Summary

James never actually intended to stop at one child. And now that he’s finally let his life move forward after Josef, he thinks it’s time to make good on those intentions, and decides to go into foster care.

But when his first foster child turns out to be a blast from Qrow’s past, the kids decide this is a sign that it’s time for Qrow to make right the mistakes of before.

Regardless of what Qrow thinks is actually best.

It’s going to be a long road.

Notes

So this was originally going to be my big Christmas fic and then LazyTown took over my brain out of nowhere, but then almost the minute I finished the other Christmas fic I started thinking about this again so I’m gonna see how far I can get into this. I do already know how it ends so hopefully I can get there in a timely manner (ha).
This is only a Christmas fic in the sense that the resolution happens on or around Christmas, but it starts in August for some reason. I'm sure that made sense to me when I wrote it.

I'll update the tags during later chapters but I don't want to spoil the surprise just yet, even though I feel like it'll be really obvious to anyone who's read the first one.

This is a sequel to last year's Christmas au, For Christmas, One Family, Ready Made, and while you are certainly welcome to read this one without reading that one, certain things might not make any sense to you if you do.

(By the way updates for this will be sporadic because my buffer for this fic is practically nonexistent sorryyyyy.)

See the end of the work for more notes.
Chapter 1

Nora was lying on her back staring up at the bottom of Ruby’s bunk, listening to Ruby mumble to herself in her sleep. It was the middle of the night, and she was so, so tired, but she couldn’t sleep, and Ruby wasn’t helping any.

Not for the first time lately, Nora found herself wishing for her own room. As much as she loved Ruby, sharing a room was getting to be, well.

And she did love Ruby. She did. Ruby was one of her best friends, her favorite cousin (don’t tell Yang), and one of her favorite people in the world. But sharing a bedroom with her-

With a sigh, Nora got up and staggered sleepily out of the room. Maybe she could sleep on the couch or something.

Her plan to sneakily sleep on the couch was foiled before it began, because when she got to the living room Qrow was already there, sprawled across the couch with one hand holding his phone and the other trailing against the floor. When she came in, he looked up and switched his phone off, but not before she caught Mr. Ironwood’s picture at the bottom.

“Hey kiddo,” he said. “What are you doing up?”

“Ruby talks in her sleep,” she said, nudging him enough that she could sit down on the couch and sprawl beside him, her head pillowed on his bony shoulder. He brought his free hand up to stroke her hair absently.

“You wanna sleep in here? You’ll be woken up early, Tai has an eight o’clock tomorrow.”

“No, I’ll go back soon, I just wanted some space.”

“Kay.” His phone lit up then; Nora was able to catch Mr. Ironwood’s picture on the alert, but Qrow moved it out of the way before she could try to be nosy. He didn’t reply immediately, setting the phone down instead so he could go back to stroking her hair, humming softly.

Her eyes closed; she was drifting off, not quite asleep but resting far more easily than she had in her room. It was so peaceful in here. So cosy.

“Hey Nora.”

“Hmm?”

“How do you feel about moving?”

And just like that the peace was gone. Panic shot through Nora before she had even processed the question- a long list of things that could have, must have gone wrong, he was sending her away, she knew this day would come-

“Hey, hey, easy.” There was a shift as Qrow moved them both, pushing up into a sitting position and curling protectively around Nora, who’d gone stiff against him without quite realizing it. He brought his hand down from her hair to rub her back instead. “I’m not sending you away, that’s not why I’m asking. Come on, kiddo, deep breaths.”
It was only a moment before calm returned. Nora side-eyed him. “Why are you asking?”

“Well-” He waved his phone vaguely. “Me and Jimmy have been talking and, well, we’ve been thinking about. Moving us in with him. And it’s still in the really vague early stages but, you know, I reckon maybe we’ve reached the point where I start floating the idea past you, see what you think.”

“Move in with Mr. Ironwood?”

“Yeah.”

Nora considered this. “Does he have room for all of us? Or do you mean we’ll get a bigger house?”

“All of- ah.” Qrow rubbed the back of his neck awkwardly. “When I say us, I just mean me and you. Tai and Yang and Ruby will stay here. It’ll just be the two of us.”

“Why?”

“Why?” He laughed. Rubbed his neck some more. “Well, you know, we’ve been dating for nearly a year now, things are looking kind of serious- and you know, it’s hard to coordinate our relationship with all the responsibilities we have and, you know, it’s, it’s just something that’s on the table, okay? Nothing is set in stone, or really planned in any way. We’re just talking about the possibility. I just wanted to know how you felt about it.”

“Well why can’t they move here?”

“This house is crowded enough as it is,” he pointed out. “We don’t really have room to bring two more people, and all of their things, into it. Besides, Jimmy works out of home a lot, he needs to have a workroom.”

“Then why can’t we all get a big house together? Uncle Tai needs you, you can’t just leave him.”

“There is that,” Qrow murmured. “Hey, it’s just an idea, okay? Nothing is being planned for real. Just give it some thought, see how you feel about the idea.”

“Okay.” She wiggled slightly, and then slid off of his lap. “I’m going back to bed now. I have a lot to think about.”

“Yeah, of course. Hey, do me a favor, yeah? Don’t tell any of the others about this? I know how you kids like to gossip and this is something private. Just between us, okay?”

Nora hesitated, halfway across the room, her mind already on how she was going to tell her friends about this at school in the morning. She nodded. “I won’t say anything.”

“Good girl. Good night.”

“Night…”

“Uncle Qrow wants us to move in with Mr. Ironwood,” Nora said the next morning, after dragging Ren away from the swingset she and her friends had taken over this year. She’d pulled him under the little tree on the line between the fourth/fifth and sixth grade playgrounds, where they were sure to get some privacy, because while she was pretty sure Qrow had included Ren in his “anyone”, she couldn’t just not tell him. If nothing else, he would know something was on her
mind, and after what happened last year, he’d gotten better about pushing to know she was okay.

“That’s a big step,” Ren said. “I didn’t know they were at that stage of their relationship.”

“They’ve been dating for ten months,” Nora pointed out. “That’s practically forever. I don’t know why they’re not married right now.”

“That sort of thing only happens in stories,” said a voice above them, and they looked up to see Jaune hanging from the branch above them. “Hey guys. Sorry about eavesdropping. Also, I’m stuck.”

“Oh, Jaune.” Nora rolled her eyes and, with Ren’s help, was able to scramble up the tree to help him unhook his belt from where it was caught on a protruding branch. His pants free, Jaune was able to drop from the branch, only narrowly avoiding landing on his face. He stood up and brushed himself off.

“What were you doing up there anyway?” Nora asked, dropping down from the branch a lot more gracefully, though still managing to scrape at her palms. She rubbed them on her skirt, hoping the redness was just temporary, and turned her attention back to her friend.

“I was climbing,” Jaune said. “My brother dropped me off early and no one was around and I was bored.”

“Why not call the playground monitor?” Ren said, very sensibly in Nora’s opinion (but Ren was always sensible). Jaune just shrugged.

“Wasn’t here yet.”

“There weren’t any adults around?” Nora stared wide-eyed. Sure, she’d been left to her own devices plenty over the years, but there was always an adult nearby somewhere. None of her guardians, even the worst of the lot, had ever left her completely unattended- and the only time she ever had been was still scary to look back on, albeit a bit thrilling as well.

Jaune shrugged again. “He had a job to get to. It’s not a big deal. I’m nearly eleven, I can take care of myself for a little while.”

Ren looked concerned by this, which was perhaps why Jaune cut off any expression of that concern he might make by turning his attention to Nora.

“So you and Mr. Qrow are moving in with Mr. Ironwood?”

“Maybe,” Nora said. “Or maybe not. He said it was just something he was thinking about, and wanted to know how I felt about it.”

“How do you feel about it?” Ren asked.

“I don’t know. I mean, it’d be so nice if him and Mr. Ironwood could see each other a lot more without having to coordinate with us kids, and I kinda wish I had my own room since Ruby isn’t the best roommate in the world. But I was wishing for, like, a room in the same house, not the other side of town.” Her face fell. “I only ever get to see Yang and Ruby at home anymore, since Yang is in middle school and Ruby is stuck in the fourth-fifth grade wing. It’ll be years before we’re all at the same place again.”

The others nodded in sympathy at this. With Yang, Blake, and Pyrrha up at the middle school, and Ruby, Jaune, and Neptune still stuck in the other wing of the elementary school, their friend group
had taken a big hit this school year. Their group was the biggest, with Sun, Penny, and Weiss alongside, but it wasn’t the same as when they were all together.

“It’s not like you’ll never see them again,” Jaune pointed out. “I mean, I don’t live with my brothers, but I see them all the time- um, when they’re not too busy. It’s not like you’re moving to the other side of the country or anything.”

“And being apart doesn’t mean we never see each other,” Ren pointed out.

“Well, yeah, but…” She rubbed her arm, and didn’t point out that Jaune could sometimes go weeks without seeing his brothers, who were both busy with their own lives and not always able to make time for him, or that when things got hectic she might go ages only seeing Ren at school. Nor did she mention that in her experience, as soon as people stopped living together they stopped being family, and she never wanted Ruby and Yang and Uncle Tai to stop being her family. Instead she gave a sodden little half-shrug. “Maybe he’ll decide against it. Or maybe him and Mr. Ironwood will decide to get a bigger house so that we can all live together.”

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Last year, the school run had been one of Qrow’s favorite times of the day. Not just because after a day of wrangling ten-year-olds it was nice to send them off for the evening, but also because James came around to pick up Penny and they got to spend a few minutes together. During the more hectic times of their year, this could be the only time they saw each other all week, and Qrow would take whatever he could get.

But Penny was off in the sixth grade wing now, and it wasn’t on the way or feasible timewise for James to stop by his classroom every day when he picked her up.

He still managed to make time some days, though. Qrow was cleaning the board when he heard his classroom door open, and had just time to register that all his kids were already gone before a pair of hands rested on his hips and a pair of lips brushed the base of his neck. He stretched his arms back and his hands found a familiar coif of gelled hair, eliciting a pleasant hum.

“Hello to you too,” he said, as more kisses were pressed against his neck. “To what do I owe this?”

“Your classroom was empty for once,” James said.

“So you decided to come molest me in it?”

“You’re not exactly complaining,” James pointed out, leaning pointedly into the hands still petting his hair. “But if you want, I can back off.”

