until I’d laid my sword against Yang's face. The hairs on the back of my neck refused to lay down, now. I sighed quietly, finding a public place to change and blend in with the crowd to lose the feeling. ‘Ruby, how is she?’

‘Upset. What should I do?’ she sent back, and I ran a hand through my hair in irritation for a moment, before moving through an ID and changing outfits, then moving into the crowd.

‘Take her back to my place. I’ll be there shortly,’ I told her, and strolled through the mall. I was surprised when, as I was picking up a pretzel, I felt the general feeling of being searched for seem to
settle in on me again. Keeping a straight face, I broke pieces off my pretzel to eat as I walked back towards the apartment. *No one here. Nothing of interest. Just a normal dude on a normal night doing normal dude things.*

By the time I had made it to the apartment, I was barely suppressing the instinct to look for the source of the feeling again —and that was mostly because it had even followed me into the elevator. Instead of sticking to its usual third person perspective of behind and above me, the sensation had moved to directly ahead of me. Even with it seemingly right in front of me, I hadn't noticed a thing—no energy, no sound, no light, no invisible person, no visual distortion of space, nothing. *What if someone has a semblance that lets them phase? Kitty Pryde, essentially. Except, in this case, what if it obeys some of the laws of physics and light passes through them, rendering them effectively invisible? No, that wouldn't explain how it's always above and behind me. Third person perspective about where I'd expect a camera to be—with my being a game character, supposedly, maybe someone somewhere is 'playing'? No, that's out there even for Bizarro Remnant. What about something similar, though? Scrying is a thing in some games, like D&D. Could it be some sort of Dust or Semblance effect that does the same thing?*

The elevator opened and I made my way into the apartment, and the feeling of being watched stopped as the door closed behind me. I blinked, wondering what had changed. *Well, the apartment's warded to contain Aura. Maybe that has something to do with it?*

I shrugged it off, moving deeper into the apartment and finding six girls on my couches—Neo and the twins seated on one couch, with Yang sitting on the other and glaring in their direction as she cradled her arm, Ruby to her side and Penny on Ruby's other side. Blake stood unobtrusively nearby, leaning against the wall and out of direct line of sight of either group—interested, but clearly not taking sides. “Okay, let's see it,” I sighed, moving over to Yang and kneeling down in front of her. She hissed as I took the arm in hand and cast Aura Examination, but that returned no results as it was designed to hunt out debuffs and status effects mostly, not physical problems. So instead, I began carefully probing it internally with Telekinesis, trying to get a sense of how it was broken and hit her with Observe. After a few moments of this, I was rewarded with a skill creation window giving me Diagnose, which would allow me to scan a person for any form of non-magical malady. Yang's results were a fractured ulna and radius, showing multiple breaks.

“What happened?” I asked, beginning the slow task of gathering up broken or fragmented bone and carefully shifting it back into place. It was a lot like trying to put a jigsaw puzzle together under water, in an opaque container—if the container occasionally flinches and throws things off.

“Why don't you ask them?” Yang answered testily, shooting a glare at the girls on the opposite couch.

I shook my head, squeezing her arm slightly and drawing a hiss of pain from her lips as she shot me a betrayed look. “I am aware of the events, Yang, and I'm asking you. Why'd you react the way you
“Did?”

The blonde in front of me blushed, turning her head away and breaking eye contact. “Do I have to say it?” she asked quietly, and I shrugged.

“No,” I answered, while the girls on the opposite couch vocally countered, “Yes.”

“Girls,” I warned, shooting an unamused look at Neo and the twins. “Behave.”

Turning my attention back to the blonde, I said, “Talk to me, Yang. I'm not going to force you if you don't want to, but I guarantee it'll help if you do.”

Yang sighed, narrowing her eyes at me in irritation. “We're friends, Jaune. I got pissed because I saw them with some other guy. What they were doing—what I thought they were doing, anyway… it wasn't right.”

I nodded. It didn't register as a lie to my Semblance, but I was well-versed enough in the language of half-truths to know one when I heard it. If she wasn't ready to say more, I wouldn't push, though.

“Okay, fair enough. And this?” I asked, tapping her break and drawing a wince.

“It was that guy the police suspect has been robbing all the Dust stores in Vale, the one on the news this morning who got into a fight with some other guy—in the middle of robbing a Dust store. They,” she indicated the girls on the opposite couch, “were meeting with him for some reason. He ran his mouth, I ran mine, and things kind of escalated from there. We fought. He was toying with me, and it pissed me off. Then he stopped playing.”

“So, what you're saying is, you let your mouth get you into trouble, and then you did exactly what I've been warning you about,” I squeezed the break slightly, drawing a whimper from the girl, “and you telegraphed one of those haymakers from a mile away, and he took advantage.”

“Yep,” she hissed, eyes closed in pain as she nodded.

I sighed, calling up mana and focusing on casting something to stop the pain. Skill Creation did its thing and I was rewarded with the skill Anesthesia—which allowed me to numb pain in others and myself, and could be leveled up eventually to completely remove pain altogether. Yang sighed in relief as the green light effect washed over her break. I held off for the moment on following it up with Aura Healing. “And what have we learned?”
Yang looked contrite as she answered, “Don't pick fights with strangers.”

“And?”

The blonde rolled her eyes. “Stop telegraphing.”

“Or next time, it won't be the back of the blade,” I deadpanned.

Yang frowned, sending me a confused look. “That's exactly what he said.”

I turned and sent the twins and Neo a questioning look. “Really? We can't stay? This is entertaining,” Neo whined.

Miltia sighed, hopping up and taking one of Neo's hands while Melanie took the other, hauling the ice cream themed girl to her feet. “Come on. Let's go work on stuff.”

Blake pushed herself off the wall she'd been leaning on, sending me a long look before nodding and following the twins and Neo. I shot a look at Penny. “Your choice, Penny.”

The gynoid hummed, placing a finger against her bottom lip momentarily. “I will join the others. That will give us a chance to work on my new outfits.”

“Thanks, Penny,” I murmured, and the girl skipped out, one hand reaching out and patting my head as she passed.

“I could…” Ruby trailed off, gesturing towards the door, and I shook my head.

“Stay,” I told her, pushing myself up from where I'd been kneeling and making my way into the kitchen. Opening the freezer, I dug out a couple of glasses and a bottle of the good stuff. Pouring two glasses, I replaced the bottle and dug a can of soda out of the refrigerator before making my way back into my living room. Passing the can to Ruby, I handed Yang one of the glasses before dropping into my preferred chair and taking a sip from my own. Wondering how to start, I shrugged. “It'll be easier to show you,” I decided, opening my character sheet.
“Show me?” Yang echoed, then blinked as my outfit was replaced with my White Fox gear. “Huh. Okay. That's unexpected—” Another menu selection swapped that for my replacement set for Shiro. “—ed. What the fuck?!”

I rolled my eyes, switching back to my Jaune gear, taking in her wide-eyed stare. “Sorry about that.”

Yang twitched before slowly shifting her gaze to Ruby, who was sitting nervously beside her, but otherwise appeared to be unsurprised. “You knew?” she asked, and Ruby nodded. “You knew!” Yang accused.

“Duh, sis,” Ruby sighed. “Jaune told me a while ago.”

“And you… what?” Yang floundered. I gestured at the drink in her undamaged hand and she growled at me, before throwing it back in one pull. “Start explaining.”

“Well, Jaune is Jaune. And also the guy in black—Shiro. And the Fox guy,” Ruby explained, and I nodded.

Shooting her sister an incredulous look, Yang asked, “We both saw that fight on the news this morning. How was he in two places at once?”

“I wish I could say it was a clone technique, because that'd be kind of cool to have. But no, it was just me, Penny, and Neo—using illusions to make it look a lot worse than it really was. But hey, if you bought it, then it's doing its job,” I grinned.

Lilac eyes tracked between me and Ruby as the blonde asked, “So the Dust robberies…?”

“Real,” I admitted.

“Wait, did you steal that train-load of Dust?!” she asked, and I wagged a hand back and forth.

“The White Fang got on board and tried to steal it first. One of their operatives turned and fled with most of the cars. That part of the train actually made it to the station. Then I stole it,” I admitted. Well, I had ID’d the Dust, stuffed it into Inventory, then done my impression of Solid Snake and
disabled the guards outside, took out the cameras, and then stole the Dust in the real world. There was now visible proof of Shiro stealing Dust and taking out Schnee and Atlas personnel, in the event Cinder or someone followed up on it.

“I.. I trusted you! I defended you, Jaune,” Yang yelled, eyes shifting to red as she glared at me.

“Yang, it's okay,” Ruby tried to placate her sister, but Yang shook her off.

“No, Rubes, it's not. He's a liar and a thief.”

I nodded. “I am,” I admitted. “At least about some things. And I feel horrible about it, but that doesn't change the fact that it needs to be done.” The blonde's expectant look prompted me to continue. “There's someone new in Vale, causing problems. The Dust heists are her plan. I replaced the guy she had doing it originally—Roman Torchwick—so I could get close enough to figure out what she's planning, beyond simple Dust robberies. I took over his gang and shut down the drug trade he had been running, along with the protection rackets and everything else, and absorbed the men who were worth anything into a new group: Fox Hunt. You've been there, actually. We—that is, Neo, Melanie, Miltia, and myself—are building a PMC to protect Vale. Officially, to protect the city from Grimm. Unofficially, to protect it from whatever comes up. Especially her.”

“So you're what, playing both sides?” Yang asked, her eyes having bled back to normal as I'd explained.

“No,” I denied, shaking my head. “I'm on my side—our side, really. I'd kind of hoped to hold off on this until after we got to know each other better, but… Yang, would you like to be on our side?”

“What… what do you mean?”

Smiling, I answered, “Do you want to help us save Vale?”

Yang flinched when Ruby put a hand over hers and sent her big sister a smile. “We could use the help.”

“I don't know. I mean, why not just go to the police or Ozpin with what you know?” Yang asked, and I shook my head.
It was Ruby who answered, however. “What are the police going to do, Yang? And the headmaster, well, uh… Help me out here Jaune.”

“Information compartmentalization and operational security,” I answered, getting a confused look from the blonde. “I think there's a leak in Ozpin's organization, firstly. Secondly, even if there's not a leak, he has no official power to do anything about her unless she's caught in the commission of a crime. He can investigate, he can have her watched, but he can't legally bring her in until he catches her doing something, except for questioning, and doing that without hard evidence will tip his hand. Thirdly, I don't necessarily trust some of the people working with him. General James Ironwood, for example—a member of the Atlesian Navy.”

“And Atlas is bad. Or at least some of it,” Ruby tacked on, and I nodded.

Rolling her eyes, Yang shot me an annoyed look. “So, your reasons for doing this yourself are, 'the cops are incompetent,' 'Ozpin's useless,' and 'Atlas bad.'”

“Pretty much,” I shrugged. “I can get more done outside of official channels.”

Sighing, Yang leaned back on the couch and winced as her arm twinged. Seeing it, I tossed a heal her way, and the blonde sighed in relief. “You sure know how to pick 'em, sis,” she snarked at Ruby.

“Jaune's a good person, Yang. You know that!” Ruby protested. “Everything he's doing, he's doing for the people he cares about. Our friends. Me. You. Yeah, it sucks knowing you can't know everything about what's going on, but we can help. You and me. Together, Yang.”

Yang sighed, bringing one hand up and covering her eyes. “Fine,” she whispered. “What about—”

We were cut off by the sound of a scroll ringing, and I blinked as my HUD popped up its caller I.D., complete with a photo beside the name and number. I palmed my face. “Not now. Why now?”

“Who is it?” Ruby asked, and I shook my head.

“I need to take this,” I grumbled, hopping up and moving quickly into the bedroom, pulling the door
closed behind me. Making sure the call was audio only, I hit 'accept.' “Cinder,” I said, by way of
greeting, using my Batman voice just in case she had me on speaker or the call was being recorded.

“Shiro. Are you busy?” she asked, and I frowned. There was something in her tone that I couldn't
readily place.

“Not as such,” I answered slowly.

“I'm sending you an address. Be there soon,” the woman said, and the call cut out as she hung up. A
moment later, I got a text with an address. Feeding it into my map, I saw it was on the northeast end
of the Commercial district.

Leaving the bedroom, I blinked as Yang pointed an accusing finger at me. “You were just toying
with me!”

“Well, yes and no. I wasn't trying to hurt you, so by that measure, no, I wasn't treating it as a real
fight,” I explained, then pointed at her newly healed arm. “But you got my message, didn't you?”

The girl winced. “Yeah, I suppose so.”

“Also, later, you and I are going to sit down and have a long chat about what, exactly, you define as
an emergency. Because that fight wasn't it. And now, you've been seen using shit I taught you in a
very public venue, in front of cameras, and worse, against me. Think about it, Yang. Video of me
has been on the news twice now. How much do you want to bet that our fight is going to be on first
thing in the morning?” I asked, drawing a frown from the blonde. “You may have just painted a
target on your back. With any luck, I might be able to pass it off as a drunken brawl or a poor
reaction on your part to me making a pass at you. I don't exactly trust my luck, these days.”

I shifted my gaze to Ruby. “Your choice about whether you want to stay and watch that.”

Ruby shot a look at her sister and shook her head. “No. I don't think I'd want anyone watching you
chew me out if I made that sort of mistake.”

I sent the small girl a smile. “Good choice.”
Deciding to change the subject, Yang asked, “So, who was that?”

I sighed, gathering my dirty glass and moving it to the kitchen. “My—that is, Shiro's—'boss.' She wants me to meet her for something. Didn't say what, but she sounded… upset.” Turning back to the pair, I asked, “Mind locking up when you leave?”

“I don't have—” Ruby began, and I rolled my eyes and tossed her a spare key. “Oh! Uh, does this mean…?”

“You're welcome to drop in whenever you want,” I told her, heading for the door.

“Hey, wait!” Yang called, and I turned back to meet her eyes. A smirk stretched across her lips as she crossed her arms under her bust, pressing them up just that much more. My eyes tracked downward momentarily and Yang's smirk widened that much more, and I mentally kicked myself for falling for that—damned hormones. “You were totally checking me out, earlier.”

“Yaaang!” Ruby whined, and I shook my head.

“I'll catch up with you two tomorrow.” I left, before Yang could try to stir up any more trouble.

Changing to my temporary replacement Shiro gear, I threw on my stealth set of spells and headed out and up to the roof as I sent a message to Neo, the twins, and Penny letting them know I might not be back that night. The feeling of being watched returned and I frowned under my mask before shaking it off. ‘Maybe you're just getting paranoid in your old age,’ I chided myself. I had yet to see any sign of any hidden watcher, so the possibility existed that my Semblance really was just acting funny. On the other hand, I couldn't discount the possibility that I really was under some unknown form of surveillance.

I followed my waypoint across town, which lead me to a small store that had, at one point, apparently sold shoes. The building was two floors tall and only the upper floor appeared to be lit. Checking my map confirmed Cinder, Mercury, and Emerald as being present. Shrugging, I went around to the back side of the building and dropped my stealth spells before knocking. I heard footsteps within and, a moment later the sound of deadbolts being undone on the other side of the door. When it opened, I found myself staring into a set of red eyes set under green hair. “Oh. It's you,” Emerald deadpanned. She seemed to consider simply closing the door in my face before thinking better of it and stepping aside to let me pass. “Upstairs.”
Deciding to ignore her attitude, I made my way further into the building. The bottom floor housed what had once been part cobbler, part sales floor, divided by a wall. The stairs were on the workshop side, and lead up to what I assumed had once been someone's home. The entire place looked like it had gone unoccupied for a few years, if the dust and the recent trails through it were anything to go by. The upstairs area was just as dusty, but areas looked to have been recently cleaned—such as the sitting room I found Mercury and Cinder in.

Molten gold eyes tracked me as I crossed the threshold, taking in my new armor—already scuffed and showing some burns from my fight with Yang—and lingering a moment on my new weapon. We locked eyes for a moment. “Rough night?”

I sighed quietly, bringing my hand up to palm my face. “Got into a bar fight.”

Cinder's gaze shifted to Emerald, slipping quietly past me. I felt a brush against my side and reached down, snagging her hand as it passed my side pouch. “Careful. It might be full of mouse traps,” I warned, my smirk plainly audible.

Emerald jerked her hand free and sent me a glare. Cinder ignored the byplay, dropping into a high-backed chair and crossing her legs, and in so doing providing a marvelous view of her toned thighs. Seeing as Emerald and Mercury had taken the only other chairs, I leaned against the wall beside the door and crossed my arms, then I waited for her to speak first. It didn't take long, as she steepled her fingers in her lap and regarded the three of us. “In light of recent events, I once again find myself in need of your skills,” she began, eyes locking with mine.

I shrugged. “What do you need me to steal this time?”

“Not what. Who.” Her lips twitched upwards into a small smirk. “Roman Torchwick.”

‘Fuck,’ I cursed internally. “Ah. You've finally decided to retaliate over his desertion?”

The smirk dropped off Cinder's face, a look of annoyance replacing it only momentarily, before shifting to distaste. “No, unfortunately. Given the recent interference in Vale, I feel it might be best to attempt to retrieve Roman and retain his services again.”

“I saw that, did you?” I asked, and she nodded. “Well, it was only a matter of time. I've since done some asking around. Police are now watching every Dust shop in Vale—and with the so-called White Fox around, it's even odds as to whether any Dust robbery in the near future will go
“Heh. Yeah, it looked like he handled you,” Mercury chuckled, and I threw him a glare.

“Look, kid, I know you're looking to prove yourself and step out of daddy's shadow.” I began, and Mercury's amused expression fell into something murderous, “but shit talking isn't going to help. Best thing we can do right now is try to avoid him.”

“Just because you're too chicken-shit to take him on doesn't mean we are.”

I sighed, palming my face. “I'm a thief with a sword, not a hired blade. I steal things. I occasionally stick the pointy end of my sword into Grimm and the occasional asshole if it pays well. I don't get paid to fight guys like that. It's not profitable. It increases the risk of every job—the risk of getting caught, pulled into a running battle, or even killed. It's why you don't do jobs without backup. I've got backup now and she's the only reason I made it out of that.”

“Merc, he's right,” Emerald cut in, and I raised an eyebrow at the thief coming to my defense. “The fucker burned down our home. If anyone has personal reason to go after him, it's us,” she said, gesturing between herself and Cinder. “And it'd be fucking stupid to. It's obvious bait, otherwise he wouldn't have left the calling card. He wants a fight. He wouldn't put out a challenge like that if he didn't think he could back it up.”

Mercury crossed his arms over his chest, shaking his head. “Yeah, well, he's never met me.”

“No one will be fighting him,” Cinder interrupted. “Shiro is correct. The Fox is an unknown variable and presents too great a risk to go looking for conflict with him. For that reason, I feel it will be best to bring Roman back into the fold. Shiro, where is the Dust you've procured stored?”

I met her gaze a moment before flicking my eyes towards Mercury and Emerald. “I'll get you the address later.”

“Fair enough,” she allowed. “For now, forget Dust. When we have secured Roman, we will shift our efforts to procuring hardware. Air transport and droids specifically, for the moment.”

“About that,” I began, drawing her gaze back to me, “How were we planning to spring Roman?”
Cinder's lips twitched upwards. “Leave that to me. I still have one more task to complete before we go after him.”

“Is he even worth it?” Mercury asked.

Across from him, Emerald shrugged. “He's a thug.”

“Much as it pains me to admit it, he is also brilliant and resourceful,” Cinder countered. “Roman Torchwick is very good at working with little in the way of resources or oversight and achieving the desired result.”

Frowning, I shook my head. “I don't care if he's god's gift to Remnant, he's not getting my gang, or my partner.”

Cinder chuckled quietly, crossing her arms under her breasts. “So you've grown attached to her?”

“Competent help is so hard to come by,” I countered, shooting a glance at Emerald.

“Hey!” the greenette hissed.

“Just saying,” I shrugged at the girl. I turned my attention back to Cinder. “When are we going after him?”

The brunette shook her head. “Soon. Roman is scheduled for a preliminary hearing the week after next.”

'I'll be in Beacon by then,' I mused, shaking my head. “I have a job coming up. I may not be able to make it. I'll let you know when it gets closer to time.”

“Would Neo be available?” Cinder asked, and I shrugged.

“Maybe. I'll see, once I work out the last few details and get things to where she can hold down the fort while I'm busy.”
Kicking his feet up on the coffee table, Mercury asked, “So, what are we doing in the meantime?”

Taking out her scroll, Cinder swiped away at it for a minute before both Emerald's and Mercury's scrolls pinged with a text message. Before she closed it, I caught an image of a girl—shoulder-length brown hair, tan skin, light brown eyes. “Ask around. Find her.”

“Who is she?” I asked, drawing an unamused look from Cinder. “Eh, it's fine. I know a guy. Junior, runs a club out on the edge of the Industrial district—imaginatively named 'The Club.'”

“I know of it,” Cinder nodded.

“Then you probably know he's an information broker,” I continued, adding, “In addition to running his own petty gang of hired thugs, for sale to whoever has the lien to pay.”

Cinder shook her head, a small smirk tugging her lips upwards. “I did not.” Turning to Emerald and Mercury, she nodded. “You heard him. Go on.”

Emerald frowned, red eyes tracking between me and the still seated Cinder, before she sighed and pushed herself up out of her chair. “Come on, Merc. Let's go pay this guy a visit.”

“Yeah, sure, whatever. A club sounds like fun,” Mercury agreed, following the shorter girl out.

“Well, then. I should—” I began, making to push myself off the wall, before Cinder interrupted.

“Stay.” The word was spoken at somewhere between a request and an order, but there was an undertone there that sounded almost longing. It froze me on the spot long enough for her to stand, slip one finger down the top of my shirt under my armor as she walked by, and pull me towards one of the bedrooms.

“Oh really?” I asked, a small smirk hidden by my mask as she pulled me into the room, before locking the door behind her.
I turned around in time to watch a fist sailing towards my face. My eyes narrowed as I pulled on Haste and the world slowed. I took a moment to take in the sight of her—lips curling into a look of anger, throwing her full weight into the punch, but unarmed and with no Dustcasting backing it up. 'Non-lethal,' I had time to assess, before I made a decision. I dropped Haste and the world returned to normal.

Her fist struck and my head rolled to the side, my nose and upper lip bleeding as one shifted uncomfortably and the other split. Cinder was already following the first punch up with a left hook. 'I was right. She's pissed. Either about me burning down her apartment as the Fox, or over losing the White Fang. I'll let her get it out of her system. Still, she needs to know I have rules. You hit me…' I stepped into her punch, my left hand coming up to parry it aside while my right fist sought its target. She staggered under the force of the blow, bringing a hand up to wipe at the blood staining her lips crimson—her beautiful face marred only by stray blood. 'I hit back.'

Molten gold eyes locked with my red contacts and several emotions crossed her face almost too quickly for me to catch, even with Observe going: anger, eagerness, respect, arousal, and oddly enough hope. I didn't exactly have time to psychoanalyze at the moment, however, as she resumed her attack, breaking out a high-low kick combo, likely expecting me to back off. I caught a glimpse of black bike shorts pulled tight against her thighs and crotch as the second kick went for my head before I stepped in, grabbed her by the thigh, and spun—using my superior weight to slam her into the door. Shaking off the blow, she twisted and freed her leg, grappling me long enough to swing her legs down and sweep mine out from under me, throwing me to the ground and sending the air rushing out of my lungs.

Dropping down, Cinder followed the throw up with an elbow to my solar plexus with enough force to knock the wind out of me through my armor before I could get my guard up, and then she straddled me, punching my chest and face again twice before I finally got my hands into position to ward off her strikes and return fire. In between knocking her next two blows aside, I struck her in the stomach once, following it with an open palm strike to the jaw. While she was shaking that off, I rolled her over and captured her wrists, dragging them up above her head and locking them in place. Her chest heaved as she caught her breath, doing interesting things for her breasts—but it was her eyes I was drawn to, as they locked with mine. “Feel better?”

Her wrists twisted, the right one slipping free, and I caught an open-palmed blow to the cheek for my trouble. I returned it with one of my own before catching her wrist again. Pulling up Charisma and Intent, I slapped her with both much the same way I had with Blake. “Stop,” I growled, and she froze, eyes going slightly wide as her pupils dilated.

Seeming to shake it off after a moment, Cinder's eyes narrowed and I felt something wash over me—Intent and power strong enough I could taste it, easily exceeding what I'd hit her with. The difference was, while I could feel what she was doing, I was unaffected by it—Gamer's Mind shrugged it off like water off a duck's back—while she, on the other hand, was clearly still under the effects of what I was still doing. “Make me.”
Seeing the challenge for what it was, I transferred her wrists to one hand and reached down, taking hold of her shorts and yanking them down, leaving them bunched about her knees for the moment. Pulling off my glove with my teeth, I sent my hand down to explore her sex, my fingers moving past her bush to her outer lips, finding them soaked. Spreading her lips, I slowly stroked her, drawing a gasp from her mouth.

Cinder shifted, bringing her mouth up to my ear, her lips just brushing my flesh as she whispered, “Do not tease me. If you don’t put your cock in me, push me down, and fuck me right now, I am going to rape you.” Her teeth caught the edge of my mask and pulled it down, before she sought out my lips with her own.

I pulled away long enough to send her an amused smirk. “You can't rape the willing.”

“Tease me and I will certainly try,” she warned.

Shrugging, I continued teasing her. “Sounds like a win/win for me.”

“Shiro,” she growled, twisting her wrists again in an attempt to break free.

Removing my hand from where I'd been teasing her, I brought it up and slapped her across the cheek, leaving behind a streak of her own fluid in the process. She froze as our eyes locked and we fought a small battle of wills. I put a finger on her lips and she opened her mouth, her small tongue flicking out to lick at the tip, apparently not bothered by the taste of her own arousal. Smirking around my finger, she bit down gently. Snatching my hand back before she could get any ideas, I reached down and got the bike shorts the rest of the way off of her, then freed myself from my pants.

“You're going to get rug burn on your ass if we stay here,” I pointed out, and she frowned.

“Bed?” she asked, and I nodded, standing and helping her back up. Her hands sought out and found the clips holding my armor in place and hit the release, and she began pulling it off as I grabbed her dress and began working it up her body. Stripping each other of our clothes, I pushed her down onto the bed, where she had stripped the sheets off the mattress and laid out a sleeping bag and blankets in what looked to be a temporary arrangement until she could get clean sheets. Obligingly, Cinder brought her hands back up above her head and brought them together at the wrist, a small grin playing across her lips as she did.

Taking her wrists in hand, I positioned myself between her legs, which immediately wrapped around
my hips and crossed at the ankle. With a bit of adjusting on both our parts, I slid home, burying
myself in her tight heat to the hilt. A quiet sigh escaped Cinder's lips and she shifted her hips
upwards a bit, urging me on as she renewed her 'struggling' to get away. Knowing exactly what she
wanted, I gave it to her—hard, fast, and rough as our fight renewed. She was just as rough as I was,
all claws and teeth and the occasional attempt to hit me again as we fought for dominance. When she
finally came, screaming, around my cock I reached down and grabbed her slender neck, squeezing
just enough to surprise her and send her into a second orgasm on the heels of the first. She went rigid
for a long moment as her muscles locked, her cunt clamping down on my cock with a force that felt
like it should have crushed steel, finishing me off in the process.

The brunette below me went limp, panting quickly as she simply lay there. Removing my hand from
her throat, I took note of the visible hand print there and shook my head. “So, what was that about?”

Cinder sighed quietly, wrapping her arms around me and dragging me down to lay beside her,
burying her face in my chest. “Can we not talk about work?”

“That bad?” I asked, and she nodded. “Okay, then. So, what should a man talk to a villainess
about?”

The women in my arms snorted, stifling a laugh. “Is that what I am?” she asked, and I shrugged.

“One man's terrorist—”

“Is another man's freedom fighter,” I finished for her.

Her face went back to my chest. “Maybe I want to be a 'normal' woman for five minutes.”

I scoffed softly. “Sure, okay, we can play that game,” I nodded. “So dear, how was your day?”

Cinder chuckled, and then I hissed as she lightly bit my chest. “You are an ass.”

“So I've been told. It's part of my charm.” I grinned down at her, giving her a squeeze.
“Comfortable?”

“Mm.” The brunette shifted a bit. “If this is what Neopolitan gets whenever she pleases, I think I'm jealous.”

Humming, I checked my HUD clock—just after midnight. “So,” I asked, “How long will the kids stay out?”

Cinder shook her head. “If they know what's good for them, until I tell them to come back. I had planned to keep you 'til morning.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Oh? You sure you aren't letting me get too close?”

Golden eyes tracked down to our entwined limbs and back up to my eyes and she sent me a deadpan look. “I don't care. Spend the night.” Her gaze broke from mine. “Don't make me say please.”

“Your pride couldn't take the damage?” I asked, and she shook her head. “I guess I'm staying, then.”

“Thank you,” she murmured, shifting again and throwing a leg over my waist, before shifting her weight and pushing me onto my back as she straddled me.

I raised an eyebrow. “Again?”

Pink lips pulled up into a small smile and she nodded, shifting atop me and easing herself back down onto my shaft. “Again.”

“As you wish,” I murmured, bringing my hands up to cup her absolutely marvelous breasts, squeezing her nipples gently between my thumb and forefinger.

“If you keep talking, I will find or make a ball gag,” the woman atop me threatened, her eyelids going half-lidded as she slowly rode me.

I shrugged. “Sounds kinky, but it'll be you wearing it, not me.” One fine eyebrow raised as she took
a moment to consider whether to take that as a challenge or not. "Of course, there is a third option. I'm sure Emerald would *love* to wear a ball gag if you asked."

"I do still need to work out her punishment for wasting my alcohol and trying to eat my panties," Cinder murmured. "She would be absolutely devastated if she were made to watch this…"

I shook my head. "You're going to break that girl." After a moment of consideration, I shrugged. "Sounds fun."

"Later, perhaps. For now, I have you to myself. No Emerald, no Neopolitan, just us." I opened my mouth and her hand came down and covered it. "No more Princess Bride. I hated that movie."

"As you wish," I got out around her hand, smirking as she glared, mouthing the word 'ass.'

Golden eyes tracked me as I made my way into the apartment from where Blake sat at my kitchen table, eating what looked like a bowl of fruit and toast while reading. As I passed, she sniffed and closed her book around her finger. "Another one?"

I blinked, realizing what she meant, and shrugged. "Don't ask."

The brunette nodded, reopening her book and going back to her smut. "So, how did you do it?"

"Do what?" I asked, heading for the washer and drier.

"Pull off being in two places at once."

I shot her an unamused look as I got started on laundry, starting with my Shiro outfit from the night before, pulled from my Inventory. The apartment was empty this morning, aside from Blake. My map showed the twins, Neo, and Penny all at Fox Hunt's barracks. "You're going to have to be more specific."

Blake rolled her eyes. "You came to me as the Fox. You are also the guy in black. Ergo, you were in
two places at once two nights ago.”

‘God damnit. Is there even any point to trying to keep who I am secret?’ Sighing, I leaned against the washer/dryer combo for a moment before pushing off and joining her in the kitchen. I’d had a long night and hadn’t gotten much in the way of sleep, though a lot of that had been spent thinking. While Cinder and I could both go for hours, she had deemed herself satisfied and gone to sleep around two or so. We’d showered together when she finally woke up and I’d left out shortly after we exited her room to the sight of an annoyed Emerald sitting in the little shop’s kitchen eating breakfast. While behind closed doors Cinder had been surprisingly… needy was the best way to put it, in front of her people she was almost a different person.

“Was it the smell that gave it away or the voice?” I asked, pulling out a chair and sitting down across from Blake.

The brunette shook her head, marking her place in her book and setting it to the side. “That was part of it, but it’s also the way you move, the way you speak, the way you carry yourself. Yang couldn’t see it, because she was too personally involved, but you were just playing with her the entire time. You were having fun.”

“I was,” I admitted.

“Until you stopped playing,” she pointed out, and I nodded again. “You hurt her. I know you broke her arm, but she seemed fine when I came in last night as she and her sister were leaving.”

I raised an eyebrow, deciding to go on the offensive. “Getting attached, Blake?”

The former White Fang member looked away. “Is it so bad if I am? Yang is… nice. She’s outgoing, easy to talk to, not judgmental, and she doesn’t expect me to carry a conversation by myself.”

“Pretty much everything you'd want in a friend?” I asked, and she shrugged. “It's not bad, no. I'd say it's very good, really. If you're making friends, it means you're healing.” She shot me an annoyed look, and I shook my head. “You can't bullshit me, remember? You were hurt. This is good for you. And to answer your question, like I told you yesterday, I can cast healing spells.” I would need to go level those soon, actually. While I was getting plenty of experience with my fighting and defensive skills, my healing skills had suffered from lack of attention lately.

She nodded, sitting there quietly as she ate and observed me for several long minutes. I went into the kitchen and set about preparing my own meal while she thought. ‘Steak, cheese, bell pepper, tortilla… looks like I'm having Mexican for breakfast.’ I actually preferred real food to ‘breakfast food’ for breakfast, most days, so I didn't mind a little extra work to make something I'd truly enjoy.
“I think I get it, now,” Blake finally spoke up. “Why you came for me, how you know so much about Cinder. You're infiltrating her organization as one identity and actively fighting against it with the other.” After a moment, she added, “And that's her scent all over you, so you're also sleeping with her.”

“I couldn't confirm if I was,” I denied.

Blake shrugged. “You can't bullshit me, either,” she pointed out, tapping the side of her nose. She watched me cooking for a while, seeming to be trying to decide whether or not to say something, before she finally continued. “It won't work. She won't change. She can't. She's gone too far, at this point.”

“Oh? You've seen her all of once. What makes you say that?” I asked, looking up from my work long enough to catch a look of what registered to my Semblance as shame cross her face.

“Take it from someone who knows,” she murmured, turning away and burying her nose in her book again. “But I couldn't exactly blame you if you wanted to try anyway. Just know that it hurts that much more when you realize that the person you've loved has become something unrecognizable.”

Humming, I stirred the mix of chopped steak and bell pepper in the pan, turning down the heat to let it brown properly and soak in spices. “You're talking about Adam,” I guessed, and the faunus girl shrugged. “So, he wasn't always a genocidal maniac. Not terribly surprising, really.”

“He's not a maniac,” Blake denied. “Obsessive, driven, and yes, genocidal—but sane. It's not his fault, though. The way he was raised—”

“Blake,” I interrupted quietly, drawing her gold eyes to my blue, “No. Don't make excuses for other people. He made a choice.” She opened her mouth and I help up a hand. “No, he always had a choice—just as you did. Otherwise, we're back to our humans versus animals discussion. If you kick a dog, you'll either make him skittish or mean. If you kick a person, he can choose to be either. Saying he didn't have a choice, when he clearly did, is like saying you think he's not capable of making decisions for himself—that he's just some helpless entity with no agency, incapable of acting himself and only capable of being acted upon. Which is clearly not the case.”

“Okay, maybe you're right. Maybe he did have a choice. But when your choices boil down to either starve or join a group that will feed you, it's kind of a hard choice to make,” she countered.
“Most of us don't get up in the morning and decide, 'You know what? Today, I want to kill everything not my species.' It's not on the table,” I sighed. “One day, when you trust me more, I'd like you to actually tell me what you know of his upbringing. I'll listen, because I'm going to need to understand him, but it won't change what I've said.”

“Maybe,” she murmured, stabbing at a piece of fruit with her fork.

“That can't be filling.” I chuckled, turning off the fire under my own breakfast. “Are you still hungry? How do you feel about steak?”

I heard her stomach rumble from my place at the stove and the faunus girl blushed. “I'm fine.”

Raising an eyebrow, I set about rolling up two wraps. “Really? You know, if you're trying to watch your figure or something, that shit will get you killed in Hunter school. You need protein and carbs—food that builds muscle and will provide Aura. Fruit won't cut it.”

Blake shot me an annoyed look. “I spent most of my childhood digging for scraps out of garbage cans. If I want fruit for breakfast, I will have fruit for breakfast.”

Shrugging, I dropped back into the seat in front of her and began cutting up one of my wraps. “If you say so. But if you're still hungry, I made extra,” I pointed towards the second wrap with my fork. “But if you don't hurry, I'll eat it myself.”

She glared, but after a few moments of watching me eat, slowly cut off a piece and tried it. An instant later, the wrap had moved onto a spare plate and sat in front of her as she chewed happily at the steak. “At least you can cook,” she murmured around a mouthful.

“I have many redeeming qualities,” I shrugged.

We ate in companionable silence, and it wasn't until she'd finished her meal and washed it down with juice that she spoke again. “I want in.”

I blinked, raising an eyebrow. “Going to have to be more specific.”
Blake frowned, pushing away her plate and leaning forward in her seat. “You have a PMC—a group you claim you'll be using to protect Vale. You need fighters?” she asked, and I nodded. “Skilled workers—craftsmen, carpenters, and the like?”

“We could use a few, yeah,” I agreed.

“I know where you could get all of those things.”

“Faunus,” I stated, and she nodded. “From where?”

“All over,” Blake shrugged. “I'd suggest the Schnee mining towns, first. You'll pay a fair wage?”

I rolled my eyes. “No, I just hire people and expect them to work for free,” I snarked. Blake sent me an unamused look and I sighed. “Yes, I pay fair wages. Yes, I will provide equal pay for equal work and equal quality work. I won't take on slackers or people just looking to make a quick lien, and I'm not going to let people do half the work as someone else then claim it's unfair they're getting paid half what that other person is making.”

“I would like to join, then,” she repeated. “I can help find recruits willing to work under those conditions.”

I frowned, shaking my head. “I need you to understand something, Blake. I can't bring you in if I don't have your loyalty. If you're just getting ready to run again, or worse, rejoin the Fang, then I can't have you knowing all my secrets.”

The faunus girl nodded. “And what can I do to earn your trust? If you're helping my people like this, then I want to be a part of it. I won't run, and I won't go back to the Fang.”

“I believe trust between us is going to take time. We can start by working on this project for you,” I suggested. “How about we get together with the girls and go visit one of these mining towns you suggested, some time in the next few days? I'll give you a chance to try and recruit them and we'll go from there.”

“That would be nice,” Blake agreed, and my eyes shifted focus into the middle distance as a quest alert popped up.
Recruit the Faunus

Help Blake convince faunus to join your PMC.

Success: new recruits, increased closeness to Blake, 2000EXP/recruit, quest continuation. Failure: no new recruits, no EXP, Blake will lose faith in you and leave.

Shooting me an amused look, the faunus across from me asked, “You just got a quest, didn't you?”


“Oh?” she hummed. “Mine? What if I don't want to be loyal?”

“Well, in that case, I put my boot in your ass and wish you good luck in life,” I shrugged. “But near as I can tell, this doesn't force you to do anything, it just guesses at your actions and reactions somehow. So tell me, would me doing this for you improve my standing in your eyes? Would you feel like I was a person worth giving your loyalty to?”

Thinking about it a moment, she answered slowly, “Yes, I believe so—at least somewhat. Your Semblance can really tell you if a person is loyal to you or not?”

“Yeah. Along with emotional state, fishing out background details, and a whole host of other shit that kind of honestly scares the girls at times,” I admitted. “Good news is, I'm not using it to game you or anything. I genuinely want to help you. I want us to trust each other. And not just because I need your help with Cinder, or the Fang, or because I think you're hot.”

“Well, that's good to know,” she murmured, before a small smile crept across her lips. “You really think I'm hot?”

I rolled my eyes. “Pretty sure you got visual proof of that this time yesterday,” I reminded, and was rewarded with a blush. “So do the twins, and Neo, for that matter. You would not believe how hard it is to keep Neo from trying to convince you to 'join up,' as it were.”

“I'm not that—”
Ah, insecurity—I know thee well. “They seem to think so, and you know what I think. And before you ask, no, I'm not telling you this to get into your pants. It's the truth, and I felt you should know, after yesterday—so there's no misunderstanding. None of us is going to sneak into your room at night and molest you while you stay here. You are perfectly safe, on that front. On the other hand,” I added, thinking over what I knew of the girls, “If you make an offer, don't be surprised if Neo or the twins jump on it.”

“Twins,” Blake murmured, eyes going momentarily vacant. She shook her head and shot me a glare when I snorted. “You saw nothing.”

“Uhhuh. Sure,” I nodded. “Don't worry, everyone does that. It seems to be a pretty common fetish.”

“I don't want to know,” she denied, opening her book and attempting to hide behind it.

“Oh, you should have heard their reaction to you,” I continued, a smirk playing on my lips as her ears twitched. “It went something like, 'Mm, cat-girl.'” The book lowered enough for golden eyes to glare into my own. “Oh come off your high horse. The twins are perfectly aware they tick certain boxes for the vast majority of people: short, loli-goth, and twins for starters. Is it really so surprising you'd tick boxes for other people?”

“It's different,” she shook her head.

“Is it really?” I asked, reaching out and pushing her book down again to force her to look at me. “Melanie and Miltia have spent years knowing that, for most people, they've been reduced to a fetish—not even seen as individuals or people. It's dehumanizing. I'm sure you can relate, when people only see you for what you are as opposed to who you are. I got onto them about that for pretty much the exact same thing I'm telling you. Talk to them. You'll find common ground. Okay?”

“Okay,” she murmured, breaking eye contact.

“So, are you staying here or are you coming with me?” I asked, pushing myself up from the table and taking care of the dishes.

“Where?”
I shrugged. “Not sure yet. Back to the barracks to pick up the others, for starters. After that, I suppose I'll have to check my itinerary. Either way, it's likely to be a busy day. Not much longer until Beacon is scheduled to start, and I don't know about you, but I'd like to have as much of a head start as possible before we go.”

Putting away her book, Blake made her way to the spare bedroom, coming back out a moment later strapping Gambol Shroud into place. “Sounds like a plan. Let's go.”

As we stepped out onto the roof, I pulled up my map and set a waypoint as a force of habit, and frowned as something caught my eye—a symbol I didn't recognize, moving through the Commercial District. “What the hell?” I murmured. Blake turned a curious look on me and I shook my head. “Run on ahead. I'll meet you guys there. I've got something to check out.” With that, I took off at a run, changing into my Shiro gear mid-step, one hand moving to check my new weapon. *Who are you?*
Vertigo

The Name of the Game

a RWBY/The Gamer crossover, SI.

Arc 7: Fall of Fall

Chapter 2 5 : Vertigo

Frowning in annoyance, I tapped my map, where the icon I'd been chasing for the past twenty minutes sat. Normally, there were three types of icon for people on my map. The first appeared either as a small green, red, or white dot for friendly, hostile, or neutral targets within range. The second was standard quest markers, which I'd only ever rarely seen. The third kind appeared as a person's personal emblem if they met the threshold to have their personal icon on my map, such as Ruby's rose. Unlike all of those, this one appeared as a small circle of what looked like condensed static or snow off an old analog television, slowly cycling through colors. It was an anomaly, an aberration. My Semblance either couldn't, or wouldn't, identify it. “What the hell are you?”

Despite tracking and following it across half the Commercial District, I had yet to actually catch sight of the person responsible for it within the crowd and it was beginning to get frustrating. Closing the full map, I dropped down to street level, cloaked under my full stealth set. I noticed that my unwanted observer was back, as the hairs on the back of my neck stood up and my detection skills pinged.

Moving through the crowd, I followed the slowly moving icon as it appeared to go into one of the many Dust stores in town—the last one I'd robbed, in point of fact. They still haven't fixed the damage from my fight with Penny,’ I noted, taking up a position to watch the door of the store without being in the way of the crowd while keeping the minimap in the corner of my eye. Until I got eyes on it, I wasn't willing to get any closer.

Several minutes later, a figure wearing a knee-length navy dress with black trim and a set of black heels stepped out of the store. She was short—around Ruby's height—with hair the same shade as her dress pulled back into a tight bun. A flash of metal at her hip caught my eye as she turned, and I caught sight of her weapon. It was a sword—silver and polished to a shine that was highly visible in the morning light. The handle lead to a small cylinder surrounded by a four sided quillion, where I could make out the faint glow of Dust—white, red, blue—and below that, it tapered to a long, thin blade. A rapier, specifically.
'I know that sword,' I realized, and my eyes trailed up to her face as she began walking in my direction. Ice blue eyes were set in a lean, angular face, and her beautifully pale skin was marred only by a scar over her left eye—though, to be honest, it did more to add some sense of maturity to her face than detract from its beauty. I glanced at my minimap again, which still showed a circle of static slowly cycling through colors. Most alarmingly, perhaps, was her nameplate—while it didn't hurt my brain to look at, it was unreadable, seeming to be made entirely of static itself. Her name, title, and level were all completely hidden from me. Even without the nameplate, I recognized her.

'Weiss,' I mused, glancing at my HUD's time and date. 'Did you come to Vale a week early just to prepare for Beacon, or for something else?'

My curiosity piqued, I sent a message to the twins and Neo and let them know I'd found something interesting and would be a while. Immediately, I was bombarded with questions, and I sighed, knowing I couldn't exactly get out of answering—and that, considering they were in party, they could easily find me.

'What did you find?' Melanie sent.

'Or who?' Miltia added.

'Show us!' Neo demanded, and I rolled my eyes.

Penny's response was somewhat more urgent. 'Do you need my help, Jaune?'

'No, thank you Penny, I'm fine,' I quickly dissuaded the gynoid from simply summoning herself to my position. I sent a view through my eyes as Weiss passed by. The responses were varied. Neo sent the mental impression of a leer, while the twins both emoted curiosity.

'I know that face,' Miltia mused, Melanie echoing agreement. That's the younger Schnee heiress. The one that did that recital that was on all the networks recently. Heiress, rich, pretty much elevated nobility, and a minor pop-idol—she's pretty popular. Why is she in Vale?'

'And in disguise,' Melanie added as I moved to follow Weiss, ascending to roof level so I could move freely. 'Someone like that thrives on attention. I highly doubt she'd be in disguise to get away from paparazzi.'
It was Neo who hit the nail on the head. 'She's going to Beacon. She's their 'W.' That's why she's in Vale, but it doesn't explain the disguise.'

'Neo, please do not complete that thought,' I warned.

'Too late,' the twins synced. Melanie continued, asking, 'So, you what, know the future?'

'I will make you forget,' I sent, deadpan.

'You won't,' Miltia denied. 'More to the point, I don't believe you can. Specifically, because I remember the last time you did it.'

I palmed my face as the girls called my bluff. Bad news: the twins were resistant to my mental spells. Good news: they were probably also immune or at least very resistant to mental Semblances now. Win some, lose some. 'Neo's not immune.'

'We've got another mask,' Melanie pointed out. 'At the very least, Miltia and I should be safe to know the whole truth now—if you want to tell us.'

Below me, I watched as Weiss stepped into an alley, looked around to make sure she wasn't being watched, and drew her weapon. A white glyph lit up beneath her and she jumped, taking to the rooftops and shooting off across Vale, one hand on her sword and the other holding her scroll up with a map on it. I dropped into Flash Step and began ascending, using the taller buildings around us to stay above her while keeping a steady pace behind her. 'Later, maybe.'

A feeling of shock and slight panic washed over the link from Miltia, before she hurriedly asked, 'Wait, if we're resistant to mental effects now, does this mean no more mind-control sex?'

I stumbled and nearly face-planted on my next landing. 'You've been given an ability that can no-sell lesser negative mind-altering effects and you're worried that it'll ruin one of your fetishes?'

'Absolutely,' Miltia defended herself. 'If I didn't enjoy it, I wouldn't ask you to do it, Jaune.'
Our conversation went quiet and I continued to tail Weiss. Eventually, she dropped into another alley and put away her sword before walking into another Dust store. Following her down, I quickly ID'd my way into the Dust shop and watched. Looking around, I noticed the walls were particularly bare—meaning they likely hadn't gotten in a new shipment since the last time I'd robbed them. Then again, that could've been on that train I took, so that would tend to put a damper on getting replacement dust. Her conversation with the owner was quiet, but my newly enhanced hearing had no problems picking it up, especially when combined with actively using Listen.

Weiss held out her scroll and the owner's eyebrows headed for his hairline. “I'm conducting an investigation into the recent string of Dust robberies here in Vale and your shop is among those hit most recently. Would it be possible to get a copy of your surveillance footage of that night?”

“Certainly, Miss Sc—”

She held up a hand, a small, strained smile on her lips. “I'm sure Vale City Police and Atlas Security Forces are perfectly capable of finding the culprits, but we're investigating this as a potential internal matter. I'm sure you can appreciate the need for discretion. I would appreciate it if you forgot I was ever here.”

The man behind the counter nodded. “Of course. Let me just get you that footage.”

Weiss waited patiently while he worked on transferring the data from the security system to her scroll. “Did anything else about the theft stand out?” she asked as her scroll pinged, signaling the transfer was complete.

“The police and Atlas already asked all of that and I'll tell you the same thing I told them: I'm a one man operation here. I own and run the shop myself. I'm the only one with the codes and keys to the door and I sure didn't steal the Dust myself. There was a group of them—about eight or nine guys, all wearing masks and hats, according to the footage from the street cameras. They were in and out quick and quiet and they took everything not nailed down. They never set off the alarms. Thing is, the CCTV footage is useless. It just shows the empty store for the duration of the robbery. One minute everything's there, the next it's gone. The footage from next door shows them pulling up and getting out of a car, then the men and the car disappear and it's looking at empty street—same for the street cams, from what I've heard.”

“I see,” Weiss murmured, closing her scroll. “Thank you for your cooperation.”

The disguised heiress made her way outside and I followed by ID, taking to the roofs before she decided on a destination. ‘So, she's looking for us. I wonder why. That story she gave was obviously
bullshit, but then, I suppose you'd about need Outsider's Perspective to know that. Pretty sure Weiss doesn't have the authority to chase this down on her own. In fact, I'm almost positive that her daddy wouldn't approve of her chasing this down on her own and putting herself in danger, when there are police for that sort of thing.'

Well, there was one way to find out. Smirking under my mask, I set up on a highly visible rooftop and dropped my stealth spells. Seeing as it was morning and I was profiled against the sky while wearing dark clothes, I stood out like a sore thumb. 'Look up,' I urged the girl below as she studied her scroll again, likely trying to decide where to go next. 'Come on, look up, damnit. Ah! Yes... no, not there,' I rolled my eyes as she looked off to the side of me, before her head suddenly turned and her eyes locked on my position. There we go. Now, let's see how serious you are.'

I took a short running leap to the next building, heading up the street and in the general direction of the Industrial District. A glance at my minimap showed her odd icon to be following at a distance, and I grinned wider, picking up the pace. We crossed districts and I came across a large building labeled as a textile mill on my map, with a wide, flat roof, and I'd crossed nearly half of it before a white flash in my peripheral vision and my detection skills going off alerted me to the heiress suddenly closing the gap.

The heiress appeared in my path several feet away, sword drawn as she took up a ready stance. Her skin was slightly flushed and she was breathing hard. A few strands of her temporarily dyed hair had slipped loose, framing her face nicely. For a moment, teenage hormones betrayed me and my brain did the rest, transplanting that image to a bedroom scenario. “Halt, thief!”

I stopped, her voice derailing the vision in my head abruptly—and leaving me cursing those teenaged hormones. Looking around slowly, I pointed to myself. “Who, me?”

“Yes, you!” she spat out, her voice going up an octave in her anger.

“Okay. I've halted. Now what?” I asked and she blinked, anger deflating as I obviously failed to follow whatever script she had in her head.

She recovered admirably, however. “You are under arrest—”

“Are you a Hunter?” I interrupted, earning an annoyed look and a shake of the head in answer. “Are you an officer of the law?” I asked, and she frowned.
“Well, no, but—”

I nodded, deciding to roll for bullshit. “You're right. No 'buts.' You are neither a Huntress nor an officer of the law. You have no legal authority to pursue, detain, or question suspects, nor to make arrests. In fact, attempting to do so with no legal standing and no probable cause is either stalking, kidnapping, or assault. So, halt, villain!” I shouted, pulling up everything I remembered from the very few episodes of fansubbed Sailor Moon I'd watched, and Usagi's tendency to speechify, and dumping it into Intent backed with Charisma. Thumbing the release on the weapon at my side and ejecting two of the escrima-style Dustcasters that would form the main body of my weapon when locked together, I pointed one of them at her. “Or you shall be punished!” My new Acting skill pinged a level gain, the notification disappearing after three seconds.

“W-wha? I— you... but,” she spluttered, before she went red with anger—all the way down, as far as I could see. “Stop trying to confuse me!”

“You should have considered that before confronting an innocent pedestrian with false accusations of a crime you haven't even named and attempting to illegally detain them,” I countered. “I am making a legal citizen's arrest!” Acting leveled again.

“No, you're not,” she growled. “I have evidence of your crimes! You were at no less than three of the crime scenes of the most recent robberies—”

“Circumstantial evidence at best. It'll never hold up in court,” I denied.

“You engaged in a sword fight in the middle of the street with that Fox character in the commission of your last robbery!” she shouted triumphantly.

I shook my head. “I was merely an innocent bystander who happened upon a robbery in progress and stepped in to deescalate the situation and detain the criminals for the police to pick up in a legal citizen's arrest, when he attacked me without warning or provocation. Perhaps, because I was wearing dark clothing and it was night, he assumed I was with the real thieves. It was a case of right place, wrong time and mistaken identity. Again, circumstantial at best and no court is going to prosecute—”

“You stole a train full of Dust! Entire box cars!” she interrupted, now breathing heavily as her knuckles went white around the hilt of her sword.
She was so close to snapping. I wondered, for a moment, if I shouldn't ease her back from the edge. 'Nah. This is too much fun,' I decided. Then and there, I knew I would be making it a regular thing to get her riled up once I got to Beacon. As beautiful as Yang was when she was angry, Weiss was just as much so—and so much easier to get wound up. “I did? Do you have proof?”

The heiress whipped out her scroll, tapping away at it a moment before she turned a smug look on me and turned it around so I could watch. There on her tiny screen, I watched myself slip up behind a guard and put him in a sleeper hold. He thrashed for a few moments before going limp—because I'd hit him with a subvocal Sleep at the time, as I did for all of the guards, because I didn't want anyone waking up any time soon. The me on the screen made his way into the security control room and the footage ended as I'd shut off the cameras. “Huh. Well, I'll be damned. It looks like someone's trying to frame me for a crime I didn't commit. And I don't see any box cars disappearing there.”

“What?!” Weiss hissed, eyes going wide as she saw her carefully gathered evidence once more about to evaporate. “And of course you don't see them disappearing, because you shut off the cameras!”

“Nope,” I shook my head. “If you'll look closely, he's not even wearing the same armor as me, nor are we even using the same weapons.” I resisted the urge to laugh out loud as Acting leveled again. ‘Even my Semblance is telling me I'm so full of shit that my eyes should be brown.’

“Because that armor was destroyed by the Fox!” Weiss countered.

I shrugged. “Was it? You'd have to bring him in for questioning and ask him to confirm that theory.” Which would be impossible, unless I got Penny or Neo to do it. I was sorely tempted, just for laughs, but it would cause all sorts of questions and problems I didn't want to deal with.

“But you just said…” she trailed off, slowly closing her mouth with a quiet click. She put away her scroll and drew her sword again. “Right. That's enough. No more distractions. No more fast talking. I am taking you in to the police.”

“If you attack me, I'll subdue you and take you in to the police for assault,” I countered, reminding her of my earlier bluff. “It seems we're at an impasse.”

“We're really not,” Weiss growled. “What's your name?”

“Me?” I asked, fighting and failing to resist the grin that spread across my lips under my mask. “I'm Batman.”
Weiss blinked twice, before her expression went completely flat. “That's it, killing you now.”

One hand went up and spun the Dust cylinder in Myrtenaster. White glyphs appeared around the roof and she began her attack. 'She's fast,' I assessed silently, watching her as she moved closer. 'But Ruby was faster before I started training her.' I powered up Haste and she appeared to move in slow motion, landing in front of me and striking out with a thrust aimed at the side of my face. It would hurt if it connected, but wouldn't be lethal. I brought the escrima in my left hand up, parrying her strike off to the side, and countered with a kick to her stomach. The blow connected, sending her rolling backwards across the gravel roof. 'Wow. She can not take a hit.' I couldn't tell her HP or MP, since her health and mana/Aura bars appeared scrambled, but from her physical reaction alone it was plainly evident I'd hurt her.

Weiss coughed and rolled to her feet, blue eyes meeting my red and narrowing as she reassessed her situation. “Yeah, Princess. I'm a lot faster than you. Want to try again?”

Another glyph formed under her and she launched herself upwards, taking the fight three-dimensional as she attempted to strike from an angle I couldn't block or counter from. She'd learned from the first hit and didn't sit still long enough for me to counter, throwing out thrusts and slashes as she pinballed around me, probing my defenses. She would have wiped the floor with me when I first came to Remnant. A couple of weeks ago, I would have been hard pressed to match her. Now, I played Flash Step tag with Ruby Rose on a daily basis—who happened to be the fastest person I'd ever come across on Remnant. Weiss couldn't touch me—and that fact soon became apparent to the heiress, as her frustration leaked through the icy mask she wore.

As she neared again, attempting to string together a multi-hit thrust combo hoping I would miss a parry, I leveled one of my Dustcasters at her and hit the switch. Her eyes widened and she dodged quickly out of the way as a wave of fire exploded from the end of the weapon. I shifted the weapon to track her and she countered with an ice wall—apparently, she had been playing by some sense of fairness, as it seemed that my use of offensive Dustcasting provoked an immediate escalation to the same on her part, as opposed to simply using it to enhance her movements. A blur of motion told me she'd taken to the air, and she spun the cylinder again before attacking. Spinning in midair as a glyph formed under her, she thrust Myrtenaster at me and a set of six blue bolts of energy raced away from her, curving around to converge on my position.

Slapping the ends of the escrima in my hands together and twisting to lock them into place, turning it into a quarterstaff, I swatted one of the Dust attacks away, dodged under another, and Leapt above the rest as they converged and exploded. A bolt of red streaking in and my detection skills going off warned me of an inbound attack and I twisted in midair. My thumb hit the selector for my Dustcaster on one end and I swung. A wave of condensed frost washed out from my weapon, neutralizing the wave of fireballs Weiss had sent streaking at me. 'Maybe I shouldn't have started off with Grade 4 Dust in this thing. Sure, it was just to test with so I could get a handle on how it performs, but it's kind of fucking me at the moment. We seem about evenly matched as far as Dust Grade goes, so a
Dust battle between the two of us is going to boil down to selection, skill, and intelligence. And Weiss is as much of a caster as I am, just with a focus on Dust. Yeah, no—fuck fighting on her terms.

Touching down, I ejected the third and fourth segments of my polearm, quickly snapping them into place. Another fireball streaked in and I spun the completed weapon in hand before batting the fireball into the air, where it exploded harmlessly. I grinned as my Semblance alerted me to the fact that I had just imported a skill: Polearm Mastery, at level 20. A quick detail check confirmed what I'd suspected—that the skill covered more than one type of weapon. Just as Sword Mastery covered every type of sword and Firearms Mastery covered every type of gun, Polearm Mastery covered every type of pole weapon—from quarterstaves, to bo, spears, lances, halberds, and other exotics. I didn't have time for more than a glance though, as Weiss was on me again, combining her speed with what looked like an Aura Strike.

That was fine by me, because I was looking to test the other part of my weapon. When I'd slapped the pole together, I had connected the Dustcaster ends—leaving the shotgun ends facing outwards. Right now, they were loaded with a combination I'd come up with and turned out a couple hundred rounds for: Grade 4 Gunmetal Gray propellant and Grade 4 Burning Crimson shot, sized at number 7. High recoil with a nasty burn for anything it hit, but the shot itself was composed of smaller pellets—bird shot, essentially. It would be mostly harmless against anyone with Aura, as far as penetration went—most of its damage would come from the velocity of the shot and the burn effect. I wasn't using it for damage, though.

With Haste running, it was almost pathetically easy to get the timing right as I tilted the pole and jumped, firing at the same time. It went off twice more as I used it to spin me around and build momentum. Weiss spun her Dust chamber and another glyph flared to life under her—green, this time. Wind rushed around us and she leaped up to meet me, sword forward in a thrust as she flew at me at ballistic speed, propelled by what must have been wind Dust of some sort. The first strike hit the inner wrist of her weapon hand, sending her rapier spinning off to the side and skidding across the roof as she was disarmed. The other end of the pole came around and slammed into the shoulder of her opposite arm with all the force I'd gathered. The pole was not a particularly light weapon—it had a good deal of weight to it, mostly lightened by built in weight reduction enchantments. More important than its weight was its mass. Enchantments may have told gravity to fuck off on a semi-permanent basis regarding its weight, but they didn't alter its mass at all—meaning it could impart a lot more force than it seemed capable of. And it struck Weiss, who was moving at a good clip at the time, with the force of a motorcycle slamming into a telephone pole—it was only thanks to her Aura that the impact didn't exact that sort of toll on her body.

Weiss' shoulder popped out of socket with a sick crack and she bounced when she hit the gravel roof, rolling twice before coming to a stop. For a moment, she lay still, stunned by the impact as I touched down on the roof. Her senses returned to her and Weiss whimpered as she cradled her shoulder, tears stinging her eyes. Her dress was ripped and bloodstained. The skin under it was cut and abraded from where she'd rolled, but her Aura was swiftly healing that. The arm, on the other hand, wouldn't be healing without help. If she came looking for me, what's to stop her from going after Emerald or Mercury, if they ever slip up and do something to draw her attention? Those two wouldn't hesitate to kill her if they thought they could get away with it. Or, God forbid, Cinder? If
she started a fight with Cinder, the woman would take her time roasting Weiss, if Weiss managed to piss her off—which she was almost universally capable of, in canon. She's going to get herself killed if she keeps this up.'

I grimaced at the thought. I couldn't let that happen. Reaching down, I thumbed the selector switch for my Dust blades. Bringing the pole around, I locked it into the hilt of the sword and drew. I felt the attention from my unseen watcher increase, but sensed none of the danger I'd felt when I'd pulled this trick with Yang. Moving to the girl's feet, I hit the switch to connect the Dust in the blade to the crystal in the hilt of the sword. The blade lit up red down the center and heat began to roll off it. I gave it an experimental twirl before leveling the weapon at her face. Weiss stared up the serrated, glowing Dust blade, tears of pain in the corners of her ice blue eyes. There was anger there, yes, but also resolve. Determination. I nearly sighed. She had strength of will, but in this instance it may just get her killed. *This is for your own good.*

“You attacked me. I disabled you. Don't make it personal, Princess. Drop your investigation. It ends at the point of a sword, if you're lucky. If you're not, well, you'll probably die screaming. There is more going on in Vale than you realize, and I am the least of your worries. The way I see it, you've got two choices: crawl off back to Atlas and daddy to lick your wounds, or…” I turned my gaze to the east, where Beacon sat atop the cliffs. The school stood out like its namesake even in the daylight from this distance, its tallest towers visible from the city below.

Weiss followed my gaze and frowned. “How did you know?” she ground out through the pain.

“I didn't, until you told me, just now,” I said—it was a complete lie, but she couldn't know that. Flipping the polearm over, I deactivated the Dust blade and buried it a foot into the roof where it would stand on its own. I knelt beside her and she flinched away. Frowning, I grabbed her arm and put a hand on her shoulder. “This is going to hurt,” I warned, then carefully popped the arm back into place, earning a muffled squeal that tapered off into a pained whimper. Standing, I collected my weapon and began the process of sectioning and storing it. “If you come after me again, I might not be so kind, Princess.”

I turned and began making my way off the roof. “Wait,” she called, and I paused. I turned enough to see her stumble to her feet and move to recover her own weapon. “What's your name?” I opened my mouth and she quickly added, “And don't tell me it's 'Batman.'”

My jaw clicked shut as she cut off my first answer. After a moment of consideration, I decided it couldn't hurt too much—it was a name I'd made up to separate my identities, after all. “Shiro.”

“Shiro,” she murmured, tasting it for a moment before nodding. “I will remember this, Shiro. One day soon, you and I will cross blades again. I will not lose a second time.”
“Well, then,” I hummed, a smirk pulling at my lips. “You've got a lot of catching up to do. See you soon, beautiful.”

The heiress' eyes went wide, before narrowing into a glare. I tossed her a wave over my shoulder, before sighting in a taller building nearby and using my line launcher to draw me up. I smirked as, between Listen and my enhanced hearing, I heard her let out a quiet growl of frustration as I left.

“Sit still!”

Gunshots sounded out across the field we'd taken to using to practice as Yang launched into a flurry of blows. On the other end of her wrath, Neo wore a cocky smirk, dancing quickly back and forth between red Dust rounds. Stepping into Yang's guard, she popped open her parasol, directly into the path of Yang's next blow. The round detonated atop the parasol, fire sheeting off of it as Neo spun under it, temporarily cut off from Yang's view. One white boot struck, catching Yang behind the knee and putting pressure on it as Neo stepped in, pulling the blonde into an intentionally erotic embrace as she forced Yang to one knee, her face coming to rest between Neo's breasts. Lilac eyes locked with strawberry and vanilla for a moment, before the sound of a blade sliding out drew Yang's gaze to the side, where Neo had compressed her parasol again and extended the blade at the end, moving it around to rest against Yang's back.

A leer crossed the tiny girl's lips as she nodded. “Well, if you wanted to take a break, you should have said so sooner.”

“I hate you,” Yang's muffled voice sounded from the valley of Neo's corset-clad breasts.

My attention was pulled back to my own fight as Ruby came flying in low—literally, in this instance. Somehow, the girl had worked out how to use wind to lift herself a couple of feet off the ground in a feat of minor levitation. She couldn't do it for long without burning through her Aura, but then she didn't really need to. On a straight line run, she had figured out that she could drop low to the ground, use wind to reduce her drag and friction, and use Crescent Rose's recoil to boost her well above what she'd been capable of before—on top of using Flash Step and her Semblance. Now that I'd taught her Haste, the only reason I even stood a chance was because Ruby was holding up her end of our deal: that being that, if I taught her Haste, she wouldn't over-rely on it. So, her sparring sessions were done without Haste, while I let her cut loose on Grimm so she could level it quickly to get the time dilation effect. She absolutely needed it, now.

Swinging my staff into the path of her scythe, I batted her aside—more redirection by using her own momentum against her than directly overpowering her attack—sending her tumbling several yards
and bouncing along the ground before wind kicked up around her and she suddenly stopped, righting herself and setting back down. I raised an eyebrow at that. “Neat trick.” And it really was—using wind for makeshift thrust vectoring was beyond what I thought she’d be capable of. Then again, Ruby was a prodigy, and I hadn’t exactly tried to do it myself yet so I wasn’t sure what the requirements were.

“Really? It took a bit of playing around to figure out how to do it without ending up face down in the dirt,” the little redhead admitted.

“You’re doing really well,” I sent her a smile, before snapping my staff into a pair of quarterstaves. “Now, let’s go for some CQC.”

Silver eyes narrowed and Ruby chambered a new round into her rifle, before taking off with a shot and closing the distance between us in a blur of red. Unlike Ruby, I wasn’t just using Haste, I was abusing the shit out of it to close the gap between us. It only really helped so much, however, and I took more than my fair share of licks from the girl's oversized weapon as we traded blows. *This is so far from working, it's not even funny,* I mused. *I'm going to need to practice more. In the meantime, it might be better to abandon CQC and break off.* Humming in thought, I grinned as I sighted in one of the trees on the edge of the clearing. Part of the forest the clearing bordered was still within the bounds of the empty ID I'd created for us to train in unobserved, and a change of terrain would force Ruby to change tactics. Hitting the right button combo, I fired one of the line launchers built into the weapon and dragged myself out of her range.

“Hey, that’s cheating!” the girl yelled, immediately giving chase.

Pulling myself up into a tree, I lead my target and opened fire, throwing out a couple of fireballs from the Dustcasters. Ruby dodged them with ease, but was forced to slow down and direct more of her attention into dodging, using the trees around us as cover. I would have lost sight of her more than once, if not for her red cloak and guessing her most likely path by the trail of rose petals that using her Semblance left behind. *Really need to work on your stealth,* I mused, leading my target and dropping another Fireball in her path.

Instead of dodging, the little reaper blew through the flames, coming out the other side of the impromptu wall of flame and sighting me in. Ruby flipped her scythe around and fired as she Leapt at me, the recoil combined with the Powered Leap kicking up a small wave of dirt where she’d last stood. Wind whipped around her, setting her cloak to fluttering and scattering a trail of rose petals in her wake, as she blurred into Flash Step. I caught sight of a buildup of red Aura along her weapon, pooling in the scythe blade, before she swung it at my head.

I dropped down in time to miss a swing that cut through the trunk of the tree I'd been standing on like a hot knife through butter. I watched as a thin line of solidified Aura slid off the blade of her weapon,
leaving behind a crimson line of energy that mowed down everything in its path as it punched its way up through the treetops behind where I'd been standing—an Aura strike that would have likely cleared a small horde of Grimm by itself. I almost dreaded what would happen once she started modifying Crescent Rose again—she'd mentioned something about retractable Dust blades, and I didn't think I wanted to be on the business end of one of those.

Snapping the pole back together as parts of trees and branches rained down around us, I used Air Walk and kicked off with a Leap of my own after her, recoil helping to throw me into an intercept course as she realized what I was up to and fired her own weapon to bring her around into a spin. A smirk crossed my lips as she missed and I sailed over her. Spinning around, I leveled the Dustcaster end of the staff at her and thumbed the selector to green Dust. “Ventas!”

Mana and Dust combined as I fired off the spell, amplified many times over by the Dust from the staff. A wall of wind slapped the red-clad reaper out of the air, sending her slamming into the ground. Touching down nearby, I moved to check her over. “You okay?”

“I'll live,” she grunted, coughing once as she heaved herself up to her feet and leaned on Crescent Rose for support. “New spell?”

I nodded. “I'm working on rounding out the basic elemental stuff. Wind was up on the list, and I've got a couple I wanted to make. So, have you figured out Surface Walking yet?” In our morning sit down to work on new techniques, that had been what I'd worked with Ruby on. The twins, on the other hand, were given something to even the playing field between themselves and the more experienced melee fighters of the group.

Ruby rolled her eyes and proceeded to walk straight up a tree. “Give me something harder, next time.”

Chuckling, I said, “Okay. Fine. Now do that on water, then thin air.”

The small redhead blinked, dropping to the ground as I gestured her towards the edge of the forest. “Is that how you change directions mid-air?”

“Yup,” I nodded. “Come on, let's go check on the others.”

“Jaune! What am I supposed to do?!” Penny called the moment we stepped back out of the forest. I shot the gynoid a questioning look and she gestured between where Neo was still keeping Yang occupied and where the twins were harrying Blake in a flurry of bladed claws and heels.
“So, you’ve got a hostage situation?” I assessed, and Neo nodded.

“I might have told her if she went to help Blake, I’d hurt Yang,” Neo admitted.

I shot the girl a put-upon look. “That wasn’t nice.” Over our link, I sent, ‘You know damn well Penny takes things too literally at times and still has trouble spotting bullshit.’

Neo shrugged. “It worked, didn’t it?” Unheard by anyone else was the other half of that response: ‘And taking advantage of her like this will force her to adapt faster than babying her will, Jaune.’

‘I’m not babying her. But you’ve got a point.’ Nodding, I turned back to Penny. “She’s not going to hurt Yang, obviously, but it’s a valid question. How are you supposed to handle a situation like this?”

“I… I do not know! What do I do?” Penny asked, and I shrugged. “How am I supposed to choose one friend over another?!”

“I know what I’d do.” Turning to Ruby, I asked, “What about you? She’s got your sis—”

I wasn’t even finished speaking before Crescent Rose folded down into its compact form, Ruby leveled it, took aim, and popped off a round at Neo—knocking her flat on her ass and freeing Yang. “That was my titty!” Neo yelped, whimpering and clutching her chest. “You little bitch.”

“It worked, didn’t it?” Ruby deadpanned.

The ice cream themed girl turned a look on me and I shrugged. “It’s what I would’ve done.”

Neo blinked, shifting her gaze and looking up to find Yang standing over her, offering her a hand up. Raising an eyebrow, she allowed herself to be hauled to her feet. “Jaune, I think I need medical attention.”

“Is that what you call it?” Ruby muttered under her breath, rolling her eyes. Shifting her aim, she began popping off rounds at the twins. “Penny, take the one on the left; Yang, go get Blake! Hit
them hard and fast, before they try to go invisible on us!”

Moving over to Neo, I watched a small smirk cross her lips as I cupped her 'injured' breast. We were only using Grade 2 Dust for training, and between all the defensive buffs running on everyone, even Ruby's precious sniper rifle wouldn't do much more than knock someone flat and leave a hell of a bruise. “She's coming along nicely,” Neo murmured as Ruby, Penny, and Yang joined the fray and gave Blake some breathing room. Both twins disappeared and the four girls took up a guard formation, back to back.

“You all are, really,” I corrected, giving her a gentle squeeze and drawing a quiet gasp from her lips as I felt her nipple stiffen against my palm. “Want to go help the twins?”

Neo rolled her eyes. “But I'm enjoying myself here.” She hissed as I tweaked her nipple, shooting a look at me that was half glare, half lust. “If you get me worked up here, you're taking care of it.”

“Not much of a threat.”

“It wasn't a threat,” Neo smirked, shifting her gaze back to the fight. “I suppose we should help Melanie and Militia. Yang's figured out how to force them visible. I'm kind of surprised Penny's still playing fair and hasn't just told them where the twins are.”

I rolled my eyes, watching a wave of fire wash away from the blonde. “Yeah, well, it's kind of hard to stay invisible when the ground and air around you are on fire. And Penny knows shit like that,” I gestured towards where the group was concentrating fire on where one of the twins had been a moment ago, “doesn't happen if they're just given the answer.” Releasing her breast, I joined my staff to the hilt of my sword and drew the completed weapon from its sheath. ‘I still need a name for you,’ I mused, looking down at the bladed polearm, going over what I remembered from Earth mythology. There were several obvious choices to draw inspiration from. Many came to mind—the holy lance of Longinus, Luin of Celtchar, Gungnir—but I discarded them each in turn. I'd had this thing made with a purpose in mind, and it wasn't just as a replacement weapon for Shiro. Certainly, it would do a fine job of killing men, but it was made to kill monsters first. And despite not having run across any yet, or even knowing if they existed here, in the land of monsters, the biggest and nastiest of those tended to be dragons. 'Ascalon.'

Spinning it once, I leveled the newly-named blade at the group gathered back to back. “Try to pull Ruby off. I'll take Blake. Let the twins have Penny and Yang.”

“Got it,” Neo agreed, and we took off at a dead run, as I jumped ahead of her in a Flash Step to give her an opening.
By the time we called it quits for the day it was getting late into the afternoon and we were all tired, sweaty, and a little worse for wear. I brought the Bullhead in directly to Fox Hunt's new helipad on top of the barracks—the retractable landing pad and its folding roof actually added another floor to the top of the barracks, but it gave us a safe place to touch down and take off from out of view of everyone else. My radio squawked as I neared the lighted circle. “Fox Hunt Ground Control to inbound Bullhead, identify yourself or be fired upon.”

“Roger that, Ground Control. Identification code as follows,” I replied, reading off the daily code I'd picked up that morning when I got in from playing with Weiss. Identification codes for incoming air and ground traffic was another bit of paranoia on my part. I'd ordered men put on rotation in guard positions on the buildings with the best vantage points, armed with sniper rifles and rocket launchers, in order to deal with annoyances trying to get into the compound. Anyone who failed to identify themselves, or claimed to be someone that worked here and used the wrong code really would be shot. Those who did identify themselves but who did not have permission to be here would be directed to the central landing pad, where they would be met with a detail of armed men whose job it was to figure out what they wanted and either report to a superior or send them on their way, with force if need be, depending on the situation.

There was a pause as my codes were checked before the lights on the helipad blinked from red to green. “Welcome home, Foxtrot-Actual. You're cleared to land.”

“Thank you, Ground Control,” I grinned, easing the Bullhead the rest of the way down onto the platform. I killed the engines and the platform beneath us began sinking into the building, taking the Bullhead with it. Above us, shutters on the roof slid closed and the lights kicked on. Standing, I stretched and popped my back. Helping Neo out of the co-pilot's seat, I hit the door controls and we piled out of the aircraft, making our way into the building.

“Dibs on the shower!” Ruby called, vanishing in a burst of rose petals.

“Uh, she does realize there's more than one, right?” Blake asked.

Yang shrugged. “Yeah, but she's probably going after the best one.”

“Mine,” I deadpanned, at the same time the twins and Neo said, “Ours.” The trio shot me an amused look before I shrugged and corrected myself. “Ours.”
“So, clean up, then what?” Yang asked, and I hummed, shooting a look at Blake.

“We've got an op to run for Blake, actually.” That drew the faunus girl's attention, eyebrows climbing towards her hairline in question. “Get me a location and we'll arrange transport. This will be your op, though—we'll follow your lead on this.” I had officially added Ruby, Yang, and Blake to the guild this morning. Ruby had been added as an Officer while Yang and Blake had both been added as Veterans. None of them, however, had been added to the PMC nor did they have official ranks within the PMC. There were a few reasons for that, but most of it boiled down to the potential for a list of our personnel getting out in the wild with their names on it.

“This is an official, Fox Hunt thing, right?” Miltia asked, and I nodded. The twins shared a silent conversation, apparently dragging Neo in a moment later as they all shared looks, before the more reserved twin continued. “Then I'll stay behind, since only one of us should be out 'in uniform' at a time. Jaune, can I borrow your bike so I can run some errands while you're out?”

I shrugged. “Sure. We'll head down to the parking garage before we leave and I'll summon it for you.”

“Well, in that case, we'd better go get ready,” Melanie grinned, grabbing her sister by the hand and dragging her off towards their room.

Blake sent me a nod before heading off for the room we'd loaned out to her in the new place. “I should have a candidate village within the hour.”

“Everyone seems to have left,” Penny pointed out, and Neo turned a grin on her.

“Sweetie, why don't you go keep Ruby company?” the illusionist suggested, and Penny raised an eyebrow.

“I am not sure about that. I do not think Ruby would enjoy company in her shower,” Penny pointed out.

'I'm a little surprised she got that one. I mean, given how the twins, Neo, and I share showers all the time I'd almost suspect she'd have come to expect shower time to be shared,' I mused.

“You'll never know until you try,” Neo countered, and I shook my head.
Penny blinked, casting a long glance between myself, Neo, and Yang who stood there watching with an amused look—still trying to figure the ancula out, apparently. “Are you asking me to keep Ruby company because she may be lonely, or because you want me to distract her so you can talk to Yang?”

“Eh?” the blonde asked, gesturing to herself. “What?”

“That second one,” Neo nodded.

“Oooh, I see,” Penny nodded, beaming a smile at us. “I will endeavor to be very distracting, then!”

I blinked as the gynoid ran off to the master bedroom, and the attached bath where Ruby was currently ensconced. “Neo,” I began, almost hesitant to ask. My voice came out as a hoarse, disbelieving whisper of mounting horror, “What have you done?”

“No idea. But it'll probably be amusing,” the smaller girl grinned. “Speaking of amusing,” she turned and cast a leer at Yang. “Come with us.”

Yang put one hand on her hip, cocking them to the side as she put on a smirk. “Oh really?”

Rolling my eyes, I stepped up and quickly swept Yang up by the back of the thighs into a fireman's carry, resting her over my shoulder like a sack of potatoes. “Come on, blondie.”

“Hey! Careful,” the blonde whined. As I followed Neo to her bedroom, she said, “The least you could do is cop a feel while you've got your hand there, Jaune Jaune.”

“I will not,” I denied, though I very much wanted to. I mean, it was so tempting—her ass was right there, all of an inch away from my hand. Yang, on the other hand, had no qualms about copping a feel of her own, as she grabbed my ass with both hands and squeezed. The sound I made was a manly squawk, not a squeak, as I quickly flung her the rest of the way across the room, where she landed on Neo's bed with a whoosh of air. “That was my ass.”

“And a nice ass it was,” Yang nodded. “Wouldn't mind another feel.” Looking around, she shot us a leer as Neo shut and locked the bedroom door. “Sooo… What's going on in here? Did you finally decide you couldn't resist my charms?” the blonde leered, wagging her eyebrows and spreading out over the blanket in a pose that caused me to nearly stumble as my eyes roved over her form.
Shaking my head, I took Neo's desk chair, turned it around, and dropped down into it. Crossing my arms, I gave Neo a nod and leaned back in the chair to watch. “No. We're here to talk about your punishment.”

“Oh? What kind of punishment? Cause this is looking more interesting by the moment,” Yang chuckled, before frowning as she asked, “Wait, what am I being punished for?”

“For not following instructions,” I deadpanned.

“Oh, that thing at The Club,” Yang nodded. “You know, I'm still mad at you about that.”

“No, you're not,” I denied as Neo slipped onto the bed beside the blonde. “Annoyed, maybe. Disappointed, too. But you see the point of it. Otherwise, you would have said something. You're not exactly the passive aggressive type, Yang.”

“True,” the blonde nodded, lilac eyes turning to Neo. “What're you doing?”

“Me? Oh, that's easy,” Neo beamed. Striking quickly, she snagged Yang's arms and pulled the blonde into a short scuffle, which ended up with Yang laying on her stomach pressed into the mattress and Neo straddling her waist from behind. “You see, Jaune won't lay a finger on you, because he knows it'd hurt your sister.” Lilac eyes met my blue, and I nodded. “Lucky for Jaune, I've got no such compunctions.”

“I spent a while trying to think up a fitting punishment. Some way to rub your nose in it, that you wouldn't just shrug off. And while I'm sure I'd enjoy spanking your ass red, I'm also pretty sure you'd enjoy it too, so it wouldn't really work that well as disciplinary action. So, instead, we talked it out and decided a little humiliation and frustration would stick with you the longest.” I allowed a smirk to tease my lips upwards.

Neo leaned down, molding herself flush against Yang's back, shifting both the blonde's hands from behind her back to above her head and moving them to one hand. At this point, Yang could have easily overpowered the smaller girl, which meant that the blonde was there entirely of her own volition. Observe gave me her emotional state as curious, aroused, hopeful, and excited—so she wasn't exactly about to say 'no' at this point. Digging into her pocket, Neo pulled out her scroll and opened it, selecting the file she wanted and setting the volume loud enough to hear but not so loud that it'd be heard outside the room. Shifting to get comfortable, she held the scroll out to where Yang could see the display, while still being able to watch me from where I sat—though, it was more so I
could watch her face to see her reaction. Neo hit 'play' and Yang's gaze was soon riveted to the screen. “Now, the fun begins,” Neo murmured.

On screen, a blonde head of hair which looked suspiciously like her own bobbed up and down, before one hand came up to shift the curtain of hair away, exposing her face and, more importantly, what she was doing—namely, that her pink lips were wrapped around the shaft of my cock as her head bobbed. The real Yang blushed, suddenly going very still. Yang's eyes went wide as she realized what she was seeing, and even in the low light of the room, I could tell her pupils had dilated as she focused on the screen. Every now and then, lilac eyes would track over and meet my gaze, before quickly returning to the screen.

Neo caught my eye some minutes later as Yang squirmed under her. I nodded, and Neo shifted to lay beside Yang, shifting her grip on the scroll to her other hand after releasing Yang's wrists from her hold—the blonde wasn't going anywhere. Yang barely paid any attention as Neo's free hand fell to her lower back, just above her shorts, and started tracing slow patterns there, creeping slowly downward. Slowly, gently, Neo's hand inched down under the waistband of Yang's shorts, along with the yellow panties under them. Yang definitely noticed when Neo's small hand cupped her bare ass directly. Lilac eyes went wide again and she made to look at Neo, only to stop and gasp quietly as the ice cream themed girl beat her to the punch, leaning in and catching Yang's earlobe with her teeth. Biting down gently to get her attention, Neo pulled the delicate flesh into her mouth to play with it for a moment, eliciting a quiet whimper from Yang, before she spoke—hot breath brushing over the blonde's ear.

“We know what you want, Yang,” Neo whispered softly, lips teasing Yang's ear with the movement of every word. “We've seen the way you look at us. You want that for yourself and your sister, don't you?” When Yang nodded slowly, Neo continued, voice dropping low enough that I had trouble picking it up even with the enhanced hearing and Listen active. “You know Jaune won't touch you, and it only turns you on more, because it means he's not willing to hurt Ruby for a little fun with you. Am I right?” Another nod from the blonde, and Neo spent a moment teasing her ear with lips and teeth. “We share everything. Can you live with that? With not having him to yourself?”

“Y-yeah,” Yang breathed, the answer coming out sounding more like a whimper than anything else.

“Nobody gets left out. Everybody can play with everyone else. Are you okay with that?” Neo asked, before slowly dipping her hand lower into Yang's panties, and apparently making contact with something sensitive as the blonde gasped. “With this?”

Lilac eyes locked with my blue for a long moment before Yang bit her lip, then nodded quickly. “Dust yes.”

“Good,” Neo purred into Yang's ear, her grin stretching into Cheshire proportions as she apparently
redoubled her efforts on the blonde, if Yang's sudden twitch of her hips was any indication. “Now, be a good girl and watch the movie. Unless, that is, you want me to stop?”

“Don't stop. Sweet Dust, don't stop,” Yang whimpered, shaking her head frantically as she turned her eyes back on the scroll and the scene playing out.

’You know, that is ridiculously hot,’ I sent to Neo, who met my eyes with a leer. ’Now remember, don't let her come from this. Not yet.’

Neo rolled her eyes. ’Yes, dear. I haven't forgotten the plan,’ she retorted, before chuckling quietly as she asked, ’So, how hard are you right now?’

’My dick is like diamonds,’ I sent back, and the girl raised an eyebrow. ’I had to turn Gamer's Mind back on, or I wasn't going to be able to sit here much longer. As it stands, I may have just blue balled myself anyway. Still, worth it.’

Nuzzling into Yang's neck and brushing her teeth against the blonde, eliciting a shudder for her trouble, Neo smirked. ’Poor thing. Want me to take care of it later?’

’Absolutely,’ I agreed. I shifted in my seat, adjusting myself in my pants as I watched Neo slowly torture Yang. Idly, I wondered if we hadn't taken this too far, before shaking my head.

Eventually, the movie ended, and Yang lay there softly panting, squirming under Neo's fingers. “Well, I believe that about does it,” Neo said, beginning to sit up and remove her hand from Yang's pants.

Yang turned wide lilac eyes on the shorter girl. “But… but I haven't finished! You can't just leave me worked up like this?”

I snorted softly, drawing Yang's gaze to me. “And why not?”

“Because it's not fair!” Yang whimpered. “Come on, you can't just leave me like this!”

Smirking, I shook my head. “No, I very well could. It's what we had planned, originally. Leave you all hot and bothered, then go fuck in Neo's shower.” The look on the blonde's face was absolutely priceless, at that. Turning to Neo, I shrugged. “I suppose it's up to you. She's not really going to
“I could!” Yang offered. “I totally could! Come on, don't leave me hanging.”

“Could, but you won't,” I countered. “Because I'm not going to let you. As fun as that would be to watch, when Neo's done with you, I'm going to have my way with her.”

Neo hummed quietly, then smirked. “Well, lucky you, I'm feeling generous.” Yang's face lit up in sudden hope, before being forced down into the blankets as Neo grabbed a handful of hair at the back of her head and roughly shoved her down. Yang squealed as Neo went back to work on her, and I shook my head.

I was honestly surprised Yang hadn't reacted violently at that, given her protectiveness over her hair. "Then again, she looks like she's just too turned on to give a fuck. Or maybe, since she's never had anyone really muss her hair good or otherwise give it a good pull and she's discovered she enjoys it. I'd have to ask, later—both to satisfy my curiosity and to see the look on her face. "You're going to break her," I warned.

The ice cream themed girl raised one fine pink eyebrow. “Is that a challenge, Jaune? Cause that sounded like a challenge.”

Considering it for a moment, I asked, “What are the stakes?”

“Who needs stakes? Seeing her break will be payment in and of itself,” Neo smirked. “Hey Yang,” Neo murmured, leaning down to the blonde’s ear again as she pulled her head back. Dazed lilac eyes rolled in their sockets for a moment before locking onto Neo. An instant later, the illusionist's form shimmered from head to toe. Medium length chocolate and strawberry hair seemingly shortened, darkening to black and red. Mint colored eyes shifted to silver. Her face blurred before resolving into that of Ruby Rose. Yang’s eyes widened as she stilled. Taking advantage of the sudden opening, 'Ruby' darted in and kissed Yang full on the mouth, tongue darting past her lips as one hand squeezed one of Yang's breasts and the other went back to work. The reaction was instantaneous, as Yang locked up in Neo's arms and squealed into the shorter girl's mouth as she came.

A wet squelching sound reached my ears and I raised an eyebrow, as did Neo. “Huh. I think she just squirted. I thought that was just one of those made up internet things,” Neo mused quietly, mostly to herself. The squelching stopped and Neo removed her hand, drawing a shudder from Yang as she did. Bringing her soaked hand up, Neo gave it a hesitant sniff. “Doesn't smell like piss.” Her pink tongue darted out and licked one of her wet fingers and I wrinkled my nose in mild disgust. While normally, the sight of Neo licking another girl's juices off of her fingers would have been pretty high
on my list of things I enjoyed watching, as she and the twins knew well, I'd been of the same mind as Neo on the subject—namely that 'squirtng' was a made up internet fetish and was just piss, and that just wasn't sexy. "Tastes like… honeysuckle? No, wait, that's just her. Don't think it has a taste."
She reached over and grabbed a box of wet wipes off her bed stand, cleaning her hand and throwing them in the trash can beside the bed, put there for that purpose.

“Yes, thank you Neo,” I rolled my eyes.

The girl's form shifted back and she sent me an impish grin as the insensate blonde in her arms struggled to regain her breath. “I did mess up a few details, though. She waxes. Also, puffy vulva. Not roast beef sandwich, though, in case you were wondering. ”

I palmed my face. “That's enough.”

“I've never come that hard before,” Yang muttered, rejoining the waking world as she stretched languidly. “Man, I feel really good. Can we do that again?”

“No,” I deadpanned.

Yang pouted, before turning a grin on Neo. “So. About returning the favor…”

Neo shot me an amused look and shook her head. “As tempting as it is, and oh, it is very tempting… no. It wouldn't be fair to Jaune, for starters. This was something we both agreed on, but I'm not going to play with you any more if he can't too. We don't do that.”

Yang nodded. “Yeah, I get it. So, uh… this is kind of awkward.”

Neo rolled her eyes. “It really doesn't have to be. We like you. We think you're fun, an overall good person, and worth keeping around—also, ridiculously hot.”

“I know, right?” Yang grinned, and I rolled my eyes.

“Don't stroke her ego,” I warned, a smile playing across my lips as I said it.
Neo continued as if she hadn't been interrupted. “But as much as we'd enjoy keeping you around, Jaune's not going to hurt Ruby by picking you over her.”

“To clarify,” I quickly added, before that could be misconstrued, “she's not saying Ruby's in the way or anything. Just that I'm not going to destroy my friendship with her, or your own relationship with your sister, over something between us.”

Yang shot me a glance and nodded. “I know. And I appreciate it—I really do. It's just… frustrating.”

“You could talk to her,” I suggested, drawing a raised eyebrow from the blonde. “Tell her what you want. It may really be that simple.”

Yang snorted. “Not likely. But I'll keep it in mind.” Sighing, she rolled away from Neo and pushed herself off the bed. “So, can I borrow your shower?”

A mischievous look danced in Neo's eyes as she shook her head. “Go borrow Blake's. I'm sure she won't mind.”

’Oh, you are evil,’ I sent, suppressing the desire to smirk. “Yeah, it'll be fine.”

The blonde shot us suspicious looks before shrugging, doing interesting things for her breasts in the process. “Eh, why not?” She started for the door, only to pause and dig out her scroll. “Mind sending me that video?”

Neo sent me a questioning look and I shrugged. Digging out her scroll again, Neo started swiping away at it. “Don't show it to anyone,” Neo warned, and Yang nodded.

“Yeah, yeah,” the blonde agreed, already distracted as her scroll pinged and the video came up.

As she left the bedroom, I turned an amused look on Neo. “What is it with sisters in Remnant? Every set I've met has been a lot closer than most people would consider normal.”
Neo shrugged. “Have you considered the possibility that it's just you?”

I rolled my eyes. Before I could respond, however, Ruby's voice coming from the hallway caught my attention. “Yang?”

Something about her tone sounded off, and a quick inspection of the link between us caused me to facepalm. “God damnit,” I grunted, pushing off my chair and sticking my head out into the hallway, taking in the scene there.

“Uhh,” Yang floundered, watching as Ruby stared intently at the scroll in her hands, having apparently taken it from Yang. A scroll playing a very familiar video. “It's not what it looks like?”

Aura flared and wind momentarily washed down the hall at that. “Really, Yang? Because it looks pretty self-explanatory to me,” Neo poked her head out of the door beside me, the motion drawing Ruby's attention. Silver eyes locked with my own and a sudden flood of emotion washed across the link between us—disappointment, betrayal, anger, hurt, and more that I couldn't categorize. “I—” Ruby began, but whatever she was going to say was cut off as Neo's form shifted beside me, taking on her impression of Yang again.

“It was me,” the brunette-turned-blond at my side quickly intervened. “It's me in the video. It was my idea to film it. Jaune was against it the whole time, specifically because he was worried this would happen. Yang didn't have anything to do with it. She only has it because I was teasing her with it.”

Ruby's eyes closed and the emotional storm coming down the link between us lost much of its strength. It was still there, churning slowly and strong enough that she couldn't help broadcasting it, but it wasn't as bad as it had been. Tossing the scroll to Yang, she turned and headed for the stairwell to the roof. “I'm leaving.”

The stairwell door slammed behind her. ‘I kept her occupied as long as I could, Jaune,’ Penny sent, and I nodded. It wasn't Penny's fault—just bad luck.

I turned my gaze on Neo and the girl winced as she shifted back to her usual choice of coloration. “You told me so. I know.”

“I... I was putting it away when she saw it,” Yang started to explain, and I held up a hand.
“Not your fault,” I denied.

Beside me, Neo sighed and made her way towards the stairwell. The door to the twins' room opened as she passed and Neo snagged them by the wrists. “Come on, we're going after Ruby. Jaune, stay here. We'll be back soon.”

“No, I should—”

Neo shook her head. “No, you really shouldn't. Just trust me, okay? Let me fix this—like you told me I'd have to. Let me take responsibility for my fuckup. Please?”

Sighing, I nodded. “Okay. Let me know how it goes.”

The trio made their way out, Neo quickly filling in the twins on the situation. A check of my map confirmed that Ruby hadn't gone far—she was still in the building, but I couldn't tell what floor. Considering that stairwell only lead to the roof and the floor immediately below and the door further down was locked, the roof was the most likely place. “Jaune, I'm sorry,” Yang apologized, and I waved her off.

“Don't worry about it. Go get cleaned up. I'm going to do the same. Tell Blake we're putting it off until tomorrow, so she's got a bit more time to plan now,” I told her, heading for my own bedroom and the shower therein. Penny followed, and I shot her an amused look. “You can't shower with me.”

“I was not going to, but if you would like me to wash your back, I will,” Penny offered.

I snorted softly. “Thanks, Penny. I appreciate the offer.”

“What did Ruby see that upset her so?” the gynoid asked, and I hummed in thought, wondering how to phrase it.

“Well,” I began, “Neo's Semblance creates illusions. She used it to look like Yang while we…”

“Made love? Had sex?” Penny asked, quickly continuing with, “Made the beast with two backs?
Rode the bologna pony?”

The sound of flesh smacking flesh echoed through the master bedroom, as I face palmed nearly hard enough to take damage. “Penny. Penny stop,” I whined. “Penny, why do you know those things?”

Penny beamed. “Oh, because Neo, Melanie, and Miltia explained what sexual intercourse was! When two or more people love each other very much, or just really want to fu—”

“Yes, Penny, I am aware of the specifics of what it is,” I interrupted her.

“So, Ruby was upset because Neo looked like Yang while you were making love?” Penny asked, and I nodded. “Is she jealous?”

I nodded. “A bit. And justifiably hurt.”

“But why?” Penny asked. “She wants to be intimate with you. Yang does as well. Why can't they just share?”

Dropping to sit on the bed, I patted the seat beside me and waited while she sat down. “It doesn't always work like that, Penny. Ruby's worried I'd choose Yang over her—”

“You wouldn't!”

I nodded. “I know that, you know that. Even she knows that, but it's still a fear she can't shake yet. Every boy she's ever been interested in has gone after her sister, once they met Yang—so Ruby's self-esteem and self-confidence are kind of low, in that regard. A lot of it stems from the fact that Yang is, well, better developed in certain areas than her sister—more mature, physically, where Ruby's still filling out.”

“But Melanie and Miltia are just as small,” Penny countered, and I nodded.

“Again, she knows this,” I pointed out. “That's the thing about being human, sweetie. Not all fears are rational. In fact, most are irrational. Spend enough time living, and I'm sure you'll start having them yourself.”
Penny frowned. “I am not sure whether that is a good thing or a bad thing, Jaune. It sounds awfully inconvenient.”

“Oh, it is,” I agreed. “Now, I'm going to go get a shower. Why don’t you go help Neo and the twins? Be a shoulder Ruby can lean on.”

“I will do my best, Jaune!” Penny agreed enthusiastically, quickly heading out the door. Moving into the bathroom I paused in the center of the room as my enhanced senses picked up the scents in the room. ‘Roses. And arousal. Damnit, Ruby. Really? Did you have to use my bathroom for that? Now the smell is going to be in my nose the entire time I'm showering.’ I groaned quietly. Flipping Gamer’s Mind back into the Defensive position, I shook my head and stepped into the shower. I'd just have to deal with it, and hope the girls convinced Ruby not to do anything rash.

By the time I got out of the shower, Ruby and Yang were gone and I'd already gotten two text messages on my scroll. Frowning, I checked the messages as I equipped clothes. The first was just a quick message from Neo, letting me know that they had talked things over with Ruby and that she wasn't angry any more. The second was from Cinder, asking when I would be available to show her the cache of Dust I'd taken. Frowning, I hummed in thought at the wording. ‘She's asking, as opposed to tossing around orders. Wonder what that's about?’

I gave up on figuring that one out today. I headed out into the main living area where I found the twins, Neo, and Blake sitting around on my couches. “Where's Penny?”

“Well, home with Ruby,” Melanie answered, and I nodded.

Looking to the faunus girl, Miltia asked, “We're not doing Blake's mission today?”

“No, it's getting late and I'd rather not show up on someone's door step in the middle of the night,” I denied.

“That's fine. My stuff can wait until tomorrow,” Miltia shrugged. “Blake was just telling us about her plan.”

“Oh?” I asked. “Tell me about it when I get back? Something came up with Cinder and I need to go take care of some things.”
The girls nodded and Neo hopped up out of her chair, following me to the stairwell exit. “I think we got her settled down,” Neo murmured as we stepped into the stairwell and made our way up. “We had a long talk. She's not mad at you any more.”

“And what about you?” I asked, and Neo shrugged.

“She's annoyed, but she gets that it's sort of my thing. She did request that we not make any more home movies with her sister's likeness in them,” Neo grinned. “Or her own.”

I stumbled on the stairs, turning an amused glance at Neo. “You did tell her you haven't been wearing her face, right?”

The shorter girl nodded. “Yeah,” she agreed. “So, want some company for this?”

“Nah,” I denied, switching to my Shiro gear. Looking down at Ascalon at my side, I hummed as we stepped out onto the helipad. Taking the sheath and its attached harness off, I set it on the ground, created a small ID, then duplicated it before equipping both copies—one at my right hip, one at my left—and moving my backup pistol to a shoulder holster under my left arm. *I should get a jacket, or a cloak or something.* 'I mused. Well, *I did* have a spare copy of the girls' cloaks sitting in my inventory, and materials to make two more. I didn't necessarily need the abilities it granted, but the living cloth aspect could be very useful. *I'll have to think about it.*

“Are you coming back tonight?” Neo asked, and I heard a hint of something in her voice that drew a raised eyebrow.

Hitting her with Observe, I hummed. *'I see.'* Nodding, I pulled down my mask and pulled her into a kiss that curled her toes. “I'll try. And just so you know, I'm not mad at you. I *did* warn you, though.”

“You did, and I'm sorry—”

I placed a finger on her lips and cut her off. “Shit happens. You took care of it, as you said you would. We're okay, Neo.” Smirking, I added, “Though, if you're angling for either angry or makeup sex, or some 'punishment' of your own, I'm happy to oblige.”
The shorter girl nodded, a smile spreading across her lips. “Sounds fun.” Standing up on her tiptoes, she planted another kiss on my lips before turning and heading back down the stairs. “Hurry back, love.”

She had already disappeared down the stairs and I was halfway into hitting the roof access controls before what she'd said registered, and I chuckled. 'Is it too soon for that?' I wondered, throwing on Invisibility and creating a small ID around myself as I Leapt outside, snagging a nearby building with my line launcher and heading to my first destination. With no weight on it, the roof began retracting again behind me. 'It's been less than a full month. Normally, you'd wait like six for the 'I love you's. Then again, this isn't Earth and I really need to stop judging Remnant by Earth standards. Still, I don't exactly know the social norms…'.

I frowned, shaking my head as I touched down at a tech store and ID’d my way inside before making my way over to the security systems for sale and stowing several copies in my Inventory, before heading back outside and moving on to my second stop—a farm house on the outskirts of Vale that Roman had purchased and kept around, potentially as a fallback bolt hole, since there was little strategic value to it that I could see from my map's details other than its open field, barn, and cellar or some other underground structure. Both would come in handy for my purposes. 'It boils down to a simple question: do I love them, or am I just playing around?' Well, the second part of that was pretty simple to answer—I didn't play around. I wasn't that kind of person. As for the first part… 'Yeah. So I suppose that really, the only thing left is telling them.' That decided, I focused on the task at hand—namely, setting things up so I could show Cinder what I had for her.

“It's… small,” Cinder pointed out as she stepped out of a Bullhead, its running lights turning off and casting the field she’d put it down in into darkness. She had come alone, as I’d hoped she would when I'd implied I would tell her where the Dust was but that I didn't exactly trust Emerald and Mercury with the location. By not bringing Neo, who I knew Cinder assumed was my own most trusted subordinate, it would imply that we were the only two who knew where this place was, and that any breaches in security would have a very short list of suspects.

“It's secure,” I countered. “There's no one around for about two miles in any direction. It's still well inside Vale's patrol zone for Grimm. No one's been here for years.” I gestured her towards the barn. Outside, it looked completely innocuous. Inside, however, was something I'd spent a good two hours putting together by itself. Unlocking the doors, I slid one of them a few feet open along the rails they were set into.

Looking inside, Cinder blinked, then frowned. Tilting her head, she took in the outside of the structure before sending me an amused look. “It's bigger on the inside.”

“Yeah, and it was a pain in the ass setting that up,” I admitted. “Bounded Fields are useful once
they're in place. Before that, they're years of study and anywhere from hours to days worth of prep time to set up. And the cost in Dust…” I shook my head, before pointing to her dress—specifically, the glowing red tracery thereon. “But then, I suspect you know that.”

“A little,” she allowed. “I'll admit, this is beyond my expertise. Is it safe?”

“Fuck no,” I snorted softly. “Space expansion fields are not fit for human habitation. If the field failed while you were inside…” I shook my head. “Imagine everything in the room being suddenly forced towards the middle while being rent to shreds as the folded space inside collapsed, and then the entire thing exploding and blowing to flinders as it compressed to the point of combustion. There wouldn't be enough of you left to bury.” Seeing she looked sufficiently hesitant to step over the threshold, I smirked under my mask. “On the other hand, that only happens if you damage the field array or it runs out of juice. It's running off redundant Dust crystals for power, so it's not going to go down that way any time soon. As for damaging it, well, it's possible but not likely. No one's ever here. So, to answer your question: it's relatively safe.” I was actually kind of pissed about that fact, because it meant I couldn't do something cool with my jacket—namely, the whole sealed in armor plates thing. Any damage and that section of the seal would go up, likely taking the ones beside it out, instigating a chain reaction that took out the rest. I didn't fancy accidentally exploding myself.

Cinder turned molten gold eyes on me in an assessing look. Finally, she nodded and stepped into the room. “How much did you take for yourself?”

“Twenty percent off the top,” I admitted, then quickly amended, “After using what I needed to make the field.”

The woman nodded. “That's fine. Have you had a chance to go over it?”

“Some,” I shrugged. “There's a lot. I haven't exactly been stealing shipping manifests and store inventory lists.” I gestured over to the side, where racks held canisters of Dust and metal crates sat stacked, containing the loose Dust crystals I'd stolen from the various stores across Remnant.

Opening one of the box cars, Cinder grinned wide upon seeing its contents—box upon box of Dust crystals, stacked on top of each other, and secured to pallets for easy removal from the shipping containers, all unopened. “So, if you don't mind my asking, how did you transport eleven box cars here without being seen?”

I blinked in surprise, then shook my head. Thankfully, she had her back turned, otherwise she might have suspected something. I had no answer to that. “How would you have done it?” I asked, stalling for time to come up with something.
“I would have stolen the train, moved them to a secure location, then moved them by truck,” Cinder answered, turning golden eyes on me and raising an eyebrow.

‘Okay, so I know Invisibility works on targets I cast it on,’ I mused as a plan came together, and I built a heist backwards from there. Walking over to one of the crates, I leaned against it and vanished, taking the crate with me as I cast Invisibility. Dropping the spell after a moment, I met her gaze and smirked. “I snuck in, took out the guards, and shut down their security. After that, well, it’s a lot easier to move something when no one sees it moving. Between Neo and myself, we were able to move them two at a time with two Bullheads over the course of an hour or so. We cut it kind of close as the response teams rolled up on-site not long after we got the last boxes out, but in the end it paid off.”

“That is good,” she murmured. Moving across the room to the cache of loose Dust crystals, she opened one of the boxes and had a look, casting a blue glow over her face from the box’s contents. “Shiro, have I ever told you how much I love seeing competence in my business associates?”

“I believe you just did,” I pointed out, and the woman rolled her eyes, moving on to open another crate, close it, then open another.

“If only you didn’t have that mouth on you,” Cinder lamented. After the fifth box, a wide grin lit her face as a red glow spilled out of the newest container.

I snorted softly. “Oh please. You enjoy it. I’m pretty sure you’d forgotten what normal conversations were even like before I came along.”

The woman smirked, closing up the Dust container and straining to lift it. It refused to budge and she turned an expectant look on me. Raising an eyebrow, I moved over and took one end of the container while she took the other. The handle dug into my hand as I lifted it and, even with Aura, it was a bit of a strain. I’d mostly just moved this stuff around with Telekinesis, so I didn’t really have a grasp on exactly how much Dust weighed until now. We moved it into the Bullhead she had come in and dropped it on the deck before securing it with rope, just in case. “This will come in handy, soon. The rest can stay here, for now.” Gesturing towards the farm house, she asked, “Is there more?”

I shook my head. “Nope. The barn was big enough to hold it all. I cleaned the house up in case I needed it as a bolt hole myself and stashed some weapons and supplies in the cellar. Other than that, it’s pretty much empty.”

“No one is watching the Dust?” Cinder asked, turning a frown on me.
I smirked, shaking my head. “Guards imply there's something worth guarding. A locked barn door probably just means farm equipment the owner doesn't want stolen. And I never said no one was watching.” Pulling out my scroll, I slid it open and tapped the newly created link to the freshly installed security system on the farm. I held it where she could see and swiped through camera feeds until coming to one showing us standing there. I waved, and she turned and tried to spot the camera.

“They're well hidden,” Cinder admitted.

“Like I said, the best security is the kind that you can't even see.” Moving over to the barn doors, I slid them closed and slipped the lock back on the chain holding them together. “So, is this satisfactory?”

“It is. You've been well worth every lien,” the woman complimented.

“So,” I began, wagging my eyebrows and gesturing towards the farmhouse, “Want to break in the bed?”

A considering look crossed her face before she sighed, shaking her head. “I would. I really would,” Cinder admitted. “But I have some business to take care of out of town and we're going to have to spend most of tomorrow between prep and travel, so I need my sleep.”

“Too bad,” I admitted, crossing my arms and leaning against the side of her stolen Bullhead. “Part of those emergency supplies included a small stash of bourbon.”

Molten gold eyes narrowed and Cinder stepped into my personal space, her eyes boring into mine. “Do not tempt me, Shiro.”

Pulling down my mask, I smirked and hefted her up in my arms. Her legs went around my waist automatically and I kissed her, turning and pressing her into the side of the aircraft to pin her in place. After making sure she was nice and breathless, I put her down and pushed her towards the Bullhead’s side door, smacking her ass as she went and earning a glare in return. “Something to think on, while you're out of town again.”

“You are a cruel man, Shiro,” Cinder frowned, and I smirked as I smelled her excitement from where I stood. “When I come back, you are mine.”
“Whatever you say,” I shrugged, making a shooing motion towards the cockpit. “Go on now. Before you get distracted.”

“Ass,” she hissed, hitting the door controls and closing them in my face.

Laughing, I watched the Bullhead take off and shook my head. “Now comes the fun part,” I sighed, unlocking the barn door and moving inside. I had to open all the shipping containers and catalog and sort the Dust therein. Then I had to decide what to take for myself to make sure Cinder never got her hands on it. Then I had to come up with a way of making sure she and her lackeys wouldn't be able to use it. When I'd first come across Sanguine's notes on bounded fields, I had thought to modify some of the crystals with enchantments to make sure they exploded when used. After further study of both Dust and bounded fields, however, I had changed my mind. The risk of the things going off in my face was not insignificant. More than that, though—if I wanted the whole thing to go up, I had to make sure I couldn't be implicated in it, and that meant that I couldn't just trap the crystals. 'I'll think of something. Until then, I have sorting to do. Then I need to get back to Fox Hunt, since I promised Neo some attention.'

As it turned out, I had a lot more Dust, in many more different types, than I knew what to do with—or was even capable of identifying. Oh, there were labels, certainly—each box was labeled with its specific color and each grade of crystal or powder was grouped together and labeled numerically, but with no idea what they were, I had no way to readily guess at the value of most of it. There was Dust in every color of the rainbow, and a few in between that seemed to be either made up names or things that were only vaguely descriptive as to what it might do. “Great. More research. As if I didn't have enough shit on my plate,” I grumbled. 'I should ask the girls for help with this one. At least that way, I'd have someone who might know what we were looking at. Assuming they know anything about Dust. Damn shame I don't have Weiss in my pocket.'

The headset over my ears crackled to life and Melanie asked, “Why are we doing this in person?”

There were only five of us in the Bullhead, plus Angel and a small fire team in the Razorback in case we ran across trouble. I was currently in my Fox regalia, as this was an 'official' excursion. Beside me, Penny was clad in a white, mid-thigh dress with matching stockings and boots, her hair temporarily dyed white to match the theme. On her face was a smaller, more female version of my fox mask, and I occasionally caught a glimpse of bright blue eyes under the mask. Behind me, in the back of the Bullhead, rode Neo, Melanie, and Blake.

Neo was clad in one of Fox Hunt's new female officer uniforms: white uniform jacket over a black blouse and skirt, all of which had gold trim, along with matching hose and thigh-high boots that zipped up the side. The normal uniforms they'd decided on would be white with black trim, while officers' uniforms were to be black with white trim, with a black-on-white long coat. The gold trim on Neo's and Melanie's uniforms were to further visibly show their higher ranks.
Neo's hair was currently a dark shade of blue and on her face she wore a mask almost identical to Penny's. Across from her, Melanie wore a matching dress, with the addition of her cloak in shawl form at the moment, her mask already out—she was waiting until we landed before shifting the cloak into its Nameless configuration. Since we had agreed that the twins would both share duty as the head of our Intelligence division, Miltia was currently hanging around back in Vale, borrowing my bike to run errands. Blake, by comparison, wore her usual black outfit with a simple cat-themed mask.

“Because we want to make an impression,” I answered, checking my gauges and adjusting course slightly as the Razorback ahead of me adjusted their own course to avoid what looked like a flock of Nevermores, difficult to see with the morning sun at their backs as they flew vaguely westward.

“Showing up in person shows a personal interest. Allowing Blake to give her message herself will show that we're supporting her.”

“I still say it's a bad idea,” Neo sighed. “We're outsiders. Odds are good they're going to just dismiss us.”

“They won't do that,” Blake denied. “These people are downtrodden and desperate. They've been denied real chances at life for years. We'll be offering them something better—a chance at a new life. New jobs where they don't have to work back-breaking twelve hour shifts in cramped, dangerous mines digging out Dust for the SDC. They will accept.”

“We'll see when we get there,” I cut her off before she could get wound up good.

'She really can't see this happening any other way, can she?’ Neo sent.

Melanie added, 'That's why you agreed. It's why you wanted us to come in person. Wow, Jaune, you can be a bastard at times.'

'Not necessarily,' I temporized.

I could hear the snort in Neo's mental voice. 'Bullshit. Oh, I don't think you want to see her break—you're not the kind of person to get off on that. But you've got a good idea what's going to happen, don't you? Something on Earth paralleled this, right?'

'Kind of, sort of, not really. I can think of a few instances, but the short of it is that I suspect the
faunus here are going to be mistrustful at best, and certainly aren't going to trust what they perceive as the equivalent to a race traitor. American Negroids had a term for that, for a black that tried to act 'too white,' or otherwise tried to get along with whites: Uncle Tom. Because doing well in school, holding down a job, and otherwise being a respectable member of society is for crackers and integrating into the culture of the nation you've found yourself in is bad and they should conform to you,' I rolled my eyes. 'Eventually, after long enough, they became the victims of themselves. That attitude continued to hold them back to the day I ended up here. And while this is Remnant so I'm crossing my fingers and hoping I'm wrong, I won't be surprised if I'm not.'

'If it's that bad, why would anyone tolerate it?' Melanie asked. 'I mean, we don't really see that here. Then again, there aren't really many of them.'

I held my initial response, and instead asked, 'How many is 'not that many?''

Looking back into the rear of the Bullhead, I caught Melanie and Neo exchanging looks. It was Penny who provided an answer, however. According to the most current census data posted online, less than five percent of the total population of Remnant. Though, when you factor in that Faunus races mirror Human races in both makeup and roughly in percentages of population and take Faunus out of the totals, that number changes correspondingly.'

Frowning, I thought back to what I'd seen around Vale, before I realized what must have happened. It was a combination of factors, really. Firstly, my perceptions were based heavily on what I knew of the series. The simplest solution was laziness—namely, RT had used the same basic character models during the first two seasons and the only variations they made to account for race was skin tone. Unfortunately, that's not how race worked, biologically. As anyone with eyeballs and an ounce of honesty will tell you, racial markers run the gamut from highly visible, such as eye, nose, face, and skull shape and hair type, to only visible internally, such as brain structure—down to intelligence and behavior as a direct result of brain complexity, hormones, and so forth. Painting a Caucasian with a spray on tan doesn't make them a Negroid, in the same way white-washing a Negroid in photoshop doesn't make them look Caucasian—in fact, the effect in both instances results in something just this side of the uncanny valley for most people, as the brain stumbles over what the eyes are reporting and fails to compute.

Secondly, one of the less obvious consequences of a world that had been forced to redraw the borders and relocate populations due to Grimm and population decline: interbreeding in different numbers and between different races than seen on Earth, due to geography, in addition to large swathes of the population simply culled by Grimm. To put it simply, race mixing had lead to a higher population of people with mixed Caucasian, Indian, and Southeast Asian traits—which included Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and more. Emerald came to mind immediately, because I'd had trouble figuring that one out from the first time I'd seen her. There were traces of both Caucasian and Asian heritage there—skull shape, eye and nose shape, overall bodily size, shape, and development, and the skin tone common in that area of the world.
The third factor was also possibly the most interesting: that Remnant, while Earth-like and with a good number of parallels, had developed a few tangents along the way. Dust and Aura were the biggest. I was not even certain whether Aura was entirely without biological origins, possibly due to exposure to Dust in the ground water, or exposure to Spirit, or any one of a number of other things. Another of those divergences was the potential that entire races of Humans had come about that were simply not seen on Earth. It was pure speculation on my part, until I saw evidence one way or another. It honestly piqued my interest for study—later. When I had time.

Pulling myself from my thoughts, I shook my head and answered Melanie's original question.

'Indoctrination from a young age. If you repeat a lie enough, eventually people will believe it. The bigger the lie seems to be, the more people seem to believe it. It's one of those weird sociological effects that are like exploits in the human brain. One of the biggest lies perpetuated by the schools where I came from is the idea that everyone is equal. All the physical evidence, centuries of study, decades of statistics, and so forth go completely against the idea, and yet, the idea of equality is so appealing to some, and the desire for it so strong that they would lie to themselves and everyone else to try to impose their desire upon reality and force it to be truth. Simple fact of nature is, people are different—and differences mean that naturally, no one can possibly be equal. Man and woman, child and elder, any race you care to name—they're all different on every level and it's impossible for them to ever be truly 'equal,' and trying to force equality upon them is a disservice. When every method you attempt in order to achieve the desired result fails, you switch to more and more drastic methods. If Joe Average can't be uplifted to the level of John Exceptional, then in order to make these two equal, the exceptional must be reduced to average—in which case you get a Handicapper General and the plot to a dystopian Vonnegut novel. The truth is, as people, we're not equal. Some are better than others. And you know what? That's normal. And in any other animal, that's okay, but apparently you're not supposed to apply the rules of nature to man. The only ones truly bothered by it are those that can't accept reality for what it is, and their sense of 'fairness' or pathological altruism won't let them leave it be.'

The two went quiet as they thought that over and I began descending for a landing. After a long moment, Melanie sighed. 'I don't disagree, but… you've really lost all faith in humanity, haven't you? I can understand why, if things were as bad as you're saying, but this isn't Earth.'

'People are people, no matter where you go,' Neo countered. 'But I suppose it's good that you still have some hope that people can be better than they really are. I'm sorry, but I'm with Jaune on this one. You're a 'hope for the best but prepare for the worst' sort of girl. We're more, 'expect the worst, prepare for worse than that.' But hey, it leads to pleasant surprises from time to time! Like you and your sister, and Jaune.'

“'I'm putting us down near the rail station,” I announced as I throttled down and dropped the landing gear, putting a temporary end to the conversation. We settled with a thump and I turned to make sure Melanie had engaged her cloak’s skills before hitting the door controls. Blake was the first out, dropping to the rocky ground and looking around, her ears visibly flicking around unconsciously as she had taken off the bow for this. Melanie and Neo followed her, and I went last, keying the door closed behind me with my scroll. Foxtrot-2 dropped down nearby and cut its engines.
"So, the entire town is faunus?" Neo asked of Blake, as we made our way towards the center of the small mining town.

Blake nodded. "Yes. It's a Schnee company town. Places like this are mostly self-sufficient, because they don't have the money to trade with other towns and villages."

"Isolated?" Melanie asked, and Blake gave a nod in answer.

We started getting stares immediately. My detection skills itched, both with the feeling of eyes on us and the building hostility in the air. *This was a horrible fucking idea, Blake.*

Blake, I noticed, slowly seemed to wilt under the glares for a time—until her fist clenched at her side, her ears perked back up, and her back straightened as she steeled herself. I could guess at what was going on in her mind—she felt she needed to do this, that she would be helping these people. She seemed to either be ignoring or ignorant of the fact that even more of the glares were directed at her than they were at us. Windows shut, curtains were drawn, and children pulled aside as we passed, and I knew that had to hurt Blake to see.

We reached the center of town, spotting the town hall, which also served as the governor's office. It was a one story prefab building—one of the few in town, it looked like, as most of the rest of the buildings were wood. From here, near the top of the hill overlooking the town and the valley below, I could make out much of the village. Buildings were pressed close together, some even sharing walls. I spotted what looked like a general store, a smithy, a school further down, and even a hospital—the only stonework in town, aside from the wall circling the town itself. It was easily the most defensible position in town, and likely a fallback shelter in the event of Grimm attacks, given the fact that there was a wooden guard tower or sniper's nest on top of it which was currently occupied by two guards—one armed with a long rifle, the other with a pair of binoculars. *That's probably the best gun in this town,' I mused.

Following Blake, we made our way into the town hall. The first room was the largest, and appeared to take up most of the building. It was a large, mostly empty room with stacks of metal folding chairs and a few folding tables leaned against the right wall, with a whiteboard and corkboard on the far wall, where I could make out what looked like some sort of schedule. *Guard rotations on the cork board. Sloppy,' I pointed out to the others, and Melanie and Neo both nodded agreement.

The back offices were separated from the front by a wall, with a short hallway leading to a set of four rooms, all helpfully labeled. We stopped at an office labeled 'Mayor Bloedig' and Blake knocked.

"Come in," a deep voice called.
The mayor was a large man, with a grizzly beard and a full head of dark, red hair. He wore a simple red and black flannel shirt with the sleeves rolled up to his elbows, along with a set of well-worn jeans and boots. Aside from his physique, two small, round ears covered in reddish-brown fur stood atop his head as the only clue to what sort of faunus he was. He stood, looming, as we approached and offered a huge paw of a hand, his grip strong but not crushing. Bloedig had the tan and physique of a man who'd spent most of his life outdoors, and looked as though he'd be more at home with an axe in his hand than a pen. Certainly, he looked alien behind the small desk. Sharp, dark eyes took us in, sweeping dismissively from Neo, pausing on Melanie for a long moment, then moving to Blake and myself. “As it says on the door, I'm Mayor Dragen Bloedig. You folks have caused quite a stir. My people don't take well to strangers, as you may have noticed, so I figure it's best to hurry you on your way. So tell me, what's brought you to Stofhol?”

Blake turned her head in my direction and I nodded, gesturing her on. Turning back to the oversized man, Blake sat in one of the two available seats crammed in front of the desk. “Actually,” she began, suddenly sounding almost unsure now that she'd been put to the question. If I had to guess, I'd say she had never actually figured out what she was going to say. “We were wondering if there was anyone in town looking for a better job.”

The huge man snuffed quietly in an almost laugh. “Didn't your boss tell you, we already turned you guys down once. Tell him if I have to tell him again, the message is going to be delivered at muzzle velocity.”

Blake's head shifted back to me and I shook my head. “He thinks we're White Fang.” Turning my gaze on the mayor, I asked, “Am I right?”

“Only one group comes into towns wearing masks and looking to recruit faunus,” he shrugged. “Who else could you be?”

“We're not with the Fang.” Blake denied, and I knew she had to be feeling weird to be saying that. Reaching up, she took off her mask.

“Dust, you're just a kid. You can't be any older than my daughter. What the hell are you doing out here, girl?” he asked, black eyes shifting to me in accusation.

“I... I grew up as part of the Fang. Before it all went bad,” she clarified, and his bushy eyebrows moved into his hairline. “I left, but I couldn't just leave people to suffer. So, I'm trying something new. The Fox,” she gestured towards me, “owns a Private Military Company run out of Vale. They're looking for people—laborers, craftsmen, and the like—to fill non-combat roles. It would pay better than working for the SDC—”
Leaning back in his chair, Bloedig reached into his pocket and fished out a pipe, then another for tobacco. “I get it,” he began, packing leaves into the pipe. He began patting down his pockets and frowned as he came up empty. Stepping forward, I snapped my fingers and lit a small flame at the end of one. “That must be a real hit with the ladies.”

“No particularly,” Neo and Melanie both deadpanned.

I shrugged. “I don't really need parlor tricks to impress.”

“Oh huh,” Bloedig rumbled, taking a long pull of his pipe and reaching over to open the window beside him, to give us some fresh air. Turning his gaze back on Blake, he shook his head. “Look, kid, I get it. You came from nothing and it makes you feel like, when you finally have something, you owe it to yourself to help people who were like you. Thing is, we’re nothing like you. Nobody here grew up in a cult—”

“It wasn't a cult,” Blake denied, golden eyes narrowing in a glare.

Bloedig shrugged. “So you say, and I'm sure that for you, it didn't seem that way. To the rest of us though, it sure looks like one. Everyone in this town grew up here. Everyone knows everyone else. We look after our own. We don't have much, except each other. We're a community. You're going to find that most places like Stofhol are. You're not going to find what you're looking for here.”

Blake raised an eyebrow. “We're looking for people who want to get out from under the Schnee—”

The huge man laughed, once. “No, that ain't it. That's the how, but not the why. The why is pretty simple. You feel you've got a cause. You say you're trying to help people, but really, all you're doing is trying to alleviate some sort of misplaced guilt—guilt that you got out and others didn't. It's selfish, really. Like humans that feel guilty that faunus have it bad, so they stick their noses in where they don't belong. What you, and they, fail to understand is that we don't want help. We're not oppressed out here, girl—we're free. This is a faunus town, run by faunus, owned by faunus. Schnee pays us to mine their Dust, and they don't pay worth a damn, but at least they're not trying to tell us how to live our lives. We have our own economy, out here, independent from the bigger towns and cities. We've got forests full of deer, two flocks of sheep, and a small herd of cattle and horses—from those we get leather, meat, wool, milk, cheese, and so on.

“There's a river running through the bottom end of town there, full of clean water and fish. From the mines, we get iron, copper, brass, coal, Dust, and even a little gold and silver. We make our own weapons and ammunition. We've got a school and a hospital, a couple of teachers and an honest to Dust Aura healer who used to be a Hunter, once upon a time.” I raised an eyebrow over that, under
my mask, and added a visit to the town healer to the top of my list of places to visit before we left.

“About the only things we bother to go into other towns for are seeds, fruits that we don't already have trees for, and a few other sundries. We neither need nor want handouts. About the only thing we've got to complain about are the Grimm, and since we're a company town, the SDC will send out a squad or two of men if we get in a bind—it's happened twice in my forty-odd years now, and both times we've held the town against them long enough for backup to arrive. We've got a deal with old Ozpin—a few times a year, he sends Hunter trainee teams by. His kids get free room and board, and in return they cull the Grimm and leave. He provides a service we would otherwise have to pay a hefty sum for. As far as I'm concerned, it's an even trade and his kids are welcome here, so long as they keep their noses out of our business.”

Kicking his feet up on his desk, the big man grinned. “No, missy. We're not 'oppressed' out here. We enjoy it and wouldn't leave it for the world. But then, your kind never seems to get that. Do yourselves a favor.” Taking out a pocket watch, he flipped it open and hummed. “Take a look around, if you're not convinced, but you'll want to be leaving around dusk. The only spare beds we've got are up in the hospital, and those are typically reserved for Oz's kids. You ain't Hunters, so I'm afraid you'll find Stofhol's hospitality a bit lacking. Now, if you don't mind, I need to get back to my paperwork. Never would've let them vote me in, if I'd known what came with the job ahead of time.”

Taking that as the clear dismissal it was, Blake pushed herself up out of her chair and made for the door, slipping her mask back into place. Once we were outside the office, she muttered a quiet, “Fuck.”

“Sorry,” Neo murmured.

The eyes set in Melanie's mask rolled. “What now?”

“May we tour the town?” Penny asked, turning her masked face up to me.

I shrugged, turning to Blake. “This is your op. What's our next move?”

Blake sighed, making her way towards the door outside. “Let's go have a look.”

That plan changed the moment we opened the door leading outside. A flash of red caught my eye and, in the slowed perception granted by Haste, I made out a tomato spinning through the air. It hit
its target with a wet splat, impacting the right side of Blake's mask and spreading juice, flesh, and seeds all over Blake's mask, hair, and upper body. Reaching up, the catgirl wiped the fruit away from her eye. A crowd had gathered around the Mayor's office, composed mostly of older townsfolk, many of them bearing hoes, pitchforks, shovels, axes, and pickaxes. “You don't belong here!” an older female voice called from the crowd.

“We don't want you here! Go home!” Another called, and another piece of overripe greenery sailed towards our group, hitting the door behind us as it missed its intended target.

Blake's fists were trembling at her sides, I noticed. “Is this normal?” Penny asked, and I shook my head.

A head of lettuce caught Blake in the chest, and she growled quietly before exploding. “Don't you get it?! We're here to help you! You don't have to live under the SDC's boot heels any more!”

“We don't want your help!” another in the crowd catcalled.

Something brown and small caught my eye and I held up my hand, snagging it with Telekinesis. A rock hovered a foot away from Blake's face. “I think it's time to go,” I told her quietly, even as the crowd stilled for an instant, before more rocks came flying in, to be snatched out of the air in the same way, this time not aimed at any of us in particular.

Blake didn't say anything, simply standing there staring at the rock that would've hit her in the head. She didn't protest as Melanie took her by the elbow and dragged her with us as we made our way through the crowd. More vegetables, fruits, and rocks joined the floating mass of intercepted projectiles around us. The crowd lined the street, moving with us all the way to the train depot, before departing as we neared the Bullhead. It was plainly obvious why, as Foxtrot-2 had taken to the air and was hovering ominously over the Bullhead with its guns already spun up. I caught sight of Angel in the cockpit, who waved and pulled the Razorback away to a few hundred feet above us, slowly circling.

As we got closer, I saw a figure leaning against the aircraft. It was a girl wearing a set of overalls, boots, and a green flannel long sleeve, with her arms crossed over her chest and eying where the crowd had disappeared with an amused expression. Her hair was a reddish brown and the name over her head gave away her identity, but I frowned upon taking in her ears—they were larger than her father's, triangular, and gray. Where the mayor's ears looked to belong to a bear, this girl's looked to belong to a canine of some sort. 'Was her mom a wolf faunus or something, or am I missing something important here?'
“So, pops told you to hit the road, huh?” she asked, grinning. “I heard you talking to him.”

“He did,” I agreed.

“We weren’t exactly expecting to get chased out of town,” Neo huffed quietly, glancing back at the pile of rotting food and rocks I'd dropped as soon as the crowd had left us.

The girl shrugged. “It doesn't happen often. Though, twice in a week is a bit much,” she murmured. “I'm Sid, by the way.” She pronounced it like 'seed,' but my Semblance provided the proper spelling above her head.

“Are you sure he'd approve of you talking to us?” I asked, and she grinned wider.

“Absolutely not. At least, not where anyone could hear him. Can we talk inside?” she asked, gesturing to the Bullhead.

Shrugging, I keyed open the Bullhead door with my scroll and watched as she leaned down, grabbed a large, heavy-looking duffel bag, and slipped inside before dropping it on the floor and taking a seat. We moved in after her, closing the door behind us. “What's up?”

“I want to go with you,” Sid shrugged. “Stofhol is a great town, and it's home, but dad wasn't quite honest about us being self-sufficient. Sure, we've got all of that, but trade skills are at a premium. Dad and I, and old Smeden are the only ones in town who know a damn thing about metalwork. Dad doesn't have nearly as much time as he used to now that he's Mayor and old Smeden is, well, old. Being able to pull nails and make horseshoes is all well and good, and any apprentice can do that, but not everyone can repair a drill, or a rifle, or make cheap armor for our men on watch. I'm good, but I'm still learning. You said you're looking for skilled craftsmen, right? Got anyone who can make armor? What about a mechanic?”

I traded a glance between Neo and Melanie and they shrugged. “I've got mechanics. It's armorers, weaponsmiths, and the like that I don't have,” I admitted. “But making Hunter-grade armor and weapons is a far cry from hammering out a plow. And I thought you said you were a blacksmith—that's not exactly the same thing.”

Sid rolled her eyes. “Pfft. Please. Part of being a blacksmith out here means you're also a mechanic, a gunsmith, a welder, and a handyman. I've been pulling apart farm and industrial equipment since I was old enough to know which end of a wrench to hold—which was pretty young, really,
considering my tiny little hands could get to a lot of places pops and old Smeden couldn't without disassembling something.” Leaning forward in her seat, she asked, “How about this: you provide me with a place to sleep, and material to study, and I'll help out where I can. You told dad you were a PMC, so you've probably got a motor pool, but you said you were looking for armorer and the like. Put me where you need me. I'll adapt.”

'\textit{We did need to check on that next,}' Melanie reminded. '\textit{If she's as skilled as she claims, let's put her to use.}’

'\textit{Agreed,}' Neo sent.

I hummed. “Won't your dad get mad, if you take off with strangers?”

Sid laughed, quietly. “He'll be fine. He knows I can take care of myself, and he knows we need the kind of skills I'm looking for. Besides, even if it's kind of crappy, we do still get CCT reception out here—it's not like I can't scroll call him later. Once I get a scroll. There are all of four in town, and I don't own one. Do we have a deal?”

Trading glances with the others, I asked, “Can you take orders? This is a military organization. You'll be granted a rank and pay grade, and you will be expected to take orders like anyone else, even if you're not going to be in the field.”

“That's not a problem,” she agreed. “What rank will I start out at?”

“We'll be starting you off as an E-1 Private. We can get someone to assess your skills later and that may change. Consider yourself tentatively hired. Barracks and meals are provided free to staff staying on base, but if you want a private room you'll have to either earn a promotion or pay for one out of your salary. You'll be in training, so we'll get someone to work out a schedule for you to be able to study and work, and see about some OJT as well. There's a mandatory service period, but some of that can be waived if you work it off. You'll technically be paying for your own training, so we'll either need you to stick around a while or provide services worth training you. Your first job is today. We need you to look at some equipment and give your professional opinion on its serviceability.”

The brunette nodded. “Can do.”

I frowned under my mask. “Yes, sir,” I corrected.
Sid winced. “Right, sorry. Yes, sir.”

“Get a handle on it quick, Private,” I warned, before pushing out of my seat and heading for the cockpit. Slipping on the headset, I keyed up to let the Razorback know we were moving. “Foxtrot-2, Foxtrot-Actual. We're on-route to second target.”

“Copy that, Actual,” Angel acknowledged.

I went through startup, shifting my gaze to the side only momentarily as Blake dropped into the seat beside me. “You knew,” she accused.

“I suspected,” I admitted. “I'm going to help you with this, but I'm not going to pretend to be blind to the difficulties you're going to face.” Honestly, I agreed with Bloedig—and she needed to hear that from someone who wasn't me. That it had come from another faunus, and one in a leadership position, almost couldn't have been better as far as delivery went. The problem was, Blake was stubborn and I got the impression that she would only hunker down and redouble her efforts from this point on. It was going to take more than someone telling her directly to convince her that not everyone needed or even wanted saving. She needed to accept reality, but I knew that the truth couldn't come from me, or any human really—otherwise, she'd never listen. Never accept it.

We were in the air by the time she finally muttered, “Thank you. I just wish it had gone better, but I don't think there's anything you could have done.” Amusingly, my Semblance picked that time to let me know I'd completed part one of Blake's quest, with a total of one faunus collected, and it had advanced to the next in the quest chain.

“Not really.” They weren't going to listen to a human, especially not if I started implying that their way of life there was less than it could be. It reminded me a bit of stories of Old West border towns, back in the early days of the US, or the Amish. Towns either living on the ragged edge or intentionally cut off from the outside world, insular and mistrusting of outsiders, because it kept them alive. I couldn't fault them for listening to instincts, even if it put me on the business end of them. In-group trust and preference lead to stable, secure communities. It's only when you started throwing open the borders and letting outsiders in that problems really started to kick up. The truth was that history showed that the best communities tended to be small and homogeneous.

'Where are we going?’ I sent to Melanie, and a moment later my scroll chimed and the Bullhead's HUD lit up. Rolling my eyes, I set a waypoint and got us moving.

Two hours of flight later, I sat us down at what looked to be an old military outpost, fallen to disuse. The tarmac below us was cracked and overgrown with grass, and the air traffic control tower's
windows were all boarded up. Rounded concrete structures circled the tarmac, all of them with ramps leading down to steel doors. A small land vehicle, looking like a beefed up Humvee with a mounted gun on the back, sat waiting for us, on the edge of a road leading off the base. Three men climbed out of the vehicle, two of them carrying rifles and wearing fatigues, while the third wore a suit and carried a holstered pistol at his hip. A fourth man sat at the vehicle's main gun, which sat in a resting position pointed skyward.

Foxtrot-2 landed first, the hatch at the rear of the Razorback lowering to the ground and a squad of six men filing down the ramp with weapons ready but not up, taking up positions in a circle around the Razorback and where I was putting the Bullhead down. Once I'd killed the engines, we made our way out into the warm air, where we were met by the man in the suit. “Welcome to Depot 57, sir,” he greeted, and we shook hands. “I'm Benjamin Greene.”

“Mister Greene,” I nodded, “What do you have for me and how much of it is for sale?”

“Well, to be honest sir, the Kingdom is looking to sell whatever you're willing to take off their hands. As for what we have,” he grinned, digging out a ring of keys and moving to the first bunker. There were two doors, I noticed—a normal-sized door for personnel and a much larger door for vehicles. Selecting a key matching the bunker's designation, he slipped the key in and keyed in a six digit code into the old style keypad to the side of the door. It opened with a clank and a squeal of metal against metal, having not been oiled in a while. There was a loud pop as the overhead lights came on and I followed Greene inside, whistling as I took in the sight before me. Taking out his scroll, the suited man began reading off a manifest for the materials here. “Ten LAV-39 8x8 amphibious armored reconnaissance vehicles, each armed with a main 25MM chain gun and positions to mount other weaponry—that's this group here. In the other storage bunkers, we have…”

I only half paid attention as he listed out what was available—most of which seemed to consist of IFVs geared towards specific purposes. They were a mixed bag of weapons, from things like the LAV-39's 25MM, which would be good against ground-based grimm, to mobile flak cannons, and even a few mounted with large 120MM main guns that I was fairly certain had been on the M1A on Earth. “Private,” I called Sid over and gestured towards one of the LAV-39s. “Have a look and tell me what you think.”

While she was busy with that, I asked, “What is the Kingdom of Vale asking for all of this?”

“Ah, well,” he hemmed, flicking through his scroll before coming up with a number. “One hundred million lien.”

I blinked, turning to show him an unamused look before remembering I was wearing my masks. Honestly, based on what I knew of the economy and a rough guess of how much similar vehicles on Earth had cost—the Abrams going for over six million, as a baseline—I knew it wasn't a horribly
bad deal. On the other hand, these had sat unused for years and were not exactly top of the line any more. The first LAV's engine turned over and I frowned as I realized that wasn't an internal combustion engine. 'Dust-based, I suppose.'

The machine moved forward and back a few feet, before the emplacement on top made a half turn left and right before settling back to facing forward. A moment later, the engine shut off and Private Bloedig stuck her head out the top. “They run, but they're going to need some serious work, sir. Complete overhaul, all the way around.”

My finely honed bullshit detector pinged, and I hit her with Observe. 'Lying. Likely for Greene's ears—at least, that makes the most sense. So she's willing to help us out here.' I turned to Greene. “You heard her. I'm going to have to do a good deal of maintenance on them before I'll be able to deploy them for missions—which is going to take both more time and money, putting me behind schedule. And we both know they're not exactly top of the line any more. Let's call it thirty million.”

“They're still functional, and even if they're not the youngest girls at the ball, they can still dance. Seventy five,” Greene countered.

'Ah, now we're negotiating,' I hummed. I was not above cheating, however. Casting a silent Charm on him, I asked, “How about fifty? The Kingdom gets these off its hands, comes away getting to say they made a tidy sum off some old hardware they had mothballed, and I get my armor.”

“Well,” Greene hemmed, then shook his head. “To be honest, I was told that if I could squeeze at least forty out of you, that'd be fine with the council.”

“You're not really getting anything off the top for the sale, are you?” I asked, and he shook his head. “How's forty and one sound? Forty for Vale, and I'll pay your commission for making the sale.”

Greene smiled. “Well, as long as it's commission and not a bribe, sir,” he chuckled.

“Oh, absolutely. A man should be rewarded for a job well done. Bribery implies someone's getting shafted on a deal, and that's plainly not the case here.” Clapping him on the back, I turned and began walking for the exit. “Now, how about we head back outside and see about getting these things signed for. I'll arrange payment later today.”

'Jaune, we don't have forty million, do we?' Neo sent, and I sent the mental impression of a smirk.
'Not at the moment, dear. Remember how I said duping money from banks was a bad idea? Well, I've got a bad idea,' I sent back. 'The Vale Trust Bank is the Kingdom's bank, right? How much cash do they keep on hand?'

'Several hundred million, due to various laws in place to prevent inflation and questionable economic practices,' Melanie answered. 'What's changed your mind?'

'Necessity. I didn't need that much money before, when I could just farm for it. This is for the Guild though, so it's fair game as far as I'm concerned.' We stepped out into the sunlight and the bunker was closed up again, and we got on with the boring details of paperwork. 'I'll wait until we've got them all back to base and repaired before we dupe them all. Also, we need to do something about an air force. I'm thinking we need to find an actual air base and see about duping some more aircraft.'

Finding an air base to detour near enough for me to fly to had been relatively easy, considering Penny had up to date knowledge of most of Atlas's installations, stolen from their network with the Queen Exploit, as I'd come to call it. Neo knew how to fly and had volunteered to take the Bullhead back with the Razorback, so it was just Penny and myself for this little test run. Stepping out the Bullhead's side door with Penny in the grasp of my Telekinesis, I sighted in the base and focused on what I wanted, calling up mana and my previous experience with playing around with flight. Skill creation kicked in and I grinned as I got my first official flight spell in *Wings*, which granted the caster a set of mana-based wings modeled after what the caster wanted. At the moment, the wings I could feel flapping away and slowly draining my mana, but keeping us aloft, were large and better suited to gliding than maneuverability.

Focusing on what I had in mind, I cast the spell on Penny, and the gynoid blinked. “Oh! That feels odd,” she commented as she rose slightly, a smaller set of insect-based wings buzzing quietly at her back. I released her hand and she buzzed around, getting a feel for them as I hit us both with the full stealth set of spells. Focusing on my own wings, I dropped a few feet in the air as they reshaped into something smaller and more maneuverable.

“Okay, let's drop down low and slip inside,” I told her, hitting us both with the full set of stealth spells. I stopped my wings, dropping like a stone with Penny following right behind me.

P enny squealed in glee as we fell and I chuckled quietly, before engaging my spell again as we neared the tops of the trees. Leveling off, we shot off towards the air base. “What are we taking, Jaune?” Penny asked as we cleared the fence, and I pointed towards the largest aircraft on the base.

“That one.”
The vehicle in question was large and angular, all sharp lines. I recalled seeing something like it in season two—one of the smaller ships Ironwood had hovering over Vale. Then again, this one seemed smaller and sleeker than those, but scale was hard to get a grasp of given their animation style—for all I knew, it could be exactly the same, or it could be an entirely different class of vessel. RT had been vague on those points. “That is a corvette class vessel,” Penny supplied as we dropped to the tarmac and I created an ID around us and the ship.

“Can you get into it?” I asked her, and Penny beamed, nodding.

“I will certainly try,” she enthused, finding an access panel beside the door. Placing her hand atop it, her eyes lit up green beneath her mask and the panel lit the same color as opposed to its normal blue. A moment later, the door hissed open. “I believe the bridge is this way.”

I followed the smaller girl through the ship, taking note of things as we passed. ‘Armory, officer quarters, officers’ latrine and showers, XO’s quarters, captain’s quarters.’ A door hissed open as it parted down the middle and we stepped onto the bridge. I paused to take it all in. There were two levels, divided by stairs. On the upper level were what looked like four stations—two screens, one to either side of the door, both with holographic interface keyboards, and two more on a waist-height console running across much of the upper level, with the stairs running to either side of it. Below, there appeared to be ten more stations: two on either wall with large holo-screens, four in the middle along a divided table of sorts, and two more at the front. Circling the bridge was a set of windows giving a view of the airbase outside—or at least, this side of the ID outside the ship.

“That has to be the worst bridge design I’ve ever seen,” I muttered, shaking my head. “Where are the chairs? Are the people working here just expected to stand for the entirety of their shifts?”

“Perhaps the Atlesian Navy does not use chairs?” Penny asked, and I rolled my eyes.

“That’d be absurd,” I denied. “Design oversight. Has to be. Anyway, can you get her in the air?”

Placing one hand on a console, the console and screen lit up green. “Oh! Jaune, this ship is equipped with a VI.”

I frowned. “Is it? Huh. Think you can deactivate it? I don't need it fighting back.”

“It has been deactivated,” Penny confirmed a moment later. “The ship is ours, Jaune.”
“Excellent. Can you give me the basics? Specs, armaments, and the like?” I asked, and the ancula nodded.

“This ship is called the *Daedalus*. It is a corvette class airship and is equipped with a standard sized Dust reactor. It is 100 meters long, by 40 meters wide, by 20 meters tall at its extremes. The *Daedalus* is capable of speeds up to 700MPH, with an operational ceiling of 30,000 feet, and an operational time of years with a full military-spec Grade XI Electric Blue crystal—which it is currently equipped with. It houses twin forward laser batteries, a single forward main railgun, ten smaller railguns along the upper sides, two missile pods each with sixteen hypersonic anti-aircraft missiles, in addition to its point defense system which is composed of flak cannons and gatling guns. The *Daedalus* carries a complement of twenty Atlesian Knights in a rear drop compartment for rapid field deployment.” While she was listing off its features, an image of the ship had come up on the holo-screen before us and each feature was highlighted as she named it.

“The ship itself is meant to house between twenty and forty crew, plus mission-specific crew if any are assigned to it. This is its internal layout,” she said, bringing up schematics for me. There were two decks, the upper deck consisting of the rooms we'd passed before, plus engineering, which spanned both upper and lower decks. The lower deck was mostly crew quarters, latrine and showers, and the mess hall and a small recreational area. Like most naval vessels of Earth, everything was small to conserve as much space as possible.

I frowned, looking over the bridge consoles. “It's meant for at least twenty crew? Can we even get it in the air with just the two of us?”

Penny hesitated a moment. “Perhaps,” she murmured, and I turned to look at her. She looked nervous, even with the mask on.

“What is it, Penny?” I asked, and she sighed.

“The VI took care of many of the ship's basic functions. Without it, no, the *Daedalus* will never fly. However, with it active, it is likely to never allow us to fly it because we do not possess the proper privileges.”

I hummed, asking, “But you've got an idea about that?”

The ancula twiddled her index fingers and nodded. “I could… create a copy of myself and overwrite the ship's onboard VI. But I would have full control of the ship—”
I pulled off my mask and turned an amused look on her. “Do it.”

Penny looked even more distressed. “But Jaune, I would be in control of the weapons—”

I shrugged. “And? You've got weapons right now. Why wouldn't I trust you with the ship?” She looked away and realization dawned. “You unlocked your memories from Atlas, didn't you?” I asked, and she nodded. “How bad was it?”

“I have lots of questions about things,” she admitted, “But I realize now that no one ever really trusted me—not even my father! Jaune, what kind of father doesn't trust his own daughter?”

“A poor one,” I answered quietly, reaching out and pulling her into a hug. “Penny, I trust you—I've tried to show that since day one. If you were going to kill me, you've had plenty of opportunities to kill both me and the others in our sleep by now. You've spent the night with Ruby—did you try to kill her in her sleep?”

“Of course not!” the smaller girl denied, shaking her head against my chest. “Ruby is my friend! I would never hurt her.”

“See? There you go,” I chuckled. “Now, how about we get this thing back to Vale?”

“But I am comfortable,” Penny whined, and I rolled my eyes. A moment later, she sighed and pulled away, moving back to the console. “Overwriting native VI,” she murmured, and a moment later all the screens flashed from blue to green. “Assuming direct control.”

I palmed my face, sliding my mask back on. “Penny?” I asked, and a moment later both her physical body and several digitally drawn versions of her face turned to regard me.

“Yes, Jaune?” they echoed, and I shuddered slightly.

“Do me a favor, Penny? Never use that phrase again. In fact, I'll get you a list of things,” I shook my head. ‘I don't think I'd stay on the ship if she told me, 'I can't let you do that, Jaune.'"

The digital representations of Penny's face disappeared, replaced with various displays of the ship's systems. “This is amazing,” the physical copy of Penny muttered. “The ship's computer is so much faster than this body's onboard processors. I wonder if this is what it'll feel like when I finally level
I raised an eyebrow at that—it seemed that the processor bump was even enough to change her speech patterns slightly. I didn't have enough information to speculate on the 'why' of that though. “What exactly did you do? Did you make a direct copy of yourself, or what? Because if I just store this thing for days or months on end, wouldn't that copy of you be stuck in limbo for that time?”

Penny giggled. “Relax, Jaune. It's a VI, based on me. I can slip inside and control it directly like I am now, or I can leave her to operate autonomously. She's not sentient. I wouldn't damn a copy of myself to live like that, because it's something I fear myself.”

Relieved that she had thought ahead of me, I turned my attention to something else she'd said. “Speaking of levels, how many have you gained?” I asked, and she quickly opened her menu.

“Four. I have choices available,” she answered, and I raised an eyebrow. “I have stat points, yes, but it seems I also have several 'trees' by which I may upgrade my body's hardware.”

“Really?” I asked, conjuring a couple of chairs for the two of us and taking a seat as the ship lifted off and quickly ascended, turning towards Vale as I dragged the ID with us. “What sorts of things?”

Penny made her menu visible and turned around for me to read. ‘Skill trees? No, more like development trees. She's got a lot of options here. The sorts of things I'd expect for an android, like endoskeleton, internal armor, options for skin, sensor suite enhancements, power system enhancements... Oh! Nice. Onboard weapons, stealth, shields, and other systems. Damn, this is kind of cool. But what's this last tree? The whole thing is grayed out. Maybe it requires some condition to unlock—like a prestige class or something.’

“You've got a few points here to spend. Do you mind if I make suggestions?” I asked, and she shook her head. “I'd go with the cloaking device first. It covers things Invisibility doesn't and can be upgraded later. After that, maybe upgrade your electronic warfare suite, to have a better range for hacking things remotely. After that, well, it's entirely up to you, Penny. Whatever you would like to do. Well, even before that, really—feel free to make your own choices, I'm just giving you the ones I'd pick.”

“Thank you, Jaune. For being my friend,” Penny smiled, latching onto me in another hug.

“You're welcome,” I smiled, reaching down and scratching the top of her head. “So, was there
anything specific you wanted to ask, about the memories you unlocked?"

“Yes!” Penny nodded, pulling back. “Jaune, what is a ‘brood mare?’”

I blinked once, then blinked again. “In what context?” I asked slowly.

“Ahem,” Penny cleared her throat, then when she spoke again it was in a woman's voice. “So I heard the old man's using spare parts to turn his pet project into a brood mare.” She paused a moment, then continued in another voice, a man's this time. “Damn, sounds sweet. Tiny little thing like that? I bet she'd be as tight as an eight year old. I wonder how long until they go on the market?” Another switch, another woman. “You wouldn't need an eight year old if you didn't have a pencil dick, Johnson.” The man again, “Fuck you, Shepherd. It wouldn't feel like a pencil dick if you'd stop fisting. If it has to be the size of a horse cock before you can feel it, you're too loose.” The first woman again, “Anyway, don't give them any ideas. With how things are now, they're just as likely to try it with men, too. They've already got one cooking in a tube. It wouldn't be a huge leap to stick a couple of balls in the male model they have and set it loose. Preservation of the species or not, I don't want to stare one of those things in its cold, dead eyes while it's hammering away at me like—well, exactly like a machine.”

Penny went silent, slowly pushing up her mask as she regarded me with wide eyes. “Jaune? Did I say something bad?” she asked carefully, and it took a second to figure out why she'd asked. The sound of chirping birds filled the bridge and, when I looked down, I saw a ball of concentrated rage clenched in my hand—more elements than I could easily identify. Taking a slow breath, I dismissed the half-formed spell and reabsorbed the mana. 'Did I just cast that on emotion and intent alone? Was that even a spell, or just pure elemental manipulation? Play with it later, deal with Penny now,' I mused.

Reaching out, I pulled Penny out of her chair and into my lap, into a hug while casting Lighten on her so her weight wouldn't bruise my thighs. “No, Penny. You didn't.” I paused, then shook my head. “Well, no. The content of what you said was terrible, but you didn't do anything wrong by telling me about it. I'm not angry at you, I'm angry for you.”

“No one has ever been angry for me before,” she admitted.

“Well, it happens,” I shrugged. “Why don't you tell me what else you can remember along those lines?”

When we were close enough to Vale, I put my hand on the ship's console and activated Claim Vehicle. The entire thing flashed briefly before disappearing around us and dropping us into empty air. Hitting us both with the Wings spell and stealth set again, we dropped out of the empty ID and made our way into Vale. Immediately, I felt the vague sensation of being watched, and frowned. The
feeling seemed to come from further away, and was much fainter than I usually felt it, but it was there—as though I were not specifically the target, but rather the entire city was somehow being observed.

'Definitely some sort of scrying ability, then. Alright, let's put together what we know. It's invisible, intangible, undetectable to Penny's sensors, Ruby's eyes can't pick it up, and it doesn't register as any sort of Illusion Barrier to my Semblance. Let's call it a technique, or spell for now. There seem to be multiple instances of the spell running across Vale. One following me, whenever it manages to tag me. There was the general one used to scan the mall a few times, which is how they probably managed to spot me as Jaune. It can track, but not see through, my IDs—that's about the only way it could've spotted me in a crowd—but something about using an ID means it loses me for at least a few seconds before it picks me up again. That implies it's a handicap of some sort. Maybe it's different versions of the technique? One to see normally, one to see Illusion Barriers? It either can't or won't see past an Aura Containment ward. It can see though my stealth spells.'

Looking up, I curved our flight away from my target destination, curving around the outskirts of Vale in an effort to triangulate the source of the feeling. 'That's about all I know about the technique, unless I've missed something. So, what do I know about the person behind it?' I shook my head. 'Not much. They're interested in Shiro and the Fox, and may have worked out who I am—but if they have, they've been content to sit on that information near as I can tell. They've got a lot of time on their hands, to be able to spend it on this technique. Likewise, that they can keep it running for so long and in multiple instances implies they've either got a lot of Aura, or a lot of control over it, or both—meaning high level, either way. The thing that stands out most though is how it reacted when I fought Yang: greater interest the whole time, then killing intent the moment I started moving in, then it pulled back when whoever was on the other end realized I wasn't going to hurt her. Also seemed to really get interested about the time I went to actually draw on her. It didn't show that much interest when I spanked Weiss.'

“Where are we going?” Penny called beside me.

I pointed towards the sky over Vale. “I'm trying to get a fix on something. Someone's been following us for a while and I'm using my detection skills to try and triangulate one of the spells being used.”

“I do not detect anything, though,” Penny pointed out. “Are you sure there's something there?”

“Yeah,” I nodded. “Either that, or something's screwing with my Semblance. But if you're bored, you can head back to Fox Hunt.”

Penny shook her head. “I enjoy spending time with you, Jaune. And flying is fun. I think one of the next upgrades I'm going to try to get will be flight.”
“Sounds good,” I nodded, turning my attention back to my thoughts. 'Okay, so it's probably a technique and there's probably a human—or a faunus—on the other end of it. Let's work on suspects. From most probable to least: Raven, in the top spot. She just got back into town for an unknown job. She's got 'portals' as a Semblance. No idea what she can do with it, beyond the one large, glowing, non-moving portal we saw at the end of season two though—which is kind of the problem there. Yeah, getting pissy when I fought Yang could point to her. On the other hand, the woman hasn't even seen her kid in a decade or more, so maybe not. And as far as her power set goes, there's a lot of scary shit she could do, but it'd depend entirely on how OP that Semblance is. It could be anything from one portal capable of blind local jumps only, to trans-continental travel, to invisible portals sprouting swords from your asshole.'

I winced at the mental imagery—I did not want to cross someone with the ability to separate one part of me from the rest of me on a whim, or slip a sword into my lungs from inside my lungs. That seemed like an absolutely bullshit and overpowered Semblance—not at all fair, even for Remnant. Then again, Remnant was a known death world, and Raven's allegiances were unknown at best. 'Maybe I'm her job. Maybe I pissed off Atlas by taking Penny, or the Schnees since Weiss was hunting me herself, or even just managed to make it to Ozpin's shitlist—the why doesn't matter so much as the fact that it's possible. I if it is her, why hasn't she confronted me yet? What is she waiting for? A asuming it's not Raven fucking Branwen, who's left?'

I set us down on a roof and took a minute to look over my map and make notations, before moving on. 'Well, the next obvious choices are Qrow and Tai. No idea what Tai's Semblance is, but you can bet if he saw some guy beating up his baby girl, he wouldn't be able to keep from stepping in, so it's probably not him. Qrow's sneakier than Tai, and I think I heard a rumor or spoilers somewhere that his Semblance allows him to turn into a crow, but that's what I get for not watching season three as it aired—all I've got to go on is spoilers I couldn't avoid and Monty's streak for the obvious and fetish for crows showing up in his previous works. Problem is, the spell is capable of things an animal form isn't. If it was Qrow, he couldn't hide from my Semblance. And that's only assuming I'm right on the 'Qrow is a crow' thing. He and Raven are supposedly twins, so they may have similar Semblances—haven't seen Melanie and Miltia's or Jane and Jean's to have a baseline to go off of. I need to remedy that soon, if only for knowing what they're capable of. Hell, have Melanie and Miltia even figured out their Semblances yet? I never see them using one during spars and everyone else uses theirs pretty much with impunity. Well, until we learn something different, let's bump Qrow way down on the list of suspects for suspected lack of ability.'

Having mostly ruled out Yang's immediate family, I moved on. 'What if the thing with Yang was a red herring? What if whoever is on the other end of that spell doesn't like seeing girls get hurt, but calmed the fuck down when he or she realized I wasn't actually going to hurt her? It would explain why there was hardly any reaction to fighting Weiss, if they knew I was bluffing. Could be one of the Seven Deadly Sisters I haven't met yet. Hell, could be one or both of the twins since I don't know what their Semblance is, but I kind of doubt it since both know I'm Shiro. That still leaves three it could be. Or it could be one of the Arc parents. Maybe they've returned to Vale and are keeping an eye on things, perhaps at Ozpin's request? Well, there's an easy way to rule them out—ask one of the sisters what their Semblances are. And one of them did want me to meet with her soon, so I could kill two birds with one stone there. Ruling them out for now, that still leaves an impossible number of
people it could be, if the answer is 'someone with a stealth or scrying Semblance.' Hell, could be Oz or Glynda for all I know—maybe Ozpin's Semblance is information gathering through scrying, or maybe Glynda's got a spell for that, since there's no way her Semblance is 'telekinesis.' I've seen it in action, it's magic like what I use, though maybe not on the same scale. Of course, on the other end of the spectrum is the possibility that it's someone working for or with Cinder—and that would be bad."

So really, the short list of suspects boiled down to: Raven, Qrow, an Arc, Ozpin, Glynda, or an unknown party. It was still a pretty long list. I wasn't going to get anywhere with it until I had more information, or whoever it was slipped up. If it was Raven, then she was somehow capable of hiding from my Semblance—and not in the same way Weiss confused it, which I still hadn't figured out the trick to. 'And even if I knew who it was right now, what could I do about it? Without a location, I've got noth…' I stopped dead on a rooftop, resisting the urge to facepalm. Pulling up mana, I focused on Skill Creation and intent, only to frown as I was denied, with an entirely new error message. "Spell Field in use.' So, what, I can't create a general scrying spell because I'm already using scrying spells? How? I'm not…"

I frowned as something clicked into place and little inconsistencies about my Semblance started adding up. Deciding to try to test that hypothesis, I tried for another spell—something for remote viewing. This time, I was met with a familiar error message complaining about lack of base INT points. 'Okay. So I can create a remote viewing spell, eventually. But a general 'scrying' spell is out of the question. What about prediction?' I wondered. Giving it a try turned up the same kind of 'no' response I'd gotten when attempting to make any sort of spell that relied on anything of a divine nature. 'Future sight is out. How about probability, instead? Pure number crunching.' Another attempt made, and this time I earned my second 'Spell Field in use' error message.

'Okay, that's good-ish. It tells me something important, at least. Namely, that I've got at least two hidden skills running. Except they're not really hidden, are they?' No, the quest system didn't exactly try to hide itself—nor did the map. It made sense, though. If those entire fields of spells were in use and I wasn't using them consciously, then it would have to be some core element to the Semblance itself. Probably something I used all the time, at that. 'How else would my quest system generate quests, except by either foreknowledge, direct interaction or proximity to someone and overhearing something, or situationally? The first one explains some of the general quests I get, but the rest are either all situational, or things like with Blake that could be explained by foreknowledge, but only pop up when they get into range—which has been expanding as I've leveled. Meaning some sort of scrying ability is highly likely. And Observe also has to run off scrying. Of course, that means I can't create a scrying spell to use myself, and that my Semblance is already using one and it's not picking up anyone watching me except with detection skills… which also probably fall under the generic 'scrying' category. Then why was I able to create those and not something to let me search manually?'

I growled in quiet frustration before moving on. 'Well, fuck it. What about defenses against scrying?'

That also turned up nothing, though I wasn't actually too surprised on that count. At least being told I
didn’t meet the INT requirements made more sense than being told to fuck off because the entire category of spells was already in use—except I was right back to the argument that defenses against scrying could be counted as part of the scrying field of spells. *Back to square one,*’ I groused. Pulling up my map, I took in the data I’d marked so far. “Penny, could you look at this and tell me what you think?”

“Of course,” she agreed with a nod, and I set my map to visible. “Your attempts at triangulation appear to be correct. The source of the spell you are detecting appears to be over the city center.”

“And at altitude,” I murmured, tilting my head up in its general direction. “If there's something up there being used for recon, then whoever is on the other side of it has a bird's eye view of the city. Probably how they spotted me immediately after the fire. Damnit. So my options are lie low, or pretend to ignore it and wait until whoever is on the other side decides to do something.” In other words, I was exactly where I had been since I'd first detected it. I simply didn't have enough information to go on to form more than a guess as to the who, why, or how of it. *Then I’ll worry about the 'when.' How's that saying go again? Hope for the best, prepare for the worst?*

“It would seem that way. What now?” the gynoid asked, and I sighed.

“For now, back to base. Then I'm going to go hit a bank.”

I blinked, then blinked again as I stood in Fox Hunt’s parking garage— rather, I should say the private parking garage under our barracks for officers, as opposed to the general motor pool garage. It was empty, save for the five of us. Miltia had joined her sister, Neo, and Penny while Blake had apparently gone upstairs, in a bit of a mood after the thing in Stofhol. Melanie and Neo had sent our new Private off to get settled into her new quarters while I had ordered the small security detachment stationed on the ground floor to give us the room. “That looks nice. I thought you were running errands?”

“This was an errand,” Miltia smirked, looking inordinately pleased with herself. I couldn't say I blamed her, though. When I'd loaned her my copy of Bumblebee this morning, I hadn't expected to be given back what might as well be an entirely new bike. It had been modified from the ground up, it looked like. The tires had been swapped out from street tread to all-terrain. In fact, it looked as though someone had replaced the single-tire configuration with dual tires both front and back, that wound up being half-again as wide as the original set had been. The suspension had been drastically altered from its racing street bike configuration to all-terrain bike. *No, that's not quite right,*’ I mused, leaning in for a closer look. *It's been converted into a four-wheeler. It splits down the middle. Probably has four-wheel drive, as well.*
The plastic fairings, panels, and fenders had all been replaced by metal equivalents in a similar style, possibly titanium or something similar—light, but capable of taking a hit better than plastic. The new fairings and panels were all white with gold trim, with the double crescent painted on both sides of the bike's fairing side panels, just below the fuel tank. The exhaust had been replaced by tail pipes tucked under the tail, where they wouldn't get in the way when the rear split open. The seat and foot rests had also been replaced, and I hummed in thought as I noticed what looked like straps to lock in feet on the foot rests. The side fairings looked a bit wider than I remembered, and a visual inspection confirmed there were seams that hadn't been there before. *They open. They're storage compartments,' I realized. 'Where have I seen something like this before?*

Even the lights had not been spared—the headlight having been replaced with a pair of HID lights that were alarmingly bright, along with a trio of smaller red lights around them, presumably for night running without alerting everything around. The tail lights had been replaced with both a standard red tail light and a HID like those on the front, and I noticed that folded under the tail with the tailpipes was some sort of folding metal contraption. Finding a switch on the back, I hit it and it folded out, extending the length of the bike by a few feet, while the rear foot pedals shifted slightly. *Gunner's position? With the light there, makes sense. If you're running from something, there's no point in not shooting back…'*

Realization struck, and I laughed quietly as I figured out where I'd seen it, or something close to it. *It's like a modified version of Cloud's bike from Advent Children. If, you know, he went kind of overboard on modifying it.*

“I like it,” I grinned, sliding onto it and starting the engine. Unlike before, where Yang's Bumblebee had been tuned as a street bike, this thing was nearly silent as it sat idling. “How much of this is the original?”

“Not much,” Miltia admitted. “The engine, fuel tank, and most of the frame. The rest is new.”

“How long have you been working on this?” I asked, turning to the trio of girls. “Surely it wasn't all planned out in a day.”

“Pretty much since you got it,” Neo admitted. “We got together with one of the local shops and went over what we thought you might need. By the time we were done, all they really needed was the bike and a few hours to put it all together.”

“Why?” I asked, killing the bike. “I mean, not that it's not awesome—it is—but why not just repaint it?”
“Function, mostly,” Melanie admitted. “It'll be good for when you're limited to what you can use. Or when you need a way of getting around out in the wilds as a Hunter, and not just in Vale.”

“I’d still have to summon it,” I pointed out.

“Ah, not exactly,” Miltia chuckled. “We paid for storage tech.”

I raised an eyebrow and hopped off at her urging. Taking out her scroll, she held it up to the bike’s control interface and selected something. A moment later, the whole thing folded down in a blur of moving metal parts and light. When it finished she held a metal disk, rounded on one side, white with gold trim and with the Arc double crescent on the top in gold. I could make out a clip on the flat back, as well. Stepping up closer, she reached in and clipped it onto the left side of my belt. “It's Gen-7 storage tech. Brand spanking new, straight from Atlas. Expensive, but worth it.”

“How expensive?” I asked, and the girls traded looks.

“Jaune,” Melanie began.

“It's bad form to ask how much a gift cost,” Miltia pointed out.

I sighed, palming my face. I would definitely have to get the girls nice things after this, otherwise I'd feel like a complete heel. In the meantime, they deserved some sort of reward for their efforts. Putting that thought on the back burner for the moment, I asked, “So, what's it called?”

Another shared look, and Neo grinned. “Arclance.”

“That's… actually better than anything I've come up with, to date,” I admitted. “I suck at naming things.”

“We know,” the twins and Neo echoed, and I rolled my eyes.

“Ha ha, very funny,” I chuckled.
“Well,” Miltia hummed, “the guys at the shop actually wanted to call it a Puma. Or a Warthog. They couldn't really make up their minds. Doesn't look much like either, if you ask me.”

I blinked. “You're joking?” I asked, and she shook her head. I'd have to swing by some time myself, if only to see if there really was someone in Remnant resembling RvB's Red Team—I kind of doubted it, though. In all honesty, it was probably just a coincidence—like the armor I'd found with Penny. That, or I needed to seriously reconsider some sort of potential bleed-over between worlds, given Earth-related media showing up here. “If I wanted another several of these made, how hard would it be to get them done?”

“Oh, for your team,” Penny realized, and I nodded.

“And Ruby's team, assuming we're not on the same team,” I stressed, and Neo rolled her eyes. “And you, as well. It'd be something too useful not to carry around. It's light, quick, easy ground transportation.” Pulling the badge the Arc Lance had been folded down to off my belt, I looked it over before finding a switch on the back. Hitting it, I tossed the badge away as it began to move, and it righted itself as it unfolded, before landing with a small jolt to the suspension. “Damn, but that is awesome,” I murmured, taking out my scroll and keying it to switch back, then scooping it up and opening my Inventory. Equipping it in the appropriate slot, it reappeared on my belt in a small flash of light.

“The guys we used customized it for nearly all terrain types—it's even amphibious. The struts they replaced the foot pegs with can lock your feet in place, so you or a rider can anchor yourselves if you decide to go for vehicular combat. The rear seat is pretty much a gunner's position, as well—or a sniping platform, if you wanted to use it for that,” Miltia added. “About the only thing it can't do well is fly. Jumps really well, though.”

'Too bad it doesn't have a horn. I'd set it to play Dixie every time it went airborne. Of course, I'd have to repaint and rename it, if I did. Then again, I don't think Remnant is ready for the General Lee, and a bike just doesn't do the car justice,' I mused. 'Who wants to help me rob a bank?'”

“You're going to ID it, right?” Melanie asked, and I nodded.

“Meh,” both the twins shrugged, before Miltia added, “There's no sport in it. Cut your way in, snag everything not nailed down, throw it into Inventory.”

“We've seen that enough times now that we know it's not much fun to watch,” Melanie nodded.
Neo chuckled. “Sorry, Jaune, they're right. It's not theft, it's shopping.”

I shrugged. “Fair enough.”

“We'll call Greene and set up a time to meet again tomorrow. Did we have any other plans today?” Neo asked, and I sent a questioning look to the twins, who shook their heads.

“I'm going to take Penny and maybe Angel and see about getting us some birds, when I get done making a withdrawal. After that, I need to go see my sister.” Before they could ask which, I answered, “Jen. She said she wanted to talk, next time I came around. I figured now's good. I'll meet you all back here tonight.” I turned to Penny. “Can you get ahold of Angel and have her make out a wish list, and get me a map of where to find them?”

Angel's wish list, as I found out a couple of hours and over a hundred million Lien later, consisted of Bullheads, Razorbacks, and one of something I hadn't seen before—a large equipment mover, looking for all the world like a Remnant equivalent of a C-5 Galaxy, if the Galaxy were sized up by a factor of two. Looking it over, I turned an amused gaze on Angel. “Really?”

“You said a wish list, sir,” she pointed out, before reaching out and tapping the display with the HALV—Heavy Air Lift Vehicle. “If you've got machinery to deploy in a hurry on the other side of the country, this is your girl. It's been out of service a while—since Vale dissolved its armed services and began relying on Atlas tech. It's one part anti-gravity lift, one part good old-fashioned aeronautics, and purely Vale tech. She's not quite VTOL, but she'll lift off and land from a short runway. I might know a pilot who would be interested in flying one, actually. He and the rest of his crew retired years ago, but they're still kicking around bitching about how they've got nothing to do.”

“Oh?” I asked, getting a feeling I knew where this was going.

“My uncle, sir. He's the main reason I became a pilot. I'm pretty sure there's one or two of these up for sale, actually,” Angel admitted. “When the others mentioned moving a lot of armor, I remembered hearing about it. Pretty sure your man Greene knows, as well.”

“I'll run it by the girls,” I nodded. “That aside, anything else? Are there any other large ships in Vale? I made a copy of the Daedalus today—”

Angel blinked, frowning as she sat back in her chair. “Your Semblance allows you to copy things?” she asked, and I tilted a hand back and forth in a so-so gesture. “How many times?”
“Once. And I'd appreciate if you kept that quiet,” I said, and she nodded.

“In that case,” she pulled out her scroll and opened up a map.

“Angel?” I asked, and she looked up. “You're in the guild, high enough to access basic functions. Say ‘map.’ Or think it.”

She hesitated a moment before saying, “Map.” The blonde woman blinked, eyes focusing on the middle distance. “This is also part of your Semblance? Looks like part of a TACNET.”

I frowned. “I thought someone explained all of this to you and Jim?”

The blonde chuckled quietly, looking suddenly embarrassed. “I uh… I thought it was bullshit, sir. A lot of the men did. I'll relay the message and get them straightened out. I think I've still got a copy of that guide your girls sent in my email.” She began doing something with her map and I opened mine as points began to display. “What's this button do, sir? 'Map link.'”

“Probably exactly what it says, but let's try it and find out,” I shrugged, and the woman nodded.

“I clicked it. It says 'waiting,’” she said, and at the same time a blinking icon on the side of my map popped up, showing an available link. Clicking it, my map shifted to display the information on Angel's. “Handy,” the woman hummed, then began drawing circles around areas of the map. “There are a few Atlas air bases outside Vale. Most of them are refueling areas. Some of them are drydocks for doing repairs and refit. Others, like these,” she tapped three in particular, “are where they keep their reserve fleet. It's not much. Couple of corvettes and a destroyer per base, probably, but it's more than we've got. Last I knew, Atlas only kept three destroyers on station in Vale for rapid response to large nasties. As you can imagine, most of Atlas's toys are kept at home. Keep in mind that I'm not even counting smaller aircraft like the Bullheads and Razorbacks—I'm talking about warships, not gunships. Ships that require a large crew and stay in the air for months at a time. Of those, corvettes are the most popular and make up the majority of the fleet, numbering a couple of hundred. Destroyers are the next most common, at around fifty. Beyond that, they have around twenty battleships and all of three capital ships—the Dauntless, Dreadnaught, and Invincible. Those don't leave Atlas, except under special circumstances. What you kind of have to have been in the service to know is that, despite how many ships they have, they don't keep them all in the air full time. Only about a third of the fleet is in the air at any one time. Most are rotated out in six-month increments. The big three are rotated out yearly. Scuttlebutt was that Atlas would eat itself if they tried to keep everything in the air all the time.”
Thinking it over, a smile stretched across my lips. “So what you're telling me is that, at any one time, two thirds of Atlas's fleet is on the ground?”

“Yes, sir. Either in drydock or on the tarmac,” Angel nodded.

I hummed, considering my map. “Okay. New goal : copy the local reserve fleet. For that, we're going to need somewhere to hide them, first of all. After that, fuel, food, ammunition, and crew.” I now knew Penny could spin off VI copies of herself and control the ships. The only problems with that were that I didn't feel like Penny should have to bear the burden of running our fleet all by herself and I wasn't sure if the VI copies of Penny were as reliable as the real thing. Not just that, but Penny wasn't purpose-made to run one of those ships. No, if I was going to stick anything inside one, I'd want to build an AI just for that purpose. Even then, I'd still want at least some human crew, probably. It wouldn't really be fair to an AI on a ship to be grounded or shut off most of the time, when not in use. 'No, I'm going to have to crew them or find a way to keep them up full time, which means a steady supply of Dust. Damn.'

“If you can duplicate Dust, then fuel and ammunition shouldn't be a problem, sir. Well, aside from getting into and out of the depots housing fuel and munitions,” she shrugged.

“It's not a problem,” I agreed.

With a nod, Angel closed her map. “Well, then crew is where you're going to come up short. How did you even get the Daedalus, sir?”

“I have my ways, and let's leave it at that.”

“Yes, sir,” Angel nodded. “What are we going after first?”

“I'll snag us some gunships. Talk to Jim and see if you can find somewhere to put down a couple of corvettes and a destroyer. I don't plan to run them unless it's an emergency, so we can just sit on them for now. I'd rather everyone didn't know we have our own fleet until it's too late for them to do anything about it,” I grinned. “And we'll need to falsify some paperwork on where we got them, too—even if the supposed dealer would have had to have stolen them. We can't have a fleet appearing out of thin air, at least not on paper.” On that note, I probably should do the same for the ground vehicles as well. I could just keep them in reserve off-site, but better safe than sorry.

“Understood, sir. I already have a short list of pilots and crew for gunships made up. With your
permission, I would like to try to recruit them.”

That was good—we would be able to start moving troops around soon. Once we got more troops. *One thing at a time,* I mused. “Granted.”

Angel pushed herself out of her chair, wincing as her artificial leg shifted slightly, before drawing up into a salute and leaving after I'd returned it. “Some days,” I whispered, “I feel like I'm just playing a role on a stage for these people. I wonder if that's how real officers feel.”

Shaking my head, I got out of my own chair and made for the door, sending a message off to Penny to meet me on the roof of the barracks. Moving to the barracks building and punching in my access code to get into our quarters, I made my way to the work room and snagged my new jacket, throwing it into Inventory. I needed new armor for Beacon, since the old stuff I had wouldn't really do, and I needed to make sure it would go over the jacket—which meant taking it to someone who made armor and getting measurements done. It was one more thing I could check off on my list of things to take care of before Beacon started.

With that done, I headed for the roof, where I met Penny. Aside from the general feeling of the town being watched, it appeared that my watcher had either lost me or was taking a break from directly observing me today and I was going to use this window for all it was worth.

G ravel crunched under my tires as I braked, bringing the Arclance to a stop in front of the Arc family home and killing the headlights and engine. Hitting the button to compress it, I slipped it back into place before moving up to the front door. The door opened and a pair of green eyes gazed out at me from under red bangs for a moment before I was intercepted by a human missile. “Jaune!” Jun cheered, and I laughed.

“Good to see you too, munchkin,” I greeted.

“You have a package!” the tiny redhead announced, and I raised an eyebrow in question. Jun detached from my waist and lead me inside, and under the lights I saw that she was already dressed in her pajamas.

I dropped onto the couch and she went into the kitchen, coming back a moment later with a cardboard box, addressed to me here at the Arc home. “Okay,” I murmured, wondering what the hell it could be. Pulling out my knife, I cut open the top and pulled out the paper stuffing. In amongst the wadded up newspaper, I found a metal cylinder. A smile crossed my lips as I realized what it was.
“Thank you, Joan,” I murmured, pulling it reverently from the box. It looked like a lightsaber hilt, to be honest, though not nearly as large as one—more the size of a medium-sized flashlight. The main body was a black metal tube with a rubberized grip on one end and a hole on the other. There was a single, recessed button near the upper half, a covered trigger below that, and a twistable selector switch at the bottom just above where it would unscrew. On the side of the tube opposite the button and trigger was what looked like a small rail mount, so it could be mounted as an under-barrel attachment.

Digging through the box, I found and ate the manual and set about reading it a moment later. “Is that what I think it is?” Jun asked, and I shrugged.

“It's probably pretty close to what you think it is,” I answered absently as I read. “I told Joan I wanted a Dustcaster attachment for my weapon that looked vaguely lightsaber-ish. Apparently, she went whole hog on it.” Following the directions, I twisted the end of it and it opened with a click, before allowing me to slide out a piece of metal about the size of the tube. There were eight slots inside, sized and shaped for cut Dust crystals in a regular icosahedron cut of a familiar size. I chuckled quietly, upon realizing what I was looking at. 'It's an 8d20 lightsaber. I am sorely tempted to paint numbers on all the faces when I fill this thing in and set them all for 20.'