He made to do so, but Qrow turned and followed, not letting him out of his personal space. Qrow grinned, and tugged him down so he could kiss him properly before, “Today’s the day, right?”

“Yes.”

“Nervous?”

“Terrified.” He rested his forehead against Qrow’s for just a moment. “How many times have you done this?”

“A lot.” He stole a quick kiss and put some space between them. “Want to talk about it?”

“The kid hasn’t said a word to me in any of the meetings we’ve had,” James said, after a moment
of considering the offer. “Which could be because of the social worker, but could be because of anything. And I feel like my social worker is hiding something about this kid’s situation from me. So I don’t actually know what I’m getting myself into.” He let out a long breath, and rubbed at his forehead. “I’m bringing this child into my home and I don’t even know what I’m getting into.”

“If it helps, even with kids and social workers who are aboveboard and honest, you can’t know what you’re getting into. There’s only so much you can prepare for, especially when you insist on taking on older kids.”

“Yeah?”

Qrow nodded. “I knew Nora was coming from neglectful guardians. I wasn’t prepared for how that had shaped her, or the work I’d have to put in- the work I’m still putting in- having to undo that. Even though I knew I’d have to. Does that make sense? Even when you know a kid’s situation intimately, you can’t know how it’s affected them. Foster care is a lot of winging it. Parenting in general,” he added. “Which you’re pretty good at.”

“I was definitely not prepared for Penny,” James agreed. “But all the same, Josef and I were the only parents she ever knew. This kid’s been shuffled around the area for a few years now. And the only thing I know about the previous guardians are that the last one was arrested.”

“Yikes.”

“Yeah.”

Further comment was prevented by the door opening again and Ruby and Penny appearing in the classroom. They tackled James, Penny getting him around the legs and Ruby hanging from his arm.

“Today’s the day!” Ruby said delightedly. “Are you excited?”

“Of course,” James said, giving Ruby a fond look and setting her down gently before ruffling her hair. “I’d ask if you are, but-“

“It’s always exciting!”

“I am excited too,” Penny said, tucking herself under his arm. “I have never been a sister before.”

“You’re gonna be great at it, Penny,” Ruby assured her.

“So what have you kids got planned for tonight?” James asked, redirecting the subject before they could notice his nerves.

“We’re going over to Sun’s house,” Ruby said. “His brother agreed to be our table master for Dungeons Dungeons and More Dungeons so we’re going to play that.”

“I will have to miss it,” Penny pouted. “But if it is fun and you do it again, we can always introduce my character later.”

“DD and More D?” James asked, glancing over at Qrow, who was grabbing his bag so they could leave.

“They’ve been listening to this podcast lately,” Qrow said. “Critical Zone? Apparently the game is pretty big now, not just for nerdy losers anymore.”
“Thanks a lot,” James said, prompting Qrow to raise an eyebrow at him before his face split into a grin. James rolled his eyes and pushed Qrow toward the door. “Yes, I used to play ddnmd as a kid.”

“That’s adorable.”

“You used to play?” Ruby asked, latching onto his arm again. “Tell me about your character!”

The walk to the sixth grade wing was spent in James telling the girls about one of the characters he’d played in high school, a Shireling Archer, and the adventures he could remember having.

“Did Aunt Glynda play with you?” Penny asked.

“Sometimes.”

“Will you play with us sometime?” Ruby asked. “I mean, if Sun’s brother doesn’t want to. Will you play with us?”

“Uh… we’ll see,” he said, hesitant. His schedule was packed as it was, and in his experience ddnmd tended to take up a lot of time. “Let’s see what happens tonight and we’ll talk about it another time.”

“That means no,” Ruby told Penny, as the group came to a halt in front of one of the classrooms. Nora was inside with Ren, and she looked up at they arrived.

“Time to go, kiddo,” Qrow said.

“Awwww, do I have to?”

“Can’t stay here.” When she reluctantly grabbed her bag and joined them, Qrow looped an arm around her shoulder. “None of that, you kids have a schedule to keep. Hey, Ren,” he added, because Ren had walked Nora to the door. “You gonna play with the rest of your pals tonight?”

“Yes. Nora and I decided our characters are going to be siblings.”

“He’s gonna be my little sister!” Nora cheered. “And we’re on an epic quest to find the monster that destroyed our village and separated us from our parents! And I get to use a giant electric hammer!”

Ruby pouted. “Aww, your backstory’s way better than mine.”

“What’s yours?” James asked, suddenly curious.

“My character is an immortal wizard who was killed in a war with the forces of evil and reincarnated into the body of a young farmhand, and now she’s trying to regain her power so she can defeat her long-sworn enemy.”

James’ eyebrows went up. “That’s a very creative backstory,” he said, a little stunned.

“I guess,” Ruby said. “But it’s not as good as Nora and Ren’s. theirs works together.”

They’d been walking while they talked, and now they had reached the main entrance to the school, where James and Penny would head left to the guest parking lot, and Qrow, Nora, and Ruby would head right to the teachers’. They lingered, as they often did; it was one of those weeks where they just didn’t have much time to spare for each other.

Nora looked between Qrow and James while they shared a few last words before parting- Qrow
was assuring James about something, but it seemed to be building on a previous conversation so she wasn’t sure about the context. But James after a moment let out a soft, half-hearted laugh.

“All right,” he said. “I’ll call later and let you know how it goes. Have fun with your dungeon crawling, kids,” he added, giving Nora and Ruby a last wave before he and Penny left.

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Ten minutes later, Qrow pulled his pickup into the parking lot at the middle school. They didn’t get out; middle school kids liked to walk out to meet their ride instead of their ride coming to collect them.

(“Why?” Ruby had asked, the first time Qrow had told her they would wait for Yang out here.

“Because Yang is in middle school now,” he’d explained. “That means she wants to feel like we think she’s grown up. By letting her come out to the parking lot to meet us, we’re telling her- and her peers- that we think she’s mature enough to handle it.”

Ruby had pouted at that- she wanted to be able to go to the middle school and look around- but Qrow had held firm, and so every day when they reached the school he sent Yang a text to let her know they were there, and she’d come out to meet them.)

Today she tossed her backpack into the bed of the pickup and climbed up into shotgun with a groan.

“Glynda is the worst,” she said.

“Sometimes,” Qrow agreed. “Got a lot of homework?”

“When does she expect me to sleep?”

Qrow chuckled and pulled out. “When you’re dead, I guess. Need help with any of it?”

“No, it’s doable, there’s just a lot of it.” She huffed her bangs out of her eyes. “Hey Uncle Qrow?”

“Yeah?”

“Why don’t you ever yell at me for calling Mrs. Goodwitch a pain like Dad does?”

“Cause she is,” Qrow said, shrugging. “And because I know you’re just venting frustrations, and you respect Glynda enough to never say anything like this to her face.”

“I thought it was just cause you didn’t like her,” Nora piped up from the back seat.

Qrow chuckled. “I like her just fine. She’s a good friend- and I owe a lot to her. But that doesn’t mean I’m blind to her faults, or that I agree with her methods all the time. Or that I don’t know how stressful it can be to be her student.”

“Penny says she’s a lot nicer at home,” Ruby put in, earning another laugh.

“I imagine she is, without the stress of all of her responsibilities to deal with.” He looked over at Yang. “Would you say anything like that to her face?”

“Of course not,” Yang said. “She’s a good teacher, it’s just rough sometimes.”

“And that’s why I let you vent to me when you’re frustrated.”
So here’s the thing: James was not entirely sure what gender his new foster child actually was.

He knew that, according to the papers he’d been given, according to the people at protective services, according to his social worker, he was supposed to be getting a girl. But he’d met the child. And after Penny had come out, he’d started learning about the things to look for, and he had his doubts about what he was looking at.

It was the little things. Sure, the child could be a tomboy. It wasn’t written anywhere that a girl couldn’t look like a boy, and he certainly wasn’t going to police how any child in his home presented themselves- he had far more important concerns as a foster parent than whether his foster children conformed to arbitrary gender standards.

But he’d seen the way the child winced when they were introduced, and when the social worker used female pronouns. He’d been watching carefully and caught the sneer when she’d spoken about the challenges of taking care of a teenage girl, as if girls were a monolith anyway.

So he had his doubts. And as soon as they brought the child home, he decided to ask.

“I’ll show you to your room in a moment,” he said, gesturing at the stairs. “But I wanted to talk to you before you go.” The child looked up at him, halfway between unimpressed and sneering. “I’ve noticed you don’t seem particularly at ease when referred to by the name on your papers, so I wanted to know what you’d prefer to be called. I’d like you to be comfortable here, and that includes something as small as calling you the name you want to be called.”

He was subjected to a searching look, suspicious, looking for honesty in his face, and did his best to make his sincerity apparent. After a moment, the child snorted and pushed his (?) hair back from his face, in a motion that reminded James oddly of Qrow.

“It’s Mercury.”
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

James deals with this new problem the same way he deals with all of his problems.

Chapter Notes

The presence of Mercury should have made this apparent already, but I just wanna heads up you guys that this story isn't gonna be a very nice story. Mercury is a naughty boy who has been hurt a lot and as the centerpoint of this tale, he's going to drive the niceness factor down.

Remember last story when everyone pulled together and there was a lot of teamwork, even in groups that were opposed? This isn't that story, and I'm not pulling my punches.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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This was not a situation James knew how to deal with. So, as he always did in situations he didn’t know how to deal with-

-he called his sister. Because she was infinitely more sensible than him, and would know what to advise.

“I have a problem,” James said, as soon as she answered the phone. On the other end, he heard her sigh.

“You just got the child home today,” she said. “Don’t tell me you’re already overwhelmed.”

It was amazing how she always did that. “It’s not that,” he said, and, “How much do you know about Qrow’s last foster child? The one before Nora, I mean.”

“Mercury? A lot. Why?”

“Because he’s my new foster child.”

“What?” There was a momentary pause, and then he heard her sigh again, this time more worried than exasperated. “James, this is- not great.”

“No kidding.” He pinched the bridge of his nose and went quiet, listening for the children. He could hear Penny’s voice coming up from the kitchen, where the last time he’d checked on them, Penny was explaining the ddmd character she’d made, just in case she got to play with her friends after all. He couldn’t hear Mercury, but judging by Penny’s chatter, he could guess the kid was with her still.
“What are you going to do?” Glynda asked, bringing him back to the conversation.

“I don’t know,” he admitted. “I mean—I’m dating one of his previous guardians. Gods, we’ve been talking about moving in. This, though—I don’t think it will do Qrow any favors, and I doubt Mercury will be any more pleased than Qrow.”

“True.” Another pause. Penny’s laughter floated up from the kitchen. “James, you can’t just send him away.”

“I know.” He laughed. “I’ve heard just enough about this situation to know how badly that would turn out. But I can’t just—I can’t just let this sit, Glynda. I can’t keep Mercury from finding out, and I definitely can’t keep it from Qrow.”

“So don’t try. Good grief, James, you’re not walking into a warzone. This is a child’s life we’re talking about. Try talking to him. Explain the situation, find out what he wants to do.” Her tone, when she spoke again, was softer. “From what I can understand, it’s not something a lot of people have bothered to do for him.”

There, what did he say? Sensible.

“You’re right,” he said.

“I’m always right.”

“Sure, let’s go with that.”

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After hanging up with Glynda, James headed back downstairs, thinking that maybe it was time to get dinner ready. He needed to spend some time talking to Mercury, but maybe they could at least have a nice evening before the heavy conversations.

“What are we having for dinner, Peanut?” he asked, joining the kids in the kitchen. Mercury was drawing on his arm with a sharpie, while Penny doodled in her notebook. When James appeared, she set her pencil down and turned to him, but Mercury just snorted and carried on with his self-graffiti.

“May we have hamburger macaroni?” she asked excitedly, raising her hand in punctuation.

“I don’t see why not. How does that sound to you, Mercury?”

Mercury shrugged. “Does it matter?”

“Of course it matters,” James said. “It’s good to be able to eat what’s put in front of you when you need to, but we’re well-stocked, and I’m perfectly able to make something you’d like to eat as well. And if there’s something you like to eat that we don’t have, just let me know, and I’ll try to get the ingredients for it next time I get groceries.”

“Tch.” He slouched further down into his chair, turning his face away so he wasn’t looking at him. “Whatever, hamburger macaroni is fine.”

“Yes!” Penny jumped up and ran over to the cabinet, rummaging around a moment before emerging triumphantly with a box of hamburger-mac. She held it aloft, just as James was taking the milk and cheese from the fridge.
“Would you like to help us, Mercury?”

He laughed, not a nice laugh at all, and said, “Nah, I don’t cook.”

“Suit yourself.”

Dinner was not a massive failure, James decided later. He asked Mercury about himself, and while Mercury clearly didn’t trust his interest, he actually answered… somewhat. Certainly he was more talkative than he’d been during their few meetings with the social worker prior.

And then- well, it was too much to hope that it wouldn’t come up on its own, James admitted. After all, Qrow and his family were too much a part of their lives, they were going to come up in the course of conversation. Even if James was careful, Penny wasn’t. She didn’t know to be.

“Mr. Port is nice, but I miss being in Mr. Qrow’s class,” Penny said, at the end of a story about their field trip to City Hall earlier that month. “Our field trips were always way more interesting in his class.”

“I’ll just bet,” Mercury said darkly. “So you were in Qrow’s class, huh?”

“Oh yes!” Penny chirped, and James would have given anything to freeze time in that moment, because the next thing Penny said was, “Actually, he and Father have been dating for almost a year now.”

“It’s only been eight months,” James corrected, and turned his attention to Mercury, who was staring at him with a mixture of anger and mistrust. James took a deep breath to steel himself. “I meant to bring it up later. It didn’t feel like dinner conversation.”

Mercury snorted, and pushed his chair away from the table. “I’m done eating,” he said, and turned to leave. “I’ll be in my room.”

“Of course,” James said. “But we do need to talk later.”

“Whatever.”

James had given Mercury a phone. He said that at thirteen, he understood that he warranted a little more freedom and a little less supervision than, say, a ten year old, and wanted him to be able to call if he ever needed to. Mercury stared down at the phone in his hand. It was pretty plain- plain silver in a plain black case. No apps. The only two numbers stored in it were the house phone and James’ own cell phone.

None of his guardians had ever given him a phone before.

There was a crumpled receipt at the bottom of Mercury’s pocket, folded in half with a phone number written in sharpie across the sale of a mochaccino three months ago. He took it out and unfolded it out onto his bedspread, and carefully dialed the number.

(As if he didn’t have it memorized. As if he hadn’t spent the past three months staring at this, this last shred of the comfortable life he almost had.)

“Rainart,” rumbled a voice on the other end.
“Is Emerald there?”

The man on the other end said something that Mercury thought might be an affirmative, and there was a click as the phone was set down. Mercury could hear unintelligible conversation on the other end, and then the phone being picked up again.

“Hello?”

“Em?”

“Mercury!”

Oh _gods_ he’d missed her. Something in his chest clenched and tightened at the sound of her voice.

“Hey, Em. Been awhile.”

“It’s been three months! You were supposed to call me sooner!”

“Yeah, well, I didn’t exactly have a phone, did I?” And now he did. He needed to think about that. “They finally got me a real placement, though. Hardass named Ironwood.”

“Is he treating you okay?”

Mercury shrugged, even though she couldn’t see him. “All right so far. It’s only been today. He’s got a metric shitton of rules. Calls me Mercury.”

“That’s _good_ ,” Emerald insisted. “It’s a good sign.”

“The bar is so damn low.” Mercury sighed. “He’s also Qrow’s boyfriend.”

“Oh. Oh, Merc, are you okay?”

“You know, if _anyone_ but you asked me that, I’d deck them.”

“I know. Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.” He snorted. “But how long do you think the hardass down there is gonna want to keep me around once things get awkward in his little love paradise?”

“He might not send you away. He might let you stay.”

“Going soft on me, Emmy?” He sneered down the line. “This new guy they got you living with must be the cat’s nightwear.”

“He’s okay,” and he could hear her own shrug as she said it. “You should come over, I’m sure he wouldn’t mind. Would you mind?” asked off to the side, and another deep rumble he couldn’t make out. “He says he wouldn’t mind. See if the hardass will let you come over, I miss you.”

_I miss you too_ , he thought, and said, “Of course you do, I’m the light of your life.”

“Just come visit me, dickhead!” she spat, and hung up.

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James was stalling. He knew he was stalling- he’d finished the dishes and helped Penny finish her homework ages ago, and now he was sitting at his desk, reading a report he hadn’t taken in a single
word of so far. He needed to go talk to Mercury. Figure out what was going on moving forward. He needed to-

-answer his phone. He picked it up without looking. “Ironwood.”

“Have I ever told you how sexy your phone answering voice is?”

Qrow. “Frequently, in fact.”

“Oh. Well. Never mind, then.” But Qrow was grinning, James could tell. “The kids enjoyed their nerd game.”

“That’s good. Dungeons Dungeons and More Dungeons is fun, if they pursue it long term they’re in for a real treat.”

“Yeah, yeah, I’ve seen the posters,” and James could see Qrow in his mind’s eye, sticking his tongue out playfully. “I just dropped off the last kid. Care for a little company before I head home? I couldn’t stay long but… it’d be nice to actually see you for a bit.”

It would be nice, but James shook his head. “Not the best night for it. I’m sorry.”

“It’s the first day, Ironwood, you already overwhelmed?”

“Something like that.” He pinched his eyes, suddenly exhausted. “We need to talk, actually. Coffee tomorrow?”

“Sure,” and now Qrow sounded concerned. “Everything okay?”

“I’m. Not sure yet. Tomorrow?”

“Yeah, all right. Tomorrow.” He paused to shout something at a passing car, and added, “I gotta go, see you tomorrow.”

And then he was gone. James scrubbed irritably at his face, feeling that bone-deep weariness settle in him. No time to sleep, he told himself. Duty first.

-/-

Mercury was sitting criss-cross on his bed, taking a screwdriver to his foot while heavy metal poured out of the phone beside him. He looked up when James knocked, but immediately returned his attention to his work.

“I think I stripped the threads,” he said. “Normally I’d just deal with it but I feel like you’ve actually got the tools I’d need to fix it.”

“I do,” James agreed. “They’re in my workroom.”

He led Mercury down the hall to the room that served as both his office and his workroom, and gestured for him to have a seat while he got out his big toolbox.

“Can you handle it, or do you need help?”

“I’ve got it.”

While he worked, James leaned on his desk and looked over his legs as well as he could from a distance. They were outdated, which wasn’t surprising- not everyone had access to state-of-the-art
prosthetics, of course. But they were also too small.

“When was the last time you upgraded?”

“I got ‘em refitted about a year ago,” he said. “Or do you mean just tech in general? Because these are the ones I got while I was living with Qrow.”

He’d looked up at that, finally. His expression said far more than his words could have. All right, so it was time to talk about this.

“I only know a little bit about what happened with you and Qrow,” he said, straightening and folding his hands behind his back. “He hasn’t said much, so I only know the bare minimum.”

“I just bet.” Mercury finished fixing his leg and pushed the toolbox aside. “He probably told you that I was a bully, always picking on poor precious innocent Yangy-boo.”

James snorted. “Something like that,” he agreed. “He said you two were always fighting. That even after separating you two, you wouldn’t stop picking fights with her.”

“She picked just as many of those fights as I did.”

“All right.” James took a seat at the other end of the couch. “What do you want, Mercury?”

“What?”

“From this. Where we go from here- whether you leave or stay- it’s up to you.” He leaned back, ticking off on his fingers. “The facts, as they stand. Qrow and I are dating, and he’s someone who has hurt you a great deal in the past. Qrow is a significant part of my life, and while I’m willing to intervene somewhat, I can’t keep him out of your life entirely if you’re going to live here. And, I took on responsibility for your well-being, including your emotional well-being. So, what do you want?”

Mercury gave him a suspicious look. “Are you trying to get me to go and pretend I had a say in it?”

“No. I’m trying to let you decide what you want for your own future. If you’re not comfortable being around Qrow and would rather live somewhere else, that’s okay- I completely understand. But if you’re okay with that, and you’d like to stay here, then you’re welcome to. It’s up to you.”

“And if I’m not comfortable with you dating Qrow at all? Would you break up with him?”

James laughed softly and shook his head. “That’s not going to happen. The decision is yours, but only within reason. I love Qrow, and we’ve fought enough for our relationship that I’m not willing to give up on that. I can take steps to keep the two of you separate, but leaving him entirely is never an option.”