Since I didn't have dice—that is, Dust crystals—to load into it at the moment, I quickly duped it and opened my Inventory. One copy was attached to the Blazefire Saber on my right, while the second copy found a place attached to my belt on my left side, so I could draw the Dustcaster by itself without having to also drag out the Saber it was attached to. Turning to Jun, I asked, “Your sister in?”


I raised an eyebrow. “What's that mean?”

“I mean, she's been acting funny since she got back home.”

“Funny how? Actually, why don’t you just give me all the details?” I smiled down at her as she flopped onto the couch beside me.

Jun opened and closed her mouth in more than one false start before finally saying, “Funny like you, except the opposite. When you came back from the hospital, you didn't even know who we were, but you were nicer than you'd ever been—not that you were really mean before, just… you didn't seem to care. You paid attention to me. You made Joan smile again. Before she left, Jen was the fun one. She always had time to play with me. We used to talk all the time, but now she barely says a
She always tried to keep the peace, when things got bad. Now? She's here, but not here. And she's kind of jumpy, now. Like she's always expecting something bad to happen.”

“Have you talked to her about it?” I asked, and Jun shook her head.

“I tried. Jean and Jane tried. Even Joan tried. She just sort of sits there until we go away, if we try to ask,” she admitted.

I had nothing to go on, there. I didn't have much in the way of memories of her—just a short, curvy thing in a blue dress, smiling and laughing as we spun around a dance floor, years ago if my height at the time was anything to go by. “Well, I was going to talk to her anyway. I suppose I could ask. Where is she, anyway?”

A flash of a smirk crossed Jun's face for the briefest of instants before she took on the most falsely innocent look I'd ever seen before. “I'll take you to her,” she stood, taking my hand and hauling me to my feet and leading me upstairs. I rolled my eyes when I realized exactly which door she'd brought me to. Opening the door and peeking her head in, Jun called, “Onee-chan! Onii-chan is here!” Pulling her head back out of the bathroom, she smirked at me for a moment while I rolled my eyes.

“She hates that, doesn't she?” I asked, and Jun nodded.

“Absolutely. Well, I'm going to bed! Have fun,” she beamed, pushing me through the door with more strength than her tiny body should possess, then slamming the door closed behind me.

I sighed in the steam hanging thick in the bathroom. The sound of something moving in water drew my attention to the tub, where a pair of blue eyes set under blonde hair, made dark with water, met my own blue. “It was her idea,” I groaned.

Jen sat still for a long moment, simply regarding me, beforeshrugging—and doing interesting things to her bare, soapy breasts that I found particularly eye-catching. “If you're going to stay, wash my back,” she quietly deadpanned.

Chuckling, I moved over to take a seat on the toilet and took the offered fluffy loofah, already covered in soap. “You're not worried I'm going to peep?”
“No. If you look, you look,” she murmured, eyes going half-lidded as I started on her shoulders and neck.

When it appeared that she would be quite content letting any conversation die stillborn, I rolled my eyes and began talking, in an effort to force her to engage. “What did you want to talk about?”

She sighed quietly, leaning forward in the tub and bringing her knees up to her chest, allowing me access to her lower back. “The others told me what happened. You really don't remember anything?”

“Not much,” I admitted. “What else have they told you?”

The blonde hummed. “About your Semblance. That you're doing shady things. That you slept with Joan and Jane.”

“Did they?” I asked, raising an eyebrow. I was surprised about that, to be honest. I realized Jean knew, and appeared to be jealous as fuck, but I didn't know they'd told anyone else. “How many of you know?”

“Joan, the twins, and myself are the only ones who know everything—depending on what you've told Jun or what she's managed to figure out for herself. The others know about the accident and that you don't remember much, but they weren't told anything else—just in case someone in Vacuo or Mistral was listening to their scroll calls. We'll probably tell them when they come home to visit soon. As for the sex? Probably just us older four, but you can never tell with Jun. She picks up more than she lets on,” Jen admitted.

I digested that for a moment. “Does it bother you?”

Jen shook her head. “They're grown women, they can make their own choices.” She turned her head to meet my eye over her shoulder. “How much of it is just exposure to your Aura?” I raised an eyebrow, and a small smirk twitched at the corner of her lips. “You think we didn't notice, Jaune? It's a mental effect. I've been wet since you walked in the front door.” She paused, before quietly admitting, “I could shrug it off, but it's honestly the best I've felt since leaving Atlas.”

“What does that mean, exactly?” I frowned, going over what Jun had said. “What happened?”

She clammed up, and I handed her the loofah back, long since having finished scrubbing her back.
Rinsing my hand off in the bath water, I leaned back on the toilet seat and thought it over. After a moment of contemplation, I hit her with Observe, and immediately frowned at what I found there. “You were fast tracked for the Specialist program.”

Jen's head whipped around, eyes locking with mine. There was something there, buried under that flat look that I couldn't quite place, and Observe was no help. “The conditioning failed and you left. What sort of conditioning, Jen?”

“Jennifer.”

“Jen,” I countered. “Is it what I think it is?”

The blonde looked away. “Can't talk about it,” she whispered.

“Won't, or can't?” I asked, wanting clarification on the wording.

“Can't.”


Jen sighed, slipping underwater for a moment before popping back up again and hitting the drain plug. She stood and stepped out of the tub, meeting my eyes with that flat gaze as she did—either unashamed or uncaring of her nudity, and I wondered exactly what sort of mental damage could do that. Observe had given me a good idea, and it was worrying. I held out the towel and she accepted it, beginning to dry off. Stepping out of the bathroom to give her time to get dry, I went downstairs and made my way to the kitchen. After a minute of digging around, I came up with a bottle of some sort of spiced rum. ‘Wonder which of them drinks this.’ Shrugging, I filled two glasses with ice and headed back upstairs.

Jen stepped out of the bathroom with the towel wrapped around her body and a second around her hair. Taking in the glasses, she raised one fine blonde eyebrow before turning and stalking down the hallway, turning into one of the bedrooms. I followed, closing the door behind us. Jen had pulled out a tee-shirt and a pair of what looked like boxer-briefs, and begun pulling them on. Setting the glasses and bottle down, I moved over and took the towel around her hair. “Here, let me,” I said, pulling up water elemental mana. With a little focus, I pulled the excess water out of her hair and deposited it on
the towel, leaving her hair only mildly damp as opposed to soaked. “That should be good enough.”

“Neat trick,” she commented, pulling on the tee-shirt and dropping down to sit cross-legged on the bed.

I dropped down across from her. “I'm full of them,” I shrugged, snagging the glasses and bottle with Telekinesis, which drew another raised eyebrow from the blonde. Pouring the glasses, I put the bottle back down and floated the glasses over to us. My own eyebrows went up when, as the glass neared Jen, her Aura flared almost invisibly—a faint green luminescence—and I felt the glass pulled out of my control. A faint green sheen covered it as it moved to hover in front of the blonde before me. “Neat trick.”

“I'm full of them,” Jen retorted, a faint smile dancing across her lips for just an instant.

I hummed, putting on an innocent expression, as I said, “You realize that this means you could’ve washed your own back. You didn't need my help.”

“True,” Jen agreed. “But it was nicer with you doing it than by myself.”

“Fair enough,” I shrugged.

She sipped at the glass and winced. “I don't see how anyone could drink this mess.”

“Well, in this instance, it's to get you mildly to moderately drunk,” I admitted. Her eyes met mine, a questioning look crossing her face. “It'll lower your innate resistance to mental spells, more than if I tried to brute-force my way in. It may also help you not remember much when we get done. The spell I mentioned to let you show me what happened? Me watching it means you remember it as I go. Can you handle that?”

She was silent for a long moment before nodding. “Yes.” Draining the glass, she snagged the bottle with her power and poured herself another. “If the point is to get me drunk, why are you drinking? Doesn't one of us need to 'drive' for your spell to work?”

“I don't get drunk as easily any more. In fact, the harder I try, the harder it becomes. The worst this'll do is give me a mild buzz. No, I'm drinking with you because it wouldn't be polite, otherwise,” I smiled.

“I keep hearing that. You all make it sound like I was an asshole, before. Well, more of an asshole than I am now.” I shrugged. People kept telling me I was an ass. It must be for a reason.

“Not an asshole, per se,” Jen shook her head. “You just… didn't handle it well. You drifted apart from us. We should have done more to help. We could have unlocked your Aura, but dad and moms said it would be best if you unlocked it on your own.”

I held up a hand. “This isn't the time for that discussion. You did all you could and it wasn't your responsibility. Whatever happened, I don't blame you, and I doubt that'll change when or if I eventually do remember. If anyone's to blame, it's our parents—and it's something I'll take up with them, eventually. For tonight, we're worrying about you. Finish your drink and eat your ice.”

Jen shrugged, pounding down the rest of the glass and went to work chewing ice. “Can you make me forget?”

I blinked, meeting her eyes. “What do you mean?”

“You said 'mental spells.' If I asked, could you erase everything from Atlas from my mind?”

Opening my menu, I navigated to my skills section and selected Forget. The spell was level 24 now and I had a pretty decent grasp over how it worked. Still, that was a large section of memories to just wipe, and by default the spell only covered about four hours worth of memories now—ten minutes per level. I could probably overpower it and get more. Likewise, I could probably cast it repeatedly and erase memories in chunks. I'd never done it though, and I didn't want to test it on someone I sort of cared for. I hadn't known her long, but Jen was family here, and I wanted to get to know her, and I couldn't do that if I accidentally left her as a vegetable. “Probably not,” I said slowly, shaking my head. “I've only tested it on short-term wipes. I don't feel comfortable trying to knock out that much. Maybe after I level the skill up, but even then, I still have no idea what it'd do. It could cause permanent brain damage, for all I know.”

“Can't be any worse,” Jen deadpanned.

The blonde nodded. “Getting there.”

Shifting around to get comfortable, I prepared myself. “Ready?” I asked, and she nodded. “Okay.” Silently, I cast Read Thoughts. The spell brushed against her mind before sliding off, and I frowned. Putting a little more oomph behind it, I tried again. This time, it made contact, before the spell failed again. “This would go better if you'd relax and just let me in.”

Jen shook her head. “I don't think I can. You're probably going to have to force it.”

‘Against someone with the title 'Divine Will.' Right,’ I shook my head. “Let's try this. Party, for testing purposes,” I muttered. One blonde eyebrow went up before she accepted. Once she was in, I hit her with Telepathy, attempting to establish a link. “Let it connect.”

It took several tries, but we eventually got a link running between us. “Your mind feels funny,” Jen assessed, and I chuckled quietly.

“Been in a few?” I asked, and she shrugged. “Well, try to get comfortable. Once you're comfortable with me in your head, I'll try digging around.”

A soft snort escaped her lips and I looked up to catch her fighting down a smile. Upon seeing my questioning look, she said, “So it's like sex.” I blinked at that. “You're inside me, waiting for me to stop wincing so we can get on with it.”

I rolled my eyes. “I don't really get complaints like that. Usually, what I hear is more along the lines of, 'harder,' 'faster,' 'deeper,' and 'I'm coming.’”

“You seem sure of yourself,” she assessed, and I shrugged.

“A gentleman doesn't kiss and tell, but I will say that of the seven I've been with, five keep coming back and one asked me not to because of her own inability to resist.” Raising an eyebrow, I asked, “What's with you and sex talk, anyway? Is there something you're trying to tell me?”

Jen shrugged. “After hearing Joan and Jane talk about it, I'll admit that I'm curious. And considering that being around you leaves me actually feeling something for the first time in months, I'm sorely
tempted.”

“You've been, what? In shock? Emotionally numb?” I asked, thinking on my own forced calm with Gamer's Mind on. It was useful, I'll admit—but I liked feeling human too.

The blonde tilted one hand side to side in a so-so motion. “Sort of. I can't explain.”

Realizing we were back to square one on that front, I decided to try probing her again. Pulling up mana, I cast, and was almost unprepared for it when the spell settled into place—and promptly leveled. Twice. 'Yeah, okay, 'Divine Will' isn't just for show. Her mind actually is ridiculously well defended—especially if it took all the modifiers I used to be able to even connect, and for me to get so much skill experience from it. It's like that first time I cast Sleep on Joan.' I was honestly kind of wondering how many times it would level, by the time we were done.

“I think we're good,” I said quietly, first going for her memories of this conversation, as it happened—the newest should be easiest, and with her 'remembering' in real time as we sat there, it was the least invasive use of the spell.

“It feels strange.”

“I know,” I nodded. “Let's try something. I do have some vague memories to go on, so a common point of reference may help. Remember us dancing when you were wearing that pretty little blue number?”

A ghost of a smile grossed her lips and I saw the memory from her end. Immediately, I noticed something seemed… off. The whole memory seemed somehow leached of emotion—as though it held no meaning to her one way or another. And yet, in the memory, she was smiling—happy, even. “They really did a number on you.”

“No, really?” Jen snarked.

I turned a questioning look on her. “So, you can't feel anything…”

“Snark's harder to kill,” the blonde answered impassively. “Watch.”
Where before, I had been directing her memories, they lurched abruptly to a sort of running montage of her time in Atlas. Everything seemed normal, or at least as normal as I'd expect from a military academy for Hunters. Really, it seemed a lot like descriptions of Basic from the few enlisted friends I'd had on Earth. It was only in the beginning of her third year that things took a turn for the strange.

“Cadet Arc? How may I help you?” – Female, brunette, with an odd red skin tone that seemed too bright to be human, because I had seen naturally red-toned humans on Earth and this was like comparing skin to paint. Still, here was proof that my speculation was correct as she appeared to be one of Remnant's unique races that Earth simply didn't have, even though all the other common markers screamed 'Caucasian.' Looking to be in her mid-40s, she wore officer's rank insignia that Jen identified as a Captain in the Atlesian service. 'Combat And Tactics Instructor, CATI,' Jen supplied the answer to my unasked question—meaning she appeared to be Goodwitch's analog in Atlas.

Jen's gaze strayed to the tablet the woman was working on for a moment before asking, “Sir, why am I being transferred?”

Cati, as the cadets called her, regarded Jen over her glasses with something approaching a proud smile. “You've shown excellent progress, so far. You're ahead of your peers in both practical and theoretical work, and frankly, you're one of the strongest cadets we've had in years, in terms of sheer volume of Aura. You've been fast tracked for the Specialist program.” She set down the pad and took off her glasses, cleaning them with a handkerchief. “To be frank, you've put in a lot of work to get this far, and it's only going to get harder from here. Do us proud, cadet.”

“Yes, sir.”

The brunette replaced her glasses and took up the tablet again. “You're to pack your things and report to,” she swiped through the tablet for a moment, “landing pad 4 by 0630 tomorrow morning. Dismissed.”

“Okay, so you were good—” I began, and Jen shook her head.

“The best of the best. They don't let you into the main academy unless you're already one of the best. Top ten percent material. Atlas is actually split into two tracks—one for normal recruits, that turns out average hunters, and the other for exceptional recruits that turns out amazing hunters. The only ones better, on average, are those that come from Vale—and that's debatable.”
That was all new to me, but it made sense from a military perspective. They wouldn't want to waste perfectly good troops that could follow orders well—those are the body of any armed service. The others, the *exceptional* ones, were officer material—which would, on Earth, earn them a ticket to Officer Candidate School. If Atlas started screening and training their officers earlier and avoided the extra few years of schooling in order to turn them out faster, it was about the sort of practical solution I was beginning to see was commonplace across Remnant. That would imply that Specialists were above even officers, somehow. “Jen, what exactly is a Specialist?”

There was more than one false start as Jen tried to find a way to answer, but kept hitting a wall. Finally, she ground out, “The best of the best of the best.”

A man – tall, Caucasian, balding with brown hair – wearing a set of black fatigues stood in front of a telescreen that took up one entire wall of the classroom. “You were all recruited because you have proven that you are the best of the best. Congratulations—you stand out just enough from the trash of the rank and file that you might prove useful to your country. My name is Overseer King, and from today until the day you earn the title of Specialist, I am god to you. When we get done with you, you will be the best, of the best, of the best. Until then, you're just only slightly better than trash—and only slightly less disposable. The scrolls you've been issued contain your schedules. Read them now.”

He waited, while the students took out shiny new black scrolls. Looking at hers, Jen selected one of the only apps available—the calendar where her schedule was kept—and began reading.

0500: Reveille.
0600: Meal.
0630-0930: Orientation.
0930-1230: PT.
1230-1300: Meal.
1300-1800: PT.
1800-2100: Orientation.
2100-2130: Meal.
2200: Lights out.

“Scrolls away. Your first Orientation class starts now,” the Overseer announced a minute or two later, and Jen put away her scroll. “Watch the film. There will be a test at the end of the week.”
With that, Overseer King left the room, the thick metal doors closing solidly behind him. A moment later, the wall-sized telescreen came on and the light turned off. A movie—a propaganda piece—began to play. A little over ten minutes in, and bored out of her mind, in between moments of the screen flashing black, Jen noticed the light levels in the room had slowly crept up. When the screen lit again, the room was filled with a barely noticeable indigo luminescence. Frowning, she glanced around—no one seemed to have noticed. A look at the girl to her left showed the bluenette completely spaced out—staring at the screen, eyes unblinking. A glance to the right showed the black haired boy there in a similar state. Then the room got brighter, and her head felt light—and the entire memory took on a sort of surreal quality, that I might expect from some sort of drug-fueled haze.

A glance upwards showed the banks of lights, previously off, now putting off an indigo glow. She would have studied it more, but something on the screen caught her attention. Glancing back, she realized just how captivating the movie was—if you could call a pattern of flashing colors and sounds captivating, though to my eyes it looked more like some sort of TV test pattern.

Once more, footage began to play, this time in quick succession—and in every image, I found text. Too small to stand out on a first pass for most people, but then I knew what I was looking for—because I'd seen it before, on Earth.

Beowolf standing in a forest. Enemy.

Faunus male, Caucasian plus dog template. Suspect.

Beowolves running in a pack. Threat.

Faunus female and child, Asian plus cat template. Thieves.

A pack of Beowolves tearing into a group of civilians. Eliminate enemies.

Three White Fang dragging a man into the street and stomping him to death. Murderers.

And so it went, until the screen went white and the lights came back on—normal, fluorescent white lights. Jen shook her head, her eyes feeling strangely dry and a headache beginning to throb somewhere near the front of her head. The doors opened and Overseer King marched to the front of the class. “Report to training field 3. Overseer Echo will be your drill instructor. Class dismissed.”
He waited for the students to stand and begin shuffling out, before calling out, “Cadet Arc, a word.”

Jen blinked slowly, rubbing at her eyes and moving to the front of the room. “Sir?”

“The videos are important, Cadet. If you don’t pay attention and learn the material, you’ll be cut from the program. Do you understand?” he asked, and something in his tone cut through the haze that had settled over her mind.

“Yes, sir,” she answered slowly, and he nodded.

“Dismissed, Cadet. Get a move on,” he jerked his head towards the door and she saluted, turned about face, and double-timed it out of the room. As she passed the last desk, she glanced down at the small telescreen system embedded there, and frowned as she caught sight of the small camera built into the system—typically used for video calls. She spent the time during PT focusing and slowly clearing the fog that had settled over her thoughts, finally managing to shake it off just as the first training session ended and they were called to lunch.

She reached the mess hall and got in line, taking the offered tray and finding an empty seat beside the girl and boy she’d sat between during Orientation. The food was bland, and tasted funny. The water had an odd aftertaste that reminded her of the well water back home, but an entirely different flavor—bitter, and just a bit sour. The fuzzy feeling returned and, before she knew it, her scroll was chirping to remind her they had another PT session. She was only vaguely aware of her surroundings as she shuffled back to training field 3. The feeling didn’t go away again that day, and she fell into bed that night dead tired—too tired to complain about the idiot who left the lights on in the barracks. Too tired to be bothered by the faint indigo glow that seemed to saturate everything.

“They were watching to make sure you paid attention,” I surmised, and she nodded. “And he was… what? Trying to keep from wasting a resource?”

“No idea,” Jen shook her head.

“Did you catch the subliminal messaging the first time through?” I asked, and she shot me a confused look.

“The what?”
'Maybe it's not something she realizes she's seen,' I mused. Holding out a hand, I cast a small genjutsu—the first image in the set. “You didn't see that word, there?” I pointed at an area of shadow, where a spot of lighter gray spelled out the word ‘enemy.’

Jen's eyes narrowed as she studied the illusion. “Are you sure that's there? It's kind of fuzzy for me.”

“Yeah. And that's another thing. What was that light?” I asked, and she shook her head. “It looked like some sort of Dust effect. Like the glow Dust puts off when it's in use.”

“Couldn't say,” Jen shrugged. “After a while, I sort of stopped noticing.”

I shook my head. “Right. Keep going.”

“Orientation is over. Congratulations—you're no longer slightly better quality trash. You have earned the right to be called Specialists, First Class. From today forward, the person you were is dead. Your family, your friends, your lovers—you're dead to them, and they are dead to you. You have been given new names. You will be assigned to a team, and they will become your new family, your new friends. Your team will be assigned to an Overseer and a Specialist Third Class. – Multiple classes of Specialist? Based on rank advancement? Skill level? – They will be your new parents, for the duration of your training. Your new names, team assignments, and the names of your immediate superiors are on your scrolls. Read them now,” Overseer King ordered.

Jen opened her scroll, careful to keep her face as blank as everyone around her, despite how much she wanted to tell Overseer King to fuck right off with his 'your family is dead' bullshit. And it absolutely was bullshit! Her family hadn't abandoned her, would not abandon her… but then, did they even know she had been transferred? There were no calls off base—too remote, they said. She dug herself out of her thoughts and speed-read the information on the scroll.

Cadet Identification: Sierra.

Team: SPTR – Specter.

Teammates: Pup, Tango, Romeo.

Leader: Sierra.

Overseer: King.
Jen blinked, blue eyes shifting up to meet Overseer King's briefly before she closed her scroll and waited. A moment later, the heavy metal doors opened and a group of six people entered the room. – Two men, four women. The class is also unbalanced, heavy on the women. Gender disparity is apparently not just a Vale thing. – All were dressed in the same sort of white uniform, depending on gender. Overseers wore black fatigues, Specialists wore Atlas-white uniforms. Jen's eyes passed over them from left to right, wondering which one would be Queen… – That one. White hair in a tight bun, blue eyes, beautifully pale, classic aristocratic beauty. That's a Schnee or I'll eat my hat. It was just too bad that my Semblance didn't tag anyone in Jen's memories and Observe didn't work. It didn't matter much, though. I had my answer when she spoke—it was all there in her tone and bearing, the way she carried herself, as though she expected to be listened to and obeyed.

Jen waited as, one by one, the first five teams were called by name and left the room with their S3C, before finally, Overseer King moved to the last S3C's side. “I am Specialist Third Class Queen. Team Specter will report directly to myself or Overseer King until you are promoted to S3C, whereupon you will be either sent into the field or held a year to train a group of new Specialists into S3Cs—after which, once you are promoted to S4C, you will be permanently reassigned to field work. Today, we will be using Training Room 6, where you will display the current full capabilities of your Semblances and we will determine how to continue your training. If you have not discovered your Semblance, please raise your hand.” No one moved. “Good. Meal time starts in five minutes. Report to Training Room 6 by 1300.” Queen turned to King, raising one fine white eyebrow. “Anything to add, Overseer?”

“Negative, Queenie.” The S3C’s left eye twitching was the only sign – that there was still a person inside her. God damn, this place needs to burn – of her annoyance, while the Overseer's lips quirked up into a faint smirk, before he turned his attention to SPTR. “Dismissed.”

“Did you ever figure out who the Schnee was?” I asked, and Jen nodded.

“Once I got out. No internet access there. Winter Schnee. Daughter to the current owner and head of the Schnee Dust Company and previously the heiress, until about the time she joined the Specialist program—if my math is right. Currently assigned under General James Ironwood,” the blonde rattled off.

“How do you know what her assignment is?” I asked, and Jen's flat look seemed to ask if I were stupid.

“I still have some contacts within Atlas, from before I was made a Specialist. And it doesn't matter
what her current supposed assignment is—I'm the assignment, because I went absent without leave. Anything else is a smoke screen. It's how the program operates. They sent Specter to retrieve me. I killed them. The next they would send would be Queen. If that failed, then they'd send King, with two squads for backup—under normal circumstances, anyway. This isn't exactly SOP though,” she explained.

“You killed them?” I asked, and she nodded. “Why?”

Jen's eyes locked with my own, and I saw there was not an an ounce of regret there. “Because they wouldn't have stopped, unless ordered otherwise. If someone tries to escape, SOP is capture, and if that fails, kill. SOP falls to pieces when one of their rogue Specialists is someone important enough that people would actually care if they went missing. Inside Vale, they can't touch me, unless they think they can make it look like an accident. In fact, they went so far as to provide transcripts and mark me as a graduate—I have an official Hunter's license and everything.”

“In other words, they're trying to make it appear to the outside world as though nothing out of the ordinary has taken place,” I guessed, and she nodded.

“Being an Arc comes with its perks, in Vale. I was able to negotiate all my rotations to be either inside the city or on the outskirts—and always with a team. When I'm not out on rotation, I'm here. As loathe as they are to do anything in Vale for fear of public backlash, they won't dare show up here. Even if our parents aren't home most of the time, the risk of Joan or one of the twins being home at the time keeps them away. I'm good, but the twins are better, and Joan is in a league of her own—she gives our parents a run for their money.”

Meeting her eyes, I shook my head. “And if they grabbed Jun?” I asked. It was one of my biggest fears, and the reason I went to such lengths to separate my identities.

Jen looked away. “If they got the drop on her, there wouldn't be much we could do. If not, though, it'd be a bloodbath.” I raised an eyebrow at that and she asked, “You don't know what our Semblances are, do you?”

“No,” I denied. “Actually, I was going to ask if one of you had some sort of scrying or information gathering Semblance.”

“We don't,” she shook her head. “All of us sisters are along the same lines: energy manipulation of some form. I won't spoil the surprise for you. If you want to know what the others' Semblances are, you're going to have to ask. But to assuage your fears, this is the safest place for both myself and Jun.”
I hummed, nodding eventually. “If you say so. You'd know better than me, on that front. So, you want to try and work through more of this? Or are you tapped out for the night?”

Blue eyes locked with my own and the blonde girl spent a long moment searching them for something, before she nodded. “Please, continue.”

“Okay. Give me a minute, though,” I said, fishing out my scroll and sending Neo and the twins a text. I'd broken the links between us after connecting with Jen, in order to keep anything from accidentally spilling over, but they were still in party so they knew where I was and who I was with.

’Sorry, change of plans. Looks like I'm going to be here all night. I'll explain tomorrow. Think you can bring a Bullhead and pick us up in the morning?’

Not waiting for a reply, I set the scroll on the bed beside me where I could answer it if need be. “Ready?” I asked Jen, and she nodded.

I focused, pulling up more of her memories, and the horror show that was the last two years of Jen’s life resumed.
I closed my eyes and took a long breath, idly fingering the mental ON switch for Gamer's Mind and wondering whether or not I should go ahead and toggle it now. I was pissed. No, that was inaccurate. I was **righteously furious** over what I'd seen. The problem with that was that I had no viable target for that fury and no means of acting on it. I was not so deluded as to think I could take on what amounted to Atlas SpecOps by myself at the moment—not when I couldn't see half the levels of the older hunters around me, and those I **could** see were quite obviously bullshit. For all my skills, spells, and levels I was powerless to do anything about it at the moment—paradoxical and infuriating as that was. That would change with time, but for the moment there was nothing I could do.

It was not a feeling I enjoyed, but it was also not something I was entirely unaccustomed to, either. Life on Earth had been full of little moments of powerlessness. *Difference is, this is Remnant, not Earth. I haven't been truly 'powerless' since I got here. So, I can't do anything about it now, then I'll treat it like any other quest—because that's what this is going to wind up being. Prepare for it, train, level, and only act on it when the time is right.* Because I wasn't the sort to go off half-cocked. That had been my approach to pretty much everything here, so far: expect the worst and prepare for worse than that. Like most gamers, if I knew there was some threat looming on the horizon, I would grind my ass off until I could deal with it. The same thing applied here.

And if there was going to be retaliation then I needed to know how much damage had been done, so I would have a good idea of exactly how hard I should bring the hammer down and where. I fully realized that not everyone in Atlas was 'evil,' in the same way not everyone in Germany had been a Nazi, not everyone in Vietnam had been VC, nor everyone wearing a rag on their head in the middle east was an enemy. I'd prefer to err on the side of caution and assume they *might* be—because I highly doubted that horrible things like suicide bombers dressed as civilians were unique to Earth—but I would rather keep any retaliation limited to those actually responsible and involved. *As satisfying as it would be to turn certain parts of Atlas into a self-lighting, glass parking lot, I don't think Remnant is ready for nukes.*
“What's a nuke?”

I started, my head whipping around to lock eyes with Jen as I realized I'd broadcast that. “Never you mind.” I resisted the urge to facepalm. 'Fuck me sideways with a goddamn rake. At this rate, I might as well just put up a sign. Big, fuck-off neon letters saying 'NOT FROM REMNANT' right across my forehead.'

The blonde raised an eyebrow. “I'm aware of nuclear forces, but the context here implies it's a form of weapon. That you don't feel Remnant is ready for.” She paused for a long moment before asking, “Is there anything you'd like to tell me?”

“No,” I denied. “I would very much like not to tell you. In fact, I'd prefer it if you'd forget I said anything.”

Jen raised an eyebrow. “And yet, you're not making me forget,” she pointed out.

“No, I'm not. It would be a pretty shitty thing for me to do, considering. That doesn't mean I have to answer. There are secrets I'd like to keep…”

“And I'm compromised,” she finished for me, and I shrugged.

“It is a possibility,” I admitted. Trigger words and phrases are a common component of programming. I hadn't run across any yet, but that didn't mean they weren't there. On the other hand, I wanted her to trust me, and not just because if she didn't then she'd be right back to keeping me out of her head, so I had to offer her something. “If I can un-fuck what's been done to you, I'll consider it.”

The girl's head tilted to the side for a moment before she nodded. “Fair enough.”

Thinking on it a moment, I pulled out my scroll and began digging through my contacts. “In the meantime, I don't think I should deal with this by myself.”

“Jaune, please don’t,” she murmured, and I looked up from the scroll and met her eyes. “I don't…” she clammed up, looking away with a quiet breath of irritation. After a couple of false starts, she said, “You're a clean slate. You don't remember me, so you won't judge me. What I did—”
I sat down beside her, pulling the shorter woman into a hug. “Hey. They're not going to judge you.”

“You don't know that,” she pointed out. “Joan and the twins were against any of us going to any school but Beacon. I argued the hardest for it, because between the seven of us, we had enough to go to every Hunter Academy. I thought we could go, learn everything they had to offer, then we'd come back and compare notes. Swap techniques. That way, we'd all be better for it. Jana and Jillian agreed to go through with it. Jana went to Mistral, Jillian went to Vacuo. I went to Atlas—and you saw how that turned out.”

Frowning, I asked, “So let me see if I've got this straight. You're turning down help and support from your siblings because of your pride?”

“Pride? I have no pride left, Jaune. I just don't want to ruin their image of me,” she denied. “It would hurt them. They'd blame themselves for letting me talk them into it.”

“Probably,” I agreed. “That's an older sibling's right, though. Do you have any objections other than that?” I asked, and she shook her head. “Okay, then.” That was all the confirmation I needed to send the twins a text. I knew Joan was still out on deployment, but the twins should be relatively free, since one of them was on leave for the week and the other made her own schedule.

Getting up off the bed, I stretched and popped my back, then frowned as my detection skills pinged. 'What is that?' I wondered for a moment, before realizing what I was sensing—an Aura, distant but powerful, suddenly flaring to life. A moment later, a second joined it. 'How far away is that?' A glance at my map showed no one in the immediate vicinity, so it must be from inside Vale somewhere. Being well outside my range, I decided it wasn't my problem and ignored it.

I had just decided to go raid the Arcs' fridge for food when two new icons appeared on my minimap less than a dozen feet away and a couple of Auras so similar I almost couldn't tell them apart slapped into my like a physical blow as the cracks around the door briefly lit with back-to-back flashes of blue then indigo light. I instinctively reached for my own weapon, the thought spinning through my mind that this was what Jean had meant when she said the first time she'd felt a completely unsuppressed Aura that it had scared the living shit out of her. The two Auras I had sensed what felt like miles away were here.

Jen's bedroom door burst open and the Arc twins burst in, hands on weapons and eyes tracking over the room—and I noticed that the levels over their heads had changed from in the 60s to the infamous 'triple question mark' of my Semblance's equivalent to 'fuck if I know.' I blinked, glancing at my HUD, taking a breath and trying to slow my racing heart while removing my hand from the hilt of my saber. *Fuck me, that Aura is ridiculous. Response time under two minutes—from inside Vale*
city, at least. Didn't hear the door open. Didn't hear footsteps coming up the stairs. They just
appeared. Raw speed or something else? Teleportation maybe?'

“That was quick,” I deadpanned.

Jane and Jean relaxed, their gazes shifting between me and Jen. “You said there was an emergency,”
Jane pointed out, her tone both accusatory and annoyed.

The pitter-patter of little feet sounded from the hallway and I heard Jun ask, “What's going on? You
came in hot. Is everything okay?”

Jane turned to deal with the littlest redhead. “It's fine. Go back to bed, dear.”

I could hear the pout in her voice as the smaller girl grumbled, “Fine,” and padded off back to her
bedroom.

“Be more specific, next time you do that,” Jean sighed, closing the bedroom door before pulling out
Jen's desk chair and dropping down onto it, earning an annoyed look from her twin at being left with
nowhere to sit. Both appeared to take a deep breath before the almost crushing force of two
unsuppressed Auras swiftly tapered back off into the realm of tolerable again. My Semblance did not
re-label them to reflect the new, lower Aura output, however. “Dust, we're going to catch hell for
that.”

“For what?” I asked, shooting the pair a couple of confused looks.

It was Jen who answered, however. “Not one but two high ranked Huntresses going to full combat
readiness at the same time. Everyone in Vale with even a little ability to sense Aura felt that. Grimm
felt that. Patrols are going to be busy for the next week. They'll be getting messages, if not calls,
within the next few minutes to ascertain the situation.”

“Sorry,” I muttered. “Yeah, I'll be more careful in my wording next time.” Taking out my scroll, I
sent a group text to Jim, Angel, Melanie, Miltia, and Neo. 'Grimm threat level around Vale elevated
for the next week or so. Organize patrols and prepare to mobilize what we can muster. And get a
fire lit under the motor pool to get that armor fit for service ASAP, once it gets here. I want at least
one group ready by Monday.'
“So, what's up?” Jane asked, once she'd brought herself down from full combat readiness. She paused, then held up a hand for us to stop. Reaching over to Jen's bookshelf, she selected a particularly hefty paperback and flung it into the door hard enough to rattle it in its frame.

“Eep!” Jun squeaked from the other side of the door.

“Go to bed!” Jane and Jean both yelled, and I heard Jun beat a hasty retreat and slam her door shut.

Shooting a questioning look at Jen, the blonde shrugged, looking away and making a 'go ahead' gesture. “Jen wanted to talk,” I answered. Deciding to forgo heading downstairs, I opened my Inventory and dug out a sandwich. “It's bad. Figured she could use a friendly face.” I smirked, before adding, “I suppose getting the same face twice works.”

“Ha—” Jane began.

“Fucking—” Jean continued.

“Ha,” the pair finished together.

Jen raised an eyebrow before turning her gaze on me. “You enjoy pushing people's buttons, don't you?”

I nodded, swallowing my current bite before answering, “Oh yes.” Gesturing with the sandwich, I asked, “Hungry?” The twins shared a look and a shrug, while Jen shook her head. “Suit yourselves.”

“What have you found out?” Jean asked. A moment later, the twins' scrolls buzzed and they winced. Digging them out, they read the messages there before sending a reply. I waited until they were done before answering.

“A lot. Apparently, Atlas is using their Specialist training program to turn out Hunters loyal to them, and they're backing it up with a healthy dose of indoctrination and brainwashing.” Seeing as it had to be asked, I turned and looked at Jen. “Rape is pretty much a go-to tool in some cases, but it doesn't make sense here—they were trying to instill loyalty, not break you. But I'll ask anyway, did they?”

“No,” Jen denied. “Say what you will about Atlas, but they never resorted to rape. As you said, it would be counterproductive.”
I nodded. “I thought not, but better safe than sorry.”

“You're handling this remarkably well,” Jane pointed out, and I shrugged.

“Can't do anything about it right now. Until I can, I'm making a list. What I do with that list remains to be seen.” Finishing off my sandwich and washing it down, I pulled Jen back into my arms and shifted us on the bed to make room for Jane, earning an annoyed look from Jean as she was left out. “Ready for the highlights reel?” I asked, and the twins nodded. “Jen, if you want to sit this one out…” I trailed off, leaving the offer open. She shook her head. “Okay, then.”

Genjutsu leveled as I cast over the room, replaying what I'd seen, starting with Jen's transfer. The twins sat and watched, occasionally asking me to pause the playback or repeat something as they took it all in. It took a little over an hour to finish showing them what I'd dug out so far. When I had finished, I killed the illusion and waited. Jean stood, pacing slowly with her arms crossed. Jane closed her eyes and dropped back on the bed, letting her legs dangle. The room fell silent for several long minutes, save for the sounds of Jean's footsteps on the hardwood floor and our breathing. Finally, the standing twin asked, “Who was in charge of the Specialist program?”

Jen shrugged. “I have no idea. Command structure was odd. Ostensibly, the Overseers were in charge, and even higher-ranked Specialists deferred to them, but there were no official military ranks. Scuttlebutt I overheard amongst the Overseers points to two people at the top of whatever passes for the Overseer command chain: Alpha and Omega. Most of my interactions were with what passed for teaching or medical staff: King, Ida, Lima, Echo, Tango, Charlie, Delta, Whiskey, and Yoko.”

“Nine instructors?” I asked, and Jen shook her head.

“Eight and one medical.”

“So you can talk about it now?” Jane asked, and Jen tilted one hand side to side in a so-so gesture.

“You know enough that I can, with some things,” she shrugged.

“Can you tell me their positions, what they did? Or am I going to have to dig it out?” I asked the girl in my arms.

“Okay. I'm going to try something new. Close your eyes and focus on what you want to show me,” I told her, and Jen nodded. Focusing on Read Thoughts, I cast Genjutsu at the same time, broadcasting what she wanted to show us into the room. It wasn't pretty.

“Specter, lessons are postponed for today. You are to report to Medical for enhancement,” Queen – Winter – announced to the four-man team seated in the orientation room. “Follow me.”

The group was lead through the halls of the facility into what was labeled as the medical wing. There, Queen left them with a group of four assistants—nurses, orderlies, or something along those lines—and they were shown into four separate rooms. Jen was lead into a clean room and ordered to remove her clothes. The nurse folded her clothes and placed them onto a shelf, before ordering her to seat herself in the only chair in the room—which looked like the bastard love child of a dentist's and a gynecologist's chair. The blonde was strapped down at multiple points on both arms and legs, in addition to straps that went over the torso, waist, neck, and head.

Once she was secured, the chair was tilted back and the arms and legs spread apart some distance from each other—not full extension, but enough to have access to each individually. Due to the nature of the memory, third-person perspective was impossible as we were seeing the world from Jen's eyes, so we didn't get a good look at Whiskey until he stepped over close to the table and looked down at her. The Overseer was of middling height, Caucasian, and looked to be in his mid-60s with salt-and-pepper stubble and hair gone to gray and beginning to thin at the temples. He looked fit, but haggard—like he spent his free time consuming large quantities of his namesake. All together, he reminded me of Dr. McCoy from old episodes of Star Trek, and that image was reinforced when he spoke. Even the accent was similar. “Well, Specialist, I have to warn you, this next part is going to hurt. A lot. And I can't give you anything for it. Normal drugs interact funny with Dust, and Dust-based anesthetic would screw things all to hell and gone, and I need you conscious for this so I can't put you under. In other words, you're shit out of luck on that front. The straps are for your own protection, to keep you from hurting yourself when you begin seizing—and you will. Now, looking at your chart here,” he held out a scroll tablet and regarded it for a moment, “you're an energetic Semblance type. Force-based, right?”

“Yes, sir,” Jen answered.

“Good, good,” he nodded. Turning to his assistant, he ordered, “Class A physical enhancement
“This is going to put you on your ass for about a week. No exercise, no Aura or Semblance use, and eat everything on your plate. If there is any lingering pain or discomfort after a week, if you have trouble using your Aura, or if your Semblance starts acting funny notify your Overseer or S3C immediately and report to me here in Medical.”

“Are you ready?” Whiskey asked, and Jen blinked.

“Yes, sir,” she agreed. Whiskey moved out of sight, and the memory went hazy as the thrashing and screaming started.

“Things like Illusory Disguise, would probably level just as fast. In fact,’ I resisted the urge to smirk, casting the spell and changing something absolutely innocuous, that they weren't likely to notice any time soon, if at all—namely, the color of my boot laces. ‘Let's test that theory.’

Shifting my attention back to Jen, I asked, “So he was in charge of Dust-based enhancements. What sort of enhancements are we talking?”
“Strength, durability, speed, flexibility, reaction times, perception speed, intelligence, Aura—both capacity and control, and so on. There were a lot of changes I noticed, when they were done,” Jen admitted, holding one hand out and studying it. “In addition, each of us was given specific types of Dust that would enhance our Semblances to some degree, depending on what those were. Obviously, not every Semblance is affected to the same extent. I'm an energy manipulation type, so the results were pretty dramatic.”

“Absorbing Dust isn't exactly a new thing, though,” Jean pointed out. “So, what was different?”

“I think I get it,” Jane murmured, drawing our attention. “Normally, you're limited in what Grade of Dust and how much you can absorb, along with how compatible it is both with any other Dust you're using and with your Aura. Too much and you get Dust Toxicity. Conflicting types or conflicting Aura and you either get no reaction or you get horrible reactions—anything from falling over dead, to exploding into flames, to melting from the inside out.”

Jean nodded, making a 'go on' motion with one hand—all old news to them, apparently, but new to me. And another reminder that I needed to study. 'Which means it's for my benefit,' I reasoned.

“That guy said they had groups—at least two we know of, with Class A and Class E. How much you want to bet that Atlas figured out a master list for not only what works, but also how it interacts with certain types of Aura and Semblances. The first part's pretty easy—there are lists on the internet of Dust that works well together, under optimal conditions—”

“Please,” Jean interrupted. “Atlas probably stole it from Mistral. We know Mistral's been doing shit with Dust for years.”

“That's debatable. Atlas has advanced by leaps and bounds in recent years, especially in regards to Dust tech,” Jane pointed out.

Cutting in, I pointed out, “So, they're both exploring different branches? From what you're saying, Mistral has been studying the uses of Dust for years—”

“Centuries,” Jean corrected, and I nodded.

“Okay, centuries. While Atlas has figured out how to integrate it into tech. Stands to reason that if one got their hands on the other's research, they'd take their own approach to making it work for them,” I mused.
“Precisely,” Jane agreed, before adding, “As that seems to be exactly what happened when Mistral started developing their own tech a few years back and making the same kind of leaps Atlas did, in different directions. The second part would require years of deep research into Aura—”

“Which they've done,” I interrupted quietly, my mind turning to Penny—an Atlesian artificial life form with a synthetic Aura. On their questioning looks, I shrugged. “Trust me, they've done their homework on Aura. So, we assume they know how to tell what Dust will be compatible with each person's Aura and they know what Dust works well together. After that, getting the Grade and amount right…”

Jean picked up where I'd left off. “Would be determined by the subject's Aura capacity, body mass, and a few other factors most likely.”

“Precisely,” Jane nodded. “The problem with Dust enhancements like that is that you have to recharge it by ingesting more Dust of the same types—”

Jen shook her head, but her mouth remained closed. Shooting a look to the twins, I asked, “Is there a type of Dust that acts as a universal battery or something?”

The Arc twins shared a look before both shrugged. “Maybe,” Jean answered. “I think it's one of the less common types—maybe synthetic. Some green variant. I don't have a list in front of me. But yeah, something like that would do it. The theory is sound, though. You'd take in one of those and it'd recharge whatever you've already got in you. You'd have to do it before whatever you were using was completely spent, though. Fully spent Dust becomes Dead Dust.” I raised an eyebrow at that and she grinned. “It's in the name. Dead. Useless. Incapable of being recharged or used in anything. It eventually goes brittle and crumbles into dust—powder, that is. But you usually only get Dead Dust from crystals. Ground Dust is spent when you use it—”

“Unless it's in a liquid medium,” I corrected. “It's how you make ink for writing Bounded Fields. Mix ground Dust in water until it gels, then paint it how you want. It dries, leaving behind a layer of shaped crystalline Dust. Even wet, it still registers as one unit instead of separated out.”

“I think we know how it works,” Jane smirked. “We did graduate, you know? I don't use them much day to day, but I still remember more about Bounded Fields from watching and listening to Sanguine work than most people working in the field.”

“Bite me,” I grumbled. “Anyway, stands to reason that Dust in the bloodstream—or bones, and other
places depending on how invasive they went—"

“Very,” Jen ground out in my arms.

I nodded. “Yeah. Then it stands to reason that you could recharge it all in one go by absorbing something like that.” Looking away from the girls, I frowned. “As horrible as what they were doing is, it’s proven to work.” Looking up, I met their eyes. “I want that information. I want to know what Dust they used, in what amounts, and how they determined what would work. How long do the improvements last?”

Jen hummed, thinking a moment before answering, “Depending on use, between three to six months. You can only recharge it so many times before it goes dead. After that, you have to let it pass from your body naturally.”

“Okay,” I nodded. “Three months worth of super-soldier level buffs. What's the downtime between flushing it out and being able to replace it? Does it prevent you from using other Dust? Does it lessen the overall improvement from other Dust sources if they're the same type and stack?”

“Weeks, sometimes a month or more, depending on the Grade, types, amount used, and the person's Aura. I was usually able to get my refills within three weeks,” Jen admitted. “It does prevent you from using certain types of Dust internally, but most of the medical-grade stuff is safe. There's a specific list of things that isn't safe, depending on which set of enhancements you were given. It will work with external Dust use—things like Dustcasters—and the improvements stack. If I were to use a Dustcaster with my Semblance, with the Semblance-enhancing Dust inside me, the effect would be increased by a good deal. I’m unsure how much.”

“And what's the process for refilling that? Do they install subcutaneous ducts or something? Reservoirs?” I asked, and the blonde shook her head.

It was Jean who supplied the missing tidbit I needed to put it together. “You can put stuff like that in someone's body, but Aura trying to heal it will likely cook off the Dust inside it. In other words, you'd go boom.”

Frowning, I asked, “So, you have to go through the whole process again every time?”

Jen nodded. “You never really get used to it, either.”
Sighing, I ran a hand through my hair. “In your opinion, is it worth it?”

“Short term, knowing you had a major op coming up? Absolutely,” the blonde in my arms agreed. “Long term? No.”

With a quiet groan, I nodded. “Okay, then. I'll keep it in reserve. Still need-to-know information as it's too useful not to have, but not a priority. I'll do better by leveling and raising my skills. If this works like you say it does, essentially like a buff, then the process will work better if applied to larger base numbers anyway.”

“You'd have to infiltrate Atlas for that, anyway,” Jean pointed out, and I shrugged.

“Been there, done that, got the tee-shirt,” I smirked.

Jane raised an eyebrow. “Then you'd have to track down the facility.”

I nodded. “We know Jen's route out of Atlas, don't we?”

The girl in my arms nodded, before adding, “Then you'd just have to slip into an Atlas black facility full of the best Atlas has to offer as far as Hunters goes, hack into their secure servers, steal the files, and get out again—all without getting caught. Or affected by whatever mental type Dust they're using.”

Humming for a moment, I finally chuckled. “So, nothing I haven't done before, then.” Glancing at my HUD clock, I thought it over and brought up my map, doing some mental math. “With travel time, I could be in and out in a week at most.” I was exaggerating a bit, however—after all, as far as I knew, there hadn't been any Hunters at Penny's black site. No, any risk of direct combat at my current level with people who were, on average, Jen's or the Arc twins' level was to be avoided.

The twins and Jen exchanged looks, before Jean pointed out, “Jaune, Beacon starts Monday. You don't have a week. And even if you did, it's way too dangerous.”

“Maybe not,” Jane frowned. “If it's like that facility where they had Penny, he could do it. However,” she looked to her twin and smirked, “We'd want to go with. And I'm sure Joan would, too. In fact, we could make it a family trip. That place needs to be razed to the ground—”
“Absolutely not,” I deadpanned. Seeing them turn frowns and questioning looks on me, I shook my head. “That is not how we're going to do this. If, and I do mean if, we decide retaliation is called for, then it's going to be a surgical strike—not a goddamn carpet bombing. I'd do better alone, for this. I can get in, work my way up the chain of command, and cut the head off the snake. Minimal loss of life involved—just those who deserve to go. And it's obviously not going to be now. I'm not going off half-cocked on this. If I go in, I want to go armed with as much information as I can so I know where to start looking, who gets the sword first, and who gets spared until they can un-fuck the people they've mind-fucked. There's no point doing it if it's going to cripple Atlas, either. They're valuable, and even I can't exactly wage a war on a nation yet. No, this is probably some black op that only a few key higher-ups are even aware of. Probably run almost completely in the black, in fact—meaning the rank and file Atlas personnel are unaware of it. So, no, until the time is right we do nothing except gather information. Do I make myself clear?”

The twins sat staring at me, and I blinked as I took in certain details—flushed faces, dilated pupils, increased breathing. In my arms, Jen had gone still and rigid, and I could feel her heart-rate had increased. I wondered, for a moment, what was wrong until I realized what it was I'd done and I nearly facepalmed hard enough to deal myself damage. 'Right. Not only did I use my 'command' voice, I backed it up with Charisma and Intent as an attention getter. Fuck sake, I need to stop doing that. It's becoming reflexive.'

Jane was the first to shake it off, shaking her head and taking a deep breath. “Would you stop doing that? Goddamnit Jaune, I just got over it.”

“That shit is not fair,” Jean grumbled, shaking off the effect next. “If you're not going to push me down after, could you stop blue balling me?”

Jen relaxed in my arms, stretching languidly and shifting in my lap as she got comfortable again. “Ignore them. I enjoy it. Don't stop,” she murmured, and I picked up what almost sounded like a purr in her voice as she did. Tilting her head enough to look me in the eye, she asked, “And when did you get so self-confident? And…”

“Commanding,” Jean supplied.

Jane nodded. “Intense.”

I shrugged. “Does it matter?” I asked, and they shared a long look before apparently deciding that it either didn't, or they would wait on an answer. “That aside, I'm still expecting an answer,” I pointed out, once more using the 'Admiral' voice, but without the Charisma-plus-Intent slap.
“Fine,” the twins sighed in sync, and Jen nodded in my arms. “It's not like this is a family thing or anything,” Jean continued, in a tone that implied the exact opposite of what she'd said.

“Or that we're all angry at what's been done and deserve a chance to go after the people responsible,” Jane added, in the same tone.

“I said no,” I growled. Sighing, I ran a hand through my hair and turned an annoyed look on the twins, who looked mildly shocked—apparently, they were unused to Jaune standing up to them. “I will consider it. After we get the information we need. Until then, we continue as normal.”

Looking at Jen, Jean shook her head. “Not quite as normal. She shouldn't be out doing patrols, even with a team. Also, being here alone with no one but Jun is a bad idea.”

Jane hummed, green eyes meeting mine for a moment before she suggested, “Medical discharge. Section 8.”

“I am not incompetent,” Jen growled, and I tightened my hold on her momentarily to settle her down.

“Actually, at the moment, you technically qualify,” I countered quietly. “And even if you didn't, having you officially Section 8 on paper would be useful.”

Jen shook her head violently. “No. I'm not a goddamn leach on society. I'll work to earn my keep.”

Jane rolled her eyes. “I'm Section 8 and I have a job.” After a pause, she added, “Admittedly, a moderately illegal job, but still…”

“Actually, I have a better idea,” I smirked. “It would put you somewhere safe, where I can keep an eye on you and where we could have these little sessions fairly frequently. It'd be a job in a Hunter-related field and you'd be making money—legally,” I added, just to rub Jane's nose in it, and earned a tongue stuck out for my effort.

“What sort of job?” Jean asked, raising an eyebrow. “Since when do you have those sorts of connections?”
Looking from one twin to the other, I asked, “What have you heard about the new group in town?”


“I might know some people who know some people,” I answered evasively, a hint of an amused smile on my lips that I tried to smother as I fed them just enough information to make them curious.

“Cut the bullshit and tell us, Jaune,” Jean demanded.

“Spoil all my fun,” I rolled my eyes. Holding out a hand, I conjured up a Fox mask and tossed it to Jean.

The twins looked over the mask for a long moment before Jean shook her head. “Bullshit.”

Jane, on the other hand, crossed her arms and studied me. “Really? You're the Fox? So, you've got one instance of yourself running around doing work for her, while the other is building up a military force? Why? Also, how? I saw the fight between you and... yourself, I suppose. How the hell did that work? And what about going to Beacon?”

“To protect Vale. Mostly from Cinder, actually. The fight was staged, with the help of some friends. And I'm still going to Beacon. The potential gain is too great not to,” I admitted.

The twins turned and shot each other a look. “Our brother is...” Jean began.

Jane finished with, “Kind of scary, actually. What the fuck, Jaune? You go from nothing, to being some punk thief, to controlling what's quickly shaping up to an independent military. How?”

“My Semblance, mostly,” I shrugged. A soft snore from the vicinity of my chest drew my attention and I looked down. “How long has she been out?”

“A few minutes,” Jane admitted. Standing from the bed, she began pulling back the covers. “Come on, let's get her to bed.” Yawning, she shook her head. “I could use some sleep myself. You texted at the end of a job. I've been out all night.”

Shifting Jen, I arranged her on the bed and moved to pull away. The girl's arms locked around my neck and squeezed, and I found myself drawn down against her chest. “Don't go.”
“Thought you were asleep,” I got out, muffled from between her breasts.

“I was, until someone moved me,” she yawned. “I haven't fallen asleep that fast in years. Can you stay?”

I shot a look at the twins, who grinned. Jean moved over and hit the light, closing the bedroom door while Jane began stripping. “You two are no help.”

“Come on, it'll be fun,” Jane laughed. “It’s just sleep.”

“Pfft. Says you,” Jean countered. “I want a little more than 'just sleep.””

“Too bad,” the other twin shook her head.

“I don't think you get a say in it,” Jean bickered back, kicking off her boots and shimmying out of her pants.

I rolled my eyes. Deciding the battle was already lost, I began un-equipping clothes, leaving my boxers behind. At the same time, I dropped the illusion over my boot laces—as I'd hoped, Illusory Disguise had leveled several times in the background over the time I'd had it leveled, going from 14 to 20 over the course of half an hour. I made a mental note to try repeating the trick in the future. “Fine. I'll stick around. But no hanky-panky.”

“Wha—? Why?” Jean asked, and I turned an amused look on her.

“Well, because one of you begged me to turn her down no matter what she said, and I have no way of telling which of you is which,” I lied. I was pretty sure I'd told them I could see names, but I was also pretty confident they wouldn't be thinking about the finer details of my Semblance at the moment.

Jean turned a burning gaze on her twin, who winced. “You cockblock,” the girl growled. Shifting her gaze to me, she asked, “Come on, Jaune. Help a girl out here.”

“Sorry, Jane, no can do,” I denied, a smirk twitching at the corner of my lips.
“Arg!” the redhead loosed a quiet half-yell of frustration. “You ass.”

“You get used to that,” I shrugged, slipping into bed beside the only other blonde there. “Are you coming or not?”

“Obviously not,” Jane sniped, drawing another glare from her twin.

“I will end you. You may have come into this world first, but I will surely see you leave it first,” the redhead threatened, slipping in behind me.

Jane made to open her mouth to retort and I shook my head. “Girls, that’s enough.”

“Yes, daddy,” they synced.

I shuddered as my brain went straight to the connotations there—namely, them equating me to our father. Of course, there was also the whole ‘daddy complex’ thing. And my own inevitable fate of producing offspring myself—not that I didn't want to, just not now. “Don't ever say that again.”

“Or you'll spank us?” Jean teased.

I sighed, hitting them both with Silence before they could say any more. “No, I'll do that. Good night.”

My eyes opened and rolled around in my head for a moment before the room swam into focus, the last vestiges of a bad dream fading with my return to the waking world. An unfamiliar scent caught my attention and I looked down, at the same time the small, curvy form in my arms shifted. Finding myself looking at the top of a blonde head of hair, I blinked as several details registered. Firstly, I wasn't holding anyone I slept with regularly—neither Neo, Melanie, Miltia, or even Joan, though the shade was nearly identical on that last one. Secondly, there was a warm form pressed up against my back and a hand down my boxers, holding my manhood but otherwise not moving. Thirdly, I was wearing clothes. I never wore clothes to bed—too constricting. A look away from the blonde against my chest showed a redhead molded to the blonde's back and a glance backwards over my shoulder showed a second redhead behind me, who proved to be the source of the wandering hand.

It took a minute, but the events of the previous night came back and I resisted the urge to groan as I
took in my situation. Jen was wrapped in my arms, her face buried in my chest, while the Arc twins were spooning the two of us—Jean behind me and Jane behind Jen. All of us were clothed, though I was down to a pair of boxers. Yawning, I shifted my focus to the familiar text of an update notification on my HUD.

The system has been updated! Would you like to view the Change Log?

Change Log : The Gamer Semblance v. 1.7.2

1. Implemented **Guild Leveling** system. 1% of all EXP gained by Guild members now goes towards leveling the Guild. For more details, check the Journal.

2. Implemented **Guild Perks**. Check the Guild section for a list of available perks, or the Journal for details on Guild advancement through the various perks trees.

3. Implemented **Vehicle Customization**. Vehicles being customized will be unavailable for the duration it takes to make the selected customizations. Guild vehicles may be customized through the Guild Equipment menu. Personal vehicles may be customized from the Mounts tab of the Character menu.

4. Fixed issue with skill evolution. Skills now evolve properly every 25 levels, instead of at level 30 for the first evolution. All skills between 25 and 29 have been advanced accordingly.

'Well, that thing about skills is good to know. I'll have to see what changed later.' Humming in thought, I closed the message, only for another to pop up after it.

Your guild Fox Hunt has reached level 2! You have gained 1 perk point.

'Nifty,' I mused, digging through my menus to the relevant section. There were three trees of perks and I could only see the first two tiers of each for the moment. The first tree was named Semblance Growth, with the first tier perk of Invisible Drops, and the second tier perks of Auto-Deposit and Auto-Loot. The second tree was named Guild Growth, with the first tier perk of Experience Boost 1, and the second tier perks listed as Reputation Boost 1 and Loyalty Boost 1. Tree three turned out to be listed as Economic Growth, the first perk being Increased Lien 1, and the second tier being Increased Item Drop Rate 1 and Increased Materials Drop Rate 1.
Everything I could see in the second and third tree seemed fairly self-explanatory, while a check of the first cleared up some questions. ‘So, Invisible Drops means that all drops—money, mats, items, and so forth—generated by my Semblance are invisible to anyone either not in the guild, not in party, or who hasn’t been in party before. Auto-Loot and Auto-Deposit seem like they should have been rolled into one skill, though. Useful, don’t get me wrong, but splitting them up seems like a choice designed to needlessly waste perk points. Question is, would having items and money automagically moved into the guild’s vaults, or a party member’s inventory, be worth more than getting more rep, loyalty, items, or mats? Or do I even have to choose?’

Opening up my Journal, I looked over the section on Guild perks and resisted the urge to curse out loud. My first instinct had been right—the entire system was set up specifically for the purpose of forcing me to choose one option over the other—without giving me the ability to either get them all or go back and change my decision. Once I picked the default number of skills in a tier of the skill tree, the others would be locked. Choosing one Tier 1 perk would lock the rest. Choosing two Tier 2 perks from any two trees would leave the rest of the Tier 2 perks unavailable, and I could guess the exact same would happen in later tiers. Also, some later skills had prerequisites—meaning I’d have to pick the skills leading up to them to get the higher-tiered versions. For instance, if I didn’t pick Experience Boost 1, I couldn’t get Experience Boost 2—the option would only be for the lowest available. Likewise, some later skills would require picking a combination of earlier skills in order to unlock them, or a certain number of skills picked in certain trees to unlock—and without the ability to see what those skills were, or their prerequisites, there was little chance of me picking the right skills on the first try.

‘No, stop,’ I stilled, drawing an annoyed breath. ‘This is exactly what this update is meant to do—butt-frustrate me and try to attack my morale either through indecision or regret over the choices. Fuck that. There’s a reason I hated games like that—they’re made specifically to fuck with completionists. Don’t play that game. Instead focus on what I need. So, what do I need?’

Looking over the short list of available choices, I frowned. ‘In most normal games, you would pick the choice for more experience. More XP means faster leveling. However, this isn’t a game. I’m going to Beacon soon, and Ozpin has cameras all over the fucking place. Not to mention, if I ever work with a team not in the know, they’d start asking questions the moment money and items started dropping from Grimm. No, the most useful is going to be Invisible Drops. I can always kill more Grimm for more lien or experience.’

My decision made, I selected the perk and confirmed my choice. As soon as I did, the other two options for the first tier of perks grayed out. Looking at the second tier, I tried to prioritize there as well. ‘I’ve got two choices here. None of those are as practical as Invisible Drops, so I can pretty much pick whatever when the time comes. Increased Reputation is too useful a skill not to have—that sort of thing tends to lead to more choices later. People are nicer, you get discounts on purchases, you get access to better quests and jobs as the citizenry comes to rely on you. Yeah, that’s in the ‘need to have’ category. Other than that, I’d say Auto-Loot is probably the most valuable. Having high-value items automagically moved to either the guild vault if they’re dropped for guild members or into others’ inventories if they’re dropped by party members would mean there’d be no
chance of either missing something or of one of the less trustworthy guild members trying to make
off with something. Loyalty would stop that in the long run, but the immediate gain is too great to
ignore. More items and mats would be great, but I'd be right back to worrying about them being
stolen or left behind. Annoyingly enough, those perks would be perfect, if paired with the Auto-
perks.'

Shaking my head in frustration, I pushed the thought from my mind and stretched. The form of the
woman snuggled against my back shifted, drawing my attention back to the present as a slender,
smooth, feminine hand examined its surroundings. After a moment, the redhead behind me went stiff
and I closed my eyes, carefully blanking my face and resisting the urge to laugh. The hand slowly,
carefully extricated itself from my boxers and I felt her shift away, sitting up. I felt the presence of her
arm reach over me and the redhead on the other side of Jen shifted, snored quietly, then whined as
she came awake.

“What?” Jane groaned. “I'm comfortable.”

“Come on, we need to talk,” Jean whispered, slipping carefully out of the bed, followed a moment
later by her sister.

Focusing on my enhanced hearing, I activated Listen as they moved into the hallway for a whispered
conversation. “What do you think?” asked one. *Probably Jean. She sounds less grumpy about being
awake.*

“About what?” Jane sighed, and I heard the sound of her leaning against the wall beside the door.

“Is leting him put her in that group of his a good idea?”

There was a short pause before Jane answered. “Fuck if I know. What I do know is that Jaune cares
for us.” She trailed off for a moment before quietly adding, “More than he has since he was little,
anyway. He won't let anything happen to her. She'll be safe with him.”

“How do you know?” Jean asked, and I heard the frustration and doubt in her voice. “He's only
recently even unlocked his Aura—”

“And now he can do shit that frankly scares me, if it were anyone else doing it,” Jane countered.
“He's determined. Driven. He's stronger every time I see him. You haven't seen him fight.”
“I have, actually.” I could hear the amusement in Jean's voice, as she added, “Against Jun.”

Jane snorted softly. “Then he was playing with her. I've seen what he gets up to lately, with those other kids. And you'd be surprised exactly how hard it is to sneak up on him, any more. He's almost caught me watching, more than once.”

“How close are we talking?”

Jane's amusement was audible as she answered, “I've started setting up a camera connected to my scroll, recently. I've got a few recordings, if you want to see. I usually set it a mile out, with a telephoto lens. Otherwise, well, his Semblance can track people in the vicinity.”

I frowned at that. 'So how are you getting in and out without me noticing? A mile sounds about right for the threshold between minimap detection at its furthest zoom level and full map, so it's entirely possible she's been skirting the edge and I've missed it. Could be she's at least part of what's been setting off my detection skills, but without knowing what her Semblance is I can't say for sure.'

What I'd seen last night came to mind and I hummed softly. The twins had both been across town when I'd sent them a message. They had crossed that distance in under two minutes. Their Auras had just appeared in the Arc home—specifically, on the second floor, within a few steps of Jen's room. I had felt them immediately, with none of the buildup that would have come with crossing the distance physically. They can teleport or something, I surmised. 'It's the only thing that makes sense with the range, time, and other factors involved. And it explains how Jane could have been keeping an eye on me without me noticing. How's that work though, with Jen saying the sisters all had some form of energy manipulation? Well, I suppose 'teleportation' could be classified as a type of energy manipulation, depending on the mechanics involved. Could explain the flashes of light I saw last night.'

“So, what are you saying?” Jean asked.

“I'm saying he's good, and getting better by the day. She'll be safer with him than she will be here. We can't be here all the time. At least with Jaune, she'll be surrounded by armed men looking to kill anyone or anything trying to get to her.” Sighing, Jane softly added, “I don't think Atlas will try anything, otherwise they would have by now, but I won't put it past them. On our end, it'll be better to make it that much more difficult for them.”

“And what about Jun? She can't stay here by herself and we can't all get medically discharged and land cushy jobs that let us stay home.” There was a bit of annoyance in the other twin's voice—understandable, considering Jane had kept her change in situation to herself.
“Let her stay with Jen. Wait, before you say anything, hear me out. We'll talk to Jaune about it, go see this place and see if it's suitable for her, and if it's not then it's not happening. If it is, though, then there's no reason not to.”

Jean—at least, I assume it was Jean—loosed a loud sigh. “Fine. We'll go see this place and decide. Come on, let's go wake up those two, then get Jun up and get her to school. I know Jaune was faking it when we left—probably hates getting out of bed any sooner than absolutely necessary.”

Jane laughed, softly. “So was Jen. It's kind of sad, but this is the best I've seen her since she got back. She looked happy.”

Raising an eyebrow, I opened my eyes and glanced down, finding a pair of blue eyes that mirrored my own looking back up at me. “Morning.”

“Are they saying anything interesting?” Jen asked, and I rolled my eyes.

“Not really,” I denied. “Come on, let's get up and start getting ready.”

The door opened and the twins made their way inside, looking mildly disappointed that we were already in the process of getting out of bed. “The girls should be here soon with transport,” I told them, already making my way towards the shower. “Also, dibs on first shower.”

“So, want someone to wash your back?” Jean asked, sending me a hopeful look.

I smirked, idly grabbing the book that had never been picked up the previous night and placing it back on the shelf it'd come from with Telekinesis. “I think I'll manage.”

“Damnit,” Jean sighed.

“'The girls?'” Jen asked, shooting a glance at the twins as I quickly made my way down the hall.

“Jaune's girlfriends,” one of the twins answered.
“Oh?” Jen hummed, and I could hear the interest in her tone. “Do tell.”

I was only partly into my shower when I heard the stomping of little feet approaching the bathroom door. The handle rattled and I smirked as a quiet curse drifted in from the other side of the door. ‘That's right. Unlike some people, I lock the goddamn door.’

An instant later, I winced as a tiny fist pounded on the door from the outside, sounding like a sledgehammer to my enhanced hearing. ‘Onii-chan!’

“What?” I yelled back, wondering what I'd done to upset her enough to yell at me.

“How could you sleep with our sisters when you don't even have the decency to sleep with sempai?!”

I blinked twice before leaning my head against the wall of the shower and groaning. “Because Ruby doesn't sleep over!” I called back. It wouldn't help my case any if she knew I shared bed space with Miltia, Melanie, and Neo on a regular basis. I had to assume that, even as precocious as she was, she meant sleep in the classical sense as opposed to as a euphemism for sex. At least I hoped it wasn’t a euphemism, otherwise we were having two entirely different conversations. ‘God, I hope she just means sleep.’ I frowned as something niggled at my memory, then had to resist the urge to thump my head against the wall. ‘No, there's a good chance she doesn't. This is the girl who reads Visual Novels and plays her sister's eroge. Fuck.’

“Oh,” she muttered. Not to be dissuaded, she quickly yelled back, “Well, you should invite her to!”

“Stop worrying about my personal life and mind your own. And don't you have school?”

“I don't want to go. Someone woke me up last night!” she retorted.

‘Right. That's it,’ I silently growled. “Young lady, you will go to school or so help me…” I left the threat hanging.

“But… but,” the girl spluttered. “Fine!” she yelled, storming off back towards her room. “Onee-chan! Onii-chan is being a meanie!”

I palmed my face, unsure whether to feel amused or incredulous. “She told on me. The little brat
actually narced on me.” Well, at least she was acting her age for once. Shrugging it off, I went back to my shower—or would have, had someone not tried the bathroom knob.

“What now?” I groaned.

“Hurry up, Jaune. You don't have time to fap,” one of the twins called.

“I swear,” I growled, “I am going to kill someone before the morning is over.”

I sat in what passed as a waiting room in Fox Hunt's on-site clinic. Apparently, one of the first things the Head of Medical we'd hired had done was bring in a psychiatrist who specialized in dealing with soldiers and Hunters who, like many of my new staff, was also ex-military—because apparently PTSD and burnout are pretty common issues in our chosen field. Go figure. On that front, I was pleased—seeing that this thing I was building was becoming self-sufficient and could take care of its own left me with a good feeling. 'But the waiting,' I nearly groaned, leaning back in my chair.

I was currently the only one of our group here, and that was mostly because someone needed to be here when Jen got out. The Arc twins were currently touring the barracks with Neo and the Malachite twins, along with Penny, while Blake had gone out as soon as we'd told her training was canceled for the morning—saying there was a new shipment coming into Tukson's that she wanted first crack at. 'Mm, double twins plus Neo. Now there's a mental image I won't be forgetting any time soon.'

That's not to say that Medical was empty. No, the entire base was a hive of activity at the moment. Apparently, when I instructed Neo, Melanie, and Miltia about the elevated Grimm threat, they had put the whole base on alert and people were scrambling to get ready—either to be sent out to kill them, or in the case of the Medical department, receive wounded. When we'd come in, they had currently been refueling and rearming our aircraft and making emergency maintenance to the few LAVs we'd received so far.

My HUD pinged a text message alert, pulling me from my thoughts, and I dug out my scroll to read and reply to it. ‘Are you sure you can't make it?’ Ruby must have either just gotten my message or had taken her time in replying. Maybe she was still feeling a bit put out about the night before last. I couldn't say I blamed her if she was.
I quickly typed out a reply and hit send. *Yeah, some stuff came up with one of my sisters last night. Details later, maybe.*

'Okay.'

I sighed. I hated text for shit like this, where I couldn't judge tone. Selecting her contact info, I hit the 'dial' button and waited, bringing the scroll up to my mask. The line picked up and we were both silent for a moment, before I rolled my eyes. “Hey.”

“Uhh… hey,” the little reaper answered weakly.

“God I suck at this shit,” I sighed. “Look, are you still upset over the thing with Yang and Neo?”

Ruby's sigh echoed my own, as she seemed to open up now that I'd broached the subject. “I am… a little annoyed. I mean, I get it—I do. It's kind of Neo's thing, and she loves doing it so it wouldn't feel right telling her off for it, but seeing it…”

“I know,” I agreed. “You thought you saw one thing and it turned out to be another, so it kind of jerked you around a bit.”

“But what really upsets me is I was so hurt, and angry, and… and jealous,” the scroll creaked, and I realized she was nearly crushing hers in her grip. “I know I don't really have a right to be. We're just friends. And it's confusing.”

I chuckled quietly, drawing a frustrated sound from her in response. “Welcome to the wonderful world of adulthood. It doesn't get any easier from here.”

“Pfft right,” she drawled, dragging the word out. “You make it look easy.”

“It's really not,” I denied. “Case in point. I have no idea how to deal with upset or crying women, other than what I'm already doing. Well, no,” I added, “I take that back. I do, but that's not exactly applicable to the situation.”

Ruby snorted softly. “You're doing pretty well, so far,” she murmured. “Thank you, Jaune. For…“
for being you.”

I raised an eyebrow at that. Before I could say anything, a voice called in the background on Ruby’s end, drawing my attention, though I didn’t quite make out what it said. “What was that?”

“Uncle Qrow. He yelled something about going out and took off in a hurry.” I could hear the shrug in her tone. “So, uh,” she cleared her throat, clearly trying to move away from the embarrassing emotional stuff, “we’re still training tomorrow?”

“Yeah, barring shit coming up last minute. I don’t have any other plans for tomorrow, anyway. Did you figure out water walking?” I asked, a grin twitching at my lips.

“No,” she grumbled. “Not yet. I guess I can go work on that today.”

“You should teach Yang. I know she knows a couple of things that you don’t, too. Sharing will work better for you, in this instance,” I pointed out.

“It will, huh?” Ruby asked. Hearing the laughter in her tone, I wondered if I’d missed something. “I’ll talk to her.” She sighed and I heard the phone shift as she moved around. “I should probably go do that. No rest for the weary or however that goes.”

“You’re too young for that sort of sentiment,” I rolled my eyes. I remembered getting up with creaking joints and all the little pains of age catching up to me.

There was the distinctive sound of a raspberry being blown from the other end of the scroll before Ruby said, “By the way, dad wanted us around for the next few days to spend time with us before Beacon starts. I think he’s jealous we spend more time with you recently than with him,” she chuckled. “So, yeah, we’re not really going to be able to do anything this weekend. He said he wants a three day weekend with us.”

‘When is that?’ I wondered, having actually lost track of the days. Checking my HUD, I saw it was a Thursday—the last Thursday before Beacon was scheduled to start, this coming Monday, in fact. ‘Damn. Time flies when you’re busy as fuck,’ I mused. “Ruby, it’s fine. You should spend all the time with your dad that you can. There’ll be plenty of time for training later.”

There was a short pause, before she quietly said, “Thanks for understanding.”
“No problem,” I smiled. “I'll let you go. Have fun with Yang and your dad.”

“I will,” she agreed. “I hope your sister's okay.”

“She's not. But she will be, hopefully. And if not, I'll be there for her. Talk to you later.”

We finished exchanging goodbyes and I tucked the scroll into my side pouch. “That was sweet.”

I blinked, looking up to see Jen standing in front of me, blue eyes regarding me coolly. “You snuck up on me.”

Those blue eyes rolled and she crossed her arms. “You weren't exactly paying attention to your surroundings. So, who is she?”


One of Jen's eyebrows ticked up towards her hair line. “The same Ruby Rose whom Jun wants you to 'sleep' with, but who doesn't stay over?”

I facepalmed. “Heard that, huh?”

Jen snorted softly. “You could have heard it from outside.” After a moment, she added, “I've never met her, but I know of her. Jun talked about her 'sempai' a lot, when she started school.” A smile twitched at the corners of her lips and she asked, “So, why doesn't she stay over?”

“Too young,” I denied.

“How old is 'old enough?'” Jen asked, and I shrugged.

I honestly wanted to answer 'twenty,’ but that wouldn't fly and I'd be a hypocrite besides, considering the Malachite twins. 'Half your age plus seven' also wouldn't work, because that number was up for debate. My best answer was, “Whatever is socially accepted as 'legal,' I suppose.”
The blonde hummed in thought for a moment. “You do realize that age of consent differs between Hunters and Huntresses and the civilians, right? Once someone starts Beacon and is accepted onto a Hunter team, they are considered an adult for all legal purposes. It doesn't matter if they're twenty or twelve, by law they're 'adults.'”

“That doesn't make diddling a twelve year old right,” I deadpanned.

Jen shrugged. “I didn’t say it did. I was pointing out that your argument is flawed and you're likely going to need to take this one on a case by case basis.”

Sighing, I silently admitted that she was probably right. Still, that didn't mean I had to acknowledge it. So, in the spirit of all men losing an argument, I decided to change the topic. Pushing up out of my seat, I asked, “How did it go?”

“She's going to put in a few calls and get me put on medical leave for now. Then there will be a few weeks of sessions, after which, I'll probably be declared Section 8,” Jen shrugged.

Nodding, I hit the button for the elevator and waited. “So, what do you say to working for me?”

Jen turned to observe me, taking in my current outfit—white cloak with Fox Hunt and White Fox patches, black pants and boots, red under shirt and light chest armor over that, along with the red neck gaiter and Fox mask. “Doing what?” she finally asked.

“Actually, I think I have something in mind,” I murmured as the elevator opened and we stepped inside. “I need a public face from Vale. The twins and Joan are out, because they don't have the time with their jobs—though, I suppose Jane could…” I shrugged. “And the younger girls are still in school. You, on the other hand. You are a Vale native, a 'graduate' of Atlas, and an Arc. Having you as my local liaison or something similar to the Kingdom of Vale would go a long way towards smoothing things over and pretty much be a public relations coup for us.”

“I reiterate: what would I be doing?” Jen asked.

“You'd be my, I guess you could say, honor guard or escort. One part security, one part personal assistant. Anywhere I go officially, you go as well. Likewise with Neo or the Malachite twins.”

Jen blinked, before she raised one fine blonde eyebrow. “So, stand there and look pretty?”
My lips twitched into a grin and I turned enough to visibly trail my eyes over her from head to toe. “You do pull it off rather well.”

“Flirt,” she accused, and I nodded.

“Shameless,” I agreed. “Other than that, pretty much whatever comes up. Not sure what that'll be yet. What do you think?”

Humming, she asked, “You said I could bring Jun here when the others aren't looking after her?”

“Yeah. Though, that's only if you're actually working here. I could arrange it as part of your signing bonus. Bring you in as an officer and stick you in our own part of the barracks.” If she agreed, I'd talk to Jim and see if we could get some sort of surveillance going for Jun's school. Something low key that wouldn't stand out, but which would allow us to spot trouble. Hidden cameras watching the place, for instance.

The elevator dinged and we stepped out, walking the short distance to the sally port, where I showed my ID while Jen showed her guest pass. We were cleared and I tapped my code into the door lock and we passed through the doors and into my part of the building. “I'll consider it.”

“You get a sexy uniform,” I tempted. “Speaking of which,” I muttered, looking at my minimap and leading us towards the others. “Going to need a color change. Black and white isn't going to work, after last night.”

“I don't think that'd go over well, no,” Jen agreed.

“What's that?” Melanie asked, as we found the others.

Pulling off my mask, I slipped it into my side pouch. “I was just trying to tempt Jen to join, once she gets medically discharged. I was telling her we'd need to change the uniform colors, after what I saw last night. Any resemblance to Atlas would make the wrong impression.”

The Malachite twins shared a look with Neo. “Well,” Miltia smiled, “Good thing we had more than one color scheme made for the first batch, just in case the black and white uniforms didn't go over
well. We've got charcoal gray,” I shook my head, “dark red,” I made a so-so gesture with one hand, “and a sort of brownish gold.”

“Dark brown or tan,” Neo corrected. “I didn't really like it, but I didn't hate it. It's got black and silver as the main highlights.”

I frowned, something about that color scheme stirring my memory. After a moment, I had to resist the urge to laugh. 'Oh, wow. They made what sounds like Wehrmacht uniforms. At least the same general color scheme. I am not sure whether that is horrible or great. On the one hand, Atlas dresses like Stormtroopers, who are Lucas' Nazi stand-ins. On the other, the most infamous color scheme in Earth history—actual Nazis. Actually, come to think of it, wasn't gray also one of those colors, and the Germans had like a dozen different variations in green, black, and so on and the brown one somehow became the image most associated with the Third Reich? Well, it's not like anyone here is going to care—no actual Nazis in Remnant… to my knowledge, which is admittedly tainted by 'canon.' And hey, I can always go with a 'browncoats' thing. It's not like the Germans were the only ones to ever wear brown uniforms in Earth's history—only the most infamous—so there's really nothing stopping me from using them. Well, no point jumping to conclusions about it when I've got Neo right here.'

“I'll have a look at them, but we'll probably go with the brown or gray. Maybe both, depending on assignment, rank, or what have you,” I decided. “Neo, can you show me what they look like?”

“Sure,” the girl smiled, and a moment later her form shimmered as her clothes were overlaid with an illusion of the uniform in question. Melanie and Miltia's forms shimmered a moment later, displaying different versions of the same uniform in different colors. “These are the female versions. The male versions look like this,” she gestured to her side, and a life-sized copy of me appeared, wearing the brown version of the men's uniform. Another copy appeared beside it, wearing a version with the full long coat. A third copy appeared, this time wearing a shorter, waist-length jacket as opposed to a long coat. “The shorter jackets are for normal enlisted, the long coats are for officers. I thought we'd keep that from the previous style.”

'Well, consider me pleasantly surprised. They're not Nazi-style Wehrmacht uniforms—in fact, about the only similarities they share are coloration. They look more like… someone took some inspiration from Attack on Titan cosplay and tried to make an actual uniform out of it. For instance, they lost the MMG straps and replaced them with actual holsters for weapons. And those shitty half-jackets were replaced with functional waist-length jackets. I think I like it. Well, except the tights. We need to change those to actual pants, because they look ridiculous as a military uniform, no matter how much Blake likes them,' I mused. “They don't look like the uniforms you've got,” I pointed out, and the girls rolled their eyes.

“Did you think we'd just make one version?” Melanie asked. “No, we made like four test models, to see what looked good. You liked the first batch, so we were going to go with those.”

“But with the thing with Atlas, that's not possible now, so this is the second model,” Miltia
“So, run with them or no?” Neo asked, and I nodded.

“Yeah, we'll go with them,” I agreed. “With some modifications. Specifically, change the tights to pants. If Blake wants tights, she can wear her own. I'm not subjecting everyone else to them.”

“Is this the sort of day-to-day thing you do now?” Jane asked, and I chuckled, before nodding.

Neo beat me to the punch, however. “Pretty much.”

Turning my gaze to the Arc twins, I asked, “So, does the place pass muster?”

The siblings exchanged a glance before nodding. “It's fine,” Jean agreed. “I won't have a problem with Jun being here.”

“We'd wondered where the 'movers' were taking your stuff,” Jane shot me a look that said I should probably have called to let her know I'd have people coming by my place ahead of time. “Luckily for them, your girls thought to pick up a scroll and call me before I made a mess.”

“Sorry about that. I'm kind of bad about the whole 'calling people' thing.” I turned to Jen. “Anyway. See, even your sisters aren't complaining—the place is fine. All that's left now if for you to agree. Well, and get your paperwork taken care of. I don't think I can get you in officially until then, but getting you a semi-permanent guest pass shouldn't raise too many eyebrows. And if it does, well, executive fiat. Ruby and Yang have them so it should be fine. That is, if you wanted to stay here now.”

Jen and her sisters traded a look before the Arc twins took her by each hand and dragged her away to confer. “Jaune,” Penny began, drawing my attention, “was… was my father involved in what happened to your sister?”

I shook my head. “Probably not. At least, not that I've seen so far. If Atlas is smart about their black ops, then they're compartmentalized. In other words, no cell knows what the other cells are doing, or even that there are other cells in the first place. The Specialist training program seemed like an almost open secret, compared to your dad's research.” A frightening thought occurred, and I turned to regard Jen with the Arc twins, across the room. “On the other hand, if it were me? I'd combine the projects.
They've got Specialists, which are your elite commando soldiers, with advanced Dust and Aura techniques, brainwashed for absolute loyalty. They've got AI, which, if Penny's memories are any indication the only thing stopping them from just programming in loyalty is her dad—and that may just be a special case with her, for all I know, sorry Penny.”

“It is okay, Jaune,” Penny murmured, looking down for a moment before tilting her head up to meet my eyes and smiling. “But you got me out—or at least a version of me. I am truly glad for that. I will just have to find a way to free my… sister.”

“I'll help you do it,” I promised.

“Thank you,” the gynoid whispered, moving awkwardly closer and wrapping her arms around my waist in a hug. “Is this okay?”

“Yes, Penny. Hugs are fine any time,” I assured her, reaching up to run my hand through her hair. “As I was saying, though. We know they've also got not only a piloted mech in development, but also power armor. It stands to reason they're working on some weapon project as well. There's a lot of things they could do with all of that.” Sighing, I hugged Penny tighter for a moment before letting her go. “It's one more thing I need to add to the list of things I want from Atlas, next time I decide to go up that way.”

“We're making another run on Atlas?” Melanie asked.

“Maybe. I'm considering it, at any rate,” I sighed.

The Arc siblings wandered back over and I sent them a questioning look. “I will move in today, if you don't mind,” Jen answered the unspoken question.

“If I minded, I wouldn't have offered,” I chuckled. Jerking my thumb towards the exit, I started walking that way. “Come on. I'll get you three a car back and you can gather up some things. The rooms are already furnished, so you don't have to worry about that. Also, pick up some things for Jun, if she's going to be staying with you. The rest of us have business to take care of.”

“Running us off already, Jaune?” Jean asked, a smirk creeping up her lips.

“No, but we generally don't fuck around when we've got things to do,” I shrugged, pulling my mask
out and putting it back in place before we got to the sally port. “Now you see what my days have been like lately. It’s been a while since we all just took a day off where we did nothing.” Turning to the Malachite twins, Neo, and Penny, I asked, “How does that sound? Saturday or Sunday, or maybe both—take some time to relax and just spend time together. Ruby told me Tai wants her and Yang to stick around the house for the weekend, since Beacon starts this Monday and he wants to spend time with them, so we don’t even have to leave the base if you don’t want to.”

“That sounds,” Melanie began, humming in thought.

Miltia finished, beaming a smile, “Wonderful. Movies?”

“Dinner?” Melanie added.

“Yes, movies?” Neo’s eyes lit up, and I nodded.

Penny practically bounced on her heels. “Jaune, will you teach me how to dance?”

“I mean you actually enjoy dancing?” Jen asked, an incredulous look crossing her face. “I thought you hated it.”

I shook my head. “Nope. What little I remember, I loved it. I enjoyed spending the time with you all. But I was a kid and ‘girls have cooties,’ or whatever.” I shrugged. “Different time, different me.” Smirking, I added, “Now, dancing is almost a surefire way to get me laid.”

The Malachite twins and Neo all nodded. “It really is,” the younger twins synced.

Neo shot a smirk at the redheaded twins. “Thanks for breaking him in for us.”

“So, we were meaning to ask,” Jean changed the subject, blatantly ignoring Neo’s comment and catching my eye as the elevator descended into the basement parking garage. “On the way in we spotted people in guard posts with what looked like anti-air missiles. What’s up with that?”
“Specifically, how is the Kingdom or City of Vale even allowing that to fly?” Jane finished for her twin.

It was the Malachite twins who answered, however. “Simple. We filed the paperwork,” Melanie smirked. “Fox Hunt owns the airspace for a kilometer out from our base, up to 5,000 feet. It's treated like any other military installation. It is officially a No-Fly Zone for any unapproved aircraft.”

“In other words,” Miltia continued, “Vale ATC routes low flying traffic in the city around it. The area's not huge, so it's not like they have to go very far out of their way to avoid us. Flyover flights from things like intercontinental airships pass by well outside of our 5,000 foot ceiling. Flight plans into and out of Fox Hunt are logged with Vale ATC, even for the low level stuff—which is kind of annoying, but a necessary evil. They warn off anyone approaching our airspace, then once they cross into our border, we take over—theoretically. It hasn't happened yet. But once they cross beyond that invisible line and onto our property, they would ideally either be turned away or forced to land. If it were someone like the White Fang looking to cause trouble, and we could be reasonably sure of that, then we would open fire.”

“So, it's a bluff,” Jen surmised, and the younger set of twins shrugged.

“No,” Melanie denied. At the same time, her sister answered, “Yes.” They shared a look, before syncing, “Up to a point.”

“Yeah, no,” Neo shook her head. “I kind of went behind you two on that and cleared some things up. Standing orders are to shoot down anyone who doesn't either leave or land peacefully. If they're armed and they don't identify, they get swatted. Once they do land, we'll have two squads on standby with someone up front to figure out what they want. If we can, they'll be sent on their way. If they get violent, the men have orders to open fire. If we weren't based inside the city, it wouldn't be such a potential problem, but leaving the city has its own set of problems with it, and until we start seeing some serious cash flow we can't do much about relocating.” Seeing the Malachite twins' looks, Neo shrugged. “Sorry, with Blake coming in and out, I decided to err on the side of caution in case any of her old friends happened to track her back to us.”

Melanie and Miltia traded a look before turning to me. “I agree with her decision. I'd rather not deal with some idiot loading up a Bullhead or something full of Dust or ANFO and deciding to crash it into one of our buildings.”

“ANFO?” more than one voice asked, and I realized I might have accidentally mentioned something from Earth. Then again, it was ridiculously common there, so there was probably a good chance Remnant used or had used it at one point, because it was easy and cheap to produce, and ridiculously
“Ammonium Nitrate Fuel Oil. Fertilizer bomb, essentially,” I explained. “You use it in small doses for taking out stumps. In larger doses for taking out structures or armor.”

“Where did you learn that?” Jean asked, narrowing her eyes.

I shrugged, gesturing around us. “Compound full of ex-military.” The elevator chimed and we stepped out into the parking garage. There were two cars waiting for us, as I'd already texted Jim ahead of time. “Anyway, I'll see you three later. If there's any trouble,” I locked eyes with Jen, “or if you just need to talk, call me. Okay?”

“Okay,” the Arc twins agreed, stepping in to hug me before heading for one of the cars.

Jen stepped in for a hug of her own, squeezing me a good deal tighter than the twins had. “Thank you, Jaune.”

“Don't thank me yet,” I chuckled. “Thank me when you're better.”

Bright blue eyes met my own and the girl gave me a ghost of a smile before turning and following her sisters. As their car pulled out, I joined Penny, Neo, and the Malachite twins in our own vehicle — a small limousine I hadn't actually seen before today. I could tell from how it sat that it was most likely armored. “New car?” I asked, once the window dividing the front and back came down.

“We thought you might need something with a bit more room. So, where to, boss?” Jim asked from the front.

“I need to make a stop by the library. I've been putting something off for a while,” I met Jim's eyes in the rearview and he nodded. “After that, I need to pick up my Beacon uniforms and I'm sure the girls would love to window shop,” I mused aloud, drawing amused looks from the girls in question.

“Sounds fun,” Neo agreed.

“But Jaune,” Penny began, “We have perfectly functional windows. Why would we need more?”
The twins shared a glance before Melanie said, “Penny? Don't ever change.”

“But Jaune said I would have to grow up eventually—” the girl began as the divider went up and the car started moving.

“She didn't mean literally,” I denied, before Penny could get started good.

I walked into the library alone, the others waiting in the limo and taking the time to take care of the day's assignments for Fox Hunt on their scrolls—of which, there were quite a few more than usual. Within the next few hours, we would have all our aircraft out and running at once for the first time due to the increased Grimm activity Jane and Jean's actions last night had attracted. *Maybe this will get us some good PR with the city.* I blinked as I went over that thought again and nearly groaned. *Dear God, I'm becoming a politician, or something similar. Not sure whether that's amusing or horrifying.*

Strolling up to the desk, I found Candice seated behind it, idly reading a novel. She looked up and met my eyes, raising an eyebrow as she did. Putting a placeholder in her book, she put it aside and asked, “How may I help you, sir?”

Seeing as there were no other employees around for her to put on the act for, I rolled my eyes. “Can we talk?”

Sighing, she nodded and pushed back out of her seat. Opening a door behind her, she gestured me to follow. “In here.”

I slipped inside and looked around, realizing it was some sort of combination break and meeting room. She followed me in and closed the door behind us, before moving to the table and dropping into one of the chairs there. Crossing her arms, along with her legs, she observed me over her glasses. “To what do I owe this visit?”

Shaking my head, I leaned against the wall beside the door and crossed my own arms. “Is that how you're going to be?”

“How's that?” she asked, and I snorted softly.
“Defensive and antagonistic,” I pointed out.

Her eyes narrowed. “I'm not.”


Glaring, the older woman answered, “No. And I don't appreciate—”

“I don't give a shit if you appreciate it or not. Someone needs to call you out on your bullshit and I've found the best way to do that is by not beating around the bush, mincing words, or otherwise trying to spare feelings. This shit?” I gestured, indicating the library, “It's retarded. I tell you there's a good chance someone may come looking to get to me through you and offer to let you come work for me, where you'll be surrounded by lots of people armed to the teeth and willing to kill anything that steps onto our property uninvited. But no, instead, the first thing you do is go straight back to your old job where you can be easily tracked down and where there aren't armed guards around 24/7. I mean, I'm glad you've at least had the sense to stick around at Jim's place instead of going back to your old apartment, but come on—this is brain-dead level stupid. I thought you were smarter than this.”

“Are you done?” she asked, when I stopped talking. I shut my mouth and made a 'go ahead' motion with one hand. “Firstly, I like my job. I know, weird right? But I'm happy here.” I opened my mouth and she held up a hand to stop me. “I don't want to come work for your gang, or militia, or whatever the hell it is this week. I don't even know how to use a gun. And while I get that you can probably find something for me to do that doesn't involve shooting at things, it's not my thing. And besides, I'm not going to change my life just because you turned off your scroll, you picked up the call, you were somewhere you shouldn't have been doing something you absolutely should not have been, and I am not going to let your mistakes dictate my life. The only people I've even seen who seem out of place are the ones Jim has watching the building, so I'd say the threat you were worried about is pretty overblown. And I'm not living in my old place because someone canceled my lease,” she raised an eyebrow at that, while I looked absolutely unrepentant. “I'm still staying with Jim because I'm fucking him. We're dating. I moved in. If you would, you know, actually talk to your people outside of work, you'd know that. I bet you don't even know half of the names of the people you've got helping you run your little experiment. Outside of the girls you're diddling, of course.”

“Leave them out of this,” I warned. “Yeah, maybe I'm not the best leader in the world, but I know the difference between being a leader and being a friend. A good leader does not make friends with his people, does not allow his people to see him as anything but an unassailable pillar that they can turn to for support. That's not to say that he doesn't value his men—each and every one of them is valuable—but there has to be a division between the leadership and the men, otherwise the men start thinking they can subvert the leader's will. Fuck that. I'm not letting that happen. So, you're right that I should probably go over my personnel files and go around and speak to my division heads, but I'm not their friend and I'm not their drinking buddy. I'm their boss.
“As for responsibility, what the fuck do you think I'm trying to do? This is me trying to take responsibility for my fuckup. I know damn well it was my fault, I'm trying to make sure you don't pay the price for that, and you're making that impossible because you won't listen. It's like the doctor telling you that if you keep smoking, you're going to develop lung cancer, and you tell him, 'Well, I just like it so much and I've done it so long I can't stop now.' I can't help you if you don't let me.”

The brunette rolled her eyes. “You assume I want your help, or even need it. I'm nobody important and even if someone did try something, they'd quickly figure that out. I'm not dating you, I don't know anything important, and I'm not part of your organization. That in and of itself is a good defense against anyone looking to do me harm. I'm useless to them. There'd be no point. You're just being overly paranoid.”

Running a hand through my hair, I resisted the urge to growl, curse, or yell at her to get my point across. There was plenty of shit she knew that could see us utterly fucked, and she either didn't realize it or acknowledge it. Little facts like: she's dating a guy who works for the Fox, and whose boss is a seventeen year old boy named Jaune Arc. It wouldn't take much to connect those dots. 'This would be so much easier if I just neuralized her,' I mused. I could do it. I wouldn't enjoy it, and it'd probably piss Jim off, but it was on the table as a possible solution. 'On the other hand, no relationship with or knowledge of me, no reason to hang around Jim, sudden gaps in her memory… I'd have to essentially either build new memories or slap one mother of a Confuse on her and hope her brain made the connections for her. And then there's the fact that I'd still be running into the same problems as I would with trying to erase large chunks of Jen's memories. I'd hit the limits of Forget and maybe even cause brain damage. No, too risky. Save it as a last resort.'

Finally, I threw up my hands in defeat. “Fine! Fuck it. You win. Have it your way.” I turned to open the door and paused. “Jim's a good man. Useful, too. I expect him to stay that way.”

“Jaune,” she murmured, halting me as I opened the door. “I get that you're worried about me, and I appreciate it. But you worry too much. It'll be fine.”

“Famous last words,” I deadpanned, shooting her an unamused look over my shoulder. “See you.”

“Yeah,” she nodded.

The door closed a little more firmly behind me than I'd intended.
As I equipped another Beacon uniform, I rolled my eyes and adjusted the tie for better comfort before looking myself over in the full length mirror. The uniform was a bit form hugging in places, but seemed somehow stretchy—not quite like I'd expect from lycra or something, but with more give than cotton/polyester blends I was used to. Then again, I supposed I shouldn't be surprised—it was the same material a lot of things seemed to be made of. Most of my wardrobe was, in fact. The cut here was just different from what I was used to. In addition, I was glad my Semblance knew how to tie a tie—and even had options for various knots—because I absolutely could not.

I took my time making sure it hung properly and was comfortable before finally stepping out. With cameras in the store and the employees keeping an eye on us unobtrusively, possibly to make sure no one decided to go for a quickie in the changing rooms, I couldn't exactly just dump things into Inventory and equip them in full view of everyone—which meant having to sit in the changing room and wait a reasonable amount of time between each change to make sure no one noticed anything fishy.

“Well?” I asked, drawing a hum from Neo and critical looks from both her and the twins.

“Range of motion?” Neo asked, and I began stepping through a series of basic stretches and movements that would test the uniform's fit against being pulled certain ways. Beacon uniforms were pretty good about being combat ready in the event students couldn't change clothes, but the girls were perfectionists when it came to that sort of thing.

“That's enough,” Melanie finally sighed. “It looks pretty close to what you're going to need, but…”

“We're going to have to play with it,” Miltia finished for her sister.

“You don't have to, you know,” I tried to reason with them, and the trio rolled their eyes.

“Please, Jaune. You are an admittedly poor judge of when something like this is 'good enough' as opposed to 'great.' Trust us, that extra little bit helps. Besides, it won't take long to alter a few of them and we don't mind doing it,” Neo grinned. “And you were going to put enchantments on anyway, so this will give you a better chance to do that.”

“After I level sewing,” I reminded, and the girl shrugged. “I've got some ideas on that, but we'll see once we get home.”

The girls all shared a look at that, and I realized what it was that had set that particular round off.
Calling the new place home—as in 'our home.' Well, I couldn't deny that I felt the same way about it. It was distinctly ours, as opposed to just mine. “Anyway,” Miltia broke in, “Our turn.”

“You turn?” I asked, raising an eyebrow. I knew damn well the girls made their own clothes. Then again, I also knew they enjoyed reverse engineering clothes for new ideas. More importantly, however, they absolutely loved attention. The girls merely grinned, slipping into the dressing rooms with arm-loads of clothes. Sighing, I dropped into one of the chairs provided and set to waiting.

“Jaune? Where did the others go?” Penny asked, and I glanced over to see a walking mountain of clothes with legs sticking out of the bottom.

I blinked twice before what I was seeing registered—Penny, carrying a stack of clothes so high she couldn't possibly see over it. “Penny, what are you doing?” I asked, having a sneaking suspicion about the answer.

“Well, Neo, Melanie, and Miltia said I should take the chance to get new clothes. And I don't have many to begin with, so I thought I would get them in bulk while we were here,” she answered.

Something about that sounded off. “Don't you have several dozen outfits?”

“I do! But I wore those already and I was running out of clothes, so…” Penny trailed off, shifting the bundle of clothing in her arms to indicate the next logical step in her train of thought there.

“What do you mean, running out?” I asked, as realization slowly dawned. “Have you been doing your laundry?”

“Laundry?” the gynoid asked.

The sound of flesh smacking flesh rang out across the store and the nearest store employee shot me a worried look. “Sir?” she called from nearby. “Are you okay?”

“Fine,” I nearly growled. The poor woman gave a startled ‘eep!' and scuttled off. “Penny. Penny why?” I stopped, shaking my head and standing. Collecting the clothes from her arms, I set them on a nearby chair. “Let's make two piles. The left pile is for things you already have. The right pile is for new things. Okay?”

“Okay, Jaune!” Penny chirped, and immediately began sorting through the pile.
“I thought I showed you how to work the washer and dryer?” I asked, and Penny shook her head.

“If you mean the boxy things you put your clothes in, then no. Is that why you keep wearing the same clothes over and over?” Penny made a face, the look of exaggerated disgust looking absolutely adorable on her face. “How can you stand to wear clothes over and over? They have germs in them! And dead skin cells, and hair! They are breeding grounds for bacteria!”

I rolled my eyes. “That's why we wash them.”

Penny turned wide eyes on me. “But that doesn't kill all the germs!”

“It gets enough,” I chuckled. “Besides, between that and keeping them in Inventory, they won't really have time to grow between washings.”

“But it's disgusting,” Penny whined—actually whined.

"That's a first for her," I mused, shaking my head. “Look, it's something you get used to. Germs, dead skin, hair, residue from fluids like sweat and,” I paused, self-censoring there, “other things are all a normal part of biological life. You'll get used to it. Or you'll get over it.” A few rather infamous germophobes came to mind, and I added, “Or you won't. In which case, you'll develop crippling germophobia, shut yourself in a clean room, and never come out again.”

“That does not sound like fun,” Penny hedged.

“It's not,” I agreed. “And you're partly biological yourself, so it's not like you can ever get away from it entirely. So, take these,” I gestured at the pile of things she'd separated out into the left pile, “and give them to one of those nice ladies over there,” I gestured at one of the store workers nearby, “then come back. And when we get back to the base, you're going to empty your Inventory and we're going to wash everything. Okay?”

“Okay Jaune,” Penny murmured, looking contrite as she gathered up the pile of clothes and made her way off.

“That would be hilarious, if it weren't so sad,” Neo chuckled from behind me, and I turned to see she and the twins had exited the dressing rooms.
Looking them over appreciatively, I noticed they all seemed to perk up and preen a bit under my gaze, and resisted the urge to laugh at it. “Very nice.”

“That’s all we get?” Melanie asked, crossing her hands under her breasts, doing her best to push them up just a little more in the small green dress she wore.

“Well, no. But I’m pretty sure we’d get kicked out if you got what I really want to give you right now,” I leered, wagging my eyebrows at them and drawing a small round of giggles.

“As fun as that sounds,” Melanie began.

“And it does sound very fun,” Miltia continued.

“It’s not exactly the best time right now,” Melanie finished, and I nodded as I realized what they meant.

“Right,” Neo murmured. “Well, at least you’re not late.”

“You’re late?” I asked raising an eyebrow. 'Well, hopefully it's nothing. And at least they're not syncing up. On the other hand, if hers comes right after theirs, then it'll be one long, unending chain of crabby women. Not sure which is worse.'

“Eh, it happens,” Neo shrugged. “I'm not too worried about it.”

Penny reappeared at my side, looking the girls over, and beamed. “You all look very nice.”

“See, exactly what I said,” I reached over and scratched the top of her head, causing the gynoid to lean into the touch. A thought occurred and I cringed, having been recently reminded that Penny was partly biological, and that the same rules would probably apply to her. 'Maybe I'll get lucky and she won't have a period or something?' I wondered, before shaking my head. I wasn't that lucky. I'd be lucky if she didn't sync up with the others due to exposure. 'Of course I think that in jest, but Murphy's Law says it'll probably become a thing.'
“Now I see why Ruby likes this,” she sighed in bliss. “Can I try on new clothes now, too?”

“Go ahead,” Neo smiled, gesturing towards the changing rooms. “So, what are we doing after this?” she asked as Penny slipped by and went into a changing room.

Miltia pulled out her scroll, looking it over for a moment before answering, “The city zoning office has been wanting you to come by and finalize some paperwork.”

“Okay,” I agreed. “After that, I need to stop and pick up some cheap fabric we can waste to practice sewing on so I can grind my skill level up.” I had some ideas of how to repay the girls for the nice things they'd done for me recently, but in order to do so I'd need to put in the time to grind those skills up. What I had in mind would be modeled off of an item from various Final Fantasy games—the ribbon. It wouldn't be an actual ribbon, however, as I doubted I could cram down the enchantment pattern I wanted into that. While in most Final Fantasy games, a ribbon protected against status ailments to some degree, I didn't actually know how to do that with bounded fields or enchantments. Protection against blindness, for example, was too specific a thing and could come from too many sources, to truly protect against. There were some variants, however, that did something much more useful in the world of Remnant, and far more easily achievable—something I already had a pattern for, in fact.

Dust, when enchanted into the right pattern, could provide protection from that type of element. So, fire type red Dust could be enchanted onto a piece of armor or clothing and provide a general ‘fireproof’ type of ward, which would protect from all forms of fire elemental damage. Likewise, the same could be done with nearly any other type of Dust. In fact, they all used the same pattern, really. Now, there were some caveats to that protection, from what I gathered. Enchanting armor or clothing against fire, for example, would only protect against fire-type Dust—and nothing else. It did not even protect against actual, real, non-Dust fire. If you were to start a fire with fire type Dust and walk into it while wearing that enchantment, you would swiftly find yourself needing to stop, drop, and roll.

Nor did it protect against physical force—impact, momentum, inertia, and so forth. A fire-type Dust round moving at muzzle velocity is still going to hurt like a bitch when it hits, even if its elemental charge can be ignored. In addition, Dust types that were more physical matter than energetic reaction—such as earth or water—would still do damage with any matter backing them up, similarly to my own elemental manipulation. Throwing a tsunami at someone wearing something with the ribbon enchantment on it would still screw them over with simple physics.

The level of protection offered against an element was also determined by the Grade of Dust used. For instance, Grade 1 fire dust in a ribbon accessory would no-sell Grade 1 fire-type effects, but against Grade 2 Dust would only reduce the difference between a Grade 1 and a Grade 2. The answer to that one was pretty obvious, though: equip Grade 9 in all the slots. That was my eventual goal, here: to produce a true ribbon accessory, loaded down with Grade 9 Dust, that could no-sell most common elements. The biggest issue I had here was lack of experience and field testing. That
was why I intended to test it on myself first. I would give the girls something nice for the time being, that would work for some basic protection on top of what they had at the moment, and then later replace them with the completed models once I'd worked the kinks out.

'The only real question is, what form do I want this ribbon to take?' I wondered some time later, after our meeting at the zoning office, as I perused bolts of cloth for a few different types of materials to play with. I had already collected some basic stuff to get a feel for how each handled, working under the assumption that using different materials would level the skill faster. The girls had immediately broken off to pick up materials to add to their personal stockpile, as opposed to what we had set aside for the guild, so I had been left mostly to my own devices for the moment.

A splash of color caught my eye and I wandered over to a rack of brightly colored bolts of what looked to be ridiculously fine silk. There were bolts in a wide variety of colors, and some even had patterns—dragons, cranes, leaves, and other motifs that wouldn't be out of place on Earth. 'It's perfect,' I realized, looking over the designs. Catching the eye of one of the clerks, I waved him over. “Let me get…” I hummed, looking over the selections available.

“Four yards of that pink,” I pointed to one of the bolts, thinking the twins would like it. Their new dresses were going to be in emerald green and the hot pink would go pretty well with it. Neo's theme was pretty obvious, but there were a good many colors that would work with it without clashing. The easiest would be something she already used as part of her outfit anyway. “Two yards of that strawberry pink.” And I wanted three for myself—one for each of my alter egos. “And two yards each of black, crimson, and that sapphire blue. That should do it for now, but I'll probably be back again for more in the future.”

Hiding the material away in my side pouch along with my other purchases, I waited patiently for the girls to finish. As I did, I turned my mind towards the design I wanted to use. 'So, how do I get multiple elements on this? I mean, theoretically, it's possible, if I branch off lines from the central part of the enchantment to the edges…'

“Finished already?” Miltia asked, sidling up to me as the others made their way up with their selections.

“Yeah. I was just thinking of all the modifications I need to get started making,” I shrugged. It was not entirely untrue, but she didn't need to know I was planning to make them something special. “Find anything interesting?”

“A few things,” Miltia agreed as Neo and Melanie checked out, Penny hovering nearby as they carried on a quiet conversation. “Mostly little things that would add some little details, nothing major.”
“We ready?” Melanie asked as she, Neo, and Penny joined us near the door.

Nodding, I held the door for them and followed them outside, where we piled into the car. Dropping into the seat in the middle, I fastened my seatbelt and stretched out, yawning, as the twins settled to either side of me and Neo and Penny settled into the seats across from me. The divider came down and Jim asked, “Back home, boss?”

“Yeah, Jim. Thanks,” I nodded, closing my eyes and resting my head back against the seat. The divider went up and the car began moving as the twins cuddled into my sides. I was nearly lulled into a nap by the ride and the feel of the girls around me, when my Semblance chimed.

“You're interrupting my nap. This had better be good,” I grumbled.

“What's that?” the twins synced, and I shook my head.

“Semblance alert,” I yawned, cracking open my eyes halfway and giving it a read.

A quest has been created! Damsel In Distress: Fall vs. Fall.

Cinder is planning to ambush the Fall Maiden! Reach the Maiden and stop Cinder before it's too late!

Success: Maiden lives. 10,000,000 EXP. ??? becomes aware of your presence. Become hated by ????. Become targeted by ???. Quest continuation, quest unlock, ???.

Failure: Maiden dies. Death, destruction, mayhem. ??? remains unaware of your presence. Quest continuation, quest unlock, ???.

Time limit: 30 minutes.

This quest cannot be refused.
My eyes flew open wide and I sat up abruptly, drawing startled squeaks from the twins. “Mother fucker!” I yelped, and an instant later, the limo screeched to a halt and the divider came down, while around us horns blared, tires from other vehicles squealed, and I heard the muffled crunch of an impact a few cars behind us. All of that was inconsequential at the moment, however.

“Boss?” Jim asked, and I waved him off.

“RTB. Drive now!” I ordered, already tuning out my surroundings as I opened my map and began desperately searching as tires squealed and acceleration forced me back in my seat.

I had no idea what this meant. What was a 'Maiden'? Why was it important? Why did I get this quest, when every other quest and event was at least based partially on knowledge I already had in the past and my Semblance extrapolating on it and seeming to be waiting to find the right event. Did this mean that my Semblance was able to find quests that I had no idea about? Why hadn't it happened before and why was it happening now? Was this proof that my Semblance really could scry out information I had no possible way of knowing? So many questions running through my mind, until the most important one.

'How the fuck am I supposed to find it if it's not on my map?'

I desperately scoured the map for anything that stood out. Here on the edge of the Commercial and Industrial Districts, it showed everywhere from the south edge of the Agricultural District, not too far north of the area we were clearing out with Fox Hunt, to the southern edge of Forever Fall when zoomed out to maximum. There were no new icons on the map, nor could I see Cinder, Mercury or Emerald's icons anywhere. Okay, no help there, and that was really bad, because the failure conditions didn't have death and destruction as dependent on the level of failure like it typically had been in the past. It was a certainty if the quest was failed, and I had no idea how to even begin on any of this. What I did have were some obvious conclusions from the quest details: whoever this 'Maiden' was, she was important—ten million experience important. Cinder wanted her dead—and anything Cinder wanted that bad was something I wanted to make goddamn sure she didn't get. Someone—Cinder's backer, or boss, or whatever military or organization she was working with or for—would be irate if I interfered, and while I was a non-entity to them at the moment I would jump up pretty far on their list of people to kill violently if I stuck my nose in it. And if I fucked it up, there was a good chance a lot of people were going to die.

“Jaune, what's wrong?” My eyes snapped from my map and met Melanie's as she observed me from the seat to my right. Neo, Miltia, and Penny were also staring at me in worry, and Jim was glancing in the rear view mirror on occasion, having left the divider down, possibly in anticipation of new orders. Obviously, I'd been staring at my quest and map for too long, or my face had displayed some of the distress I was feeling, probably both if even Jim was showing concern. Then again, it was entirely possible they'd heard exactly how bad I thought it was in my tone when I'd told Jim to get us back to Fox Hunt.
I got a new quest, an important one and I have no idea what it's about or even how I'm supposed to do it. To top that off, it's on a ridiculously short time limit,' I sent to them. It's not that I didn't trust Jim, but I hadn't given him full disclosure about my Semblance yet and as I was on a definite time limit, I didn't have time to even begin to explain things.

'Okay, what's it about? Maybe we can start researching to find what we need,' Miltia replied, already pulling out her scroll to get started on a search, while Melanie was opening the phone app on her scroll to start calling contacts.

'Don't have the time for that kind of search. Apparently Cinder is targeting someone called the 'Fall Maiden' and if I don't stop her, everyone's fucked. It's important enough to be worth ten million EXP if that tells you anything. But I've got no idea where Cinder went off to the other day or who she may be after. I've got half an hour to get it done, which implies that I can reach the person it wants me to save within the time limit, but it won't give me the person's name, there are no new icons on the map, and I've never even heard of the thing they refer to the target as.' It was extremely frustrating that my Semblance was being so vague on something that was apparently so important, and I wasn't about to tell them about the failure conditions, that would just make them worried.

'Wait. The what? ' Melanie, eyebrows creeping towards her hairline while her sister took on a similar look and Neo bit her lip in contemplation.

'Something called the Fall Maiden. You've heard of… it?' I asked, trailing off as a piece of paper appeared in front of my face from out of nowhere and fell into my lap. It was only then that I realized that in my preoccupation about the quest, I'd completely missed the return of the 'being watched' feeling—which, at the moment, appeared to be coming from the car's roof. I grabbed the piece of paper off my lap and read it quickly.

Two miles southeast of the farmland reconstruction project's most eastern point, along the old over road to Mountain Glenn.

Well, that was both helpful and horribly terrifying. None of that had been said out loud, and that implied the watcher could hear our thoughts. Maybe it was some sort of long range telepathy? Something like Professor X's Cerebro watching me, and that was how they were listening in as well as watching me? That didn't explain how they got the piece of paper to me. That one was pretty easy to guess, though. I only knew of three people with any sort of ability, Semblance or otherwise, that could possibly, maybe, allow for ranged matter transportation—either teleportation or portals—and two of them were my siblings. That left only the third as the most likely candidate.

'Raven fucking Branwen.' I palmed my face, taking a calming breath. 'Yeah. Okay. So, Raven's just cemented her position as the top slot on my list of 'who's watching Jaune.' Still doesn't explain the mind-reading though. Maybe a partner?' I glanced at my HUD and winced. Dammit, I'd have to worry about all this later, along with moving the 'develop mind shielding Bounded Field' project up the to-do list. Followed immediately by a 'fuck your portals bullshit' field, if at all possible.

Switching to my Fox outfit and tucking the paper into my jacket pocket, I told Jim to pull over. Thinking quickly, I ran some mental math, calculating my top speed and the distance involved.

'Impossible for me to make in half an hour. Maybe with a Bullhead, the Duster, or Daedalus. Yeah,
that might work. Run to the airfield, summon up the corvette, haul ass. But I can't be seen with it yet, so I'd have to unsummon it outside of sight. A Bullhead, though…'

I went over my options before making a decision. “Penny, I need you to get back to base and secure Foxtrot-1. Make sure no one's using it, that it's armed and fueled, then let me know and stand by for summon.” The gynoid nodded in confirmation and I continued. “Girls, I'll see you tonight, I've got to go and deal with this right now.”

The girls looked at me like I was stupid. “You're nuts if you think we're not coming with you and letting you do this on your own.” Neo said hotly.

I sighed as we pulled over and the girls started to get out. Penny was the first out and immediately took off at speed towards Fox Hunt, making a leap that cleared the nearest building and disappearing from my sight. I slid out right after her, moving onto the sidewalk and heading for the nearest alley, where I could take off relatively unseen. Car doors slammed behind me and the girls followed close on my heels. “Look, this is Cinder I'm going up against, I'm not sure I can even take her in a straight up fight. I'm not endangering you as well. I'll be focusing mainly on getting in, getting the target, and getting out. There's a much better chance of that succeeding on my own.”

“There's also a much better chance of you dying. And how are you supposed to do that as the Fox when your stealth and escape techniques are usually Shiro's realm of expertise? At least with myself or Melanie we can have the cloak and mask and sneak out of there, and we've already got Invisibility down. Or what about calling one of your sisters to come help?” Miltia crossed her arms under her bust, glaring at me for trying to be stupid as I judged we were far enough down the alley to be out of sight and turned around to face them.

“I could use Jen,” I murmured, before shaking my head. “No, too unstable right now. Can't use the twins either, because it wouldn't make sense for one of the them to show up with me as the Fox.” Jane's 'Kuro' alter-ego was also confirmed as working with Shiro, having been seen both by Cinder herself and by police, so that was right out as well.

Neo frowned. “We are not helpless, Jaune. We can help.”

“I did not say you were, but I don't have time to argue it. That's why I'm having Penny on standby with Foxtrot-1. There ain't much a gunship doesn't scare right the fuck off. Look, it's not that I—” I was cut off again by another piece of paper. Two, actually, as one fell in front of Melanie as well. We both grabbed our respective papers out of the air. I watched her to see if she was going to read it aloud, but at the widening of her eyes, I turned my eyes from the girls to my own message.

Stand by.

'What the hell is that supposed to mean?' I wondered, looking up to meet the girls' eyes. A sudden feeling of falling backwards washed over me as it felt like the world was yanked out from under my feet.

I fell, and the world went black.
Light and sound returned in one brief moment where the world seemed to rush in to crush me. Drawing a breath, I gasped at the cold, thin air, and in the sudden rushing wind I realized I was still falling. As I accelerated, I began to tumble and caught sight of the ground below. Trees to the north leading towards Vale and the east climbing up a mountain range, plains stretching out to the horizon west and southward. Before I’d fallen too far, I cast “Wings!” Large, invisible projections of force spread out from a point between my shoulder blades as the spell anchored to my body. My uncontrolled tumble righted and I was slammed with sudden, teeth-rattling deceleration and a flash of momentary searing pain from the point where the wings connected at my upper back—the wings acting like parachutes, but I had still been entirely unprepared for the suddenness of it, or having all of that force concentrated into two points that effectively bypassed my Aura. I would have to revise the technique, now that I knew that was a weakness.

A thumping sound filled the air around me as they beat softly and a glance at my HP bar caused me to wince. ‘Right, note to self: reflexively trying to stop falling is bad. Next time, redirect the fall into a swoop or glide or something and bleed off momentum more slowly.’

I cast a quick couple of Heals on myself, bringing my HP back up to full and focused on meditation long enough to start regenerating the spent Mana. Pulling up gravity and wind elemental Mana, I dumped it into the spell and stilled the wings, allowing them to spread out and hold me aloft silently as I looked around and attempted to orient myself. ‘Where the fuck am I? Is that what portal travel is like? That was not fun.’

This was… probably bad. My unknown watcher—or at least one of them, considering I knew of at
least two now—had the ability to transport me places at will. However, given the content of the two notes I'd gotten, Raven—or whoever it was—potentially seemed intent on helping, though for what ends I couldn't say. Then again, for all I knew he or she could have sent me halfway across the continent to keep me out of the fight. Well, there was an easy way to check that and lay my fears to rest there. Opening my map, I began searching for familiar icons. I was pleasantly surprised when I spotted the phoenix-like icon that represented Cinder not too far away. That answered the question about whether my watcher wanted me out of the fight or not, but still left many other questions still up in the air. Questions like how, exactly, they had known the content of my mental conversation with the girls. 'I'm wasting time. Stop woolgathering. I've got enough to go on to, if not trust whoever sent me here, then to give them the benefit of the doubt for not fucking me. Speculate later, mission now.'

That thought in mind, I refocused on the map and took in their positions. 'Okay, there's Cinder. Emerald is beside this road and Mercury is directly across from her, while Cinder herself is back a good ways in a decent vantage point. Could be for observation, could be for ranged support.'

The facing indicator showed Emerald was facing back up the path into the mountains, so she was waiting for something considering she wasn't moving from that spot. If the terrain reading was right, she should have a clear view of anything coming down the road for a good ways, while any traveler would have a hard time making them out, given the cover available—brush, the occasional rock formation or boulder, and natural furrows in the terrain were all excellent hiding places. There was a farm house and a barn behind them about a quarter of a mile away—likely where they had been camped for the night, at a guess. An icon I didn't recognize—a n amber circle bordered in gold with a trio of leaves, gold, red and green sticking from the right side of it—was moving slowly down the road from the mountain pass. Motion caught my eye as a final icon came into view, moving quickly and in a straight line from Vale. 'That looks like Qrow. Damn, he's moving pretty fast. Straight line travel at constant speed implies air travel, low overall speed implies it's not an aircraft. How did he know to be here? Raven? Either way, he's not going to get here in time to help. So, what are you planning?' I mused, taking in the positions of those involved and coming quickly to a conclusion. 'Looks like an ambush, though not the way I'd set it up. The Maiden comes down the road to about here,' I fingered a point on the map where the fence line for the farmhouse property began, 'Then if it were me and I wanted her alive, I'd jump her. Otherwise, if I wanted her dead, I'd just snipe her. But those three aren't set up for sniping. They're... set up for a two-pronged assault with the third as overwatch or potential backup. That says 'capture,' not 'kill' to me. Was my Semblance wrong? Arg, fuck, I don't have time to sit here and play guessing games all day. Worry about my Semblance's accuracy later.'

With a rough idea of their plan, I began making my own to counter it. 'I need to find somewhere to bring in the Bullhead, so I can get Penny here and ready.' Looking around below me, I spotted a clearing out of sight of both Cinder's group and the approaching Qrow and dropped like a stone. 'Penny, how long until Foxtrot-1 is in the air?'

'Five minutes, Jaune. It is being refueled now. It was just brought in from a mission,' the gynoid sent
Looking at my map and judging distances, I frowned. That would take too long. 'Is one of the pilots there with you?'

'Angel is, yes,' Penny confirmed.

'Ask her if it's bingo on fuel, and if not, if it's got enough for a hundred mile flight.'

There was a delay while Penny relayed my questions, before she sent, 'Angel says, 'Negative on bingo. You might make it to Vale.' What should I do?'

Doing some quick mental math, I nodded—if it wasn't empty, I could use passive and active skills to cut down on fuel use and get it back to Vale, even if it was running on fumes by the time we got back. 'Tell them to stop refueling it and get back from it. I'm going to unsummon it. Let me know when they're done, then…' I paused, wondering how to pull this off. Penny just teleporting in front of our people would give away too much. 'You know Invisibility yet?' I figured I'd ask, because for all I knew she could have been training on her own time. Penny didn't exactly need sleep.

'I bought an upgrade that allows me to cloak like Invisibility,' Penny answered.

'Okay. Do that, then get somewhere out of sight of the cameras before you summon yourself to me, just in case,' I instructed. By the time my feet hit the ground of the clearing, Penny had sent her confirmation that the armed Bullhead had been cleared. I immediately unsummoned the vehicle, then held out my hand and called it up in the clearing. Penny appeared at my side in motes of green light an instant later, already decked out in her Fox outfit. ‘Penny, I want you standing by in case shit gets bad. Keep the engines spooled up and ready.”

“Do you want me in the air—’on station,’ I believe it's called?” Penny asked, and I considered it for a moment.

Slipping into the Bullhead, I checked the fuel gauge—it was low, but a few minutes worth of circling or hovering shouldn't be bad enough that my skills wouldn't make up the difference. I moved back outside and gave Penny a nod. “Actually, yeah, fuck it. Take off and start circling a mile out from this point.” Pulling up my map, I tapped the spot of the potential ambush, marking it on both our maps. “Wait until I'm there then go,” I warned her, and the gynoid nodded as she climbed into the Bullhead.
Pulling my wings back up, I dumped gravity and wind elemental Mana into them and yanked myself skyward, wind whipping around me as I 'fell' upwards as Remnant's gravity gave up on trying to argue with magic. Climbing quickly, I oriented myself on the ambush site and tore off across the sky, my hood yanked back by the wind and my cloak snapping and popping about my heels. I was suddenly glad that I'd had the foresight to make sure the eye holes for the mask were actually clear glass, which kept the wind out of my eyes—though that reminded me that I needed to replace the mask with something with more tech in it at some point soon.

'How do I want to do this?' I wondered, taking in their positions on my map as I approached. Take out Emerald first—she's the weakest link and the most likely to give me away if she tries to hit me with her Semblance right off the bat, so that's going to need to be a sneak attack. Mercury is the next closest, he'll likely jump in the moment I start kicking around Emerald. That leaves Cinder and the Maiden unoccupied. If this Maiden chick is smart, she'll run, and once she's clear I can go myself. If she's some sort of hero-complex type or a fight junkie, she'll jump in. Or she could be more of a pragmatist when it comes to dealing with enemies than I am and would rather leave corpses than live enemies that could come back to haunt her later. Either way, I've got no fucking clue what's going to happen if she does step in.'

Unfortunately, I couldn't just kill Emerald or Mercury—I might actually need them later, for something. That, and there was the potential that if I could turn Cinder, they would turn as well. There was also the fact that if I did kill Emerald and Mercury, Cinder could replace them with potentially more competent unknowns. No, I wouldn't eliminate them until they became a problem. It was the same reason I had decided to set Roman up to be arrested instead of outright killing him—except, in the case of Roman, 'Shiro' had made for a viable replacement. It was with that in mind that I focused on Conjuration, creating something I could use to hit Emerald with that wouldn't be immediately fatal, but would deal enough damage to put her out of the fight.

The light of the spell flashed in my right hand and, a moment later, it was filled with the hilt of a sword—four feet long, black, with a wide 'blade' and a swept back hand guard. It looked more like something pulled from a fantasy game than a functional blade. The 'edges' were actually rounded—meaning it was little more than a very pretty bludgeon, but it would do the job I wanted it for.

As I neared, I caught sight of Emerald moving to stand in the middle of the road with her kusari pistols drawn. Across from her, a woman pulled a large, white horse to a stop—the horse and its tack looking very plain, in the way the woman's cloak and general demeanor seemed to be trying to say 'just a traveler, nothing special here.' It told me that whatever this Maiden was, she didn't want to advertise.

The woman slid down off the side of the horse and approached the greenette, pulling her hood back and giving me a good look at her as she did. She was on the darker tanned side of Caucasian, with brown hair in a short bob. She looked to be in her mid-20s and wore fairly simple fare for clothing: green hooded traveling cloak, brown thigh-high leggings or leather armor of some sort over what
looked like brown pants, a white blouse under a short corset, and some sort of mantle or something similar that fastened at her neck and went down her back under the cloak—I couldn't quite make out the finer details at this range. Her armor was golden and in a similar style as that which Pyrrha had worn in canon. I stood by my initial assessment—for a Huntress, she seemed to be trying very hard not to stand out.

I quickly dumped altitude, stooping into a dive and accelerating towards Emerald as the woman approached her, looking around warily as she did. It was that attentiveness to her surroundings that allowed her to spot my approach. Jumping back towards her horse and slapping it on the side to send it running away, she threw off her cloak and whipped the staff off her back before taking a defensive stance—and in so doing told me she was not going to be doing the smart thing and leaving the area. The staff itself extended from the center, telling me there was at least some level of tech involved in its creation despite its otherwise humble appearance, and at either end of it the wood that made up the staff twisted to cradle a pair of Dust crystals—one mostly clear with a white tint, the other red. I couldn't readily identify the grade of either of the Dust crystals, nor were they in a common cut—in fact, they looked as though they had been harvested straight off a crystal formation instead of being refined and shaped by machines.

For a moment Emerald looked shocked, then her head turned to track what the Maiden was looking at. Red eyes widened as she caught sight of me and her body flared with green Aura as she began trying to leap away, but I was too close and moving far too fast by that point. Four feet of black steel slammed into the side of her head at over two hundred and fifty miles per hour. Physics told Aura to fuck off for the moment and the smaller girl ragdolled, tumbling head over heels in a tangle of limbs as she slammed into the dirt road and rolled several feet. Flaring wind and gravity, I dumped speed. Having learned from the first time, I made sure not to try to stop on a dime and instead glided in, using the wings as air brakes, and sending dust and gravel swirling around me as I landed—though I didn't quite stick the landing, and was forced to roll to bleed off leftover momentum, leaving me several yards away from the cloaked woman. I turned my head to regard the Maiden as my Semblance did its thing.

Amber

Fall Maiden

Level: ???

I was not the only one getting an eyeful as her eyes swept over me and took in my form—hood still blown back, spiky red hair a mess from the flight, mask covering my face. Her eyes shifted to the downed form of Emerald and she frowned before looking around in confusion. “There was a little girl...”
“No girl.” Striding across the road, I picked up the unconscious Emerald by the hair, giving her a hard shake. “Just a rat.”

I turned towards where I knew Mercury lay in wait. Holding her aloft by the hair, I smirked under my mask as an explosion sounded and he rushed out of cover. “Flash Freeze,” I subvocalized, under powering the spell and watching Emerald’s HP run down as she went stiff and frost formed over her body. I tossed her off to the side as Mercury drew near. He leapt at me from several feet away, shifting in midair and curling his feet around for a double kick aimed at my chest. Calling up earth elemental Mana, I made a sweeping gesture upwards with my free hand and raised a wall between us—ignoring the Skill Creation alert letting me know I’d created the skill **Wall**—and called up my wings again.

He kicked off the wall and, as I rose up above its level, I was able to make out some sort of Dust round going off from the area of his feet. *Right, artificial limbs and Dust weapons. He’s all foot-based techniques, from what I recall of the last time I observed him,* I mused. *Need to figure out what his Semblance is so I can counter it and warn the others about it later, in case they run across him.*

Wind swirled around me as I launched myself towards him, dropping the wings and striking out, my blow turned aside by a crescent kick, which quickly reversed itself into a side kick. Drawing a line in my mind along the path of his leg, I tilted mostly out of the path of that line an instant before the weapon fired and a white ball of Dust and Aura grazed my chest plate, spinning me around as I took in the damage it’d done. *Negligible damage. Non-lethal round?*

“Tch,” the other teen sucked his teeth, flowing into a combo of kicks that I alternately dodged or parried, occasionally bringing my sword up to block one and get a good idea of his strength. His booted foot impacted solidly and I rolled with the blow, allowing it to send me tumbling back before I came back to my feet with some distance between us. “You’re not as fast as I was lead to believe.”

Motion caught my eye as Amber moved to strike the gray haired boy’s back—drawing a pleasantly surprised grin from my lips that she wasn’t above double teaming an opponent or striking one in the back. It was not to be, however, as before she could take Mercury out from behind a flash of silver caught my eye as an arrow streaked in from the side. There was an unearthly scream in the air, along with a quick buildup of red light. The explosion announced Cinder’s arrival and Amber was driven back under a flurry of blows from the red-clad beauty, armed with a pair of curved swords that glittered faintly in the afternoon light. “Keep him busy!” she yelled, over the staccato sound of her swords against Amber’s staff. Something about that sound seemed off to my enhanced hearing, but I didn’t have time to place it as Mercury began pressing his attack harder.

“No problem,” the boy called back, a fierce grin adorning his features. “It’s too bad, really. I thought you’d be a better fight than this! It’s fucking disappointing.” He stopped attacking, took a small leap back, and smirked as his eyes shifted off of me to a point behind me. “Die.”
Casting a quick glance over my shoulder, it was at that point that I noticed that the white orbs—which seemed like some sort of wind-based attack—that he'd been shooting at me had not simply flown into the distance behind me, but had circled back around and were streaking towards my back. Dropping to one knee, I called up my wings again and thrust down, at the same time I Leapt upwards. My feet left gouges in the dirt road and a storm of dust was kicked up around me as I launched myself out of the path of the attack.

Looking down, I frowned as, instead of striking the ground or hitting Mercury as I'd hoped, the path of the attacks curved upwards as they followed me. 'Homing attack. Fun. Note to self: make one of those—call it Magic Missile or something. So, now I've got at least some idea of his capabilities.'

Flipping over so I was pointed head-down towards the ground, I pulled my sword back and reversed course. Pulling up Haste, the world slowed as its second-tier evolution of haste-speed perception kicked in. Tracking the attacks coming towards me, I noted their placement, speed, and path and planned my attack accordingly. I swatted the first three aside back to back in three quick strokes, sending them spinning off into the air around me where they exploded harmlessly.

Mercury's look of triumph as he tilted his head up to watch shifted to one of fury as I made my way through his string of attacks. When they became too many and too dense for me to handle with one sword, I Conjured up a similarly shaped sword, which gleamed white in the mid-day light, and spun to catch the last of the attacks as they closed in on me, deflecting the rest into the ground, where they sent up small gouts of earth as they exploded.

I flared the wings wide, killing my momentum as I landed in a crouch. Giving the swords a spin in each hand, I released both in a Strike Raid, the black one curving in from the left while the white one curved in from the right. Mercury tracked the swords for just a moment before he realized they would miss. Gray eyes shifted back to me just in time to watch me disappear, reappearing with my booted foot in his chest and sending him flying backwards, into the path of the swords I'd thrown.

I raised an eyebrow in surprise when he kicked out his feet, throwing himself into a spin that allowed him to narrowly avoid the first sword as his hand streaked out and caught it, repeating the process with the second blade before touching down. Hefting the weapons in his hands, he shot me an incredulous look, apparently noticing that they weren't sharp. "What the hell kind of swords are these?"

I released the Conjuration holding them in place and they disappeared from his grip in a flash of light. A twitch of my wrists and another Conjuring brought them back to my hands, giving the impression I'd summoned them from him somehow. To his credit, the boy didn't waste time questioning it. He took off for me at a dead sprint, closing the distance before making a Dust-assisted leap into the air above me. He spun midair, throwing out kick after kick—the force of them keeping him airborne much longer than would have been possible normally—as unspent attacks began to
orbit his spinning form. About a quarter of the attacks were directed at me, forcing me to swat them aside or block as he attempted to pin me in place long enough to build up for what looked like a finisher.

'Does he just expect me to sit here and eat that?' I wondered. 'No, he's still under the impression he's keeping me pinned here with his shots. Arrogant little shit.'

Behind him I noticed clouds suddenly gathering in the clear sky as the wind kicked up, the temperature dropped sharply, and lightning began to pop around us. 'Oh, shit.'

It took a moment, focused as I was on this fight, before I realized that it wasn't Mercury who had summoned up a sudden storm as I'd worried, but the Maiden. A glance over showed she had lifted into the air, eyes burning with supernatural power and a sphere of visible wind swirling around her as she began to rain down lightning on Cinder. 'Weather manipulation? So, a cheap Storm knockoff powerset?'

My danger senses tingled and I returned my gaze to Mercury, who had curled into a ball before kicking both legs out and down, towards me—his entire attack buildup having taken place over the course of only a few seconds, but it still seemed ridiculously slow to me. You really needed a teammate to keep the enemy occupied if you were going to try to build up an attack like that. Well, it's not like I was going to be giving the kid any pointers—it was an exploitable weakness one of us could use later, so it was best to let him continue thinking it could work.

Every sphere of Aura and Dust circling him abruptly shot downwards, expanding into a virtual Aura carpet bombing on the area where I was standing. I Leapt to meet them, wings flaring around me and pulling me up. My conjured swords flashed out, striking only those attacks that would have hit while I ignored the rest, punching a hole through his attack and throwing out another double Strike Raid at him.

The boy curled his legs up in front of him to block, with his hands crossed over his face behind them, and I saw my opportunity. The sound of a thousand chirping birds filled the air and, for an instant, realization crossed Mercury's face as he saw how he'd been played. That everything I had done against him so far had been to gauge his skill, test his speed, probe his defenses, and take the full measure of him before I brought him down hard.

Instead of saving time and curb stomping him, I'd underplayed my hand. Ten million EXP was a lot, yes, but I wasn't going to start revealing all my secrets for that prize—and especially not when the quest said that I'd be coming to some unknown factor's attention by intervening. I would much rather play it safe and avoid showing off everything I could do. This way, when they went off to lick their wounds—assuming they got away—there would always be that lingering doubt. By comparison to the fight I'd set up between the Fox and Shiro, with Penny and Neo's help, I had been practically
moving in slow motion. And seeing as I was doing all of this while running under full Aura Suppression, it would leave the impression that I had never really gone all out—that I was simply toying with them. Or at least I hoped it would. The only problem there was the whole 'zero Aura' thing, but I'd deal with that when the time came. I had an idea, but it would mean contacting Neo shortly after this fight was over to ensure my alibi.

But what had really done him in was a simple mistake. He had chosen to block when he should have dodged. If he had chosen to dodge instead of block, he wouldn't have obscured his view of me. The swords, as close to being imitation Keyblades as I could make them, would hurt when they hit but he could easily shrug it off—especially if they hit his prosthetic legs. They were relatively harmless, and mostly made for bludgeoning. The blade in my hand, however, was anything but harmless. I'd lulled him into a false sense of security and he had taken the bait hook, line, and sinker. It was entirely too late for him to do anything about it, however.

I dropped into Flash Step, reappearing under him in mid-swing. Lightning met metal and the boy's entire body seized up as the Plasma Blade met the prosthetic on his right leg and dumped crunchy, crunchy voltage into his body. The artificial limb sheared off, spinning through the air and taking part of his pants leg with it, leaving behind a stump with a ragged end covered in molten slag where the blade had melted the metal. An instant later, the unspent Dust in the weapon detonated, the shockwave slapping across both of us. The two conjured swords were insult to injury, as one caught him in the stomach and the other in the face before I dismissed them. To finish it off, I sighted him in as he began to fall and subvocalized "Ventas," sending a blast of wind slamming into him and driving him the hundred or so feet down to the ground, where he collapsed in a heap. He groaned, attempting to roll onto his back—I had to give him credit where it was due, he was one tough little bastard.

Stilling myself in the air, I sighted down my hand and cast Mana Bolt for good measure. 'And stay down.'

The attack exploded on impact, sending him skidding and rolling across the dirt road. He did not get back up. Abruptly, the lightning stopped and the clouds above dispersed. 'Guess I was right about her being able to hold off Cinder,' I mus ed, turning to find the other fight now that Mercury was down. What I saw chilled me to my bones. I was wrong—dead wrong. Amber had not, in fact, defeated Cinder. Quite to the contrary, it looked as if Cinder had handed the woman her ass.

Both were beat to hell, but Amber was clearly the worse off of the two, considering she looked like a human pincushion. A pair of silver arrows nailed each of her feet to the ground, while another had lodged in her right bicep. A fourth was buried in her left thigh, just above the knee, while a fifth had punched through her chest and either penetrated or grazed a lung if the bright pink bloody foam at the corners of her lips was any indication. My mind came up with a likely scenario: the first had possibly been the one through the bicep, then the one in the meat of her thigh had slowed her down or possibly even sent her to the ground. The two arrows pinning her feet to the ground were most likely to make sure she couldn't get away, while the final one to the chest was a slow death sentence.
'Not going for capture,' I realized, my eyes tracking to a sudden glow. Amber lay on the ground writhing in agony, and while the arrows may have had something to do with it, the line of glowing *something* connecting her face to a fucking Grimm bug of some sort sitting atop Cinder's gloved hand was the more likely culprit.

Dropping into Flash Step again, I reappeared between the two women, my Plasma Blade dragging a line through the middle of the tendrils connecting the woman on my left to the bug on my right. The golden glow of Aura connecting the two faded and Amber went silent and limp. There was a moment of silence as the bug shook itself before diving through the odd red symbol on top of the white glove on Cinder's right hand and disappeared. The glove didn't so much disappear as it seemed to melt into Cinder's hand, reminding me of the cloak and mask the twins had equipped. I felt an immediate power buildup in the air. *Fuck your goddamn power up sequence, it's not a free action,* I thought, casting Ventas in Cinder's face and blowing her off the dirt road, to roll into the ditch.

Moving quickly, I dismissed my Plasma Blade, dropped to my knees, and yanked the arrows pinning Amber to the ground out. I gathered Amber in my arms and Flash Stepped away from everyone else there. Finding a couple of boulders, I set her down out of sight of the road and checked her over. Her title had changed. It still read as 'Fall Maiden,' but the letters rotated slowly through normal text and the sort of eye-stabbing fucked text that I had come to associate with things outside my Semblance's ability to understand. Her Aura was mostly depleted and going down quickly, while her health was at 30% and falling. I began removing the arrows and throwing them to the side, at the same time hitting her with both Heal and my HoT spell—there wasn't time to be delicate here, so I had to hope my spells would heal any damage pulling them out as I had had done. *'God fucking damn I should have spent more time leveling these spells. She's stable, but her Aura is still draining. Fuck, deal with Cinder first, then fix it."

Looking up, I spotted Foxtrot-1 circling overhead. *'Penny, change of plans. Move closer and keep an eye on my current position. If anyone other than me approaches this rock formation, light them up.'*

The gynoid's response was immediate as the Bullhead tightened its orbit and shifted from straight flight to a hover that would allow her to keep the rocks, and subsequently Amber, in sight at all times. *'Do you want me to fire on the other woman, Jaune?'*

I considered it for a moment. I would love to drive her off, but at this point what I *needed* and what I wanted were two different things. I absolutely needed information—combat data about Cinder's capabilities, especially now that it looked like she'd acquired some sort of instant power up. With an idea of her capabilities, I could plan around it as opposed to going in blind later. *'Negative. Only engage if she approaches or attacks the injured woman hidden back here.'*

A roar of wind drew my attention to where I'd swatted Cinder and I Flash Stepped away, dropping
the technique when I came within sight of her. Her left eye was glowing, burning with power to the point that it leaked out, while wind whipped up into a sphere around her. A glance at my minimap showed that her previous phoenix-like icon had changed, replaced by a familiar symbol that I had expected her to have the first time I'd met her—the angular heels forming a hollow heart I recognized from seeing in what passed as 'canon.' More disturbing though was the fact that her information had changed in my Semblance.

Cinder Fall

Cinder's burning gaze shifted back to me and a sword appeared in her left hand. A twitch of my right hand brought the Plasma Blade back to life, the sound rolling over the land around us as we stared each other down. Abruptly, Cinder shifted forwards on her heels and shot across the distance between us, bringing the blade in for a strike. Tracking her with Haste speed perception, my Plasma Blade came up in a casual block. Her sword came down on mine and the smirk that had been forming on my lips died stillborn as her body refused to lock up. She shifted on her heels, bringing the blade in from another angle—high and right—and I met her strike again. The locked blades hung there between us for the span of a breath before the flowed into a sweeping combo of strikes. Taking the Plasma Blade into a two-handed grip, I brought it up and began parrying her strikes aside as I waited for an opening, my blade crackling every time it met hers, sending sparks and flashes of light dancing around us. 'Why doesn't the Plasma Blade cut straight through that thing? It's obviously non-conductive, otherwise she'd have either been fried or dropped it by now. It's also not heating up

Where before, her suppressed level had been listed in the 60s, it was now outside of my Semblance's ability to even guess. There was also the fact that she shared the title of Fall Maiden with Amber now, complete with fuckups. 'Cinder, what the fuck did you do? How? Where did that glove come from and what was that Grimm?'

She noticed me and the wind stopped. She dropped to her feet, her dress flashing in a pattern of orange tracery. Her face was suddenly obscured by what looked like a heat haze as she looked around for her underlings. I wasn't stupid enough to take my eyes off of her to check for myself, but a glance at the minimap showed Emerald was moving slowly towards Mercury's position.

'She's awake. Fuck. If she casts, Gamer's Mind will give me away,' I realized. Well, I did have one way to deal with that eventuality. Reaching for the mental toggle switch for Gamer's Mind, I flipped it down from Defensive to OFF. If worse came to worst, I could deal with Emerald's bullshit Semblance the easy way: large scale AoE attacks centered on my position. I might not be able to perceive her properly, but an AoE wouldn't give two shits about that.
We clashed again before she spun away, her empty hand flashing out at me with her palm splayed out and an instant later, I was thrown backwards by a burst of hurricane force wind. I bounced along the ground twice before righting myself with a chuckle. 'I deserved that,' I mused, before motion caught my eyes. Cinder had conjured up a second sword and joined them at the hilts, a silver line connecting them from tip to tip. 'Recurve bow, unknown composition, unknown draw weight—with Aura, there's no telling what the upper limit is. But it's safe to assume bullet-speed arrow velocity, because otherwise it's a waste of time.'

She put a trio of arrows on the string and fired. As they neared, the screaming sound from before came back as their tips began to glow and I frowned as I caught sight of a faint outline, hidden in the glow. 'What is that? A glyph? A small Bounded Field pattern? Looks sort of like what I saw of the design on that glove with the little Grimm.'

I jerked my own free hand up, a blast of wind from a subvocalized “Ventas,” sending them spinning back towards the woman. One hit the ground in front of her and exploded, kicking up a fountain of dust. The second went wide, while the last blew up nearly in her face—or I thought it did, seeing as I couldn't confirm that with the dust between us.

More screaming announced the presence of a second flight of arrows from above me, and as I lifted my hand to blow them off course, my detection skills pinged and Sense Danger flared to life from my left. I dropped into a dive, just missing having a pair of arrows punch through my left lung followed by a third arrow coming down and exploding where my head had been. 'Okay, she's a fair bit faster than she lets on,' I mused, finding her again as she moved to close the distance between us, the bow breaking apart into a pair of swords and the string between them disappearing.

I blinked as she flung the sword in her right hand at my head, sending it spinning through the air similarly to my own Strike Raid. I batted it aside before closing, swinging my blade down in an overhead strike. The blade in her left hand came up in a block and a sword she flowed into a follow-through strike with her right hand, my own experience summoning blades screamed at me to move. Cinder's dress flared to orange life and even without the nascent elemental sense manipulating wind gave me in the same way manipulating gravity allowed me to sense the specific gravity of objects, I could feel the sudden vacuum as air was drawn in towards her. I dodged backwards just in time as a wave of heat and orange light rolled over me, and the sound of chirping birds was joined by a deep, prolonged roar as orange fire sprang to life in her hand, taking the form of a blade like my own. Her blow went wide and I frowned as she began slowly circling me—no, not circling, stalking.

'Fuck it,' I thought, twitching my left hand and Conjuring up another imitation black keyblade. We shot forward at the same time. Cinder's blades came in from an outwards arc on my left, the non-conductive blade leading. I brought my own blades up, snapping the first away in a parry and attempting the same with the fire blade, only to see the imitation keyblade go red hot at the point of...
contact before her fire blade ate right through it, sending sparks and molten metal blasting off of it from where they met. I dodged back quickly, the conjured blade in my hand falling apart as the magics holding it together failed entirely. 'Okay, note to self: don't try to catch that thing with physical constructs.'

The woman across from me began stalking closer, and I realized what she was doing. Much the same way as I'd tested Mercury, she was testing me. Not liking that idea one bit, I decided to tip things back in my favor. I dropped into Flash Step, reappearing in her face with an overhead strike from the Plasma Blade. Her fire sword streaked in, aiming to cleave me in half from the shoulder, and I smirked under my mask. The chirping of thousands of birds and the jet engine roar of fire was joined by the howl of a blizzard—a pale white blade of condensed, spinning, sub-zero frost and wind spinning up in my left hand and intercepting her weapon. After that, we began trading a flurry of blows, lightning cracking, fire roaring, and wind howling around us as we probed each other’s defenses.

I was forced to admit that with a sword in her hand, Cinder was much better than I was. The fact that both my Sword Mastery and Dual Wield skills were leveling as we fought was testament to that, and it was only Haste perception that allowed me to keep the playing field somewhat level. And then, suddenly, everything changed.

Parrying another of her swipes with the flame sword off to my right, the red-clad beauty stumbled two steps following the path of the deflection before regaining her balance. The jet engine roar of her blade spluttered once, twice, before dying entirely. The heavy feeling of an unsuppressed Aura that had been swiftly climbing as we fought, threatening to crush the air from my lungs, likewise spluttered and died. I blinked as her level plummeted from triple question marks to 13, and the heat haze hiding her face failed entirely. I skipped back and brought my weapons up defensively and across from me, Cinder did likewise as we resumed circling each other. 'Nu h-uh. That's bait,' I assessed. 'Feign power loss, lure your opponent into a false sense of security, then power up again when they get close and it's too late for them to react? I'm not stupid enough to bite.'

There was only one problem with that theory—namely, the fact that Cinder looked suddenly tired, exhausted really, and surprised. I suspected it was an act, and if it was, it was a good one. She cast a glance back over her shoulder, towards where I knew Emerald and Mercury to be. I could just see the greenete trying to rouse the boy, but it appeared Mercury was still down for the count—and even if he wasn't, he wouldn't be going anywhere fast any time soon. A glance at my minimap showed Qrow getting closer, but still a minute or two out. 'Hold her off till he gets here, then we'll double-team her and bring her in. Capture her, find out what she did to the Maiden beyond the obvious, figure out how to reverse it. Sounds like a plan. I think I have enough combat data now that I can call it. Time to end this fight.'

Deciding to go for the quick finish, I subvocalized, “Sleep.”
Cinder wavered, her eyes slipping closed and her grip going slack on the blade in her hand. And then the battle changed again. The crushing power of before was back, ramping up to a height I hadn't seen outside of the Arc twins—and this had well and truly eclipsed what I'd seen from them, by a large amount. More disturbingly, a low moan floated across the space between us as the brunette shuddered in a moment of what looked to be rapturous ecstasy. Golden eyes flashed open and locked on my green under the mask, and she smirked—the effects of Sleep blown off like cobwebs in a hurricane. Her level once more changed to outside my range to detect, and I reassessed my earlier observation. 'Not faking it? Genuinely has a problem keeping a handle on the power, because it's still settling? If that's the case, fuck. I missed a chance to end this.'

Wind exploded out from around her and she shot forward, leaving gouges in the ground as she closed the distance between us. The jet engine roar came back as I caught her blades on my own, only to be thrown completely off my feet, sent tumbling head over heels for several yards before I was able to right myself, only to find her right back in my face. I was forced into close combat again, once more relying on Haste to keep me a step ahead. I parried a thrust, with her physical sword, blocked a low slash at my legs from her fire sword, and attempted to put my boot in her chest between them, only to find her a step ahead, her own foot flashing out to connect with my chest. Wind exploded outwards from the blow, sending me tumbling again before I cast Air Walk and redirected my flight, sending myself hurling off to the side and out of the path of a fireball that had followed her kick.

The fireball exploded off to my side and I brought up my hand, sighting her down and casting Mana Bolt. She dodged and returned fire with an explosive arrow. I threw both the swords in my hands in a pair of Strike Raids before dropping into Flash Step, Conjuring up an oversized two-handed sword as I did. Reappearing at her 5 o'clock, I put all my strength into the swing as she was forced to deal with the two flying blades. The sword in her left hand flashed out, batting aside the Plasma Blade spinning through the air at her, before she began turning. The fire blade in her right hand caught the arctic blade I'd made to counter it and slapped that off to the side as well. In the time between when I'd dropped out of Flash Step and swung my oversized sword, she had parried both my thrown blades and completed her spin, bringing both her weapons up to try to catch my own.

A slab of sharpened steel eight feet long, a foot wide, and several inches thick weighing a couple hundred pounds and driven with Flash Step speed backing it up crashed into the physical blade she'd constructed, forcing it back into the fire blade crossed under it and I saw her Aura flare bright red from the center of the blade. Between the combined forces, the blade in her left hand shattered, and I realized why I was having such a bastard of a time simply cutting through it with my Plasma Blade and why it was nonconductive—she'd created her swords from glass and she'd been dumping Aura into them to keep them from melting or outright shattering.

The woman below me flinched away, closing her eyes to protect them against the spray of glass as my Buster Sword replica passed through the shattered sword without slowing down and met the fire blade under it. Once more, steel melted and sheared off before it could pass the blade, spraying flecks of molten metal all over the place as half the blade went spinning off behind Cinder while the half still in my hands continued its swing, missing cleaving through her dress and chest by a hair's breadth before both halves shattered into light particles as the spell holding them together failed.
Shattered glass flew up from the ground around us, spun through the air and collected, flowing almost like liquid as a nother glass sword appeared in Cinder’s hand and I spun up an arctic blade while conjuring a thick, curved, and dense steel sword in the style of a falchion. Cinder’s eyes narrowed as the fight changed again, her glass sword cracking under the first blow of my falchion while I kept her fire blade at bay. The second direct hit to her blade snapped it cleanly in half and she spun, presenting the fire blade in a defensive whirl of flame as she created another physical sword, this time allowing the more dangerous of her blades to lead while she looked for an opening to slip the glass sword in. I exchanged strikes with her for a moment before presenting such an opening, and as the glass sword slid in I dropped the out of place falchion and the arctic sword, summoning up a pair of the same in hands opposite to what they’d been in a moment before, and shattered her glass sword again before stepping in with a thrust of my own with the arctic sword and reversing the downward swing of the falchion into a swipe that could cut across her breasts if it hit.

Wind exploded around us as she called up her new power again, knocking me back several feet again, though this time I managed to keep my balance. The wind died down an instant later as the fire blade in her hand spluttered and died out and she growled, calling up a pair of glass blades and dropping into a defensive stance—her level dropping down to 38 as her new power failed her. ’Way less of a dip than it was before. Shit. Is she getting it under control, or is it random? Either way, it’s still above my level at the moment.’

I cast a silent Sleep on her, which she shrugged off. I tried Confuse/Sleep combo and suddenly felt like I’d slammed into a brick wall, and I frowned. ’She was at least vulnerable for a moment there, but now mental spells aren’t even working anymore. What the fuck?’ It was like her own Will save didn’t even matter—something was actively no-selling my mental spells now. ’Stop wasting time on shit that doesn’t work, focus on what does.’

Dispelling the arctic blade, I dropped into Flash Step, Conjuring up a second falchion as I went, and reappeared in her face in the middle of a three-pronged attack. My swords swept in from either side, forcing her to block while my booted foot came up in a kick aimed at her groin which, even with Aura, would still hurt like a bitch and leave her temporarily stunned. Instead of outright blocking, however, she twirled to my left—the sword in her left hand coming up to push aside the falchion coming in from her right so that her own blade wouldn’t break, while she shifted outside the range of both my kick and second swing.

Stepping into a short combo, I occupied her attention for a moment, forcing her to focus on turning away my blades and keeping me from shattering hers. When she was out of place to respond, I dropped the falchion in my left hand and subvocalized “Ventas,” sending her spinning away from me. To her credit, Cinder contorted her body and brought her blades in for a defensive spin to ward off any potential follow up on my part unless I wanted to get gutted. Instead of following the blast of wind in with my swords, I sighted her down and tossed off a Mana Bolt. My eyes went slightly wide when her sword flashed out and smacked the Mana Bolt back at me, forcing me to dodge to the side or eat my own attack. I fired off two more—one at her head, which was batted aside with contempt, and one at her feet. I could almost see her crunching the numbers for a moment before she ran towards the second blast and jumped. She cleared the immediate blast, and I raised an eyebrow as
she was thrown skyward. 'Did… did she just rocket jump? I call bullshit!'

Cinder was not idle in her temporary height advantage, as she sent her swords spinning down towards me, conjured up a second pair and tossed those as well, before summoning her bow and sending a trio of arrows following after the swords as she hit the ground in a roll. Glass shattered and fell around me, pelting off my cloak and mask as I smashed the four swords she’d thrown and began advancing on her new position, moving swiftly into a run. The earth rose in front of me and the arrows impacted against my Wall and exploded as I Leapt, flinging my own swords at her and opening fire with a trio of Mana Bolts fired one after another, as fast as I could chant, my hands streaking out—right, left, right—and sending the bright blue orbs downrange in a short bombardment of the area around her.

What I had not expected was the second volley of arrows that had come in behind the first. There had been no sound, no tell as to their having been fired—meaning these were sub-sonic. Either way, they still punched through my Aura and Reinforcement, leaving them buried in my abdomen and just under my left lung where they pinned my cloak against my body.

'The bitch gut-shot me!' I growled internally, as pain racked my body and the scent of burning flesh reached my nose and I realized how they had punched through my Aura—she had coated them in her own Aura and likely super-heated them. The edges of my vision went red, then gray as the arrows continued to burn and a glance at my HP bar showed me that the one good hit she had gotten in had cost me more than 80% of my HP.

I reached down and grabbed them, my gloves beginning to smoke the moment the leather came into contact with metal, and yanked them out—at the same time quietly chanting, “Anesthesia, Heal, Regen,” as fast as I could get the words out.

Across from me, as I hit the ground with glass buried in my guts and dealt with that, the brunette danced around my Strike Raid attacks; her hands streaked out and caught the swords in much the same way Mercury had earlier. The first Mana Bolt was swatted aside by my own sword, as was the second. Her eyes went momentarily wide as she caught sight of me tossing aside her arrows—my cloak and the long sleeve under it each with three holes in them, their edges clearly black where her arrows had burned what they’d touched but my flesh underneath smooth, unmarred and white. Gamer's Body had removed the physical evidence of her attack the moment I'd removed the arrows.

The instant of realization passed as the third Mana Bolt neared her face, only to be countered with a double overhead strike that sent it back down the trajectory it’d come from and would have sent the Mana Bolt slamming into me if I hadn’t seen it coming. I hit the ground, rolled, and came up with a new weapon in hand—a Conjured recurve bow, about the size of Cinder's own, with a conjured aluminum broadhead arrow already nocked. Lightning danced along the arrow as I electrified it, reinforced the bow and string with Aura, drew, and sent it running downrange with a crack! as the arrow went supersonic.
I ignored the message telling me I'd imported Bow Mastery at level 9—now wasn't the time to assess whether my Semblance had accurately judged the skill I'd gained using bows and crossbows for hunting back on Earth. I was, however, mildly annoyed that using a bow hadn't been rolled into Firearms Mastery since that had had a much higher skill level. Then again, using a bow and using a gun were two entirely different skill sets and this was one I had only picked up in the last few years before waking up on Remnant, so I supposed I shouldn't be too surprised at its low level by comparison to my other imported skills. I was surprised that it had given me the skill, considering I was far more familiar with a compound or crossbow.

The look on Cinder's face at seeing me turn her own trick against her was priceless, for all of half a second before she reacted instinctively, dancing to the side and out of the line of fire while bringing one of her stolen falchions in to swat the arrow off to the side. An instant too late, she realized her mistake—why I had let her hold onto my swords, when I'd clearly shown I could summon and dismiss them at will. One of those thick slabs of metal touched the arrow I'd sent downrange, and there was a zap! and a flash of light as the arrow dumped its payload into her body. She locked up for an instant before dropping to her knees.

Cinder's gaze shifted back up and our eyes met again as I conjured up another arrow—this one hissing with the near silent sound of wind spinning around it. Her head tilted down for a moment as her fists clenched at her sides—I had her now and she knew it. And then she arched back and the ground exploded around her as a swirling vortex of wind spun up around her body, lifting her into the air—her mouth open in a silent scream as once more, her eye lit in a blaze of eldritch power. “Fuck,” I growled, loosing my arrow with another crack!

The arrow flew true, punching straight through her wind barrier. A hair away from burying itself in her gut, her hand snapped out and stopped it dead. Cinder dropped to her feet and held the arrow out to inspect for a moment, before negligently snapping it and tossing it aside—where, like the rest of my conjured items, it disappeared into light particles after a moment. A rush of air and a quick flash of light from her dress and hands, and the jet engine roar was back, rolling across the area at double the volume it had previously—she had skipped out on summoning her glass swords and had moved straight to fire swords.

My hands twitched, fingers spinning in a familiar pattern as a pair of Plasma Blades burned into life in my hands and twirled to a stop in an attack stance. We charged, wind exploding around Cinder as she moved while I dropped into Flash Step. The red-clad woman glared as we locked blades again, the heat between us suddenly almost unbearably intense. Where before, we had initially seemed to be evenly matched—even the occasional instance where I had been the stronger of us—that was now clearly not the case as she began forcing our joined blades back towards me. Molten gold eyes met my green through the mask and I knew then that I was being played with. She felt she had the upper hand and she was drawing things out.

“You've lost a step,” she purred across from me, lips twitching up in an almost parody of the look I
was used to seeing on her face in the bedroom.

A glance at my HP bar showed me back up to about half and slowly rising as Regen did its job, but I was running very low on Mana—to the point where I I had a choice now: I could continue this pointless fight and get myself killed, or I could grab Amber and retreat to safety. The only problem with that second option was safely disengaging and keeping Cinder off my back long enough to get to Amber, then get us to Penny and Foxtrot-1.

Cinder shoved her blades outwards, and I allowed myself to be thrown, coming up several yards away and rolling to my feet just in time to see a pair of flaming swords flying through the air at me, thrown like spears, with Cinder herself following right behind with another set of glass swords. Dropping the Plasma Blades that were drawing too much Mana now, I went with reflex that I had drilled with so often with Ruby, Yang, and the others. “Kaiten.”

Heat was sucked out of the air as an icy sphere of spinning Mana whipped into existence around me, shrouding my form in a momentary white-tinted blue glow. The attacks struck home on the spinning barrier and exploded, the resultant bloom of fire swept away and the heat drained from it before it could do any damage. I dropped the barrier in time to Conjure another pair of falchion style swords and once more catch Cinder's blades as she crashed into me and sent me to one knee.

Before either of us could break the blade lock—either for me to attempt to run or Cinder to attempt to skewer me—my detection skills pinged at the same time I felt a massive Aura unsuppress from my 7 o'clock. I managed to catch a faint mechanical sound behind me, and then the sound of a shotgun going off. Following my instincts, I ducked. At the same time, Cinder's eyes went wide and she sprang back.

A massive length of metal slid through the space Cinder and I had occupied a moment ago as a white-clad form materialized at my side. Turning my head enough to confirm my suspicion, I found Qrow standing there, hefting his scythe over one shoulder and pushing a hand through his messy hair to get it back out of his eyes. “Hey,” he greeted, before his eyes shifted back to Cinder.

My own gaze returned to the woman as her face wavered back into heat haze. A moment later, my brain itched as Emerald's green-haired form popped up from the ditch behind Cinder for an instant before the trio disappeared. I could have kicked myself for allowing situational awareness to slip. Cinder had lead me, bringing us closer to where Emerald was waiting with Mercury—potentially in an attempt to try to have Emerald ambush me or otherwise create an opening for Cinder, but with the way she was kicking my ass I kind of doubted it. But with Qrow showing up, their plan—whatever it was—had gone out the window and it looked as though Emerald was looking to secure their escape.

Reacting quickly, I flung one of my falchions out in a Strike Raid towards the greenette's last
position. The blade spun in, before abruptly changing course and veering off to my right. Now sure of Cinder's position, I flung my second falchion at her and tossed out a Mana Bolt after it, the second projectile aimed at the ground. Qrow took off running, following in the wake of the attacks. The falchion was swatted out of the air, but it cost Cinder as the Mana Bolt hit the ground and threw up a gout of dust—effectively ruining Emerald's efforts to cloak them however she was doing it.

Qrow took advantage and launched himself skyward, aiming to cleave her in two and follow through on the pair behind her. Cinder's hand jerked downward in a slashing motion and the ground screamed as it was lit with a line of orange. I had only seen her cast her fire mines using the bow and arrow, but now I realized they were either props or a long range delivery system, because she was perfectly capable of creating them without the weapon.

“Qrow!” I warned, jerking my own hand downwards and sending a Wall exploding out of the ground in front of Cinder's fire mines, tilted at an angle to put it over them to mostly cover them and hopefully shape the blast to come back towards Cinder. To his credit, the white-clad reaper saw the threat as it was forming, along with the wall I'd put up, and made his own escape. He shifted his grip on his weapon and the gun component of his scythe fired, arresting his forward momentum enough to get a foot on the top of the wall and kick off backwards a moment before the mines exploded under it, destroying the construct and erupting into a wall of fire that spread across the road like napalm, covering the trio's retreat as they ran for the barn in the distance—which looked like it had sat unused for a while, if the fading red and white paint and the hole in the roof was anything to go by.

Reaching up to my mask, I began speaking aloud at the same time as I sent a message to Penny. “Foxtrot-1, come around and fire on the barn.”

'Penny, target the barn and open fire.'

'Okay Jaune!' Penny answered, and the armed Bullhead pulled out of its protective circling over Amber's position, the nose gun spinning up and sending a line of red at the barn. An instant later, the barn exploded as the vehicle hidden there went up when Penny's rounds punched through what I assumed was its fuel tank— unless there was a stockpile of Dust in there. I heard a faint, female yell of “That fucker!” from the direction of the barn in what sounded like Emerald's voice.

“Now, neutralize the fleeing targets,” I spoke, at the same time I sent, 'Fire on their heels and chase them into the woods.'

Even with Qrow here, I didn't want to risk dealing with Cinder since it seemed like she was quickly getting a handle on her new powers—not in the close confines of a Bullhead with Amber's insensate body nearby, at any rate. Cinder's threat level was way, way higher than I had initially estimated it and while I might have thought it could be done before, I knew better now.
Yeah, no. She, Emerald, or Mercury would kill Amber first chance they got and there's no guarantee mental spells would even work on them, since Cinder can apparently no-sell them now. Besides, never transport prisoners with the injured. It was a bad idea from the start. And that was assuming we could actually win. With Gamer's Mind off, I couldn't just no-sell Emerald's Semblance and I didn't know if Qrow was resistant to it or not. Likewise, I didn't know if Cinder was a match for Qrow with her new powers.

Penny opened fire, and I turned and Flash Stepped to the rock formation where I'd left Amber. Looking over her, I frowned, seeing her Aura was down to less than 10% and she seemed to be unconscious. Kneeling, I scooped her up into my arms and began walking towards the road while Qrow quickly made his way over. “They got away,” he growled, and I shrugged.

“But not with the prize,” I countered, before again miming as though I had a radio in my mask. “Foxtrot-1, cease pursuit and swing around for pickup.” I sent, 'Penny, need you back here quick.'

The gynoid sent an affirmative and Foxtrot-1 pulled away from where Penny had been razing the tree-line, and incidentally starting a small fire—nothing like the forest fire I'd started in Atlas, but still a good chunk of woods burning off. “How is she?” Qrow asked, moving closer to examine the girl in my arms.

“Losing Aura quickly,” I answered shortly. As soon as we were in the Bullhead, I was going to try to hit up Skill Creation to make something to stop that.

Nodding, Qrow watched as Foxtrot-1 came to a hover a meter or so off the surface of the road in front of us, kicking up loose dirt everywhere as it did. The side door slid open and that was all the invitation I needed as I made the hop inside and dropped to the deck plating, laying Amber's head in my lap as I did. The sound of boots on metal echoed through the Bullhead as Qrow made the leap after me. Penny turned around in her seat, drawing Qrow's attention to her fox-masked face and eliciting a raised eyebrow from the older man. “Should I get rid of him?” Penny asked quietly, and I shook my head.

“No. Get us back to Vale,” I told her, and the ancula nodded, turning around in her seat and hitting the door close switch. Qrow sat in one of the jump seats as the side door slid shut and we gained altitude and speed.

“We're taking her to Beacon.”

I looked up and met his eyes for a moment, frowning. “Shut up, I'm trying to concentrate. Argue in a minute.” Closing my eyes, I focused on what I wanted from Skill Creation and took Amber's hand in
my own as I brought up Meditation and began regenerating my own spent Mana. At the same time, I began going through the active buffs I had on and shutting down everything eating Mana that wasn't also contributing to raising or regenerating my Mana. 'Come on, I need something to let me give others Aura. That one should be a basic Aura control exercise.'

Skill Creation kicked in and awarded me with Aura Transfer, which would allow me to transfer Aura from one target to another by touch. 'Skill reads like I can transfer from people other than myself.' I noted, then shrugged it off. It wasn't germane to the situation. I could potentially borrow Aura from Qrow, but I would only ask if this failed. My eyes shifted to my HUD, locking onto my Mana bar as it stopped increasing. At the same time, Amber's Aura fell to 9%. I sat and waited, watching— and the entire time, Aura Transfer leveled, with the first ten levels coming within the first thirty seconds of simply holding it active on her. 'God damn, level disparity between us is ridiculous,' I mused, watching as its growth slowed but did not stop. 'It may get into the 30s by the time we get to Vale, if not higher.'

Her aura did not tick downwards again over the course of several minutes, and I sighed. 'Okay. Let's say we've got ninety minutes to get back to Vale, before my Aura runs out, followed shortly by Amber's unless Qrow wants to help. I'll ask him if it gets under 5%.'

“She's still losing Aura, but it's slower than it was. We've got time to get to Vale,” I announced quietly. Pulling up Air and Gravity manipulation, I focused on the Bullhead and lightened the aircraft, while at the same time streamlining it. My Mana took a dip, but I reached into my side pouch and pulled out a pair of faintly glowing blue potions.

“Wait, are those…?” Qrow asked, eyebrows climbing towards his hairline.

I smirked under my mask. Twisting off the cap on the first, I tilted my Fox mask up a bit and brought the bottle to the hole I'd stitched in my neck gaiter specifically so I could drink or eat with it on— a recent modification I'd also made to the one on my 'Shiro' outfit. I downed the potion and my Mana shot up again while my regen rate also went up, countering the loss I was taking sustaining Amber while speeding us on our way. Pulling my mask back down, I dropped the spent bottle into my side pouch before twisting the top off the second potion. Tilting Amber's head back, I parted her lips and tipped a dribble of blue potion past them.

Her face was scarred now—the scars following the same pattern the goop connecting her to the Grimm bug had left—but they looked like they had been there for years. The scars themselves didn't even register as a concern at the moment, compared to the possibilities they brought up. 'Acid-based maybe? Too bad I couldn't get a sample. Or the bug itself. Where did that fucker go, anyway? Did Cinder's glove have some kind of space-expanded storage field on it, or was it something else? The fact that she absorbed the glove would imply that, if the Grimm was inside it, she absorbed that as well. That can't be good.'
Amber coughed once before reflexively swallowing as I drained the rest of the potion into her. 'Okay, that's bought me a few percent. She's got way more Aura than me,' I assessed. Still, it had stopped her loss of Aura for the moment, so I wouldn't complain.

“Restoratives,” I answered shortly, before asking, “Why Beacon?”

“Ozpin,” Qrow answered shortly, and I nodded. “I can feel it from here—her Aura doesn't feel right. Like it's only half there and bleeding out. Oz might be able to stop the bleeding, so to speak.”

“Uh huh,” I deadpanned. While I couldn't *sense* what he was describing, my Semblance could see its effects—telling me that I was either missing a skill, or I needed to level Detect Aura further. Fact of the matter was, I was coming to over-rely on visual cues from my Semblance when I should be focusing on the sensory input I was getting from my various detection skills. It was something for another time, though. At the moment, I had a dying Maiden to deal with and I needed to make a decision fast. “Might,” I quoted. “Whereas Fox Hunt has a dedicated medical facility.”

“Got an Aura Healer, then?” Qrow asked, sounding a bit smug as he did, and I went over my mental list of base personnel before I shook my head. I'd need to get one of those, and the sooner the better. “Well, Beacon does.”

’If Beacon has the better facilities, then we should take her there. I can sneak in and try to help later, if I have to,’ I mused, before nodding. “Pilot, change course for Beacon Academy. Radio ahead, let them know we're coming in with injured.”

Qrow shifted his gaze to Penny before adding, “Tell them it's a Code Corvus, that should get you ground clearance to land by the medical wing.”

“And let Ozpin know you're aboard?” I asked, raising an eyebrow under my mask. “Corvus being the genus crows, ravens, rooks, and jackdaws belong to, if I recall correctly.”

“Clever,” Qrow admitted, turning appraising eyes on me. “You know, you don't act like a kid with amnesia.”

I blinked, thankful for the mask over my face as I shifted my gaze to meet his. “Excuse me?”

“It's the swords that give it away,” Qrow smirked, holding out one hand and shifting his fingers and flicking his wrist in an all too familiar pattern, “Jaune.”
Sudden Stop

The Name of the Game

a RWBY/The Gamer crossover, SI.

Arc 7: Fall of Fall

Chapter 28: Sudden Stop

Several things happened all at once. Foxtrot-1 lurched to the side, slamming my back and head against the folded up jump seat behind me. A massive energy buildup registered to my senses as the air suddenly took on a tang of ozone thick enough I could taste it and I felt the hairs on my arms and the back of my neck standing up. A green glow lit the compartment bright enough to hurt my eyes as Penny disappeared from the pilot's seat and reappeared standing between where I held Amber and where Qrow sat, swords out and whirling as it looked like she was building up a blast that would, in all likelihood, explode the Bullhead like an over-pressured soda can. On the other side of the ancula, I could make out a smirk crossing Qrow's face and a dangerous glint in his eyes as he reached for the weapon at his back.

“Stand down!” I yelled, drawing the pair's attention away from each other.

Penny shifted slightly and her masked face tilted enough to glance at me while still keeping Qrow in her sights. “He—”

'It's okay, Penny. I'll deal with it,' I sent, and after a moment the ancula nodded. “Go make sure we're not going to run into a mountain or something, okay?” Almost as an afterthought, I added, 'Could you send a message to Neo, as well? Ask her to go out somewhere public with 'Shiro' and be seen. I need an alibi.' I would have myself, but I had dropped my links to the twins and Neo as soon as I'd summoned the Bullhead, so I could concentrate on the fight. In retrospect, I probably shouldn't have. I would reestablish the links now, but I needed to focus on dealing with Qrow and Amber. And Gamer's Mind was still off, so I flipped it back up into the 'defensive' position.

The energy buildup dissipated as Penny's swords retracted under the small half-cape she wore, which I assumed hid her backpack until she could get replacement weapons made. Casting one last look at the man across from me, she hurried back into the cockpit. Qrow's eyes followed her as he took his hand off his scythe, currently in sword form. “That's the little one with orange hair, isn't it?”
“I can neither confirm nor deny—” I began, only for the man across from me to snort.

“So, yes, in other words,” he nodded, cutting straight through my bullshit. Leaning back in his seat and digging out a flask, he took a pull and then offered it to me. I shook my head in the negative—now was not the time for booze. Well, not for me, at any rate. Apparently, any time was drinking time for Qrow.

I recognized the motion he'd made, of course—it was the same flick-twist-press movement of fingers and wrist required to shift my Blazefire Sabers from their storage mode to saber mode, while the inverse pattern would shift them back. A similar motion would unfold the weapon into rifle mode. The problem was that, apparently, the motion had become so ingrained as to have become reflexive—a twitch of muscle memory that carried over to every sword I used. If I really were a video game character, I'd say it was just my character animation, but I didn't have that excuse. Frowning, I decided to see if I could roll for bullshit.

“Let me see if I've got this straight. You see two people who happen to hold their swords the same way and you automatically assume they're the same person?” I asked, and he shook his head.

“Nah. I've been keeping an eye on your group since you showed up on Patch.” He smirked, before adding, “The first time. Besides, if I'd had any doubts, your little friend there just confirmed it.”

I groaned quietly. Reaching up, I pulled my Fox mask off, then pulled the neck gaiter down. Qrow raised an eyebrow, and I allowed the illusion over my hair, face, and eyes to drop. “And where do we go from here?”

Qrow shrugged. “That depends on you, I suppose. We'll start with that,” he suggested, gesturing towards the young woman in my lap. “What were you doing out here?”

'Ten million EXP,' I mused, though the quest had yet to complete either way. Did this count as success? Failure? Partial success? I wasn't sure. I would have to check the quest log later, but considering I had yet to receive a notification either way, the quest could still be in progress. I wasn't entirely sure how to answer his question, either. Finally, I shrugged. “I was sent.”

The man across from me stared for a long moment before chuckling and taking another swig from his flask. “Sent' huh? Did they say why?”
“No,” I denied, digging into my side pouch with my free hand and coming up with the two messages I’d been sent. I held them out and Qrow took them. His eyebrows headed for his hairline as he read them. “Those appeared out of thin air.”

“Yeah, it's her chicken scratch,” he murmured almost too low for me to hear, before pocketing the paper and returning his red gaze to me. “And you make it a habit of just doing what you're told?”

Shooting him an annoyed look, I shifted Amber into a more comfortable position before answering. “No. I do try to make it a habit to do the right thing when it's staring me in the face—or dropped into my lap—however.”

“Heh. 'The right thing,' huh?” He cast a glance at the girl at my feet before asking, “Do you even know who she is?”

I considered how much to tell him, before giving a mental shrug. “The Fall Maiden. Though, what a 'Maiden' is, let alone the Fall Maiden, I have no idea. I don't like operating on a lack of information, so what's a 'Fall Maiden'? Is it something unique, or part of a set? Is it a family thing or something else? And more importantly: what's her name?”

There was a calculating look in the older man’s eyes as he considered the question. After a moment of thought, he said, “There are always four, at all times. They're named for the seasons: Fall, Winter, Spring, and Summer. It's not a family thing. How do you know what she is but not who?”

“I don't think I should say. It's not that I don't trust you, but... actually, yeah, I just don't trust you with that, sorry,” I shrugged. “I trust Yang and Ruby, but how do I know you won't go running your mouth the moment I tell you? No. It's too fucking risky. We're already well outside my comfort zone here.”

“Hrm,” Qrow hummed. “You're assuming I won't just tell Oz you're the Fox.”

I nodded. “There is that, yes. So, let's talk about the elephant in the room, shall we? Are you going to tell Ozpin?”

Qrow’s lips twitched as he fought a grin. “That depends on you, I suppose.”

“Smartass,” I sighed. I was beginning to suspect that Yang’s entire family was trouble, and she was simply the culmination of all of their annoying quirks, distilled down into a curvy blonde package.
Of course, Ruby had also grown up around Qrow, so odds were good that the only thing keeping her own little quirks in check was crippling social anxiety—which was swiftly going the way of the dodo, now that she finally had friends to socialize with who didn't walk on eggshells around her, or weren't simply being nice to her because of Yang. “Fine. We'll play Twenty Questions. What's her name?”