“So it’s not really up to me, then,” Mercury said, and at the pointed look from James, he huffed, and slouched down into the couch. “I don’t actually have a choice here, you know that, right? I mean, ,” he added, when James made to protest, “You’re giving me a say, but I don’t actually have a real choice in the matter. I’ve been bounced from home to home in this town for three years. I don’t have any options left. The only reason they gave me to you was because you’re new and they didn’t give you enough information to know you should turn me down. Hell, if my stupid social worker wasn’t such a fucking transphobe she’d have told you my name right off and you’d have known who I was from the beginning. So no, I don’t get to just ‘decide’ I’m going to leave just cause you’re dating the only half-decent guardian I’ve ever had. My ‘choice’ is to risk getting sent out of the county, or sticking it out.”
His speech done, he folded his arms and looked away, staring at some point over James’ desk. James sighed. Leaned his elbows on his knees.

“You’re right, of course,” he said softly. “I didn’t think about that.”

“...whatever.”

“We’ll make it work somehow. I can promise you that.”

“We’ll see.” Mercury pushed up to his feet and slouched out, leaving James with a lot to think about.

-/-

Qrow was feeling fidgety. There was something James was keeping from him, something important, and that bugged him - but James had made it clear he would tell Qrow tomorrow, over coffee and in person, so it wasn’t like he was *keeping secrets* or anything.

Which didn’t make Qrow less fidgety, because what could be so important that James would have to talk to him in person? He went through a mental checklist of their relationship lately, double-checking that he hadn’t done something hugely improper, but he couldn’t hit on anything in particular.

Of course, it was always possible that he’d done something that would never occur to him as objectionable, but that James would consider seriously offputting. It wouldn’t be the first time; they had wildly different backgrounds and upbringing and had butt heads more than once over Qrow’s more permissive attitude toward raising children, for one.

(Though Qrow still maintained he was right. He was there to back his kids up while they figured out for themselves what they were able to handle - he couldn’t fight their battles for them forever, after all, better to let them learn how to fight them early. But disagreements about parenting philosophies was hardly dealbreaker material, at least Qrow didn’t think it was.)

Maybe it wasn’t anything bad at all, Qrow reminded himself. His other-shoe syndrome had proved wrong with James before, after all. Maybe James just wanted to talk about their moving in discussion more, without the kids there to overhear. As far as Qrow knew, James hadn’t told Penny yet, and he had his new foster child to consider as well.

(Or maybe it had to do with his new foster child. Maybe he was feeling overwhelmed with that realization of what he’d signed up for. Qrow could still remember his first night after bringing Tukson home, when he’d sat there talking to the kid while he unpacked his meagre belongings and it had hit him, square in the chest, that he was responsible for this kid’s wellbeing now. No amount of preparation and psyching himself up could have prevented that blow - it could only come with the experience. Maybe James was feeling that now, maybe that was what he wanted to talk about. Maybe it didn’t have anything to do with Qrow at all. Maybe he was worrying over nothing.)

Qrow groaned and buried his face in his hands. “I need a drink,” he said to the air, and then started counting.

He made it to one hundred fifty seven before the urge pushed its way back down to the bottom of his mind. Not gone - never gone - but under control again. He let out a slow breath.

“No point in worrying,” Qrow told himself, pushing to his feet and heading into the kitchen. “It’s only till tomorrow afternoon, so it’s not like it’s long to wait. Just deal with it. You’re a grown up. Grown ups deal with things.”
“Dad said being grown up means knowing when to ask for help,” replied a voice somewhere near his middle. He looked down to find Ruby, carrying a glass over to the counter before turning to the fridge. He held it open and watched her silently while she carefully carried the milk carton over to the counter as well, then dragged a stool over to the counter so she could climb up and pour herself a glass.

“That’s true,” Qrow conceded, and, “That’s a pretty big glass of milk.”

“Yes.” She finished pouring her glass and climbed down from the stool, then carried the milk back to the fridge. She returned to her stool and dragged it over to a different cabinet, climbing up so she could take down the jar of Ovaltine they kept up there. Then dragged the stool again, grabbed a spoon from the drainer, and climbed up to start mixing her Ovaltine. Qrow pursed his lips thoughtfully.

“I thought we were going through milk and Ovaltine quicker than usual,” he said. “Do you come in here for a glass every night?”

“Yes.” Her Ovaltine mixed, it was now time to go through the entire process again to put it up. Qrow leaned his hip on the counter and watched her, arms folded, amusement tugging at his lips. "Jaune says he drinks a glass of milk every night before bed, and he’s a giant now.”

“Oh, I see.” He covered his mouth with one hand, hiding his smile. “I hate to be the bearer of bad news, kiddo, but drinking milk isn’t going to make you a giant.”

The look of utter betrayal she turned on him would have been heartbreaking if the situation weren’t so comical. He turned to the fridge to hide his expression, grabbing a glass and pouring some milk of his own. With his free hand, he fumbled behind the fridge for a second, before emerging with a plastic baggie containing a few Oreos.

“You tell your dad about these and you’re dead to me,” he said, holding out the bag so she could help herself.

“I won’t tell a soul!” she promised. “But only if you tell me why drinking milk won’t make me big. Because I distinctly remember being told that it would.”

“You were lied to,” he said bluntly. “No, not the eyes- all right, you weren’t lied to, but you were told a really simplified version of the truth that didn’t really make it clear what you were supposed to be understanding.”

“Dad says half-truths are still lies.”

“He would.” Qrow sighed, and bit into an Oreo. (It drove Tai crazy that Qrow didn’t eat Oreos the ‘right’ way, which was of course why he did it.) “All right, so basically, milk does help you grow, but it doesn’t make you grow. No matter how much you drink, you’re not gonna get any taller or bigger than your genes say you’re going to.”

“My jeans?” She looked down at her pajamas. They had bats on them. “I’m not wearing jeans.”

“Not jeans, genes. Your genetic makeup- it’s the traits your parents passed down to you. Like whether you’ll be tall or short, for example.”

“But Dad is super tall!”

“He sure is,” Qrow agreed. He held up the last Oreo, letting her twist off half of it and then pouting when she pulled away with all of the creme. Oh well. “And my family tends to run tall, too, which
is why Yang is shooting up so much. You, on the other hand, seem to be taking more after your mom than anyone else in your family. So I hate to break it to you, but no amount of milk is going to make you taller.”

“That’s not fair.” She folded her arms and pouted. “All my friends are giants. I wanna be big, too!”

“Sorry, them’s the breaks.” He ruffled her hair, and gave her head a playful shake. “Chin up, maybe I’m wrong. Your dad didn’t get huge until he was in his teens, maybe you’re just waiting.”

She carried on pouting, drinking her Ovaltine in silence. He suppressed his smile and waited until her funk passed- she rarely pouted long.

“So what were you worrying about?” she finally said, turning a curious look on him, pouting forgotten.

“Heh? Oh, nothing major, just grown up problems.” At her disgruntled look, he took pity on her- he’d always hated hearing that at her age. “You ever had someone tell you they needed to talk about something important later, but didn’t tell you what it was about?”

“Yes.”

“Yeah?”

“Yes.” She nodded. “A few weeks ago Penny told me she wanted to talk to me about something very important, but we had to wait till we were alone. She was so serious! I thought she was dying or something! But it turns out she just wanted to tell me that-” She broke off, and turned a suspicious look on Qrow. “Wait, you know, right?”

“I know everything.”

“No you don’t!”

He chuckled, giving her another playful shake before pulling her in for a noogie. Once she’d wriggled away, she gave him her serious look again. He grinned.

“All right, you’re right, I’m actually pretty brainless. But I know what you’re talking about.” He grabbed her empty glass and his and moved them over to the sink, then sat back down beside her. “So Penny told you the big secret, huh?”

“Yeah. She thought it was this super critical thing, but I don’t know why? It’s not like she suddenly stopped being Penny.”

“Heh. It’s pretty important for her, though. She must trust you a lot if she was willing to tell you.”

“She said I’m the very best friend she’s ever had,” Ruby confirmed, and then bit her lip. “Um, I think she might be the very best friend I’ve ever had too? But I already told Weiss she was my bff, too. Is that okay? Am I allowed to have more than one very best friend?”

“I don’t see why not. You can have as many as you want. Not like there’s a law against it.”

“What if there was?”

“Henh?”

“What if there was a law? And it said you could only have one very best friend, and that was it.”
“Then you find ways to circumvent it,” Qrow said, shrugging. “Lots of things have been illegal, that didn’t make them wrong.”

“Like what?”

“Well…” He considered, and, “Once it was illegal for people like Penny to live as themselves, because people thought it was bad. Once it was illegal for people like me and Jimmy to be together, because we’re both men. Once it was illegal for people like your ma and your dad to be together, because they weren’t the same race.”

“That’s dumb.”

“Yeah.” He grinned, and ruffled her hair. “That’s why we got rid of ‘em.”

“I’m glad. Penny is happy, and you and Mr. Ironwood are happy, and Dad- um…” She frowned.

(“Well, he was happy with Mom, right?”

“In the back of his mind, that ever-present shadow raised its head and sniffed the air, and Qrow wrapped his metaphorical hands around its neck until it subsided. Not here, not with her.”

“He was very happy,” he assured Ruby, who was looking up at him with her usual cheerfully curious look, oblivious to the war raging in the back of his mind. “She was, too.”

“I’m glad,” she said, taking his hand so she could wrap his arm around her. His face softened and he pulled her into a one armed hug.

“You ready to head back to bed yet?”

“I guess. Oh, wait!” She dropped his arm and ran over to the doorway. “Measure me before I do?”

She was referring to the series of marks on the entry between the dining and living rooms, where dashes all up its length marked the heights of her and Yang over the years, alongside all of Qrow’s various foster kids, a permanent record of their time in his life. There was a pencil hanging on a string from a pushpin, added after the pencil in the drawer kept disappearing.

“All right,” he said, taking the pencil and gesturing for her to stand against the wall. Once he’d got her to hold still and stop standing on her toes, he swiped a quick mark over her head. “There, you see?” He tugged her away from the wall and pointed at the mark. He wrote her name and the date next to it. “You’ve grown a tiny bit since last month.”

“Oh!”

She looked pleased, and he was pleased to have pleased her; he reached down and lifted her up, carrying her down the hall to her room so he could put her to bed.

Nora was fast asleep and snoring when he tip-toed in; he pressed a finger to his lips at Ruby, and crept carefully over the toys, clothes, and bookbags that lived on their floor despite his and Tai’s best efforts to get them to clean their room, depositing Ruby onto the top bunk.