“Amber,” he answered, before immediately launching into asking his own question. “I caught a good bit of that fight, coming in. Why'd you wait so long to take down the guy you were fighting? I saw the fight between you and the guy in…” Qrow trailed off, frowning as he closed his eyes. After a moment, he shot a look towards Penny, then back to me. “Oh. Oh, I see,” he murmured. He gestured between Penny and myself with the flask. “I knew I only sensed two of you there, and neither of them was you. You can suppress your Aura output to zero. That means the other two were her,” he pointed at Penny, “and someone else. One of the other girls, I bet. The one with the illusions.”

I blinked. 'How did I not sense him at all? Was it a range thing? He wasn't on my minimap, but I don't remember if I checked the full map or not. Fuck. Just how many people are watching me?’ I wondered. “How do know about her Semblance?”

Qrow rolled his eyes. “Please. I've been keeping tabs on the local underworld goings on for years. I believe you know one of my contacts.”

“Hei,” I realized, and Qrow nodded. Shaking it off, I nodded. “Yeah. That's how we did it.”

“So you're playing both sides.”

His tone was neutral, but I got the feeling the question was anything but. “No,” I denied. “I'm playing my side. With Fox Hunt, I actually have a side now.”

“Uh huh,” Qrow nodded. “And what does your side want?”

“I'd think that would be plainly obvious by our actions. Then again, we haven't really done much yet,” I mused aloud. “I want to keep Vale safe—from all threats. Grimm, assholes, Atlas, you name it. I live there. I can't live there if someone comes in and starts wrecking shit.”

Chuckling, the older man shook his head. “You don't even know what you're up against, do you?”

“Grimm, assholes, and Atlas,” I deadpanned. “Most threats fall into one of those three categories. Unless you know something I don't?”
“I know plenty that you don’t.” Qrow snorted softly. “What’s your beef with Atlas?”

I raised an eyebrow at that as I considered the question. On the one hand, I didn't exactly trust him not to go blabbing my secrets. On the other hand, having a sympathetic ear fairly high up in Ozpin's organization would be very handy—and Jen's story was nothing if not heart-wrenching. The problem there was that it could very well drive a wedge between Ironwood and the others. I would have to give it more thought before I decided one way or another. “Ask me again some other time,” I finally answered.

Frowning at that, he nodded and moved on. “Who were those three? The one in red is the leader—I know that much.”

“I couldn't say,” I denied.

Qrow raised an eyebrow. “You mean you won't.” I shrugged in answer and he added, “Right now, I've got you for theft, destruction of property, and attempted murder—”

“Theft and destruction of property, maybe. Attempted murder, no.”

“If you're working with them and didn't report it, it counts as attempted murder in the eyes of the law. Doesn't matter if you tried to stop it. The law doesn't care much if you got a guilty conscience.” The man looked insufferably smug as he laid that out for me.

“Yeah, no,” I shook my head. “If you wanted more details about what I was doing, you could try asking instead of resorting to backhanded threats.”

“Then help me understand.” Leaning forward in the jump seat, he asked, “What are you doing with them? Why are you helping them? Why steal Dust for them?”

“Because I don't think the woman in red is entirely responsible for this,” I gestured down towards Amber. “I've seen her operation from the inside. She knows too much to be working by herself. My gut tells me she's working for or with someone. Another nation maybe, or someone high up in one of the other nations with a grudge against Vale. No idea why they'd target Amber here, though—other than the power boost that this 'Maiden' thing confers. I mean, sure, it'd help with personal combat but it won't exactly level a Kingdom.”

“You'd be surprised,” Qrow sighed. “If you won't tell me who she is, then where did she come
“Fuck if I know.” I’d never asked and my Semblance hadn't told me.

“Then what's her plan?”

Running my free hand through my hair, I took a moment to check Amber's condition again—her Aura had dropped another percent. I should be able to keep it in check until we arrived at Beacon, or so I hoped. Hitting her with Observe, I frowned at what I saw there—which must have looked odd to Qrow, given how I was sort of staring into the middle distance while I looked at her, looking like I'm reading something he can't see. There wasn't much I could do about that, though, since I needed the information Observe provided. 'Debuffs. Aura Bleed, which sounds pretty self-explanatory, and Soul Leech—which I have no idea about. If Aura is 'the light of the soul,' she's bleeding out Aura, and Cinder's stolen part of her power... yeah, that's not promising. I don't think I can fix that.'

Shifting my attention back to the Hunter across from me, I answered, “I don't know. She hasn't exactly told me. I'm working on it. Why do you think I'm at least giving the appearance of going along with her? She doesn't trust easy, but I'm getting close—I think.”

That was not entirely true. I knew Cinder had originally planned to open up a path into Mountain Glenn under Vale and lure in the Grimm beneath the city. I planned to have Fox Hunt clear that tomb before she could do that, though. After that, however? I had no idea. I was kind of hoping she'd start being forthcoming with more information by then. Until then, however, I had to bide my time and wait.

Shaking his head, Qrow said, “That's not good enough, Jaune.”

Sending the man a frustrated look, I said, “I do know she wants the White Fang in her pocket. Badly. That tells me she wants manpower and people who aren't squeamish about killing humans, which means whatever it is is going to be big. She also wants to spring Roman Torchwick soon.”


“That one's my fault,” I admitted. “Partly because she's worried about the Fox, due to that little exhibition match I set up. No idea if today's going to change that or not. Partly because I told her I'm going on a long-term assignment outside of Vale and wouldn't be available for a while.”
“Beacon, in other words,” Qrow surmised. “How were you planning to keep tabs on her, if you're not there?”

“My partner.”

Taking another pull from his flask, Qrow leaned his head back against the hull of the Bullhead and closed his eyes, going silent as he thought. That was fine with me—I was getting tired of answering his questions anyway. Shifting Amber again, I leaned back and closed my own eyes, focusing on pouring mana into her. I lost track of time, until I felt the ship decelerating and dropping altitude as the engines began to spin down. The Bullhead shook slightly as the landing gear deployed, then again as it touched down. Opening my eyes, I caught sight of a level notification as Aura Transfer hit level 20. Closing it, I pulled up my neck gaiter and slipped my Fox mask back on before reapplying the illusion to my eyes, face, and hair. After a moment, the engines shut off completely and the side door opened.

I hefted Amber up into a bridal carry and began to follow Qrow as he stepped out of the cabin. Penny turned to look at me and I shook my head. 'Stay with the Bullhead, in case we need a quick exit.'

'Okay, Jaune,' she sent back, turning back around in her seat.

Waiting for us on the landing pad were Ozpin and Goodwitch, with a gurney beside them. Qrow was speaking quickly to them and as I stepped out of the Bullhead, the pair shifted their gazes to regard me and the woman in my arms. I made my way quickly across the landing pad and lowered Amber onto the gurney, but kept her hand in mine. Goodwitch began securing the straps that would keep Amber in place while we moved and affixed a lead to the end of the girl's right index finger, since I had her left hand. A small pair of displays lit on the sides of the gurney, giving a readout of various things—heart rate, blood pressure, temperature, and Aura level among them. “I've managed to slow her Aura loss, but that's all.”

Ozpin's eyes tracked down to where I held Amber's hand for a moment before he smiled faintly. “Come. Walk with us.” Turning towards the school, he asked, “Glynda, would you?”

“Yes, Headmaster,” the blonde nodded, drawing her riding crop and gesturing at the gurney, which began moving along behind them.

I followed the silent trio into the tower, and from there into an elevator. Pulling out his scroll, Ozpin held it up to a reader beside the digital floor selector readout and an instant later, another selection lit for a lower floor. Ozpin tapped the new button for what I now knew to be the bunker built beneath Beacon and the elevator moved smoothly downward. “So tell me, Mr. White Fox—it is 'White Fox,
'isn't it?’ Ozpin asked, glancing over towards the patch on the right side of my cloak.

‘Well, it's not like there's a 'Red Fox,' a 'Blue Fox' or an entire sentai team worth of Foxes,’ I mused idly, before answering the Headmaster's question. “Fox is fine.”

“Fox, then. What exactly lead you to be in the company of the young Miss Amber here?’” Ozpin asked, and I frowned at that.

’He knows who she is.’ I shouldn't be surprised—Ozpin had always seemed like the Dumbledore type, though whether that was 'benevolent wizard' or 'spider spy master' I wasn't certain. “She a friend of yours?” I asked, wanting to see where he went with that.

“You could say that,” he nodded. “Amber was actually on her way to Beacon for business with us when she was attacked. Which leads us back to my original question.”

The elevator dinged and the doors slid open, revealing a large chamber ahead of us, lit by what looked like gas sconces or torches burning with green flame. The floor was polished to a high sheen, reflecting the odd, emerald green lighting and the entire place was deathly silent save for the very faint hum of machinery and electricity, along with the constant low hiss of burning flame. It was much larger in person than it was on a blueprint—to the point that the scale, knowing what I did from the blueprints, was like a small city unto itself. “Well. This isn't creepy or ominous at all,” I deadpanned. “Qrow, didn't you say we would be taking her to your medical facility, where she'd be seeing an Aura Healer by now? If I'd known you were planning to go ahead and just inter her body in this crypt, I'd have kept going to Fox Hunt and found my own Aura Healer.”

Qrow snorted softly as we filed out of the elevator, the gurney moving along behind Goodwitch and providing the only sound aside from our boots and Ozpin's cane clacking on the tiled floor. “He's got you there, Oz,” Qrow tossed out. “As for your Aura Healer, Glynda and Oz are both qualified, and this is the safest place for her.”

Ozpin adopted a wry look. “I admit, the décor is a bit…”

“Theatrical. Foreboding. Dark Lord chic, perhaps?” I suggested, and the older man turned his head enough to give me a half-amused smile as he walked. Seeing he wasn't rising to the bait, I shrugged mentally and switched gears. “To answer your question, a little bird told me.”

“Oh?” Ozpin asked, raising one eyebrow.
“Someone I trust,” Qrow answered.

“Someone I know?” Ozpin asked, a knowing look on his face as he did, and Qrow shrugged. “I see.”

Turning over what I'd learned, I hummed as something occurred to me. “So, you know Amber, and you know what she is. You sent word to have her come here, to Beacon. And less than a day's travel away, she's ambushed by someone who also knows what she is and has a means of usurping her power for herself. Sorry to be the bearer of bad news, but you have a leak—that, or you've been careless with your information and you have a very determined spy on your hands.”

“Yeah, that's what I was thinking,” Qrow agreed, trading looks with Ozpin and Glynda. I could see he wanted to ask, but was holding off because I wasn't exactly 'in' with their little circle.

“How was her power stolen?” Goodwitch asked, providing a change in subject for her colleagues and delaying the inevitable infighting over where the blame for this incident lay.

Pulling up the memory, I focused on what I wanted and called up Genjutsu, projecting an illusion in front of our group of the scene I'd witnessed between Cinder and Amber, with Cinder's face blurred in the same heat haze method she had tried using. Ozpin paled, while Qrow's eyes went hard, and Glynda winced. “In case you missed it, that's a Grimm,” I pointed out the glove, and the bug resting on top of it. “How is she doing that?”

Qrow turned and locked eyes with me under the mask and I shook my head at his unspoken question —I wouldn't have asked if I knew. “I have some idea,” Ozpin muttered darkly.

Seeing as they weren't going to tell me, I let it slide and dismissed the illusion. We came to an intersection with a large symbol on the floor that I couldn't quite make out in the low light, nor was I really paying attention. Ozpin turned left and we followed. “So, the million lien question: what is a Maiden?”

Ozpin's expression lightened slightly, and he turned a brief look on me before asking, “Tell me, Mr. Fox, what is your favorite fairytale?”

I blinked at the seeming non sequitur. 'I don't actually know any of the local stuff.' Feeling particularly like a smartass for doing so, I answered honestly. “I don't exactly know any of the fairy tales passed around Vale. However, I have been reminded of two or three in particular that I do know recently—but I don't think that they're what you want to hear. So why don't you tell me which story you were thinking of?”
“The Story of the Seasons,” Ozpin answered, and I frowned as I realized I recognized the name.

“That… I think that’s one of the books I brought Cinder, back when I was still doing black market runs,’ I realized. “I’ve heard of it, can’t say I’ve read it though.”

“Long story short,” Qrow cut in before Ozpin could get started, and earning an annoyed look from the Headmaster, to which Qrow grinned, “Man becomes a hermit. Four girls come along and look after him, if you know what I mean,” he wagged his eyebrows, earning a quiet groan from Glynda and a chuckle from Ozpin. “Eventually, they convince him to rejoin the world. In thanks, he grants them power to ‘share their gifts’ with the people of Remnant until the end of days.”

“Your nieces must have loved having you tell them stories, Qrow,” Glynda muttered, her words laced with sarcasm.

The white-clad Hunter snorted. “Yeah, well, there’s a time and a place for stories — this isn’t it. He doesn’t need fairy tales and allegories, he needs facts. And for your information, they loved it when I told stories — because I tell the best stories. So,” Qrow shot me an annoyed look, “fact: the story’s true, for a certain measure of ‘truth.’ Fact: wars have been started over them before, back when they were fairly common knowledge. Fact: the other three are in serious danger, because someone out there has a way to steal their power—a guaranteed way of doing it that circumvents all the stupid rules these things normally follow. Fact: that someone can control Grimm, and that is bad news no matter how you look at it.”

“That still doesn’t answer my question. What is a Maiden?” I repeated.

“A weapon,” Qrow deadpanned.

Ozpin shook his head. “To some,” he admitted. “Once upon a time, a symbol of hope— before they were slowly erased from history. And to a very small number, guardians of Remnant itself. But, for all intents and purposes, think of the mantle of a ‘Maiden’ as a sort of second Semblance, capable of manipulating the elements without the presence of Dust, in addition to enhancing the effects of Dust.”

I blinked. “So, magic,” I surmised, and Ozpin raised an eyebrow at that.

“Exactly like magic,” he agreed. “Genuine magic use fell out of favor long, long ago with the rise of
Aura and for other reasons. Oh, there are some that can still use it to this day, but those individuals tend to rely just as much, if not more, on Aura. But the Maidens are something more than that. They are… forces of nature, in human form.”

“Wait. Genuine magic is a thing?” I asked, glancing between the three Hunters there. I had thought, on some level, that my Semblance was unique—that the fact that it could grant magical ability was either specific expressions of Aura simply mimicking magic, or maybe something only possible because of my Semblance interacting with people. I noticed that Qrow looked faintly amused at that, for some reason, but I wasn't going to spare the time to find out why.

“It is, in fact, 'a thing.'” Ozpin nodded. The headmaster shot me a sidelong look before asking, “Tell me, why did you intervene?”

“Aside from being dropped pretty much on top of the situation? Because it was the right thing.” Though, I was beginning to regret my decision to under sell my abilities in that fight. I wanted them to overestimate me, to not have an idea of the full scope of my abilities, and to constantly suspect I was just toying with them. As Shiro, I could point out the simple fact that I had fought 'the Fox' at a pace he hadn’t used on them. It was the sort of twisty, counter-intuitive logic that would lead them into potentially endless speculation on what I might be capable of with no hard evidence as to what I was capable of. They would build up a specter of something dangerous enough that they go to great lengths to avoid confrontation with the Fox and, by extension, Fox Hunt. And then they were going to talk. Cinder was going to report back to whoever she was working with, and the last thing I wanted was whoever that was thinking that coming up against me would end well for them.

'Alternatively, I could have just blasted the shit out of Emerald and Mercury and scared Cinder off. Except going in with guns blazing still sounds like the dumbest possible thing I could have done. I could have potentially grabbed Amber and flown away. No, she'd have likely thought I was working with Cinder and tried to escape from me—in which case I'd be right back to square one. Or I could have tried talking… no, again, any properly paranoid Huntress would have called bullshit even if I warned her she was walking into an ambush, and while I was standing around flapping my gums Emerald would have been doing her thing and either cutting Amber's throat or hitting Gamer's Mind and blowing my cover. Stop wasting time second guessing yourself. If you feel like you've fucked up, do something about it.'

Pulling myself from my self-recrimination, I asked, “What else can you tell me?”

Ozpin turned enough to nod to Goodwitch, and the green eyed blonde cleared her throat, adopting what I suspected was her 'teacher' voice. “The Maidens have existed for thousands of years but, as with nature, the seasons change. No two seasons are alike. When a Maiden dies, her power leaves her body and seeks out a new host—ensuring that the seasons are never lost and that no individual can hold onto the power forever.”
“So, not passed along in a bloodline, like the Schnee Semblance,” I mused aloud. A memory of my and Ruby’s first meeting with Ozpin surfaced—something I had been wondering about for a while now and had been working with Ruby to unlock. Baiting my metaphorical hook, I cast a line. “Or the Silver Eyes.”

Ozpin’s head jerked in my direction so fast I heard his neck pop. Glynda's eyebrows went up at that, while Qrow's eyes narrowed as he shot a look between the three of us. “No,” Ozpin agreed, after a long moment of tense silence. “Not like those,” he said, confirming my guess. I could see by the look in Qrow's eyes that we would be having words about this later.

“And the rules of how it chooses a new host?” I shot Qrow a look. “Convoluted and finicky?”

The older Hunter rolled his eyes. “Like you wouldn't believe.”

Glynda shot the man an annoyed look, but didn't contradict him either. “At first, the only thing that was certain was that the powers were specifically passed on to young women.”

“But that's not the only rule,” I surmised, to nods from the other three. “That one is pretty obvious, in a 'name on the tin' sort of way. So, it always goes to young women, then—every time, without fail?”

It stood to reason that it would, otherwise you'd get the old 'maiden, mother, crone' triumvirate goddess myth, and I had yet to see evidence of it. Of course, that didn't mean it didn't exist, just that my knowledge of the various Remnant mythos was limited. Well, non-existent really. Doing that particular bit of research was climbing upwards on my list of future projects. Though, to be more truthful, it would actually go on my list, where before I hadn't considered delving into myths beyond factual history. Maybe I should have put more weight on those 'myths,' considering the world I was in.

'It's like those games where, if you—the player—had just studied the local myths and legends, you would have been prepared for what you went up against. Or in books where the characters mostly end up ignoring history except for the one guy who doesn't, and ends up saving the world because he realized they were dealing with White Walkers or whatever the local equivalent scourge was.'

“There are exceptions,” the blonde murmured.

Qrow shot her a dry look. “Meaning if a woman kills one, odds are about fifty-fifty that the power will transfer to the assassin.”
“Given what you've said so far, I take it to mean that one of those rules is probably some nonsense about the power passing to the last female in the Maiden's presence, or the closest, or the last person she sees,” I speculated, and judging by their reactions I'd gotten pretty close. “But not this time,” I pointed out.

“Not this time, no,” Ozpin agreed, turning again and heading towards a door that opened as he approached. Unlike the halls, the lighting in the room was bright, fluorescent white. The room was cold, sterile, and smelled like a hospital and as I stepped in and caught sight of the beds lining the room, I discovered that it was a hospital of sorts—or at least a medical wing.

‘Who does their cleaning down here?’ I wondered. ‘The place is huge, and yet it's spick and span. And you can't just hire anyone to do it. It'd have to be someone in on things—or at least to the point that they are willing to keep the huge, secret, underground bunker beneath Beacon quiet.’

He moved over to one of the beds and drew down the sheets before nodding to Glynda. The blonde disconnected Amber from the device reading her vitals and unstrapped the restraints on the gurney before making her way across the room to a small closet, containing what looked like hospital clothes. Gathering some in her arms, she turned and frowned at us. “If you would please leave the room, I'll get her situated,” she instructed.

I glanced down at Amber and checked her Aura—it was down to 5%. “I don't think I should.”

“It'll be fine. She's made it this far. We can take over from here. Come on,” Qrow nodded towards the door.

Casting a last worried glance at Amber's Aura, I released her and moved to follow Qrow, Ozpin trailing after me. A notification popped up, letting me know that Aura Transfer had hit level 25 and gained its first evolution: generic Aura transfer. Blinking at that and wondering what it meant, I made a note to dig through my Skills menu and investigate later—when I wasn't surrounded by people who would definitely notice me taking a minute to state blankly into space as I dug through my menus and read skill descriptions. 'Still, if it only now got the ability to transfer 'generic' Aura, what have I been doing?'

The door slid closed behind us and I took up a position leaning against the wall beside it. Qrow stalked into the hall and pointed at me. “You stay there.” He turned and walked away, gesturing for Ozpin to follow.

While they moved, my thoughts turned back to the skill that had just leveled. I was pretty sure that, in my haste to come up with a quick fix for Amber's problem that I had missed something—namely,
that I already had a similar skill that I'd made and used on the twins not too long ago, when they first got the masks and cloaks. 'Well, it can't be the same skill, because the Semblance would not have allowed me to make it, otherwise—meaning it's a variant. Like everything I've made using Mana Bolt as a base. Check it later and figure out what's different.'

Closing my eyes, I focused on my enhanced hearing and activated Listen. The clack of boots echoed for a time before the pair stopped some distance away. "What did you learn?" Ozpin asked quietly, and if it weren't for the tomb-like silence of the place, I wouldn't have been able to make it out.

Qrow sighed, and I picked up a note of frustration in his voice as he answered, "He's good, and he's trying real hard not to show how good. He throws out elements like they're candy, Oz."

"It's not uncommon for a Semblance to grant elemental manipulation," Ozpin countered.

"For one element, maybe. I saw evidence of at least three: lightning, earth, and either wind or cold. No Dust involved. Illusions, as you saw. Ranged energy attacks of some kind. Creation of physical objects. Flight. And he's kept her stable since the fighting stopped." Qrow chuckled softly. "We've got a genuine magic user on our hands, and I don't think he's even fully aware of it. Sure, after this he's probably going to be thinking long and hard about it, but from what I gathered, up 'til now he's just passed it off as having a particularly strong Semblance. Get Glynda to confirm it, if you don't believe me."

"I will," Ozpin agreed. "Can we trust him?"

Qrow grunted. "There's the rub. Says he's not picking sides, 'cause he's got his own."

"Really."

"Yeah. But the thing is, we could use him. He's got an army, and it's getting bigger by the day. He's invested in Vale. His side sounds a helluva lot like exactly what we were doing anyway, only way more active about it. I think, if you explain what's going on, he's not going to say no," Qrow pitched, and I frowned.

'Why are you backing me? Why aren't you telling him who I am?' I wondered. The best answer I could come up with came back to the fact that Cinder had somehow found out about the Maiden—specifically, where she would be and when—and Qrow didn't want a repeat of that. He took information compartmentalization and OpSec seriously.

'Maybe. Or maybe he just doesn't want to piss off the guy with the standing army in Vale. Seen from
their side of things, we could cause a whole lot of damage in a short period of time—and that's not even counting the Grimm it'd draw in. Then again, that's one of the bigger reasons I've had Fox Hunt focusing on Grimm removal—for PR. Once we land that big contract, things should be set on that front for a few months. Just need a large scale deployment to prove we can handle it. I'll have to work something out with the girls later.'

After a long moment, Ozpin finally said, “Alright. I'll leave it to you. If he accepts, get him a scroll.”

“I think it'd be better coming from you, Oz,” Qrow hedged.

The headmaster chuckled quietly. “You've already established a rapport.”

“Fine. But you owe me,” Qrow grumbled. “Let's get this over with.”

The sound of boots clicking against the tiled floor announced their return and I dropped Listen. Opening my eyes, I shot them a glance as they approached. I pushed off the wall as Ozpin stopped beside me and the door opened. “Mr. Fox, thank you for stepping in today. You didn't have to, and in doing so you have, if not prevented a disaster, at least delayed it and given us a chance to prevent it. I would like to talk some time, when you get the chance. Unfortunately, I believe my schedule will be rather full for the immediate future. If you'll follow Qrow, he will lead you back outside and answer any questions you may have.”

The Headmaster extended one hand and I took it, finding the man's grip firm but not crushing. 'Confident, but not overbearing,' I assessed, before nodding. “I look forward to it. If there's anything I can do to help,” I glanced at Amber's form through the door and trailed off, finding Glynda sitting by her bed and holding her hand in much the same way I had.

“I'll be sure to let you know,” Ozpin agreed, releasing my hand. A grin twitched across his lips as he added, “Though, these are hardly the actions of the 'rogue and thief' you claimed to be, the first time we met.”

I shrugged. “I didn't have a read on you and I didn't have the contacts in Vale or the resources to deal with the hack tool, so I spun a line of bullshit—which it seems you saw right through.”

“Quite,” the man nodded.
“Did you manage to do something about that, by the way?” I asked, and he gave a half-shrug.

“We're upgrading Beacon's security to deal with it,” he admitted, before turning to look at Amber.

I nodded, waving for him to go ahead. “Do whatever you can for her.”

“I will,” he promised before moving into the room. “I'll take over, Glynda. Would you be so kind as to check in on us in,” Ozpin glanced at the clock on the wall, “two hours? In the meantime, please call James and let him know we'll be needing the stasis units.”

“Yes, Headmaster,” Glynda nodded, pushing up out of her seat and heading for the door, while Ozpin took the chair Glynda had vacated, taking Amber's hand in one of his and his cane in the other. As soon as Glynda was clear of the door, there was a faint flash of green light and a green sphere surrounded Ozpin, Amber, and the bed. Before the door closed, I noticed that the second hand on the clock on the room's wall had slowed noticeably.

“Did he just slow down time?” I asked, gesturing back towards the room as we headed for the elevator.

“Heh. Yeah, that trick gets people every time,” Qrow chuckled.

I hummed quietly, then decided it didn't matter at the moment. Ozpin's Semblance, cool as it was, wasn't as important as the little conversation he'd had with Qrow. “So, Ozpin told you to try to recruit me for whatever this,” I gestured around us, “is. What is this, exactly?”

“Did he?” Glynda asked, turning an arch look towards Qrow, who nodded. “I see.”

“Oz wanted you to check him,” Qrow nodded at me, “and see if he's like you.”

“Like me?” Glynda asked, then frowned as she turned a skeptical look on me. “Please bring up your Aura,” she began, and I shook my head.

“And give you something to track me down by? I think not,” I deadpanned, and Glynda's eye twitched in annoyance. “Whatever curiosity the Headmaster has over what I can or can not do is going to have to wait.”
“Mister Fox,” Glynda began, only to stop as Qrow put a hand on her shoulder.

“He’s right. It can wait,” Qrow shrugged. “It's not a big deal either way.” Given his conversation with the headmaster, that was a blatant lie, but more for my benefit than Glynda’s most likely.

“Fine,” Glynda hissed.

‘When's the last time she got laid?’ I wondered, shaking my head. 'Someone needs to let off some stress.'

“To answer your question,” Glynda began, pulling me out of my thoughts and drawing a smirk to my face under the mask.

‘You sure you want to answer that question, Ms. Goodwitch?’ I mused.

“We are an organization which has been around in one form or another for thousands of years now. It is our sworn duty to protect Remnant and safeguard its secrets from those who would seek to use them to bring the world to ruin. The Maidens are one such secret.”

“Like I said, they used to be pretty common knowledge,” Qrow added. “Problem is, they drew the wrong sort of attention. We pulled them out of the limelight and have kept them mostly safe, since then. They'd all but faded into nothing but legend, until now.”

“And now someone's actively hunting them,” I pointed out, and the pair nodded agreement. “So, this group of yours have a name?”

“Not as such,” Glynda denied.

“Harder to track something down if it doesn't have a name,” Qrow smirked.

Qrow snorted in suppressed laughter and Glynda turned a glare on the both of us. “No,” she ground out, before pointing at the cross dangling off Qrow's neck. “The symbol of the cross is the simplified form of the first known Bounded Field used,” she explained, and I blinked. Pulling up her left sleeve, she exposed a simple bracelet—an even, silver cross inside a circle on a chain. I remembered Ozpin also had one, an old Gothic style cross in silver with a black orb in its center, pinned to the collar of his green turtleneck. I didn't recall Ironwood having one in the animated series, but then he wore a high collared military jacket, so he could have one hidden under it somewhere.

We arrived at the elevator and Glynda called it down with her scroll. “How popular is this symbol that you can use it and assume anyone else wearing one is part of the 'in' crowd?”

“Not very,” Qrow shrugged. “But then, our group is small enough that everyone knows everyone else—so it's not like we'd mistake someone else for one of our own.”

“It's also a symbol shared by a few members of older faiths. Particularly, those who either worshiped the seasons, the Maidens themselves, or the four basic elements,” Glynda supplied.

Qrow shook his head. “They don't pray to fire, or water, or whatever. They pray to the spirits of those elements like they were individual gods,” the man corrected.

“It's a matter of contention,” Glynda argued, and Qrow rolled his eyes.

“What contention? I've been there.”

I shot the two an amused look. “Where is this?”

The two older Hunters traded a glare for a moment before Qrow answered. “There are some secluded places here and there. Up in the mountains around Vale, for instance. They keep to themselves, mostly. Don't like outsiders. Most of them are under a permanent Sanctify effect—Grimm won't go near them. I got hurt clearing out Grimm on the mountain below one of them a few years back—didn't even know the place was there, before that. They took me in for a while and I picked up a few things. Point is, they've got crosses up everywhere.”

“Its some of our number believe it's where the truth behind the Story of the Seasons originated,” Glynda sighed. “Doctor Oobleck will gladly talk your ear off on the subject, if you'll let him.” The elevator came to a stop and opened with a ding. “This is my stop. Qrow, do try to take this seriously,
“Would you?”

“Oh, sure, you bet. I'll even break out the good whiskey,” the man snarked, and the blonde stepped out of the elevator in a huff. The doors closed behind her and Qrow leaned against the wall beside the floor selection panel. “Dust, that woman needs to get laid.”

“Something tells me you keep offering and she ain't biting,” I deadpanned and he shrugged.

“I like a little challenge every now and then,” he admitted. Meeting my eyes, he brought a finger to his lips before pointing up towards the ceiling. It didn't take much guesswork to figure out his meaning—the walls have ears. We rode the rest of the way to the top floor in silence. “Stay here and hold the elevator,” Qrow said, stepping out and walking into what I assumed to be Ozpin's office, if the clocks and gears were any indication.

The older Hunter moved over to Ozpin's desk and tapped his scroll to the top of it. I couldn't see what happened, but he reached down and plucked something out of what I assumed was a drawer in the desk before making his way back to the elevator and hitting the button for the ground floor. From there, he lead us across the grounds and back to the landing pad. As we approached, I heard Foxtrot-1's engines spin up and Penny waved from the cockpit. I returned her wave and we slipped inside, dropping into the fold-out jump seats on either side of the hull as the door slid shut behind us and we lifted off. “Let's head back to your place,” Qrow suggested.

Pulling off my Fox mask, I shot him the most deadpan look I could muster. “Sorry, Qrow. I know I'm attractive and young, but I like women.”

“Real funny, Jaune,” he rolled his eyes. Digging into a pocket, he fished out a dark colored object and tossed it at me.

I caught it in the air and raised an eyebrow. “It's a scroll.” And unlike my other two scrolls, this one was black.

“Yeah. Try and keep it separate from your personal scroll, if you have one. Don't want to answer one as the wrong person, and you've got three of yourself to keep track of,” he smirked.

Shooting the man an unamused look, I pointed out—entirely too casually to be casual, “And so you decided it'd be a good idea to hand me a device that has a camera, microphone, and tracking device that likely has back doors in it to high hell that you, Ozpin, or anyone else in your little club can use
to snoop on me whenever you feel like it? No, thank you.”

Looking moderately impressed, Qrow asked, “You are paranoid, aren't you?” Assuming it was rhetorical, I didn't bother to respond with an answer. “It's not bugged and the tracking feature can only be enabled from your end. We made sure of that.”

“I'm supposed to take your word for it?”

Qrow shrugged. “Trust has to start somewhere.”

I did not like the idea of carrying around a portable listening device, but he had a point. Besides, with my Semblance, I could give the illusion of trust and still have some measure of security. Inside my Inventory, it couldn't be tracked and my Semblance should, theoretically, alert me to anything screwy with it. Maybe. I'd have to test. Until then, I could go along with it. “Thought I had to pass some kind of test or get approval to join?” I asked, and he shook his head.

“Oh, no. You're joining. And even if there was a test, I'd find a way to waive it. No, you don't have a choice,” Qrow denied. “I've decided you're too useful to just leave floating in the breeze. Oz has pretty much agreed and Glynda will back his call. Jimmie will get over it, but I don't think he'll have too many qualms. The Fox ticks a lot of his boxes—military, serious about security, skilled personally. Just stop running your mouth so much and he'll be fine with it. Us four are the ones calling the shots and things get a hell of a lot easier when you only have to convince two other people to get something done.”

Powering on the scroll, I was greeted with the typical user setup screen. Humming in thought, I began setting it up for my Fox alias. “And what makes you think I'll just agree to that? I've told you already, I'm dealing with the woman in red and Fox Hunt is poised to take on any threat that pops its head up in Vale. What's in it for me?”

“You said it yourself. I'm too useful. I could cut ties right now and you wouldn't do anything about it because I'm already doing exactly what you want anyway. Try again.” I could tell he was probing, trying to both get a read on me and see how far he could push— I had to make sure he understood that I wasn't a pushover and was perfectly willing to push things into hard bargaining. I wasn't unwilling to compromise, but I couldn't give the impression that I worked for them as opposed to with them.

Pulling out his flask, he downed a swallow before shaking his head. “Nah. You want to join. Otherwise, you wouldn't be setting that thing up,” he pointed out, gesturing towards the scroll in my hands.
'Oh god damnit,' I groaned internally. 'What did I just say about bargaining?' I couldn't deny that he had a point there. If I hadn't already decided to join, I'd have just pocketed it. By going ahead and setting it up, I was pretty much tacitly agreeing. 'Shot myself in the foot on that one.'

“Let me put it this way. This benefits you as much as it does us. You get contacts, access to information, and allies—leaving you in a better position with your self-proclaimed mission of protecting Vale. We get someone in Vale with a force capable of reacting quickly to threats that's homegrown and not Atlas military running around scaring people. I get someone on the inside of that woman's operation. It's mostly win/win.”

“And you're not worried that I might fuck off, because I'm…” I trailed off and he chuckled.


“I am.”

“Then we're all on the same page,” Qrow shrugged.

Frowning, I asked, “Why trust me at all? I mean, I figured you and Ozpin of all people would be against an unknown joining your little brotherhood.”

Qrow took on a wry look and shook his head. “I suppose that's because you come with recommendations.” He patted the pocket with the two notes for emphasis. “You broke my niece's arm and she didn't kill you for it. I heard that story from Yang's side, after it happened. It sounds an awful lot like tough love to me. She's not telegraphing as much, at least. And Ruby,” he chuckled. “She won't shut up about you. I've seen the way you're helping those two and the effects it's had. You care for them. And that's good—because if you didn't, I wouldn't hesitate to gut you like a fish.”

“Is this the 'angry, overprotective relative' speech?” I asked, raising an eyebrow. “If so, Tai already covered that one. Did a pretty good job of it, really. Something about crushing my nuts like grapefruit, if I recall correctly. I'll tell you the same thing I told him: I'm not dating Ruby and/or Yang. We're friends. That's all. I have a girlfriend already—four of them, for fuck sake. I'm not exactly looking for more.”

“Uh huh. Oh, sure. That's how it starts. I've seen it before, so I know what I'm seeing when I look at the way you deal with all of them—and the way they act.”

I blinked. “How long have you been stalking me?” Assuming he started tracking me down about the
time I showed up on Patch, he could have realistically seen me as all three of my alter egos at various times.

“Long enough. Just make sure you don't break either of their hearts,” Qrow warned, and I nodded. “Glad we understand each other. Now, that scroll should be pre-loaded with our contact information. Have you finished registering it?”

“Almost,” I answered, slipping my Fox mask back on and holding the scroll up until it had a good view. Snapping a picture for the profile information, I saved it and removed the mask again. “And done.”

“Good,” he muttered, pulling out his own black scroll as it buzzed. He checked it before turning it so I could see without looking through the back of the transparent screen. “That just went out to everyone on the list. I’ll probably be getting texts here soon,” he grumbled, compacting the device and sticking it back in his pocket.

Opening up the contacts list, I raised an eyebrow as I found the four I was expecting to find, in addition to Port, Oobleck, Tai, and several others. I closed it and shot Qrow an amused look. “Are you sure it's a good idea to have a list of your known members just laying around?”

“Probably not. I've been saying the same thing for years. It's not everyone, but I still think it should be cut down further,” Qrow shook his head. “One of us will be in contact with you in the next few days, once this thing with Amber settles down.”

“I'll start doing some research and see if there's some way I can help more directly. With any luck, the woman with the other half of her power will call me and I'll be able to get a look at it from that end,” I supplied.

Qrow frowned, crossing his arms as he slowly suggested, “There's no way you can just kill her right then, huh?”

I raised an eyebrow at that. “Someone uses an unknown, Grimm-based method of stealing part of the power of your Maiden and you suggest I kill the woman holding onto that part? Sounds like a bad idea, to me. Yeah, there's always the possibility that the power could rubber band back to Amber. Then again, there's the possibility that, because it wasn't taken 'naturally,' that the half the woman in red has just goes poof—gone forever. Or it transfers to whatever female is nearest the woman in red at the time and we're right back to square one.”

“It sounded like a bad idea to my own ears, but I thought I'd ask,” Qrow admitted. “Let me know
how that goes. *Not* by the scrolls. We need a code phrase for a meet-up and a place to meet."

“How about Junior's Club? It's fairly neutral ground, as he's a mutual contact,” I suggested, and he made a disgusted face.

“No thanks. I don't do *clubs*. If we're meeting anywhere, it'll be a bar. There's a place on the seaside docks, called the Crow Bar—”

“Bullshit,” I laughed, and he grinned.

“I shit you not. It's where I took Yang for her first drink. I figured she'd appreciate the pun,” he shrugged.

I blinked at that. “You know, shit like that makes me wonder if you're the best or worst uncle, ever. You are a bad influence on that girl.”

“Heard that before.”

Nodding, I said, “Fine. How about this. If one of us needs to meet, we'll say we feel like a drink.” Qrow nodded, and I continued with, “followed by, 'how does whiskey sound' or something—the drink indicating the urgency of the meeting.”

“Or what, or who it's about,” he agreed. “So, whiskey would be your normal priority meeting.” Chuckling, he added, “If I say coffee, it's probably going to be about Ozpin or the 'brotherhood.'”

That made sense—I knew Ozpin had a thing for coffee from the series. “Bourbon is going to be high priority. Assume if I use that one, it's about the woman in red.”

Qrow shot me an amused look, asking, “So, she likes bourbon, huh?” I did not rise to the bait. I didn't need him thinking I was compromised because I was getting my dick wet with Cinder. “We can make a list later. One last thing, before I head out. The Silver Eyes thing. Explain.”

Shrugging, I answered, “I threw out bait. He bit.” When that failed to elicit a response, I rolled my eyes. “Well, I know some basic facts: it's a bloodline, Ruby's part of it so probably her mom as well unless it's from Tai's side, and it's got some pretty nifty powers with it from what we've been able to work out.”
“You mentioned bloodlines, and the Schnees. Does that mean what I think it does?” he asked, and I shrugged again.

“If you think it means ‘a trait passed down through a family,’ then yes. The Schnee Semblance is pretty much the classical definition of a ‘bloodline’ power. We only recently figured out she had it and how to use it, and we’ve been experimenting with it off and on ever since,” I explained.

Frowning, Qrow asked, “What can it do?”

I was reluctant to answer that one, and when I didn’t answer immediately, his focused gaze became a glare. “We only know the basics,” I temporized, and he made a ‘go on’ gesture. “You know what an Illusion Barrier is?”

“I've heard of it,” he nodded. “They're more spoken of in Mistral.”

That was news to me. “You're going to have to explain that one later,” I demanded, and he grinned, knowing he had something I wanted now. “She can see them, make them, and enter and exit them if they’re already present. Not sure what else it can do. I'd suggest asking Ozpin. He knows—hell, he knew the moment he met her. Pretty sure that, and the fact that you trained her, is why he gave her an early invite to Beacon.”

“Why am I not surprised?” the old crow grumbled.

“Well, if you find out more, do me a favor and tell your niece. It’s kind of stupid to let someone wander around with an untrained power if you've got some idea of what it can do,” I requested.

“Sure. Now, if you'll excuse me, I need to go track someone down and wring her neck,” he grumbled, pushing himself out of his seat and hitting the door controls. Tossing a wave over his shoulder, he stepped out of the Bullhead and dropped like a stone.

Moving over to the door, I took a look around, managing to spot a small, dark form turning for a different part of the city. 'He really is an animagus. That's kind of cool,' I mused, hitting the door close switch and moving up to the cockpit. “You did good today, Penny. Thanks for your help.”

“You're welcome, Jaune. I like helping when I can,” she chirped, and I could hear the smile in her voice as she did. After a moment, she asked, “Did I go too far, trying to blast him?”
“A little,” I admitted. “You jumped the gun. If you'd just sat here and kept calm, I might have been able to convince him he was mistaken—or at least lied convincingly. But you jumping to my defense like that pretty much confirmed his suspicions.”

“I'm sorry,” she began, and I shook my head.

“Just be more careful next time.” Reaching over, I snagged the side of her head and pulled her into a hug against my side, before kissing the top of her head. “I appreciate that you're trying to look out for me. I really do. But you need to have a little faith in me.”

I let her go and Penny righted herself, before turning her masked face to regard me. “But weren't you going to do the same thing with Neo, Melanie, and Miltia? You were planning to leave them here, before you were sent away.”

I opened my mouth to tell her that was different, then closed it with a click of teeth. Was it really all that different? I'd been training with them, teaching them skills, and helping them level for a while. If I was being honest with myself, I could have seriously used one of the twins' help with Mercury. With Melanie or Miltia there, either of them could have held him off long enough for me to help Amber double-team Cinder, then come back for Mercury. With Neo there as well, she and either twin could have handled Mercury with ease, even without Neo's illusions giving her away. The problem with bringing Neo was that, unlike the twins, her Aura would have given her away. The twins at least had a cloak that acted to hide their Aura.

'Raven—assuming it was her seems like a safe bet at this point, with Qrow's confirmation—didn't exactly give me a chance to change my mind, there. Hell, she may not have let me take one of them. I've got no way of knowing,' I sighed quietly, wondering at the woman's reasons for sending me to find Amber. 'How did she even know?' Assuming Raven was working solo was a good place to start. So, the question wasn't how she read my mind—especially with Gamer's Mind running in defensive mode. The question was, how did she do it without telepathy?

'The most likely sequence of events from Raven's perspective would have likely begun with following me. So, we know she watched us meet with Cinder at least once. Assume from there that she took an interest and began tracking Cinder as well. Maybe she watched Cinder planning out her attack, or maybe she caught her setting up her ambush on Amber. Alternate theory: she's working with or for Ozpin. I kind of doubt it, but it's possible. In which case, if Ozpin knew the Maiden was coming and was working with Raven, he could have had her on overwatch… except that doesn't fit with what I saw. If she was working with Ozpin and knew Amber was in danger, why didn't she do more? Ignoring the question of Ozpin's involvement for lack of proof, I also don't have hard evidence that Raven knows who or what Amber is, so ignore that question too. We're back to assuming Raven caught on to it through Cinder. What then?'

'Well, around that time I got the Maiden quest. So, from Raven's perspective, as she's watching
Cinder get ready to ambush some other woman since she obviously had eyes on that situation, I freak the fuck out over what appears to be nothing and start trading worried looks with the girls. If she's seen us do it before—and I'm pretty sure she has—odds are good she's figured out we've got a way of communicating silently. If it were me, I'd throw out some bait to see what happens—thus, the first note? I react like that's exactly what I was looking for and start getting ready to head that way. I get into an argument with the girls and we start wasting time.

'At this point, one of two things happens. Option one: Raven gets tired of listening to us argue and settles it herself. Option two: Raven makes a judgment call about how long it'll take me to get there and intervenes only minutes before Amber would have been jumped. This also implies that, since I got there only a few minutes before things kicked off, my Semblance was dead wrong on how long I actually had to get there. It also means that there's absolutely no way Qrow would have made it in time, since my fight with Mercury didn't last all that long and that's about when Cinder started eating Amber's power. Alternately, maybe I'm wrong there and she could have held them off longer. That doesn't make sense to me unless Cinder's positioning when I arrived meant she would only act either as a backup or once Emerald and Mercury had worn Amber down, assuming they didn't put her down instantly. Hell, if that was the plan, then maybe she could have held them all off until Qrow got there, but me putting down Emerald and keeping Mercury busy would've forced her hand—forced her to act sooner than she'd intended, if only to keep us from taking out Mercury and then double-teaming her. Then again, Amber could have been dead and going cold by the time Qrow got there. Trying to figure that one out is an effort in futility. That aside, what does Raven get out of it?'

I didn't have an answer to that—the woman's motivations were a mystery. 'The flip side of the coin is, Raven's working with someone that can read minds. In which case, that person likely read one of the girls—likely Neo since the twins have the mask and that should cockblock most mental effects.'

Shaking my head, I put thoughts of Raven to the side for the moment. 'I'm going to have some ass kissing to do when I get back. I was kind of an asshole with the girls, I'll admit.' I ran a hand through my hair, resisting the urge to start yanking on it. I had never dealt with having a girlfriend—let alone more than one—potentially going into live-fire combat with someone looking to kill them. Grimm were one thing, but dealing with humans was entirely different. I wasn't necessarily worried about Grimm, where the girls were concerned. I trusted them to handle themselves, or to use their own judgment about whether or not they could take on whatever Grimm came their way. People, on the other hand, were infinitely more dangerous than Grimm. Humans could think for themselves, and in far more devious ways than any Grimm I'd ever seen.

'Is it really so different, though?' I wondered. 'No, it really fucking is. Problem is, there are human—and faunus—threats in this world that they might not necessarily be able to avoid or run from, and at some point it's probably almost inevitable that they're going to run across someone looking to kill them. What the hell am I supposed to do about that? I can't be there for everything and I can't always tell them to stay out of things, even if they'd let me—which, as we've seen, they won't.'

An errant thought crossed my mind, and I snorted softly with laughter. 'Could always take the Negima route of the battle harem.' I mean, I'm halfway there already. And it wasn't like I was
planning to stop training with them. Well, not taking into consideration time needed for Beacon, anyway.’

If they wouldn't be able to stay out of fights in the future, and didn't want to, then the obvious solution was to make sure they could handle them to a point where I could feel comfortable with it.

'We have kind of slowed down our leveling here recently, in favor of Fox Hunt, crafting, and other projects,’ I hummed.

I blinked as I realized that the feeling of being watched had returned, having stopped around the time Qrow showed up to Cinder's little party. Hearing opportunity knocking, I took a glance at the fuel gauge and, seeing there looked to be enough to make it back to Fox Hunt, turned to the gynoid beside me to ask, “Penny, would you take Foxtrot-1 back to base and get it refueled and rearmed? I've got something to take care of.”

Penny's masked face turned to regard me for a moment before she nodded. “Okay, Jaune. What should I tell the others?”

“I don't know,” I chuckled, slipping my mask back on. “I'll be back.”

The ancula nodded and I made my way to the rear of the craft, opening the door and dropping into open air. Taking a look around as I fell, I noticed that we weren't far from Fox Hunt at all. A quick cast of “Wings” and I came in for a landing on top of one of the nearby buildings, carefully this time, now that I had a grasp of the limitations of the spell. Turning to look directly at the point in space where I felt like I was being observed from, I said, “We need to talk.”

When nothing happened, I moved to find a place to sit, then dropped down and crossed my arms as I settled in to wait.

While I had a minute, I opened up first my Quest Log then my Journal, digging through them until I found the quest to save Amber. 'It hasn't finished,’ I assessed. 'So, assume it's still in progress and it'll only complete if she wakes up or dies, I suppose. That seems the most likely choice.'

While I had a minute, I went ahead and opened up my Skills menu. Moving down through the list, I rolled my eyes at what I found there. 'Yeah, I already had Aura Transfusion. Okay, so what's the difference?’ I asked myself, opening up the skill descriptions and comparing them. The difference was blatantly apparent, from the skill description, but the short of it boiled down to that Aura Transfusion was for delicate work, where I could potentially damage the target by giving them too much Aura. Aura Transfer ignored that and flooded the target with as much Aura as possible, as quickly as possible. By default, Aura Transfusion filtered my Aura down into something compatible with the target: a sort of generic, neutrally aligned Aura. Aura Transfer didn't get that ability until its first evolution at level 25, and instead dumped Aura into the target unfiltered and raw. There were implications there as to there being consequences for doing it for a prolonged period of time, or a large volume of Aura, but my Semblance wasn't helpful enough to tell me what those consequences
were, nor how long was too long or how much was too much— that, or it didn't know. 'I'm going to have to find an Aura Healer and ask at some point. Put it on my list of shit to do.'

Several minutes later, red light washed over the area as a red and black distortion appeared in the air several feet in front of me. I stood and waited a moment to see if anyone was coming through and, when no one did, figured this was Raven's way of inviting me to come to her. 'Well, you called this meeting, Jaune. Hope you're ready,' I mused, and stepped through into the black.

There was a moment of disorientation as everything went dark, and then the world returned as I stepped out onto a flat surface covered in gravel. Looking around, I took in my surroundings. 'Rooftop—pretty high up, too. I don't think I'm in Vale any more, though.' None of the sounds or smells I'd come to associate with Vale were present. Traffic, radios, the susurrus of people moving and talking, the smells of food, smoke, human odor… all of it was simply gone. In its place was the scent of old rust, mold, rot, and decay—like metal, wood, and drywall left exposed to the elements for years, with an underlying tinge of something long dead. The area I was in looked like some sort of industrial district, like that of Vale, and the building across from me appeared to have been some sort of water treatment facility if the over-sized pipes were any indication.

Idly, I noticed that the background music was much more ominous than anything I'd heard in Vale—more like something out of one of the Resident Evil games. A look to the side showed that while there were many tall buildings around, few of them had been completed and all of them were in various states of disarray. A glance at my minimap showed the place was vividly bright red with spirit density and absolutely full of Grimm. Odds were even as to whether I would be able to make an empty ID here if I needed one for anything.

'Where am I?' I wondered. I was about to bring up my full map when my detection skills registered a presence. My head snapped to my left, where a second portal had opened and deposited the figure I'd been both expecting and dreading. The background music changed again: piano and strings, and vaguely ominous in the way of music that tended to precede a boss battle—it was the sort of thing that tended to follow around most Final Fantasy villains, really. Something about it tickled my memory, but I didn't have time to try and place it now as I took in the newcomer. Female, long dark hair, dark red gauntlets, a black and red Japanese style robe top and red obi, short skirt, some sort of leg gaiters or stockings, and a weapon at her left side. Most ominous was the mask—white, with thin red markings, but not shaped like any Grimm mask I recognized. Catching sight of the nameplate above her head, I resisted the urge to groan.

Raven Branwen

???
The portal closed behind her and I waited for a moment as she simply stood there. When she remained silent, I realized I was going to have to get this conversation started myself. “Nice place you’ve got here.”

“Mountain Glenn,” she answered the unspoken question, and I nodded in understanding. That explained why the whole thing screamed ‘dead city.’ It also explained the high Grimm concentration. What I remembered from the show said the entire city had fallen to a Grimm incursion.

“Why did you send me after the Maiden?” I asked, deciding to cut straight to the heart of the matter.

The woman's masked face tilted slightly to the left as she seemed to consider. After a moment, she said, “To see what you would do.”

I blinked. “That's it? To see what I would do?” The woman across from me nodded and I frowned. “And do you know who she is?”

“Yes,” Raven answered after a moment of consideration. “I helped train her.”

“So, you knew what she was and apparently how important she was, you knew she was going to be attacked. So instead of sending your brother to help, or Ozpin, or Glynda, or all of the above—or hell, just 'porting her to Beacon, since it's obviously within your capability—you decided to send me. The guy who, less than a month ago, woke up in a hospital with no knowledge of the world. The guy who, not even counting the memory problem, didn't graduate Signal before that—let alone attend Beacon or one of the other academies. The guy who works with the woman ambushing her on a regular basis.” I had begun pacing at some point and I paused to cross my arms and fix her with a glare, most of the effect of which was lost under the mask.

“I have to ask, are you fucking insane?!” I asked, my voice rising into a shout at the end.

“I do not have to explain my actions to you,” she denied, mirroring my crossed-arm pose.

I shook my head, pointing one finger at her warningly as I did. “Nuh uh. Oh no you don't. You want something out of me, otherwise you wouldn't have been following me around as long as you have. And if that's the case, then the answer is 'no,' unless I hear a goddamn good reason.”
The woman across from me was silent for a long moment before finally nodding. “Do you spoon feed a child that can feed itself?”

Blinking at the question, I shrugged. “If it's sick, sure. Otherwise, no, they can pick up a spoon and do it themselves.”

“And do you keep a constant vigil over a child that has been taught not to do dangerous things?”

I was beginning to see where she was going. “Not past a certain point, no. At some point, they have to take responsibility for themselves. Is that what you're getting at?”

“Yes,” she nodded. “My Semblance allows me a great many options for dealing with any given situation, as I'm sure you can imagine. While there are limitations, the largest four costs I've found are in Dust, time, attention, and motivation.”

“Motivation?” I echoed. “Whether or not you feel like helping?”

The woman's head tilted slightly to one side for a moment before she nodded. “Good Dust is expensive. There's not enough time in the day and I have to sleep eventually. I can't focus everywhere equally. And it's not my responsibility to save everyone.”

I would say it sounded callous, but it really wasn't. It was, essentially, the Superman dilemma. If Superman has the power to save everyone, why doesn't he? Because—ignoring the personal cost to himself—in doing so, he would take away free will, privacy, and independence. Humanity would become dependent on someone else making their decisions for them, keeping them from hurting themselves, and providing for them. It would create a world of adult children at best. And while the situation wasn't quite so bad here, I could see the parallels. “You don't want them to become dependent on you, otherwise they'll never learn to rely on themselves—and when they most need your help, you might not be there. Am I right?”

“Yes.”

Sighing, I nodded. “And you said you helped train Amber, so you know what she's capable of.” It wasn't a question, but she nodded anyway. “You expected her to look after herself.” I chuckled, shaking my head. “Yeah, I'm guilty of that mistake, too. Doesn't stop me from feeling like it's my fault that I didn't do more.”

“Why didn't you?” the woman asked, and I turned a curious look on her—hidden as it was.
“Why didn’t you?” I countered, my tone deadpan. “Could I have disabled Mercury and Emerald? Yes. Probably instantly. But that would mean showing some of the most useful cards in my hand right off the bat. There's no guarantee we could have put down Cinder, or that she wouldn't have gotten away, or just outright killed one of us. How did she get Amber, anyway?”

“Arrow ricochet put one in her arm. After that, Amber couldn't do much with her staff.”

“You didn't see fit to step in at that point?” I asked, receiving no answer. “So, it just got worse from there,” I assessed, getting a nod. “As I was saying… you don't lead with your best stuff, you always hold something in reserve, and you trust the people you're fighting with to handle themselves. Then again, I'm new to this whole 'combat' thing, so what the fuck do I know?” I shrugged. And wasn't that a big part of it as well? Simple inexperience on my part. I had fought Grimm before, yes, but as I'd said before: there was a hell of a difference between fighting Grimm and fighting people. I had fought people before, yes—fist fights, which took little more to deal with than showing you were willing to hurt the other guy worse than he was willing to hurt you. Never had I been in actual, life or death combat against another person. Even running around Remnant, all of my fights against humans had been either cheap shit like mental spells, or the one legitimate fight against Weiss where I'd outclassed her so badly that I was never in any danger.

'Maybe I just haven't been taking it seriously,' I mused. 'When you can just put someone to sleep, or order them to obey, or if things get nasty kill them in any one of a myriad number of ways and they can't fight back I guess it kind of removes any sense of danger from things. Limiting myself from using those skills means I have to rely on actual combat, and I'm still a novice at best as far as that goes—but because I have them, they're always there in the back of my mind as fallback options. And here I am, again finding myself staring down the same problem—that I'm taking this world and the threats in it for granted. I got lucky twice. There won't be a third time. No more fucking off on this, Jaune.'

Pulling myself out of my thoughts, I asked, “So, that's why you've been watching me—to see what I could do? Why? Voyeurism isn't polite, you know.”

She shook her head. “No initially,” she denied. “I was watching you because I was hired to, by Atlas. There was an open contract out on you after the incident at the Atlas black site. The reward was too good to pass up.”

“Oh huh,” I hummed, slowly reapplying my buffs and getting ready to try to cast an empty ID. If she wanted to bring me in, I wouldn't be going quietly. Maybe I could talk her out of it, though. After all, she hadn't 'ported me straight to Atlas when it was clear she probably could. “What made you change your mind?”

“I haven't, yet,” she shrugged.

“So, Amber was a test,” I guessed, and she nodded. “Did I pass or fail?”
“Undecided,” Raven murmured. “Convince me.”

I raised an eyebrow at that. “And how am I supposed to do that?”

The woman across from me shifted subtly, her stance lowering just slightly as her right hand flexed, while the left settled atop the tube sheath of her sword. “As a warrior. You have thirty seconds to prepare.” After a moment, she added, “Don’t hold back this time.”

’Fuck,’ I mentally hissed, and started throwing on the last of the buffs I’d dropped in order to conserve mana while I’d kept Amber stable. Thankfully, I’d had Meditation running in the background since I handed her off to Glynda and my Mana had filled up again since then, so I wasn’t entirely fucked on that front. On the other hand, this was a full fledged Huntress—there was no way in hell I was going to win this fight. ’She’s already established that she can track me through Invisibility. Instant Dungeons are the only thing that even slow her down, on that front. Can’t run, can’t surrender, can’t fight.’

I growled and reached for the mental switch for Gamer’s Mind, slamming it home into the ON position. My mounting panic blew away like fog in a stiff breeze. ’Try. It’s another test. She knows I can’t win. She knows that I know. She wants to see what I’ll do. Worry about the ’why’ later, deal with the ’how’ now. Specifically, how am I going to put on a good enough show to impress her?’

With that thought in mind, I opened up my Inventory and began selecting equipment. The cloak was removed in favor of ‘Shiro’s’ new armor. The Blazefire Sabers I intended to use as ‘Jaune’ were dropped into the slots reserved for over the shoulder draw at my back, while one shield was equipped on my left forearm, and Ascalon was dropped into the slot at my left hip for side draw. After that, I began bringing up defensive spells. I could rule out trying to use an ID to slip away—it would defeat the purpose at this point.

Across from me, Raven’s head tilted slightly again, and I realized that must be about the best way one could emote while wearing a mask—I’d been wondering that, myself. “Trying to wield more weapons than you have hands is typically a bad idea,” she pointed out, and my lips twitched up into a grin of amusement.

’Soo, Yang didn’t get her sense of humor only from Tai and Qrow,’ I observe d. I recognized snark when I heard it, even if the delivery was completely toneless.

The bubble of Mana Barrier sprang into being around me and I began planning out my attack. “Time.”
I blinked, and Raven disappeared. Detection skills screamed, and I dropped into a roll, casting A.T. Field behind me as I drew one of my Sabers. Raven drew and something shrieked—I realized it was the sound of her Dust blade sliding across my A.T. Field, but not penetrating. I launched myself back away from her across the roof and spun the Saber around into rifle mode, taking aim through the scope's red-dot mode and snapping off shots. She stepped forward, bringing the red blade up in a return swing. There was a brief flash in front of her and then a small explosion of fire several meters off to the side as the first round detonated—then the second, third, and every round after that.

“She's deflecting bullets with a goddamn sword. What kind of bullshit is that?” Sure, I remembered Adam or someone doing something similar from what I thought was the Black trailer, but it was still amazing.

“You're off to a poor start,” she assessed quietly. There was no emotion behind the words, one way or another—it was simply a statement of fact.

Frowning, I drew the second Saber, shifting it to rifle mode and flipping the laser sights on both weapons on, before taking off at her at a run. The woman across from me shook her head slightly as she continued to close distance with me, using her sword to bat aside Dust rounds like they were flies. Take the bait. I thought as I closed to just outside of the range of her sword. Her stance shifted, her sword swinging back for a wide horizontal swing, and I grinned. Got you.

I dropped the Sabers and for just an instant, I caught sight of red eyes tracking them as they fell—less than a foot, before righting themselves in midair. There was a simultaneous click as both fire selectors switched from semi- to full-auto. My next step brought me into the opening stance for a draw, and red eyes tracked my hands as I hit the selector for Ascalon, switching it over to the most lethal blade in my small arsenal. I drew.

Dust blade met Dust blade in a shower of red sparks as Ascalon lit up red and heat began rolling off the blade. Raven's eyes met mine, and at the same time, Telekinesis shifted both Sabers until two green laser dots lit the woman's chest. Triggers depressed and the weapons spoke. Instead of falling back or dodging, Raven's booted foot slammed forward, impacting my Mana Barrier and sending me tumbling back—in addition to wiping the smile off my face.

The Sabers stopped firing as I righted myself and regained my bearings, only to find her barreling down on me and drawing back for a diagonal slash from hip to shoulder. My A.T. Field swung into its path, only to shatter as the weapon cleaved through the first and second hexagonal barrier. Her sword didn't stop so much as simply reverse course and flow into a thrust aimed at my heart, and I began to realize just how large the gap in our respective swordsmanship skills was. I'd assumed it was pretty big, yes—the difference between a novice and a master—but knowing it and seeing it were two entirely different things. Then again, I wasn't expecting to beat her with a sword in hand—
or at all. I just had to impress her.

The red blade slid cleanly through the pair of Mana Barrier bubbles around me, only to meet the steel of my shield. As the blade scraped along the shield, I heard the metal shriek in protest as the sword gouged a line across it. I pushed it aside and turned the shield to face her. Pulling the trigger mounted under the shield, I frowned as she simply shrugged off a face full of double-ought Grade 5 Purity White and the flattened shot fell around her feet. ‘Her goddamn mask isn’t even scratched.’

“Stop,” she began, bringing her foot up again, this time shattering my Mana Barrier completely as she drove her boot into my gut and sent me flying into the concrete wall of the utility room on the roof. The wall collapsed, crumbling around me as I flew through with little loss of momentum before slamming into and through the wall on the opposite side of the small room with enough force left over to send me rolling to the edge of the building.

“Holding,” the same foot caught me in the same place and the breath I’d managed to regain was sent whooshing out again as she punted me off the roof, across the street, and onto the one of the oversized pipes of the water treatment plant, where I landed in a heap.

“Back.”

She drew back for a third kick and I slapped her in the face with a hastily cast, “Ventas!”

The spell did more to send me flying away than it did to affect Raven, but then, that had been the point. I needed a second to think, to improvise some kind of plan. ‘She’s fast. I’ve been running with Haste’s throttle firewalled and she’s still moving faster than I can perceive half the time. Strong enough to shrug off bullets where she doesn’t outright swat them. My Sabers are useless against her at this point. The way she scratched the shit out of my shield, she’d probably cut through them like a hot knife through butter if we got into a blade lock. They have too many moving parts, too many potential points of failure for something like this. They were never meant as a specialized weapon meant to take heavy abuse, Joan and I designed them as an all-rounder type weapon, capable of filling multiple roles. Focus on Ascalon—I designed it with shit like this in mind.’

I frowned as my feet touched the ground and Raven wasn’t immediately in my face. She stood still where I’d hit her with the wind spell, seemingly simply waiting. ‘Why is she waiting? I’m missing something here.’

With some quick menu navigation, I unequipped both Sabers, along with the physical shield— they would only slow me down. I recast my shields and prepared myself. Calling up gravity and wind, I dropped into Flash Step, coming out of it into a diagonal strike from her left shoulder towards her
The red odachi came up and blocked, turning enough to send my blade sliding off. I followed it up by shifting the swing's momentum around and bringing the blade back in for a horizontal slash, which she parried, spinning around and returning with a vertical slash of her own.

We danced like that for what felt like minutes. Strike, parry, block, dodge—a rhythm that was becoming more familiar, more natural, the longer I spent doing it as my Sword Mastery went up, leveling as we exchanged blows. Though, Sword Mastery was not the only skill to benefit from this—all of my buffs, but especially Haste, had been leveling the entire time and didn't look to be stopping any time soon. The dance ground to a halt as her blade came up in a hard block, held in a reverse grip, parallel to her body as it stopped Ascalon cold a foot from her masked face. “Is that the best you've got?”

I blinked. Where before, she had seemed completely flat—all business, strictly professional—there was something new in her voice now. She sounded… 'Amused,' I guessed. 'Though, I get the feeling it's more in the way of a lioness watching a tame kitten batting at its tail.'

She shoved her sword and I hopped back, allowing her to throw me a few feet away. “Oh, I'm just getting started.”

Focusing on the blade in my hand, I dumped elemental mana into it in the same way I had with my swords as Shiro—except, instead of lightning, I went with fire. The blade, run through with a Colorless Dust core, was already lit red with Grade 4 Burning Crimson—I hadn't replaced my Dust crystals since the last time I'd sparred with it, and now that was coming back to bite me in the ass. However, the combined effect of red Dust and like-elemental Mana had the blade covered in a fiery Aura and radiating far more heat than it had previously.

I Stepped in again, waiting as she blocked the first right-to-left horizontal swing, then the follow up from the opposite direction. The third swing had a bit more behind it than simply fire, as I ramped up Ascalon's specific gravity and slammed it down onto Raven's waiting sword, held in a two-handed guard over her head. If the woman was surprised that the metal pipe under her had buckled and cratered slightly, she didn't show it—no r did she actually show any exertion at holding the gravity-enhanced strike at bay, as she stood completely unbent. She pushed the sword upwards, throwing Ascalon off and we began trading blows again.

'This is getting me nowhere,' I mused as she casually pushed aside another strike of my sword. 'Let's try something else, then.'

Drawing gravity around me and lightening myself, I Leapt. She followed an instant later, and I was forced to block as she continued her attack. After one particularly strong blow sent me spinning back, I righted myself as I recognized I had an opening now that there was space between us. AP Rounds spun up over my left hand and I sighted her in, firing off the spell with a crack! of sound.
Once more her sword flashed out, intercepting three of the attacks back to back as she shifted to avoid the others, and I was again reminded that I needed a homing technique badly. More importantly, she had swatted aside a technique I had made specifically with the intention of being too fast to dodge, block, or counter—she had moved so fast that I hadn't seen her arm or her sword move, and the air around her weapon had cracked as her sword broke the sound barrier. The rounds she had swatted detonated off to her sides, while the ones that had missed outright ran downrange where they punched holes in a building.

As I fell, I began speed-chanting AP Round, throwing different elements at her—fire, ice, lightning, gravity, wind—but nothing seemed to stick and more snaps and cracks from her sword sounded across the dead city as she continued to swat away those attacks that would have hit, where they detonated to no effect. In frustration I dropped Ascalon, holding it nearby with Telekinesis while I Conjured up swords. Six blades were sent spinning in her direction in quick succession. As they neared, she hesitated as she realized the obvious—they weren't aimed at her. When they were where I wanted them, I cast, "Bind!"

The spell latched onto the only available physical material present and branches and wires of steel sprang outwards from the blades around Raven, quickly forming a shell around her. 'Physics, don't fail me now,' I prayed, pulling up Mana and focusing on Skill Creation. I had never truly made a purely lightning element spell, since Plasma Blade was a variant of Mana Sword, but I figured it couldn't hurt to try—even if it did break my rule against trying to make skills in combat.

Skill Creation rewarded me with Chain Lightning, and for a moment, blue lightning connected me with the cage. All hell broke loose as the cage exploded into steel shards and spent electricity, and Raven emerged from the explosion, sword in hand. I frowned as I caught sight of the blade in question. Where before, she had wielded a red Dust blade of some sort, Raven had swapped it out for one glowing so bright a shade of yellow that it hurt to look at and left spots and after images in my vision until Gamer's Body cleared them up. Then she swung at me and lightning arced off the blade. I had an instant to react as the attack crossed the space between us. Intellect said counter by grounding it. Instinct said respond in kind. I rolled with instinct.

The sound of chirping birds echoed out across the dead city and I swung, catching the attack with my hastily cast Plasma Blade. The line of what had been a ranged Aura Strike disappeared as like found like and the electricity in the attack sought a home in the blade spun up in my hand. Raven shifted her grip on the sword, sheathing it quickly as her left hand came to rest on the sheath, her thumb flicking side to side in a motion I recognized—it was the same one I used to switch between blades for Ascalon. Flinging my Plasma Blade at her in a Strike Raid, I grabbed Ascalon and waited.

I didn't have to wait long, as she drew a green blade and a gust of wind hit the Plasma Blade dead center. The Plasma Blade detonated, temporarily obscuring my view of her. Raven swung again as she came swooping in, and I caught sight of a thin line of energy racing towards me—much harder to track than the lightning before, but a bit slower. I used gravity to yank myself out of the path of it, and the two that followed as I felt the pipe swiftly approaching my back. Flipping over, I landed on my feet atop the pipe and waited. One of the Aura Strikes hit the pipe in front of me, and I flinched.
as it punched clean through. Raven touched down ahead of me, the line she'd drawn through the metal separating us as the whole section she was standing on began to fall.

She passed out of sight below me and my detection skills blared a warning. I jumped back an instant before she came flying at me, slicing her way up through the pipe. I wasn't fast enough, as she caught my recast Mana Barrier and the bubbles shattered as I was swatted away again, sent flying into the gap between two buildings behind me. The sound of wings flapping and my detection skills going off again had me spinning in midair, Ascalon streaking out and bisecting a Nevermore that had tried to attack me.

'I had wondered why they weren't attacking.' Around us, the sky was beginning to blacken with aerial Grimm circling around us, seemingly waiting for the opportune moment to strike. A glance below revealed a writhing mass of black fur, white bone, and occasional spots of red. 'It's because they were gathering.' I had been so focused on the more immediate threat that I had neglected the one that wanted us both dead.

Hitting the trigger to deploy Ascalon's pole sections, I caught the four pieces in Telekinesis and aimed them downward, at the horde of land-bound Grimm gathered below, I didn't even bother trying to identify types as I tossed off a Flash Freeze, followed by a Fireball, then fired the four Dustcasters simultaneously. The section of street immediately in my landing zone froze over, the Grimm caught in the area of effect either frozen solid or chilled to the point of being left immobile. Fireball hit a second after that, exploding those Grimm weak enough to have been frozen and setting fire to the rest. Then wind, lightning, fire, and ice Dust attacks further cleared the area and finished off anything not already dead. I landed in a blasted circle—charred, frozen, melted, and scored—and shifted my gaze back up to track Raven.

The woman stopped above me in mid-air, and I resisted the urge to groan as I realized what she was doing. “You can fly.”

'Well. That's not fair at all,' I shook my head. 'Running low on Mana. If I'm going to do something, now's the fucking time.'

There were more than a few problems with that, however. She was stronger than me, faster than me, more experienced than me, and better armed than me. Grimm pouring into the hole I'd punched in their ranks distracted me for a moment and I sent Ascalon's Dustcasters whirling around me—torching, freezing, frying, or blowing away anything that tried to slip into my blind spots while dispatching anything that got close with the blade. Above me, Raven appeared to be waiting for something again.

'It's like I'm moving a step slower than I should be,' I mused as I turned the problem over in my head. It took a moment, but I realized what the problem was. When I'd fought Cinder, I'd done it with... well, with a human's mindset—fear as a constant companion, pushing me just that much harder; to
be just a bit faster, stronger, more aware. Desperation and fear were what had kept mankind alive since we started walking upright. They were finely honed instincts that triggered deep psychological and physiological changes in whoever felt them—from the mindset to be able to kill as needed, to that surge of adrenaline to avoid being killed. And I had turned that off.

'It wasn't a problem when I fought against the Nameless, so why is it a problem now?' I frowned, before a thought occurred. In front of me, an Ursa managed to shrug off one of Ascalon's blasts of lightning and get in close, rearing up on its hind legs and drawing its arms up to bring them smashing down on me. Flash Stepping forward, I buried the blade of my sword in its stomach before shifting my grip and heaving upwards, drawing the superheated, serrated side of the blade up and out—feeling the blade bite and saw through its rib cage and drawing a spray of steam and stinking black gore as I pulled it out and stepped back. The Ursa fell at my feet and I checked to make sure nothing had tried to follow it.

'Or was it? If I had been truly afraid, and not just rightfully wary, would I have done better?' It was possible. It was also possible I would have frozen up and died. The description for Gamer's Mind said that it forced a calm mind-state and allowed the user to think things out logically. Did that mean that it naturally lent itself towards greater introspection and more thorough thought on any given problem—and would that crop up as a tendency to overthink things? 'The ability to logically think yourself out of almost any situation, at the risk of potentially overthinking situations that would be better handled on instinct—especially snap decisions? Haste negates some of that woolgathering, but obviously not all of it.'

It was only now, after I'd had a chance to truly compare them, that I realized that Gamer's Mind was a truly alien mindset. It was useful, yes—immensely so. But the absolute clarity it brought came at a price. There came a time when being able to plan meant nothing if all your plans met with failure—that was when you had to stop thinking and act. 'Yeah, I think that's it. Greater thought at the cost of gut instinct. Both are useful, but you have to be able to recognize which any given situation calls for.'

For thinking things through and discovering a facet of how The Gamer Semblance works, you gain +1 WIS!

'Patronizing skill point gains. Oh, how I've missed those,' I grumbled internally. The logical course of action here was to retreat, regroup, or call a halt to things—but I couldn't do any of those. When the battle ended was entirely under Raven's control. And I still hadn't shown her what she wanted to see, if this fight was still going on. 'Desperate times,' I mused, a sardonic smile crossing my lips as I reached for the mental switch to Gamer's Mind, and flipped it down to Defensive.

The first thing I noticed was her Aura. I had been aware of it, before—there was no way I couldn't have been. She had started the fight suppressed to what I assumed was a reasonable level for a Hunter in a city and had slowly been releasing it the longer our fight had dragged on. With Gamer's
Mind on, I had noticed, but only registered it as a background detail. But now, the weight of it was absolutely crushing—like being submerged beneath cold waves, air running out. My hands clenched involuntarily as my heart-rate skyrocketed and my breath began to grow short. Under that was the taste of emotion in the air—fear, anger, rage, jealousy—all the negative emotions that came with any high concentration of Grimm hit me like a stench that wouldn't wash out and would have swept me along with it if not for my Aura. The very air I was desperately trying to gasp in was thick, suffocating with the stink of it. And the sounds. The sounds of I wouldn't even bother to count how many Grimm echoed all around us.

'Focus!' I growled, bringing my will to bear on the initial panic response. Unable to resist the lure of a human with Aura and sudden, sharp emotion where before there had been little to none, the Grimm around me rushed in again and I lashed out with Ascalon's Dustcasters once more, sending elemental damage washing over the first line of them as I focused on my target. Lightening myself again, I cast, “Wings,” and threw gravity and wind Mana into them. I Leapt, at the same time I yanked myself skyward.

Ascalon met Raven's green blade and the woman's head tilted to one side. “You are a very poor swordsman.”

“I'm no swordsman,” I denied, spinning up a Rasengan in my off hand. The attack exploded at point-blank range, sending the woman flying away to slam into the side of a nearby building, in what was the first good hit I'd gotten in on her since we began. I had realized something, in all our little exchanges of blows. I was so overwhelmingly outclassed that there wasn't much I could do to hurt her. I had found someone I could finally just unload on with almost no consequence—hell, someone who had pretty much demanded I do exactly that right from the start.

Raven shot away from the building, and I chanted, “Lift-Pull-Throw,” as fast as the words could be formed, abruptly yanking her out of her flight and sending her hurtling down towards the ground, and the Grimm below. Tracking her flight down, I began throwing out all the small, cheap spells I could. AP Round, Mana Bolt, and more streaked down in a magical carpet-bombing. I didn't bother to keep track of what hit and what didn't—with saturation fire, it didn't really matter. My Mana had been low already, but now it began to plummet as I started throwing in my heavier attacks—Fireball, Flash Freeze, Chain Lightning, Ventas. I pulled water from the air and sent it down, followed by Conjured reactive-metal grenade arrows, which exploded on contact with water, blood, or whatever source of moisture they found. All of it was supplemented with a constant stream of Dust attacks from Ascalon's Dustcasters, lighting the area up in a hell-storm of elemental damage. I lost sight of her in the light show and smoke for a moment, before the red of her blade caught my eye again. 'She hasn't moved.'

Easing up on my own casting and letting my Dustcasters do the work for a moment, I began charging up another Rasengan—the sphere growing larger as I continued to dump Mana into it. 'Well, it worked for Naruto,' I mused, before dumping wind-elemental Mana into it just for what was, at this point, shits and giggles; at the same time using up the last of my mana that wasn't being used as for spell upkeep or held as an emergency reserve. Firing it downwards, I frowned as a burst of red light caught my eye—though was quickly obscured by the explosion of light, sound, and wind as the
attack hit home and detonated. The final explosion was followed by a rumbling as the buildings on either side of it began collapsing inward, burying the street. I glanced at my minimap, confirming what I'd feared. 'She wasn't down there for that last one, so where—'

My thought was cut off in the literal sense as a flash of red appeared in front of me and a red blade stretched out from it, punching through my defenses like they weren't even there and straight through the right side of my chest. 'I am getting really sick and goddamn tired of things just cutting through my defenses,' I mused, even as my body spasmed, my vision going faintly gray with red at the edges. A panicked glance at my HUD showed my HP at under one tenth and going down steadily—and I was suddenly thankful that the Bullhead ride to Beacon, along with the time spent there and heading back into Vale, had given my HP plenty of time to recover. Unfortunately, between getting smacked around and a sword shoved in me, I was worse off than I'd been when Cinder had gut-shot me.

Raven moved out of the portal ahead of me, pushing the blade with her as she went, and consequently deeper into me. Other than being a bit dusty and splattered with a bit of Grimm blood, she looked none the worse for wear. She hummed quietly, tilting her head down to take in the ruined street below us. “Moderately impressive, for your age. A truly amazing variety, but ultimately wasteful if it doesn't hit anything.”

I glared at her from under my mask. Somehow, I got the impression that she looked awful smug under that mask right about now, and I wanted to wipe that smug look off her face. I did not particularly enjoy being on the other end of smug looks. Glancing down at the sword, I shook my head. 'This shit again. Not going to rely on Penny this time.'

“Anesthesia,” I subvocalized, and the pain dulled to a manageable level. I cast it again just to be sure, cast my heal over time spell, then reached down and grabbed the blade.

“You won't be able to pull it out,” Raven warned.

I tilted my masked face up to regard hers, green eyes meeting red. “Not my plan,” I grunted, then heaved myself forward.

Raven’s eyes went wide under her mask in one of the first signs of genuine emotion I'd seen from her. “What are you doing?!” she hissed in surprise.

I reached forward and grabbed her wrist where the held the handle of her sword, our bodies now only inches apart. Reaching up with my free hand, I grabbed her mask and yanked it off. As I'd expected, she was beautiful—like an older, dark-haired version of Yang. Red eyes narrowed as her expression shifted from surprised to irate. An instant later, her expression went completely flat as I pulled back my fist and did my level best to break her nose. I honestly think I hurt my own fist more
than I hurt her, but it was the thought that counted. “Fuck. You,” I ground out.

The woman's face twitched, as though she couldn't decide whether to be angry, amused, or somewhere in between. There was a sound behind me and she shifted the sword, bringing up her boot and planting it in my chest as she gave a good, solid heave and sent me flying off her blade. Her lips twitched upwards into a wry grin as she lost that particular battle and the last thing I heard from her was a quiet chuckle, before the world went black.

Light and sound returned a moment later, and I slammed violently into the ground. Or a floor. 'Sounds like a floor,' I mused as the sound seemed to echo in the enclosed space I suddenly found myself occupying.

“Jaune!” several voices cried out at once.

I would have answered, but I was too busy bringing up my hands and trying not to get smacked in the face with my own sword as Raven sent Ascalon flying through the portal to clatter across the floor of our quarters in Fox Hunt. There was something about that that bothered me, but I was having problems putting it together at the moment. The red portal closed and I coughed up blood as Neo, Melanie, Miltia, and Penny rushed over, checking me over and trying to help me sit up. Shaking my head, I turned to the side and began coughing, more blood coming up as Gamer's Body reasserted itself and internal damage to my lungs disappeared.

I caught sight of Blake sitting on one of my couches, golden eyes taking me in and a hint of worry there. One of the girls left for a moment as I sat there trying to clear my airways, only to return a moment later with a glass of water. Getting what felt like the last of the blood that had pooled in my lung out, I gratefully accepted the glass and sipped at it, giving one final cough and a groan as I closed my eyes. “Ow. Remind me never to do that again.”

“Do what?” the twins synced, at the same time Neo asked, “What did you do?!”

“Accidentally picked a fight with Raven Branwen. Don't think I won that one,” I mused.

You have completed a challenge from Raven “Fucking” Branwen!

I rolled my eyes at that, dismissing the message telling me how I'd gained enough EXP for two levels along with the notifications for reaching those two levels.
“Okay, what the fuck is going on?” Neo asked, and under the anger I heard her worry.

“Chair?” I asked, and the girls traded looks.

“Bed,” they all countered, the twins hefting me to my feet and Neo grabbing Penny by the hand and dragging her along.

“Sorry,” Melanie shot at Blake.

The faunus girl nodded. “It's fine,” she murmured, standing and heading for her own room.

“Can I at least shower?” I asked, looking down at my filthy, bloodstained form. Not all of it was mine, but that which wasn't belonged to Grimm, and almost all of it was partly mixed with concrete dust from where I'd been kicked through a couple of walls. I hadn't even managed to draw blood from either Cinder or Raven. Cinder had only gotten me once, but that once had been nearly enough. Raven hadn't been truly serious until right there at the end—and even that was in doubt, because there had been no follow through. If she'd truly wanted me dead, there had been plenty of opportunities for it. 'I suppose she wanted to see what I'd do, if she ran me through. What did she think I was going to do, aside from bleed like a stuck pig? Maybe she suspects something's fishy with my Semblance, given how I heal.'

I stumbled slightly as I realized what it was about Raven 'porting me directly here that had bothered me. Every time I'd had the 'being watched' feeling, it had stopped just shy of the boundary of my apartment or Fox Hunt's officers' quarters—or, more specifically, just short of the Bounded Fields around it. I had assumed that meant that whoever was watching me couldn't get past them. Her opening a portal and kicking me through proved that all kinds of horribly wrong, however. I had the sudden feeling that the only reason she hadn't just waited until my guard was down and attacked me here was simple curiosity, because it was blatantly obvious now that she could have opened a portal through my wards at any time.

Neo released Penny and took hold of my armor, dragging me towards the bathroom by the chest piece. The twins relinquished their hold on me and went to go wash the crud off their hands that they'd gotten from dragging me in here while Neo took over pulling me towards the shower. “Look, about earlier,” I began, and a small finger pressed against my lips.

“Save it,” she sighed, shaking her head. “Come on. Let's get the crud washed off of you and you can tell us what happened. Then you can apologize, when we know exactly what you should be apologizing for.”
Chuckling at that, I nodded. 'I suppose that's fair.'

The girls were… angry, to say the least. 'Furious' would be a better descriptor. They were pissed, and I supposed it was rightfully so in this case. They were, however, also feeling particularly clingy after I'd shown them both the fight with Cinder then the fight with Raven—so I didn't sleep alone that night, regardless of how much they probably wanted to give me the 'sleep in different rooms' treatment. We turned in early that night and, though we all slept very close together, there was no sex. Even Penny had been dragged into our bed, cuddled between the twins—the mattress sagged slightly under her weight, but apparently this one was much sturdier than the one in my old apartment. I wasn't exactly comfortable having her there, let alone with Neo and I sans clothes, but I was out voted.

Looking down at the girl in my arms, I sighed and kissed the back of her neck, causing Neo to stir. “What time is it?” she mumbled sleepily.

Glancing at my HUD, I answered, “Seven.”

“Urgh,” Neo grunted. She appeared to attempt to go back to sleep, only to go stiff for a moment before rolling out of the bed, stopping for a moment to fish something out of one of her dresser drawers, then heading for the bathroom. A few minutes later, she came back wearing a pair of normal panties, as opposed to the more risque kind she preferred. Slipping back into my arms, the girl buried her head in my chest. “Period started. I blame you, making us worry.”

“I'm sorry,” I murmured, kissing the top of her head. “But I'm not going to keep apologizing for it. Once was enough. I've already promised to try not to run off on my own again, and I will make this one up to all of you, somehow.”

“I know. That doesn't change the fact that we're still angry about it,” she grumbled quietly.

“And you have every right to be,” I told her as her arms wrapped around me and she pulled herself in closer. “I would be pissed too, if our positions were reversed. Doesn't mean I'm going to grovel over it.”

“I didn't say you had to. Though,” the girl shot me an amused look, “a little groveling wouldn't go amiss.” Neo nuzzled against my chest for a moment before murmuring, “It's just, we love you and we don't want to see you hurt—especially if we can help keep that from happening. And I don't think you get that, or believe it, or—”
Reaching down, I took her chin in hand and tilted her head up, kissing her lips and effectively silencing her worrying. “I do,” I countered, breaking our kiss to speak. “I understand. And I do believe it. And yes, I love you too.” The ice cream themed girl's eyes went slightly wide, cycling colors. She opened her mouth and, before she could say anything, I pressed a finger against her lips. “I don't think you understand what that means for me, though.”

Neo frowned and motioned for me to elaborate. “I like to think I'm a pretty decent guy, all things considered. Generally, I just want to be left alone, to enjoy life with my friends and the people I love. We don't always have that luxury here. So believe that I am deadly serious when I say I would do absolutely horrible things with not a shred of remorse to keep you by my side. Lie, steal, cheat, kill—whatever it takes. And if that means that, occasionally, I have to make the call between going it alone or dragging you all down with me, you can bet your sweet ass I'm going to do the selfish thing and keep you out of it.”

“We're stronger as a group,” Neo countered, a frown tugging her pretty lips downward.

I nodded. “Yeah. And I'm going to have to pick up our training and find a way to organize things so we can all train together, so you don't fall behind while I'm at Beacon. As I said last night, I was wrong. I could have really used some help with Cinder and Mercury, and someone else paid the price for it. I don't want to put you in danger, but we both know it's going to happen regardless of what I want, so the best thing I can do is help you prepare for when it inevitably happens, until I'm satisfied.”

“We're not just going to sit on our asses here doing nothing while you're at Beacon,” Neo rolled her eyes.

“Didn't say you were, but you have to admit that training as a group is more effective,” I countered, and she nodded. A thought occurred and I added, “That reminds me. On a mostly unrelated note, hold off on the space-expanded bags for the moment. I need to do a bit of research into fixing that so that they don't explode if you damage them.”

Neo shifted her head and looked up, meeting my eyes with an incredulous look for a moment before a smirk crossed her lips. “You think that's why no one's done it before?”

“Could be,” I shrugged. “It'd make sense, if it's got such a glaring weakness. On the other hand, I've got a few ideas for how to fix that, I just need to figure out a way to do it.”

“Fair enough,” the girl agreed. “I'll let the twins know. I take it that's why you nixed the whole 'stored armor plates' idea for your coat, too?” When I nodded, her smirk returned. “It could be amusing, though. Someone or something damages one and it explodes in their faces...”
“Taking the wearer with it,” I deadpanned, and Neo pouted.

“Right, there is that,” she sighed. “That would be bad.” Shifting slightly to get closer and rubbing one of her legs against mine, she asked, “Do we have plans for today?”

I shook my head. “Not to my knowledge.”

Lips pressed against the back of my neck and I shivered slightly at the unexpected contact. “We're supposed to take delivery of the AFVs, but receiving them is going to be an all day affair and we're only really needed to sign for them once delivery is complete and we've inspected them,” Miltia informed me, shifting against my back and putting one arm around me, idly stroking Neo's side while she was at it. “Someone needs to inspect them, but we've got people for that.”

“When did you wake up?” I asked, and she shrugged.

“We woke up when Neo came back,” Melanie answered for her.

“So, you were playing possum, so you could eavesdrop,” I deadpanned, shaking my head with a grin. “Does it have to be one of us that signs for it?” I asked, and I felt her shake her head against my upper back, her hair tickling where it brushed.

“No, just someone with the authority to sign for the company. Jim or Angel could, or really any department head,” she shrugged.

Yawning, I turned an amused look on the girl over my shoulder. “Get Jim to do it.”

Miltia nodded. “Greene also got a line on some surplus Bullheads, Razorbacks, and a few other toys. It's a mixed bag of older and newer equipment, from the information he sent over.”

“Have Angel take someone out to look at them and send pictures,” I instructed and the girl at my back murmured agreement. “That it?”

“Yeah,” Miltia agreed. Stretching, I rolled onto my back and pulled the twin closer, my lips meeting hers for a moment and drawing a smile from them. “We're still mad at you,” she reminded.
I sent her an amused look. “You'll get over it.”

Miltia and Melanie shared a momentary look before pouting. “So, Neo gets 'I love you' but we get 'you'll get over it'?”

Pushing myself up so I could regard them both, I moved to kiss first Miltia, then Melanie—leaving both flushed, breathless, and squirming by the time I was finished. It was somewhat awkward with Penny between them, but I managed. “I love you both.”

Whatever the twins were going to say was cut off by Penny's eyes popping open as the gynoid pouted. “I want a kiss too!”

Raising an eyebrow at that, I resisted the urge to facepalm—of course Penny was awake. Penny didn't sleep, Penny waited. Chuckling quietly, I leaned down and planted one between her eyes. “There you go.”

“That wasn't what I meant, but I'll take it,” the redhead pouted, and this time I failed my Will Save not to roll my eyes.

Deciding to change the subject, I began, “So, I've got some ideas for a couple of projects we can work on today. I'll go make breakfast. Then tonight, I'm taking you all out dancing.”

The girls' eyes lit up at that as they shared a look, then Neo slid out of bed and began getting dressed—or equipping clothes, at any rate.

“I have a question,” Miltia brought up as I began equipping my own clothes. Seeing she had my attention, she said, “I understand not bringing us along. I don't like it, but I understand it. And you had Penny there circling in case anything went wrong, with Ruby and Yang's uncle inbound, hopefully to provide backup—but why didn't you use Sanguine?”

“A couple of reasons,” I began. “Firstly, because I don't know what will happen if she's injured or killed while I've got her summoned. If she just goes incorporeal and has to heal a while, that's great, but if not—if she can be destroyed—then I won't risk her senselessly, just like I won't risk anyone else on something I suspect may get them killed.”

“Just yourself,” Melanie deadpanned, and I shrugged.
“Secondly, the ability to summon spirits is something I'm holding in reserve for a nasty surprise, when I need it. Another trump card, that I can throw down that's not tied to any of my identities at the moment—making that skill even more versatile; especially when, if I play my cards right, I can keep the ability from being discovered while still using it when needed. Spirits don't show up on camera, and from what tests we've done, normal people can't even perceive them if they don't want to be seen.” I was thankful for that, because I had already used her in Atlas as Shiro, in full view of their cameras—but based on the tests I'd run, anything she did would appear on camera as though carried out by an invisible force. It was a lot like ghost genre movies on Earth, in that way.

At least, that was for what my Semblance classified as 'lesser' spirits. I'd seen references to 'greater' spirits, but had yet to run across any—and my summoning spell required I actually have some sort of agreement with a spirit to be able to summon it, so it wasn't like I could just dump mana into it as I cast and summon something else. I had my suspicions as to what the difference was between lesser and greater spirits was—namely, that the greater spirits were likely Elemental Spirits or something along those lines. I had a skill book for it, but didn't meet the requirements yet—nor did I know what was involved in summoning an Elemental. It was on my to-do list, along with a hundred other things.

“Those with active Aura can, however. That's only a small part of the overall population, yes, but most of the people we're going to be dealing with are going to have an active Aura, so she's not going to go unseen unless I hit her with Invisibility—which is a legitimate strategy, but still runs some risks. Using her against Cinder would have been a horrible idea, especially once she ate part of the Maiden's power. In hindsight, it was probably an even better idea not to, since Ozpin pretty much confirmed Maiden powers are Magic, not Aura. For all I know, a Maiden could one-shot spirits. I don't know, and unless I want to ask Cinder to help, I can't until either Amber wakes up on her own or I find a way to wake her up and get her on our side. Aside from that, it'd be one more skill she'd seen the Fox use and I wouldn't be able to use her in other situations unless I could guarantee it wouldn't get back to Cinder. So, no, I'm not going to call her up in view of people who aren't already aware of her unless I absolutely need to.”

“Seems reasonable,” Miltia agreed slowly, “But what good is a tool if you don't use it?” She paused at that before quickly adding, “Not that I'm saying she's a tool, just...”

I nodded. “I know you didn't. And yeah, it's a good point. I'd say about as much use as anything else your enemy has seen before and developed a counter for.”

“Not everyone can do that,” Melanie pointed out.

Turning an amused look on her, I asked, “You really want to run that risk with Cinder?”

They all shared a look before Neo groaned quietly, “Yeah, you're probably right—she seems like the
type to obsess, so she's probably working out how to counter everything she's seen you do already."


“Mm,” she nodded agreement. “Just came out yesterday.” She spared a moment to look away from it and look me over. “You're not injured.”

I shrugged. “I've honestly been hurt worse.” And in all likelihood, if things kept going the way they were, it would happen again. All I could do was try to prevent it and, failing that, prepare for it.

Blake went back to her book as I set about making breakfast. Soon enough, I had pancake batter made and set about dicing fruit. “What do you like in your pancakes?”

The faunus girl shrugged. “Plain is fine, but a side dish of fruit would be nice. Whatever you have leftover.”

“Eh, I prefer mine plain too. Pancakes shouldn't be fouled by other stuff in them. I'm kind of outnumbered here, though,” I chuckled, pouring out the first set and adding different fruits and berries to each. The twins preferred blueberry, while Neo would try pretty much anything in or on hers—today, it was orange slices. Penny, being new to food, wanted to try everything she could put in her mouth at this point, so hers would have two or three different types of fruit, berry, or nut in each to give her a wider sample size to see what she liked and didn't. 'And if Ruby were here this morning, I'd have to hide the strawberries. Still, it kind of leaves me wondering how Vale gets most of its fruit, spices, and so on. We know Grimm have screwed over the agriculture industry, and any hiccups there tend to cause luxury goods to go first. Fruit, berries, nuts, pepper, and the like would be put aside to focus on staples—wheat, corn, potatoes, and other vegetables. So, who grows it, and where? Also, salt. Real salt has to be mined. Plastics require petrochemicals, but nothing here runs on gas, to my knowledge. Bio-plastic or something, maybe?' It was another gap in my knowledge, but probably not terribly important in the immediate sense—at least, not with the upcoming project to reclaim Vale's arable land. 'And at some point in the near future, I'm going to need to finagle some time off from Beacon to take Fox Hunt out and see about running a few big field tests to take out Grimm.'

“So,” I said as the twins, Neo, and Penny joined Blake and I shortly after I'd finished making plates, “I was thinking we could spend the day getting some crafting projects done. You've got new outfits that need Enchantments and I've got something in mind that I want to play with…” I trailed off, leaving the offer hanging as I took a bite of pancake goodness.

The twins exchanged looks between themselves, then one with Neo, who nodded. “Sounds nice,”
they synced. Melanie added, “A couple of days together just hanging out would be a nice change of pace.”

“A break,” Miltia agreed. “What's the project you've got in mind?”

My lips quirked up in a grin and I shook my head. “That would be telling.”

“What should I do?” Penny asked, and I turned an amused look on the small gynoid.

“What do you want to do?” I countered, and she hummed, thinking it over as she tried one of the slices of pancake on her plate.

After taking the time to chew and swallow, she beamed a smile at me. “Can I help?”

“Sure,” Neo agreed beside her, drawing nods from the twins.

“Blake?” I asked, shooting the faunus girl a questioning look.

Black ears twitched slightly as she glanced up from the book she was holding in one hand. “New book,” she smiled slightly, popping a berry into her mouth. “I was going to find somewhere warm to curl up and read the rest of the day.” She shot a glance at the others before adding, “Besides, I wouldn't want to intrude.”

I rolled my eyes at that, but Neo beat me to the punch. “You wouldn't be. You're welcome to join.” Her lips curled up into a leer and she opened her mouth, only for Miltia to clamp a hand over her mouth.

“No. Bad Neo,” she scolded. “Behave.” She twitched a second later, shooting the ice cream themed girl an amused look. “Does my hand taste good?”

“Mhmm,” Neo nodded.

We finished up breakfast quickly after that and headed for the work room. As soon as we were inside, Neo pulled the long coat she'd been working on for me off the table where it'd been sitting and said, “Try this on. I want to make sure the cut’s right for movement. Also, last chance on this: are you sure you want to wear your armor on the outside?”
“Yeah,” I agreed. “It'll help protect the Enchantments I'm going to be putting inside it.”

“You're not really going to be able to wear it open, that way,” Neo pointed out, and I nodded.

“It's fine. That's part of why I'm adding temperature control Enchantments. Other than, you know, being comfortable in extreme environmental conditions like blizzards, deserts, and the like,” I answered. “Besides, most of the time I'll be wearing it at Beacon will probably be with the armor off, unless I need it for something.”

“Okay,” the ice cream themed girl nodded. “I should have it finished today and then you can start putting on Enchantments.”

“Thank you,” I smiled at her, and she grinned in return before turning to her work. Moving over to where the twins had taken seats in front of a couple of tables, I leaned in between them and said, “So, let's see these new dresses.”

The dresses the girls had designed were nearly identical in cut and color, save for minor differences here and there. They appeared black at first glance, but turning them at different angles showed that it was actually a dark green that would shift to lighter green depending on how the material caught the light. They both had knee-length skirts, closed backs, and sleeves that stopped just above the elbow and were made of the same material that most Hunter-grade clothes used. That's a fair bit more conservative than their previous dresses, I mused, taking them in. Closer inspection showed they were actually multi-layered, with a silk interior or liner and what looked like some of the Beowolf fur we'd been recovering as drops between them. “What am I looking at, here?” I asked.

“We took your advice about armor,” Melanie admitted. “The outer layer is pretty standard fare, though we've added mounting points for light armor pieces. We want to keep our mobility and speed, but at the same time we can't argue against the need for armor. We're squishy, as you've said, so this is a compromise.”

“If you're worried about weight, I can add weight reduction enchantments,” I suggested, and the girls nodded.

“The second layer is Beowolf fur, for the bonuses,” Miltia shamelessly admitted. “We're both primarily melee fighters, so those will help. The silk layer is to prevent pinching, binding, chafing and so on with the armor on top.”

“Well, good news is that it gives me a lot of surface area to work with that's not going to be visible to the naked eye, so we can add a good number of Enchantments to help out.” I already had a few in
mind, beyond the basic suite of stuff I would have put on anyway. *Then again, maybe I could go a different direction.* I still had Cinder's stolen dress, after all—a dress that had an Enchantment that turned it into a Dustcaster. And while Cinder's shtick was fire and she'd probably figure out something was fishy if the girls started tossing around fireballs, that didn't mean I couldn't swap Dust types to something else. “How do you feel about me turning these things into Dustcasters?”

The twins exchanged a look before Melanie asked, “What did you have in mind?”

“And can I get some of that action?” Neo asked, and I grinned.

“Yes, we can do that,” I agreed. “And how are Penny's outfits coming along?”

“I like them!” Penny chirped from nearby, and I turned to see the girl looking over a trio of outfits on mannequins. The first of those was a white dress, smaller and lighter than the ones the twins wore, with a white and red hooded mantle, stockings, and white boots. On the mantle's breast was a Fox Hunt patch, so I knew this must be what she was going to be wearing while we were 'on the job' so to speak.

The second outfit drew a grin to my lips as I realized what I was looking at. It pretty much screamed 'ninja,' or at least the stereotype of what most people think of when they think 'female ninja.' Or what shows up in media when you see a female ninja who doesn't dress like a whore—or come from the Naruto universe, but those don't count anyway. It consisted of black leggings and a long black shirt, along with gray armor pieces, gloves, boots, neck gaiter, and belt sash. 'So, obviously for use when I'm out as Shiro and she needs to help.'

The third looked more like civilian clothes than the other two, to be honest. Plain brown boots, black cargo pants, and a bright green, long sleeved blouse/dress that would end about mid-thigh on her. There wasn't anything special about this one, which left me frowning at the thought that there was something I was missing there. “They're very nice, Penny. But what's up with the third one there?” I pointed it out and the ancula blushed.

“That one is for when I am in my 'civilian' identity,” the ancula supplied.

“For when she's hanging out with us,” Miltia clarified, and I nodded.

I turned back to Penny, asking, “So, do you have weapons yet?”

“Well, I have weapons designed for the Fox Hunt set and the third set, but not the second,” Penny
answered.

“The ninja outfit?” I asked, and she tilted her head in thought for a moment before nodding. Humming, thought on it a second before grinning. “How do you feel about a sword?”

“A sword would be fine, Jaune,” she agreed.

Smirking, I opened up my Inventory and drew out the copy of Ascalon I'd made shortly after I had first gotten the weapon. “It's a bit more than a sword, and it'll take some training to get used to, but with your strength and speed wielding it shouldn't be a problem for you.”

Accepting the weapon, she looked it over a moment before nodding and sticking it in her Inventory. “Thank you, Jaune.”

Waving her off, I asked, “So, what about the other two?”

“Ah!” Penny beamed, looking up from her Inventory. “Dust blades and Dustcasters for the Fox Hunt disguise. I'm going to make six to eight of them and use remote anti-gravity units to control them.”

Trying to picture it in my mind, I chuckled when I realized how that would look. “You're going to go with the white hair for that disguise, right?” I asked, and the gynoid nodded. “And blue eyes?” Another nod. “This should be good, then.”

“You think she's going to be mistaken for a bastard Schnee child, right?” Neo asked, and I nodded.

“Oh, yeah. I just wish there were some way to emulate their glyph,” I added.

Penny's eyes unfocused as she began navigating menus. “There is a hologram emitter upgrade I can get,” she suggested. “It could be useful for other things, too.”

“Penny, you don't have to convince me. If you want to, then get it. If not, then don't worry about it. But you don't have to waste an upgrade on something that, for all intents and purposes, is a bit of a prank on the Schnee. We could see if you can pick up Genjutsu and you can just use that to do the same thing, if so.” Reaching out, I ruffled the girl's hair, drawing a pleased noise from her throat as I did. “What weapons did you decide on for the third outfit?”
“Actually,” Melanie spoke up, drawing my attention as she grinned. “We’re kind of proud of that one. She can't use her energy swords, sadly—that would give her away.”

I nodded and Miltia continued for her sister. “So we went with the next best thing. Penny's 'civilian' identity will have a technomancy Semblance.”

I blinked at that. “Control over technology?” I asked, and they nodded. “Okay. Where's that going?”

“For her personal weapons, we thought we'd use those lasers you took off the spider bots,” Neo answered. “Well, that, and a few other toys. Essentially, make them flying, individually powered drones. Lasers, cameras, maybe a few more specialized drones that would use rifles for sniping or suppressive fire—that sort of thing.”

“Huh. That... yeah, that could work well,” I agreed. It would also be kind of a pain in the ass to face in combat, but considering I wouldn't be coming up against her, it wouldn't really matter. Against Grimm, it should be pretty effective. Now that Penny had an 'official' Fox outfit, however, I had an idea. “Penny, could I get you to help me take some pictures, later? I want some shots of you in the Fox-themed outfit.”

“What are you thinking?” Neo asked, and I grinned.

“Something to throw Cinder off,” I supplied.

Penny turned a smile on me. “Whatever you need me to do, Jaune.”

With an idea of what I needed to do now, I let the girls work while I set about my plan for the day. In order to use Enchanting on a permanent basis with clothing, I needed to learn to sew. Other materials, like metal, would call for completely different techniques. The good news on that front was that my crafting level for whatever it was I was doing didn't necessarily have to be very high, unless I was attempting ridiculously fine work. Once I had the basics down, everything else should fall to my Enchantment skill—well, the skill for making Bounded Fields, of which Enchantments were a part.

Yesterday, before the business with Cinder and Raven, we had picked up supplies. Some of that, I would be using now. Namely, a few books on sewing to get the skill and add patterns, and raw materials that had no real value if they were destroyed in the process—which they wouldn't be, because that was one of the great things about working with cloth as a medium: you could remove
the thread and start all over again once you had completed one pattern or mastered one technique and then move on to the next. Yes, cloth would eventually degrade, tear, or otherwise become worthless to use and I would have to replace it—but it'd take several passes before it came to that point.

Under normal circumstances, I would probably take a few days to pick up the skill sufficiently to be able to use it for Enchanting. I had other plans, however. Opening my Inventory, I began digging out materials and consuming the books I'd bought. Needles, thread, and cloth all found their way onto a table top. From there, I opened up my Skills menu and selected the pattern I wanted, which allowed me to keep it up on my HUD so I could visually compare what I wanted to what I was getting. Then, I grabbed up ten needles with Telekinesis, threaded them, and went to work. 'Combining sewing with Telekinesis should allow me to increase my learning speed for that skill by at least a factor of ten. And since it's fairly fine manipulation and I'm doing so much of it at once, it should level Telekinesis as it goes—making it win/win. Add Haste on top of that and it should decrease the time it takes as well, so in real-time, it'd be more like picking it up forty times faster. That's assuming I just firewall Haste instead of running with it about half speed until my skill gets up to where I can actually handle doing that with ten objects simultaneously—or that I don't have to adjust downward on controlled objects. Actually, yeah, I'll probably have to use it just for Haste-speed perception so I can keep track of everything without fucking up and then slowly up the speed as the skill improves. Try that first and see how it goes.'

Once I got the skill up to an acceptable level, my next step would be to start adding Enchantments to the girls' outfits along with my coat and then, once that was finished, I could start on the Ribbons. I wouldn't use the nice silk I'd bought for the girls until I had a handle on making the Enchantments and had made sure that I could layer them the way I wanted—which is where the leftover cloth I'd be using to level the sewing skill would come in. I would keep reusing it, testing with low grade Dust, until it fell apart or until I figured out how to layer the Ribbon Enchantments I wanted—whichever came first.

By the afternoon, I had gained sufficient levels in sewing to move on to working with Dust thread and set about laying down Enchantments into our outfits. The first, and probably most complex, was adjustable climate control—using the twins' silk inner lining for their new dresses and a pair each of Grade 6 fire and ice cut Dust crystals to power them, per dress, so they would have redundant power in case one of the crystals they were using ran out of juice and they didn't have time to replace it. With the metal setting pieces we'd gotten just for this purpose, that was actually fairly easy—socket Dust crystal in setting, sew setting into place on the Enchantment pattern with Dust threat, turn it 90 degrees in its setting to switch it on and test that it worked, then repeat the process with the backup socketed crystal, then with the other two crystals to make sure it could both heat and cool as needed.

After that came durability Enchantments on the outer layers, to protect against cuts, gunshots, and the like; followed by waterproofing and silencing. I would have slapped Aura Containment on as well, but the twins already had their cloaks for that. All of Penny's new clothes got the Aura Containment Enchantment, however. It was a risk if they were spotted by Cinder or someone else who knew about Shiro and the Fox both being able to hide their Aura down to nothing, but being able to completely hide Aura was too valuable a trait to pass up. Besides, I planned to cast a bit of doubt on that ability with Cinder soon.
Once I had finished adding Enchantments to everyone's clothes—including Neo who, not wanting to be left out, had promptly doffed her usual outfit and handed it over for work—I got started on my own project, all the while silently cursing the timing of biology. My first test for a Ribbon involved a ward against Fire type Dust, using Grade 4 Burning Crimson to fuel it. Though, in reality, the same pattern worked for any element and the thing that determined what kind of Dust it protected against was the Dust powering it—so, in theory, I should be able to just repeat the pattern over and over on the same piece of gear and stack it with multiple Dust crystals, so that it would protect against as much as possible.

Moving out of the sewing room and into our small practice room to test it, I took up one of the many hard-line telephones mounted in various rooms for communicating with the rest of the base and dialed the guard post to let them know to expect some intermittent gunfire from our testing/practice range for the next few hours. I was happy to see that it worked exactly as advertised—completely dissipating a fire-based Dust attack from one of my Dustcasters. Switching over to one of my Blazefire Sabers, armed with red Dust rounds, proved that while the enchantment would protect against fire, it would not protect against physical force—and that punching a hole through the cloth with a round would ruin the Enchantment pattern.

'Well, there's a reason I wasn't going to rely on these for physical damage protection. Still, I can add a durability Enchantment to make sure the finished product doesn't rip or tear easily,' I assessed, moving back to the sewing room to turn out another copy of the pattern—this time doubled, with two different Dust crystals on it, one for each pattern. Further testing showed that the patterns could be stacked, but as my first test had shown, physical damage could not be negated. More importantly, physical and chemical effects could also not be negated. For instance, a Ribbon pattern fueled by a fire-type Dust crystal would eat fire type Dust effects until it ran out of juice—however, the material still caught fire and burned just as well as normal cloth when exposed to 'real' fire. Likewise, the results of testing with more... esoteric types of Dust were mixed, at best.

Of the types I recognized on sight, Electric Blue, for instance, came with both an electrical and a cold effect—and so required either another Electric Blue to counter it, or a yellow for electricity and a blue or certain types of white for cold. I was leery of testing too much of the new stuff until I spent the time to figure out what it did, however. Still, there was value in having an object that could no-sell the effects of some of the more commonly used types of Dust for combat.

My work on creating a working Ribbon was put on hold that evening, when the sun started to set and we called it a night. Coming to a place where we could all stop and pick up easily later, we took some time to go out and get some shots of Melanie and Penny in costume before heading back inside to prepare to go out. While the girls went to go get ready and dressed for the occasion, I took a few minutes to take a quick shower and change into a set of good looking street clothes that weren't my usual jeans, tee-shirt, and hoodie.

We spent the night dancing at a dance hall, as opposed to Hei's club—as much as they enjoyed The
Club, even the twins could admit that the quieter, more toned-down atmosphere was nice every now and then as a change of pace from the thumping, bone-rattling bass of electronic music. If they were looking for proper dancing, that is. For some reason I couldn't quite fathom, they still loved electronic music. Mostly though, they agreed to go as a concession to the fact that after getting shot with arrows and stabbed, I wasn't particularly feeling up to techno and ass-shaking tonight. As promised, I taught Penny to dance... and spent the night getting my feet stepped on. Her smile, and the others' amusement, was worth it though.

My scroll buzzed and a text notification popped up just after midnight, as I was in the middle of taking Penny on one last spin around the dance floor. Raising an eyebrow, I opened the message in my HUD and frowned.

*My place. ASAP. Bring Neo. - C.*

'Well,' I thought, *'that's not ominous at all.'*

Deciding that Cinder could wait a few minutes, I kept Penny out long enough to finish her round. When we finished, Penny allowed herself to be lead off the dance floor to where Neo, Melanie, and Miltia waited with drinks. “What's wrong?” Miltia asked, seeing the annoyed look on my face.

“Cinder wants to see Neo and I,” I answered shortly. “Her sense of timing sucks.”

As we headed for the exit, Neo quietly asked, “You think it's about yesterday?”

“Probably,” I guessed. “That, or she's decided on going with her plans for Roman.”

I set up links with everyone again and we split up from there. The twins and Penny took the sedan back to Fox Hunt while Neo and I found a blind alley to change outfits in before taking to the rooftops and heading for the cobbler's shop where she had taken up residence. “So, where was I yesterday?” I asked as we went.

Neo grinned. “You and I robbed a store selling weapon parts and accessories, on the north side of the Commercial District,” she supplied. “It was a quiet afternoon heist. We incapacitated the store clerk and left before anyone caught wind of it.”

“That works for me. What'd we make off with?”
“Nothing of tremendous value, but that wasn't the point. The point was to test the Fox's alertness and response time, to see if he was specifically targeting us or if the last Dust shop was just a one-off,” Neo suggested, and I caught on immediately.

Nodding, I continued the train of logic. “And we found it a bit odd that he didn't seem to be in town. I like it. So, about my excuse for the whole 'no Aura' thing,” I began. “She knows 'Shiro' can suppress his Aura output to nothing. Now, she's seen me do it as the Fox as well. I was thinking about showing her pictures of Melanie or Miltia in their Head of Intelligence disguise along with Penny, and telling her at least two other people could do it as well. Because if there were more—one of them being one of the few Fox-masked people wandering around the base, and most especially one that looks like a Schnee—it could send her to chasing down ghosts in Atlas looking for a connection that isn't there.”

“And she would possibly disregard the fact that 'Shiro' can also do it, seeing as people only started popping up with the ability to do so after your fight with the Fox,” Neo followed along, before finishing the train of thought, “Thus implying that the Fox copied it from you somehow and gave it to his subordinates.”

“Could work,” I nodded.

“Go for it and I'll back your play,” Neo agreed, before we moved on to finalizing small details of the story we would be telling Cinder.

'She looks pissed,' Neo sent as soon as Emerald opened the door, red eyes glaring balefully at us from under green hair.

'She always looks pissed when I'm around,' I pointed out, walking past Emerald and heading for the stairs. In the main sitting room, I found Mercury sitting on the only couch, taking up most of the room there as he removed the partially melted and burned remains of one of his artificial legs. Cinder, however, was nowhere in sight. 'Your line, dear,' I sent to Neo, while focusing on my enhanced hearing and bringing up Listen.

“Dust accident?” Neo asked, gesturing at the leg and following my lead as I moved to lean against the wall with a view on the hallway and of Cinder's preferred chair—the only other available place to sit in the cramped room.

“No,” Mercury ground out, wincing in pain as he set about trying to remove the metal from his stump.
'I wonder if it cooked part of his leg under there? The Plasma Blade wasn't really in contact long enough to do that much damage, I think.' Mentally shrugging it off, since I didn't really care one way or another about Mercury's well-being beyond keeping him alive in case I found a use for him later, I listened for the sounds of another person in the shop.

I found them, coming from Cinder's room. There was the faint sound of a scroll trying to connect to another, along with footsteps. Step, step, step, away and then pause, step, step, step back… 'Pacing,' I realized.

Emerald knocked softly on the woman's door. “They're here,” she announced through the door, clearly having been warned not to simply enter.

“In a minute,” Cinder answered back, and I saw Emerald send a worried look at the door before quickly making her way down the hall to perch on the arm of couch, as far as she could get from Mercury and still be occupying the same piece of furniture.

Step, step, *stomp*. “Pick up,” Cinder growled. A moment later, I had to resist the urge to wince as something plastic slammed into wood at high velocity, bounced off, and skidded across the bedroom floor. The connecting ring stopped.

*Thrown her scroll. Wow, she is pissed.* That was both good and bad. Pissed, she would be distracted, and it meant things were likely not going her way. It also meant that if she found a target to focus that rage on, they were shit out of luck.

The bedroom door opened and Cinder made her way down the hall, closing and pocketing her scroll with a disgusted look as she did. She looked up, molten gold eyes meeting my red, and she frowned. I nodded in her direction, keeping my face carefully blank—well, what was visible given the neck gaiter covering most of it, at any rate. She seemed to get the message, though—I had seen her with her guard down before and had yet to say anything, so I wasn't likely to start now. I hit her with Observe as she started moving again.

'More debuffs—different ones from Amber's. 'Aura Leak' sounds pretty self-explanatory. 'Infestation, Stage 1' sounds kind of fucking ominous.' Her mood was listed as angry, afraid, irritated, and paranoid. 'Her boss or backer, whatever, isn't answering the phone and The Fox pretty much showed up out of nowhere to stick his nose in her business. Probably worried about a leak, right about now. I'm out of the running for that, since she explicitly kept me out of the loop—which she knows, so really, that makes me and Emerald the safest bets right now. Mercury lost a leg though and looks pissed about it, so that likely rules him out in her mind as well. As for those debuffs, the first may have something to do with stealing part of Amber's power, but what about 'Infestation'?
Maybe something to do with the Grimm tick thing? I mean, it dove through her glove—does that mean it's inside the glove, or inside her, or did it teleport or something? I'm going to need more time to figure this one out. Going to have to look into medical Bounded Fields.' I blinked as a quest alert popped up.

*A quest has been created! Cinder's Fall.*

Cinder has potentially been infested with a Grimm. The consequences of having a Grimm inside a person are unknown, but it can't be anything good. Find a way to remove it before Infestation and its effects become permanent.

*Success: 1,000,000 EXP, quest progression unlock, increased closeness with Cinder Fall.*

*Failure: no EXP, loss of affection level with Cinder Fall, quest failure. Death, destruction, mayhem.*

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes. 'Everything these days seems to result in 'death, destruction, and mayhem' if I fail.'

A moment later, a second quest popped.

*A quest has been created! Maiden Mishap: Fall of Fall.*

Cinder has stolen part of the Fall Maiden's power. If something isn't done soon, both Cinder and Amber will die. According to Qrow, it is possible that killing one or the other of them would complete the torn Mantle of the Maiden within the survivor.

*Kill Amber: Cinder gains the Mantle of the Fall Maiden, quest unlock, ???.*  
*Death, destruction, mayhem.*

*Kill Cinder: Amber regains the Mantle of the Fall Maiden, quest unlock, ???.*  
*Death, destruction, mayhem?*

'What the fuck is this shit?' I wondered as I turned it over in my head, frowning under my mask as I kept half an ear on the conversation going on around me.
Cinder took her seat, eyes shifting to regard Mercury. “How bad is it?”

“Hang on,” he hissed, working the upper part of the leg back and forth for a moment before it slid loose. I winced at the stump under the leg. The flesh was red, cracked, and beginning to blister—second and some third degree burns. Still, it wasn't fourth degree burns, so he was lucky. Considering how much pain he seemed to be in, that meant the flesh was alive and not cooked—which would be painless, but would, on Earth, require excision or amputation. If the flesh was still alive, time and Aura would heal it naturally. He should be up and mobile within a day or two at most, but how long until he could be mobile without pain was anyone's guess.

'Okay. The short of it is, if I kill one then the other probably gets the power, but either way I go Bad Things are likely to happen. Reading between the lines there, if I kill Amber, Cinder goes through with her plans—whatever those may be. If I kill Cinder, Cinder's employer, partner, sponsor, or whatever retaliates or otherwise finds a way to complete Cinder's plan regardless. No. Fuck that. This quest is bullshit. I'm not killing either of them. There has to be a way to fix this that doesn't lead to a TEOTWAWKI situation.'

Quest Maiden Mishap: Fall of Fall has been declined.

A quest has been created! Maiden Mishap: A Third Option.

Killing either Amber or Cinder doesn't sit well with you, nor does the possibility that either choice you make results in the potential end of the world as we know it. Find a third option.

Success: unknown, unknown, unknown,

Failure: either must die at the hand of the other, for neither can live while the other survives.

'Oh for fuck sake, did I just break the quest system so hard it started quoting Potter at me?' I groaned internally. I would have to deal with it later. Mercury was complaining and I didn't want to appear distracted. Well, more distracted. Thankfully, I hadn't been distracted long enough to draw undue attention—one of the hidden benefits of Haste.

“That bad,” he snarked, gesturing at the stump. “Hurts like a bitch, but I'll live, and we don't have to go find some back-alley cutter to patch me up, like we might have if I had yanked it off when you wanted and it had gotten infected, because I was out of Aura and unconscious for most of the trip.
back,” at that he shot an annoyed look at Emerald. “This,” he held up the remains of his artificial leg, “is a complete loss.” He tossed it onto the floor in front of him, glaring at it. “And it's not like I have spares laying around. You know how long it took to put those together the first time.”

“Hey, it could be worse,” Emerald pointed out, and the boy's eyes shifted off his stump to meet hers. She gestured to where his left leg dangled off the couch normally, still firmly attached to his body. “It could be both of them.”

Mercury glared, but nodded. “Yeah.”

Cinder nodded, closing her eyes in thought. I asked, “So, if it wasn't a Dust accident, what happened?”

Mercury and Emerald both looked to Cinder at that. “The Fox,” she answered simply.

I sighed. “I told you not to underestimate him.”

“Shiro,” Cinder warned, “now is not the time for ‘I told you so.’”

“Fine. What'd you do to piss him off?” I asked, and she frowned at that.

Shaking her head, Cinder answered, “Nothing. His interference in our mission was completely unexpected.”

Humming, I asked, “Was this yesterday?” When she nodded, I shot a significant look at Neo.

“That explains that, then,” she murmured.

“What are you talking about?” Emerald asked, and while the annoyance was there in her voice, there was also curiosity.

“Most of our day yesterday was spent on recon. Mapping out the Fox's base, patrol times and routes, force strength—that sort of thing. It's more secure than the Repository,” I assessed. I didn't even have to lie about that one. When I'd designed our security, I'd done so with the goal of keeping three people in particular out: myself, Neo, and Emerald. As such, there were cameras everywhere—both normal and infrared—in addition to motion sensors and other toys. I couldn't sneak in without an ID.
Invisibility and Neo's illusions were flat out useless, now. And while I had set up predetermined signals to let the people watching the cameras know it was me and they were to ignore my presence if I came in under Invisibility, that didn't extend to anyone but our group.

In addition to that, patrols overlapped and I'd made sure there were no places where guards could be isolated and quietly eliminated outside of view of other guards or cameras. Emerald's Semblance should also be counteracted by that alone, since there would simply be too many people watching for her to get them all—or so I hoped, since I still wasn't sure on the specifics of how it worked or its limitations. I was betting on simply overwhelming her with numbers.

The guards all wore identification badges like my own that stood out under UV and on infrared, so anyone looking to fake one of their I.D. badges would have to go through a lot of trouble to do so. Assuming they went the easy route and stole one, then they would still have to give the guard's personal passcode to get onto the base. And while that could be coerced out of someone, the final visible test was passing through an Aura scanner. It hadn't been too hard to get our hands on one of those, according to reports from my Head of Security—they were common at sporting venues and could be programmed with either a blacklist of known Aura signatures—which was more common, as criminals' Aura signatures were apparently kept on file—or a whitelist of approved personnel. Even civilians with inactive Aura had enough to register to a scanner, so everyone who worked there was registered into the system. Anyone trying to pass themselves off as a guard would not only have to look like a guard, have the guard's credentials and codes, they would also have to have his or her specific Aura. And if someone passed through all of that undetected, they still had to deal with the chance that either I or the Head of Intelligence would show up randomly—a possibility they would be unaware of going in, so there was no real way to guard against it.

Between my original plans and our Head of Security filling in any gaps I'd missed, Fox Hunt's internal security was top notch—on the level of any Atlas military base. Anyone who wanted in was going to have a hell of a time sneaking past the defenses. It would be easier to try to infiltrate, instead—attempt to hire on with the group and take the time to gain our trust. Except that, between the twins and I, that would fail as well.

“We wanted to see if his stepping in on our Dust heist was an isolated incident, or if he was specifically gunning for us. Given everything else we’d hit, that store was pretty much the last on the list and the most obvious next target, so it'd make sense that if he was looking to make an impression then stopping a heist and capturing or killing the ones responsible would make him look pretty good to Vale's Council. On the other hand, it could have just been bad luck that he'd happened to stumble across us in the act. So, we hit a weapon supply store yesterday. No one showed up. No police, no Fox. The cops didn't actually show up until the store owner woke up and called them,” I explained.

Beside me, Neo nodded. “We figured there were only a few reasons he would have for not showing up. Either the first meeting was luck, or this didn't rate his personal appearance, or he was otherwise occupied.”
“‘Occupied’ is a good word for it,” Cinder agreed darkly. “It was supposed to be a simple assassination mission.” I raised an eyebrow at that and she shook her head. “I know your stance on wet-work—too much risk, not enough reward. It's partly why I didn't ask for your assistance.”

I shrugged. “Fair enough. As for plans, well, you know what they say about those and contact with the enemy.”

“There wasn't supposed to be any enemy other than the target,” Cinder countered. “Our intel was good. Covert reconnaissance verified that intel. The area of operation was abandoned and had been for months, by the look of things. We took every precaution that we could, and yet…”

I nodded. “So, you've got three options there: bad intel, enemy action, or bad luck. Either you missed something, the enemy discovered your plans, or it just wasn't your day.”

“He wasn't as tough as you said he'd be,” Mercury cut in, and I shot an amused look at him.

“Ooh, I see,” I nodded. “He took your leg. It was that lightsaber clone, wasn’t it?”

Mercury glared, before a smirk crossed his lips. “So, how’d you deal with that?”

’He thinks he's got you trapped,’ Neo pointed out.

I snorted softly at that. ’Fat chance,’ I sent back. Reaching down to my side, I flicked Ascalon's blade selector over to the extendable blade and slowly drew the weapon. A combination of selector switch and button press swapped the connected Dust crystal in the hilt from Burning Crimson to Lightning Yellow—or just base yellow, since it was the baseline yellow Dust. The sword began to hum audibly as small arcs of electricity popped and crackled off of it, along with the occasional chirp.

“Luck, mostly. After he broke my old blade I replaced both of them with this one—this is actually the blade from the second sword. As it so happens, I use lightning type Dust a lot to aid in cutting through doors, locks, that type of thing where I need to. That energy blade he has is electricity, though based on what I saw in our fight and the damage there,” I gestured at his partly melted leg on the floor, “it seems to have a plasma core or something similar—so electricity plus heat damage. The Dust in my blade countered his, but the heat eventually broke it.”

“What actually happened?” Neo asked, directing the question at Cinder.
Odding at that, I added, “We should compare what we know.”

“The Fox showed up as we were executing our ambush. He incapacitated Emerald first, possibly because she moved out of cover first if he hadn't already discovered our positions,” Cinder theorized. “After that, he engaged Mercury while I drew off our target.”

Cinder gestured at Mercury and the boy rolled his eyes. “He mostly just dodged a lot.”

I raised an eyebrow at that, shooting a glance at Cinder. “How did he fight? With that plasma blade, hand to hand, what?” I shot a look at Emerald. “Then again, if he'd used the plasma blade, sounds like you'd be dead.”

“No, he had a couple of weird swords,” Mercury reluctantly answered. “I got ahold of them at one point. They were heavy as hell and dull—smoothed edges, like they were made for bashing and not cutting.”

“Not what he used against me,” Cinder murmured, and I shot her a questioning look. “He switched to a couple of curved short swords.”

Mercury continued with, “Weirdest thing was that I couldn't hold them. He called them back to him, somehow.”

“What? Like telekinesis or something?” I asked, and the boy shook his head.

“They, I don't know, teleported I guess,” he shrugged. “He wasn't as fast as that video where you fought him, either. And right there at the end I think he hit me with some sort of ranged attack—I was kind of in a lot of pain, so I wasn't exactly paying attention.” Begrudgingly, he added, “I think he flies, too.”

“He flies,” Cinder confirmed, picking up where Mercury left off. “Pretty much the same on my end, though I'll add that he used elemental techniques besides lightning—at least earth, wind, and maybe cold. He also summoned or created a bow, in addition to swords.”

She didn't seem to want to go into details on her fight, so I let it lie. Instead, I hummed and pretended
to think it over. “So, let's put it all together. He's fast as fuck. Faster than me. He didn't hit the two of you with a sustained speed blitz when he did against me. He didn't pull out his lethal sword against you until something changed the tempo of the fight. He can pull swords and a bow out of his ass, somehow—and make them teleport to him. He can use earth, fire, wind, and lightning effects without Dust—it was without Dust, right?” I asked for confirmation.

“I didn't see any and it was too controlled to be normal Dust effects. I would suspect a Schnee or some other Glyphcaster Semblance, but there were no glyphs,” Cinder denied.

“So, Dust effects potentially without Dust for at least four elements, he flies, and he's got 'some kind of ranged attack, ’ ” I quoted Mercury, sending him an annoyed look. “It sounds…”


“Yeah,” I agreed. “My question to you is, why didn't he use all of that at once and end the fight before it could begin?” I asked, raising an eyebrow at Cinder.

The woman shook her head. “I don't know.”

I sighed, palming my face. “So,” I shot an annoyed look at Mercury, “now do you believe me when I say he's out of your league, kid?”

Mercury made that teeth-sucking sound I had come to loathe on Earth and my fist twitched at my side. Emerald spoke up, interrupting before I could say anything else. “I was out for most of the fight, but I can confirm that my Semblance works against him. If we could catch him alone…”

“Too risky,” Cinder denied. “As much as I want to, he's not stupid. Even under the effects of your Semblance, he has enough ways of counteracting it that it would be difficult to account for them all.”

“No, we could do it in public. Catch him at a public gathering or something, slip in close, then put a knife between his ribs,” Emerald suggested. Shooting a look at Neo, she added, “If we worked together, we could take him.”

I shook my head. “I'm not risking my people on revenge. Unless you can guarantee it'll work, we won't move against him directly. No assassination, no direct combat. Besides that, it just wouldn't be profitable. I'd make more money moving my operation to Mistral or Atlas.”
“Well why don't you then, if you won't help?!” Emerald growled, and I turned a glare on her, pulling up Charisma and Intent to back it up.

“Because I still have business in Vale. Until that business ends, I'm not leaving,” I denied, dropping the Aura slap after holding it a moment longer.

Cinder spoke up, drawing my attention away from the suddenly flustered thief. “There was one other thing,” she murmured, golden eyes narrowing and locking on mine. I raised my eyebrows and waited for her to continue. “He never unsuppressed his Aura.”

I blinked at that. “So he fought suppressed? Huh. He didn't, last time,” I mused aloud, waiting for the other half to that that I suspected was coming.

“He didn't seem to have an Aura,” Cinder lead.

Neo turned a worried look on me and I winced. “Well. Fuck.”

“Care to explain?” the red-clad woman asked. “So far, you're the only one I've even seen capable of reducing your Aura output to zero.”

“Well, that makes four, then,” I sighed, digging out my scroll.

One fine eyebrow went up as Cinder asked, “Four?”

I nodded, pulling up a picture of Melanie in her Head of Intelligence outfit, taken from off the base looking in as she walked across one of the open areas between buildings. A second shot was of Penny alone, in her own Fox-themed mask and 'bastard Schnee' disguise, while a third was of the two of them together meeting the Fox—Neo, under an illusion. “Near as I can tell, this one,” I pointed out the picture of Melanie, “occupies some high position in his organization. She doesn't have any Aura output either. The smaller, Fox-masked one is the same on the Aura front, but no idea about her connection to him. So, either he figured out how to duplicate my Semblance, or he's doing something else. A new type of Dust, maybe?”

Cinder's eyes narrowed as she studied the picture on my scroll. “You're certain?” she asked, and I
nodded. “I agree, then. Fuck.”

“So, what's the plan?” I asked, and the woman leaned back in her chair and crossed her arms, after returning my scroll.

“When does your mission start?” she asked, and I shrugged.

“Some time next week. I need to leave by Thursday at the latest.” That was a blatant lie, but if I had to, I could run back to Vale for a few days to obscure when I actually 'left town' so that it didn't coincide with the start of Beacon.

Taking out her scroll, she consulted it for a few moments before nodding. “I'll need to borrow Neo, Monday and Tuesday, perhaps also Wednesday.”

“F―” I asked, wondering if she'd changed plans.

“Freeing Roman Torchwick,” Cinder answered, a small smirk turning her lips up. “I'll send the details to you as soon as possible, but according to my sources, he's being transferred for trial Tuesday morning.”

“Neo?” I asked, and she shrugged.

'I'd rather not, but maybe I'll get lucky and a guard will shoot him. And if it's just me and Emerald, I could always cut her throat,' Neo suggested.

'No. Bad Neo. Emerald's Semblance may be useful, later. I'd like to keep her alive long enough to figure out exactly what it is and how I can use it,' I denied, giving her an amused look.

The girl sighed. “Fine.” She turned to Cinder and added, “But I'm not working for him. Or alone with him.”

“Duly noted,” Cinder agreed. Turning to me, she said, “There is a train bringing a shipment into Vale, due to arrive Tuesday. I need you to capture the train and its cargo and bring them to a location I will provide you.”
I frowned at that. “What’s on this train? How well-guarded is it?”

“Money,” Cinder answered shortly. “As you know, Vale and Vacuo are the last countries still holding out on making the switch from paper money to plastic,” she began, and I nodded along. It explained why mobs dropped both paper and plastic. I’d thought it was kind of weird but had never really bothered to ask before as it didn’t seem pertinent. “The train contains one of many shipments of plastic Lien, to be given to the banks and exchanged for paper Lien.”

I frowned at that. “What about the old money?”

“It is to be destroyed on site, so there will be no chance to take it in transit,” Cinder answered, and I frowned at that. There went the chance to double our money.

“And since this thing is transporting money, it's going to be full to the brim with security,” I assumed, and she nodded. “Maybe even Hunters. And I’ve heard rumors that the Fox is looking to get his group into Vale's security, so there's even a chance he'll be there.”

“The possibility exists,” Cinder admitted.

Frowning at that, I asked, “How much money are we talking about here?”

“That, I am not certain of,” she denied, and I hummed.

“Twenty-five percent,” I demanded.


I shook my head. “Combat bonus, because you can guarantee I'll be seeing combat. Twenty, at the lowest.”

Molten gold eyes narrowed at me. “Fifteen. There should be enough money there that even fifteen percent will make up your combat bonus.”
“Twenty, or Neo and I go home,” I denied, threatening to pull Neo off of the Torchwick job. “Besides, intentionally or not, I've got you over a barrel here. You might be able to get someone else to do it on such short notice, but you'd be hiring an unknown. You're paying for results, not for someone to half-ass it. I take a job, I deliver, I get paid. That's how it works.”

Cinder sat and met my stare with a glare of her own for several long moments. Finally, she tilted her head slightly in a nod and smirked. “Fine. Deliver the money and the train to me, undamaged. Do we have a deal?”

I pretended to consider it for a moment, reaching up to stroke my chin in thought. “Send me the details. I'll think about it.”

The amusement left her face and Cinder frowned. “Think quickly, Shiro. As you said, there is not much time for me to hire a replacement.”

Nodding, I asked, “Was there anything else?”

Cinder shook her head, waving dismissively. “No. That's all for tonight.”

Taking Neo's arm in the crook of my elbow, I lead her for the stairs. “Then a good night to you all.”

Popping open her parasol in her other hand, Neo turned an amused grin on the three left in the room as she twirled it, walking at my side. “Are you sure I can't kill Roman?” she asked, loud enough that I knew the others would hear it.

“No, dear. As useless and irritating as he is, Cinder still needs him,” I denied, a smirk crossing my lips as I did. I activated Listen as we made our way down the stairs.

“Why do you still work with him?” Mercury asked, annoyance clear in his voice.

“He's an ass,” Emerald added.

“As he said. I pay Shiro for results. Yes, he's an ass, and yes, he runs his mouth—but you can not deny his effectiveness,” Cinder countered. “Mercury, what would you need to replace your leg?”
The boy snorted softly. “A real doctor,” he deadpanned.

Cinder hummed, and I almost didn't catch her next words as we stepped outside. “I've heard Atlas has made several advances in cybernetic replacement limbs.”

The door closed behind us and I couldn't make out any more of that conversation. “Sounds like Mercury is going to be out of commission for a while,” I grinned down on Neo.

“Sucks for them, good for us,” Neo returned my look. “Can we go home?”

“Yeah,” I nodded. “We'll take tomorrow and just… do nothing. Well, today, since it's after midnight. Maybe tomorrow as well.”

“All day?” Neo asked, looking hopeful. “Both days?”

Picking her up in a bridal carry, I made us Invisible and headed for the rooftops. “Sure, why not? All day, today and tomorrow. We can lay in bed and watch movies or something and just fuck off all day long.” I paused, wincing as I corrected myself. “Well, most of the day. My new armor should be done to day and I'll need to go pick that up. Shouldn't take but an hour or so.”

“Oh Dust, that sounds wonderful,” Neo sighed. “Are you sure you're ready for Beacon?”

“Nope,” I denied, chuckling as I broke line of sight with Cinder's base. “Illusion?” I asked, and a moment later, the air around us shimmered. Now relatively certain we weren’t being watched, aside from Raven, I switched into my Fox outfit and flew us up above the city. At least, I hoped it was Raven. Considering how the 'being watched' feeling moved with me and remained an even two yards distant from my estimation, I suspected it was Raven this time and not Qrow. Leading Qrow to Cinder's hideout would be bad. “I'm as ready as I'm going to be. Everything's packed away, so all I've really got to do this weekend is go pick up my new armor and make an armor set and we're good.”

“What about Cinder's job? You'll be in Beacon by then,” Neo pointed out, and I nodded.

“I'm thinking I'll tell her an emergency came up.” After a moment, I added, “Or not. If I time it right, I might be able to slip away from Beacon, jump on a Bullhead, go do the job, and come back before I'm needed for anything. I suppose we'll see.”
“‘Just one more job,’ huh?” Neo asked, an amused look crossing her face. “You're addicted now, you know that, right? Admit it, you love the thrill of all of this and you're going to be bored out of your mind at that school.”

I sighed, nodding. “I do. And I probably will be,” I admitted. “But it still needs to be done.”

“I know,” Neo murmured, burying her face against my chest. “I know. It still sucks for us.”

“I know.” I pulled her a bit closer and leaned down to kiss the top of her head. “We'll be fine.”

Turning my eyes back towards Vale, I looked out over the city below me, lit by street lights, stop lights, holographic signs—and the academy on the cliff above the city, visible as a shining beacon standing tall in the dark. It was a sight I would never get tired of seeing. ‘Two more days.’
My peaceful morning just lying in bed surrounded by beautiful women was rudely interrupted by the sound of a scroll going off, to the tune of this universe's Casey Lee Williams equivalent pouring out 'This Will Be The Day.' Cracking my eyes open, I was greeted with my HUD's scroll interface and a picture of Ruby. A glance up and right showed the time to be just after 9am, Saturday morning, and that I had an unread text message waiting for me.

"Why is Ruby calling me this early?" I wondered, cracking a yawn and deciding to find out. Mentally selecting the green 'accept call' button, I shut my eyes again and pulled Melanie closer.

"Morning, Ruby. What's up?" I asked. 'Small wonders,' I mused, the fact that I could take calls in my head without ever having to take out my scroll if I didn't want to never ceased to amaze me on some small level.

"What did you do?!" Ruby yelled, and I winced at the volume. Beside me, the twins stirred and I caught sight of one green eye cracking open in Miltia's face as she observed me. Neo, however, was still sound asleep.

I frowned at that. I hadn't really done anything that would affect Ruby since the last time I'd spoken with her. At least, I didn't think so. Unless she'd somehow found out about my little... altercation with Raven. "Ruby, sweetie, I have no idea what you're talking about. So why don't we start with that? What, exactly, are you asking me here? What's got you upset?"

Ruby made a frustrated noise before I heard her take a slow breath. After a moment, she asked, "Did
I wake you up?"

“You did,” I agreed. “I was going to sleep in today.”

“Oh. Uh, sorry,” she murmured, and I rolled my eyes. “Have you checked your messages yet?”

“Not yet.” It was on my list of things to do this morning. Somewhere between taking a shower and making breakfast, but before returning to bed and telling the rest of the day to fuck off. We had earned a day off, damnit, and by God we were going to take it!

Ruby, it seemed, was having none of that. “Jaune, check your messages.”

I groaned quietly. “Fine. Hang on,” I sighed, opening one eye enough to select the section in question. “Huh. Text from Goodwitch. How did she get... oh. Right. From the transcripts.” My scroll number was part of the paperwork required to forge my transcripts—when the original Jaune had gone along with Joan's plan to get Hei to make him papers—and Ozpin had gone ahead and done me the favor of putting the faked transcripts into their systems. And while the original scroll with that number was sitting on the bottom of the sea somewhere between Atlas and Vytal, I had kept the same account information and number with the new scroll—that way, as Jaune, I could simply claim someone had stolen my scroll and I'd gotten it replaced if I was ever questioned as to why my scroll had been making calls in Atlas. Opening the message, I began to read aloud, for Ruby's benefit and that of the twins listening in silently, seeing as we'd woken them up.

“To all current students and new applicants for Beacon's fall semester. I regret to inform you,” I frowned as I read ahead, both my eyes cracking open. Melanie shifted in my arms, turning her head around to regard me with one eye and urging me to continue as, on the other side of her from me, Miltia lifted herself onto one elbow to shoot me a curious look. Behind me, Neo stirred but did not wake. Seeing that they were awake and figuring Neo wouldn't be bothered either way, I put the scroll on speaker mode—though how it actually broadcast sound when it was in my inventory and I was using my HUD interface, I have no idea.

“I regret to inform you that due to unforeseen circumstances, the start of the fall semester will be delayed until September 20, two weeks hence. The dormitories will be open and current students may return to campus, if they so desire. The staff of Beacon would like to apologize for any inconvenience, yada yada yada,” I trailed off. Fuck. This one really was my fault. Well, probably. Maybe. Unless it had nothing to do with Amber, in which case, it wasn't—maybe. Still, I had to ask. “How do you figure this one's my doing?”

“Well,” Ruby began, her voice dropping, “Yang and I heard dad and Uncle Qrow talking last night,
about an attack outside of Vale and how the school was going to be closed for some reason because of it, until some delivery made it to Beacon. And he mentioned the Fox being involved, so…”

“Is that Jaune?” I heard Yang's voice muffled in the background, followed by something I didn't catch.

A moment later, I could hear the eye-roll as Ruby added, “Yang says thanks for the extra two weeks of vacation.” There was a rustling as she covered the scroll with her hand, then turned to yell back, “Some of us were looking forward to going to school, Yang!”

“Oh, god,” I groaned, palming my face. “Ruby, are your dad and uncle in the house? Because if they are, and they heard that, then they’re going to be suspicious as hell.”

“Uhh,” the girl hemmed, and I heard the sound of her Semblance activating over the scroll. A moment later, she let out a sigh of relief. “No. Coast is clear.” She moved the scroll away and covered it again. “Yang! Be more careful next time!”

I heard the blonde utter a muffled, “Oops. Sorry!” in the background and rolled my eyes, following by Yang telling Ruby to put her scroll on speaker so she could hear.

Ruby uncovered the scroll and asked, “So, what did you do?”

“If you want to talk about it,” I began, drawing the little redhead's attention again, “ask me in person. I don't think the others would mind if you and Yang showed up, but let me ask.”

Melanie and Miltia both shot me amused looks, shaking their heads, while Neo remained unresponsive. “Will we have to put on clothes?” Melanie asked, a smile twitching across her lips.

On the other end of the scroll, I heard a faint squawk of surprise and embarrassment from Ruby. “Yes, you'll have to put on clothes,” I rolled my eyes.

“But we'd have to leave the bed,” Miltia added, looking mischievous.

Reaching out to tweak her nose, I shook my head. “Not if you don't want to.”
“But then Ruby and Yang would have to join us in bed,” Melanie pointed out. A faint squeak came from Ruby's end of the conversation and, judging by the grins on the twins' faces, they knew exactly what they were doing and were intentionally putting ideas in Ruby's head. I almost felt sorry for her. Almost. An instant later, Melanie shared a glance with Miltia before both turned their gazes back to me. “Invite them over.”

“You're incorrigible.” I ignored the girls sticking their tongues out and asked, “Ruby, you catch all that?”

“I-um-buh. I-I-I... But uh... Err—,” the girl spluttered for a moment and I raised my eyebrows. I could hear the blush, along with Yang cracking up in the background. “TLL BRING MY PAJAMAS!” Ruby yelled into the scroll and then hung up before I could tell her that normal clothes would be fine.

'Great, now she's panicking,' I mused, before turning an exasperated look on the twins. “You realize what you've done?”

“Of course,” they synced, and I groaned quietly. The little schemers.

“Just for that, you get to pry Neo off of me so I can go get a shower and make breakfast.”

The twins shared a look before Melanie rolled over and began attempting to pry Neo's hands out from around my waist. Neo responded by locking her hands together and pulling herself closer to me, before intertwining her legs with my own. “Well,” Melanie frowned, looking over my shoulder to where Neo had shifted to bury her face in my back, “I don't think she's going anywhere.”

“Neo,” I began, trying to get the girl's attention. “Neo, I have to get up.”

“Nn,” the girl grunted quietly, shaking her head and squeezing tighter.

Sighing, I shot an exasperated look at the twins. “Okay. You asked for it,” I warned, a smile twitching across my face. “I guess I just won't be able to go to the store and buy a new tub of ice cream—”

There was sudden motion behind me as Neo partially released me to prop herself up on one elbow
and look around blearily. “Wha? Ice cream? What kind?”

“That was cruel,” Miltia commented, shaking her head.

“But effective,” Melanie countered.

Neo glared at the twins. “Someone promised me ice cream.” There was an expectant tone to her voice, and I couldn’t help but chuckle.

“How about after breakfast?” I offered.

Neo snorted softly, turning mismatched mint and strawberry eyes on me. “How about for breakfast?”

Rolling my eyes, I offered, “You let me up and I’ll get you a bowl.” Neo grudgingly disentangled herself from around me and I made good on my promise before heading into the shower where I was joined by Miltia, who had won another round of rock-paper-scissors against Melanie to see who would go first. Freshly showered, I answered a text from Ruby letting her know I would meet her and Yang at the transport terminal before heading out, promising the girls I would be back soon. They had opted to skip breakfast in favor of waiting on Ruby and Yang to get in so we could do lunch instead—all of them except Neo, but then she didn’t really seem to count ice cream as a meal. I think it was more that she would always find a way to argue in favor of more ice cream later.

I grabbed my newly finished coat out of the girls’ project room and dropped it into Inventory, equipping it in the proper slot and taking a moment to get a feel for it. Despite the size and thickness of the material, it was flexible and weighed almost nothing—that last one courtesy of weight reduction seals. An adjustment of the socketed Dust crystals at the sleeves hidden under a buttoned flap at the inside of the wrist had it set to a comfortably cool temperature, and after a check of the socketed crystals hidden on the other sleeve, I activated the other enchantments meant to be always on. Once everything was properly in place and activated, I updated my ‘Jaune’ armor set so it would be easily accessible.

Before I left our quarters, I opened up my map and checked the local area, to see who was around. ‘Well, that explains why I didn’t see Penny—she left early,’ I mused, wondering what the gynoid was up to. Since her icon was stopped in what I knew to be a weapon shop—the same one I’d gotten Ascalon from, in fact—I had a pretty good idea. ‘Looks like Jen's in the medical ward again. I guess she had another evaluation this morning or something.’ I considered going down to see her, but since she was already behind closed doors in a session, I nixed that as being a bad idea. Besides, while ‘Jaune Arc’ was occasionally seen around the base accompanying his sister or other personnel and had been off and on since I’d founded Fox Hunt, I didn’t want my civilian face becoming a
common sight around here. If someone managed to infiltrate past both the twins and my Semblance's ability to detect bullshit, then I didn't want them being able to say I showed up in my public identity as anything more than a guest, and usually as a friend or relative to someone who was already here. Ruby, Yang, and Blake at least had the much more believable excuse of being groomed for recruitment into Fox Hunt—and both Ruby and Yang had publicly fought 'Shiro' at different times, so I could always claim that's what had caught the Fox's interest. Maybe by the time we graduated, I could just have them recruited straight into Fox Hunt and pay off their mandatory service period or something. Assuming they wanted to.

'Imagine if Cinder somehow figured out Shiro's 'secret identity.' She'd start backtracking and I'd have a hell of a time explaining what I was doing here. If I'm here because I've managed to slip Neo and the twins inside, that makes sense from an infiltration perspective. If I'm here because the Fox hired one of my sisters, who has been mistreated by Atlas, then that might make sense from a personal perspective. But if I'm here because I want to be, and I'm not either plotting something or doing recon for a job? Nu h uh. That stinks of collusion at best, most likely double-cross. I'd like to avoid that.'

The Fox would have cause enough to see to the well-being of someone he was attempting to recruit, but showing more concern than that of a prospective employer looking after a valuable employee would potentially cause people to draw the wrong—or right, in this case—conclusion and assume we were closer than that and that I was involved on a personal level. Barging into her session to check on her as the Fox would be even worse than doing it as Jaune—at least as Jaune I had the excuse of being her sibling. Shaking my head, I decided it would have to wait until I got back.

Switching to my Fox outfit, I passed through the exit for the officer's quarters and took the elevator down, stepping outside and finding the base buzzing with activity—most of it centered on the motor pool. Curious, I made my way towards the building where it was housed, nodding to personnel who stopped to salute as I passed. Stepping inside, I found several of our new AFVs opened up, people scrambling over them with tools in hand.

Stepping off to the side and making sure I was out of the way, I took it all in. A few vehicles in, I spotted a familiar form—short, female and with a set of gray wolf ears poking from a set of holes cut in an olive drab hat. She had exchanged the green flannel I last remembered seeing her in for a uniform, though the overalls remained—in keeping with nearly everyone else working in this section of the base. Even without my Semblance putting her name above her head, I recognized Sid Bloedig—the girl we'd picked up in Stofhol. Considering she was Blake's one example of a successful charity case from that particular mission, she kind of stood out in my mind. "Charity case,' my ass. No, she was doing fine in Stofhol before we got there. Still, wonder what she's doing here? We had her assigned to working on armor for the troops so her skills would level up and I'd eventually have my own personal armorer.'

She was currently looking the other direction at the moment, so I smirked under my mask as I casually snuck up behind her—with all the noise going on, I didn't even really need the bonus from Move Silent. “Private,” I greeted from behind her, causing the girl to jump nearly a foot in the air.
while letting out a surprised 'Eep!', spin around and level a glare at me. That is, before she realized who had addressed her and the glare dropped off her face as her eyes went wide and she came to attention in a salute.

“Sir! I'm sorry, sir. Uh, you startled me,” she explained in a rush, and I chuckled under my mask.

“At ease,” I waved her concerns off. “What's going on here? And I thought you were supposed to be assigned to turning out armor?”

Scratching at the back of her head and chuckling nervously, she nodded. “Oh, I am. But we got these things in and the head of the motor pool called for anyone who could hold the right end of a wrench to help get them tuned up and ready. Said something about how warning had come down that we were expecting more Grimm activity and we might get a chance to use them soon.”

I did remember issuing that warning, after the Arc twins had overreacted to my message concerning Jen. I just hadn't expected it to happen so quickly. Not that I was complaining. I would love an excuse to test out my new toys. “I see. How are you settling in?”

“I'm doing well, sir. I've made a few friends and I'm really enjoying the chance to work with better equipment than we had back home. The classes required for certifications to advance are kind of dull, but that's mostly because they're covering stuff I already know. I won't get into new stuff until I finish them though, and they're required for everyone, so,” she trailed off, giving a 'what can you do' shrug. Someone dropped a wrench under the AFV behind her causing her to wince as one of her ears flicked back towards the source of the sound. “Shit,” the girl hissed. “Sorry, sir. I should get back to it.”

Nodding, I gestured towards where one of the other mechanics was swearing and nursing cut knuckles. “Carry on, then.”

“Yes, sir,” she smiled, scurrying off to climb under the vehicle in question.

As I was making my way back out of the motor pool, I caught sight of Angel hurrying over to catch me before I left. I paused to let her catch up, then resumed my walk for the exit. “Sir, I heard Greene procured some aircraft?”


“Good,” Angel sighed quietly, and I turned to look at her. “When the little one came running in requesting a bird, she almost didn't get one. We've had them all out in rotation, nearly non-stop due
to increased Grimm activity. I've since issued orders to keep Foxtrot-1 on standby from now on, but at the moment we barely have the one to spare.”

I raised an eyebrow at that. "The little one? Is that what they're calling Penny in general or in her 'bastard Schnee' disguise? I know Angel and Jim are at least aware of who's under that particular mask, so it's probably because she doesn't want to just blurt out Penny's name where anyone could hear—thank you, Angel. We really need to come up with names for Penny. And Neo and whichever of the twins is playing as 'Head of Intel' at the time.' It was something I'd have to sit down with the girls and discuss sooner, rather than later. “In other words, we need Greene to get us the new birds,” I surmised, and she nodded. “What about the ones we got...?” I trailed off, and she shook her head.

“Vale ATC is keeping track of things now. The only good it's doing us is being able to rotate those with the same identification out for maintenance, refuel, and rearm faster with their duplicates. We can't have two of the same one in the air at the same time,” she denied, and I groaned quietly.

“I am beginning to suspect that agreeing to allow Vale ATC to 'help' us with our air traffic in return for granting us control over our airspace was a bad idea.”

Angel shook her head. “Not really. It's a trade-off, yes, but in the long run we come off better for it. It's just that in the short term, it's not so great.”

“It's hampering our operations.” She nodded and I turned a grin on her, unfortunately lost under the mask. “So, let's cheat. Can we repaint them? Change tail numbers or muck with the IFF so they identify as different craft?”

“We could,” Angel agreed slowly. “But we're back to introducing the same problem in a different way: too many birds, no paper trail to show where half of them came from.”

Humming, I thought it over. “Who keeps those records?”

“I don't know, sir. That's outside my expertise. Sorry,” she apologized, and I waved her off.

“I'll put someone on it. We might have to convince someone to do some creative bookkeeping. I'll let you know when I have something,” I told her, digging out my scroll and firing off a text to Miltia to look into it for me. What was the point of having a hack tool that could crack government systems if I wasn't going to use it, after all? And even with that, I was still going to need more aircraft. “Okay. You've convinced me.”
“Sir?”

I gestured towards the motor pool. “See if we can spare a few people to evaluate some aircraft. Talk to Greene and see if you can arrange to look at what he's offering, and how soon. You have my permission to go out, evaluate their viability, and—if he's not selling us a load of shit—forward it to me. If it is a load of shit, feel free to walk away from it. We'll see if we can talk him into letting us work out billing them over time instead of buying them straight out like we did the other kit. We should start pulling in enough money soon that we can start setting aside enough to do it. Make contact, evaluate what he's got, then give me a couple of weeks to work something out before we approach Greene again, okay?”

“Yes, sir,” the woman agreed, a smile twitching her lips upwards.

“Also, I want to try and organize a little... expedition for this coming week. With the Grimm around Vale as agitated as they are, we'll have plenty of targets to test our new gear on. As soon as we've got enough of the AFVs inspected and running, I want to take some of those and some of our air force out and scare up some fun. Maybe work on some sort of demonstration to show we're a viable choice for that contract,” I told her, and she nodded.

“I'll speak with the other department heads and start getting things ready.”

“Carry on,” I waved her off, and she turned and headed back into the base, presumably to start seeing to my orders. Tilting my head skywards, I subvocalized, “Wings,” before shooting up and out of the base, wind rushing around me and yanking my hood back. Clearing the buildings, I turned for the transit hub where I would be picking up Yang and Ruby, casting Invisibility as I went.

“Jaune!” Ruby cheered, disappearing in a puff of rose petals and reappearing latched around my midsection. “Ooh, cool,” Ruby murmured, slipping her arms under the coat and giving a quiet sigh. Despite the fact that it was officially fall now, the day was unseasonably warm. Even Yang, who refused to go without her own jacket, had opted to wear it tied around her waist by the sleeves, leaving her in just her yellow-gold tube top with her emblem on the left breast. Ruby, on the other hand, looked to be wilting in her normal Hunter attire. Wearing a coat should have stood out, but from what I gathered from most of the people around me, their first assumption upon seeing it and the weapons strapped to it was 'Hunter.' Which wasn't far off the truth. Remnant-normal, I reminded myself.

“Ruby,” I greeted the girl. “Good to see you too. And Yang.” I nodded at the blonde, sending a pair of party invites, which were quickly accepted. Once those were up, I established links next, as a
“Nice outfit,” Yang hummed, dragging lilac eyes over my form.

“Thanks. It's not complete yet, though. I still need to pick up my armor. You guys mind if we make a detour on the way back so I can do that?” I asked, earning a shake of the head from the blonde as Ruby pried herself out from around me.

“How is it so cool in there?” Ruby asked, and I grinned.

I gestured towards the exit and the girls followed. “Let's get going,” I said aloud, while at the same time sending, ‘Climate control enchantments.’

'Like the one on my scarf?’ she asked, and I nodded. 'Except yours covers your whole body.’

I nodded again as we pushed through the exit and into the parking lot. “Yep. If you want, we could probably do something about that for you. You too, Yang.” Yang's eyes lit up with mischief and she opened her mouth to say something. Having some idea where she was going, I decided to be a little cruel and cut her off before she could. ‘I'm sure Neo will be happy to take your measurements or whatever is needed.”

Yang's mouth closed with a clack of teeth clicking together. Something that was half memory, half imagination flashed across our link—Neo's hands on Yang and the blonde's thoughts and feelings on what Neo could get up to while ‘taking her measurements.’ I snorted softly and Yang had the decency to blush. ‘Damnit, Jaune, now that mental image is stuck in my head,” she grumbled, a grudging smile creeping across her lips as she did. I noticed Ruby roll her eyes, even as a smile played over her face.

Raising an eyebrow at that, I realized that the little reaper hadn't gotten half of that exchange—Yang was apparently experimenting with the links and had figured out how to send only to me. 'Good for her. She needs more practice with it.’ I gestured at the backpacks the sisters were carrying. “What's up with those?”

Yang grinned. “Well, if we're going to be spending the night, we'll need a change of clothes.”

“And pajamas,” Ruby added. “Also, toothbrushes. We planned ahead.”
Shooting the pair an amused look, I asked, “When was that decided? Last I checked, we were only spending the day together lounging in bed.”

A smug little smirk teased Yang’s lips upwards as she said, “Well, we could always call the others and ask...”

“Don’t bother, I already know the answer,” I deadpanned. Not that I was complaining about it.

Ruby reached over and patted my shoulder. “I think you’re outnumbered, Jaune. It may be time to admit defeat and accept the inevitable.”

“Note to self: learn what it takes to bribe the others onto my side,” I mused aloud in a stage whisper, earning a pair of laughs for my trouble.

I lead them to where the sedan sat waiting. ‘I really do hate cameras,’ I mused, slipping into the driver’s seat. Ruby claimed the seat next to mine and Yang slid into the back while I got us moving to our first stop. What was the point in being able to fly, or summon vehicles, or other things if you had to account for cameras nearly everywhere you went inside the city? ‘Fly across town invisible, drop down into a blind alley, change outfits, summon up a vehicle, drive the rest of the way here looking like I’d been parked there the whole time. Too many steps for a trip across town, just to make sure some government mook who just happens to glance at the city footage doesn’t notice. Fuck city-wide CCTV.’

While it was a thing in some places on Earth, it wasn’t in the city where I’d grown up and spent most of my life—you could still get away with speeding or going through a pointless red light when no one else was coming, as opposed to those cities where doing that would see a traffic ticket mailed straight to your home. ‘I should go out as Shiro and take down the CCTV network. It’d make things a hell of a lot easier for me. Then again, it’d also blind the city in the event of a Grimm attack—which, now that I think about it, is probably the primary reason for having it. Crap. Can’t kill the city’s defenses just for my personal convenience. I really need a way to come and go from Fox Hunt that doesn’t involve changing outfits every time. Pretty sure Raven would be annoyed if I asked her to be my personal taxi service, though. Too bad. Portals would be convenient. I suppose I’ll be making ‘Dimension Door’ or something similar my next big spell target, after true flight.’ While spells like Plane Shift or Astral Projection were off the table, Dimension Door should be within the scope of my ability to create, once I had the base INT required. And while I could have just dumped all my points in INT right then, I was still waiting—patiently, mind you—for Beacon to start. Once I started studying, I figured that—like with physical exercise—I would gain points in INT. Dumping points before that would be a waste.

The tail end of the song that had been playing when we’d gotten back in the car ended and a radio
host came on the air. “And now for your local news and weather at the top of the hour. Authorities have issued a curfew for all civilians in the area immediately surrounding the city of Vale due to an increase in local Grimm activity.”

I blinked at that, frowning as I turned the radio up. 'Sounds like a patrol may have picked up something nasty. They've been talking about increased activity since Jane and Jean rang the metaphorical dinner bell, but this is the first time I've heard anything about a curfew.'

“Hunter patrols have been increased accordingly, but unconfirmed reports from the field indicate that a recent local addition to Vale’s forces—the private military contractor Fox Hunt—has been helping to lighten the load for our Hunter forces. Civilians are advised to remain vigilant and seek shelter should they encounter Grimm. The Vale City Council is now accepting bids for booth spaces at the upcoming Vytal festival, and in town preparations are already beginning to welcome those students showing up early. Negotiations are still ongoing as to the format of this year's tournament. Your three day forecast is as follows. Tonight: partly cloudy, winds from the north at five to ten miles per hour with the occasional gust, temperatures falling into the mid-50s. Tomorrow: clouds increasing, chance of rain 20%, winds—”

“So,” I began, as Yang unbuckled her seatbelt, leaned up between the seats, and hit the station selector for the radio, “your dad let you out of the house, since Beacon’s been put off?” I glanced to the side and wondered for a moment how, exactly, Yang didn't simply flop out of her considering the fact that it was essentially a 'boob tube' and she was clearly not wearing a bra. 'Some sort of built in support, maybe?’

“Yep. Thanks for that, by the way,” the blonde agreed, a grin drawing her full lips up as she regarded the radio. “What song is that? It's kinda catchy.”

“Well it's midnight, damn right, we're wound up too tight…”

“Not sure,” I shrugged. It sounded familiar—in the way pretty much all 'instant music' did to me these days. 'Which is the problem. It sounds familiar because I've heard it before, not because it sounds samey.'

Ruby turned an annoyed look on Yang. “I was looking forward to going.”

“…we got no fear, no doubt, all in, balls out…”

Yang rolled her eyes. “It'll still be there.” Silver eyes narrowed and Ruby's hand streaked out, tapping the seek button and changing the station. 'This Will Be The Day' began blaring from the
speakers and I reached out to turn it down. “Hey! I was listening to that!” Yang complained. Something warm and soft—and entirely unmistakable as anything other than boob-flesh—smashed into the side of my head as she leaned forward again to change the station back.

“…Alright sir, sure I’ll have another one it’s early…”

“Yang, come on, I’m trying to drive here,” I complained. “I don’t need you trying to give me a black eye with your boobs. And buckle up. If we get a ticket, you’re paying it.”

“Heh sorry,” the girl chuckled, only to glare as Ruby changed the radio back. I frowned as something else I recognized began to play: ‘Red Like Roses.’ “You brat,” Yang growled, disregarding my previous warning and hitting the radio hard enough to cause the plastic to creak. ‘I Burn’ began playing.

Ruby's hand shot out for the radio again, and a sharp crack of flesh-on-flesh sounded through the car. The small redhead yelped, drawing her hand back and cradling it to her chest. “That's enough,” I warned.

“Haha!” Yang pointed. “Ow!” the blonde whined, drawing back her own smarting hand as I smacked her too.

Blue eyes met lilac in the rearview and I sent the girl a no-nonsense look. “Behave.” Reaching out, I tapped the seek button. I frowned as guitar poured out of the radio. ‘I think that's ‘Gimme Shelter.’ Did The Rolling Stones make it to Remnant? If not, is this proof that my Semblance is pulling songs from my memory, or doing something else?’ So far, I hadn't run across anything that I could prove didn't exist on both Earth and Remnant, so I'd have to add it to my to-do list. Figuring out if my Semblance was screwing with me when it came to music was low on my list of priorities, however.

“Yaang, Jaune's being a meanie,” Ruby whined.

“What do you want me to do about it?” Yang rolled her eyes.

Shooting the pair a half-amused, half-annoyed look, I threatened, “I will pull this car over.”

“Oh really?” Yang leered. “You hear that, sis? Jaune's promising spankings.”
I wasn't sure whether to be amused or somewhat horrified as a contemplative look crossed the little reaper's face even as she blushed. "You're incorrigible, and a horrible influence on your sister," I deadpanned at Yang, before sending her my memory of her being spanked by Neo. Lilac eyes went wide as she blushed. Apparently, she had given up on the radio but had decided she'd rather try to occupy the front seat with Ruby and myself, so had leaned up between the seats. At that point, I gave up on convincing her to buckle up. Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed that the position offered an absolutely amazing view of her breasts in that tube top. 'Yeah, not a bra in sight— and apparently she enjoyed that little memory. Has to be built-in support.'

“That's what big sisters are for,” Yang countered.

“I blame Uncle Qrow,” Ruby shook her head. “With him around as a role model, we were doomed from the start.”

The blonde beside me nodded. “Pretty much. So, what'd you do to get the school closed down for another two weeks?”

“Hey, now. I didn't do shit,” I denied. From the passenger seat, Ruby shot me an incredulous look. “Okay, I may have had a hand in it…”

“Spill!” Yang demanded.

Sighing, I recounted an edited version of the story, leaving out little details like the names of everyone involved except Qrow and Penny, references to Amber's Maidenhood, and the like. “So, yeah. That's why. Beacon has a high profile guest and the senior staff are too busy keeping her alive to run the school.”

Frowning, Ruby pointed out, “You aren't telling us everything.”

“No,” I denied. “Sorry. Some things, like the identity of the attackers, it could be dangerous for you to know.”

Yang snorted softly. “How's that?”

“Well, suppose I told you who it was. And suppose you ran across this person in public. Do you think you could keep the fact that you know they're up to no good a secret? Other things aren't my
secrets to tell. I shouldn't have even told you as much as I have. People knowing there's someone…

special hiding out in Beacon would be bad. I'm not saying I think you'll go out and blab it somewhere. Ozpin asked that I keep it secret and I'm still not sure whether or not there are people out there with Semblances capable of pulling things straight out of your mind. Just because we haven't run across it yet doesn't mean it's not out there. If you need to know, I will tell you—I promise. But you don't need to know yet,” I denied.

The sisters shared an annoyed look before Yang sighed. “Fine. It sounds like if we screw up with this then someone could die.”

“Yes,” I nodded confirmation.

“Then we'll trust your judgment,” Ruby gave her own nod, crossing her arms and turning her head to look out the window. “We don't like it, but we don't have to like it.”

I chuckled softly. “That is a very mature way to look at it,” I complimented. “I'm pretty sure it's something we're all going to have to get used to. In a military organization—which the Hunter Corps seems to be based around—you don't always get to know everything. Sometimes, you're told to shut up and follow orders, and you just have to trust that your superiors know what they're doing. It sucks, but there's a reason for it.” My HUD showed me we were coming up on our destination. I had more to tell them, but I didn't know how Yang was going to react. “There's one other thing. I'll tell you when we're done here. Your choice whether it's in the car or back at Fox Hunt.”

“Is it bad?” Ruby asked, and I shrugged.

“That's hard to say. I wouldn't call it bad per se, just potentially upsetting.” I had no idea how Yang would react to the news that her mom was back in town. If she knew that Raven was watching us, even now, there was no telling what would happen. The spot behind and above me where I figured Raven's method of watching to be shifted quickly, moving around in front of me to just off center to my right. Shifting my eyes off the road to regard the spot for a moment, I tilted my head slightly and raised my eyebrows—hoping she could intuit that as me asking if that was okay. Not that I particularly cared if she was okay with it or not, but I'd rather avoid pissing off a woman who could swat me like a bug. The feeling shifted back to its usual position—a non-answer if I'd ever seen one.

As we drew closer to the shop where I'd be picking up my armor, I raised an eyebrow as something interesting on my minimap caught my eye. Six icons denoting people my Semblance felt were important enough to show up on the map or minimap were situated either in the armor shop or in the Dust store next door. Of those six, I only recognized the two in the Dust shop: a purple lotus and a pink hammer with a lightning bolt through it. 'Ren and Nora,' I smiled faintly. Of the other four, only two were even vaguely familiar: a crosshair inside a circle, both gold; a pair of crossed daggers in copper; a brown heart that looked to be covered in stitches; and a fishhook shaped sword und er
some sort of five-layer shield. I could swear I had seen the circled crosshair and the patchwork heart before, but I couldn't put names to the emblems.

“Who’s this?” Yang asked, reaching out and tapping a point in space that I knew would correspond to her own minimap.

“No idea,” I smiled, bringing the sedan to a stop in a parking spot outside the store.

“Hmm,” Ruby hummed, unbuckling her seatbelt as she hopped out of the car. “I bet they’re Hunters.”

“Possibly,” I allowed, following her lead and locking the car out of habit as Yang slid out and closed her door. “We’ll find out in a minute.”

“What kind of armor did you decide on?” Yang asked, and I grinned.

“Oh, you’ll see,” I murmured, heading for the door to the shop and turning a grin on Yang and Ruby, opening the door as I did so. “I think you’ll be im—”

“—can't believe school was delay—” a voice was saying at the same moment, an instant before a smaller, soft form ran right into my chest.

A combination of slick footing and momentum sent both of us heading for a spill on the shiny shop floor. At the same time, something tickled my senses—and not one of the ones I'd been born with. Other Auras nearby, unsuppressed and a fair bit above our own, brushed against my fledgling Aura sense, while the girl and the box of things she carried registered to my sense of the surrounding gravity as they began to fall.

There were simultaneous cries of “Jaune!” and “Velvet!” from both sides of the door as we fell. Reflexively, I reached out—both with my arms and gravity—and snagged myself, the girl, and the falling objects. The girl thumped against my chest again as I righted us, while the objects froze mid-air. My eyes tracked down and registered a head of long brown hair, topped by brown ‘Rabbit ears?’

“Careful, I just waxed the floor!” the shopkeep called from the counter, entirely too late. I ignored him in favor of the female in my arms. My Semblance helpfully supplied her identity.
Something about the title tickled my memory, but I was distracted from figuring out why for the moment. The girl’s head tilted up and brown eyes locked with my blue and for just an instant, I felt something brush against Gamer’s Mind. “Hi there,” I said, my mouth speeding ahead of my brain as it was occasionally wont to do as I wondered at the feeling.

“H-hello,” the girl stuttered quietly, glancing down and taking in exactly how close we were, along with the fact that we were still holding onto each other.

Nearby, I heard air hiss and a loud *pop!* which drew my eyes to another girl—brown hair with a red and yellow dyed bang—regarding us over a pair of dark sunglasses, her tongue darting out and pulling in the remains of the bubble she’d popped with her gum. Dark brown eyes peered over the sunglasses and swept up and down my form as her eyebrows went up slightly. *Did she just check me out?*

Sending the girl in my arms a polite smile, I released her and took a step back. “Sorry about that.”

“Oh no, it was my fault! I wasn't watching where I was going,” the faunus girl denied, shaking her head quickly. Her accent sounded familiar, but I was a little distracted at the moment to bother trying to place it.

“Are you okay?” Ruby asked, popping up at my side, before looking down and frowning at the floor. “Man, this floor is really slick.”
“We're fine, Ruby. Right, miss…?” I trailed off, regarding the faunus girl.

“Velvet,” she answered the unspoken question. “Velvet Scarlatina.”

“Jaune Arc,” I returned.

“Ruby Rose!” Ruby beamed at the taller girl. “Are you a Huntress?”

I shifted enough to catch Yang's eyes, the blonde looking amused at her sister's antics. “Ruby, what have I said about fangirling?” I asked, and the little reaper blushed, turning a glare on me as she puffed out her cheeks and pouted—and in so doing went from a natural six to a ten on the adorkable scale.

“Beacon students, actually,” the girl with the shades answered for her friend. “Coco Adel.” Her gaze shifted to the blonde behind me expectantly.

“Yang Xiao Long,” Yang introduced herself. “We're just about to start Beacon, actually.”

“Were.' Past tense,” Ruby grumbled.

“I believe this belongs to you,” I offered, bringing the pieces of what I now realized was the armor parts to a combat outfit together in front of Velvet. They looked like gold, but that was probably for simple aesthetics. The girl held open the top of the box they had spilled from and I eased them down into place. “And we should probably move out of the doorway, before we have another accident.”

“Thank you,” Velvet smiled, and I nodded as she finished collecting them.

“Cute,” the other nearby brunette murmured under her breath, low enough that I knew she had meant it only for her own ears—though, given the way Velvet's ears twitched towards the sound and how she rolled her eyes, I could have been mistaken. Clearing her throat, Coco turned towards the inside of the store. “FOX! YATSU! We're leaving! We're going to be late for the next flight back if you don't hurry up!”

Velvet and I both winced at the volume, before her eyes tracked to mine and her eyebrows raised in
curiosity. My lips twitched as I resisted the urge to laugh. “Well,” I grinned, shaking my head. “It was nice meeting you.”

“Likewise,” the girl returned, and I finally realized where I recognized the faint accent from.

‘Oh lord, there really is a Remnant Australia and it wasn’t just her voice actress. Well, here’s hoping it didn’t start off life as a prison colony. Then again, faunus, Menagerie—damn, it really is Remnant Australia,’ I mused. “See you around some time,” I offered, moving aside so she and Coco could pass by.

“Probably,” Coco answered, tossing a wave over her shoulder as they left.

From the back of the store, two young men hurried to catch up to the girls. The first was tall—tall enough that I had to look up—and wearing green armor, looking to be of Japanese ancestry, or the Remnant equivalent, considering Japanese weren’t known for being tall. Even by American standards, seven feet was an outlier for height—to the point where I felt like I was craning my neck to check his nameplate.

Yatsuhashi Daichi

Daisy Cutter

Level: 61

The second was very tan and had hair a shade of dark copper. Well, his skin was tanned where it wasn’t the lighter shade of scars, which criss-crossed over much of his visible skin—and much of it was visible, given that he wore a dark red sleeveless vest. I noticed, as he neared, that his eyes were milky white.

Fox Alistair

Unseen Blade

Level: 61
While I wasn't entirely willing to rule out some local Byakugan clone—especially given Ruby's own 'dojutsu' as proof that such a thing as special eyes existed in Remnant—I suspected he was merely blind. If it was the latter, I wondered how he got around—hearing would only get you so far, especially on a world like Remnant and even more so in a profession like Hunting. 'Aura Sense, maybe? Or some kind of echolocation using Aura? Being blind would go a long way towards explaining the scarring. That it's that bad means it's either fresh—and they don't look fresh—or was bad enough that his Aura is still healing it.' I remembered hearing somewhere that scars faded to nothing over time, thanks to Aura—so lasting scars tended to fall into one of two categories: evidence of severe wounding, or vanity. I, and likely Fox, were part of the first group. Weiss, with that little scar over her eye marring her otherwise flawless face, fell into the second category.

Beside me, Ruby sucked in a quiet breath while Yang went slightly stiff. 'What's up with them?' I wondered as the pair of boys passed by, the door to the shop closing behind them. Shrugging it off, I headed up to the front counter while the sisters went to look around. “Jaune Arc, for pickup.”

“I've got your order boxed and ready. Give me just a moment,” he said, turning and heading for the back of the shop.

“Hey Jaune, what do you think?” Ruby asked, walking up with a set of what looked like shin guards and knee protectors in her hands. Bending down, she strapped them to her legs and I hummed in thought as I looked them over. They mostly covered the nearly knee-high boots she wore, but there was enough of a gap between the knee pads and shin guards to ensure flexibility of movement.

“Just the lower legs?” I asked, raising an eyebrow.

Looking down at the armor, Ruby shrugged. “Well, what would you suggest?”

“Since I can make it all nearly weightless, I'd suggest proper protection for a melee fighter. But what I suggest and what you'll be able to live with are two different things—I know how some people are about their 'Hunter look.' I'd suggest armor for the boots, shins, knees, thighs, gloves with fingers, arm guards and upper and lower arms, maybe elbows as well, and chest and stomach pieces. Also, a helmet,” I answered, and smirked when she rolled her eyes.

“So, heavy armor,” she summarized in deadpan, sticking out her tongue.

“Careful. Someone's going to take that as an invitation one day,” I warned, causing her to look away and blush. She really was too easy to tease. “And armor comes in more materials than just metal.
Leather would work for most of it, while allowing you to be light and nimble to fill a scout role without getting wrecked if you take a decent hit. I told you, you wouldn't be able to live with it. So, bare minimum: shins, knees, forearms, gloves, chest, and stomach.” I knew she likely wouldn't agree to that, either. She proved me right a moment later.

Crossing her arms, Ruby asked, “Can't I get rid of the stomach piece at least?”

“Sure,” I agreed with a smile. She began to smile herself, until I continued with, “If you don't mind your entrails becoming extrails if a beowolf or something gets in a lucky swipe through your Aura. I mean, sure, my Semblance pretty much makes it so my entrails would get vacuumed back into my body a moment later, but I'm still going to wear stomach protection.”

“He's got you there, sis,” Yang snickered, coming up behind her sister and mussing the shorter girl's hair.

“Says miss 'I'll use my boobs to distract the Grimm,’” Ruby rolled her eyes, earning a mild glare from Yang. “And you're one to talk! At least I have full body coverage and my corset could double as armor.”

I knew I should stay out of it, but I couldn't resist. “And yet, it doesn't. Also, the boob-window is a traditional fantasy armor feature. It's great for distracting human enemies… or giving them a target to stick a sword in, or swipe a blade through. But no huma or Grimm would go for an easy, painful, and debilitating target, right?” I asked, heavy on the sarcasm. Ruby smirked while Yang crossed her arms over the area in question, though I noticed she did look thoughtful now that I'd put the idea out there. Shifting my gaze back to Ruby, I said, “Even something as simple as a material change and a few additions here and there could work. You could swap most of your outfit for hardened leather cut and dyed the same as your current outfit, then back it up with the same sort of stuff I'm putting on mine and have little to no negative impact on your fighting style while increasing your survivability dramatically.”

The little reaper hummed in contemplation, but before we could talk further on the issue of putting melee combatants in proper armor, the shopkeep returned with a large box of armor in his hands. “All polished up and ready to go.”

“Excellent. How much do I owe you?” I asked.

He rang up the remaining half of the figure he'd initially quoted me on the job and I quickly paid him, hefting the heavy box of armor in my hands and heading for the door. “Let's get back home and I can see about putting the finishing touches on it.”
Yang held the door for me and I stepped outside, heading for the car. As I reached the car and popped the trunk, the door to the Dust shop next door opened and a pair of familiar figures stepped out. Well, I say familiar—they were familiar in the same way Ruby, Yang, Blake, and Weiss initially were, in that I had seen their animated counterparts in another world. “Nora,” a young man clad in a green and black Chinese themed outfit groaned quietly, “how many times do I have to say it? Please, stop scaring Dust store owners by asking them what they feel is the best Dust for making squirrels explode.”

Lie Ren

Silent Step

Level: 34

“But Renny!” the short, busty orange-haired girl exiting the store behind him whined. “They're evil! They're plotting something. With their beady eyes and their twitchy tails…” She shuddered, incidentally doing interesting things for her chest area, and I wondered just how much of that was real and how much was just her having fun. I supposed I would find out in a couple of weeks, if things went to plan—not about her breasts, but rather whether or not she really was as nuts as she seemed.

Nora Valkyrie

Boop

Level: 34

“Nora,” he sighed a sigh of long-suffering. Our eyes met briefly and I winced in sympathy. He shook his head and turned to walk off down the sidewalk, the girl trailing along with him. “What would you like for lunch?” he asked, before quickly adding, “Not pancakes,” at the same time his companion answered, “Pancakes!”

Taking in the pair, I resisted the urge to roll my eyes. ’Am I sure I can't sentence, I don't know, Yang and Weiss to deal with Nora's… Nora-ness? I mean, I'm pretty sure I could rig the launchers if I really wanted to….”
“Huh,” Yang blinked beside me, watching the pair go and incidentally pulling me from thinking on it further.

Ruby shook her head. “Weird.”

“You said it,” Yang agreed.

I did roll my eyes this time. “Just for that, I'm tempted to make sure you wind up teamed up with them.”

“Don't you dare,” Yang hissed.

Meeting her eyes as I dropped my box of armor into the car's trunk, I grinned. “You have to admit, time in the dorms would never be boring.”

“No,” Yang denied.

“I don't know, I think Jaune may be on to something,” Ruby hummed, catching my eye as a small smirk flashed across her lips—apparently, she had decided to get in on the act of teasing her sister.

“Jaune, if you do, I will find a way to get us on the same team as you,” she countered. “And when I do, I will make your life miserable.”

I shook my head. “Nah. I don't see it happening. You can't make a color from our names. The academies have a thing for color names, so you don't often find an academy team that isn't one. It happens, but it's rare, from my understanding.” Though, I had to admit, JRNY—or Journey—made for an awesome team name.

“Damn, he's right,” Yang grumbled. Frowning, she asked, “Hey, wait a minute. How do you know they'll be in our year?”

'Shit.' I shrugged, sending the blonde a grin. “Lucky guess.” I knew with certainty I had failed that Bluff check. I could have said their ages were listed in the information available to me by Observe, but I suppose this is what happens when you're caught flat footed.
“And he did say teams were basically made randomly this year,” Ruby pointed out, narrowing her eyes at me and getting in on the interrogation.

“For certain definitions of the word 'random,'” I muttered, causing the pair to exchange a suspicious look between themselves. I needed a distraction, fast. “Well, time to go. Who's riding up front?”

Shooting a smirk at Ruby, Yang dashed over to the front door to the car. “Shotgun!”

“What? No! I wasn't ready! Cheater!” Ruby called as Yang slid inside, slammed the door closed, and locked it behind her. Ruby had gotten there a second too late to stop Yang from locking the door and now stood fruitlessly pulling at the door handle. “Grr. Must. Resist. Urge. To. Strangle. Sister.”

I rolled my eyes, dropping into the driver's seat as Ruby finally gave up and got in the back. “You rode up front on the way here,” I reminded. “Do not make me turn this car around.”

Ruby stuck her tongue out again and I resisted the urge to roll my eyes as I drove us back towards the base. 'Well, you know they're comfortable with me, if they've stopped hiding all their bad habits and sibling bickering.'

“So, what were you going to tell me?” Yang asked, and my good mood soured somewhat. “Other than, you know, the whole 'team assignments' thing you're not wanting to talk about.”

Idly, I noticed the focal point for Raven's little spying technique had moved in front of us again. 'How is she doing that? Invisible portal? Tiny portal? Some sort of actual Scrying technique? I'll have to ask, if I ever get the chance. ' A thought occurred and I blinked. 'What if it's not Raven? Or someone else can do something similar enough that I can't tell them apart. Fuck. I need some way to verify that it's her when she does that. Going to have to talk to her about it.'

“I'm still not wanting to talk about it,” I deadpanned. “No, I got a lead or two on that information you wanted me to track down,” I began, and Yang immediately turned in her seat to fully face me, the normally boisterous blonde suddenly deathly serious. Behind me, I saw Ruby's face grow pensive in the rear view mirror. I wondered, for a moment, if Yang had told her sister who it was she was looking for. I knew she hadn't wanted me to tell her, so odds were that Yang hadn't yet. On the other hand, Ruby could clearly read the mood. “One of Hei's guys spotted her in town last week.”

“Hei?” Yang asked.
I shot her a small smirk. “You know him better as Junior—the owner of the club we almost trashed.”


“Right. Well, they lost her—obviously.” I shook my head. I couldn’t really blame them for losing her—portals would be a ridiculously effective way of avoiding being followed anywhere. “But she popped her head back up the other day. She was involved in that mess I told you about—the attack on that girl.”

“Involved?” Ruby echoed, shooting a look between me and her sister. “Like, in the fighting...?”

I shook my head. “No. She just pointed me in the right direction. Honestly, the girl who was attacked would be dead now if it weren't for her.” Even if she had done only the bare minimum, and only for her own agenda—which I was still worried about, considering I was part of that agenda.

Yang frowned, but otherwise remained quiet as she studied my face. Behind us, Ruby asked, “So, who is this mystery lady? Or do you know?”

“I know,” I confirmed. When I did not answer further, Ruby frowned and crossed her arms as she realized she wouldn't be getting any more answers. She wasn't pleased about it, but she didn't press either. I cast a sidelong look at Yang. “There's more.” The blonde motioned for me to continue. “I spoke to her, after.” There was a sudden look of something like hope in her eyes, and I shook my head. “Just about the attempted murder. I was kind of angry and didn't think to ask—and it kind of devolved into a fight from there. Sorry.”

“Shit,” Yang sighed, shifting in her seat and turning away.

Seeing she looked upset, I shot a glance at the point in space where I knew Raven was watching from. Slowly, I offered, “I may have a way to get in contact. Is there something you'd like me to pass on?”

There was no reaction from Raven’s end, but Yang growled in frustration. “About a million things!” the blonde yelled. “And... and nothing, at the same time. I mean, what the hell am I supposed to say?” She clamped her jaw shut before she said any more, so hard I could see the muscles twitching and worried she may damage her teeth.

“Yang?” Ruby asked, shooting a concerned look at her sister before turning inquisitive silver eyes on me.
“If she wants to tell you, that's up to her,” I shrugged. “Sorry. I like secrets about as much as the next guy, but I won't spill ones that aren't mine to tell.”

Yang shook her head at that. “I... I need to think about this, before I do anything.”

“That's reasonable,” I agreed quietly. As soon as the words left my mouth, my Semblance popped up a quest completion and advancement notification, causing me to raise my eyebrows. ‘A Favor for Yang' completed and moved on to stage two. Huh. Too bad 10k XP didn't put me over the limit. Still, every bit helps.’

Reaching out, I tapped the button for the radio to fill the silence that had fallen over the car. The words of Billy Joel's, 'And So It Goes' poured out of the speakers and I shook my head softly. 'I don't think Yang's in the mood for this,' I mused, reaching out to change the station, only for a soft hand to catch mine a hair away from the button. Looking over, I met lilac eyes as the blonde gave me a rueful smile before shaking her head.

“It fits the mood. Leave it,” she murmured, releasing my hand and leaning back in her seat.

I equipped my Fox disguise as the base came into sight, thankful for the sedan's dark tinted windows. Pulling up to the gate, I rolled down the window and passed my ID card to one of the guards manning the gatehouse. A quick check later, the large, chain link gate rolled open for me to pass through. As I did, I made a mental note to look into replacing the fencing around the property with something a bit sturdier. ‘I kind of want a wall of reinforced concrete and steel gates. It'll mean reworking our patrol routes, cameras, and so on but the added security would be worth it. Thirty foot walls would keep most medium size category Grimm out in the event of an incursion. Expensive, though—it'll have to be after we're getting paid regularly and not just for bounties. Of course, if I do that, I may as well go ahead and set up some areas for an emergency shelter. It'd be good for PR in Vale if we put out that, if worse came to worst, we would offer shelter for the civilians.’

We pulled into the parking garage where I pulled my box of armor from the trunk and stowed it in Inventory. From there, we made our way to the elevator and up to the officers' quarters. I switched back to my 'Jaune' outfit once we were through the final checkpoint and on our side of the salle port. A glance at my minimap showed that Jen had finished her session and was waiting up ahead with Neo, the twins, Penny, and Blake. The faunus girl was at least fairly consistent in making attempts to socialize, for which I was grateful. 'Maybe she won't be quite so closed off as she was in canon by the time we get to Beacon.'
"We're back," I announced our presence as we came into what passed as a living room. Miltia, Melanie, Penny, and Neo were seated on one of the two couches, partly under a light blanket, and clearly still in their bed clothes—not that they actually wore them to bed most days. Blake was seated on the end of the opposite couch, curled up with a book but clearly only half paying attention to it. Jen had claimed my chair as her own, and I resisted the urge to roll my eyes at that.

"Welcome back!" Penny chirped.

The girls all exchanged greetings and I moved to my preferred chair, regarding the blonde sitting there with an amused look. "You going to get up?"

"I'm comfortable," she denied, and I rolled my eyes. Her lips twitched in what might have been the beginnings of a smile before she quietly added, "There may be room for two."

"Fine," I agreed, seeing what she was angling for. The shorter girl hopped up and I dropped into the chair, only to let out a whoosh of breath as she plopped back down, halfway in my lap. "Comfy? Can I get you a pillow?" I snarked.

"I'm fine," she answered, her voice low and intimate—and leaving me unsure whether that was intentional or not. Something felt off, however. Looking down, I saw she was clad in tight jeans and what looked like one of my tee-shirts—which wasn't entirely out of the ordinary, seeing as most of the girls tended to steal my shirts these days. No, what was off was that the texture my body was reporting did not match what I saw. Hesitantly, I placed a hand against her hip. 'Light. Thin. Smooth. Feels like silk,' I assessed, moving my hand down to her upper thigh, where the material abruptly stopped and my hand was met with warm flesh. "Problem, Jaune?" she asked, turning her head enough to look at me over her shoulder. I shot her an amused look before shifting my gaze to Neo, who looked to be putting on her best innocent, 'ice cream wouldn't melt in my mouth' look and failing entirely as she practically radiated mischief.

To either side of Neo, the twins looked just as guilty, small smirks twitching at the corners of their lips. Only Penny actually managed to look innocent, which told me she likely wasn't in on whatever mischief Neo and the twins had managed to wrangle my sister into. The gynoid tossing aside the blanket and hopping off the couch to go encircle Ruby in a hug that I worried would crack the girl's ribs allowed me to get a look at what Neo, Miltia, and Melanie were wearing—what looked like silk nightgowns. I had a suspicion, considering what I felt under my hand, that those 'nightgowns' weren't quite what they were pretending to be. I wondered, for a moment, if this wasn't pushing Jen too far. My eyes shifted back to hers and I shot her a questioning look. In response, she shifted back slightly in my lap, showing absolutely no sign that she was bothered by it. 'Okay, then.'
Shaking my head, I turned my attention to the others, where Ruby and Yang had dropped their bags on the floor and dropped onto the couch with Blake, Ruby on the end nearest me and Yang in the middle. “So, movie?”

“I think the general consensus is food,” Neo supplied, and I nodded.

“Fine. Pizza okay with everyone?” I asked, getting nods from all around. I began fishing out my scroll and noticed more than one pout leveled my way. “What?”

“You're ordering out?” Melanie asked, gesturing at the phone.

“We thought you were going to cook,” Miltia added.

Chuckling at that, I began searching through the local listings for pizza places. “Not today, no. Sorry to disappoint.”

Jen shifted in my lap, shooting an incredulous look between me and the others. Finally, she asked, “He cooks? Since when?”

Neo and the twins shared a look while Ruby answered, “Since we've known him?” The way she said it as a question left the implication hanging, wondering why that would be strange.

“Jaune doesn't know how to cook,” Jen denied.

“He does,” Blake countered, looking up from her book briefly. “Is that strange?”

“I picked it up a while ago,” I cut in. “Back when I first woke up. Ate a cookbook and it gave me ‘Cooking’ as a skill. I’ve been eating recipes since then. Joan got me a book of family recipes and I ate those, too.” It was not a lie—I had specifically done just that in front of Joan, for the express purpose of being able to point back on the event and use that as an explanation as to where I’d picked up the skill. Only three people in the room knew that I could have, and probably did, know how to cook well before then. “Found a place that looks good. What does everyone want?”

Once I had their orders, I shifted out from under Jen and made my way into the kitchen to place the order while the girls talked. Giving instructions for the driver to come to the main gate and leave the delivery there, I hung up and pocketed my scroll before taking up the base phone mounted on the
kitchen wall and dialing the extension for the gate house at the front gate. Upon doing so, I discovered that my people were a step ahead of me. Deliveries of food, parcels, mail and the like were to be expected in a place like this and there was already a system in place to handle them—to the point that I could have skipped calling the pizza place directly and just called the department responsible for handling that.

'I have a department that will order pizza for me?' I wondered, shaking my head as I hung up. 'Well, we have a staff mess hall, but it wouldn't surprise me if departments like the motor pool ordered parts, or food, often enough to assign someone else to handle the purchases and deliveries inside the base. I suppose it's a good thing I had Jim round up people who were already experienced with setting things like this up. I'd have never thought of that one on my own.' That was good, as it meant I wouldn't have to micromanage everything—I could let my department heads handle things and occasionally things like this would happen, where someone realized we needed something and did something about it of their own initiative. In all likelihood, they had probably consulted the ranking officers to get approval first, but I hadn't been brought into the loop—meaning one of the twins probably approved it and didn't bother telling me, because it wasn't exactly important. And I was fine with that. I didn't need to know the minutiae of running the place once it got past a certain level of complexity—which it was swiftly approaching.

Shrugging, I made my way back into the living area, where I was fixed with expectant looks. “What?”

“We want to see the new armor,” Neo answered. “Need to make sure it'll actually fit on the coat.”

I shot her an amused look. “Didn’t we say today was a day to just fuck off? No work, no projects, just sitting around the place and watching movies.”

“We did, but we still want to see it,” Miltia countered.

“Yeah, come on. Give us a show,” Yang leered, drawing more than one giggle from the gaggle of girls.

Putting on an affronted look, I huffed. “I am not a piece of meat. I feel so, so… used. Objectified, even.”

“Pfft. Yeah, right,” Ruby chortled.
“I don't think they're buying it, Jaune,” Penny pointed out, and I dropped the act.

“Fine, fine. I'll play along,” I grinned, pulling up my Inventory and beginning to equip the new armor set from the feet up. I was met with an immediate groan from almost all corners as they realized what I was doing and rolled my eyes. “What, you expected me to strip or something?”

“Yes,” Neo, Miltia, and Melanie all agreed loudly, though I could have sworn I heard more than one other voice mixed in there.

Everything from the waist up save for the gauntlets went over and attached to the coat at points Neo had put in for them, secured by straps and metal clips—while everything from the waist down went under the coat, allowing its open bottom to hang over it. Shifting around, I tested the armor's fit and my range of motion and found my first mistake, but it wasn't anything that couldn't be fixed. Moving my wrists showed that the Dust crystals there were a bad idea given the way the armor pressed them against the bottom of my wrist even through the jacket, pinching them between the forearm guards on top of the coat and the bottom of the gauntlets where they stopped at my wrists. I made a mental note to move them later. The entire set was white with the occasional splash of yellow trim along its lines or edges, along with the double-crescent of my emblem on the left breast of my chest piece. All in all, it looked like exactly what I had designed—power-armor aesthetic, without the power.

As much as I wanted to, I couldn't justify breaking out the Halo themed armor I'd stolen from the black site. But one day, hopefully soon, I would have someone reverse engineer it so we could design and build our own for use at Fox Hunt—and then I would be able to use it, or something similar at any rate. Until then, I'd have to settle for ripping off designs from Mass Effect—specifically, the armor I remembered seeing in a few teaser trailers and pieces of artwork for Andromeda, before I'd been brought to Remnant. The entire getup looked like a white and yellow version of what the guy who'd been named as simply 'Rider' by Bioware had used, if it'd been put on around a long coat.

'Not bad at all,' I mused, looking it over. 'Still missing something, though.'

“That is a lot of armor,” Blake deadpanned, and I looked up from my inspection to find the others looking me over.

“Looks heavy,” Jen frowned.

Nodding at that, I grinned. “Oh, it is. It won't be a problem for long, though. I'll add weight reduction enchantments and it won't weigh more than a couple of pounds by the time I'm done.” Humming, I mused aloud, “I should really do that now.”
Neo, Melanie, and Miltia all crossed their arms and shot me unamused looks. “No,” Melanie shook her head.

“We're not working today,” Miltia reminded, a smile crossing her lips.

Neo grinned. “I guess you'll just have to play with it tomorrow.”

“I feel like I made exactly that argument, before you told me to do it anyway,” I deadpanned. I rolled my eyes, but decided to let them have their way.

“Is that what you wanted me to wear?” Ruby asked, drawing my attention to her incredulous look. “There's no way!”

“I told you that you wouldn't be able to live with it,” I shook my head, tapping the armored finger of my gauntlet to my cuirass. “Honestly? If I didn't have the Inventory system and a way to make it lighter, not to mention equipping it ensures it fits right, I wouldn't have bothered.”

“So, why so much?” Yang asked, moving around me to study the new additions.

“Other than because it'll set me apart from both Shiro and the Fox, as neither of them relies on this much armor? Because I am sick and fucking tired of things punching through my armor, shields, and everything else like goddamn tissue paper. So, in addition to weight reduction enchantments, I'm slapping on a few other things to make them stronger and then I'm going to power the enchantments with Grade 9 Dust in the field, and fuck anything trying to get through it. I figure, whatever team I get on, I can act in a few different roles. My weapons give me options for long, medium, and short range combat but the armor is for tanking if need be. But with its weight reduced to damn near nothing on top of my powered movement skills, I'll be a very fast tank. Throw in the 'gravity' Semblance I'm going to be pretending to use and it should make for a decent cover,” I explained. That reminded me, I still needed to reverse engineer Cinder's dress for the offensive enchantment she had used to turn it into a Dustcaster, so I could do the same with the long coat—only I'd be using gravity instead of fire.

Penny popped up at my side, leaning in close and examining the various pieces. “It looks very sturdy,” she agreed, and I realized from the glow of her eyes that she had likely done some sort of scan. Looking up, she pouted. “But not very huggable.”
Reaching down, I ruffled her hair. “It does come off,” I reminded her.

“No headgear?” Blake asked, drawing my attention.

“Actually, there is,” I grinned, selecting the last piece and equipping it. A small, white collar materialized around my neck. “This was the most expensive piece, individually,” I explained. Reaching up, I tapped a slightly raised section on the right side and the collar began to swiftly unfold—expanding far beyond its mass and size should have ever allowed. The wonders of Gen 7 storage tech—the same kind that the Arclance used, actually. The entire helmet had unfolded in just a couple of seconds, leaving my head completely enclosed. Like the rest of the armor, I’d lifted the design of the helmet from early trailers of Andromeda. I’d even gone so far as to order another set of glasses like the ones I used as Shiro in order to have the armorer strip the tech out of them and incorporate it into the helmet, giving me more options than my Semblance’s built-in HUD. And as I’d told Blake, it had been very expensive—but worth every lien.

“That looks kind of badass,” Yang admitted, and I grinned under the helmet.

‘I’d hope so,’ I thought, reaching up and tapping the button to compact the helmet again. Opening my interface, I quickly made another armor set, before changing over to the version with just the coat. “That’s better. Yeah, going to have to get weight reduction stuff on this ASAP.”

Our conversation was cut off as the base phone rang. Raising an eyebrow, I moved over and picked it up. Listening for a moment, I grinned. “Someone will be right out,” I answered, hanging up and turning a grin on the girls. “Pizza’s here. I’ll be back.”

A quick trip to the salle port as the Fox later, and I came back with a load of boxes held up by Telekinesis. Dropping them on the kitchen table, I watched as the girls descended on them like a school of hungry piranha. “Movie time!” Ruby yelled, disappearing from the kitchen in a spray of rose petals, in the direction of the living room.

“Pajamas!” the twins yelled back, drawing a muffled reply that sounded like, “Oh, yeah,” around a mouthful of food.

“Such a kid,” Yang rolled her eyes as Ruby’s Semblance sounded again, headed for one of the bedrooms, presumably to change.

Neo invading her personal space and taking hold of her chin to pull her face downwards had Yang blinking as she found herself staring into mismatched strawberry and vanilla eyes—now suddenly
intimately close to Neo's much shorter form. The blonde's face dusted slightly red at the sudden
closeness and I had no doubt that was Neo's intention—that, and planting the image in my head of
her closing that distance. Damned tease. “You're still wearing clothes,” Neo pointed out. “We have a
strict 'pajamas only' rule today.”

The blonde raised an eyebrow before shooting me a leer, then turning on her heel and sauntering
towards the living room herself—presumably to collect her own bag and go change. I could not help
the way the sway of her hips drew my eyes to her ass and upper thighs—I was only a man, dammit.
“Don't encourage her,” I said to Neo, shaking my head and grabbing my own food as the girls began
to clear out, only to find myself blocked by the twins.

“That rule applies to you, too,” Miltia grinned up at me.

I blinked. “I do not own pajamas.”

The twins shared a look before turning identical leers on me. “That's too bad. I guess boxers will
have to do,” Melanie suggested.

Rolling my eyes, I focused on Conjuration and called up a simple pair of black jogging bottoms and
a blue tee-shirt. Seeing the twins pout, I raised an eyebrow in question for a moment before I realized
what was wrong. 'Ah. They want me to play along. Well, I suppose that's fine. I may as well ham it
up a bit and get a laugh out of the girls,' I grinned. Grabbing a drink, I went back into the living
room and put my plate and drink on the table beside my chair, which was again occupied by Jen.

“Well, you wanted a show,” I leered at Yang, before beginning to strip. Beginning to tease my
hoodie off, I pulled up Charisma and Intent. While Dating Mode was stuck as an 'always on' passive
skill now, I'd found I had at least some control over it—namely, since it ran off of my Aura, the more
Aura I used the greater the effect while suppressing my Aura cut the effect entirely. The effect I was
going for wasn't the usual combination Aura/Intent slap I tended to use with Killing Intent or even
the brute force arousal effect of using it just with Dating Mode, rather I was going for something a bit
more subtle—a slow ramp-up to get them worked up, followed by dropping it. It would leave them
frustrated, but then, I considered that turnabout for making me strip in the first place.

The blonde grinned, before sticking her fingers in her mouth and wolf whistling at me. “Take it off!”

“Dinner and a show?” Melanie asked, looking thoughtful, before beginning to shift in her seat.
“Needs popcorn,” Miltia commented, seeing where her sister was going and drawing a nod from the other twin. Miltia, likewise, looked to be getting antsy.

Neo snorted softly, her mismatched eyes fixed on me as she watched with a grin. Her breath was already coming slightly faster as she warned, “Don’t complain, you two—you may discourage him from doing it again.”

Rolling my eyes, I tossed my hoodie at her face. The shorter girl caught it, sticking her tongue out at me for the attempt. “Bite me.”

Three answers to that came immediately from Neo, the twins, and surprisingly Jen, who I noticed seemed least affected—at least, in the normal way. Where the others all showed at least mild signs of excitement, Jen seemed to have gone somewhat boneless as her eyes went half-lidded and she relaxed. “Okay,” from Neo. At the same time, the twins asked, “Where?” while Jen asked, “How hard?”

“My ass,” I retorted.

“But Jaune, I do not believe that would be pleasant for anyone involved,” Penny piped up.

Throwing the gynoid an amused look, I noticed that even she was blushing faintly—which left me to wonder whether it was the situation or whether she was reacting to my Aura somehow. I clarified, “That was the point, Penny.” I took a second to wonder if it would be worth it to introduce Penny to what I remembered of Futurama. Having her tell someone to bite her shiny metal ass would be amusing, but I wasn't entirely sure I should corrupt her quite that badly.

“Stop distracting him,” Blake cut in quietly and I glanced over to find her with her book closed in her lap with a finger holding her place between the pages. Her golden eyes were fixed firmly on me, pupils dilated and breath coming faster as a hint of a blush stained her face. Beside her, Ruby seemed to be a even worse off, showing the same pupillary dilation and increased breathing, while her fists clenched tightly into her pajama pants. Of those present she seemed the most affected and I made a mental note that she didn't seem to have the same sort of resistance most of the other girls did due to constant exposure—even Blake had more exposure at this point than Ruby. On the other side of Ruby from Blake, Yang was shifting uncomfortably in her seat eying me like a piece of meat and it was plainly obvious she wasn't wearing a bra at the moment.

I raised an eyebrow at her words but didn’t comment—no point scaring her off by singling her out if she was willing to join in the fun with everyone else. I did, however, make her the target of my next projectile, pulling today's shirt over my head and sending it flying across the room to smack into her
face. The faunus girl reached up and pulled it off, sending me an unamused look as she did so. There was the sound of someone choking off to my side while Ruby gasped, her hands flying up to cover her mouth as her eyes went wide. I turned enough to see Yang sitting down her glass and coughing, but her lilac eyes were locked on me.

“What?” I asked, wondering what those two were on about. There had been an abrupt shift in the mood somewhere and I wasn't sure what had brought it on. Allowing my Aura to drop, I asked, “There something on my face?”

“No, Jaune,” Neo sighed, and a glance at the couch where she and the twins were seated showed three annoyed expressions turned towards the other pair of sisters in the room. “Your chest.”

Blinking at the girl with mismatched eyes, I glanced down. “What? This?” I asked, gesturing at the scars situated between and partially across my pectorals, down nearly to my stomach. While the edges could be clearly identified as claw marks in a four claw drag pattern, the middle was a mess of criss-crossing scar tissue. There were no gouges or furrows where muscle or meat would be missing—which I could probably thank my Semblance for—but the texture, especially in the middle, was a bit rougher than the skin around it and it was definitely lighter in color than the rest of my flesh.

“What the hell is that?!” Yang asked, her voice sounding rough from having almost drowned herself recently. Every set of eyes not belonging to myself, Ruby, or Yang herself turned to glare at the blonde.

“Well, I believe they're what happens when someone gets hurt. I think they're called scars,” I deadpanned at the blonde. For a moment, her expression shifted to exasperation before her eyes refocused on the skin in question. “Can't believe you two haven't seen this yet,” I muttered quietly, shaking my head. “They were there when I woke up in the hospital. You can't see it, but there's a matching set under my hair—you'd feel it if you touched my scalp. They're just scars. Not a big deal.”

Gesturing towards the scar in question, Yang asked, “How can you say that?”

Rolling my eyes, I said, “My Semblance turns most aspects of my life into a video game. In most games, you get to pick and choose your scars—and in those, there's usually a way to remove them if you're not happy with your choices. I didn't exactly get to choose, but I figure there's a way to remove them out there somewhere so I'm not exactly worried about it. Besides, it's not like they're impeding my ability to function or causing me pain. They're pretty much superficial.” A thought occurred and I chuckled softly. ‘I suppose not all chicks dig scars.’

“Actually, you're wrong,” Blake pointed out quietly from beside Ruby, who still looked horrified. I'll admit, I couldn't tell if I should feel a bit hurt at that look being directed at me—I was reserving
judgment until I figured out if she was horrified at me or for me. Meeting Blake's eyes, I gestured for her to go on. “While advancements in medical technology have lead to being able to perform reconstructive surgery, it's very expensive and resources are limited, so it's typically reserved for the most severe cases—leaving it out of the reach of most normal civilians and Hunters. In other words, the people most likely to be hurt by Grimm or those who would need it most,” she began, before slowly adding, “For those who can use it, Aura heals pretty much everything but lost limbs. Though, supposedly, given enough time someone with a powerful enough Aura could regenerate a missing limb. It just doesn't happen, because it'd take years and the people with that kind of Aura available tend to be Hunters and they can't be impaired or out of commission for that long.”

“You can regrow limbs?” I asked, incredulity clear in my tone. “Okay, that's cool. So, what's the big deal? Also, starting to feel kind of uncomfortable here. Mind tossing that back?” I gestured towards the shirt and Blake pitched it back at me. Catching it, I pulled it over my head as Miltia picked up the explanation.

“It's a social stigma thing. It's not something you see in civilians—it's mostly in Hunter culture, and then only in inexperienced ones,” the red-clad twin explained with a pointed look at Yang and Ruby. “Aura flash heals most things and what it doesn't—either from being too severe or from running out of Aura—will heal as you replenish your Aura or over a longer period of time if it's bad enough. For something to actually leave a scar on someone with an active Aura, it tends to mean one of a few things depending on the type and placement of the scar. If it's small and superficial but highly visible, then you're making some kind of personal statement or it's a badge of honor, a memento, or something along those lines. You're choosing to keep it and actively preventing your Aura from fixing it—which it would eventually, given enough time. Something like yours, though…”

Melanie picked up where her twin left off. “It's a sign of weakness and/or stupidity. You fucked up bad enough to get grievously wounded and you were too weak to heal it properly.” The girl shifted her glare from Ruby and Yang to meet my eyes, her expression softening as she did. “Older Hunters know that's bullshit, for the most part—except for the most self-absorbed and the idiots. Live long enough and eventually something or someone is going to give you something to remember them by.”

“It's not like we hid it from you,” Neo jumped in, and I sent her an amused look as she looked somewhat flustered at the moment. “We know the situation, but even before that we didn't really care.”

“I guess that explains the thing with Fox in the armor shop this morning,” I murmured. Gesturing towards where Yang had joined her sister and Blake on the other couch, I asked, “So, what's up with them? You'd figure with Tai and Qrow around, that wouldn't really be a thing…”

“We're right here, you know,” Yang grumbled, holding Ruby against her side. I noticed the younger girl's expression had shifted from horrified to ashamed, and she was sending me the most pitiful look I'd ever seen at the moment.
A quiet voice answered with a single word and it took me a moment to realize it was Jen, as she had been quiet since Yang had first said something. For a moment, I wondered why, before I realized that with no 'Lust Aura' active, she'd lost her mellow. “Signal.”

I shot her a questioning look, but it was Blake who picked up that trail of logic. “Yang, Ruby, and your sister are the only ones here who have had an 'official' education as a Hunter.”

A laugh escaped me as I sent the faunus girl an incredulous look. “Peer pressure?” I asked, before almost doubling over in laughter. “Really?”

Neo's mental voice drew my attention. 'Not everyone here is immune to peer pressure, my love. You have to remember, they're just teenagers—and girls at that. They don't have the experience you, or I, or your older sisters do to shrug it off. Even the twins would probably fold to the right influence.'

'Oh, right,' I sent back. Put that way, I could see it made sense. Put another way, it was like finding out that I had a debuff to Charisma when applied to certain situations or with certain people, if they knew about it. Considering how much I loathed any sort of stat debuff, I was going to be looking into a way to fix it at some point even if it didn't bother me on a personal level. “Well, if it'll make you feel better, I'll keep my shirt on.”

Penny chose that moment to pipe up. “Organics are weird,” she muttered under her breath, and I caught Blake's ears twitching and eyebrows going up out of the corner of my eye. “Don't worry, Jaune! I'll still like you even if you're ugly.”

“Thank you, Penny,” I sighed, palming my face. There was more than one source of stifled giggling at that. Shaking my head, I shifted my attention back to Yang and Ruby, but not before muttering a parting shot of, “Laugh it up.”

Yang made to say something before her teeth clicked as she shut her mouth. Melanie sighed in disappointment, shooting another irritated look at the other pair of sisters on the opposite couch. “And that's another reason we didn't bother mentioning it. We happen to enjoy shirtless time.”

“We didn't want to make you self-conscious,” Miltia clarified. Her gaze shifted to follow her sister's and her own displeasure was plain to see. “We'd just sort of gotten used to it and forgot it'd be a big deal for some people.”

The sound I'd come to associate with Ruby's Semblance echoed over the room and the girl herself
nearly knocked me over in a shower of rose petals and wind as she slammed into my chest and wrapped her arms around me, crying quietly as she buried her face against my chest and sobbed apologies, though I couldn't make out half of it through her mewling. I think she was equal parts sorry for me getting hurt and for making me feel bad about it. Which, in turn, made me feel like a bit of a heel because I wasn't here when it happened and I really didn't feel bad about it.

“Hey, whoa, it's okay. Ruby, I'm not mad at you,” I consoled the girl, reaching up to stroke her hair and returning the desperate hug.

“If—if you want to kick us out, we understand,” Ruby got out quietly, muffled as it was against my chest. I shifted my gaze over to Yang, where lilac eyes met my blue, regret clear in her expression—though she said nothing to contradict her sister.

Raising an eyebrow at the blonde, I gestured towards Ruby in my arms and asked, “What?”

Yang sighed, lilac eyes turning away as she quietly answered, “Ruby's never had many friends. She's kind of a prodigy, and a bit awkward, so you can guess how that went over with most of the people in her classes. You're probably the first people who just didn't care about any of that.”

“So you're worried we're going to tell you to go away?” I asked, and the girl in my arms nodded. “I'm not the kind of asshole who ditches his friends over a simple misunderstanding. Just… don't act all weird over it,” I sighed. “Like I said, it doesn't bother me. Is it going to be a problem for you?”

Ruby shook her head quickly against my chest and Yang sent me a small smirk, regaining some of her typical confident demeanor. “It's not a deal-breaker.” Her expression shifted to slightly worried as she asked, “Anything else in the 'need to know' category?”

Sending a look at the twins and Neo, the trio exchanged a glance between themselves. The twins shrugged while Neo shook her head minutely. “There are a few things, but nothing I would call 'need to know' and none of it that we really need to get into today.”

I released Ruby and pushed her gently towards the couch. The girl shook her head and disappeared into the kitchen, where the faucet turned on and I heard her blowing her nose. I moved to sit down and Miltia turned an amused look on me. “Forgetting something?” she asked. When I raised my eyebrows in question, she said, “You're still dressed.” From her tone, I could tell she was trying to lighten the mood, so despite not particularly feeling like it any more, I went along with the suggestion.
“Be right back,” I said, heading into the bedroom long enough to change into the clothes I'd conjured. Padding barefoot across the living room, I dropped down into my chair as soon as Jen hopped up, only for her to drop back onto me again. Wanting to change the subject, I asked, “So, what movie are we watching?”

Neo hummed, putting her plate on the table before moving over towards our entertainment center. “I'll pick something.”

As she moved, I noticed her 'nightgown' slowly changing—growing more and more sheer as she crossed the living room and losing material here and there as though it were evaporating. ‘Or more like glass shattering,’ I realized, as she got close enough for me to get a good look at the effect. 'She managed to scale down or refine the 'break' effect of her illusions shattering. Maybe her Semblance leveled? That'd be nice.' All those thoughts couldn't distract me from the fact that her outfit was practically transparent as she bent over and studied a stack of movies.

“Ah ha!” the short, curvy girl cheered, twirling around and causing the 'skirt' at the bottom of her outfit to flare upwards. ‘Found one!’

“Uh huh,” I muttered quietly, my eyes glued to the show she was putting on.

A spray of rose petals announced Ruby's return as she dropped back onto the couch she had been sharing with her sister and Blake—her eyes still red and slightly puffy, but she looked better. “So what movie are we watch...ing…” the girl trailed off before murmuring a quiet, “Eep.”

Beside her, Yang sat frozen, taking in the scene. I couldn't say I blamed her as I finally managed to pry my eyes off of Neo and take in what she and the twins had set up. Neo, Melanie, Miltia, and Jen all wore similar negligees, though in Jen's case, it looked as though she had borrowed one of Neo's. Jen was short, but not nearly as short as Neo, and a bit more well-endowed and curvier overall as well—so where the negligee fit Neo perfectly, it clung to Jen like a second skin, left her breasts looking as though they might pop out if she inhaled enough, and was so short that moving wrong would have left her exposed for the world to see. It was lewd in a way that it shouldn't have had any right to be, to the point where it would have been less lewd for her to have gone naked. She shifted slightly in my lap and I nearly groaned as I had to remind myself that I was the one who said I would be keeping my hands off. Harmless flirting or occasionally letting her sleep in my bed was one thing, but having her on my lap grinding her firm ass against my erection through the thin fabric of her panties and my own cotton boxers and jogging pants was going to be torture.

“Well, shit,” Yang sighed, sparing a look at her attire—a loose yellow spaghetti strap top and a set of gray shorts that stopped about halfway up her thighs. “If I'd have known it was that kind of pajama party I'd have brought mine.”
“Yaaaaang!” Ruby half-whimpered, half-whined, blushing from the tips of her hair all the way down and clad in her black tee-shirt and pajama pants.

“Don't worry, sis, I'm pretty sure they've got something in your size,” Yang smirked at her sister, who couldn’t seem to decide whether she wanted to bury her face in the couch cushions or strangle her sister.

Looking down at her own, by comparison, very tame robe—what I thought was supposed to be a short kimono of some kind—Blake hummed thoughtfully. “I need to go shopping,” she muttered to herself. She loosened the belt and shifted slightly, allowing one shoulder of the garment to slide down her arm and exposing her cleavage. Shifting her legs drew the end of the robe up, exposing a very generous amount of her pale, creamy thighs in the process. Looking up, gold eyes met my blue with a look I couldn't quite place before she snagged a slice of pizza and stuck her nose back in her book while occasionally peeking over the top to take in the drama unfolding.

Sighing, I palmed my face and gestured towards the light switch, hitting it with Telekinesis and casting the room into darkness. “Neo, remind me to discuss this with you in private later.”

“Somebody's going to get a spankin',” Melanie taunted. I think only Ruby missed the way Yang blushed at that as she shifted in her seat.

“Oh dear. No. Anything but that,” Neo retorted in a completely flat voice as one corner of her lips twitched up in a small smirk.

Penny chose that moment to ask, “Jaune, why does it seem like that is something she wants?”

“Because it is,” I answered, noting there seemed to be an echo coming from the twins, Yang, Blake, and Jen—along with a strange whining sound from Ruby's general vicinity.

It was very late—or very early—when credits rolled on the last movie of the night and I yawned, stretching a bit but careful not to stir the sleeping form laying against my side. At some point in the evening we had moved from the living room to my bedroom, as it had the largest available bed. The bed was a tangle of mostly female bodies and limbs as the girls had piled up to watch one last movie before we called it a night. A glance at my HUD showed it to be after two in the morning—which went a way towards explaining the softly snoring blonde drooling on my chest and pinning my right
arm. Jen had been asleep for at least the last hour and didn't look like she'd be waking any time soon.

“I think that's enough for tonight,” I muttered quietly, looking around to see who was still up.

“Yeah, I'm beat,” Yang agreed. “And Ruby's out like a light.”

“More of the same tomorrow?” I asked, and I felt the bed shift for a moment before the glow of a scroll lit the room.

“You mean today,” Melanie corrected from my left.

Putting away her scroll, Miltia said, “We don't really have anything scheduled, but…”

“But we're getting restless,” Neo supplied from somewhere near the foot of the bed, and I raised an eyebrow at that.

“What do you mean, 'restless?'” I asked.

It was Blake who answered, her voice coming from somewhere in the vicinity of Yang, also near the foot of the bed. “Aura makes people more inclined to be physically active.”

“Yeah. A day or two of not doing anything is about the most anyone with a normal level of Aura can stand before getting bored and restless,” Miltia added.

Melanie nodded. “It's not like some sort of inability to focus or relax, just more of an abundance of energy. You want to get out and do things more, but you're not forced to. Which, from what we understand, works out well for the various Hunter training schools. It's easy to convince students to get out and run through obstacle courses and the like if the alternative is sitting in a classroom.”

“Oh, Dust. Anything to get out of class,” Yang groaned quietly. “I've heard the schedule at Beacon is worse than the other academies—which are worse than the initial training schools like Signal. I'm already dreading it.”

“It'll be fine,” I waved her off. “Besides, you signed up for it voluntarily. You don't get to complain.”
“I can totally complain,” Yang shook her head.

“How about we finish up crafting projects? It’s a nice middle ground between doing something and taking a day off,” Neo suggested, and I snorted softly. I happened to enjoy long weekends of doing precisely fuck all. Hell, on Earth, I’d have killed for a week or two off of work to do exactly that. Then again, I had been ridiculously busy since first waking up in Remnant. Would Aura leaving me restless explain some of my drive to constantly find something to do—aside from knowing that if I didn’t, bad things were coming down the pipe and I would be unprepared for them, that is? Or was it simply that, unlike on Earth, I wasn’t constantly fatigued and mentally drained, and left with the sort of mind-numbing stupor and headache at the end of the day that only dealing with idiots could produce? I believe the quote goes, This job would be great if it weren't for the fucking customers.”

“That sounds good. We could work on something for Yang and Ruby, while we've got you here,” Melanie agreed, and I rolled my eyes. Of course, it could just boil down to the girls wanting to play with new clothes. Well, I couldn’t exactly fault them. I still needed to finish up the work on my new armor. If Beacon hadn’t been pushed back, I would have spent part of today doing that and working on the Ribbons. Then again, I suppose that was bullshit—the girls had wanted their time off, regardless of whether Beacon was starting or not.

“Jaune, don't you have active quests?” Miltia asked.

“Where’d that come from?” I asked, raising an eyebrow.

The girl shot me an amused look. “It's something I've been wondering for a while. Humor me.”

“I do,” I agreed. “I've got a few I haven't read the details for. I've been putting it off.”

I felt something shift against my left leg and looked down to see Yang had rolled over onto her stomach and was regarding me with lilac eyes. “So, don't keep us in suspense. What are they?”

Rolling my eyes, I opened up my quest log and sorted the quests there by completion and priority, with active quests at the top and in descending order of importance. “Mai—” I cut myself off and nearly face-palmed as I remembered that half the people in the room weren’t aware of that quest and the others weren’t fully in on the details. “Skipping that one.”

“Is that…?” Neo asked, and I resisted the urge to groan as I nodded. Thankfully, she hadn't said
more on it.

“Is that what?” Blake asked. I felt the bed shift slightly before golden eyes popped into my field of view over the curve of Jen's body.

Frowning, I wondered how to word it so as not to give too much away. “Remember me getting dropped into the living room with a sword through me?” I asked, and she nodded. “It was just before that. Someone important got hurt and I'm supposed to fix it. I told Ruby and Yang a bit about it this morning. I can't share all the details, unfortunately.”

Humming, Blake shot a glance at the twins and Neo, who did not look as though this was new information to them. Biting her lip as she considered a moment, she finally nodded. “I won't push, then.”

“Thanks,” I murmured, moving on to the next. Looking over the rest of my active quests, I frowned. *I'm not going to tell them about Romancing Remnant. I don't think they'd appreciate that one. Likewise, things like Blake's loyalty quest. And I don't think Yang wants me to tell everyone here about the next stage of her quest for Raven.* Looking up, I said, “There are a few more. Path of the Rogue, for instance. It's stuck in holding until I get out and do more black market jobs, then it'll probably advance again because this one seems like a fairly long quest chain.”

“Black market jobs?” Blake echoed quietly, and I shrugged.

“Mostly deliveries. Pick up unknown cargo, deliver unknown cargo to buyer, that sort of thing.”

Blake frowned. “That seems kind of shady.”

I shot her a deadpan look, going silent for a full five seconds before she got the message and looked away, uncomfortably reminded that she had no room to talk given her activities with the White Fang. Once the message was delivered, I continued. “Maybe, but it paid the bills for a while and it’s useful for infiltration and information gathering, not to mention training. Aside from that, I have one named ‘Picking up the Tab.’ That one says to go pay Hei a visit and pay him for the damages Yang's bar fight caused—”

“Hey! You were involved in that too, mister,” the blonde countered.
I continued on as if she hasn't interrupted. “But I don't remember getting that one. Or accepting it. What the hell? Weird. Then there's 'The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly,' which is my quest to get Sanguine to one of her extremes on the progression scale. And 'Damsel in Distress,' which is glitched as still active, because the girl that was attacked isn't dead yet but is comatose. And I shouldn't really give out details for the rest of that.”

“Why not?” Yang asked, shooting me a suspicious look.

Shifting my gaze to the blonde, I asked, “Would you want me giving out personal, private details regarding things you want done if I were doing something for you?” The girl paled and shook her head quickly. “Thought not. Aside from that, there's The Great Hunt, which essentially says to track down and kill at least one Nameless-level boss for each type of Grimm. Similarly in that vein is Kaiju Killer, which wants me to track down and kill Kaiju-class Grimm. The Nameless was a Kaiju-class, so I assume there's a reason those two are separate and not just rolled into one quest—probably the first is based on level and the second on size category. How many types of Grimm are there? I ask because I've got another one to track down and kill at least one of every type.”

“A lot,” Neo answered with a frown. “New types are being discovered every day.”

“Nothing else you can tell us?” Miltia asked, and I looked over and caught her eye, finding a small smile on her lips. Her expression plainly said they knew I wasn't telling them everything, but that they understood—not everyone in the room was ready to hear the full details of my Semblance, or the sort of things it could do, including scrying out details of someone's life that they wouldn't want revealed. Miltia was, thankfully, crafty enough to disguise it as simply teasing, however. “Perhaps about that first quest? It sounded interesting…”

They weren't satisfied with what I'd shared, so I should probably give them something a bit more interesting to focus on. Thinking it over, I shrugged before opening up my Inventory. “Nope, but I found a particularly shiny bauble in Atlas. Pretty sure it's a key item, but my Semblance isn't really labeling it as such.” Sticking my hand in the Inventory window, I fished out a small, angular shape. I held it up for the others to see and in the process bathed the room in a wave of soft, multi-colored light that looked like the light off a properly lit Christmas tree—save that it moved and shifted in random patterns, as though the light source were under water. The shifting was due to the fact that the object in my hand was shifting constantly under its surface—the exterior of which had reshaped into something resembling a sphere about the size of a tennis ball at the moment, if a sphere had been composed of countless angles and faces.

“Shiny,” Neo murmured, reaching out and taking it. “Mine now.”

“What is it?” Miltia asked as Melanie swiped it from Neo and examined it closer.
“I believe Jaune called it a Prismatic Dust Core. My father desperately wanted one for his research, but Atlas never allowed him access,” Penny supplied quietly, and I blinked as I realized she had been silent the entire time. Shifting a bit, I tried to figure out why, and found the gynoid serving as Ruby’s full body pillow, given that the little reaper had wrapped all of her limbs around Penny, squid-like. ‘That explains that. She didn’t want to wake Ruby up.’

“Yeah, that's what it's tagged as in my Semblance. Though, it's kind of a mouthful.” I admitted.

“You said Atlas had it?” Melanie asked, and I nodded. “Where? Where you found Penny?”

“No,” I denied. “The PDC was at a Schnee mining operation. They were doing readings on it, but I didn’t stick around to check out the results.”

Blake shifted again and I caught sight of her eyes, looking faintly luminous in the soft light—in the way a cat's eyes look at night. “This came from Schnee?” Her lips twitched into a faint smirk. “I wouldn’t mind taking away more of their toys…”

“So, what's the shiny rock do?” Yang asked, having taken it for herself.

“Fuck if I know,” I shrugged. “Other than change shape and size, I've got no idea. It's why I say it's a key item—games are notoriously bad about that sort of thing. They give you a McGuffin, tell you it's valuable, then never reveal what the hell it does.”

“A McMuffin?” the blonde asked, and I rolled my eyes. “You do know that for the rest of us, life isn't a game, right?”

“Party, now it is,” I deadpanned, shooting the girl a party invite as a reminder that that could change at a moment's notice.

Yang declined the invite and stuck her tongue out before passing me the crystal back, where I stowed it in Inventory again. Neo picked up where Yang had started. “Yang’s right, though. It's not like it was just waiting in the world for you to pick it up.”

“You're right,” I agreed. “Doesn't mean it's not a key item.”
I could almost hear the eye-roll as she countered, “Now you're just arguing to argue.”

A grin made its way across my lips. “You know me so well.” Glancing at the time in the corner of my HUD, I yawned. “I think it's bed time.” When no one moved, I rolled my eyes. “This bed isn't big enough for all of us.”

“Sure it is,” Yang countered.

“You're not going to win this argument, Jaune,” Miltia giggled, and I sighed.

Shaking my head, I gave it up as a bad job. “Fine, fine. Just don't blame me if you wake up stiff tomorrow.”

“I don't think we're the ones who are going to have to worry about waking up stiff,” Neo smirked, and I groaned softly as Jen decided to shift at that moment, her breasts moving against my chest as her bare legs shifted to pull my left leg between them. It was going to be a long, long night.

I woke up to the feeling of a soft hand wrapped around my hard shaft. Cracking open my eyes, I skimmed over the update text that morning—some minor improvements to the Guild interface that weren't important enough to memorize or really delve into—before trying to figure out who had gotten handsy. Looking down, I found a head of straight, blonde hair under my face—Jen's head buried in my chest, one arm and both legs wrapped around me, while the other hand was down the front of my conjured jogging pants. Or at least where those conjured pants had been, considering that they seemed to have mysteriously vanished. It took a moment to figure out why, given the distracting nature of the hand in question, but I eventually remembered that conjured items tended to have a twelve hour time limit on them at this level. A glance at the time showed it to be after 10 a.m. and I noticed that the bed was empty, save for us. 'I slept in, I mused. 'I slept in and the girls didn't. Even Neo is up. That's kind of surprising. I didn't even know I could do that. I figured them moving around would wake me up, or Gamer's Body would eventually kick in and have me awake at a certain time or something. More proof of biology trumping weird Semblance shenanigans? But what about the opposite, where it allows me to stay up for days at a time with little to no consequence?'

Shrugging mentally, I checked the minimap to see where everyone was. Blake, Penny and Neo were in showers—Blake in her own, Penny and Neo sharing mine. I raised an eyebrow at that—Penny had quickly become a very touchy-feely girl and loved attention, so I wasn't too terribly surprised that she would share shower time with the others. And knowing Penny, it was entirely innocent of the kind of touching that tended to go on between myself and the twins or Neo when we shared the shower. Shifting my focus from Penny and Neo, I saw the Malachite twins, Ruby, and Yang were
all in the kitchen—and judging by the smell, there were pancakes cooking. My stomach growled and I shook my head. I would need to get up, soon.

“Do we have to get up?” a soft, low voice asked, and I realized that Jen was awake.

“At some point,” I agreed. My lips quirked up in a mischievous grin and I intentionally made my dick jump in her hand. “Comfortable?”

The blonde's answering squeeze killed any notion I may have had of embarrassing her. “Very,” she said softly, shifting her head slightly back and forth, rubbing her face on my chest. Rolling my eyes, I pulled up a bit of Intent and Charisma—enough to be noticeable at her range, but not enough to hit the entire Officers' Quarters. The blonde wrapped around me practically purred, melting in my arms. “Mmm. Keep doing that,” she murmured, her voice hitting that sultry range that ran straight to my dick, as hers tended to do quite often I'd noticed.

“Only if you'll take your hand out of my pants,” I countered.

“You're not wearing pants,” Jen was quick to point out.

I rolled my eyes. “Touche. However, as much as I enjoy it, I don't want blue balls.”

She groped the balls in question before removing her hand. “I could—”

“No,” I denied, reaching down and running a hand through her hair. “I'm not going to take advantage of you like that. If you still feel that way when we fix what's been done to your head, ask me again.”

She tilted her head up, blue eyes regarding me with curiosity. “Not going to try to talk me out of it?”

“Went through that with Joan. Didn't work,” I deadpanned, and she gave a soft laugh in response. It was a nice laugh—sexy and unintentionally sensual, and a little giddy. “You feeling okay?”

She hummed, closing her eyes for a moment. “A little giddy, a little horny, and happy. Well rested, too.”
I raised an eyebrow at that. “Still having problems sleeping?” It seemed to be a fairly obvious thing, given what I knew had happened to her, but I wanted to confirm it.

Jen nodded. “You have no idea how much this helps.” She paused for a moment, before adding, “We won’t be able to do this when you’re in Beacon.”

“Why not?” I asked.

“You won’t have time,” she deadpanned. “Joan and the twins never had time to leave the school, except on the weekends—and then they were wiped from classes.”

“I'll make time,” I promised. “I've already promised I would. You've got a place here. If you're here when I come to visit the girls, they aren't exactly going to complain about one more person sharing the bed. Besides, once the shrink gets you medically discharged and you're hired on with Fox Hunt, I'm thinking I'll make you my personal escort-slash-bodyguard—one of, anyway. That way, there's always a reason for you to be around. I'm sort of working with Ozpin and his little group now, so it wouldn't be out of the question for me—the Fox, that is—to have you liaise with them in my place if I'm busy. Meaning you'd have an excuse to be at Beacon, from time to time. And hey, while you're there…”

“I might as well stop by and check up on my little brother,” she gave a faint smile, nodding. “And if I timed it right, spending the night wouldn't be out of the question.”

“See? Problem mostly solved.” I grinned. “I'm pretty sure I can convince whatever team I wind up with that letting you camp in our dorm for a night or two a week isn't a terrible thing. You may have to part with some training or something to make it worth their while, though.”

“I'd be fine with that,” Jen agreed, settling back down and inhaling deeply through her nose. “You smell nice.”

I sniffed myself and shook my head. “I need a shower.”

The blonde in my arms shrugged, before making a languorous stretch, her body pulling closer to my own as she did. My bathroom door opened, letting out a small cloud of steam, along with Neo and Penny. “Oh good, you're up,” the ice cream themed girl grinned, before crawling onto the bed. Her towel fell off halfway to me and she wound up sprawled naked over both me and Jen as her lips claimed mine. “Mm. Good morning.”
“Morning,” I returned, when she pulled away.

A teasing grin crossed her lips as Neo’s mismatched vanilla and strawberry gaze met Jen's blue, before she leaned down and planted her lips on the blonde woman’s. “Just so no one's jealous.”

“Does that mean I can have one too?” Penny asked, drawing my attention to where the gynoid was finishing drying off—wrapped in a towel and only a towel.

With her hair damp and ruffled and the red left on her skin from the heat of the shower, she looked pretty much indistinguishable from a human—which was the point, I supposed. Doll joints would kind of give things away, after all. *Still, emulating a blush response? That's a lot of effort to go through for something like Penny—a project that, near as I can tell, was supposed to be some sort of combat gynoid. And yet, evidence speaks to the contrary: blush response, simulated nervous system mimicking all five senses, skin and hair that feel mostly real unless you're paying attention, working reproductive organs… As a combat platform, that's a lot of wasted energy. Hell, aside from her strength, all of her weapons are externally mounted. As an infiltration unit, however, it'd be perfect. What was her 'father' planning for her? I get the feeling that whatever it was, I'm not going to like it. And I'm going to have to set aside a weekend at some point to do some deep dives into Penny's memory core with her. Not sure how that's going to work, what with Penny's mind being a computer. Mental spells can't target her, but maybe I can figure something out with the connection between us. Either way, she'll probably need someone to hold her again until she can calm down.*

“You certainly can!” Neo grinned, rolling off the bed, bouncing up, and planting a quick peck on the ancula's lips. A moment later, her usual outfit materialized around her body and she shifted slightly to adjust the fit before heading for the bedroom door. “I think I smell pancakes.”

“Oooh, pancakes,” Penny echoed, equipping her own clothes and following quickly on Neo's heels, the door closing behind her.

Jen blinked before shooting a faintly amused look my way. “Seems like Neo has figured out how to manage Penny,” she commented, and I nodded.

“Penny's not hard to deal with once you figure out that she's ridiculously easy to please.” Giving my own stretch, and noticing how the girl in my arms pulled herself tighter to me as I did, I cast a glance at the door to the bathroom. “So, are you coming?”

Jen blinked before raising one fine, blonde eyebrow. “Are you asking me to shower with you?”
“I didn't want to presume, but I kind of figured you'd enjoy it,” I told her.

Jen glanced away, considered it for a moment, then nodded. Taking one of my hands, she sat up and pulled me towards the bathroom. “Wash my back for me? And my hair?”

“Sure,” I agreed, willing to give her excuses to reach out or be close if it helped.

Once we were finished, we joined the others for breakfast and headed to what passed as our project room. While the girls set about sizing Yang and Ruby for outfit modifications, I pulled my new armor and jacket, along with Cinder's dress out of Inventory and dug out my kit for creating Bounded Fields, Enchantments, and the like. The room went suddenly quiet and I blinked before looking up to find the others staring at me. “What?”

“Jaune,” Yang began, looking unsure how to put what she clearly wanted to ask.

Blake beat her to the punch by asking, “Why do you have a woman's dress?”

I rolled my eyes at that. Of all of them, Neo looked the most amused—clearly she recognized whose dress it was. “Cause reasons,” I answered evasively. A smirk threatened to break out but I ruthlessly crushed it as I stood and held the red, gold, and black piece of material up to my chest. “What do you think? My color? Would it make my ass look fat?”

Once everyone had settled down from the ensuing giggle fit, Yang asked, “Hey Jaune, got a minute? Can we talk?”

Before I could answer, Neo shot Yang an annoyed look. “No, it's fine, I'm totally done here.”

Yang had the decency to look sheepish. “Sorry,” she apologized. In response, Neo made a shooing motion towards the door.

“Sure,” I nodded, putting the dress down and following the blonde outside, to curious looks from the others. “What's up?” I asked, when she lead me up into the retractable hangar above our quarters—which was about as far away and as isolated as one could get without going outside or leaving the bounded fields around the place.
“About my mom,” she began, then hesitated and shook her head. “No, actually, I'm sorry—about yesterday.”

I rolled my eyes. “It's fine, Yang. No harm, no foul. Now, what about your mom?”

Heaving an irritated sigh, the blonde asked, “What's she doing here? I mean, she hasn't been around in years and all of a sudden she just decides to show up?”

Frowning, I leaned against the hangar wall and crossed my arms over my chest. “That one's my fault.”

Lilac eyes narrowed on me as Yang asked, “What do you mean?”

I took a moment to figure out how to word what I wanted to say without giving away too much. “I can't go into the exact reason, but I can tell you that it was official Hunter business. The issue is still outstanding, I believe, so I think she'll be hanging around a while.”

“And she can't be bothered to see her kids?” the blonde ground out, and I shook my head. “Sorry Yang, I can't give you much insight into her reasons for that.” I got the feeling that Raven didn't really appreciate me asking, either.

Yang began to pace, and I noticed the room getting warmer as her Aura picked up, beginning to cause some of her hair to start taking on that weightless quality it had when she used her Semblance. “Where is she, then?!”

Sighing quietly, I shrugged. “I've got no idea. In town, somewhere, but I can't track her. She doesn't show up on my map.”

“Then how were you planning to contact her?” she asked, spinning around and leveling a red-eyed glare on me.

“Because I can contact her, sometimes. Usually when she's snooping on me. When she's paying attention and feels like listening.”
Moving to close the distance between us, the blonde stepped into my personal space and said, “Call her now.”

I shook my head. “I can't. Have you figured out what you would even say to her?” I asked, but I suspected I already knew the answer. ‘And at the rate she's going with this, she's either going to implode or explode and wind up hurting either herself, or someone around her. At this point, it'd actually be better for her to just get it out of her system rather than letting it build. And better me than, say, Ruby.’

“How about, 'where the fuck have you been for the last ten years,' for starters?” Yang spat. “Or 'did you forget our scroll number?' Better yet, 'why did you abandon me?!”’

And that was the true heart of the matter, wasn't it? Ruby at least had the knowledge that her mother loved her and that Summer was dead and not simply off somewhere, doing God knew what, but obviously something she felt was more important than taking care of her kid. If I had to guess, Yang seemed driven to either convince her mother to return, or get closure—it was what made the most sense, given what I knew of her situation and comparing that to what I knew of people in general. I'd heard the same story time and time again on Earth. Parent seemingly abandons child, child grows up to resent parent, child seeks out parent who left, and the child is usually left with nothing like the answers they were expecting.

The problem with that was, I didn't know if there was any closure to be had. I hadn't pieced together much, but the impression of the woman I had was that Raven was driven, mission-focused, and didn't do anything without a goal in mind. 'Who knows what the hell runs through that woman's head, though,' I mused. She simply played things too close to the vest to be able to read much off her—especially where her personal thoughts and feelings were concerned. Even Observe came up blank half the time—the other half giving 'helpful' little readings of her emotional state like: bored, hungry, sleepy.

Aloud, I asked, “What if you don't like the answers?”

“What do you mean?” Yang asked quietly, and I elaborated.

“I mean, do you really feel that any answer she gives is going to make you feel better? And what if there is no answer? What then?” Sighing, I softly added, “Yang, throwing a tantrum at your mother the moment you see her isn't going to convince her to come back and stay. Hell, depending on why she was gone, it may just convince her you don't want her around.”

“Then what the hell am I supposed to do?!” Mt. Xiao Long erupted, her Aura exploding around her
as she brought her hands up. Reflexively, I dumped mana into Haste and tracked the path of her descending fists—preparing to shield if I needed to. It turned out that I didn't, however, as I saw where she was aiming. An instant later, the hangar rang like a struck gong as Yang's fists slammed into the metal wall to either side of my head. I grabbed her wrists and pulled, dragging her bodily against me as I pivoted and traded places with her, shoving her back against the wall. “Let go!”

“Not until you settle down,” I denied, and the blonde in my arms began to struggle, trying to throw me off. Weight and leverage gave me the advantage, but a bit of subtle gravity manipulation might have helped it along.

After a whole lot of fruitless thrashing and screaming, she went limp in my arms and her Aura went out like a candle in a stiff breeze. I loosened my grip on her wrists and she slowly pulled them out of my grasp, before draping her arms around my neck and dropping her head on my chest as she began to shake. Carefully, I wrapped my arms around her and pulled her into a hug. It was with a quiet, hollow voice, scratchy with tears that she asked, “Why doesn't she want anything to do with us?”

“I don't know, Yang.” Thinking it over, I quickly came to a decision and added, “But I'll do what I can to find out.”

“Thanks, Jaune,” she murmured, in between a sniffle. Sighing, she pulled away and wiped at her eyes. “We should get back.”

I nodded, gesturing towards the door. “Any time you need to talk, I'll listen,” I offered, and the girl turned a watery smile on me in answer.

Though I know the others surely noticed the wet spots and rumpled state of my shirt and the red around Yang's eyes, they didn't say anything. The absolute last thing we needed was Ruby jumping to the wrong conclusion, but thankfully she didn't. Instead, the little reaper pulled her big sister into a hug and pulled her off to the side to have a quiet conversation of their own. Retaking my preferred spot, I went back to work. Pulling up the patterns I needed to do, I set to work on the armor first. I had the requisite level of Sewing to modify the coat and reverse engineer Cinder's Dustcaster design now, but getting the armor wearable ranked higher on my list of priorities. With any luck, I would get both done today. If not, there was still time before Beacon started, given the new commencement date. I tuned out the noise around me and settled down to work.

I spent the day finishing out setting up the enchantments on my gear and, once I was done with that, started adding a set for the girls. Normally, this would have involved the twins and Neo sitting around in the nude and trying to distract me while I worked, leading to bedroom fun later—but with our guests, and other factors, we couldn't exactly do that. So, whichever girl was getting her clothes modified at the time got to wear a robe while I worked. Thankfully, it didn't take nearly as long to do theirs as it had to do mine—between my armor and coat, and all the enchantments I'd added, it had taken a while there. The girls all had less material to cover for the most part and not much in the way
of armor or accessories to modify.

Additionally, reverse engineering Cinder's Dustcaster enchantment had taken a fair bit of time, as had getting it onto the upper part of my jacket on the inside, where it wouldn't be seen. It was the most complex pattern by far, and not adding it to the girls' outfits cut down the time I had to spend on each by a lot. I would add it later, if they wanted the option to use their clothes as a Dustcaster, but for the moment they didn't really need it—and, realistically, their outfits just didn't have enough material to stack that on top of everything else. I made a mental note to suggest adding more clothes, later. Even just a short jacket would be enough, on top of everything else, but I would prefer long coats simply for the fact that, like my own, it would act as an extra layer of light armor. Then again, maybe I'd get lucky and they would consider an outfit change at some point, shifting to something more practical. Well, it was something to bring up with the others, once Ruby, Yang, and Blake had some time at Beacon and some experience under their belts. I was hoping one of the teachers would do the job for me and convince them that turning down options for keeping their insides inside was dumb.

It was some time after dark when Melanie and Miltia finally pulled me away from my work—though, more likely, they had watched and waited until I'd finished the last outfit because they knew interrupting while I was working on this was a bad idea. As soon as Melanie took her dress back and equipped it, I found myself dragged out of the otherwise empty work room—the others having departed at some point. As it turned out, they had left to go see to basic needs—specifically, silencing the growls of empty tummies. I hadn't even realized I'd worked straight through lunch until the smell hit me and my stomach voiced its own complaints. A nice meal and conversation with friends and loved ones rounded out the end to an otherwise quiet day, and I went to bed that night the most relaxed I'd been in days—a couple of days doing fuck all had been exactly what I'd needed.

Monday morning rolled around with more minor Semblance updates and my scroll chiming a text notification—the black one, specifically. Frowning, I looked at the ID and was only mildly surprised to find it was Qrow. Rolling my eyes, I attempted to get out of bed to head to the bathroom while I sent a reply, only for two sets of arms around me to tighten and pull me back down. One of those turned out to be Jen, again—spooned against my back. The second, however, caused my eyebrows to run towards my hairline. There must have been some nighttime shenanigans involved, because I distinctly remembered going to sleep with Miltia in my arms. Instead, I had woken up to find Ruby had taken her place—or had been put in her place.

A look around showed that for the second time in as many days the others had left before I'd woken up as well. A quick check also showed that I was naked again, thanks to evaporating clothes. I made a mental note to start equipping boxers under my conjured clothes and went about equipping something to prevent Ruby from having an embolism should she wake up at the most inopportune time possible. *There's always the possibility that she's faking sleep,* I mused, which drove me to check for that. Sighing quietly as I found that she was still asleep and not just feigning sleep like Jen, I opened the message.
I blinked at that and shook my head. 'So, something about Ozpin's group.' Thinking over my reply, I frowned. 'I should probably give him a heads up about the train job, while I'm at it. It'll make for a decent show of faith on my part and it won't cost me much—assuming he keeps his mouth shut about it.' With that in mind, I sent my reply.

'Sure, as long as there's a shot of bourbon in that coffee.'

That done, I set about extricating myself from the grasp of the two girls in my bed. Tilting my head back slightly to look over my left shoulder, I turned my attention to Jen first. “I've got a meeting I need to get to. It's kind of urgent,” I whispered. A moment later, I felt her nod against my back and her arms loosened. Shifting my gaze to Ruby with her nose buried against my chest, I debated how to go about this. On the one hand, I could just wake her up—it's not like she was naked, or doing anything the others hadn't done before. On the other hand, odds were good that she would be very embarrassed—and while she was absolutely adorable when she blushed, I felt I could probably handle it better than that. Shaking my head, I subvocalized “Sleep” and carefully loosened her arms from around me before sitting up.

Bright blue eyes set under a messy mop of long, blonde hair regarded me when I shifted my gaze to Jen. “Would you do me a favor?” I asked, and she nodded. “Keep her company till she wakes up?”

“Sure,” Jen agreed, reaching over and pulling the smaller girl into her arms as I moved out from between them. I noticed that even in induced sleep, Ruby went right back to clinging to the closest warm body. “Where are you going?”

“Her uncle sent me a text. He wants to meet up for coffee—which is code for he wants to talk about Ozpin,” I answered, heading for the shower. A quick scrub later, I walked out in street clothes and found Jen had closed her eyes again, but was still awake—as evidenced by one eye cracking open to track me. I paused as I took her in, thinking for a moment before asking, “I think he's on our side—or at least that our goals line up nicely. Would you mind if I told him about you?”

The blonde frowned before giving a small shrug. “What will it get us?”

“Sympathy, for one,” I answered, and before she could open her mouth to protest, I held up a hand. “The man's got two nieces just a few years younger than you—Ruby and Yang. He's also one fourth of Ozpin's inner circle. If he shares it with them, Ozpin and Goodwitch will likely also be on our side. The fourth guy, Ironwood, is high in Atlas command—hell, you've probably heard of him. Either this will be a wedge between them, opening room for me to work, or it'll get us unanimous
support from Ozpin's group if Ironwood is a decent man and is unaware of the Specialist project. Either way, it's win/win for us.”

“That seems… cold,” she quietly assessed. “The kind of thing I saw in training—not something I'd expect to see from you.”

“Probably,” I agreed. “I know I can be a manipulative bastard, but at least I keep it all pointed externally, for our benefit. Someone has to. Can you live with that?”

There was no hesitation whatsoever as she answered with a quiet, “Yes.”

“Okay. The Sleep spell I hit Ruby with was pretty under-powered, so it should wear off in a few minutes, if you want to wake her up.” Taking in their forms, I grinned and added, “But if you want to stay in bed a bit longer I don't think she'll mind terribly. I'll be back soon.”

Leaving the room and glancing at my HUD, I checked the time and winced—I was running late. Finding the others, I traded quick 'good morning' kisses with Neo, Melanie, and Miltia—and gave Penny a peck on the forehead when she pouted about being left out, as well as waving goodbye to Yang and Blake—then told them I was going out to take care of some things and made my way out for the stairs leading to the hanger above us. Equipping my Fox gear, I set the hangar to cycle open and closed, cast “Wings,” and took off across town under Invisibility.

Almost unsurprisingly, it wasn't too hard to find a blind alley down on the docks where the bar Qrow wanted to meet at was situated—the cameras on most of the street it was situated on having long since been smashed and never replaced. The bar itself was situated within sight of one of the largest sea-side docks in Vale, making it a prime piece of land for anyone catering to the two primary things sailors were looking for when they came ashore. I bet money that if I looked, I'd find a brothel nearby as well. Even in Remnant—even in Vale—you couldn't escape man's oldest trades, and prostitution was safer by far than war in this world where war was sure to attract Grimm. On the other hand, odds were good that any such establishment would be well hidden from the public eye, to protect the reputations of both Johns and whores—meaning if I were looking for one, it might be more difficult than I'd initially thought. ‘Or I could just follow the first horny sailor to step off a ship and see where he goes,’ I mused.

Dropping down, I checked to make sure the coast was truly clear before swapping out of my Fox set to my new Jaune set—complete with long coat, armor, and weapons. Shifting around to get a feel for it again, I grinned. “Oh yeah, that's a lot better.” I could move easily now that the weight of the armor wasn't forcing me to use my Aura to lift it.
Walking out of the alley, I made my way to the door and pulled it open. Looking around, I frowned at the setup—roll-up metal door, small open area, a couple of small tables in the corners, and a single bar with stools set up along it running the width of the building. If it weren't for seeing the man sitting at the bar, I would assume I had the wrong place.

Qrow looked over his shoulder as I neared and nodded. Making my way over, I took a seat on the stool beside him as the bartender started heading our direction. Qrow looked over my gear and hummed. “Nice outfit. It's missing something, though.”

“Nah, I don't think I could get away with both a long coat and a cape,” I retorted and he rolled his eyes. He had a point, however. Even with the full ensemble, it still looked like it was missing something. 'Something to offset the white and yellow,' I mused, making a note to ask Neo and the twins later, before a thought occurred. ‘I was planning to make a ribbon anyway out of that silk I bought the other day, since I'm pretty sure I'm done with the testing phase on those—and I need to make some for the girls anyway. I could wear it outside, instead of hidden inside the coat as I'd intended. Wear it like a belt or something.’

The bartender speaking pulled me out of my thoughts. “What can I get for you?”

“Just a soda, I don't really care what kind,” I answered, drawing an amused look from Qrow as the bartender shrugged and went away. “What? It's too early for alcohol and I don't drink coffee or tea.”

Qrow rolled his eyes. “You and Glynda would get along, then—assuming she could reach deep enough to find the stick and remove it from her ass.”

“And Ozpin loves his coffee, so I imagine that drives her nuts,” I surmised, and he nodded. “But I'm assuming you didn't text me just to talk about your coworkers' bad habits.” The bartender came back with my drink and I thanked him as I took a sip. Being that this was Remnant, finding something that tasted like a Dr. Pepper was proving kind of difficult. The drink I'd been handed tasted like someone had combined RC and Coca Cola and used cane sugar when processing it—so, while a bit odd, it wasn't entirely unpleasant either.

“Yeah,” Qrow drawled, waiting until we had that section of the bar to ourselves again. He opened his mouth and I held up a hand before looking around to make sure I wasn't being watched. As I had so many times before, I focused on a spell I already knew—Silence, in this case—and made an effort to twist it into something new. A moment later, I felt the new spell snap into place and was rewarded with a spell creation notification, letting me know I'd just created the spell Muffliato, which would allow the caster to create a sphere of space that would muffle and distort all sound within to listeners outside and leveling it up would eventually allow it to completely silence the area within it from outside listeners. Humming as I tried to recall where I'd heard that spell name before, I gestured for Qrow to continue as my paranoia had been properly appeased for the moment.
“What was that?” Qrow asked as the spell settled into place.

“Everyone outside of about a meter won't really hear us now,” I explained. The man raised an eyebrow at that and I could tell he was filing the information away for later use. While the thought was on my mind, I added, “Also, your choice of venue sucks. Seriously—back to a non-existent door, small, too well lit, nowhere to have a truly private conversation. And how does he keep the place temperature controlled given that it's open to the elements? How is this place even a bar?”

Chuckling quietly, Qrow said, “I'm friends with the bartender. He owes me one or two, so I drink for free.”

I rolled my eyes. “That does not refute my points.”

The older man shrugged and got down to business. “Thanks to that stunt with Amber, we're having to call in favors with a few people. One of them is the fourth leading member of our little… drinking club. James Ironwood. Big wig general in the Atlesian Navy, but an old friend of Oz. He'll be showing up in a fortnight and we want you there.”

I blinked, running the timing over in my head before saying, “Goodwitch sent out an email to the students saying Beacon had been rescheduled for Monday two weeks from now. Your General Ironwood—”

“He's not my anything,” Qrow cut in, and I rolled my eyes at that, continuing as if he hadn't interrupted.

“—Is supposed to be showing up around then. So, you're taking delivery for Amber's stasis pod on the same day the students are going to be coming back into Beacon?” I asked, and he nodded.

“Best time for it. Bring it in boxed in nondescript cardboard packing boxes in the morning when the fresh meat is getting their 'Welcome to Beacon' speech and it just looks like Atlas is bringing in a new shipment of tech. Oz being on fairly good terms with them helps, so that kind of thing is actually pretty common. Between all the brats and the stuff they're bringing with them, no one who matters will notice,” he explained. It made a certain amount of sense—the students couldn't really go asking what it was because it wasn't their business. If they were using a freight elevator in the tower instead of one of the main elevators, everyone would assume it was going into the basement level of the tower where they likely kept the armory and not the sub-basement level.
Then again, why put the armory in a basement? And especially under the tower? If I were going to store Dust and weapons for students to use, I'd keep it in a central, easily accessible location far enough from any nearby buildings that if it did happen to explode, it wouldn't do any damage. *Note to self: figure out where they keep that. It could be under the tower, or like much of the rest of Beacon the armory could be directly connected to the underground bunker, so they could take an elevator down from there.*

“Fair enough. So, what do you need me there for? Also, you realize that requiring me being there as the Fox means 'Jaune' has to disappear for a few hours,” I pointed out.

Qrow shot me an amused look. “I figure that shouldn't be too hard for you. And the meetings are kind of mandatory. Believe me, if I could get out of them, I would most of the time,” he admitted.

“Mandatory for whom?” I asked, frowning at that. “Everyone? Wouldn't that be a lot of people showing up with no real explanation as to why? Or just the four of you? In which case, why include me—or am I that far in?”

“Everyone locally who can make it. And disguising it as something else is easier than you'd think. Either as staff meetings or parent-teacher conferences, when they're this big—since most of those involved are either on staff or have kids in Beacon. That's if anyone even bothers with any sort of cover story. As the headmaster of Beacon, it wouldn't really be all that strange for Ozpin to call in a group of other Hunters to advise, or make suggestions, or pretty much anything related to his position and the curriculum—which would include gathering intelligence about Grimm movements in the field.” Taking a pull from his cup of coffee, he grimaced before adding, “As far as your other question, I don't know yet. Haven't really had much of a chance to talk to Oz about you—or anything, really, since he's been shut in. Hell, Glynda is the one who called the meeting, technically—though I assume Oz told her to.”

Frowning and thinking back to that conversation, I asked, “What about Ruby?” Seeing his confused look, I elaborated. “Her eyes. Ozpin was supposed to fill you in on what he knew.”

The man nodded slowly before reluctantly saying, “Oz had some contingencies in place, in case of emergencies. I got access to copies of what he had.”

“Let me guess, more secret shit like the Maidens?” When he failed to answer, I sighed. “Better she know now than go in unprepared. Right now, she's got a loaded weapon she has no idea how to use beyond the basics. It's not safe—for her, or anyone around her. If ever there was a case of needing to know, this is it.”
“It's a bit more complicated than that,” Qrow drawled.

“Un-complicate it. You know how she is better than I do. Now that she knows it's there, she's not going to stop playing with it until she figures it out,” I started, only to be cut off by a quiet growl.

“I don't want to hear a lecture on playing with things you don't understand from you, of all people. Kid, you have no idea the world of shit you have found yourself in.”

Chuckling quietly, I nodded acquiescence. “You don't know the half of it,” I murmured.

That only seemed to piss him off more. “I don't want to drag her into something she is in no way ready for—”

“Bit too late for that, isn't it?” I shot back, raising an eyebrow. “Ozpin already has his eyes on her. She's already in. When has ignorance ever kept someone safe?” Shaking my head, decided to bring the topic back onto safer ground and asked, “So you don't know exactly what the meeting is about?” Red eyes bored into the side of my head for a moment before he shrugged and turned away. “And it's definitely not just a meet-and-greet?”

“Probably not.”

Sighing, I shot him an annoyed look before deciding to drop it. Either he didn't know, or he did and he was being irritating on purpose because I'd pissed him off—or just because it was who he was. In the first case, there wasn't much I could do about it. In the second, the best thing to do would be to make sure he could take no enjoyment out of trying to frustrate me. I had years of experience dealing with friends exactly like that, so I changed the subject. “So, I've got a job in the middle of the week. Not one hundred percent sure on the date and time yet, but it's coming.”

“And?” Qrow asked, leaning forward slightly on his stool, suddenly all business again.

I took a slow sip of my drink and waited just long enough for him to start looking annoyed again before I answered. “All I know for sure is that it's a train. I think it's bound for Vale eventually, but I'll probably intercept it well before it gets here. No idea what she wants with it, though. I do know that at the same time, she's borrowing one of mine to help spring Torchwick, so we'll have to deal with that clown running around Vale again soon.”
“She can’t get her hands on whatever it is,” Qrow warned, and I shrugged.

“Maybe, maybe not. I'll poke around and figure out what its cargo is before I make a decision one way or another. If it's something too dangerous, I'll make sure there's an 'untimely accident' or something. If not, well, it'd be more useful to look competent and be relied upon than to fuck up a simple job and lose the trust I've gained so far. And I'd need a damned good excuse, too. Pretty sure I could manufacture one, but I'd rather not have to.” I could probably draw in some local Grimm and get them to wreck the tracks or something, or take out a bridge, but if I didn't have to then I wouldn't. I certainly wasn't going to tell Qrow that I already knew what the cargo was—I didn't think he'd appreciate me handing Cinder a train load of money.

“Fine,” he grunted. “What about Torchwick?”

I shook my head. “There's nothing I can do about that. If Neo intentionally fucks it up, my cover's blown—and she's sending two of her own to go with Neo. I expect he'll be back in town by the end of the week at the latest.”

“Any more good news?” Qrow asked, his voice heavy with sarcasm.

I considered for a moment before nodding. “Yeah, there's one other thing. What do you know about Atlas' Specialist program?”

Qrow blinked, frowning slightly as he shook his head. “Not much—just that they're using it to crank out stronger Hunters.”

“If by 'stronger Hunters' you mean 'brainwashed puppets,' sure,” I nodded. Red eyes narrowed and he motioned for me to continue. “Ever seen Dust in the indigo color spectrum?”

“Rarely,” he admitted, a disgusted look crossing his face. “And never for anything good. Why?”

“One of my sisters went to Atlas Academy—”

Qrow raised an eyebrow at that, asking, “Why?”
“Three of them went to Beacon. They figured if they had three in the other big academies, they could come home and compare notes and cross train. The youngest would get the most benefit out of it—and me, if I'd ever shown any aptitude for the Hunting thing before my accident. But once they were through, they could pass all of that on to their kids…” I trailed off and he nodded, seeing where I was going.

“The Arcs are already pretty well-known in the Hunter circles even outside of Vale for being ridiculously strong. If that worked, the next generation would be… well, they could pretty much name their terms for working for someone,” he admitted. “I take it something went wrong?”

“Yeah. The one who went to Atlas was fast tracked through all their stuff, then 'promoted' to the Specialist program. She assumed that it was some sort of elite training program—and to an extent, she was right. Except they don't really tell you about the brainwashing and body modification going in.” I continued, giving him a much abbreviated version of Jen's story.

The older man hummed, thinking it over for a moment before saying, “I can see why they would snatch an Arc. She was the only one within easy reach and if she later went back to Vale, they would have a mole. Are you sure she's not a mole?”

“I'm sure. I'm working on deprogramming her, but I'm sure she's not going to turn of her own free will.” Which reminded me, I needed to have another session with Jen soon. I was in uncharted waters, when it came to this stuff—nearly everything I knew about mental programming I'd picked up from fictional sources, and most of those were concerned with getting the programming done as opposed to breaking it. I had no way of knowing if I was supposed to try to fix everything at once, or if I was supposed to take it slow. On the one hand, if I went to fast there was the worry that something important could break. On the other hand, if I went too slow and their programming was good enough, it could reinforce itself over time and any good I'd done could 'fix' itself by the time I tried again. Worse, once I actually started—since, I had only even viewed her memories once so far—I would have little in the way of ability to tell how far along I was in helping her. If I actually trusted someone else to do this, I would have handed it off to someone with more skill in the field than myself in a heartbeat. But I didn't trust anyone else with it, and Jen only trusted me to handle it, so it was my responsibility.

“How?” he asked, and when I raised an eyebrow in question, he clarified with, “How are you deprogramming her?”

I shot him a deadpan look. “I'll figure something out, but suffice it to say that I'm not trusting my sister to someone with a mental Semblance in this state—so if you know someone and are offering, thanks, but no thanks.”
Thankfully, he dropped that line of conversation. “We knew there was some shady stuff going on in Atlas, but this…” Qrow shook his head. “I assume you're telling me for a reason?”

“I want it shut down and burned to the fucking ground,” I answered quietly, my tone completely flat as I said it. I may have accidentally leaned on Killing Intent a little, if the few other patrons deciding they had somewhere else to be were any indication. “I don't care who does it, but to be honest, I kind of want to put the match to it myself.”

Qrow glanced at the door as they left and shot me an annoyed look. It passed after a moment, though, and he turned thoughtful. Eventually, he said, “I'll see what I can dig up.”

“Then that's about it. I'll let you know if anything else comes up. We done here?” Qrow nodded, making a dismissive motion with his hand and I stood, dropped ten Lien in cash on the bar, and left to head back to Fox Hunt.

After returning home, we went back to the project room. My goal for the day was to complete the Ribbons, so I could start handing them out to the girls. My original intent had been to supply Ribbons for myself, the twins, and Neo, but given that we had some extra time between now and when Beacon started, I figured I would go ahead and do an entire batch of eighteen: three for the Malachite twins and Neo, four for Team RWBY, four for Team JNPR, and seven for my sisters since I knew that if I gave one to any of the Arc girls the rest would probably be annoyed that they didn't get one as well. I suppose it was a good thing I had gone back and gotten more material recently.

When I was finally interrupted, it was shortly after midday. I lost track of time,' I mused, shaking my head and tracking down the source of the distraction. The girls had been good about letting me work while they did their own things, so it hadn't been one of them. I looked over as the base phone in our workshop rang again. As I was the nearest, I pushed myself up out of my chair and made my way over to answer it, stretching and popping joints as I did. “Officers' Quarters, Fox speaking.”

“Sir, we've found something we think you should see,” Jim said, cutting straight to the punch. “You said you were looking for a field test for our new equipment, and I think we've found one.”

“Okay, I'll be down in the conference room in a few minutes.” Hanging up, I turned to where the gathered girls had all paused in their work to see what was going on. “Apparently, they've got something worth seeing. I'll be back in a few.”
Switching to my Fox outfit on the way, I made my way through the checkpoint and downstairs, to the conference room. While I waited for Jim and Angel to show up, I looked around and frowned. 'We really need to get a proper Operations Room built. Turning one of the buildings on the property into a command center needs to be our next big project. I don't want meetings to be in the barracks forever.'

“What's the SitRep?” I asked, as soon as they had taken their seats.

“One of our pilots observed a dust plume moving in the direction of Vale, several miles out past the mountains during a patrol. He went to investigate and found this,” Opening up her scroll, she touched something on its display and made a flicking motion towards the top of the table—which had, at some point after the last time I'd been in here, been replaced with a newer model. Personally, I had liked the wooden table just fine, but then, I was allergic to over-complicating things with technology that didn't really need it. It was something I had picked up from years of working as a technician—a distinct loathing for people who tried to replace perfectly functional equipment with new, cheap, flashy, gimmicky crap. Then again, we hadn't had equipment like this on Earth. Smart phones just didn't compare to a scroll's capabilities, and we were only just figuring out interactive surfaces for office equipment like tables. Here, we had holographic tables that could cast information from someone's scroll to display it in three dimensions as a floating hologram above the table.

Humming, I studied the images that had appeared floating over the table. “That's a lot of Grimm.”

“It's a land-based swarm,” Jim assessed, and I raised an eyebrow under my mask at that. “Numbers are estimated at between seven and eight hundred, but more are converging as they get closer to Vale. This group appears to be primarily made up of smaller Grimm—mostly Beowolves and Stalkers. There are some larger Grimm they probably collected on the way, though—Deathstalkers, Ursa and their larger variants, and a few King Taijitu. The biggest threats we're tracking are the pack of Goliaths moving at its center.” The image over the table switched to a close-in shot of the group in question.

Studying the images, I asked, “And you think this would be a good test to deploy some of our new hardware?”

“Yes, sir,” Jim nodded. “We've got a dozen working AFVs and ammunition and fuel enough for all of them.”

“Good ammo, or trash? I remember the last time we tried to hose down a Goliath, it didn't go so well.” I pointed out. I wouldn't be surprised if that was the pack we'd opened up on, in fact—even with the pretty good bit of distance between where we'd encountered those and where these were now. I wondered for a moment if the smarter, older Grimm could remember that sort of thing and hold a grudge. That was before I remembered the old saying, 'an elephant never forgets.' ‘Shit.'
The pair traded looks before Angel grinned. “We have since corrected that oversight, sir. Though, we are running low on high-grade Dust now.”

“I’ll see about refilling our supply soon,” I nodded. “What’s the terrain look like?”

Angel tapped away at her scroll for a moment before more images sprang up above the table. “Currently, the enemy forces are advancing across flat, open land. However, they will soon make it to the foothills, here,” she changed the display again, showing what looked like a large expanse of terrain where the plains tapered off into forested hills, and from there into mountains. “Based on their direction of approach, the best place to set up an ambush to intercept them would be here, at this natural bottleneck, where the road narrows and many of the other trails start becoming impassable.”

I frowned at that, reaching out for the image and zooming it outwards. "So, there's the main path through the mountains from this side and the terrain around it is difficult at best. The next path through is a good forty miles to the north. Why do these two expect them to take the trail, though? They're Grimm. Grimm are stupid. Why wouldn't they just follow a straight-line path to the city? Or... are they not as stupid as I'd thought. Deer and other animals will always take the path of least resistance, even if it means taking a winding path versus moving in a straight line—it's why, when you spook one, they'll wheel around and run for the nearest game trail as opposed to just running in a random direction.' Wanting to make sure, I decided it wouldn't hurt to ask. "Why this road? There's another, easier route further to the north. Barring that, why use the trail at all when most of them probably wouldn't have a problem crossing terrain that would be nearly impassable for people?"

“Path of least resistance,” Jim answered, confirming my suspicions word for word. “It's something people have learned to exploit over the years. If you cut a path through the forest, Grimm will be more likely to use the path if they're trying to get somewhere.”

“Doesn't that mean the roads are about the most dangerous place to be, between cities?” I asked, and the pair nodded.

Angel added, “It's part of why new villages or towns sometimes don't survive long. Someone makes an oversight and forgets to put in proper defenses and the roads provide an easy path straight to their town for any traveling Grimm.”

“So, they're coming up the road because it'll be easier for them. Let's take advantage of that and set up traps,” I supplied, and they nodded. “Why wouldn't they just turn around or scatter at the first sign of human resistance?”
“Sometimes, they do. Not often, though. No, for the most part, finding people actively resisting them tends to goad them into moving faster towards the defenders in question,” Jim grimaced. “It’s one of the reasons why some people are convinced that Grimm are some sort of divine retribution for something people did in the past. Grimm will prioritize killing a single human over a hundred, or a thousand, or more Grimm losses. And that’s why Hunters tend to be so effective. The combination of Aura as a lure and a person actually killing Grimm tends to focus their attention on the Hunters. Then again, in a city like Vale, that wouldn’t necessarily be true. Too many potential targets. You’d be guaranteed to see most of them break off to pursue other people rather than chasing after a Hunter or group of Hunters. A breach is always nasty and never comes without civilian casualties.”

“I see,” I murmured, filing that away under the heading of ‘Grimm behavior’ for later study before gesturing at the hologram to indicate they should continue.

Angel began adjusting the hologram. “They will be forced to cluster up and slow their approach, before making it to the next area of interest.”

The hologram shifted again and my lips twitched into a grin, already seeing its potential use as an ambush site. “A canyon with high, steep walls.”

“Yes, sir. Roaches check in, they don’t check out,” Jim smirked.

“So, send a few Bullheads to drop men with heavy weapons up on the top of this thing, looking into the canyon below, plant some mines at the mouth of the canyon, and set up our AFVs on high ground on the opposite end of the canyon and turn the whole thing into a meat grinder—and that's after trapping the pass leading up to it to high hell and killing them when they’re forced to cluster up?” I asked, getting nods from the pair. “Sounds like fun. If you'll start getting our people en route, I'll round up our guests and we can head out.”

“One more thing, sir,” Jim drew my attention. “We've had a few requests for interviews from the local news stations. This may be a good opportunity to get some free PR.”

I considered it for a moment before nodding. “Do it, but only under the condition that we are allowed to inspect and edit or remove any footage of sensitive material. And make sure they understand that we aren’t going to wait around for them on this. Also, that they have filming rights to this operation only. Nothing more.”

The pair stood, saluted, and quickly left to see to making it happen. I waited until I was sure they had
left and the minomap showed no one nearby before turning my chair around to regard the spot in
space where I knew Raven to be watching from, which had begun following me again as soon as I'd
stepped out of the Bounded Fields surrounding the officers' quarters. “You want in on this?” I asked.
I wanted more time to get to know the woman—I needed to figure out what her interest in me was
and I couldn't do that without observing and interacting with her. I was hoping she would let
something slip, or just come out and say, but she didn't seem the type to let something like that get
out easily.

I was somewhat surprised when a slip of paper materialized in the space in front of me. Reading the
note, I rolled my eyes. “You can wear a disguise.”

Another slip of paper dropped into my lap and I took a moment to read it, before frowning. 'How the
fuck does she know that?' I wondered briefly, before shaking my head. She must have overheard me
explaining my Semblance at some point—or enough to get the gist. “Give me a minute to test
something.”

Sending a quick message to the girls to let them know I was testing something with my Semblance, I
dropped party before throwing an invite to Raven. “Party, Raven Branwen, Hit Accept,” I muttered,
manually inviting her by name since she wasn't here to invite by using focus commands. Her profile
image appeared on the left side of my HUD, along with HP and MP, and I frowned as I noticed her
level was still listed as triple-question marks while her Health and Mana/Aura levels didn't actually
have numerical labels. 'Well, that is bullshit.' Apparently, if they were above a certain threshold, even
being in party wouldn't allow my Semblance to accurately estimate their level.

Selecting her image, I focused on the name listed and was rewarded with my Semblance giving me
the option to edit, or even hide details. As I was doing that, I noticed her image had changed while I
was playing with my interface. Her hair had been pulled up into a high ponytail and her eyes had
shifted from red to blue. In addition, she now sported what looked like a dark gray scarf or
something similar that covered her lower face and looked like it would double as a hood. 'Not a
horrible disguise,' I admitted. It was simple, but would be effective for what I had in mind. For a
moment, I wondered what she would look like with lilac contacts as opposed to blue. 'Pretty much
Yang with black hair and a flat expression, at that point. Still sexy, though.'

Shooting a glance back at the point in space, I said, “Give me a name.”

Another slip of paper. 'Rook? Oh for fuck sake.' I groaned and turned a deadpan look on where she
was watching from. “Really? Really? Well, at least now I know where she gets it from.” Shaking my
head, I said, “At this point, I'm waiting on you.”

I didn't have to wait long before a red and black portal opened and the woman in question stepped
through. “Nice outfit,” I admitted, looking her over. She had traded out her Japanese-themed outfit
for a dark green jacket, brown shirt, and tight black pants in addition to the scarf. She wore pretty basic armor in a more modern style—shin guards, knee pads, chest piece, and gauntlets—and carried what looked like a pole weapon on her back, with some transformation tech shoved into it. A closer inspection showed it to be some sort of sniper rifle/polearm combo, with a Dust blade on the end making it something like a glaive—similar to Ascalon's own fully deployed form. “Go out in disguise often?”

“For work,” she agreed softly. “And sometimes, the best disguises are the ones that are too obvious and so get ruled out by default. As you probably know.”

“Yeah, yeah,” I grumbled. Making sure my Semblance wouldn't give her away, I pushed out of my chair and headed for the door, and from there to the elevator. “Well, let's go tell the others we're going hunting.” As we stepped into the elevator, I shot her a glance and smirked under my mask. Calling up Conjuration, I offered her a mask—dark gray with dark green highlights in the shape of a wolf's face, with forward facing ears and a longer muzzle than the fox masks. “Here. This will help.”

One dark eyebrow quirked upwards as she regarded the mask, before shrugging and slipping it on, then pulling up the hood of her scarf—which, now that I'd had a chance to see it from front and back, I could tell it was long enough to function as a short cape. “Does this make me 'Green Wolf?'”


“You don't seem to mind,” she retorted, and I turned an amused look on her, before remembering it'd be lost under the mask.

Shrugging, I said, “She's fun,” I admitted.

“'Fun,'” the woman echoed. “Well, you do seem to enjoy pulling her pigtails.”

I chuckled at that. “For all the fuss over her hair, she sure loves having it pulled.”

“Bringing up my daughter's almost non-existent sex life won't make me uncomfortable. But by all means, continue if you like,” she countered.

Raising an eyebrow at that, I hummed. “Is that so? So, how do you know she doesn't have much of a sex life?”
“The same way I know you are the only one she’s been intimate with,” the woman shrugged.

There was only one explanation that made sense. “So, you have been keeping tabs on them.”

“I never said I didn’t,” Raven denied. “You inferred that.”

I was tempted—sorely tempted—to ask why, if she kept tabs on her family, she couldn’t be bothered to visit every once in a while. However, at the end of the day, that was a conversation she needed to have with Yang, not with me—and if I pushed, odds were good she’d simply leave. That she’s willing to go along with this harebrained scheme means she’s willing to give me some leeway—or maybe just really does want to see her daughter. Daughters? Does she see Ruby as her own? Hell, was she even around for Ruby? I’ve been kind of running under the assumption that she wasn’t, but maybe I’m wrong. I’m going to have to ask Yang at some point. Either way, this may be a 'take what you get and be happy' situation. I suppose we'll find out.’

“One more thing,” I turned to meet her eyes under her mask. “You've been using portals to spy on me this whole time, right? There aren't two people spying on me?”

Raven considered it for a moment before answering, “I have, but I can only account for my own actions. If someone else is keeping tabs on you, I am unaware of it.”

“Well, shit. That's less reassuring than I'd hoped,” I sighed. “I don't suppose I could convince you to stop spying on me?”

“No,” the woman denied.

Opening the door to the project room, I found the girls had gone back to their work while I had been out. Met with several sets of stares, I reached up and pulled off my masks, dropping the illusion over my face as I did. “So, who wants to go hunting? Well, I say 'hunting,' but in this case it's more like 'killing,' since we know what it is we're after and where they'll be.”

“What's the situation?” Melanie voiced one of the two questions on everyone's mind, as every set of eyes had shifted off of me and focused on the masked form behind me.

Neo was the one who asked the other question, as she sent, 'So, who's this?’
“A swarm of Grimm is making their way towards Vale,” I answered. “This is Rook. She'll be joining us for this op.” To Neo, I replied, 'Raven Branwen. Let's keep that between us and the twins for now, okay?'

'Yeah, I can see how that might not go over well,' Neo mused, eyes shifting over towards Yang, who was eying her mother—though she didn't know it—with a look of amusement.

Yang snorted softly. “Where'd you pick this one up?”

“Too easy,” I deadpanned. Yang's mouth opened for a moment before closing with a click of teeth as she took on a look that said she knew I had her there. “So, who's in?” Given that I was speaking to a room full of women who were either Huntresses in training, an active duty Huntress, or girls who had always wanted to go to Hunter school, every hand in the room went up. “Great. Neo, Penny, and either Melanie or Miltia—we need you 'in uniform' for this as we're going in an official capacity. Also, Ruby, Yang, and Blake—you'll need to change clothes. We can't do anything about your weapons right now, but your 'Hunter' look is way too identifiable. Jen, you as well.”

There was some complaining from the girls, save for Jen, but they understood that getting filmed in their Hunter gear would give the game away to anyone who saw it. Luckily, we had uniforms in their sizes already made. The weapons, though, were a problem. We didn't have much in the way of 'generic' weapons aside from the stuff I'd looted, and certainly nothing that would qualify as a Hunter's weapon. 'Well, all else fails, they could always say they were being scouted by the Fox and he offered to let them wear uniforms to at least offer that much anonymity.'

'By the way,' Neo sent, drawing my attention. We talked it over amongst ourselves and decided on names for our Fox Hunt alter egos. We think you'll like them.'

I sent back, 'What'd you come up with? I'll show you how to edit your display information so it'll show up to everyone who can actually see it.'

'For the twins: Garnet Doublet for whichever one of them is in their Fox Hunt uniform. For our Head of Intelligence, Atra Dawe,' Neo began. Seeing my questioning look, a small smirk twitched at her lips. 'Dawe. Jackdaw. As in—'

I resisted the urge to facepalm, knowing it would give away our silent conversation. That is bad. Almost as bad as Raven calling herself Rook. Only almost, because at least there's no blatant connection there.'
'It's not that bad,' Neo protested.

'So, what's she called with the mask on?' I sent in question.

'Magpie,' the girl answered.

I snorted softly. 'Neo, dear, that is exactly as bad as Raven calling herself Rook.'

Neo stuck her tongue out, ignoring the commentary as she continued explaining, 'We took a page from your book on separating identities. So, we all have two layers of cover there—the 'public' faces of Fox Hunt and the 'private' faces under those masks. And none of them connected to us. 'Garnet' is actually the least protected that way, but she doesn't officially head any departments or anything. We could get away with saying she's our personal assistant.'

'My paranoia is rubbing off on you,' I deadpanned, but I couldn't say I was displeased over them taking proper precautions.

'Penny's is Jacqueline Snow. She really wanted to pick a name beginning with 'J,' and you can probably guess why.'

'Cut her some slack,' I mentally sighed, glancing over at the gynoid, who had already changed outfits. I guessed she had already made an armor set for this particular ensemble, to have changed so quickly. I had to admit, based on what I'd seen of Weiss in canon, she looked every bit the Schnee—white hair pulled into a low pony tail, dress going down to her knees, knee high boots that ended in short heels, a long jacket ending around mid-thigh, and a white Fox mask with red highlights identical to my own. The clothes were, of course, also white. The only thing missing from the outfit was a proper weapon—which she, Neo, and the twins had assured me they were having built.

Neo sent me an amused look and added, 'With the mask on, she suggested her handle be 'Snow Fox.'"

I palmed my face. 'Well, at least it fits. So, what about you?'

'Saved the best for last,' the sent the mental impression of a smirk and I rolled my eyes. 'Yin Huli.'
Looking over, I shot her a deadpan look. 'My Chinese is a little rusty.'

'Is that what that's called on Earth?' she mused, before answering the unspoken question. 'Silver Fox.'

Blinking, I turned it over in my head before nodding. 'It's good, but damn if it doesn't make me want to kick myself for making a sentai team of Foxes.' A moment of inspiration struck and a grin twitched my lips upwards. 'Do me a favor? Make your eyes silver when you use it. If you ever run into Ozpin in that getup, it'll drive him nuts.'

Neo shot me a questioning look before her eyes traced over Ruby, and understanding dawned. 'Yeah, I can do that. Should be fun to screw with his head.' She considered for a second before a wicked smirk crossed her lips for the barest of moments. 'Well, if you're putting in requests, you're going to have to supply me something to work with.'

'What do you mean?' I asked, sensing a prank or something along those lines potentially brewing.

'Oh, nothing much. Just some memories of women from Earth,' she answered innocently.

I didn't buy it for a second. Considering what I knew of her Semblance, I asked, 'Does it matter if they're real?'

'Real, animated, doesn't matter. I just want a larger group of samples to work with so I don't have to constantly either copy people or manually alter my features to get things right,' Neo explained.

'Works for me,' I shrugged, tossing her a link and beginning to feed her memories.

When everyone had finished getting ready, I passed out freshly created masks to the girls who needed them. By the time we were done, I nearly groaned as I remembered Raven's earlier comment. I wouldn't hand out masks that weren't customized to their wearers, so Jen, Ruby, Yang, Blake, and Miltia each had Fox-style masks with different colors—silver, red, yellow, black, and green respectively. And while Miltia had her own bloodline mask, Melanie was already 'in uniform' as our Head of Intelligence, so Miltia couldn't use it if we wanted to keep up the illusion that there was only one of them—likewise, Miltia would be primarily using the ranged magical attacks she'd picked up while Melanie would be using her boots and gloves when the fighting started. When I factored Penny, Neo, and myself in there were eight of us in total wearing fox masks, plus Raven and
'It really is a goddamn sentai team worth of Foxes,' I mentally groaned, looking them over. Shaking my head, we headed up to the roof where Foxtrot-1 was waiting. I found Angel leaning against the hull and shook my head. “You don't have to chauffeur me around, you know?”

“It’s part of the job description, sir,” she denied, a small grin playing over her lips as she did. “Is this everyone?”

“Yeah,” I agreed as the girls began to file into the Bullhead. “How are we getting the AFVs on-site? It'll take a while to drive them through the city.”

“Air lift,” Angel answered, gesturing for me to get in. I took one of the jump seats, which I noticed happened to be between both Jen and Penny. I wondered if she had already begun assuming the role as part of my security detail. I made a mental note to talk with Penny and Jen about it later, once we could officially take Jen on, to let them know they'd be partnered up for that.

“You can do that?” I asked as the woman climbed into the cockpit.

Angel nodded, pulling on her headset as I did likewise. “Bullheads were designed to be multi-purpose VTOL aircraft. Troop transport, cargo transport, fire support, Search and Rescue, and so on.”

'So, they fill the roles that different types of helicopters fill on Earth,' I mused, nodding. “Okay. Get us moving. Our first stop is going to be our contacts with one of the local news station s . ”

“Roger that,” she agreed, before switching to external comms and cutting us out of her conversation to our flight controller and likely, Vale Air Traffic Control.

“Where is the AO?” ‘Rook’ asked, drawing the attention of everyone present.

“South east side of Vale, a canyon on this side of a narrow pass through the mountains,” I answered.

Raven, or Rook rather, nodded before leaning back in her seat to observe the others, supplying, “I
know of it. It was a defense and training outpost before the war.”

I raised an eyebrow at that. “It's not any more?”

“No,” she denied. “It was shelled with mortar fire. There wasn't much left and after the war, I suppose the King didn't feel like rebuilding—and since his passing, the council has never bothered to.”

“So, kingdom defenses aren't what they once were,' I mused. An idea began forming and I grinned under my mask. I'll take a look at the place. It might be a good idea to have Fox Hunt scout out all those little passes through the mountains around Vale and make sure they're secure. And if not, it would be a good idea to fortify them ourselves. It'd keep out Grimm, and I'll bet it would cut off more than one land-based smuggling route. Walls, cameras, and automatic defenses like turrets would be enough to give us an early warning and slow down anything coming this way if we didn't want to man them. Otherwise, throw in a couple of outposts on top of all that and have people rotate through on watch. Hell, open them up to Hunters as rest stops and we'd have them on hand if shit hit the fan. Definitely something to bring up at the next staff meeting. Now, how to buy the land to do all of that and convince the Council to let us police the lands of the Kingdom when we're something like a for-profit non-governmental organization. Ugh, red tape alone could tie this up for years—let alone building up the funds for it.'

A few minutes later, Foxtrot-1 began descending as the engines spun down before it bumped to a stop and settled down. I stood and moved to one of the side doors, hesitating a moment before turning and shooting a glance at 'Rook.' A smirk crept onto my face as I hit the door controls and the girls began piling out. “Ruby, Yang, why don't you stick around and keep our guest company for a few minutes. I'm sure she would appreciate some news from home.”

'Rook' tensed and blue eyes narrowed at me under her mask as she hit me with a laser-focused burst of Killing Intent, letting me know I’d managed to successfully annoy her. Yang pounced on the information, shifting her gaze between me and her estranged mother. “What do you mean?”

“How's your father?” Raven asked, apparently deciding that taking charge of the conversation was the lesser of two evils, now that I'd opened that particular can of worms.

Ruby and Yang exchanged a look before Ruby asked, “You know our dad?”

“Mm. I've worked with Tai before,” the older woman admitted quietly. I slipped out of the Bullhead and hit the door control to close it up as she added, “I... knew Summer, too.”
'You are a bastard,' Neo sent to me, not bothering to try to be heard over the noise of the engines as they spooled down, and I shrugged, my eyes tracking to where Blake, Penny and Jen had fanned out ahead of us. I figured we would have been safe from Blake's curious ears, but it was just easier this way. Besides, Penny, with her built-in noise filters and the like, could probably pick out the sound of a pin dropping over the noise, so would have been able to follow our conversation regardless. And while I trusted Penny not to betray my secrets intentionally, she did occasionally slip accidentally. Miltia and Melanie joined Neo and I as Neo continued. 'Please stop irritating the woman who has already made it painfully clear she has no compunctions against running a sword through your guts.'

'We would be displeased if she managed to finish the job,' Melanie added.

Miltia continued with, 'It'd be a shame, too, because you've kind of grown on us.'

Shooting the girls around me an amused grin, lost under the mask, I shrugged. 'But it's fun.'

'Ass,' the three synced and I laughed.

"Okay," I shook my head, slowly wiping the smile off my face. "Game faces on. Let's do this."

I strode through the group towards the other side of the helipad we had put down on atop the Channel 5 building—well, I say helipad, but it was more a generic VTOL landing pad. A look around showed there were two other VTOL craft up here already—both bearing the Channel 5 logo—and one of them was being loaded by a short woman in a long yellow and black leather jacket and a taller woman wearing a ball cap and a windbreaker. There was a constant breeze up this high, tugging capes, cloaks, and hair around as the girls fell into formation with me—Neo and Melanie, in her Head of Intelligence outfit, to either side of me with Jen and Penny flanking us and Miltia and Blake bringing up the rear. The pair had continued loading their vehicle, but from the occasional glance they threw our way I knew they had been aware of us since Angel began our approach to set down—there was no way they hadn't heard us coming. On spotting the jacket, I resisted the urge to laugh—Yang would have killed to have one like it, I was sure.

The shorter woman looked up as we grew closer, drawing an inch long metal cylinder from her pocket—also marked with the Channel 5 logo—and pinning it to the collar of her coat. The taller one—deeply tanned and wearing a ball cap with her long, curly hair pulled into a ponytail and sticking out of the back—took out a small digital camcorder and moved to the side to get a shot of our group and the woman in the leather jacket. The short one was Caucasian, maybe—though I'd have pegged her as being at least partly Asian of some sort, considering her features. Her straight black hair was highlighted with blonde—however, given that this was Remnant, I wasn't entirely certain that it
wasn't some naturally occurring alternating pattern—and cropped in a short pixie cut. Dark, almost black almond eyes were set in a heart-shaped face and she stood a good head shorter than me so couldn't have been more than 5'5". Her eyes traced over us, taking each of us in individually and the group as a whole—lingering a moment each on Penny, more specifically her white hair, Melanie and her Nevermore mask, and myself. “April Yellowjacket, war correspondent and military liaison for Channel 5 News. You're the representatives from Fox Hunt, I take it?”

I was silent just a half-beat too long, enough to begin to unnerve her and the girl with the camera before nodding. “We are.”

“You're him, right?” she asked, and I raised an eyebrow under my mask. “The one who put all this together,” her hand gesture took in both our group and the Bullhead behind us, and I took it to mean she was implying Fox Hunt as a whole. “The guy the police are calling the White Fox?” I nodded and, before I could get a word in edgewise, a smile that was more like a leer spread across her lips before quickly smoothing into something more like a smirk. “So, what do you say to a little exclusive interview before the show, hmm?”

“No,” Neo cut in, drawing the older woman's eyes her way. “This is a time-sensitive operation. We're on the clock.”

“I understand,” April nodded. “After, then.”

“Under a few conditions,” Melanie countered. “Our original request to review and edit your footage remains in place. All interview footage will be subject to the same review process. We will keep copies of all the video taken and if it is later found that you or your network is guilty of creative editing in order to further an agenda, we will release the original, unedited footage and your network will be taken to court for slander.”

The woman hummed quietly, considering the terms before turning to her cameraman, who shrugged. Finally, she turned back and nodded. “Deal. If you'll send Prissam, my partner and pilot,” she gestured at the taller woman who lifted a hand from her camera and waved, “the flight plan we'll get into the air and be right behind you.”

The light on the camera shut off and April spun on her heel, stalking towards the back of their VTOL. Agitated buzzing filled the air for a moment and a faint blur drew my eyes to her back, where a long, nearly transparent set of wings stirred and pulled down tightly against the jacket. My eyebrows went up as I traced them to a pair of slits set in the back of the jacket between her shoulder blades—difficult to see at best, as they were disguised as simple folds in the leather. 'Insect-type faunus?' I wondered. Shrugging it off as something interesting to consider later, I turned around to head back to our own craft. I couldn't help but notice that enough of Blake's golden eyes were visible under her mask to track her line of sight—right back to the only other Faunus on the roof.
'That's got to be a bit on the nose. Blake goes on and on about Faunus being oppressed and yet here's a Faunus who is a fairly successful field agent for the largest news station in Vale, dealing directly with Hunters.' Well, the largest local news station anyway. Like Earth, I'd found the stations tended to be divided into levels of local or national depending on their focus and intended audience. Channel 5 was Vale's equivalent to the local news affiliate and focused on local issues pertaining to the City of Vale and surroundings, whereas VNN—Vale News Network—was the equivalent of CNN, and as such focused on national level news. Though I suppose I should say 'kingdom level' news, considering where I was. To my knowledge, we had yet to get any offers of interviews from VNN or similar stations—we simply didn't rate that sort of attention yet.

Our group headed back to Foxtrot-1 while the reporter and her assistant boarded their own VTOL—a stubby looking, boxy thing that looked like a helicopter without rotors, complete with skids on the bottom instead of retractable wheels like our Bullheads. As we entered, I caught part of the quiet conversation taking place between the trio we'd left behind—Raven was telling some story about her brother wearing what sounded like either a skirt or a kilt and I filed it away in the mental blackmail folder I was building against Qrow for later use.

I noticed that, as soon as they caught sight of Ruby, Yang, and Rook, the other girls immediately picked up their own conversations, apparently going out of their way to give the trio some privacy. Even if they didn't know who she was, they could see that something was going on. I wasn't too surprised, considering Neo and the twins at least knew who 'Rook' really was and how important this was for her, even if Raven would never admit it—so the other girls likely picked up on that. The woman's voice was light and amused, sounding more relaxed and even energetic than I'd heard it in either of my encounters with her. 'Yeah, I'm going to have to find a way to get those three together again on a regular basis. Before that, though, I need to do something about that reporter—she's a tricky one, I can tell.'

Shifting my attention to Penny, I sent, 'Penny, how's your radio gear?'

The ancula's gaze shifted to me as she sent back, 'What do you mean?'

'You can detect and block radio and network traffic coming from the Channel 5 VTOL, right?' I asked, and she tilted her head a moment—possibly to attempt just that—before nodding. 'Okay. Keep an eye on them and if they start trying to broadcast, shut it down please.'

'Okay, Jaune. Will do!' the girl agreed before turning back to her conversation with the twins.

That potential issue taken care of before it could become a problem, I leaned back as much as I could in the uncomfortable jump seat as Angel circled back to Fox Hunt to pick up the last AFV we had
left behind long enough to have our meeting, and from there we rose ponderously into the sky and made our way south east. Closing my eyes, I let the girls' conversations wash over me. They get along pretty well. That's good, because the last thing this group needs is petty in-fighting and drama. I knew I probably couldn't avoid it forever, but I would enjoy the relative peace while it lasted. After all, even if this was an entirely different world, the girls were still human—or close enough, in the cases of Blake and Penny. At the moment, we were all still just sort of getting used to each other—learning each others' habits and the like. It was that 'new couple' or 'newlywed' phase that pretty much everyone went through at some point, where everyone was still on their best behavior and not quite sure where the boundaries were—walking on eggshells, almost. Eventually, someone would say or do something to upset someone else. It was as inevitable as the tide. It couldn't be avoided, but it could be managed.

The easiest way to do that was by doing exactly what I was right this moment—absolutely nothing. By leaving them to their own devices, they could talk and get closer naturally without me leading the conversation. If they became friends on their own, without it feeling to them as though I had forced things along, they would be much less likely to hurt each other so badly as to fracture the group later on and would be more willing to make up with each other without my intervention. It was a sneaky bit of psychological manipulation, if looked at from one angle—namely, that I was knowingly allowing it to happen and encouraging it, for my own benefit. On the other hand, it would have happened naturally on its own and it benefited everyone else involved as well, so I wasn't entirely to blame for it—meaning I didn't feel guilty at all for taking advantage, in this case. 'Besides, I silently added, 'even if Neo, the twins, and Joan remain the only ones I'm in a relationship with, I still need RWBY—and having Beacon's best rookie combat team actively antagonistic towards us would be annoying.'

Some time later, Foxtrot-1 jolted slightly as it descended, pulling me out of digging through my Guild menu. We jolted again before the headsets crackled. “We're here, boss. Where do you want to set up?”

Hopping up from my seat and pulling off the headset, I moved into the cockpit and dropped into the empty co-pilot's chair. Casting a look outside the windows, I pulled on the headset above me. “Circle the block and let me get a look,” I told her, and our pilot nodded before climbing to a higher elevation and setting Foxtrot-1 into a short circle around the canyon. As Raven had said, I spotted the blasted and burned out ruins of what had once been a small outpost, situated on the Vale side of the canyon and built partly into the walls of the canyon itself. I could tell there had once been a wall, or more likely a gate, on the Vale side of the canyon with a bunker or barracks at the bottom and an outpost at the top—possibly connected through the canyon walls by an elevator. 'Ruined, now. But if there are other setups like this, they could be used to our advantage. Besides, it's not like it's entirely beyond repair. It'd just take some work and money.'

“There,” I pointed to a ridge above and slightly to the side of where our Bullheads had begun dropping the AFVs and their crews, along with soldiers. It had a good view of the entire canyon and would be an excellent place to both stay out of the way and provide ranged magical fire support from. Though, given that our group was full of melee combatants, I had a feeling that we wouldn't be staying there for long.
Angel hit the door controls and we hopped out as she passed over the drop site, before she pulled the Bullhead around to join the others in landing around the area as there was still time remaining before they would need to take up stations for air support. “How are we doing this?” Neo asked, drawing my gaze back down to the group around me.

“Well, first, I'll re-party us,” I began, tossing out party invites and establishing links between those of us not already linked—the only one not linked in being 'Rook.' Once that was done, the girls focused on bringing up the buffs they knew already and could keep running without running out their Aura. No one was quite up to my own ability to leave my buffs running full time simply because they were self-sustaining and had leveled to the point that the passive draw on my MP never outpaced my MP regen rate—at least, until I made a new buff and had to juggle things until my skill levels caught up and things balanced out again. “Personally, I say we set up here and wait for the Grimm to come through to this side of the canyon. Our AFVs and Bullheads can probably keep up with them for a while, but eventually the Grimm will likely start pouring out faster than they can keep up.” I pointed down towards where several groups of men were setting up near where the AFVs had organized into groups with overlapping fields of fire. “That's where our mortar crews come in. Neo…?” I asked, sending her the mental image I wanted.

“Oh, nice,” the girl grinned, before we began throwing up a combined illusion/Genjutsu. In this case, I was using her Semblance and my own spell as a visual aid, overlaying the field below with details only visible from our perspective. AFVs were highlighted in red, mortars in yellow, and lines for fields of fire and areas of effect were drawn indicating where each AFV would be firing and where the mortars were aiming.

“That's not even half the canyon,” Yang pointed out and I nodded, but Ruby beat me to the punch, already having assessed the layout and figured out what I intended.

“That's where we come in,” the little reaper pointed out, gesturing towards an area that had been highlighted in white, extending from just outside the field of fire from the mortars back to the AFVs. “We'll have to pick off anything that makes it out of the first kill zone, if the people on the ground don't get to it first.”

“What happens if they make it past that?” Blake asked.

“Then the people on the ground start dying,” Rook deadpanned.

“Is there anything our more experienced Hunters would like to add, or suggest?” I asked, turning my attention to Jen and Rook.
All traces of the girl I had woken up with this morning were gone as Jen—or was it the Specialist, Sierra?—assessed the plan. “It's a solid plan, sir.”

That I couldn't tell if that was just Jen getting into character for when she would be acting as my personal bodyguard or if that was Sierra responding to a superior officer was somewhat worrying. I shot a look at Rook and the older woman hummed, looking around our group before casting a long look down on the hardware and people gathering below. After a moment of thought, she began, “You've got a good deal of firepower gathered down there and the terrain is in our favor. Assuming we’re even needed, I suggest you divide us into teams. Team 1 stays here and provides long-ranged fire support. I'm not sure of your individual strengths or weapons, so I can't make the call on who should be in each team.”

“That's fine. So, Team 1 is a sniper team,” I supplied, and she nodded. “What about the others?” I gestured for her to continue.

“Team 2 would take up a position with the rest of the fire-teams below, acting as mid-range support. Team 3 would be our melee fighters, cleaning up anything that gets into knife range,” Rook suggested. “You wouldn't want to deploy them very far, otherwise they're cutting off fields of fire for your fireteams. Go out, intercept anything that crosses this line,” she pointed at the line closest to the fireteams on the ground, “and get back before being out there becomes a problem.”

Thinking it over, I looked to each of the girls, weighing their strengths and skills before making a decision. Casting a glance at Rook, I asked, “Just so I'm sure, is that a sniper rifle or what?”

Ruby's attention, I noticed, immediately focused on the weapon in question and I could feel her fangirling over our link. “It's a semi-auto sniper rifle that compresses into a carbine. I'll be good at any range.”

I raised an eyebrow at that. 'Raven is willing to let me decide where to put her, instead of telling me where she's going to go? Well, considering she's in disguise, I suppose I shouldn't be too terribly surprised she's willing to go that far.' Putting it aside as a question to answer later, I turned to Jen and asked, “What about you?”

Jen reached behind her back and drew her weapon. My eyebrow twitched slightly as she gave it a very familiar spin before it came to rest where I could observe it. Idly, I noticed Ruby's internal fangirling go up a few notches, but she managed not to let it spill over into verbal squeeing. On the surface, it looked like a sword and some sort of motorcycle had produced an illegitimate love child. The whole weapon came in at around four feet in length, handle included. The blade was silvery and reflective, double edged and coming to a base at what looked like a futuristic v-twin engine of some
sort where the hand guard would be—each side of the V roughly four inches long. “I give up. What the hell is that? And how is it even remotely balanced for fighting?”

Jen's thumb flicked out, hitting a button near the handle, and I heard a faint whine as the engine spooled up before it tapered off into the inaudible range. A flick-and-twist motion saw the blade split in two down the middle, opening up slightly and revealing a short barrel. The handle elongated, split, and folded into a short stock and pistol grip, while a small hand guard extended forward to cover enough of the lower half of the blade so she could hold it with both hands. “Sword and energy rifle,” Jen answered, before shifting the weapon back to its base form and shutting off the engine. “I needed something to back up my Semblance and cover gaps in it. This gives me range and a melee weapon if I run out of Aura.”

‘Key word there being ‘if,’” I noted. Thinking it over, I made my decision. “Okay, Neo, Miltia, and Ruby are with me on Team 1. Team 2 will consist of Blake, Yang, and Rook. Melanie, Penny, and Jen will make up Team 3.”

“What? But my whole thing is that I hit things!” Yang protested, and I rolled my eyes. “Yes, and you've got Ember Celica and a bunch of ammo, which gives you a mid-range attack. Melanie can't use her mid-to-long ranged stuff at the moment and Penny doesn't have her weapons yet—and we don't want her to have to use her swords, because that'll give things away. Melanie's faster and more agile than you, Penny's stronger than you, and she can use my Plasma Blade so there's that. Jen's Semblance, if it can do what I think it can, should be overkill at close range.” I’d seen her float things using green energy before, and given the color—well, if it was anything like my initial assessment of her being a Remnant Green Lantern, then it really was overkill.

Yang either didn't realize or couldn't help bleeding off upset and disappointment over the link anyway, even with the explanation. “Look, odds are that if anything makes it into melee range, we're going to need to regroup anyway, and then you'll get your brawl.”

The blonde brawler cheered up somewhat. “I can live with that.”

Something down below caught my eye as the last of the troops were dropped off. One group in particular stood out from the others. Their weapons and armor were less uniform and their levels were higher than the average of those around them—though in the 25 range, they were lower than our group. “Who are they?”

The twins turned their attention to me and I could feel the smugness radiating off them over our link. “Remember that side project you gave us?” Miltia asked, sending a mental image of the one in
question.

*The thing about trying to level mages and other things,* I realized, and nodded. “Yes…”

“That's them,” Melanie finished for her sister. “They're not much right now, but they've got potential.”

I nodded, making a mental note to inspect them after the battle. “Alright, go get into position while we wait for this shindig to kick off.”

Seeing that the last of the groups had gathered, I opened my menu and navigated to the section I had been looking over earlier. Under the Guild Menu, I found a tab labeled 'Active Parties.' Selecting it, I grinned under my mask as I found the button I was looking for. Selecting it, I was rewarded with a prompt.

*Would you like to make a Raid Group? Yes/No*

After checking to make sure my Semblance wouldn't give away our names, I selected Yes and was then asked to choose which parties would be joining mine. Choosing all of those in the vicinity, I waited as my Semblance sent out invites. As people started accepting—first Angel, then Jim, followed by other groups over the course of the next minute—my Semblance began highlighting group positions on the field. Angel's party, for instance, was composed of all of the pilots circling over our heads like mechanical buzzards waiting on the meal they knew would be coming. I didn't bother linking them with Telepathy—I could issue commands to the entire group through my Semblance as the Raid Leader in the same way I could in a party and my radio was already set to the command channel. I didn't need to give orders to every individual soldier—just to the unit leaders. But then, as I had seen firsthand recently, sometimes it was best to just leave them to their own devices—I'd hired people who knew more than me in this field for a reason, and it wouldn't look good to start tossing out orders if I didn't know what I was doing. With that done, I kept an ear on the radio and settled in to wait.

Comms chatter pulled my attention almost immediately as someone said, “Sweet Dust, where'd we dig up someone with a TacNet Semblance?”

There was more than one round of questions along those lines before the channel went silent and someone cut in—older sounding, and with more steel in his voice than I'd heard from pretty much anyone else since getting to Remnant. “That's above your pay grade. Cut the chatter and focus on the mission.”
I snorted softly, rolling my eyes. *I'm surprised no one's asked that before. And is that how they see it? I suppose the party system fits the definition of a tactical network. Still, that's a thing, and apparently both fairly rare and likely very useful and/or valuable—meaning there's probably at least one more floating around somewhere. If I had to guess, being the more successful military, likely Atlas. Have to keep an eye out for it. If it works even remotely like mine, it could be dangerous to run up against.*

As it turns out, waiting for the enemy to make its way to you is both incredibly dull and nerve-wracking at the same time. By the time the muffled echoes of the first explosions reached our ears, almost everyone was on edge. The only ones who seemed not to be were Raven, Jen, and Penny. Raven was to be expected, being an experienced huntress. Jen had a problem feeling much of anything these days, so I couldn't really count her—well, unless I was in very close proximity, it seemed. And Penny? Penny was just happy to be spending time with us.

My own nerves, on the other hand, were not just a product of waiting around. There was something in the air—I could almost smell it. The air felt heavy and hard to breathe. I had felt this before, of course, but only once had it been worse—namely, when I had been in Atlas. Mountain Glenn had been a close second, but I was pretty sure that most of the Grimm in that dead city were underground and that if they had been drawn up to the surface by my fight with Raven, it would have been an entirely different story. The difference was, I didn't have Gamer's Mind set on Active now, which would have allowed me to ignore it. It wasn't even a mental effect or status ailment—it was just the natural consequence of so many Grimm gathered in one place.

Comms chatter picked up as guild members began reporting the enemy's advancement through the pass below the canyon, funneling into the kill zone. I opened up my map and winced when I saw the tide of red dots swarming up to us, but as we had expected, the terrain forced them to cluster together into a line, making them easy targets. Keying up my mic, I asked, “This is Foxtrot Actual. Do we have a count?”

It took a moment, but eventually someone came back with a final total. The swarm had grown from under 1000 to over 2500 as they were joined by other, smaller groups making their way here from other directions. It wasn't as many as there had been in Atlas, but it was still a lot. *Well, good news is, this means everyone's getting a level or two, probably.*

I chuckled quietly before checking in on everyone. Now that the action had drawn closer, the anxiety was gone, but many of the girls were getting antsy and impatient for things to start—reminding me once more of the fact that these girls were all, to a one, fighters. Pulling myself from my observations, I turned my attention to the girls on the ridge with me. Ruby had set up Crescent Rose in a prone position and was aiming into the mouth of the opening on the south end of the box canyon.
The redhead barely looked recognizable without her iconic red and black dress, clad as she was in one of our Fox Hunt uniforms—but then, that was the point. Somehow, I had even managed to convince her to leave the hooded cape at home. She had kept the red scarf, however—and I had to admit, the splash of red against the mostly brown uniform looked good. Considering what the uniforms were based on, Ruby looked the part of a shorter, more adorable Mikasa when she wasn't wearing the red and black mask. Yang had cleaned up nice in her own uniform, but of the two Ruby sold the look while her sister wore it uncomfortably at best. Yang had never really seemed like the 'uniform' type anyway, even from what I remembered of her in her Beacon uniform in the series. Yang had, of course, insisted on her own colors for her mask and hadn't taken 'no' for an answer.

Militia sat beside the little reaper, likewise in a uniform, her scroll out and looking over something I couldn't make out from here. The uniform she wore was standard fare for the women in Fox Hunt and identical to those Ruby and Yang wore, while her mask was green with white highlights. Her long hair had been pulled back into a set of orange twin-tails held up with bells courtesy of one of Neo's illusions and my Conjuration. She had also added a set of mismatched light green and blue contacts to try and further separate her from Melanie playing the role of 'Atra,' who had left her hair long and loose. Militia had suggested adding a tail to add to the disguise, but I had veto'd that idea when she'd told me exactly what kind of tail she had in mind—and had only gotten her to agree on the understanding that she would be using it at some point in the near future and most decidedly not in public.

Neo stood near me, her mask up and resting atop her head at the moment and wearing a bored look—though she had had the foresight to apply an illusion to her face in case anyone looked our direction. Currently, Neo was wearing a face pulled from my memories—specifically, a version of Teletha Testarossa of Full Metal Panic! fame adapted to real life as opposed to animation. She had, however, taken my suggestion about copying Ruby's eyes a step further and copied her hair coloration and adapted it to her look as well—so instead of simply Tessa's silver hair, what she had was a blue-to-silver blend that looked like a combination of both Tessa and Kaname. I had to admit, Neo mostly had the build to pull it off—though she was a few sizes larger in the chest area than the girl she was emulating. Unlike Ruby or Militia, Neo's uniform included the full long coat, while the Fox-themed mask sitting atop her braided hair was silver with white highlights. 'Well, I did request silver eyes,' I mused. 'I'm almost afraid to see what she does with all those images of women she wanted, though.'

I had even taken the time to summon up Sanguine so she could benefit from us killing so many Grimm, and the spirit sat on her haunches, her tail occasionally twitching as she actively broadcast her boredom and annoyance over our link—both of which were aimed firmly at me, seeing as I had forbidden her from leaving our position unless absolutely necessary. I didn't exactly want some trigger-happy grunt mistaking the spirit for a Grimm—and it would be an easy and justifiable mistake to make. However, that she was now aware and cognizant enough to feel both bored and annoyed, and blame me for it, was probably a good sign.

Seeing my attention, Neo smiled before asking, “So, what are we doing? Just spamming AP Round at everything downrange?”
“Pretty much,” I agreed. “You and Miltia should be able to hit things from here—especially if you aim for the largest groups. If they get closer to our ground forces, I'll glass the area in the middle with AOE s.”

We went quiet after that, waiting for the Grimm to make it through the pass—a pass our men had trapped to hell and back with explosives. Over the course of ten minutes, I counted at least twenty explosions as our forces reported in where each was so that everyone not looking at a copy of my Semblance’s map could tell how far the Grimm had gotten. Despite the effectiveness of such preparations whittling them down, they had the numbers to replace them and Grimm were incapable of being demoralized for the most part. Worse, the ones running into the claymores that had been set up tended to be smaller, faster Grimm that made up the leading edge of the horde—as well as not clustered up so the claymores weren't taking out many of them. The biggest and strongest of them were mostly plodding along in the middle of their group.

‘I was wrong,’ I thought some time later, a wry grin crossing my face as I watched a constant stream of Grimm pour out of the mouth of the pass and into the canyon, only to be mowed down by full-auto cannon fire from one of our AFVs. A line of red connected the vehicle and the Grimm, laser-like, and where it touched Grimm exploded into plumes of flame and clouds of black mist. A call over the radio announced that that particular AFV was beginning to run low on ammunition—and I saw the first streaks of blue mixed in with the red: different Dust types used the same way as tracer rounds on Earth. As soon as the first AFV ran dry, the call came over the radio and the second AFV in the line opened up on the mouth of the pass. None of the handful of Grimm that had managed to slip into the canyon made it more than a few steps before a new line of red and fire cut them down. Below, a pair of people exited the first AFV from the rear and began reloading it from the supply of ammunition that had been moved up behind each. ‘Us being here is overkill. Hell, more than about three to five AFVs is probably overdoing it. We brought twelve.’

“Jaune,” Ruby asked from nearby, laying beside her weapon and looking down its scope, “Are we even going to get to shoot anything?”

I shrugged, though she couldn't see it from her position. “Maybe. Honestly? I hope not. If we're not needed, then that means our first real test for Fox Hunt is a success. It means we can act without Hunters as backup if need be.” The smaller girl made a quiet sound and I raised an eyebrow.

“What?”

“Aren't you worried that you might put us out of a job?” she asked, turning and meeting my eyes. “I enjoy shooting Grimm, but I kind of need the money if I want to keep shooting them.”

“Ruby, sweetie, Fox Hunt was never meant to replace Hunters. If we didn't need hunters, I think Vale would still have a standing army. We fill a gap and add some more resources to throw at the 'Grimm' problem—which isn't something we should be looking at as a career choice anyway. A career implies long, stable employment—and in this case, that implies keeping the Grimm around so
we have some justification for our existence. If I could wipe out the Grimm in a single stroke right now, and in so doing put myself out of a job, I wouldn't hesitate. They're too much of a threat to sentient life on Remnant to deal with them as anything but what they are—a genocidal plague in desperate need of some plague control. If Fox Hunt can deal with Grimm without the aid of Hunters, that's good—it means that when you call us, you're actually getting your money's worth. You're not calling a bunch of red shirts to come and act as Grimm fodder—you're calling in needed backup, to come and bail your ass out of the furball you've found yourself in.” Aside from that, I wanted my forces as strong as possible, to deal with the likes of the White Fang and Cinder if necessary, but I wasn't going to say that out loud.

Militia piped up from nearby, looking up from her scroll. “We're getting a steady stream of EXP. It's not much, given how it's divided amongst the entire raid group, but it's not zero either. And I know it's not exactly free EXP either. Between fuel and ammunition costs, this little stunt is going to set us back a bit—the EXP isn't worth the cost of supplies. The Lien left down below may make up for some of it, but not entirely. The bounty for killing all of this should about make up fuel and ammunition costs though.”

“But that still leaves us forking out combat pay,” Neo pointed out.

Militia nodded. “Yeah. We're not going to break even on it. However,” she pointed towards where the civilian camera crew had set up with a view overlooking the action, on the far end of the canyon from where the Grimm had made their approach and with their own guard detail of Fox Hunt soldiers—and halfway across the canyon from us by design, so they wouldn't be able to overhear anything, “That is worth it even if we weren't making a profit here.”

“I know, I know,” Ruby muttered, shaking her head before pulling away from Crescent Rose and rolling over onto her back to look at me. “Still doesn't make it any less boring.”

My lips twitched into a grin under my mask. “If you think sitting up here watching Grimm get mowed down by fiery death is boring, I hate to see how you're going to feel about being stuck in a classroom at Beacon all day.”

Ruby groaned quietly, wincing. “Don't remind me. I'm dreading that part. Just… don't tell Yang. I don't want to hear the 'I told you so.'”

The radio squawked something I missed and Neo held up a hand to silence us. “Did you catch that?”

“No, what's up?” I asked.
“Larger stuff is starting to come up the pipe. Looks like Ruby may get her wish,” the ice cream themed girl grinned.

“Yes!” Ruby cheered, rolling back over and putting her eye to the scope again. Below, I spotted the first group of Ursai break through the mouth of the pass and into the canyon. Crescent Rose opened up, boring a round into the eye socket of the one in the lead, and then the noise from below tripled as our ground commander ordered three AFV positions to open fire. “Nooo!” Ruby whined, her legs kicking in frustration.

Neo and Miltia giggled and I valiantly resisted the urge to laugh. “Were you expecting something different?” Neo asked, and Ruby tilted her head enough to stick her tongue out at the older girl.

“One's broken through,” Miltia pointed out, drawing our attention to where a particularly large and armored Ursa had somehow made it out of the crossfire. By the time Ruby had adjusted her aim, I heard the hollow thump of a mortar being launched, and then the area immediately around the Ursa in question exploded. “Never mind. I spoke too soon.”

“Rrr,” the little redhead grumbled, and this time I did laugh.

More poured out after it—Ursai, Deathstalkers, King Taijitu, and more. Of those that managed to make it past the initial crossfire from our AFVs, none made it outside of the mortars' field of fire. Over the course of a bit over an hour, not once were any of us actually required to step in. By the time the final Goliaths were squeezing their way out of the passage in single file, we had finished nearly everything else save for a few stragglers at the back that appeared to be losing interest and wandering off now that the majority of the horde had been neutralized. Focused fire from our AFVs and a few mortars dropped on their heads finished off the last of the Goliaths and I opened my map to see about getting our men to fan out and take out the stragglers before they could cause trouble elsewhere.

“That's weird,” I murmured, my eyes immediately drawn to the almost black color of the map and the Spirit density reading.

“What?” Miltia asked, drawing my attention off the map momentarily.

“Normally, when you kill Grimm, Spirit density goes down—mostly because you're absorbing it, partly as EXP, partly as Spirit, while the rest dissipates. It's why when we clear areas out, Spirit density tends to drop to nothing and Grimm won't spawn for a while,” I answered, before gesturing at my map. “It's gone up instead. Last time I saw something like this…” I blinked, closing my map as I sent out a Raid-wide command to stay alert. Where people below had begun to relax, they suddenly
snapped back to full combat readiness. It was not a moment too soon as the oppressive feeling in the air swelled suddenly and black blood began to drip from a point in space above where most of the Grimm had been killed. Black mist, the stuff Grimm tended to dissolve into upon death, swirled through the air, collecting into a single point. A sphere of black formed and the AFVs opened fire—not that it did any good, as they seemed to simply pass into the black sphere and disappear. Seeing that there appeared to be no effect, the order was given to hold fire for the moment.

“What is that?” Neo asked as I began layering on shields.

“A 'Nameless' level Grimm. Black nameplate, raid-level boss,” I answered shortly. “I don't have an official classification, yet. Kaiju size class, though.”

“So, big and strong,” the girl surmised, and I nodded. “Sounds fun.”

I shifted my gaze to meet her eyes, about to tell her that she and the others wouldn't be getting involved, only to stop as I saw the look there. I realized that this was going to be one of those times where if I asked them to stay out of it, they were going to be more than a little annoyed—and hurt. “Fine,” I grunted, turning as movement from the surface of the orb of black liquid caught my eye. “We'll see what it is and decide where to go from there.”

White bone broke the surface of the bubble, slicing outward and resolving as a long and thin curve with a sharp looking point on the end, followed by a second, slightly shorter curve of bone set just under the first. A moment later, a third and fourth bone broke the surface before the entire bubble popped, exploding into a shower of black blood and mist. A low rumble echoed through the canyon as the sphere's contents dropped to the ground. What stood in the canyon resembled a Goliath, if that Goliath had been sized up several times its actual size. It towered about fifty feet high and was covered at the top, sides, and legs with the kind of bone armor seen on most larger Grimm. Its ears appeared to be oversized, even for an African elephant if that's what it was based on, and it actually took me a few moments to figure out why as my eyes found its nameplate.

Jumbo Jr.

Ain't Never Seen A Goliath Fly

Level: 85

'Where have I seen that name?' I wondered for a moment, before the memory surfaced and I had to
try hard not to palm my face. “Really? First Yogi and now Dumbo? Fuck you, Remnant,” I groaned quietly. Around us, the din of automatic weapon fire resumed as the AFVs resumed fire.

“What is it?” Miltia asked, and I shook my head.

“Doesn’t matter. I’ll tell you later,” I waved her off, knowing I wouldn’t exactly be able to explain it to Ruby and the others without spilling the secret about where I’d come from—and now was not exactly the time or the place for it. Instead, I took in how the battle below was shaping up. “Looks like our weapons aren’t exactly working,” I assessed, glancing at its health bar and seeing it had dropped maybe one percent under the assault from everything being thrown at it. I had to give my ground forces credit—they hadn’t hesitated to open up on the new threat, assess the situation, and apply more firepower when it seemed that what they had was ineffective. Still, at this point, they were just wasting ammunition.

“Its armor is too strong, and it’s smart enough to turn its armored flank towards the AFVs,” Ruby pointed out.

Neo frowned as it began moving. “Where’s it going?” The beast had begun lumbering across the canyon. “The only thing over there is—”

“The stream,” I muttered as it stuck its trunk in. After a moment, it turned its head and pointed its trunk at one of the AFVs, and the air cracked as a line of water moving at supersonic speed crossed the distance and connected the Grimm with its intended target. The vehicle rocked from side to side on its wheels for a moment before the attack cut off, revealing a large dent in its armor that looked more like what I’d expect an impact from an explosive or something to look like. The Grimm stuck its snout back in the water and I shook my head. “Yeah, no more ranged attacks for you,” I growled, channeling mana and casting, “Flash Freeze.”

Ice spread, freezing that section of the stream solid for several yards around the point of impact. Dumbo jerked its trunk out of the water and shook its head, before opening its maw and drawing in a huge gulp of air. It pointed its trunk at the same AFV it had initially targeted and blew, sending another crack echoing across the canyon above the sounds of gunfire. A couple of solid chunks of ice punched into the vehicle—one hitting the damaged area and breaching the vehicle, while the second hit an undamaged section nearer the front and exploded into ice shards. The oversized Grimm shuffled a few steps upstream and made to stick its trunk into the water outside the range of my first Flash Freeze. Not wanting to give it any more easy ammunition, I shifted my target further upstream and cast a Wall, focusing on the shape I wanted. The water downstream stopped as the stream began spreading across the canyon floor outside of its normal path. It made an attempt to snort up more off the canyon floor, but apparently decided against that when it got a snout full of mud.

Seeing it moving away from the displaced stream turned swiftly spreading mud slick, a plan began to
form and I cast a glance at Ruby occasionally taking pot-shots when she caught a glimpse of something not covered by armor. “So, Ruby, still want something to do?”

“Absolutely,” the girl grinned, grabbing her weapon and kicking up to her feet. “What's the plan?”

“It's a three-phase plan. First, I'm going to go piss it off and draw it away from our people. Then, we're going to work on getting that armor off. Lastly, everyone's going to blow the shit out of it,” I summarized.

The little reaper bounced on the balls of her feet and nodded. “I love simple plans. What am I doing?”

“Well, you've got the most important part,” I chuckled before opening a private comm channel to our group. “Okay, Penny and Jen are going with me. We're going to draw it off. Everyone else, stand by.” Switching channels, I selected the ground team's frequency. “Ground fireteams, prepare to cease fire and wait for my signal to resume.” Next, I changed over to Angel's frequency. “Foxtrot-1, Foxtrot Actual. Pull your wing back and prepare to engage, but hold fire until I give the word.”

“Copy that, Actual,” the woman replied.

Turning to Neo and Miltia, I said, “We're going to knock the armor off it. When it comes off, light it up. Okay?”

“Got it,” Neo agreed, while Miltia nodded.

“Wings,” I cast, before turning and casting the same on Ruby. “You've got about three minutes to figure that out before I'm going to need you,” I warned her, earning a nod in reply as she hovered a few feet off the ground and began trying to get a feel for the new pseudo-appendages. “Word of advice: don't try to make any sudden stops at speed, or you'll wind up hurting yourself.”

That taken care of, I took off for the canyon, spotting Penny and Jen waiting below. Hitting them both with the flight spell, I said, “Pretty sure this thing has more tricks up its trunk than tossing a spray of water around. Penny and I are going to lead it up away from the ground forces. Jen, you can make shields with your Semblance, right?”

“Yes,” she answered quietly.
“Okay. Good. How quickly can you adapt to flight?” I asked, and the woman hummed before closing her eyes.

The wings twitched and she lifted off a foot before shifting around from side to side. “I'll be fine.”

I didn't bother questioning if she was sure or not. Between the two of them, Ruby was squishier and Jen was an experienced Huntress. The Arc girl was far more likely to survive any direct hits and wouldn't be moving at the speed I expected Ruby to. “You're running interference. Try to keep yourself between its trunk and our Bullheads, and keep a shield up at all times,” I ordered, and the blonde nodded. “Okay, let's go.”

I took off with Penny hot on my heels and Jen trailing at the rear of our formation and quickly sent the order to temporarily cease fire. The valley went dead silent for a beat before the sound of chirping birds filled the silence. A Plasma Blade spun up in each of my hands and, catching on, Penny brought up her own as we neared the Grimm. “Down the sides!” I yelled as we neared and the gynoid nodded, shifting to its right flank as I took its left. As we shot by it, both of us swung, dragging the blades down its armor. A glance back showed the armor had barely been scored where the blades had passed, but that didn't particularly matter. What did matter was that we now had its attention. Intending to keep it, I took aim and tossed both of my blades in a pair of Strike Raids, sending them circling under the beast. Dumbo roared and black blood splattered over the ground as the blades passed under its unarmored underside. I knew that most armored creatures tended to have the least armor, sometimes even no armor, on their undersides, and this Grimm appeared to be no exception.

It took off into a running charge at us but we zipped ahead faster than it could run, pulling up and climbing skyward as I tossed out an AP Round behind me, only to see the spell splash off its armored face mask. Seeing it couldn't catch us on land, those massive ears spread and dust kicked up around it as they thrust downward, pulling it ponderously into the sky as I'd suspected it would be able to. As it rose, I noticed that, in some weird effect of Grimm ignoring physics—it flew strangely level.

“Looks like we've got its attention. Now to hold it,” I sent to the group. Going over my list of spells, I hit it with Observe and grinned. 'Okay, I think I've got it.'

A subvocalized “Rage” followed by “Taunt” had it seeing red and focused solely on me as I began leading it up. Over the wind rushing around me, I heard one of those great, heaving intakes of breath signaling it was getting ready to attack. “Scatter!” I yelled, and the gynoid at my side jinked away. An instant later, a trumpeting blast of sound slammed into me like a city bus and sent me tumbling upwards head over heels. Spots danced in my vision and my ears rang. For a moment everything was silent as my ear drums had been damaged irreparably—my enhanced hearing having suddenly become a liability, though I suspect my ear drums would have ruptured even without it. And then Gamer's Body kicked in and I could hear again. A glance at my HUD showed it had taken a good
twenty percent off the top of my HP, through my shields—two of which had popped under the assault.

‘Again?! God damnit!’ I cursed internally as I recovered. I was unamused to see that all of my defensive spells had leveled off of that—at least twice for the highest leveled spells—along with Physical Damage Resistance, which had hit 25 and given me the skill evolution notice before leveling twice more. I didn’t exactly have time to carefully read through and pick what I wanted, however, so I skimmed as quickly as I could between the available options, which essentially boiled down to increased critical resistance, increased penetrating resistance, or a lower level of increased resistance to all types of physical damage. ‘Fuck it, resist all the things,’ I decided, hastily picking an option as I jinked out of the line of fire again.

“Ah, shuddup,” I ground out, casting Silence and shaking my head when the debuff refused to stick. ‘Of course it’d be immune to having one of its ranged attacks shut down.’

“Jaune!” Penny was yelling nearby and I shook my head to clear out the residual dizziness—realizing, with a glance at my HUD, that it was some sort of disorientation debuff. Thankfully, whatever the debuff was passed quickly—shortly after Gamer’s Body kicked in, which meant it was likely a purely physical effect and wouldn’t last long on me. That it worked at all though made some implications I didn’t exactly have time to ponder, but I knew they could only be bad.

“I’m fine,” I answered, thankful we were far enough away that no one would hear. “Just stay out of its range.”

And speaking of range, a glance down showed the oversized Goliath had closed the distance between us and looked to be lining up another shot. Considering that I’d been about a hundred yards away from it when I’d been hit with the first one, I didn’t want to try my luck tanking a blast from it at less than that. Dumping gravity and wind elemental Mana into my wings, I resumed climbing and began taking evasive action—occasionally jinking to one side or the other to make sure it couldn’t keep a steady bead on me. I recast my shields on top of that, knowing that if I didn’t then the next hit would do a lot more than leave me stunned and hurting all over.

The Grimm’s trumpet-blast sounded behind me again and just its passing through the air nearby rattled my bones and teeth. ‘It disperses,’ I realized, ‘Meaning it’s not a burst or a line, but a cone type attack. I shouldn’t be surprised—I mean, it’s sound—but that it actually behaves like sound is surprising, since half the elemental shit in Remnant doesn’t behave like the element it claims to be. And there’s dropoff in damage due to distance and other factors. The water and ice were air-propelled projectile attacks, so they’d behave differently from sound and wind. Of course, that also means that it’s most dangerous up close—it’d probably one-shot any of us except Raven and Jen, and maybe Penny. And that long trunk gives it the ability to cover its blind spots pretty well. You’d have to be standing pretty much right behind it in order to be out of its line of fire.’
With that thought in mind, I made a couple of quick addendums to my improvised plan and sent what I wanted done to Ruby. 'Okay, it's high enough and it's good and pissed at me. Time for phase two.' Sending orders to Penny to pull back and Jen to get into place, I opened a channel to Angel and broadcast, “Engage the target, but watch for friendly targets in the kill area.”

Receiving an affirmative, I shifted around and hurled a Fireball in Dumbo's face, following it up with another Taunt. Circling around us at half a kilometer out, Angel's air wing shifted as one to turn their nose guns inward, and twelve pairs of red streams lit the Grimm up from all sides—small fireballs exploding on and around Dumbo as the Dust rounds detonated. Up above it, the air was already starting to heat up, and I had a moment to wish for my duster jacket and its shiny new climate control enchantments before the Grimm leveled its trunk at one of the Bullheads and blasted out an attack. Jen was there in a blur of green Aura, a faint shimmer of green rippling in the air as she absorbed the blast, but considering that it hadn't even budged her at that range, I highly doubted it would have even damaged one of our machines. Just to make sure, I ordered them to pull back another hundred meters and to keep even with it if it tried to close with one of them—with its poor acceleration, that wouldn't be a problem for even the slowest of them.

Drawing its attention back to me, I lured it higher. 'Penny, I've got something for you.' I sent to the ancula. As she approached, I Conjured up a thick slab of steel with a handle on the end and passed it to her.

“What's this for, Jaune?” she asked, and I grinned under my mask.

Shaking my head, I pointed upwards. “You'll see. Now, start climbing. Get a few hundred feet above it—enough to accelerate into a powered dive, but not so far that it's going to take long to catch up to it when it falls.”

The little redhead tilted her head slightly, asking, “It's going to fall?”


“Okey dokey!”

I rolled my eyes as she headed up, wondering idly if Ruby and Penny weren't bad influences on each other. The sound of another trumpet blast and my shields being slammed with an impact drew my attention back down. At this distance, the effect was much lessened and I really only had to worry about the noise hurting my ears. Heat filled the air, along with the stink of cooking Grimm. A closer
look at its armor showed that it was starting to turn a dull cherry red from the heat. It would have to be good enough. 'Ruby, you're up. Commence Operation Dumbo Drop.'

'I can't believe you're calling it that. I mean, seriously, I have no idea where 'Dumbo' is from but even I can tell it's a bad pun and you should feel bad,' she sent back incredulously, and I snorted softly at the tone as I caught sight of her ascending—a faint red Aura around her as she rocketed upwards. Her natural speed carried over in the air and the girl became a red streak through the air as she quickly caught up and passed us. She passed close enough for the boss to attempt to track her, but by the time it got its trunk around and a blast of sound heading in her direction, she was well outside of its range. 'Ready!'

"Cease fire," I ordered Angel, and our air wing cut their fire a moment later. I tossed out a quick Heal-chain and HoT to bring me back up to full and hopefully keep myself from being one-shot, before trying to get its attention again. "Hey, fugly!" I yelled, throwing out Taunt again before spinning up AP Round. Taking aim, I began tossing out volleys of lightning element spells as it turned its focus on me once more. 'Now!'

With its attention on me and the bright flash and cracking of spellfire going off around it, the Grimm was entirely unaware of what was going on above it. I cast a glance up in time to see Ruby flip over and line Crescent Rose up behind her. I did not even want to guess how many G's she pulled as she turned her upwards climb into a tight loop, adjusted her aim, and accelerated downwards in a powered dive. I picked up the pace of my fire and focused on landing as many hits in the Grimm's face as I could as she neared. By the time she hit it, Ruby was little more than a line of red leaving behind a contrail of rose petals. I had a moment to wonder if she'd actually hit it as she blasted by the thing's head, before the oversized ear on the left side of its head—furthest from where I had been firing off AP Round—exploded in a shower of Grimm blood and smoke before starting to dissolve. There was a second there where its black eyes met mine and I caught a glimpse of the malignant intelligence driving it before those eyes widened in an expression of surprise. And then it tilted over to the left and began to fall.

I dove after it, tossing out several quick casts of Flash Freeze, which hit its armor with a godawful shriek of whatever the material was made of and great billows of steam wherever they struck as the superheated armor began to freeze over. 'Penny, hit it!'

I couldn't track the gynoid's own descent as I drew even with the oversized Goliath, forced to close range after one of my spells missed because they moved too slowly to close the distance in time. As my Mana drained away, I switched over from Flash Freeze to the cheaper and much faster AP Round, using ice elemental mana. Movement out of the corner of my eye caught my attention and the air rang like a struck gong as Penny slammed into the tumbling Grimm's back—the girl's monstrous strength coming down on it and sending it rocketing towards the ground.

The boss may have come off the worse out of that exchange, but it clearly didn't intend to go down
alone, as it began blasting off its trumpet wildly. Sheer, dumb luck saw its wild tumbling rotation line up just right to bring Penny into its field of fire. I didn't really have time to think about what to do as I reacted, dumping Mana into Haste and dropping into Flash Step. I wrapped my arms around the smaller girl and made to drag her out of the blast radius, but Haste Perception showed we weren't going to make it. Mana began to spin up around us as I shifted my shields around, already casting, “Kait—”

The world went dark.

“That was stupid,” someone was saying, and I groaned as I cracked my eyes open, attempting to assess my situation. I hurt all over and my HP was sitting at less than ten percent, but I still had all my limbs and I wasn't bleeding out. Movement above me drew my eyes to a masked face I didn't recognize immediately. 'Who wears a wolf—?' I wondered, before I remembered that I'd made that mask this morning.

“Where's Penny?” I asked quietly, attempting to sit up, only to find the older woman's hand on my chest pushing me back down.

“Should you be moving?”

There was no real concern or worry in her voice, telling me she was likely simply trying to prevent me from further injuring myself. “I'm fine,” I ground out, rolling away and stumbling to my feet. There was something off about my field of vision, and I felt air on my face—more than I should, with this disguise. Frowning, I brought a hand up and checked my mask. 'Yup. Broken,' I assessed, conjuring up a replacement and swapping them quickly. A glance around the battlefield gave me the answer to my earlier question.

Penny had closed in and was using her smaller size to maneuver around the giant Goliath, always keeping just outside of the range of its trunk, using some length of metal I didn't recognize to occasionally bash the thing and keep its attention while fire from the others and the occasional burst from one of the AFVs got tossed in on whatever side she wasn't occupying. Our group had settled in along the outskirts of the fight, outside the range of its ranged attack, in order to take potshots.

“Why is she in that close?” I murmured, not really expecting an answer.

I was a bit surprised when Raven supplied one. “Your plan to bombard it from range fell apart when it switched targets and started trying to destroy your armored vehicles. She got close to distract it.”
A quick count turned up three fewer AFVs than we'd started with and I frowned, looking around in an attempt to spot them, since the battle had moved some distance through the canyon from where we'd been set up originally. The first damaged AFV was where the crew had left it, after it had been cored by ice. That one may be repairable, but wouldn't be rejoining the battle today. A smoking trail of metal confetti and the occasional glimpse of something wet and red on it gave me an idea of what had happened to the second AFV. 'Must have taken a shot from that thing pretty much point-blank to get that effect.'

The third destroyed AFV looked as though it'd been hit by a meteor. The top and right side were crushed in and scored, and a path lead through the middle of it to the ground below, effectively leaving it cored through the middle. I didn't see any bodies nearby and it wasn't on fire, so I assumed the crew got out okay. A look at the front showed the barrel had been broken off somehow. I blinked, before my eyes tracked back to Penny, where she proceeded to beat the boss in the back of the knee with what I now realized was a gun barrel.

“You're lucky,” Raven said, gesturing towards the AFV. “Your shields took most of the impact from the blast and the landing.”

“That's how we survived, then,’ I mused, imagining the structure of my overlaying defenses. A.T. Field's double barrier hovered outside Mana Shield's own double spheres, and Kaiten should have rotated between the two. Kaiten wasn't fully up when it hit, but the A.T. Fields were in place. 'It hit the flat wall of my A.T. Fields and instead of getting splattered, that energy went towards tossing us away at gunshot velocity.'

“Well, they say luck is its own talent,” I answered the older woman distractedly, casting my eyes back to the battle. A snort from beside me momentarily drew my attention to her, but when I shifted my gaze to look, she gave nothing away and I was left wondering if I'd actually heard it. Shaking my head, I looked at the HP bar over Dumbo's head. “Looks like they've nearly finished it off. How long was I out?”

“A minute, at most,” Raven—or Rook, rather—answered absently. “You can thank your sister and 'Snow' for that, but I think most of the damage is just the difference between it having armor and not having it. How did you know it would break?”

“Because I've physics'd one nearly to death before, pretty much the same way,” I deadpanned, throwing a HoT on myself and dropping down to the ground before focusing on Meditation. If I could get my HP and MP back up, I could rejoin the fight and not sit here feeling useless as I watched the girls do the work for me. “Why are you here and not helping?”
I could hear the amusement in her tone as Rook answered, “Because your second in command asked me nicely to kill anything that tried to touch you while they stuck to the original plan. Did you tell her…?”

“Yes, but only Neo and the twins. I trust them to keep their mouths shut. I'm kind of surprised Yang and Ruby haven't figured it out.” I said quietly. If Raven had any thoughts on the matter, she did not say. I turned back to watching the battle as Penny swept around the Goliath's front again. It opened its mouth to inhale for another of those trumpet blasts and the girl's hand darted out, sending something glowing red into its gullet as she rolled back under and then away from it. Dumbo reared up to stomp her flat and I smirked as a flash of red light could be seen faintly through its chest area, followed by a muffled explosion. It brought its front legs crashing to the ground, sending out a shock-wave and tearing up the earth around it, but by then, Penny had made it to the other side and had leapt up to straddle its back and rain down blows along its spine. The Goliath's attack was strong enough that the AFVs around it rocked on their suspensions and a few men lost their footing briefly, and even I felt the ground under me jostle slightly from my position, but no one was really close enough for it to do any damage.

Running along its back, Penny brought the barrel she was using as a bludgeon down and jammed it into one of the Grimm's massive eye sockets, lodging it there and ruining the eye. The trunk came up and the girl jumped—not away, but towards the trunk. Hands wrapping around the appendage, she jumped out from its face, planting her feet on one of the tusks and stretching it out to its full extension. I had a moment to wonder what she was doing before the air cracked as a streak of red zoomed down towards the Goliath. A shower of black blood painted Penny as Ruby severed its trunk on her fly-by—an arc of red Aura sweeping out from the point of contact in what was obviously an Aura Strike, which she'd used to extend the reach of the blade to cut through the trunk—before Crescent Rose fired again and sent her angling away faster than her wings should have allowed her alone. As though that was the cue they were waiting for, our close-range fighters rushed in and began laying down damage.

“Looks like it's winding down,” Rook pointed out, and I nodded. “Usually they're trickier than this.”

I raised an eyebrow at that. “You've seen these before?”

The woman shrugged. “If you mean the 'bithed from thin air' thing then yes, a few times.” She paused and seemed to consider for a moment before asking, “Do you intend to rejoin the battle?”

“I had, but it looks like they can handle it,” I shrugged. “I'm not the kind of guy who needs to be the one to take all the credit.”

“Perhaps not,” Rook murmured, before pointing at the camera crew. “But you may have backed yourself into a corner there. If you appear weak, then all your work to craft a reputation for yourself
I groaned quietly before pushing myself back up to my feet. I wasn't fully recovered, but half would have to be enough. “Fine. Let's do this.” Surveying the landscape around the fight one last time, I picked a likely spot in view of the camera and dropped into Flash Step, reappearing near the front line. Walking out, I made my way towards the boss while pulling up Mana and focusing on what I needed to do. I wasn't trying to create a spell, so much as I was going for raw elemental manipulation here, so it should theoretically be easier—maybe. ‘Pull back,’ I sent to the group, before dumping the Mana I'd accumulated into the ground around the Grimm.

The thing was moving erratically now, trying to track and spear the fighters around it with its tusks and having no luck, as all of our front line fighters were too agile for that. As it shifted to face me, it apparently recognized me—or my earlier Taunts had made an impression. It bellowed and broke into a lumbering charge. Dumbo had barely made it five yards before the ground broke under its feet, the soil loosened to the consistency of something more akin to quicksand. It sunk in face first, its rear following swiftly as it tried to plow through, only to find that I had spent most of that Mana making sure the sinkhole was deep enough to prevent exactly that. It had sank in up to its neck by the time it got close enough to attempt to swipe at me with its four tusks.

Instead of moving out of range, I walked forward, moving between the slow moving tusks and to a point where it couldn't tilt its head enough in any direction to hit me. A Plasma Blade spun up in my hand as the bloody stump of its trunk swung up trying frantically to bat me away. My arm snapped out and the remainder of the trunk was severed at the base as the dissolving chunk hit my shields and bounced harmlessly to the ground. Pulling the Plasma Blade back, I rammed it home into the thing's one good eye as it kept its hateful gaze on me until the last moment. I extended the blade, feeding Mana into it until the Grimm stopped moving and black mist began to steam up off of it as my Semblance announced its demise by awarding us EXP. At the same time, I got a notification that the guild had leveled and was given the option to assign points. A glance at the list of available perks had me selecting one that would enable auto-loot and deposit items into the guild bank—meaning no more having to pick up drops. I would need to get the perk for money later, however, which meant we were still left picking up lien and drops off the ground since the perk wasn't retroactive. That was going to be a problem with our reporter friends hanging around, though.

I canceled the spell and turned to regard the gathered men and women around me. “Party's over. Let's clean up and go home. Leave the drops, I'll get them once our guests are gone.”

As the dust settled, it finally, truly sank in—what we had accomplished here. What I had done. And what it had cost—and would continue to cost. I had gathered together a competent band of well-armed individuals into an independent fighting force, not beholden to any one nation or kingdom. We had proven that we could take on most normal threats and, with a little help, even something that would typically warrant calling in a team of Hunters—probably closer to three, if I were honest with myself, given the need to make sure none of the Grimm escaped and the fact that even if a single team could wipe out that many at once they would potentially be left too tired to continue fighting for a while afterwards. It had only cost the lives of some of those men and women under me, and would
likely continue to do so the longer we were active.

I should have felt good that I had managed to craft a tool that could be used to keep the people of Remnant—and Vale in particular—alive when the Grimm inevitably started crawling out of the woodwork. All I really felt was vaguely ill at the sight of the bloody pulp left over of those of our group who had been killed—something that couldn't even be gathered and put into a proper coffin. Hell, we weren't even going to try to gather enough to send them back to their families. They would be given a Hunter's funeral—a term I'd come across at some point here that essentially meant that the survivors would gather the pieces and see to it that what was left went on a pyre.

Before we could leave, there was still something that needed to be taken care of. While everyone else was busy, I signaled Penny and took off into the air. 'What about our guests?'

'You were right, Jaune. They've been trying to send a stream of the fight since shortly after the battle began,' the gynoid answered and I rolled my eyes under my mask. My lips twitched up into a smirk as Penny added, with just a hint of pride and smug satisfaction, 'Their attempts have been unsuccessful.'

'Good job, Penny,' I chuckled quietly.

'Does this mean I get a reward?!' she asked, darting ahead a few feet and turning around to fly backwards as she turned her gaze on me. Most of the effect was lost, due to the mask, but her mental voice sounded hopeful enough that there was no doubt in my mind that she was making some absolutely adorable hopeful face under the mask.

'Sure,' I agreed. 'Later, though. For now, we have to deal with them.'

'Aww. Okay,' Penny pouted.

“Why isn't this working?” the yellow-and-black clad reporter growled, slapping the side of a computer that was accessible now that the sides of the Channel 5 VTOL had folded up and out, creating a weather-resistant awning for the crew's use.

“Ms. Yellowjacket,” I called, causing the woman to start and spin around, wings buzzing into a blur as she about-faced. The expression on her face was that of a child with their hand caught in the cookie jar as she met my eyes, but it only lasted a moment before her wings stilled and she dropped a foot to the ground and a tight, strained smile crossed her lips.
Penny and I touched down across from her and I held out my hand. “I'd like to go ahead and collect those recordings now.”

“Uh, sorry, we're having a bit of technical difficulty,” she hemmed.

I tilted my head slightly to the side, my voice taking on an amused tone as I asked, “Oh? Yeah, I've heard some of our equipment is having some problems transmitting out of the canyon. That's okay, though. We'll just go ahead and get what you have here, please.”

“April?” the other woman asked quietly, cradling one of her cameras protectively against her chest.

The Faunus woman's expression shifted from irritation to realization, then back again and she sighed. “I see. I suppose I underestimated you. I take it that any equipment we use to record our interview later might also suffer the same transmission errors?”

“It's very likely,” I agreed with a nod, before gesturing with the hand I still held out. “That is, if we have time for an interview. I am a very busy man.”

April chuckled quietly, a rueful grin crossing her lips as she shook her head. “I see.”

“Do you, Ms. Yellowjacket?” I asked. Quietly, I added, “I like to see that good behavior and acting in good faith are rewarded. Likewise, bad behavior and betrayal are punished. You've already attempted to circumvent our deal once. For that, there will likely be a bit of a delay in getting those recordings back as we make certain we're extra thorough in our care and handling of them. That is, if you provide me with them now. If I have to take them from you—and make no mistake, I can and will—you will not be getting them back and we will not be doing business with Channel 5 again. What you've got there is dangerous—to yourself and everyone else in Vale.”

“Is that a threat?” the woman asked, crossing her arms under her small breasts and I rolled my eyes. Beside me, Penny's head tilted up to track between me and the reporter and I sent her a non-verbal order to stand down—no need to jump the gun.

“No, it's a statement of fact,” I denied, crossing my arms over my chest. “I'd like to continue doing business with you in the future. Your network and you in particular. I think you've got spunk. You're not afraid to stand up for yourself. There is a time and a place for that, however. This is not one of those times. I'm not exaggerating when I say that what you've recorded today could be disastrous if it...”
were released to the general public.”

April snorted softly. “You mean the fact that Grimm can spawn out of thin air? That information would make my fucking career. So what do you have to offer that's worth that?”

‘Jaune, is that what they call 'extortion?’” Penny asked over our link.

‘It is,’ I sent back.

“Your life,” I deadpanned. I paused a beat to let that sink in—and give her just a second for the implied threat to sink in. “Along with the lives of, well, pretty much all of humanity. At the very least, those within the City of Vale. If people knew that this could happen, they would panic—or they’d be angry that their government hid it from them, because it’s very likely that they already know. Can you imagine it? A Channel 5 exclusive: local private military contractor group Fox Hunt kills horde of Grimm threatening Vale… only for a massive Grimm to spawn from thin air after the other Grimm were killed. Aired prime time in the highest billed slot, with the largest potential number of viewers. All of those viewers—all over the Kingdom of Vale and beyond, because there's no way this won't get picked up by the national and international stations as soon as it airs—shown that sometimes, when you kill Grimm, worse Grimm spawn. All of them left feeling betrayal, anger, and panic at the news that not only have they always been in more danger from Grimm than they've known, but that their government, the Hunters, Beacon, and so forth have lied to them for years. All for their own good, of course. Because they couldn't be trusted to handle the truth calmly, rationally, like adults… Imagine what putting a match to all of that sentiment would draw down on Vale.”

Seeing both the reporter and her assistant had gone pale, I asked, “Now tell me, is your career worth that? Because I don't want to be the one responsible for that. Do you?”

Across from me, dark eyes closed and the woman's jaw and fists clenched, before she hissed out a sigh. “Give him the disk.”

“Are you sure?” Prissam asked, and April spun to shoot her a glare.

“Yes I'm sure,” the shorter woman hissed before stalking off towards the back of the VTOL. “All the copies, Prissam.”

“Yes, ma'am,” the taller woman reluctantly acknowledged before thumbing a switch on the side of her camera and ejecting a small metal square. Penny took it and slipped it into one of the pockets of
her jacket. “Come with me, I'll get you the one out of our other camera and the backup stored on board the VTOL.”

“Thank you,” I told her after she'd handed me the last copy—at least, I suspected it was the last copy, considering I'd hit her with a subvocalized Charm while her back was turned. I considered allowing the spell to break, but thought better of it. I'd rather have these two on friendly terms, and if her partner liked us, April was more likely to cooperate as well. Turning to the taller girl, I said, “If you'll follow us back, we'll get your partner her interview and you can be on your way. We'll be in touch when we're finished editing the footage for both.” When she nodded, I shifted my gaze to where April had her back turned towards us. Subvocalizing another Charm, I turned and headed for our own transport, Penny following a step behind.

“Could that really happen? All of Vale, wiped out because people got angry?” Penny asked, and I shrugged as we took flight.

“Grimm are attracted to humans in general, but strong negative emotions draws them like sharks to blood. By that logic, it seems that a large enough shock to the psyche of a people in any given town or city could cause what amounts to a collapse,” I reasoned.

“Would people really react that way, though?”

I turned an incredulous look on the smaller girl before I remembered who I was talking to and where I was. “Sweetie, people get angry when their favorite television show gets cut off. Mass media has always been the best method of influencing a large group of people, and with television broadcasts occurring at the same scheduled time every night and day, you can bet that something like this would piss them all off simultaneously—and this is an order of magnitude more potent than someone's favorite show being interrupted. Humans were never rational animals to begin with. We're always one bad day from snapping. Give a large enough group an excuse and you'll see rioting in the streets.”

“That does not sound like fun,” the girl admitted, and I nodded.

“No. It's not,” I agreed.

A soft knock at my door followed by it opening caused me to look up and I blinked as golden eyes locked with my own. My Fox mask was off at the moment, but I had my illusions up over my face so I wasn't exactly worried about someone walking in on me. “Yes?” I asked, one eyebrow going up
slightly at the sight of the dark haired faunus girl slipping into my office and closing the door behind
her.

She looked around, humming quietly before saying, “I didn't know you had an office.”

I shot her an amused look before turning back to my screen, fingers ghosting over the keyboard as I
typed. A glance at the clock in my HUD showed it to be late—or early, depending on how you
looked at it. Considering the interview I'd given April had only lasted an hour, once I'd escorted
Raven somewhere where she could open a portal home without being seen on camera—or by her
daughter and… half-daughter? Step-daughter? Now there was an interesting conundrum—I had
been sitting in this chair staring at the screen before me for a few hours, trying to decide if the words
I had there were what I needed to say, and what the families who would be receiving them needed to
hear. “Neither did I, until I asked.”

I knew she hadn't come by simply to state the obvious, but I wasn't really in the mood for guessing
games. That wasn't to say that I couldn't guess, however. Besides, I knew that if I was quiet I could
out-wait her and she would eventually give in and say what was on her mind. When she finally did
break the silence, I glanced at the clock to see that she had lasted all of five minutes attempting to
stare me into submission before finally giving in. “What are you doing?”

“Typing out letters to the families of the eight men and women who died under my command,” I
deadpanned. Glancing up, I saw that had silenced her, and followed it up with, “Then, I have to sign
the forms approving posthumous promotions and medals for the dead and dispersal of funds to the
families of the dead.” I wasn't certain private armed services actually did the posthumous stuff, but
the reasoning behind it was simple: it cost me nothing but money while gaining me, and Fox Hunt by
extension, both goodwill and good press with both the families of the deceased and the media when
word inevitably leaked. It would also lend us an air of professionalism we desperately needed to
have if we were going to secure the contracts within Vale and move forward from there. That I was
doing each individually, and myself, instead of having some secretary type up a form letter probably
said something more about me than I cared to look into. It had been a long day and I wasn't
particularly in the mood to dissect my personal motives for doing it.

The girl was silent for several long moments and I almost disregarded her presence as I went back to
my typing before she spoke up again. “It's not your—”

“Don't finish that sentence, Blake,” I cut her off softly. Golden eyes narrowed and I met her glare
with a steady, cool look of my own. I had already spoken with Raven about exactly this subject
before she left. I suppose I shouldn't have been surprised, but the woman had been entirely practical
and realistic on the subject. She hadn't offered any empty platitudes and she hadn't tried to convince
me I wasn't responsible. By that same note, she had also flatly told me that there was a fine line
between taking responsibility for something that went wrong and attempting to take blame for more
than I was responsible for, and I found myself agreeing with her.
I had brought them together, I had put them on that battlefield, and I had gotten them killed—but I had not lead them into a battle with something they weren't equipped to deal with and I had no control over how Grimm spawned. At least, not outside of an ID, but she didn't exactly need to know that detail. The point was, I could blame myself for putting them in the situation, but I shouldn't be—and wasn't—so full of myself as to think I could control every variable in the field, especially when it came to Grimm. Now that we had definitive proof that sometimes larger Grimm could spawn when enough small ones were killed fast enough in one area, we could plan ahead and deal with it accordingly—even Raven had not been entirely sure on that detail. She had seen it happen before, but according to her, it was fairly rare.

The young woman across from me crossed her arms under her breasts and frowned, before slowly nodding. “Fine.” Looking away, she quietly added, “Adam never did this.”

“No?” I asked, raising an eyebrow, and she shook her head.

“No. But then, I suppose ‘your son or daughter died while attempting to steal a shipment of Dust’ doesn’t have quite the same ring to it as ‘died defending Vale from an incursion of Grimm,’” she snarked.

I nodded, a small smirk twitching at the corners of my lips. “Not even in the same ball park.”

“So, why?” she asked, and when I sent her a confused look, she elaborated. “Why do it yourself?”

I blinked at that before answering slowly, as though speaking to a child, “Because I care about my people.”

Blake shot me an unamused look, asking, “Did you even know their names?”

Shaking my head, I admitted, “No. But not knowing them personally doesn't mean that I don't care for them as part of this organization. You don't know every faunus in Vale, but you'd feel pretty shitty if you banded together a bunch of them to go kill Grimm and some of them died on your watch. They are—or were—my responsibility.” I frowned, glancing at my screen a moment before saying, “I cannot even give these people the comfort of bringing their family members home in a box, so they can have the closure of giving them a funeral. A few letters is the least I can do.”

The faunus girl once more lapsed into silence and I ignored her as I went back to my work. Finally,
she stood and made for the door. I glanced up as it opened and she paused. “You're not what I expected.”

“Should I take that as a compliment?” I asked, raising an eyebrow in question.

“I'm not sure. I'm still trying to decide,” the girl shrugged, before slipping quietly outside and closing the door behind her.

Sighing quietly, I hit 'Print' and leaned back in my chair as my laser printer spooled up and began spitting out paperwork—what I had would have to be good enough, because I didn't think there was some perfect way to say, 'I'm sorry I got your loved one killed.' I would sign those and stuff them in envelopes, and my secretary—I had a secretary—would see to having them mailed tomorrow, while the rest of the documents would be sent wherever they needed to go. 'I think I'm done with this. That just leaves authorizing repairs, replacements, and so on. Maybe I can foist some of this off on Neo and the twins,' I mused, a small grin tugging at my lips at the thought of subjecting the girls to the horrors of paperwork. 'And I'm still waiting on Cinder to call at some point this week. Well, at least a train heist should be fun. I'm still not sure about sending Neo with Emerald and Mercury, but I'm pretty sure Cinder knows that if anything happens to Neo and they come back without her, I'll kill them—so I don't think that's going to turn into a double-cross.'

My scroll chimed and my HUD popped up an alert as a call came in. I blinked as a familiar face popped up beside the number, along with a name. I winced and accepted the call. “Jaune,” a familiar voice greeted, entirely lacking the affectionate note it usually held. “Where are you?”

“Uh, hi Joan,” I answered awkwardly. 'I knew I was forgetting something important.' I had not called her since she'd left town, or texted, or even sent word that we had moved out of the old apartment. 'Well. I'm boned.'
“You don't text, you don't call. A girl might start to wonder if she's been replaced,” Joan said, and I groaned quietly.

“You haven't—”

“Jaune,” she cut in before I could start covering my ass and I noticed that there was amusement in her voice—she was enjoying making me uncomfortable. “I'm teasing. Come meet me at the apartment.”

The scroll disconnected and I slid my hand over my face. “Damnit, woman. Scared the shit out of me,” I grumbled quietly. I didn't have links up with anyone, so I opened the scroll interface from my HUD and dialed Neo.

“What's up?” the ice cream themed girl asked by way of greeting. “Finished with what you needed to do?”

“Yeah,” I agreed, before asking, “The twins with you?”

“Pretty much everyone but Ruby and Yang. Ruby's uncle called and asked her to come home and Yang went with her,” Neo explained, following it up with, “Why?”
“Joan called,” I began, only to be cut off as Neo snorted quietly.

“So you're going to be out at least the rest of the night.”

I hesitated before answering. “I don't know.”

“Wait,” Neo began, sounding as though she already suspected what was wrong. “We've been stupidly busy since she left. Did you even call her?” she asked, and when I didn't answer immediately, she laughed quietly. “That's it, isn't it? You forgot to call.”

I couldn't exactly deny it at this point. “I did. Now I'm going to go run damage control.”

“Want help?”

I considered it for a moment before shaking my head, then remembering she wouldn't be able to see that. “No, it'll probably go over better if it's just me.”

Neo laughed quietly on the other end of the scroll. “Okay. Have fun, Jaune. I'll let the others know. Should we be expecting a guest, or do you plan to stay out?”

“No idea. We'll see how it goes.”

The girl hummed and said, “Bring her over later, then. I still haven't gotten to meet her yet. It's no fair if the twins get to have all the fun.”

I paused for a moment as the memory of Joan 'meeting' the twins came to mind, before adding Neo to that picture. 'Yeah, going to have to make that happen. The girls have gone without since their periods started and Joan hasn't gotten laid in three weeks. Should I be worried about death by snoo-snoo? Nah.'

We said our goodbyes and I disconnected the call. Equipping the rest of my Fox set and making sure the mask was in place, I left my office and made my way up to the roof before taking off to the east —away from my apartment. Once I figured I was far enough away, I threw on Invisibility and the rest of my stealth set and changed course, heading south towards the road that lead to the Arc home.
It would look *much* less suspicious if 'Jaune Arc' started leaving a visible trail on the city's CCTV. The Fox disappearing and appearing pretty much at-will would just about be expected at this point, considering he had demonstrated the ability before, during his fight with Shiro. If the visible trail Jaune Arc left tended to begin and end at destinations that lead off the CCTV grid—locations like the Arc family home—then it would help build up my cover should anyone actually go back and look at the footage. It would also help to not always be stepping out of blind alleys near my destinations—which meant that occasionally, I was going to have to take the long way into town.