“Goodnight, Uncle Qrow,” Ruby whispered, beckoning him close enough that she could kiss his forehead, which got her a silent chuckle.

“Night, kiddo.” He returned the gesture and backed up, checking on Nora as he did. She had kicked her blankets off; he pulled them up over her, then bent over and rummaged around on the floor until he’d found her Mad King plush. He tucked it in next to her, and slipped out before he...
managed to wake her up.

(She’d gotten the plush from Jaune’s oldest brother, apparently. She won him in a bet, she said. He kept meaning to have a word with Jaune’s brother about making bets with his kids; if nothing else, they were going to end up with either a gambling problem or a lot of clutter.)

The house was quiet, apart from the sounds of his family sleeping. It was dark, apart from the nightlight in the hallway and the moonlight peeking through the living room curtains. The world was still and gentle, welcoming.

Qrow was tired.

“I need a drink,” he said to the shadows, and went to his room to collapse until morning.

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Chapter End Notes

I really love writing Ruby.
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

James talks to Qrow, Mercury settles in, and Tai has a mystery to solve.

Chapter Notes

I'm updating the character tags, now that I have a better idea of who the major players in this will be.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-/-

Qrow managed to get through the day without letting his nerves show through too much, mostly by putting his kids on catch-up study time for the day- a useful tool he’d hit on a few years ago. He left the kids to their own devices, letting them work on anything they were struggling with, making his rounds in the room to help them and answer their questions. It gave his kids a chance to work with him one-on-one, but more importantly, working with them made it far easier for him to focus on teaching than if he was standing at the front of the classroom. It kept him out of his head, and kept that shadow in the back of his mind quiet, at least for awhile.

Finally, finally, evening came. He said goodbye to his kids, spent some time chatting with parents, waited for Tai to pick up Ruby and Nora, and headed out to Release the Grounds to meet James.

James was already there, their drinks already waiting at their table. He greeted Qrow with a quick kiss and sat back down, and Qrow frowned as he took his own seat.

“Am I in trouble?”

James raised an eyebrow at him. “No? Why would you be in trouble?”

“I don’t know. But you kissed me like I’m in trouble. That was a joke,” he added, because James looked baffled. He took a sip of his drink; it was overloaded with far too much sugar, just the way he liked it. He fidgeted a little. “So what’s up? Am I in trouble?”

James sighed and shook his head. “You’re not in trouble. It’s about my new foster child.”

“Yeah?”

“It’s Mercury.”

“...oh.” Qrow was glad he was sitting down; he didn’t think his legs would be able to hold him up. The shadow in the back of his mind grinned, his grip tightened on his cup. “Well... okay then.”

“I just wanted to let you know,” James said, reaching over and resting a hand over Qrow’s, carefully pulling the cup from him before he crushed it. “It didn’t seem like a good idea to just
spring it on you when you came over.”

“No, yeah, that makes sense.” He took his cup back and downed a huge gulp of it, just for something, and wished for the burn of whiskey and the cool flask in his hand. “So what now?”

“I don’t know,” James admitted. “I told Mercury about you, told him what we did moving forward was up to him. But Qrow, I’m at a complete loss.”

“Yeah, you’re in way over that pretty head of yours,” Qrow said. “Why would they give you Mercury to start off with?”

“According to him, every other home in the county has sent him away.” He scrubbed at his temples, mussed hair that was normally far more kempt than currently. “Qrow… help me? I’ve never asked for details about what happened but now I think I need to know.”

“All right.” Qrow nodded, brushed his bangs up out of his eyes. “All right, what do you already know? About Mercury, I mean. His situation.”

“I know he was taken from an abusive home.” James ticked off on his fingers while he spoke. “I know he’s been shuffled around from home to home for at least three years. I know his last guardian was arrested a few months ago. And I know that when he lived with you, he and Yang got into fights a lot. By the way, he says she picked as many of those as he did. I believe him.”

“So do I.” He ran his hands through his hair again. It was standing up even more than usual now. “That was around the time Yang met her mom. I definitely believe she started a lot of those fights. And that’s a whole other list of problems we’re not going into,” he added, jabbing a stern finger at James.

“Of course,” James murmured. He’d long since learned not to ask questions about Qrow’s sister. Instead he rubbed irritably at his forehead. “I am stuck between a rock and a hard place here.”

Qrow nodded. “All right, so I don’t know how up to date my info is, but from what I know, his dad was an alcoholic.” When James grimaced, Qrow nodded. “Yeah, I’m sure you can imagine how well that went over. I think Leo gave him to me hoping it would get me to quit altogether but we both know how well that was going to work.” An eyeroll. “I would recommend not yelling or raising your voice at him, but he really hates when people try to talk gently to him. Snark worked out really well for me, I don’t think it’d have the same effect coming from you.”

James nodded. He could understand that, sort of; Qrow had a world-weary, done-with-this-nonsense aura to him that meant snark was expected from him. James was just as prone to snark as Qrow, his demeanor just made it sound more smug than he meant it to.

“I’m not generally in the habit of yelling at children.”

“No, but the kids you’re around are good kids and don’t really give you a reason. Merc is gonna be another story. Besides,” Qrow added, “You have got a temper in there, and the last thing you need to do is lose it where this kid is concerned.”

James opened his mouth to argue, and then sighed. “All right, fair enough.” He tapped his fingers in a nervous cadence on his cup, and, “He said you were the only half-decent guardian he’d ever had.”

“Aw, geez.” Qrow slumped down in his chair. “You’re kidding, right?” He ran his hands through his hair again. “Dammit, kid.”
“I tried, you know. I really did.” He straightened and hunched over his drink. “I really wanted to help this kid, I tried everything I could think of. Just nothing worked. But, it was the girls, you know? He couldn’t stop fighting, and, I don’t mean arguing like they do with each other, I mean actual violence. And I couldn’t leave my girls in that kind of situation and I couldn’t keep him away from them without isolating him and in the end it was just a situation that there was no way to win. I had a choice to make and I- I don’t think I made the right one. I think I did more harm than I was trying to prevent.”

While he said this, he hunched lower and lower until his forehead was touching the table. James reached over brushed gentle fingers over his hair, offering some form of soothing until Qrow finally sat up, slouching down in the chair.

“I don’t like this, Jim.”

“It’s not my favorite, either,” James pointed out. “We’ll just have to find a way to make it work. Until then, I- think maybe it’s best if we put our moving in discussions on hold.”

“Yeah, no, of course.” Qrow snorted. “Don’t think Nora’s too keen on the idea anyway, honestly.”

“I’ll try not to take that personally,” James teased, shooting for some way of lightening the mood and falling short of the mark. Qrow just gave him a grim smile.

“I don’t think it’s that she doesn’t want to live with you and Penny, it’s just that she- uh, well, when I asked her, she sort of thought I meant all of us, me and Tai and the girls too. I don’t think she wants to leave them.”

“There is that to consider too,” James agreed. “If you leave that knocks Tai down to a single-income household, and him taking care of both of his daughters alone. I’d hate to put him in the lurch just because I want you and Nora closer to me.”

Something warm hummed in the base of Qrow’s chest. He managed a more genuine smile this time. “Well, if Nora had her way we’d all just get a big house together. But then, I think if Nora had her way Ren and Jaune would probably live with us too.”

James chuckled. “Given I’m suggesting this because I like having you around as much as possible, I don’t think I have room to argue. At least we can sneak off in the middle of the night if nothing else. Nora doesn’t have that option with her friends.”

“True. All right. We’ll shelve any discussion of moving in together until we get this Mercury situation sorted out. And I’ll, I dunno, talk with Nora more seriously about how she feels about the idea overall.” He leaned on one hand and drummed a tattoo on the table with the other. “There is one thing that’s bothering me, though. You were open with your social worker about our relationship, right? My name should have been on Mercury’s papers as a previous guardian, why didn’t it come up at any earlier point?”

“I definitely mentioned you a few times. I didn’t want any later funny business about my sexuality to come up.”

“So the echo answers, why didn’t it come up?”

“Mercury did say that they withheld some information so I wouldn’t know not to take him on. You think this was a set-up?”
“If it was, it was foul play. I don’t doubt you can work with Mercury, but I’m a factor and my presence is going to throw this in the grinder. Actually, I should probably stay away for awhile.”

James didn’t bother trying to mask his disappointment. “That’s probably best.”

“Hey, come on, holster those things. We can still see each other, just, you know, not at the house.”

“And since I don’t have a live-in babysitter, that means we see each other when I can arrange for someone to come over and watch the kids.”

“Feh.” Qrow shrugged. “We’ll make it work.”

-/-

They lingered at Release the Grounds for awhile longer, neither ready to part and resume their busy schedules. It was rare for them to get a spare hour or so to just sit in a coffee shop and sip coffee or, in Qrow’s case, sugar with a small amount of coffee added.

They left together, but once they reached Qrow’s truck he wrapped his arms around James’ waist and burrowed close to him, burying his face in James’ shoulder.

“I hate splitting up when I know it’ll be ages before I see you in person again,” he grumbled into James’ shirt. James rumbled a laugh around him and wrapped his arms around Qrow’s shoulders.

“I know, I feel the same way. That’s why I suggested moving in together.”

“It’s not fair.”

“I know.”

Qrow groaned long and low into his shoulder, and then finally pulled away. “All right. I should go before I change my mind.”

“All right.” A quick kiss, and, “Love you.”

“Yeah, yeah, you too,” Qrow said, waving that away as if it was nothing. “See you around, hot stuff.”

-/-

Mercury was sitting on the front steps of the house when Winter walked up. She stopped short, mouth forming an ‘oh’ and eyebrows climbing up to her hairline.

“D-“

“Mercury,” he said, cutting her off with a glare. “It’s Mercury.”

She looked him over, and, “Ah. Right. Mercury.” She adjusted her satchel awkwardly on her shoulder and stiffened her posture a little. “Is Mr. Ironwood home?”

“He’s out cosying with his boyfriend, probably.”

“Right. And Penny?”

“What am I, her keeper?”
Winter scowled. “I’m only asking because I don’t think Mr. Ironwood would leave her- or you- at home alone long term.”

“Well my bus just went by about five minutes ago,” he said. “And he told me this morning he was going to be home by four thirty, so he’d trust me to handle being on my own for that small amount of time, rather than go through the trouble of a babysitter.” He shrugged. “And Penny went over to a friend’s house after school. I think old General Hardass wants some alone time so we can bond or something.”