'Well, at least I can ride in,' I mused, dropping to the ground and checking my minimap to make sure no one was around. Once I was sure the area was secure, I changed into my new Jaune armor set before pulling the badge the Arclance was compacted into off my belt, hitting the 'deploy' switch, and tossing it at the ground. The bike finished unfolding before the tires touched the ground and I slid on, starting the quiet Dust-powered engine and speeding off into the dark under the illumination of high-intensity headlights to the sound of the radio pouring out *Riders on the Storm* by The Doors. I would have deployed my helmet, but it was a nice night out and I wanted to feel the wind. *Besides, Aura means I don't exactly need one for this,*' I mused.

The crunch of gravel under my tires gave way to the consistent hum of rubber on asphalt as I crossed into city limits and a glance at my minimap confirmed that I was back on the CCTV network by highlighting fields of view from cameras lining the road. Something brushed against my Aura Sense and I frowned, focusing on the neglected skill and trying to sort out what I was feeling. *Three... no, four Aura signatures. All moving towards me,* I assessed. A glance at my minimap showed that there was still no one around, so these fell into that range just outside minimap range that would require me to bring up the full map to see if it was someone my Semblance would label with an icon. *Another reason to level up Aura Sensing—relying on visual cues is going to leave a blind spot in my detection range and I can't always be letting my vision shift off-center to check it.*

I couldn't sense any kind of Intent in the air and my danger sensing skills weren't going off, so I opted to wait and see what happened. I was rewarded a minute later by headlights coming around a curve in the road and my minimap lighting up with a cluster of icons heading my direction. The icons were initially too close together to make out individual ones—pretty much on top of each other, really—but I quickly adjusted the minimap display to allow me to get a quick look at them. When I did manage to make them out, I frowned. *That's Jane. Who are the other three?*

The icon that most stood out of the four was familiar—it should be, since the sigil was emblazoned on my armor, bike, and several other things I owned. The only difference was that the the double-crescent on my minimap was gold. The sigil I wore was the *Arc family* sigil—not my personal sigil, at least according to my Semblance. I'd figured out that one when I started playing around with my map settings and turned on the setting to display my personal sigil as my map marker, rather than the arrow that had been denoting my position previously. Amusingly enough, I had two: a red-and-white fox face that mirrored the Fox's mask any time I equipped the Fox set and a *white* double-crescent any time I was in my 'Jaune' outfit. The system had yet to assign a sigil to my Shiro disguise, but then again, I hadn't exactly chosen one either.
'Maybe I should do something about that?' I wondered idly as I closed with the car. 'I mean, it could be interpreted as coasting on my family name or something if I leave it, and supposedly all of my sisters each have their own. On the other hand, maybe it's something that was passed down to me by Jaune's father as a family thing, similarly to how the sword and shield was. Eh, I'll figure it out later when I can ask Joan or someone. Not high on my list of priorities for things to figure out.'

The other two sigils shown were new to me. They were both flowers: a white, six petalled iris seen from the top down with what looked like four—'I think that's a stamen.'—things and a spindly red icon from side-on that looked like a... 'Spider lily?' Where the iris had four dots representing what I thought were stamens, the lily had only three.

I blew by the car at a combined speed of about 120 MPH—between the speed and the headlights, I only really caught a glimpse at the driver and the car itself. J a n e, driving her mother's car. The other three in the vehicle were little more than shadowed blurs. 'Ask Joan later. She just got back into town so she might be out of the loop. Then again, maybe not. Won't hurt to ask.'

Pulling up outside the apartment building several minutes later, I killed the Arclance and compacted it back down into storage form before heading inside. A stray thought crossed my mind, leading me to wonder how long it had been since the twins had last come to visit their mother. I had only met the woman once, myself. Hell, at this point, I knew Qrow—Ruby and Yang's uncle—better than I knew two of my girlfriends' mother. I made a mental note to talk to the twins and arrange a visit at some point in the near future, before Beacon started. That settled, I refocused on the matter at hand—namely, dealing with Joan. 'Let's start with the truth,' I mused. It wasn't like I'd been intentionally neglectful, after all, and Joan had already proven herself pretty level-headed about things, in spite of her particular mental peculiarities.

Before I had time to really decide one way or another, the elevator pinged and the doors slid open. I didn't quite have that 'dead man walking' feeling as they opened, but I would be lying if I said I wasn't nervous. 'Dammed teenaged body.' I mentally groaned, taking a deep breath and forcing my mind to clear. 'Ugh, the clammy hands and sweating I could have done without. Why did I ever think turning off Gamer's Mind was a good idea? Oh, right, because I hate the idea of something fucking with my mind by manipulating my emotions more than I hate the idea of dealing with them. Well, it's the price you pay, I suppose.'

Pulling up Mana, I hit myself with a blast of cool air—courtesy of some wind and ice manipulation—and stepped out, filing away the feeling of awe at being able to magic up my own personal cool breeze under 'small wonders.' 'Don't think I'll ever fully get used to this. Well, I suppose that just means that nothing about my powers will ever truly get boring.'

“I thought the elevator was going to close on you,” Joan teased from where she leaned against the wall next to my apartment's door, a small smirk pulling up the left corner of her lips. My eyes took in her form leaning there, all curves and lean muscle—I found my mouth had gone suddenly dry, and I
remembered why it was I had been attracted to this woman, regardless of who she was. I noticed her sharp blue eyes raking up my own form and widening slightly at what she found there. It was understandable that she was a little surprised.

All that training—and sex, because who was I kidding, that was one of the fastest ways I'd found to gain attribute points, not to mention the most enjoyable—had paid off. In the short time she was gone, I had shot up at least an inch in height, my shoulders had gotten a little broader, and my muscles had firmed up and filled out. On Earth, I'd say it looked like I had spent a hard year in the gym while going through a growth spurt. On Remnant, I knew Hunters could develop much faster thanks to Aura, but I still outpaced that by an order of magnitude thanks to my Semblance. And all of that was without ever setting foot in Beacon, which left me wondering just what I'd come out looking like when I finished there. Jaune's father, from the pictures I'd seen of him with his family in their home, was not a small man by any means—but at least he wasn't a giant bear of a man either. If that was what I had to look forward to, I could live with it. Then again, with Iris' genes mixed in there, I may end up coming out shorter or narrower. There was no way to tell but wait and see.

“Yeah, well, your call had me kind of flustered. I'm pretty sure you're enjoying that, too,” I pointed out and the elder blonde shrugged. I reflexively hit her with Observe and resisted the urge to wince at what I found listed under her emotional state: worried, irritated, relieved. 'Well, as if I needed any more proof that I'm an asshole for forgetting to call.'

“What can I say? It reminds me of when we were younger. You never could hide anything from me,” she mused. Jerking her head towards the door, Joan pushed off the wall. “Come on. Let's go inside and you can tell me what's been going on. I figure it must have been pretty important if it kept you busy enough not to call.” Now that I knew how she felt, there was a note of worry in her voice that was almost easy to pick out—she did a good job hiding it, playing it off as annoyed teasing, but the fact that even that much had slipped showed that my thoughtlessness had likely cost her a few nights of sleep at the least. I would have to make that up to her, sooner rather than later.

Pulling out my key, I shot her an annoyed look. “I can tell already you're going to hold this over my head any time you want something or feel like guilt tripping me, aren't you?”


I snorted softly, opening the door and heading inside. “So, it's 'elder sibling' only when it's convenient for you?”

“Only for you,” she returned, closing and locking the door behind us. “The wards are weak. Feel like they've mostly discharged,” she assessed. “You haven't been here in a while. And it looks like some of your furniture is gone.”
'Because the girls raided the place and moved most of it to the officers' quarters in Fox Hunt.' I would have to do something about that, at some point. A secret identity—let alone two—wouldn't hold up without somewhere to lay my head that looked lived in. If someone like Emerald managed to track me here, again—or God forbid, Cinder—then they'd likely pick up on 'little' details like the place missing furniture. And considering Cinder had been paying 'Shiro' a mint, if it didn't show up in my living arrangements, the question then arose of where the money had gone. I couldn't exactly pass it off as being frugal or enjoying spartan living arrangements, either, seeing as it was the most expensive apartment in the building and all the other details added up to the owner having some class and taste in decor. Though, to be fair, the place hadn't changed much since Sanguine stayed here, so it was really her tastes that anyone showing up would see on display.

'Note to self: dupe the furniture in Fox Hunt and bring it back. Easier than buying new shit,' I decided, then shook my head. 'No, wait. Scratch that. If someone not in the know were to see both somehow... yeah, that'd be bad. Fuck, I really am going to have to buy all new stuff.' I was thankful that the girls hadn't taken everything, at least. Dropping onto the lone remaining couch, I gestured for Joan to take a seat.

I watched as she pulled a compacted shield from the small of her back and dropped it to the floor, along with what looked like a sword and some other weapon under it. A few clicks had her armor off and dumped on the floor beside them. Blue eyes met mine as she caught me watching and I smirked faintly before subvocalizing the command to switch armor sets, changing into more comfortable civilian clothes. "Show off," she rolled her eyes, working on the rest of her armor.

"There are some benefits to my Semblance," I shrugged. "I've had you in party before, you should be able to…" I trailed off, frowning, before rolling my eyes. "Right, no, sorry. Got that update after you left. Here. Party, You'll Thank Me Later."

Plopping down on the far end of the couch from me, she began working off her boots before kicking first one, then the other halfway across the room. Yanking her socks off as well, she sighed in relief before turning an amused look on me and dropping her feet into my lap. "If you're feeling guilty, a foot rub would be a nice place to start making up." Now that she wasn't working her boots off, she reached out and touched a prompt in the middle distance, and her profile picture and name popped up on my party list, along with her level. Of course it was displayed as triple-question marks—I reminded myself that any level it had estimated for her was just that, an estimate. And more specifically, an estimate of her suppressed Aura level.

"Blackmail," I hissed, shooting her a glare for a moment before failing to hold the look and laughing. Reaching down, I began kneading her feet. "Lucky you, I'm actually good at this."

"I'll be the judge of that. Now, spill," the blonde across the couch from me demanded. Her stern look was ruined a moment later as her eyes went half-lidded and her breathing heavy as I began applying pressure to the arches of one of her feet.
“First, say 'Inventory,' then stick all your gear in there,” I told her.

Joan's blue eyes shifted from my hands on her feet to the armor and weapons on the floor. “But I'm comfy.”

Rolling my eyes, I levitated the gear up off the floor with Telekinesis. “I'll walk you through creating armor sets later. The short version is, you get to keep part of my Semblance now, and the Inventory system is part of that.”

The blonde blinked, before frowning as she asked, “So it's infectious?”

“Say what?” I asked.

Joan shook her head. “Maybe that was the wrong word. 'Transmissible' also implies a disease, but you get my meaning. Your Semblance can spread to others. How long does it last? How many people have you shared this with and how many can you? What are the limits?”

I smirked slightly at that before answering, “No idea, haven't found an upper limit yet, and we're still testing to figure that out. It's part of what I've been doing—I made a guild.”

“As in...” she prompted, shifting slightly in her seat as I found a particularly good spot on her foot.

“As in an MMO-style guild. So, recap of things that happened while you were gone: met another girl, infiltrated Atlas, stole an android girl, got shot down by missiles, killed a giant Nevermore, met a couple of girls going to Beacon, turned a former White Fang operative, met Jean, robbed a train full of Dust, eliminated or took over pretty much all the gangs in Vale, burned down a woman's house, robbed a bank, got some shiny new toys, met Jen, found out she got brainwashed by Atlas, made a guild, discovered more things about my Semblance, did a bit of training, and most recently saw a Goliath fly—and killed it,” I summarized. Judging by the way her face shifted from worried, to incredulous, to annoyed I had succeeded in pulling her out of the worry she'd met me with, if only by trading it for worry over what the hell sort of things I was getting into.

“Yeah, no. Going to need a bit more information than that. Start explaining, Jaune,” she demanded, digging the heel of one foot into my thigh as she did. I was pretty sure she'd aimed for the pressure point she was currently squeezing.
“Ow! Geez, alright. Damn, woman, next time just aim for my dick while you're at it,” I grumbled.

Though she was clearly enjoying the attention I was giving her, she remained focused as I spoke, retelling the events of everything that had happened over the last few weeks that she had been out. She held her questions and simply let me talk, but I could tell Joan knew she was getting a very abbreviated version of events to save time—though at least not as abbreviated as what I'd first given her. And some things I was simply skipping, until I found a better time—things like telling her that her dead teammate may not be quite so dead and was sort of leeching off of my soul to keep herself that way while we waited for her to advance far enough to retake human form. When I was finished, and had since moved up from her feet to her calves, the blonde shook her head. “Well. I hate to say 'I told you so—'”

“Liar,” I deadpanned.

Joan continued on as if I hadn't interrupted, “But I told you so. I told you day one—”

“Day two, actually,” I corrected absently.

“That if you went that route, you'd never be able to get out,” she finished, shooting me a stern look. Shaking her head, she said, “Well, at least some good may have come out of it. Your Fox Hunt could be very useful.”

I rolled my eyes—it seemed I was doing that a lot, recently. “Glad you think so.”

“Jaune,” she sighed. “You can't help it, can you? You keep getting yourself in over your head.”

“It's the only way some people learn to swim,” I shrugged. “I haven't drowned yet, so I'd say I'm doing pretty well.” What I didn't say was that, if I drowned now, then what good was I going to be later when things got even worse.

The blonde woman nodded, conceding the point for the moment. “How did you get Jen to open up?”

Shooting her an amused look, I deadpanned, “I talked to her.” The ball of her foot dug into my thigh
again and Joan's eyes narrowed in annoyance. “She couldn't actually say all that much, but I think she wanted to open up to someone.”

“To you.” Joan’s reply was flat and quiet, and the way her mouth snapped shut after told me she hadn’t intended for that to be aloud.

I blinked, raising an eyebrow. “What do you mean? Did she say something to you?”

“No. It’s nothing. Forget I said anything,” she shook her head.

I wasn’t buying that for a minute, and I almost let it slide for now. Even if 'nothing' was always 'something,' it wasn't always an invitation to pry. On the other hand, this concerned the sister whose brain I would be trying to fix. “Joan, if it’s something that'll help me undo what Atlas did to Jen, tell me. Please.”

The blonde groaned quietly, bringing a palm up to rub at her eyes. “It has nothing to do with that. It’s personal.” Turning an unamused look on her, I sat and waited, staring her down as she removed her hand and looked me in the eye. It quickly became a contest of wills as she figured out I wasn’t going to drop it until I got an answer that satisfied me, and her blue eyes narrowed in frustration. Finally, she settled on resignation as she broke eye contact. “She wanted to open up to you.”

“Okay,” I began, dragging the word out. “Your point being…?”

“Dust, you are just as dense as ever,” Joan groaned quietly.

‘Oh for fu—’ I palmed my face and winced. “You’re not the only ‘bro-con’ in the family, then?”

Surprisingly, Joan shook her head. “No, I wouldn’t say she is. Things were not great between us for a while,” she admitted softly, still refusing to meet my eyes. “Dad and our mom were standoffish and never offered you any training beyond the most basic of the basics. I didn’t agree with it, neither did mama Lily, but we both went along with it to a point. We all did, for stupid reasons. Dad didn’t want us to train you—he said that if you unlocked your Aura on your own, you’d be stronger. We had six examples of that approach working, so we assumed he was right and it was just something you’d have to figure out for yourself. Even now, as much as I hate to admit it, you’re proving him right on a daily basis.”

Shifting slightly in her seat and crossing her arms under her bust, she turned and met my eyes, and I would have had to have been blind not to see the remorse there—even without my Semblance labeling it as such. “What happened?”
“They decided they wanted a break,” Joan deadpanned, before adding, “From us.”

“Do what?” I asked, raising an eyebrow.

“They didn’t say it in so many words, but that’s what it boiled down to. And I get it. Eight kids would drive anyone to distraction. Didn’t make it hurt any less.” A bitter smile crossed her lips as she sighed. “Jun was only a couple of years old when it started. They’d go out for a month at a time or so on long missions and leave one of us—usually me—in charge. You have no idea how hard that was to manage, with classes and everything going on. I don’t resent you or the others for it, but—”

“But it shouldn’t have been your responsibility,” I finished for her, and she nodded.

“Even though I came back every night, I wasn’t really around much and when I was I didn’t exactly have enough time or energy left for much of anything. It was the same with the twins, when they started Beacon. There were a few arguments over things and we fought back and forth on occasion. You stopped bothering to even talk to me for a while.”

“And spent all that time with Jen instead, since she was there and I’m guessing she was a sympathetic ear,” I supplied.

Closing her eyes, the blonde nodded. “It’s petty of me, I know, but I was so jealous. Still sort of am, I guess.”

’So, she wasn’t joking,’ I mused, remembering what she’d said to me in our scroll call. “Look, that happened a while ago and I don’t even remember it. You don’t have to worry about being replaced.” Joan looked skeptical, but didn’t comment. I decided a change of subject was in order. “So, question: are our parents in town?”

Joan blinked, frowning as she asked, “Why?”

“I met Jean driving three people back towards the Arc house on the way here. Aside from Jean’s, the other three icons were the Arc family emblem, an iris, and a lily,” I supplied. “Which reminds me—the yellow or gold crescents, those are the family emblem, right?”

Sighing quietly, Joan closed her eyes and leaned back against the arm of the couch, going still for a long moment. I felt something brush against my Aura sense coming from her position and raised an eyebrow at that. Finally, she opened her eyes and nodded. “Yeah. They’re back in town. So are the
“Others?” I echoed.

“Our other sisters,” she clarified.

“Any idea why they're here?”

Joan made a face, looking as though she'd just bitten into a lemon. “Yeah. There's a… family thing we do every year. You don't really have to worry about it, if you don't feel up to it.”

Sending her an unamused look, I said, “I think I'd like to meet them.”

Joan was hesitant as she slowly shook her head. “I'm not sure that's a good idea.”


“You, me, them—everyone involved. I don't know if you're ready yet. And if you meet them, you're going to try to confront them—”

“Damn right I am. I have a right to know,” I growled quietly. It was something that had been bothering me for a while, but that I hadn't really been able to do anything about. With an opportunity in front of me, she could bet her ass I would be demanding answers for why they had left their son to his own devices and wound up getting him hurt—killed, for all intents and purposes—and hadn't even bothered to turn up at the hospital. We lived on a death world, covered in supernatural creatures that fed and bred on misery and every other negative emotion—I could understand if circumstances had prevented them from rushing back to Vale and they had trusted Joan with it, but I had a feeling that that wasn't what had happened.

“You do,” she agreed quietly. “I'm not trying to keep that from you. I'm just wondering if you're ready for it. I doubt you're going to get the answers you want.” Joan held up a hand as I opened my mouth. “I know you feel you are, and I know you're different now. I'm not blind,” she admitted, the last part coming out as a whisper. “Just... be careful.”
“I will,” I murmured, sighing quietly. Looking down, I lifted her legs and shifted across the couch before dropping her legs again so that her knees were resting in my lap now. “How about we move onto something a little less volatile?” I suggested and she nodded. “What did they have you doing, while you were gone?”

“Oh, you know. The usual,” Joan shrugged.

I shot her a deadpan look. “I don’t know. What’s ‘the usual?’”

The blonde partly in my lap winced. “Right, sorry. Uh, in this case, we were deployed to patrol up along our northern border. Given the terrain, it was essentially a bunch of camping out in the mountains and then near the beach when we got to the edge of our patrol zone. Killed a few Grimm, helped fend off a small incursion in one of the larger villages, nothing major. It was actually pretty relaxing.”

“If you can relax in woods that are full of Grimm,” I pointed out, and Joan shrugged.

“Most of the stuff you'll encounter near Vale isn't old enough or large enough to cause someone like me problems. We keep our patrols up too well this close to the city. The things you've encountered were either in Atlas or a fluke. Shit happens, sometimes. You just got luckier than most. Once you start getting outside of the primary Vale patrol zone and into the wilds, you'll start running across some of the nastier stuff.” My hands on the older woman's thighs shifted upwards slightly and she squirmed, biting her lip. “How long are you going to keep torturing me like this?”

“As long as I like,” I sent her a grin. Blue eyes locked with mine and Joan pouted. “Neo was interested in meeting you.”

“Oh?” she asked, eyebrows raising. “Is she, now?”

Chuckling, I nodded. “I think you'll get along.” Glancing at my HUD clock, I hummed. “You came here first thing after getting in, didn't you?”

“First thing after debrief, yeah,” she agreed.

“It's getting late. Come to bed,” I told her, and her eyes, which had gone half-lidded again, shot open and locked with mine.
“You, uh,” she hesitated, her face and neck coloring slightly as her mind went pretty much exactly where I was heading with that. “So you've um... gotten over the whole sibling thing?”

“You mean does the fact that my older sister wants to ride my cock still bother me?” I asked, and she moaned quietly—either in mortification at the wording, or because she found the dirty talk exciting. Given her tone and the darkening blush, however, it was probably the first one. My grin became a teasing smirk. “You're cute when you blush.”

“Shut uuuup!” Joan whined, covering her face with her hands. “You're not supposed to tease me, it's supposed to be the other way around.”

Chuckling, I shifted on the couch, parting her legs and moving between them, effectively pinning her there as I leaned over her before taking her by the wrists to complete the image. “Well, if you don't want to wait on the bed,” I murmured, leaning in and lightly scraping the shell of her ear with my teeth, and in so doing drew a quiet intake of breath from her lips, “the couch is fine too.”

“J-Jaune,” the blonde under me whimpered as I captured her lips. Our tongues danced as she 'struggled' beneath me, though given the way her lips kept wanting to twitch up into a smile I knew it was an act.

I pulled away enough to say, “I'm fine with it,” in answer to her earlier question.

“Since when are you this aggressive?” she asked, before hastily adding, “Not that I'm complaining or anything, I mean, it's nice and different just—”

“Joan,” I interrupted, pecking her on the lips and interrupting. “You're babbling,” I pointed out. Shifting both of her wrists to my left hand, I moved my right down and quickly undid the button on her jeans before sliding my hand down the front of them, under her panties, and sinking my first two fingers into her soaking wet heat. Her panties were already a total loss at this point, and I made a mental note for later that she enjoyed the prolonged, teasing approach.

Joan's hips bucked under me as she gasped. “God Jaune, stop teasing already and put it in.”

“What's that? 'Tease me more,' you say?” I grinned, kissing the side of her lips before trailing down to her neck.

“No,” she whined quietly under me, before hissing softly as I found a particularly nice spot on her
neck and bit down.

My fingers had not been idle, as they stroked and rubbed her sex, shifting between paying attention to her clit and slowly pumping into her vice-like sheath. I could feel her tightening around my fingers, her muscles beginning to rhythmically contract as she grew wetter, and came closer to orgasm. So it was completely understandable that she was justifiably irritated when my scroll chose that moment to chime loudly over the quiet, wet sounds of our kisses and my fingers inside of her. I paused as a text notification popped up on my HUD, my fingers slowing their action as I saw who it was from. The scroll chimed again as I got a second, and then a third text.

“Jaune,” Joan began, intentionally squeezing her muscles down below to get my attention. “Don’t answer that. Don’t you do it.”

I sighed quietly and slowly resumed fingering her, but she could tell my attention was clearly split now. “I can't ignore it. It's one of the two or so I absolutely can't ignore at this point.”

Joan frowned. “Who would be sending you a text at this hour?”

“Cinder,” I sighed quietly.

“That's the dangerous one, right?” she asked, and I nodded. “What's she want?”

Withdrawing my fingers from her slit, to a quiet whimper from the blonde beneath me, I pulled a set of wet wipes from Inventory—left there specifically for such incidents—and set about cleaning my hand off as I opened the first message and began scanning it.

'My contact required certain assurances that he would not be burned following the job we spoke about and only now gave me the information necessary to pull it off. Unfortunately, he waited until the last minute and your objective is already in motion. I know this was not part of the deal, and I apologize for the short notice. If you wish to decline the job, let me know ASAP. I ask that you consider taking it, however, because given the short notice I have no one on standby to complete the job should you decline and I do not know when, or even if, the next opportunity will arise.'

I rolled my eyes as I translated that in my head. 'In other words, someone wanted more money and wanted to be patted on the head and told that of course they would be looked after when Atlas inevitably starts looking for the leak, and now I have to scramble to make a move on it. God damnit.' Opening the second text, I continued reading.
'Re: our reunion with Torchwick, I will need Neo starting tomorrow morning. Neo, Emerald, and Mercury will depart in the morning and—barring any unforeseen difficulties—return within three days. We expect her by 0500 sharp. Thanks in advance. - CF.'

I rolled my eyes at that. Opening the third message showed it to be the route the train would be taking along with a note that Cinder would text me where to bring it once I'd confirmed I had it, which allowed me to feed it into my map—and in doing so, generated a quest.

A quest has been created! The Train Job.

Cinder wants you to steal a train carrying a load of plastic Lien into Vale.

Success: 50,000 EXP, 20% of the take in Lien, increased closeness with Cinder Fall.

Failure: no EXP, no Lien, suspicion and loss of trust as Cinder loses faith in your ability to deliver.

“Fuck,” I groaned quietly.

“What is it?” Joan asked from below me.

Meeting her eyes, I leaned down and kissed her soundly before pulling back and standing up. “I have to go—now, if I want to have time to prepare.”

“And what does she have you doing?” she asked, eyes narrowing as she sat up.

I winced slightly before answering with, “Stealing a train.”

Joan sighed. “Another train robbery? Really?” She blinked, then frowned as she asked, “Wait. You said ‘stealing a train.’ You mean an entire train, not just its contents, don’t you?”

“Maybe?” I shrugged, equipping my Shiro outfit and sending Penny a party invite. As soon as she accepted, I sent, ‘Meet me at the airfield, ASAP.’

“Damnit, Jaune!” Joan growled softly. Heaving out an annoyed breath, she grabbed me by my
armor's chest piece, yanked down the mask over my lower face, and pulled me into a kiss. “I can stop you, and I want to, so tell me this is necessary or I am going to.”

I took a moment to think about it, despite having already weighed all the pros and cons before. In the end, gaining and keeping Cinder's trust outweighed allowing the job to fall through and avoiding any potential danger. Finally, I nodded. “It is.”

“Fine,” she sighed, slumping against me and planting her head on my shoulder as she wasn't remotely short enough to lean against my chest comfortably. “Telling you to be careful is asinine, because you will be,” she stressed, an implied 'or else' hanging unsaid there. “Come back soon.”

“I will,” I nodded, tilting her chin up and giving her another kiss. Pulling back and letting her go, I winked. “Soon-ish.”

“What do you mean, 'soon-ish?'” Joan asked, eyes narrowing. I dropped into Invisibility and threw on my stealth set of spells. “Jaune?” she frowned, eyes shifting as she lost track of me. “Damnit, Jaune! Don't screw with my head like that.”

“But it's fun,” I countered from the door, and she rolled her eyes.

“Go, before I change my mind,” she huffed, dropping back down onto the couch and crossing her arms. I could tell she was disappointed and I made a note that between not calling while she was out on patrol and now having to leave on short notice, that I had a lot to make up for later.

Exiting the apartment, I sent off a text to Neo letting her know Cinder wanted her to show up in the morning, followed by one to Miltia asking her to make sure Neo got up and actually went. I knew that if left to her own devices, the ice cream themed girl might just say 'fuck it' and sleep in. I headed for the roof, changing into my Shiro gear and throwing on Invisibility and the rest of my stealth spells as I went.

A thought occurred as I remembered the state of the apartment I'd left Joan in. 'No appliances, little furniture. Unless she heads back to the Arc home, that's roughing it. Fuck.'

Opening the call interface, I speed-dialed Joan's number. It picked up on the first ring. “Forget something?”

“Very funny,” I grumped. “Look, the apartment is kind of... barren right now. Do you want me to send Miltia by to get you, or did you plan to head back to our parents' house?”
Joan hummed quietly before answering, “I think I’d like to see your base. Think you can sneak me in?”

“No need to sneak, in this instance. You’d be a visitor with a valid reason to be there,” I answered. “Sit tight and she should be there in a few.”

Getting a confirmation from her, I hung up and called Miltia. While I had her on the phone, I figured I may as well have her take care of another problem that had been bothering me since the fight with Dumbo. I’d had my mask broken and replaced it with another Conjured copy, but they were not truly permanent and I wasn’t sure I could enchant Conjured items. A real one, on the other hand—perhaps made of high-end composite ceramic to act as actual armor—would be a huge upgrade. Maybe I’d even get lucky and it would be done by the time I got back. *While I'm at it, might as well have real versions made for all the girls. I’ll have to see if Miltia can get whoever she goes to for it to defer payment until after the train job, since I know Cinder’s paying me for that. Hopefully, it’ll be enough.*

Surveying the land below as we floated invisibly in the pre-dawn sky, I hummed and checked my map again. Below, forested mountains spread out as far as the eye could see leading northward. “What do you think, Penny?”

Of all of the girls, Penny had required the most disguises, because she tended to want to accompany me as *all* of my alter-egos. And while Neo could get away with illusions, Penny could not—at least, not without spending time learning and leveling Genjutsu or putting points into her perk tree to get holograms. And while both of those would be handy to have later on down the line, they weren’t immediately useful. So we’d had to get a little creative in that department. The girl beside me was currently in her ‘criminal’ disguise, modeled after my look as Shiro—soft-soled black shoes, dark gray leggings, a black and gray checkered skirt, long-sleeved black shirt with a gray vest over it, gloves, and a gray neck gaiter to cover her lower face. Her hair was pulled back in a ponytail and shaded a light blue-green color, while her eyes were currently copper red. On her left hip, she wore a copy of Ascalon, which looked a bit oversized on her—not that she had any problems handling the weapon, given her strength.

“Because of the time constraints, we don’t have much time for preparation. If we move further up the track to scout ahead for something better, the odds of being able to set up a proper ambush before the train reaches it decrease,” she pointed out, and I nodded.

“In other words, make the best of what we've got,” I summarized, and she nodded. “Are you sure this'll work?”
Penny shot me an amused look. “Yes, Jaune. I've had time to study how the CCT network functions.”

“Okay. Let's go,” I nodded, dropping altitude and heading for the mouth of a tunnel.

The plan was sound, so long as Penny's information was correct... and so long as several other assumptions were also correct. 'So, we hope for the best and plan for the worst.'

The plan was fairly simple and required a little knowledge of geography, terrain, and how wireless networks worked. The CCT system functioned pretty much analogous to the cellular network on Earth—meaning that it also shared many of the same vulnerabilities. One such vulnerability was terrain features. Like on Earth, anything going into a tunnel would be cut off. Likewise, signal tended to be spotty in mountainous terrain. To deal with this, cellular companies—and whoever managed the CCT network—set up repeater towers in the mountains. To deal with the issue of tunnels, repeater units were stationed along the length of the tunnel and at either end, so as to allow any device relying on the CCT network to function inside tunnels.

Trains, as I'd found out after robbing the one Blake had ridden into Vale, were equipped with CCT transponders. These transponders allowed whoever was watching to not just track whatever the equipment on the train checked for—emergency alarms such as fire, or structural integrity, or intruder alarms for instance—but, as on Earth, allowed them to triangulate the trains’ positions based on distance to repeater towers and the primary four CCT broadcast towers located in Vale, Mistral, Atlas, and Vacuo. These repeater towers also meant that no one nation could truly be cut off from the CCT network for long, in the event of a Grimm incursion destroying a primary tower. If both the primary and backup towers in a kingdom were toppled, someone could, theoretically, shift basic emergency functionality to one of the many repeater towers. It would take some hands-on work, but it could probably be done in a matter of days to get a nation's communications back up and running—at least for government use and coordinating an emergency response. Civilian network use would likely take a back seat until they had a better grasp of the situation. Then again, I was forgetting to account for Grimm again. How would the civilian populace react to being told to wait for service to be restored while the government got critical infrastructure back up? ‘Not well,’ I mused.

The moment a train entered a tunnel, however, it was cut off from the greater CCT repeater network and entirely reliant upon the repeaters in the tunnel it was traveling through. The city of Vale was surrounded on three sides by mountains, while the kingdom's territory extended out beyond the mountains over most of the eastern half of the continent, if I was reading my map correctly. That area included a whole lot of flat land near enough to the city to be ideal for farming—part of which was the reclamation zone Fox Hunt would soon be vying for the contract to guard. The mountain range to the north was especially large, dense, and difficult to traverse. This was why, similarly to Earth, the people who had constructed the rail lines had opted to simply blast tunnels through many of the mountains—they were too steep to go over and too wide and close together to go around effectively in some cases.
Our plan depended on isolating the train in question and dealing with any security riding on it before moving on—making the assumption that it would be on the CCT network. I had my doubts about that, however—after all, one train had already been hijacked by White Fang, and this one was carrying a lot of money. Odds were good that this particular train was running dark, off the CCT grid with its transponder shut down to prevent it from being tracked. So, while one part of the plan was using small explosives to destroy the repeaters in the tunnel once the train was in, the other part was to seal the tunnel itself off. I would be using Earth-aligned mana and the Wall spell to seal off the far end of the tunnel while leaving the tracks intact, before moving to the opposite end of the tunnel where the train would enter while Penny remained behind. Once the train was in, I would seal off the entrance and we would blow the explosives, effectively cutting off the tunnel and everything in it from the outside world. From there, Penny and I would work our way through the train from both ends, moving towards the middle. Penny would secure the engine and shut down the train, and hopefully all of its electrical and security systems, while I started at the opposite end.

My biggest worry here—the place where everything could go completely sideways—was in exactly who was riding that train. Cinder and I had discussed the possibility of Hunters being aboard. If I were looking to guard a train full of money, I’d have sent no less than two full teams worth. I had no delusions that I would be able to take on eight people at Qrow’s level, even with Penny as backup. The only plan I had come up with for dealing with any potential Hunter teams that had even a remote chance of success was simple: cheat. Cheat my ass off. In this case, abuse the fuck out of Create ID. Once we boarded the train, we could sweep for Hunters and, if we found any, pull a disappearing act. From there, I would make the absolute largest ID I could and dupe the entire train then immediately flee a safe distance before dropping the ID. I was calling that ‘Plan F’ and hoping I didn’t have to use it. It would cause problems all on its own, what with there being tangible evidence I hadn’t stolen the train but had instead created a duplicate—so I was justifiably reluctant to go that route. Well, ‘reluctant’ was a bit of an understatement.

Setting up the final explosive on the far side of the tunnel, I shot a glance over to Penny, who had shifted her focus out into the mountain pass beyond, where the tracks extended out into a bridge between two mountains with a wide gorge between them. “Penny?”

“I heard someone,” she answered, and I frowned before activating Listen. I could faintly hear a train whistle echo in the distance bouncing off the mountains, along with the sound of the wind, but nothing else. ’No, wait. No birds chirping but there’s a squirrel barking nearby.’ A thought occurred and I frowned. ’Why are they using the whistle? Aren’t they supposed to be trying not to draw attention?’ The answer became obvious as I remembered what I’d seen coming in—the area was crawling with wildlife, especially herds of mountain goats. It’d make sense for them to use the whistle to drive them off if they were on the track.

“Near the squirrel?” I asked quietly, and she nodded, pointing back behind us, above and to the left of the tunnel exit. “What are they saying?”
“Replaying,” she murmured, before her voice shifted to that of a man and she began repeating the conversation. “Okay, boys. When the train comes out of that tunnel, we're going to zipline down and take it over.”

Penny's voice shifted again, to that of another man. “I can hear it coming. Looks like the boss's information was correct.”

Another shift in her voice. “Any minute now…”

Back to the second voice. “Where the hell is it?!”

The third one again, this time asking, “Are we sure copying something you saw in a Captain Atlas movie is going to work?”

Sighing, I shook my head. “That's enough.” I gestured towards the mouth of the tunnel. “Can you get eyes on them?”

“Sure, Jaune,” she agreed, casting Invisibility on herself and stepping out from the dim tunnel interior into the early morning light before turning around and scanning her eyes over the mountain. Copper red eyes lit up with a bright green sheen as she turned her head and locked in on the group she was searching for. ‘Five people. Four men, one woman, all hiding in the brush. The last one is using some sort of optical camouflage, but her heat signature gives her away. All faunus. All wearing masks.’

“White Fang,” I muttered. “Come on, we're going to seal it up.” Penny nodded and quietly hurried back inside. Once we were out of view of the opposing ambush, I began channeling Mana before casting, “Wall.”

Earth sprang outwards from the top and sides of the tunnel—a foot thick of solid rock—moving inwards and down, before mating flush with the tracks as I took care not to damage them. A further bit of manipulation had the wall looking less like a wall and more like the result of a collapse—so if the train was armed, which I wasn't entirely sure of, they would hesitate to try blasting through for fear of bringing the mountain down on top of them. The tunnel gradually curved so that you couldn’t see one end from the other, but they should have time to stop once they spotted the fake cave-in. “Jaune, what are we going to do about the people outside?”

“For now, ignore them. We'll figure something out once we've got the train,” I instructed, and she nodded. “I'll head to the other end.”
Penny nodded, moving away from the tracks and into a small alcove set off to the side—a recessed area hiding a steel door, which I assumed was some sort of tunnel maintenance storage area. I had noticed one at the other end of the tunnel as well. It was good that those were there, because it would give the train’s crew a place to hole up while they waited for pickup, once we kicked them off that is. Dropping into Flash Step, I took off for the other end of the tunnel. ‘My question is, if these are White Fang as Penny said, is Adam nearby? If he is, that could be bad.’

Stopping just shy of the tunnel exit, I cast a glance outside and winced at the difference in light levels. Equipping my shades, I sighed in quiet relief before casting about for our target. It wasn’t terribly hard to spot, as it crossed a raised segment of track leading from a tunnel through the nearest mountain to the one we were situated on—less than a minute out. It gleamed silver in the light and even without the glasses providing telescopic zoom I could make out what looked like gun emplacements on the engine—in addition to a large, forward-facing cannon. ‘Definitely loaded for bear,’ I mused. ‘Looks newer than the one Blake stole, too.’

Moving back into the tunnel, I cast Invisibility on myself and backed into the maintenance alcove to wait for it to pass. And then it was flying past me in a rush of noise and displaced air. ‘It’s in the tunnel,’ I sent to Penny as I watched the cars zip by. Every now and then, hidden amongst the freight cars, I picked out a different sort of car—silvery, and bristling with weapons. I reassessed my initial opinion upwards—they weren’t just loaded for bear, they had enough firepower to punch a hole through a Grimm horde and keep moving.

Finally, a second engine flew past my position and the tracks on this side were clear. ‘Last car just passed me.’ Moving out of the alcove, I threw a Genjutsu over the opening showing it as it currently was and sealed off my end of the tunnel—if the second engine was manned, I didn’t want them to notice it. In so doing, felt a bit like Wile E. Coyote blocking up a tunnel to lock the Roadrunner in and painting over the rocks. I just hoped this worked better for me than it did for Wiley.

‘Detonate the charges now?’ Penny asked.

‘Go for it,’ I sent back, grinning under my mask as I dropped into Flash Step and chased down the train. There were some benefits to having an android girl in my party. For instance, Penny could trigger the charges to detonate herself, without any external equipment.

Muffled echoes of explosions bounced down the tunnel and, a moment later, the sound of brakes filled the air as the train must have spotted the blockage. That would be Penny’s signal to begin the operation. ‘Boarding the train now. One person manning the engine.’ There was a brief pause, then she sent, ‘Neutralized.’

‘Hold off on shutting things down, since there’s a second engine,’ I ordered as the engine in question came in sight and I boarded it. Slipping inside, I found a woman standing up out of one of the chairs
there, doing something with the controls.

“Engine 1, I say again, what's your status?” she asked.

She had only just begun to turn to see who had entered when I subvocalized, “Sleep.” Catching her with Telekinesis, I eased her down into one of the chairs and moved to the controls.

'Okay, second engine crew neutralized. What am I looking at here, Penny?'

The gynoid took a moment to respond, possibly looking over her own set of controls. *There is a button beneath a flip-up shield to the right of the throttle marked 'Emergency Shutdown.' I believe that is what we are looking for.*

'Okay. Hit it,' I sent back, flipping the panel on mine upwards and hitting the button. A moment later, the engine shut off and the lights went out before coming back on, likely running on emergency power.

Once the security was down, Penny's voice in my head told me she was moving on to the next phase of the operation. *Actively jamming comms and moving to sweep towards the rear of the train.*

Leaving the rear engine compartment, I thumbed the selector switch on my sheath and drew out the extending straight blade. *I know knocking someone unconscious doesn't work a damned thing like it does in the movies, and I can't always rely on casting obvious spells if I ever have to do this sort of thing around Cinder. So, I need a more believable way of doing it than simply gesturing at someone and casting. Sleep is too useful not to use, especially as it's pretty much a one-hit KO for most people, so…* Focusing on my blade, I set about trying to imbue it with a specific spell, in the same way I would with just Aura.

*You have created the skill Spell-strike!*

**Spell-strike**: Level MAX. Active. Effect: By applying a specific spell to your weapons, you can cast that spell as a physical attack. All ‘strike’ skills use the current level of the spell used. Spell-strike cost determined by current level of the spell being cast.

Reading the message, I grinned. *So, Sleep-strike will roll off of my Sleep spell's level. Good to know.*
A glance at my minimap showed the next car to have a small group of enemies, if the five red dots were to be believed. Throwing on Invisibility, I opened the door and stepped through, to the sound of someone talking. “And I bet that's one of the engineers—”

The man speaking cut off as I dropped out of Flash Step, the flat of my blade colliding with the side of his head with a dull thump as I tagged his helmet, before falling to the ground under the effect of Sleep. There were scattered curses from the remaining four, but I was already moving. Two more were down before the first shot was even fired, and then one of the remaining two thought to try the radio while the other dove towards some panel I couldn't identify, but I had to assume was some sort of alarm or something. Picking the more immediate threat, I Stepped again, the flat of my sword slamming down hard on the guard's arm before he could reach whatever switch he was aiming for. I could feel the bone snap through the sword I held and had a moment to wince in sympathy. *That's going to suck when he wakes up.*

A boot to the last guard's chest knocked him against the wall of the train car, before sending him sprawling to the ground before he could transmit anything over the radio. Tagging him on the head as I moved past, I took a moment to look around to figure out what it was the other guard had tried to do with that control panel. A cursory inspection turned up a squad of stored droids in storage compartments lining the walls of the train car—twenty in total on this car. *Penny, looks like some of the cars are disguised as standard freight cars but are full of bots and guards.*

*Okay, Jaune. I'm in the third car back and haven't run into anyone yet. However, thermal sensors and passive sonar show people in the next car.*

*Proceed with caution,* I advised, before moving on to the next car up.

With my minimap pointing out threats before they became a problem, sweeping through the rest of the train went fairly smoothly. The only hiccup came when I came across one of those pillbox cars for use against Grimm. The car was locked down tight from the outside, but a quick trip through an ID got me inside—where a small crew manned the guns and a two-man security team guarded them. Apparently, word had spread by runner of intruders on the train and they had begun locking it down—but by then, it was too late, especially since they were unsure who or what exactly had managed to get in, only that some cars towards the front and back had reported hearing sporadic gunfire. I listened just long enough to hear them arguing about activating all the droids on the train before taking them out before they could come to a decision either way.

“All ready?” I asked Penny, as I slipped into the front engine.

“Both engines have been restarted and the rear engine's functions have been slaved to this control panel,” Penny confirmed. “What about the crew? Will they be okay?”
“They should be fine. I shoved them into the maintenance supply room. Those things are essentially built like small Grimm holdout shelters. They've got food, water, and all the tools and spare parts they need to get the transceivers replaced and get back on the CCT network. They should be able to call for help within a day or so—and by then, we'll be long gone.” In point of fact, the little bunkers actually had working CCT terminals. Had—past tense. I had gone out of my way to open up the back panel on each and remove something important. The removed parts had been left sitting on the top shelf of the lockers in their respective supply rooms, which housed spare uniforms—a counter intuitive hiding spot for them, but one that made sense, in a 'last place they'll look for it' way.

Moving to stand behind Penny, I eyed the wall plugging up the tunnel ahead of us. I could still feel both it and the one at the other end, connected as they were by my Mana. With a thought, I willed both constructs to retract back into the mountain—carefully, so as to not damage the tracks. I already had an idea of how I would explain this one to Cinder if word ever got back to her about a potential geomancer being on-site and in order to pull it off, I couldn’t leave any physical evidence of earth manipulation behind. “Let's go get this thing delivered so we can get home.”

The train quickly picked up speed as it made for the end of the tunnel. “It's later,” Penny spoke up suddenly, and I shot her an inquisitive look. “You said not to worry about the White Fang boarders until later,” she reminded me, her tone so guileless I wondered if she wasn't giving me sass.

Shifting to look out the window as we cleared the tunnel, I got a good view out over the coming terrain. The tracks exited the tunnel onto a bridge between two of the mountains spanning a gorge nearly a kilometer wide, before curving around the side of the far one and passing out of view. Something caught the light ahead and I spotted a set of thin wires anchored to the tracks and leading back to the mountain behind us. Moving my focus to my minimap, I found the dots there coming from the mountain towards the train and sighed. “Can you lock the engine room doors and lock down the control panels so they can't screw with them if they get past us?”

“Yep!” Penny chirped.

“Okay, do that and meet me up top. We're going to repel boarders,” I told her, leaving the engine room and making the short leap up to the top of the train. I spotted the group of five moving swiftly down a pair of zip lines anchored to the side of the mountain. Dropping my hand to Ascalon's hilt, I thumbed the selector switch over to my Dust blade. As soon as I felt the blade click into place, I dumped wind elemental Mana into it and hit the assisted draw. The Iaido draw launched the Aura Strike I'd prepared, the heat and wind combining to form a near-invisible line of superheated air in a razor thin Aura/Mana envelope that passed over the train and neatly severed the lines. The zip lines went slack and the five White Fang riding them fell.

Over the sound of the wind picking up as the train accelerated, I could just make out four thumps as four bodies collided with the side of the train. A scream sounded, growing fainter as the fifth man fell below into the gorge. A moment later, three masked White Fang pulled themselves up from the side of the train to the top. ‘Where is number five?’ I wondered, risking a glimpse at my minimap, which
showed three dots nearly on top of each other ahead of me and a single dot crossing off the edge of the map as we moved away. *Maybe went after the one who fell? They could be close enough to show up as one dot, or simply off the map now.* Returning my attention to our boarders, I gave them a look over. My Semblance refused to identify them by their actual names but it did provide me with their levels, titles, and an actual guild name—the one on the left at 35, the one on the right at 36, with the last one being 39. When I focused on their names, the triple question marks there shifted to 'Mook 1,' 'Mook 2,' and 'Mook 3.' Their 'guild' was listed as the White Fang, while their titles were all 'White Fang Grunt.' They spotted me standing there and, for a moment, they hesitated.

'Penny?'

'Almost done,' the girl replied.

“Sorry, fellas,” I called, loudly enough to carry over the sound of the wind and the rattling of the tracks as I began stalling for time. “This train was over booked. Tell Adam you'll have to catch another!”

“Adam?” the one on the left asked, confusion evident in his tone as he turned to the others, who shrugged. “We don't work for Taurus!”

I blinked at that. *Wait. What? But didn't Blake say Adam ran the Fang? Splinter cell, maybe?’* I wondered. I could work it out later, I needed to keep them distracted and buy Penny time. “Ah. My mistake. Still, I'm afraid that this train has already been stolen, and it would be a slight to my pride as a thief if I let you rob a train I'd already gone to the trouble of taking.”

The one on the right opened his mouth and made to say something, but the center one—who seemed most likely to be the leader if not for his title labeling him as a mook—held out a hand. “Stop. He's stalling. He's probably got a partner somewhere. Kill him, then find whoever he's working with.”

“Now, that's not nice. I was just going to boot you off the train. But if you've moved up to murder, I may just have to return the favor,” I warned, slipping my sword back into its sheath in preparation to draw.

Reaching behind his back, the tallest of the three drew a large blade and leveled it at me. I had the feeling I had seen something like it before, and a moment later I was proven right when what I thought was a serrated edge blurred into motion with a sound reminiscent of a circular saw. *So, saw-blade must be a pretty common thing with the White Fang, then. Which means they don't have unique weapons for their mooks, just a whole bunch of mass produced crap. Still, even mass produced crap can be deadly—every cheap Slav 1911 knockoff or Chinese AK can speak to that.*
To either side, the two shorter White Fang drew their own weapons—a longsword that appeared split up the middle with a glowing red Dust chamber near its base, and an SMG that looked like an MP5 clone adapted to Remnant tech. The two sword wielders charged, while the mook with the SMG strafed to the side and made to draw a bead on me. My danger senses screamed.

“Shiro!” Penny's voice called from behind me as a request—demand, really—for mental attention hit me and I found myself accepting the feed from her senses reflexively. The fourth White Fang member showed up as a blue and white blur of heat against the cooler background of the train and mountains as we passed over the gorge and the tracks began to wind around the side of another mountain, a quiet flutter of cloth creating a ghostly outline of her form, her body appearing translucent while her bones, armor, and weapons stood out brightly—all of Penny's input senses, all at once and overwhelming, but I got the idea as the invisible girl descended on me from above with a pair of what looked like kukri raised to strike. In trying to distract the three I could see so Penny didn't realize that they themselves were acting as a distraction for their fourth member to take me out.

Dropping sharply into Haste, I pivoted and hit the assisted draw—there wasn't enough time to channel for an Aura strike, so I was going to have to brute-force it. Worse, I was having to deal with suddenly seeing myself in third person while at the same time still having my own normal vision. I caught sight of Penny already moving to intercept at the same time her feed shifted perspective, a copy of my polearm in her hands. Thinking quickly, I sent her a mental image of what I wanted her to do, making it an order through the party system then dropped her feed so I could concentrate. As I turned and drew, aiming high for the descending White Fang member, Penny dropped low and slipped under the arc of my blade, shifting the polearm in her hands into a wide swing to fend off the two mooks who appeared to be a whole lot faster than I had initially suspected given how quickly they'd covered the ground between us.

Glowing red Dust blade met with arcing electricity from a pair of kukri glowing with yellow tracery. I had a moment to think that those didn't look like mook weapons, before I felt my muscles spasm. Momentum kept the blade moving, however, and electricity forces muscles to contract, which is why people being electrocuted spasm. It was a bit of good luck on my part that my grip remained solid as the force of my blow caught the girl above me and flung her several yards away, sending her rolling backwards along the top of the train with several thumps. Behind me, a wave of frost blasted out from Penny's first swing, drawing the White Fang up short before the one with the longsword swung and sent a wave of fire at us. A second swing of Penny's staff neutralized the fire and returned with a wave of fire of her own from the other end as she completed the rotation.

“I'll deal with them,” she told me, loud enough that we both knew they would hear and leaving me to deal with the invisible girl.

I had a moment to wonder why I was getting stuck fighting someone I couldn't necessarily see, before the girl in question rolled to her feet. She wore a skin-tight body suit of some kind, along with
a cloth mask in the style of the White Fang masks, but which trailed material and seemed to actually be part of the rest of the suit.

White Fang

Mook Leader

White Fang Infiltrator

Level: 42

“That’s why I’m getting her. She’s the biggest threat.’

I was pretty sure I was being glared at under that mask, but I didn’t much care. The girl crouched and disappeared—her suit going translucent and leaving an impression of a full expanse of naked flesh for a fraction of a second before she vanished. What I’d seen was a whole lot of pale, hairless flesh topped by a head of black hair just long enough to pull into a ponytail, small breasts, and a body covered in lithe, toned muscle. I would have enjoyed the free show more, if she wasn’t trying to kill me. ‘She’d have to be pretty self-confident to walk around exposed like that, too.’

Frowning and looking around to see if I could spot anything out of place, I activated Listen and focused on my surroundings while focusing on trying to detect her Aura. Results came back negative and a look at my minimap had my eyes narrowing—she had disappeared. My Semblance had stopped tracking her. My assessment of her threat level shifted drastically upwards as I got solid confirmation of something I’d feared for a while now—someone else could suppress their Aura output to zero. The pad of feet moving quickly to my left drew my attention to a faint distortion in the air. ‘Even if she can fully suppress her Aura, her cloak kind of sucks. Thank fuck for that,’ I mused silently, before channeling for an Aura strike and sending an arc of energy her way. I heard something hit the deck in what sounded like a roll before subvocalizing “Invisibility” and suppressing my own Aura.

“What the—?” I heard a quiet mutter.

Dropping into Flash Step, I came out immediately behind the faint distortion in the air that she was creating and slammed her hard with the side of the blade. Her camouflage dropped and she went crashing to the roof of the train, desperately patting down her clothes where they had begun to smoke just from the short contact with my blade. Dropping Invisibility, I met her gaze and smirked under
my mask. “Sucks when someone uses your own tricks against you, doesn't it?” The girl's eyes narrowed and I added salt to the wound. “Especially if they can do it better.” At this point I was hoping that coming up against someone who could do her own trick would rattle her nerves enough to send her into retreat.

Instead, the girl stood up straight and spread her arms out to the side. The suit around her went translucent again, and then things went a bit trippy. Her body began to pulse a quick pattern of colors up and down and even my under-leveled Aura Sense could pick out the subtle wavering pattern of Aura washing off of her as she gave up on stealth to try a different approach. 'Where have I seen something like this?' I wondered, pausing as she slowly stepped closer, weaving slightly to the left and right as she stepped. I had paused long enough to wonder what the hell she was trying to accomplish, but given that she was moving on me, I got the impression that that's the effect whatever she was doing was meant to achieve.

When she got close enough, she drew her right arm back and thrust forward, aiming for my throat. Ascalon flicked out parrying the blow at her wrist with the side of the blade as I returned the favor, stepping into her guard and bringing my return strike around to swing down diagonally from left to right. Her eyes went wide and she hastily back stepped, but not quickly enough to escape the arc of my blade. The suit was cut and the area around the strike went black as it burned, while the skin beneath it parted and cauterized on contact. The girl clutched her chest and hissed in pain. Taking in the damage and how little resistance my sword had met, I frowned. ‘I didn’t expect her to take any damage from that. It’s like she didn’t have her Aura up to shield. Does her fancy flashy skin require enough to force her to choose between shielding or cloaking?’

The clash and occasional squeal of swords on the metal of Penny's copy of Ascalon's Dustcaster stopped for a moment, only to be replaced by the sound of a gun squeezing off bursts of automatic fire. Meeting the eyes of the woman across from me, I weighed my options for a moment. On the one hand, I had killed before, but usually indirectly—either through turning the enemy against each other with spells, or feeding people to Sanguine. They were terrorists and killing them would remove them from the White Fang’s arsenal—especially their little infiltrator/assassin.

On the other hand, at least one member of their little excursion was still alive and unaccounted for—the one who had fallen off the zip lines hadn’t died. I would have gotten a notification or an EXP gain or something, and I had not. Even if I disappeared the bodies of these four, unless I tracked him down and made him disappear as well then he would report back and word would filter down that someone associated with Cinder was killing White Fang needlessly—assuming he got a good enough look to identify me. It was safest to assume I was made when I cut down the zip line. That they had attacked us with lethal intent first wouldn't matter, it would just be a human killing more faunus, and it would cause Cinder problems that would directly impact my standing with her. If I killed them, I would have to stop the train and Penny and I would have to track down the fifth mook, to make sure he didn't become the one that got away—which would mean delaying leaving the scene of the crime when the guards and engineers we had left alive, if unconscious, would be calling back in as soon as they woke up and got communications working. 'Let them go and they continue their terrorist ways. Kill them and I potentially lose my 'in' with Cinder, meaning everything I've done to this point to get there goes straight down the shitter. Fuck me, some days you just can't win for
A yelp of pain from behind me drew my attention to Penny. Penny—an Aura-and-Dust fueled combat android, who had tanked something that had nearly one-shot me—had somehow actually been injured by one of those mooks? *Fuck it. Err on the side of caution.*

Priorities shifted and I reversed course, darting back across the train towards the other four combatants. I dropped into Flash Step, coming out of it mid-draw to the SMG-wielding mook's 2 o'clock—who, now that I was closer, looked to have a set of small bat-like ears atop his head. He looked like he'd already been on the receiving end of Penny's tender mercies, judging by the obvious damage and the fact that the arm not holding the SMG was handling limply at his side—if I had to guess, he was probably out of Aura or damn near it. Ascalon bit into the armor over his right arm and punched clean through, drawing down the length of the arm and coming out between his index and middle-fingers—leaving behind a bloody, cauterized mess and sending the SMG tumbling off the train as he fell to the ground screaming and tucking his maimed appendage against his chest.

Turning back to Penny, I found she had disarmed the longsword wielding mook and likely broken his leg—at least, I suspected as much, given that knees weren't supposed to bend in and backwards like that. The gynoid had been hit full on by a good burst from the SMG, but other than damaging her armor, she looked fine. *Penny, you okay?* I asked, to make sure.

*'Fine, Jaune. Electric Dust rounds really sting.*'

Shifting my gaze towards where I'd left the other girl, I was unsurprised to see she had bolted.

*“Hey fugly,”* I called to the guy holding the saw-blade, looking uncertainly between me, Penny, and his downed comrades. *“Take your guys and go. You won't get a better offer. We just want the train, but if you push the issue, a little maiming is going to be the least of your worries.”*

The high pitched sound of the saw cut off abruptly, leaving the comparatively quiet sounds of a moving train and the wind rushing past us seeming like dead silence by comparison. *“Fine,”* he grunted, picking up the mook with the bum knee around the waist while I hefted the one with the ruined arm and gave him a shove towards his buddies. The big one hesitated, looking off the side of the train as the ground rushed by—the terrain dropping off from the side of the tracks at an angle down the rocky side of the mountain, broken only by the occasional tree and bit of brush—before asking, *“Do you think you could stop the train first?”*

*“Could be worse. At least we’re past the gorge,”* I shrugged, before leveling Ascalon at him and beginning to pour Mana into the blade, causing its already glowing length to brighten. *“Now, tuck
and roll.”

“What? N-no, I can't make that,” the guy with the wounded arms whined.

He was forcibly shut up when the largest of the three picked him up in a fireman's carry and took off at a jog for the edge. As he jumped, I faintly heard him complaining, “This is going to suck.”

The rough terrain off to either side of the train looked unpleasant to land on, but with Aura it wouldn't be fatal. I moved over to Penny to check her out even as a notification popped up, letting me know I had leveled. “Jaune, I am fine,” the girl protested quietly as I pulled the damaged shirt under her chest piece aside and probed the places where she had been hit.

When the gynoid winced, I met her eyes with a knowing look. “'Fine,' huh?” Penny stuck her tongue out at me and I rolled my eyes. “You were holding back.”

“So were you!” Penny accused.

I conceded the point with a nod. “Yes. Holding back from killing them. You could've roughed them up a lot harder than you did.”

“I didn’t want to break them on accident. Biologicals are fragile, even with Aura,” she admitted.

I didn’t really have a counter to that. Sighing, I asked, “How did those rounds even get through your Aura?”

“They didn’t,” Penny answered. “My Aura blocked most of it.”

“So why the 'ow?'”

Penny stuck her tongue out. “Because robots are weak to electricity?”

Now I knew she was giving me sass. The best way to deal with it was to not respond. “Go back to the engine room and wait. I'm going to make sure the rest of the train is secure and that chick didn't
sneak off to cause trouble while I wasn't looking.” I didn't know if she had some way of hiding from my map, so I would be making a manual sweep.

“Oh, okay,” she pouted, and I shook my head. She didn't want me worrying about any potential injuries, but she pouted over being left alone for ten minutes.

As it turns out, infiltrator-girl had actually left the train when I'd taken my eyes off her. Once I'd made sure of that, and that there weren't any traps waiting for us, I set about moving back towards the front of the train, making note of everything I came across as I went so I could duplicate it once we stopped—bots, guns, Dust rounds in calibers to fit the guns, and the real prize: money. Lots and lots of money. All of it in the new, plastic Lien as opposed to paper or coin. I wondered briefly whether or not the duplicate Lien would flag as counterfeit if someone happened to use the same piece of plastic across town, but decided it wouldn't hurt to try it out regardless. If it worked, I could certainly find uses for it. Fox Hunt could always stand to have more cash, after all. On the other hand, my own personal stash of money was nearly out after having equipped myself for Beacon, so I would probably wind up sticking a bit into my own pockets regardless of where the rest went.

“Hey, Penny,” I began as I entered the forward engine room again, “Do you know how Lien works?” Penny opened her mouth and I beat her to the punch by fishing out one of the little plastic cards from my Inventory. “Plastic Lien.”

“Oooh,” the girl mouthed, before smiling. Her eyes lit up green a moment and she hummed. “Magnetic strip on the side, RFID chip inside, and… the entire thing is one circuit board with contact points on the upper and lower left side connected to a second chip that looks like a solid state memory module.”

I blinked. “That’s… fucking overkill,” I muttered, shaking my head. “Yeah, there’s going to be no way that someone doesn’t pick up on half these things being counterfeit if they ever get them side by side.”

“What do we do, then?” Penny asked, and I shrugged.

“On Earth? I’d plead ignorance. Especially if you couldn’t tell which was which. Here? I’m not so sure. It’s something to ask the the girls when we get back, since I don’t know the local laws nearly as well.”

Opening up my HUD’s scroll interface and selecting the number I wanted to dial from, I selected Cinder from my contacts and waited for the other end to pick up. I was moderately annoyed when, instead of picking up or allowing it to ring, I was forwarded to voicemail. The scroll beeped, waiting
for a message. Smirking faintly, I said, “Hi honey! Got the eggs you wanted. They were running a special on bacon, but I decided against bringing any home with me. Got harassed by some political activists on my way out of the store, but you know how that goes—they run away when someone actually fights back. Luckily none of the eggs got broken. I kind of forgot where we were going tonight, so send me a message with that when you get the chance. See you soon."

Disconnecting the call, I made my way back into the front engine and opened up my map to look over the rail lines. “Take the next right, Penny. That'll take us into the forest. Once we're a few miles in, we can find a rail spur somewhere to park and wait since someone's not answering her phone.”

“You sound upset. Has Cinder done something bad?” she asked. Before I could answer, Penny shot me a suspicious look. “Jaune, why do women you know keep doing things they know will get them spankings? If they keep doing it, I don't think you're doing them right.”

Snorting quietly, I turned away to hide my smile, but I had a feeling it was entirely too late for that. “You'd have to ask them, Penny.”

“I think I will,” Penny chirped. “I am beginning to wonder if I am missing out on something.”

“Lord give me strength,” I muttered under my breath.

As the day neared an end, we pulled up to the end of a rail spur situated in a valley hidden in the mountains, several miles off the main path of the tracks. I had picked this location for a few reasons—being under the cover of trees was one of those, but the biggest was its proximity to a small lake. Additionally, my map showed no people or Grimm within its detection range, so that was a nice bonus. I supposed it made sense—no people around, middle of nowhere, Grimm were as likely to simply pass through the area and keep moving as they were to set up camp and stick around a while.

The center of the valley looked like it was the site of a large impact some time in the distant past—which had left a crater that collected water coming from a stream leading back up into the mountains. Considering that my Semblance labeled the lake as 'Meteor Lake,' that left the options for what had created it as either a random meteor or perhaps whatever event had shattered the moon. Oddly enough, the map showed this area sitting at less than five percent Spirit density. Either a Hunter team had passed through here recently, or some places in the wilds were safer than others.

Making sure the train was locked down and secured, I pulled down the mask over the lower half of my face and turned a smile on Penny. “How do you feel about camping?”
“I don’t know, Jaune. I have never been camping,” Penny answered, likewise removing her mask for the moment.

“Well, I suppose we’ll see then,” I told her, moving down towards the lake while looking for a nice place to set up for the night. Picking a good spot, I opened my Inventory and dug out a tent and the other things I’d need. “I’ll set this up if you’ll go look for firewood. Don’t cut anything down if you can help it—try to get only stuff that’s already fallen off trees. Green stuff makes more smoke and you can see that for miles.”

“Alrighty then,” she chirped, turning on her heel and marching towards the woodline to look for wood.

Once I had the ground cleared and tent tied down, I pulled a couple of rolled up sleeping bags and pillows from Inventory before tossing those inside the tent. The map said it would probably rain later tonight, so if I wanted to get fish caught and cooked, I was going to have to hurry. Another look into my Inventory, however, came up empty on either bait or tackle. Making a mental note to fill those holes in my Inventory later, I set about abusing magic to get what I needed. Some Earth manipulation left us with a shallow depression in the ground in front of the tent for the fire—and while I was at it, I went ahead and softened the earth under where our sleeping bags would be so I wouldn’t wake up sore.

Humming in thought, I produced my Bounded Field creation kit from Inventory and checked to make sure the ‘pen’ was full of Colorless Dust before dropping it to float in the grasp of Telekinesis. Then, I pulled up more Mana and walked a circle several yards out from the tent and camp fire, solidifying the earth beneath my feet into stone and raising it up an inch above the surface as I did—the pen moving along between my feet and leaving a line on the newly raised stone. Making a short spiral inwards once I had the outer circle up, I raised a small, round section of stone in the middle of the camp and set about tracing a Sanctification seal atop it, using just enough Purity White to light up the whole pattern. It wouldn’t last forever, and it wouldn’t have the power the one back in my apartment or at Fox Hunt did—especially since I was going to power it strictly with Mana and wouldn’t be using the ritual empowerment method—but it would be good enough for tonight. Thankfully, with Spirit density so low, I wouldn’t actually have to make an ID and clear the last few percent.

With that done and the seal powered up, I moved closer to the base of a nearby tree. I looked around for a good bed of dead leaves and, kicking those aside, churned the soil up with more Earth manipulation—pushing a writhing mass of earthworms to the surface. Conjunction gave me a small coffee can—complete with red paint and a familiar label—while Telekinesis got a handful of bait and dirt into the can. Cleaning up the mess I’d made, I headed for the shore. Penny’s voice halted me before I was halfway there as she called, “Is this enough?”
Turning to see what she had collected, I laughed quietly at the sight of her hauling a pair of logs bigger around than she was wide and longer than she was tall, one under each arm. “Penny, it's overkill. Here, let me,” I said, grabbing both logs with Telekinesis and dropping them beside the fire pit I'd dug. A Wind blade had the end of one of them cut off and sectioned into something useful—but a glance at the Map and no real idea when Cinder would call and tell us to meet her convinced me to section up that log and make firewood of the entire thing. Stowing the excess in Inventory in case we wound up staying longer than tonight, I arranged the firewood how I wanted it in the pit and Conjured a metal grate over it to cook on later. “That should take care of just about everything except food. Come on,” I nodded towards the lake and took off.

“But Jaune, don't you have food in your Inventory?” Penny asked, hurrying to catch up and turning copper-colored eyes up at my red contacts.

“I do,” I agreed. “But part of the fun of camping is that you're supposed to get your own food and not haul food in.”

Nodding in acceptance of that logic, Penny asked, “What are we going to be eating?” Holding the coffee can out, I let her see its contents and had to hide a grin at her disgusted look. “I… I do not believe I am hungry tonight, Jaune.”

“Not the worms, silly. Most people don't eat worms,” I told her, and the ancula gave a quiet sigh of relief at that information. “They're bait, for fish.”

Penny blinked, her head tilting sideways a few degrees as she pointed out the obvious. “But couldn't you just use magic to get fish?”

I nodded. “Sure. I could walk out on top of the water and use any one of half a dozen different spells to just pull fish straight out of the water. If we were in pressing need of a lot of fish or in any particular hurry, I would. We don't need much though, and the only rush I need to put on this is to get it done before the rain gets in. I kind of need to get some practice in anyway, for when Beacon starts and we start going on overnight missions and the like.” A smirk crossed my lips as I added, “Besides, doing it that way would take all the fun out of it.”

Frowning, Penny looked highly skeptical as she said, “If you say so.”

Rolling my eyes, I came to a stop at the lake shore and Conjured a bucket, which I filled part of the way with water. The lake water was nearly crystal clear, and even in the red-orange light of the setting sun I could still make out fish of all sizes swimming in its depths. Putting my makeshift livewell and bait can to the side, I Conjured up a couple of metal folding chairs. I followed that up
with a pair of fishing rods, reels, along with the necessary lines, hooks, corks, and sinkers to use them. Leaning mine against my chair, I handed Penny the rod I'd made for her. “Here, hold it like this,” I instructed, showing her where to put her hands.

“Are you sure this is going to work?”

Admittedly, the reels didn't look like much. I wasn't sure I had a high enough level of Conjuration to make a proper spinning reel like I really wanted so I had settled for the simplest reel I knew: a set of metal discs and a handle to turn them. I hadn't used one of these since I was a kid, but I figured it was like riding a bicycle. “Yes, I'm sure. Now, bait your hook.”

Walking Penny through harpooning a defenseless worm on a hook was as much an exercise in frustration as it was good for laughs. She was oddly squeamish about it—though, considering how she reacted to me telling her to wash and reuse her clothes, I suppose I shouldn't be too terribly surprised. Once she was set, I showed her how to cast and nearly got myself impaled for my trouble. “Sorry, Jaune,” she apologized. Somehow, she didn't sound one hundred percent sincere, and I suspected it may have been payback for making her handle a worm.

“It's fine,” I waved her apology off. “Try again. Not as hard this time.”

Once she had her line cast, I set about baiting my own hook. “Jaune?” Penny asked, and when I hummed in acknowledgement, she asked, “Now what do I do?”

I shot her an amused look as I pulled back and cast my own line out several yards from where hers was. “Isn't it obvious?” I asked, and when she shook her head, I grinned and dropped into my chair. “Sit and wait.”

“That doesn't seem very fun, or very efficient,” she protested, but dropped into the chair I'd made for her anyway. The chair sank an inch into the sand under her weight, but when it didn't protest further I turned my attention back to the view of the sunset over the lake, keeping my eye on the corks as a matter of habit.

“Penny, if it were efficient, it would be called 'catching,' not 'fishing.' And it is fun, but it's also supposed to be relaxing.” Gesturing towards the lake, the sun, and the mountains I asked, “Isn't this pleasing to look at?”

“The sun is a ball of gas exploding in nuclear fusion—”
“Penny,” I interrupted gently. “You're overthinking it.”

“Yes, Jaune. It's very pretty, when I… don't overthink it,” she agreed, and I snorted softly. I had the distinct impression she had wanted to say something else there, likely along the lines of 'dumb myself down.'

I shrugged. “Get used to it. Having an appreciation for the world around us is part of what sets humans apart from animals. Sometimes, it really is nice to just sit and take a while to take it in.” Of course, there were entire swathes of people who didn't agree, but I wasn't going to tell her that.

Penny was silent for a time, and from the glow of her eyes and her sudden sitting up in her chair, I guessed she was watching the fish a little more directly than I was. Her cork dropped below the surface a moment later and she turned wide eyes on me. “Jaune, it has my hook! What do I do?”

“Pull the rod up to set the hook. No more than a couple of pounds of force—you don't want to yank the hook out of the fish,” I instructed.

The temporarily green haired girl gave the rod a swift jerk upwards before reporting, “It's still on!”

“Good. Now, reel it in. Not too fast, and if it starts moving to one side or the other, move the rod with it. And since I know you can see the bottom, try not to let it run up under something and snag the line.”

Feeling my own line twitch against my finger, I jerked reflexively and started reeling slowly, keeping my attention focused on Penny. Finally, her fish came up out of the water and the girl shot me a wide-eyed look that brought to mind the idea of the dog that's finally caught the car: 'now what do I do with it?' “It's big enough that you can lip it. Stick your thumb in its mouth,” her nose wrinkled and I laughed. “Don't give me that look, little lady. Now, stick your thumb in that fish's mouth and push the hook out, then drop him in the bucket.”

“It's slimy!” Penny complained, as she worked the hook out. “How does Blake eat these?!”

“Prepared,” I deadpanned. “You don't usually eat them with the scales and slime still on. Bucket.”
Sticking out her tongue at me, the gynoid dropped the fish in the livewell and turned to watch as I pulled in my own. While Penny's had the look of a medium sized bass, mine looked more like a perch or something similar—smaller, but just as tasty. “So,” Penny began, drawing out the word, “Do we eat now?”

I snorted softly and shook my head, dropping my own fish in the bucket. Floating the bait up to eye level, I focused on trying to bait my hook using only gravity-elemental Telekinesis. My first try was a resounding failure, but at least the poor worm I crushed to death wasn’t harpooned, drowned, and used as a last meal for a predator. I grabbed another out of the can, carefully this time. It splattered the moment I tried to stick it on the hook and I growled quietly in frustration. “Nope. Two fish aren’t going to cut it. For one person? Sure, if they’ve got enough meat on them. And while these look like they do,” I admitted. I passed Penny the can so she could grab her own as I crushed my third worm, before returning to trying to bait my hook as soon as she handed it back. “I’d still prefer at least six. Maybe eight. Enough to last tonight and for breakfast tomorrow, figuring two for each of us.”

Penny pouted, but set about baiting her hook again. Slowly, a small smile stole over her lips and she admitted quietly, “Getting the fish in was kind of fun.”

“Told you so,” I smirked, finally getting a worm onto the hook without crushing it into paste. I settled back into my seat before casting an orb of light above us since the sun had finally gone down behind the tree line.

If Penny had been squeamish about baiting the hook and touching fish, she looked positively rebellious when I handed her a conjured knife and told her to help me clean them. Once they started cooking and the smell of them hit her nose, however, she couldn’t get her fork into one fast enough. ‘Another thing I need to add to my list for Beacon: travel-safe spices. If I have to actually make and use a backpack and not just carry shit in my Inventory, then I’m going to need some basics for food prep. Salt and pepper at least, preferably red pepper too. Those shouldn’t smell overpowering if they’re closed up properly or when we cook with them. And having a good stock of spices in Inventory for when I’m not confined to a backpack would be nice. We seriously need to get space expanded bags tested and made safe, ASAP.’

With the meal finished, leftovers stored, and Conjured dishes and flatware dismissed, we made one more patrol of the train and surrounding area to make sure everything was secured and nothing had moved in while we were distracted before coming back to camp. “Brush your teeth,” I handed Penny a conjured toothbrush and dug a tube of toothpaste and a bottle of water out of my Inventory, before conjuring up my own toothbrush.

Once we were finished with that, I went to relieve myself a bit deeper in the woods before coming back and finding Penny had already made her way into the tent and slipped into the sleeping bag. I frowned as I noticed that the pair of sleeping bags I’d laid out had been zipped up together down the middle. “The others are a bad influence on you,” I sighed, unequipping enough gear to leave me in my pants and a shirt. “Did you take off your boots?”
“Mhmm!” Penny chirped, beaming up a smile at me before holding her hands out for a hug.

Rolling my eyes, and earning a raspberry in return, I slipped into the sleeping bag and let her cuddle. “So, any progress decrypting those memories?” I asked, and the girl in my arms shook her head.

“Some, but it’s slow going,” she admitted. “I guess I went through a lot of effort to make sure no one else could open them.”

“Well, keep at it. If you went to that much trouble to hide them, they’re probably important.” I left it unsaid that it could be that they were just that bad.

“Will…” Penny hesitated before looking up to meet my eyes. “Will you watch them with me, when I finish decrypting them? I don’t want to be alone when I do.”

Pulling her into a hug, which she eagerly returned, I nodded. “Yeah. Can you hold them once they’re unlocked?”

“I can keep them isolated indefinitely,” Penny answered quietly, her voice partly muffled against my chest.

That would help. It would mean I wouldn’t have to rush over every time she got close to decrypting one and we could set aside time to go over them. “Okay, just let me know when you need me.”

Reaching down to ruffle her hair, I said, “Bed time.”

“We’re not in a bed, Jaune,” Penny protested.

“You know what I meant,” I deadpanned, closing my eyes and shifting to get comfortable. It wasn’t long before rain began to patter softly against the roof above us, before picking up in intensity as wind began to shake the tent and intermittent flashes of blue lightning lit up the area even through the walls.

“Are you sure lightning won’t hit the tent?” Penny asked quietly, a hint of worry in her voice.

I snorted softly at that. “It’ll be fine, Penny.” A particularly close strike caused the girl in my arms to jump. “Probably.”
The system was unable to update! Would you like to view the Error Log?

Error Log : The Gamer Semblance v. 1. 7. 4

Rolling sleep-filled eyes around, I took in my surroundings before yesterday's events came back to me. A glance down showed Penny curled up in my arms, with her face pressed into my chest. “Good morning, Jaune,” she greeted softly.

“Morning,” I grunted, stretching in place to pop my neck and back. Glancing back at the update notification, I hummed before opening the error log and reading over its contents. 'Hrm. 'Unable to update, insufficient spirit reserve?'' I glanced at the SP bar under my HP and MP and frowned, finding it sitting in the bottom tenth but not draining. 'Wonder what happened there.'

Checking myself for negative status effects and finding none, I resigned myself to being unable to investigate it for the moment. Sighing, I unwrapped my arms from around Penny and sat up. “Mind checking the train while I get breakfast going?”

Pouting, Penny stood and equipped her boots and the rest of her armor, along with her copy of Ascalon as she stepped off the sleeping bag. “Okay, Jaune.”

Rolling my eyes at her behavior, I rolled out of bed and equipped my boots before moving outside. Rain left the fire pit an ashy, muddy hole, but everything else was intact. Some earth manipulation had the ash and mud slurry buried and fresh earth pulled to the surface, where I dropped a stack of cut firewood from Inventory. Dropping onto the log we'd left in front of the fire last night, I Conjured up a grate to cook on and lit the fire, waiting for it to burn down before I put food on it.

Yawning, I sat staring at the fire as it burned before finally deciding to have a look through my settings again. At times like these, I almost regretted not being a coffee drinker—and then I remembered exactly how foul the stuff was and promptly killed that train of thought. Soda would have to for my morning caffeine fix. Today's can was labeled as 'Schnee Cola' and tasted like some imported Coca Cola knockoff on Earth. Not terrible, but not what I was looking for. 'Could be worse. Could taste like Mountain Dew,' I mused. Judging the fire to be low enough, I pulled cleaned and prepared fish from Inventory and lifted them onto the grate with Telekinesis before settling in to wait.
“The train’s systems report everything is secure and still locked down,” Penny reported, dropping down onto the log to my left a little while later.

“Thanks, Penny.” I murmured, reaching out with Telekinesis to pull the fish off of the grate. Watching her from the corner of my eye, I teased, “Have fun last night?”

As I began conjuring up plates and cutlery, Penny tilted her head up and pouted at me. “I’m scared of lightning. And you’re a meanie.”

“Yep,” I agreed with a nod.

The redhead turned greenette frowned, tilting her head to the side for a moment in contemplation before asking, “Are you teasing me?”

My lips twitched as I fought down a smirk. “No,” I drew the word out.

“Jaune, why did that set off my sarcasm detection algorithm?” she asked, and I blinked.

“Didn’t know you had one of those.” Penny stuck her tongue out and I raised an eyebrow at that. “Did you make a joke?”

“No,” she returned, drawing the word out as I had.

Reaching over, I mussed her hair and turned my attention to finishing my breakfast. “You’re going to have to tell me which of the girls taught you how to sass, so I can have a talk with them when I get back.”

Penny turned a suspicious look on me, asking, “Jaune, will this talk lead to spanking?”

“Probably,” I admitted. Gesturing at her plate, I asked, “Now, finish your breakfast so we can head out. I figure we can range out of here a few miles until we hit Grimm, then work on skills and such and maybe get a few levels.”
“That sounds fun,” she answered, before digging into her food with machine-like efficiency as I watched.

Once she was finished, I released the mana holding our plates and cutlery together. Pushing myself up off the log, I walked away from the fire. “Come on, we’ve got until Cinder calls before we have to move again—no point wasting time sitting around.”

Picking a direction at random, we set off at a brisk pace. Opening up my map, I kept an eye on it as we moved—looking for both enemies and increased Spirit density. A little over a mile away from the southern edge of the lake, I noticed something odd—a line of light red encircling the area around the lake. ‘It's almost like looking at a sanctify effect,’ I mused. The area around the lake had a higher Spirit density, sitting at around 15% as opposed to the lake's 5%, with the boundary a rough circle centered roughly on the middle of the lake according to my map. ‘Naturally occurring safe zone, or something leftover from the meteor that made the lake?’

I could probably go poking around in the middle of the lake and find out, but if my growing suspicions were correct and there was a large deposit of Dust there, I was going to leave it be. I marked the lake on my map for later, in case I ever passed through the area again in the future, and made a mental note to keep an eye out for similar areas while in the field. If there were other natural sanctuaries out there, it would be nice to have a list of them in case I needed one—or to bring my team here if we passed through.

Slowing our pace through the trees, I frowned as I realized that even outside the field or whatever it was around the lake, Grimm seemed to be avoiding the place. ‘Good to know.’

Once the map read 20% Spirit density, I opened up an ID with the default settings. “Ready, Penny?”

“Ready, Jaune!” she chirped, and I chuckled at her enthusiasm.

Swapping into my new ‘Jaune’ armor and the weapons that came with it while Penny kept her ‘Verdi’ outfit on to get some more practice in with Ascalon, we started looking for trouble. Scouting around the ID, we found an encampment of goblins and I grinned. “This should be fun,” I murmured, reaching up to tap the button and unfold my helmet from its storage form around my neck. The display booted immediately and began highlighting everything in the area with IFF markers. A look at Penny showed her with a green circle around her head as it identified her as a friendly. I frowned at that—I hadn’t had a chance to set up the software or enter anyone onto my list of ‘friendly targets,’ so it should identify everyone with the yellow circles of potential hostiles. ‘Semblance integrated it fully, then,’ I guessed. It made sense, seeing as it painted every goblin there—numbering at 60, according to my modified HUD—Kill-on-Sight red.
Shrugging it off, I targeted the group. They were clustered around a low camp fire, eating what looked like roasted deer. The Dustcaster pattern in my coat lit up Mass Effect blue as I channeled mana, magnifying the effect as I gestured in their direction with a wave of raw gravity and intent. Six green-skinned barbarians splattered into paste as the ground cratered slightly under where they had been. Penny took off from my side, Stepping into the flank of a group of three and hitting the assisted draw. Her copy of Ascalon whipped out, describing a perfect green arc through their position and cleaving bodies in its wake.

’Wind Dust?’ I wondered, observing the blade for a second as she pivoted and rammed it into another goblin's skull. Instead of pulling the sword out, she pushed it deeper as she stepped forward, then yanked it out length-wise through the goblin's skull, the serrated back side of that blade taking bits and pieces of meat and bone with it and leaving behind a ruined mess as she moved on to the next target. I knew the sword could hold up to eight different d8 sized Dust crystals to power the Colorless blade—it had been one of the big reasons why I'd opted for that type of Dust for the blade, since it would mean I wouldn't have to lug around a single blade of each different type of Dust and it could be swapped on the fly. I just preferred to use red or yellow for the heat or electrical effects. I needed to branch out in my experimentation with it, it seemed.

’Speaking of experimentation,’ I mused, focusing and channeling gravity around me. Flash Step combined with gravity elemental mana got me a bastardized version of the biotic Charge, sending me flying into a group of three more gobs, slamming into the one in the middle and coming to a dead stop as I dumped momentum into it. What was left looked like a truck had hit it as it went flying away. Leading shield first, I tried out another skill backed up with gravity—Shield Bash—and was rewarded with a skill creation notification for a short range AoE named Nova. The remaining two level 30 goblins flew away from me in bits and pieces, floating around the area where they would stay until the gravity effect wore off. A look at the popup showed that I didn't actually need to use Shield Bash to initiate it, for which I was thankful, but that combining the two gave a significant boost to damage.

A roar from behind me drew my attention to a group of six charging my position with spears raised. A gesture sent a Shockwave into the middle of them, scattering them and sending them flying. Dropping a Singularity on them while they were still airborne yanked them violently back into a cluster, while tossing a Warp on top of the mess promptly ended their lives as a fine mist. Thankful I was far enough to avoid blood spray, I looked around for more targets. Spotting a lone gob running away from my position, I picked it up with a Pull and targeted a group nearby for a Throw combo. The goblin spun through the air, its neck and spine snapping audibly as it impacted with its comrades and sent the middle of their group of ten falling to the ground. Penny was there an instant later, dropping out of Flash Step above them to send Aura Strikes flying down into their ranks, leaving behind a bloody mess in her wake.

An arrow hit Penny's lower back and bounced off. Turning and catching sight of the ranged attacker—and two of his buddies—I focused Mana and gravity in my hand. I needed an accurate ranged attack faster and cheaper to cast than Gravity Round, even if it didn't do as much damage—hell, preferably if it didn't do as much damage, since I needed to be able to use some skills on friendlies during training without accidentally killing them. Throwing the attack like I would a baseball, a
Lance streaked out in a deformed sphere, speeding across the distance and catching the goblin I'd targeted in the head. Its head rocked back as the attack detonated, sending it flying into the air for a few feet before crashing back down on the ground. I finished them off with a Singularity and Warp combo and turned in time to get my shield up as something large smashed into it.

Reacting instinctively, I squeezed the trigger in my left hand twice, letting the semi-auto shotgun built into the shield speak for me as I jumped back to clear space. Hitting the ground, I shifted around to see just what it was I'd aggro'd, finding a massive goblin—easily twice my height and thrice that in width—standing there holding a burning club.

Goblin King

Level: 40

I was a bit annoyed that it had managed to block the shotgun blasts with the club, especially since I had inadvertently made its weapon a bit more dangerous in doing so. 'Can't be running around without my Shield spells,' I mused, casting a Shield using gravity elemental Mana. The bubbles formed around me and I frowned as I felt lighter. King Gob rolled forward, pulling back for a grand slam with that flaming club and I brought my physical shield up again. The club caught my Shield spell and, instead of breaking through or stopping dead, sent me flying back.

Striking a tree, I was sent pinballing away at an angle. A glance down showed my feet hovering an inch or so off the ground while the shield spell rolled around me. Reaching out to grab the Mana inside it, I focused on making it move how I wanted. A moment later, my path curved to the left, bringing me back towards King Gob. He swung at me again and this time I was ready, allowing the shields to drop as I dropped into a slide under the massive club. Rolling to my feet, I drew one of my Blazefire Sabers, shifting it into sword form as I moved to stab his protruding gut. 'Really need to figure out how keep impacts to gravity elemental shields from pinballing me. Potentially useful for making space away from something, and my shields didn't take nearly as much damage since most of the force was converted into motion, but if it happens all the time I'll be flying all over the place. Maybe increase my specific gravity and anchor it to the ground or something. Note to self: get Penny to help experiment later.'

The second Saber flew out of its holster, shifting under the direction of Telekinesis as I flipped the laser sight on and targeted his legs. Opening up a burst, I grinned when his thigh and knee froze over. The Saber in my right hand buried itself in his gut, a wave of stinking smoke spewing out as the sword punched through its leather armor and began burning everything it touched. Pulling the sword out as he dropped his club to grab at his wounded gut, I whipped it down and struck the frozen knee. Ice hissed and shattered and my blade neatly sliced through the area just below the knee joint. King Gob toppled like a felled tree.
The goblin king's agonized squealing came to a wet, squelching end as I crushed its head with gravity. A look up showed Penny ramming Ascalon, now in full pole-sword form, through a trio of gobs and lifting them over her head. The impaled goblins writhed as she brought the weapon down and I winced as it crushed and cut its way free of two of them. The third, however, had been shoved far enough up the blade to actually slip onto the shaft it was attached to. Penny spent a moment shaking the pole-sword, trying to get the thing off before finally rearing back and slinging the weapon horizontally, sending the goblin impaled on it sliding off and splattering against a nearby tree. Seeing she had my attention, she beamed a smile my direction. “I think that's all of them!”

“I think so too,” I agreed. “Let's loot them and move on to the next area.” I planned to circle the lake, so we wouldn't stray too far from the train.

Potions and paper Lien in Inventory and my Shiro gear back on, I closed the ID and we began circling eastward. “So,” I began, casting a look at Penny, “how are you getting along with the others? Are they treating you well?” Not that I didn't trust Neo and the twins to do exactly that, but I'd noticed our ideas of treating Penny well may differ in significant ways.

“I think we're getting along well,” Penny answered, smiling up at me. “Everyone has been so nice. It's like… having a family.”

With a quiet chuckle, I nodded. “That it is.”

“I think Miltia, Melanie, and especially Neo are up to something, though,” she said, and I nodded.

“Knowing those three? Definitely.” They were doing their best to corrupt Penny in subtle ways. Thankfully, it didn't seem to have borne much fruit yet. Not that I was going to try too hard to stop them, so long as it remained harmless fun. I would have to keep an eye on it just to be sure they didn't go too far, though.

“And Ruby is the bestest friend ever! She lets me sleep over at her house.”

I raised an eyebrow at the wording. “‘Bestest?’ Where did you pick that word up?”

“Ruby used it!” the gynoid happily sold out her 'bestest' friend.

“Of course she would corrupt your vocabulary,” I murmured, shaking my head. “Do you have fun?”
“Mhmm!” Penny chirped. “She gives the best hugs! They last all night.”

‘So Ruby’s a really grabby sleeper,’ I assessed. Not that I would complain over much if it helped her sleep.

Before I could say anything, Penny tilted her head to the side and continued with, “Except when she has a nightmare. Then she goes to Yang’s room.”

Frowning under my mask, I asked, “How often does that happen?”

“I'm not sure,” Penny shrugged. “A few times when I've slept over, though.” Pausing, she turned worried eyes on me and asked, “You do not think I am the reason—”

“I doubt it, Penny. Otherwise she wouldn't hug you all night, let alone let you sleep over,” I denied. “I'll ask her when I find a good time.”

“I am glad I don’t have nightmares,” Penny sighed. “I don't see how you do it. You close your eyes and sleep for eight hours and your brain does weird things and you dream. It sounds an awful lot like going temporarily insane.”

Snorting softly, I reached out and scratched the top of her head. “It kind of is,” I deadpanned. “For most people, dreams are either random or subconscious things rearing their heads.”

“Most people?” Penny asked, moving closer to lean against my side as we walked.

“Some people can direct their dreams,” I clarified.

Penny hummed, looking up at me from the corner of her eye. “Can you?”

I shrugged. “Not with any reliability. Mine are usually pretty normal, unless I'm bored or reading a good book or something. Occasionally, I'll go to bed with a story in mind and dream that, but it doesn't happen often. Very rarely, I'll actually realize I'm dreaming and be able to change things.”
“Do you have nightmares?” she asked, and I nodded.

“Very rarely, but they do happen.” Once every few years or so, really. I hadn't actually had one since coming to Remnant, for which I was grateful. “But those are easy to deal with. They’re just nightmares. You shake them off and keep going. No, the ones I hate are—were—the ones where I was happy.”

Penny blinked, turning to look up at me as she asked, “Why would you hate dreaming about being happy?”

“Because you wake up,” I answered softly. Wanting to move away from that line of questioning, I asked, “You don't dream?”

The gynoid hummed before shrugging. “You could call it dreaming. My mind reviews the day and looks for lessons I can learn from it, then correlates that data with what I already know.”

(Is that how a learning AI works?) I wondered. I could see it, but I had to wonder if it was a need to sleep or if it just made things easier. “Penny, do you need to sleep?”

“Nope!” she chirped. “I like to, though. It's nice to spend time with everyone. Even if you are all unconscious and temporarily insane. Sleeping helps, but I could perform those functions awake in the background for a few hours a day. Even doing them at night while everyone sleeps, I’m fully aware of my surroundings.”

“Lucky you,” I shook my head. “I still need to test the limits of my Semblance and see how long I can go without. Somehow, that plan always seems to get foiled…”

Penny snorted softly. “Neo, Melanie, and Miltia enjoy cuddles too much to let you stay out all night.”

“Point,” I acknowledged. Checking my map, I found we'd gone far enough to make it to another pocket of denser Spirit. “Ready for round two?”

“Yep!”

Making an ID, I swapped armor again and set about practicing the skills I would be using for Beacon. I would need to check on those soon, along with the rest of my skills, to see where
everything stood but it could wait for a while. Idly, I wondered when Cinder was planning to text me to let me know when and where to move the train.

Looking at my map, I frowned. We were in the middle of BFE on a lonely stretch of track in the woods, deep in Grimm-infested territory. Between the two of us, we likely didn't make much of a target for the creatures, but the danger was still present. With the sun setting, shadows stretched long and every time the wind blew I swore I saw Grimm between the trees. My Semblance told me it was my mind playing tricks on me, seeing as it wasn't actually picking up anything in the immediate vicinity. I had lived around and grown up playing in deep woods my entire life on Earth—not nice, open forests with clear lines of sight and lots of visibility, but dense, dark woods. I was comfortable in them. This, on the other hand, set my teeth on edge.

“Are you sure this is the place?” Penny asked, and from her tone, I could tell I wasn't the only one feeling a bit put off.

I nodded. “Yeah. No one here, so I guess we wait. While we're here, Penny, would you mind going ahead and summoning the Bullhead?”

“Sure, Jaune. Where do you want me to put it?” she asked, and I frowned, looking over the terrain.

“Think you can put it on that service road next to the tracks?” I asked, pointing off to our left. The road in question was more of a trail, really—two parallel ruts worn into the ground beside the tracks and partly covered in gravel to keep them from washing out, likely used by ground vehicles to service the tracks without actually traveling on the tracks.

“Maybe,” she hemmed. “It's kind of small, but I'll try.”

Sending her a smile and a nod, I jumped up to take a seat on the roof of the engine where I could keep a better eye on our surroundings, and because I didn't particularly feel comfortable standing around at ground level. “If Cinder comes along, I don't want her wondering how we got here in the first place,” I explained, before settling in to wait.

'More fucking waiting,' I grumbled at the thought. I had spent most of yesterday killing things while waiting for Cinder to finally text me, and when she did the answer she'd sent had simply been coordinates and a time. We had made camp on the train last night and spent most of today getting here. Being made to wait again—especially somewhere that set me on edge like this place did—was beginning to wear my patience thin. It was nothing like the relaxing little valley we'd spent the first
night in. *At least I can go back if I ever get the chance.*

Eventually, lights moving in the distance caught my eye and I frowned. “Well, if that's not her, someone's about to lose a few minutes of time,” I mused aloud.

Presently, the quiet hum of a Dust engine and the crunch of tires rolling over gravel reached my ears and I stood, hopping down from the top of the engine to meet our guest as the vehicle slowed—Penny dropping down silently beside me. Headlights shut off and I got my first good look at the vehicle. In all honesty, it reminded me of an old-fashioned Willys Jeep, with its narrow body, high ground clearance, and rugged all-terrain tires—the only difference being, this was clearly designed with Grimm in mind, as the vehicle was sealed on all sides and all the windows were backed with what looked like some sort of wire mesh. Idly, I wondered how effective that would be against a determined Grimm. *Probably not very, against anything bigger than a Beowolf. Even then, probably not much good against a particularly determined Beowolf, either. Likely, its advantage is speed and being able to navigate rough terrain. The enclosure may just be to prevent things from reaching in to snag the driver and passengers.*

The driver's door opened and Cinder slid out, all long legs and smiles. “Shiro. You came through for me.”

“That's what you pay me for,” I shrugged. “Though there were some complications.”

The dark haired woman frowned. “Oh? What sort of complications?”


Cinder's face lost all expression and she calmly asked, “You killed them?”

“No, I spanked them and sent them to bed without supper,” I rolled my eyes. “Considering I knew you were looking to use this to buy their services, I figured it would look bad if we delivered it to them after killing their people to keep it.”

“Thank you for the consideration, but I do not think most White Fang leaders value their subordinates the way you or I do,” she sighed.

“Probably not,” I shrugged. “Funny thing, though—they said they weren't working for Taurus.”
Cinder blinked, before her eyes narrowed. “Filthy animals can't even coordinate between cells properly,” she muttered, shaking her head. When she saw my raised eyebrow, she rolled her eyes. “I don't hate faunus individually—some of them are useful. As a group, however... there are two kinds of faunus.”

“White Fang and everyone else?” I asked, and she shook her head.

“Those who try and those who try not. The first group is responsible for things like Menagerie being the leading producer of media for Remnant.” I blinked at that, but refrained from commenting. I'd have to ask the girls later, though. It didn't mesh with what Blake had told me about Menagerie, at all—meaning somebody was mistaken, somewhere. Things could have changed since she'd left, certainly, but this sounded more like a well-established industry—meaning more than the five or so years since Blake had been on her own.

“The second group complains about what they've been given and demands more. They were given their own island nation at the end of the Great War, in order to make peace and ensure they wouldn't revolt. Certainly, it was couched in terms of being a reward—somewhere, in the words of their own leaders, easily defensible for them to make a utopia free from oppression and with as much, or as little, human influence as they wanted… but the truth of the matter was, with the faunus as a racially united force composed entirely of active-Aura fighters and every human nation strained near to the breaking point by the war, they could have crippled or destroyed either Vale or Vacuo and there wouldn't have been much the other could do about it. And it's not like Mantle or Mistral would've lifted a finger to help people who had just defeated them.”

All of this was new to me—and again made the point that I desperately needed to crack open a history book, soon. I had hopes that Beacon would give me the chance. Cinder had not stopped talking, however, so I didn't have time to think too long on it. “What is now known as Menagerie was once home to a great civilization which was wiped out after an undersea quake created a series of tsunamis that destroyed their coastal cities a few years before the Great War. Everything inland fell to the Grimm and the survivors scattered. After the war, the first generation of immigrants to Menagerie looked on their new land and saw a lush, fertile island covered in usable housing—even if it would require a little repair and maintenance. Later generations saw only a tomb. It's generated a victim complex amongst those younger generations, making many of them absolutely useless—for themselves and to their race as a whole.”

“I've seen it,” I nodded. “So, what do you want to do about it?”

“Well, we can't kill them all, some of them are actually useful,” she deadpanned, before a faint smile twitched her lips upwards. “As to the train, however—short them on the money I offered. Charge them for failing to keep their organization under control.” Molten gold eyes cut to my right, where
Penny stood observing her. “Who's your friend?”

I glanced down at Penny. We had spent a while talking about it before I'd finally found something Penny agreed with. “Verdigris,” the color copper turned when it tarnished— the same color as her hair, at the moment.

Raising an eyebrow, Cinder hummed but didn't comment. “Do you have the manifest?”

Resisting the urge to roll my eyes, I dug into my side pouch and pulled out the document in question. I had been surprised that they had gone to such great lengths to keep this shipment secret that they had even resorted to paper for indexing the train's contents as opposed to using a scroll with network functionality disabled. Taking the manifest, Cinder pulled out her own scroll and began tapping in things. “Let's have a look at what we got,” she said, gesturing towards the train.

We walked through the cars as Cinder visually inspected everything and this time, I did roll my eyes. “Checking to make sure I didn't pilfer anything?”

“Well,” she murmured, sending me a teasing smirk, “you are a thief.”

“Point taken,” I shrugged.

“But no, I want to make sure the manifest matches the cargo before I hand this off to the White Fang. This way, there can be no confusion as to just how much I've paid for their services,” the woman answered.

Nearly two hours later, Cinder announced we were done. “Take the contents of cars... twenty-six through thirty-five as payment. Car thirty carries only attack drones, however, so take care not to activate those. In fact, I'd appreciate it if you made sure those found their way to me,” she said, and I hummed as I took the manifest back and looked it over.

I did some mental math and frowned. “Assuming it's evenly distributed, that's a bit more than my cut,” I pointed out, and Cinder shrugged.

“You've earned it, with this job.”

Remembering something that had been lurking at the back of my thoughts since the mission began, I
said, “I should charge for more for this job, but it’s not polite or professional to try to change a deal you’ve already agreed to.”

“Oh?” Cinder hummed, raising one fine eyebrow. “And thank you for that. Acknowledging that you made a mistake in negotiations can be… difficult,” she said, and I had the feeling she was speaking from experience, “but sticking to a deal, even if you’ve shorted yourself, tends to go over better than making demands later—which tends to get one killed. Your mistake was in leading with the figure you wanted when haggling over the pay—it could only go down from there.”

“That’s what I get for playing straight with you as a courtesy to a business partner,” I shrugged. A flicker of surprise crossed her face before she quickly smothered it. Deciding to let that one pass, I asked, “So, why weren’t there Hunters on guard duty? I was kind of expecting there to be.”

Molten gold eyes met my red and a sardonic smile crossed her lips. “Please. You think the fools at the bank trust anyone they haven’t bought and paid for to ship their money? No, they are far less trusting than even you or I.”

“So you weren’t actually expecting Hunters,” I deadpanned.

The red-clad woman smirked. “I said the possibility existed. It’s why I agreed to twenty percent—for the risk of dealing with Hunters, under the assumption that you wouldn’t have to. Factoring in the certainty that you would see combat with at least one non-Hunter security detail and possibly droids, I came out ahead.”

Throwing her an unamused look, mostly lost under my mask, I said, “Definitely charging more next time, now that I know what sort of margins you’re looking at.”

“The up side is, you’re still walking away with enough for most people to retire comfortably on.” Pausing a moment, she frowned before adding, “As for your payment, you might want to just decouple them and take the cars. I imagine you wouldn’t want to hang around and attempt to claim your cut with the Fang on site. There is every chance that someone could get greedy.”

“I see,” I murmured. “Verdi, let's see about getting these things uncoupled and getting one of ours ready for air transport. I think we've got some ratchet straps in the Bullhead. We can make a few trips to move them one at a time if we have to.” We wouldn't. I'd be loading them into Inventory, but Cinder didn’t need to know that.

Penny, or Verdigris rather, nodded and answered with a quiet, “Understood.”
Thinking on it, Cinder quickly added, “And could you do me the favor of decoupling them at car twenty-five? You’ll leave one through twenty-five here with the engine and leave the rest for the White Fang, minus your cut. I can come back for them when we’re done.”

“I couldn’t get you to haul mine for me, could I?” I asked.

Cinder considered the question for a moment before answering, “They aren’t going to Vale.”

“Ah. Yeah, no, don’t want my share running off across the country somewhere. I’ll back it up onto a spur and use a Bullhead when I get a chance.”

Once we’d disconnected the cars at the proper locations, we set about visibly preparing the first cargo container for transport under Cinder's occasional watchful gaze when she wasn't absorbed in her scroll. Digging around in the Bullhead, we quickly found a set of nylon and steel weave ratchet straps rated for heavy loads. Once we had those, I guided Penny over the first cargo container, where she touched down without so much as a bump. Thankfully, the train was using a type of modular cargo container, meant to be easily fitted to a base structure such as a truck or rail transport bed and locked into place, then unlocked and lifted off once on site. Like their Earth counterparts, those containers were meant to be stacked on top of one another—meaning the weight of the Bullhead was far less than the loads they were rated for. Once we had moved the car full of droids around and re-linked it to the part of the train Cinder was claiming, I tracked her down to where she had gone to wait in her Jeep clone—which, once I got closer, I could see was marked as a Crawler.

She shut off her scroll as I approached and I raised an eyebrow at that, but didn't say anything. “What next?”

“With the cars disconnected, the White Fang are to be given the remainder.” Her eyes lost their usual smoldering look, in place of calculation as she asked, “You don't suppose I could trouble you for delivery, do you?”

Blinking, I pointed at the train. “It's not delivered now?”

“No,” Cinder shook her head. “I made sure you would be several miles away from the Fang to keep them from stumbling across you and simply taking the train. And while I have no doubt you and your little accomplice could handle their rank and file, I am unsure how you would match up against Adam Taurus in a sword fight.” Pulling out a paper map of the area, she pointed to a circled spot to the north. “They are camped here.” She moved her finger an inch or so over eastward, “And the
nearest tracks are here.”

“So, how were you planning to convince them to take the train as payment and not simply kill us and take it?” I asked, raising an eyebrow.

The dark haired woman twitched a smirk at me before reaching down and turning the key in the Crawler's ignition. “Leave that to me. Go ahead and get the train moving. Stop a mile or so from that point and wait for my signal to begin moving, then approach slowly.” 'That point' turned out to be marked on the map as a destroyed town the rail line passed through, whose name was long since forgotten. That was fine with me, however, since my Map interface would be able to spot it.

Frowning I asked, “You're aiming to make a spectacle of this, aren't you?”

“Why Shiro, I have no idea what you mean,” she demurred, but I caught the look in her eyes that said otherwise.

“Fine, I'll help you put on this dog and pony show, but you owe me. Shifting some cargo around is a favor, but theater is outside the scope of our original agreement,” I deadpanned.

Red lips curved up into a sinfully sexy smirk and molten gold eyes locked with my red. “I'm sure we can negotiate something. I'll text you when I'm ready for you.”

“What about the other section?” I asked.

Shrugging, Cinder answered, “It can be programmed to follow a specific route, correct?” I cast a glance at Penny, who nodded. Cinder followed the exchange with her eyes, smirking when I turned my gaze back on her. “I'll deal with it later.”

Once the Crawler had pulled away, I turned to Penny. “Come on, let's go. We need to move our cars to a rail spur nearby, then I need you to bring our Bullhead with one of those cars so we can avoid questions.”

“Jaune, is it my imagination, or is your Semblance starting to create more work for you in trying to disguise it?” Penny asked, and I shrugged.
"Not any more than usual. Situations like this, where we have to visually move something, are the exception still—not the rule."

I slipped back into the forward engine, then set the train moving while Penny moved into the Bullhead to follow. Really, there wasn't much to the controls on these things—throttle, brakes, controls for remote-operated switching stations ahead of the train so the driver could move to other tracks, speed readout, map, and a variety of sensors for the operation and maintenance of the engines themselves. The only thing I had to really keep in mind was that this much mass would never be able to stop on a dime, so I had to brake early if I needed to stop for anything. Settling into the driver's chair, I sighed quietly and glanced at the map. “More waiting.”

It was well and truly dark by the time my scroll finally chimed with a message from Cinder to move the train up the tracks from where I'd parked it the second time. Penny stood beside me, having left the Bullhead behind a ways so we could come back to it once we were done with the drop off. As the train slowed to a stop for what would hopefully be the last time for us, I shifted my gaze out the window and caught sight of a crowd of faunus as the light from the engine passed over them. Many of them were looking somewhat worse for wear, but there were a few who were not. Of those, one in particular stood out.

Adam Taurus

The Beast

Level: 50

The title was about what I had expected. His level, however, was surprising. Even if it was just an estimate of his suppressed level, it wasn't astronomically out of my reach. While he could probably stomp my ass in a fair fight, I had made it a habit not to fight fair. In my mind, I ranked him as around Mercury or Emerald on the threat rating scale—potentially dangerous, but not immediately lethal.

Cutting off the engine completely and casting the area into darkness, I realized that was a potential tactical mistake in the making and flipped my glasses on—their built-in night vision evening the playing field between me and the faunus there and doing more to hide my face than just using my normal face mask. Leading the way out of the forward engine, I dropped to the ground and held out a hand to help Penny down. Not that it was really needed, but it was the polite thing to do and I was not above sending subtle messages—namely that I treated my people well. The sound of a Bullhead approaching drew my eyes skyward for a moment, before shifting to my minimap. The three icons there told me all I needed to know about who had shown up—a green diamond, a winged boot in black, and a circular three tomo pattern in black with a white center. I knew there was a name for the specific symbol, but I had never bothered looking it up. It didn't matter either way, since I
intimately knew who it belonged to. 'Not seeing Roman's jack o' lantern though, so either he didn't come with them or something went wrong.'

I would get the story out of Neo soon enough. For now, it could wait—we had more important matters to take care of. Namely, the White Fang eyeing the Bullhead—along with Cinder, Penny, and I—suspiciously as it touched down several yards up from the train. Emerald was the first off the Bullhead as the engines spun down, followed a moment later by Mercury. Finally, Neo came strolling down the ramp and sent me a grin as she sauntered over twirling her opened parasol. Leaning into my side, she slapped the weapon shut and placed it tip-down on the ground. The message there was clear—Neo was with me. I did not fail to notice her finger hovering over the trigger to deploy the blade I knew was hidden in the end of it. I sent her a party request and set up a link as she settled in.

'I'm glad you're back safe. Where's Roman?' I asked.

The shorter girl shook her head minutely. *The entire situation was a cluster fuck. Grimm swarmed the prison before Roman was set to be transferred. We went in to look but he was gone—as were most of the prisoners.*

I frowned under my mask, but I couldn't really find it in me to be annoyed over losing Roman. I was more upset that Neo had wandered into a prison under attack by Grimm than I was that that clown Roman may have been eaten. *Cinder is going to be annoyed, but to be honest, this is probably a win for us. He's out of the way for good and I didn't have to kill him myself so there's nothing pointing back to us on this.* I kept that to myself, however—I didn't know if Neo would understand the lengths I went to to get her, or the lengths I was willing to go to keep her.

Shifting my attention to Cinder, I saw an emotion I couldn't place flash across her face where she had been watching Neo and I, there and gone before I could get a read on it. Hitting her with Observe showed only 'irritation, impatience, expectation.' Whatever it was, it was gone now. She turned her eyes on Mercury and Emerald before looking back to the Bullhead. I saw a brief look of irritation from her as she realized Roman wasn't there, before she schooled her expression into something more neutral and moved to stand before the train, Emerald and Mercury moving to flank her. Emerald looked as though she wanted to say something, but a look from Cinder silenced her. “As you can see, I make good on my promises.”

Adam snorted softly and I got the feeling there was more to that than a simple promise to deliver resources in exchange for their services. Knowing Cinder, it was probably also a threat, along the lines of a promise to kill them if they betrayed her. Or maybe that was my own ideals coloring my assessment. Then again, this was a woman who had gone out of her way to orchestrate our groups showing up at the same time for the visual effect and implications. It was an obvious message of *'This is just some of what I can call on,'* along with the train itself standing as evidence as to what we—because she was attempting to include myself, Neo, and now Penny in that—were capable of. It
was pretty much textbook psychological warfare—presenting a strong, united front to a potential ally will make them more likely to align themselves to your goals. The reasoning being, if you can get someone else to follow you, then you were someone *worth* following.

Adam moved away from the main body of his group of White Fang, two of the least injured breaking off to follow. “We'll see. Show me the cargo.”

*Too bad you don’t get to keep it, fuck face.* I’d had plenty of time to think about it and come up with a solution to giving the White Fang a large stockpile of cash over the last few days. I had created and leveled up a tracking spell, **Homing Beacon**, to stick on the train. Since I hadn’t known how Cinder would divvy up the cars and could only cast the spell on one target at the moment, I had held off until the last possible minute. Now, the spell was anchored to the floor of the engine and anywhere the train went, it would show up on my map for the next thirty days.

I didn’t think anyone in the White Fang could detect magic, but I didn’t want to try it with Cinder nearby—I didn’t know what sort of benefits being partly a Maiden would give her. Ozpin had warned me that it was magic, so if she could detect magic being cast nearby I was boned if I tried—which was why I had cast it as soon as she’d left in the Crawler to go meet up with Adam. *Problem is, they practice decent OpSec, so infiltrating to steal or destroy it without having the finger pointed at me will be hard. Sure, the Fox could get away with destroying it, but I'd like to avoid the attention for the moment if at all possible,*' I mused as our little group followed behind the other six, joining Adam and his two selected White Fang in the train car.

Ahead, Adam had begun inspecting the contents of the first car. “Where's the manifest?” he demanded, shifting his masked gaze between myself and Cinder.

“Lost while taking the train,” Cinder shrugged.

“Those things are kept in a fireproof safe,” the red-haired faunus deadpanned.

“Yes, they are,” I agreed. I’d been very careful in cutting into that safe, to prevent the contents from being destroyed. “Why don't you ask your people? Five of them boarded the train while we were in transit. We lost track of two of them for a while when we were dealing with the other three. They were gone when we got rid of the others, so I assume they bolted.”

“My people?” Adam parroted, and I could hear a growing undercurrent of frustration and anger in his voice. Of course, I should have expected the indignant attitude towards any variation of the phrase 'you people,' but I didn't give a rat's ass about people whose feelings would be hurt by referring to their group—be it an organization, gender, or race. On the other hand, this wasn't Earth,
where leftists screamed and raised a stink. Where the worst they would usually do was try to get someone fired by tossing around slap-words like 'racism' or 'sexism.' This was Remnant, where if I didn't watch my mouth, odds were good that Adam's butthurt would lead to him trying to bury his sword in my guts—and then Penny and Neo would kill him before I could do it myself, and Cinder would be upset. Best to avoid it altogether.

“They were White Fang. They were in the area. They were not under your control, then?” I asked, hoping that tweaking his pride would redirect his anger. Redirection was much easier than diffusing it, and backing down or apologizing would make me look weak, which was something I didn’t need here.

The man's grip tightened on the sheath of Wilt and Blush. My own thumb slid up to the button for assisted draw, but I kept my free hand off Ascalon's hilt. Signals over our links from Penny and Neo let me know they were both prepared to act. After a moment, Adam growled and turned away, his coat flaring outwards as he stalked into the next train car and Cinder followed, Mercury and Emerald trailing her, with myself, Neo, and Penny trailing behind them. Three human shields between us and Adam would give us a second to get away should he actually snap, but I doubted he would. ‘Better safe than sorry. Besides, pretty sure Cinder could spank him at this point, and he’d have to get through her to get to us.’

Adam dug out his scroll before turning to one of his people. “Go gather the men. I want this done tonight.”

“Yes, boss,” the smaller of the two lieutenants nodded, scurrying off to go relay the order.

“In addition to the train is a large stockpile of Dust, stored outside of Vale. I will send you the coordinates later,” Cinder began. Looking up from his scroll, Adam turned to shoot us a glare and cut off whatever else Cinder was going to say.

“We'll deal with it later. For now, I think you should leave.”

*Power* filled the suddenly small-seeming train car, the air growing warmer as a breeze kicked up out of nowhere. I noticed that the ambient light in the room had gone up as well, with Cinder apparently as its source given how Adam and his remaining lieutenant were lit in an eerie orange light. I couldn’t see its source since I was behind her, but I remembered her left eye had glowed the same color when she had stolen Amber’s power—so I was pretty sure she was pulling on her Maiden powers to put on a show. Then, just as suddenly as it had come, it was gone. “You would do well to remember who it is you're working with, Adam. My patience is a finite resource and it is running dangerously low at the moment.” Under his mask, I caught Taurus's eyes narrowing, but he nodded slowly. Once she was sure he was sufficiently cowed, Cinder turned away and strode towards the car's exit, glass heels clicking loudly against the metal flooring in the near silence. “We'll leave you to
it, then.” As she left, she turned a piercing stare on him before adding, “I'll be in touch.”

Following Cinder's lead, I urged my own group out after her. I was leery of turning my back to Adam, but it seemed he had enough sense not to try to backstab us—at least, not literally and not yet. Betrayal would come eventually with that one, though. 'Assuming he lives that long. Cinder may have just signed his death warrant,' I gave a mental shrug at the thought. The world would be a better place without scum like that floating around, so if he pissed her off enough to kill him, I wouldn't have any fucks to give on the matter.

We followed Cinder in silence as we moved away from the train, towards the Bullhead Neo, Mercury, and Emerald had arrived on. Looking around, I wondered where she had left the Crawler. Opening the Map, I zoomed in and looked for nearby vehicles, finding it parked at what I supposed was the White Fang camp—meaning they had cut through the woods to get here instead of taking the road. Humming in thought, I made a mental note to come claim it later. If she didn't want it, I'd take it myself. Once the hatch was sealed and we were in the air, I turned to the woman sitting in the pilot's seat. “He was pleasant.”

“Quite,” Cinder replied. “But dealing with Taurus is a necessary evil. We need the manpower the White Fang brings with it. Regardless of how irritating they are to deal with.”

I shrugged. “If you say so. Personally, I don't think the guy's stable and if there are other White Fang operatives running around the area outside of his chain of command, then he's obviously failing as a leader.”

“As a cell leader, he is a blunt instrument. Every problem is a nail needing to be hammered down.” The woman beside me shot me an amused look. “Unless you meant to imply that Adam Taurus is the leader of the White Fang?”

Frowning at that, I shrugged and rolled for bullshit. “No, but I know at least one former White Fang member who does.”

Cinder hummed at that. “I might like to meet them, at some point. But no, only the White Fang under Adam would believe he is their leader.” She paused long enough to shoot me a knowing look. If only someone under Adam would believe he was their leader, then I'd just narrowed down the list of suspects as to who it could be. Shit. “He broke off his group into a splinter cell and is aiming to kill and replace the current leader of the White Fang who is what you would call a moderate—at least on the surface. I don't think anyone knows what her true goals and motivations are. Her actions and stance to date have portrayed her as someone willing to work with humans, but who is unwilling to back down when it comes to getting what she wants for faunus. She claims every group performing violent acts is a splinter cell, outside the control of the majority of the White Fang—so called 'radicalized faunus' who have strayed from the path and gone too far. In reality, there is no way she is not aware of their movements. My theory is, she is using them as her militant arm and every one of
those cells knows that once they go active, she will disavow them.”

“Makes sense,” I agreed, though I was annoyed that Cinder had not provided me a name. That she hadn't implied that she expected me to know it, which was irritating—more common knowledge that I didn't have. And if I asked, I’d just be confirming that I didn’t know. More research I needed to do, and fast. “It gives her plausible deniability.”

“Quite,” Cinder agreed. “As to Taurus, he's a terrorist. Of course he isn't stable,” she said, a bit of disdain coloring her tone. It seemed even other criminals disliked working with terrorists—probably because they were bad for business. Not to mention there was that whole 'zealot' thing most terror groups had—a 'with us or against us' mentality, where everyone but their own was an enemy.

The Bullhead slowed as it neared the spot where Penny had parked our own transport out of here. “We'll take care of the other train and move the cargo to a secure location. Expect to reconvene for debriefing over what exactly happened in the attempt to free Roman later tonight. I'll send you a text when I'm ready.”

“We'll be there,” I agreed, pushing up out of the copilot's seat and moving to the back, where Neo had already hit the door controls. Penny, Neo, and I dropped out of the hovering Bullhead and hit the ground below as Cinder pulled off and headed to deal with the train. As soon as she departed, my Semblance chimed and I grinned at the quest completion notification and the level up the experience provided. That made three levels gained during this little sojourn—once on the train, once killing mobs with Penny while leveling my skills, and just now for quest completion.

Turning to Neo and Penny, I shot the pair a grin. “It'll take them a few minutes to get those things secured, so we've got some time.”

“Oh? Time for what, Shiro?” Neo asked, slipping into my arms and reaching up to pull my glasses off and yank my mask down, before standing on her tiptoes and kissing me.

Reluctantly breaking the kiss a few moments later, I shook my head. “Not that, sadly.”

“Aww, I wanted a kiss too,” Penny pouted.

Resisting the urge to roll my eyes, I planted a peck on her forehead, earning a beaming smile as I did. “So,” Neo caught my attention, a grin on her face as she asked, “How much did we get?”

Resisting the urge to smirk I said, in my most innocent voice, “Oh, not much. About two hundred
“Two hun—” Neo echoed, stopping mid-word. “Your part of the take was twenty percent…”

“Give or take,” I nodded. “Cinder gave me a bit of a bonus for not fucking up and taking care of some White Fang.”

“Jaune,” she began, leaning on me as she suddenly grew weak in the knees. Holding her against me, I felt her quivering faintly. “Jaune, you… you duped it, didn't you?”


“Oh sweet Dust, I just came,” she whispered. “I don't think I can make it back to Vale, my love. We might need to make a detour.”

“Nah, you'll be fine,” I chuckled.

Neo shot me an annoyed look before sighing. “I can't even be annoyed with you being an ass with numbers like that floating around. Speaking of numbers, you left before we could find out what Dumbo dropped.”

I hummed, opening up my Inventory. “Mats, obviously. Four tusks and eight bolts of hide, all of them with huge defense and strength bonuses, and large WIS bonuses. Money, but who's counting? Sadly, a lot of it burned up at some point,” I sighed. Apparently, drops weren't invulnerable to damage.

“Ha ha,” Neo muttered.

“Potions and an Elixir. No mask, though. I was kind of surprised.”

“Well, that's too bad. I was kind of hoping to get one soon,” Neo said, and I shook my head.

“Even if one had dropped, it wouldn't fit your theme, I think,” I pointed out.

Neo shrugged, not looking particularly upset. “I've never had a thing for Goliaths anyway. What now? Vale?”
Turning back to Neo, I teased, “Someone's eager to get home.” She stuck her tongue out in response and I gestured back towards where the White Fang were. “I'm going to go make some friends among the White Fang.”

“What are you planning?” Neo asked, narrowing her eyes at me.

“Nothing,” I lied, grinning under my mask.

“Uh huh,” Neo deadpanned. “I want pictures of this 'nothing.' Video if at all possible. In fact, just send me the feed from your senses.”

“I'd rather there not be photographic evidence,” I denied.

Neo's face took on a look of realization. “Ahh, that kind of nothing.”

“Yeah,” I agreed.

“Well, tie me into your senses anyway,” Neo insisted, and I nodded agreement.

“I’ll meet you two at the rail spur where we parked the other cars. I’ll stuff them into Inventory when I return. Be back in a few.” Turning for where we'd left the White Fang, I cast Wings on myself, followed by every stealth spell I knew and went to go change some minds.

I had some ideas in mind for that. I couldn't have them calling or texting me, as it would leave a trail. I also couldn't have them keeping the money or getting their hands on the Dust. Both would have to be destroyed. If they did it while Adam was around, however, he was going to kill whoever I turned and then would suspect foul play—so I needed a way to make it look like either infighting due to greed, or an accident. But without the ability to directly control them, or send them messages via scroll, I was going to have to set up some pre-programmed commands and directives. Things like: 'destroy the Dust and the money.' And 'avoid drawing Adam's suspicion when you do this.' The wording was going to be tricky, but I would figure it out. If all else failed, the tracking spell I had placed on the train would let me get it myself.

Emerald's surly face and mistrusting red eyes glared at me from the crack of the door to Cinder's
current hideout. After a moment, she turned away, leaving the door open behind her. *'She's always so welcoming.'* Neo sent over our link, and I nodded.

Neo and I entered and headed upstairs, having sent Penny back to Fox Hunt because I didn't really feel the need to have her in on this meeting. The less exposure Cinder had to people I knew, the better. We found Mercury and Cinder already upstairs and seated, and Emerald dropping into her own seat as we entered the room. Dropping into the last remaining loveseat beside Neo, I waited for Cinder to begin. It didn't take long, as molten gold eyes shifted between Emerald, Mercury, and Neo. “What happened, and where is Roman?”

“It's not our fault,” Mercury began, at the same time Emerald said, “We failed.” I shook my head at the pair as they began trying to talk over each other.

“Quiet!” Cinder ordered, her voice rising to almost a shout.

“Neo,” I cut into the sudden silence, drawing four sets of eyes my way. “What do you have to report?”

Neo straightened up beside me, cleared her throat softly, and began. “We reached the area where we had planned to intercept the transport vehicle carrying Roman back into the city for his hearing. Smoke from the direction of the prison alerted us to a potential problem and we brought the Bullhead close enough to get a look. Grimm had overrun the prison complex—the outer walls and fences were breached, along with one of the interior walls leading into the building itself. The guards had already evacuated per standard procedure in the event of a Grimm attack, so we met no resistance other than Grimm when we fought our way inside to the main office, then from there to the cell block where Roman was being housed. There were bodies everywhere, but many of the cells were just empty. Roman's was one of the empty ones. We fought our way back out and came back here.”

"Wait, SOP for those places is to just abandon the prisoners?" I wondered. That went entirely contrary to what I knew from Earth. In a natural disaster situation, the guards were obligated to evacuate and transport the prisoners to safety, not leave them to die. *'I'll have to ask Neo later if this is normal for Remnant or just something specific to Vacuo.'*

“And there was no sign of Roman?” Cinder asked, and Neo shook her head. Turning to Emerald and Mercury, she asked, “Is there anything you'd like to add?”

“We would have called ahead, but you had said you wanted radio silence for the duration,” Emerald quickly answered.
Mercury added, “The place was a fucking mess and it looked like half the inmates were dragged out for snacks later.”

I rolled my eyes. “Grimm don't eat.”

Mercury shrugged. “Yeah, well, for something that doesn't need to eat they really seem to enjoy chewing on people.”

I wasn't willing to argue the point further, but I felt that ascribing drive and reason to these things that they didn't have was wrong. They weren't biological beings, and as such any instincts they had along the lines of the things they mimicked were nothing more than a mockery. If they were taking people to 'chew on,' then it wasn't because they were hungry or understood the concept of saving food for later. The fact that I didn't know why they would do it bothered me.

“What's the plan, ma'am?” Emerald asked, and Cinder frowned.

“Having Roman was on my wish list, but not absolutely necessary. He can be replaced.” Turning to me, she asked, “Are you sure I can't tempt you into turning down this other job you have lined up?”

I shook my head. “Sorry. I've had this planned for a while and if I back out now, I'll take some serious losses in more than just money.”

The woman in red sighed softly and nodded her understanding. “Emerald, Mercury, go into the city and quietly scout out the local talent. Get back to me with a list of names.” When neither made a move to leave, she narrowed her eyes. “Now.”

Emerald jumped up and headed for the exit, while Mercury took a more sedate pace. “Man, I was hoping to catch some sleep,” the boy grumbled as he thumped his way downstairs.

Cinder shifted her head and eyed Neo for a moment, before shifting her gaze to me. “Tonight wasn't a complete disaster, and it seems I have you to thank for that—and your young friend. Or is that protege?”

“Verdi is undecided at the moment. She likes the excitement, and the money, but like me she knows how to weigh danger against payoff. She probably won't do anything more than help me out on occasion for jobs I've screened as being safe for her until she gets trained up enough to stand on her
own if shit hits the fan,” I supplied. “She's not ready to be thrown into the deep end quite yet, which is why she's not sitting at the adults' table tonight.”

The woman across from us chuckled softly before nodding. “Fair enough.”

“Well,” Neo spoke up, popping up from her seat beside me. “I am beat and ready to get home.” Spinning around, and in so doing sending her skirt twirling at just the right speed and angle to flash her panties at me—and Cinder, now that I thought about the angles involved—she bent down and took both my hands before hauling me to my feet.

“I guess that's my cue,” I shrugged to Cinder as Neo proceeded to drag me towards the exit.

Molten eyes narrowed in irritation and red lips pouted. “I had hoped you would stay a while.”

Neo turned around and eyed the other woman before snorting softly. “Nu h -uh. It's been over a week since I've gotten laid. I don't mind sharing, but unless you're offering the same,” Neo's eyes roamed up Cinder's body and the half-Maiden's glare became smoldering— less in the bedroom sense and more in the sense of taking on a temperature and intensity to melt lead , “then the line starts behind me.”

I gave the red-clad woman a 'what can you do' shrug. “I'll call you tomorrow.”

Neo shook her head. “Try the day after.”

Sighing, I corrected myself. “Well, looks like my schedule is full for the next day or so, then. I'll find some time soon.” I was still a bit annoyed at being left in the woods with no contact, but I wisely refrained from comment before my brain to mouth filter finally sprung a leak—even as I took perhaps a little too much enjoyment in making her wait.

“Make time,” Cinder growled softly, before turning away.

“Come on, you, before you step on any more toes,” I sighed at Neo, before hefting her up onto my shoulder and hauling her out, much to her enjoyment. Then again, that could have had something to do with the fact that the way I'd grabbed her had left my hand full of one of her firm ass cheeks.
Throwing on Invisibility and one of Neo's illusions as we left, I set her down and winced a moment later when the sound of something breaking reached our ears from inside. “Someone's jealous,” Neo smirked. “You're welcome, by the way.”

“Oh? What for?” I asked, raising an eyebrow at her as we took off deeper into Vale on a circuitous route to somewhere public to change outfits, before heading back to Fox Hunt.

Shooting me an amused look, Neo said, “Two things. Firstly, I got you out of there when she was clearly angling to get you to stay. It's kind of funny, really. Other than asking about the prison, she seemed all too keen on getting her underlings out and keeping you in. Almost like she planned it.”

“Yes, thank you for cockblocking me. And I'm sure Cinder's not going to bear a grudge over that,” I deadpanned.

“Only so you can come home and screw the rest of us silly,” the shorter girl returned.

I hummed, putting on a thoughtful look. “Well, I suppose it's a fair tradeoff.”

“Ass,” Neo rolled her eyes, reaching over and swatting my arm. “Secondly, the sex the next time you do come over is going to be great. Jealous women always try harder.”

“Neo,” I began slowly, worry creeping into my tone, “I believe you may have miscalculated in your manipulations.” Seeing I had her attention, I continued. “She was strong before she stole half the Maiden's power. I don't need her more enthusiastic. I already have to worry about Joan slipping and crushing my pelvis into paste. I don't need any more opportunities for 'death by snoo-snoo.'”

Neo snorted quietly. “‘Snoo-snoo?’ Really? What the fuck?”

Rolling my eyes, I pushed the memory of that particular scene from Futurama over our link and she nodded a moment later. “It's a thing.”

“You'll be fine, you big baby,” the girl laughed. “The sort of casual power someone like that can pull off while suppressing their Aura is still impressive, yeah, but I doubt you're going to die from it. You heal too fast for there to be any lasting damage.”

“You're not the one who has to worry about it.”
Neo shrugged. “And isn't that a shame. Cinder is hot. I would not mind sharing you with her, at all. Even the 'evil' thing is just more sexy on top of a pleasing package.”

“Opportunistic,” I accused, and the girl nodded shamelessly. “I see now why you and the twins encouraged bringing in other girls. It's so you can have kinky fun with lots of different women, all of whom are supermodel hot.”

“Oh no, you caught us. Curses, our plans are foiled,” Neo deadpanned, before shifting slightly and bumping her hip into mine. “Now, take me home. You're holding up my kinky fun with lots of supermodel hot women.”

Putting my hand over my heart and adopting a wounded look, I said, “I-I'm just a toy to you.”

“No,” Neo denied, dragging out the word. Her eyes dragged down my form and stopped at my crotch. “I promise, you're not just a toy.”

I raised an eyebrow at that. “Says the woman addressing my penis.”

The shorter girl shrugged before stepping in and standing on her tiptoes, her lips locking with mine. “Home. Now.”

“Okay then,” I agreed, hefting her up into a bridal carry and dropping us into an empty ID, heading for the mall and the crowds there, and from there back to base.

A short trip and an outfit change later we were into the base, through security and had stepped through the final checkpoint to the officers' quarters. The salle port closed behind us and I sighed, stretching my arms over my head and feeling a couple of vertebra pop. “It's good to be home,” I mused aloud before switching from my Fox outfit to my normal clothes while beside me, Neo swapped out illusions over herself along with her gear, changing from her Yin disguise to the ones she usually wore over her eyes and hair.

The sound of conversation spilled from the living area as we approached and I found the twins, Joan, and Blake sitting around listening as Penny recounted the events of the last couple of days. At least, they had been before the girls spotted Neo and I coming in. “Jaune!” the twins echoed in stereo, bounding up from their seats and moving quickly across the living room to latch arms around me in tight hugs.
“Hey there,” I greeted. A closer look at Miltia caused my eyebrows to go up. “You cut your hair.”

The red-clad twin nodded. “You like?”

I was so used to the twins emphasizing the ‘twin’ thing with nearly identical looks aside from clothing that it was a bit jarring to see one of them so different from her sister. On the other hand, it looked good on her. I recognized the hair style as the one she’d worn in the Yellow trailer, which left me wondering for a moment if my showing up in their lives hadn't convinced her to put off getting it cut for a while. The other possibility was that, canonically, the Yellow trailer wouldn't have happened yet and the bar fight with Yang was coincidental. There was no way to tell and no sense worrying about it. Reaching out, I brushed back one of the long bangs framing her face and ran my fingers through the shorter hair at the back of her head. Green eyes closed and the girl practically melted under my touch. Gently grabbing a fistful of her hair, I pulled her head in and kissed her lips, drawing a quiet whimper from her throat in the process. “It looks good.”

Not wanting Melanie to feel neglected, I pulled her into a kiss as well before releasing her and pushing them gently towards the couch. Making a trip around to the other couch, I caught Joan's chin and angled her face up to kiss her as well, just so no one felt left out. Well, almost no one. I wasn't sure Blake would appreciate the same treatment. She'd probably enjoy it, given that animal magnetism between us, but I wasn't in the habit of kissing girls who were just friends. “So, anything interesting happen while we were gone? Aside from Miltia getting a haircut, that is.”

A look at where Blake and Joan were seated showed Blake a bit red in the face and looking suddenly antsy—at least what I could see of her around her book. Joan's hands twitched in her lap and she was eyeing me like a slab of meat. After a moment, it was Blake who broke the short silence. “Yang came by to hang out. She's apparently getting bored sitting at home with Ruby and their uncle gone.”

“I imagine,” I nodded, dropping into my preferred chair and letting out a quiet groan of contentment. Then the words actually registered and I focused on the faunus girl. “Gone where?” Qrow hadn't said anything about taking Ruby anywhere, just that he'd be working with her on the Silver Eyes thing.

“She didn't say,” Blake shook her head. “Just that they'd left town for a few days and wouldn't be back until just before time for Beacon to start.”

“Fuck,” I grunted. I did not like being left in the dark, especially where my friends were concerned. 'Well, it's not like she's in any danger with Qrow around, either. Drunkard though he may be, he would kill anything that so much as looked at his niece funny.' Noticing the lack of blonde in my lap,
I asked, “Where's Jen?”

“Shortly after Miltia left to go pick up Joan, she got a scroll call. She left after that and said to let you know that she wouldn't be back for a few days due to family business,” Melanie supplied.

Frowning, I shifted my gaze to Joan. “This have anything to do with our parents being back in town?”

“Yeah, probably,” Joan admitted quietly. “Can we not talk about them?”

“Wait,” Miltia began.

Melanie asked, “Your parents are in town?”

“So does that mean we get to meet them?” Neo asked, a small grin tugging at the corners of her lips.

“Dust, no,” Joan denied. At my curious look, and the twins and Neo looking somewhere just this side of murderous, she winced. “I mean, uh… Fuck. I didn’t mean that how it sounded.”

The sound of a book closing from the other couch preceded Blake standing and padding softly out of the room. “I'll give you some privacy,” she murmured as she passed my chair, heading for her bedroom.

Turning to Penny, I smiled at the girl. “Penny, sweetie, we need to ask my sister some questions and we're probably going to be a while. Why don't you run along to bed?”

“But I'm not tired—I don't get tired! And I can help,” Penny argued.

“Not with this,” I denied. “Please?”

Giving me the most pitiful looking pout I'd ever seen, Penny nodded. “Fine. But I don't like it one bit. It's not fair that everyone else gets to stay up.”

Sighing in exasperation, I dragged the smaller girl into a hug, getting quiet giggles from the girls.
“Good night, Penny.”

The girl answered with a muffled, “Good night, Jaune,” against my side before waving to the others and padding off for her own room.

Waiting until I heard Penny’s door close, I cast a look at the twins and Neo before we turned our collective gazes on Joan. “Spill,” all four of us demanded as one, though there may have been more of an edge to the girls’ voices than my own.

“I don’t want to,” Joan denied, shaking her head. The twins shared a glance before moving to sit to either side of the blonde and molding themselves against her sides, whose eyes went slightly wide. “W-what are you doing?”

“Convincing,” murmured Melanie at Joan’s left side as her hand trailed along the inside of the elder woman’s upper left thigh, just shy of the juncture of her legs. Small lips found the side of Joan’s neck and began trailing their way along the flesh there.

On her right, Miltia’s hand rested gently against Joan’s taut stomach while her lips brushed the blonde’s ear. “Enticing,” the red-clad twin whispered, before her lips took in the lobe of the older girl’s ear.

At Joan’s sharp intake of breath, Neo smirked and sidled over to the couch where the twins were molesting my sister before straddling the taller woman’s waist and draping her arms over the blonde’s shoulders. Meeting Joan’s eyes, she murmured, “We can be very persuasive.” Closing the distance between them, she captured Joan’s lips with her own, drawing out a muffled ‘mmf’!

While the girls began their assault, I slipped up out of my chair and moved around behind the couch, pulling up my Aura and slowly flooding the room with the same slow-buildup technique I had used against the girls a few days ago. Leaning against the back of the couch, I reached down and dropped my hands onto Joan’s shoulders, shifting Neo’s arms aside enough for what I had in mind. Squeezing gently, I began kneading the elder blonde’s shoulders before leaning my head down to a stop beside Joan’s left ear, just above where Melanie was slowly giving her a hickey. “Tell us,” I said, allowing my voice to shift into the deeper register typically reserved for the bedroom—something I knew from experience tended to go straight from the girls’ ears to their sex. Neo pulled back enough for her to talk.

Joan folded like a cheap suit. “They—ahn! Not there!” she jerked slightly as Melanie apparently found a particularly sensitive spot further up on her neck. Instead of stopping however, the twin latched on like a leech, drawing a low moan from the blonde’s throat. “They have an evaluation
every year to see where everyone stands.”

I frowned “What, a series of tests?”

Joan shook her head. “More like a tournament.”

“When? And you don't think I should go?” When she shook her head, I asked, “Why not?”

Sighing quietly, Joan said, “The middle of next week—around Wednesday. It was supposed to take place after you were already in Beacon, but school getting delayed put the kibosh on that. And do you really want them finding out about you?”

I rolled my eyes. “Not particularly,” I admitted. “But it's something that'll need to happen. And for that, I'm going to need your help.” Then there was the timing to consider. Had they rescheduled it intentionally? If they didn't know I would be in Beacon, then it could be interpreted as them wanting to rub that in. If they did know, then it could be seen as intentionally excluding me. ‘Add it to the list of grievances I need to air with them.’

“Not happening,” Joan denied.

Shrugging, I allowed a grin to creep across my face. “Well then, we'll just have to convince you.”

“Why shouldn't we meet them?” Neo asked as I shifted to take the tip of Joan's ear between my lips, softly sucking it in before gently scraping it with my teeth.

“Because you'll get dragged in,” Joan got out, her breathing coming raggedly now. “Stop teasing me already.”

Melanie removed her lips from Joan's neck long enough to ask, “What do you say, Jaune?”

Miltia chuckled quietly, following her sister up with, “Should we reward her for being cooperative?”

“Well, it would encourage further good behavior,” I murmured against the elder blonde's ear. I
allowed the slowly building Aura I'd been flooding the room with to ramp up, drawing a quiet pant and a shudder from the elder blonde, while the twins and Neo both looked similarly affected.

“Dibs!” Neo called, and I rolled my eyes. Shifting back slightly on Joan's lap, she reached down and undid the button and zipper on the taller girl's jeans before slipping her hand down the front of Joan's panties.

“No dibs,” Melanie denied, slipping her free hand down the back of Joan's pants.

Across from her, Miltia did likewise. “It's not fair for you to get all the fun,” she smirked at Neo.

Joan's eyes rolled up into the back of her head and she shuddered as the trio went to work. Seeing an opportunity, I pulled her head back slightly and kissed her open, panting mouth. Our tongues danced as breathy little panting moans threatened to escape her lips. The twins went back to work, hot lips and tongues playing across the flesh of the elder blonde's neck and ears. I felt Neo move close, her lips brushing my ear as she breathed, “She's about to come for us.”

Joan's entire body went stiff as she shuddered, and for a moment even her breathing came to a halt. I broke the kiss and she gulped down air, blue eyes rolling wildly in her head before settling on mine. “No more teasing. Bed, here, I don't care but I want you inside me, now.”

“I think I heard 'tease me more,'” I grinned.

“No, I'm with her on this,” Neo disagreed and I turned an amused look on her. “What? We haven't gotten laid in over a week, Jaune. A week!”

I rolled my eyes, even as the twins pulled away from Joan and nodded their agreement. “Well, fuck me. I'm out voted.”

“We intend to,” Melanie deadpanned, hopping up from the couch and helping Neo up off Joan's lap.

Reaching down, I slipped my arms around Miltia and hefted her over the couch, eliciting an 'eep!' from the red-clad twin as I hauled her towards the bedroom. Joan popped up from the couch and followed quickly behind Melanie and Neo. “You're going to need a bigger bed,” she pointed out on getting a look at our bedroom.
“It's king-sized and we don't normally have everyone sharing the same bed,” I pointed out.

“This is the first time more than four of us have shared a bed for sex,” Melanie admitted. “Not quite certain how this is going to work out.”

I pushed open the bedroom door and dropped Miltia on the bed, earning a giggling, “Jaune!” for the action.

From behind me, Neo said, “I don't know about the rest of you, but I was kind of hoping to be the meat in the middle of an Arc sandwich.”

Joan snorted softly. “I've been out on patrol three weeks while you've had him to yourselves—and had to suffer through the last two days after he got me wound up.”

Melanie rolled her eyes and slipped onto the bed beside her sister, where the pair turned a twin sultry look on the rest of us. Neo's mismatched eyes shifted between the twins, me, and Joan before she hummed. “How about double twins?” she murmured, moving over towards her dresser and opening drawers in search of something.

Joan turned a curious look on me. “Double twins?” she echoed, and I shrugged.

“You'll see in a minute,” I answered, though I was wondering that myself. If she wasn't going to mimic one of the twins for triplets, then it would have to be Joan. *Though why she's digging through the toy drawer*…

“Ah ha!” Neo called, drawing our eyes as she turned her back to us and shifted around adjusting her clothes for a moment before they disappeared—unequipped as she got tired of fighting with them. A quiet gasp escaped her lips before she chuckled and turned towards us, her form shimmering as she did into…

“What?” Joan asked at the same time the sound of flesh striking flesh sounded across the room as I facepalmed hard enough to do damage.

“No,” I deadpanned, looking at the copy of *myself* standing across from us, complete with bulging erection jutting from his—her!—crotch. Logically, I knew it was just Neo using an illusion to copy my form while wearing a so-called 'strapless strap-on,' but gut reactions rarely have anything to do with logic. “Just… no, Neo.”
“Come on, it'll be fun,” she teased, in my voice but with her mischievous tone.

It was uncanny valley level weird on my part. Joan, on the other hand, turned and leveled a pleading look at me. A glance at the twins showed they were interested, but not particularly thrilled by the notion. “Please?” Joan asked, drawing my eyes back to her.

“No. Too weird,” I denied. “Not happening unless it's a clone of me under my direct control.”

The girls all blinked, turning their gazes on me as Neo asked, in my voice, “You can do that?”

I shrugged. “Maybe. Not yet. I don't meet the requirements, but I'm getting there.” Last time I had tried, my Semblance had told me that my INT, WIS, and CON were too low to pull it off. Theoretically, I could just dump all my points into those three areas, but I didn't know how many it would require and my Semblance wouldn't tell me. Unlike many other spells, a clone spell was apparently going to be difficult enough that my Semblance didn't know what the requirements were yet—just that I didn't meet them. I could try dumping my points in ten at a time, but it would be a waste—especially when I had been sitting on them for so long specifically so I could build them up at Beacon with training before dumping them.

“So, it's a hard no for you?” Neo asked, this time in her own voice, and I sighed.

Thinking it over, I shook my head. “For today. Maybe some time in the future,” I hedged, and she nodded.

“I can live with that,” the girl-turned-me agreed. Leering at me—and did that ever ratchet up the 'weird' factor—she asked, “How about this, then?” The illusion shifted, replacing my body with her own. There were still some very close resemblances, however. Her long hair, which had appeared shorter while she was illusioned as me, was blonde still and her eyes the same shade of blue as my own. Her face looked like a feminine version of mine. “Is a female twin good?” Neo looked down at the cock still jutting from between her legs. “Well, mostly female.”

I hummed, turning the idea over in my head. On the one hand, futa was filth, meant to appeal to people who didn't know any better by wrapping a poisonous idea in an appealing form. Down that path lay traps and unironic use of the phrase 'feminine penis.' On the other hand, it's just a fucking dildo. And it's Neo,’ I mused. One of the many reasons Neo hadn't enjoyed her time with Roman was the man's inability to keep up with her level of kink.
Decision made, I smirked. “Well, twincest is wincest.”

“Hey!” the twins complained, but I could see amusement dancing in their eyes as they did.

“Are we done talking yet?” Joan asked, sending us an amused but clearly impatient look.

“Sure,” I agreed, quickly unequipping my clothes.

“Well just take all the fun out of it,” Melanie pouted.

“We were hoping for a show,” Miltia agreed.

Joan rolled her eyes and, an instant later, her own clothes vanished in the same way. In the next moment, I found my arm grabbed and Joan half dragged, half threw me onto the bed as easily as I'd manhandled Miltia earlier, reminding me again of the difference in strength between us. I landed mostly on the bed, though my legs still hung off enough for my feet to comfortably rest flat on the floor. I sat up, only for Joan to straddle me, her thighs moving to either side of my own as she shifted her lips, lined us up by feel, and impaled herself on my cock with a sigh of contentment. “That's better,” she breathed, wrapping her arms around my neck as she shifted her legs enough to wrap them around my waist.

Looking down, I chuckled softly as I pointed out, “You know neither of us has much leverage in this position.”

“Don't care. Comfortable,” Joan denied. “And I can still do this.” 'This' turned out to be shifting her hips back and forth just enough to work up a pleasant friction between us, and I fell into rhythm to match her slow grinding pace.

The twins—now also nude—moved to either side of us, Melanie on my right and Miltia on my left, before sending the blonde riding me an annoyed look. “I am feeling kind of left out,” Miltia pointed out.

Melanie nodded. “Ditto.”
Standing on the floor behind Joan, Neo wore a smirk. “Well, there's a way to fix that. Grab her legs.”

“Don't you dare,” Joan warned, but the twins were having none of it as they unlocked her legs from around my waist and forced her to fold them under herself so she was kneeling in a proper cowgirl position. Her arms were a little harder to unwrap from around my back, but the twins managed. The fact that they could at all meant that Joan was allowing it—meaning she likely wanted to see what they had in mind. We weren't disappointed as, a moment later, Miltia urged me to lean back a bit and I watched as she and her twin resumed their attack on my sister. This time, Melanie focused on Joan's throat and neck while Miltia's mouth sought out the blonde's breasts. I watched as Miltia sucked Joan's nipple into her mouth while her hand drifted down and began rubbing the blonde's clit where our hips joined.

Joan's arms pulled the twins flush against her as she used the better leverage from the new position to pick up the pace of her grinding. Not wanting to leave Melanie and Miltia out of the action, I reached out to stroke both of them. Miltia felt my hand brush her ass and shifted her hips, spreading her legs slightly and giving me better access as I slid my hand between her thighs and ran my fingers up and down her damp sex. Melanie had a slightly harder time adjusting, but eventually managed to find a comfortable position where she could work over her targets while still getting attention herself. After that, the twins were all happy little breathless sighs and moans as I slowly alternated between pumping my fingers in and out of their slits and stroking their lips, with the occasional brush against their clits mixed in.

Neo had, by now, been conspicuously—suspiciously—absent as I had lost track of her. Motion from the other side of the bed drew my attention to where she had dug into the girls' shared toy box again and come out with a bottle of lube. Catching her eye, I raised an eyebrow and she grinned before spreading a few drops on the tip of her dildo—currently illusioned to look like my cock. Moving around behind the blonde slowly riding me, Neo ran her hands over Joan's shoulders before pulling herself flush against the older woman's back. Joan suddenly froze as her eyes went from half lidded to fully open and she turned her head to look back at Neo—clearly feeling the bulge that must have now been resting between her ass cheeks. “Forget about me?” Neo smirked, before turning blue eyes on me. “Hey Jaune, do you think we'll both fit?”

Despite having a larger frame and wider hips than the other girls—childbearing hips, at that—Joan was still ridiculously tight. It was not the reluctant, nervous tightness of a virgin but the kind of grip that came with muscle strength from practice along with simply not stretching herself out like so many women made the mistake of doing with oversized toys. “Probably not,” I admitted. While my dick wasn't exactly forearm width and length, it was above average in both length and girth. Joan was a very snug fit around me, as it was.

Neo did not seem upset at that. If anything, the mischievous look on her face only increased in intensity. “What a shame. Then there's nowhere else for this to go,” she began, shifting her head beside Joan's so her lips brushed the older woman's ear as she spoke, while below she moved her
hand to shift the dildo up and down between Joan's cheeks. “Except here,” Neo finished, and with a push forward and a grunt from Joan, the toy parted Joan's ass.

“Oh Dust,” Joan groaned, her eyes rolling up as Neo slowly worked her hips back and forth to sink the dildo in deeper. Joan's hips shifted against mine as she worked herself back against Neo, unconsciously urging her on. I let Joan set the pace as she and Neo worked out a groove, before joining in and matching their rhythm on the next back stroke of Joan's hips. The blonde above me jerked at the unexpected motion and I felt myself bottom out—behind her, Neo gasped as the toy connecting her with Joan moved in a way she must have approved of. Apparently wanting to try that again, Joan shifted hard again on the next stroke back and my eyes went half-lidded as she clenched around me.

Melanie moved from the blonde's neck and throat to her lips, her small tongue dancing with Joan's as she grabbed a handful of the older woman's hair and crushed their lips together. Below her sister, Miltia drew both of Joan's large breasts together as her tongue flicked over the painfully erect nipples there before sucking them both into her mouth—licking, sucking, and occasionally drawing her teeth across them as Joan's fingers fist ed into her short hair and nearly crushed the smaller girl to her breasts. Miltia didn't seem to mind, going by her muffled chuckle at the action. Both of the twins were starting to clench around my fingers, getting closer to their first orgasm of the night while I could tell Joan wasn't going to be too far behind.

It wasn't long before I felt both the twins clench, their hips jerking in time as they latched onto the elder blonde for a moment while they shook in shared ecstasy. Pulling away from Joan, they collapsed against the bed to either side of me and wrapped their arms around my chest, panting slightly as they recovered. Moving my hands up to Joan's hips, I urged her into a faster pace as I began to thrust harder. The blonde came down, her breasts pressed firmly into my chest as Neo grabbed a fistful of her hair and pushed her down, her other hand over mine as we timed our thrusts to match. A lewd, wet flesh-on-flesh slapping resounded through the bedroom as Joan grit her teeth and buried her face in my shoulder to keep from screaming—her fists clenching the sheets above my head hard enough I thought they may rip.

“Jaune, Jaune I'm going to—” she gasped out, interrupted as I caught her lips with my own. She groaned into my mouth as she clamped down hard around my cock, her already tight cunt becoming vice-like as she attempted to milk my cock dry. She pulled back long enough to demand, “Inside! Come inside!” My eyes rolled back in my head momentarily as I did just that, burying myself in her to the hilt.

Joan collapsed against my chest, and I admit I was feeling a bit boneless myself at the moment. “That's really hot,” Neo commented from over Joan's shoulder, leaning around the blonde to peck my lips. “Me next?” she asked, before looking down at where she was still buried in Joan's ass. “Well, after I get this cleaned up.”
“Shouldn’t be much cleanup,” Joan sighed softly, turning her head and planting a kiss on my neck before shifting her head enough to eye Neo. “I took care of things before you got here, when Penny showed up.”

“So were you expecting to get fucked in the ass tonight, or just hoping?” Neo grinned down at the blonde atop me, her hands softly stroking the older woman’s flanks.

“A bit of both,” Joan admitted. Reluctantly, she signaled Neo to back up, shuddering around me as the smaller girl pulled out before she lifted herself off of me and stood. She gave a full-body stretch, putting her well-toned body on display as she did, before taking Neo by the hand and dragging her towards the bathroom. “Come on, you. Jaune, take care of your girls while we get cleaned up.”

I glanced down at the twins, catching green eyes following the sway of Joan’s and Neo’s asses as they made for the bathroom. “So,” I began, drawing their eyes back to me and grinning down at them, “I guess you two are all tuckered out now, huh?”

“Jaune, shut up,” Melanie ordered as she propped herself up on an elbow.

Miltia mirrored her sister as both leaned in, finishing the command Melanie had begun. “And make love to us.”

“Can’t argue with that,” I agreed. Melanie’s lips met mine, her tongue slipping out and flicking against my own. A moment later, it became a three-way kiss as Miltia joined in—the twins’ tongues dancing with mine and each other. It was wet, sloppy, and by the end of it the pair were giggling as I laughed.

“So, cross that off our list of things to try,” Miltia said, wiping the drool off her lips and chin.

Beside her, Melanie ran her hand across her mouth and nodded. “Yeah, that doesn’t really work like it does in the books.”

“I could’ve told you that,” I deadpanned, rolling my eyes before licking my lips and wiping up stray drool. “Those are always awkward and messy.”

“Fun, though,” Miltia argued.
Chuckling, I nodded in agreement as I pushed myself up from between them. “True. Let’s try something that might actually work. Come here,” I ordered. With a bit of maneuvering, I directed Melanie onto her back and Miltia atop her sister, their svelte bodies flush against one another. At my urging, Melanie's legs wrapped around Miltia's hips, while Miltia brought her knees up along the outside of her sister's thighs. It looked uncomfortable to me, but the twins were ridiculously flexible since their dancing and fighting style pretty much demanded it. It didn't bother them, however, and it succeeded at what I'd been going for—getting both their bare pussies lined up one atop the other. Leaning down, I ran my tongue from the bottom of Melanie's slit all the way up to the other side of Miltia's, drawing a shared gasp from the twins. I brought my hands and fingers into play in addition to my mouth, tongue, and teeth as I got the pair worked up again from where they’d come down off their last shared orgasm.

Once they were ready—in this case, literally begging for me to stop teasing already—I took hold of Melanie's hips and pulled her and Miltia down until they were nearly hanging off the bed. There was a slight problem with height—namely, the twins were small enough, and the bed low enough, that the position would be awkward—but I remedied that with a quick Conjuration of a couple of pillows. The new pillows under Melanie's ass got them to the proper height and I lined up, running my cock up and down their slits once before sliding into Melanie's tight, hot cunt. The twins didn't have the vice-like muscle grip Joan did, but they were naturally tight and tiny besides.

Melanie's lips gripped my cock, trailing along it and reluctant to let go as I pulled out, shifted up, and pressed into Miltia's wet heat, earning a quiet pant as I bottomed out. Like her sister, Miltia's snatch grasped around me as I slowly withdrew and slipped back into Melanie. Below me, the twins had locked lips, burying their hands in each others' hair as they began grinding their hips together. I took a slow pace, intent on taking my time and working the two up before I finally picked things up.

The bathroom door opened and Neo came out, trailed by Joan. Seeing the pink toy between Joan's legs, I raised an eyebrow. Neo, seeing me alternating between Melanie and Miltia, leered. “That looks fun.”

Joan rolled her eyes and snagged Neo about the hips, lifting the smaller girl up with a startled yelp before moving around the bed to the side opposite me and the twins. Planting Neo face down on the bed, Joan met my eyes and smiled before lining Neo's hips up and slamming home inside the petite girl. A high pitched, muffled squeal escaped from where Neo's face was buried in the covers as Joan pulled back and set a pace to match mine with the twins. “You can't just jam it in like that,” I warned.

The blonde across from me snorted softly. “Please, she's so wet she looks like she pissed herself. She'll be fine. Besides,” reaching down, she grabbed the hair at the back of Neo's head and pulled her up onto her elbows, pulling the smaller girl's head around until her eyes locked with mine. Once she got her eyes to focus, Neo beamed a grin my way. “You're enjoying it, aren't you?”
“More please,” Neo groaned quietly. “It's not Jaune's cock, but it'll do for now. And I really like watching you fuck the twins.”

“See?” Joan smiled, before reaching down and giving Neo's ass a swat, causing the girl to jump and let out an 'eep!' “So, want to see if we can make them come at the same time?”

“Probably not possible,” I denied, nodding at Neo. “She's on a hair trigger right now. How about trying to fuck one or more of them unconscious?”

“We like that one,” Melanie agreed, while Neo nodded.

“Harder, Jaune. We won't break,” Miltia said, shaking her ass as she did.

I rolled my eyes at Joan. “Now look what you've started.” I made sure my next thrust into Miltia sent a slap echoing across the room, drawing a muffled squeal from her as Melanie recaptured her sister's lips. At the same time, I redoubled my push outwards with the 'lust Aura.' I wasn't above cheating to win, in this instance. The twins rocked beneath me as I picked up the pace and force of my thrusts. I couldn't go too fast, or I'd risk missing—the likely outcomes of which would be, best case, a 'wrong hole' scenario. Not that I thought the twins would mind. No, it was the potential worst case outcome of bending my dick that kept me from just hammering away.

Across from me, Neo's eyes, pupils having gone slightly wide and her breath starting to come in quick gasps, drank in the sight of me screwing the twins silly—their bodies writhing under me as they kissed, their hands wandering over each others' bodies. Breaking their lip lock, the girls began licking, sucking, and biting at places I knew each enjoyed along their throats, necks, shoulders, and ears—and everything else they could reasonably reach without maneuvering around much. Joan likewise watched, though her eyes were more drawn to my form, or the occasional glimpse of my dick slipping in and out of Melanie or Miltia that she got, since the angle was poor for that. Joan's entire upper body was flushed and her nipples looked painfully erect, and I noticed she had bitten her bottom lip and looked to be trying not to come on the spot. For my part, watching the busty blonde pound away at Neo's pussy, their breasts swaying in time with their motions, was almost hypnotic—not that I could really be blamed, swinging breasts was a sight every straight man enjoys seeing.

Neo's face and upper body were turning red and her hips began twitching as she reached under her body with one hand and began desperately rubbing at her clit. “Jaune! Jaune, I'm coming,” she gasped across from me. Surprising the illusionist, Melanie reached out with both hands and grasped her head, pulling her down into a lingering kiss before Miltia pulled Neo up and took her turn. Neo's eyes closed and she whimpered quietly as she came, breaking her kiss with Miltia when she finally had to come up for air.
“Forget how to breathe through your nose?” I teased, to which the smaller girl merely raised her middle finger as she collapsed face down on the bed, still twitching as Joan slowed her pumping of Neo's cunt but didn't stop.


I raised an eyebrow and shot her a grin. “Was that a request?”

“Absolutely,” the ice-cream themed girl huffed as she caught her breath.

Feeling Melanie tightening around my cock, I changed things up a bit. Breaking my alternating pace, I grabbed the long-haired twin by the ankles and lifted them up, forcing her legs to bend at the knees and changing the angle I was penetrating her at, in addition to causing her to tighten further around me thanks to the position. Picking up a hard, fast pace I slammed home inside her. Above Melanie, Miltia got the idea and redoubled her efforts to make her twin come, grabbing Melanie by the wrists and lifting her arms up over her head. Switching Melanie's wrists to one hand, I caught a faint smirk on her face as she brought her right hand down and gently wrapped it around her sister's throat. Melanie's eyes went wide and she thrashed under me, her face turning red as wordless cries escaped her lips, her body beginning to quake as tears escaped the corners of her eyes and I worried for a moment she really was approaching overstimulation. The long-haired twin clamped down hard around my cock as she came, at the same moment Miltia leaned in and stole her sister's lips again. Miltia released her hold and Melanie gasped in great heaving breaths as I slowed, before finally pulling out of the girl entirely.

Releasing Melanie's legs, which collapsed limply to the bed to either side of her sister, I took Miltia's hips in hand and lined up before sliding inside her again. Wanting to see just how far I could push her, I opened up the lust Aura all the way. Once I had a good, hard pace set I reached forward and ran my fingers through her short hair, before grabbing a handful and pulling her head back. Apparently looking to get back at her sister, Melanie shifted under Miltia, sliding down the short-haired twin's body enough to suck one of Miltia's nipples into her mouth. A strangled cry escaped Miltia's lips and I thrust harder, bringing one hand down and slapping her ass. Across from me, Joan watched with avid interest as she maneuvered Neo around onto her side. Joan pushed the upper leg up to the smaller girl's chest as she straddled Neo's lower leg and slowly pumped into her. Neo's eyes were likewise locked on us as Melanie and I brought Miltia closer to the edge. Just as she was tightening up around me and about to come, I heard the bedroom door open behind me. Two sets of eyes—Joan and Neo—shifted to track whoever was at the door. At the same time, I pushed Miltia's face down into the covers to muffle her scream as she came around my cock.

The door closed behind me, but whoever it was had yet to make a move. Not wanting to look and dreading the answer, I asked, “That's Penny, isn't it?” Just the thought of her walking in and the
awkward conversation that would follow left me tempted to throw on Invisibility and flee to somewhere safer—like Cinder's hideout. At least there, I'd only have to worry about dirty looks from Emerald, jealousy from Mercury, and Cinder trying to pulverize my hips if Neo was right about her being more enthusiastic since she'd pushed Cinder's buttons.

An understanding look crossed Joan's face as she winced and shook her head, while Neo smirked. “Try again,” Neo giggled.

“Jen?” asked, and Neo shook her head this time as Joan rolled her eyes.

“Oh god, Yang?” I asked quietly. If it was the blonde bombshell, I was going to be damned disappointed to turn her away. Sure, there was always the remote possibility that Raven—who I noticed was spying straight through my wards even now—had said 'fuck it' and decided to become an active participant, but it was a near-zero possibility and she would have used a portal besides.

“Nope,” Melanie answered, popping the 'p' as she sat up to get a look. Miltia was too busy gasping and half-laughing half-crying in post-orgasmic hysterics to care. Seeing the state of the short-haired, I released the handful of hair I had and made a point of rubbing her scalp while shifting my other hand down along her back. Melanie tilted her head back to regard Neo for a moment, then shifted back around to regard our visitor. “In or out.”

“Ha ha, very funny,” a quiet, familiar voice snarked as bare feet padded quietly across the wood floor. The weight of a new body pressed the mattress down to my left and I risked a look at the newcomer. Gold eyes stared back, framed by black hair and set under a set of black cat ears. A glance down showed the smoke gray short kimono style robe she wore was open, draped in such a way that it hid her nipples from view but left much of her breasts exposed. In addition to teasing with the view of her breasts, it displayed her sex as she sat down—wet and glistening, with a neat patch of short, straight hair set on her pubis but nowhere else.

The other girls had gone silent—even Miltia managed to get herself under control enough to turn and regard Blake, though she still shook all over—as they waited to see what would happen. Finally, I said, “Well. This is a surprise. What brings you here, Blake? Not that I'm complaining about the view, mind you, but we're a little occupied.”

“Jaune, if your mouth runs her off, I will maim you,” Neo threatened as Melanie groaned quietly in agreement.

“I can see that,” Blake returned fire, golden eyes drifting up and down my form, stopping at the point where my hips were still flush against Miltia's ass, before moving across the twin and from there the
others in the room. Finally, they completed their circuit and her gaze locked with mine. “I blame you for this.”

I blinked. “For… what?”

There was a quiet undertone of a growl as Blake answered. “I have been masturbating for the last hour. I've gotten off more times than I care to count and it's only gotten worse. I blame you.”

‘It's Jane all over again,’ I mused, catching Neo's eyes as she hid a knowing smirk. ‘Oh. Oooh. Clever girls. You planned this.’

I had to hand it to them, if this had been their intention, then it was a master stroke. They had even gone without for a week when, if they had asked, I wouldn't have minded period sex so long as it was in the shower. And now that we were all back in the same room, after a long enough time without—barring the little strip show a few days back—the effect on Blake was probably along the lines of dragging an alcoholic forced to go cold turkey into a bar. Well, perhaps not that bad—she wasn't Jane, after all. Finally, I asked, “What do you want me to do about it?”

“Take responsibility,” Blake deadpanned.

Snorting softly, I shook my head. “Firstly, it's not my choice alone. Secondly, I don't do 'casual' sex.” The one time I had even bothered to try in Remnant, it had gone over poorly—though, I suppose I was naive to think the 'friendship' I had with Candice was based on anything other than sex and shared kinks. “If you want in, we'll put it to a vote—but there has to be something there.”

Blake broke eye contact for a moment before nodding. “There is,” she whispered.

“Same here. Good enough for me.” Turning to the others, I asked, “Well?”

The girls shared a look for a long moment before Melanie said, “Yes.”

Miltia nodded. “Sure.”

Joan shook her head. “I don’t know her well enough to say one way or another, if I even get a say.”
“You do,” I assured her. “Abstain?”

The blonde nodded. “Sure.”

“Neo?” I asked.

The ice cream themed girl hummed, regarding Blake for a moment. Finally, she said, “A catgirl is fine too.”

I resisted the urge to facepalm. Blake groaned quietly before admitting, “Well, it beats Yang's puns.”

“That would be a cat-tastrophe,” Melanie agreed, her tone entirely too innocent to be believed.

“Cat-acysmic,” Miltia agreed.

Neo’s lips twitched into a smirk as she added, “Yang’s puns should be a feline-ious offense.”

“I hate you all,” Blake glared, crossing her arms over her breasts as her ears twitched, but I caught the hints of a smile tugging the corners of her lips up.

“How about we make it up to you?” Joan suggested, turning a look on the twins and Neo. “Girls, why don’t you show her what you showed me, earlier?”

“I think I can move now,” Miltia murmured, pulling away from me with a wet squelch as my dick slipped out from between her greedily sucking lower lips. While my erection had flagged when Blake entered, it had swiftly come back to attention now that I knew she would be sticking around.

Blake’s nose twitched as her eyes tracked down to my cock, her pupils dilating slightly as she stared. While she was distracted, the twins each took a hand and hauled her further onto the bed. Neo quickly divested the faunus girl of her gown, tossing the garment off the side of the bed and leaving Blake completely nude—a veritable feast for our hungry eyes. I noticed I wasn’t the only one eyeing the catgirl— the twins, Neo, and to a lesser extent even Joan were drinking her in. Blake’s body was lithe and muscular, more towards the nimble side of the scale like Neo or the twins than the brute force side of the scale like Joan. On the other hand, Joan had enough body fat that she didn’t
look grotesquely over-muscled like you get with most female bodybuilders, whereas much of Blake's was absent—in other words, she looked leaner than she was really supposed to be.

I was pulled from my thoughts as the faunus girl gasped. “W-what are you do...ing,” she trailed off as Melanie and Miltia each took an arm, flipped it over, and applied their mouths and teeth to her wrists. I had used that particular move on them before and it never failed to get them going.

Neo settled in behind Blake and brushed the faunus girl's hair back from one of her human ears before settling her arms around Blake's shoulders. “Making up for the cat puns. What's it look like?” Neo asked, her lips brushing against Blake's ear before her tongue flicked out and ran over it. Blake shuddered slightly in Neo's arms and the ice-cream themed girl smirked, before moving away from Blake's human ear and moving up to the cat ears atop Blake's head. “Or do you prefer these? I wonder how sensitive they are,” Neo murmured, before taking the tip of one of the triangular ears.

Golden eyes rolled up in her head as Blake whimpered, and from my position settling between her legs, I could plainly see she was having a small orgasm just from that. Pulling her thighs over my shoulders while she was otherwise insensate, I dove in and went to work on her folds with my lips, tongue, and teeth. My first impression of her taste was tart, green apples—and the smell wasn't too far off—which meant it was definitely an Aura thing since I knew her diet was heavy on fish. Her thighs immediately clamped down around my head and an almost pitiful-sounding mewl escaped her lips as I pushed her into a second orgasm on the back of the first. 'She's overstimulated. Probably not going to last long at this rate,' I assessed. 'And I haven't slacked off on the Aura, either—so I might just knock her out and win that little wager with Joan.' A glance upwards showed the twins had abandoned Blake's wrists and moved on to her neck, throat, and human ears while above them, Neo molested the other set. Her hands quickly found their way into my hair and I chuckled faintly as she tried her best to grind my face into her crotch, but I was the one in control here and I refused to budge.

I kept licking, sucking, and occasionally nibbling at the folds of her lips and the bud of her clit until she came again, then decided I'd had enough foreplay. Gently forcing her legs to unlock from their death grip around my head, I pulled away and wiped off the leftovers of my impromptu 'meal.' I took a moment to take in the sight of Blake being teased by Neo and the twins before catching sight of Joan, laying off to the side and watching as she slowly fingered herself. I caught her eye and she shrugged. “What? We've got plenty of time and I'm not going anywhere for a while. Besides, I like watching you work.”

“I thought Jane was the voyeur,” I snarked, and the elder blonde rolled her eyes. Joan stuck her tongue out at me and I smirked. “Careful, I might take that as an invitation.”

“I'm not scared,” she countered.
Turning my attention back to the sexy catgirl spread out before me, I shot Neo a look and gestured for her to move. Getting the idea, but deciding to take her own interpretation, she shifted around behind Blake. Leaning back and taking the taller girl with her, Neo took Miltia's place trying to leave hickey's on Blake's neck while wrapping her arms around Blake's chest, just under her breasts—incidentally, lifting those already fairly large breasts up and giving the impression they were a bit larger than they looked. The twins each shifted their assault downwards, trailing kisses, licks, and the occasional bite down from the catgirl's neck to her chest, then breasts—their hands playing over her stomach and occasionally running through the short crop of soft hair above her crotch. Taking hold of Blake's thighs, I put her where I wanted her and lined up, before slowly parting her lips with my cock. Gold eyes snapped open, focusing on my blue as I pushed into her to the hilt. Her eyes went half-lidded and she panted softly, biting her bottom lip and nodding, urging me on.

Blake was not nearly as tight as the others, but she was still pleasantly snug and wetter by far than any of the girls had been. Thrusting into her produced a nice, lewd wet sound that I was quickly growing to love hearing. Her legs wrapped around my hips, pulling against my ass and urging me to take her faster and harder, but I was determined to drag this out and enjoy it as I had with the others instead of just jackhammering away. Her hands went up to my shoulders and pulled me down into a kiss—and in so doing, forcing the twins to move—before going over my back. A moment later, I felt nails digging into my back as I thrust into her—short though Blake's nails may have been, they were still sharp. Melanie and Miltia didn't go far, however, as I felt them mold themselves against my sides and back—hot lips trailing kisses up my arms and shoulders to my neck.

Miltia's lips brushed my left ear as she breathed, “She wants it so bad. Fuck her harder, Jaune.”

On the other side, Melanie's teeth scraped the other ear for a moment before she added, “Make her scream for us, Jaune.”

'Well, how can I resist that?' I grinned at their egging me on and took hold of Blake's hips, shifting my knees forward a bit for a better angle, and pounded into her hard enough to force Neo below her deeper into the mattress. Neo responded by grasping Blake's breasts and squeezing tightly, pinching both her nipples and drawing out a keening moan from the catgirl. Not satisfied with that result, Neo left her right hand in place to torment Blake's tit while the left slipped down between them. Her eyes fluttered for a moment as she fingered herself, and over the connection I'd left up between us, I got the mental image of her gathering her moisture onto her fingers. Sending her a curious look, Neo smirked in answer before pulling her hand away from herself and moving towards her intended target.

Blake's eyes went slightly wild as she felt Neo's probing fingers and she jerked beneath me. “N-not theeeere ooooh Dust,” she got out, entirely too late to stop Neo from slipping a finger into her ass. Pulling my head down, she leaned forward and I felt sharp teeth sink into the flesh where my neck and shoulder joined as she screamed against me, her legs and arms going almost painfully tight around me as her cunt fluttered around my cock. An instant later, I felt a flood of fluid against my
cock and balls as she let go, which sent me boiling over as I emptied myself into her with a deep growl. Blake's grip slackened and she unclamped her jaw from where she'd bit me as she collapsed backwards, panting quickly, and with a small trail of blood dribbling from the corner of her mouth. Propping myself up a bit, I looked down at her as Melanie giggled.

Miltia, however, was carefully inspecting the ring of blood left over from where Blake had sank her teeth in. Feeling her fingers brush it away, I shot her a questioning look and she smiled. “It looked worse than it was,” she supplied. I wouldn't be surprised that in her worry, she'd forgotten that Gamer’s Body worked better than even flash healing by most other Hunters.

“Good job, Jaune. You fucked her unconscious,” Melanie said, gently prodding Blake's face.

“Not. Unconscious,” the catgirl huffed out, reaching one hand up to shakily swat at Melanie's prodding finger and then wipe at her bloody lips.

“Damn. There goes my win,” I grumbled, a small smile crossing my lips as I looked down on her.

Below Blake, Neo shot me an amused look. “A little help? I'm stuck.”

“Can't move,” Blake deadpanned.

“We should leave you like that,” Miltia teased.

Neo shrugged. “If you're going to, at least help roll her onto her side.”

Carefully extricating myself from Blake's sopping snatch, I looked down to take stock of the bed and the huge wet spot the catgirl had left. “Not it,” I called.

One golden eye cracked open and regarded me with a glare. “Ass.”

Joan laughed off to the side. “She made it, she can sleep in it.” The twins turned their eyes on the blonde before trading a look with each other. When they turned back to her with hungry looks on their faces, Joan shook her head. “I think that's enough for tonight, girls. We've got all of tomorrow.”
“Kind of disappointed that I didn't get dicked,” Neo pouted, and I laughed quietly at the wording. “But like she said, no need to rush. Sleep time.”

“Sleep sounds good,” Blake agreed quietly, rolling slowly onto her side, and curling her legs up nearly into her chest as she shifted about to get comfortable. “I can sleep here, right?”

“You don't have to go,” Melanie agreed, reaching out and stroking one hand through the catgirl's dark hair.

“Shower for me,” I denied, pushing up off the bed and heading for the shower. Neo popped up off the bed and hurried after me. “I changed my mind. Shower, then sleep.”

“I figured you would,” I chuckled, turning to the bed and calling up water elemental Mana. Pulling the moisture from the sheets as best I could, I floated it with me towards the bathroom. “Suppose I can't just let Blake sleep in her own wet spot.”

“Aww,” Melanie and Miltia pouted as Neo and I crossed the room.

“Let her have him. He'll probably finish her off in the shower,” Joan said, standing and pulling the twins to their feet. “Speaking of a shower, where can I get one around here?”

Closing the door behind me cut off the rest of their conversation and I turned to Neo in time to catch her taking a flying leap at me. I made sure to dump the moisture I'd collected from the bed into the sink before she distracted me enough to lose control over it. “Hello, lover,” she practically purred in my arms as she wrapped her legs around my waist and her arms over my shoulders.

“Well,” I dragged the word out, a grin twitching my lips upwards, “I suppose I could go for one more round. And shower sex is always fun.”

“Woohoo!” Neo cheered, before pointing towards the shower in question. “Let's go. Less talking, more grunting, moaning, groaning, and splitting my greedy pussy wide open.”

Raising an eyebrow at her, I shrugged and carried her to the shower. “You say the most romantic things,” I snarked as I turned the water on and waited for it to warm up.
“You know you love it.” Shifting her hips, Neo teased her slit side-to-side across the top of my cock.

“The things I do for you,” I sighed, attempting and failing a put-upon look, as it was ruined by the grin on my face. Further conversation was curtailed as I stepped into the shower with Neo in my arms and nailed her to the wall, much to her delight.
I groaned quietly as consciousness returned. The bed was empty, I noticed, save for one other person—and the cause of my interrupted sleep. Not that I was complaining too much, considering that waking up to a blow job was one of the best possible ways to start the day—the other being ‘hello and good morning’ sex. Taking a moment to simply enjoy the feeling, I wondered who it was who had decided to give me this particular wakeup call. Peeling back the blanket, I found a head of dark hair in my lap, topped by a pair of triangular ears that twitched as they were exposed to the cool air of the bedroom.

“Good morning, Blake,” I greeted.

“Mmnn,” the catgirl hummed in answer, causing my toes to curl as the sound traveled straight down my dick.

Reaching out, I stroked the top of her head, gently kneading the flesh around the base of her ears. Her eyes went half-lidded and a small smirk pulled at my lips. “Here, I’ve got a better idea. Turn around,” I suggested. Her eyes went slightly wide and I nodded. Pulling back off my manhood, she quickly turned around, her knees moving to either side of my head. Taking a firm hold on her hips, I brought her pussy down to my mouth, breathing in her scent for a moment before running my tongue up her slit. The faunus girl atop me gasped quietly before laying across my body, her mouth going back to my shaft as I went to work licking, sucking, and occasionally biting her lower lips and clit. Her green apple taste filled my mouth as she grew wetter the longer I worked on her—apparently she had taken a few minutes to clean up at some point between when we all finally went to sleep and when she woke me up. Determined to get her off before me, I parted her lips and slid two fingers inside her, curving them so I could stroke her inner walls while I pumped them quickly in and out of her snatch.
I was nearing my own orgasm a few minutes later when I felt Blake start to quiver as she grew even wetter. I smirked as I felt her beginning to spasm around the fingers inside her. I refocused my efforts on her clit, latching onto it and sucking it into my mouth as I rolled my tongue over it. I felt a throaty moan from Blake around my cock and she redoubled her efforts, her cheeks going hollow at the force of her suction. That was enough to send me over the edge. Blake’s lips wrapped tight around me and it felt like she was trying to suck out every last drop, even as her body shook and her cunt dripped grool onto my face as she came.

The faunus girl above me panted quietly through her nose for a moment as she caught her breath before sitting up and turning around to meet my eyes with a smoldering gaze. Her cheeks were puffed out slightly and I blinked as she opened her mouth enough for me to see the thick, white fluid she’d collected without spilling any of it. Closing her mouth, she swallowed audibly, and as she did I couldn’t help but notice her eyes had gone slightly out of focus. She hummed a satisfied, “Mmm,” as her tongue flicked out to lick her lips.

“Well, that was arousing,” I muttered quietly, already feeling myself stirring again at the sight and thankful Gamer’s Body meant my refractory period was pretty much nonexistent. Mildly curious given what I’d seen so far from every girl I’d slept with, I asked, “Taste good?”

“Well, vanilla,” Blake answered and I laughed softly.

“Well, at least it’s not lemon,” I shrugged. ‘Or, you know, what sperm actually tastes like on Earth, according to every woman to ever complain about giving blow jobs. Thank you, Remnant—your insanity works in my favor in this instance. I suppose that narrows it down to either Aura or Dust, then—the two things Earth doesn’t have—and since I’m not using Dust, that means Aura is most likely to blame.’

The dark haired girl shrugged. “Not the best flavor in the world, but I won’t complain. Now if it were fish…”

I rolled my eyes. “Pretty sure you’d be alone in that.” Reaching over, I pulled her closer. Blake shifted onto her side, her arms going around me as she buried her face in my chest. I felt her nose running across my pectorals a moment later as she inhaled my scent and chuckled quietly. “Are you ready to talk about last night?” I asked, before a grin crossed my lips and I added, “If not, I can always dig around in the girls’ toy drawer for one of the tails I know they keep in there.”

A quiet laugh escaped the girl’s lips as she shook her head, golden eyes peeking up through her bangs as she tilted her head up to look at me. “Does this mean I check off the box for your catgirl fetish?” she snarked, and I decided to return the favor.
“That’s what the tail is for,” I deadpanned, earning a swat on the arm for my mouth. Reaching down, I swatted her ass in return, causing the girl in my arms to jump slightly and hiss at the sudden sting. Blake’s nipples going hard and tight against my chest told me she hadn’t disliked the little swat I’d given her.

“You’re an ass, Jaune.” Her eyes turned towards the door before she shifted against me as she considered. “Save the talk for later. Do you think we have time for another round before breakfast?”

I raised an eyebrow at that, trailing one hand down to lightly stroke her sex and earning a quiet sigh in response. “We can make time.” Pale arms wrapped around my neck as I kissed her. Blake’s eyes slid shut as I let my fingers work their magic on her, bringing my free hand up to gently rub at her ears and earning a quiet moan in appreciation.

I entered the kitchen fresh out of the shower with Blake, dropping down into a chair at the table and accepting a plate of pancakes from Miltia, who quickly moved back to her seat at my right. Blake sat down a few places away next to Yang, a towel around her shoulders as she allowed her hair to dry. Taking in the knowing looks from the others, minus an absent Penny, she narrowed her eyes in a glare—though I noticed there was no real heat in it—before digging into her own plate, covered in an assortment of fruit to go with her pancakes.

“You didn't have to hold breakfast on our account,” I began, only for every girl present save Blake to turn amused looks my way.

“And yet, we did,” Joan pointed out.

Rolling my eyes, I dug into my pancakes. “Thanks for that, then.”

“So,” Yang began, dragging the word out and drawing every eye at the table to her, “am I the only one here not screwing Jaune?”

“Yes,” came multiple replies.

From my left, Neo grinned. “Yet.”
Turning lilac eyes on mismatched chocolate and vanilla, Yang grinned shamelessly. “Are you implying something?”

Neo met Yang’s grin with a leer of her own. “Only the obvious—that it’s just a matter of time.”

“Can we not talk about sex at the breakfast table?” Joan asked from the next seat down from Neo on my left.

Across from the elder blonde, Melanie leered. “I don’t know, I think I like the idea of sex on the breakfast table. It’s just the right height—”

“At. Not on,” Joan countered, pointing a fork at the younger girl. A small smile twitched at the corners of her lips as she tried to maintain her stern visage, before losing it as her blue eyes cut to me. “Though, that is a nice mental image.”

“Pfft. Who needs mental images?” Neo rolled her eyes, opening her hand and projecting an illusion in her palm—the breakfast table, with every girl there bent over it, their pants and panties down as I made the rounds.

“Okay, that’s enough,” I sighed, reaching over and breaking the illusion before jerking my head towards where Yang sat somewhat slack-jawed, even as the blonde’s gaze shifted to me—then drifted down my body to my crotch and back up. “I don’t think she can take much more before something breaks.”

Neo was willing to let it drop, but apparently not without a parting shot. “One word, Jaune,” the ice cream themed woman leered, conjuring up another illusion. “Clones.”

I palmed my face as every girl there took on a thoughtful look at the imagery provided. Breaking the illusion again, I made a mental note to do some more research into getting a proper clone spell up and running, since now that I’d put the idea in their heads last night they were already starting to press for me to go for it. ‘Can’t be too hard, right? I mean, Blake and Sun both have clone Semblances. Except I want either actual clones or shadow clones ala Naruto, not shitty clones that are barely there or only last a few seconds. Maybe that’s why the requirements were so high when I tried to make it—because Skill Creation knows the parameters I want for that spell. INT and WIS I can train, or dump points into, once I get into Beacon—but how the fuck do you train CON? Well, aside from sex. It’s kind of hard to work sex into a normal workout and it doesn’t help that I don’t know how the system defines CON. It obviously includes ‘stamina’ and ‘endurance’ under its umbrella, otherwise marathon sex wouldn’t level it. But it also affects things like my poison resistance, so maybe it also means the dictionary definition as well—that is, overall health. But Gamer’s Body
nullifies adverse physical conditions... It’d be great if my Semblance weren’t actually pretty fucking vague on the skill point descriptions.

I had to admit, a clone spell would solve a lot of problems. That was without taking into consideration the sheer versatility of the Naruto universe's 'kage bunshin' technique—from infiltration, to information gathering, scouting, assassination, as a combat force multiplier, and more. Even a bastardized, nerfed version would be better than nothing—because at least then I'd be able to level it up into something amazing later. Suppose it was nerfed to not have the memory transfer portion of the technique, for instance. I didn’t need it when I had other techniques that could cover the gap or surpass it. Telepathy, for instance, would allow me to link up with myself so I had information in real time. The party system would allow for easy direction of multiple copies, if I even needed to considering that copies would think identically to myself in whatever situation they were in. Yes, I was practically salivating at the possibilities, but I simply wasn’t there yet.

Putting the thought aside, I asked, “Where's Penny?”

“She went out to collect her new weapons for 'Jacqueline' and buy parts to build a weapon for her 'civilian' identity,” Miltia answered. “She should be back in a while.”

Nodding, I cut into my pancakes and savored butter and syrupy goodness. “What's the agenda for today?” I directed the question at Miltia, who had pretty much nominated herself as my unofficial secretary. ‘Maybe she's the one acting as my secretary for Fox Hunt? I should figure that out. Maybe swing by the office and visit.’

“Hmm, let's see,” Miltia hummed, drawing out her scroll with one hand while she ate with the other. “It looks like the schedule is booked up today. You're to engage in trust and intimacy building exercises for the rest of the day.”

I blinked, raising an eyebrow at that and turned to Melanie. ‘Translation?’

“What my sister meant to say was 'sex,'” Melanie smirked.

“Oh course,” I chuckled.

Miltia shot her sister an amused look. “I was thinking more along the lines of a movie or something before my date tonight. Aside from that, there are a few things regarding the operation of Fox Hunt that we should go over,” Miltia supplied.
Miltia, Melanie, and Neo all exchanged looks, and before I could ask, Joan beat me to it. “What, exactly?”

“Money,” Miltia answered.

“Specifically, where it comes from,” Melanie clarified.

“We have a lot of cash, and Fox Hunt needs equipment, building materials, construction done, and so on,” Neo continued.

“How much cash?” Blake asked, and I wondered how to answer that.

“Well, I'm not sure about our official books,” Neo began, looking at Miltia, who tapped her scroll and apparently sent a message off to Neo as the ice cream themed girl's scroll pinged. “Thank you. Unofficially, though? We're billionaires.”

Down the table, Yang suddenly choked on the glass of juice she'd been drinking. Blake reached over and patted the blonde's back as she hacked and coughed, before finally croaking, “Billion? How?”

“Duped the contents of a certain train. It's where Penny and I have been the last few days. You know how the kingdoms are moving from paper to plastic money?” I asked, getting a nod from the blonde. “They've got to ship the money somehow. We tracked down one of those trains.” Everything I said was true, if not truthful. Neither Blake nor Yang needed to know about my involvement with Cinder. Penny, despite not being here at the moment, thankfully knew better than to mention the woman's name around anyone outside myself, Neo, the twins, Jen, and Joan.

“And you intend to funnel all of that back into Fox Hunt?” Joan asked, drawing my attention.

“Yeah. That's the problem. I promised Angel more aircraft to play with, but we can't just have a large sum of money spring into being with no paper trail as to where it came from,” I sighed, sitting back in my seat and rubbing at my forehead. It was a problem I had forgotten I'd have to deal with before I had left with Penny. “I think I'm back to trying to get a loan from the bank. Or off a loan shark. Well, no, can't have any trace of Fox Hunt doing business with those sort of people, at least not on paper. What about buying up property and businesses out of town anonymously…” I murmured, trailing off as my mind turned the problem over.
To either side of my, quiet snickering drew my attention to the twins and Neo. Raising an eyebrow, I asked, “What?”

The trio traded a look before Neo asked. “Should we let him off the hook?”

Melanie hummed, shooting me a considering look. “Maybe. If he's learned his lesson. Personally, I kind of want to watch him flounder a bit, until he begs.”

Miltia turned an annoyed look on her sister. “That's pushing it too far,” she chastised the white-clad twin before turning back to Neo. “I think we've watched him squirm over this one long enough. Besides, he did actually ask me to look into it.”

“Out with it,” I growled at the trio, though there was no real anger in my voice.

Neo stuck her tongue out before asking, “Jaune, what are we?” Before I could answer, she gestured between herself, Melanie, and Miltia. “The three of us, specifically.”


“That, too,” Melanie agreed.

“We're criminals, dear,” Miltia clarified, before casting a look at Neo. “To varying degrees.”

Neo shrugged. “You two have managed to keep your hands mostly clean, which is pretty amazing in our line of work. Mine are… not so clean.”


“Criminals,” Joan repeated, yawning. “The twins worked for my old teammate. He’s sort of a minor mercenary crime boss at this point. Those two were enforcers and arm decoration.”
“Hey!” Melanie and Miltia complained before Miltia continued. “We were not just arm decoration. Hei is a family friend. He offered us training and a job.”

Joan shrugged. “That’s about what I’d expect from him. I didn’t say he was a bad guy, just that there’s not much of a point denying what he is. He runs a gang and hires his men out for other jobs to whoever has the cash to pay for it.”

“What about her?” Yang asked, pointing at Neo.

The ice cream themed girl smirked. “Extortion, blackmail, robbery, arson, murder. We were quite busy when I was still working with Roman.”

“No jaywalking?” I asked, to which Neo stuck her tongue out.

“Never.”

Yang’s eyes had gone wide. “Murder!”

Neo shrugged. “What? They were running a child slave ring. Roman found out when we went to do business with them and they offered us ‘the goods’ as payment. Killing them and turning the kids over to the cops actually made us the good guys, for a change. It was nice.”

“For a change?” Blake echoed, arching an eyebrow. “How often were you the bad guys?”

“Not that you’re one to talk,” Neo shot back, earning a flinch, “but I wasn’t going to mention the two dozen cops and three ice cream parlor employees in front of the goody good.” At the round of blank looks she got, Neo asked, “What? They got my order wrong!”

Melanie sighed, palming her face. “I can’t tell if she’s joking about that. I don’t think she’d kill someone for that, but on the other hand...”

“It’s Neo,” Miltia finished, mirroring her sister’s facepalm.

Neo rolled her eyes. “It was only the one set of murders, actually. We always avoided conflicts with
police and I wouldn’t kill ice cream parlor employees for getting my order wrong. That’s almost literally impossible.”

Yang opened her mouth but Joan held up a hand, turning a look on the younger blonde. “She’s right. Circumstances leading up to it notwithstanding, if I had come across something like that I would have done the same thing. Give it time, you will too. And before you ask, it’s not even remotely in a legal gray area for us. Hunters have the authority, in extenuating circumstances, to kill on sight. Such circumstances include but are not limited to: self-defense, defense of someone else, and defense of a population center. They weren’t hunters, so it wasn’t exactly legal, but no one’s going to bother to dig too deeply into it once they learn the circumstances. At best, she would get a fine and maybe be put under house arrest—what amounts to a slap on the wrist.”

“But morally—” Yang tried and Joan shook her head.

“You find yourself in a volatile situation that requires an immediate judgment call. On the one hand, you have pieces of shit who have kidnapped, used, and sold children. On the other hand, you have the children themselves. If you don’t take action, things go on as they have been and the entire operation becomes more of a danger to everyone as time goes on. Unless they’re drugged out of their wits—” Joan shot a questioning look to Neo, who nodded. “Then they’re both in danger and are a danger. Even then, drugs can only do so much. If things get bad enough, they become Grimm lures. If you just subdue the people responsible, then that gives them the opportunity to get free later—either by force or bribery—and they go right back to what they were doing, only smarter this time to keep from getting caught. If they don’t escape, they’re thrown in prison, where they’ll live out a living death sentence with an unknown execution date while at the same time draining the resources of whatever nation they belong to for having to feed, clothe, house, and care for them while they themselves serve as Grimm bait. Jobs for prison detail aren’t available while you’re in Beacon specifically because you’re guaranteed to see people killed. It’s the point of housing that many evil people together away from the rest of us—to lure the Grimm into gathering together to spend a day or two trying to force their way in before Hunters come in and wipe them out. Option three is to just end them where you find them. It’s quicker and, if you disagree with the use of murderers, rapists, and the like as live bait it’s more humane.”

I blinked at that, but didn’t interrupt. ‘That answers a few questions I had but brings up more.’

“But.. but that’s— Dad never...” Yang trailed off.

“Grow up,” Joan deadpanned. “You honestly think a father would tell his daughters about the darker side to the job when they’re as young as you? You’re young, idealistic, and naive.” Yang opened her mouth and Joan held up a hand. “I don’t hold it against you. I was just like you, before...” She shook her head. “Experience comes with time. What I’m saying is to keep an open mind. Things like killing people are never black and white in our line of work.” Part of me wanted to chastise Joan for being too hard on the younger girl. A much larger part agreed with her on every point, however. I kept my mouth shut about it.
Deciding now was as good a time as any, I asked, “I'd heard some of that about the prison system before, but I'd like some more details. How does that work, exactly?”

Shifting her crystal blue gaze to me, Joan shrugged. “About like you'd think. We know Grimm have some sort of empathic sense and are attracted to negative emotions. The most negative sorts of people are the kinds that tend to go to prison—murderers, rapists, and so forth. That much evil gathered that close is a siren song Grimm never fail to ignore. Hunters routinely patrol the region to monitor Grimm presence and, when it reaches a peak and they eventually try to break into the prison to get at the prisoners, the staff are evacuated and Hunters come in and clear out the Grimm.”

“And the prisoners...” I lead.

Joan's gaze turned cold. “If you actually manage to make it to one of those places, you're either in holding in the minimum security section, in which case you're usually evacuated with the staff, or you're in the maximum security section—in which case, you get to ride it out. No Hunter is in a hurry to keep those kinds of people alive, so there isn't a high survival rate. Once the Grimm breach the external walls, every door locks open, including the exterior doors. It saves on repair costs if Grimm don't have to break down doors.”

Frowning, I asked, “They purge the inmates?”

“It's that, or like I said—let them continue to be a money sink,” Joan nodded. “At least this way, they're made to be useful to pay off the debt they owe to the rest of society.”

“That is... despicable,” Blake glared. “So anyone who isn't useful to you gets killed?” she began, her voice rising as she spoke. “What next, leading the elderly out into the forests to die? The handicapped? The poor or unemployed, because they can't contribute?!”

Joan's open palm slapped the table, causing more than one person present to jump and for just an instant, Killing Intent flooded the room—reminding me, and likely everyone else, that while she was generally fairly mild-mannered, the woman before us was a trained Huntress. She was a killer herself. “Do. Not,” the Eldest Deadly Sister growled. “Do not delude yourself into thinking that those two things are even remotely similar. You can not conflate executing violent criminals with culling random groups of people just because they're a burden. It's not even an apples-to-oranges comparison, it's like comparing apples to dog shit. We're talking about people who have been tried and convicted, found guilty of their crimes by a jury of their peers. These aren't people who are capable of being rehabilitated and released back into society. These are hardened criminals who would like nothing better than to continue doing whatever it was they were arrested for in the first place.”
“Then why not just execute them and be done with it?!” the faunus girl demanded. “It's inhumane and an injustice to just leave them locked up, waiting to be torn apart!”

“Because, it's not about some perception of justice at that point,” Joan deadpanned.

“It's about sending a message,” Neo quietly added, earning a nod from the older blonde. “These are things we do not tolerate in a polite society and there are consequences for violating our laws. It's a deterrent to other would-be criminals of that caliber.”

Joan nodded. “Yes. And do you know why it's done?” she asked, looking around the table.

“Because it works,” I answered, earning a nod.

“Because it works,” she agreed. “You can argue until you're blue in the face about whether it's humane or not, but the fact is, it works on so many levels that it's not going away. In the years since that policy was implemented, violent crime rates have plummeted, along with the rate of Grimm attacks on larger settlements—mostly because many of those swarms are now being drawn to prisons instead of settlements. If you think things are bad now, then you need to brush up on your history. If, after you learn for yourself, you still feel it's wrong then you can either try to change the law, kill them yourself when you find them out of some misguided sense of mercy, or quit being a Hunter.”

Frowning, Blake asked, “How can you just calmly kill like that, though?”

“There are four kinds of killers. The first kind are the ones who feel some deep sense of remorse after they've killed someone and usually wind up losing their composure and puking their guts out. They tend to not last long as Hunters. If they're lucky, they get to go Section 8. If not, they quit after their mandatory service is up. The second kind don't feel anything. They become numb to it. This is how most Hunters deal with the responsibility. The third kind are the ones who feel something good about it. There are those of us who feel justified knowing that they're put down a mad dog before it could hurt anyone else. Then there are those who just enjoy killing. That last group tend to be the ones who wind up in jail to begin with.”

“I think that's enough on that subject,” I interrupted gently, before either of those two could get wound up again.

Silence fell across the table at that, save for the sounds of utensils on plates, before Melanie quietly
Miltia reached over and placed one glove-covered hand atop my own. “You try to micromanage and do everything yourself and occasionally miss the bigger picture. Let us help.”

Sighing softly, a rueful laugh escaped as I looked between the three girls. “I suppose I have a habit of that,” I admitted. “So, what can we do about it?”

Miltia’s lips twitched up into a mischievous smile. “You sent me a text asking about ’creative bookkeeping’ before we killed Dumbo.”

“We figured this would come up sooner or later, so the twins got in touch with some people while you, Penny, and I were out. We’ve got three people already working on it,” Neo supplied.

“It’s going to take time, though,” Melanie warned. “They can only move so much at a time. You’ll have to let Angel know to put getting aircraft on hold for a few weeks, unless she can convince Greene to accept some kind of payment plan.”

Shaking my head, I turned my hand over and squeezed Miltia’s hand in mine. “Thanks. I can’t exactly promise I won’t slip and do it again—bad habits, and all that—but do me a favor and let me know when I am?”

“Oh, we will,” Neo smirked. “Speaking of bad habits...”

The twins and Neo exchanged looks before all three of them said, at the same time, “Our dates.”

When Joan took on a hopeful look and Blake a curious one, I palmed my face. “I know. It’s not like I’ve been putting it off intentionally. Things keep coming up. Stuff happens.”

“‘Things and stuff.’ Sounds important,” Yang smirked from across the table.

I shot the blonde a betrayed look. “Yang, don’t shit stir.”
“There are plenty of ‘things and stuff’ to do here,” Joan deadpanned.

“We’re willing to compromise on the timing,” Melanie cut in. “We all know how schedules tend to fall apart around you.”

Casting my eyes around the table and seeing the girls all seemed to be in agreement, I laughed quietly and nodded. “Okay, we’ll make time. We can put everything that isn’t important on hold and turn over everything to do with Fox Hunt to Angel and Jim until Beacon starts. Sound good?” The girls nodded at that. “Great. Why don't you get together and work out a schedule? In the meantime, I should probably take care of things in preparation. So that means no movie, sorry to say.”

Neo caught my attention, “Swing by your office before you hit up Angel and Jim. There's some stuff you need to approve and sign for.”

I rolled my eyes. “Why haven't we switched to entirely paperless?” I asked, though I suspected I knew the answer—for the same reason the ‘paperless office’ never worked on Earth.

“The need for hard copies,” Miltia answered, confirming my suspicions.

With a grunt, I pushed myself up out of my chair. “Alright then. Better to get this done sooner rather than later. I'll text you when I'm finished.”

“Be back in time for lunch,” Joan called after me.

Staring down at the pile of paperwork in my IN tray that had accumulated during my short absence, I frowned. “Note to self, make sure Yin knows she can approve shit in my name,” I muttered.

“Will do, sir,” a voice I didn't recognize piped up from nearby, and I jumped slightly as I realized someone had managed to sneak up on me.

‘How in the world?’ I wondered, glancing between the woman in question and my minimap. A plain blue dot showed up right beside my own Fox-masked icon. I could have sworn that hadn't been there a moment ago. The speaker was a little on the tall side for a woman—standing at 5’8”, with red hair, blue eyes, and a heart shaped face. She looked somewhat familiar and was sexy in that ‘girl next
door' sort of way—small but perky breasts emphasized by her tight button-down blouse, creamy pale legs and thighs coming out of a mid-thigh length skirt, shapely hips and waist. Her nameplate listed her as 'Amelia River,' level 15, and attached to my guild. “Thanks,” I drawled out the word.

Dropping into the chair at my desk, I pulled everything out of my IN tray and began going over it. Cloth rustling drew my eyes to where the secretary had taken a seat at a second desk and begun typing away at her terminal. Ignoring her, I focused on getting through the backlog before my eyes jerked back up as they caught the motion of her crossing her legs and I realized two things: her desk lacked a back that would have hidden the view of her legs and she was wearing a small, lacy white thong under that skirt. ‘Nope. Do not eye up the secretary.’ I pulled my eyes away from the sight of her crossed legs under the desk. ‘Requisition approval, funds dispersal approval, final after action report for our first official deployment,’ I skimmed through the documents, signing what needed signing as I went.

The better part of three hours went by that way, in silence save for fingers tapping at a keyboard, the rustle of paper, and the occasional scratching of my pen as I signed White Fox, Admiral, Fox Hunt to each document needing a signature. I had to admit, the woman’s Word Per Minute count was a damn sight higher than mine, going by the sounds of her fingers. She seemed quick and efficient at least, so I could see why Neo hired her. Occasionally, Amelia would shift in her seat or move one of those pale legs up and down, the motion inevitably drawing my eyes for just a moment. If she was going for ‘eye candy,’ then Neo had succeeded—not that I could blame her. When I finally finished and dropped the stack into my 'Out' box, Amelia stood and moved over to my desk to collect them as I got ready to leave. “I'll have these filed by the end of the day, sir.”

“Thank you.” Shifting to move around her, I was stopped by a small hand coming to rest in the center of my chest.

“With everything going on, we haven't really been introduced. Why don't you stay a while and we can get properly acquainted?” she asked, her hand curling to dig her nails into my chest slightly—or they would have, if not for the light armor I wore with this outfit.

“Erm,” I eloquently said, blinking as I took in the look she was giving me. Those are definitely bedroom eyes. Nope. Nuh-uh. Ain't happening. I'm not that kind of boss and I know a honeypot when I see one. Going to have to talk to Neo and/or the twins about this. I can't have someone here trying to seduce me in the office and making things awkward. Or worse, a fucking lawsuit.’ Reaching down, I carefully lifted her hand. “Some other time, perhaps. I'm on a tight schedule at the moment.”

“Certainly, sir. I'll put it on your calendar,” she smirked, and I resisted the urge to facepalm.

Leaving the office—I did not flee—I headed for the elevator. Making the short trip across to the
Officers’ Quarters, I hurried through security back into our quarters. I changed gear as soon as I was on the other side of the salle port and the smell of food hit me full in the face now that I wasn’t wearing my masks. ‘That smells delicious,’ I mused as my mouth watered. I found Miltia sitting in the living room, speaking with Yang when I walked in. The pair looked up at my entrance and I raised an eyebrow.

Miltia’s lips twitched up into a smile. “Everything taken care of?”

“Yeah, we should be good for the handover,” I nodded. Dropping onto the couch beside her with a groan, I asked, “Who hired the secretary?”

“I did, why?” Neo’s voice answered from the direction of the entry hall and I turned to find her dropping into place on my other side.

“Neo dear, do me a favor?”

The small woman considered it before smirking and answering, “Depends on the favor. Is this favor sexual in nature?”

“Yes. Please don't hire people you'd like to sleep with,” I deadpanned.

Neo snorted in quiet laughter. “I have no idea what you're talking about,” she denied, though from the tone of her voice I could tell she wasn't being entirely truthful.

Miltia shifted enough to shoot an amused look at Neo before asking me, “Is she a problem?”

“She's a sexual harassment suit waiting to happen.”

Neo shrugged, “I don't think you'll have to worry about it. But if it bothers you—”

I rolled my eyes. “It does.”

“Then she's fired,” Neo continued. “I'll have her replaced before the week is out. I'll make sure the
next one is better.”

Somehow, I wasn't entirely certain our definitions of the word 'better' lined up in this instance—if the amusement in her tone was anything to go by. I had the feeling I was being set up for a joke at my expense, but knowing Neo it would be harmless fun. Probably. Turning a look on Miltia, I asked, “Why is she in charge of hiring my secretary?”

A mischievous look crossed the short-haired twin’s face and she grinned. “Because you made her your second in command. I’m just Head of Intelligence—I don’t have anything to do with hiring and firing aside from being part of the screening process.”

“Well, in that case, it really is harmless. She’s having fun with it, so there’s really no point raising a stink about it.’

Checking my minimap and finding Joan, Blake, and Penny in the kitchen, I asked, “What are the others up to?”

“Blake is helping Joan with lunch. So is Penny, actually. Penny wanted to learn, but I suspect Blake may have had ulterior motives, since Joan is apparently making fish,” Miltia answered.

Neo laughed quietly. “Well, we know what to bribe her with.”
A small, lithe form dropped into my lap and Melanie wrapped her arms around my neck. “What’d I miss?”

“Jaune was just telling us how his secretary was too sexy for him to handle,” Yang smirked and I turned an annoyed look on her.

“I said she was a lawsuit waiting to happen,” I denied. A scroll ringing drew my attention towards my HUD before I realized it wasn’t mine going off. I suppressed a smirk as Yang fished her scroll out from her bra. “Do I even want to know why you keep your scroll in your bra?”

“Harder to accidentally break it that way,” the blonde admitted with a shrug.

“I’m surprised those things don’t crush it,” Melanie muttered.

“Shh! I’m trying to eavesdrop,” Miltia shushed as Yang flicked a finger across the scroll and Ruby’s face appeared a moment later.

In the background, I could make out a patch of bright, blue sky and what looked like a striped rock formation of some sort, vaguely reminding me of images of the painted desert in Arizona. Yang beamed a smile down at the camera. “Hi sis! What’s up?”

“Hi Yang,” Ruby greeted happily, though I noted a tired quality to her voice. “I’m taking a break for lunch. What’re you doing? And where are you?”

A smirk spread across Yang’s lips as she answered. “Oh, not much. I’m at Jaune’s.”

Ruby’s eyes went wide. A moment later, her hand holding her scroll moved and her eyes shifted, locking onto mine through the ‘back’ of the two-sided display. “Hi guys!”

“Having fun?” I asked, and she shrugged.

“The traveling is fun. The training, not so much.”
Smiling at the younger girl, Neo asked, “Where’s your uncle got you training?”

“I’m not supposed to say,” Ruby began as she stood up.

The camera view switched, showing an outwards view with her fingers just to one edge of the screen, and I blinked. ‘So, the entire surface is a camera, on both sides? That’s kind of cool. I suppose that explains why the video quality is so good.’

As I’d been thinking that, the camera panned around, showing a view of Ruby’s surroundings: scrub land, red dirt that looked to have a near-sand consistency where it was disturbed, a slightly more green patch of land around what looked to be a slow moving stream, and finally back around to the painted rock formation Ruby was taking shade under. The scroll’s camera switched again and Ruby smiled. From my lap, Melanie hummed before saying, “Looks like Vacuo.”

“It’s definitely Vacuo,” Neo confirmed.

Ruby shrugged. “I can neither confirm nor deny that it’s Vacuo. But it’s really pretty out here. I always thought deserts were supposed to be all sand dunes and stuff.” Her smile dropped as she wrinkled her nose. “Hot, though. Ugh. I need like three showers after this.”

“If that stream is deep enough you could always go swimming,” I pointed out, and she nodded as a faint blush covered her cheeks. Yang rolled her eyes and I caught a leer from Neo, while I heard giggles from Miltia and Melanie.

“I plan to later. It’s why I picked this spot. I killed all the local Grimm yesterday, so there’s not much in the area. I’ll head into town and meet Uncle Qrow some time after dark, then we’ll probably move on in the morning.” Her eyes tracked to Yang again. “How’s dad?”

“Oh, you know. ‘My baby girl is growing up,’ blah blah blah. He worries but he’ll get over it,” Yang shrugged.

“Should I call—” Ruby began to ask, before Yang interrupted.

“No!” she hissed, and I raised an eyebrow at that. “Unless you want him expecting us to call every time we’re out on a mission. And do you really want to expose your teammates to our dad?”
Ruby winced. “Yeah, no. That… let’s not do that. Dad can be a bit… much.”

“Older sister knows best,” Yang taunted.

The little redhead leveled a glare at her sister. “And what did you mean ‘my’ teammates? My dearest sister Yang, are you implying that you don’t want to be on the same team as me?”

“Hmm,” Yang hummed. “Team with Jaune or team with the cookie monster…”

“Hey!” Ruby grumbled

I rolled my eyes at the byplay. “Your dad’s not that bad.”

Lilac and silver eyes met mine at the same time, staring in silence for a long moment before the pair burst out laughing. “He—he has no idea!” Ruby chortled.

“I know, right? I mean, there’s the meddling,” began Yang.

“And the hovering,” Ruby added.

“And the dad jokes,” the pair synced, in a simultaneous groan.

Yang sighed. “I mean, I know my taste in humor is—”

“Crap,” Ruby deadpanned. “Absolute trash. You wouldn’t know funny if it walked up to you and smashed you in the face with a pie.”

The blonde snorted. “Shut it, you. My sense of humor is great! As I was saying, it’s an acquired taste. But dad’s like a hundred times worse.”

“He really is,” Ruby nodded, meeting my eyes again. “You’ve met dad, but you haven’t really had
time to get to know him. *It gets worse.*

Shaking my head at the pair’s antics, I grinned. “I don’t know. I kind of like your dad. He seems like a decent guy.” My grin shifted to a smirk as I added, “Besides, it’s a parent’s prerogative to embarrass their kids in front of their kids’ friends.”

“He’s working with the enemy, Yang!” Ruby accused, silver eyes going wide.

Yang withdrew as if struck. “I... I just don’t know if I can trust you any more, Jaune. It’s like I don’t even know you!”

“Ha ha. Laugh it up,” I rolled my eyes, earning giggles from the girls.

“They have a point,” Melanie agreed from my lap.

Turning my eyes on the white-clad twin, I said, “Remind me to ask your mother to tell me all your embarrassing secrets.”

“You know, I never thought there’d be an upside to being an orphan, but I see it now,” Neo admitted, turning a smirk on us. “Their dad is an embarrassment,” she gestured at Yang and Ruby.

“He really is,” the pair agreed in tandem.

Neo’s gaze shifted to the twins. “Your mom enjoys embarrassing you.”

“That’s because our mom is a conniving bitch,” Melanie countered.

“She really is,” Miltia agreed. “She enjoys head games.”

Neo’s mismatched eyes locked with my blue. “And your sisters are obsessed with you.”
“Hey, now. It’s just the one.” Neo’s eyes bored into my own. “Jun doesn’t count. She’ll grow out of that phase.” Neo’s eyes continued boring. “Jen doesn’t count either, she needs a constant in her life right now.” Still staring. “Jean doesn’t count either, she’s just annoyed about Jane having slept with someone without her. She’s obsessed with the idea of sex with me, not with me in particular.” Yet more staring. “Okay now you’re grasping, Jane’s obsessed with staying away from me of late, that’s not being obsessed with me.”

“If you say so, dear,” Melanie smirked.

An alarm quietly chimed from the other side of the scroll in Yang’s hands and Ruby sighed. “Well, I guess break time is over. I should get back to work.”

Echoing her sister’s sigh, Yang nodded. “Yeah, and I should head back home soon. If I skip training again, dad’s going to get annoyed.”

Trading goodbyes with Ruby, the scroll shut off and Yang stowed it. Standing up, she popped her back. “You staying for lunch?” I asked, shifting Melanie off my lap as I stood. “Speaking of, let’s go check on that.”

“Yeah,” Yang agreed. “I really do need to leave when we’re done, though. I need to up my game if I’m going to keep up with Ruby. Last time she trained under Uncle Qrow she handed me my ass in our next spar. I don’t want a repeat of that. I’ll swing by again when I get a chance.” A smirk crossed her lips as she added, “I figure I’ll give you a day or two to start missing having me around before I do, though.”

“Oh, you can take a couple of months, then,” I teased, and she reached over and smacked me on the arm.

“Ass.”

I returned the smack with one of my own. “Blonde.”

“Well, if that’s not a case of the pot calling the kettle black,” Yang snorted.

“It’s okay when I do it,” I countered, earning an eye roll from the blonde in question.
“Just kiss already,” Neo groaned, sidling up to press herself into my side as we headed into the kitchen.

Yang slipped up to my left side and turned a glare on Neo. “Maybe I will.”

“Do. It.” Neo egged the blonde on.

“Neo,” I sighed, turning an annoyed look on the shorter girl. “What have I said before? You break it —”

Strong hands grabbed my jaw, yanking me around to my left as Yang closed the distance. Then her lips were pressed to mine, my mouth opening to meet hers as I responded on reflex and our tongues danced. ‘Neo was right. Honeysuckle.’

When the blonde pulled back and broke away, I found myself looking down into a pair of burning red eyes for a moment before she shifted her gaze to Neo and smirked. There was a distinct sway to her hips as she turned on the spot and walked into the kitchen, leaving Neo, the twins, and I standing there. “Did that just happen?” Miltia asked.

“She snapped,” Melanie answered.

“Fucking finally,” Neo chuckled. “Now, if Jaune will just get her into bed…”


“You know it,” she agreed.

Shaking my head, I managed to put one foot in front of the other and finished the short trek to the kitchen. I caught sight of Penny sitting next to Blake in the kitchen while Joan leaned against the counter next to the stove, where the timer for the oven was counting down from just under ten minutes. The gynoid’s green eyes went wide and her face lit up in a blush. Yang, I noticed, still looked incredibly smug where she sat to Blake’s right, opposite Penny. Blinking, I asked, “Penny, are you okay?”
Her mouth opening and closing like a fish out of water, Penny shook her head slowly as she reached up to hide her face. “No?”

“What’s the matter?” I asked, my eyes darting in to take in the others and noticing various looks of amusement to some degree. “What didn’t you tell me?”

“I-I… when you told me to go to bed last night I didn’t,” Penny began, and I nodded.

“Okay,” I drew the word out. “And?”

Penny’s blush grew brighter, if that was possible. “I peeked through the walls.”

Yang’s face screwed up in confusion. “‘Peeked through the walls?’ Do you have x-ray vision or something?”

I blinked twice as the implications registered. Bringing my hand up and palming my face, I groaned loudly. “Oh god, I am not ready for this conversation.” Muffled giggles erupted from the others and I glared at them from between my fingers, though there wasn’t much heat in it. “This isn’t funny,” I sighed, exasperation tinting my voice. Turning to the gynoid, I asked, “How much did you watch?”

“All of it,” she answered quietly. “I’m sorry!”

“It’s fine, Penny.” Taking in her mortified state, I resisted the urge to smirk. “Well, you won’t peek through the walls next time, will you?”

“No!” she whined piteously.

“So, next time I urge you to go to bed,” I lead, and she nodded swiftly, sending copper colored hair flying with the force of her head shaking.

“I will!” she promised.
Sighing in relief at that, I added softly, “Well, at least you learned something from it.”

“Yes,” Penny agreed, and I raised an eyebrow. “Biologicals are weird.”

“Oh, this should be good,” Neo muttered, eyes alight with mirth as she watched Penny.

“‘Biologicals?’” Yang repeated.

Ignoring the blonde, Miltia asked, “How do you mean, Penny?”

With a completely innocent look, Penny answered, “You have physical ports for biological data exchange.”

“Last time I checked, so did you,” Melanie countered, and Penny flushed at that, but kept going.

“But it’s so inefficient!”

Grinning, Joan argued, “But it’s fun.”

Penny shot the woman across from her a skeptical look. “I don’t know… You have to reseat the ports so many times during a single coupling just to exchange data!”

“Again, fun,” Joan repeated.

“Mmm,” Neo hummed. “Talk techie to me more.”

Shooting the ice cream themed girl an amused look, I did just that. “Open your ports so I can dump my data.”

“That’s…” Miltia began.
Melanie finished in a flat, “Terrible.” At the same time, Yang finally lost it and broke down into peals of laughter.

“Oh, so you aren’t interested. More for me, then!” Neo chirped. “Now, come here, Jaune. I want a torrent of your data all over my display.”

Penny tilted her head to the side, sending Neo a confused look. “You keep using these words. I don’t think they mean what you think they mean.”

“So wait,” Joan began, turning an amused look on my ancula. “You’ve got an always-on internet connection, right?” Penny nodded as Yang mouthed a silent ‘what?’ “And this is the first time you’ve ever seen people engaging in sexual acts?”

“Well, no,” Penny admitted. “But having the data in my libraries or seeing something on the internet is not the same as seeing… that.” Poking her fingers together, she quietly added, “It’s different when it’s people you know.”

“No shit,” I groaned quietly. Nearby, Yang collapsed into a chair at the counter with a stunned expression on her face as she stared at Penny. Neo and the twins broke into laughter.

“It’s not that funny,” I deadpanned.

Neo met my eyes, wiping tears of mirth from her own. “Oh, but it is, my love. Her face is priceless,” she pointed at Yang.

The twins nodded along with Neo. “It really is,” Melanie agreed. “I think she finally caught on.”

“The penny dropped,” Miltia added, earning a snort from Neo.

Yang pointed at the little redhead. “You’re a—”

“Girl?” I supplied.
Yang shook her head. “No, a—”

“Person,” I cut her off.

“Ro—” Yang tried again.

Penny smiled a shy smile at the blonde. “Robot?”

“Yes?” Yang drew the word out.


“Where…?” the blonde asked, looking around the room.

I rolled my eyes. “Atlas. Where else?”

Frowning, the blonde’s lilac eyes narrowed as she considered things. “You all knew!”

“You were the only one who didn’t know,” Melanie countered.

“Even Ruby knows,” Miltia added.

Biting her lip, Penny asked, “Does… does this change anything?”

Yang was not oblivious to the tone. Shaking her head, she pulled Penny into a hug. “Nope. It explains a lot, though.”

“Changing the subject,” I began. “I know what the others will enjoy. What were you thinking for your date night?”
Joan hummed. “Two days and nights.” There were sounds of protest from the twins and Neo, before Joan cut them off with a glare and two words. “Three. Weeks.”

“Fine,” the protesting trio acquiesced.

I raised an eyebrow at Joan’s request. “So, what? You want a vacation?”

Joan shot me a flat look. “‘Vacation?’ What’s that? Does it taste good?”

Snorting softly, I nodded. “Okay, so you’ve never had a vacation before. It’s this magical thing where you take a few days and leave town. Go somewhere. See sights. Spend a few nights in a little village somewhere in the middle of nowhere.”

“So, my job, essentially,” Joan rolled her eyes.

That brought me up short for a moment, before I came up with an idea. “Okay. I may have something else in mind, then. I know a lake in the middle of nowhere…”

“Done,” Joan agreed quickly, before frowning as she dug out her scroll. “Tomorrow?”

I shook my head. “I need to go see someone tomorrow night or the day after,” I denied, turning a look on Neo, who smirked at that. “Day after that, maybe?”

Joan bit her lip, then shook her head. “Not if you want to see our parents. Personally though, I’m all for blowing them off and fucking off to the middle of nowhere for two days, if you want to.”

“Tempting, but no,” I denied. “It’ll have to be after.”

“Fine,” the elder blonde sighed. “We can leave that evening.”

“Jaune,” Penny spoke up, drawing my gaze. “Do you want us to come with you to meet your parents?”
Neo snorted softly at that. “Like he could stop us.”

Beside her, the twins nodded. “We’re coming,” Melanie agreed.

“We’ll need transport large enough for all of us, that isn’t visibly tied to Fox Hunt,” Miltia supplied.

Looking between the three of them, I asked, “You’re sure? I’ve got no idea what we’ll be walking into.”

The trio exchanged looks before nodding, “We’re sure,” they synced.

“It’s kind of creepy when they do that,” Blake murmured from the other couch.

Turning a look on the faunus girl, I asked, “What about you? You want to come too?”

Blake hummed, then shook her head. “Tempting as it is, I’ve already made plans. There’s a new book being released that day by an author I like. It’s about a man with two souls.” Biting her lip, she offered, “I could put if off, if you wanted—”

“It’s fine, Blake,” I denied. “I’m sure you’ll hear about it afterwards.” Thinking about it a moment, I added, “Or I could do the tacnet thing and send you the feed.”

Blake shook her head, “No. As curious as I am, it would distract from my book. Can I get the details after?”

“Okay then,” I nodded. Turning my gaze on Joan, I asked, “So, what’s for lunch?”

“Blake wanted tuna,” Joan began and I made a face. “Yeah, I remembered you hated it before.”

I blinked at that. It wasn’t the first time my tastes and those of the original Jaune had lined up. Then again, there were lots of coincidences like that between me and the Arc siblings. ‘Luckily, I’ve yet to find something I enjoyed that this body’s taste buds hate.’
I pulled myself out of my thoughts in time to hear Joan saying, “Penny had fish in her inventory, so I baked those, some fries, and hushpuppies.” She checked the timer and popped open the oven to check. “Looks done to me,” she shrugged, turning off the oven then reaching in to pull the dishes out. With her back turned, Joan didn’t see my hand twitch to stop her from doing so, but everyone else did. While Yang and Blake looked confused, Melanie, Miltia, and Neo shot me knowing looks. Penny, on the other hand, bounced up to help Joan.

“Sounds good,” I finally said, grabbing a stack of plates down out of the cabinet and gesturing for the elder blonde to go first.

Lunch was quick and, soon enough, I was washing up plates as everyone was getting ready to go see about doing their own things. Finishing up the last plate, I stretched and popped my back before looking to Miltia and asking, “So, we’ve got a couple of hours to kill before our date. How ever shall we pass the time?”

“Actually,” Miltia began, digging out her scroll. “There are some other things you should probably take care of while you’ve got some time. Things like picking up transport to get us to your parents’ home without using a company car.”

“But what about—” Melanie began, only for her sister to throw her an unamused look.

“You are not draining him dry on my date night before it’s even started,” Miltia denied hotly.

Neo laughed at that. “Oh, I see how it is. Someone’s feeling possessive tonight.”

“We agreed—” Miltia began and Neo waved her off.

“And I agree. Really.” Neo nodded, before a smirk crept across her lips. “I’d be kind of pissed off too, if it was my night and he couldn’t cover my face and hair in hot, steaming c—”

Hitting Neo with Silence, I turned an amused look on her. “That’s enough of that.” Giving the three of them a peck on the lips, I headed for the door. “Right, then. Errands it is. Again. Yay.”

I dropped the Silence on Neo and opened the door. Not a second before I closed it, the ice cream themed girl continued where she’d left off. I rolled my eyes as I began the process of passing through security to get out of the base as the Fox. ’Miltia mentioned transport. She’s right, we can’t just use
the sedans for this. I’m sure anyone with brains watching the base has figured out we use those. Maybe an SUV?"

I would have to swing by a car lot on the way back to pick up Miltia. Before that, though, I needed to check in on the state of the gangs. I knew we had been collecting the tithes they had been leaving us from their operations, but I wanted to make sure the mental commands I’d left using Dominate were still in place and perhaps add some new ones. Specifically, I’d be using them to be on the lookout for White Fang operations within the city. A thought occurred on my way out the elevator and into the light. Casting Wings, I took off across the city, throwing on Invisibility and the rest of my Stealth suite of spells as I went. ‘I wonder if I could get away with sending the gangs after the trains the White Fang stole. Cinder doesn’t know I’ve consolidated them by puppeting their leaders.’

Checking my map, I made sure the tracking spell I’d placed on the train was still working as I considered it. ‘Run it by the individual gang leaders. Pose it as a hypothetical. ‘What would you do if you found out the White Fang was sitting on a load of Lien?’ If they think they have the forces to try to capture it, then it could be worth it. And it’s not like I’m really risking anything there, since I poached all the decent people from their ranks to bolster Fox Hunt.’

I was still thinking it over when I dropped into an alley and switched over to my Shiro gear. ‘Okay, first stop, Akamaru. Let’s see what he has to say before I decide. After that,’ I glanced up at the bar labeled ‘SP’ on my HUD. Gamer Semblance updates seemed kind of important and having one fail was… unsettling. There was also the worry that, if I hit zero SP, one of two things could happen: either my Semblance would stop working, or I’d die. Oh sure, there was always the third option that maybe nothing would happen, but I didn’t want to chance it. ‘So, gangs first, then create and clear an ID or three in town to refill Spirit. After that, swing by a car lot to dupe one then back to base to get cleaned up for our date.’

My HUD pinged, alerting me to a new email. Raising an eyebrow, I checked both the address it had been sent to and from. ‘Come in from Fox Hunt’s secure mail server. Don’t recognize the address though.’

Shrugging, I opened the mail and found a video waiting. I watched the first few seconds play out and realized what it was I was looking at. A quick text to Miltia asking who had been working on our video editing project confirmed who the email address belonged to. ‘Jen must have been working on this since we got it in. Didn’t know she had any experience with video editing,’ I mused. I would have to thank her in person next time I saw her. Spending a few seconds to compose a short email, I fired off a copy of the video to April as I had promised. Considering that this wasn’t exactly breaking news but rather a public interest piece on Fox Hunt, her producers would need time for their editors to go over everything. I didn’t expect to see it in the news for a few days at least.
While I thoroughly enjoyed the feeling of Miltia’s ass grinding against my crotch through our clothes, the decor and music left much to be desired. As the ‘song’ ended and the next one began, the petite girl took my hand and lead me off the dance floor. Weaving through the crowd and tossing a negligent wave towards where Hei sat at a table off to the side of the dance floor, we hit the exit and I resisted the urge to sigh in relief as the blaring thump of bass and chirping of techno was muted by the walls of the club. Miltia laughed quietly as she caught her breath. “Thank you, Jaune. That was fun, and I know how much you hate club dancing.”

“I don’t really mind, if it’s for you,” I shrugged.

“I appreciate it,” Miltia nodded, slipping up against my side and putting my arm around her as we walked towards the car. “That worked up an appetite.”

Slipping into the car and leaving Junior’s club behind us, I considered our options. Beside me, I felt Miltia briefly struggle against the Dominate spell holding her—token resistance at best, but more likely a demand for attention. It was even more token given the fact that, with the masks she and her sister had absorbed, either of them could break my mental spells pretty much at will if they wanted to. I had yet to actually get through their defenses when they were trying to keep me out. Thankfully, at least for Miltia, some experimentation had shown that the resistance could be dialed down—or shut off entirely in this instance, as she trusted me enough to let me control her. Well, that, and the act of having me control her really turned her on. Case in point, our date tonight.

Smirking, I directed one of her hands to clutch the seatbelt resting between her small breasts, while the other settled on her right thigh, not quite close enough to touch herself. As I left her hands there, I felt her desire and excitement ratchet up another notch across our link. Considering that I had been in control of her since we’d left Fox Hunt, she was already worked up to begin with—but the agonizingly slow, teasing approach was starting to drive her mad. “I’m thinking we should find somewhere nice and… public to eat,” I mused aloud.

Miltia flexed against the spell again, but it was my words that spilled from her lips this time as she answered. “That sounds wonderful. We should get a table.” Her eyes widened slightly as she realized what it was I had in store for her and I turned a knowing grin on her for a moment as we drove on. For the most part, I was allowing her to speak and react as she would normally, just giving her a mental push to do so—that is, until I found somewhere it’d be more amusing to override her, such as forcing her to offer up the suggestion for our seating arrangements. With a booth, we would have at least some semblance of privacy. A table would put us in plain view of anyone who happened to be looking our way and paying attention. The risk of being caught had sent her heart rate climbing the moment the words slipped past her lips.

The short ride to our destination was spent in companionable silence, save for the radio pouring out
some instrumental piece. The place I had in mind for the night was a small, upscale restaurant with the sort of classic look and feel I preferred. Dim interior, candles on the table, intimate atmosphere, with just enough background noise to allow for a sense of private conversation. More importantly—no screaming kids, no obnoxiously loud idiots, and the wait staff knew their trade well. They even had a band playing something along the lines of jazz in the corner.

Once we were seated and our orders taken, I turned my attention fully on the red-clad twin across the table from me. Miltia had traded her usual outfit for a shorter, lighter red dress that clung in all the right places, and the only makeup she wore was a bit of green eyeliner and a shade of pink lipstick that drew the eye. Those pink lips tilted upwards in a small, smug smile as she watched my eyes take in her form—the hunger in her green eyes probably mirrored my own, and had nothing to do with the food we were waiting on.

“So,” I began, “got any plans for once I’m in Beacon?”

She flexed against the spell holding her again as she answered. “Yep.”

I blinked at that as her mouth shut and she smiled. Giving her a mental prod, I asked, “Really? Such as…?”

“Nothing much,” she evaded, and I frowned in thought as I realized she’d figured out a way to lie while under Dominate. Well, not necessarily lie so much as tell half-truths and withhold information.

“You’re being evasive,” I pointed out, deciding to turn it into a game.

The girl across from me smirked in reply. Under my direction, she scooted her chair further in and leaned forward to rest her elbow on the table and her chin in her right palm. Her left hand moved down to her lap, playing with the hem of her skirt which had ridden up her deliciously creamy thighs when she’d sat. Her heart rate and breathing picked up slightly in excitement, before settling back down as she realized that I wasn’t going to make her take it further for the moment. With a little more mental encouragement to speak, she began. “Well, there’s the bag project, for instance. You still need to fix the whole ‘exploding failure’ issue if we’re going to sell them.”

I winced. “Yeah. Can’t say that losing a limb is an appealing consequence of the seals failing,” I admitted. The problem on my end had been lack of time to play with it. I couldn’t just Semblance up a working pattern for what I wanted and Sanguine’s notes had been less than helpful on this particular issue. This one was going to fall to me to fix on my own. ‘The look in her eyes says she’s still dancing around whatever it is she doesn’t want me to know, but I get the feeling it’s more of a game for her, too—showing that she can resist in different ways.’ Leaning on the spell, I tried the
brute force approach. “Anything else?”

“We talked it over and we’re going to have Jen train us while she’s staying with us,” she answered as a smile spread across her lips that looked more akin to Neo’s preferred shit eating grin than something I’d normally see on Miltia. And of course I already knew that, as she was aware.

Nodding, I asked, “To what end?”

“To get stronger, obviously,” she retorted, mirth dancing in her eyes.

“Smartass,” I accused, and she stuck her tongue out at me. In response, I focused on Dominate and shifted her left hand two inches up her thigh, leaving her index finger just brushing her mound through her panties and drawing a quiet gasp from Miltia’s lips. “Why?”

“Do I need a reason to want to get stronger?” Miltia asked, her eyes going half-lidded as she glared at me for teasing before I smoothed her face back out into a smile, which immediately shifted back into ‘shit eating grin’ territory the moment I wasn’t focused on it.

In a normal conversation, that would usually be a sign to the person asking questions that they were being an asshole and should drop the subject. In this case however, it was one more example of how she could evade without directly going against the spell forcing her to speak. I didn’t particularly care what the girls had planned—I’d like to know, but not knowing wouldn’t bother me since I trusted them. The fact that she didn’t want me to know was interesting, but more interesting was her showing me the gaps in my Dominate spell. Her reply had cornered me, though. If anyone was actually paying attention, then pressing further would be out of place and she knew it. Verbal check, as it were.

“Clever girl,” I murmured, earning a giggle from the girl in question.

The waiter arrived with plates bearing our food before disappearing as swiftly as he’d come. “This looks good,” Miltia said, taking in the pasta dish on her plate—some chicken thing with white cheese sauce that I didn’t bother to remember the name of.

Digging my fork into my lasagna, I hummed appreciatively as the first bite hit my tongue. As Miltia’s fork reached her lips, I pushed my will on the Dominate spell on her, directing the hand still in her lap to shift and begin slowly stroking her sex through her silk panties. The girl squirmed, nearly dropping her food, but I forced her to recover and go still. Green eyes locked with my blue again as I fed her while slowly teasing her. As I made her swallow, I smiled and pointed at her lips, where a
small dab of that thin cheese sauce had smeared rather suggestively. “That’s a good look for you,” I smirked.

I let her tongue dart out and lick the sauce off under her own direction, keeping her hands occupied as she spoke. “You’re a cruel man, Jaune.”

“You enjoy it,” I countered, forcing her head to bob in a nod. “And it could be worse. I could have you doing all sorts of humiliating things.”

Miltia chuckled softly. “That’s Melanie,” she denied, before a small, mischievous smirk crossed her lips. “Oops. You didn’t hear that from me.”

“Oh really?” I asked, raising an eyebrow. “I’ll have to remember that. And just throwing your sister under the bus like that—how terrible.”

“I have no idea what you mean,” she demurred, a happy smile on her face as I fed her another bite.

“Oh huh,” I shot her a knowing look at that. “Trouble maker.”

“Mother always said we had a talent for causing trouble,” Miltia chuckled.

“When’s the last time you visited her, by the way?” I asked, popping another forkful of lasagna into my mouth and contemplating wandering into the kitchen to throw around a few Charm spells to get the recipe.

Miltia hummed as a thoughtful look crossed her face. “It’s been a while. We should visit her soon, and bring you along when we do. She likes you.”

I turned a skeptical look on her. “You sure about that, given the head games?”

“Yes. That’s just mom being mom. And then there’s Dating Mode to consider,” she mused aloud and I rolled my eyes. Miltia waited as I began sipping my drink, then added, “We wouldn’t mind you giving us a little sister.” I choked, coughing as I set down the drink as she smirked. “I’m sure mother would appreciate the company of a younger man.”
“You. Bitch,” I managed to choke out as I cleared my throat. “You planned that.” It was yet another flaw in the Dominate spell—namely, unless given specific instructions otherwise or unless I was fully in control of them, then the person under it could still plan against the person casting it. Sure, surprising me and causing a coughing fit wasn’t exactly intent to harm, but it was still subversive to the intent of the spell. Then again, Miltia was the one person who had the most experience being under that particular spell at all levels of effect and I hadn’t completely crushed her will as I had with the criminals I’d used it against, so she could still plot against me—actively wanted to, in this instance. That, and she had both a naturally high Will save and her mask to fall back on, so perhaps she was the exception.

“I would never do anything to upset my master,” she murmured quietly, amusement and anticipation radiating off her from our link.

I stilled her left hand, directing her to push aside her panties. A moment later, she gasped quietly as I forced her to roughly shove two fingers deep into her sopping snatch. Her breath hitched in her throat as they withdrew, before slipping up to circle her clit. Then they stopped entirely, pulling away as I set her back to eating. Frustration and excitement in equal parts spilled across our link and I smirked at her. “I think you would, just to get a rise out of me.”

“Absolutely,” she admitted as I forced her to answer honestly. “What’s the fun in having an owner if you don’t occasionally step out of line, just so he can correct you?” Her eyes widened slightly at being forced to say that and she blushed faintly.

“Why am I not surprised?” I shook my head, grinning at her answer. ‘Then again, she didn’t actually try to be evasive about the answer, so she wants me to know this as opposed to whatever she was hiding earlier,’ I realized. “Finish your meal, pet, and if you’re good I might just take you on a walk.”

“Promise?” she asked, and I rolled my eyes, focusing instead on my meal as I idly directed the hand in her lap to stroke her inner thigh.

By the time we left, after I had managed to Charm the chef into giving me copies of his recipes, Miltia had to lean against my arm to steady herself as her legs didn’t quite want to cooperate and her breath came in quiet pants. “Where are we going?” Miltia asked as I helped her into the car before moving around to my side.

Turning a grin on her as I started the car and pulled out, I shrugged. “I found a nice spot on one of my flights across the city,” I answered vaguely, reaching over to turn on the radio, familiar synthesized notes pouring from the speakers as A-Ha’s Take On Me began playing. I laughed
quietly as I forced Miltia to dance along to the music in her seat, much to her amusement.

“Something from Earth?” she asked as her body bounced around out of her control.

“Some anime dance that was ridiculously popular a few years back,” I answered as she brought her hands up to her head like ears and shifted about in her seat. “I should have you, Melanie, and Neo all do it and record it for future blackmail material.”

“It only works as blackmail if it bothers us,” Miltia pointed out. “I think it’s cute, Melanie wouldn’t mind, and Neo would go along just for laughs.”

“Curses, foiled again,” I heaved an obviously exaggerated sigh, stilling Miltia’s dancing and turning my eyes back to the road for the few minutes it took to get to our destination.

As we pulled to a stop, the short-haired twin raised an eyebrow at our surroundings—an empty parking lot on the Residential District side of the river, not too terribly far from my old apartment. Directing her out of the car and to follow, we walked towards a ten foot rise in the land that stretched out to our left and right ahead of us—clearly a man-made feature as opposed to a natural part of the terrain. “What is this?”

“River embankment,” I answered as we crested the top, to a view of the commercial district across the water with the city’s lights dancing off the river stretched before us. Pulling a folded blanket from my Inventory, I found a flat section of ground and spread it out before dropping down to sit. Miltia kicked off her heels as she stepped onto the blanket before dropping gently into my lap under my direction. Leaning back against the embankment, I pulled the lithe girl in my arms closer as she pressed her lips into mine—our kiss slow, languid, and unhurried. My hands trailed down her back and flanks to her thighs, before slipping back up and under the hem of her one piece dress. Her skin felt hot, flushed under my fingers as I enjoyed the feel of her. Miltia fought briefly against the spell holding her, trying to move her hands, but I kept them draped around my shoulders.

Silk panties met my fingers and I met her eyes as I smirked against her mouth before grabbing them and giving them a firm yank, ripping them off of her and tossing them to the side. Her teeth snapped down, catching my bottom lip between them as she bit down—not hard enough to break my Aura or draw blood, but definitely enough to feel uncomfortable. “I liked that pair, Jaune.”

I cast a glance down at the stringy little red number lying in a pitiful, wadded up ball on the blanket, soaked through with her excitement. “They look better there.”
“You’re horrible,” she murmured against my mouth as I kissed her again, effectively shutting her up even if I could have just forced her silence with the spell holding her.

My scroll ringing brought the fun to a temporary halt as my HUD displayed an icon for an incoming video call. Miltia’s irritation at the interruption showed as I felt my control over the spell holding her snap. “Who is it?”

“Ruby,” I frowned. “I could just—”

Miltia sighed, shaking her head. “Go ahead. Let’s see what she wants.”

I fished my scroll out of my pocket and answered the call. “Ruby, what’s up?”

The scroll in my hand lit up, showing a field of stars for a moment. A quiet splash sounded and a pale hand took the scroll on her end and tilted it down until it came to rest on a head of dark hair—black in the low light cast by the scroll—and a pair of silver eyes above a wavering, watery surface. Ruby pushed upwards slightly, exposing her lips, neck, and stopping at bare shoulders as she sent me a hesitant smile. “Hey, Jaune.”

I raised an eyebrow at that, catching Miltia’s eyes as her expression mirrored my own. “What’re you doing?”

The girl on the other side of the scroll stuck out her tongue. “Swimming,” she answered, as though it should be obvious. “It was hot all day and I wanted to wash off the funk.”

“I see that,” I murmured.

‘This is unexpected,’ Miltia’s mental voice pointed out, and I silently agreed.

The camera bobbed as Ruby shifted on the other side. “What about you?” she asked as she moved, before the camera settled back down.

“We’re just enjoying a night out,” I answered vaguely.
“We?!” the little reaper asked, panic suddenly in her voice. She ducked down lower in the water, silver eyes going wide as she asked, “‘We’ who?!”

Miltia shifted off my lap and molded herself to my side, bringing herself into frame on the other end as Ruby’s eyes tracked the other girl. “Me,” the twin answered with a small smile.

“Buh-I-uh… But I—” Ruby spluttered quietly. Miltia sent the girl on the other end a knowing look, before turning and locking lips with me—a quiet, throaty moan clearly audible. While her lips were sealed to mine, the red-clad twin’s green eyes were locked firmly on Ruby. I glanced at the scroll to see silver eyes had went wide and even in the low light provided by the glow of her scroll, I could make out the blush creeping up her features. “I’llcallbacklater!” the redhead whimpered, disconnecting the call.

“That was evil,” I scolded gently, pulling back from the girl in my arms.

Miltia snorted softly. “No, evil would have been mounting and then riding you while you two talked. Now that I think about it, I should have done that.” Laughing softly, she rolled back into my lap. “Now, where were we?”

I reasserted my hold over the girl straddling my waist, forcing her to stand. One hand slipped down to grab her dress and lift it, exposing her bare sex to my gaze. The other hand moved down to lightly stroke herself, her long fingers working back and forth gently over her bare lips—never quite dipping between them or coming close enough to brush her clit. “I believe I was going to force you to torture yourself while I watched.” Meeting her green eyes with my blue, I smirked as I asked, “How long do you think I can keep you right on the edge before you start begging?”

“I’m on the verge of begging now,” Miltia pointed out breathlessly. She whimpered as I forced her to spread her lower lips wide, taking in the sight of her for a moment before resuming her teasing.

“Too bad you’re not quite there yet, then,” I smiled and the girl before me bit her lip. I forced Miltia to stand like that, the soft, wet sounds of her stroking her cunt filling the air for several minutes as I felt her struggling against the spell grow more and more desperate, aching to let me allow her to do more while fighting against her own self-control not to simply snap the spell holding her.

Finally, when I felt she really could stand no more, Miltia’s head lowered. Her green eyes stared up at me through dark lashes. “Please? Won’t you please let me come, master?”
I stilled her hand. “Come here,” I ordered, allowing her enough control to move on her own as I beckoned her closer.

Miltia stumbled as her knees threatened to buckle, but I caught her by the hips and held her steady, directing her how to move and ending up with her thighs to either side of my neck as she straddled my face. I put my mouth to work kissing her lower lips. The taste of cherry filled my mouth as I lapped up and down the small girl’s slit, giving her the attention she’d been desperately craving all night. Long, thin fingers threaded into my hair seeking a handhold as her thighs began to shake. ‘She really was that close,’ I mused as she shuddered in my arms.

Forcing the girl to stand on shaky legs, I followed her up and helped her disrobe. Holding out a hand, I Conjured up a collar and leash. “Ready for that walk now?”

Melanie’s green eyes went wide as she bit her lip and excitement radiated over our link. “Oh my.”

The day after my date with Miltia was a total loss in terms of getting anything productive done. On the other hand, I believed that time enjoyed was never time wasted—and the day was very enjoyable. The girls agreed, if their insistence on not leaving the bed for anything except food and the occasional break was anything to go by. I was beginning to worry for the state of our bed though, if the creaking it had developed was anything to go by—that, and the structural integrity of the wall the headboard rested against.

Joan had been talked into helping set up and power new wards both over Fox Hunt itself and the Officers’ Quarters where we made our home. I was still looking for a pattern or theories on a pattern in Sanguine’s notes that would give me a way to curtail Raven’s spying, but I didn’t have much hope of finding anything any time soon. Well, Raven’s spying, and the ever present possibility that she could decide the money had gotten too good and she wanted to turn ‘Shiro’ over to Atlas. Or do something like opening a portal into an active volcano just to play a real life game of ‘the floor is lava’ if she decided to screw with me—assuming that was within the scope of her Semblance’s power.

Even with my current skill level, I simply lacked the necessary experience to interpret much of the information in the faunus-turned-spirit’s journal and I had no completed patterns that would fit the bill. That was fine though, since it gave me something to work towards, along with the bags.

Today, as soon as I had managed to get out of bed and prod Neo and Miltia into getting up and joining me in the shower, we had changed into our Fox Hunt outfits and headed down to the briefing
room, while leaving the other girls to sleep. Miltia was dressed for the role of Head of Intelligence today while Neo was in her Yin disguise and mask as my Second. Angel had apparently been busy and wanted to go over her findings before we video called Greene to negotiate terms on the new hardware we were trying to purchase. We entered to find the smell of coffee filling the briefing room and Miltia and Neo broke off to join Angel at the coffee maker.

“Angel, you truly live up to your name,” Neo murmured, beginning to fix her own cup.

“We order it in bulk. I'm pretty sure every military in existence would simultaneously mutiny if Grimm managed to destroy the coffee plantations,” Angel grinned before turning to shoot me a curious look as I sat down. “Boss?”

“No thanks,” I shook my head.

Miltia’s mask shifted, becoming inert and allowing her to push it up to rest atop her head—Angel being one of the few that had seen all of our faces, we trusted her not to blab. Smirking as she filled her own cup, the short-haired twin said, “He doesn't do coffee.”

Neo’s smirk mirrored Miltia’s as she moved over to sit on my right. “Give me a kiss,” she demanded, puckering up and leaning in.

Reaching out, I pushed her gently away with a finger to her forehead. “After you brush your teeth.”

“Blasphemy,” Angel shook her head, taking her own seat as Miltia dropped into the seat on my left. “Don't let the men hear you say that, boss.”

“Just a little one?” Neo persisted, and I rolled my eyes at her teasing.

“Nope,” I denied, shaking my head as she slipped away from my finger on her forehead and closed the distance.

“Come on, you won’t even taste it,” she tried.

“I will throw out your ice cream if you keep that up,” I threatened.
Neo’s eyes went wide. “You wouldn’t dare!”

“You don’t know me very well, then,” I countered. “I absolutely would. For an entire week.”

The shorter girl shot me a glare before dropping into her seat with a pout. “You win this round.”

Shaking her head and draining the last of her coffee, Angel said, “Right. On to business.”

“And away from those two trying to one-up each other,” Miltia added, sticking her tongue out at us as she did.

Angel ignored the byplay as Neo made a lewd gesture with her own tongue in answer and I rolled my eyes at the pair’s antics. The hologram projector in the center of the table lit up, displaying a picture of what looked like a bullhead. “We can go over these one by one if you like—”

“Send the detailed report to my scroll and just give us the summary, please,” Miltia instructed, and Angel nodded. I would be going over those in private with her later anyway, since this was something I needed to learn as part of my role as the owner of the company. Also, in case Miltia was injured or otherwise indisposed and could not handle it. That of course brought to mind the fact that there was no real redundancy for the upper positions. Critical roles were left without people capable of filling in, should something happen. I made a mental note to ask about that, since I was pretty sure I couldn’t have been the first person to think of it as training up replacements was standard operating procedure in military organizations.

“Yes, ma'am. Sixty bullheads on offer. Of those, sixteen are either in dire need of repair or are fit only for parts. Nine are in moderate condition and could be refit inside a few months. Six are in need of miscellaneous replacement parts but would be airworthy within a few weeks of purchase if we ordered the parts—faster if we cannibalized parts off that first sixteen. The rest are in good, working condition but require maintenance. We could have a fleet up within a week or two,” Angel began as a detailed list of each unit and the parts required for each replaced the bullhead in the holographic display.

“How much are we looking at for the lot, plus cost of repairs?” Neo asked, eyeing the list warily.

Angel tapped at her scroll and ours chimed a moment later. Looking at the figure in question, I winced. “Yeah, we can't swing that at the moment, can we?”
“No,” Miltia denied. “Not if we want to stay above board.”

“Can’t we just use the hack tool to change the records?” Neo asked, and I shook my head.

“Too much risk. We’d have to alter the digital records, then I’d have to hunt down everyone involved outside of Fox Hunt and alter their memories,” I denied. Shifting my gaze to Angel, I ordered, “Forget you heard that last part.”

“Sorry boss, I couldn’t hear you all the way over there. Did you say something?” the older woman asked.

“Good girl,” I grinned under my mask.

On my left, Miltia drummed her fingers on the desk, adding, “There are also the physical records to consider. Melanie and I have been looking into where they’re kept. We need to do something about the bill of sale for the stuff we’ve already purchased, preferably before we get audited—which is probably going to be either the end of the year or the end of the fiscal year.”

I winced at that. I really didn’t want the Remnant IRS equivalent digging around my organization. “Right, get me that quick as you can please.”

“Yes, dear,” Miltia smiled and I chuckled.

“So, we have an idea what to do about getting these from Greene without paying cash up front?” I asked, and Miltia hummed.

“Perhaps,” she nodded. “We have enough in official liquid assets for a ten percent down payment. With that, they would possibly be willing to allow us to pay off the rest.”

I blinked at that before rolling my eyes. “Right. Should have considered that,” I admitted, scrubbing a hand through my hair. I’d taken out more than one vehicle loan before, so I knew how that process worked—I just hadn’t expected the same thing to apply to our situation. That, and I hated the very concept of interest. Usury was a sin for a reason, after all—on the personal level, it was voluntary indentured servitude and on an international level it was economic warfare. I had gotten to the point where I’d much rather just save money and buy things outright—even if it meant I’d do without for a
while. ‘On the other hand, this is a ‘spend money to make money’ situation,’ I mused, before finally nodding. “Okay. We’ll lead with that—unless there are any objections or anyone has a better idea?”

There were no objections, so I reached out to the interface on the table to dial up Greene and open negotiations as Miltia and Neo replaced their masks.

‘My faith in the universe is restored. Even on Remnant, lawyers and salesmen are universally despicable,’ I groused later that night as I made my way towards Cinder’s current base. ‘I fucking swear, if I didn’t need him I’d put a missile through Greene’s bedroom window.’

I shouldn’t have been surprised, considering Green was essentially a lawyer playing the part of used car salesman for the government—compounded evil, as it were. He had scented blood in the water and bilked us for as much as he could. If we missed payments—which I didn’t expect us to—they would repossess the equipment. If the check bounced, they would repo everything. We were doing the maintenance ourselves to lower the costs, but we would essentially be buying fuel from them at a set price written into the agreement. Nor could we scrap the sixteen busted ones for parts, as they weren’t ours to scrap yet—so we were stuck with them in the lot, either letting them sit as hulks taking up space or we were going to have to repair them, making them even larger money sinks. And so on. We couldn’t even technically claim them as an asset on our taxes, thus until we paid them off they were a money sink. The only good news was that we would be taking possession of them within the week and could probably get them in the air on the timetable Angel had laid out—unless it took longer to get replacement parts than we thought it would. That would give us some breathing room, but I wouldn’t stop worrying about it until we got the contract for the reclamation project. We had to rely on trash bounties that Hunters didn’t want—scraps, essentially—until the money from the train job started filtering back in. That is, unless we got lucky and ran across a bounty worth some actual Lien before the Hunters did, but I wasn’t going to rely on luck. It was like starting a plan with, “step one: win the lottery.”

I was still irritated by the time I set down on a roof a few blocks from the shoe shop. Finding the front door locked, I forced the lock open with Telekinesis by turning the deadbolt on the other side—since I didn’t have the precision to force the tumblers—and entered, setting off the little bell above the door. Quick footsteps moved almost silently down the stairs as I closed and locked the door behind me. My senses warned me of the incoming attack and I dropped into Haste, turning back towards my attacker in time to snatch her right hand at the wrist with my left as her hand descended on my head with one of her weapons drawn. Shifting, I pivoted and slammed the smaller woman against the wall, pinning her there with the weight of my body. Her free hand came up in an attempt to put a bullet through my head, but I pinned that one above her head as well. I faded into sight as I allowed Invisibility to drop.

“Emerald,” I greeted the girl as her red eyes glared into mine.
“Asshole,” she ground out, her body shifting under me as she tried to force me off. When I refused to budge, the greenette demanded, “Get off me.”

Letting her go, I backed away and asked, “So, why’d you try to kill me this time, since you knew damn well it was me the moment you spotted me from the stairs? Are you mensing?”

“Eat shit,” she growled.

I jerked my head towards the stairs. “Your boss in?”

The thief considered the question for a moment, clearly weighing her options, before apparently deciding the backlash from Cinder if she lied about me showing up wouldn’t be worth the satisfaction of sending me away. “Yes,” she answered shortly, holstering her weapons and turning towards the stairs. “Knock next time, fucker. That door was locked for a reason.”

I shrugged. “Force of habit.” Still, I was pissed and Emerald was an easy, if not willing, target for my frustration. A smirk spread under my mask and I added, “And I’ll keep doing it, if only because I know it pisses you off.”

“I will kill you,” she threatened. “Sorry boss, my hand slipped. Guess you’ll have to find another bed warmer.”

As we topped the stairs, I retorted, “Maybe, but it wouldn’t be you.” The smaller girl flipped me off over her shoulder as she lead us towards what passed as Cinder’s meeting room. “If you’re good though, I might just put in a good word with Cinder for you. Getting laid would really help with your attitude, so she may give you a pity fuck just for that.”

“Fuck off and die in a fire,” Emerald growled, turning another glare on me over her shoulders.

As we entered the room, I caught sight of Mercury sitting on a couch tinkering with his prosthetics while Cinder sat in her chair with her nose buried in a book. Cinder looked up from her reading as we entered, molten gold eyes locking with my red contacts and for a moment her lips twitched as though she couldn’t decide whether to smile or frown, before her eyes moved to take in Emerald and that smile shifted into a smirk. “If you two can’t get along, I will lock you in a room together until you work out your differences,” Cinder threatened, her tone somewhere between amused and exasperated.
Emerald’s hands twitched towards her weapons as she grinned. “That sounds like a plan—”

“Without your weapons,” Cinder deadpanned.

The greenette considered it and Mercury rolled his eyes. “Don’t bother. He could take you in hand to hand.”

“Fucker,” Emerald grunted.

As the greenette grumbled to herself, Mercury sighed and gave the screwdriver in his hand one last twist before dropping it on the table in front of him. Pushing himself to his feet, he grabbed Emerald and lead her back towards the stairs. “Come on, let’s go get a drink.”

“She’s not going to put out just because you get her drunk,” I warned, earning a middle finger from Mercury as he passed, which I returned in a negligent wave.

As the pair cleared out, I dropped into a chair and pulled my mask down, turning a grin on the woman across from me. “She really does not like me.”

Cinder marked her place in her book and set it aside. The bell over the door chimed below, signaling Mercury and Emerald’s departure. “She can dislike you all she wants so long as she can work with you.”

“True,” I nodded. “The fact that getting under her skin is amusing helps.”

“You shouldn’t abuse my subordinates,” Cinder shook her head. “Otherwise, I may abuse yours.”

I rolled my eyes. “Neo would enjoy it. Mercury still bitching about his leg?”

“Yes. He’s looking into non-conductive materials to prevent them from being damaged in the same way in the future.”

Frowning, I asked, “Does he think that’ll work? That blade the Fox uses doesn’t behave like an electrical Dust blade— or like actual electricity, really.” It wouldn’t be much of a problem for my alter-ego if Mercury figured out a way to ignore one of my favorite attacks. The Plasma Blade was
loud, highly visible, and pants-shittingly scary to be on the opposite end of for most people. However, if he did find a way to ignore it and could get into close combat range where his fancy prosthetics would be useful, that still would n’t leave me pitting my martial arts against his, plus his fancy toys. As the Fox, I had shown them enough elemental manipulation that getting into close range should be considered a bad idea for a melee fighter. He would need something more if he wanted to deal with everything they actually knew about. There was no way he would spend the time figuring out some way to defend against or neutralize everything he was aware of. If he was smart, he would work on ways to kill me in one shot—but I certainly wasn’t going to put the idea in his head.

“It won’t hurt to try. Any insight you could give,” she began, and I shook my head.

“You know more about him than I do by now, I figure. I fought the guy once and it was just a short running battle.” Of course, I’d claimed to have been spying on myself, so I had to give her something. “I don’t have anything that’ll help, just a whole bunch of shit we can’t do and should avoid doing.”

“Oh?” she asked, raising an eyebrow.

I nodded. “He rotates patrol schedules, routes, and so on daily so we can’t rely on that. His computer network is air-gapped, so there’s no chance of hacking in and getting those routes. Every camera in the place can see me, even with my Semblance, so that’s out. Getting friendly with some of the grunts got us some details on their internal ranking structure. Seems military, but that shouldn’t be surprising considering what it is.”

“Do you think he’s ex-military?” the woman asked, and I shrugged.

“Could be. Or that could be because he’s been recruiting a bunch of ex-military for his upper echelons—if not his command structure—from what we’ve been able to gather. The one with the spooky possible mental Semblance that you can’t ever really focus on is apparently his Head of Intelligence. Someone you can’t identify after seeing them being in the Intel business—go figure. Aside from that, all I’ve really got is what passes for a rotation on his bodyguards—the visible ones, at least. When he bothers coming out. When he doesn’t simply fucking fly everywhere,” I grumbled. “I reiterate: too much trouble to pick a fight with for me.”

Cinder hummed, then nodded. “Fair enough.” A small smirk twitched her lips upwards as she asked, “How did you convince Neopolitan to release you from her clutches?”

“What with?”

I turned an amused look on her. “I promised her ice cream, then sicced the twins on her. Don’t think that’s going to work if you want to attempt bribing her in the future. Then again, if you offered to let her in your pants, that probably would work. You have my permission to bribe my underling with your body while I’m gone, but I want video and I’ll expect a repeat performance next time I’m in town.”

A small smirk tugged her lips upwards as she asked, “You don’t think I’ll seduce her away from you?”

“Ha ha. No. If anything, you should be worried about her seducing you. She’s downright predatory when she wants to be.” Golden eyes rolled as the woman scoffed softly. “And on an unrelated note, you’re being awfully civil, considering—”

“Considering you’re late?” she interrupted, and I nodded. “I am trying to determine how upset I should be. You said one day.”

“Got held up. Traffic was—” Golden eyes narrowed in anger and I cut myself off. “Neo did warn you.”

Red lips turning down into a frown, the woman across from me nodded. “That she did, which is one reason why I am tempering my response.”

“I’ll talk to her about it. What’s the other reason?”

Her eyes bored into mine for a long moment before she said, “If I take something, I expect it to be mine. This,” she gestured between the two of us, “was… not planned as thoroughly as I would have liked and you were already attached beforehand.” Frowning, she added, “It is difficult to admit, but I am unsure how this arrangement is supposed to work. Ideally, I’d simply remove Neopolitan from the picture. On the other hand, I am not unwilling to consider the potential advantages such a situation presents.”

“I don’t think Neo is going to go along with that whole ‘removal’ thing. Or the twins,” I denied. Grinning, I added, “In fact, they’ve pretty much tasked me with getting you ‘on board,’ so to speak.”
Cinder hummed, looking amused as she asked, “Have they, now?”

I nodded, ticking off points on my fingers. “You’re strong, you’re smart, and you’re dead sexy. I’m not going to try to convince you one way or another, however, and they’re in no hurry as far as that goes. In other words, we’re fine with keeping the status quo.”

“I do enjoy our current status quo,” Cinder admitted. Her lips quirked up as she added, “Perhaps I may consider Neopolitan’s offer.”

“You seem to be disregarding the twins’ opinion on the matter,” I pointed out.

“Not at all. I’ve seen them at Junior’s little club. They are young and easily manipulated. Case in point,” she gestured at me.

“Hey! I’m not manipulating them,” I denied. Her lips turned up in amusement and I quietly added, “Much.”

“They would follow your lead. Neopolitan, despite her previous attempts at the silent routine, is clearly the most influential of the three. The most likely to lead. She would require… handling,” the woman across from me assessed.

I turned a deadpan look on her. “Do not abuse my minion in ways she doesn’t enjoy.” I managed to hold the serious face for all of three seconds before laughing softly and adding, “Though, with Neo, there aren’t many ways she doesn’t, and she really wants in your pants.”

“Your minion is damaged,” Cinder rolled her eyes.

“Maybe,” I shrugged. “But she’s loyal. Probably more so than Emerald is to you, seeing as she’s getting laid regularly. If you’re not careful, one of these days Emerald is going to wait until you’re drunk then push you down and tear your clothes off with her teeth.”

The woman across from me palmed her face and groaned quietly. “Do not remind me.”
“It’d help if Mercury could actually draw her attention, but that’s not happening and he’s more than a little interested in you himself. Can’t really blame him for that, though,” I shrugged.

Cinder glared at me through a gap in the fingers over her face and I felt her power flare in warning for a moment. “That is quite enough about my minions’ personal failings,” she hissed.

“Sure, sure,” I nodded. “We could always talk about mine. Oh wait, we’re back to clothes and removing them with teeth.” The woman across from me growled softly and I grinned. “Or not.”

“Not,” the brunette grumbled.

I shrugged at that. “On a more serious note, I’ll be heading out soon. End of the week at the latest.”

The red-clad woman dropped her hand from her face and raised an eyebrow. “Already?” I nodded and she frowned. “The date crept up on me, it seems.”

“That tends to happen when you’re enjoying something,” I pointed out, earning a nod in agreement. “I’ll be leaving Neo behind to coordinate things for me, but don’t expect her to be available full time.”

Frowning, Cinder asked, “Why not?”

Humming as I thought about how best to answer, I finally said, “Let’s just say that I have more than one iron in the fire and leave it at that.”

“Mm.” Shifting in her seat, Cinder crossed her arms under her breasts and narrowed her eyes at me. “I take it you plan to return at some point—you wouldn’t leave Neopolitan or the Malachite twins behind, otherwise.”

I nodded. “That, and I think you’d get bored without someone around you can actually talk to instead of at.”

“I do not—”
“You do,” I countered, cutting her off. “Though, to be fair, Mercury doesn’t seem like much of a conversationalist and Emerald’s just going to agree with whatever you say. You need someone around who isn’t afraid to call you on your bullshit and who won’t blindly kiss your ass.”

Cinder chuckled, turning an amused look on me. “And that’s you? I don’t recall you ‘calling me on my bullshit’ at any point in the time I’ve known you.”

I made a show of looking around at the empty seats in her sitting room before turning back to her with a raised eyebrow. “You know someone else who fits the description? As for the second part, I’m sure we’ll get around to it eventually.”

Her eyes narrowed and her gaze turned pointed. “Then you should make sure to complete this job quickly, lest I grow bored of waiting.”

“It’ll take as long as it takes,” I denied, shaking my head. “It’s long term and… well, let’s just say I’m getting more out of them than they’re getting out of me for this one, even if they don’t know it. I can probably swing back through Vale every now and then, but it won’t be often.” Cinder growled softly at that before pushing up out of her chair. Taking my hands, she dragged me to my feet before pulling me across the room towards the hall. “What are you doing?”

“Making the most of the time I have left before you depart, since I also have to share that time with Neopolitan and the Malachite sisters,” she answered simply, pushing her bedroom door open and hauling me inside, before closing it with a kick. “And if, in doing so, I send you back to them thinking of me,” she turned to face me, a malicious little smile crossing her lips as she did, “so much the better.”

I really should have learned to keep my mouth shut by now, but I’d always had a problem with my brain-to-mouth filter. “Possessive mu—” I was cut off as she grabbed the back of my head, yanked, and crushed her lips against mine.

My eyes snapped open and I wondered where I was for a moment as I sat up and looked around in the dark, the room around me still shaking faintly as something glass fell somewhere nearby and shattered. I found a system update waiting on me but dismissed it—I could read it later, after I figured out what had happened. Beside me, a warm body sat up and molded itself against me. The room lit up with a soft orange glow and I turned to find Cinder at my side, holding a small ball of flame aloft. “Did you feel that?” I asked, getting a nod from the woman.
“Yes. It felt like—” she was cut off as a siren sounded from outside, and from the sound of it I could tell it was some sort of city-wide emergency broadcast system. Two short barks of sound blasted across the city, followed by a two second burst, then the pattern repeated. “That’s the Hunter scramble pattern. Something kicked the wasp’s nest.”

“Felt like an earthquake,” I theorized. I wasn’t aware that Vale was on or near any sort of fault line.

Cinder nodded. “That, or an explosion.” Yawning, she extinguished her light and wrapped her arms around my midsection before pulling gently. “Either way, it’s not our problem. Come back to bed.”

“Who knew you’d be so clingy a sleeper,” I teased, earning a nip on the shoulder as she bit me, before following it up with a kiss.

“And no one will, if you know what is good for you,” she threatened, throwing one leg over my hips and mounting me, before laying out across my chest. “This is nice.” Shifting, she buried her face against my neck before sleepily murmuring, “It may be worth negotiating terms with Neopolitan, if I could have this every night, when you return.”

I chuckled quietly, fully intending to tease her some more when our scrolls both rang. Rather, Cinder’s rang while mine chimed as a text came in. At the same time, a second text came in from one of my other scrolls—the one assigned to the Fox, once I’d made sure it was secure. Frowning, I looked at my HUD, seeing the first was from my automated camera system while the second text was from Miltia. As Cinder’s scroll continued to ring, I groaned quietly. “You should probably get that.”

Molten gold eyes narrowed, one of them flaring brightly and trailing flame for a fraction of a second before she huffed out a frustrated breath. Shifting atop me, she reached out for her night stand and snagged the two scrolls there. Handing mine to me, she put hers to her ear and answered. “This had better be good.”

While Cinder was occupied, I unlocked my scroll and checked the message I’d gotten on its screen to keep up appearances. Every camera but one at the farm had lost connection. *That would explain why I’m getting texts from that, since I set it to alert me only if something malfunctioned.* I opened up the message from Miltia on my HUD, giving that a read over as well.

‘*Dust explosion reported in the southeast sector of the city, Residential District. Orders?’*
“Slow down and repeat what you just said,” Cinder demanded.

Frowning, I considered the location in question. I knew the farmhouse where I’d been storing Cinder’s Dust stockpile was in that area and that the White Fang were supposed to move it, but surely those idiots hadn’t… ‘Damage control first, information gathering second,’ I decided, shooting off a return text telling Miltia to scramble a few units and offer whatever assistance we could. Once that was done, I connected the scroll to the one active security feed at the farmhouse. The camera still working had been set up high on a tree in the woods overlooking the house and barn, out of sight so that even if someone found the rest of the cameras they might miss this one. Now, instead of the house and barn, it showed only the sky lit by a crazy multi-hued flickering glow—as seen through a spiderweb of cracks all along the camera’s surface.

Manipulating the screen, I quickly backed the footage up by half an hour and flipped through cameras as I advanced it. After a minute of watching footage from various feeds on fast forward, headlights showed up on the camera that had been facing the small dirt road leading up to the farm. Three box trucks—all of them marked FISH on the side—pulled up outside the barn and White Fang began to spill out from the cabs and cargo areas. Another camera caught sight of a Bullhead touching down in the field behind the barn before Adam disembarked and moved into the barn to inspect things. They all moved around inside for a few minutes, taking stock of what was available, before Adam gestured and the White Fang mooks there began picking up crates and moving them towards the trucks. He carried on a conversation for a few minutes with someone off to one side, but out of deference to Cinder’s conversation, I kept the audio muted. Eventually, Adam made his way outside and the Bullhead took off again.

“What do you mean, ‘trap?’” came a quiet hiss from above me, and Killing Intent suddenly filled the air. Looking up, I found a pair of eyes glaring down at me with the first stirrings of what looked like hurt and betrayal behind them. Raising an eyebrow at her, I gestured with my scroll and turned back to it. The Killing Intent in the air sputtered for a moment before dying out as the legs to either side of my hips tightened and one of Cinder’s hands came down, her fingernails digging into my chest almost painfully.

On my scroll, I watched as a White Fang member inside the building looked around for a moment before kneeling next to one of the boxes of higher grade Dust I’d left there. These crates were nearer to the back of the barn, while the terrorists had started moving the things closest to the door first. ‘Wait… isn’t that one of the mooks I puppeted back when we delivered the train to Adam?’ I wondered, my eyes narrowing as I watched the man on the screen dig out a few Dust crystals and pocket them—it was hard to be sure with the masks, but he looked about the same height and build. A moment later, a second White Fang operative came around the corner, yelled something, and drew a gun. The SMG in his hands spewed glowing red rounds as the other mook dove away from the crates. Several of the rounds found their way into what I now recognized as a crate of red Dust, which began to glow ominously even as the mook with the gun shifted his aim to track the ‘thief.’ Bullets hit the wall and the camera feed went white, then black as it died after that.
I had to back up the video and advance it frame by frame, but when I did I winced at what I found there. Several of the rounds had impacted the Bounded Field pattern I’d drawn on the wall, destroying it. Switching camera feeds, I watched in slow motion from an exterior camera as the barn violently imploded—the force of it enough to create a vacuum, drawing in the White Fang nearest to it and even rocking the vehicles parked nearby on their suspensions. Immediately following total folded space field collapse as the Bounded Field pattern broke, the area was suddenly bathed in light of every color imaginable as the Dust inside went up all at once and every other camera in the area was temporarily flash blinded and outright destroyed, save for the camera I’d left in the tree.

A thought occurred and I backed up the video again. The camera in the tree had a view on the barn, the house, and enough of the field behind it… ‘Oh fuck me, tell me they didn’t…’ I silently pleaded, watching the events unfold again. On screen, Adam left the barn and disappeared around the back of it. The Bullhead lifted off from the field and turned towards Vale as it ascended. The Bullhead was still in the camera’s field of vision when the barn violently imploded, then exploded, leaving the camera temporarily blinded. My stomach dropped out from under me as the realization set in. ‘That explosion was large enough to be felt all across Vale—it’d need a yield in the multi-kiloton range for that. Adam was still inside the blast radius when it went off. There… there is no way he survived having what amounts to a low-yield nuke go off in his face. Those stupid fucks! God damnit, Adam was a genocidal maniac, but he was a known element! I could predict him, plot around him with what I could get out of Blake. Now? Everything I know or had the resources to learn about their actions and Cinder’s just went straight down the shitter. No Roman, no Adam. Though that first one is entirely my fault. Having an ‘in’ as his replacement was worth more than having Roman around as a known element, but that was before Adam went and got himself blown up. We’ve gone completely off the rails and the only thing keeping things even remotely predictable now is inertia—and even that is iffy, because in this fucking metaphor the terrain ahead doesn’t exactly match what I was expecting. Every encounter with the White Fang and Cinder’s bunch is now in question. Mother fuck!’

“Shiro,” Cinder spoke above me, her voice quiet and entirely too calm as she brought my slowly spiraling panic to a halt. “Tell me you had nothing to do with this.”

I considered the question for a moment before shaking my head. “I can’t.”

Her nails dug into my chest harder and I winced. “Explain.”

Back up the video and switching the feed to the interior cameras, I handed it to her. “See for yourself.”

Cinder took the scroll and I watched her face through the screen as she followed along, her jaw clenching and eyes narrowing in barely contained rage at what she saw. “Those… stupid, thieving animals,” she ground out, hands clenching my scroll hard enough that I worried she’d break it. Finally, she seemed to relax slightly and her face softened somewhat as she regarded me. “I fail to
see how this is your fault.”

“Back it up and watch it frame by frame. The dipshit with the SMG hit a box of red Dust, so they were fucked anyway, yeah,” I pointed out, before admitting, “But numbnuts also caught my Bounded Field with a burst. That went up first, so technically…”

Cinder snorted softly. “No. Firstly, I warned those idiots not to damage the seals. Secondly, as you said, he shot a box of red Dust. They were all dead in a few more seconds, regardless—especially given that it was sitting in the middle of a pile of other miscellaneous Dust. Thirdly, no one with sense starts shooting a gun near a Dust stockpile. It was suicide by stupidity. They were too stupid to live and the Faunus race is better off without them polluting their gene pool.” She turned a small smirk down on me as she set aside the scroll. “I knew it was too soon for you to betray me.”

“‘Too soon,’ huh?” I raised an eyebrow. “Do you expect everyone to betray you?”

“Absolutely. You don’t?” she returned my raised eyebrow.

“Not really,” I admitted. “Trust is useful, if dangerous. And while I don’t expect it at every turn, that doesn’t mean I’m not prepared for it to happen. Though my reaction for dealing with it is the same almost regardless of who it is: get as far away as possible as quickly as possible and lie low for a while.”

“Fair enough.” Sighing softly, she pushed herself up off of me and began searching for her clothes. “Come. We must go meet with the White Fang and show them this, if I am to salvage this situation. With some luck, I may actually be able to turn it to my advantage.”

“Adam’s dead,” I pointed out and Cinder blinked, wincing at the news. “Watch camera 8 again—there’s no way his Bullhead cleared the blast radius before it went up. And yeah, that was pretty much my reaction. Adam was a genocidal maniac and he planned to betray us and kill us both eventually…but at least he was predictable like that.”

Cinder nodded. “You are correct. The Fang will never allow a human to lead them. They will either promote one of his lieutenants to leadership or make contact with the main body of the White Fang and ask for orders.” She frowned before adding, “Assuming they don’t all believe that Adam initiated a coup and was their supreme leader. It’s entirely possible that Adam’s cell was officially disavowed, so that he could act outside the normal White Fang while still using their resources.”

“And you think they’re black ops?” I asked, and Cinder nodded.
“Essentially, yes. The most likely explanations they would have used when Adam formed his cell would be to either go with the story of an assassination attempt by humans to rally the members of the cell together or a successful coup by Adam—depending on how extreme they wanted to go and whether or not they ever intended to make contact with the main body of the White Fang again. So, it isn’t entirely implausible that an agent broke off from his cell and simply has bad information regarding the internal structure of the White Fang,” she surmised.

“I’m just telling you what she told me,” I reiterated, pulling my pants on as Cinder finally found her bra—hanging off an arm of the ceiling fan above us.

Jumping up and snagging the garment, and in the process setting her breasts to bouncing in a way that I found very distracting, Cinder hummed. “You’re going to have to introduce me.”

“She’s skittish,” I denied. “Says she wants nothing more to do with the White Fang and wants to turn over a new leaf.”

“If she wanted that, why did she immediately shack up with a criminal?” Cinder asked, one fine eyebrow climbing towards her hairline.

“You’re assuming she’s ‘shacked up’ with me,” I pointed out, earning a patiently amused look in answer. “I’m not going to dignify that with a response. As I was saying, if she wants out I can’t exactly deny her the opportunity. Not everyone is cut out for this life.”

Sighing as she adjusted the bra and began pulling her dress on, Cinder nodded. “She may know valuable information.”

“Probably, but I don’t know if she’d be willing to give it up,” I shrugged. I felt comfortable enough with Blake now—and thought she was comfortable enough with me—that I could start asking her for information about the White Fang. It would help to get that information before Beacon started, so Fox Hunt could act on it. There was always the risk she would say no or get upset, but the potential information Blake had was worth too much not to ask just because it might upset her. Either way, I wouldn’t be sharing what I got with Cinder. Changing the subject as I pulled on my shirt, I asked, “How are we going to do this?”

Cinder considered it for a moment before sighing quietly. “I will call Emerald and Mercury and meet them before going to see the White Fang. I doubt they would be willing to listen if you were there, so it would probably be for the best if you went back to Neopolitan and your twins for the night. Would you send me a copy of the video?”
“Sure,” I agreed, finishing up buckling my armor on and picking up my scroll to do so. “This kind of sucks, you know. We finally get comfortable enough for me to spend the night and then this shit happens.”

“Don’t remind me,” Cinder groused.

We finished getting dressed and left the shop, taking to the rooftops as we sped across Vale. We stopped on a roof halfway through the commercial district, sharing a quick kiss before Cinder parted to meet up with Mercury and Emerald while I took off in a circuitous route to lose any followers before heading back to Fox Hunt. I’d noticed that Cinder and I had picked up a tail at some point after leaving the shop and I didn’t want to lead them back to anything important, but I also didn’t want them breaking off to follow Cinder if I suddenly dropped off the map. ‘Then again, I could stand to blow off some steam,’ I mused, deciding a change of plans was in order.

Checking my map over I picked a park nearby, altering course as I traveled while leaving Invisibility and the rest of my stealth suite off to offer my pursuer some tasty bait. The lure proved irresistible and as I came gliding in for a landing, my senses screamed a warning. Faint light lit the area ahead of me, painting my silhouette on the ground. Drawing Ascalon as I hit the grass, I brought the Dust blade around behind my back even as I began shifting out of the probable path of the attack. A black-clad blur rushed through where I’d been standing as metal clanged and screeched against Dust. The shorter form quickly turned around, leveling a silver sword at me as I returned the favor with my own glowing blade.

For a moment, neither of us moved. Her light blue eyes swept over my form, narrowed into a glare. “You stopped the attack blind.”

‘Yeah, out of sheer, dumb luck, you crazy little bitch! I was trying to smack you like a tennis ball, not block,’ I wanted to yell, but resisted the urge. Better that an enemy overestimate my threat level. It worked for the Fox, so far. “Miss Schnee, good morning,” I greeted instead, moving to circle her to put us into a better position. I’d picked this park specifically so I could turn the environment to my advantage if the need arose, after all. “Isn’t it a bit past your bedtime?”

Weiss’s jaws flexed and I swore I heard her teeth grinding from where I stood. “Funny. You’re a real comedian.”

“I try,” I shrugged. “Any particular reason you tried to sneak attack me? Not that I’m judging—sneak attacks are the best attacks, after all. Don’t ever believe what anyone else tells you about them being cowardly, underhanded, or dishonorable.”

“I went to investigate the ruckus out in the Residential District and, what do you know, it was
blatantly obvious that it was a Dust explosion. I thought to myself, ‘who do I know who has been stealing large quantities of Dust and who likely doesn’t know safe handling and storage procedures for it?’ Then who do I find, out and about town, but the very man I had been thinking of?’ The Schnee heiress seemed so very sure of herself about this, and so very serious… It made me want to fuck with her head, and she had left me such a nice opening it would be a waste not to use it.

I sighed loudly, palming my face with my free hand. “Miss Schnee, really? I mean, I get it—really, I do. I’m a bad man and that is very appealing to some women, but I really don’t think it would work out between us. Oh, it’d be fun no doubt, but I’m pretty sure it wouldn’t last.”

“W-wha—?” she stammered, taking a moment to parse that before her eyes went wide and a blush crept up her face.

Not quite done pressing her buttons, I added, “What would your father think of his daughter dating a suspected criminal? And a Dust thief, no less. Why, I imagine he would be furious.” I paused a beat, just long enough for that to sink in, before I continued my verbal assault. “Of course, just like the ‘bad boy’ thing, there’s a certain appeal for a girl in disobeying her father. Is that what this unhealthy obsession of yours is about, Ms. Schnee? Finding a man strong enough that when your father objects, he'll be powerless to do anything about it?”

“Y-Y-Y-YOU SHUT YOUR MOUTH!” Weiss finally erupted, waving her sword at me. “I am not—! We are not talking about—! No!”

“If you say so,” I agreed, nodding along. “So, if you weren’t planning to ask me to help piss your father off—”

“I WAS NOT!” the snow-white blonde across from me screamed.

I continued as if she had not interrupted. “Then why did you seek me out, princess?”

Taking several quick, deep breaths to steady herself, Weiss attempted to steer the conversation back around to where she had intended for it to go—but it was obvious I had thrown her off her game. “You’ve moved from theft to terrorism.”

I raised an eyebrow at that. “Not confirming the theft bit,” I began, getting a glare in response, “but what makes you think I’m any kind of a terrorist?”
“A Dust explosion in the middle of Vale, for one thing,” Weiss deadpanned. “Or it could be the dead White Fang—and pieces thereof—littering the area. I knew you were scum, I just didn't realize just how low you could sink.”

“Well, I’m sorry to hear a bunch of terrorists died when the Dust they were mishandling went up,” I snarked. I could have faked surprise but I knew how much the Weiss of canon loathed the White Fang—it would be more effective to play to that than feign surprise or shock, simply because it was highly likely I would be mirroring her own feelings on the matter. Some of my own feelings may have slipped through, too—namely, that the only member or former member of the White Fang I gave a single, solitary fuck about was Blake and the rest could all die tomorrow and I wouldn’t shed a tear. “Did you consider that possibility? Why blame me when the simplest explanation is one of those idiots dropping, sneezing on, or spilling coffee on something?”

“Well,” she frowned, eyes shifting away as she muttered, “It’s possible.”

Pulling out my scroll for Weiss’ benefit, I checked the time. “I’ve been maybe half an hour since that explosion. You mean to tell me you got up, put your disguise on—you forgot to change your hair by the way.” Weiss’ eyes went a bit wide as she glanced to the side, eyes settling on a bang before her face scrunched up in annoyance at the slip. I continued on. “Then you ran over to the site of the explosion, found someone willing to talk to you despite obviously being a Schnee trying poorly not to look like a Schnee… How’d you manage that if there were White Fang in the area? Then you hauled ass back into town and just happened to run across me?”

Weiss frowned. “Well, no. I had finished my last patrol of the night—looking for you—and was in the process of getting ready for bed when the explosion happened. I rushed back out and was fast enough that I was one of the first on the scene. I didn’t talk to anyone, because there were White Fang there picking up bits and pieces of other White Fang. They didn’t find me because I was hiding in the top of a tree. I came back into Vale intending to go back to my hotel for the night. I did not expect to run across you, but that I did means you were almost as close to the crime scene as I was. And why am I answering your questions?! You answer mine!”

“You haven’t actually asked anything,” I pointed out, earning more teeth gnashing in the process. “But I’ll have you know I was in bed and happily sound asleep when that explosion went off,” I denied, before irritation at the situation slipped through and my mouth ran along ahead of me, adding, “And now I’m not, because the woman I was with had to go deal with it.” I turned an annoyed look on the heiress. “Needless to say, I am not amused by this bullshit and I am not in the mood to deal with you beyond a little banter, princess. We are quickly approaching the point where I’ll get bored with you and leave.”

The girl across from me frowned at that. “A convenient excuse—”
“You spotted me a few minutes before we parted and you've been following ever since, so you know damn well I was with a woman before you attacked me. Black hair, fancy glowy red Dust-enhanced dress? Impossible to miss her,” I countered. Smirking, I added, “In fact, you probably saw us say our goodbyes for the night, too.”

Weiss shook her head. “Then you’re either both involved somehow and she’s an accomplice, or you’re using her as a cover.”

I stopped circling the blonde and lowered my sword, incredulity written all over what was visible of my face. “Do you even hear yourself? What are you smoking that that’s even a possibility for you?” I wondered, shaking my head. Sure, she was right, but she’d have to be crazy, lucky, or just plain doggedly stubborn to believe that a woman she hadn’t even met was guilty by association with me. That, or she’d done a lot more digging than I’d given her credit for and had actually stumbled onto Cinder somehow.

Weiss had no answer to that—or if she did, couldn’t put words to it. Intuition and instinct were such an ingrained part of the human psyche that we often made wild leaps of logic we couldn’t explain later because our subconscious minds put something together that our conscious minds had missed. So, in the age old tradition of people everywhere faced with a problem they couldn’t solve or a question they couldn’t answer, Weiss ignored it and bulled right on ahead. “I heard a certain train went missing a few days ago. You like trains, don’t you Shiro?”

“Not really. I never had a model train set as a kid,” I shrugged. “What train is this? I haven’t heard anything about it on the news.” Of course there hadn’t been any news on it—it was a secret shipment. Drawing attention to it would mean letting the world know there were other such trains out there.

“It wasn’t on the news,” she ground out. “As you well know.”

“So, you’ve got nothing,” I deadpanned. “Bored now. I don’t know about you, but I want to go crawl into a warm bed and pass out for a few more hours before the day starts. So, unless you’re looking to join me—”

“Take a long walk in the dark,” the girl growled quietly, with more teeth gnashing.

“Then I’ll be going,” I finished, sheathing Ascalon to further impress my point upon her—I was done for the night. Still, I couldn’t resist a parting shot. My lips twitched into a smirk under my mask as I added, “And just between you and me princess, you should too. Some beauty sleep would do you some good. Might help those bags under your eyes.”
I half turned and made to snag a building I’d lined up with my line launcher, but the Schnee heiress disappeared in a burst of speed and put herself back in my path. “You can sleep in a jail cell.”

I sighed. “We’ve been over this. You have no jurisdiction, no authority to make arrests, and no evidence. At best, if I came along willingly, the police would hold me a day or two for questioning and release me after that. I don’t really feel like dealing with the inconvenience, however—and I don’t want to give you the satisfaction—so I won’t be coming along peaceably. I highly doubt you’ve improved enough in the week or so since we last met to take me on—especially given your sloppy sneak attack earlier.”

At this point, even riling Weiss up wasn’t doing it for me. The night had been thoroughly spoiled and I just wanted to go home, crawl into the middle of my big bed with the girls, and tell the world to fuck off for a few more hours until I had to go deal with the Arc family stuff. So, I gave the peaceful route one last try.

“It’s a nice morning. Don’t suppose I could interest you in a quiet stroll through the park instead of the fight you seem dead set on starting?”

“No,” Weiss denied, reaching up to spin the chamber on Myrtenaster.

“I’m not packing low grade Dust like the last time we fought,” I warned tiredly.

The girl across from me smirked. “Neither am I.”

“What have you got? Grade 5? 6, maybe? That thing holds half a dozen colors at most, and half of them are visible from here. You’ve lost the element of surprise, you’re broadcasting your options for Dust, and you’re outgunned. You should have just stayed in bed,” I growled, my hands dropping back down to my sword and preparing to draw.

Weiss snorted softly, nodding towards the weapon at my side. “Variable-blade Dust sword/polearm combo. You could probably fit well over a hundred blades in that sheath if you weren’t using it for the other half of that weapon—as it stands, you probably have a maximum of fifty with Gen 6 storage tech, maybe more if you’re crazy enough to try to combine that with space expansion Bounded Fields in a Dust weapon sheath… in which case, please tell me so I can stand far back when it explodes. At least one of those blades is Colorless, which tells me you’ve got anywhere from one to eight Dust crystals in the hilt to power it—and unlike powder form Dust, crystal Dust is limited on ranged attack options. If you’re not a complete idiot, you’ve probably got at least a few backup Colorless blades while the rest will be individual colors for when the crystals in the hilt run out. You tend to favor fire and lightning though, so they’re probably weighted heavily towards that and equally flashy elements.” A small smirk crossed her lips as she added, “Most damning though is the fact that you keep trying to push my buttons and do everything you can to avoid a fight without
running away, even though we both know you could—so either you really do want a fight—"

I opened up the throttle on Haste, subvocalizing Invisibility as I dropped into Flash Step. Hitting the assisted draw, I swung at her from her 8 o’clock, dropping Invisibility as I did to keep up that particular ruse. Ascalon caught nothing but air as the heiress vanished. I Stepped away and disappeared again just as she reappeared at where my 4 o’clock had been, Myrtenaster halfway into a thrust that would have slid under my ribs if I had hit and managed to get through my Aura. ‘Okay, she’s faster now. Why?’

Taking in her form, I caught a faint light shining under her feet and realized what it was I was seeing a moment later. ‘She’s casting to increase her own speed without using the usual oversized glyphs.’ A quick Observe told me the Dust type was Momentum Black—one of those ‘exactly what it says on the tin’ colors and one of the basic ones on the list of those my Semblance could identify thanks to Use Dust and eating manuals. ‘So, the glyphs probably give her control over how much momentum she applies, along with direction.’

Her stance shifted, Myrtenaster held at the ready as she watched her surroundings. The placement of her feet, the way her weight balanced, all told me she was ready to spring away again at a moment’s notice. As she brought the sword up to eye level, I watched her blue eyes briefly glance at what passed as the hilt and narrowed my eyes as I realized she was using its partially reflective surface as a crude mirror, clearly expecting me to try attacking from one of her blind spots again.

“Clever,” I commented, immediately Stepping several yards away as her eyes tracked to my last position but she refused to take the bait. “Or obsessive.” Another Step moved me further away, back towards my previous position at her 9 o’clock. “You must have spent a lot of time thinking that fight over.”

“Don’t flatter yourself,” Weiss rolled her eyes. “I—”

I moved to her 12 o’clock and attacked, my foot passing through the space her face had occupied a moment before as she disappeared again—there one moment, gone in a blur or black light the next. ‘It’s like Flash Step,’ I realized, frowning as I moved and went Invisible again. Weiss had settled into a defensive stance again, a grin on her lips as her eyes tracked over the area. ‘She’s… having fun. Huh. I guess she really didn’t buy my warning last time.’

Deciding a change in venue was called for, I checked my map and oriented myself on my next destination before taking off. Partway there, I turned back to face her and dropped Invisibility. I didn’t have to wait long for her to notice me and attack. Pulling my disappearing act again, I proceeded to lead her towards my goal. As soon as Weiss moved into position again, I attacked, swinging a high overhead strike. I missed, Ascalon eating air as it passed through where Weiss had been a moment ago, before slamming into and through the raised concrete wall surrounding one of
the large fountains in the park. Water rushed out around my feet and I took a few steps to the side before going Invisible again and freezing in place. True to her previous pattern, Weiss took up a defensive stance and waited for me to make the first move.

The red glow of the lighted Dust blade in my hand faded out as I thumbed the switch on the hilt of the sword. A moment later, it lit up yellow and hummed quietly—nothing at all like the intimidating roar of my Plasma Blades, but then that wouldn’t help me here anyway. Quietly hopping up on top of the ruined fountain, I dropped the tip of my blade into the water. A *crack!* sounded as the lights in the fountain exploded, but my focus was on Weiss. The girl’s Aura flared briefly before she disappeared again and I waited.

As soon as she reappeared, I was on her, slamming my blade into her side and sending her stumbling a couple of steps as her Aura flashed briefly around the area of impact. Instead of trying to fall back on the defensive again, she blurred into an attack. Bringing my sword up to parry her thrust at my chest, I was surprised as her arm and blade were lit with the same black light and blurred, before a rain of sharp impacts slammed against my Aura. At the same moment, my vision was swarmed with various popups.

**Physical Resistance** has increased by 1!

STR has increased by 1!

DEX has increased by 1!

CON has increased by 1!

INT has increased by 1!

WIS has increased by 1!

CHA has increased by 1!

LUK has increased by 1!

Popups enough that,
STR has increased by 1!

**Aura** has reached level 25. Would you like to choose a **Skill Evolution**? Y/N.

DEX has increased by 1!

**Aura Strike** has reached level 25. Would you like to choose a **Skill Evolution**? Y/N.

CON has increased by 1!

**Reinforcement** has reached level 25. Would you like to choose a **Skill Evolution**? Y/N.

INT has increased by 1!

**Physical Endurance** has reached level 25. Would you like to choose a **Skill Evolution**? Y/N.

WIS has increased by 1!

**Meditation** has reached level 25. Would you like to choose a **Skill Evolution**? Y/N.

CHA has increased by 1!

**Sneak Attack** has reached level 25. Would you like to choose a **Skill Evolution**? Y/N.

LUK has increased by 1!

**Iaido** has reached level 25. Would you like to choose a **Skill Evolution**? Y/N.

for a moment,

STR has increased by 1! **Confuse** has reached level 25. Would you like to choose a **Skill Evolution**? Y/N.

**Fireball** has reached level 25. Would you like to choose a **Skill Evolution**? Y/N. STR has increased by 1!

DEX has increased by 1! **Dominate** has reached level 25. Would you like to choose a **Skill Evolution**? Y/N.

**Flash Freeze** has reached level 25. Would you like to choose a **Skill Evolution**? Y/N. DEX has increased by 1!

CON has increased by 1! **Forget** has reached level 25. Would you like to choose a **Skill Evolution**? Y/N.

**Spinning Mana Sword** has reached level 25. Would you like to choose a **Skill Evolution**? Y/N. CON has increased by 1!

INT has increased by 1! **Read Thoughts** has reached level 25. Would you like to choose a **Skill Evolution**? Y/N.
Elemental Manipulation has reached level 25. Would you like to choose a Skill Evolution? Y/N. INT has increased by 1!

WIS has increased by 1! Telepathy has reached level 25. Would you like to choose a Skill Evolution? Y/N.

Rasengan has reached level 25. Would you like to choose a Skill Evolution? Y/N. WIS has increased by 1!

CHA has increased by 1! Telekinesis has reached level 25. Would you like to choose a Skill Evolution? Y/N.

Invisibility has reached level 25. Would you like to choose a Skill Evolution? Y/N. CHA has increased by 1!

LUK has increased by 1! AP Round has reached level 25. Would you like to choose a Skill Evolution? Y/N.

Charm has reached level 25. Would you like to choose a Skill Evolution? Y/N. LUK has increased by 1!

most of my field of vision was blocked. 'What the fu—'

There was a sound like ice shattering and cold washed over me, radiating out from my chest. My lungs seized up as I felt searing pain from the point of impact. From the corner of my eye I could make out my HP bar drop as I was sent flying—yet more popups clogging my field of view even as some of the notifications disappeared on their own. Rolling to my feet, I dropped into Invisibility—another popup—and Flash Stepped—yet another popup—to move away from my last position. Growling softly, I began closing out windows as I wondered what the fuck had happened while checking myself over. My Aura flickered around my body for a moment before stabilizing as I felt the wound Weiss had given me close up as though it had never been as Gamer's Body kicked in. The only sign she had managed to gig me was a thin puncture through my armor on the left side of my chest, at the point where the armor was split between two plates for flexibility. She had managed to punch the thin blade through my Aura after repeated strikes to weaken it, angled it up and caught my lung, then blasted me with ice for good measure.

While I cleaned up my UI and Weiss retook a defensive stance, I took a moment to consider my options. 'She's too fast for the pole to be effective. Likewise for the Dustcasters built into Ascalon. I could retreat, but I can't have her thinking she can win against me—it'll only encourage her to go after stronger opponents by herself. I have a more limited spell selection as Shiro and Weiss is a pretty decent foil to my power set. And with Momentum Dust giving her instant speed... wait a minute,' my train of thought came to a halt as I glanced down at her feet. The smaller glyphs were there again.

'I need to lock her down. Limit her mobility. It'll mean no more hit-and-run tactics, but at this point that has failed anyway. I can deal with the loss of mobility, she can't.' With that, a plan began to
form and I took off towards the trees. My plan was actually pretty simple—the trees would serve as obstacles, concealment, and cover. With any luck, Weiss would be forced to slow down or risk pinballing herself. Then again, I wasn’t intending to rely on luck.

Once I was a few yards inside the tree line, I dropped Invisibility. A sharp whistle caused Weiss to start and I grinned as I yelled, “Over here, princess.”

This time, there was enough distance between us that I could track her when she launched herself at me. Waiting until the last moment, I swung my sword and dumped power into the blade for an Aura Strike. The blade buzzed quietly as it passed through the air, missing Weiss’s face by inches as the heiress came to a sudden dead stop. The blade hit the tree to her right and I jumped away an instant before physics took over and the tree trunk exploded outwards—electricity flash-boiling the water inside and causing a sudden, violent outgassing of steam and wood shrapnel. Weiss flinched away, one hand going to her left eye as she was temporarily flash blinded and possibly deafened. To her credit, the heiress anticipated my follow-up attack from her blind side and reacted accordingly even as her Aura flared brightly for a moment and her left eye refocused on me.

Ascalon went flying in as I launched a series of probing strikes, testing her defenses and pressing her deeper into the wooded area of the park. Realizing what I was doing, she tried to make distance by going around me to head back into the open, but I intercepted her before she could.

‘I was right. She doesn’t have the control to use it in this clutter yet. Too much brush to trip over and too many limbs to run into at that speed.’

Recognizing a losing situation when she was in one, Weiss changed Dust types. A flick of her free hand had a glyph spinning up under her and, an instant later, trees around us exploded outwards—suddenly sprouting limbs and spikes of ice meant to limit my own maneuverability. She changed Dust again and one of the more familiar glyphs I’d seen her use before for jumping around appeared in the upper branches of one of the trees around us, above her icy additions to the forest. Weiss leapt upwards, quickly bouncing out of her own trap, before turning to regard me as she changed Dust types again.

“You realize I’m not going to just let you sit up there and attack with impunity,” I deadpanned, flicking the switch to change over my own Dust crystal. Ascalon’s yellow glow and faint buzzing faded out, replaced by soft green and a quiet hiss of moving air. More ice erupted around me from the trees and the ground and I swung twice, charging up back to back Aura Strikes—the first turning Weiss’s ice into sleet while flinging the second not at Weiss, but the tree she was perched in. The heiress leapt away and made to send more ice my way before a cracking sound drew her attention back to the tree she’d been in, where the top had fallen out of it and crumpled against the tree next to it. Shooting her a grin under my mask, I taunted, “Can you dance?”

Ice blue eyes widened as I began flinging out Aura Strikes, forcing her to give up on the offensive Dust and simply dodge. For my part, I worked on clearing enough of the ice Weiss had nearly
managed to trap me in before taking to the air—jumping into the nearest tree and using Surface Walking to maneuver around the heiress, cutting off her attempt to get back to a clear spot at ground level. I faintly heard Weiss growl in frustration as I forced her back down towards the mess she’d left on the ground, effectively forcing her back into her own trap.

Touching down a moment after she landed, I was forced to dodge a rising wave of ice she had launched into my projected path. Flipping the selector switch on Ascalon’s handle again, the blade turned an orange color. Earth Orange was one that, when asked for her input, Jen had suggested using to balance out my limited selection. It was one of my two more defensive Dust types loaded into the sword’s handle—the other being a light blue that I would bet was what Weiss was using: Ice Blue.

As the girl across from me brought her weapon down in a vertical slash, sending out an expanding crescent of Aura and ice, I returned the favor—swinging Ascalon into a rising arc that dragged the tip of the blade against the ground. Earth and rock erupted at my feet, slamming into Weiss’s own attack and crushing it under its greater mass and weight, before continuing on to slam into the heiress a moment later. Not taking any chances, I followed up with two more—the first missing as she managed to roll behind a tree, the second partially uprooting the tree and forcing her out of cover. I was there waiting for her, having thrown on Invisibility and run the distance after the attack. I dropped out of Invisibility and slammed the flat of the sword into her head—a Sleep Strike spell already imbued in the blade. Weiss hit the ground. I had to give her credit as she actually tried to roll out and get to her feet, wobbling drunkenly as she did so. Another application sent her into la la land as her Aura finally broke and the sword smacked into her skull.

“Good night, princess,” I muttered, sheathing the sword and dropping to rest against one of the still standing trees in the area, exhaling a long sigh as I did so. Looking down at the battered form of my unwitting sparring partner, I considered my options. ‘Fuck it,’ I decided after a moment of thought, before casting on the girl. Weiss’s naturally higher Will Save didn’t help her here as it had against the first Sleep Strike, considering she was unconscious. Forget to erase the last thirty seconds or so, which should include any potentially worrisome memories of feeling funky after I hit her the first time and she rolled high on her Will Save. Dominate, Read Thoughts, and a second casting of Sleep just to be sure she wouldn’t wake up washed over the girl one after the other until I was satisfied. Then, I ordered her to remember where she was staying.

Pushing up from my seat, I brushed myself off and bent down to lift the girl into a bridal carry. ‘She doesn’t really weigh anything. Hell, I think she may be lighter than the twins.’

Throwing on Invisibility once more, I took off into the city, making my way to the heiress’s hotel. Slipping inside, I made my way up to her room—surprisingly not the penthouse suite and, more surprising, not the most expensive hotel in town. It seemed Weiss was fairly serious about not drawing too much attention. Fishing her room key out of her pocket, I let myself in and looked around. Her luggage stood out and I made a mental note to dupe its contents before I left—or at least the Dust therein, at any rate. ‘Then again, I’m pretty sure she’s close enough to the same size as the twins that they could use what she has or alter it to fit. They’re not going to turn down gifts—
especially since whatever Weiss has is bound to be high quality stuff.’

Moving to her bedroom, I looked down on her dirt and sawdust covered form and shook my head. “Sorry, princess. You can take care of that in the morning.” Looking around the room, I found a set of stationary and a pen on a table beside the bed. A faint smirk tugged at my lips as I set about making a note.

Brought you back safe and sound after our late night rendezvous and put you to bed. Don't worry princess, your chastity is still intact—after all, if you're going to use me to piss your father off, I want you to be conscious to enjoy it. Sleep well. - Shiro.

P.S.: Don't bother changing hotels. I know it's disappointing, but we won’t be meeting again for some time. I have some business to take care of for the next few months and I'll be out of town.

P.P.S.: I am not running away so that does not count as a win for you. Nor does it have anything to do with the Dust explosion—not that I expect you to believe me on that front.

Chuckling quietly, I left the note on the table beside the bed and made my way over to her luggage. Opening the first compartment, I whistled softly at the Dust I found there. “I'll dupe it all and sort it out when I get home.”

One trip through an ID to collect a copy of Weiss's luggage later and I left the hotel room, locking the door behind me as I made my way outside and went looking for somewhere to change over to the Fox so I could head home for the night. As I neared the edge of my range, I allowed the spells I’d left on Weiss to dispel. The only thing that would stick would be the Forget ensuring she didn’t realize I’d tried to use Sleep on her. I was tired, my foul mood was back now, and my temper was growing dangerously short at this point. Fighting Weiss had helped—I had probably enjoyed that more than I should, to be honest. On the other hand, I may have beaten her, but I couldn’t really call it a win since I’d had to resort to tagging her with Sleep. She had forced me to use something outside Shiro’s ‘official’ skill set. Worse, she had managed to tag me through my Aura. That only illustrated that the gap between us wasn’t nearly as wide as I would have liked. Weiss learned from her mistakes and adapted quickly. It meant I needed to find time to work on more training for tactics and techniques to use as Shiro—time which would be in short supply, come Monday.

I was sorely tempted to just say ‘fuck it’ and ignore the whole Arc situation, but curiosity wouldn't let me. “What's the worst that could happen?”
“It’s not the end of the world, you know.”

I turned an unamused look over at Neo, seated on my left. Behind us, the twins giggled softly. “Quiet, you two,” I warned preemptively.

“So you have problems with not being in control, Jaune?” Joan asked from the back seat, and I could hear the smirk in her voice.

“Yes. That’s absolutely it,” I deadpanned. I winced and grabbed the 'oh shit' handle as Neo swerved around a slower moving vehicle. “It has absolutely nothing to do with the madwoman driving.”

“You agreed that it would look suspicious if we showed up and you were the one driving my car, my love,” Neo reminded with a smirk.

“I remember,” I growled quietly. “I should have just had us change seats outside of town.”

“Too late for that!” Neo cheered, reaching out and hitting the radio button.

“MOVE BITCH, GET OUT THE WAY—”

“Fuck no,” I hissed, reaching over and jamming a finger on the seek button.

“Last night a little dancer came dancin' to my door—”

Neo's finger hovered over the seek button for a moment before moving back to the steering wheel, tapping along to Billy Idol's Rebel Yell. Behind us, Joan asked, “Is that a Semblance thing?”

“Eh?” I asked. “What do you mean?”

“We think so,” Melanie answered from Joan's right. “Unless it's Penny...”
“Nope!” the gynoid chirped from where she sat in Joan's lap, under the effect of a Lighten spell—because while Joan could ignore Penny’s weight, the seats had complained.

“Speaking of Penny,” I interrupted, turning enough to eye the gynoid. “I got an update last night and only got around to checking it this morning. Apparently certain notifications were reset and permissions were removed for ‘pets and summons’ to close those messages. So, Penny, have you been closing my Semblance notifications?”

“I was, until your Semblance updated and now I can’t. They were constantly popping up and a hundredth of a second is plenty of time for anyone to read them!” Penny answered guilelessly.

Turning away, I facepalmed and resisted the urge to groan. “I know they’re annoying, but I kind of need those. I got stabbed last night because my Semblance reset a couple of weeks worth of notifications and then dropped them all at once.”

“Wait, you got stabbed? By who?” Melanie asked, beating the others to the punch.

“Three guesses and the first two don’t count,” I offered.

Neo shook her head. “No, sorry Jaune, that’s not nearly enough. Even when you cut the list down by lumping people like the White Fang all as one group, it’s still pretty long.”

“It’s not that bad,” I rolled my eyes. “It was Weiss. She picked us up when we left Cinder’s place. The usual song and dance ensued. Oh, and on a completely unrelated note, I got you presents. Came across a small stockpile of Dust and expensive clothes and duped the lot.”

“‘Unrelated,’ right,” Joan snorted softly.

“We don’t care if it’s related. In fact, if they’re copies of Weiss Schnee’s things, they’re bound to be the sort of high-quality stuff that costs an arm and a leg. And let’s face it, rich girl or not, she’s got good taste,” Miltia pointed out, to which her sister and Neo both nodded.

“We’re probably about her size, too,” Melanie hummed.

Neo frowned, however. “I don’t think I’m going to be able to squeeze into anything she had without some adjustments in the chest area.”
“Like you won’t enjoy playing with it while you alter it,” Miltia countered, earning a nod from Neo. “As I was saying, before Jaune interrupted,” she turned a smile my way and I stuck my tongue out in reply. “We’re pretty sure everyone has individual playlists.”

“My Semblance has done that since day one. At this point, I just assume it’s doing it to screw with me.” It was also a good way to tell just how bad off I was in any given situation. If my Semblance felt like putting on the mood music, odds were good I was about to get fucked.

“Weird,” muttered the blonde, before quietly adding, “But I think I’ve seen it before.”

Blinking at that, I turned and asked, “When?”

Joan's blue eyes met my own for a moment before she answered, “The day you died. I was there in the hospital with you. Doctors called Time of Death and you were clinically dead for a few minutes. Then everything went nuts and you started healing up.”

“What, the heart monitor started tapping out the rhythm to Take On Me or something?” I asked, resisting the urge to laugh at the mental image.

“No. More like every speaker on that floor of the hospital, including the P.A. system, started playing random songs.”

Her expression had closed down, going flat as she’d talked and her tone matched it. ‘She’s dwelled on it so much it looks like she’s numb to it,’ I realized. I turned back towards the road as we finally cleared the city streets, heading deeper into the Residential District. “I want you to show me that memory later. If you don’t mind.”

“I...” she hesitated, frowning as she considered it.

After a moment, I nodded. “It’s okay. You don’t have to.”

Sighing, the elder blonde closed her eyes. “I will later.”
“So, any idea what caused that explosion last night?” Melanie asked, blatantly changing the subject, for which I was grateful. “Reports from our teams on site had lots of details on the effects, but nothing on the cause.”

Joan shrugged. “No idea.”

I winced. “I might have been responsible.”

Three voices from the back simultaneously asked, “What?”

Neo’s head turned and her eyes locked onto mine as she raised an eyebrow. “Eyes on the road,” I ground out, reaching for the ‘oh shit’ handle again.

“Explain,” she demanded before turning her attention back to the road.

“Indirectly.” I clarified quickly, watching the scenery whip by worryingly quickly. I made a mental note not to let Neo drive us back when we left. Considering it for a moment, I added, “This doesn’t leave this car, understand? Do not mention this after we’re done talking, do not talk about it amongst yourselves, if you must do so use telepathy and only between those of us present. Understand?”

“Why not, Jaune?” Penny asked.

Running a hand over my face, I answered, “Because if Blake finds out, you know who she’ll blame. And she won’t necessarily be wrong. Are we agreed?” I asked, and waited until I had affirmatives from the others before continuing. “Remember the train? I puppeted some White Fang there and left orders to destroy the Dust cache at the farmhouse to prevent them from getting their hands on it. Apparently, they decided the best way to do this was by shooting the Dust—except they also shot out the seals for the space expansion Bounded Field inside the barn. Full field collapse on top of all that Dust going up. I didn’t give them any sort of orders as to how to accomplish this, so they decided on it themselves.”

“You can do that?” Joan asked, her tone clearly worried. “Give people orders that will result in them killing themselves?” I nodded and she sighed. “I, that is... Dust, Jaune, you can’t let anyone else know!”

“We’ve been careful,” Neo answered before I could. “And it’s not like he’s just throwing that spell around all over the place. Mostly on assholes who deserve it.”
“Or me, for fun,” Miltia smirked.

“Fun? Being mind controlled is fun for you?” Joan asked, incredulity plainly obvious in her tone.

Miltia shrugged. “Only when it’s Jaune doing it.” Her smirk became a leer as she quietly added, “You should try it some time.”

“I'll pass,” Joan retorted. “As I was saying, though. Mental Semblances are rare—”

“Fuck,” I breathed, running a hand over my face. “‘Rare,’ but they do happen. So Emerald isn’t a fluke.”

“You know someone else with one?” Joan asked, eyes going wide for a moment before she frowned. “That is a rarity. And yes, they are a thing.”

Turning a look on the twins, I grumbled, “So I wasn’t being paranoid to worry about it.”

“No. People with mind-affecting Semblances do occasionally turn up. But anyone with anything remotely like mind control or mind reading gets disappeared. Either by one of the governments or by private organizations. Don’t let anyone figure out you can do that,” Joan warned.

“I'll keep it in mind,” I agreed. I had always been careful with that particular spell before, treating it as a ‘need to know’ subject. Angel was the only one outside the group who knew now, and I could reason that her knowing was more useful than not and worth the risk. “Anyway. White Fang mooks shot up my space expansion Bounded Field on the barn. Field collapsed and detonated the Dust inside. How bad was it?”

“Very,” Miltia and Melanie answered in tandem. A moment later, my scroll chimed and a text from Miltia popped up with a picture of the site. Opening it, I whistled softly as I took in the scene. The barn was gone and in its place was a crater that had to be thirty yards across and at least ten yards deep—or so I guessed, using one of the people standing in frame holding a piece of equipment as a reference for scale. The entire area was lit with a multi-hued glow—most of which came from the center of the crater, but some was simply moon-and-starlight, somehow amplified to nearly a daylight level of brightness.
The thing that first caught my eye, though, had to be the crystal formation. It spanned from the bottom of the crater at least twenty yards upwards and twisted in odd curves, bands, and arches away from a central spire. Some of it even floated free from the main body of the crystal, suspended in mid-air. From its coloration and the fact that it looked to be shedding mist, it was a safe bet to say it was made of ice—at least on the exterior. Where physics packed it in and called it a day however, was what appeared to be stuck inside the ice. Lightning and fire were two of the more easily identifiable things frozen in place—lightning arcing through several individual arms branching off the formation and running through the pillar at the center; tongues of flame hanging suspended in bands and branches.

The earth around the crater was littered with jutting stone spears—most pointed outwards, but a few near the edges curved inwards. A closer look showed odd rises in the landscape, stretching away from the crater—like ripples in a pond. The farmhouse had been blown away as well, but at least part of the foundation had remained, if only as part of the garden of stone surrounding the blast site. Trees around the area had been blown to flinders from the shockwave while others were merely knocked down—reminding me of pictures of the Tunguska blast on Earth.

The man I’d been using for scale earlier shook his head, turned away from the blast, and shouted something before waving his arms away and moving quickly back from the blast area. I blinked, realizing I’d been looking at a video—not a picture. With the man there moving through the frame, I realized just how unnaturally still it was. ‘That shouldn’t be possible. There has to be some other type of Dust at play here, because surely either the lightning or the fire would’ve burned through the ice. And that's not counting all the countless other striations running through the crystals—metal, water, and more that I can't place that could be just as destructive as fire or lightning or could be completely inert.’

“That is... pretty.” I found myself at a temporary loss for words. Nothing I could say would do it justice. I’d honestly never seen anything quite so beautiful—and made all the more so for the sheer destruction it contained, frozen in a moment.

“Cameras don't catch half of the effects going on,” Melanie added. “If you’ve seen the guy moving, that’s what he was shouting about. Sound didn’t carry inside the range of that crater—a result of Silent Silver in the crates, they think—but he was trying to warn people to stop looking at it with the naked eye. He said it was a cognition hazard.”

I blinked. “Does that mean what I think it means?”

“Persistent mental effect capable of enrapturing or trapping a person,” Joan confirmed my suspicion. “I don’t know what kind of Dust would do that.”

“Indigo,” I quietly supplied. “It’s what they used on Jen.”
Miltia winced. “The more of that crap destroyed, the better. It’ll be a costly loss for someone. Not the most costly, though.” Her green eyes met mine and she added, “You missed something important when you went through everything.”

“Keeping in mind that it was labeled with numbers and not words, and I can only identify the basic colors at the moment,” I pointed out, and she nodded.

“It’s still a loss. There was at least one crystal of Time Brown—”

“Of what?” I interrupted. “I could have sworn you said ‘time.’” Miltia nodded. “Fuck me, that is bullshit. So not only can Dust fuck with matter and space, it can make time do screwy things too. That’s so much bullshit. Also, who picked the name? It’s terrible.”


Joan nodded. “There are a few naming schemes for Dust, depending on who discovers it. Mistral tries for things that sound catchy. Atlas goes for no frills, description-in-the-name.”

Closing the video, I asked, “How dangerous is this? Will it all explode when the time Dust wears off?”

“Very. And yes, once it wears off the effects that are being held in check by the Time Brown will go off. The area has been temporarily quarantined, but it should be safe for a while. It might be worth going to have a look in person,” Miltia suggested. “Fox Hunt is helping Vale PD keep the area locked down while they clean up what they can and warn people away from the area, so it wouldn’t be out of the question for us to show up. It’s kind of a limited window of opportunity, though. We won’t be there pro-bono forever—only until they’ve got a handle on the situation, so we aren’t losing too much money on this.”

I shook my head. “No, I’ll just have to take your word for it. Worst thing a criminal can do is return to the scene of the crime.”

“And on that note,” Joan spoke up, shifting her gaze to Neo—or as much of the ice-cream themed girl as she could, given their respective positions in the vehicle. “I went to bat for you with Yang.”

“Thanks for that. Blondie’s a bit too goody-goody for us some days,” Neo smiled back at the rearview mirror.
“Uh huh. Now, before I do the same with our family, I’m going to need to know more about you. I called Hei, so I’m well aware of everything he knows about these two,” she gestured towards the twins, “but I’m going to want to hear it from their lips. As for you, Jaune wouldn’t keep you around if it was bad, and I assume he knows...” she trailed off, shooting me a questioning look.

I nodded. “I do. Not my story to tell, though. I kind of thought you’d trust my judgment.”

“I do, but as they say—trust but verify,” Joan countered.

Turning an amused look on me, Neo shrugged. “I don’t mind. Since you asked so nicely,” she shot a look at Joan through the rearview. “I grew up rich. Part of Vale’s so-called ‘high society.’ Dad was on the Council, mom was a Hunter. Between their jobs, they didn’t have much in the way of time to spend with me, so I spent most of it with our maid, who taught me how to sew in her free time. Hunter’s kid, so I figured out my Aura and Semblance pretty early. Mom was kind of amused at the superficial similarities. Her Semblance allowed her to induce auditory hallucinations, produce UHF and ULF—shatter your skull or induce an embolism, fun things like that. With so much time to myself and the fact that I was home-schooled, well, I got bored. I didn’t exactly need money, but jewels and Dust are both shiny and you know I’m like a magpie at times—and crime sounded fun. The thrill of going out and pulling it off without getting caught was addictive. Roman and I crossed paths a few times—well, more like I stole things out from under his nose after he’d already stolen them. Eventually, we partnered up. Then Jaune came along and everything changed.”

Joan turned an annoyed look on me. “How much of that is truth?”

I shrugged. “Your guess is as good as mine was the first time I heard it.”

“You don’t believe me?” Neo asked, chuckling quietly. “Fine. I grew up in a series of temporary compounds in the woods, as part of a secret group of assassins that have been around since the time of the Wizard and have been blending in at every level of society—from the high rollers to the gutter trash—in order to keep the peace in Remnant. It’s where I learned acrobatics and where to put the pointy end of a blade. The thievery and everything was just a cover for infiltrating the criminal element of Vale. Now, I’m holding in place and waiting for orders since Jaune seems to have thrown a monkey wrench into things.”

Palming her face, Joan groaned quietly. “My bullshit detector must be on the fritz. If I didn’t know that was literally the background for one of the characters of ‘Rogues in the Dark’ I might actually buy it.”
“Those novels are trash,” Melanie shook her head.

Miltia nodded agreement. “Worse than 'Ninjas of Love' as far as plot-to-porn ratio. It can’t even pretend to be erotica at this point. It’s just wordy porn.”

“There is nothing wrong with wordy porn,” Neo countered.

“Neither of those stories is true?” Penny asked and Neo laughed from beside me.

I sighed. “No, Penny.”

“Okay, so the truth?” Neo asked and Joan turned an unamused look on her. “To be honest, there isn’t much to tell. Short story short: I'm an orphan. Never knew my parents. Grew up bouncing from one foster home to another to another because I was too much of a problem, but I was too damn cute not to adopt. In between places, I picked up skills here and there. I was never abused or molested or anything like that—never even really bullied, beyond the usual pecking order type shit that goes on in places like that when I actually managed to get kicked back to an orphanage. Got old enough to join an academy but I didn't like the idea of risking my neck for the same people who looked down on me for where I came from, so I took off on my own. By then my Semblance had kicked in and I started stealing to survive. And for fun. And because I like shiny shit. Roman and I crossed paths on the same job. Well, that is to say, he stole the goods and I sat back and waited, then lifted them off him when he was done. Had a good laugh over that. We played cat and mouse for a couple of months before he finally offered me a job. After that, things took off and I found myself playing second fiddle at the heart of a small time gang. Roman was great at first—funny, charismatic, charming really…” Noticing the look Joan was shooting her, she shot a glare back in the mirror. “Hey, don't look at me like that! I was young and stupid, okay? Anyway. I figured out that I was pretty much eye candy and a handy tool to keep around since he hadn't awakened his Semblance. The sex was mediocre, to be honest. The only reason I stuck around was because I didn't really have anywhere else to go. No marketable skills, as it were—at least, not legally—and taking off on my own would mean being in competition with Roman again.”

Leaning back, Joan sighed quietly. “So, how much of that was bullshit?”

“Only a little,” I clarified. “The truth is a combination of the first and last story. The second is because she wrote the book in question.”

“Yup!” Neo nodded. “I get a royalty check every six months. It didn’t sell well thanks to those jackasses releasing ‘Ninjas of Love’ almost immediately after. But as Jaune said: I grew up in high society, until my parents died. Mom didn’t come back from a mission and dad… couldn’t take it. He blamed himself, me, everyone else—for the longest time I thought it really was my fault that they died. ‘Video killed the radio star.’ I got over it. I realized mom died from bad luck and dad was sick in a way I couldn’t help.”

A look of realization crossed Joan’s face at that. “I remember that. I’m—”

“Don’t bother,” Neo cut her off. “As I was saying though, considering where I came from and the fact that I was adorable, there were plenty of people willing to take me in. I ‘acted out’ a lot as a kid. Eventually, they took the hint and I got shoved into an orphanage. Pretty much ran the place after six months until I left. I wrote ‘Rogues in the Dark’ after crossing paths with Roman, actually—before I started in on the crime thing. I made enough off the initial sales to buy an apartment and royalties would have kept me fairly comfortable for a few years until I put out another—which my publisher keeps urging me to do—but it wasn’t enough for me. I was bored. So I went looking for trouble. I called it ‘research’ at first, but really, I loved the thrill. Yes, I had a crush on Roman. Yes, I tracked him down and fucked with his head until he got the picture. I didn’t realize what I was getting until after I had it though. He finally pissed me off enough to leave and Jaune picked me up in a bar. He manipulated me into joining him and I’ve been happier in the last month than I have been in the last six years.” Neo leered as her eyes found the twins in the mirror. “The twins helped.”

“And that’s it?” Joan asked, drawing a nod from both myself and Neo.

“Yep. No dark secrets. No tragic past. I’m pretty much average in that regard. Unless you want to get into the whole bullshit psychological breakdown of my Semblance, how it makes me an everygirl who can blend and survive anywhere, and what it says about living in orphanages and foster care.”

Joan rolled her eyes. “Losing your parents is generally considered tragic. And I’ll avoid the trip down the rabbit hole into psychobabble if you’ll agree to do the same.”

“Agreed. So, show of hands. Who here lost a parent?” Neo asked before throwing up her hand. Miltia and Melanie added theirs. “Now, who here had at least one parent who was a piece of shit?” Neo’s hand went down, Penny’s hand slowly went up while Joan groaned quietly and raised her own hand. “Ruby lost her mother and Yang’s… is complicated.”

“That’s an understatement.” I grunted, turning an eye on the point where I felt Raven watching from. “Taiyang, Yang and Ruby’s dad, is a lunatic. Pretty sure he acts that way as a coping mechanism, because no one can be that off-kilter and still be functional.”
“I’ve met him,” Joan nodded. “Great guy—definitely someone I’d want at my back in a fight—but yeah, he’s a bit off.”

“And their uncle is a drunkard and probably a womanizer. Blake said she grew up on the streets,” I supplied.

“So, yeah. Average,” Neo grinned. “Anything else you’d like to know?”

“No, I think I’m good,” the elder blonde murmured. We fell silent after that for a few minutes until she sat forward in her seat and pointed at a road coming up. “Turn off ahead,” Joan instructed Neo from the back seat, and the maniac behind the wheel slowed the red SUV enough to take the corner on two wheels as opposed to rolling, heading up the long driveway towards the Arc home.

The brakes pumped then locked, throwing us into a slide and my hand went back to the 'oh shit' handle as the vehicle spun around one hundred and eighty degrees before coming to a stop. Opening my tightly clenched eyes and seeing we weren't all dead, I yanked off my seatbelt and bailed out before Neo decided to try that stunt again for laughs. Once I was on solid ground, I turned to see Neo had parked with the rear bumper all of a foot from the closed garage door. “Nutcase,” I grumbled as the others left the vehicle.

“But Jaune, you drive like that sometimes,” Penny supplied and I shot the gynoid an annoyed look.

“Not like that,” I denied.

Moving up to my side and bumping her hip into me, Neo leaned up and whispered, “Forget you have Aura?”

I blinked. “No,” I answered, refusing to meet her eyes as she laughed quietly. Sweeping my eyes over the five girls, I gestured towards the house. “Joan, it’s your show from here. Lead on.”

The blonde nodded, starting off towards the house and asking, “What grade Dust are you packing?”

“Six mostly, for offensive stuff—one nine in each of the Sabers, though. Sevens loaded on defensive enchantments for the armor—I figured there’s no point wasting a nine on it unless I need it, in which case I can just swap it out in the field through menus.”
Joan shot me a look and shook her head. “Don’t tell our parents you have that, or where you got it and go ahead and swap it out for Grade 3 or 4, before we get started. And don’t have it equipped when you get to Beacon. If they catch you with it, you’ll catch hell.”

I nodded. “That’s fine. I can change out to something lower before Monday. Why not tell our parents? I don’t think they’re going to report me.”

“No,” Joan agreed, “but you’re not supposed to use it except for emergencies. They’ll recognize it on sight if you use it, so as I said, change it out. What about the rest of you?”

The twins and Neo traded looks and shrugs between themselves. “We don’t really use much Dust,” Miltia admitted. “No Dust weapons anyway.”

“We’ve got defensive enchantments like Jaune’s, also using Grade 7,” Melanie finished.

“Grade 7 for defenses and I might have upgraded my parasol with something new and shiny, running Grade 6,” Neo answered, turning a grin on me.

I raised an eyebrow at that, eyeing the weapon in question where Neo was leaning it against her shoulder, currently folded up. A closer look showed what looked like something faintly glowing from the inside of one of the folds. “You turned it into a Dustcaster using an offensive enchantment sewn into it.”

“Maybe,” Neo hummed, smirking as she dragged out the word.

“Right, all of that has to go,” Joan sighed.

From her other side, Penny chirped, “I am powered by three full sized Grade 9 crystals,” the girl answered. “Currently, they are at seventy-five percent capacity.”

Joan's eyes went wide as she looked at the little gynoid. “Well, that explains some things, like the strength and the laser power output,” she muttered, shaking her head. “I’m kind of surprised you haven’t blown yourself up with those.”
“My power regulation circuits are top of the line,” Penny explained.

“You can use the family stockpile to swap what you’ve got out with lower grade stuff, if you don’t have any,” Joan offered.

I turned an amused look on the woman. “A stockpile of Dust I haven’t duped yet? Please, show me.” The elder blonde opened the doors and the girls trailed in after her as I brought up the rear. I’d barely gotten the door closed behind me when the group came to a halt. Looking over the heads of the four shortest girls, I saw Jen had met us at the door, and she and Joan were now eyeing each other warily, unsure how to proceed. “Did you two have a fight while I wasn’t looking or something?”

“No,” Joan answered, at the same time Neo and the twins answered, “Yes.”

“It was an old argument,” Jen shrugged.

Frowning, I asked, “Is that why you left?”

Jen nodded and I turned a look on Joan. “You broke it, you fix it.”

“But—” the elder of the pair began. At the same time, Jen tried, “It’s—”

Not in the mood for bullshit, I pulled up Charisma and Intent before growling quietly, “Fix. It.”

Joan tensed and turned a pleading look on me as she half-whined, half-whimpered for doing that to her, before the elder blonde nodded slowly. Jen’s emotionless mask thawed somewhat and she sent a small smile my way. The pair traded a look and Joan asked, “Talk after this?”

“Mm,” Jen nodded in agreement.

With that handled for the moment, I asked, “Where are our parents?”
“They’re talking to Jana and Jillian. We have a few minutes before things start,” Jen answered.

“The others outside?” Joan asked, and Jen nodded, tossing her head towards the back door and turning to lead us through the house.

“Family photos?” Melanie asked, crossing her arms as she and Miltia took in the photos in question, arranged on one wall and a table. One in particular stood out, centered amongst the others as it was. Jun stood front and center, beaming a smile missing her two upper front teeth and looking about five if I had to guess. Immediately behind the tiny redhead were a pair of blondes, each with a hand on Jun’s shoulders. The one on the left was shorter—around five feet at the time of the photo—with long hair pulled back in twin-tails. The girl on the right was a few inches taller than her sister at what I guessed to be five foot three, with short hair in a pixie cut. I didn’t recognize either of them, so I assumed they were the two siblings I had yet to meet.

Behind who I supposed were Jana and Jillian were, from left to right, Joan, Jean, Jane, and Jen. ‘Poor Jen,’ I mused, a small smile crossing my face. She hadn’t grown much since that photo—either in height or bust. She was the runt of Iris’s litter, apparently. Other than some differences from growth spurts, the four elder sisters looked much as they did today.

Standing behind their progeny were the Arc parents. Jacques Arc in the center, tall and broad-shouldered, short cropped blond hair, and a neatly trimmed full beard that failed to conceal a roguish grin. To his right stood Iris—blonde hair pulled into long braid that draped over her right shoulder, curvy, and very tall for a woman. I could see where Joan got it from. To Jacques’ left stood Lily—shorter, slimmer of build than Iris, and with somewhat less in the chest department. Where Iris had the Nordic valkyrie look down pat, Lily had the sportier build of an Olympian.

‘Well, this should tell you something,’ Melanie sent to the group, along with the picture in question. It was plainly obvious that it was missing someone. Namely, me. Well, minus Jaune, rather. Original Jaune. Whatever.

‘There could be a good explanation for that. I could have been sick—’ I began. My eyes shifted across the other photos. Many of them—mostly the ones taken more recently—seemed to also prominently miss the only Arc son.

Joan turned her head enough to meet my eyes as we walked. ‘You weren’t.’

I rolled my eyes, linking in Jen as well and posing the same question to her. She thought over it a moment, pushing open the back door and stepping outside before answering, ‘You were in school that day.’
'So were the rest of us, and they pulled us out of school,' Joan added hotly. Ignoring or missing the mental jab, Jen nodded in agreement.

I gave a mental shrug and set about partying everyone and throwing out more links, bringing in Ruby and Yang and sending them a feed from my eyes and ears. Looking around the back yard as we stepped outside, I spotted the twins sitting with Jun. The little redhead looked up, spotted me, and beamed a grin that seemed to split her face in half. “Onii—!” she paused mid-yell and winced, before correcting herself with, “Jaune!” and launching herself at me like a human missile.

Catching the smaller girl about the middle as she wrapped around me like an octopus, I laughed. “Hey, squirt.”

Jane and Jean stood as we got closer, the pair of redheaded twins going wide eyed and trading incredulous looks. “Oh Dust, I think he got her to start acting…” Jane trailed off, seemingly looking for a word that wouldn’t offend their little sister.

“Normal,” Jean supplied, apparently not caring if she pulled the punch or not.

Jen shot a glance at her youngest sister before quietly adding, “Not like a child.”

Jun flushed red and dropped off of me. “I can act normal! I’m grown up, I drink milk!”

“If the shoe fits,” I teased, earning a look of betrayal from the youngest Arc.

“I hate you all,” she grumbled, moving to sit down at one of the two wooden picnic tables set under a couple of umbrellas for shade, but only after snagging Penny by the hand and dragging her over to talk.

Neo hummed as she looked between the four eldest siblings. “How’s this thing going to go?”

The Arc sisters exchanged looks before Jane sighed and answered, “I’ve got no idea. Usually we’d do a round-robin style tournament. This year, Jaune’s actually going to compete... and he brought girlfriends.”
“Dad and moms are going to want to evaluate you, probably,” Jean supplied. “They’ll probably have you fight some of the younger siblings.”

Nodding agreement, Jen added, “Jaune will probably either fight one of us or—”

“Me,” a quiet voice answered from behind us, and I turned to see two blonde Arc girls I recognized from pictures—Jana and Jillian—in addition to Lily, Iris, and Jacques Arc. Lily waved from where she had spoken, a bright smile on her face as she looked at me.

“Jaune,” Jacques grinned, looking over the group gathered behind me before his eyes locked with mine.

Jacques Arc

Arc Clan Head

Divine Light

Level: ???

Intense, storm gray eyes met my blue and I felt the small smile I’d had since greeting the others slip as I hit him with Observe and the skill came up blank.

“It’s been a while.”
I ignored Jacques, Lily, and Iris for a moment to study the pair of blondes flanking them—Jana, the
taller of the two with shorter hair to the left of their group and Jillian standing to their right with her
longer hair pulled into a braid that draped over her shoulder. Penny moved to stand beside us, as Jun
ran over and latched onto her mother’s side. Jacques wore a look of amusement, Iris's face was
cautiously neutral, Lily turned a smile on me and the others, while the two younger blondes sent me
curious looks. This was actually the first time I’d seen any of my sisters other than Joan wearing their
Huntress outfits—not to mention the first time I’d seen my ‘parents’ in anything other than pictures.
Speaking of outfits, I took a second to give all three of the elder Arcs a once over—mentally
comparing how my own setup stacked up to those of a trained Hunter and Huntresses.

Jacques Arc wore no real armor to speak of, beyond a white and gold breastplate—which bore the
Arc family crest in the center of his chest. Beneath the breastplate was a long-sleeved white shirt,
rolled up at the elbows and over the breastplate a multi-pocketed vest hung open, with several
magazines peeking out of the pockets for them. His boots and pants were nothing special, beyond
being made of the same durable material all Hunter clothes seemed to be. On his left hip, he carried a
sheathed sword of some kind—it looked to be one of the many European variations given the hilt,
but beyond that I had no ideas—while on his right side was what looked like an SMG of some sort,
which was probably what the magazines were for. Beyond a red dot sight, the SMG looked just as
normal as the sword—and by ‘normal,’ I meant Earth normal as opposed to Remnant normal, as in
neither looked like they had any sort of form shifting ability or secondary features.

Lily’s outfit was even more generic than Jacques’. She wore some light armor here and there in
shades of dark red and green over jeans and a green long-sleeved shirt, but overall it looked like
she’d picked it up from the same place I got my ‘Shiro’ gear—save for her holster and what I could
make out of her weapon, which wasn’t much since it was mostly hidden behind her back. ‘Oh,’ I
realized what it was that made her armor look generic compared to the others. ‘No sigils on it.
Wonder why.’
Iris was the only one I’d really say wore anything approaching the sort of ‘Hunter’ gear I’d come to expect—though, like her husband, she wore no armor. Iris’s outfit consisted of a white, sleeveless long coat—or was it a long vest? Her boots were black, but mostly hidden beneath some sort of gaiter that strapped around the bottom of the boot and ran up well past her mid-thigh. Pants—at least I thought they were pants, they could have just as well been shorts—were tucked into the tops of the gaiters, colored a light, ice blue. Like her husband and wife, she wore a long sleeved shirt, the same shade as her pants/shorts. All of her clothes were trimmed in silver. Iris’s weapon was a simple, modern recurve bow—again, with seemingly no built in storage tech or special features beyond modern optics, along with an arrow rest and counter weight as I’d expect to see on a compound bow. I wondered why she hadn’t gone for a compound bow, but when I thought on it the answer seemed painfully obvious: compound bows had major vulnerabilities compared to a recurve bow—namely, the pulleys. Her quiver was a cylinder strapped to her right thigh, and given the buttons and switches along the top I felt pretty secure in guessing that the arrows themselves had selectable options for Dust loadouts.

Having no real idea how to respond to him, I decided to go for the usual roll for bullshit, “Hi. Has it? Been a while, I mean. I wouldn’t know. Who are you again? I can guess, but…”

The Arc patriarch frowned. “Jaune, I’m your father.”

My lips twitched as a grin pulled at the corners. “If you say so, Lord Vader.”

The blond man turned an incredulous look on Joan. “He gets brain damage and that’s the kind of crap you stuff his head with?”

“Brain damage resulting in amnesia,” the eldest sibling corrected, her voice quietly accusing as she did. “As a direct result of trying to take on Grimm with no training.”

Jacques shrugged. “Sounds self-inflicted.”

I frowned at that before forcing a chuckle out. “Sorry, maybe I should have said ‘hello, asshole,’ instead.”

‘So that’s what that looks like from the outside,’ I mused as Lily and Iris simultaneously facepalmed.

“Husband, you are being rude and callous,” Iris muttered, turning an annoyed look on the man in
question. “Please stop before you say something we make you regret.”

Equally quiet, Lily added, “I know it’s your natural state of being, but can you at least try to be polite?”

Jacques ignored his wives, one eye twitching slightly as he brought up a finger to wiggle in his ear. “Sorry, didn’t catch that. Got this buzzing in my ear—too close to one too many guns going off, I think. Sometimes someone says one thing, but I hear something completely different—it usually comes out sounding like whining.”

“Sure you’re not having auditory hallucinations in your old age?” I asked.

Raising one blond eyebrow, he said, “I could have sworn you called me an asshole.”

“Well,” I drawled the word as a small smirk twitched across my lips, “if the shoe fits…”

He rolled his eyes. “No respect for your old man,” the man grumbled quietly.

An elbow in his side from Lily caused him to wince. “Don’t prove him right by making ‘asshole’ synonymous with ‘father,’ dear,” the woman hissed.

‘Too late for that,’ multiple voices retorted across the links between myself and the girls.

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes. ‘Come on, he hasn’t even done anything yet other than be an asshole. It’s just a bit of banter. Give the man a chance.’

That got feelings ranging from anger to incredulity from my sisters in the party. While the twins and Neo were willing to follow my lead here, there was still a healthy dose of skepticism from them.

‘Hasn’t done anything?! I’ve known him nearly thirty years, Jaune! He’s had plenty of chances and blown them all,’ Joan’s mental voice cut in.

‘I want to give him a chance myself.’ Still, I could see where she was coming from—of all the sisters, Joan knew him best by virtue of being his eldest child. I trusted her judgment but that didn’t mean I’d
skip out on this in a hissy fit because someone said a few mean things. All he was really doing was helping me make my mind up about how to proceed with them all in the future—whether I’d keep in touch or cut all contact. Of course, that didn’t mean I had to put up with it either. If it got bad enough, I’d tell him to knock it off.

Melanie’s mental sigh was tinged with a mixture of fondness and amused exasperation. ‘I can’t help but think that it’s more along the lines of one asshole seeing another asshole and recognizing one of its own kind.’

‘Love you too, dear,’ I sent back, resisting the urge to laugh. ‘All joking aside, that’s not what it is. On the one hand, I want to give them an honest chance. On the other, I don’t mind handing out enough rope to hang themselves. If he keeps on, I’ll tell him to fuck off. Let me do this?’

There was grudging agreement from the girls and Jacques started talking again before they could say anything. “Yes, dear,” he shot back at the redhead, his tone thick with sarcasm, dodging a swipe at his head from Lily before sticking out a hand. “Jacques. Though, I’ve met Jacques Schnee and he’s kind of a dick, so call me ‘Jack.’ And these are Iris and Lily. That should be easy enough to remember, even with the brain damage.”

“Father of the year,” Jean snarked, sending, ‘More like ‘Call me Jackass.’”

“Okay. That’s enough of that,” I said, leveling an unimpressed look on ‘Jack.’ “I don’t mind some shit-talk and banter, and I tend to give abrasive personalities some leeway since I’m kind of an ass myself. But you’ve gone beyond abrasive and into antagonistic. It’s going to stop now.”

“Oh? Is it?” Jack asked, raising an eyebrow, as his lips pulled into a grin even as his eye began to tick. He was either not used to people calling him on his bullshit, or wasn’t expecting it from me.

I nodded. “Yeah. The way I see it, you’ve got two choices. You can knock it off and we can do this thing, or you can keep it up and we’ll leave. It’s up to you, really. I’m not invested enough to want to stay beyond satisfying my curiosity and meeting the two sisters I hadn’t yet. I can always come back for them when you’re gone, or exchange scroll numbers and call them later if you stick around long enough for them to leave before you do.”

“You’re giving me an ultimatum, then?” he asked, the grin slipping off his face as the first stirrings of Killing Intent bored down on me with laser focus.
I didn’t bother returning the favor with my own Intent—I knew the skill wasn’t high enough to do anything to him. “Yeah. Act your age or we pack it in and go home.”

Lily turned an annoyed look on her husband packed with more Killing Intent than I’d felt from anyone else—and that was just indirect exposure, considering she had focused it on Jack. “Enough.”

His eyes shifting between me and the others, Jack raised an eyebrow as his entire demeanor changed and he smiled. “Huh. Tough crowd. Come on guys, relax. We’re here to have fun.”

“So, Jaune!” the redhead chirped, her lips turning up into a smile as she blatantly changed the subject. “Who are your friends?”

“I admit, I’m curious as to the answer myself,” Iris agreed, looking over the girls who had come with me.

The Malachite twins exchanged a look between themselves and Neo before the younger pair smirked and said in tandem, “Age before beauty.”

“So I go first and second?” Neo asked, sticking her tongue out at the twins before turning her attention back to the redhead who had asked. “Neopolitan. Just ‘Neo’ is fine.”

“She looks kind of familiar,” Iris muttered as an aside to Jack.

The Arc patriarch frowned, taking in the short girl. “Yeah. Wasn’t there that one —”

Neo cut them off. “My mom was a Huntress.”

The twins rolled their eyes and cut in before someone could put their foot in their mouth. “Melanie,” began the white-clad twin.

“She looks kind of familiar,” Iris muttered as an aside to Jack.

The Arc patriarch frowned, taking in the short girl. “Yeah. Wasn’t there that one —”

Neo cut them off. “My mom was a Huntress.”

The twins rolled their eyes and cut in before someone could put their foot in their mouth. “Melanie,” began the white-clad twin.
“Malachite,” they both finished.

Penny bounced slightly on her heels, realizing it was her turn. “Penny.”

“So they're your girlfriends?” Lily asked, her tone and smile turning teasing.

“Yes,” four voices answered as one.

I reached over and ruffled Penny's hair, shaking my head. “Not this one,” I denied, earning a pout and an “aww” from Penny.

“Not bad,” Iris commented quietly, before asking, “What do they do?”

Neo met my gaze, mouthing ‘not bad’ and raising an eyebrow. ‘You hear that, Jaune? Your mother approves.’

‘Don’t let it go to your head,’ I rolled my eyes.

“I'm self-employed,” Neo shrugged.

“We work for a family friend,” Melanie answered for herself and her sister.

Penny smiled as she added, “I think I want to join a Hunter academy.”

“I see,” Iris nodded. Moving over to the tables that had been set up, she dropped into a seat and gestured for us to follow. As though they had been waiting for the invitation, the Arc sisters moved to take places at the first table with their parents. There weren’t enough seats at the first table for everyone, so the eldest siblings got preference there while the youngest three sat at the second table. Jun patted the spot next to her and I took her invitation. “How did you all meet?” Iris asked, drawing my attention back to where she, Lily, and Jacques sat.

‘Truth or bullshit?’ Neo asked.
‘Mixture of the two,’ I quickly supplied before shooting a look at Joan. “Joan wanted to catch up with her old teammate.”

“How is Hei?” Lily asked.

Joan shrugged. “Same old.”

“Hei is our boss and an old friend of our mom's family,” Miltia explained. “We work for him part time—waitressing, tending bar, whatever.” That ‘whatever’ had included acting as Junior’s enforcers and helping to run his gang-for-hire and information network was better left unsaid.

“And in exchange, we got training and money,” Melanie supplied with a grin.

“Hei introduced us and we hit it off,” I finished.

Neo’s lips twitched into a small smirk before she said, “He picked me up in a bar—the same bar Miltia and Melanie work at, in fact—and got me drunk, then took me home.” Silence fell over the gathered group as several sets of eyes—those who did not know Neo—shifted to me and I palmed my face.

“Club, actually,” Miltia corrected.

“There is a bar there. I was there for the bar,” Neo shrugged.

I rolled my eyes. “Neo.”

“Where we then proceeded to take advantage of each other,” she added. “And the twins. Repeatedly.”

“First of all, they do not need to know that,” I deadpanned.
Lily, who had perked up at Neo’s mention of ‘taking advantage,’ shook her head. “No. Please. Do go on.”

“Do not encourage her,” I warned the redhead before turning back to Neo. “Secondly, you were already dead set on getting drunk. If anything, you should be thanking me for pulling you out of your moping.”

“I was not moping,” Neo countered. “I was fuming. There is a difference.”

“She see what I have to put up with?” I gestured at the ice-cream themed girl, who stuck out her tongue. “We struck up a conversation and now she won’t stop following me around.”

“In a bar?” Iris asked, raising one blonde eyebrow.

“Club,” Melanie argued.

Iris and Lily traded a look before turning on Jack. “He’s your son,” Iris muttered quietly.

“I never picked up women at a bar. Maybe that comes from your side of the family?” Jack suggested.

That earned a glare from both women before Iris shook her head. “Says the man who flirted with anyone with ovaries when we were in school.”

“The flirting was mutual—and you’re conveniently leaving out that you were involved.” The blond patriarch shrugged, a grin playing across his lips. “I can’t help it that Arcs are genetically predisposed towards being attractive.”

The man’s wives rolled their eyes. “Genetically predisposed to being assholes,” Lily chuckled quietly.

“Well!” Jack clapped his hands, drawing everyone's attention. “How about we get this thing started? Jaune, you're up first.”
Turning an annoyed look on her husband, Lily said, “I wasn’t done talking to them yet.”

Jack shrugged. “So do it between bouts.”

Sighing, Lily hopped up from the table and moved out away from us, towards the large, open field used for training. I caught Joan’s eyes and she shook her head. A look at Jen earned a shrug and the Arc twins were equally helpful. So, turning a deadpan look on Jack and Iris, I asked, “So, what, just go out there and get my ass handed to me?”

Jack and Iris exchanged a look before shrugging. Turning back, Jack answered, “Pretty much, yeah. How else are we supposed to figure out where you stand now?”

“We’re not expecting you to win, Jaune,” Iris said, before quickly adding, “Just do your best.”

Palming my face, I nodded. “Fine. I think it’s bullshit, but whatever. I’ll play your game.”

“We could always leave,” Miltia suggested as I turned to walk out to meet Lily.

‘Not yet,’ I gave a mental sigh.

‘Pity,’ Joan added.

Turning to the Eldest Deadly Sister, I asked, “About that Dust?”

“Yes, come on,” she agreed, jerking her head towards a small rise at the edge of the property, just this side of the woodline, that I had noticed before but ignored. I studied her as we walked, allowing my eyes to wander as I considered the upcoming fight against Lily. Now that I could compare, of all the sisters Joan wore the most armor—circlet, breastplate, bracers, spaulders, gauntlets, greaves, and sabatons over her outfit of jeans, a white hoodie, high-heeled leather riding boots, and duty belts to hold her sword, shield, and her backup weapon. The armor itself was primarily white, with gold and dark violet accents, with her larkspur on her upper left arm.

Walking around the small mound after the elder blonde, I saw a steel door set in a concrete foundation under an overhang—all of which had apparently been disguised with earth over it to make it look like a buried rock or something. “Bunker?”
Joan nodded. “Yeah. You saw what a Dust explosion can do. There’s no way we’d keep this stuff in the house. Burying it like this reduces the chances of it damaging much of anything if something does go wrong.” Reaching out, she tapped a six digit combination into the electronic lock set on the door—which I made sure to memorize for later use.

I followed Joan as she stepped inside, reaching to the side of the door to flip the light switch on. I whistled softly as I took in the Dust present—sorted into individual metal cabinets reminding me of the tool boxes I had kept in my shop back on Earth, except that these were bolted to the floor. There were nine of them, each painted in one of the primary colors Dust came in. ’ROY G BIV—or it would be if the cabinet for Indigo wasn’t missing—plus black, white, and I assume gray represents colorless.’ I frowned at the toolbox sized hole where Indigo was supposed to go—along with the spots on the floor where a box had obviously been mounted at one point. “What happened to the Indigo?”

“Huh?” Joan asked, looking at where I was pointing with a frown. “I never really noticed. It’s always been missing but it’s pretty obvious there was one here at one point.”

“So they removed it,” I hummed.

Joan nodded. “Considering we have some idea what at least one variety of it can do? Yeah, I’d say it’s probably a good thing they did remove it, just to prevent accidents with kids in the house.”

Walking towards the first—red—I pulled open the top sliding drawer, revealing a flat expanse of metal and no obvious means to open it. The entire drawer hung out from the cabinet in a metal rectangle and the only sign it was even supposed to open was the seams along the sides and top. Frowning, I pointed out the obvious. “Its flat?”

Joan smiled and shooed me aside before taking the handle and turning it ninety degrees to the right. What I had thought was a simple pull-out drawer folded open and expanded, revealing a shelving unit that stood three feet deep, four feet wide, and five feet tall. “Built in storage tech,” the blonde answered. “Worth every Lien. This is sorted by name, then further subdivided by grade and form.”

Nodding, I searched for a replacement crystal for the Saber I used as my primary. ’Arid Carmine. Aweburn—God that’s a terrible pun. Chilly Chili. Who names these things? Marvel? Ah ha! Crimson Burn.’ Pulling open the drawer, I found ten panels, labeled 1 through 9 with the final panel listed as ‘X’ and bearing a plaque containing a description of the effects of the Dust type.
Curious, I opened the X panel and found it empty. Joan spoke up before I could even ask, “It’s for Dust higher than Grade 9. Ten is ‘emergency only’ stuff and has to be issued by the state, one crystal at a time. Eleven is ship-grade and almost always snapped up by Atlas or Mistral the moment they uncover any. I’ve heard rumors of a grade thirteen crystal being found out in Vacuo, but that’s all they are. Those same rumors tend to say that the entire crew at the dig site, along with their belongings, equipment, and all traces of them disappeared the very next day and the only evidence of their ever having been there is the collapsed mine. It’s an urban legend.”

“I see,” I muttered, closing the lid and moving on. Flipping up the panel labeled ‘four,’ I found several crystals of the ‘uncut’ variety, in addition to small canisters of powder form propellant. “No pre-cut stuff? No ammunition?” I asked, pulling a crystal out and opening my Inventory. Selecting the correct weapon, I unequipped the Grade 9 crystal powering it and equipped the Grade 4 in its place. A second crystal replaced the one powering my shield.

“No. We have the equipment for that in the house. It's all stored in the basement, same with the ammo cans. Keeping rounds outside of easy reach would defeat the purpose of having them on hand if there were an emergency. We just keep the majority of the stockpile out here, since the rounds themselves are less volatile than large, uncut crystals,” she explained as I closed up the drawer and moved on. “I thought you were going to dupe everything?”

I nodded. “Oh, I am. Later.”

Joan raised an eyebrow. “Why later?”

Shooting her an amused look, I moved on to the next stop on my list, located in the Blue toolbox — Ice Blue, for the second Saber. “I can't see their levels. It's safe to assume they'd notice something weird if I made an ID around us.”

“Point.” Frowning, she added, “Also, stop unequipping Dust.”

I blinked before raising an eyebrow. “Why?”

Jerking her thumb back towards the entrance, Joan explained, “They’ll sense it. Pull out what you’ve already swapped out and either pocket it or give it to me. In here, with all the Dust surrounding us, they won’t notice but as soon as you step outside—yeah, they’ll figure out that lots of high-grade Dust disappeared. It’s my fault for not warning you off from wearing it today in the first place. If they ask where it came from, tell them I gave it to you.”

“I see,” I muttered, doing as she said and fishing out the crystals I had been using before slipping
them into a side pouch and making a note to do the same with whatever else I replaced and to let the
twins, Neo, and Penny know likewise. “I didn’t realize it was possible for people to sense Dust like
Aura.”

“Oh yeah,” Joan nodded. “It’s something that gets taught after Aura detection—mostly because
sensing internal and external Aura is such a key skill to learning how to properly control and later
suppress it.”

“I see,” I muttered, looking over the selections available and finding the one I wanted. In the
meantime, I attempted to create a skill to sense Dust—only to be denied as apparently my Use Dust
skill was too low. “So, what am I walking into?”

“Mama Lily has always been the most sympathetic of our parents. The problem is, sympathetic or
not, she still went along with it,” she sighed.

I nodded. “Okay. That's not what I'm asking though.”

“Ah,” the blonde nodded. “She'll probably give you a free shot. Open with your best stuff. Aim to
kill or it won’t even phase her. Even then, it's probably not going to for long anyway. Assuming you
make it through her Aura to begin with.”

“I see,” I muttered, thinking over my options. Playing the role of ‘Jaune’ with the supposed gravity
Semblance, I was limited to only those skills. ‘Gravity Round might do some damage, maybe. It's
the highest damage thing I've got in gravity spells at the moment.’

They didn’t have anything pre-cut to fit the slots on my coat, so I changed those out with my
personal stock from Inventory. I’d sacrifice the protection having Grade 9 powering those would
afford, but I didn’t think I’d need it at the moment anyway. ‘Besides, I'll just have to replace it when
Beacon starts anyway. Better to save it for emergencies.’

Sending a mental message off to the twins, Neo and Penny, I got a list of the Dust they needed and
found appropriately leveled crystals and handed them off to Joan to give to the others. A thought
occurred and I asked, “So if they can sense the Dust in my gear, why can’t they sense what’s in
Penny? She’s running off of three Grade 9’s. Also, isn’t there some law about civilians not having
access to high-grade Dust?”

Joan raised an eyebrow at that. “She’s probably shielded somehow. I can’t sense her internal Dust
supply—just her Aura and whatever Dust she’s got on her. You really can’t sense it yet, can you? I kind of thought with your Semblance you’d have made a skill for Dust Sensing by now.”

“Tried that. The required skill is too low,” I admitted.

“Ah,” the blonde nodded. “As for the law, no one here is going to report anyone for breaking that one. Despite not being Huntresses, your girls are all trained well enough to use what they have without blowing themselves or us up. There are exceptions for that one for spouses and children of Hunters as well, in extenuating circumstances. So long as they don’t flaunt it in public, they’ll be fine.”

We left the small bunker and closed it up behind us. While Joan made her way over to sit down, I made a beeline for Lily, who had broken off from her conversation with the others as soon as we’d exited the bunker and moved back into the field. Coming to a stop a few yards from the redhead in the middle of the field, I frowned as I took her in.

Lily Arc

Twisted Hourglass

Level: ???

She was cocky—her stance arrogant and open, her hips canted to one side with a hand resting on them and her weapon still sitting in the holster at the small of her back. Then again, I didn't blame her, she was a fully qualified Huntress, I was the irrelevance of a child, with no talent or training, that they'd all but abandoned—at least from their perspective. Not to mention I'd supposedly lost my memories only a few weeks ago. Realistically, I didn't stand a chance.

The redhead smirked at me, “Alright, since we're going to be the opening bout, and considering you're not a full Hunter yet, I'll give you the same handicap I'd give Jun, Jana and Jillian. You can win by points, or by making me activate my Semblance. I'll even give you a free first shot.”

Well, wasn't that just par for the course of what I'd heard from Joan and the rest about them? Even if they weren’t qualified Hunters yet, the others had been trained to an extent and might actually put up a fight, but I was essentially new to this, had never seen them fight, and they'd put me in the first match. I wouldn't get a chance to see how they fought, to develop counter strategies, to think of a way to win. No, I'd just be thrown in the deep end and when I failed, they'd just feel justified at having ignored me for the girls.
'Fuck. That.'

A DUEL IS ABOUT TO BEGIN!

I managed to stop myself from jumping at the loud proclamation that accompanied the unexpected pop up. The new window was the same as any other, laid out like a quest notification, but quests had never had loud and startling sound effects when they were given. The update the other night had not mentioned anything about Duels though, and I’d been in enough fights lately that I was sure this should have come up sooner. Thankfully, a new window spawned to explain the situation.

Duels are a subset of challenges. Designed for multiple formats of combat, they are meant to represent any fight that ends in any win/loss condition where the terms are agreed upon beforehand. Duels are never a part of quests, and any fight that is part of a quests progression will not be a Duel.

Well, that explained that then. While the recent update hadn’t mentioned anything specific about Duels, it had mentioned changes to how challenges worked. I wonder if this was a preemptive update for when Beacon came and I had to fight in Goodwitch’s class, or if it was a reactive update to what happened with Weiss last night.

Duel: Lily Arc

Victory conditions: Point total, Lily Arc activates her Semblance

Loss conditions: Point total

Optional Objectives: Beat Lily Arc in one attack, Beat Lily Arc on points, Duel Lily Arc for over five minutes

Penalties: Use any element other than Gravity, Kill Lily Arc, Injure anyone other than Lily Arc

Victory: 200,000 XP, Increased closeness with Arc Sisters, Increased closeness with Lily Arc

Loss: 10,000 XP, Decreased closeness with Arc Family
Well, if that didn’t give me even more incentive to win than I already had, nothing would. Still, operating under fancy new Dueling rules or no, it didn’t change anything about the fact that I was going in handicapped. Time to stall. Maybe I could invoke the age-old plan of getting the enemy to tell me his—or her, rather—weaknesses. “I don’t suppose you’d tell me what, exactly, your Semblance is so I know if you’ve activated it?”

That brought her up short, if the surprise on her face was any indication. “You... you don’t know?” she asked, her voice sounding suddenly hesitant. Her eyes flickered over to my sisters, apparently seeking confirmation that they hadn’t told me something as important as any of my parents’ Semblances; or maybe trying to determine how much they had told me—if anything.

‘Ooh, exploitable.’ There was a chink in the armor and I was not above psychological warfare. I pulled back and drove the point home with a hammer. “Lady, I barely know you. Hell, I’m not even entirely sure if your name’s Iris or Lily.”

That put a look of genuine hurt onto her face. I hit her with Observe and was mildly annoyed—but unsurprised—to see that like her husband, the skill failed to get anything at all. I didn’t need a skill to tell me that she looked damn near heartbroken by that, however. A glance at Iris—and another failed Observe—showed nothing but cool indifference, by comparison. Was I—was Jaune—closer to the woman who wasn’t his biological mother before he died?

“I’m Lily, Jaune,” the redhead explained softly, her tone much more subdued than earlier, before she seemed to rally herself—taking a quick breath and forcing a smile onto her face. “Well then, I guess I’ll have to put you on at least equal grounds with the girls,” she said, adopting a chipper tone that sounded false.

“My Semblance is Regeneration. Non-lethal wounds heal the same as any other person with Aura, but those sorts of things are simple and would heal naturally with time, your Aura just speeds it up,” Lily explained, one hand waving in a ‘so what’ gesture. “It’s the things that your body wouldn’t heal normally on its own that are the problem injuries and where my Semblance differs from the healing anyone with Aura possesses. Removed limbs for example, takes Aura years to heal, unless you can get a hold of the removed limb and hold it to the stump for a few minutes. But even that, in the middle of battle, is enough to slow you down and get you killed. My Semblance allows me to grow a new arm or leg in seconds. Any lethal wound, and I regenerate to full health.”

Her chipper tone of voice ratcheted up a notch, into the ‘blatantly, intentionally fake’ range. The kind
of voice one uses when they’re talking to an imbecile, except I got the feeling I wasn’t the idiot in question here. “It doesn’t matter if all the bones and organs in my body were liquefied, if I had a giant laser remove my lower body, or if I was decapitated—I’m alright seconds later.” Her voice returned to normal as she continued her explanation, “I regenerate. I get thinner, lose fat reserves, and burn Aura the more I have to heal. Mostly Aura—especially the less of me there is to regenerate from—and I’ll never regenerate into a condition where I won’t be able to move, so I’ll never come out looking like a starvation victim. Never figured that one out. I mean, where does the extra mass come from?”

I practically salivated at the thought of her Semblance and the potential there, as my mind spun away with possibilities. ‘She’s functionally fucking immortal. Surprised someone like Atlas hasn’t strapped her down to a table and experimented, for Science.’ Then what she’d said at the end actually registered, and I blinked before sending a thought to the four eldest Arcs. ‘Wait, what? How the fuck?’

Jane gave a mental shrug. ‘No idea.’

‘We always chalked it up as an ‘Aura did it’ thing and left it at that,’ Jean explained.

I had already seen enough weird shit in Remnant by now to agree—‘Aura did it’ was as good an explanation as any. Instead of dwelling on it, I focused on something else she’d said. Those examples of ways she’d almost died seemed way too specific for a casual explanation, even more so with the fact Iris was rolling her eyes while Jack was pinching the bridge of his nose, and damned if I wasn’t going to ask. “I take it those particular deaths weren’t just thought of on the spur of the moment?”

I heard multiple groans behind me as well as catching a muttered ‘here we go again’ from Joan. Lily shot an accusing look to her right at Iris and Jacques, both of whom seemed unperturbed by it. “Let’s just say that some people—who shall remain nameless—need to work on not getting so lost in each other’s eyes when they’re supposed to be on watch that they let an Arachne sneak past them, capture one of their teammates, and get most of the way through liquefying them for a meal before they notice anything is amiss. And that certain people—who may or may not be a part of said nameless first group—need to practice better battlefield awareness so that they don’t catch one of their teammates in the crossfire when letting their Semblance loose on an enemy.”

Jacques just rolled his eyes at his wife’s glare, “You survived didn’t you? And I have worked on checking my fire since then.”

“Obviously not enough, if the fact that you vaporized my arm last week is any indication,” Lily shot back. “Oh, and you’re buying me a new wedding ring again—you realize that, right?”
Letting the two get into what seemed to be a long-standing spat, I decided to ask my sisters for explanations through the links. ‘So, that explains at least two of the three, but is she talking about a specific instance with decapitation or does she regularly end up losing her head? In the literal sense, I mean.’