“General Hardass?”

“Yeah, you know, the guy who has a million rules? Most of them really dumb stuff that acts like I can’t take care of myself? That guy.”

“You shouldn’t call him that.”

“I’ll call him anything I damn well please.” He snorted. “Figures you’d be into him. Got a crush on him or something?” When she leveled a stern glare at him, he gave a nasty sort of laugh. “Oh, right. Finally came out of that closet, huh? So what are you doing here, anyway?”

“Mr. Ironwood helps me with my homework sometimes,” she said, adjusting her grip on her bag again. “And it’s… nice, being able to come here. Father approves of Mr. Ironwood, or at least who he thinks he is.”

She finally moved to sit down on the steps, and to the surprise of some hypothetical onlooker, but not to either of them, he slid aside to make room for her. She leaned forward and rested her elbows on her knees, her chin in her hands.

“So tell me about Ironwood,” he said. “What’s he like? You obviously think he’s the bee’s knees but that could mean anything.”

“He’s… kind,” she said slowly. “And gentle. He tries. He listens. We have a similar sense of humor, which is refreshing. He’s very patient with Penny. He can be overbearing, and he doesn’t always hold his temper, but he does always apologize, which is more than many adults I’ve known. His questionable taste in men aside-“ Which got her a snorting laugh, “-he doesn’t really have many downsides. And what he presents is genuine. If he says something, he means it.”

Mercury was silent for a long time, and, “My last guardian was a cultist, I think. He was always talking about how things would be when the Queen returned, and how she would cleanse the world of humanity’s sins. I definitely think there was at least one body buried in the backyard and I’m pretty sure he had either a shrine or a torture chamber in the basement- or hell, maybe both- because we weren’t allowed down there but he went down there a lot.”

“It could have just been personal space.”

“Maybe!” He gestured irritably. “But he also got arrested - for, get this, unpaid parking tickets. And other traffic violations. Turned out he had outstanding warrants in like fifteen states. So they arrested him and then me and Em- Emerald, that’s the girl who was living there too- got sent away. But you know? Cultist or not, murderer or not, torture chamber or not, it… wasn’t a bad time. We were happy. We were together, and if we could stick it out for just a few more years, we’d be free. Now she’s living up in Argus with some guy and I’m… here. With old General Hardass and Uncle Qrow back in my life.”

He leaned forward and rested his forehead on his knees, while Winter watched him impassively for
a long moment. She considered his words, and nodded firmly to herself.

“Would you like to come out with my friends and myself tomorrow evening? We were planning to
go to the roller rink. You would be welcome to join us.”

Mercury sneered into one knee. “Are all your friends like you?”

“They’re… like me in some ways. Very much not like me in others. I think you would like them.”

“Yeah?”

“The offer is open. We’re a mixed age group, so you wouldn’t be out of place.”

“I’ll… think about it. If only to get out of this house. If the General allows it, I mean.”

“Unless he has something specific planned, I don’t see why he wouldn’t,” she said, after a grimace
at the reminder of the nickname. “I can ask him for you, if you like?”

Mercury was silent for a long time after that, before, “Why are you being so nice to me? You
didn’t used to be nice to me.”

“I did so. You just liked pushing my buttons when I tried.”

“Yeah right.”

“All right, I suppose I could have been nicer.”

“If you’d tried I’d have punched you in the throat.”

“Are you going to punch me in the throat now?”

“I’m still thinking about it.”

“Let me know when you’ve decided.”

“Hn.”

-/-

When James got home, only a little bit later than he'd intended, Mercury and Winter were sitting on
his doorstep; Winter had a book open in her lap, a pencil and a pad of paper balanced awkwardly
on one knee, while Mercury played with his phone, which had acquired some decals at some point
between today and last night.

James sighed, and got out of the car, turning his attention to Winter after a brief greeting to
Mercury.

“Hello, Winter,” he said. “Did you need something?”

“Sir!” She said, straightening a little and knocking her notebook aside. “I needed some help with
my science homework, I was, um, going to ask if you could help me. I’m having trouble
understanding the material.”

“Of course, you know I’m always happy to help you. Why don’t you come in- I have a little time
before I have to start dinner. Will you be joining us?”
“I shouldn’t impose,” she said, which usually meant that she didn’t think she could clear it with her father, and stood up to lead the way into the house. At the door, James reached out a hand to stop Mercury before he could follow.

“We need to talk later,” he said. “Not while Winter’s here- we’ll talk after she leaves.”

“Whatever,” Mercury said, rolling his eyes and pulling his shoulder away to follow Winter into the house.

Inside, Winter had already laid her books on the table, so James took a seat beside her and pulled the assignment sheet toward him. Mercury stood awkwardly in the doorway for a moment, ignored by both, before sneering and turning to trod up to his room.

-/-

Tai was pretty used to Qrow not coming home on Friday nights. Granted, he used to actually come home and then go out drinking later, but after his last relapse back in December, he’d stopped coming home at all, staying out indescribably late and then sneaking in sometime around three.

(He probably didn’t think Tai knew when he got home, but their bathrooms shared a wall and Qrow sang in the shower.)

He didn’t like to confront him about it. He had his ground rules- no drinking in the house, no drunkenness around the kids- and Qrow had faithfully kept to both those and his promise to Summer ever since he'd moved in. It wasn’t Tai’s place, otherwise, to tell Qrow what to do.

At least he knew at Junior’s Qrow would keep to his limit.

Unless he had another relapse, of course. Roman’s dedication to holding Qrow to his self-imposed limits only went so far, after all.

“Taaaaiiiii~”

...and speak of the devil, here was Roman now. Tai stilled his buggy and prepared himself to be hit on, and turned to greet the cheery cry.

“Hi, Roman.”

“Well well well, if it isn’t my favorite dad bod. Out here on your own? Where are those charming kiddies of yours? With Qrow, I suppose?”

What? “What? Um, they’re at Ren’s for Dungeons Dungeons and More Dungeons.”

“Oooh, they’re getting into ddnmd? Excellent!” He beamed, so Tai assumed that meant he meant it, and then added, “And how has Qrow been lately? I haven’t seen him in months, I’m starting to think he forgot where to find me.”

What . “He… hasn’t been going to Junior’s?”

“Not while I’m there.”

“Oh… well… maybe…”

“I’m always there, dad bod. I pretty much run the place these days, at least on weekends.”

“You’re not there now,” Tai pointed out.
“Yes, well.” Roman shrugged. “We’re doing renovations right now. Junior wants to appeal more to the younger crowd. I think he’s trying to turn the place into a nightclub.”

He scowled at that, but Tai wasn’t paying much attention. He frowned. “So… the place is closed right now?”

“Yup.”

“Then where has Qrow been going?”

For a moment, just the barest fraction of a second, Tai thought Roman looked worried, but it must have been a trick of the light because he immediately shrugged, and, “Maybe he found somewhere else to drink.”

“I’m a little afraid of that,” Tai admitted, and scrubbed one hand through his hair. Roman just clapped him on the shoulder.

“Hey, relax. He’s a big boy, he can make his own mistakes.” He gave Tai a reassuring look, but Tai only managed a weak smile in return.

“I know. Look, I have to get going- I’ve got frozens… I’ll see you around, Roman.”

“Sure.”

The trouble, of course, (Tai thought, as he left Roman standing in the middle of the cereal aisle), was that unlike Roman, Qrow’s mistakes didn’t happen in a vacuum, and affected more than just himself. Qrow had a family, had a daughter to look after. If he’d found somewhere new to drink, that suggested that he’d stopped holding to his limits.

And Tai knew what lay on the other end of that road, and would rather not go down it again.

(Of course, there was always the chance that Qrow was going somewhere else on Fridays, but Tai could think of nowhere he’d go that he wouldn’t just say.)

(Stil, it wouldn’t be fair to accuse Qrow. He’d ask. Maybe it was something innocent. Maybe there was nothing wrong. Maybe he had no reason to worry.)

-/-

Roman frowned as Tai walked away, and then took out his phone. He scrolled through his contacts to one listed as “Peaches”, and sent off a quick text: Darling, I have a favor to ask.

After a few moments, a reply.

Yes?

-/-

Chapter End Notes

Mercury and Winter have an interesting dynamic that I'm really looking forward to exploring because I was not expecting it.
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Everyone is starting to settle in.

Chapter Notes

There's some slight out-of-order wonkiness going on here, since everything happens in the same evening and is unconnected enough that I didn't need to chronological it. Also, logically the first scene should have been in the previous chapter but I didn't think of it till I'd posted the previous one, so it had to go here instead.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-/-

Penny was glad for the chance to play Dungeons, Dungeons, and More Dungeons with her friends so soon after their first game. She rode with Sun over to Ren’s house after school (her father had arranged it, since he was meeting with Qrow to talk to him about Mercury), Sun giving her a play-by-play summary of their game the previous night. By the sounds of it, they’d had an intense adventure, meeting on a stagecoach across the resident country and then forming a fast bond when their group was attacked by a giant bird monster.

“-and then my character swung her scythe and just- beheaded the darn thing, like it was nothing! It was so cool! And it meant I got our first boss kill, I couldn’t believe it!”

“That is amazing!” Penny said, bouncing a little in her seat. “Do you think my character will be that cool?”

“I bet your character will be almost as cool as mine,” Sun said proudly. “Which is a really high bar to clear. Why don’t you tell me about them?”

“Um, she is a gladiator,” Penny began, and Sun nodded.

“Always a strong start.”

“-and, she has a very special ability called polarity, that lets her control metal. Father helped me make her character sheet. I am very excited.”

“Oh, man, she sounds REALLY cool!”

Penny blushed a little, and added, “I am surprised you did not make your character a winged monkey.”

He pouted at that, and folded his arms to enhance the effect. “I was going to, but Weiss beat me to it! And she said if I made mine a winged monkey too then she would never speak to me again, which doesn’t sound that bad in theory but I like talking to Weiss. It’s funny to wind her up and I
can’t do that if she’s giving me the cold shoulder.”

-/-

After Winter left, James went looking for Mercury, and found him in his room, still playing with his phone. James knocked lightly on the door.

“Mercury? It’s time to get dinner started. Come downstairs, we can talk while I work.”

Mercury looked down at his phone, and for a moment James thought he might protest, but after a few seconds he sighed and shoved his phone into his shirt, making a disgruntled noise as he slid off of his bed.