‘Specific instance,’ Joan replied almost instantly. ‘We’ve come to realize that her memory seems to have been hard coded somewhere else in addition to her brain—possibly her DNA or an imprint on her Aura—so even if her head’s destroyed, once she regenerates she’s still fully functional and remembers everything. But when mama Lily talks about being decapitated, it’s almost always about one time in particular.’

After almost five seconds of silence, I realized Joan wasn’t going to continue with that explanation. ‘That being?’

Jen was the one to supply the answer, ‘Joan was the one who did it, actually.’

I blinked at that. I’d guessed she was involved in some way from her silence, but hadn’t thought she would be the one who had actually done the deed. A glance at her showed that Joan was just sitting there at the table in mortified silence as Jean picked up when Jen didn’t continue. ‘She was practicing new ways to use her Semblance. It’s a multi-part shield that can be separated into sections which can rotate and be angled and positioned at will.’ So, the Rho Aias clone was not the only form it had, then. ‘She was seeing how effective they would be as weapons by throwing them and willing them to return and decided to have some fun with it. A few trick throws later and there were two on an intersecting path right where Lily had just walked out the door. The fact that they’re hard light constructs and thus sharp as a monomolecular weapon, and their opposing directions and speeds causing a pinching effect, put enough force into the blow to pop her Aura shield. It took Lily’s head off clean. I don’t think I’ve ever seen her yelled at so much before—though most of it was about Joan’s lack of situational awareness, using a technique so close to the door, and how lucky she was it was Lily coming out rather than anyone else. Of course, considering it was dad saying how lucky it was that it was Lily and not someone else, he got yelled at too—there were a lot of comments made along the lines of ‘like father, like daughter.’ It was kind of amusing.’

‘Okay, well, I can understand why that would be memorable, but why would that particular instance be a sticking point for Lily?’

‘Because it’s the only time she’s been decapitated cleanly,’ Joan groaned. ‘And that apparently has a weird effect on her Semblance. Cut off an arm, it’s dead flesh. Explode her head, it grows back. Cut the head at an angle, leaving some of it behind, you’ve got a living Lily and something to shine up and sell to a weirdo collector as a soup bowl. A clean decapitation, however, confuses her Semblance. It doesn’t know which part to regenerate—the body, or the head—and it apparently
shrugs and goes ‘why not both?’ That first argument? Yeah, it happened in stereo on mama Lily’s part. We had two of her for three and a half months after that—both of them thinking, feeling beings. Both of them with access to their Aura and Semblance, so they both had souls. It was weird. To make it worse, we couldn’t tell the original apart from the copy and there were some… heated arguments before we finally settled on them being unintentional twins, as opposed to one being the original and the other a copy.’

Well, that both answered questions, and raised others. ‘Okay, so what happened to the other one?’

‘She died,’ Jane supplied. ‘Since no one could actually tell which was the original Lily—what with both having a soul, the same Aura, and the same memories—we were just trying to get used to having a new mother. We were finally adjusting and making jokes that twins ran in the family when all the parents went off on a mission to Mistral. They came back one less. Apparently, they’d been fighting a horde of Grimm out in the Mistral Dust Plains when one of the Lilys got blindsided by a Grimm that snuck by the others. She got knocked down just as the Dust island they were on started disintegrating back into the lava and fell in. Melted alive. It’s pretty much the only way we’re sure we could kill mom if we had to.’

I frowned in thought, asking, ‘So I assume the same happens if she gets split down the middle?’

There was a collective feeling of contemplation from the Arc siblings before Jen tentatively replied, ‘Maybe? We’ve never seen her bisected vertically. A horizontal bisection will result in regeneration from the part with her head, usually.’

‘The obvious exception being if there’s more mass in her torso and her Semblance decides to try to regenerate from both ends and she ends up with a double,’ I surmised.

Well that was saddening, morbid, informative, and disturbingly scary all at the same time—especially considering what that meant for me now that I was going up against her in a fight and what it meant for anyone that would have to take her down if she went rogue. There was always a chance non-lethals like drugs or Dust could work, depending on her metabolism, but that wasn’t going to help me here. Filing away the mentions of some rather weird sounding geography for further research that I already had planned for Beacon, my gaze traveled back over to the parents, who seemed to be wrapping up, with Lily finally running out of steam for her tirade.

Her piece said, Lily turned back to me. “Anyway, on top of my Semblance healing me no matter the damage, it interacts strangely with the usual properties of Aura. Aura has this weird little side effect of constantly trying to keep people as close to their prime and as close to the best their genes can be as possible, as that's the optimum form the body can be in. It reduces cellular degradation during division, retarding the aging process by a large factor. That’s why most young Hunters can compete with models in the looks department, ignoring the fact that you’ll find that a lot of models are Hunters
or trainees trying to supplement their income, and why Hunters who survive their careers can hit upwards of four hundred, five, if they're lucky. Sure, they don't always keep their looks as they age, that’s lifestyle and genetics and your Aura can only make you as good as those allow, but I once worked with a Hunter who was in his early two hundreds. He could keep up with a buff forty something civilian without using Aura, with it he beat me down in a spar so easily it wasn't funny.”

She stopped for a moment, her face scrunching a little as she seemed to be thinking, before grimacing and continuing. “Sorry for the tangent. Anyway, what that means for my Semblance, is that those new cells that are created during regeneration don’t follow even the rules for normal Aura healing. My cells are perfect copies of the ones they are supposed to replace—because my Semblance wants me in peak condition and whole of body, and Aura’s basic healing factor is secondary to my Semblance. The short explanation is, if I take enough damage, I get younger. I never seem to go further than my twenties, though.”

‘She gets younger, too? Fuck sake,’ I sent to my sisters.

‘Yeah,’ Jane agreed. ‘When we had two, they were ‘young mom’ and ‘teen mom.’ It was hard to tell them apart though, unless they were side-by-side.’

Jean sent a mental smirk as she added, ‘She’s technically younger than Joan now.’

A thought occurred. ‘And you’re not sure which one died?’

Joan gave a mental sigh, answering, ‘Well, no. We’re pretty sure it was. The younger one died.’

Well, all of that explained why she looked younger in photos and now than my other two parents—and probably why her ‘twin’ looked a bit younger. And here I'd thought that Jaune’s dad had just waited a decade after graduating before starting a family and managed to pick up a second wife out of the new graduates when he did. Her Semblance essentially covered the gaps in Aura where healing was concerned, and as a side effect left her functionally agelessly immortal. And that gave me a piece of vital information and would allow me to finally test one of my new skills for my public Semblance that I’d had questions about since creating—after reading the skill description, I had mentally labeled it ‘not for use on friendly targets’ and avoided using it against humans. It meant I didn't have to hold back too—at least within my supposed skill-set. Well, that and I might actually have a decent chance of winning this Duel and getting what was a fairly decent sum of XP. ‘Here’s hoping the Duels at Beacon are this good.’

Something must have shown on my face, because Lily's smirk dropped. Obviously she knew that something she had said had given me the idea I might be able to beat her. She wasn't moving, apparently willing to keep to that 'one free shot' she offered me. ‘Well, better not waste that,’
thought, as I spun up a Warp and launched it at her.

It was slow moving—way too slow to not be easily avoidable by everyone here at even this distance, and my family knew it if the amused look on Iris’s face was any indication. Lily also didn’t seem too concerned, especially with how she stood there, waiting for it to hit. ‘‘After all, any attack that slow couldn’t be that powerful,’’ was what I was sure they were thinking. I risked a glance at Iris and Jack, and the man couldn’t have looked any more disappointed. He may as well be broadcasting his thoughts, ‘‘Obviously, he still doesn’t have a grasp on his Semblance, but what should we expect after only a few weeks with it and losing his memories—especially from him?’’

And then the Warp impacted, and to my surprise, passed straight through her Aura barrier and exploded.

Her HP bar phased into view above her head, and then a vertical black line was imposed onto it about a tenth of the way along from the left. To the right of the line, the red that represented her health turned an inactive gray and the border around the tenth that remained active shone white before its contents started quickly draining away due to the Warp’s damage. Lily went down with a scream of pain, completely unprepared for her Aura not protecting her, as she and the area around her were enveloped in purple-blue ghost fire, conflicting gravity bubbles pulling flesh, bone, muscle in different directions to the parts next to it. The ground she lay on churned just as violently, sections ripped up and shredded or crushed into a nimbus of debris floating around her.

‘‘Oh shit,’’ was the first thought through my head. The description given for Warp had simply said that it ‘‘shredded barriers,’’ and I’d thought it might do double damage or more to the protective barrier Aura users could project—but ignoring that shield completely was far beyond anything I’d thought it could do.

The physics made a sort of twisted sense, from a purely biological standpoint. Human bodies were adapted to one Gravity, one Atmosphere. Rapidly changing Atmospheres would cause blood to literally boil as gases like nitrogen formed bubbles—which was commonly called the bends—which could lead to nasty things like emboli ms on the extreme end. Playing with conflicting G-forces—especially negative Gs—tended to do funny things to the body, like cause hypoxia on the lower end of the scale by screwing with the circulatory system. Crank that up into the hundred G range and bones would snap, tendons would tear, and the body’s own weight would destroy itself.

Aura only repaired damage, it didn’t protect against nature and the elements, and I could think of at least a few examples where that would apply off the top of my head. People with Aura couldn’t survive in a desert without water any longer than people whose Aura was locked could, nor could they survive much longer than a normal person without food. They likely couldn’t survive freezing temperatures any better—even if their Aura repaired any damage to their bodies from frostbite, hypothermia would still cause problems that, unless their Semblance provided extra heat, could potentially be fatal. And it certainly wouldn’t allow people to survive in a vacuum, underwater, or in any other environment where getting a clean supply of breathable air was an issue. Hell, Yang had complained about not being able to tan like a ‘‘normal’’ person—which could easily be explained by Aura healing any damage the sun did and the body not bothering to initiate its natural reaction of
producing more melanin. ‘That begs the question of where our Vitamin D comes from, though. Maybe the body just produces it naturally without also releasing more melanin?’

The result was a completely normal, unaugmented human having their outside pulled harshly in all directions, and at least the insides of their limbs pulled in others. I didn't know if Warp was strong enough to get all the way inside the torso. If it did, then had this been any other person, they’d have already been well on their way to dead, as it would take an insane healing factor to survive this.

‘And here was me complaining that my new Beacon skillset didn’t have the damage output of my older skills. Well, against Grimm I might lose some of the damage, but against humans with Aura, I only have to deal with a tenth, maybe even less, of the health. This spell is all but made for killing people.’ I was just thankful that the effect was so obvious and none of the others were willing to step into the area affected by the Warp to help Lily out, that would have been disastrous for them. Or, more likely, they all knew that despite the pain she’d survive, and them endangering themselves would be pointless and far more permanent for them than her. ‘The DoT is applied to anyone who enters the spell’s AoE, hell, it sticks to them for the duration even if they leave. If this is the effect of the Warp DoT on a person… I need to make a Magic Cancel spell, if I throw out a Warp when Ruby is running around she could accidentally run right through it and kill herself, never mind the possibility of friendly fire.’ I didn’t think this was the same DoT that Gravity Round had—mostly because it’d be impossible to miss if people started screaming and winding up maimed during practice with the girls.

Turning my attention back to her health bar, I noticed that not only was the damage not going to be enough to actually kill her with how slowly it was decreasing, far slower than it had initially despite Warp’s DoT being a constant amount of damage, but that her Aura bar had appeared beneath it and was depleting slowly but steadily, likely due to her Semblance activating to keep her alive, which would also explain why her health bar was dropping slower than it had at first. It would likely take her down to around two thirds of her unaugmented health, what she had naturally through hard work and training rather than what her Aura boosted her to, but not lethal on its own with her Semblance intervening. I wondered if that would be the case once I’d levelled Warp further and increased its damage output.

When it stopped, she was a pile of bleeding, rent flesh—a couple of broken bones breaking the surface of her skin and blood pooling around her on the ground, which was sporting its own scars. Despite all that, she was still obviously alive.

**Warp** has leveled!

**Warp** has leveled!

**Warp** has leveled!
I closed out the boxes, carefully keeping my face blank as, internally, I winced—I’d counted nine levels off of that one attack. I would say it was three times the amount of skill growth I’d gotten from using Sleep and other things against Joan except that I knew level progression wasn’t linear, even for skill growth mechanics in games that had them. Experience requirements, depending on the game and genre, tended to go up one of two ways: adding the previous two tiers of requirement together got you the next level's requirement or by doubling the previous requirement and then adding something like twenty-five to fifty percent more. To make matters worse, I’d noticed that I seemed to have two experience growth tracks. Some skills, like A.P. Round or Sword Mastery followed the first, fast progression route and gained levels quickly. Others, like Fireball and Flash Freeze leveled more slowly but tended to have more significant gains when they did level. I wasn’t entirely sure what the scale was between the first and second types of progression, unfortunately—or did I have enough data yet on Warp to decide which category it fell into.

‘Too bad I just used the one skill,’ I mused, before turning over what I’d seen Warp do to a living, human target. ‘Well, that was far more gruesome than the Mass Effect games showed, but with how Warp works—and the fact that biotics probably have natural protections against space magic in that game—I’m not really all that surprised. The fact that even then it’s still supposedly one of the less-lethal Mass Effect abilities is terrifying when you consider the pain. Warp must be an Asari commando’s favourite torture tool.’

A hush fell over the back yard, broken only by the sound of overgrown grass swaying in the faint wind and the quiet gurgle of labored breathing from the mess that had been a woman. Then, there was a sudden buildup of Aura and Lily's broken body shrank in on itself slightly as bones snapped back into place, cuts sealed up, and things that had been twisted and contorted shifted back into place.

“That really hurt,” Lily’s annoyed voice ground out as she rolled to her feet in front of me. Maybe it was just my imagination, but I thought she looked a little shorter—though that could have simply been from the lack of footwear considering that she was naked save for the sword and holster she was quickly strapping back on. The clothes she’d been wearing had been either shredded by my attack or destroyed entirely in places and left mixed in with the little clumps of compressed dirt scattered over and around her. About the only thing not in tatters was the holster, though now it was somewhat looser on her hips without the rest of her clothes under it. I wondered briefly how that had survived when everything else had been shredded—but considering how often she said things like this happened, I probably shouldn’t be surprised that she’d invested the most Lien into her weapon and keeping it on her person even if she lost everything else. “I’ll admit though,” she grinned, “That was pretty good. You won by the rules so I’ll go ahead and bow out. Unless you want to keep going—that is, if you’d really fight a naked lady, Jaune?” she teased.

‘Strip to make it fair!’ Neo sent and I resisted the urge to facepalm. I refused to dignify her with a response.

“You don’t have anything I haven’t seen before,” I retorted. ‘And on one of the newer models, no
“less. Though, in her case, isn’t she always a newer model of herself every time she regenerates? ‘Later generation,’ then.’

Lily turned green eyes on the girls before they shifted back to me. “Oh really? I’ll have to ask your girlfriends later. Congratulations.” Looking down, she sighed as she started for the tables where the others were. “Well, there goes another outfit.”

Rolling my eyes, I hit the quick-release snaps for my armor and pulled my coat off before holding it out to the redhead. “I destroyed your clothes, so you can borrow this until you change.”

Lily grinned and slipped into the coat as I pulled my armor back into place and secured it again. “Thank you,” the redhead said. With that, Lily returned to her seat beside her husband, Jun zipping to her side and climbing into her lap the moment she’d sat down, hugging her fiercely.

“Great. I win. So I’m done,” I nodded as a notification popped up, letting me know I’d won the Duel and gained 300,000 XP, bringing me up into level 43.

“Joan, you’re up. Jaune, stay there,” Jack’s voice called and I turned away from Lily, shooting an annoyed look at the Arc patriarch.

I shifted my gaze to Joan who froze as she was getting up from her seat, before turning back to Jacques. “Last I checked, ‘exhibition match’ wasn’t synonymous with ‘circus.’ I’m not a trained monkey—I’m not going to just stand out here and do tricks until you’re satisfied. You want to see more, you can wait your turn like everyone else,” I deadpanned, moving to retake my seat beside Neo.

Jacques opened his mouth to protest, only to be silenced by an elbow in his ribs from Lily. “That’s fine, Jaune. It wouldn’t be fair, otherwise. Would it, dear?” she asked, turning a falsely sweet look on her husband.

The bearded blonde rolled his eyes. “I suppose you’re right.” Turning to Jun, he grinned. “You’re up, sweetie.”

“Yes!” the little redhead cheered, bouncing up from the table and out onto the field. Jun’s gear looked relatively tame compared to her sisters—consisting of a simple sleeveless red gi top, black gloves, leather pants and boots similar to many of her elder siblings, and some armor over her elbows, knees, and boots. At either side of her hips attached to her belt were a pair of small weapons.
I’d never seen before. She pulled off one and slipped it over her gloved hand before doing the same with the other. Armor plates unfolded over the backs of her hands, stopping at her wrists. On the top of each, I could make out the red glow of active Dust through what looked like a small viewing window—probably a Dust chamber inside, if I had to guess. I’d have to get her to let me take a closer look at them later.

“Now, who should—” Jack began, only for Iris to cut him off.

“You,” she pointed at Neo. “Neo, was it?”

Neo shrugged. “Sure. I’ll go easy on her.” Patting me on the shoulder, she moved out to join Jun on the field. *What can she do?*

*‘She’s pretty fast for her age. Beyond that, I’ve only ever seen her using two swords. I have no idea how she is with hand-to-hand,’* I sent back. *‘Her Semblance is pretty much Kaio-ken, unless I miss my guess.’*

Neo sent me the mental equivalent of a raised eyebrow. *‘Kaio-what?’*

*‘It’s Explosive Overclocking. Greatly increased damage output and speed at the cost of self-damage. Yang’s got something similar,’* I explained.

I felt Jun’s Aura swell as it shifted into the visible spectrum, coating her body in a layer of burning red light. Her level display, which had shown 10 until now, jumped up to 34 and I frowned. “You’re teaching her Aura suppression?” I asked as an aside to Joan and the Arc twins.

“Kind of had to, given her Semblance,” Joan shrugged. “You’ll see why in a minute.”

Jun launched herself at Neo, crossing the distance between them quickly enough that for a moment, I thought she had learned Flash Step—until I realized it was just raw speed. Miltia quietly voiced the thought already on my mind. “Her acceleration is on par with Ruby, when she’s not using her Semblance.” Not that it mattered much. We had all gone a few rounds with Ruby and by now could accurately track her when she wasn’t pushing herself. Jun may as well have been moving in slow motion for all the good it would do.

“And she’s only going to get faster,” Melanie added, and Miltia nodded.
“Ruby?” Lily echoed, raising an eyebrow before turning to me with an amused upturn to her lips. “Another one?”

“Yes,” Melanie, Miltia, and Penny all answered at the same time—almost drowning out my own, “No.”

At the knowing looks from the others, I sighed and rolled my eyes. “There is nothing there. We’re friends. That’s all.”

“Sure,” Miltia agreed, hiding a smile.

Melanie’s words practically dripped sarcasm, “We believe you.”

“What was that saying about ‘the Nile’ you used once?” Penny asked with false innocence.

Lily’s grin shifted into the shit-eating range. “Any others we should know about?”

“No. I don’t believe you should,” I answered. When she raised an eyebrow and snorted, I turned back towards Jun's fight with Neo, hiding a smirk as I did.

Jun’s weapon-clad fist sped through the space Neo’s face had occupied half a second before as the ice-cream themed girl leaned aside with a smile, dancing out of the way of the follow up blow, then putting her flexibility and acrobatics to use flipping over, dipping under, and weaving around the barrage of punches and kicks that followed. Jun’s frustration at being unable to land a blow began to show quickly—especially with Neo keeping up a string of taunts every time Jun missed. “So close,” as a punch flew past her face. “Almost had it that time,” as Neo danced back from a series of kicks. “Good try,” after a foot swept through the space her head had occupied a moment before.

I shook my head. “She’s allowing herself to be baited.”

Joan sighed and Jane shook her head. “Yeah, it still happens occasionally,” the redhead admitted.

“Well, I guess I shouldn’t be surprised. She’s only eight,” I shrugged.
“Twelve,” Jen corrected across from me and I blinked.

‘Oh. That… Yeah, she did say she was already in Signal, in the year under Ruby. Ruby's fifteen though, and was in her second year, going on third, right?’ Frowning, I asked, “She got into Signal two years early?”

“She's an overachiever,” Jen deadpanned, to nods from Joan, Jane, and Jean.

“Even by our standards,” Joan agreed.

With a nod, I asked, “So, why’s she tiny?”

Jane fielded that one, jerking her head towards Lily. “Her Semblance is like mom’s. Yeah, she gets stronger—but at the cost of burning off bio-mass. And unlike mom, there doesn’t seem to be a lower limit. She lost four or so years in one go when she first activated her Semblance, but for those few minutes she was on par with our parents. At least, in terms of strength and sheer Aura output.” When I opened my mouth to ask why the hell she would need that sort of power—unless she activated it under duress—Jane shook her head. “If she wants to tell you, she will.” Turning back to the fight, she added, “For all intents and purposes, she is eight. Twelve year old mind, eight year old body and brain. Essentially, eight with four more years of experience.”

“Fair enough,” I agreed quietly. I could relate, given my own mind/body issues. At least Jun’s mind-body difference was only a few years. “What triggers the de-aging? At what point does she start regressing?”

“When she gets hurt—since, like mom's, it heals her. Or when she runs low on Aura and then burns off her fat reserves. Hunters as a whole don’t have much fat to begin with due to the active lifestyle and the requirements for fueling Aura. In fact, we could put away twice what we normally eat as far as caloric intake and it’d still go straight to either muscle development or Aura production,” Jean explained.

“That explains why Neo never seems to put on weight from all that ice cream,” I mused aloud.

Jean nodded in agreement. “After that, she’ll start regressing based on how much Aura she’s generating. It’s not as fast as you’d think, though.”
“So, like Lily, there’s some component in there making up the difference that isn’t immediately obvious,” I surmised, and the redheaded twin nodded. ‘Magic, maybe?’ I wondered, noticing Lily had turned a speculative gaze on me while I was speaking. When I turned to shoot her an inquisitive look, she shook her head and refocused her attention on the fight.

‘I wonder if it’s hereditary. If so, the twins may be capable of using it. And since I know they won’t rat me out, I’ll see about approaching Jane or Jean about it later.’

“It’s like watching Neo with Yang,” Melanie admitted, drawing my attention back to the fight. “Except, you know, without the cursing from blondie.”

“‘Yang,’ huh?” Lily asked. “From the context, she's either Neo's child—in which case, I'm going to have to disapprove for allowing a child that age curse like that—or…”

“Yang Xiao Long. Ruby's older sister,” Melanie supplied, earning a nod and a knowing, amused look from Lily. Jack, I noticed, actually twitched a grin before hastily wiping it off his face.

“Two sets of sisters?” Lily asked, a smirk crossing her face as she giggled. “So there were more.”

Humming quietly, Iris asked, “Isn't 'Xiao Long...?'”

“Blonde, attitude, brawler, and that name? Yeah, Taiyang's kid,” Jack agreed. I supposed I shouldn't be too surprised that they knew him.

I raised an eyebrow as Jun’s attack shifted, a wave of red streaking out from her next sweeping punch—a ranged Aura Strike, backed up with that red Dust in her gloves. For the first time, Neo was forced to block as opposed to simply dodging. Her parasol shifted up into the path of the wave and popped open, red tracery lighting up across its surface in a familiar pattern. The wave of Aura and fire washed over Neo’s defense as she twirled forward, through the other side of the attack and lashed out. One booted heel collided with Jun’s face as Neo used the opportunity provided by Jun’s attack and her own defense to slip in a blow the younger girl wasn’t anticipating. Jun’s own forward momentum from following the attack through saw her flipped upside down to land roughly on her face in the grass.

“That’s new,” I shot a suspicious look at Joan.
The Eldest Deadly Sister sent me a sheepish look. “I did tell her to take it easy on you at first. Besides, we’ve had her training outside her specialty for a few months now. Swords are most compatible with her style and Semblance, but not optimal. Jun’s a fist fighter and she focuses on Aura Strike and variations thereof—mostly just changing its shape, reach, and effectiveness—along with physical enhancement. The gloves give her the option of either adding Dust effects to her Aura Strikes or throwing out just Dust attacks to keep from burning Aura. They’re still a work in progress—they’re only using one Dust reservoir at the moment and we’re trying to convince her to add some things to them to give her more options.”

“She’s still in Signal, though,” Jean added. “Plenty of time to learn new tricks. Before that, it’s best for her to get the basics down—which is why she’s there. We taught her enough to give her an edge and figure out the basics of her Semblance. She can pick up everything else from school.” Biting her lip, she quietly added, “Besides, if we teach her too much, Signal will press to advance her to Beacon early. They’re probably going to do it anyway, but better it be one year than two. She needs more time to socialize with her peers and learn to work with a team.”

Our attention shifted back to the fight as Jun let out a strangled yell. “SIT STILL SO I CAN HIT YOU!”

“Nope!” Neo taunted, laughing as she continued to dodge, having taken in the new range the younger girl’s technique gave her and adapted. Or at least that’s what she wanted Jun to think. My Semblance told a different story as I watched Neo’s icon on my minimap slowly move into place behind our youngest sister while Jun attempted to swat an illusion.

The fight ended rather anti-climatically as Jun suddenly tripped and planted her face in the dirt. The Neo she had been fighting broke apart into the familiar shatter effect of Neo’s Semblance, while the woman herself flipped her parasol around in her hand to grasp the handle—having used it to trip Jun. Planting her heel in the middle of Jun’s back, Neo brought the parasol down and tapped it against the side of Jun’s face. “Game over, kiddo. I win.”

Jun’s face screwed up in anger and her Aura flared brightly for a moment, before sputtering down into nothing as a blade popped out of the end of Neo’s parasol. Neo shook her head, clicking her tongue as she did. “Learn to lose gracefully. This is just a match, not a real fight. Once you’re down, stay down and concede—don’t keep trying to fight or your friendly match will swiftly turn unfriendly. Understand?” When the little redhead nodded, Neo retracted her weapon and stepped off her before offering a hand up. Hefting Jun to her feet, Neo ruffled the younger girl’s hair, earning an annoyed look in return. “You did good.”

“I still lost,” the redhead pouted.
Neo shrugged as the pair made their way back to the tables. “So? You don’t have to win every single fight—just the ones that matter. In fact, half the time, if you have to fight someone else then you’re doing it wrong.”

As Neo dropped down at my side again and Jun plopped into her mother’s lap with a childish pout on her face, Iris pointed at Melanie and Miltia. “What about you two? Do you prefer to fight individually or as a unit?”

“We prefer not to fight,” Miltia and Melanie synced. Miltia continued with, “We’re decent at hand to hand—enough to defend ourselves anyway, but…”

“Not up to a level where we’d feel comfortable participating in this sort of thing. Sorry,” Melanie finished with a shrug. That was not entirely true, but they weren’t going to be breaking out the spells I’d taught them for this.

One of the two Arc sisters who had been quiet up until now—Jillian—spoke up at that. “Are you sure? I could stay on the ground to make things more fair.”

Miltia and Melanie exchanged a look, and likely a quick telepathic conversation, before the red-clad twin turned back to the blonde. “We haven’t figured out our Semblance yet.”

Jillian shrugged. “That’s fine! I know lots of people at Shade who haven’t found theirs either and are scary fighters because they don’t have it so they have to make up for the lack with skill. Besides,” she smiled at the twins, “if you don’t try, you’ll never find it.”

“That’s assuming it’s combat-related,” Melanie deadpanned. “We’re aware of the theory.”

“We’ve gotten close a couple of times, I think,” Miltia added, her green eyes cutting over to me for a moment and a smile crossing her lips. “Not exactly during a fight.”

Jillian blinked. “Eh? What do you mean?”

Beside her, Jana rolled her eyes. “Sex, you idiot,” she snarked.
“Oh.” She blinked once before her eyes went wide. “Oh!” Jillian blushed, looking between the Malachite twins, Neo, and myself with wide blue eyes as though just now figuring it out.

The twins in question sighed and stood from the table, taking a few steps out onto the field before turning back. “Well, you coming?” Melanie asked, arching an eyebrow. The flustered blonde nodded, popping to her feet and following.

“That was mean,” Joan shot an annoyed look at Jana.

The short-haired sister shrugged. “She’ll get over it. Besides, it’s her own fault for being so dense she hadn’t figured it out herself.”

As the pair of siblings argued, I tuned them out and turned my attention to the fight. I hadn't bothered to read their nameplates beyond a glance at their names and levels earlier, so a second look at the words over her head got me Jillian's title—a bad habit I knew came from playing too many MMOs and ignoring friendly player information.

The Sixth Deadly Sister

Jillian Arc

Divine Life

Level: 61

Jillian wore the least armor of the group—none whatsoever, save for a chest piece. The long-haired blonde had opted for something similar to Chinese style silk robes in a shade of sandy yellow trimmed in black and a scarf around her neck that looked like it was meant to fold up into a hood and face covering. At her hip, she carried a rectangular slab of metal a little over a foot long and three or four inches shy of that in width, and about three inches thick with a rounded handle on one of the short ends that she used to secure it to the sash around her waist.

The twins and Jillian had separated by several yards and both sides seemed to be waiting to see who would make the first move. The standoff drew to an abrupt end as the twins dashed off towards Jillian’s position. At the same time, the blonde drew her weapon from her right hip. The surface lit up and I realized that it was some sort of tablet—which would explain the ridiculous thickness as
ruggedization to survive combat conditions. ‘ Scrolls aren’t that thick though, and they seem to do 
fine. Then again, they’re not used in combat usually.’

My questions as to what the tablet was for were answered as Jillian flicked her finger across the 
screen and orange Aura pulled away from the surface like an oversized water droplet. The droplet 
swiftly broke away from her finger and spilled upwards, coalescing into distinct shapes as it split into 
four separate forms mid-air, before hitting the ground before her. A pack of four over-sized wolves— 
not Beowolves, but actual wolves— stood in front of the blonde for a second before growling and 
taking off at a dead run towards the twins. The four critters were luminous orange and partially 
transparent—reminding me of the sort of CGI constructs from that one, terrible Green Lantern 
movie, except for the fact that these were obviously real. “Is that Aura, Dust, or something else?” 
Neo asked before I could.


If the twins were surprised, they didn’t show it. Miltia dropped back a couple of paces and shifted to 
run behind Melanie as the pair angled for the lead wolf. The construct—easily twice as tall as the 
twins—opened jaws wide enough to swallow one of them whole as it drew within striking distance. 
Orange jaws snapped down on air as Melanie jumped over it and behind her, Miltia dropped into a 
slide. The twins struck as one, Melanie’s bladed boot coming down in an axe kick on the back of the 
construct’s neck while Miltia’s hand flashed out in a vertical swipe, her claws raking along its 
underbelly in a single line, splitting it open from neck to crotch. Miltia rolled out from under the 
construct—which was dispersing into a mist of Aura and light particles—and lunged at the one to the 
right of the formation while Melanie landed in a roll and flipped up into a scissor kick at the one on 
the left. Two more wolves popped before the twins spun and took out the last one with simultaneous 
strikes to either side of its neck, sending its head flying through the air for a moment before it 
dissolved.

As fast as the twins were in destroying Jillian’s constructs, the blonde had simply made more in the 
few seconds that it had taken them to do so. Four more wolves, a pair of bears, and a squadron of six 
of what looked like some sort of eagle spawned in front of the blonde and split up, apparently 
intending to surround the twins. Closer examination of the new constructs revealed some differences 
between them beyond the obvious. While the wolves were the same color and brightness as before, 
the eagles were much lighter and the bears several shades darker. ‘Inconsistencies from having to 
create them quickly?’ I wondered.

Watching the twins take out the new constructs changed my mind on that. The first eagle to go down 
did so with a negligent flick of one of Miltia’s claws cleanly splitting its body in half. The wolves 
were drawn away from the rest of the group and eliminated as they moved faster than the bears. 
When they were down to just the pair of bears, I figured out the trick to it as the constructs took 
much more effort to put down than anything else so far. Cuts and punctures ‘bled’ Aura as they kept 
fighting, until the first one finally dispersed. For the second, the twins simply cut off its hind legs and 
left it lying there, unable to give chase.
“This is becoming a battle of attrition,” I surmised as Jillian made yet more constructs. This new pack of wolves was different—one red and radiating a shimmer of heat, one pale blue with a thick fog of chilled air rolling off of it, one yellow and arching small bursts of electricity, and one darker blue with water weeping off its form; all of which had a faint orange outline. And behind them came a swarm of other animal constructs, some in different colors but the bulk of them made up of the default orange.

“Jaune, rifle!” Melanie called.

Chuckling as several of those at the table looked at me, I stood and pulled one of my Sabers out before sending it spinning across the field towards Melanie and Miltia before retaking my seat. The red-clad twin caught the weapon her sister had asked for and spun it down as I’d showed them, raising it to her shoulder as she took a knee and began popping off rounds—not at the crowd of constructs, but at the girl creating them. Jillian, who had been splitting her attention between the twins and her tablet until now, yelped and tapped a button on the tablet in question as her Aura barrier flared around her—her silks offering no protection against the mid-grade Dust rounds my Saber was spitting out. The rectangle in her hands opened up, unfolding into a full-body shield between herself and the twins, just in time to stop the next burst from Miltia. ‘Well, that explains why it’s so damned thick,’ I mused.

Miltia switched targets, snapping off a round at one of the nearer wolves—the yellow one—which exploded into arcs of lightning as soon as the round punched through it. The area around the yellow wolf was suddenly clear of constructs and the twins began advancing, Miltia now targeting the elemental constructs to clear the path between them and Jillian. That’s not to say it was exactly easy, as the pair had to avoid torrents of fire, cones of frost, arcs of lightning, blasts of water, and more as Jillian’s constructs opened up with breath weapons—each construct spending its load of Dust and breaking apart after firing. Eventually, the pair split off and began trying to circle around Jillian’s shield so one of them could get in close and force the blonde to surrender. Apparently not liking her odds, Jillian spawned a new construct—what looked like an oversized manta ray, and hopped onto its back before it took to the air.

“Thought you said you were going to stay on the ground,” Miltia called up to the blonde.

“I did, but that was before you got my brother to let you borrow his weapon,” Jillian countered. She smiled as she added, “You changed the rules.”

Miltia and Melanie traded a look and shrugged. “Fair enough,” they agreed in stereo, before Miltia shouldered the rifle and ran a burst through the manta’s belly.
Jillian’s eyes went wide as the construct ruptured beneath her and she fell onto her ass, where the twins pounced on her. “So, call it a draw?” the blonde asked with a laugh.

“Sure,” Melanie agreed, hoisting the taller girl up to her feet as the trio started walking back towards the tables—Jillian compacting and stowing her tablet while Miltia spun down my rifle.

“Thank you,” the red-clad twin beamed a smile at me, planting a kiss on my lips and handing me the weapon before retaking her seat.

I raised an eyebrow. “You’re welcome. But I distinctly recall saying—”

“Yeah, yeah. We know. We’ve heard it before,” Melanie stuck her tongue out at me. Sighing, she admitted, “You may be right though. Sister, I believe it’s time to look into some ranged weaponry of our own.”

“Agreed,” Miltia nodded. “Perhaps something small that could be disguised as an accessory…” she trailed off verbally, but I was sure the two were trading ideas back and forth via Telepathy.

The eldest three Arcs consulted for a moment before Lily announced, “Jen and Jana, then Penny against J a n e , and Joan against J e a n . Then we’ll start round two.”

Jen and Jana stood from the table—the elder of the two a full head shorter than her younger sister—and made their way out onto the field. Jen’s outfit looked like a mix of her siblings—long high-heeled boots covered in greaves, tight leather pants, a long sleeved compression shirt with a small breastplate over it, and a tight knee-length coat over that. Considering that everything but the coat was done in shades of white and brown arctic pattern camouflage, with the occasional dark green patch, I’d guess that it was what she’d worn in Atlas. Then again, the dark gray fur lining on the open white uniform coat was a pretty big hint. Her weapon was holstered at the small of her back, within easy reach of her hands hanging loosely at her side.

Jana actually had the second heaviest set of gear—taking after Joan’s for the most part, save that she had added a waist-length cloak to it in a shade of gray and she hadn’t bothered with gauntlets, instead wearing what I recognized as shooting gloves. The biggest difference was in the color scheme—a dark orange and black tigerstripe pattern covering much of her clothes and armor—and in the style of armor. While Joan’s armor was distinctly European in design, Jana’s appeared to resemble what I remembered was feudal era Japanese armor. The barrel of her weapon—some sort of rifle from the look of it—peeked over her shoulder, where it was strapped across her back.
The Fifth Deadly Sister

Jana Arc

Divine Fire

Level: ???

The fight, if you could call it that, was embarrassingly short and anti-climatic. Jana un-slung her weapon, extending what looked like some sort of sniper rifle, before sprouting wings of yellow light from her back and taking to the air. Jen waited with that same flat expression on her face that she wore ninety percent of the time I’d known her. As soon as she cleared about a hundred yards above her target, Jana sighted Jen in and opened fire. A beam of yellow light streaked across the distance between the pair—faster than my AP Round, but not so fast that I couldn’t track it. A foot in front of Jen, it crashed into a faint green barrier and diverted to the side.

At that point, I realized two important things: The beam was still connected to Jana’s rifle and had never stopped, and she was clearly expecting that given the smirk that played across her lips. The intensity of the beam suddenly doubled as the deflected attack curved back around and attempted to hit Jen from another angle, only to be met with the same result. Instead of being discouraged, the airborne blonde curved the beam around and poured more power into it—sending the length of energy circling around her sister until Jen was cut off from the outside world by a sphere or yellow light. Around the sphere, the grass had caught fire and burned off, while the ground began to smoke.

In the next moment, several things happened all at once—and in the confusion I had trouble keeping track of it all. Jen’s Aura, which had been detectable but not much more than any of her other sisters, suddenly flared—the strength of it hammering me hard enough to cause me to flinch.

Detect Aura has leveled!

The sphere around Jen shattered in a flash of green light and caused most of us sitting at the tables to wince, flinch, or shut our eyes. I was unable to control my own instinctive flinch away from it and so missed what happened next as a sound like a gunshot echoed across the field. My vision cleared only a second later thanks to Gamer’s Body and the burned circle where Jen had stood was left empty. Green light drew my eyes upwards, to where Jen hung suspended in front of Jana—who had also flinched away from the flash and was only now opening her eyes and realizing the danger she was in. It was far, far too late for Jana to do anything about it, however—as Jen cocked back one fist and a massive fist composed of green Aura expanded outwards from the limb as the elder of the two blondes threw a punch at her sister. I winced in sympathy as Jana was slapped from the air like a fly
and slammed into the ground a second later, leaving a shallow crater as she bounced once and went still.

The oversized fist Jen has used disappeared as green light flared around her in a circle and she was thrown downwards to land near Jana. Striding over, Jen kicked the rifle out of her younger sister’s hands and planted a boot on her chest as her Aura output dipped back down to the same average level as her older sisters sitting at the table.

“That’s not fair, you know,” Jana groaned out.

“You point being?” the elder blonde asked. “Yield.”

“Fine,” the younger of the pair nodded.

“Train more. Haven is not doing you any favors,” Jen assessed. “Atlas is—” she cut herself off, shaking her head before removing her boot from Jana’s chest and walking away as Jana hefted herself out of her crater, grabbed her rifle, and stumbled after her sister.

I shook my head as the pair sat down and Penny and Jane made their way onto the field. “Just how many of you can fly?”

Silently, I sent, ‘What was that about?’

Across from me, Jen’s blue eyes met mine as she answered, “Joan, Jillian, and Jana. The twins don’t need to. Jun isn’t that advanced. I’m not quite there yet. Left as soon as I could.” The blonde’s mental reply was tainted by anger, ‘One of the tertiary goals of a Specialist was to recruit promising candidates to Atlas.’

“Ah,” I nodded, reaching over and squeezing her hand, earning a faint smile in response. “Well, still, that is kind of bullshit,” I muttered as I watched Penny and Jane turn to face off across from each other.

A thought occurred and I asked, “How come no one’s saying anything about you unsuppressing?” The last time the twins had done so, it had caused a bit of a commotion in Vale—and summoned a horde of Grimm from miles away. I kind of doubted that the people in charge of the city/country would allow that to happen again.

Jen blinked once before smiling faintly. “Bounded Field.”
Frowning, I shifted a look to Joan for clarification, but it was Iris who answered. “Every year, we erect a temporary, wide-area Aura Containment seal around the property so the girls can go all out if they want.”

In other words, the same trick I pulled at Fox Hunt’s base, except I’d tied in more wards and seals into my field pattern—and double-layered it so that even within the compound, no one could detect Aura coming from the Officers’ Quarters. “I see,” I muttered, wondering who of the three had done the job. Jack didn’t seem like the patient type, so that left either Lily or Iris as the most likely suspects. On the other hand, given that they were professional Hunters, I could be wrong and any or all of them could’ve picked up some of the basics here and there for use in the field. Shrugging it off, I turned back to the next match.

Jane and Jean were dressed nearly identically to each other and where Joan had gone for heavy armor, the Arc twins had instead opted for leather with a few pieces of more modern tactical armor over the top of it. Flat soled knee-length boots led up to knee pads, followed by pants that looked like they were painted on, belts for their short sword/guns, long-sleeved compression shirts under something that looked one part waist-length leather coat and one part plate carrier. The jackets were a dark brown while the pants and boots were black, but all of it had indigo—for Jane—or blue—for Jean—highlights here and there. Like Joan, Jen, and Jana the Arc twins' levels displayed as triple-question marks—meaning even if they were suppressed, their detected power was still outside my Semblance’s range to put a number to.

Penny’s ‘civilian’ disguise was flashier than most of her other outfits. She wore a pair of long boots with short heels, with stockings leading up from those, a short skirt that barely covered her ass and left a gap of a few inches between that and her stockings, a corset, gloved long sleeves attached together around her neck, and a pair of crossed-keyboard hairpins on either side of her head pulling her temporarily blue hair into a twin side-tails configuration. The whole thing was black and light blue, lit up by brightly glowing blue Dust tracery. Once more, I was reminded that the gynoid I’d stolen from Atlas wasn’t a girl so much as a young woman—regardless of her attitude and naivety at times.

Penny’s fight was interesting, but the results were about what I’d expected. Penny was using some new combat drones she’d constructed for her civilian disguise, equipped with shields and lasers—in fact, I recalled those were the same beam weapons I’d ripped off the spider-tanks I’d fought in Atlas. Jane however, was more experienced, more powerful, and to be honest her Semblance was bullshit. Any time one of Penny’s drones lined up a shot, Jane would move—step, jump, roll, or dodge—her indigo Aura glowing around her as what looked like liquid light slipped over her body before disappearing, only to explode outwards elsewhere. The entire effect brought to mind stepping into a mirror and shattering it on exit. She reappeared out of range of Penny’s fire and usually in a position to take potshots or the occasional swipe at the pseudo-blue!enette—sometimes in positions and orientations entirely different from where she’d begun her transit, allowing her to attack from unexpected angles. Watching her teleport around Penny and land strikes here and there against the shorter girl, it quickly became apparent that the gynoid had no hope of even landing a blow—let alone winning. After a few frustrating minutes of this, Penny conceded.
As Penny returned to the table, I reached out and ruffled her hair. “I did okay?”

I nodded. “You did fine. It was a crap matchup and I don’t think any of the rest of us could win against her either.”

Joan and Jean’s matchup was just as unbalanced as Penny’s bad been—save that it went completely in the other direction. Jean, like her twin, could also teleport—and while the medium was similar, the effect was different. Where Jane’s teleport looked something like stepping into a pool of light and a shatter effect on exit, Jean’s was a solid, rectangular construct in the blue of her Aura that appeared and disappeared as she moved into/out of it. I’d argue it was more like a portal, except that it didn’t always open on both ends simultaneously. Unlike Penny, nothing Jean did could punch through the violet ‘petals’ of Joan’s shields—each petal having split off to form a separate shield rotating around her and shifting into place to block whatever Jean threw at her. That was a bit of an eye-opener. I knew Joan had been taking it easy on me, but I hadn't truly grasped how easy it had been before now.

Finally, Jean sighed and forfeited, teleporting herself into her seat with a groan. “That’s seriously not fair. No one can win a battle of attrition against her and I don’t have anything that can punch through her shields.”

Turning a look on Joan, I asked, “Just how much were you holding back against me when we fought?”

Looking a little embarrassed, she nodded. “I tried to match your Aura level as closely as I could, then advanced it about ten percent. There's no point in a challenge you can't win, except to prove that you can't win every challenge. That wouldn't have let me judge your skills and would have only frustrated us both.”

“I see,” I murmured. “And the color change is due to using less power for your Semblance when we fought?” I asked, earning a nod in answer. “Fair enough.”

“You can teleport yourselves, but what about just teleporting objects?” Neo asked, and I immediately saw where she was going.

“What, something we’re holding?” Jean asked, and Neo and I nodded.
“Or throwing,” I supplied.

The Arc twins shared a look before Jean took out her scroll and teleported it to Jane—dropping the device into a small mirror under her hand, only for another to appear over Jane’s outstretched hand and the scroll to fall into her grasp. Once more, I wondered if Jean’s Semblance was more portal or teleportation. Jane, sent it back—liquid light rolling up from her hand to cover the scroll where it disappeared in a flash of light and spray of broken mirror shards, only to reappear over her twin’s hand in an identical splash of pieces that disappeared only a second after they’d formed. After that display, both facepalmed. “How did we miss that?” Jane groaned quietly.

“I don’t know about you, but I was more focused on getting all my other skills up,” Jean sighed. Her sister nodded and Jean turned to Joan, who was just sitting back down. “Rematch.”

Joan raised an eyebrow and smirked. “No.”

“But—!”

“Nope,” Joan smirked, looking especially smug as she denied her younger sister. “Should have thought of that years ago. I kind of assumed you couldn’t, since you didn’t—which is likely why no one else brought it up, come to think. Think you can teleport bullets?”

Jane and Jean each pulled one of their weapons—some sort of pistol/dagger hybrid—and took aim at the treeline. The weapons each barked once as they fired, but the telltale tracer-like effect of Dust rounds leaving a barrel was missing—the only evidence as to what had happened was an indigo flash from Jane’s and a blue flash from Jean’s. Across the field, a pair of flashes caught my eye as the rounds materialized and slammed into a tree in an explosion of bark. Seeing that, the pair sighed.

“Yeah,” Jane confirmed. “Well. Fuck. Wish I’d have known sooner.”

“I think I’m glad she didn’t,” Penny muttered, earning a quiet chuckle from the rest of our little group.

Humming, I asked, “Did you ’port them inside the barrel?” At their nods, I followed it up with, “How far down?”

“Just before the end, to let the rifling do its thing,” Jane shrugged.
Frowning, Jean took out her pistol and tried two more shots—both rounds rematerializing several yards from the tree in question from a barrel-width mirror. While the first hit its mark, the second missed entirely and streaked off to the left of the tree and deeper into the woods somewhere. “Yeah, end of the barrel works better,” she confirmed.

“Right, next round then,” Jack announced. “Jaune and… Jen.”

Yeah, there was no way that was happening. I needed her to trust me if I was going to try to help her and I wasn’t willing to throw sparring into the mix and potentially screw things up. At least, not here in front of a crowd. Maybe in private. Shaking my head, I said, “I forfeit.” Jen’s quiet voice beat mine by a breath as she said, “Yield.” Our eyes locked across the table and a faint smile crossed her lips momentarily.

“Jen?” Iris asked, concern in her voice.

The shortest blonde shook her head. “No.”

At the other table, Jack sighed. “Really? Fine, scratch that matchup. Jane against Neo—”

The pair traded a look before Neo answered, “That’s an exercise in frustration. I cloak. She teleports. I make a copy. She destroys the copy. I make another copy. She destroys the copy. Rinse, repeat. Eventually, she wins because I run out of Aura.”

“Sounds about right,” Jane agreed. “Me against Joan is a repeat of Jean’s fight, just with some new tricks. Don’t think it’ll be enough to win though.”

“Jaune and I have fought before. He doesn’t have anything that can punch through my shields and I can smack him around like a pinball all day,” Joan cut our father off before her could suggest that matchup.

I smirked and added, “Neo and I spar all the time, so we know all of each other’s tricks. More than that, I can sense her through her illusions, so it’s not exactly a fair fight.”

Neo nodded. “And me fighting Joan is another exercise in frustration. It’d be like trying to take down a brick wall with a rubber mallet. It’s not happening.”
“Jaune against me would be just like Penny against me—I could move and strike with impunity,” Jane continued.

Shooting a look at Jen, Joan added, “And anyone but me against Jen would end poorly, as it did with Jana. That particular matchup would escalate quickly and I don’t think we want to pay to have the property repaired from the subsequent damage.”


“No,” Iris and Lily deadpanned simultaneously. Lily continued with, “You don’t know how not to escalate things and somehow, I get the feeling he’s just as hardheaded as you are in that regard.”

I shrugged. “That, or I’d just refuse. So, we done here or do you want to throw your hat in?” I asked, looking between Iris and Lily but directing the last half of that to Iris.

“No!” came seven voices at once and I blinked as I realized all of my sisters had chimed in for that one.

“Do I want to know?” I asked as an aside to Joan.

Before Joan could answer, Iris cut in. “No, no girls. Don’t spoil it. Yes or no, Jaune?”

I studied the woman carefully. Like Jen, she had an excellent poker face. Without my Semblance feeding me clues via Observe, I couldn’t read her. I really needed to work on a cold reading skill that didn’t rely on Observe—that skill was becoming a crutch. “Rules?” I asked, buying time to think.

A mental aside from Joan answered the question and I resisted the urge to swear. ‘Temperature manipulation—with pretty much everything that implies—and a ridiculous level of control over it. Good news: she can’t directly do it to living things or anything with active Aura running through it. Bad news: there’s all kinds of things she can do that will kill you dead without directly affecting your body itself.’

‘What sort of range are we looking at here?’ I sent back.
‘About a meter sphere centered on her,’ Joan answered. ‘That doesn’t mean she can’t project things outside of that range, however. And anything coming into range that doesn’t have Aura running through it? She owns it. So bullets? Yeah, those don’t work. She’ll freeze the air around them to stop them, or superheat pockets of it to prematurely detonate them, or a combination of the two and fire them back at you.’

‘That’s all small scale stuff. So what’s the big deal?’

There was a soft mental snort from Joan as she sent, ‘Mama Iris is more destructive than dad when she wants to be. Thankfully, she polices herself better. She’s only almost completely killed Mama Lily twice, and hasn’t taken one of her limbs off in a while now—at least, that I know of.’

“I think we’ll have to go for different rules than we used with Lily, since I can’t exactly re-grow my parts,” Iris answered with a small smile. “Hit me and you win. You can lose by point total, submission, or knockout.”

I opened my mouth to refuse, only to close it with a click when I received my second Duel notification of the morning.

A DUEL IS ABOUT TO BEGIN!

Duel: Iris Arc

Victory conditions: Hit Iris Arc

Loss conditions: Knockout, Submission, Point total

Optional Objectives: Duel Iris Arc for over five minutes, Evade more than half of Iris Arc’s attacks, Win the Duel on the first attack, Land a physical blow on Iris Arc

Penalties: Kill Iris Arc, Severely injure Iris Arc, Injure anyone other than Iris Arc, Use any element other than Gravity, Activate Gamer’s Body in a noticeable manner
Victory: 200,000 XP, Increased closeness with Arc Sisters, Increased closeness with Iris and Lily Arc

Loss: 10,000 XP, Decreased closeness with some members of the Arc Family

Additional Objectives: +100,000 XP per objective

Penalties: -100,000 XP per penalty, ???

Note: Penalties incurred will not cause you to lose XP already gained prior to this Duel.

I mentally closed the window without reading anything beyond the objectives, on the assumption that the XP reward would be similar to my Duel with Lily. I did like XP, but I also didn’t want to show off more of what I could do. ‘Who’s to say they won’t just be getting progress reports from Ozpin anyway, once I start Beacon? He knows I faked my papers but he filed them anyway with what amounted to a wink and a nudge, and he knows who I am—or at least who my family is. It stands to reason that anything Ozpin learns, he’ll share with them. Glynda has already seen some of what I can do. Flash Step and a few other movement skills at the very least.’

“Me and my big mouth,” I muttered quietly—apparently loud enough though, given the snickers it got. Sighing, I pushed myself out of my seat. “Fine. Last one.”

“That’s fine,” Iris nodded, standing as well and following me out onto the field.

Iris Arc

Burning Cold

Level: ???

As we faced off, I considered how to go about this. ‘Well, she did say if I hit her. Can’t let her know Joan told me, otherwise they’ll wonder how. So, if I didn’t know, the first thing I would try is shooting her—since bullets would count.’
Giving a mental shrug, I drew my right Saber and spun it around into rifle mode before opening fire. Iris moved, dropping into a dash as she came around to my right, drawing my fire further away from the tables as she closed range on me. After only a couple of seconds worth of fire, the Saber clicked dry and the slide locked back—and it was then that I remembered I had forgotten to reload it after I'd let Miltia borrow it and the hundred-round drum mag had run empty. ‘Fu—’

A fist streaked through the space where my head had been as I ducked, rolling out to my left to avoid the follow-up kick aimed at my midsection. At the same time, I flipped the selector switch on the underslung Dustcaster and pulled the secondary trigger, leaving a fiery explosion in my wake in an effort to throw off her charge. Spinning the Saber back down, I deployed my shield and closed range with her in a Charge, flying through the remains of my own fireball. Iris jumped, leaping over my head and coming down behind me in a kick aimed to drop on top of my head. Instead of trying to stop and meet the attack head on, I dropped into Flash Step and came out again a few yards away.

**Flash Step** has leveled!

“Not bad, Ja—”

I dropped into Flash Step again and came out swinging in her face with an Aura Strike charged—Gravity from my pseudo-Semblance and fire from the Dust slotted into the Saber itself combining to tear a hellish red-and-black line across the space between us. My ears popped at what felt like a sudden pressure change half an instant before a wall of solid ice sprang up between myself and Iris, radiating a biting cold that burned even through my Aura. The ice wall shattered under the combined elemental Aura Strike—

**Aura Strike** has leveled!

—but that hardly mattered as the world lit up in a brilliant flash and deafening boom and I was sent flying away. I hit the ground on my ass and tumbled, losing my Saber along the way as my ears rang and eyes burned until Gamer’s Body kicked in.

**Reinforcement** has leveled!

**Reinforcement** has leveled!

**Reinforcement** has leveled!
Reinforcement has leveled!

Aura has leveled!

Aura has leveled!

Aura has leveled!

Aura has leveled!

Aura has leveled!

Physical Endurance has leveled!

Physical Endurance has leveled!

Physical Endurance has leveled!

Physical Endurance has leveled!

Physical Endurance has leveled!

Mana Shield has leveled!

Mana Shield has leveled!

Mana Shield has leveled!
“What the fuck was that?” I shook my head, blinking and willing those and more level up notifications out of my vision as I stood up and regarded Iris standing in the middle of a circle of burned grass that had nothing to do with my earlier fireball.

My eyes caught a glint in the air around Iris as shards of ice formed around her—each shard a foot long and several inches thick. A moment later, she flicked a hand and one shot in my direction. Sense Danger screamed at me to move—

Sense Danger has leveled!

—and I obeyed, dropping into Flash Step and coming out again a few yards to the right of where I’d been standing—snagging my dropped Saber off the ground as I went. I winced as the ice crystal Iris had shot at me hissed loudly before exploding in a gout of ice and steam. ‘Oh great, someone using something like my own tricks against me.’

Another explosive ice spike flashed towards me and I Stepped away again—I wasn’t moving anywhere near my full speed, but it was enough for now. ‘Fuck it,’ I sighed, dropping the Saber and pulling it into a tight orbit around my body as I spun up a Gravity Round and returned fire. Iris disappeared and reappeared a few feet away in a short Flash Step, but not quite far enough to avoid the Area of Effect, as her hair and what clothes were loose against her body yanked in the direction of the attack’s wake.

Gravity Round has leveled!

Gravity Round has leveled!

She paused long enough to turn and follow its path with her eyes, watching it connect with one of the trees on the edge of the property and explode into sawdust and splinters.

I considered the blatant opening for a moment before I disregarded it. If her Semblance gave her an area of territorial control, then she would sense me entering her range even if she couldn’t see me or manipulate anything on my person—similar to how my Gravity sense could pick up things when they got that close, probably using my body heat. I wasn’t exactly keen on taking another explosion on the nose. Instead, I opted for a ranged bombardment. Opening up with Gravity Round again, I aimed low this time, looking to hit the ground at her feet. Iris dodged again and I lead her path,
looking to hit her on the move, only to have a wall of ice spring up in the path of my shot.

Where my first try against one of her walls had shattered it, this one held firm—at least, just long enough for my Gravity Round to splash off of before she must have intentionally detonated it and sent a wall of ice shards expanding outwards towards me, blocking my view of her momentarily. What I did not expect was for the woman herself to come flying out of her own attack with a sword bigger than she was made of foggy ice and trailing steam from the cold radiating off of it, swinging around into an arc that seemed set to split me in half.

I jumped back in time to avoid the swing, but the blast of freezing wind off the thing knocked me off my feet. I was quickly coming to realize that certain Semblances had a far wider range of options for what they could do than others. While she may not have direct Elemental Manipulation the way I did, Iris’s Semblance allowed her to emulate the feat to an extent. Those thoughts came to an end as my back hit the ground and I rolled out of the way of a follow-up strike at the end of a trident made of the same foggy ice. With the sword nowhere in sight, I could only assume she'd changed its form or melted it and made a new weapon.

Coming to my feet and seeing the length of ice in Iris’s hands shift form, I brought up my shield and simultaneously cast a Gravity-elemental Mana Shield to soak the damage. Catching the head of a hammer against my shields sent me flying backwards at speed.

*Mana Shield* has leveled!

‘Okay, we’ve got range on her. Now what?’ I wondered as I shifted the spherical shields around me and changed course, angling my roll to my right and sending me circling back around to her, tossing out a couple of Lance attacks that she neatly swatted aside.

“I see what Joan meant about you being a pinball,” Iris chuckled.

‘*Blind her and attack from the side. It worked against Joan the first time,*’ I decided, spinning up a Gravity element Rasengan in my hand as I dropped into Flash Step.

“Another frontal attack?” the elder blonde sighed, shaking her head and shifting the length of ice in her hands into a bow. Arrows streaked out and I lifted the shield on my arm, sending shattered ice shards flying around me as I closed range with her—and I came to the conclusion that she was just showing off at this point, since there was no way ice should have the sort of flexibility or tensile strength required for that.
At the last second, I dropped my Mana Shield and shot the Rasengan out and down, exploding in a wave of dirt at Iris’s feet just outside of what I figured to be the range of her Semblance that threatened to swallow her whole.

**Rasengan** has leveled!

While we were cut off from each other, I Stepped to the side, snagging my Saber from its orbit. The wave of dirt froze in mid-air—simply stopped moving the moment it hit the edge of Iris’s range like it'd hit a wall, before the area around her exploded—the roar of it temporarily deafening me—and sent it blasting away. Blue eyes turned to track me and she smiled, raising her shaft of ice and beginning to shift it into a new form. Whatever she had in mind stalled as I hit her with a subvocalized **Lift**, lighting her up in the blue-purple glow of Gravity-based mana and yanking her off her feet.

**Lift** has leveled!

You have created a new skill!
**Silent Casting**: Passive. Thanks to repeated practice subvocalizing spells, you have learned how to cast them silently. No longer will you have to call your attacks—unless you want to, that is. Note: calling your attacks will not power them up. Level: MAX.

Charging a quick Aura Strike, I closed range between us and slammed it into a hastily raised shield of ice in her hands—but Lift’s effects held true and the momentum I’d imparted sent her flying up into the air.

I was about to Leap and follow her up for a combo when her flight suddenly stopped dead—a faint aura of mist radiating off of her as the air grew bitingly cold and the glow of the Lift I’d hit her with popped like a soap bubble. The ice shield in her hand melted away all at once, part of it falling to the ground as water and the rest simply evaporating into fog as she regarded me with a look that was one part surprise, one part pride, and one part speculation. “You got me.”

I blinked before shaking my head. “I got your shield,” I pointed out.

“Nope, before that,” Iris admitted. “The attack that pulled me off my feet.” Sighing, she dropped lightly to the ground and crossed her arms. “Maybe I should have stipulated three hits?” she muttered.

I absently closed the Duel completion notification as the XP gain notifications disappeared on their own after a moment—it wasn’t enough to level me, but it was a good start towards the next level. “I’ll take what I can get,” I told her, half distracted as I compared this fight to the fight against Lily. ‘Warp is definitely a track two spell where level progression is concerned. It should’ve leveled like ten times or more doing that much damage to her. Also, note to self: talk my sisters into letting me and the girls use them to power level skills. Pretty sure Joan would agree at the drop of a hat though.’

“That’s a good attitude to have,” Iris said, pulling me from my thoughts as she gestured towards the house where the others were filing inside, having gotten up from their seats.

Curious, I asked, “So, how’d you stop yourself?”

“I froze the air—condensed it around my body. I can fly similarly, using a combination of micro-explosions and freezing the air as needed.”

I rolled my eyes. “Does everyone figure that one out?”
“Most. Eventually,” she agreed. “Gravity should give you an advantage in that regard, I think.”

“Maybe,” I shrugged. The Wings spell wouldn’t cut it long-term, but I wasn’t sure Gravity manipulation was the way to go either. “And the explosions?”

A small smirk pulled at her lips as Iris said, “Water is two parts—”

“Hydrogen, one part oxygen,” I sighed, shaking my head.

Raising an eyebrow, she said, “For an amnesiac…”

I was not entirely feigning the ‘tired of this bullshit’ look I turned on her. “People keep saying that and it’s gotten to the point that I don’t think they understand how this shit works. It’s not like I got to pick and choose what got scrambled upstairs and what stuck around. I can’t remember ever sitting a class, but I can rattle off things like that. Pretty sure I know math, too. And there’s the little fact that I can still read, write, and speak.”

With a nod, the woman said, “Fair enough. You didn’t choose,” she agreed. “To answer your question, I have to flash heat it past steam so it separates, but once it does it ignites on its own.”

“And let me guess, you solidified the air around it to turn it into a shaped charge?” I asked, earning a nod in answer.

Apparently feeling talkative, Iris explained, “As for the explosive crystals, it’s just a steam explosion. I create a superheated center and surround it with ice. Once I throw them, they’ll either explode on impact or shortly after depending on how much Aura I used to make the ice.”

I didn’t even bother trying to wrap my head around the physics of that. “So much bullshit.”

“Come on, let’s go get lunch.” Her lips twitched into a smile and she added, “And you can tell us about your girlfriends.”

“A gentleman doesn’t kiss and tell,” I denied.
With a completely straight face, Iris countered, “But there was kissing.”

“Embarrassing me about that sort of thing isn’t a game you can win,” I warned.

Iris shrugged. “Lily will surely try.”

“Hey Jaune!” Jack called, and my eyes swiveled around to where he stood in front of the house with his arms hanging loosely at his side and a grin on his face. “One more thing and you’re done.”

I made a show of looking around. “Not seeing any trained monkeys here, so no. No more things.”

“Jack,” Iris said, a warning tone to her voice as her eyes narrowed and the air grew cold again. “We spoke about this. Do not—”

“He’ll be fine,” Jack countered before the bearded blond’s grin shifted to a smirk. “Block this.”

The only warning I had were his words and the movement of his right hand coming up at his side to point at me. The part of me that had spent years working with guns recognized the motion instinctively—I’d done it enough myself over the years. Even if it was just his fingers, the motion was still that of a classic pistol quick draw technique. I cast reflexively, the sphere of a gravity-based Mana Shield forming around me and lifting me a few inches off my feet.

Before the last syllable left his lips, before my shields had even formed properly, a dense shield of ice sprang up between myself and Jack as the air cracked and went violently cold. At the same time the ice shield formed, a hand grabbed my arm, yanking me to my right. My own shields sprang into being and I had enough time to register the jerk of movement before a beam of light arced between Jack and myself. The ice shield exploded into shards that sprayed off the bubble of my own shields where it didn’t simply evaporate on contact with the attack, an instant after the blindingly bright beam struck home. Where the foot wide beam hit the side of my shield—at such an angle that it would have probably taken my arm off if Iris had been a hair slower—it bent, before streaking off behind me to my left, where I heard it punching through trees. A glance back showed more than one tree had been felled in the path of the attack. I gawked at the destruction as trees exploded and fiery shrapnel rained down—superheated water at the points of impact cooking off violently.

The attack had moved exactly as light should and would have been absolutely unblockable if he hadn’t warned me—even with Iris putting a shield between us herself. It was everything I’d ever
wanted when I’d set out to create A.P. Round and its later variants—absolute speed that can’t be countered, blocked, or dodged. I wondered if it had actually moved at the speed of light, but with no real way to measure it at this distance, I couldn’t say—and for all intents and purposes, it may as well have.

Worse than the sheer destruction were the messages now popping up in my line of sight.

    **Mana Shield** has leveled!

    **Mana Shield** has leveled!

    **Mana Shield** has leveled!

    **Mana Shield** has leveled!

And so on. By the time I finished closing the notifications, I counted *twenty* individual boxes. It was ridiculous. *Impossible*. And yet, the proof stood staring me in the face. I knew that level difference increased the rate of skill growth, especially if the skill used was successful—I had abused that more than once for what I’d thought at the time were large gains. *That would have killed me dead,* I realized.

My jaw clicked shut and I turned a glare on Jack, but he had already turned and made his way inside the house. Instead, I focused my ire on the next nearest target as I allowed my shields to drop.

    “Jack, you *shit,*” Iris whispered at my side as she glared after the man.

    “You knew,” I accused.

Iris shook her head. “*No.*” Sighing, she shook her head. “*Yes.* We had talked about it. We had *decided* to use this to test your Semblance—assuming you had awakened it. Jack wanted to do his own test—as he’s done with pretty much all of the girls to some extent—and Lily and I vetoed him. We argued that you weren’t ready even if you *had* figured out how to use your Semblance. Apparently, your fight with me convinced him otherwise and he decided to go through with it anyway. So no, I didn’t *know* he was going to do it—not when we had explicitly agreed that he wouldn’t. But yes, I’m not surprised that he did—he *is* our husband and we know how he is.”
Frowning, I asked, “So what do you intend to do about it?”

Iris shook her head. “That's for Lily and I to decide. You don't have to worry about it.”

“You don't sound too broken up about it,” I pointed out.

“What point is there in getting angry, shouting, and causing a scene in front of our children and guests?” Iris countered. “Private disputes should be resolved in private, even if they concern an event that occurred in public.”

Blinking, I surmised, “So instead of dealing with the problem now—which would show that you feel it's important and that you’re willing to let us see that—you’re saving face by not causing a scene.”

With a sigh, Iris shook her head. “I know it looks that way, but it isn’t.” A small smile crossed her lips for just a moment as she turned a look on me and said, “You’ll understand one day, when you’re married.”

“You’re a real piece of work,” I sighed, shaking my head as I headed for the house, spotting Lily watching from the door. “You all are.”

“Perhaps,” she agreed quietly from behind me. “Go speak with your father. He has something to give you.”

Opening the door and stepping inside, I turned an annoyed look on her. “An explanation? That’d be nice.”

“I wish,” Iris said as she smiled and stepped around me. “Considering that there are some things he won’t even tell us, he’s probably not going to.”

I closed the door behind me and spotted Lily and Jack—with Jun tucked into a hug against his side—standing at the bottom of the stairs. The sounds of conversation from above told me the girls were upstairs. Locking eyes with Jack, I considered how I should respond. On the one hand, he had tossed an attack at me that could’ve easily maimed or killed me, and I wanted to be done with him. On the other hand, I had come this far and now I wanted to know why he thought throwing around lethal techniques was a good idea and I felt I deserved an answer for that. Iris had said that he tested almost all of his children the same way, so I was no exception there. Even if I was justified for
leaving after that, it’d just look like I couldn’t cut it where my siblings could. ‘On the other, other hand, I think I’m about done giving a single fuck what they think.’

In the end, I said, “We’re done here.”

Jack nodded, “Yeah, pretty much. Iris, Lily, and I have a meeting we need to get to soon so we should probably get changed.” Turning an amused look on Lily, he added, “Or put on clothes.”

“Asshole,” Lily groused, green eyes narrowing in a glare at the blond man as she pulled my borrowed coat tighter around her and stormed off upstairs, presumably to do just that. Iris followed, splitting off at the top of the stairs to head towards where I knew Joan’s room to be.

“I love you too, dear,” he grinned after her.

Shaking my head, I said, “That’s not what I meant.” At his raised eyebrow, I continued. “You and me? We’re done.”

“Is that so?” the taller man asked.

Taking a calming breath and resisting the urge to raise my voice, I said, “I saw the damage that did. You threw a lethal attack at me with no warning beyond ‘block this.’ I’d say so, yeah.”

Jack shrugged, waving it off. “I aimed—”

“Don’t care,” I growled out, cutting him off and earning an irritated look in answer. “Iris said you’ve pulled this shit with most of the rest of the girls. Did you at least tell them you were going to beforehand, so they were prepared? I wasn’t prepared. If I had dodged instead of shielding, there’s a fifty-fifty chance I’d be dead—if I went left instead of right. If I’d used my physical shield instead of my Semblance or if my Semblance had failed, that would’ve punched straight through it and likely taken my arm off. I’m not going to lie and say I’d have considered it if you’d asked, either. I’d have flat out refused. The risk is too high and I don’t enjoy taking needless risks that have a high potential for getting me killed. And for what? So you could satisfy your curiosity?”

I gave him a moment to answer and when he kept silent, I added, “That goes so far beyond training or testing that anyone in their right mind would call it child endangerment. Fuck sake, it wouldn’t be too much of a stretch to call it criminal negligence. The sad thing is, I know you’re not the absolute
“An explanation? A reason as to why you didn’t train me, when you at least did that much with my sisters? How about telling me why you forbade them from training me? I’d almost be willing to let that all go, since I don’t actually remember any of it—except not remembering doesn’t mean it didn’t happen. Instead, how about we try something more recent—like why you decided it’d be a good idea to toss out lethal force when a powered down attack would’ve done the job just as well,” I suggested, raising an eyebrow.

“Graduate.”

Frowning, I asked, “Come again?”

“Finish Beacon and I’ll tell you. No bullshit, I won’t hold anything back, and I’ll tell you whatever you want to know,” he said, and I could see from the set of his jaw that he wouldn’t budge on this.

Unfortunately for him, I was just as stubborn if not more so. “No, you’ll tell me now. Waiting a few years isn’t going to change anything.”

“You’d be surprised,” he shook his head. “Trust me, it’s better you not know yet.”

“What you don’t know can’t hurt you?” You realize that’s bullshit, right?” I countered. “Why then? Why not now?”

“The same reason my great-grandfather waited until I graduated. You don’t need to worry about it right now.”

Frowning, I guessed, “What are you so worried about that you won’t tell me and you haven’t told your wives?”
“Jaune, that kind of knowledge will get you killed if you’re not prepared,” he shook his head. “Knowing there is a secret is almost as bad as knowing the secret. You’ll just have to wait.”

“Not good enough,” I denied. “I wanted to give you all a chance. I could understand not showing up when I was first put in the hospital because of work or something—I get it. But all of this? You threw lethal force at me and now you’re withholding critical, need-to-know information on the grounds that it might, maybe pose some vague danger? I was a complete failure before my Semblance activated and everyone knew it—don’t try to pretend otherwise. That very failure would put me so far beneath the notice of the sort of people you’re worried about that it’s not even funny. I guess keeping that secret is worth more to you than my life.” I shook my head. “You’re out of chances with me.”

The bearded blonde chuckled quietly. “If that’s the way you feel.”

“It is.”

“What’s one more added to the list of fuckups?” he muttered under his breath. “Come on,” he jerked his head towards the hall leading deeper into the house, “I need to give you Crocea Mors. It’s yours, Jaune—was always meant to be. Use it with pride at Beacon.”

Shaking my head, I crossed my arms. “Don’t need it, don’t want it, go fuck yourself.”

That brought the man up short. “Excuse me?”

“I wasn’t kidding when I said I wouldn’t have anything to do with you. Besides, I’ve already got weapons. I worked my ass off getting myself equipped for Beacon—paying for everything myself because you’ve shown zero inclination to help and it’s not Joan’s responsibility to foot the bill for my gear. Joan designed my weapons for me, I designed my armor, and Neo, Miltia, and Melanie made my coat. I wouldn’t feel right using it—especially when I’m already used to my own gear.” Shifting my gaze to the tiny redhead at Jack’s side for a moment—and almost kicking myself when I realized I’d forgotten she was there and had told her dad to fuck off right in front of her—I said, “Give it to Jun.”

Jun’s answer was a sulky, “Why would I want it when you don’t? It’s not even something I’d use normally!”

I turned a smile on her. “I know you’re more of a fist fighter and you have your own weapons, but
you need a backup in case you run low on Aura or run out of Dust rounds. This will be good to use as a training weapon until you build your backup weapon.

S torm gray eyes met my blue for a moment before Jack asked, “You’re sure?”

“I’m sure,” I nodded, sending him a flat look.

“Right. Okay then,” he sighed, running a hand through his hair. “Well, best get going. I’d like to be out of town before nightfall. It was… good seeing you, Jaune. We’re glad you’re okay. Really.”

He tossed a negligent wave over his shoulder, turning to head deeper into the house as he picked up Jun at his side, to her delight. “Come on, squirt. You’ll need to take good care of the family sword while you’re in school. It belonged to me, your grandfather, and his father before him, and so on. That’s a lot of family history you’ll be holding. It’s a heavy responsibility.”

The littlest Arc sister likely had no idea what had just happened. It was petty of me, especially pulling Jun into it and using her to get at them, but I didn’t care. Jun appreciated the gesture and I got some sense of satisfaction out of snubbing them. Having Jun bearing that sword while I did my own thing would be a huge slight. It would be like… well, like Weiss not walking around with the Schnee crest all over everything she owned. ‘And speaking of which, it’s definitely time to replace my own personal sigil.’

I turned and headed upstairs, heading towards Joan’s room where most of the Arc sisters—in addition to Melanie, Miltia, Penny, and Neo—had gathered. Topping the stairs, I found Lily standing there holding my folded coat against her chest. She was dressed this time in what I suppose were her casual clothes—a green long sleeved shirt, skin-tight black pants, brown boots, and a dark red coat left hanging open. A small pendant hung from her neck—what looked at first glance like four circles overlapping in the middle with a small ruby set in the center. Closer inspection showed that the circles were actually two figure-8s in a vague cross-shape. “Can we talk?”

Frowning, I accepted the coat when she held it out to me but didn’t bother putting it back on yet—it’d be faster just to equip it again when they left. “What’s up?”

“You really don’t remember anything?” she asked, and I shook my head.

“Bits and pieces about my sisters—mostly related to them teaching me to dance. Beyond that? No,” I shrugged.
A pained look crossed the redhead’s face and she sighed. “I thought that was the case, but I wanted to be sure. You’ve lost everything, then. We’re just strangers to you, aren’t we?”

“Pretty much,” I admitted. “Surprised it took you this long to put it together.”

Lily turned an unamused look on me. “We suspected it was a possibility, but your father had hoped…” she trailed off, shaking her head. “You don’t act like a boy who’s lost everything he knew.”

“People keep saying that,” I shrugged. “You got a better explanation?”

“No,” she murmured, breaking eye contact. “You say you’ve remembered some though?”

“A little,” I agreed. “Things may trickle back in over time, or I may get it all back one day. Or I might not. Regardless, I’ll never be the old Jaune you knew again. Too much has changed.”

Frowning, I quietly added, “From what I’ve heard, that might not be a bad thing. I guess I was kind of a broody, mopey brat for a while there and not exactly the best brother to my sisters.”

The redhead at my side snorted softly. “I wouldn’t say that, actually. We all act like little assholes at that age, so if it was just that then you’d have been no better or worse than any other teenager. We weren’t around as much as we should have been though, so you weren’t really to blame for being moody or feeling lonely. Given that, you were honestly not nearly as bad as you could have been. I’m sorry we weren’t, but—”

“But you were out on assignment, right?” I asked, and she nodded. “Well, either way, Jun seems to like it better. Jane and Jean have accepted it. Jen doesn’t care. Joan’s—”

“Desperately clinging onto whatever’s left,” Lily cut in. I couldn’t deny it so didn’t bother trying. After a moment, Lily asked, “Where do we go from here, Jaune?”

I raised an eyebrow at that. “Nowhere.”

Blinking, she turned bright green eyes on me and asked, “Do what? You don’t know or—”
“No, it’s more that I’m not invested in you, or Iris, or Jacques. Jack. Whatever he wants to call himself.” Meeting her gaze, I told her, “I was willing to give you all a chance—gave you that chance, even. A fresh start. It’s why we even bothered coming today. So far, all I’ve learned is that Jack’s an asshole when he wants something—to me in particular—even if he won’t just say what it is he wants. And my supposed moms let him get away with it. Speaking of, all of that being an asshole business—is he like that all the time, or was he was trying to get a reaction out of me? Why?”

Lily considered it for a moment before nodding. “He was, and I couldn’t say. Yes, your father can be an asshole, a jackass, a hard-ass, and other forms of ass—he has mastered the art. I wouldn’t say we let him get away with it so much as we’re used to it at this point. It doesn’t register at times. Today was worse than others and we will be talking to him about it later.” A hopeful look crossed her face as she asked, “Can we try again and have that fresh start?”

I considered it for a moment before shaking my head. “No. That Jackass blew it for all of you. I’m done with him and, since you’re married to him, you and Iris by extension.”

Humming, the redhead frowned. “So you’re cutting ties with us? Just like that?”

“There weren’t many to cut to begin with,” I deadpanned, and she winced. “Besides, your husband did a good job of that himself.”

“So, you don’t want anything to do with any of us because one of us made a bad first impression?” she asked, and I shook my head.

“People are people and bad first impressions happen all the time,” I admitted. “This wasn’t just a bad first impression. The fool could have killed me if he’d missed and then he didn’t even have the decency to tell me why. Then there’s the fact that neither you nor Iris have done anything about it. You want to build bridges, but that bridge is not on fire—it’s already in the river. I don’t see why you’re even bothering to try, if you’re willing to let him get away with that shit.”

Lily’s eyes narrowed in a glare, but there was no real heat in it. “Of course I want to try. Why wouldn’t I?”

I sent her an unamused look and asked, “You have a hell of a way of showing it, considering that neither of you seem willing to do anything about your husband being a dick—”

Lily chuckled softly, shaking her head. “For one thing, we keep disputes between us strictly between us. Let me put it this way: would you rather get a dressing down for screwing up in private, or in
“In private, obviously. Wounded pride takes longer to heal,” I shrugged.

“Exactly. And it’s so much worse when it comes from the person or people you love. When you care for someone, you’ll try to spare them that. Moreover, you don’t want that wounded pride to turn into resentment for humiliating them in public.”

“Really?” I snarked. “You want to talk about wounding pride? Is that why I got to fight one of my ‘mothers’ when it would’ve been just as easy to put me up against one of the other sisters? That was a lose/lose situation for me—it was bound to be nothing but humiliating if I’d lost.”

“Worse than if you had lost to one of your sisters?” she countered.

Shaking my head, I said, “I know where I stand with most of them. What you did singled me out and put me up against impossible opponents in front of my friends, my siblings, and yourselves. If it were against any of my sisters, it would’ve been just another fight. Instead, you made a production of it.”

Considering it for a moment, the redhead nodded. “I can see your point. It wasn’t what I had intended, though. We could have done it differently.”

Sighing quietly, I nodded. “As for the rest, I get it, really. But there are times where exceptions should be made and noses need to be rubbed in mistakes immediately—while it’s still fresh.”

“No,” Lily denied. “No exceptions, ever. Because one of two things happens. It hurts your relationship in a way that lasts for years and isn’t worth it in the long run, or everything becomes an exception.”

“Bullshit. Do it in public once and they’ll remember being called out in front of everyone.” That, and really, the only time that sort of thing would last for years would be if the person reprimanded had the emotional maturity of a child.

Putting a finger to her lips in mock contemplation, the redhead said, “Remind me again, which of us has been married for more than two decades.”
“Remind me again who lets her husband get away with whatever he wants, up to and including throwing lethal force at one of his children with little to no warning,” I snarked in return, earning a short glare in answer.

“You aim below the belt,” she huffed.

Shrugging, I added, “You want below the belt? None of you have asked, even once, how I am. Next to that, Jen.” Lily flinched, her mouth opening and closing for a moment as though she wanted to ask but knew that doing so now would be a waste. I didn’t let up, however. “I’m not the only one you’ve been neglecting. Do you have any idea what went on in Atlas?”

“The twins told me some,” she admitted. “They said she opened up to you. We're digging into it, carefully.”

“I see.” I wondered if there was really anything they could do about it, in the way of making sure those responsible met justice and ensuring that it didn't happen again. I kind of doubted it. There was nothing I could personally do about it at the moment, though. A trip to Atlas for Search and Destroy in my current state, would be a suicide mission. A snatch-and-grab mission was a whole different thing from sabotage and assassination.

Biting her lip, Lily asked, “How bad is it, really?”

I sighed quietly. “Not as bad as you probably think, but bad enough.”

“Is there anything we can do?” she asked, and I shrugged.

“Know someone with a mental Semblance that you trust implicitly to go in and un-fuck her head?” I asked, and Lily shook her head. “Thought not. In that case, no—not directly. But talking helps. Anyway, you were saying? About Iris?”

For a moment, it looked like she would continue trying to defend her sister wife, then a tired look crossed her face and Lily sighed. “Iris is... Iris and I can't really apologize for her. Your dad pretty much threw the plan out the window—he shouldn’t have tried his Semblance on you, but he couldn’t resist.”

Frowning, I pointed out, “You realize that that little stunt could have maimed or killed me, right? If I’d dodged or blocked instead of shielding, if my shields hadn’t curved the beam, if Iris hadn’t helped...”
with her own shield and yanked me out of the way, if he had missed—”

Lily nodded in agreement. “Say what you will about him, but your father doesn’t miss. He just
doesn’t always take collateral damage into account,” she admitted. “You’re right, though. You could
have been seriously hurt at the least. We have no idea why he tried it this early.”

“So he really does test his Semblance against all of his kids?”

“Yes,” Lily nodded. “As training. After warning them,” she bit out. Taking a slow breath, she
chuckled quietly and continued, “He’s in the dog house for this and he knows it. It’s part of why
we’re not sticking around. Iris wanted to give you all some time to yourselves—give you time to
reacquaint yourself with your sisters, while they’re in town. We already had a meeting soon, but
while you were having it out with your father, Iris and I talked it over and agreed you’d probably feel
more comfortable without us looming, as it were.”

It was plausible, but it didn’t explain other things, such as, “He wouldn’t give me a straight answer—
not until after I graduate from Beacon. At which point, I told him to fuck off. So I’m asking you.
What the hell was going on with my training—or lack thereof?”

Biting her bottom lip, Lily answered, “That was your father’s doing. We trained the girls some, yes
—but they mostly trained themselves and each other once their Auras unlocked. Stepping back and
taking a more hands-off approach worked with Jana, Jillian, and Jun, so…”

My eyes narrowed into a glare and I grabbed her hand, dragging her downstairs with me. A
confused look crossed the redhead’s face as she allowed herself to be pulled along. I say allowed,
because I was under no illusions about her ability to stop me any time she choose. I brought us to a
stop in front of the wall of family photos. “I’m not in the pictures, Lily. It’s like I wasn’t even a part
of this family. If that’s your ‘hands-off approach,’ congratu-fucking-lations, you did an excellent job
of it!”

Lily winced, and I realized that while I hadn’t been at the point of shouting, I had reflexively gone
for the Aura slap I tended to use to drive my point home with the girls. Cutting my Aura output off, I
let go of her hand and took a slow breath. Looking at her hand for a moment, Lily’s green-eyed gaze
shifted to the photo wall. “I hadn’t noticed,” she murmured. “I mean, we have pictures of you and all
of us together in the family photo album, but… I think those are all from when you were much
younger.”

“What the hell is going on?” I asked, meeting her eyes. “I’m asking directly. Is there something
you’re not telling me?”
“I-I don’t know,” she shook her head, her ponytail shifting behind her head. “He just said it was family training—something your great-grandfather told him, before he died. He said that forcing you to awaken your Auras and Semblances on your own would make you all stronger.” Her eyes shifted away from mine and she muttered, “Is that why they put the well there?”

I blinked. “What about the well?”

“You haven’t noticed?” she asked, meeting my eyes again. “The well was dug over a Dust deposit—some shade of white. The property has been in the family for generations and that well has been there for longer than the house has. Your father insisted on raising our children here—he said it was a tradition dating back to before his great-grandfather’s time.”

Thinking back on it, I remembered the water had tasted funny—sweet, with a mineral taste I couldn’t place. I shook my head. “Are you naturally this scatter-brained or are you trying to distract me?”

Judging by the redhead’s pout, there were good odds that it was natural. “‘Family training’ doesn’t excuse everything.”

“No,” Lily agreed, “It doesn’t. And I’m sorry for that—I truly am. I never agreed to it, but then Joan…” she sighed, chuckling mirthlessly. “He was right, you know? Every one of you is amazing. No, it doesn’t excuse it, but he was right. You have to see that.”

Frowning, I nodded. “Right or not, it’s an ‘ends justifies the means’ situation. You wanted strong kids. Congrats on that. We’re not going to thank you for it. Joan hates him for it—probably you and Iris as well. I’m sure some of the others feel similarly. Jun’s going to be hurt when she finds out, if she hasn’t already. She plays the innocent act so well it even fools me at times, but I can tell she’s a lot smarter than she lets on. As for me? You’re lucky. I don’t know you well enough to hate you for it. Him? I don’t like. You and Iris? I don’t know you and at this point, I don’t want to.”

Lily’s eyes closed and she nodded. “I understand. It hurts—but I understand.” Her eyes opened and locked with mine as she shook her head. “But I wouldn’t change it if given the opportunity. Do you want to know why?” she asked, and I nodded. “What we put you through was hard, yes. Unforgivable. I know that. I will spend the rest of my very long life trying to make amends for it. But I don’t regret the outcome. Because of what we put you through, you all have come out stronger than we could have ever hoped, just as you said.”

“Bullshit,” I cut her off. “The girls had training. I got neglected and it got me killed. And that whole ‘not training you makes you stronger because you learn for yourself’ thing is a complete load of crap too. Training makes you stronger. Determination gives you the motivation to train. But being ignored means one of two things happen. Option one: you get discouraged and waste years of time that could have been spent productively building your body from the ground up. You get so discouraged that you give up. Option two: that lack of help festers and becomes determination fueled by resentment and you push yourself harder than you would have otherwise, but with no one to help
point out what you’re screwing up you train yourself wrong and eventually get yourself killed.”

“You’re wrong, Jaune. We pushed the girls enough to get them to unlock their Aura but didn’t start seriously training any of them until they did. Unlocking your Aura on your own always results in a stronger Hunter and an Aura activation under duress—even manufactured through tough sparring or similar controlled settings—is almost guaranteed to also activate someone’s Semblance. Almost one hundred percent of the time, that Semblance turns out to be something immensely powerful in some way. Think of it like a bird—or a moth. Breaking out of the egg or tearing out of the cocoon is a natural process and it ensures that what comes out is strong enough to face the world. If you interfere with that—if you pry open the egg or cut the cocoon—while you may feel like you’re helping, in reality you’re doing more harm than good in the long term. That’s what unlocking someone else’s Aura for them does, most of the time—it stunts your growth in the long run. Struggle, adversity, conflict—they’re all integral to your growth as a Hunter. Just as much if not more than they are for growing up.”

Glaring back at the redhead, I countered, “And did you do that with me?”

Lily sighed. She was quiet for a moment before saying, “No. You’re right. We never trained you to the level required to unlock your Aura that we did with your sisters. That was your father’s idea and I’m sorry.”

“And you just went along with it?” I asked. “You realize you essentially set me up to die, right?”

Shaking her head and sending her red tresses flying at the force of it, Lily said, “No! We argued against it every step of the way.”

“Then why—”

“Because!” she interrupted me, fists clenching at her sides. Taking a deep breath, she visibly calmed herself down before asking, “How much do you trust those girls, Jaune? With your life?” she asked, and I nodded. “With your children’s lives? If they said, ‘Trust me, I have a plan.’ Would you still follow the plan if, when you asked why they thought it would work, all they would say was, ‘It’s a family secret. I’ll tell you when it’s time.’ That’s what Jack asked of us.”

Groaning quietly, I asked, “You mean to tell me you don’t even know? That you went along with it on faith?”
“We questioned it, we argued against it, we did everything short of taking you and your sisters and leaving. But eventually, yes—we went along with it. Because your father had earned it,” Lily agreed, though the way she worded it and her tone heavily implied it was past tense.

“And now?” I asked, following up on my hunch.

She was quiet for a long moment before answering, “Looking back, it was probably the wrong call. Hindsight is twenty/twenty and I’ve got enough regrets to play the ‘what if’ game all day.” Her voice dropped to a near whisper and she closed her eyes as she admitted, “I am beginning to think you’re right and it wasn’t enough—that we’ve been wasting our time out there when we should have been here. There is a shit-storm coming and we wanted you all to be ready when it hit. Your father knew that as well. We trusted that he was right—”

“Yeah,” I drew the word out, “because neglect is right and not training them and forbidding others from training them will make them strong enough to survive when faced with this nebulous threat you’re talking about. It’ll definitely keep them alive rather than set them down the path to dying horribly. And I’m not just talking about the lack of direct training. I’ve spoken with everyone but Jana and Jillian. From what I gathered, I’ve been virtually ignored for the last ten years or so and foisted off on the older girls to take care of—again, not in the pictures. Me not remembering it doesn’t mean it didn’t happen.”

“We—you weren’t—” Lily frowned, her mouth closing with a soft click of teeth as she considered it. “We’ve had to spend a lot more time in the field recently it’s true, but I wouldn’t call it neglect, Jaune.”

Raising an eyebrow, I asked, “Ten years doesn’t seem like much to you, but for your kids? It’s everything. I suppose it’s not really neglect if you fuck off for months on end so long as you check in every now and then and drop in for holidays.” Pretending to consider it for a moment, I shook my head. “Wait, no. Still neglect and absentee parenting.”

A pained look crossed her face. “Yes, we told your sisters we were going on vacation, or on routine extended jobs to keep from worrying them. Better they’re angry and focusing that into something useful than worried.”

“But you’re telling me because you think that not lying to me will help your case?” To be fair though, it was the sort of thing I would pull—had pulled in the past. That didn’t mean I liked having it used against me.

Lily winced. “A little?” she asked. “We had honestly planned to tell everyone today, but your father
kind of shot those plans down and I don’t think anyone’s going to be in the mood to listen. Would you…?”


Lily’s mouth opened and closed like a landed fish for a moment before a chagrined look crossed her face. “Salem. Soon. Because she hates everyone.”

I blinked, having not expected a straight answer—let alone several. Parsing that quickly, I asked, “Who is Salem?”

Shrugging, the redhead answered, “I don’t know for sure. I’ve never gotten that close. The basics though? She’s the leader of a nihilist anarchist terrorist death cult with some stupid plan to destroy the Kingdoms. The only difference between her and the White Fang is that not every member of the White Fang wants genocide—just most of them. They’ve been recruiting elements across the Kingdoms for… a long time, really. But there’s been some worrying build-up lately. Even right here in Vale.”

“That is worrying,” I frowned; suddenly, dealing with the Arc parents didn’t seem as important as it had five minutes ago. It wouldn’t have taken a genius to figure out where my mind went, given what I knew. ‘Cinder, what have you gotten yourself into?’

“As you can probably guess, this is the sort of thing that would needlessly worry people if they knew—to the point that it’d draw in Grimm. Tell your sisters, but be very careful who else you decide to share it with. But I won’t fault you if you decide to let your girls know,” Lily said.

“Where did you learn all of that?”

Lily chuckled quietly. “What do you think we’ve been doing all this time?” she asked, an amused look crossing her face. “I wanted to fly back to Vale the moment Joan called, but couldn’t given our location and situation. So did Iris.”

Nodding along, I said, “So the first thing you do when you do finally get back from you know, finding out who is trying to kick off a war to kill us all, is to pick a fight with the son with no training to see if he’s figured out his Semblance instead of informing your family about the danger and doing
something sensible—like immediately yanking us out of school to start personally training us yourselves.” Laying the sarcasm on thick, I added, “Makes sense to me.”

The redhead winced. “We knew where you stood before. Comparing that to where you stand now, you’ve grown by leaps and bounds. In Aura capacity alone, you’ve exceeded your sisters’ growth rate. You could use some work with your weapon training, but the truth is that you’re arguably better than any Signal graduate or Beacon first year student has a right to be, given how little time you’ve had to train. I can see you’ve been training with your sisters at least some—mostly Joan. It’s all over the way you move and fight. Your girls have obviously had an influence as well. And there’s at least one other person you’ve been practicing with who is much faster than the others—your reaction times are too good for it to be otherwise.”

That was a frighteningly accurate assessment, especially since they had only seen me fight twice and I hadn’t done all that much in the first spar—and the fight against Iris was almost as bad. The problem with assuming that they’d gleaned all of that from two fights was that it was simply too much. Too accurate. ‘If I assume they’re telling the truth about not coming back before yesterday, that means they’ve been talking to someone who has seen me training with other people. That narrows down the list of possible suspects. Who do I know who has a bad habit of spying and entirely too much free time on their hands?’ I mused, my eyes drifting towards the portal I sensed was there but couldn’t see. ‘Raven’s a ‘maybe.’ She’s got means and opportunity but no known motive. The only other one who fits the bill is Qrow, but if it is him then he’s at least kept some things secret. Going to have to ask him about it.’

Lily sent me a questioning look—as though hoping I’d supply an answer to her implied question of who exactly it was I was training with—but I wasn’t feeling particularly forthcoming. When she realized that, she added, “As for why we’re not pulling you all out of school, instructors would talk. Word would get around fairly quickly that one of the better-known Hunter families had pulled all their kids in school out of school, then people would start wondering why—and since Hunters are a pretty professionally paranoid bunch, they’d immediately wonder what we knew that they didn’t.”

Her reasons for not pulling us out also made sense—which was annoying, because it meant they’d considered it and already decided against it. When I was feeling particularly forthright. When she realized that, she added, “As for why we’re not pulling you all out of school, instructors would talk. Word would get around fairly quickly that one of the better-known Hunter families had pulled all their kids in school out of school, then people would start wondering why—and since Hunters are a pretty professionally paranoid bunch, they’d immediately wonder what we knew that they didn’t.”

Snorting softly, Lily continued. “No kidding. I argued for removing you all but that wasn’t happening.” Shrugging, she said, “But you’ve done well for yourself so far. You won both of your fights. I’ll admit that first one was my own damn fault—I wasn’t expecting you to have something that could actually hurt me, let alone force a regeneration. You were able to tag Iris through her own Semblance with something that couldn’t be blocked or even seen until it was on her—even if she did break it, the fact that it landed and worked at all is enough. And you managed to deflect one of your father’s attacks. Your sisters can’t even do that. Dust, Jaune, if you actually remembered anything I’d worry that you hated us so much that your Semblance expressed as something tailor
made to counter us.”

“You sure it didn’t?” I snarked. “I haven’t— ‘Seen the memory,’ I almost said, but caught myself before I did. “—gotten the full story out of Joan and Jun, but the way I see it, I survived whatever it was that attacked me and to do that, I’m guessing it died.” I made a mental note to ask later today, once I could get Joan or Jun alone long enough to do so.

Lily paled, green eyes going wide for a moment. “Oh,” she whispered.

A scroll chimed and a glance at my HUD confirmed it wasn’t one of mine. Lily frowned before digging into her pocket and fishing out a black scroll— and between that, the necklace, and the warning I figured it was a good bet she was in Ozpin’s little club. That could very well explain why Qrow would be talking to them about my training—if he had mentioned something at any point after I’d met him and Taiyang the first time, my ‘parents’ could have asked him to keep tabs on me.

Opening the scroll, Lily checked the message there before sighing. Pocketing the scroll again, she turned green eyes on me with a determined look. “I don’t want us to part on a sour note.”

“Way too late for that,” I snarked.

The redhead narrowed her eyes in a glare, but there was no real heat in it. “You’re difficult, just like your father,” she growled quietly. “What I’m trying to say is… you said it yourself—you don’t like us and you don’t want anything to do with us, but you don’t care enough to hate us either.” I nodded—hating them would simply be wasted energy at this point. “Unfortunately for you, I’m very stubborn and I do care. Even if you feel that way now, I’m going to keep trying until I convince you to give me another chance.”

I shrugged. “I can’t exactly stop you from doing whatever you want, now can I? Doesn’t mean I have to cooperate.”

“Then I’ll just keep trying,” Lily smiled. She moved faster than I could track and pulled me into a fierce hug. My arms hung limply at my sides and for a change, I was unsure what to do with a woman latching onto me. She let go, then leaned up and pressed a kiss to my cheek. “We have to go. We’re running late. Stay safe and look after your sisters, okay?”

At a loss for words, I simply nodded as she moved around me and headed for the door. Pausing with her hand on the knob, she turned an amused look on me. “Don’t knock Joan up any time soon.”
I blinked. Once, twice. “Wha—?”

Laughter trailed after her as she left, closing the door behind her. I heard the car in the garage start a moment later, then the sound of gravel spraying as it took off. Shaking my head, I opened my Inventory and re-equipped my coat before heading back upstairs. ‘Yeah, someone’s definitely been feeding them information. Note to self: kick Qrow in the balls.’
Brawl in the Family (part II)

The Name of the Game

a RWBY/The Gamer crossover, SI.

Arc 8: Trainspotting

Chapter 3 2: Brawl in the Family (part II)

Bracing myself as I opened the door to Joan’s room, I stepped inside. The bed was currently occupied by the girls I’d brought with me, Joan sat at her desk chair, and the other Arc siblings sat wherever they could find—Jane and Jean on the desk itself with Jun in Jean's lap, Jen leaning against the night stand, Jillian perched on the dresser, and Jana atop the small book shelf under the window. The chatter went silent as I stepped inside—eleven sets of eyes swiveling to focus on me.

While Joan looked nonplussed, Jane and Jean both were shooting annoyed looks at Jana. Given that, and the concerned looks coming from Neo, Melanie, Miltia, and Jillian along with the positively furious look from Jana, I wondered what the hell their conversation had devolved into. Penny and Jen were the odd ones out—Penny simply looking confused while Jen wore her usual flat expression. Jun pushed herself off of Jean’s lap and stomped across the small room towards me.

“You jerk ,” she growled, winding back and kicking me in the shin. Fortunately for me, I was wearing armor and barely felt it. Looking down, the smallest redhead pouted. “That’s not fair at all. Take that off so I can kick you again.”

“No thanks,” I denied. “Are we good or am I on your shit list?”

“Make it up to me later,” Jun grumbled. I wouldn’t even bother trying to argue that—arguing with Jack in front of her had upset her and I kind of felt like a heel about it.

Jana opened her mouth to say something but Joan spoke up before she could. “What’s done is done. We can’t blame Jaune for not knowing.”

“I wish he hadn’t, but you’re right,” Jane agreed.
Jillian shrugged. “I don’t feel like it’s that big a deal. It’s just a sword—even if it does have some history to it. As far as the family politics stuff goes, we rarely even see any of our relatives in Vale.”

“But—” Jana began, only for Jen to cut her off.

“Let it drop.”

Seeing she was out-numbered, Jana crossed her arms with a huff and fell silent with a final, “Fine.”

“Great,” I sighed. “Before we leave, remind me to pass along what Lily told me.” Gesturing me over, Neo patted a spot on the bed between herself and Miltia. I dropped onto the bed with a quiet sigh. Neo moved in close, as though to kiss me, then paused. Sniffing the air, she frowned. Raising an eyebrow, I asked, “What now?”

Reaching for my coat, she opened the collar and brought her nose down to inhale, drawing questioning looks from the Arc sisters and amusement from the Malachite twins, while Penny simply looked confused. After a moment, Neo pulled away and leered. “Your mom smells delicious,” she murmured, and I rolled my eyes. I had noticed the distinct smell of an unfamiliar woman the moment I put it on, but it wasn’t exactly bothering me. Moreover, I knew an attempt to lighten the mood when I saw one.

“Is she some kind of pervert?” one of the siblings I didn’t recognize by voice asked. I turned to find Jana sending Neo and I a flat look, her arms crossed over her chest.

“The biggest one in the room,” I deadpanned, earning a swat on the arm from the pervert in question.

I saw the other youngest blonde Arc sister—Jillian—shift her gaze across Neo, the twins, and Penny, an amused smile turning her lips up. “So, you’re our brother’s girlfriends, huh?”

“Yes,” chorused four voices, and I rolled my eyes before pointing to Penny.

“Not you,” I corrected.

“Aww,” Penny pouted.
Jana asked, “So, what school do you go to?”

Neo turned an amused look on the girl before answering, “Actually, I'm Joan's age, so I'm not going to a school.”

Jana shot a look at Jillian. “Sounds suspicious,” Jana muttered. “Maybe she's some kind of predator, taking advantage of our brother.”

The more reserved of the pair shook her head. “I think you're letting your imagination run a little wild.”

“A little support would be appreciated,” Jana grumbled.

I rolled my eyes but refrained from commenting. Joan was the first to respond with her answer. “Neo is self-taught. And as they told mom before we started fighting earlier, Melanie and Miltia were taught by Hei and work for him.”

Jana wrinkled her nose. “Why do you still talk to that thug?”

“Because that thug was my teammate,” Joan growled quietly, a warning tone to her voice.

“So,” Melanie cut in, catching Jillian's attention, “What's Shade like?”

The long-haired blonde opened her mouth, but hesitated. Finally, she settled on, “It's... nice.”

“In other words, it sucks,” Jana supplied from beside her.

Jillian ignored her sister and added, “The people there try very hard to be unique—”

A smirk played across the shorter-haired sister's face as she translated, “They're posers trying to look edgy and failing.”
Frowning and shooting her sibling a look of exasperation, Jillian continued. “They’re very creative with repurposing things for their weapons—”

“In other words, it’s like looking at garbage sculptures,” Jana interpreted.

“Please stop that,” Jillian sighed. “It’s really not that bad.”

Jana rolled her eyes. “I’ve seen the pictures you sent to our group texts. It’s *that* bad. They’re all broke so their gear looks like whatever they could scrounge from the local landfill.”

Seeing Jillian fall silent as her sister steamrolled her, I tried to throw her a bone and asked, “So, is that the reason for your outfit? Don’t want to dress like the rich kid in the school of poor kids?”

Jillian shook her head, sending me a thankful look for the attempted save. “No, not really. The reason for the silks is pretty simple: most of Vacuo is desert, so it’s hot during the day. I’d cook with much more on, and heat stroke isn’t something to play around with. Sure, Aura heals us fast enough not to get sunburn and it’ll keep you alive longer and allow you to get back on your feet quicker, but you still need water or you die. Armor would also weigh me down on the sand and I’d just get tired faster if I didn’t fly everywhere. And do you have any idea how hard it is to get sand out of anything you can’t just take off and dust out? It gets *everywhere*. Sand storms are common, so you learn to prepare for them. It’s pretty much what the shemagh is for—keeping dust out of my face. I have a set of goggles that I’m not wearing right now for when it gets really bad, and sunglasses are a must during the day. At night, it gets down below freezing so I have to keep a jacket and a blanket on hand along with my sleeping bag. So while my gear isn’t great right now, it’s suited for my environment. As soon as I graduate and transfer out of Vacuo, I’ll redo everything.” Tilting her head to the side, she considered it for a moment before shaking her head. “Well, maybe not everything—silk is pretty nice and I really like this shirt and the belt.”

“Makes sense,” I nodded before turning to ask Jana, “So, if Shade is all narcissistic posers, how’s Haven?”

“Shade with a budget. And frat-bros,” Jana deadpanned. “And more guy-liner.”

I groaned quietly. I had a feeling I knew what she was talking about. I had hoped Sun and Neptune had been exaggerated in canon, but it looked like I may be wrong. It wasn’t enough of a problem to ask for more specific details, though. “That bad?”
Sighing, Jana shook her head. “No, not really. They’re actually pretty serious about their training. There’s more of a focus on group combat than individual stuff—formations, team combinations, overall battlefield tactics, that sort of thing. I mean, sure—there’s some of the whole posing and throwing money away on stupid shit. And yes, irritating frat-bros. The country more than makes up for the school atmosphere though. The buildings, the land, the food—it’s amazing. Well, except for the communal baths and the tigers. I get that Beacon does something similar, but at least they offer private showers in your rooms. They don’t even bother with that in Haven—it’s a cultural thing, apparently. There are a few things like that, really—the baths, the coliseums, clothes, armor, weapons and so on.”

“So, is that why you’re wearing that stuff?” Jillian asked, gesturing at the curved breastplate Jana wore, along with the other pieces of armor across her outfit. “In all our texting, you never really said.”

Jana frowned, looking down at her outfit before turning a look on Jillian. “Says the sister wearing what amounts to glorified pajamas for all the protection it offers.”

“I meant, what’s the point in heavy armor? I thought you went the sniper route. Wouldn’t you normally be out of the line of fire?” Jillian asked, apparently used to brushing off her sister’s casual insults.

“So you don’t die, idiot,” Jana growled. “Anything that hits armor has to waste more energy to get through that to get to the squishy parts underneath and gives me more time to get away or kill it. Sure, as far as one-shot one-kill battles go, I’ve got the upper hand. But not every battle is like that and once I start firing, I announce my position to everything on the field. If something slips past my team, I either have to kill it or evade, and I’d rather not waste energy flying if I don’t have to. As far as ‘going unseen’ goes, that’s what this is for,” she gestured towards the cloak, which abruptly shifted colors from plain gray to green and brown. “Electrically-reactive cloth. The specific name is something like ‘electrochromic thread,’ if you want to get technical. It’s new stuff they’re just now selling to the public in Mistral and it’s expensive as fuck, but it’s worth every Lien.” Pausing to let that sink in, she added, “And again, for a lot of people in Mistral heavier armor is a cultural thing.”

“Finally, someone else who understands the value of armor,” I muttered. Apparently, I wasn’t as quiet as I thought I was as Neo, Melanie, Miltia, and surprisingly Penny all stuck their tongues out at me.

Joan, the only other person in the room who seemed to prefer heavier armor, laughed quietly. “Don’t feel bad, Jaune. I caught hell for it at Beacon until we started going out on missions. Once the other teams in your year come back beaten up a few times while you walk away unscathed, they’ll shut up. Especially once they start sending you on multi-team missions.”
“Why the tiger stripes?” Melanie asked, pointing at Jana’s armor.

The short-haired blonde chuckled quietly. “Because there are tigers.” When the white-clad twin shot her a flat look, Jana rolled her eyes. “Mistral is all jungle, swamps, lakes, mountains, and forest—plus the Dust plains. It’s also full of large ground predators that make most of the smaller Grimm look tame. Tigers are surprisingly hard to spot—it’s natural camouflage. Between that and the cloak, I’m not worried about being spotted by most things.” Sighing, Jana asked, “Okay, can we change the subject? I’m home. I don’t want to talk about school. I get enough of that while I’m there.”

Jillian held up a hand. “Seconded. Motion passes.”

“Now, hold on,” Jane interrupted. “Maybe we wanted to know how school was going for you two.”

“How about an answer for an answer?”

The Arc siblings agreed and Neo held out a hand, projecting an illusion into the room. “It’s pretty self-explanatory. I make illusions. Light, sound—don’t have touch yet, but I hope to figure it out eventually. I can create them anywhere within line of sight and leave them up even if I leave line of sight. They’re basically Aura constructs like that. Your turn,” she pointed at Jana.

The girl mirrored Neo’s hand-out pose and a sphere of yellow light formed in her palm, before
stretching and streaking around the room, angling and curving around everyone present before coming to rest in her hand again. “Directed beam weapon. It puts pretty little holes in things or lights them on fire. It’s kind of like Dad’s Semblance, except… you know, not capable of punching through a mountain range. Then again, I can bend mine where I want it to land precision hits and he’s stuck just blasting whatever’s in front of him.”

“It was one mountain,” Jillian corrected absently.

“And then another, and another, and so on,” Jana countered.

Jane sighed. “Yes. Sequentially. Not all at once. There is a world of difference between the two.”

Jana rolled her eyes. “It doesn’t sound as cool when you say it like that.”

“She’s always been a daddy’s girl,” Jean snarked, earning a glare from the girl in question.

“There’s nothing wrong with that,” Jana denied. “Our dad is awesome, and you’d agree if you could get over whatever it is you’re pissed at him about.”

I shot a questioning look at Joan and asked, ‘Is she blind or did you not tell them what you told me?’

‘A bit of both. I didn’t want to poison their relationship with our parents,’ Joan answered.

Jane picked up with, ‘And we figured that they would see it for themselves eventually.’

I got the impression of a mental sigh from Jean as she added, ‘We just didn’t expect them to be this dense about it when it’s smacking them in the face.’

“Are you okay? You all kind of spaced out there,” Jillian asked, sending us a somewhat worried look.

‘Don’t answer that with anything but ‘we’re fine,’” Joan warned as I opened my mouth.
“What, you can’t do the silent conversation thing?” I asked, smirking at the girl. When Joan shot me a consternated look, I sent, ‘Except ‘we’re fine’ screams ‘something is going on.’ It’s sometimes better to deflect questions like that with sarcasm.’

Jana shook her head. “Ugh. He’s a smartass now.”

‘See?’ I sent Joan the mental equivalent of a smirk.

‘Except dad and moms might not be so fast to write it off. When Jean said Jana was a daddy’s girl?’ Joan sent, and I didn’t have time to acknowledge her before she finished that thought. ‘She was understating. Anything you say is going to go straight to our parents, courtesy of Jana.’

“You get used to it,” Melanie smirked.

“Or you get over it,” Miltia shrugged.

Neo grinned as she added, “We get ‘over it’ a lot.” Melanie and Miltia both groaned quietly at that. “And I don’t know, I think it’s kind of sexy.”

“Is there anything you don’t think is sexy?” Miltia deadpanned.

“Sure I do!” Neo countered. “Vegetables are for eating.” She paused a beat and added, “So you shouldn’t waste them after you’ve used them for sex toys.”

“See what we have to put up with?” Melanie sighed, palming her face. “They feed each others’ bad habits.”

Miltia snorted softly. “Poor choice of wording, sis.”

Neo and I shared an amused look before we asked, in tandem, “What’s wrong with that?”
“It doesn’t seem fair that only Jaune and Neo are allowed to have bad habits,” Penny pointed out.

Turning an entirely too fox-like smile on the ancula, Neo said, “Penny, you are perfectly welcome to develop your own bad habits. Or pick up ours.”

Penny perked up at that and I sighed. “Horrible influence.”

Jana coughed into her fist and pointed to Melanie. “What about you? You really haven’t found your Semblance?”

The Malachite twins traded a look and shrugged. “Nope,” they synced, before identical grins spread across their faces. Turning to Jillian, they said, “Your turn.”

“Okay then,” Jillian smiled before pulling what looked like a heavy-duty tablet off her hip. Pulling a stylus off of it, she tapped at it for a moment before making a flicking gesture outwards from the screen. A kitten made entirely of Aura manifested on the floor. “I make hard-light constructs, as you saw when we fought. I can direct them or imbue them with a limited will of their own,” she pointed at the kitten, which proceeded to groom itself. “I can create almost anything I can imagine—with a few limits based on size, complexity, power, and so on. But this,” she waved the tablet, “lets me do so much more. I can store drawings, stats, things like that so I don’t have to remember how everything is supposed to come together for every single construct.”

Raising an eyebrow at that, I asked, “‘Stats?’ As in…?”

“Each construct requires a base amount of Aura depending on complexity and size. However, the bare minimum amount of Aura doesn’t work for a lot of stuff. If I want something to wade into a fight and take attention off my teammates, it needs to be able to take a hit. If I just want a quick distraction, it doesn’t need to have much Aura. Or if I want something to explode the moment a Grimm hits it, then it needs to be fragile.”

When I nodded, she continued. “That said, there are only four stats to any drawing I make: dimensions, the amount of Aura it needs to have, whether it has Dust or not and what kind I’m filling it with, and special abilities outside the construct’s normal range of motion. So, a basic wolf construct is around 65 inches in length and stands 35 inches at the shoulder. A bigger wolf—the sort of things I use against Grimm, like the ones I used for Melanie and Miltia—is double that. Wolves don’t have breath weapons though, so I have to add that in. Whatever I draw has enough sense to understand how it’s supposed to move, but if I want to add something outside of that I have to specify. Still haven’t figured out how to make it more than a one-shot attack, though.”
Shrugging, she added, “You would think that would mean I could just make them huge and strong, and fill them full of Dust, but no. That’s not cheap on Aura and I have to conserve where I can. So I try to go more for versatility than power.”

“You’re support,” I interpreted, and she nodded.

“Pretty much. Can I do damage? Absolutely! Aside from the options a construct would normally give—claws, teeth, that sort of thing—I can load in Dust cartridges to do other stuff. But considering my team is weighted heavily towards offense… well, it’s a matter of which we’d rather have: a construct setting things on fire, or a construct that explodes and freezes everything caught in the blast so my teammates can come in and smash them to pieces. Ice Dust is less likely to lead to friendly fire incidents from secondary effects. I’m usually relegated to crowd control and transportation. You’d be surprised how handy flight is at our age. It changes the entire combat dynamic when you can sit safely above your enemy and drop hurt down on them. Of course, becoming close air support for a team of melee fighters isn’t exactly what I would call fun, but if it helps the team—”

“She means it sucks,” Jana rolled her eyes. Seeing her sister was done, she shot me a look before grinning, “So little brother, what exactly is your Semblance?”

“Gravity,” I answered. “For instance,” I gestured at the pair of blondes and silently cast a ‘Lift,’ earning a pair of shrieks as they floated up into the air.

“Put me down!” Jana demanded.

Jillian, on the other hand, simply laughed and spun in a lazy flip. “This is fun!”

I carefully placed Jillian back down before cutting off the spell, dropping Jana messily on the floor and earning a glare as everyone else laughed. “It’s pretty much exactly what it looks like.”

“How did you block dad’s beam?” Jana asked.

Jana rolled her eyes. “Fine. How’d you deflect it?”

Turning an amused look on her, I deadpanned, “With a shield.”

“Ha ha ha. You should show your siblings some respect,” Jana frowned.

I nodded. “You know, you’re right.” She perked up and I noticed the twins and Neo sharing an amused look, waiting for the other shoe to drop. And drop it I did. “As soon as you do something worth respecting.”

“That’s kind of funny, considering who it’s coming from. What have you done again? Oh, that’s right, you nearly got yourself killed. But hey, it’s kind of an improvement in a way, considering that you sucked so bad before that a civilian would’ve been more useful—since at least they can figure out when not to go picking fights with Grimm,” the blonde snarked, earning a glare from more than one of her elder sisters and not an inconsiderable amount of Killing Intent thrown her way—a good bit of which seemed to be coming from Neo and the Malachite twins. “Here’s hoping you learned something from that one.”

Before any of the others could say anything, I shot back, “And all you’ve really shown me is an immature brat.” I shook my head, adding, “You’re what? Two years older than me? Three? And what have you done with it? What do you have to show for it?” I pointed at Jen. “Disarmed and beaten in under a minute.”

“Please don’t fight,” Jillian cut in, but went ignored by her older sister.

Jana scoffed, ignoring her closest sister. “Big words coming from someone with, what, a month of training? Probably less.”

“And how good were you when you only had Aura and a month worth of training?” I rolled my eyes. “So yeah, you’re right. I have only had about a month worth of training. But it’s not the time that matters, it’s what you do with it.”

Laughing quietly, Jana said, “Given your friends, you were probably distracted for much of that.” She turned an amused look on the twins and Neo. “I can understand it—the desire to have a man who’s a blank slate to shape and train how you see fit, without any of those pesky bad habits. It’d be easy. And an Arc, no less. Even if it’s Jaune, there’s still some pull behind the name.”
“You say that,” Melanie began, a small smirk spreading over her lips, “But to put it into perspective: Jaune fought both of your moms and won.”

Miltia nodded. “Not to mention that neither of them ever laid a hand on him.”

“Pretty sure any of us could beat you, too. You seem like the weakest, after all,” Neo pointed out.

Jana rolled her eyes at the pair. “Like you could.”

“You are being baited. It is not even particularly good bait,” I argued, shaking my head. “Question is, why does she seem dead set on provoking a fight?”

“Because she wants the sword,” Jillian answered quietly, earning a glare from Jana. The younger of the pair flinched but continued now that she’d opened her mouth. “She was upset that dad offered it to you at all, but you giving it to Jun? That just made it worse. She’s taking it out on you.”

“If she wants a fight then let us give her what she wants,” Neo suggested and I rolled my eyes.

“No. We’re not starting another fight because someone,” I shot an annoyed look at Jana, “likes to run her mouth and wants the shiny metal stick. I am done with fighting for the day.”

“I’m not the only one guilty of that,” Jana pointed out. She hummed, bringing a finger up to her pink lips before saying, “I suppose one on five wouldn’t really be fair, though. The blue-haired one’s not mouthy, so we can exclude her—”

Penny shot the Arc sibling a flat look. “I will not be made to stand idly by if you instigate a fight with Jaune and the others.”

Shrugging, Jana pointed to Jillian, who shook her head. “The two of us,” then she pointed at Jun, “the squirt,”
Jun’s reply was an immediate, offended, “Hey!”

Jana’s finger shifted to Jen, “and—”

Jen’s response was immediate. “No.”

Jana frowned. “Why no—”

“I refuse,” Jen cut her off.

Sighing, Jana shifted her gaze to the Arc twins. Jane shook her head. “Don’t look at us. It’d be overkill.” She turned an apologetic look on me and the girls, “No offense.”

“Some taken,” Neo grinned. “You can make up for it later. Bring your sister.”

“You’re drooling,” Melanie pointed out.

Neo turned an amused look on the white-clad Malachite twin. “Double twins.”

The pair of younger twins turned a considering look on the elder set of twins. “Fair enough.”

Jane rolled her eyes. Jean, however, turned a glare on Jana. “We’re not backing you up. We’ve warned you time and time again not to let your mouth write checks your ass can’t cash.”

“I do not agree to this. This is fucking pointless and I will not be party to it,” I denied. “There is a time and a place and this is neither.” Turning to Joan, I asked, “Is she always this intentionally abrasive?”

The eldest Arc sighed. “Yes,” she admitted. “You’re right, she’s baiting you.”

I shook my head. “Yeah, it’s not happening.” Turning to Jana, I said, “You’ve got two choices: knock it the fuck off and we can do the whole ‘getting to know you’ thing like a normal family or we’re leaving.” Given what Joan had said about Jana—and possibly Jillian and Jun—reporting
things back to our parents, I wouldn’t be presenting any of them with the Ribbons I’d made for them today, or any time soon for that matter. Not until I was sure they wouldn’t rat me out. I would just have to give the others their presents later. And speaking of, I sent, ‘I made you all presents. I can’t really give them out right now since Jana, Jillian, and Jun are likely to tell our parents, but I can give them to Joan to bring back to you.’

‘Presents?’ Jean asked

‘Good ones, too,’ Miltia agreed.

‘If only your sister wasn’t a bitch,’ Melanie deadpanned, ‘or a narc.’

Sighing, the short-haired blonde nodded—thankfully missing the byplay this time. “Sorry, Jaune. Yeah, I’m pissed about the sword… and it’s sort of automatic at this point. My teammates are the sort who always want to start shit so we spend more time fighting amongst ourselves than training or on missions, some days.”

“And you enjoy it anyway,” I pointed out, and she shrugged.

“I like a good fight.” Glaring around the room, she added, “I’m not the only one.”

Jane snorted softly. “Just the worst.”

I pulled the sedan into our underground parking garage and sighed quietly as I killed the engine. We had only been gone about four hours—making it just shy of 4 o’clock, since we’d gotten to the Arc house around noon—but it felt longer. “So much better.” Neo stuck her tongue out from the front passenger seat and we began piling out of the vehicle. We had stopped outside of town to change seats, mostly because I couldn’t stand much more of Neo’s driving—after the whole thing with the Arcs, I was just not in the mood for it.

The car disappeared as the last of us stepped out, dismissed back to my Inventory, and we made our way up to the Officer’s Quarters. Catching sight of Blake looking up from her book where she sat on the couch, I frowned. “Joan, go ahead and get ready. I need to take care of something, then I’ll meet you in the hangar upstairs.”
“Want help?” Melanie offered, and I shook my head.

“No. Thanks, though,” I sent the girl a smile. Coming to a stop in front of the now curious faunus, I asked, “Got a minute?”

Biting her bottom lip, she glanced down at her book—three quarters of the way through—and nodded. Sticking a piece of paper between the pages to keep her place, Blake followed as I lead her back to my bedroom and gestured for her to sit on the bed. Pulling out one of the chairs from under the small table tucked into a corner of the room, I spun it around and dropped onto it, resting my arms on the back as Blake’s golden eyes watched. “Was it that bad?”

I shook my head. “Nah. Didn’t get the answers I was looking for, but then I didn’t really expect to—and I suppose I’m partly to blame for that. Never really found the right time to ask and our parents had to leave for a meeting. The others can fill you in later, when you’re done with your book.”

“So, this isn’t about your meeting with your family.”

Sighing, I ran a hand through my hair and wondered how best to word what I had to say. Coming up empty, I went for the truth—or as close to it as I could get at the moment. “There’s no easy way to say it. There was a Dust explosion last night.”

“It’s been all over the news,” Blake said. “That was you?”

“No. Well, yes.” I rolled my eyes. “My Dust stockpile, for the woman I’m investigating.”

“Infiltrating,” Blake deadpanned, and I shrugged.

“Infiltrating,” I confirmed. “She bought off the White Fang—gave them the Dust stockpile in exchange for their services.”

Blake frowned. “They wouldn’t work for—Adam wouldn’t work for a…”

The girl across from me trailed off with a wince. “Human,” I finished for her, earning an apologetic look and a nod. “You don’t need to dance on eggshells with me, you know. To be fair, it was a lot of Dust, money, and guns. That, and she kind of beat him down first and made him an offer he couldn’t refuse from what I gathered.”
“How? Adam’s Semblance—”

I shot her an unamused look. “I keep telling people she’s dangerous.”

Blake’s eyes narrowed and she asked, “Then why bother with her beyond what you have to in order to take her down, if she’s so dangerous?”

“Because I don’t know if cutting off the head will kill the snake, or if it’ll turn out to be a hydra in this case—or if she’s even the head. But that’s beside the point,” I pinched the bridge of my nose. We had gotten sidetracked and I had put it off long enough. “Adam was leaving the area in a Bullhead when he was caught in the blast range. He wasn’t the greatest guy in the world, but I know he was your friend at one point. I’m sorry.”

Golden eyes closed and, after several quiet moments, silent tears ran down her face, ruining what little makeup she wore under her eyes. Taking a quiet breath, she whispered, “You ki—”

I cut her off before she could fling that particular accusation. “No. I was in bed, sound asleep, halfway across the city when it went off and woke us up.”

“Then your mystery woman—”

“Was in bed with me, so no,” I denied. “It was the White Fang themselves.”

Blake’s eyes shot open and she met my own eyes with a glare. “I don’t believe you. Why on Remnant would they blow themselves up?!?”

Opening my Inventory, I fished out the right scroll and queued up the video feed from the barn, backing it up to the right time and setting it for the correct camera before tossing it squarely in Blake’s lap. I couldn’t say I blamed her for not believing me. If one of the men I’d puppeted had been one of the two stealing Dust or shooting the place up, then she was right and I bore at least some responsibility for it. Or I could be wrong—they were wearing masks, after all, so it was difficult at best for me to tell them apart. ‘You’d figure, being faunus, it’d be easier to remember which ones I did that to,’ I mused. But no, I couldn’t remember their features because there were multiple people in that group with the same—or similar—animal parts. In the dark, it’s hard to tell fox ears or tails from cat, dog, wolf, or raccoon. Then again, that was probably the whole point—combined with the masks it made identifying one of them difficult at best if they disappeared into a group of other faunus. It didn’t help that my Semblance helpfully labeled them as numbered mooks.
instead of with names.

Her face was blank as she watched through teary eyes, before the video went white through the screen. Reaching up and wiping at her eyes, she refused to meet my gaze as she passed the scroll back. “They shot a box of Dust. If you want to get real damn technical about it, you could say that I am responsible, because they also shot my Bounded Field array keeping the place bigger on the inside and that went up first. My array that was fine right up until the time someone ran a couple of Dust rounds through it.”

“No,” Blake murmured, her voice scratchy and tight, shaking her head. “They… they really did do it to themselves.” Looking up at me through her lashes, she added, “I’m sorry I snapped at you.”

Moving to sit beside her, I pulled her into a hug and shook my head. “Don’t be, because I’m not done.” Blake buried her face against my chest and I continued, “With Adam gone, I need to know who they’re going to turn to for leadership. Who is the leader of the White Fang?”

“One of Adam’s lieutenants would have taken over,” came the quiet answer against my shirt. “There were a few, so I’m not entirely sure which would have assumed control. That’s assuming there wasn’t any in-fighting. Adam was the glue holding everyone together.”

Running a hand through her hair, I asked, “What about before that? What happened that made him leader?”

Blake sighed. Though the answer was a bit muffled, I could make it out clearly. “Adam came to me one night and told me humans had assassinated the old leader during a meeting, and that we had to leave Menagerie because he suspected everything was compromised. He thought we had a mole, or someone close to us was a sympathizer, so we cut off all contact to home. Dust, I haven’t even spoken to my parents in years. He warned me that they could be listening in and any contact could give away our position.”

I filed that bit of information away for later before asking, “So, who was the leader when that happened, and who would leadership have fallen to outside of Adam? There’s normally a chain of succession and the only way someone like Adam gets leadership is because everyone on that list is dead.” Pausing, I added, “Sorry if this is common knowledge—”

“It’s not,” Blake denied. “It’s not like they have a web site or something. The higher-ups never really did public appearances outside of Menagerie, and always with masks. The leader was Sienna Khan. And before that, m—” she cut herself off, shaking her head. “It doesn’t matter. If Adam took over, it’s because either he was killed or refused.”
I had a name now. I’d run it through my server in Akamaru’s hideout and see what it could dig up in digital records before asking around. More than that, I was beginning to suspect Cinder was correct and Adam’s group was a splinter cell. Worse, my future knowledge—or rather, what I knew of the series I had watched on Earth—was either inaccurate or incomplete here, maybe intentionally so if the writers kept a lid on it until later seasons or if they had taken the pragmatic approach and just not mentioned it in the event that the series was canceled or failed. Anime pulled shit like that all the time—leaving enough of a plot hook to draw one in without giving away so much that the plot wouldn’t make sense if the show didn’t make it past a first season. “Khan, who was his second?”

“Her,” Blake corrected absently, “I don’t remember. I’m sorry. I assumed, if Adam took over, they were all dead anyway.”

‘So, a woman. I kind of figured, with a name like ‘Sienna,’ but then again you could say something like ‘Sky’ or ‘Ocher’ are also on the list of ‘gender neutral but probably female’ names. What color is sienna again? A shade of green?’ I put aside the thought for my next question. ‘Blake, what happened during those first few months after Adam became the leader? What did your group do?’

Shifting against me, she answered listlessly. “We stole supplies and set up our own network of safe houses and fall-back positions. There were a few attacks—a choked sob cut her off momentarily before she looked up, wide gold eyes meeting mine. Regret hung heavy in her words as she continued quietly, ‘They were so angry. There were attacks on human settlements. Adam said it was just hit and run distractions to get the supplies we needed, but I remember the smoke from the fires hung around for days and could be seen for miles around. They lashed out, didn’t they? You don’t think…”

“You would know better than me on that,” I shrugged, but continued with, “but in any organization, after something like this people tend to gravitate to whoever talks the loudest and speaks towards what they’re already feeling. It’s why mob violence is a thing. A member of the community, or the race, or anyone who can be martyred dies then people inside the communities start stirring up shit. For them, it doesn’t matter if he was guilty of a crime or not, sometimes it’s just an excuse to vent—or cause trouble, if they’re the type. Sometimes, the voice of reason speaks out and people listen. Other times, not so much. Which is more likely to happen here?”

Blake bit her lip and I saw that we both knew the answer to that, even if she didn’t want to admit it—wanted to see the best in her people. I also realized that if I pushed now, while she was hurt and vulnerable, she would be right to say I’d taken advantage of her. Instead, I tried a different track. Reaching back, I felt at her ass, earning a look that was half-confused, half-bemused until I found what I was looking for. Fishing out her scroll, I put it in her hands. “Call your parents.”

Blake looked down at the scroll in her hands, her ears drooping. “But… what do I say?”

“Start with ‘hello,’” I suggested. “If you’ve been away from home this long without word, they’re
going to be more relieved to hear from you than anything. With Adam dead and you out of the White Fang, there’s no reason not to.” Mentally, I added, ‘Of course, after the relief will come anger, shouting, threats, and so on—but that’s normal. You fucked up and that just shows they care enough to be angry.’

As Blake dug into her contacts and the scroll began dialing, a thought occurred. “Oh, and make sure you tell them you’re going to be starting at Beacon come Monday. Otherwise, they may just decide you should come home.”

Blake nodded as the scroll picked up on the other end and I realized, as the screen lit and displayed the interior of another house, that she had initiated a video call. ‘Too late now,’ I mused as a woman with dark, short-cut hair and ears similar to Blake’s answered. Similar, but not identical, as they were easily half again the size and height— giving her a somewhat wild look that contrasted with a face that seemed almost predisposed to ‘sweet’ or ‘motherly.’ “Hell...o.” The woman blinked, golden eyes flickering briefly to me before coming back to the girl at my side. “Blake?”

Blake nodded. “Hi, mom.”

Her mother’s eyes went wide and she turned away from the scroll. “Ghira!” she called, and Blake and I both winced at the volume.

Turning a mischievous look on Blake, I leaned over and tilted her head enough to kiss her lips. Blake’s eyes went wide as they shot back to the scroll—where her mother’s ears had twitched and her head had jerked back around towards the camera. “Jaune!” Blake hissed quietly.

Grinning at the girl, I shrugged shamelessly. “Have fun. I’m heading out. I should be back by Sunday. We’ll be kind of busy, but call me if anything comes up—or you want to talk.” Turning briefly to the scroll, I tilted my head back towards Blake before mouthing ‘You’re welcome,’ then pushed off the bed and headed for the door, casting a look back over my shoulder to shoot Blake a grin and a small wave.

Golden eyes so much like her daughter’s narrowed on Blake, clearly visible through the transparent ‘back’ of her scroll. “You forgot to call for years and suddenly you’ve remembered to just to tell us you had a boyfriend?” The elder Belladonna’s tone practically dripped skepticism—mingled with hurt and anger.

Blake visibly flinched and I heard her sigh. “No, mom. That’s... that’s not—”

“Can’t say I disapprove of your taste, though,” the woman hummed. “And an Arc, too. So you’re in Vale?”
“How—” Blake began.

The woman on the other end of the scroll snorted softly. “Sigil. Oh, here comes your father.”

The door closing behind me cut off the conversation, giving Blake some privacy. Glancing down at my armor, I frowned. ‘Going to have to do something about that sooner rather than later if everyone who’s heard of my family recognizes the damned thing on sight. When I get back, then.’

I found the twins, Neo, and Penny in the living room, talking about the whole ordeal with my estranged family with each other. They looked up as I entered. “What was that about?” Miltia asked.

“I broke the news about Adam to her,” I answered, earning nods from the others.

“Is Blake okay?” Penny asked, and I nodded in answer.

Jerking a thumb back towards the bedroom, I said, “Yeah. I convinced her to call her parents. Apparently, she hadn’t talked to them in years. Adam fed her a line of bullshit and she bought it hook, line, and sinker.”

“So we should go comfort her,” Neo suggested, looking entirely too innocent as she did, before adding, “and see what her parents look like.”

I shook my head. “Didn’t see her dad. Her mom, on the other hand, I did get a fairly good look at,” I grinned, sending the mental image to Neo across our link, where she recreated it in an illusion for the others—a bust, since that was all I’d gotten out of the scroll conversation.

Neo’s jaw had dropped as her eyes hungrily roamed the older woman’s face, ears, and the swell of her breasts that were only hinted at by the cut-off from the recreated scroll image. Still, there was enough there to hint at her figure and I could tell Neo was already hard at work imagining what it was she couldn’t see. Neo even went the extra step to recreate the entire memory, including the elder Belladonna’s expressions and voice. “Damn. Blake got the short end of the stick.”

“Neo,” Melanie sighed, swatting the older girl’s arm. “Blake did not ‘get the short end of the stick.’”

“No,” Miltia agreed, before adding, “besides, who’s to say Blake won’t take after her mother in a few years anyway?”
I palmed my face, groaning quietly. “No, Blake’s beautiful as she is—you all are. Also, and this goes for all of you, don’t ever drag me into some stupid argument over who looks better. The answer’s always going to be some variation of ‘I don’t play favorites’ or ‘you all look equally beautiful in your own ways’ and I can only word that so many ways before it starts sounding stupid.”

Neo rolled her eyes. “That’s not what I was doing and you know it.”

“Maybe I do, but who’s to say she would. That kind of thing doesn’t fly in any relationship. And seriously, what woman wants to be compared to her mother and told she comes up short?” I asked, turning a look to the twins as I knew it was a sore spot for them. The younger pair crossed their arms and glared at Neo.

Wincing, Neo sighed. “Right. Open mouth, insert foot. Sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry,” Miltia began.

“Just don’t do it,” Melanie finished.

Tilting her head to one side, Penny asked, “So, ‘be nice to each other’ is what you’re saying?”

“Yeah, pretty much,” I agreed. “Anyway, Joan and I are heading out, so I’ll see you all again Sunday.”

Goodbye kisses—and in Penny’s case, hugs—were exchanged and I made my way up to the hangar above us, where I found Joan and Jen waiting. “ Came to see us off?” I asked the shorter blonde.

Before Jen could answer, Joan shook her head. “She’s coming.”

I blinked at that. Humming, I asked, “So you two made up?”

“Working on it,” Jen agreed with a nod.
“I’m not going to ignore one of my family when they need help. This will give the two of you time away from everyone else to work on it together.” Shrugging, Joan added, “Besides, I want to be there for it. I want to know what happened.”

Nodding, I gestured the pair into the Bullhead parked there before switching to my Fox set and hitting the button for the roof controls and platform elevator. Slipping into the Bullhead, I frowned as I found Joan in the pilot’s seat. “You’re in my seat,” I deadpanned.

The blonde turned an amused look up at me. “Since when can you fly?”

“Since I ate a manual on it,” I retorted.

Jen got out of the co-pilot’s seat as Joan changed seats with a grumble. I dropped into the pilot’s seat and cast a backwards glance at where Jen was folding down a jump seat mounted just behind our full-sized chairs. Turning my attention back to the controls, I picked up the headset and pulled it into place. “Vale Tower Control, Foxtrot-1.”

“I read you, Foxtrot-1. Do you have a flight plan?” the air traffic controller on the other end asked.

Frowning at that, I checked my Map, deciding on a course. “We do, Tower Control,” I answered, giving the woman a bullshit course leading out southwest of Vale. Once we got outside the city, I would drop to the deck and swing around before putting us on a course for Meteor Lake.

“Acknowledged. Skies are clear. Safe flying, Foxtrot-1.”

“Roger that, Tower,” I signed off, lifting us off the pad and throttling up. Switching the headset over to internal comms, I turned to Joan and tapped mine before gesturing to the set above her. Jen, seeing Joan putting the headset on, grabbed a third set and plugged it into the port beside her seat. “So, when’s your next patrol?”

“I go back to work Monday,” Joan shrugged, turning away to look out the window as a smile pulled at her lips.

Nodding, I asked, “Jen, how’s the process of getting your medical discharge going?”

Behind me, the shorter blonde answered, “Mental health evaluation is finished, with a recommendation for Section 8. Paperwork was filed. Waiting on Hunter’s Association now.”
“That’s good. The girls already have your uniform made up?”

Joan turned a curious look on me. “‘Uniform?’”

“Yes,” Jen answered. “I will be working for Jaune, acting as one of the Fox’s bodyguards.”

“Huh,” Joan murmured. “How’s he pay?”

“The salary was generous. The bonuses alone are worth it.”

I rolled my eyes. “It’s not like the money is coming out of my pocket directly. It’s the company’s money.”

Humming quietly, Joan turned a speculative gaze on me. “I may just have to look into a change in career, if the pay is that good.”

“I thought hunting paid well,” I asked, and Joan shrugged.

“It does, but it’s a question of risk vs reward. And as a Hunter, you have to spend money to make money. All of that Lien that you get for bounties goes right back into armor, weapons, and Dust if you’re smart,” Joan countered. “And high grade Dust is expensive.”

That reminded me, I needed to swing by the Arc house and dupe the Dust there. In order to do that, however, I would need tools to get the damned cabinets un-bolted from the floor. ‘May as well just stop by a hardware store first and fill out everything I might need that I can’t just conjure, or that would be better than conjured versions. Screwdrivers are easy enough, but a drill and a proper bit set is faster—and I need one and a wrench to get those hex bolts off anyway, unless I want to cut them and risk blowing myself up. Fuck that. Consumable items, too—nails, screws, that sort of thing. I’ve got unlimited Inventory space, so I may as well use it.’

Glancing between my Map and instrument panel, I said, “Remind me on the way back to swing into the city and pick some things up, then stop by the family house so I can dupe the Dust there. Now, tell me more about field work.”
“You know, you’re not actually supposed to come in that hard on the landings,” Joan pointed out as we stepped out of the Bullhead.

I rolled my eyes and dug into my Inventory for my camping supplies. “Says you.” Passing her the tent, I gestured towards where I’d set it up the last time I was here with Penny. “Go put that up and I’ll get the Sanctification field running, if Jen will gather wood.” The sun had already begun to set, but we still had an hour or so before it was fully dark, so we should have plenty of time for setting things up between the three of us.

“Actually,” Joan began, “It’s not supposed to rain, right?”

I checked my map and shook my head. “Probably not.”

“So, let’s sleep out under the stars,” Joan smiled, tossing me the tent back.

“Bugs?” I asked, raising an eyebrow.

Looking around, the eldest blonde shot back, “Do you see any? Besides, with Aura, mosquitoes aren’t an issue.”

Shrugging, I stuffed it back into Inventory. “Okay then. I’ll get started setting up a Sanctify—”

“No need,” Jen shook her head. When I met her eyes with a questioning look, she asked, “You don’t feel it?”

“It’s safe,” Joan clarified. “There’s probably a Dust deposit in that lake that drives away Grimm. End result, Sanctification would be overkill.”

Turning an unamused look on her, I said, “Yeah, well, I happen to like redundancies on some things. Especially things that keep Grimm from eating my face in my sleep.”

“Fine,” I muttered. “I suppose my justifiable paranoia in a world full of face-eating monsters can be set aside for a couple of nights.”

“It’s not paranoia, it’s professional wariness,” Joan corrected. “Also, don’t go throwing those fields around in the wilds. It’s fine if you’re with your teammates—who I assume you’ll tell about your Semblance—but you should get used to sleeping without one. Even if you have the technical know-how to Sanctify an area, you might not always have the tools at hand—and even if you do always have the tools at hand, you’d be shorting your teammates by not allowing them to adjust to the danger of sleeping in the wilds without the safety of a Sanctified sleeping area. What happens when you’re separated?”

Sighing, I nodded. “Fair enough. Wood? Or do we not want a fire?”

Joan rolled her eyes. “You’re only asking because we’ve shot down two out of three of the steps you wanted to do. What do you think?”

“I think that if you want s’mores, you’ll help gather wood,” I deadpanned, walking off for the forest with Jen following at my side. I shot the shorter blonde a questioning look. “What about you?”

Jen gave a small smile in answer. “I haven’t had s’mores in years.”

Joan slipped up on my other side and I felt her hand mussing my hair. “I’m just giving you a hard time, Jaune. We’ve both survived in worse conditions, so a sleeping bag and a fire is two things more than we really need. Well, I suppose you’ll figure it out when you get to Beacon.”

I raised an eyebrow at that. “Oh?”

Joan nodded. “Goodwitch is notoriously bad for her practical exams. You’re going to be sent into the Emerald Forest practically naked at some point and told to rough it for a few days. Don’t piss her off, or it’ll be actually naked. She did that to a pair of partners in our class because one of them kept running his mouth.”

“Bullshit. No teacher could get away—”
“Waiver,” Jen interrupted.

I blinked, shooting her a questioning look, and Joan nodded. “You sign a waiver when you sign up for school. It’s technically a military organization. They can do whatever they damn well please short of permanent harm.” Joan turned a considering look on me before adding, “I know I’ve said it before, but don’t. Do not play her games. She will take pleasure in making your life miserable.”

“What makes you think—” I began, only to be cut off with a laugh from my right and a quiet snort from my left. Jen refused to meet my gaze when I turned her way.

“We know you, Jaune,” the elder of the pair shook her head before gesturing at a downed log. “Come on, let’s drag that back to camp. It should be good for tonight and tomorrow.”

Jen flicked her fingers towards the log in question and it lifted off the ground, surrounded by a nimbus of green Aura. “That’s probably overkill, but fuck it,” I shrugged. Once again, I was reminded that in Remnant not everything had to be done by hand if you had the right set of powers.

“Food?” the younger of the pair asked, showing no sign of exertion as she maneuvered the log back to camp.

“We could catch fish, but I kind of thought steak sounded nice,” I smirked.

“Steak,” the pair agreed.

I split the log down into sections when we made it back into camp and set fire to one of them as soon as Jen dropped it into the middle of the remains of the pit Penny and I had used last time. Some quick Conjuration had a grate to cook on top of over the fire. We sat on the logs left over from my last trip out here and waited for the fire to die down enough to toss the steaks onto. “So, you said you go back Monday?” I asked Joan.

“Yeah, I leave for work Monday. Technically, I won’t start until Wednesday. It’s not field work though, so I won’t be leaving Vale,” she admitted.

“Fun,” I murmured. “Can’t decide what’s worse. The idea of being out in the wilds surrounded by
“Grimm, or stuck in an office surrounded by paperwork.”

“Jaune?” Joan began, turning an amused look on me. “Shut up and watch the sunset with us.”

A glance at Jen showed the younger of the pair nodding. “As you wish.”

“Cut that crap out,” Joan chuckled, shifting closer and dropping her head against my shoulder. Movement on my left drew my attention to Jen, who mirrored her eldest sister. Shrugging mentally, I put my arms around the pair and pulled them closer.

Eventually, I remembered to throw the steaks on my conjured grill and we ate a quiet meal before I broke out the stuff for s’mores. “This is nice,” Jen said quietly, biting into one of hers as I finished off my first while slipping a second one into my Inventory. “Seems a shame to stop.”

“It’s for your own good,” Joan countered.

“I know,” Jen quietly answered. Finishing off the last of her smore, she turned to me and said, “Ready.”

“Where do you want to start?” I asked, releasing the mana holding the constructs I’d conjured to cook and eat with and allowing them to disappear.

Blue eyes shifted to the eldest sister and Jen shrugged. “The beginning again.”

“Okay,” I agreed, linking the three of us and casting.

**Telepathy** has leveled!

Perhaps it was stubbornness on her part, or maybe she just wanted Joan to understand exactly what it was she went through. Hell, it could have even been a little bit of pettiness and lingering resentment Iris’s second daughter had for the eldest. Jen was damned near impossible to get a read on, so I would likely never know and all I was left with was guesswork. Either way, the torrent of memories didn’t end with the first few she’d showed me—or did it move at the same pace it had before. The first couple of times we did this, Jen had been hesitant, reluctant to show me her past. Now? They
came in a torrent—a flash flood of memories she didn’t want tainted with the indigo haze of the Dust they had used on her as she all but shoved them down the link at us.

Much of what she showed us, I had expected—more of the same of what she’d showed me before, just in increasing doses. What I did not expect was when she moved on to ‘live fire’ exercises, as they called them—where someone with a mental Semblance was brought in and the recruits were shown images of random people and ordered to kill them. And not just kill them, but kill them in specific ways, under specific conditions, and in specific scenarios until they could do so on command.

Day s— maybe weeks— worth of material went by before Jen finally stopped sending anything. Everything Jen had showed me, she’d just repeated for Joan. It took me a moment to recover from the onslaught as the real world faded back in around us and I saw we had been at it for hours. Joan took slightly longer, but when she did finally shake it off, she stood and moved to sit on Jen’s other side and pulled her younger sister into a silent hug. ‘Give us a few?’ she sent, and I nodded.

Patting Jen’s thigh once, I pushed up off the log we’d been using as seating and crossed the camp, taking the time to stretch my legs and relieve myself in the woods, in addition to clearing out all the level notifications for Telepathy. Apparently, using it on both Joan and Jen at the same time increased the skill experience bonus—to the point where the skill had leveled enough to evolve again. I would have to take the time to select skill evolutions in the next day or so. After Conjuring water and digging soap out of my Inventory to wash my hands, I made a circuit of the camp and checked our perimeter. I found no Grimm inside my detection range—which wasn’t all that surprising, given that last time they seemed to avoid this place for at least a mile out.

Before heading back to camp, I pulled the smore I’d secreted away out of Inventory and turned towards where I knew Raven to be watching from. Wagging it at the portal I couldn’t see, I chuckled as a small red portal formed near my hand and a pale hand shot out of it to snag the treat before disappearing. “You’re welcome,” I said, shaking my head with a smile. “So, is there any way I could convince you not to follow me around at Beacon?”

There was no answer, not that I really expected one—ask stupid questions, get stupid answers, after all. “This would be a lot easier if we just swapped scroll numbers, you know? I could stop looking like a crazy man talking to thin air, for one.” Just as I was about to give that up and head back to camp, a small portal opened and a note dropped out. Snagging it out of the air, I smiled as I found a scroll number there in Raven’s chicken scratch. Entering it into my contacts list for my ‘Jaune’ scroll, I crumpled it up and set it on fire before dropping it. There were a few ways I could interpret that, really—but the one I eventually settled on was treating it as an olive branch.

Checking my HUD, I considered whether I’d given Joan and Jen enough time. ‘Eh, twenty minutes should be fine. And if it’s not, pretty sure they won’t turn down hugs if they’re still weepy.’ That thought in mind, I headed back towards the fire.
“Are you okay? I thought I felt…” Joan trailed off as I walked back into camp.

“Fine,” I nodded. “I figured I’d offer the perpetual voyeur some chocolate.” Even in the flickering light from the fire I could tell she had been crying, though her face was dry now. A glance at Jen showed she was either asleep or close to it. “You?”

“We’re okay,” Joan smiled, squeezing her sister once. “Better than we have been in a while, I think.” A curious look crossed her face as she asked, “‘Voyeur?’”

I turned a look on the portal I could sense. “Thought I told you about her,” I muttered, shaking my head. “Raven Branwen. Apparently she has a lot of time on her hands.”

Joan’s eyes narrowed before she sighed. “Right, her. Yeah, you told me. I forgot, to be honest. Could she, you know, not?”

“Sure,” I nodded. “If she decided to turn me in to Atlas for the bounty on Shiro’s head. How much is that, by the way?”

A slip of paper dropped into my lap and I picked it up. ‘15 million L.’

I whistled quietly before passing the note to Joan who read it then threw it in the fire. “Fuck,” she hissed.

“So, yeah! If all she’s doing is watching and not turning me in, I could give a fuck. Of course, that begs the question of what it is she wants from me, since it’s obviously worth more than several million Lien,” I shrugged. No answers were forthcoming, not that I expected them to be. Glancing at Jen, I asked, “Bed?”

“Bed,” Joan agreed, standing and pulling the shorter blonde to her feet.

I followed along to where Joan had placed our sleeping bags and rolled my eyes when I saw she had zipped all three of them together to make one large bag. Jen’s clothes disappeared as she dropped onto the bag and slipped inside and I resisted the urge to groan. ‘Well, it’s not like it’s the first time she’s slipped into my bed naked.’
Joan likewise simply unequipped everything and slipped into the bag, pulling Jen into the middle and meeting my eyes for a moment before patting the spot on Jen’s other side. Getting the hint, I followed the pair’s example and crawled into the tangle of limbs, spooning up against Jen’s back. Once more I realized how accustomed I had become to city life as the silence—save for the occasional owl, cricket, or wolf in the distance—closed in around us. Jen was asleep in moments, softly snoring against Joan’s breast and the elder of the pair joined her soon thereafter. The fire died down to embers, the night grew colder and eventually, sleep claimed me as well.

Despite her stated goal of spending the weekend doing nothing but getting laid, Joan never once made a move towards anything physical beyond the occasional kiss. Instead, we spent most of our time either delving into Jen’s memories or—when she grew tired of that—sparring. Well, if ‘sparring’ was code for ‘beating Jaune into the ground.’ I didn’t complain too much, since it brought my skill levels up. Sword Mastery finally topped sixty while Shield Mastery lagged behind in the mid-forties—mostly because I spent so much time running around as Shiro wielding one sword or another.

In the down time in between, I took the time to go through my menus and select Skill Evolutions and work through the Guild interface to assign perk points—things I had been putting off for a while now. Both of those seemed intentionally designed to frustrate me by forcing me to choose between two choices that both sounded good—but then, that was how most games with any kind of points-allotment system for gaining new skills or advancing current skills worked and I had been dealing with that kind of cheap tactic since before multiclassing became a thing in World of Warcraft. The only problem here was that I couldn’t exactly run up a new character to see what the other choices would have offered, and my choices seemed permanent. Whatever I picked, I’d have to live with. Such was life, I suppose.

“Remind me again why we’re not at home, screwing like rabbits before you have to leave tomorrow?” Neo asked, and I rolled my eyes as we made the hop across to another rooftop.

“You know why,” I turned an amused look on her. “Cinder’s hot and you want to see her fill out that little red number.”

Neo shook her head. “Nope!” she denied, pausing long enough to make our next jump, “if my libido had final say in it, we’d still be at home so I could see if it’s really possible to do what I saw in this anime thing this one time.” She turned her head enough to shoot me an amused look. “The things we do for you.”

“Yes, dear. I love you too,” I said, realizing when one of the girls was using my own lines against me. My mind was already conjuring up images of the sort of weird shit Neo could have seen and I
wasn’t entirely sure I even wanted to ask.

“I love hearing that. Tell me more,” the ice-cream themed girl beamed.

I snorted softly as we dropped to the ground outside Cinder’s temporary base. I had gotten a message from Cinder Saturday morning asking for a meeting with Neo that night. Thinking it wouldn’t hurt to put off Shiro ‘leaving’ another day, I’d asked if she could reschedule for Sunday. Surprisingly, Cinder had agreed. “Later. All joking aside, we’re here because you’d have needed to show up anyway to keep from pissing her off. May as well go together. Unless you’d rather have her pissy.”

“Not really,” Neo shook her head before a smirk crept across her lips. “Regardless of how good the sex would be.”

“I don’t think she looks at everything as an excuse for sex, dear,” I deadpanned, opening the door to Cinder’s shop and gesturing her inside.

Cinder looked up as Neo and I entered, one fine, dark eyebrow creeping towards her hairline as she saw me. “I thought you were leaving.”

I turned an amused look on Neo, who in turn put on her best ‘cat who ate the canary’ look. “Oh, I am. Someone delayed me a bit. Luckily, the schedule changed a bit on the client’s end, so I figured that it wouldn't hurt too much to add another day or two to getting out of town.”

“I see,” she nodded, then gestured towards one of the two love seats. She waited until Neo and I were seated before shifting her molten gaze across the room. Mercury and Emerald sat opposite us, and while it was clear that Emerald wasn't happy about me being there, she hadn't said anything either. “I'll get right to it, then. Tomorrow begins Phase Two of our Vale operation.”

Pointing to an envelope sitting on the small table in the center of the room, Cinder continued. “That envelope contains two international airline tickets. Emerald, Mercury, the two of you will be going to Mistral to make contact with our allies there. I’ve agreed to lend out your services for a few jobs in exchange for having them forge transcripts for you both, giving you cover identities as students of Haven Academy. Treat it as a learning experience and pick up everything you can while you’re there. I expect you back within a fortnight.”

Leaning back in her chair, Cinder crossed her legs and steepled her fingers as she shifted her gaze to Neo. “Neopolitan, I have need of your services as a thief. The White Fang's mishandling of the Dust
stockpile has set us back.”

Frowning, I asked, “How much are you paying for the job?”

With a hum and a glance at Neo, Cinder said, “I am willing to negotiate terms later.”

I shot a look at Neo, who nodded. “That’s fine. I’ll need to know the scope of the job before I name a price, anyway.”

“Tack on ten percent for me for loaning her out to you. Neo, you get the rest, naturally—since you’re the one doing the work here. So, how far back are we talking?” I asked, and Cinder shrugged.

“To be fair, not terribly. I moved several boxes of higher grade Dust out for my personal use, in addition to securing enough for Emerald, Mercury, and Neopolitan for the expected duration of the Vale operation. Mostly, the loss sets back the White Fang, and using them means we need to also arm them.”

I raised an eyebrow at that. “That was considerate of you. Neo and I do have our own stockpile, you know.”

Cinder sent me an amused look. “I assumed as much. However, it’s easier to plan for incompetence, failure, or outside influence and then be pleasantly surprised when things don’t go wrong than it is to fix such a mistake at the last minute.”

“Well, it’s nice to know you don’t generally expect us to fuck things up but are prepared in case the worst happens.”

Cinder nodded. “As I said, good help is hard to find.”

“Speaking of,” I began, “What about the White Fang? They can’t get their own Dust now that they’ve destroyed what we got for them?”

“My point still stands. I simply didn’t expect them to botch things this early,” she grumbled. “Providing Dust for them was part of the initial deal with Adam. I assure you, I tried everything short
of murder to explain that our part of the deal in securing their services was fulfilled and that they were responsible for the loss of materials. They refused to acknowledge it. In short, their answer was ‘No Dust, no job.’ Needless to say, that will not work. The Dust being destroyed still serves a purpose in resource denial—keeping it out of the hands of other forces in Vale, especially now with the Fox’s organization further straining the Dust supply—so, all things considered, it is not a total loss.”

Frowning, I asked, “And there’s no getting that shipment you sent off back?”

Cinder shook her head in answer. “Neopolitan, I want you to scout out locations with Dust stockpiles—stores, government stockpiles, known private caches, and so on—and draw up a plan to take them with a minimum of conflict. If we have to engage in combat we will, but I would like to avoid anything that would result in another loss of materials.”

Neo frowned, shifting her mismatched eyes to me before saying, “A total-stealth approach is likely going to be out, in some cases. It would be a good idea to avoid private Hunter caches, unless we know the Hunters in question are out of town. How difficult would it be to get a list of active Hunters in Vale?”

Cinder’s lips turned up into a smirk. “Not very.”

“With a list, I could case each residence individually and go from there. That won’t last for long, though. We might have a window of a week before they start returning and finding their caches broken into, then word will spread and they’ll likely try to lay a trap. The best approach will probably be to see who has the largest caches and hit those first. As for stores, the police are still on alert and staking those out, and as always the Fox is a wildcard and could show up at any time—and that’s ignoring the fact that with news of the heists and this month’s shipment being stolen, people are making a run on the few stores that we didn’t hit. I’d suggest just hitting the supply line instead, but someone,” Neo turned an amused look on me, “has been playing with trains lately, so security is going to be much tighter on those.”

“Why does everyone think I have some obsession with trains?” I muttered, shaking my head.

“Maybe they suspect you’re compensating for something,” Emerald snarked quietly, and I flipped her the bird in response.

“So, unless we’re willing to raise our perceived threat level from theft to murder, and get a proportionate response...” Neo led, drawing Cinder to shake her head.
“No. It would draw too much of the wrong sort of attention,” Cinder denied.

Nodding, Neo continued. “As for government storage units... maybe. They would be heavily guarded, especially given everything else going on. I doubt we could pull enough guards off of them to make a difference and they'll call in backup at the first sign of trouble, which would bring Hunters, cops, and maybe even the Fox down on us. I could hide a Bullhead or a truck with my Semblance, no problem. Even then, there's only so much we can grab at one time.”

“It's better than nothing and likely more than we would get from any private cache in a single job,” Cinder mused. “However, we may not have to. I may have the resources to forge orders to release Dust for transport off-site…”

“And we walk in the front door and take it, easy as you please,” Neo nodded.

“Maybe someone should volunteer to look into getting some while they’re in Mistral?” I suggested, shooting a look at Emerald and Mercury.

Cinder considered it a moment, then nodded, shifting her gaze to her minions. “See what you can find and get back to me.” She locked eyes with Emerald and added, “Show me you can work together and advance our goals of your own initiative.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Emerald quickly agreed.

I caught movement in the corner of my vision, drawing my eyes to my minimap and an icon I hadn’t seen before that had popped up— not at the edge of my detection range as someone should when approaching, but damn near on top of us, just across the street from the building. It looked familiar— but something about it seemed wrong. Before I could place it the radio kept in the corner of the room squealed out a burst of static as it turned on. ‘That can not be good,’ I mused.

“Weird,” Emerald muttered, as a song I recognized began to play.

‘Jaune?’ Neo sent across our link and I answered with a mental sigh.

‘Yeah. Looks like we have company coming. Check your minimap. It just appeared across the
And that was worrying, because it meant either there was another gap in my detection skills I was unaware of or something else was going on. I could think of at least a few possibilities off the top of my head: Aura Suppression, teleportation, or some sort of ability to hide from my Semblance’s scrying were the ones that came to mind though, because I had seen all of them in some form or another.

Sending me a covert look, Neo asked, ‘What are you thinking? Aura Suppression or something else?’

‘No fucking clue.’

Down below, the bell over the door chimed and the sound of boots echoed up the stairs.

‘Please allow me to introduce myself.

I’m a man of wealth and taste.

I’ve been around for a long, long year,

Stole many a man’s soul and faith.’

Cinder stood up from her seat as the boots grew closer, her eyes narrowing in a glare on the hallway, the red tracery on her dress lightning up in response to her Aura and warming the room slightly. Mercury and Emerald followed her lead and spreading out to either side of the entrance from the hall, moving into a position to allow for overlapping fields of fire. Neo and I stood as well, readying our own weapons but not drawing them yet. Neo frowned the moment we were able to pick out a third tap mixed in with the boots. Thump-thump-tap. Thump-thump-tap.

“Well, hello!” A familiar voice cheerily greeted from the hallway as he came into sight.

‘Pleased to meet you,

hope you guessed my name.
But what's puzzling you

is the nature of my game.'

BGM Image Song Unlocked! The Rolling Stones – Sympathy For The Devil

Tilting his bowler back, our guest grinned around the cigar between his lips. “I don’t know what that is, but it is catchy and I like it.”

Cinder’s molten eyes shifted between Neo, Emerald, and Mercury in confusion for a moment before she quickly schooled her expression. “Roman Torchwick.”

“Good guess,” he agreed, before Emerald hit the switch for the radio, shutting it off. “And you must be the one causing such a stir around Vale.” His head turned towards us and his eyes locked on my companion. “Neo! Good to see you again. I have to wonder though, why are you here? This,” he made a sweeping gesture to encompass the rest of us, “doesn’t seem like your usual crowd.”

The shorter girl at my side rolled her eyes. If she was thrown off by his presence, she hid it well—her only visible tell the hand she slipped into mine. “Hmm. Let’s see. Continue your small-time drug smuggling operation with the new guy in town kicking down doors and laying down the law and my partner having run off to who knows where with his tail between his legs… or find a new partner, drop the smuggling, and group up with someone with more imagination for jobs than ‘move in drugs and occasionally knock over a store.’”

“Ouch,” Roman winced. “That gets me right here,” he whined, one hand going to his heart. He sighed, shaking his head as his gaze shifted to me. “Replaced so easily…”

A glance at Cinder showed she had crossed her arms over her chest and was following the by-play. She met my eyes and on my raised eyebrow and subtle nod towards Neo, shook her head. ‘So, she wants to let it play out.’

“And made more in a month than you did in the entire time we worked together. The results speak for themselves,” Neo deadpanned.
Roman shook his head. “You know, I think that’s the most you’ve spoken to me in, well, ever.” A smirk crossed his face as he added, “Well, outside of the bedroom anyway.”

My hand twitched around Ascalon’s hilt. Neo, on the other hand, laughed. “Do you really want to go there, Roman? I’d reconsider if I were you.” The bowler-clad man opened his mouth to retort, only to pause and shake his head. “How did you survive?” she asked the question on all our minds. “We went there to break you out. Grimm tore everyone in that place to shreds.”

“You were worried about me? I knew you cared!” he grinned.

“Only worried that whatever Grimm ate you got indigestion,” Neo grumbled.

“Well, as you can see here I am—alive and very much not in shreds,” he grinned, gesturing down his suited form, looking exactly as he had the last time I’d seen him, when I had sent him off to Vacuo to get arrested.

Cinder spoke up, her voice cutting through the chatter, backed up with just enough Aura and Killing Intent to act as an attention getter—very much the same way I did on occasion, save that I used a different Intent most of the time. “That didn’t answer the question.”

Roman rolled his eyes. “ Spoil a man’s fun by taking all the mystery out of it,” he whined. “Do you think I tied my bed sheets together, lassoed a Griffin, and rode off into the sunset? No, that escape took planning and finesse. Also, bribery.”

“You paid a guard,” Mercury chuckled.

“Exactly,” Roman nodded before turning back to Cinder. “I heard you were looking for me.”

Cinder considered it a moment, sending a thoughtful look my way, before she smirked. “I have need of your services.”

“Sure, sure,” Roman nodded, moving to perch on the arm of the love seat nearest Neo, who moved around to my other side in response. “But first, introductions!”

Frowning, Cinder’s eyes narrowed. My own frown was hidden under my mask as what was so off about this finally registered. ‘He’s not afraid of her. At all. She can see it, and it’s pissing her off.’
Molten eyes cut to my red contacts for a moment before a smirk twitched the corner of her mouth upwards slightly. “You already know Neopolitan. With her is her partner, Shiro.” I knew when I was being thrown under a bus and I was not amused.

Roman turned an interested look on me, his green eyes sweeping down my form. “Yeah, not impressed. Really, Neo?” Sighing, Roman shook his head, gesturing for Cinder to continue.

“Mercury Black,” Cinder waved to the boy in question.

Roman hummed, meeting Mercury’s gaze. “Heard of your dad. Marcus, wasn’t it?” Mercury glared. “Heard he was a real asshole.”

“You have no idea,” Mercury deadpanned.

Roman shrugged before turning his gaze to Emerald. “Emerald Sustrai,” Cinder named her.

The redhead assessed the girl for a moment before nodding. “Thief,” he pointed at Emerald, “good thief,” another finger pointed at Neo, “assassin,” a gesture at Mercury, “either/or,” he flicked a finger at me, “and then there’s you and me.”

“All of the above and more,” Cinder smirked. “Cinder Fall.”

“Mm. So what do you need little old me for? I’m just another thief,” Roman shrugged, playing up the humble routine.


The bowler-and-coat clad thief shook his head, the end of his cigar flaring brightly as he pulled a drag before pulling it away from his lips. “Really? All my skills reduced to smash-and-grab tactics? I can do all of that, and more.”
“I certainly hope so, for your sake,” Cinder’s voice cut off any further argument. “What I need from you is simple. The execution, however, will be entirely up to you.”

As Cinder explained her needs to Roman, Neo sent me an unamused look. *You should have just killed him when you had the chance—hit him with Sleep and Poison when you put him on the flight to Vacuo, that way he would wake up dead.*

I blinked, turning to look at my partner. *‘I have no—’*

*‘Jaune, I know you better than you think. I’m not mad that you did it. It’s actually kind of flattering—especially knowing what I do now. You saw me and saw an opportunity to recruit me, then immediately acted on it. I like that. But damnit! You should’ve finished the job! Then I wouldn’t have to deal with this asshat while you’re playing with the others at Beacon.’*

I rolled my eyes. Roman interrupted our private mental conversation. “There’s two of them.”

Neo smirked. “It’s almost like he *understands* me.”

“You done rubbing it in?” I asked Neo, who shook her head.

“Not really. It’s fun, in a vindictive sort of way.”

Resisting the urge to sigh, groan, and/or roll my eyes I turned to Cinder. “Well, I think we’ll be going now. You have our numbers if you need us.”

Cinder stood as Neo and I did, before gesturing towards the hall. “I’ll see you out.”

As we left, Roman called, “Shiro, we should talk sometime! We should compare notes. I’ll need to know what you’ve hit so I’ll know what to avoid.”

“Leaving town for a job, sorry,” I denied.

Shrugging, Roman suggested, “Well, I’m sure Neo wouldn’t mind.”
I reached down and grabbed Neo’s hand as it twitched around the handle of her parasol and the blade popped out—apparently, she very much would mind spending any time with him. “You can’t kill him, dear. That would upset Cinder.”

The woman’s molten eyes turned to me and an amused look crept across her face, before she turned her gaze down to Neo. “At least wait until he no longer serves a purpose, or you have a replacement lined up.”

“And until then, he’s going to be insufferable,” Neo grumbled, retracting the blade as we made our way downstairs and out the door.

Cinder grabbed my free hand as we stepped outside, quietly closing the door behind us. She took a moment to look around before pulling me close, pulling my mask down, and kissing me—thankfully it was dark and Cinder had long since destroyed the street lights nearest her temporary base or I might have been worried about us being spotted. I pressed her flush against the door, which sent her legs wrapping around my hips. I felt one of Neo’s hands slip between us as she moved to my left. Cinder’s gasp into my mouth told me all I needed to know about where Neo’s hand had gone. ‘My turn,’ Neo sent.

I pulled back, breaking my kiss with Cinder, only for Neo to dart in, her lips and tongue replacing my own. Cinder’s eyes went wide for a moment before narrowing as she growled quietly. The brunette’s left eye erupted into ominous orange light and I grabbed Neo’s shoulder to pull her away—too late, as Cinder snagged Neo’s hand at the same time. Caught between just the taller woman’s pointer and thumb, and only for a moment, it was still enough for the smell of burned flesh to flood the area as my partner yelped and jerked her hand away—a pair of red burn marks conforming to the tips of Cinder’s fingers on either side of Neo’s hand.

“Play with fire, get burned,” the golden eyed woman warned as the flames left her eye.

Frowning, Neo turned an irritated look on Cinder. “I’m not just going to stand here with my hands in my pockets if you’re going to play with him in front of me.”

“I do not recall giving you permission to touch me,” Cinder countered. “In addition, you have had time with him for the last several days. I was getting in a goodbye and you intruded.”

Neo turned a look up at me and, as I watched, the burn marks disappeared—her Aura already at work. Seeing the direction of Neo's gaze, Cinder's gold eyes locked with my own. Looking between
the two women, I shook my head before addressing Neo. “Don’t look at me. You deserved that one.”

“But—”

“Personal space, dear. And you’ve been getting kind of handsy lately,” I pointed out, and Neo pouted.

Red lips pulled up into a smirk as Cinder said, “You’ve allowed her too much latitude.”

“Perhaps,” I agreed, meeting her gaze again with a flat look. “She went too far, this time, but she’s my subordinate and mine to discipline.” Cinder’s lips parted to say something but my finger pressing against them silenced her, while drawing an annoyed look in the process. “You were in the right this time—I’m not denying that. And you didn’t do any lasting damage, which I’m grateful for. Neo will keep her hands to herself,” I shot a look at the shorter girl, asking, “won’t you dear?”

For a moment she looked like she wanted to argue the point, but the ice cream themed girl eventually nodded. “Yeah. You’re right.”

Cinder sighed, unwrapping her legs from around around my waist. Once she had her feet under her, she turned an annoyed look on me. “Someone ruined the mood. I expect you to make it up to me when you return.” Turning her glare on Neo, she eyed the shorter woman as Neo scrutinized the place on her hand that Cinder had burned. “You and I will be having a long talk later.”

“Great,” Neo sighed. “That’ll be fun.”

Cinder loosed a sigh, bringing her palm up to rub her forehead. “How do you deal with her on a day-to-day basis?”

I turned a deadpan look on the woman in my arms. “A reward and punishment system. Of course, with Neo, normal punishments are also rewards, so you have to get creative. Threaten her ice cream and she usually behaves. That, or you can try bribery—ice cream and sex work.”

“Far too much latitude,” Cinder muttered.
Shrugging, I added, “Then again, that’s on a day-to-day basis. Usually, she’s not this bad.” Easing back from Cinder, I planted a quick kiss on her lips before pulling my mask back up. “Call me if she gets out of hand.”

Cinder turned an exasperated look on Neo. “I imagine if I did that, I would never get off the scroll.”

“I’m not that bad!” Neo complained.

Swatting the girl on the ass, I jerked my head towards the road. “Evidence points to the contrary. Come on, let’s get going.”

“Farewell,” Cinder murmured, her voice barely audible as she opened the door and slipped back inside, straightening her dress as she went.

As Neo and I took to the rooftops, I turned an amused look on her. “You just couldn’t resist, could you?”

“No,” Neo denied. “But getting to taste that would have totally been worth dealing with Roman and getting burned.” When I glared at her, she pouted. “Okay, yes, I went too far and I may have accidentally alienated Cinder. I’ve learned my lesson and I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry. You know the rule,” I countered.

Rolling her eyes, Neo parroted, “You break it, you fix it.” When I nodded, she sighed and said, “Fine. I’ll do what I can to rebuild that bridge if I didn’t accidentally burn it down.”

“What am I going to do with you?” I asked, affecting a put-upon tone.

Neo timed our next jump to land on my back, latching on and wrapping her legs around me. Her lips came down to play with my ear as I kept running. “Take me home and have hot, kinky sex with me? It’s my night, you know.”

Shaking my head, I asked, “How did you convince the twins to give you tonight?”

“It wasn’t easy,” Neo murmured. “They drive a hard bargain.”
It was around nine when Neo and I returned to Fox Hunt and made our way inside, where we found the others bustling about the kitchen. Raising an eyebrow, I shot a questioning look at Neo, who shrugged. “Don’t look at me.”

“It was my idea,” Joan said, opening the oven and checking on whatever she had in. “We were going to surprise you, but you’re early. So, surprise.”

Looking around the kitchen, I saw Blake putting together a salad while Melanie and Miltia worked on what looked like a pie of some sort for dessert. Penny gave me a hug before she began laying out plates on the table while Jen strolled in with an open bottle of wine in hand. “We have wine?” I asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Stole it from home,” Jen shrugged, handing me the bottle. “Mom’s favorite. Would you?”

Joan winced. “Oh, ouch. That stuff’s expensive. Mama Lily’s going to be pissed.” Licking her lips, she added, “On the other hand, it’s the good stuff, so it’s worth the eventual yelling.”

“Would I…?” I asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Chill it,” Jen answered. At my inquisitive look, she answered, “It’s been breathing.”

“If you say so. I know nothing about wine.” Nodding, I carefully used ice elemental Aura on it until the bottle frosted over then handed it back. Miltia slipped around Joan and put the pie in the oven as the blonde pulled out what looked like a casserole, followed by a loaf of bread. Turning an amused smile on me, she gestured at the table. “Sit down.”

Chuckling quietly, I dropped into the seat at the head of the table, Neo quickly claiming the space to my right as the others went about putting plates together and took their own seats before Joan finally claimed the one to my left. “No toast?” I asked, sipping at the wine Jen had brought back. ‘She was right, this is actually good.’

Looking out over the gathered girls who had already begun to dig in as conversations sprang up, Neo shook her head. “I don’t think so, dear.”
Shrugging, I followed their example and took up a fork. ‘Definitely going to have to try this recipe myself later,’ I mused.

Eventually, plates were cleared, glasses refilled, and pie was brought out—some sort of chocolate and nut confection I’d never had before but thoroughly enjoyed.

“What are you thinking about?”

“Hm?” I asked, pulled from my thoughts by Miltia's soft voice from my right, at Neo’s other side. Around us, the others continued their conversations as I watched, though more than one knowing look was cast our way.

“You were being quiet,” the short-haired twin pointed out.

I turned an amused look on her. I opened my mouth to make a smartass comment, but what came out instead was, “I was just thinking that there won't be much time for things like this after tonight, so I was enjoying it while we had it.”

“You do realize that Beacon is all of fifteen minutes away, tops,” Miltia pointed out.

I nodded. “True, but that doesn't mean that schedules won't be a problem.”

Not to be deterred, she countered, “We'll find time or we'll make it.”

“We will,” I agreed. There was really no arguing with that—in fact, I was pretty sure I had made that very argument myself at one point or another.

“Well, I don't know about the rest of you, but I'm ready to call it a night,” Neo leered in my direction and I rolled my eyes.

Melanie turned an amused look on Neo. “Only because you're getting antsy because it's your night.”

Neo shrugged, pushing away from the table and standing. “I'm not denying it.”
“Of course she’s not,” Joan snarked, but the smile on her face took any real bite out of the comment.

Neo stuck her tongue out and I stood to follow her. “We’ll get the dishes,” Miltia said before I could move my stuff to the sink.

“Night, then,” I smiled at the short-haired twin as Neo practically dragged me towards the bedroom. A new icon showing up on my zoomed in minimap drew me up short and I nodded towards the hall to the salle port. The door opened and Yang strolled in, freezing for a second as she spotted us. A deer-in-the-headlights look crossed her face for a moment before it was replaced by one of determination and she closed the rest of the distance between us.

Seeing the serious look on her face, I asked, “Yang, what’s up? Something wrong?”

The blonde shook her head, “No, nothing’s wrong.”

“If you’re sure,” I began, and she nodded. Gesturing towards the kitchen, I grinned. “You missed supper, but there are still leftovers if you’re hungry. There’s pie.”

Beside me, Neo asked, “Isn’t Ruby back by now? We kind of thought you’d be home, spending the night with your family before tomorrow.”

Yang bit her bottom lip, chuckling quietly. “Yeah, Ruby and Uncle Qrow just got back—they were running a bit late. As soon as she got back in, Ruby wanted to come into town to restock her ammo for school tomorrow and I realized there was something I needed to do.”

I exchanged a look with Neo, who shrugged in confusion. “What do—” Neo began, trailing off as Yang grabbed the top of my jacket and yanked me in to crush her lips to mine. “Oh. Oooh!”

Between Cinder and Neo earlier—before Cinder got pissed, that is—along with the fact that I had wanted her from the moment I laid eyes on her, I was a hair’s breadth from saying ‘fuck it.’ Pulling back slightly, I tried to reason with her. “Ruby—”

“Will get over it,” Yang interrupted. “We both know what we want. Does the order matter?”
'To her,’ I thought. ‘Though to be honest, I’m tired of waiting myself.’

Reaching down, I cupped the blonde’s ass and lifted her up. Yang’s legs wrapped around my waist and I walked us towards the bedroom. Neo followed us inside, closing the door behind us, before turning an amused look on Yang. “No.”

In my arms, Yang blinked. “No?”

“No no no,” Neo shook her head. “We have a schedule now. It’s my night.”

“But—but,” Yang spluttered, tightening her arms around my neck.

“Nuh uh. Respect the schedule,” Neo denied, crossing her arms over her chest. Turning her head away, she observed Yang and I from the corner of her eye. “However, I think exceptions can be made. I am not beyond being bribed…” Her playful mood slipped for a moment and her eyes locked on me, her nerve seeming to waver.

‘What’s up?’ I sent in question, earning both a mental and audible sigh from the shorter woman.

‘I’ve already been scolded once tonight for screwing up and overstepping. Wouldn’t want to alienate Yang, too,’ she pointed out—oddly hesitant, considering it was Neo.

I shook my head. “Well, it is your night. So long as Yang wants to…” I turned a questioning look on Yang.

Yang rolled her eyes. “I’ll buy you enough ice cream that they’ll have to roll you out like a ball.”

Neo considered it for a moment, her playful mood back as she became all smiles again. “Mm. Tempting…” she nodded, then shook her head. “But no. Try again. Think more along the lines of ‘instant gratification.’”

Yang blinked twice before lilac eyes shifted to meet my blue. “Does she means sex?”
“It is Neo,” I sighed. “And as much as I really, really want to throw you down on the bed and bury myself to the hilt in you,” Yang shuddered slightly in my grip at the words, her legs wrapping tighter around my waist as she ground her crotch against the bulge in my pants, “she has a point. The schedule is there for a reason.”

“You’d like nights of your own, right?” Neo asked, earning a slow nod from Yang. “And you’d be miffed if someone else barged in on yours, right?”

Yang shrugged. “Well, yeah. There are definitely times I’d want him to myself—I’m kind of selfish like that,” she admitted. “The rest of the time, it’d depend on who it was I guess.”

Neo nodded, grinning. “Exactly! You see where I’m going with this.”

Despite her earlier bravado, Yang suddenly looked flustered. “But… it’s my first time.”

I carefully schooled my features. ‘That is not what I expected. At all. Not that I thought she was a slut, but the way Ruby talked—and the way Yang acts—I expected her to have had some experience. Well, their loss, my gain.’

Neo, however, leered. “We’ll be gentle. Decide now.”

Yang closed her eyes, tensing in my arms before going momentarily limp. Finally, she sighed a quiet, “Fuck it.” Grabbing the hair at the back of my head, she brought her lips to mine again, the kiss much slower this time.

“I’ll take that as a ‘yes,’” Neo chuckled. I felt her hand on my back, pushing me towards the bed. “Don’t just keep her to yourself, my love.”

I rolled my eyes as I lowered Yang and myself onto the bed, my body pressing hers down into the mattress. Breaking the kiss with Yang, I turned an amused look on Neo. “Jealous?”

“Absolutely,” she agreed, darting in and locking lips with the blonde, who made a soft noise of appreciation.