“Am I in trouble?”

“A little bit, but there’s other things we need to talk about too.” He tried to look and sound reassuring; judging by Mercury's disbelieving "tch" as he pushed past him and headed downstairs, he’d failed. He followed. “Any preferences on dinner?”

Mercury shrugged, folded his hands behind his head. “Who cares? Food’s food.”

“You are allowed a preference,” James reminded him, and opened a couple of cabinets. “How does yakisoba sound?”

“Yakisoba?” Mercury wrinkled his nose. “Whatever, it’s fine.”

“Do you not like yakisoba?” James tossed a pillow of noodles on the counter, and took down a box of sauce mixes. “There are other options, if you’d prefer something else.”

“I said it’s fine. Gods . What is with you?”

James pursed his lips, considered, and tossed a pouch of yakisoba mix onto the counter. “All right. As you like.”

While he turned his attention to making dinner, Mercury reached into his shirt and took his phone out again. He held it up.

“Are you aware that you left a bunch of cct store credits on this thing?”

“Yes, of course. I put them on there so you could buy some music or books or anything else you might want.”

“ Why ?”

James raised an eyebrow at him. “This may come as a shock to you, Mercury, but I want you to have nice things. I want any child I’m responsible for to have nice things.” When Mercury still looked mutinous, he added, “I started planning and making arrangements when I applied to be a foster parent. It wasn’t a spontaneous decision.”

A slow nod. “So... this is all just stuff for your foster kid, not for me specifically?”

“I have no idea why that matters, but if it means something to you, then yes. I would do this for you or any other child they sent me.”

Mercury gave him a look seething with mistrust, and then nodded slowly. He set the phone down on the table. “I bought a bunch of music last night. And a monthly to Music Box.”
“What level?”

“Just the cheap one. You didn’t leave *that* many credits on it.”

James chuckled. “Remind me when it renews and I’ll make sure it’s covered.”

A slow nod, and, “I don’t… *owe* you anything for this, do I? I mean, you’re not going to make me work it off or anything? You gotta tell me now, don’t just spring it on me.”

James looked up from chopping vegetables to give him a close, studying look, and turned back to chopping after a moment, shaking his head a little. “No, you don’t owe me for it. I *do* expect you to help out with household chores, but I also expect that of Penny, and it’s not transactional- the house needs keeping, and you should have things. Both of those would be true even if the other weren’t.”

“Tch. Housework’s *boring*.”

“I know. It still has to be done.”

Mercury groaned, and for a moment James felt like he was talking to any other teenage boy. He gave a tiny smile to the vegetables as he dumped them into the broth.

“Anyway, I made an appointment for you with a friend of mine. It’s about time you got your legs refitted, and he’ll talk to you about repairs and upgrades while you’re with him.”

This got him a bitter look, and James felt the slight slip in the wall between them build itself back into place. Mercury turned to his phone with a scowl.

“I can handle my own repairs. I don’t need some doc to hold my hand.”

“You still need a professional to check you over and handle the big stuff. I know you like to be independent and it’s *good* to be able to handle your own needs, but there’s limits to what should be expected of you.” Mercury didn’t stop scowling, so James went on, “If it makes you feel better, designing and repairing prosthetics is *literally* my job, and even *I* have to give my repairs over to a second party sometimes.”

“Whatever.”

“It’s true. I have standing appointments, twice a year. In fact you’ll be seeing the same doctor I do.”

“And why is *that* supposed to make me feel better? If you’re trying to get me to trust you just cause we’ve got some bogus *common ground* going on- look, just don’t bother. It doesn’t matter.”

“Let’s talk about something else then,” James said, after studying him closely for a moment. “Why did you leave school after lunch?”

“How do you even *know* about that?”

“Your teacher happens to have me on speed dial. She let me know.”

“Oh for fuck’s sake. So she’s just gonna call and tattle on me whenever I put a foot out of line?”

“Probably.”

“Well that’s just fucking great. Is that why they put me in her class? Because she’s your boo or
“She’s my sister, and no, at least probably not. I didn’t have anything to do with what class you were put in. Actually, I did want to ask- I know Yang has her class this year too. Are you okay?”

A chill swept through the room; Mercury’s expression was ice. “Ask me that again and I’ll deck you,” he spat. “And I’m fine. So am I grounded or what? Just get it over with so I can go back to my room.”

“You’re not grounded, at least not this time. If it continues to be a problem you might be, or I’ll handle it another way.”

“Why do you even care?”

“Because your education is important, and it’s my responsibility to make sure you get one. Did something happen?”

“No, nothing happened. I just got sick of being there. School is stupid, the public education system is a joke, my classmates are all jerks, and let’s face it, I’m probably not gonna survive to see graduation anyway. So who cares if I’m there or somewhere else?”

James looked up from his work and gave Mercury a sharp look. “Why do you think you’re not going to survive to see graduation?”

Mercury just looked unimpressed. “Come on, General. You gotta ask? I’ve seen the statistics. People like me don’t tend to have much staying power.”

“Hmm.” A frown. “I’ve seen those statistics as well. They’re not promising, and they tend to be even worse for young people in your situation.”

“You mean disabled trans kids in the foster system,” Mercury said, a kind of malicious glee to his voice. “Yeah, I know. Amazing, who could have imagined that I wouldn’t expect to survive high school?”

“Well,” James said, “I can’t make any promises about what will happen in the future, but I can promise that as long as you live with me, I’ll do everything in my power to keep you safe. Believe it or not, I would rather you didn’t become another statistic.”

“I guess that wouldn’t look too good on you as a foster parent.”

James sighed. “If that’s what you need to tell yourself, then all right.” He gave the soup a quick stir before moving over to sit with him. “But mostly I just don’t want you getting hurt.”

/-/

Penny was so excited to join her friends in ddnmd that for awhile, all thought of Mercury was driven out of her mind. It was easy enough for her to join the group; they were all having a stayover at a coaching inn so her character was just written in as a fellow guest, who would be joining the coach when it left.

Sun’s brother had been uninterested in continuing as their table-master, so Ren’s mother had stepped in, for tonight at least, and she wove such a beautiful story around them that at times they grew so engrossed they forgot they were meant to be interacting with the story.

Eventually, Mrs. Ren called a break, and went off to do her own thing for a bit while they ate
snacks and talked. It was Ruby who drew Mercury back to her mind, asking about their new foster child between mouthfuls of popcorn.

“Oh!” Penny said. “His name is Mercury. I do not think he is a very nice boy, but Father says we must make allowances and be patient.”

“Mercury?” Ruby said thoughtfully. “Isn’t that the name-” -at the same time that Nora broke in with, “Mercury! Wow! That means Ozpin came through after all!”

All eyes were now on Nora. “What do you mean?” Sun asked. “What has Ozpin got to do with it?”

“Oh, that’s right, you don’t know,” Nora said. “Okay, so, you know how Ozpin was Santa last winter?”

They all nodded that, yes, they were aware.

(The subject of whether Ozpin was Santa himself, or was intimate friends- a term Ruby had recently learned and brought forth- and filling in on that account, had been debated endlessly on the playground last winter. Ruby and Sun had both been sure that he could not truly be Santa, on the grounds that he was neither fat nor bearded, but Ren had pointed out that as Santa was a legend centuries old and the current image of him was a recent affectation- a term he had learned just that week- then it would be unfair to hold Ozpin to such standards, and Jaune had thought that made a lot more sense than either Ruby or Sun’s arguments. Nora had been uncharacteristically silent in these discussions; she wasn’t sure she believed in Santa, but she did believe in Ozpin, and that was good enough for her.)

“Well, I made Uncle Qrow take me to see Santa on Christmas Eve and I asked Ozpin if he would arrange for him and Mercury to see each other again so they could talk and maybe be happy again, and he said he’d see what he could do.” She folded her arms. “I thought he’d given up when nothing happened but obviously he was just biding his time for Mr. Ironwood to get his license so he could arrange that. That’s pretty smart of him, actually.”

“Oh, that is why!” Penny said. “Mercury said it was probably foul play by his social worker.”

“That’s also a possibility,” Nora agreed, having had her own history with bad social workers. “But it’s probably the Ozpin thing.”

/--

The house was quiet when Tai got home. Ruby and Nora were over at Ren’s playing Dungeons, Dungeons, and More Dungeons, and Yang- well-

Yang was the only one of his kids not getting involved with the game the others were so thrilled with. Tai had asked a couple of probing questions about her lack of interest, and had concluding based on her answers that she just didn’t want to seem too much like a little kid. She was, after all, a paltry seven months away from being thirteen, and thus couldn’t be seen to be playing pretend like some child.

Tai hadn’t forced her, but he hoped she soon grew out of this need to be seen as too grown-up to have fun.

In the meantime, he let her go play- er, hang out, at the Belladonna house with Blake and Ilia while her sister and cousin went to Ren’s house to play their game. And then came home to put groceries away alone in an empty house.
He should be thrilled, he knew. It wasn’t often he got his house to himself, and he knew lots of parents would jump at such privacy. But then, those parents had someone to enjoy that privacy with.

And they weren’t stuck in a quiet, empty house, worrying about their brother with nothing to distract them but a sleepy dog.

“I need a hobby,” he told Zwei, who perked up in case the conversation involved petting or feeding him, and then lay his head back down when he realized that there would be neither in his immediate future. Tai went on putting away groceries, ignoring this. “I mean, I’m a cool guy. I shouldn’t be moping around on a Friday night just because my kids are out and Qrow is- well, wherever Qrow is.”

Zwei looked up again, then whined and rolled over, exposing his soft tummy to the world, just in case. This time Tai noticed, and knelt to give him a few courtesy scritches.

“It’s probably nothing. Maybe he’s just been going over to see James. Maybe he didn’t say anything because he didn’t think it needed saying.” Zwei yipped at him, and he sighed. “Yeah, I know. He’s a grown up, he can make his own choices. It’s not like he’s done anything out of line. I should trust him.”

Another yip; Tai gave the dog a final pat and got back to the groceries, but only made it as far as putting away the milk cartons before the quiet emptiness of the house hit him again, and he huffed.

“I really need to get a hobby,” he repeated. "Or, a girlfriend."