“Insatiable,” I muttered. Shaking my head, I reached down and yanked off Yang’s boots, followed
by her socks. Neo, thinking along the same lines, already had the blonde’s jacket open and was stripping her out of it. Undoing Yang’s belt, I grabbed it and her shorts and yanked down. The shorts were halfway to her knees before I realized that Yang had gone commando, and that for all her protesting earlier, she was clearly turned on by the situation.

As soon as Neo had Yang’s top off Neo’s outfit disappeared, unequipped to her Inventory. “You know, I think I’ve changed my mind. Maybe I don’t mind sharing my first time,” Yang commented, eyeing Neo up and down.

“Good, because it’s too late to back out now,” Neo grinned teasingly, before shoving the taller blonde back onto the bed. Turning to face me, she smirked and shifted to straddle herself over Yang, her knees on either side of the blonde’s head. Yang was not slow on the uptake, as she grabbed Neo’s hips and pulled her downwards. Neo’s eyes closed for a moment and a quiet sigh escaped her lips. “Oh, that is nice,” she murmured, her hips grinding back and forth as Yang’s tongue delved into her depths.

Taking Yang’s calves in my hands, I lifted her legs and knelt, dropping her knees over my shoulders. Reaching down, I gently spread her open and took in the sight of her—all pink flesh and glistening, puffy lips. My mouth watered at the sight and I dove in, my tongue running over her from bottom to top, filling my mouth with the taste of honeysuckle. My tongue circled her clit as I reached the top before I brought my lips down on it, gently sucking it into my mouth. “Oh Dust,” Neo hissed softly as Yang’s muffled moans reached my ears. “Whatever you’re doing, keep it up.”

I flicked and rolled my tongue, batting Yang’s clit back and forth for a moment before pulling away to kiss, suck, and gently nip at her lips. I could hear the whine from Yang even muffled as she was, with her face buried in Neo’s snatch. I paid attention as I worked, learning what best drew out the sorts of sounds I most enjoyed hearing from a woman or caused her body to shudder and thighs to go tight against my head. Above me, Neo panted under Yang’s attention. I felt hands on my head, fingers wrapping in my hair and looked up to see Neo leaning forward, pulling my head up and into a kiss.

Yang whimpered at the loss of attention and Neo smirked against my mouth, before easing herself off the blonde’s face and turning around to instead straddle her waist. Neo leaned forward, her breasts crushed against Yang’s as she dove in to kiss the taller blonde. While Yang was distracted, I grasped my cock and lined up, running it up and down her slit then slid slowly inside of her. Like Cinder, she was incredibly hot-natured, and her channel clamped down tightly around me as I filled her, clenching around my length. As soon as I hit bottom, I took Yang’s calves in my hands and leaned forward until my knees bumped against the bed, forcing her to bend and pressing Neo down harder against the blonde as I leaned in and kissed the back of her neck, drawing an appreciative sound from her throat in response.

I looked up to see Neo had trapped Yang’s arms above her head, releasing the blonde’s lips to kiss
her cheek, jaw, neck, and ear. Lilac eyes met my blue and Yang loosed a quiet, breathy gasp as I
drew slowly back and started a slow rhythm back and forth. Yang’s eyes went half-lidded when Neo
opened her mouth and bit down on the blonde’s neck, sucking hard and doing her best to leave a
hickety despite Aura—we’d proven it could be done with each other and the twins, it just took a bit
more effort to do so.

Not wanting to leave Neo out of the fun, I let go of Yang’s right leg, pulling it out straight before
reaching forward and taking hold of Neo, shifting her off of Yang to the blonde’s left. I settled Neo
onto her right side and turned Yang onto her left so they faced each other. Getting the idea, Neo
pulled her left knee up to her chest, leaving her pussy exposed for my hand, which immediately went
to work stroking her folds. Neo let out a surprised sound when Yang twisted her hands free, one
hand going down to join mine in playing with Neo’s slit while the other roughly grabbed the shorter
girl’s breasts. Where I had opted for the slower approach, Yang’s fingers invaded Neo’s snatch
ruthlessly, three fingers immediately sliding in and pumping hard enough to draw a lewd, wet sound
as she did.

Neo whimpered, clinging tightly to the blonde and burying her face against Yang’s breast, inhaling
one of the smirking blonde’s nipples as she did— the sudden reversal of aggressor and aggressor
not bothering the ice-cream themed girl in the least. “H-harder, Jaune,” Yang demanded softly as
Neo bit down, eliciting a pinch from Yang in response, which Neo seemed to enjoy if her grin
around the blonde’s tit was any indication. Neo’s free hand trailed down to play with Yang’s clit,
occasionally brushing the top of my shaft as I split the blonde’s lips with my thrusts.

Seeing as Yang had Neo’s slit otherwise occupied, I took Yang’s leg with my right hand and used
the left to reach up and fist my hand into the hair at the back of Yang’s head. Pulling her hair hard
easy to draw her head back, I thrust harder, my hips slamming into the blonde’s ass with an
audible slap. Yang’s eyes—having gone red the moment I yanked her hair—rolled back as Neo took
ruthless advantage, abandoning the breast she had been suckling in favor of diving in to kiss and nip
at the blonde’s exposed throat. Yang grunted quietly in time with my thrusts, her breasts
bouncing back and forth from the force of it. Unable to take it any longer, the blonde’s pussy clamped down
hard on my cock as she came around me, her body shaking as she pulled Neo in tight and damn near
buried her fist in the smaller girl’s snatch.

Neo squealed, her hands moving to wrap around Yang’s midsection as her hips twitched. Turning a
pitiful look up at me, she whimpered, “So close. Don’t leave me like this.”

“I should,” I threatened, grinning down at the girl.

Leaning down, I drew Yang into a short kiss as she tried to regain her senses. Pulling slowly out of
the blonde, I carefully extricated her hand from Neo’s slit before rolling the blonde onto her back.
Taking hold of Neo’s hips, I forced her to straddle Yang again, pushing her down and taking a fistful
of her hair as I had Yang. Lining up, I slammed inside the smaller girl, mildly surprised to find that
she was no looser from having Yang’s fist nearly buried inside her a moment ago. Shrugging it off, I pulled her head back and fucked her just as hard as I had Yang, only with none of the buildup. Below her, the blonde had recovered and leaned up, capturing one of Neo’s swinging breasts with her mouth in a reversal of Neo’s earlier treatment of her—including more than one bite if Neo’s reactions were anything to go by. Neo didn’t last more than a minute like that before she cried out, her hands going around Yang, her nails dragging down the blonde’s back to little effect as she came.

Smirking down at the panting, quivering mess I’d reduced Neo to, Yang shifted her gaze to meet mine before asking, “Did you finish yet?”

“No, not quite,” I shook my head as an amused smile played across my lips. If she thought we’d be done any time soon, then she was in for a pleasant surprise.

“Good,” Yang grinned, grabbing hold of Neo and shoving her to the side, where the collapsed on the bed, whimpering as her body jerked the moment my cock left her. “Come here,” Yang demanded, moving forward until my cock nearly brushed her face. Reaching out, she took my shaft in hand and licked up the underside of my length. “Mm,” she hummed at the mixed taste of herself and Neo, before engulfing my cock and reaching out to fondle my balls. Her tongue swirled around my cock as she bobbed up and down, sucking so hard it felt like she was trying to pull my soul out through my dick. What she lacked in experience, Yang made up for in spades with enthusiasm.

Reaching down, I threaded my hands through her hair. Like Neo before me, I wasn’t too far off from my own peak. Her lilac eyes locked with mine the entire time as she did her best to inhale my cock. “Yang,” I warned, my hands tightening in her hair as I resisted the urge to simply pull her down and fuck her face.

“Mhmm,” Yang hummed, smirking up at me around my cock and sucking harder, which I hadn’t thought possible.

Neo, having caught her breath, moved shakily to lean against Yang’s side. Reaching behind the blonde, she grasped Yang’s head and pushed her forward, directing the blonde’s head on my shaft. “Let her have it, Jaune,” Neo encouraged. That was the last little bit I needed as I came, filling Yang’s mouth, forcing her to quickly swallow to keep from losing it. “That’s it, drink it all down,” Neo murmured, pressing a kiss to the side of Yang’s lips around my cock. Pulling Yang’s head back off my shaft before she could swallow the last of my seed, Neo quickly met Yang’s lips, her tongue delving into the blonde’s mouth and apparently seeking out her share. I watched, entranced, as the pair shared a sloppy, stringy kiss—eagerly cleaning each other’s lips and mouths off as they went.

When Neo finally broke the kiss with a contented sigh, Yang cast a glance down to my cock—which stood in proud salute. “Already?” she asked, blinking.
“Yeah, it’s kind of ridiculous, even for a guy with Aura,” Neo agreed. “I’ve never seen him actually fail to get it up for another round.”

“Well,” I murmured, “there was that one time—"

“Doesn’t count. We did our best to tag-team you and ride you into the ground,” Neo countered. “You were out of Aura.”

Shrugging, I asked Yang, “When were you planning to go home?”

The blonde grinned. “Some time before midnight?”

I traded a look with Neo, who shrugged. “Works for us,” I said, Neo half a beat behind me.

“So,” Neo began, drawing out the word and turning a leer on Yang. “How do you feel about anal?”

Yang blinked, then smirked. “Only if I get to do you first. What do you say, Jaune? Make her the meat in the middle?”

From the way Neo’s eyes lit up, I knew she wouldn’t turn that down with a gun to her head. “I’ll go get the toys,” she said, bouncing up off the bed.

Yang blinked, then turned a worried look my way. “Uhh, Jaune? I was joking. She knows I was joking, right?”

I shook my head, reaching out to rest my hand on her shoulder. “It’s entirely too late for that now. You’ll quickly learn not to suggest sex acts around Neo—especially in the form of any sort of bargain, bet, or dare—unless you’re willing to ante up.”

“But—but,” Yang began, “it’s my first time…”
“We’ll be gentle,” I grinned.

The blonde shot me a glare. “You lied about that before,” she accused.

I shrugged. “You told me to stop being gentle, and I seem to recall you enjoyed it.”

Yang opened her mouth to protest, then shut it. “Damn. I can’t argue that.” Sighing, she shrugged. “Oh well, I suppose I don’t mind losing all my cherries in one night.” Looking suddenly bashful, she asked, “You’ll do it, right?”

“No of course,” I agreed. “I wouldn’t let Neo mishandle you your first night out.”

“Thanks,” Yang murmured, before turning to shot a suspicious look at me. “Wait, what do you mean, ‘your first night out?’ Does that mean you’ll let her mishandle me later?”

Grinning, I nodded down at her. “That was what I implied, yes.”

“Not sure whether I’m looking forward to it or dreading it,” the blonde muttered. A moment later, her lips were stolen in a kiss as Neo returned. Yang gasped into Neo’s mouth as the smaller girl reached down and slid something up into the blonde’s sopping cunt. Pulling away, Yang looked down and eyed the golden-yellow toy protruding forward from between her lips, the end of which glistened in the low light of the room with a sheen of fresh lube. “…Do I even want to know why you have that in my color?”

“Probably not,” I deadpanned as Neo giggled.

Moving up onto the bed, Neo dropped down to all fours and wagged her ass at Yang. “Well? Come on, we don’t have all night,” she said, giving her own ass cheek a smack.

Yang’s eyes narrowed before she turned to me and asked, “Is it alright if I ‘mishandle’ her?”

I snorted softly. “Please. Abuse her. There are few ways she doesn’t enjoy.”
“Hey!” Neo complained. “That’s not true—UE!” she protested, her voice going up an octave as Yang forced her way into the smaller girl. “Oooh, Dust that’s nice. What are you waiting for, Jaune?”

Rolling my eyes, I moved around to Neo’s front. Looking back at Yang, I hummed. “I’ve got an idea. Back up a bit,” I said, directing the blonde back off the bed and onto her feet. With a bit of juggling, I got Yang in place with Neo held suspended by her knees, her legs spread wide and exposing her slit for the world to see. Standing as well, I maneuvered the smaller girl down a bit before sinking my shaft into her tight cunt.

Neo’s arms and legs immediately went around me as she moaned into my ear. “So full,” she sighed, planting a kiss against my neck as her hips began moving back and forth.

Yang watched carefully as she thrust into Neo, knowing she would be next but still obviously enjoying the sight of her yellow toy disappearing into Neo’s ass. “Yeah, totally worth sharing it.”

I woke in the middle of a tangle of limbs. Yang nestled in my arms, her face pressed against my chest as she snored softly. Behind the blonde, Neo spooned up against her and Miltia behind Neo. A glance back showed Blake pressed into my back, sleeping soundly, with Melanie behind her. ‘Definitely need a bigger bed,’ I mused, not seeing Jen or Joan anywhere.

The answer to that question came as I realized what had woken me up—the smell of breakfast cooking. A soft knock at the door preceded Jen poking her head in. Meeting my gaze, she smiled softly. “Breakfast is almost ready. You should shower first.”

“Don’t want to get up,” Blake groaned quietly from behind me, shifting to rub her face against my back.

Jen left, closing the door behind her, and I sighed. Glancing at my HUD and seeing it was just before seven, I sighed. “Everyone going to Beacon needs to get up and get showered.”

Yang groaned and stirred in my arms. “M’comfortable. Five more minutes.”

“No more minutes. Come on, get up,” I said, shifting out from between Blake and Yang. Reaching out, I took both their hands and hauled them upright.
Yang sleepily rubbed her eyes before realizing where she was. Looking to her right, she spotted Blake in all her naked glory. Likewise, Blake took a long eyeful of the blonde. “Oh come on. You’ve showered together. It’s nothing you haven’t seen before,” I groaned.

“It’s different now,” the pair countered simultaneously, before turning to look at each other. A grin broke out across Yang’s lips as Blake smiled.

Glancing at the twins and Neo, who were still sound asleep, Blake smirked and held out a fist towards Yang, who raised an eyebrow. “What’s this?”

“Rock, paper, scissors. To see who gets to shower with Jaune,” Blake explained. “If you don’t hurry, one of them will wake up and we’ll have to fight them for it. Pretty sure one of the twins cheats, somehow.”

Yang frowned, sliding out of bed and heading to the bathroom. I watched her go, opening the door and looking in. “Looks big enough for all of us.” She did her best impression of one of Neo’s leers as she added, “If we’re comfortable with each other.”

Blake rolled her eyes. “There’d barely be enough room to move.”

Yang snorted softly. “Screw that.” Moving over to the bed, she grabbed my hand and Blake’s and hauled us off the bed. “Come on, let’s go try it out.”

Two near accidents later, the pair were convinced not to try it again until I replaced the shower with a larger model, but not entirely disappointed as they simply took turns and traded off—Blake going first, then watching while drying herself as I nailed Yang to the wall. We left the bathroom to find the bed empty. Trading a shrug between us, we equipped our gear and headed into the kitchen, where we found Melanie, Miltia, and Neo seated at the table in various nightgowns. Penny, Jen, and Joan were fully dressed—apparently having gotten up well before the rest of us.

“We’ve been meaning to replace that shower for a while,” Melanie drawled as we sat down. “Who fell?”

“Both of them,” I rattled the girls out, earning a pair of swats from Blake and Yang as they sat down to either side of me. “So violent.”
“Bite me,” Blake glared my way.

Smirking, I leaned over and kissed the faunus girl’s neck right where I knew she liked it, before biting down. Blake shuddered slightly, her eyes going half-lidded and her ears drooping slightly. “You should know better than to make requests like that by now,” Miltia snickered, waving her scroll. “I’m having the Maintenance Department schedule replacing our shower. Anything else we should do while we’re at it?”

“Yeah, a bigger bed. Just get a second one like that and put them up together,” I suggested, digging into the muffins on my plate.

“We do keep winding up in piles of limbs,” Melanie nodded. “It’d be nice to stretch out and not elbow someone in the face for a change.”

Looking up from her plate, Joan asked, “Jaune, you do have all your school materials, right?”

I blinked, then frowned. “What?”

“No,” I realized. I had been too busy and it had slipped my mind. Rolling for bullshit, I shrugged. “I thought it would all be done by scroll.”

“Bullshit,” Neo, Melanie, and Miltia all called at the same time.

Sighing, I palmed my face and turned an amused glare on the trio. “Thanks for that.”

Joan rolled her eyes. Opening her Inventory, she dug out a black backpack, complete with the Beacon logo. She passed it to Jen, who passed it to Melanie, Blake, to me. Looking down at the bag, I could tell it was clearly not new—but it was sturdy enough that it looked like it would last another few years. “Luckily, I figured something like this would happen. You’re welcome. While you were out last night, I had Jen retrieve that from home and picked up supplies.”

“Your old bag?” I asked, spotting her sigil—a violet knight’s larkspur—sewn into the side.
“Yeah,” she nodded, then pointed at the sigil. “You can remove that if you want.”

Shaking my head, I grinned. “Nah, I’ll leave it. Though I’ll probably add my own, later on.” A thought occurred and I snapped my fingers. “Speaking of,” I stood and made my way over to the phone mounted on the wall. Picking it up, I dialed the number for requisitions.

“Requisitions Office,” a woman answered after only a couple of rings.

“Yeah, I need an angle grinder with grinding and buffing discs and… Hang on.” I muted the phone and turned to the others. “Going to remove the Arc sigil and put on my own. Color ideas?”

“Green,” the twins synced.

“Black,” came the answer from Blake.

“White,” Neo countered.

Yang, of course, voted, “Yellow.”

“Blue,” Joan and Jen suggested. Jen gestured for Joan to continue and the eldest blonde pointed at the ribbon tied around my waist as a sash—looking like a blue version of the one Pyrrha wore in canon, save that my ribbon was shorter.

Penny hummed, tilting her head and smiling. “Red.”

I rolled my eyes at the wide variety of suggestions before turning back to the phone and unmuting it. “Black, violet, and blue. I’ll text the exact shades to your department scroll. How quick can you get that to me?”

“Sure. What department is this?” the woman on the other end asked. “And where are we delivering it?”

I chuckled softly. “What’s your Caller I.D. say?”
“Officers’ Quarters,” she answered after a moment’s pause to check.

“Command Staff. White Fox. Officer’s Quarters.”

There was a quiet ‘eep!’ from the other end of the line, followed by something that sounded like ‘rightaway!’ and a click as the line disconnected. Neo shook her head. “You’re going to scare the staff if you keep that up.”

“Says the woman who hired me a secretary based on her fuckability,” I deadpanned, opening up my black scroll and sending off the color pallet codes to the number listed on the directory printed beside our hard-line phone.

Neo smirked but didn’t say anything. I rolled my eyes and returned to my seat, finishing off my breakfast just in time for the base phone to ring. I checked it, finding that it was one of the guards stationed at the salle port, letting me know my ‘box of stuff’ had arrived. Rolling my eyes, I changed over to my Fox gear set and went to retrieve the stuff in question. Once back inside, I slipped into our project room and created an ID to keep from getting paint or metal shavings everywhere. Changing outfits again to my ‘Beacon’ set, I dropped the box on a table and pulled my primary shield off. Expanding the shield and dropping it on the table, I pulled the grinder out of the box, attached an abrasive disc, and plugged it in. A high pitched whine filled the room before I carefully applied the grinder to my shield. There was little in the way of sparks, but the painted on Arc family crest came off cleanly. The moment it was off, I got a Semblance notification.

Would you like to remove this Sigil? Y/N

“Yeah, that was kind of the point of grinding it off,” I deadpanned. Selecting ‘Yes,’ I watched as what few scratches I had made in the shield’s surface disappeared while little flecks of yellow paint that I had missed also vanished. Shrugging, I put away the sander and focused on Conjuration. What I wanted was fairly simple—a stencil, with the shapes I had in mind cut from it. My magic responded and a small square of iron appeared in my hands. Centering the stencil on the shield, I took the black paint out first. Laying a good coat on the center of the sigil, I followed it with the violet and blue around the exterior. As soon as I finished, I got another notification.

Would you like to make this your new Sigil? Y/N

“Yes,” I rolled my eyes, selecting the correct button.
I blinked. “Yeah, I believe so.” Selecting the choice, I watched as the Arc family sigils on my armor—on the breastplate, the left bicep, and my Arclance badge—were replaced with the new sigil. Pulling the stencil off my shield, I saw that the hack job I’d done of it had been fleshed out into something that looked professional and polished to a shine. I wouldn’t even need to use the buffing disc. “Very nice,” I mused. A glance at my minimap showed my sigil had changed there as well and I chuckled. Tossing the grinder and paint back into the box and letting the Conjured stencil dissolve, I broke the ID and swapped gear again to drop off the box and ask that its contents be returned to their respective departments. Heading back into the kitchen, I switched into my Jaune set again.

“Well?”

“What is it?” Penny asked, and I grinned.

“A black hole.” Or at least a modified version of one of the icons from the Mass Effect series. The end result was a black central circle with vectors leading inwards in alternating blue and violet—the same colors as my sash and Joan’s larkspur. Glancing at my HUD clock, I winced. “So, we ready to go? We should make the next shuttle there if we hurry.”

The girls all stood, Yang and Blake performing last-minute checks of their Inventories to make sure they had everything. Yang’s eyes went wide and she groaned before fishing out her scroll.

“Problem?”

“Yeah,” Yang drew the word out. “I knew I forgot something.” Seeing our questioning looks, she chuckled. “I left my luggage for Beacon at home. I had intended to go home at some point last night, but we see how that worked out,” she stuck her tongue out at me. “And I’ve got like thirty texts and about as many missed calls from dad and Ruby. And… one from Uncle Qrow.”

“Well, shit,” I sighed. “Do we need to swing by Patch and pick up your gear?”

Yang bit her lip and shook her head. “Nope. Uncle Qrow brought it for me. With Ruby.”

“Oh, ouch. So, should we be planning for cat-bag exodus?” Neo chuckled.

“Probably,” Blake deadpanned, rolling her eyes at Neo’s choice of wording.
Sending off a quick set of texts, Yang pocketed her scroll. “I guess we’ll just have to wing it. You ready?”

No longer distracted by Yang’s little crisis, Neo, Melanie, and Miltia dove in for kisses. When those three were finished, I found a fourth waiting behind them in the form of Penny. Raising an eyebrow at the gynoid, I smiled down at her and asked, “Yes?”

“I want a kiss too,” Penny pouted.

Bending down slightly I kissed the girl on the forehead, earning a blush in response, followed by a hug that threatened to crush my ribs. “Air! Penny, air!” I choked out.

“Sorry, Jaune!” Penny chirped, releasing me.

Taking a deep breath of sweet, sweet oxygen, I reached down and ruffled the gynoid’s hair. “It’s fine. No harm, no foul.” Turning to Neo, Melanie, and Miltia, I said, “I’ll call tonight and try to swing by this weekend.”

“It shouldn’t be so busy that you won’t be able to, this being the first week and all,” Joan nodded. “You should be okay to slip back into Vale for a while.”

“I’ll put it on the schedule,” Miltia smiled, and I nodded.

Sparing a moment to kiss Joan and hug Jen, I changed to my ‘Fox’ gear yet again. Taking the clue, Blake equipped one of the masks and Fox Hunt uniforms I’d given her. Yang, having come in her civilian clothes, didn’t bother changing as I lead them through the salle port and down to the parking garage below. “Blake, you good to ride with Yang?”

Turning a critical eye on the bike, Blake nodded. “Sure.”

“Okay. I’ll meet you halfway and ride with you the rest of the way,” I said as the blonde climbed onto her bike and passed Blake a helmet, which she traded for her mask after looking around to make sure we weren’t seen. “Make sure you don’t forget to change outfits on the way. Don’t want to show up dressed like that,” I pointed out and the faunus girl nodded.

Yang grinned at me before flipping her visor down. “If you can keep up,” she taunted before Bumblebee roared out of the garage. Throwing on Wings and my stealth spells, I followed them out
before turning on a direct path for the transit hub. Finding a blind alley along the way, I dropped down and switched gear one final time back to my Beacon set—once more weighing the pros and cons of destroying the CCTV system for personal convenience. Pulling the compacted badge that was the Arclance off my belt, I hit the button to convert it and tossed it down before climbing onto the heavily modified bike—just in time to see Yang go flying by the mouth of the alley on the road, Blake on the back in her usual outfit so I assumed they had already stopped for her to change gear. Rolling my eyes, I gunned the throttle and slipped into traffic, following the blonde and engaging in a short game of chase along the way.

Yang parked Bumblebee and I stopped beside her, hopping off my own bike and storing it back in its place on my belt. Yang shot the badge a jealous look. “I so want one of those.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” I send her a smile. I’d already planned on getting them all similar bikes at some point—that could make for a decent set of Christmas presents. Or whatever passed for Christmas around here. I doubted it’d be this year, though—pretty much everything Fox Hunt made would have to go back into paying off what we’d borrowed, maintenance, and so on, so unless I went out specifically hunting down Grimm to cover the costs that wasn’t happening. At most, I might be able to use my personal funds to get one more, but it’d come close to wiping out what I had. ‘Fast transportation is worth it, though. With two real ones, I can dupe them using an ID into four—enough for two per team.’

Gesturing towards her bike, I asked, “Getting your dad to take it back?”

Yang snorted. “Dust no. I’ll have Uncle Qrow get it since he’s here.”

“It sounds like there’s a story there,” Blake said, and Yang nodded.

“Oh, you have no idea. Let me tell you about the time dad broke my bike,” Yang deadpanned as we headed for the entrance.

Spotting the familiar form of Qrow leaning against the wall, I met the man’s eyes as he glanced between me and Yang and sent me a knowing look. “Uhh, hi Uncle Qrow,” Yang began and Qrow snorted softly.

“Forget something, kiddo?” he asked, gesturing to the bags at his feet.

Yang sighed, nodding as she bent down and slung her backpack on before hefting a much larger
duffel bag. “Yeah, sorry.”

Reaching out, the taller man ruffled the blonde’s hair, earning an annoyed look but no real rebuke from her. “I’m not the one you have to apologize to. Your dad was worried. I told him you were probably out with a friend, but you know how he gets. Next time…”

“Call,” Yang agreed, earning a nod from her uncle. She pulled the taller man into a hug and pulled back before handing him the keys to her bike. “Please don’t scratch it.”

“Oh don’t worry, I won’t take it to tonight’s demolition derby,” he joked, earning a growl in answer. Shifting his gaze to me, he said, “I need to talk to your friend for a minute.”

I nodded and allowed myself to be lead off to the side, out of earshot from the others. Just to make sure no one was listening, I surreptitiously cast Muffliato around us. “If this is about Yang—”

“Save it,” he shook his head. “You’re adults and her dad and I already warned you what would happen if you hurt her.” I nodded at that and he said, “Meeting’s today, an hour after Oz gives his little speech. You need to find a way to get away from the crowd and the Fox needs to show up.”

I nodded, pulling out my scroll and shooting a text off to Neo. “I’ll switch places with Neo and make sure she hangs around with Yang or Ruby so we can switch back.”

“Might want to have an escort or security detail to help with that,” he suggested, and I nodded.

“Already have that covered. Text me just before so I can arrange the switch,” I said. While I had the chance, I asked, “You didn’t happen to tell my parents anything about me, did you?”

Qrow shrugged. “Observations from your training with the girls that I picked up, that’s all. Why? They say something?”

“Yeah. I was beginning to worry I had more watchers to worry about,” I deadpanned. “You didn’t tell them about Yang and Ruby hanging out with us?”

“They didn’t ask.”
“And somebody needs to fill me in on Salem,” I added.

Qrow’s eyes went hard but his smile remained in place. “Later. Not here.”

“Fine. Not the time or place,” I agreed. “Don’t be surprised if I ask Ozpin later.” Qrow nodded and I dropped the spell and rejoined the others, heading inside as he went to pick up Yang’s bike.

I let their conversation wash over me as I kept an eye on the crowds around us, looking for familiar faces. ‘Weiss,’ I spotted the girl in question boarding the airship to Beacon ahead of us. The heiress was carting around enough baggage for three people—most of which I knew for a fact was Dust, since I’d duped it all—and didn’t seem to want to part with it, if her arguing with the attendants attempting to convince her to stow it below deck was any indication. Thus, it was a bit of a surprise when one of them finally sighed, gestured towards the entrance for the lower decks, and Weiss nodded before allowing herself—and her luggage—to be shepherded below. ‘Can’t exactly blame her for worrying that someone would steal it. That’s probably my fault. Kind of makes me want to go steal something of hers and leave a note, just to get a rise out of her.’

We showed our IDs and were waved through, moving up the ramp. Tossing out Party invites and links to Blake and Yang, I looked around for Ruby. Her icon on my minimap showed she was nearby, but I couldn’t see her. Frowning, I checked the minimap again and saw her icon there flicker for a moment, before Ruby dropped out of thin air in an explosion of rose petals and latched onto my middle in a hug that gave Penny competition.

Ruby Rose

Desert Rose

Level: 46

I blinked at the girl’s new title as she squeezed me. ‘Must be something she picked up in Vacuo. Looks like she gained a few levels, too. Damn, now I’m stuck playing catch-up again.’

Yang rolled her eyes. “What am I, chopped liver?”

“Chopped liver is useful,” Ruby snarked, earning an attempted swat from her sister as she danced away, then danced back to hug Yang too.

Returning the hug, Yang asked, “So, where’d you end up going last night? You ran off as soon as we got to town.”

“Heh. The Dust store downtown that’s open all night. From Dust ‘till Dawn. Thankfully, it hasn’t been robbed in a while so they had what I needed.” Ruby’s silver eyes cut over to me at that and I rolled my eyes.

“You do realize that I have Dust to spare, right? You could’ve just asked,” I reminded her.

Ruby stuck out her tongue. “Or I could buy my own, because they also sell weapon-smithing magazines there and they had a new one I wanted to look at.” Turning to Yang, she asked, “What kept you out all night, sis?”

I wondered how to answer that for a moment before Blake spoke up, apparently attempting to cover for us, “She was—”

“With Jaune and Neo,” Yang answered hesitantly.

Ruby rolled silver eyes before turning to me. “She finally snapped, didn’t she?”

I blinked twice, my mouth falling open as my brain stuttered and returned a ‘does not compute’ error. “Wha—?”

Ruby snorted softly before devolving into a full laugh, bending over double and pointing at me. I noticed we were drawing curious looks from those around us and sighed. “Ruby, you’re making a scene.”

“Sorry, it’s just, your face! Pfft bahahaha!” she set herself off again. “Haa, that was good. Thanks for that.” Sighing, she turned an amused look on Yang. “Sis, I know you. Probably better than you do. You finally found a decent guy you’re actually interested in who doesn’t just stare at your boobs all the time—I’m honestly surprised you lasted this long.”
If the poleaxed look that crossed Yang’s face looked anything like mine, I could see why Ruby would find it hilarious—if it weren’t for the fact that we were on the receiving end of it. “You mean—you… wait. I could have screwed him earlier…?”

Ruby nodded before a small frown pulled at her lips. “I mean, I’m not exactly happy with it, but considering everyone else involved, I kind of realized that it didn’t matter if I came first, or last, or somewhere in the middle,” she said, blushing brightly as she looked at me.

“That’s… surprisingly mature,” Blake pointed out, echoing my thoughts, and probably Yang’s as well.

The little redhead turned an annoyed look on the faunus girl. “I’m not a kid anymore. I can be mature when I want to.” She paused, before adding, “It’s just more fun not to be, sometimes.”

“Absolutely,” Yang grinned, pulling Ruby into a hug.

Tossing the redhead a Party invite and a link, I smiled as the sisters began chatting. “I’ll let you two catch up.” Turning to Blake, I said, “I’m heading up topside. You in?”

Blake hummed, then shook her head. “I think I’ll have a look around for a bit, if that’s okay?”

I eyed the bow that hid her ears and asked, “Looking for more?”

“Yeah,” Blake agreed.

Sending the girl a smile, I gestured towards the crowd around us. “Good luck. There’s bound to be a few. Maybe even some with the same idea you had,” I pointed out, nodding towards her hidden ears before heading for the nearby stairs and out into fresh air. ‘And maybe I can find Weiss before she causes trouble,’ I mused.

“Who?” Ruby asked, shooting me a curious look.

“W...
“Metaphorically or…?” Yang asked, wagging her eyebrows.

I rolled my eyes. “Pretty sure she’d be more pleasant if she got laid.”

Blake hummed. “Probably best to leave her be, given how that tends to work out between the two of you from what the twins have told me.”

Frowning, I asked, “What have they told you?”

A small smirk crossed Blake’s lips. “That you’ve been flirting with the Schnee heiress.” Ruby and Yang both nodded, confirming her story.

“Traitors,” I sighed. “Surprised you’re not upset about her.”

“You gave me a chance,” Blake shrugged. “I figure I’ll wait to see her in person before I make up my mind about her.”

“Fair enough.” Shrugging, I tossed a wave over my shoulder as I left them to their own devices. “We’ll see.”

In the end, I decided that screwing with Weiss’ head was just too much fun to pass up on. Pulling pen and paper from my backpack, I jotted out a quick note.

Thought I’d wish you well on your first day at Beacon before I caught my own flight. Train hard and maybe we’ll have a rematch when I get back, princess. Be seeing you. - Shiro.

P.S.: I am a sticky-fingered thief, so you might want to check your belongings. Who knows what I made off with?

Checking my surroundings and making sure I was unobserved, I threw on my stealth suite of spells and made my way down into the hold. Finding Weiss sitting atop one of her pieces of luggage, I spotted her handbag and slipped the folded note inside before heading back out. Closing the door as silently as I’d opened it, I cackled internally as I dropped my spells and made my way on a tour of
the ship. ‘That’ll get her riled up,’ I mused. That I hadn’t stolen anything didn’t matter—knowing her, Weiss would probably pull her hair out in frustration upon finding the note and go digging through her things to figure out what was missing.

I stood on the upper deck of the airship, leaning against the railing at the fore of the craft. The wind played merry hell with my hair and whipped the bottom of my white duster and blue ribbon around as we ascended, occasionally creating small popping sounds as the tail ends of them snapped. Clouds of mist hung thick in the air, coming off the waterfall that fed the river running through Vale and into the sea. As we banked ponderously and ascended around one of the large land formations dotting the area, Beacon itself finally came into sight, standing tall and proud as its namesake—a shining beacon to the city below. It was gorgeous.

Oh, I had seen it before—more than once, in fact—but it was still a sight to behold. And this time, I wasn’t the one in the pilot’s chair, nor was the ship moving at a pace that would have shoved me back into my seat. It was… ‘Scenic. It’s the scenic route,’ I realized, smirking at the thought. Of course Ozpin would put on a show for the foreigners just coming to Beacon. I may as well be a foreigner myself, and I had to admit, it was damned awe inspiring.

Three sets of boots on the deck plating behind me drew my attention and I tossed a look over my shoulder. Blonde, red, and black hair flew wildly in the wind coming out of the canyon the waterfall ahead fed into—updraft generated by its shape, I idly noted. Even Ruby's skirt wasn't left unmolested, as she had to keep a hand on the front of it to kept it from flipping up. “What’s up? All done?” I asked, turning around and leaning back against the railing.

“We were wondering where you went,” Ruby smiled, nodding in answer to the question.

“Well, here I am,” I said, before gesturing behind me towards Beacon. “Taking in the view.”

“It is a nice view, up here,” Yang admitted, coming to lean against the railing and press herself against my side.


“It almost doesn’t seem real,” Ruby murmured, moving to my other side, and standing just as close as Yang. I could feel their warmth through my coat, smell them both in the air around us, and it was distracting to say the least. ‘Honeysuckle and… roses, with a strawberry undertone.’ Nice, but still very distracting. “I mean, a month ago I was enjoying my summer vacation and looking forward to
another two years at Signal, and now…”

“I know what you mean,” Yang agreed. “It kind of makes you feel…”

“Unprepared,” Blake finished for her, and the blonde nodded. “Are we sure we're ready for this?”

Before I could answer, Ruby took a quiet breath and nodded. “It doesn't matter if we're ready or not. We're going to have to be.” She cast a sidelong glance at me. “So, what's the plan?”

“Why are you asking me?” I asked, a grin teasing my lips upwards.

“Oh please. You're always the one with the plan. You're like the plan guy. You can't tell me you don't have a plan,” Yang countered, and I caught Blake nodding in agreement.

Nodding at that logic, I shrugged. “I thought I'd just… let the chips fall where they may.”

“Leave things to fate?” Blake asked, golden eyes locking with my blue as she raised an eyebrow. “ Doesn't seem like you.”

Yang nodded. “Yeah, I call bullshit.”


“I don't think so. But you're right, it's not me,” I shrugged. “So, here's the plan. Go down below deck and start scouting. Blake, you're better at the sneaking thing than these two, so you'll be better for the initial assessment. Yang, Ruby, once Blake's found a likely candidate, you'll move in and start making conversation. Take notes on anything of interest—names, weapons, if they seem to already have friends and if so the same for their friends. You're not looking for anything in particular, so just keep an eye and ear out for anything that seems important. Relay the important bits to Blake, who's going to be keeping notes.”

The trio blinked, before Yang asked, “So wait. You've got a Semblance that does nearly all of that—you see names, levels, you can pull out personal details from someone's life just by looking at them. So why are we doing this?”
“Yang,” I hissed, turning a short glare on her. “Public.”

“Err, oops,” the blonde winced.

I sighed, my eyes flicking to my minimap as I checked our surroundings. The only person even remotely nearby was Pyrrha’s familiar icon—several meters south of my position and moving slowly away, so hopefully well out of hearing range. If not, I’d find out soon enough. Shaking my head, I said, “And it doesn’t matter if I can or not. The point isn't necessarily about information gathering. I mean, it is—it's good practice—but that's not all. It's about networking. Meeting people, making friends and contacts, learning others’ strengths and weaknesses and evaluating whether they'll make the cut or not. Treat it like an infiltration mission,” I explained. *That, and it'll force Ruby to socialize in a mission-oriented mindset, which should circumvent her social awkwardness nicely.*

The trio exchanged looks before shrugging. “Sounds interesting,” Ruby admitted. “What are you going to be doing?”

“Me?” I hummed, turning back to look at Beacon. “Well, you did say I was ‘the plan guy,’” I reminded, complete with air quotes. “I figure I'll be drawing up a plan for tomorrow. We’ve got all night to see who looks promising, but ideally we want an eight man group—so two teams worth of people. We have one team worth here, so we just need four more.”

“Why?” Ruby asked, and I blinked, shooting her a confused look. “Beacon teams are four-man groups.” She flicked her fingers between herself, Yang, Blake, and me. “Four.”

I rolled my eyes. “Yeah, *if* we all ended up on a team together. With all the variables, we’re looking at either four, eight, twelve, or at most sixteen people if we all get split into different teams. Eight is ideal if we can arrange to partner with each other or fudge the team selection process so even if one or two of us gets paired with someone else, we can still have the minimum number of people to bring in. I think four others would be manageable depending on who they are, as far as keeping my Semblance secret—because it’d get out eventually, so we may as well bring them in early if they seem trustworthy. Up to twelve other people? Hell no. Someone would run their mouth.”

“Oh, yeah, good point,” Ruby nodded in agreement.

“Besides,” I grinned, “If four people is a normal sized party in Beacon, then eight is a small raid group.”

“He’s got you there, sis,” Yang laughed, while Ruby stuck her tongue out.
“We’ll compare notes tonight and again in the morning before the exam and finalize our choices for partners. Tomorrow, we’ll have to run Ozpin’s gauntlet. Should be fun. Now, go on, get me intel.”

“Yes, sir,” Ruby and Yang both mock saluted, and I rolled my eyes as the trio made their way back inside.

Turning back around to regard Beacon, I shook my head. ‘I need a plan for more than just tomorrow. What are my long-term goals? Where do I go from here? Cinder’s still got that Grimm inside her. I know enough about her now to say that, whatever else she is, she’s not irredeemably evil. Having a Grimm inside you—as disgusting as that sounds—can’t be healthy at all, physically or mentally. So I need to focus on removing that before it can do lasting damage and she goes off the deep end. Maybe try the shotgun approach to cover as many possibilities as I can to get rid of it—though it’d help if I had some idea as to where to start. Then there’s her boss to worry about. Assuming this Salem—and if that isn’t the most intentionally ominous name I’ve ever heard—is her boss. Makes sense, though. If not her boss, then someone she’s working very closely with. I’d been wondering where Cinder kept getting her resources—my money’s on Salem.

‘Roman’s going to be working on gathering the Dust the White Fang destroyed according to Cinder, so he won’t be causing problems for us any time soon—probably not until that big heist I remember at the end of Season 1, where they stole the mechs. Or was it Dust he stole, and mechs was Season 2? Adam’s out of commission and I have no idea who they’re replacing him with. It could be an ‘out of the frying pan, into the fire’ situation there. Blake left me notes on the White Fang that she drew up while I was with Jen and Joan, and Miltia has those now so I expect Fox Hunt will be paying those safe-houses a visit shortly.’

That left only Mercury and Emerald, along with the remnants of the White Fang in Vale since several of the m had bought the farm when the Dust stockpile went up. Emerald and Mercury probably wouldn’t do anything stupid without Cinder’s permission, so I likely wouldn’t have to worry about them until Cinder moved into the next phase of her plan—and those two would be in Mistral and out of my hair for a while anyway. The White Fang, without Adam to lead it, was not quite headless but it was much reduced in their ability to operate inside Vale.

Currently, it was being lead by a couple of Adam’s top lieutenants according to Cinder, but one of them was a spineless mouse of a man—literally in this instance—and the other was an extremist among extremists. And neither of them could find their asses with both hands and a map. If brought in, Khan would either be a stabilizing force, or she would send the whole thing running straight off the rails, and I was running in the dark on intel about her. Even Blake had come up blank there beyond saying that she was a great leader before she was ‘assassinated,’ which she still believed to be the case.
'Amber. I should focus on getting Fox Hunt’s hidden medical facility up and running then transferring her there. Once that’s finished, then I need to work on trying to fix whatever Cinder did to her. She’s fine where she is for now—at least, I think so. Those stasis pods Ozpin ordered from Ironwood should be here today, according to Qrow. Amber seems like the key to a lot of this. Whatever this ‘Fall Maiden’ thing is, it’s important—and grants a huge power boost, if Cinder’s anything to go by. I’ll need to set up a full security suite of Bounded Fields just for her—whatever it’s going to take to keep her from being found from outside, then I’ll have to transport her. It might be best to just ask for Raven’s help on that front—I know she’s going to want payment for it, but it’d be worth it for the security alone since I don’t think anyone else can track point-to-point portals. And she did send me after Amber to begin with, so that tells me she’s invested.’

“Then what?” I wondered aloud. ‘Stop Cinder, hopefully turn her. Figure out who she’s working with. Stop them. Gain levels, power, money, build up my forces, hunt for immortality for all of us… I’m going to have to take over Remnant at this rate.’ Really, now that I thought about it, it wasn’t a half-bad idea.

‘Carry on my wayward son,

there'll be peace when you are done.

Lay your weary head to rest.

Don't you cry no more.’

BGM Image Song – Kansas – Carry On Wayward Son – Unlocked!

Chuckling, I shook my head as the sound of music filled the air, if only for my own ears. “Sounds like a plan to me.”

Notes:

Literalsin:

This chapter has been the worst, most delayed, most revised and rewritten chapter we’ve put out since chinlamp and V rael came aboard. Sorry about that.
As I’ve said on my author’s profile for months now, we’re going to be taking a three month hiatus to plot out and work on future chapters and hopefully build up a buffer of chapters. The Name of the Game will return in August with Disc 2, which will span all of Volume 1 and some extras.

Thanks for reading and sticking with us so far, despite the delays. In return, teasers for the next Disc.

**Warning: Spoilers.**

Ruby will make a move.

Weiss will get some tough love.

Blake will talk more with her parents.

Yang will punch all the things.

Jaune will not have a lot of free time on his hands.

Nora will eat pancakes.

Pyrrha will be the best friend ever.

Ren will get bullied into making Nora’s pancakes.

Ozpin will be cryptic.

Penny will do as Penny does.

Arc parents may or may not show up again.

Luck will be removed as a stat.

**chinlamp:**

I joined up with this circus fairly early on, with world building and ideas being bounced back and forth for months through PM's before I was made a full beta for chapter 20. You'll likely notice that was when chapters decided to jump from the 10k words per chapter that they were, to the 30k words per chapter that they average now. I won't say I'm the only reason for the jump in word count, as Literal's plans would have necessitated it anyway, but my anal retentiveness certainly didn't help keep the word count down.

With this chapter, nightmare that it has proven to be, I'm also, barely, a co-writer, as I wrote one of
the scenes for this chapter. I say barely, because Literal wrote all the corrections and changes we've made to it since, so it's unrecognizable as my work. We have plans to remove that qualifier eventually.

Thanks to all of you for reading and keeping with us, especially with the delays to this latest chapter. We're hoping to keep bringing this story to you for a while yet. See you all again in August!

More spoilers:

Cardin will have a few surprises up his sleeves.
Ruins will be explored.
Duels will be plentiful and varied.
Lists of stats, skills, and levels will be seen.

Hunters will have less work to do in Vale and its surrounding areas.
Velvet will get some spotlight, and won't have it stolen.
Sanguine will be summoned.
Team names are important, you should pay attention to them.

Vrael:

I was the one lucky enough to get through to be the second beta reader a couple chapters back. Unlike with chinlamp, there shouldn't have been an appreciable jump in chapter length when I joined, but there was a jump in waiting time. Don't let what chinlamp said fool you though, one of the scenes is his baby, and while some of it may have been reworded slightly in some bits, it is at its core what he wrote.

The gentlemen are completely right, this has been a nightmare chapter - 6 rewrites in total. Here's to hoping we don't get many of these types of chapters as we write the rest of the story eh? With the hiatus coming up, there may be lots of discussions and debating on details and subplots coming up, which I have to admit I'm really looking forward to.

Repeating both of my friends statements, thanks for being with us, I hope you carry on reading after our hiatus and keep on enjoying it!

“Now what?” Neo sighed, dropping into a seat at the kitchen table and picking idly at a leftover muffin. Jen and Joan had left shortly after Jaune, taking Foxtrot-1 from the hangar above their living quarters. ‘I wonder where they went,’ Neo mused idly. Jen had been in her Fox Hunt uniform and mask while Joan had been dressed in her usual Huntress gear, so she assumed it was something relatively official. ‘Except I’m the 2IC and they totally skipped the chain of command. Eh, it’s Jaune’s sisters, he’s not going to care unless they wreck a Bullhead. Either way, Jen needs to hurry back soon or I’ll be taking a Bullhead to Beacon myself. Can’t believe Jaune forgot he had a meeting with Ozpin later today. Ugh, coordinating that with all of Beacon’s cameras is going to be a
Melanie dropped down to Neo’s right, Miltia to her left, and Penny across from them. “Life does go on, you know. There are things to do,” Melanie pointed out.

“Things like kicking the White Fang in Vale in their collective dicks while they’re down,” Miltia agreed.

“Mm,” Neo hummed. “Talk dirty to me more?”

Penny reached out and patted Neo on the hand. “It’s okay. We miss him too.”

Neo was about to retort that she was not some little girl pining away for her boyfriend off to school, when the strangest damned thing happened. Red light spilled over the room and a six foot tall, four foot wide red-shaded hole in space appeared off to the side of the table. Neo blinked. “Is that what I think it is?”

“It looks like an invitation,” Melanie murmured, her sister nodding. The twins quickly equipped clothes and popped up out of their chairs, before turning back to Penny and Neo.

“Well? Are you coming?” Miltia asked, smiling down at the older girl and the gynoid.

Neo turned an amused look on the twins. “I don’t know, could be dangerous,” Neo pointed out, but opened her own Inventory and equipped clothes as well.

“If Raven Branwen wanted us dead, we would be dead,” Penny pointed out. “Jaune and I theorized about potential applications for her powers… Needless to say, they are quite terrifying. I believe Jaune’s favorite was ‘the floor is lava.’”

Shrugging, Neo hopped up and lead the way to the portal. “Eh, fuck it. What’s the worst—”

Two small hands clamped over her mouth and the twins glared at her from either side. “Are you trying to tempt fate?” Miltia demanded.

Neo rolled her eyes. “Really feeling the love here,” she muttered, walking through the portal. She was surprised when, instead of an active volcano—or a forest, rooftop, or any one of the dozen other possibilities that had crossed her mind—she found only an ordinary apartment on the other side. ‘Messy.’

Takeout bowls were stacked beside a couch while beer cans and empty alcohol bottles littered a table in front of the couch in question. ‘Not the cheap stuff, either. That’s the good stuff, made for Hunter-level constitution.’

Melanie bumped into her back, causing Neo to stumble forward. Catching herself, she quickly stepped aside and cleared the portal so Penny and Miltia could come through. “Anyone here?” Melanie called, looking around and wrinkling her nose.

A microwave went off nearby, drawing their eyes to an open doorway leading to what looked like a kitchen. A moment later, an almost-familiar form stepped into the living room from the kitchen, surrounded by a number of scroll-sized glowing portals in full color as opposed to the red one the girls had stepped through. ‘Sweet Dust, Yang is a clone!’ Neo thought, eyeing up the older version of the girl she’d enjoyed with Jaune the night before as the woman did likewise with them.

Raven really did look frighteningly like her daughter. Sure, her hair may have been black and her eyes permanently red, and her face may have been just a bit sharper—but beyond that, they were damn near identical as far as any of the girls present could tell. Well, any of them save Penny, who could pick out the minuscule differences between them from a mile away if need be. The biggest difference was in the attitude. Where Yang was flirty, warm, and welcoming for the most part, Raven appeared cold and aloof—her expression flat as she observed the girls. Even standing there as she was—clad in bike shorts, a ragged band tank top that looked two sizes too small for the breasts stuffed into it, and barefoot—the girls felt strangely vulnerable by comparison.

Finally, after what seemed like a small eternity, Raven moved to the couch and sat down. With a flicking gesture, the portal the girls had arrived through closed. Another flick sent a set of multiple portals scattering across the room. It didn’t take long for Neo to spot what had drawn the woman’s interest. Jaune, standing on an airship, looking all handsome as the wind did sexy things with his hair. She thought, for just a moment, that she heard music. “Okay,” Neo began, drawing the word out. “Why are we here? Not that I’m complaining that that portal didn’t open into an active volcano…”

Raven turned an amused look on Neo. “If it were volcano day, volcano would fall on you—not the other way around.”
“Wait, you mean—” Neo began.

“Rocks fall,” Melanie began, one hand reaching up to rub at her forehead.

“Everyone dies,” Miltia finished, mirroring her sister’s staving off a headache. “Dust, don’t tell me there are two of them.”

“No, but your boyfriend had some creative ideas for uses of my Semblance I hadn’t even considered before,” Raven shrugged. “I didn’t even know it was possible to open a micro-portal into someone’s sinus cavity, then open one under the sea until I tried it.”

Penny winced. “Ten portals that explode heads,” she recited. “You were listening.”

Raven nodded, gesturing towards the portal in question, where Ruby, Blake, and Yang had joined Jaune. “It’s like my own personal soap opera.”

Neo blinked twice, then leered at the older clone of Yang before dropping onto the couch beside her. Reaching out, she attempted to snag popcorn from the bowl Raven had brought, only to have it pulled away. “Get your own,” Raven denied.

‘Are you sure that’s safe?’ Miltia sent, a worried look crossing her face.

Raven turned a look up at Miltia. “I hate it when you do that.”

“Do what?” Miltia asked, smiling.

“The telepathy thing. It’s irritating. There are no subtitles, so I miss important bits.”

‘Sure it’s safe. Watch,’ Neo sent back. As soon as the popcorn bowl settled again, she cast an illusion over herself and the bowl, then reached out and grabbed a handful. Dropping the illusion, she popped some in her mouth. “Mm, salty. Not enough butter, though.”

Raven frowned. “That’s cheating.”
Neo shrugged. “Call it the viewing fee. After all, you’ve been spying on us this entire time.” The leer returned as she leaned in and asked, “How was last night’s show?”

Raven turned an amused look on the younger woman at her side. “Enlightening. I thought I missed something, since I couldn’t account for the video. I had thought that was Yang. I suppose it was you?”

“It was,” Neo agreed. “So, why bring us here?”

“Simple. I have something you want. You have something I want. Let’s talk terms.”

The twins exchanged a look before dropping onto the couch beside Neo. Penny, however, frowned down at the stacked takeout bowls. “This stuff is terrible for you. The sodium alone is unfit for prolonged human consumption…”

Raven shot the gynoid a flat look. “Look, robot-girl. Do you have any idea how hard it is to find the motivation to cook when all I have to do is call a friend, ask him to make me a bowl of the usual, and then portal it straight here?”

“What do you do with the dishes?” Melanie asked.

“Volcano day,” Raven shrugged, several small red portals opening under the stacked takeout bowls until there were none left. “As I was saying. You want to see this. I want information. Specifically, questions regarding your boyfriend’s Semblance that he’s been tight-lipped about when he knows I’m listening. I was being polite before the Maiden affair, so I know I missed things.”

“Why is it so important to you?” Miltia frowned as Penny dropped onto the couch on the opposite side of Raven from them, nearly sinking through the cushions to the floor.

Raven frowned, shaking her head. “That information is more expensive than you can afford at the moment.”

“And what guarantee do we have that you won’t simply turn Jaune over to Atlas for the money?” Penny asked.
Red eyes rolled. “This is why I don’t deal with people,” she sighed quietly. “Because if I wanted to do that, I’d have done it already. Suffice it to say, he’s interesting, entertaining, and potentially useful. How useful remains to be seen—and no, I will not tell you what he would be useful for. The first two would have been enough to convince me to leave you to your own devices and not hand your boyfriend over to Atlas—the last one sealed the deal.”

Neo giggled. ‘She’s a voyeur by nature and her Semblance only makes it worse. She can’t not know. Ah, this is great. Relax and enjoy for now, girls.’

“It looks like they’re arriving,” Miltia pointed out. “Can you adjust the volume? And make it bigger?”

Raven dug around in the couch, fishing through the cushions before coming up with what looked like a television remote—if the buttons were all made of d6-sized Dust cubes. “There,” she said as the small room filled with the sound of rushing wind and airship engines while the portal expanded to take up nearly the entirety of the far wall. “Now shush. This should be good.”

The notes to a song Neo recognized poured through the portal, seemingly from Jaune’s scroll where he stood beside Ruby, Blake, and Yang.

‘They see you as small and helpless...’

END OF DISC 1.

INSERT DISC 2...
Stepping off the airship, I nearly stumbled as several notifications popped up in my field of vision.

_Congratulations on completing the tutorial! Your efforts have earned you the title ‘Overachiever.’_

_‘Ha ha ha. Such funny. Many keks,’_ I mentally rolled my eyes, then closed the window before quickly going over the rest of it as I walked.

_You have enrolled in Beacon Academy and, upon completion of your entrance exam and team assignment you will begin your official training as a Huntsman. Mission availability and pay scale are determined by your Huntsman Rank, which is itself determined by the number of missions you’ve completed, their difficulty, your grades while attending Beacon, and miscellaneous stats such as measured Aura level and kill count._
Close proximity to a large concentration of people with active Aura of varying strengths has triggered a recalibration of the Level Estimation system in order to more accurately assess Aura levels. This recalibration will not affect Level Estimation of Grimm or creatures created within Instant Dungeons. Recalibration will take place during tonight’s routine update.

The second message confirmed what I already knew for the most part, but I suppose my Semblance felt the need to make it ‘official’ so to speak—minus the part about rankings, which I hadn’t known but wasn’t surprised by, simply because it made sense to evaluate everyone coming in and pay out based on their worth. ‘Pure meritocracy—no ‘affirmative action’ horse shit here. Which means if you make it that far, you actually deserve to be there.’

The third, on the other hand, was cause for worry—though it was a bit of a good news/bad news situation.

‘Good news! Grimm levels have always been accurate. Bad news! Now that it’s got a larger group to compare to, it’s going to reassess and tell me I’m under-level. If this were actually a game, I’d say it smelled like a back-door nerf was coming… except my Semblance can’t, to my knowledge, change other people’s power and de-leveling me would be retarded and self-defeating. So, likely only the numbers on my end are going to change. Meaning it was always wrong to begin with, due to Aura Suppression and other bullshit. Not entirely surprising, when even a twelve year old can spoof her Aura level to make my Semblance think she’s weaker than she is.’

I could guess at what would happen all day long, but the only real option available to me at the moment was waiting, so I put it on the back burner to deal with tomorrow. Instead, I took the opportunity to take in the campus before me as I waited for the others to get off the airship, since they had decided to make a quick restroom stop before disembarking.

‘Didn’t really get a chance to appreciate the scenery last time I was here, what with the whole ‘girl dying in my arms’ thing going on. Or the time before that, since I was trying to get in and out quick.’

It was very… green. There were lots of trees, grass-covered open spaces, fountains, and so on. Of course, I knew at least a few of those fountains contained secret exits/entrances to the underground bunker hidden beneath all of this finery, but it made for very pretty camouflage.

Other prospective students stepped off the ramp leading from the airship and I moved off to the side, out of the flow of foot traffic before turning to find Ruby, Blake, and Yang catching up. Noticing the frown on the blonde’s pretty face, I asked, “What’s up? You okay?”

“Fine. Some people are just assholes,” Yang deadpanned, crossing her arms under her breasts.
Turning to Blake, I asked, “What did she do?”

“Why do you assume I did something?!” Yang demanded, shooting a half-hearted glare at me.

Smirking, I answered, “Because it’s you.” In response, the blonde stuck out her tongue. “Careful. Keep that up and someone’s going to take it as an invitation.”

Bouncing on her heels, Ruby asked, “So, what now?”

“I want to look around the school,” Blake said, golden eyes turning briefly away to sweep over the campus. “Maybe find the library…”

Beside her, Yang hummed. “It’d give us a chance to do more of this ‘research’ stuff.” A grin crossed the blonde’s face and she nodded. “Okay, let’s go do that. We’ll catch up with you two later.”

I nudged Ruby with an elbow, stage whispering, “Sounds like your sister and Blake are looking to ditch us.”

“It’s like they don’t love us,” Ruby sniffed, turning a wide-eyed pout up to Yang, and drawing a flinch at the weaponized cuteness on display. “It-it’s okay, Yang. I don’t mind if you abandon me here in the wilds of Beacon.”

“We’re not! Cut that out!” Yang denied. “We’re just… yeah, we’re totally ditching you so we can check the place out. Jaune can keep you company if you’re lonely, sis.”

“Yang,” Ruby glared.

I shrugged. “Split the party. It’ll be fine. There should be no encounters here.”

Yang sent me a confused look while Blake winced. “Are you trying to get yourself in trouble?” the catgirl asked, casting her gaze about, as though expecting trouble to suddenly pop up.
“Maybe,” I said, drawing out the word. “And you do know that’s what the whole ‘orientation’ thing is for, right? We’ve still got time to check people out and there’ll be a sightseeing tour eventually. There’s really no point splitting up right now unless you’re dead set on getting your hands on those books,” I turned an amused look on Blake.

The blonde and brunette exchanged a look before Yang sighed. “Jaune. We’re going to go have some girl time. Alone.”

“I’m a girl. I like time—” Ruby protested.

Lilac eyes flicked over to silver and the pair engaged in a short stare-down. Finally, Yang reiterated. “Alone.”

Ruby shrugged. “Have fun with that. I’ll be right here. Not splitting the party.”

“Oh. Okay,” I nodded in understanding. “No need to make up excuses. Have fun making out.”

“We’re not—” Blake started to protest.

“We might!” Yang laughed. A teasing smile crossed her face as she shot a look at Ruby. “Besides, I can read a mood. I figured you two might want some ‘alone time’ of your own. Eh? How about it?” she asked, punctuating the question with an exaggerated eyebrow wag.

“Yang!” Ruby hissed, drawing out the word.

Fishing out her scroll, Yang checked the time before putting it away. “We’ve got a while before we’re supposed to be at the welcoming ceremony. Meet you guys there,” she called over her shoulder as she grabbed Blake’s hand and dragged the Faunus girl away. “If we get there first, we’ll save you a spot!”

“They totally are,” Ruby rolled her eyes.

Turning to Ruby, I nodded towards the grounds and we started walking. “See anybody you like for a potential partner?”
“Ehh,” Ruby hemmed. “No one that really stood out.” Correcting herself, Ruby nodded off towards a girl wearing familiar looking armor and sporting a particularly vivid shade of red hair, “Other than the redhead, but you can’t just pick a teammate because they have the same hair color as you. Even if that would be awesome. Team Redheads!”

‘Ruby, Pyrrha, and Nora. But who would… Jun. Ozpin’s already made the case for snapping up promising young students with Ruby, after all.’ Considering it for a moment, I shook my head. ‘Nope. Also, note to self: keep Jun away from Nora. I don’t need that in my life.’

Ruby turned an annoyed look up at me. “Are you sure we can’t just be partners?”

I turned an amused look down on her. “Ruby, don’t be afraid to branch out. Try something new. Besides,” I added, “this is mostly to see who you should try to avoid and who you can work with, if only from a technical perspective. And with so many applicants, there’s a good chance we won’t end up together. It’s not like it couldn’t happen, but the odds are stacked against it. I mean, you see the size of that crowd, right?” I pointed deeper into the campus, towards what my map labeled as an auditorium.

“Maybe,” the girl agreed quietly. “And yeah, that’s a lot of people.”

“By the way, where’s your bag?” I asked. I’d noticed she wasn’t wearing it earlier and had thought it may be in her Inventory, but I felt I should ask.

Ruby blinked before opening her Inventory. “Uhh… I had it when I got on the—” she groaned. “Crap! I took it off when we went to the bathroom and hung it on the back of the door!”

“Come on, let’s go get it,” I said turning around and starting back for the airship.

“No, it’s fine! I’ll go get it,” Ruby smiled, turning and blurring away in a small explosion of rose petals.

“Wai—” I called, catching sight of a familiar head of white hair and wincing at the coming disaster—and like watching a train wreck, I couldn’t look away. Against all my expectations, Ruby didn’t so much as break stride as she leapt over Weiss and her luggage and kept moving towards the airship. Weiss’s eyes went wide, tracking the path of quickly dissipating rose petals before narrowing as she turned towards where Ruby had run.
“You! Get back here! Do you have any idea what kind of catastrophe you could have caused?!” she shouted after the retreating redhead, to no avail as Ruby disappeared inside the ship. “Grr.”

“You seem upset,” I deadpanned, drawing the heiress's attention.

Weiss growled, balling her fists at her side and stamping one foot as she leveled a pretty impressive glare on me. Well, impressive for someone of her stature, anyway. “What gave it away?!” she snapped.

Rolling my eyes, I said, “Could've been the needless shouting in public and causing a scene.”

Weiss froze, apparently just now realizing where we were and that while we hadn't drawn an audience, we were getting looks from a few passers by—prospective students exploring the grounds before the welcoming ceremony was scheduled to take place, most likely. Taking a steadying breath, she visibly calmed herself—uncurling her fists and smoothing down her skirt—before saying curtly, “I apologize for yelling.”

I shrugged. “I'm not the one you should be apologizing to.”

Weiss growled quietly under her breath. “Well, if she had stuck around instead of rushing off...”

“She would have gotten yelled at, not apologized to,” I pointed out, causing Weiss to huff in irritation—probably because she knew I was right. “I'll tell her to be more careful in the future. No harm, no foul?” I asked, earning a sigh and a slow nod.

“Fine,” the heiress grumbled. “Why was she in such a hurry?”

I shook my head. “She left her bag on the airship.”

“That doesn’t mean she can just zip around the place like a lunatic! Even if she didn’t collide with anyone, she could have still caused an accident by surprising someone. It’s that sort of lack of forethought and consideration for others that gets people hurt,” Weiss argued. Shaking her head and taking another calming breath, she said, “Look, could you just tell her to slow down?”
I snorted softly. “I can tell her, but I doubt she’ll listen.”

Weiss’ pretty face screwed up in distaste for a moment, but she didn’t say anything about it. Pulling out her scroll and checking the time, she said, “I should get going. I need to find someone from the faculty to secure this stuff for me, before the welcoming ceremony starts.”

“Sure. See you around, Snowflake,” I grinned.

Turning an unamused look on me, she asked, “There’s no way I can convince you to not call me that, is there?”


“Jaune Arc,” I nodded, before gesturing towards the airship. “Ruby Rose.”

Frowning, Weiss hummed quietly. “That name sounds…” Looking me over again, she asked, “Are you related to Jonathan Arc?”

I blinked. “Who?”

Weiss rolled her eyes. “Fought in the Great War. His actions and those of his troops were critical during the battle for Vale.” At my blank look, she sighed. “You’ve never picked up a history book, have you?”

“Amnesia,” I explained, earning a disbelieving look. “No, really. I have a medical excuse and everything. I’m probably going to have to ask for tutoring specifically for any history classes we have. But that could be my great-great grandfather, or maybe one of his siblings, if he had any. Never heard his name mentioned though.”

“Hm.” Weiss’ clear blue eyes narrowed on me for a moment, before she nodded. “I see.”

I resisted asking what it was she saw. Instead, I gestured towards the campus. “Go on. Didn’t you
just say that if you didn't leave now to lock up your Dust, you would be late for the welcoming speech.”

Weiss turned away and took all of one step, before she paused and turned to send me a suspicious look over her shoulder. “How do you know it’s Dust?”

I pointed to her hair, the distinctive shade of white that seemed to be one of the hallmarks of her family. “Schnee.”

Her weapon, glowing at least three colors I could make out from where I stood. “Dustcaster.”


“Don’t worry about it,” the snow blonde shook her head. Seemingly satisfied, Weiss resumed hauling her baggage up the sidewalk. Faintly, I heard her mutter, “I’m getting paranoid. Damn Shiro.”

Leaning in the shade of a tree off the side of the path and carefully hiding my grin, I settled in to wait for Ruby to approach. Thankfully, I didn’t have to wait long as the sound of Ruby’s Semblance announced her presence before she spoke, a few moments after Weiss departed. “She was kind of…”

I nodded. “She grows on you. You could have said something to her, you know? I know you were there for most of that.”

Ruby shrugged. “Well, yeah—it only took me a few seconds to get my bag. I thought I’d practice my stealth and let you guys talk.”

“And eavesdrop,” I pointed out, to which the girl smiled and shrugged guilelessly.

“I can’t help it if she sucks at situational awareness. I wasn’t all that far away,” the little reaper shrugged. “I hope she doesn’t end up on my team.”

Raising an eyebrow at that, I asked, “Oh? That bad?”

Shooting me an unamused look, Ruby began counting off on her fingers. “Loud. Nitpicky. High-
strung. Made an issue out of absolutely nothing. And she was talking about me behind my back. Yang says those are the worst kind.”

Snorting softly at that, I pointed out, “No, I'm sure she'd have been perfectly happy complaining to your face.”

“You didn't deny the rest,” the little redhead pointed out, and I shrugged. Humming, Ruby asked, “Isn’t she the one you’ve been flirting with at night?”

I turned my head slightly to meet her eyes, raising an eyebrow as I did so. Ruby grinned and took my hand, pulling me down the path. “Where did you hear that?”

“The twins talk, you know? Neo talks more.”

“Of course,” I chuckled. “It wasn’t exactly a secret. And we weren’t flirting.” Ruby gave a quiet ‘mhmm’ and I shook my head. “We weren’t,” I denied.

Ruby nodded. “Sure, I believe you.”

“Trying to beat each other silly does not count as flirting,” I denied.

“Somebody should’ve told Yang that,” Ruby snarked.

Spotting a familiar pair of faces in the crowd, I grinned and pointed them out to Ruby before taking off, her hand still gripped in mine. “Come on, let’s go say ‘hello.’”

Ruby allowed herself to be pulled off the path and asked, “Didn’t we see them in Vale once?” She frowned, trying to remember, before her eyes went wide. “No!” she dragged the word out. “Don’t embarrass me in front of the upper class-men!”

“I wasn’t planning to, but keep that up and you’ll do it yourself,” I warned her with a grin, which produced a pout before Ruby pulled her hood up to hide her face. Something about what she’d said stuck out though, and I asked, “Who even calls them that?”
“What, ‘sen—?’” Ruby started to ask, only for her teeth to click closed.

Groaning quietly, I realized what that was. “You definitely hung around Jun too much at Signal.”

“She was fun!” Ruby protested.

“And a bad influence.” Rolling my eyes, I sidled up to the pair of girls I’d recognized. “We meet again.”

The pair of brunettes spun around—one cracking a smile while the other blew and popped a bubble. “Jaune! And Ruby, wasn’t it?” Velvet asked, her ears having perked up and swiveled to track me the moment I’d greeted them.

Unlike the last time we’d seen her, she was actually wearing her Huntress outfit. It looked good on her, in my humble opinion—though I questioned the practicality of a body-stocking where her armor didn’t cover. For someone supposedly so shy, she was not afraid to show herself off.

The armor looked like brown leather and sort of hid the curves of her breasts, but then it was actual armor and not fantasy game armor with boob slots built in so I wasn’t surprised there. The chest piece zipped up the front, came down to just under her breasts, and was short-sleeved. Detached sleeves of the same material covered her arms from the back of the hand up to a small gap at her bicep, which itself was mostly covered by brass-colored spaulders.

She also wore short shorts and a belt, along with what looked like boots or shoes integrated into her body-stocking, with a couple of armor pieces at the toe and heel. Beyond that, there was a very large expanse of leg from upper thigh down that was left covered only with the stocking. The body-stocking itself was semi-translucent, to the point where if she had any freckles they would have stood out.

‘That was definitely not in canon. Then again, not exactly Rated PG either. Not like it shows off anything indecent though.’

Coco pulled down her shades enough to meet my eyes, her gaze shifting between me and Ruby. “‘Sup,” Coco greeted.
“Uhh, hi guys,” Ruby waved from my side and I rolled my eyes.

Reaching over, I pulled her hood back, exposing her face. “You do realize it wasn’t you who ran
into them last time, right?” I asked her, mussing her hair again, much to her ire. “So, blatantly
changing the subject, you know why we’re here. What’re you guys doing today?”

Velvet pulled out her scroll and checked the time. “The schedule was changed. Usually, they
volunteer second years to show the incoming freshmen around the campus before the welcoming
ceremony ceremony. The Headmaster changed the schedule this year, so ceremony has been
bumped up to,” she checked her watch, “in about ten minutes. They arranged it so that it’s before
Orientation this year. Meaning we’re stuck waiting until he’s done and we won’t finish until some
time before dinner.”

“Is that mandatory?” Ruby asked, earning a shake of the head from the other girls. “So what’s it
involve?”

Coco leered down on the younger girl. “It’s where we get to lead around a bunch of young,
impressionable, naive freshmen—such as yourself—and show them all sorts of interesting things.”

Instead of blushing, Ruby sighed and turned a long-suffering look on me. “I don’t know how, but
this,” she pointed at Coco, “is somehow your fault.” Turning back to Coco and planting her fists on
her hips, she said, “I meant in comparison to, say, Signal.”

“How is it my fault?” I asked, putting on my best innocent look.

“You started it,” Ruby grumbled. “It’s like starting something with Yang. Or Neo. You know how
that goes.”

Coco frowned at me. “Not even a blush? That one even got Velvet,” she pointed at her friend and
teammate, who blushed harder at having the obvious pointed out. Turning back to Ruby, she
admitted, “It’s basically the same thing here, too.”

“Coco,” Velvet hissed, in the same long-suffering tone Ruby used.

“I can usually get a better reaction out of her than that,” I admitted, earning a silver-eyed glare from
the shorter girl at my side. “But I think she’s still annoyed about Weiss complaining about her behind
her back. That, or she’s finally getting used to the constant teasing… Don’t worry, I promise you’ll have plenty of opportunities to make her blush later—she’s still pretty susceptible to innuendo.”

“Traitor,” Ruby grumbled.

Pulling her into a side-on hug, I grinned. “We only do it because we love you. Just ask Yang.”

Ruby let out a sigh and Velvet giggled, pointing at the shorter girl’s face. “You got one.”

“Shut uuuup,” Ruby muttered, burying her face into my side to hide the blush in question.

Coco gestured towards the campus. “Come on, we’ll show you where the welcoming ceremony is being held. After that, you should join our group for orientation.” A small smirk crossed her face as she added, “It’ll be fun.”

“Well, with an invitation like that,” I began, “I should probably avoid it like the plague.”

“But Jaune, what’s a little hazing between friends?” she asked, chuckling darkly.

“Coco,” Velvet sighed. “No. Bad. We do not haze friends.”

“We don’t?” Coco asked, putting on a confused look. “No one told me that.”

“Sounds like someone I know,” Ruby groused, though from the way her lips played into a smile I got the feeling she was talking about Yang.

“Oh, you know what? You’re right,” Coco sent a grin at her partner. “I forgot. It’s best to wait until they stop expecting it to start the hazing.”

“That is not what I meant,” the Faunus girl sighed.

Turning a sympathetic look on Velvet, I shook my head. “I see what you have to put up with. You
Coco leveled a challenging look at me over her shades. “You know, humiliation is always best when it’s public…”

Ruby groaned quietly. “No. Don’t. Anything but that,” she said, completely flat, before snickering.

Seeing Coco’s confused look, I explained. “She knows I have a bad tendency towards one-upmanship and escalation. If you start something, I’ll come back at you with worse. Do we really want to start something like that, first thing this year?”


Sighing, Velvet palmed her face and turned a smile on Ruby. “You may want to stand far back from him when the fireworks start. Minimum safe distance is about three meters.”

“Well, at least Beacon won’t be boring.” Ruby grinned up at me before turning her attention back to Coco and Velvet. “So, what can you tell us about our classes?”

“Oh, there’s Yang and Blake!” Ruby beamed, pointing out her sister and friend in the crowd.

Blake’s bow twitched and she turned around and found us at the entrance, then pointed us out to Yang, who proceeded to cup her hands over her mouth and yell across the room. “Ruby! Jaune! We saved you a spot!”

“Ugh, inside voice, Yang,” Ruby sighed. Turning to Coco and Velvet, she asked, “See you guys around?”

“Sure,” Velvet smiled down on the shorter girl.
Coco smirked. “Count on it.” Turning to me, she said, “Remember, join the cool kids after the welcoming ceremony.”

“Gotcha,” I nodded. “If I see any, I’ll let you know.”

“You are not as funny as you think you are,” Coco snarked, snagging Velvet by the hand and pulling her away through the crowd.

Ruby likewise took my own hand and started hauling me towards her sister. When I planted my feet and refused to budge, she turned a questioning look on me. “Go ahead, I’ll catch up.”

“But Jaune, what about…?” she asked, raising an eyebrow.

“What, you didn’t think you were the only ones I’d have doing recon, did you? I need to have a look around for myself,” I gave her a smile. Over our link, I sent, ‘I need some time to get in contact with Neo and Jen and arrange a switch. I’ll need you and the others to cover for us while I’m playing the Fox and Neo’s taking my place. That may be easier if I’m alone when we switch and Neo, disguised as me, comes looking for you to hang out long enough for me to get my meeting with Ozpin over with.’

“Oooh,” Ruby murmured. “Makes sense. Yeah, go do that. I’ll let the others know.”

I watched her walk away before finding an empty spot of wall near the door to post up on. Opening my scroll interface, I sent out another text to Neo while watching the crowd. ‘Looks like this thing is about to kick off, since Ozpin and Goodwitch just showed up. I’d say you’ve got an hour, but Ozpin looks dead on his feet and according to the students we’ve talked to they’ve rescheduled things so that his speech gets done as soon as possible. Call it half an hour at most. Any word from Jen?’

A moment later, my scroll chimed with a response. ‘We thought you might have forgotten that. No reply. I can get there alone if you need.’

‘Give me time to contact her,’ I sent back before closing the interface and physically pulling out my scroll—since, while I could send texts without looking weird, talking to someone without a scroll in hand or a hands-free set would draw attention.

Pulling up Jen’s scroll from my list of contacts, I hit Dial and waited, casting Muffl i ato around me
as I did to prevent eavesdropping. I didn’t think I’d have to worry about anyone trying to listen in in a crowded room full of people talking, but better safe than sorry.

The scroll picked up on the third ring. “Jen, where are you?”

“In the air,” she answered, over the sound of Bullhead engines. “Sorry. Can’t text and fly at the same time.”

“It’s fine. Neo said you and Joan went out?” I asked, curious about that myself.

Jen hesitated a moment before answering, “Dropping her off at work.”

“That’s fine, you don’t have to ask if you need to go somewhere—just make sure to let Neo or one of the twins know so they can coordinate. They’re in charge while I’m here,” I nodded, thinking it over. “As soon as you touch down, get in contact with Neo. She needs a ride to Beacon and I’ll need you here as well. Ozpin changed the schedule, so we’re a little pressed for time.”

“Understood,” the blonde agreed.

Smiling, I said, “I have to go. See you soon. Fly safe.”

“Setting down now. Bye,” Jen answered quietly, the words almost lost in the sound of Bullhead engines changing pitch.

Ozpin stepped away from his conversation with Goodwitch and started towards the microphone as I slid my scroll into my pocket. ‘He looks... even worse under the lights,’ I assessed, taking in his ragged look.

Ozpin’s normally immaculate suit looked rumpled and slept in, his hair lank, and his eyes baggy. In short, he looked about ready to collapse where he stood. A glance at the bars over his head for HP and Aura showed both down to just a sliver of what they should have been—which, given there was no numerical value, I took to mean somewhere under the ten percent range.

A quick Observe confirmed what was blatantly obvious to my eyes—the man was running on
fumes. ‘Sleep deprivation debuff?’ I wondered. Well, I now had proof of what happened if one went
too long without sleep here—they stopped regenerating Aura. Or Mana. Possibly both if they had
access to both.

‘Funny, Observe can get a read on Ozpin but not my ‘parents.’ Wonder why. Doubt it’s level
difference. Skill of some sort maybe? Intent on his or their part? More open nature? It’d help if I
actually knew how Observe worked. Maybe there’s some sort of active defense component they were
using against it and Ozpin’s too tired to be bothered.’

Stopping in the center of the stage, he tapped the microphone once to make sure it was hot and
cleared his throat, silencing the crowd of prospective students and drawing all eyes to him. I had to
admit, the man had a presence to him—even if he looked like hammered shit at the moment. Glynda,
by comparison, was more akin to the man’s shadow—present but overlooked. “I’ll keep this brief.”

Opening my scroll interface again, I sent another text out to Neo. ‘Jen’s on the ground. Didn’t want
to text while in the air. She’ll get in touch shortly. Let me know when you get here.’

‘Will do, my love,’ was Neo’s reply, and I closed the interface again.

“You have traveled here today in search of knowledge; to hone your craft and acquire new skills,
and when you have finished, you plan to dedicate your lives to the protection of the people. But I
look amongst you,” Ozpin swept his gaze over the crowd, “and all I see is wasted energy—”

I raised an eyebrow at that. ‘Hearing it in person as opposed to a voice actor reading off the lines, I
don’t think that’s the speech he had intended.’

A look at Goodwitch behind him showed a brief look of surprise and consternation before she
schooled her features. ‘She looks annoyed. He’s definitely either off script or improvising. Given
how bad he looks? Whatever speech he had planned probably got tossed out the window because he
couldn’t spare the attention to memorize it.’

“—Direction.” Ozpin paused as quiet murmurs swept over the crowd, wobbling almost
imperceptibly on his feet before taking a slow breath in. “You assume knowledge will free you of
this, but your time at this school will prove that knowledge can only carry you so far.”

Even from where I stood, I saw his eyes shift to single out Ruby from the crowd. “It is up to you to
take the first step,” he finished, and I realized that while he may have been speaking to the crowd,
those words were for her and her alone.

‘Question is, what’s he setting her up for?’ I wondered. Last I knew, canon hadn’t gotten that far into the story—hell, we didn’t even know what Ruby’s ‘Remnant Sharingan’ officially did, just that it was a thing that was occasionally alluded to, and had been since the very first episode in a blatant case of the ‘uh-oh eyes’ trope. They may as well have put up a flashing neon sign.

Then again, I’d put off watching Volume 3, so maybe it came up in later volumes—assuming it hadn’t been canceled. RT had made some questionable decisions even in the first two seasons and there had been rumors of issues between the staff, and with Monty’s death that aspect of the plot may have completely changed for all I knew.

As Ozpin exited stage left, Glynda took his place at the mic. He hid it well, but the Headmaster’s hand trembled on his cane as he cleared the stage and his knees looked ready to give out. “You will gather in the ballroom tonight. Tomorrow, your initiation begins—be ready. You are dismissed.”

I waited for Ruby, Blake, and Yang to turn around before waving them over and looking around as students began to stream out of the auditorium, many of them not bothering to stick around for orientation and instead exploring on their own. Spotting Coco and Velvet, I made my way over as Velvet held up a sign labeled ‘Group C’ and began calling out, “Freshmen here for orientation!”

‘What’s this about a switch?’ Yang sent over our links as I met Coco’s eyes over her glasses again, an amused smile tugging her lips up. I felt Yang bump against my right side with her hip as she drew beside me, Blake on Yang’s right and Ruby stopping at my left.

“Couldn’t find any cool kids, but I suppose you’ll do in a pinch,” I shrugged at Coco before turning a smile on Velvet and nodding by way of greeting as she continued calling for freshmen.

‘The Fox has to attend a meeting shortly. I need you and the others to act as cover for Neo while she’s taking my place, then bring her back around for us to switch again when it’s time for the Fox to leave. Think you can manage?’

‘Sure, no problem,’ Yang sent back. ‘I take it she’s coming in from the landing pads. Can we arrange to meet up somewhere between there and the main building, if we’re with a group like this?’

‘A larger group should make it easier, rather than harder,’ Blake supplied. ‘The timing is the
biggest issue.’

‘I don’t like it. You’re right, we’d need a lot of luck to get everyone in the right spot, and we’d have to be constantly talking to each other to organize everything. And if they’re just sitting in a Bullhead waiting, that’ll look kinda weird. It’ll be easier if Jaune goes alone,’ Ruby suggested.

‘Works for me,’ I agreed.

“I think this is it,” Coco told Velvet, a couple of minutes later. The faunus girl nodded and lowered her sign. “If you’ll all follow us, we’ll be heading to the cafeteria for lunch, then we’ll start the tour.”

Ending the mental impression of a grin, Ruby added, ‘And there’s your chance. Jaune can break off to go to the bathroom or something and switch with Neo.’

I tuned them out and allowed Yang’s hand on my arm to pull me in the right direction as we walked with the crowd, opening up my scroll interface again to text Qrow. ‘Where is the meeting being held?’

The reply came just a moment later. ‘Ozpin’s office. Top floor of the tower. You got everything arranged?’

‘Yeah, we’re good. Who else will be in attendance?’ I asked, out of curiosity.

‘Besides Oz and Glynda, James and his second. Maybe one more.’

I considered asking who for a moment before deciding against it, since it wouldn’t matter if whoever it was didn’t show. ‘Right. I’m with a group of students, but I’ll break off when my escort gets here. I need about twenty, maybe thirty minutes. Is that going to be okay?’

‘Should be fine, I think. Still waiting on the last one anyway. Not sure whether she’ll show or not, since she was here for our last meeting and she’s busy right now, holding Oz’s spot with Amber while he’s doing this. If they get the install finished fast enough, maybe. Oz is willing to wait and Jimmy’s too much of a good soldier to complain to his face.’
The next text I sent to Neo. ‘We’ll try to switch somewhere between the landing pads and the tower. Let me know when you get here and we’ll see what we’ve got to work with. Ruby suggested a bathroom switch.’

‘Change of plans. Penny and Miltia are coming too,’ was Neo’s reply, and I resisted the urge to groan. I hated last minute changes in plans—especially when I wasn’t the one making them. Still, I’d hear her out—there was a reason I’d trusted them with Fox Hunt while I was at Beacon, and it wasn’t because we were sleeping together. The girls were smart.

‘Why?’

‘I’ll be disguised as the Fox when we arrive. Jen, Penny, and Miltia will act as your security detail and Head of Intelligence, respectively. I’ll throw out a wide-area illusion and veil us all. You and I switch places. I throw on an illusion to make me look like you while you change gear. I go with Ruby and the rest, you go with the others to the tower. Same process in reverse when we leave. Melanie’s staying on base in case something comes up—we doubt it will, but better safe than sorry.’

‘Okay, that’ll work.’ A thought occurred and I hastily added, ‘Run full Aura Suppression on everyone. Don’t need Ozpin and the rest getting a sample of your Auras for later comparison.’

Neo’s reply was quick in coming. ‘Are you sure that’s not overkill? We’ll be pretty much flaunting that trick if we do this.’

I considered it for a moment before coming to a decision. ‘Risk is minimal vs risk of later discovery because one of them recognizes someone’s Aura. Besides, Cinder’s already seen it—as have Ozpin, Glynda, and Qrow. The only possible problem is you running around as me with no Aura, so try to stay away from the teachers.’

With that, I looked around and took in our surroundings. I hadn’t really been paying attention as Coco and Velvet had lead us around, but a glance at my Map showed I didn’t really need to since it was updating itself as we went. I made a mental note to compare it to the official map on the school website and what I’d swiped from the repository—and Cinder—later.

“And this is the dining hall,” Coco announced as the group pushed through the doors. Directly in front of us, tables and chairs occupied the floor. Against the far wall was a temporary buffet-style setup with a variety of foods available, though I noted that there was what looked like a more normal cafeteria window setup closed up behind those tables. “For today, get whatever you want. If you make it through tomorrow, you’ll get to visit the school dieticians and they’ll work out a diet plan for you.”
So saying, Coco joined Velvet, who was already moving about the various stations and picking up food. The rest of the group quickly followed suit, and we were swept along with them. I wasn't particularly craving anything in particular, so I piled a bit of everything onto my plate to get an idea of what was on offer and the quality.

I dropped into a seat a few places down from where Velvet and Coco sat. Ruby blurred across the lunchroom and sat beside me. Moving at a more sedate pace, Blake and Yang settled into the seats across from us and we dug into our lunch as we listened in on students around us asking the older students questions.

“Do they serve pancakes at every meal?” a familiar, chipper voice asked, and I rolled my eyes.

I almost didn't catch the quiet admonishment that followed, over the din of silverware scraping plates and people talking. “Nora. No. You can't have pancakes for every meal.”

“They do, but if you get in late for breakfast you may have to fight for them,” Velvet answered, amusement coloring her voice. “And if you eat nothing but pancakes, your dietician will get angry.”

“People with broken legs can't fight for pancakes,” Nora countered, her voice just as chipper, ignoring Ren's argument about her eating habits with what I suspected was the ease of long practice.

“Remind me not to get here late for breakfast if I want pancakes. I value my legs,” a boy's voice spoke up from further down the line, before he asked, “Any suggestions you can share? You know, stuff you wish you'd known the first day.”

Coco and Velvet shared a look before the faunus girl began. “Well, firstly, you all passed the very first part of the entrance exam.”

“Do what?” someone else asked, prompting the girl to explain.

“Taking help or extra lessons when they’re offered, but not mandatory. ‘Not mandatory’ doesn’t mean ‘not useful.’ Those students who skipped going to Orientation in order to explore on their own will not learn that curfew tonight is at 8P.M. and that if they’re late, they’ll be summarily disqualified from attending Beacon.”
Following Velvet up before anyone could say anything, Coco added, “And if you’re smart, you’ll keep it to yourselves. Less competition that way. After all, there are limited class slots.”

“Sheems kind of ruthless,” a girl somewhere up the line pointed out. I turned my head to see where she was speaking from but couldn’t make her out through the crowd seated at the table.

“Tough shit,” Coco shrugged. “As for more practical stuff we’ve picked up over the last year… The commissary sells meal bars and water purification tablets. Buy them. Keep at least three days’ worth on your person at all times. They also sell a water filtration attachment for standard canteens that runs off of Dust. I’d highly recommend it for anything over three days.”

Velvet picked up the explanation. “Sometimes, you won’t be able, or allowed, to start a fire in the field or during an exercise. Unless it’s your day off, you’re on call 24/7. Meaning you won’t always be able to prepare for something like that the day of, so it’s best to prepare early. Sometimes, emergencies happen, and you may be called out at any time, day or night, and not have time to do anything other than grab what’s in your locker and go. Sometimes, you won’t even have time for that and you’ll have to make do with whatever is on your person.”

“You can leave your weapons and gear in your lockers, but I’d recommend at least carrying a backup weapon around campus, just in case,” Coco suggested. Beside me, Ruby whispered, “But Crescent Rose is all I need!”

“Most of you will start making those in second year, but now is a good time to get a jump on it. Otherwise, well, sometimes the scrolls or the Rocket Assisted Delivery System fail and you’re stuck in the field without your equipment,” the fashionista shrugged.

‘Something about that sound off to anyone else?’ Yang asked, looking up from her plate to trade looks amongst the rest of us while popping a cherry tomato in her mouth.

Blake gave a small nod before turning to look down the table and ask, “Are there things you’re not allowed to talk about with us?”

“Yes,” Velvet agreed.

“Someone’s a smart cookie,” Coco grinned.

Someone else—a blond guy across the table and a few seats to my right—loudly asked, “Wait, why the hell not?”
Coco turned and leveled a glare on that end of the table. “Because we were told not to. End of
discussion.” Her glare faded as a small smirk pulled her lips up. “Besides, you'll find out soon
enough. Assuming you make the cut.”

“The success rate is really low,” Velvet admitted.

Humming quietly, I asked, “So, where do the washouts go?”

“The B-cademies, usually,” Coco shrugged. Seeing the confusion on the faces of those around her,
she explained. “Everyone knows the names of the four biggest Hunter academies in the kingdoms.
And then there’s the ones you can’t name, or no one bothers to, or those rare few that are so
specialized only a select few ever go there. If Beacon's an A-cademy, they're B-cademies. Even our
worst tend to be better than their best.”

Velvet sighed, nodding once. “We pay a price for that, though. The schedules and courses for the
four big academies are all harder and more thorough by comparison. Ours stands out even amongst
the best. It's a bit insane at times, to be honest. The courses are selected to ensure that we turn out the
most well-rounded Hunters possible. By the time you're done here, you should be able to fill in for
just about any role in any team if needed. If you're dropped naked in a forest full of Grimm, you
should be able to survive and make it back to civilization unharmed.”

“That's not a thing, is it?” a girl a few seats to my left and across the table—wearing a lot of brown
snake-skin and with oddly opalescent hair—asked. When neither Velvet nor Coco answered, the girl
who'd asked groaned quietly. “It's a thing.”

“Bullshit,” the boy sitting to the left of me spoke—vaguely Asian-ish features, wearing a lot of green
and with some kind of bow and a quiver on his back.

“We all signed the consent forms,” Coco reminded. “Besides, think about it this way. Which is more
useful: sticking a misbehaving or hard-headed student in the brig to sit on his ass for a few days? Or
using the situation as a 'teachable moment' and coming up with something that will humiliate the
students involved, serve as visible proof of the consequences and a deterrent for other students, and
likely act as a practical review for the stuff they've been teaching?”

“Uh,” the guy beside me muttered. “When you put it that way, it seems kind of obvious.”
Velvet's smile wavered a bit. “The professors love 'teachable moments.' Even the nicest of them can be... creative. Professor Port once gave a student he caught sleeping in class his pocket knife and told him to kill the Boarbatusk the Professor had brought in.”

The scroll interface of my HUD chimed as a message came in from Neo. 'Flying in now.'

I shot off a quick reply, 'Call my scroll.'

“What about—” someone began saying as the scroll in my jacket pocket rang. Fishing it out, I stood up from the table. “Excuse me a minute,” I said, turning away and swiftly heading for the cafeteria doors. To Ruby, Blake, and Yang, I sent, 'Going to go swap with Neo. See you in a bit.'

Once I was outside, I pulled up my map and angled my walk towards one of the bathrooms just off the main walkway from the landing pads into campus. “Thanks for that. I needed an out other than needing to take a leak. Bathrooms in the cafeteria are convenient for students, but horrible for people trying to sneak off.”

Neo's laugh filled my ear. “Yeah, it's pretty inconsiderate of them. You'd think they would be more accommodating to thieves, spies, and infiltrators. You know, put out things like random hay bales or closets to hide in.”

I snorted softly. “No thanks. I don't my life becoming an IRL Assassin's Creed.”

“You’ll have to explain that later. We're about to land. Where do you want to switch?” Neo asked.

Looking over the map again, I told her what to look for and slipped into the bathroom to wait. A few minutes later, I stepped out with the scroll still up to my ear. I spotted Neo and the rest a moment before they spotted me and sent out party invites. As soon as they were added, Neo started walking towards me and sent, 'Illusion is up. Memory transfer?'

I smiled—it was good to have competent help. We traded places and I switched into my Fox gear. Pulling up the events of the day since we’d left, I passed them to her. 'Are we good?’

'I think so,' Neo agreed. ‘Let me know when you get ready to leave so I can break off and meet back up.’
As soon as we were back in our places, 'Jaune' walked away from the restroom towards the cafeteria while my group walked into the administration building at the heart of Beacon and stepped into the elevator. Neo would let me know if something important came up.

Of all of them, the twins and Neo knew me well enough to pull off acting like me in a crowd for a few hours without constant supervision on my part, but Neo had trained to do exactly that for anyone she was mimicking.

'Are you ready?' I sent to Miltia, Jen, and Penny, giving them a quick once-over to make sure nothing was out of place.

Miltia was dressed in her Head of Intelligence disguise—the white, pointed mask covering her face and her Nameless cloak pulled up over her head and hanging about her. Her mask’s four red eyes burned brightly under the unnatural shadows provided by the cloak, adding to the overall creepy vibe the outfit gave off. Even with her in party, I could faintly feel Gamer's Mind occasionally trip on the mental effect the legendary rarity bloodline items granted her, nullifying the effect for me.

Jen wore her Fox Hunt uniform with her white Atlas jacket over it, plus her personal green Fox mask.

Penny wore her 'bastard-Schnee' disguise—white hair, blue eyes, and white Fox mask and Fox Hunt uniform with a white cloak over it, which hid her weapons from view.

Getting affirmatives all around, I grinned as the elevator opened into Ozpin’s office. Taking in those gathered, I raised an eyebrow under my mask as we moved out from in front of the elevator. Ozpin, Glynda, Qrow, and Ironwood, I had either met in passing or had heard of—either from those present or from the series, in the case of James. Ironwood’s ‘second,’ as Qrow had called her, was a problem waiting to happen.

Winter Schnee

Specialist Queen

Level: ????
By the way Jen stiffened upon spotting her, I could see it was a surprise for her as well. ‘Jen, calm down. You’re okay. We’re here.’

‘That’s not it. I need your help,’ she admitted, even her mental voice was quiet. ‘Do to me what you do to Miltia.’

‘I can’t. Ozpin and Glynda would pick that up in a heartbeat, this close. We’re linked, though. If something happens, I’ll know. Trust me.’

‘Okay,’ the blonde sent back as we fell into place—Jen to my right, Miltia to my left, and Penny to Miltia’s left.

“Is this everyone?” I asked into the sudden silence of the room.

Before anyone could answer, Ironwood settled his hand on the butt of his pistol and glared at something over my shoulder. “What the blazes is that?”

Tilting my head to follow his gaze, I saw him staring at Miltia. No, it was more like him and everyone who wasn’t us was staring at her. Well, us and Qrow. “A woman in a mask.”

“Magpie,” Miltia answered. “Fox Hunt. Head of Intelligence.” Her voice came out flat and atonal, without distinguishing features—and if I hadn’t heard it before it would have made my skin crawl.

“It can talk?” James asked, seemingly more unnerved, not less. “You have a human-Grimm hybrid —”

“A what?” I blinked at that, before shaking my head. “Well. That’s a disturbing thought. Magpie is what happens when you make things other than weapons out of Grimm and give them to someone capable of using them. She’s fully human.”

Qrow cleared his throat, drawing everyone’s attention to him momentarily. “I’ve seen her around. I think. The mental effect makes it hard to remember the details—which I suppose was the point.”

“Quite,” Miltia agreed quietly. “Shall we proceed with the meeting?”
Ozpin smiled faintly and checked his scroll. “I believe so. Our last guest—”

The doors from the elevator opened behind us and I turned around as a woman's harried voice announced her presence. “Sorry I'm late! The guys Jimmy had doing the install took their sweet time, but we got everything switched over okay.”

Lily Arc paused partway into the room as her green eyes locked onto Jen's masked form, then Penny. They stopped on Miltia for a long moment, though eventually she shook her head and moved on. Finally, her green eyes settled on me.

Before the redhead could say anything, Ozpin spoke up. “Thank you, Lily. I appreciate the break. I'm sure there would have been questions if I couldn't make it to my own speech.”

“Yeah, yeah,” she waved him off, asking, “Who are the newbies? I assume the tall one is the new guy in town?”

Movement from Qrow drew my eye to where he'd brought his flask to his lips to hide his smirk. ‘Oh, that bastard. He knew she'd be here,’ I sent to the others.

“He is,” Ozpin answered, putting his scroll away. “Mr. Fox has worked with us before, on the Signal incident.”

“The data theft and subsequent fire? If that is the quality of his work—” Ironwood began, and I cut him off.

“At least I was there to do something about it. I didn't see anyone else on-site stopping the theft, despite the fact that at least two members of this organization either work or live nearby,” I countered, earning an annoyed look from the general, who shifted the focus of his ire to Qrow a moment later. Qrow simply shrugged in response.

“Which we appreciate,” Ozpin cut in before Ironwood could say anything. “The potential damage caused if that data fell into the wrong hands... Well, I'd rather not think about it.” Shaking his head, he shifted his gaze to where I knew Raven to be watching from. “Would Ms. Branwen care to join us?”
“I don't know. Would she?” I asked, tilting my head towards where I knew Raven's viewing portal to be even as Qrow groaned quietly and Ironwood turned a glare on Ozpin. *Fuck. Ozpin can sense her portals. Well, it's not like this one's somehow my fault. Besides, given Qrow reporting on my involvement with Amber, he's sure to have told his boss about his sister having had a hand in it.*

“She’s an intelligence leak,” James protested.

Ozpin sighed. “James, we’ve been over this before. Ms. Branwen’s loyalties have not changed, regardless of her lack of participation and focus elsewhere. Though, I would like to know why she is observing today.”

I blinked at that under my mask. ‘So, Qrow didn’t tell him?’

“Yeah, sorry Oz. Meant to tell you, but you’ve been busy and I didn’t want to add more to your plate,” Qrow sighed. “She’s been keeping an eye on them since the thing with Amber. No idea why she’s taken an interest though. You know how it is, she barely talks to me any more.” At that last, he cast a glare in the direction of the portal.

“Qrow’s lackluster reporting aside,” Ironwood shot the man an annoyed look, before gesturing to my entourage. “Just how many of them have been vetted?”

Quiet murmuring from Winter’s corner drew my attention but no one else seemed to be paying it any attention. The woman had taken a long look at Penny before dismissing her and focusing on Jen. “Longing, rusted, furnace—”

I frowned, wondering what the hell she was saying. “I understand OpS & Co, General. I assure you, everyone on my side of the room has been vetted. However, I have to ask about your own shadow. Has she been vetted? And what is she going on about over there?”

That drew the attention of everyone in the room as they went silent, just as Winter finished. “—homecoming, one, freight car.”

At my side, Jen stiffened and I felt something shift over the link between us. ‘*Control phrase? Oh fuck no,*’ I growled, slapping the blonde with a Forget to wipe the last thirty seconds from her memory. As everything returned to normal on her end, I sent, ‘*Queen just tried to remote activate something with a control phrase. You might want to do something to dissuade her from doing that again.*’
Jen’s fist balled at her side and, before anyone could do anything, she had crossed the room in two strides. The sound of an Aura barrier snapping and a sharp crack announced Winter’s nose breaking, but the woman barely noticed as her sword cleared its sheath—which would mean very little considering Jen had her skull firmly in the green grasp of her Semblance.

Ironwood pulled his pistol, aiming at the back of Jen’s head. It was there before I could react, even as I throttled up Haste, a Plasma Blade spinning up in my left hand and filling the room with chirping as I leveled it at his throat.

Two of Penny’s new Dustcaster swords flicked out and pointed at Winter as she maneuvered around Ironwood, a multitude of small, evenly-spaced Bounded Field patterns lighting up along the weapons in Mass Effect blue.

Lily’s sword—a one-handed weapon I hadn’t gotten the chance to see during my brief match with her the day previous—cleared its sheath and shifted into a short barreled rifle that she leveled at Jen’s back.

Glynda’s riding crop made an appearance, but she couldn’t decide who to direct it at.

Of all of us, only Miltia, Qrow, and Ozpin failed to draw their weapons.

From the corner of my eye, I saw Lily side-step around to my right. Looking between Winter and Jen, her expression shifted between shock as she recognized the Aura holding Winter and thunderous anger as she must have realized some of what was going on. Her rifle, which had been covering Jen, shifted to press against Winter’s temple. “Drop the sword or I drop you. Now!”

“Arc, what the fu—” the General started to ask, only for her to shift her head just enough to fix him with a glare while keeping Winter in sight.

“Jimmy, as your friend, I’m telling you to put it away. Because if you don’t, you die second,” the redhead warned quietly.

Ironwood’s eyes shifted between the redhead, his subordinate, and Jen before drifting down to the bright blue bar of electricity at his neck. Before he could finish running the odds in his head, Ozpin cleared his throat, speaking up to be heard over the sound of chirping birds.
“How about we all take a moment to put away our weapons, settle down, and work out what just happened, shall we?” Ozpin asked. When no one moved, he frowned and tapped his cane on the floor—and around us, the gears of the clock tower skipped a beat. “That was not a suggestion.”

I met Ironwood’s eye and after a beat, we both lowered our weapons—his pistol returning to its holster while I dismissed my Plasma Blade. “Snow. Green. Stand down,” I ordered.

A moment later, Ironwood followed up by demanding the same of his subordinate. “Schnee, you too.”

Penny’s swords folded down and disappeared back under her cloak—I had yet to see her new setup, so I didn’t know if she was using something similar to the old backpack or if she had traded it out for holsters—and she moved back to my side.

Lily’s sword disappeared back into its sheath but Glynda’s riding crop remained out as she folded her arms under her breasts.

As soon as Jen’s power released Winter’s head, however, the Specialist started up again with, “Rai—” only to be silenced by Jen’s power clamping her mouth shut as Lily grabbed Winter's wrist and twisted hard enough to forcibly disarm her.

Turning an unamused look on Ironwood, I said, “Muzzle her or I’ll do it.”

“Schnee, I gave you an order. What the hell are you doing?” Ironwood growled.

Chuckling, Qrow asked, “Trouble in paradise, Jimmy?”

“Shut up, Qrow,” James retorted. “This isn't the time.”

When Jen’s power let up again, Winter answered, “Classified, sir. Retrieval of Atlas assets. La le lu—1f,” her jaw snapped shut again.

“Atlas assets? You bitch,” Lily growled, the hand holding Winter's sword twitching like it wanted to reunite the weapon with its owner in the most violent way possible.
“I warned you,” I sighed, flicking a Silence at Winter. “You can let her go, Green—but keep an eye on her. If she moves funny, grab her. Try to be gentle, if you can. Ms. Schnee is in time out for the moment. Or should I say, Specialist Queen?”

As Jen released Winter and returned to my side, Ironwood turned a frown my direction. “‘Queen?’” Ironwood repeated, confusion crossing his face. “I’ve never heard that designation.” Suspicion colored his tone as he asked, “How do you know it?”

“Oh, she didn’t tell you?” I asked, chuckling under my mask. “Ladies, gentlemen, allow me to introduce you to former Specialist Sierra, of team SPTR—under Overseer King and, at the time, Specialist, Third Class, Queen. Green, the choice is yours as to whether or not you want to go mask off.”

Shifting my masked face towards Lily, I added, “Though, it looks as though someone has already figured it out.”

“Sir,” she nodded, reaching up and pulling off the green Fox-style mask covering her face.

Qrow turned to Ozpin and put on that insufferable smirk I was pretty sure he knew pissed people off. “Told you so.”

Frowning, Ozpin asked, “James? Would you care to explain?”

“I,” the man looked between Winter and Jen, “I have no idea beyond that they were both in the Specialist program.”

Glynda cut in, asking, “What is the Specialist program? We know the official story, what’s really going on there?”

When Ironwood frowned and opened his mouth, I cut him off. “‘Classified?’” I guessed, causing his mouth to snap shut with a click.

Lily’s green eyes rolled as she fixed the man with a glare. “Cut the bullshit, Jimmy. We need to know at this point.”
When Ironwood remained stubbornly silent, I turned to meet Glynda’s eyes and answered, “The Specialist program is—”

Winter disappeared and green light flared bright enough to leave me seeing spots for a moment.

I heard something crack at the same time the snow-blonde rematerialized a foot in front of me, her right arm twisted at an unnatural angle in the middle and clearly broken, surrounded as it was by the green light of Jen's Semblance at work. Her sword slipped from her fingers and clattered on the floor. *Must have yanked the sword out of Lily’s hand faster than she could react. Probably the only thing that gave Jen time enough to act.*' 

Winter's eyes, the same ice blue as her sister, stared into my own, completely devoid of emotion or pain—the same cold mask I'd seen Jen wearing so often before she had warmed up to me.

'That was entirely too close for comfort.'

Turning my masked face to Jen, I reminded her, “I did say to be gentle.”

“It wasn't her neck,” was the blonde's cold reply as she shoved Winter away and into the waiting arms of Ironwood. “Keep her still, or next time it will be.”

Clearing my throat, I continued. “As I was saying, the Specialist program is Atlas’s own little black op for creating super-soldiers. Candidates are selected from Atlas academy and sent to one of several black facilities—I’m guessing the one Ms. Arc attended has since been relocated. There, the candidates are exposed to a combination of Indigo Dust and other Dust types—in the food, in the water, and even special lights made with the stuff. This leaves them highly susceptible to suggestion and crude mental programming. I wouldn't be entirely surprised if they had a few people with mental Semblances on staff to help things along.”

Holding out my hand, I paused, considering what I was about to do before turning a questioning look on Jen. “May I?” At the same time, I sent, *We have an opportunity to get both Ozpin and Ironwood on your side here. If you don’t want me to, I won’t.*

Jen’s jaw flexed minutely as she grit her teeth, before the twitch relaxed. “Yes.”
‘I’ll make it up to you later,’ I promised.

‘Okay,’ came the hesitant reply.

Nodding, I cast a Genjutsu into the middle of the room, playing back select scenes from the memories Jen had shown me—a highlights reel of the worst I’d seen so far. I had already shown Ozpin this particular trick so I wasn’t really concerned with showing it off again. “For unknown reasons, Ms. Arc proved more resistant than most and was able to break her programming and escape. Of course, her handler—King—sent her team to retrieve her. She put them in the ground and fled back to Vale before he could send Queen.”

Lily pulled my sister into a hug and it took my enhanced hearing to pick up the words she whispered into Jen’s ear. “I’m so sorry. We knew it was bad when we heard, but we didn’t know how bad.”

Jen stood there with her arms hanging limply at her side for a moment before casting a sidelong glance at me, as though asking for permission. I shrugged, and the blonde slowly—awkwardly—returned the hug. “Not your fault.”

I agreed, the Atlas situation really wasn’t the fault of the Arc parents. The girls had decided to attend schools other than Beacon for themselves and Jen volunteered for Atlas. They had no way of knowing about the Specialist program, nor would her being out of contact have been out of the ordinary while in what amounted to advanced placement training—at least, as far as they knew.

For all our parents’ many fuckups, this one lay squarely at the feet of Atlas.

Turning to Ironwood, I asked, “General, I take it you weren’t involved?”

“No, and if I had been involved in some sort of super soldier program, you can bet I wouldn’t have been using Indigo Dust to turn out drones,” James growled quietly. “I had no idea.”

Tilting his head down to the woman who’d gone mostly limp in his arms at this point, apparently realizing there was nothing she could do to escape, Ironwood quietly said, “Schnee—Winter, I apologize. I should have noticed something was wrong sooner.”

Turning to Ozpin, I said, “And as much as I would like to lay the blame at Ms. Schnee’s feet for this, she is as much a victim as Ms. Arc—save that her conditioning took somewhat better. I don’t think it took entirely, or she probably wouldn’t be willing to just stand there now that she’s been outed. Am I right?” I asked, turning the question on the woman herself.
Winter refused to meet my eyes, giving nothing away. Ozpin sighed, leaning back in his chair. “I was going to ask her to leave anyway, but now that we know Ms. Schnee is compromised, I’m going to have to ask you not to bring her back, James. She’ll need to wait outside the building until we’re done. Ms. Arc and…” he trailed off, finally really seeing Penny for the first time, before his eyes shifted to Jen, then Miltia and the full Nevermore mask obscuring her face, then back to me. 

“Interesting,” Ozpin murmured. “Ms. Snow, I believe?” he asked, earning a nod from Penny. “Glynda, if you wouldn’t mind keeping them company—and making sure they don’t break anything important?”

Lily released Jen long enough to turn a fierce look on the headmaster. “Fuck off, Oz. You're not putting my daughter anywhere near one of the people who brainwashed her with just Glynda for supervision.”

The redhead turned an apologetic look on Goodwitch and added, “No offense, Glynda, but even we’re not sure what Jen's capable of now. I'm not sure you'd be enough to stop her if she was determined. That also applies to Winter, given that they were in the same program. You may be able to handle one of them, but I don’t want to put you between them when they eventually go for each others’ throats. Definitely don’t want to see those two go at it on campus.”

“None taken. I would hate to see students get caught in the crossfire,” Glynda shook her head. “Ms. Schnee and—”

I fixed Ozpin with an amused look. “You do realize I'm just going to brief them on anything said here later, considering they make up parts of my command structure and personal security detail?”

“I told you it was a security risk,” Ironwood put in.

Beside me, Miltia spoke up. “Either you want to work with us, or you don't. But make no mistake, it is an 'us' you'll be working with.”

Turning a frown on the blue-black haired, woman, Ironwood’s asked, “And who are you exactly?” His hands twitched as though they wanted to go for his weapon, but he kept a firm hold of Winter.

Several people blinked at that, eyes fixing on Miltia as though suddenly remembering she was there. Qrow groaned quietly. “Right. Mental shit. Forgot about that.”
“Are we sure that’s safe?” Ironwood asked, directing the question to Ozpin. “The danger an infiltrator you can't remember poses—”

The headmaster frowned, weighing his answer for a moment. “I believe so.”

Deciding to intervene, I asked, “General, what would you do with an agent whose identifying features would be forgotten almost as soon as you took your eyes off of them?” The older man’s gaze turned considering at that, and I added, “I decided to put her where she could do the most good.”

Miltia took that as her cue, repeating her earlier answer. “Magpie. Head of Intelligence.”

“Do you have an actual rank?” Ironwood asked, and I noted a hint of sarcasm there.

“Admiral,” Miltia answered, adding, “General.”

A smirk spreading across his lips, Qrow asked, “So’s that mean her dick’s bigger than yours, Jimmy?”

“About equal,” Ironwood deadpanned. “But it’s not the size that matters, it’s what you do with it. Not that you would know, Qrow.”

“Hey, now. I'm not the one who’s—” Qrow glared, pointing his flask at the General.

“Gentlemen,” Ozpin interrupted. “We do have business to attend to. But first,” he gestured towards Winter. “Glynda, if you would please escort Ms. Schnee out and keep her company.”

Glynda turned a no-nonsense look on the Specialist. “Come along,” she demanded, moving out from around Ozpin’s desk and holding the door open for Winter, who followed only after a nod from Ironwood.

As soon as the door closed, Jen said, “Mom, I'm on the clock. Please let go.”
Lily shook her head. “Not going to happen.”

Sighing, Jen turned a pleading look on me and I shook my head. “Mrs. Arc, I realize this has taken you by surprise, but could you please release my subordinate so she can do her job?”

Grinning under my mask, I added, “That, and she's beginning to look uncomfortable.”

And just below the surface, the anger from the other day returned, leaving me silently irritated and not quite sure how to feel about it. On the one hand, Lily at least cared for her kids. Some of them, at any rate.

On the other hand, it didn’t change the facts. I wouldn’t begrudge Jen time with her mother—one of them, at least—especially given how much she needed exactly that sort of thing with what she’d been through.

‘And really, having Ozpin and the others see her like this humanizes us—reminds them that there are people under the masks. Given how much Miltia unnerves them, in this case, I think the sympathy from Jen’s situation may be worth it. It might be enough to balance out their opinion of us and shift it from ‘potential threat’ to ‘sympathetic ally.’”

Lily huffed a quiet sigh before nodding. “Fine,” she muttered, releasing Jen but not moving from the blonde’s side. Turning her green eyes on me, she added, “You and I will be having words later.”

‘So long as ‘later’ is postponed indefinitely, preferably until it becomes ‘never,” I did not voice.

“Now that that’s settled,” Ozpin interrupted, turning his gaze on me. “Can you forward me your information on the Specialist program?”

“And me,” Lily added. “I'll give you my black scroll contact later.”

I shot a look at Miltia, who pulled out her scroll—presumably to get ahold of Melanie. I’d made sure we kept meticulous records of everything we discovered from Jen, but I hadn’t had time to transcribe everything from the last set. “We can have you something to start with soon and update you as more becomes available,” I nodded. “Now, what’s this meeting about—b eyond the broken bird in the
basement?” Ozpin flinched at that and I asked, “Is she stable?”

“Broken bird?” Lily echoed with a frown. “You mean Amber?” she asked, and I nodded.

“For now,” Ozpin agreed tiredly. “Thanks to James, we now have the equipment to keep her that way indefinitely.”

Raising an eyebrow, I asked, “When’s the last time you slept?”

Ozpin chuckled and shook his head. “Too long,” he sighed, settling back into his seat. “I’ve been keeping her stable myself.”

“Ah,” I nodded.

Standing from his desk, Ozpin picked up his coffee cup and walked over to a fancy-looking coffee maker in the corner. Pouring himself a cup, he turned and asked, “Coffee?”

Ironwood was the only one to accept and moved to make his own cup as Ozpin sat back down and took a long sip before turning his attention back to me. “Would you care to show us the events surrounding your rescuing Amber again, please?”

Nodding, I cast another Genjutsu into the middle of the room, recreating the scene I had showed him from my encounter with Cinder and Amber—edited as it was to protect Cinder’s identity. As they watched, Ironwood frowned while Lily turned a considering look on Ozpin. When the memory ended and I dismissed the illusion, Ironwood shook his head.

“I’ll admit, I was skeptical when you first described the event for me,” he said, fixing his gaze on the headmaster. “Then I remembered a report from another base and dug up the footage. You need to see this.”

Pulling out his scroll, Ironwood flipped through the menus before placing it down on the top of Ozpin’s desk, which lit up with blue light a moment later as the scroll and desk synced. A projector built into the table itself cast an image into the air above the desk.

I resisted the urge to wince as I recognized the scene it showed—shot at range, a flock of airborne Grimm blackened the sky above Atlas as a bullhead flew away from the camera before being blown out of the sky by the streak of a missile. Of course I recognized it—I had been there in person, after
The fight played out, complete with Penny bisecting the Nameless and our riding off into the sunset on a pair of Griffons. Ironwood picked up his scroll and backed the image up to a good shot of Shiro and paused it there. “A woman using a Grimm to steal the Fall Maiden's power and a man who controls Grimm. Both events took place within a few weeks of each other. It's too much of a coincidence. My guess is, they're both working for her. The question is, who are they?”

Miltia and I exchanged a look and I could feel the woman's smile through our link. 'Do you want to throw yourself under the bus or should I do it for you, dear?' she sent, and I rolled my eyes.

“Is there something you'd like to share?” Ozpin asked with a quirked eyebrow, having noticed the silent exchange.

“Not sure on the woman's identity. She wasn't exactly chatty when I fought her. The other one calls himself 'Shiro' and has been running around Vale causing trouble since around the time Torchwick got himself arrested. I almost had the little shit, but he's got competent help. He's fast and has what I believe to be a stealth Semblance—invisibility, a means of making himself completely silent, and the ability to lower his Aura output to zero without relying on Bounded Fields. Beyond that? He showed no signs of anything that would point to some ability to summon or control Grimm,” I supplied.

I thought a moment before adding, “Then again, magic. So who knows? If he does have some hat trick for dealing with Grimm, it may not summon them but it may be capable of controlling them if there are any present. Obviously he couldn’t control that big one, so there’s some kind of limit to it if he can.”

“You fought both of them? The woman in red and this Shiro character?” Ironwood asked, and I nodded.

“I was following up on a lead. He styles himself as a mercenary thief and I'm pretty sure he's either working directly for her or she's hired him to do jobs in the past. That train robbery no one's talking about? That was him and one of his associates.”

The General raised an eyebrow at that as his frown deepened. “There is no video footage of the train heist. How do you know—?”

“I tracked a White Fang cell to a meeting in the middle of nowhere on an abandoned rail spur. And I'm not surprised there’s no footage. If his Semblance didn’t make it obvious, being a ghost is sort of
the guy’s thing,” I pointed out. “As for his partner, I saw her there. She’s got a sword like his. Got close enough to eyeball the train itself and there was damage all along the top where they fought off somebody.”

“I think we’re missing something here,” Lily interrupted, gesturing towards the floating hologram. “Back it up,” she demanded. James looked about to protest, but a look from Ozpin silenced him. Backing up the footage, Lily stopped on Penny. I was very glad Penny had been in one of her disguises yesterday. “Who is she?”

“I—” Ironwood began, only for Ozpin to sigh and shake his head.

“James, we discussed this. Why did you go through with it?” the headmaster asked.

“You know why!” James ground out, glaring at the headmaster. “If it means not having to send children into battle, then it’s worth doing.”

Humming quietly, Qrow said, “So, that’s the robot that’s supposed to replace us Hunters.”

“No,” Ironwood denied, then shook his head. “Yes. It’s complicated. Someone duplicated its hardware platform and this Shiro infiltrated one of our facilities to steal the AI that was meant to run it, then activated the android on-site.”

The next words were ground out as James added, “They’ve made advancements to the design and used what have to be at least Grade 8 Dust crystals to power it. It’s got teleportation capability and looks more real compared to ours. It moves like a human.”

“We know she has someone capable of that level of tech in her employ,” Lily supplied. “It’s not hard to imagine he got ahold of the original designs and modified them to suit her purposes.” Frowning, Lily’s green-eyed gaze narrowed as she quietly added, “She looks familiar, too.”

“Him, ‘her’—you people keep dancing around a couple of names, so let me take a guess,” I cut in, hopefully before Lily made the connection. A change in eye and hair color, hair style, along with clothes, did nothing to change her height and build—and I recalled that Penny had used her own face yesterday instead of trying to change it. There was a good chance Lily may put that together and start wondering why ‘Jaune’ was hanging out with a combat gynoid.

“The ‘her’ in question is Salem, isn’t it?” Every member of Ozpin’s little club froze at the mention of
that name and turned to look at me. “Oh, should I not know that name?”

“No,” Ozpin answered before Ironwood could, “but I would very much like to know how you learned it.”

I shrugged. “You're not the only one with contacts. I did some digging. Admittedly, they couldn't find much—but what they did turn up was worrisome. I only got confirmation from a reliable source recently, though. So, do you want to read me in on this or not?”

“Why don’t you start by telling us what you know?” Ozpin asked.

“As I said, not much. She sounds like your standard, run of the mill terrorist-slash-cult leader. Based on what he said about Shiro though,” I jerked my head at Ironwood, “I'd infer she has some sort of control over Grimm.”

Ozpin, Qrow, James, and Lily exchanged glances at that. Finally, Ozpin said, “That is a gross oversimplification, but good enough for the moment.”

“In other words, ‘need to know, and you don’t need to know.’ Fair enough,” I shrugged. “We’re all still working out where we stand, I get it.”

Lily cleared her throat. “Right, moving on. Since you were the only ones not here for this yesterday,” Lily began, casting a questioning look at Ozpin, who nodded permission for her continue. “We just got back from a little recon around that way.”

Ironwood opened his mouth and Lily beat him to the punch. “I'll send the full report later, Jimmy. Short version: she's building up her forces. We think there's a White Fang connection there somewhere around Vale but haven't tracked that down. Qrow said he'd look into it,” she said, casting a glance at the taller man, who nodded in answer.

“Adam Taurus,” I tossed in, drawing raised eyebrows. “Word has it, the woman in red found him and threatened him and his White Fang buddies into working for her. He was caught in that Dust explosion a few days back.”

“But his cell is still alive and kicking, right?” Lily asked, and I nodded. “Figures. There’s no cutting the head off that snake. As I was saying, Jack gives it three, five years tops before something kicks
off. And when it does, shit's going to get bad.”

“What sort of numbers are we talking?” James asked, earning a wince from both Ozpin and Qrow.

“Too damned many,” Qrow grumbled.

“Numbers and classifications are in the full brief,” Lily answered without actually answering. “Suffice it to say, Qrow’s right. The sooner we get out ahead of this, the better. Problem is, I don’t think sending in a couple of kill teams is going to cut it.”

Miltia rolled her many red eyes. “In other words: lots of Grimm. Too many for a few Hunter teams to handle alone—to the point that you’d need to start pulling teams away from kingdom defense, which would leave openings for this Salem to exploit. Gee, if only you had some sort of standing military force to defend your kingdoms while you send your elite Hunters to take care of the worst of the problem, instead of subcontracting out to other countries.”

Ironwood bristled slightly under the implied insult. “Atlas is not responsible for the Vale Council deciding that cutting the kingdom defense budget, then outsourcing non-Hunter related security to Atlas was a good idea.”

“This is what you get for letting the council get too big for their breeches,” Lily muttered, casting a glance at Ozpin.

Shifting my gaze towards the Headmaster, he interpreted the tilt of my head as asking for details. “I don’t have that much say, unfortunately,” he sighed.

“Who does?” I asked, earning a shake of the head from the Headmaster.

It was Qrow who answered, however. “Money talks, bullshit walks.”

Acknowledging the other Huntsman’s words with a small nod, Ozpin sighed, “Moving on.”

“You’re doing team assignments tomorrow, aren’t you?” I asked, and Ozpin nodded. “Bets on who ends up on what team?”
“I’ll take some of that action,” Qrow started, only for Glynda to cut him off.

“Don’t,” she warned, earning an annoyed look from the man. “Team pairings are chosen by the Headmaster.”

I blinked under my mask and asked, “I thought you had some sort of trial or something?”

“Oh, we do,” Ozpin smiled, “But the trial is only half of it.”

“So how’s it work?” I wondered aloud. “Not how you decide, obviously you’ve got a system of some sort to match up who’d work best with whom. Probably based on profiles just like the ones that Torchwick attempted to steal from Signal. I mean, how do you control for a few hundred people in a forest full of Grimm?”

“Planning. And cheating,” Qrow chuckled. “Tomorrow’s a catapult launch, right?” he asked, getting a nod from Glynda. “Oz controls the angle and force of the catapults. There’s stuff to measure wind speed set up on poles above some of the trees in the Forest. The catapults measure your weight and there are laser scanners hidden in most of the doors.”

Taking that in, I nodded. “So, you control for weight, crosswinds, drag, and so on… it’s really just math.”

“Correct,” Glynda agreed. “The only true variable is the student and their chosen landing strategy, and by telling the students to pursue a specific goal—”

“You point them all in the same direction, so even if someone’s moving faster or slower than expected, if the partner you want for ‘em is further down the line, you just crank up the launch strength,” Qrow chuckled.

Ozpin cleared his throat. “I wouldn’t call it cheating—”

“What the hell do you call it, then?” Ruby’s uncle asked, incredulous.
“Yes, well,” Ozpin had the decency to look embarrassed at being called out, at least. “Team placements themselves are random, based on the order in which the pairs arrive. So while the partner pairs are not random—barring accidents, that is—the teams themselves are determined partly on who arrives first and, for this test, which piece they pick. With pieces limited and the most compatible people paired together, the first through tend to be the best of the group.” Turning an amused look on Qrow, he added, “Or lucky.”

“What was the point to that?” I asked of Qrow as we rode the elevator down, Muffliato already cast around us to prevent any listening devices in the elevator from picking anything up.

Qrow turned an amused look on me. “Oz is the kind of leader who likes the people working with him to feel included—even if he doesn’t need anything from them right that moment.”

“So that had absolutely nothing to do with me, until I brought Jen into it,” I guessed, drawing the attention of the girl in question. When Qrow nodded, I asked, “You knew?” He grinned and nodded again. “And you left me to worry about nothing. Wow, Goodwitch is right. You are an asshole.”

“Pot calling the kettle black, dear,” Miltia countered quietly, sending a mental impression of a smile to make up for the lack of tone in her voice thanks to the items she wore.

“Shush,” I warned.

Qrow blinked, casting a look at Miltia before huffing out an irritated breath. “Dust that's annoying. Can you maybe turn that off?”

“No,” Miltia shook her head. “Don't worry, I'm sure you'll forget about it in a few minutes.”

“That's the point,” Qrow grumbled.

“Getting back on track,” I said, shooting Miltia an amused look. Turning to Qrow, I asked, “Any idea what he’s going to do with Winter? She can’t go back to Atlas. She knows too much.”

Frowning, Qrow shook his head. “No idea. Oz isn’t exactly the type to kill people just because they’re inconvenient or they’re working for the wrong side, if he thinks he can turn them to his own
ends.” Turning a look on Jen, he said, “If he thinks the Fox had a hand in her recovery, he may ask you for help with that.”

“Yeah, the last thing I want to do is get into a literal battle of wills with her,” I shook my head. “Not without some serious help. Jen let me in. I doubt Winter would be so willing. And we’re still working on Jen. Hell, we’re still in the ‘figuring out what was done’ phase. We haven’t even moved on to fixing anything, so I don’t have anything useful for Winter.”

“It’s helping,” Jen murmured from beneath her mask, having replaced it when we left the office. “Even that much.”

Taking a pull off his drink, Qrow sighed as he found it was empty. “Wish there were more we could do, kid. Most of us are out of our depth on this sort of thing.”

“We’ll figure something out.” The elevator opened and I nodded to Qrow before dropping the muffling spell and stepping out with my entourage. Spotting Neo—in the guise of Jaune—walking just outside the tower by herself.

“You were just on your way to catch up to the tour group. They’re heading for the foundry. The burrito you had at lunch didn’t agree with you,’ Neo snickered as she took my place with the Fox Hunt group leaving campus.

I rolled my eyes. ‘Thanks for that. Really. Thank you.’

‘I’m sure you’ll find a way to get me back for it later. Have fun, my love,’ she sent back.

‘You bet your ass,’ I sent, shaking my head as I took off towards where my map said the Foundry was located. Neo adjusted the illusion around us so the two of us could switch back and the foursome dropped party as they headed for the landing pads.

Rejoining the tour group as they were leaving the building, I found Ruby, Blake, and Yang in front speaking with Coco and Velvet. Well, Ruby was speaking a mile a minute, everyone else was just trying to keep up. “So the school really supplies materials for weapon upgrades? What about exotic materials and components, like storage tech? Oh! And Dust? Do they supply Dust? Crescent could really use some new blade upgrades.”
“Ruby, breathe,” Yang groaned.

Blake shook her head. “I think she’s discovered circular breathing.” The faunus girl’s ears twitched off to the side under her bow and she turned her head, spotting me as I made my way over.

‘How did she ever get away with the bow in canon? Or do people just ignore it?’ I wondered, smiling as I rejoined them. “What’d I miss?”

Ruby inhaled and Yang slapped a hand over her mouth. “Just the Foundry. It’s for making, upgrading, and repairing weapons and armor while on campus. It was pretty cool. Ew, sis!”

Yang removed her hand from Ruby’s mouth, wiping it off on her shorts. “I’m coming back as soon as we get some time away from classes.”

“Assuming you make the cut,” Coco cut in.

Ruby snorted softly. “We’ll make it. Now, answer my questions! Please?”

Velvet put on a patient smile and spoke up before Coco could. “Yes, the school will supply all materials for repairs, upgrades, and new weapon development—so long as it’s within reason. Usually, that means a few versions down on things like storage tech, so we should have access to the Gen 4 stuff this year for free, but they’ll subsidize up to Gen 6. The materials are typically donations supplied by the companies themselves, for tax write-offs. But to prevent abuse, there is a system in place—essentially, each student has a yearly R&D and repair budget, and the cost of the components you’re using can’t exceed that.”

“In other words, if you blow all your allowance on shiny new toys, you’re shit out of luck if they break and you have to pay out of pocket to fix them,” Coco explained. “And the more expensive the toy was to begin with, the more it typically costs to fix.”

“So, would you recommend going cheaper on things like storage tech initially and then upgrading to newer stuff later, or getting the new stuff now because you may as well get used to it?” I asked.

“That’s a ‘function vs form’ argument. Realistically, it boils down to personal preference and what you’re willing to give up to do it. I want my gear to look amazing, so I’m willing to shell out the extra for it. My suggestion? Design your gear so that if you want to upgrade later, you can swap as few pieces as possible at a time. There’s no point rebuilding your entire weapon every time you go up a caliber or add a feature. If you want to make it look good, then pay for the new hotness now, and if it...
breaks it'll be easier to replace. If you want to save money for a larger upgrade at the end of the year, use older tech and when the time comes you just swap out the old junk for new. But... well, if you have an amazing idea that blows everything else out of the water, go for it and damn the development cost. You can always repay it later—assuming you live that long.”

Nodding in agreement with her teammate, Velvet continued, “As for Dust, yes. Beacon will supply all the Dust we need. Dust doesn’t count towards your Research, Development, and Repair budget because it’s expendable—so long as it’s Grade 3 and under. So if you add a Dust blade to something and it breaks, feel free to replace it—though the faculty would prefer you melt down the broken blade and use it to make ammunition.”

“One Dust blade? I’m thinking four,” Ruby muttered, quietly enough that I knew she hadn’t actually meant that as a response to Velvet. “I could add a pair of recessed blades and have them deploy so they cover Crescent Rose’s forward and rear steel blades. What about another mode shift, though? I already have a straight blade mode, but with Gen 5 tech, I could rework the head and maybe add more blades to the back side...” The little redhead pulled out her scroll and began tapping away at it, lost in her own world as she allowed herself to be guided along.

I left Ruby to her plotting, turning my attention to Blake and Yang. “This could be a good excuse to make backup weapons. If Beacon’s footing the bill, it’d be a shame to waste the opportunity.”

“Technically, we’re footing the bill. I’m sure that’s part of why mandatory service is required,” Blake pointed out.

“Got it in one,” Velvet nodded with a chipper grin. “So if you’re going to have to pay for it later, you may as well enjoy it now.”

Coco chuckled at that. “So says miss ‘spent six years worth of R&D in one go and still isn’t done.’”


_That got Ruby’s attention. “Wait. What? You mean there’s a way to get more money? And use it all in our first year? How?!”_

With a sigh, Velvet answered, “I’m a Teacher’s Assistant. Don’t let the fancy title fool you, though. Basically, I’m a glorified gofer. I grade papers, fetch coffee or food, help administer and grade tests, tutor students, and so on—on top of everything else we do.”
“She gave up her free time for shiny toys,” Coco smirked.

“You forgot to add, ‘and a few hours worth of time I could be sleeping every night,’” Velvet groaned. “Totally worth it, though. But I’m kind of the exception, not the rule.”

Casting a glance at her sister, where Ruby appeared to be fighting the urge to drool at the prospect of six years worth of funds for weapons development, Yang sighed and asked, “So, how’d you swing that? What makes you the exception?”

Velvet’s face went carefully neutral. “A few reasons. Eidetic memory helps.”

Ruby pouted. “Well, that rules me out,” she sighed. “Oh well, I’ll just have to plan my upgrade path carefully—make sure each modification is functional, instead of a complete overhaul all at once. How much is the normal budget?”

Coco quoted a figure that made me wince. ‘Jesus, that’s almost as much as I paid to have Ascalon made.’

“I think we lost her,” Blake smiled at Ruby, who had gone back to her scroll and was quickly pulling up various weapons’ parts websites—apparently making a wishlist, now that she knew how much her allowance was.

Considering my current loadout, I said, “I think I should be good for the rest of the year, barring repair costs, and I’ve already got enough stuff that I don’t really need a backup weapon.”

“Bullshit,” Yang scoffed. “Jaune, you’re basically a walking armory. If we let you, you’d make backups for your backups for your backups.”

I considered that a moment, then shrugged. I couldn’t really deny it. At all. I duplicated everything I owned specifically for that purpose, after all. “Well,” I hedged, “it’s probably a good idea to track how well it does over the year and look into upgrades or modifications later. Does the budget roll over to the next year if you don’t spend it, or is it a ‘use it or lose it’ thing?”

“I’m surrounded by weapon nuts,” Coco sighed quietly.
Velvet snorted softly. “Hunter school, Coco.”

“Right,” Coco sighed, before turning an amused look on me. “It’s a school, bankrolled by the government. What do you think?”

“They’re out to screw us twice over,” I supplied, and she nodded.

“Yup. Anything unspent is lost and next year’s budget is cut for you. Spending it all means you can argue for an increase.” Turning back to Velvet, she added, “Unless you spend it all and then some.”

“That’s not fair,” the Faunus girl pouted.

“Anyway, we’re here.” Gesturing at a door set into the wall of the building we had just entered, Coco spoke up so the rest of the group could hear. “This is one of our training rooms. These things sport a fully modifiable holographic interface. You can change everything from terrain, to weather, to enemies. They’re usually used to test out new techniques, Dust, or Semblances outside of actual combat.”

A grin pulled her lips upwards as she continued. “Well, that’s the official use, anyway. They’re also used for sparring, exhibition matches, or grudge matches. For those of you who don’t already know, Beacon isn’t like whatever school you came from. The teachers here aren’t going to hold your hand. If you have a problem with someone, you’re expected to settle it yourself.

“If you go running to them with every little problem, they will make all our lives miserable. The first night of sleep I lose because one of you idiots went to Goodwitch of all people to complain about some he-said-she-said bullshit and I will drag your sorry ass in here myself and beat you like a rug.”

There were a few mutterings from the crowd and Coco pulled down her sunglasses to glare across the crowd, backing it up with a respectable dose of Killing Intent for her age. “Shut up!” she yelled, silencing the crowd. “Those are the rules as laid down by the Student Council President and agreed upon by the faculty. If you have a problem with them, you can look her up in the school directory and take it up with her—but if you do, it’s your funeral.

“As far as the faculty are concerned, there are only a few rules: no permanent harm, do not disrupt class, do not keep someone else from attending class, and never before a field exercise or mission. Beyond that, anything goes. Now,” her gaze swept the crowd again. “I’m going to need two suckers
—I mean, volunteers.”

“Not it!” I called immediately, echoed by Ruby, Blake, and Yang.

Velvet giggled. “They know how to play,” she pointed out to her partner, to which Coco pulled her glasses down just so we could see her rolling her eyes.

“Fine, for now,” Coco grunted. “You and you,” she pointed out two people in the crowd. “Take the hallway to the right. Everyone else, take the left path.” Turning to our small group, she added, “You four, come with me.”

We entered what looked like an anteroom that split into two halls. The right path lead down a short flight of stairs and curved around out of sight, while the left path did likewise only the stairs lead upwards—putting an entire floor’s worth of space between the two levels. We followed Coco and Velvet up into a stadium set above an arena, with seats circling the open area below—which, at the moment, was barren and blank, just a circular floor of what looked like concrete.

“Alright. Anyone looking to place bets, please see my lovely assistant while I get the field set up,” Coco called, moving towards what looked like a control booth set at the twelve o’clock position—or north-most end, according to my map—of the circular room. She jerked her head for us to follow as she went.

Velvet stepped to the side, taking out her scroll and putting on a huge smile. “We have a weekly tournament where, for a small fee, anyone can enter and compete and those who want to can bet on fights—either individually, or in brackets. Now, who’s first?”

Following Coco into the control booth, we looked around as she moved to a computer overlooking the arena below. “So, what’d you want to talk about?” Yang asked, leaning against the glass wall and crossing her arms.

“How sure are you that you’ll make the cut tomorrow?” the brunette asked, as the terrain below began to change, taking on the appearance of a boulder-strewn field with a few bare, dead trees standing or laying scattered across the arena.

“We’ll make it,” I answered. “Why do you want to know?”
Coco ignored the question, activating the microphone and speaking into it. “The rules are simple. The fight ends on either knockout, submission, or Aura depletion. We’re using standard Tournament F rules here. For those of you that don’t know what that means: your Aura bars won’t replenish as you naturally regenerate Aura.” A six-sided jumbotron-like screen lit up above the arena, displaying the faces and names of the two below, along with a blue Aura meter under each. “The match begins in one minute!”

Turning off the mic, Coco turned away from the control panel and leaned back against it, mimicking Yang’s crossed-arm pose. “You four look close. Team-like, almost. It would be a shame if you were split up tomorrow, or if one or more of you failed.” Smirking, she added, “I just so happen to have information on the exam. I was wondering what it was worth to you…”

We exchanged glances before Ruby spoke up, “So do we. It’s not like we’re going in blind.”

“So the question is, do you have something we don’t?” Blake asked.

Grinning, Yang added, “And depending on what it is, it’s probably not going to be worth nearly as much as you think.”

Coco frowned, apparently not accustomed to being put on the back foot like this. “I know the location, format, objectives, and rules of the test.” Holding up a hand, she stopped us long enough to turn around to the mic and flip it on. “First match, begin!” she called, before tapping a series of controls that started a timer and sounded a buzzer. Once she was done, she turned back to us.

“We have most of that,” I countered as soon as she turned off the mic again. “What are the rules?”

‘We do? You found out the rest?’ Blake sent.

‘Ozpin confirmed what we already knew earlier,’ I bent the truth. Ozpin had confirmed it earlier, actually—just far, far earlier than I was implying. No, what Ozpin had given me today was… worrisome. The man had plans of his own for the formation of partners and the means to carry it out.

A thoughtful look crossed her face for a moment before Coco offered, “It’ll cost you a quarter of your R&D budget. Each.”

“Get fucked!” Yang blurted immediately, her eyes going wide.
A flash off to my left caught my attention for a second, and I turned to see Velvet with a boxy, old-fashioned camera in hand and taking pictures of the fighters below. ‘Is she into photography, or just some sort of fighting/weapon nut who likes pictures?’

Coco pulled down her glasses, sweeping Yang’s form up and down once with her brown eyes. “Nope. Not an equivalent offer.”

Before Yang could retort, Blake held up a hand to stop her. “Velvet. You’re trying to recoup her spent budget.”

“No,” Coco denied, earning dubious looks from pretty much all of us. “I’m trying to get her more.”

“That makes more sense,” Ruby agreed with a nod. “Now I really want to know what she built that cost six years worth of funds and still requires more.”

“Unfortunately, we’re not the suckers you’re looking for,” I shook my head. “However,” I muttered, turning my attention to the crowd. I had spotted her Sigil on my minimap in the crowd with us, along with Pyrrha’s… “I know someone who would and could pay that. In cold, hard cash no less. You tell us the rules, I’ll send them up.”

Coco snorted, looking out the window herself for a moment. “What’s to stop me from skipping you and going to Schnee myself?”

I rolled my eyes and pulled out my scroll. Keying in one of the speed-dial entries, I waited. Two rings later, Joan answered. “Jaune? What’s up? I thought you would be in orientation by now.”

“We are. Quick question. Did you ever see a ‘fetch the relic’ type Initiation?” I asked.

The Eldest Deadly Sister hummed, even as Coco turned away. “Yeah, the twins were in one. Why?”

Grinning, I asked, “What are the rules? We know you’re supposed to be catapulted across the Emerald Forest and retrieve a couple of relics, but beyond that—”

“Jaune, listen,” Joan cut me off, her voice sounding urgent. “There are no rules.”

I blinked. “None. As in—”
“Yeah,” she agreed, “killing is permitted. Frowned on, but permitted. If I had known what type of Initiation it was going to be, I would’ve warned you this morning.” Sighing as someone said something in the background, she said, “Look, I’ve got to go. Be careful tomorrow. Okay?”

“We will,” I promised. “Thanks.”

We said our goodbyes and I pocketed the phone. “So,” I turned to Ruby, Yang, and Blake. “No rules. Everything is permitted. Up to and including killing.” Spotting the frown on Coco’s face, I asked, “Want me to get the Snowflake?”

“Would you—” Coco began, only for Ruby to cut her off.

“Be right back,” the redhead grinned, before taking off in a burst of rose petals.

Coco huffed a frustrated sigh. “I don’t get you.”

“Who says we can’t both have what we want?” I asked. The buzzer sounded in the background, announcing that one of the two ‘volunteers’ had lost.

Coco turned her attention back to the mic for a moment. “Anyone interested in volunteering for the second match, see Velvet. If no one has volunteered within the next five minutes, we’ll pick two candidates,” Coco announced, shutting off the mic again as Ruby returned the same way she’d left. “Huh. Maybe you really will pass tomorrow.”

When Weiss showed up, we got a surprise in the form of Pyrrha tagging along with her. “Uh, hello,” she waved, smiling somewhat awkwardly as she followed Weiss inside.

Ice blue eyes took us all in, narrowing into an annoyed look at Ruby, before stopping on me for a moment. After a quick round of introductions, Weiss asked, “What’s this about?”

“So, how would you like to know how the teams will be determined tomorrow?” Coco asked, her lips turning up into a grin.

Frowning, Weiss asked, “What’s the catch?”

Coco quoted her figure and Weiss blanched. It was half of what she’d asked for our group’s total.
“Take it or leave it,” the brunette gave the ultimatum.

Pyrrha shrugged, turning towards the door. “I don’t really care to know,” she admitted.

Seeing that, Weiss growled quietly under her breath. “Fine! I’ll get it to you later.” Reaching out, she snagged Pyrrha by the elbow and held her in place. Casting a look our way, she asked, “You already know, don’t you?”

“Jaune’s sisters went to Beacon, so we kind of had inside information,” Yang shrugged.

Weiss nodded before turning her focus back to Coco. “How are they decided?”

Humming quietly, Coco turned away and asked into the microphone, “Contestants ready?” On some signal from Velvet, she adjusted the settings and the terrain below changed again. “Same rules as before. Fight begins in one minute at the buzzer!”

The mic clicked off and Coco turned back to us. “You’ll gather in the morning at 8 A.M. on the cliffs overlooking the Emerald Forest. There, you’ll be launched by catapult into the Forest. The first person you see upon landing will be your teammate. Don’t bother arguing with the staff, they won’t change who you get after the fact. In fact, depending on who you try it with, you may get on their shit list, and it’s your funeral if you do.

“Following your landing and partnering up, you’ll have to navigate through the Forest to a small shrine on the northern end, where you’ll be tasked with retrieving a relic. If the pattern holds true, this year’s relic should be chess pieces. Whichever partner pair grabs the matched chess piece to yours will be the other half of your team—king with queen, bishops, knights, rooks, pawns, all of them divided by white or black.”

“Wait,” Weiss said, holding up a hand. “Even if you counted out every single pawn, pairing pawn A with pawn B and so on, just to pad the numbers instead of counting pawns as two pieces per set, that means it’s only possible for there to be sixteen teams between both sides. There are hundreds of prospective students here! You’re saying only sixty-four will pass?” Coco shook her head at that. “…So, the pawns are counted once?”

“Yup,” Coco smirked, popping the ‘P.’ “Competition’s tough. Five teams per class this year. Meaning there’s a maximum of forty survivors. And I do say ‘survivors’ because as for the rules… well, there are none.”
Weiss blinked. “No rules? At all?”

“I know I keep saying this, but for some idiot first years we really have to hammer it home. *You signed the waivers,*” Coco cut off any further protests. “And while the professors will frown on killers, well… it has happened in the past and we are trained to fight against and put down sentient targets, not just Grimm. Usually, though, the ones attacking other applicants for their pieces just rough them up a bit.

“Be thankful it’s not an Elimination type selection this year. Those are fun from what I’ve heard, and they cycle through every few years so we should have one coming in the next year or two. Basically, all the upper years get to go set up camp in the Forest the day before, it lasts all day, and only the ones who make it out get to pass. The actual students aren't supposed to *kill* anyone, but accidents happen.”

The buzzer sounded and Coco turned back to the mic. “Last round, then we’ll break up for the day. Velvet will be choosing this round’s competitors.”

“This doesn’t change anything,” Blake shrugged.

Yang turned an annoyed look on the Faunus girl. “No, just makes it potentially lethal.”

“And the life we’re choosing isn’t?” Blake countered, raising an eyebrow.

“She has a point,” Weiss agreed. “I’m not backing out just because the stakes are a little higher. I won’t.”

Weiss fixed a look on Pyrrha, who simply smiled. “Mistral’s entrance exam has similar rules, so I was honestly expecting something along these lines.”

Ruby shook her head as the buzzer sounded and Coco announced the next match had begun. “It seems needlessly dangerous this early on.”

“Exactly!” Yang nodded her agreement.
Except this is the only time they can do it,” Coco countered. “The faculty aren’t going to pit the students that passed against each other in life-or-death battles. Not intentionally, anyway. Against Grimm? Sure. During the Vytal Festival? Accidents happen, but intentionally going for the kill or maiming someone will get you arrested. In class? Dust no. There are rules in place to prevent us from hurting each other too badly, specifically because they don’t want to end a career before it’s begun and waste the resources put into us.”

Shifting her gaze to Pyrrha and Weiss, Coco asked, “So, you two already decided to partner up?”

“Yes,” Weiss nodded.

At the same time, Pyrrha said, “No.”

The pair exchanged a look, a small grin crossing Weiss’ lips. “She’s being stubborn.”

“I’d rather just… let whatever happens, happen,” Pyrrha countered.

Ruby shot an amused look my way. “I still say that sounds like loser talk.”

Pyrrha chuckled quietly while I rolled my eyes, before turning my gaze to Weiss. “What part of ‘launched by catapult’ was hard to understand? It’s random.” Well, semi-random—not that I was going to tell her Ozpin had the launch down to a science.

Before the girl could argue, the buzzer sounded and Coco turned on the mic again. “That’s it, folks. Good luck during the test tomorrow. I’d suggest heading back and making an early night of it.”

The door to the control booth opened as Coco killed the mic again, allowing Velvet to enter and make her way over to Coco. Counting out Lien, Velvet handed her partner a stack of plastic cards before turning a smile on Ruby, Blake, Yang, and I. “We’re pretty much done with orientation so we’re heading back to our dorm. If you guys make it…”

Coco picked up where Velvet left off. “Swing by some time and we’ll introduce you to the boys.”
“Will do,” I agreed. Digging out my scroll, I brought up the option for number exchange and held it out. Velvet smiled and tapped her scroll to mine, swapping our numbers, and Coco followed suit a moment later, before the pair did the same with the rest of the girls, minus Weiss and Pyrrha. “See you two later.”

“Later,” Coco agreed, tossing a wave over her shoulder and pulling Velvet along and out of the booth.

Turning back to Pyrrha and Weiss, Weiss huffed out a sigh and turned for the door. “Come on, let’s go. We can continue our discussion over dinner.”

“Sounds fun,” Yang agreed as we followed the heiress out of the control booth to the stairs. “But isn’t it a little early for that?”

Blake shook her head. “Not really. As Coco said, it might be wise to turn in early tonight.”

“A soldier or Hunter should take advantage of food and rest as they’re available,” Pyrrha spoke up. “Because it might not always be.”

“Agreed,” I nodded. “So, as I was saying, the partner pairs are random. Headmaster Ozpin plans to literally let the chips fall where they may.”

Weiss scoffed at that, shaking her head. “It’s only semi-random, if you think about it.”

“What do you mean?” Pyrrha asked, raising an eyebrow as we exited the building and made our way towards the cafeteria.

Smirking, Weiss took out her scroll and waved it once before pocketing it. “Think about if. If we knew beforehand who we wanted to partner with, all it would take is staying in touch. Call your partner, figure out where you are, meet up, then make your way to the objective. Then call the other half of the team you want, pick up two chess pieces that match, and stick around to give them the other half of the set. It’s only random if you don’t plan.”

I shrugged. “Fair enough, you could game the system that way I suppose. You’d have to be careful about avoiding un-partnered people before meeting with your partner, though.”
Blake hummed. “Even that’s not really random,” she pointed out. “Some of us have means of maneuvering, once we’re airborne.” At that, Weiss’ face lit up in a grin that would make the Grinch green with envy, before swiftly pulling it back into a neutral expression.

“That only makes it semi-random, since you can’t account for every variable,” I countered. “Launch timing, wind, other people, Grimm, and so on.”

Entering the cafeteria, we put the conversation on hold long enough to put together a couple of plates and took an unoccupied table some distance away from the serving stations. “So, who were you guys looking to team up with?” Yang asked as we dug in.

“Not sure yet,” Weiss shrugged. “I haven’t seen anyone that truly stood out as worth pursuing yet. You four come the closest, but you’re clearly already planning to get into a team together.”

“Most of us are,” Ruby grumbled, turning a look my way.

Reaching out, I patted her arm. “I didn’t say I was against it, just that the odds aren’t in favor of it. Even if we plan, and plan, and plan some more there are still ways things can go wrong tomorrow. No plan survives contact with the enemy.”

“Then you don’t have enough plans,” Weiss rolled her eyes.

“Okay,” Blake’s eyes narrowed on the snow-blonde. “You want to partner up with Pyrrha. She clearly doesn’t care one way or the other—or, at least, she’s willing to humor you.”

Pyrrha smiled at that. “I left Mistral to escape the fame, media, politicking, and social parasites—people looking to be ‘friends’ only because I was famous. I came here to make friends, but I knew I couldn’t escape it entirely. Weiss, in her own way, at least is honest in her intentions.”

“I want the best possible partner. I’m not going to pretend you’re some nobody. Those kind are the worst, because you never know if they’re being honest or not,” Weiss shook her head. “Besides, you’d have to live under a rock not to know the name ‘Pyrrha Nikos.’”

Sending the heiress an amused look, I pointed out, “Knowing the name is not the same as knowing
the person. Like any athlete, all you know is their name, their looks, and their record. You know nothing about them as a person.”

“That can come later,” Weiss shrugged.

“Ideally, it should come first,” I countered, before admitting, “But to be fair, this situation is not ideal and most people won’t get the choice. For the majority of people, their partner will be random and they won’t know anything about them beyond the most obvious.”

“Doesn’t apply to us,” Blake cut in. “Now, suppose Pyrrha changes her mind between now and tomorrow and decides she doesn’t want you as her partner and will do everything she can to avoid it. How exactly would you plan around that?”

Weiss narrowed her eyes in thought for a moment. “Start with launch. If that doesn’t work, pursue through the forest then pick the same relic. If we got separated even further, get to the relics as fast as possible and wait.”

“What if she’s faster than you?” Yang asked, trading a look with Blake.

“Run above tree-top level to skip the Forest. It would suck, but I have the Aura and Dust for it,” Weiss shrugged.

Blake shook her head. “The air is full of Grimm.”

“Run through the trees, then.”

Blake hummed, nodding. Yang asked, “What if she arrives in a group?”

Weiss grinned. “Observe how they arrive—their placement, who is talking to whom, and so forth. Then wait and see who picks what piece.”

“And if they pull a bait and switch?” Yang added.

Rolling her eyes, Weiss asked, “I don’t think anyone would go that far—”
“I would,” I countered. “If I had a specific plan in mind.”

“See?” the blonde on my left grinned. “Well?”

Turning an annoyed look on me, Weiss grumbled, “Then I suppose it would come down to either luck, or bartering with the other half of the team to trade pieces.”

“Double bait-and-switch,” I grinned, getting in on the action just to rile her up.


Using my fork, I arranged a few vegetables on my plate. “These two, this pea and this carrot, arrived together in a group with this bellpepper and this piece of corn—pea with carrot, bellpepper with corn. You assume those are the actual groups. They pick the same pieces. You, Snowflake, want to be paired with the carrot, so you barter with the bellpepper to take their piece. They agree. The bellpepper is actually the carrot’s partner, and you’re now stuck with the pea and the corn.”

Weiss opened her mouth, and I added, “And just for fun, triple bait-and-switch: as soon as you accept the piece, they all replace their pieces and grab new ones, then leave—sticking you with whatever you’ve got in your hand.”

“That’s our Jaune. A master baiter,” Yang grinned, earning a groan and a smack from Ruby. At the same time, I palmed my face while Blake rolled her eyes.


Weiss, however, disregarded the shenanigans, turning a calculating look on me for a moment before her gaze flicked to Pyrrha. “Then I suppose I’d better make the first attempt count,” she murmured, turning her attention back to her plate.

“You know,” Pyrrha began, a thoughtful look crossing her face as she turned an amused look on Weiss. “You two might not make a bad pairing. You love making plans and Jaune appears to love throwing a wrench into them.”
Weiss looked up from her plate for a moment and met my eyes. Throwing her an amused look, I grinned. “Could be fun,” I teased. “You know what they say, Snowflake. Friction makes sparks fly.”

“Absolutely not,” Weiss denied. “I’d murder you in your sleep.”

“He snores,” Blake nodded in agreement.

Turning a hurt look on the Faunus girl, I protested, “I do not! Besides, at least I don’t li—”

Golden eyes went wide as Blake cut me off. “Shut up!”

“And that’s too much information for me,” Weiss sighed, standing up from the table. “Good night.” Turning to Pyrrha, she asked, “You coming?”

Casting a look around the table, Pyrrha nodded and stood. “Sure. Hope to see you all again later. Good luck tomorrow.”

“You too,” I said, which was echoed by the others. Once the pair had gone, I asked, “So, we ready to go too?”

“Dessert!” Ruby demanded, before disappearing for the dessert table.

“Oh, yeah, I could go for some chocolate cake,” Yang quickly hopped up as well.

Sharing a shrug with Blake, we followed. As I selected my own dessert—a bit of chocolate cake with a scoop of vanilla ice cream on top—and returned to my seat, I turned over everything I’d learned during the meeting with Ozpin and his group. ‘I am in so far over my head… Well, at least I don’t have to juggle Shiro and Cinder for a while, so there’s that.’

My spoon scraped my plate and I blinked, looking down to find the smeared remains of dessert I didn’t remember eating. “Are you back with us?”

Turning an amused smile on where Blake was sending me a concerned look, I shrugged. “Sorry, a
lot on my mind. Tomorrow’s a big day.” That said, I sent to the group, ‘Trying to sort through everything I found out during that little meeting with Ozpin and decide where to go from here.’

‘You’re not going to share, are you?’ Yang asked. Aloud, she said, “Ready to call it a night?”

“Sounds like a plan,” Ruby agreed, popping up from the table and taking my hand as her sister and Blake followed. “I want a shower.”

“Shower sounds nice,” I agreed, allowing myself to be pulled along. ‘Sorry, guys. Not tonight. Soon, though. When everything settles down and we’ve got some time to talk without being interrupted, or observed.’

Curiosity and worry spilled across the link from Blake before she sent, ‘Then it’s bad. What—an 8 or 9 on a scale of 10? Immediate danger or something we have time to prepare for?’

‘Yeah, about that. And we have some time, I think. Probably less than we’d like, though. Initial estimates are between three and five years. My gut tells me less.’

Further conversation on the topic was put on hold as we found the ballroom, which had been converted into a communal sleeping area for the night. Glynda glanced up from where she stood in front of the doors with a tablet-sized scroll in hand as we approached. “You’re early,” she pointed out. “Turning in for the night?”

“Yep!” Ruby nodded.

“Well, maybe. Depends on where we’re supposed to shower and change. No point heading in if we’re just going to have to leave and come back,” I said.

Frowning, Glynda checked something on her tablet before sighing quietly. “My apologies. It seems Ms. Adel forgot to inform you of some things. I will be having words with her,” she said, her voice tinged with annoyance and a hint of threat. “The ballroom has an attached locker room— where you’ll store your gear tonight until you’re assigned a permanent locker tomorrow, should you pass—a long with shower s. It’s on your right as you enter.”

Green eyes shifted between Blake, Yang, and myself before focusing on Ruby as Glynda added, “Like most of the facilities in Beacon, it’s coed. If you would prefer private accommodations, I can
arrange something. Several students have already made the request, so don’t hesitate to ask if you feel the need.

Ruby turned a confused look on the teacher, asking, “Wait. You mean they’re for everyone? At the same time?”

“That’s what ‘coed’ means, sis,” Yang sighed. “Didn’t they go over this… oh. That was supposed to be this year for you,” she muttered.

Glynda nodded. “That is correct. There are small, attached private bath rooms with a shower in each dormitory unit, but for the most part you should be using either the locker rooms or bathing facilities. As I said, arrangements can be made if needed while on campus but in the field, privacy is a luxury that you most likely won’t have available. That’s why the facilities are coed—to get you used to the idea in a safe environment, so that when you are in the field, you aren’t distracted.”

“Makes sense,” I nodded in agreement. Ruby turned back to the three of us and I shrugged. “Go ahead, we’ll meet you inside.”

Coughing quietly to catch our attention, Glynda turned her intense green eyes on me. “While the facilities are coed, there is to be no horseplay and no… shenanigans.”

I rolled my eyes, earning a mild glare from the woman. “I don’t think you’ll have to worry about that from us, Ms. Goodwitch.” My lips twitched in a grin. Something about the woman's attitude made me want to antagonize her—ruffle her feathers and get some sort of reaction out of her, but caution and Joan’s warning not to mess with her won out.

Despite her attitude and demeanor, she wasn’t that much older than Joan—making her thirty at most. ‘If she keeps that up, Aura or no she’ll have wrinkles before she’s thirty-five.’

Yang took my arm and began pulling me inside. “Come on, let’s get a good spot. We’ll see you in a few, sis.”

My eyebrows crept towards my hairline as I heard a quiet growl from the little reaper before Ruby hurried after us, Blake trailing in her wake. I turned a questioning look on the redhead, who blushed but refused to leave. “She’s right. May as well get used to it,” the shorter girl muttered.
I opened my mouth to argue, but a silver-eyed glare cut me off. Apparently, ‘stubborn’ had won out over ‘embarrassed’ today. “Okay, then,” I finally nodded. Turning a glance back to Blake, I raised an eyebrow. ‘What about your bow?’

‘If we pick a spot near the back, I can probably use you and Yang to block lines of sight from anyone else. Once I’m under the water, they shouldn’t stand out,’ she suggested. ‘As far as Faunus traits go, mine are fairly easy to hide.’

‘Not that I’m encouraging you to hide them. I happen to think your ears are cute,’ I sent, earning an eye roll and a faint smile in answer.

Yang pushed open the door to the locker room, holding the door for us and fishing out her scroll. “I’ve got number ninety, what about you guys”

“Sixty-three,” Blake answered after a glance at her own scroll.

“Seventy-two,” Ruby supplied.

Visibly checking my own scroll, I hummed. “One-one-seven.”

We split up to change out of our gear and I made my way over to my locker for the night. The place was a bit crowded, but not so much that it was uncomfortable—I guessed most of the students hadn’t gotten around to calling it a night yet. Opening it up with my scroll, I hummed as I found a robe bearing the Beacon logo stitched over the breast neatly folded on one of the shelves.

I unslung the backpack from my back and stuffed it inside before hitting the quick release straps for my armor and weapon holsters. Hanging what I could on the pegs provided and piling the heavier pieces at the bottom of the locker, I quickly stripped out of my clothes and pulled on the robe.

Closing the locker, I made my way over to the shower area.

The locker room was divided into three sections: a section for lockers for gear, a section for locked cabinets that held toiletries, towels, and other shower supplies, and the last section for the showers themselves. Seeing that the cabinets lining the walls of the second room were all numbered, I made my way over to the one labeled 117. Sure enough, it opened for my scroll. Shrugging, I tossed my scroll inside and grabbed soap, shampoo, and the supplied wash cloth before closing it. The screen flashed a four digit code before clicking locked.
Before I could turn for the shower, a pair of arms slipped around my neck and a warm body pressed flush against my back. “Glynda said no hanky-panky in the showers,” I sighed, turning an amused look over my shoulder on Yang, whose robe hung open at the front.

The blonde put on her best innocent look. “I’m not doing anything. And no she didn’t, she said no shenanigans.”

“Yes you are, and they’re the same thing.” Blake snarked as she drew alongside us, before jerking her head towards the showers. “Come on.”

With a quick hop, Yang pulled herself up onto my back and wrapped her legs around my hips. “Mush!”

“Yang,” I began, reaching back and cupping her ass. “You realize you’re giving anyone to the side of us a free show, right?”

“Hmm,” the blonde on my back hummed, before smirking and leaning forward to nip at my ear. “Let ‘em look, you can’t see much. That’s all they’ll be doing. First one to touch me gets his hands broken. Now, forward!” she pointed from over my shoulder.

I shot a look at Blake, who sighed. “Yang, I’m trying not to draw attention,” Blake reminded.

“Yup. Which is why this plan is perfect. They’ll be too busy looking at me to notice you,” the blonde nodded as I carried her into the shower room and Blake followed.

“That plan’s not actually half bad,” I muttered, heading for the back of the room. A look at the wall confirmed my hopes—there were hooks for the robes, so we wouldn’t have to throw them on the floor or go back to the cubby holes to drop them off.

Thankfully, there were only a few other people here at the moment. ‘Most of these people won’t be here after tomorrow anyway,’ I mused.

There were few enough people that everyone there had one of the four-person shower units to themselves. Depositing Yang on the ground, I pulled off my robe and hung it on the closest wall hook before moving to the shower and flipping on the hot water. I groaned quietly as it washed over me.
Blake positioned herself directly in front of me, putting the pole the shower heads were mounted on and my body between her and most of the room, while Yang took up the spot on my left, effectively hiding the faunus girl from view. “So, where’s Ruby? Did she get lost?”

“I think she chickened ou—” Yang began, only for the sound of Ruby’s Semblance to announce her presence and cut the blonde off.

Looking over my shoulder, I spotted a red blur crossing the bathroom. The redhead’s eyes went comically wide as she tried to stop on the slick floor and failed, sliding straight towards us as her arms pinwheeled madly at her sides.

I had time to think, ‘Oh, this is going to suck,’ before turning around and catching the girl as I anchored myself to the ground with Surface Walking to keep either of us from slamming into the shower, or the walls. Ruby slapped face-first into my chest with a meaty smack! and explosion of rose petals, along with a flash of red and white Aura. I quickly closed my arms around her to keep her from falling.

“Ow,” I muttered, looking down to the girl in my arms. “You okay down there?”

“No,” Ruby whined pitifully.

“You hurt, sis?” Yang asked, mild worry in her voice as she made her way over.

“Just my pride,” Ruby whimpered. “I think it took a critical hit.”

“Well, nice as this is,” I began, squeezing the girl in my arms and earning an ‘eep!’ as she finally registered just where she was, “you should probably let go before someone gets the wrong idea and sics Goodwitch on us.”

Ruby jumped away like she’d been burned—an idea lent support by the full body blush she sported. “Oh Dust, just kill me now,” she whined, quickly yanking off her robe and throwing it on the hook before stepping under the shower to my right and hanging her head, letting the water pull her hair down over her eyes.
“Could’ve been worse,” Yang grinned. “You could have fallen on your ass and given everyone a show if the robe came loose.”

Blake turned a scolding look on the younger girl. “No more Semblance in the showers.”

“Yes, mom,” Ruby stuck her tongue out.

“She’s right, you know,” I pointed out, grabbing the shampoo as I began the task of actually getting clean as opposed to simply enjoying the water. I had to wonder though, given both Summer’s death and Raven's... child abandonment, if they didn't say things like that in order to help get past it.

“Yes, da—”

“Don’t finish that,” both Yang and I cut the younger girl off.

Ruby’s face scrunched up in disgust. “Ew. Ew ew ew! Now it’s in my head!”

“It’s your own fault,” Yang sighed, holding out her fluffy whatever-it-was-called. “Wash my back?”

“Sure,” I agreed as the blonde turned her back to me. Movement from Yang’s other side caught my eye as Blake passed Yang her own cloth thing.

“That’s not fair. Who’s going to do my back?” Ruby sighed.

Rolling my eyes, I finished up Yang before taking Ruby's and gesturing for her to turn around. “Whipped,” Yang chuckled.

“Totally,” Blake agreed.

I shot the pair an amused look. “I’ll remember that the next time you want something special, intimate, or otherwise fun. Wouldn’t want to look whipped, now would I?”
Blake and Yang exchanged a wide-eyed look before the blonde shook her head. “I take it back,” Blake quickly said.

“Don't cut me off!” Yang whined.

“Now who's whipped?” Ruby giggled. “Ooh, that's nice. Lower?”

The blonde at my side snorted softly. “Someone's feeling brave.” Ruby turned an annoyed look on her sister before sticking out her tongue. Returning the gesture, Yang grinned. “They grow up so fast.”

“Right, you're done,” I passed Ruby her floofy thing back. A bundle of blonde energy and curves molded against my back and I groaned softly as Yang rubbed her soft, soap-covered skin against my own. “Yang. Stop.”

“Not shenanigans,” the blonde leered. “I'm just helping you get clean and returning the favor.”

“And if you don't stop, I'm going to push you down and fuck you on the floor in front of God and everybody,” I growled softly, which only made the girl laugh.

“Fine, fine,” she nodded, stepping back. “So, we're sneaking out later, right?”

I sighed, casting a glance down and gesturing at the obvious physical reaction to Yang's teasing. “What do you think?”

From my other side, I saw Ruby had frozen in place. Noticing my gaze, silver eyes tracked up to my blue, going slightly wide before she broke eye contact. I was not oblivious to the fact that she continued peeking every now and then, however. Not that she hadn’t been before, but this was blatant.

“Dibs on tomorrow night,” Blake called quickly. “Are we done?”

“Give me a minute for this thing to settle down. I don't need to walk out with my robe hanging off a hat rack,” I muttered, glaring at Yang.
“I have an idea.” The mischief in the blonde's eyes caused warning bells to go off in my head. Her eyes darting over to the shower knob told me exactly what she had in mind.

“Woman,” I glared, earning a catty grin. “Don't you dare.” Yang's hand began creeping towards the knob. “Don't you dare.” Her hand grasped the knob and turned it over to 'Cold,' before she grabbed her robe and bolted for the door, cackling while I cursed at her back.

“And there she goes,” Blake sighed as I hurried to cut off the freezing water.

We grabbed our robes and I stalked towards the door, Blake and Ruby following. “Going to kill her. Ruby, I am going to smother your sister in her sleep.”

The little redhead rolled her eyes. “Don’t bother, it’ll just encourage her.”

Hurrying back into the locker room, we toweled off and changed into sleeping clothes for the night. Leaving the rest of our gear in our lockers, we made out way out into the ballroom where we found a quiet place off to one side to bed down for the night. Surprisingly, the crowd was much thinner from this morning. That was when I remembered the warning Coco and Velvet had given us. ‘Ah, so we lost about a third of the people who were trying out because they couldn’t be bothered to go to orientation. Well, less competition for us, then.’

“I’m so excited! I don’t think I’ll be able to sleep,” Ruby bounced atop her sleeping bag.

“So, did you two find anyone interesting?” Yang asked, dropping onto her bag beside her sister and propping her head up with one arm. My eyes trailed down to where her short-shorts and shirt had ridden up, exposing her toned thighs and midriff. Meeting my eyes as they trailed back up, Yang winked as a grin pulled her lips upwards.

Ruby shrugged. “No one I want to partner with.” Turning an annoyed look on me, she added, “I still think this is a dumb plan. We should just try to get on a team together.”

Humming, I opened up my sleeping bag and dropped into it to sit cross-legged. “Name a color that contains the letters R, B, Y, and J.”
Yang opened her mouth, frowned, then closed it with a click. “There isn’t one,” Blake supplied, not bothering to look up from her book.

“Nope,” I nodded. “Not one that doesn’t suck and require twisting things anyway.”

“JYBR, if you called it ‘Cinnabar’ maybe,” Blake suggested. “Or Jasper.”

“If we throw in last names, ARBY could, with a stretch, make Ebony. AYBR could be Amber, I suppose,” I supplied. “Full breakdown of possibilities is: JA, RR, YX, BB. Remove the repeats and you’ve got JARYXB to play with, but you can’t have both JA or YX. That gives you four possible combos: JRYB, JRXB, ARYB, and ARXB—or variations on those.”

Ruby grinned. “Why not JBRY: Jazzberry?”

“Ugh,” Blake grunted.

I pulled a face. “Terrible.”

“ABRX or ABRY could be Auburn,” Yang pointed out. “And it works regardless of the order of the last two places.”

“Yeah,” I agreed, “That, Ebony, and Amber are some of the very few that don’t suck.” Grinning, I added, “You also have to account for all the team names currently in rotation—at least within Beacon, possibly all four of the academies since, if they work together often, they wouldn’t want confusion over repeats.”

“Okay, but that’s a dumb reason for not being on a team. It’s not like the headmaster chooses teams based on their names,” Yang countered.

Turning a page, Blake sighed, “Yang, it’s pretty obvious he already has someone in mind.” Looking up, golden eyes met my blue and she asked, “Pyrrha?” Her bow flicked once and she added, “Possibly the Schnee?”

I grinned. “Maybe. I could see it. If we substituted Pyrrha for Ruby, we’d get Team PBJY—Peanut Butter and Jelly.”
Blake shot me a funny look, mouthing those words out to herself and shaking her head. “Disgusting.”

“Pretty sure teams are also only ever one word,” Yang countered.

Ruby snorted a laugh before quickly covering her mouth. “Almost worth it just for that. ‘So,’” she began, pitching her voice up a bit, “‘what’s your team called?’” Her voice pitched down and she sent a mischievous look at me, “‘Team PB&J.’”

“I do not sound like that,” I deadpanned. “And if that’s your Batman voice, it’s terrible.”

Blake raised an eyebrow. “I don’t know. I’ve heard the ‘Batman voice.’ It was pretty accurate.”

“Traitor,” I grumbled. “Just for that, I’m going to make sure you end up with someone who will annoy you to no end.”

“I thought you didn’t want to be on our team?” Yang asked with a smirk. I rolled my eyes and flipped her off in reply.

“Good one, sis,” Ruby chuckled. Turning a speculative gaze on me, she asked, “So, was Blake right? I could see Pyrrha—I mean, she’s Pyrrha Nikos.”

“Not necessarily. As for Pyrrha,” I shrugged. “Weiss had a point about one thing—she’s kind of a badass and having her on board would be nice. Which is why, again, I am suggesting splitting up so we can get eight people and have more talent than just the four of us. Even if it’s divided as Ruby and I, and Blake and Yang, if we split into two groups we’d each have two more members who could add something to the overall team.”

That, and canon teams would make events at least somewhat predictable. Maybe. Things were going to change, regardless—that was inevitable. ‘My options boil down to: force canon teams and try to steer things so my future knowledge is still relevant, or take Pyrrha’s approach and just let things happen, in which case that knowledge becomes mostly worthless.’

Humming at that, Yang shook her head. “I still don’t like it. And wasn’t Weisscream the one in Vale who you—?”
“Yes,” I interrupted. “She’d be very useful to whatever team she wound up on. She just… needs some work on her attitude and someone to treat her like a normal person. I imagine that in Atlas, she’s used to getting her way.”

A thought occurred, and I frowned. ‘And then there’s the girls’ reactions. They don’t know and I can’t tell them yet. I’m basically asking them to blindly trust that I know what the hell I’m doing.’ A quiet snort escaped my throat at that. ‘I sound like Jack. God, I’ve come full circle. I’ve become my father from another world.’

“What is it?” Blake asked, looking up briefly from her novel.

I considered not telling them, then shook my head. “So I think if we all cluster up at one end of the launch platform, we should be able to manage getting in pairs together. If we take Weiss’ advice and keep in touch via scroll, we can arrange to meet up and get to the relics together, then pick the same pair.”

Yang and Blake exchanged incredulous looks, while Ruby went wide-eyed. “I thought you wanted more people?” the redhead asked.

Chuckling, I reached out and mussed her hair. For once, she didn’t protest or make a face. “I kind of just realized how that sounded and that I was being a dick without meaning to. I have—had—something in mind, but, well, it doesn’t really matter. This will work out better for us anyway.”

The trio of girls traded looks—and likely conversations via Telepathy—before Blake asked, “You’re sure?”

“Don’t say that, he may change his mind and try to ditch us again,” Yang shushed the Faunus.

I winced. “I deserved that. I wasn’t trying to ditch anyone, but yeah, I guess it could have looked that way. I’m sorry.”

Ruby hummed. “We’ll forgive you, but you’re definitely going to be making up for it for a while.”

“What’s this ‘we’ stuff? You’re not even dating him,” Yang pointed out, earning a raspberry from her sister.

“Regardless,” I interrupted the two, “there’s no point worrying about it tonight. We can work things
"Well, at least tomorrow’s going to be fun. I’m not looking forward to classes after that," Yang sighed.

I resisted the urge to groan, even as Ruby failed. "Ugh. Class."

The lights above us clicked off without warning. "Lights out," Goodwitch called from the doors. "I expect to see you all tomorrow morning, 8 a.m. sharp, at the cliffs on the north side of the academy overlooking the Emerald Forest. Good night."

With that, the doors closed and the sound of students’ voices filled the ballroom again. Grinning in the low light streaming in through the windows, Yang slipped out of her sleeping bag and into mine, settling onto my lap as her lips found my own. "Every Faunus in the room and many of the other students can still see you," Blake quietly reminded. "In fact, you have an audience."

I felt a shiver run down the blonde’s spine and she shifted in my lap, grinding herself down against me. "Don’t care."

Sighing quietly, I mustered up a monumental effort of will and pushed the blonde back. "Bad Yang. Down girl. Don’t make me get the hose."

"But-but… my night," she whined, her lips pulling into a pout.

A pillow smacked into Yang’s head, thrown with deadly accuracy by her sister. "Yang, knock it off. It’s just one night. Trust me, you’ll live."

Grinning, I added, "Besides, consider it payback for the cold shower treatment."

"Says you," Yang grumbled. Stealing one last kiss, she fled back to her sleeping bag. "Fine. I’ll just be over here. Doing… stuff."

Watching as the blonde pulled her bag up and curled down in it deep enough to hide, I shook my head and flopped back down on my own bag. My eyes flicked through my menus, quickly setting an

Yang and Blake gave calls of the same, while Ruby hummed a quiet note and pulled out her scroll, rapidly typing something out with her thumbs. A moment later, her scroll buzzed. “Heh.”

Rolling over, I closed my eyes, listening to conversations die down around us and people slowly drop off to sleep. ‘Ugh. I hate sleeping in a new place, surrounded by people I don’t know.’

A shuffling sound from nearby caused me to open my eyes, and a moment later I felt the zipper to my sleeping bag open up. Raising an eyebrow, I spotted Yang in the low light, attaching her bag to mine. Once she was done, she scooted over and rolled around pressing her back up against me. “My night.”

The smell of honeysuckle and Yang’s arousal hung heavy in my nose and I groaned silently. “Taking this out on you later.”

Laughing quietly, Yang settled into a more comfortable position and relaxed. “Sounds fun.”

Author’s Notes:

LS: Sorry for the delay on this. Between workload and schedule changes, we haven’t been able to get done nearly as much as we had hoped, unfortunately. We’re a little ahead though, so, for now, we’re still looking at a monthly release cycle, though there’s no guarantee. I’ll just go ahead and say release dates are probably going to be more towards the end of the month than the beginning.

I have—or will have—uploaded a copy of the story to Ao3 under the name literalsin, naturally. If not by the time I’ve posted this, then by Saturday.

As mentioned in the author profile update the 24th, I’m looking to get some idea as to interest in original content. I have a number of projects I’ve been playing with for a while now, but the most promising are, in no particular order:

(these are not titles, so much as internal reference project names)
1.) Necro – I made a Western ‘isekai’ genre story. Yes, I realize The Name of the Game is technically also of a similar genre, so sue me. Guy from Earth with superpowers gets isekai’d to a foreign world where magic is real, winds up becoming the villain.

2.) Wizard – A companion story/sequel to Necro, set in the same universe, follows the necromancer’s master.

3.) Hero – ‘Prequel’ set on the other side of Neco, in ‘hero world.’

4.) GameLit – Kind of like Necro on steroids. Where Necro doesn’t have the GameLit genre stuff, this one does.

5.) Dungeon – Another GameLit style story, in the ‘dungeon’ genre, taken to the logical extreme.

Ozpin stared at the chess board in front of him. It was a relic of a bygone age, but despite its age it had clearly been well-cared for. Its warm, cherry wood surface was polished to a high sheen, as was each and every piece.

The pieces were all hand-carved and highly detailed, carved not by tools, but by his very own magic. The white pieces were all crafted from a pure white marble, while the black pieces were all of obsidian. Both sides were decorated with inset jewels.

Shaking his head tiredly, he glanced at the coffee pot in the corner of his office longingly before deciding against it. Before him, Professor Port finally made his move. “Black Bishop takes White Rook.”

“Knight takes Bishop,” Ozpin countered, glancing over at the pieces beside them.

Port hummed, before moving a piece forward. “Pawn takes Knight.”

Ozpin moved another piece and Port grinned.

“Careless. The White Queen is exposed,” the larger professor pointed out.
Ozpin did a double-take, before realizing he had indeed accidentally exposed his queen. Port’s Black Knight moved forward, sweeping Ozpin’s Queen from the board. “I’m sorry, my friend. I believe this is where I’ll have to concede the night. This should have been done weeks ago,” Ozpin sighed, toppling his King before cracking a massive yawn as the exhaustion he had been staving off ever since the Fox brought in their Fall Maiden finally reached the point where he could no longer safely ignore it.

“No, no. I understand. The Maiden had to come first. But it seems we have enough to determine the classes,” Port smiled, gesturing to the pieces off to the side.

Standing and gathering the fallen pieces, Ozpin laid them all out. “So it would seem.”

Black Pawn.

Black Bishop.

White Knight.

White Rook.

White Queen/King.

“Now, the only question is, who will pick which piece,” Port murmured, looking them over. “Any guesses?”

“A few,” Ozpin admitted. “It all depends on who gets there first.” Picking up his suit jacket from off the back of his chair, Ozpin made his way towards the elevator. “Lock up for me, Peter?”

“Certainly, Headmaster.”

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!