-/-

Yang liked hanging out at the Belladonna’s house. She liked that Kali left them alone rather than needing to watch them every minute- something Yang could understand her parents doing for Ruby and Nora, but she didn’t need to be chaperoned like they did. She was twelve. She was going to be thirteen soon, she might as well be thirteen now, it was so close. Ilia was already thirteen. Blake was even closer than Yang was.

Anyway, Kali left them alone unless she was offering them snacks, and had once even let them stay at the house by themselves while she walked down the street to return a borrowed book to a neighbor. They’d been in the house themselves, alone, unsupervised, for a whole thirty minutes before she’d come back, and the worse thing that had happened was Ilia spilling her nail polish. (They’d cleaned it up, of course. They were very-nearly-almost-teenagers, not animals.)

Besides, Blake’s house was big and not nearly as crowded as the tiny house Yang lived in. They could spread out in one corner of the living room to do their homework and not worry about anyone coming through and tripping over them.

“So…” Yang said, setting her pencil down. “Mercury, huh?”

“Oh, my gods,” Blake said, putting her own pencil down and looking up with a slightly horrified look. “What in the world is he doing in our grade? What is he doing in our class?”

“Who is Mercury?” Ilia asked. “He was really giving you the stinkeye at lunch.”

“He’s one of Uncle Qrow’s old foster children,” Yang explained, at the same time Blake said, “He’s a jerk.”
They exchanged a look; Yang pressed on. “I heard from Coco that last year his old guardian got arrested at the end of the year, so he wasn’t able to sit his exams, and since his grades were already so bad they just made him repeat the year. That’s what I heard.”

“Are you going to tell your uncle?”

“...I don’t know.” Yang picked up her pencil again, and doodled in the margins on her work. “I mean, he’s going to find out eventually.”

“Does it matter, though? He was in Glynda’s class last year, I heard, and it never mattered.”

“Yeah, but I wasn’t there with him. It’s not the same.” She looked uncomfortable. “I mean, what if he comes in to pick me up, or has a meeting with Glynda? Or hell, what if he just goes in to see her? They’re friends, you know. It could happen.”

“Well he didn’t manage to find out any time last year,” Ilia pointed out. “I don’t see why he has to know, and if it would upset him to find out-“

“Yeah, but I don’t wanna lie to him,” Yang said. “But on the other hand, he sent Mercury away because we couldn’t stop fighting. What if he tries to get him transferred out of the class or something? Or me?”

“Then you wouldn’t be in Glynda’s class anymore,” Blake said.

Yang considered this for a moment. Not being in Glynda’s class anymore. “…I’ll tell him tomorrow.”

“Maybe you’ll be put in my class,” Ilia added hopefully.

-/-

“So how are things going with the General?” Emerald asked, when Mercury called her that night.

“They’re fine. He’s Glynda’s brother, apparently.”

“Wow, it is a really small world.”

“Right?” He flopped back onto his pillow and shook his head. “Sometimes it feels like my life is a fictional story being written by a dude with a very small pool of characters to pull from to fill it out.”

“If it is, he’s an asshole.”


“Maybe you are living in a romance novel,” Emerald said, amused. “Maybe this is just the build up of backstory so your leading lady can come in and save you.”

“All right, well who’s my leading lady? Who’s going to ~save~ me?”

“I don’t know. Maybe you haven’t met her yet. Maybe you have and you don’t know it.” A barely suppressed snicker, and, “Maybe it’s ~me~. Maybe we’ve been living in a romance novel all along and just didn’t know it.”

This got an actual laugh out of him, an ugly snorting laugh that, had he only seen it, put a relieved
smile on Emerald’s face. “Look, I know I’m a hottie-”

“You’re really not.”

“-but you gotta put a cap on it. I’m just not into you like that. I know it’s going to be hard, but you’ll just have to move on.”

More laughter. “You’re such a dick.”

“Hey, you’re the girl in this romance novel, it’s your job to fix that.”

-/-

Chapter End Notes

For the sake of my sanity and my inability to keep track of who should be in a given scene, the kids will not all always be in every ddnmd session. Coordinating a stable session with a bunch of adults is hard enough; coordinating a group consisting of at very least seven kids has got to be a nightmare.

For the record, the main group in whole consists of Ruby, Nora, Penny, Sun, Jaune, Ren, and Weiss, with others coming and going as they take an interest or lose it. Just because someone is established as playing in one session doesn't automatically mean they'll be in every session.

(Also, for clarity's sake: Tai and Qrow are not as prone to such close supervision as Yang claims, it just seems like it from where she's standing because they live in a small enough house that there's usually one of the adults at hand anyway.)
Saturday morning found Qrow pouring himself a bowl of cereal when Tai went to make breakfast for the girls. He was still wearing the same clothes he’d worn when he left the house the morning before, and he looked sleep-deprived and night-worn, half-dozing over his cereal while he ate. Tai watched him in his periphery while he cooked, until finally,

“Late night?”

Qrow groaned. Tai frowned.

“Hey, Qrow? Can I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

“Where do you go on Friday nights?”

He was watching for it, which was why he saw the shift in Qrow’s body language: the nervous tightening of his shoulders, the way his spoon froze halfway to his mouth. All this in a split second before he fell into one of his more casual, overly relaxed poses, the kind he used when he was about to start lying through his teeth. And he didn’t turn around while he spoke.

“Where do you think?” he asked, and shrugged. “And why does it matter?”

“Well I thought you were going to Junior’s,” Tai said carefully. “And it doesn’t really matter, but I was wondering.”

“What do you mean you thought it was Junior’s?”

“I mean I had just assumed you were going out to Junior’s like always but then Roman said he hasn’t seen you in months.”
“Roman? The fuck, Tai? What are you asking him shit about my doings for?”

“I wasn’t, I just ran into him while I was getting groceries. He *asked* about you because he *misses* you because whatever you’re hoping I’ll believe, you haven’t gone to Junior’s in months.” He turned fully to Qrow, who was still hunched over his bowl of Pumpkin Pete’s. “Qrow, did you find somewhere new to drink?”

There was a long silence, while Qrow sat very still over the table before he suddenly stood, carried his bowl to the sink, and disappeared into his room without a word. Tai stared after him in shock.

“Qrow, what- ow, f-“ He bit back a swear and turned his full attention to the stove, hastily switching on the fan and switching off the burner while he worked to salvage what he could of breakfast.

Oh well, at least they had cereal.

-/-

Winter arrived to pick up Mercury while they were still eating breakfast. She looked ragged and exhausted, so James invited her to join them, especially when he found out she’d left without eating.

“Do your parents know where you’ll be for the day?” James asked, setting a plate of French toast in front of her.

“I told Kline,” she said. “If Mother and Father stop yelling at each other long enough, he’ll tell them.”

“Is everything okay?”

“I am not sure.” Winter frowned. “...Mother did not come home yesterday. When she finally returned this morning, she informed Father that he would be leaving her.”

James very carefully said nothing, and waited for her to continue. It was Mercury who spoke next, though.

“That’s a goddamn power move, that is,” he said. “Good for her.”

“Perhaps.” She shrugged. “I am not so sure. I just think it is best not to be home today.”

“Might be a good day to see if Weiss wants to come over for a playdate,” James said. “It’s no better for her to be around than it is for you, if your parents are fighting like you say.”

The look she turned on him was packed with gratitude, but she schooled her face back into order before turning to Mercury instead. “Are you ready to go? We have just enough time to reach the rink to meet my friends if we leave now.”

“Yeah, lemme go put on pants.”

He stood and hurried upstairs- he was still wearing his pajamas- leaving his plate on the table. James glanced at his plate, and then looked over at Winter.

“How are you doing with this? Parental divorce isn’t an easy thing to go through, I know. Even when your parents are terrible for each other.”

“I think I’ll be okay,” she said. “I’m sixteen, so custodial concerns are minor and largely moot, for
how much longer I’ll be required to live at home anyway. My siblings on the other hand…” She
looked helpless, and James nodded, but before he could answer Mercury reappeared, now wearing
pants.

“Let’s go, Princess, I’m sick of this place already.”

“That is not-“ She rolled her eyes. “Never mind, it’s not like you’ll listen.” She gave James a
gracious nod. “Thank you for your concern. I’m sure it will be fine.”

“Sure. You kids have fun, be safe- give me a call if you need anything.”

-/

It was Kline who answered the phone when James called, and Kline who passed Weiss off to him
when he headed over to pick her up. She was looking just as ragged as her sister, though at present
the house was quiet.

“You’re a good man, Mr. Ironwood,” Kline said, giving Weiss’s shoulder a squeeze as she went
by. James shook his head.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. I’m just inviting my daughter’s friend over to play on a
Saturday.”

“Hmm. Well. Have a nice day, Miss Weiss. Hopefully things will have calmed down by the time
you return.”

“Thank you, Kline.” Weiss threw her arms around him, giving him a big squeeze before following
James down the walk, grabbing his hand as she caught up to him.

“And thank you, too,” she said. “I guess my sister told you what happened?”

“She did. Are you okay?”

She shrugged. “I guess. It’s not like I’ll be sorry to see him go, but I don’t know what’s going to
happen. And it’s not like Mother is any better.”

“...no comment,” he said, earning a weak laugh. “I was thinking about going over to the Xiao
Long-Branwen’s today. Does that sound good to you, or would you like to go somewhere else?”

“It sounds fine. I think Ruby will prove to be an excellent distraction from my own problems, if
nothing else.”

-/

Qrow finally emerged from his room about two hours later, after the rest of the house was well
awake. He’d showered and changed and looked a lot more presentable, and the only indication he
gave to Tai of their conversation earlier was a warning look before, “Jimmy called, wants to know
if we mind having him and Penny and Weiss over for awhile.”

“No objections here,” Tai said. “Must be something up, if he’s inviting himself over on short
notice.”

“A couple things,” Qrow said, pinching the bridge of his nose. “One he told me and the other I’m
guessing at. You know how he was getting a new foster kid?”

“I am aware, yes.”
“It’s Mercury.”

“Oh no ,” Tai said, at the same time Yang snapped her fingers and, “So that’s what he was doing in my class!”

They both turned to her. “He’s in your class?” Tai asked. “Shouldn’t he be a year ahead of you?”

“He had to repeat the year,” Yang shrugged. “He was giving me and Blake the stinkeye all day, but he beat it after lunch. No idea how that’ll go. So he’s living with Uncle James now?”

“Yeah. That’s why they’re coming over short notice, kid’s gone out with Winter and since me and Jimmy are playing slowball until things get sorted out, he’s taking advantage of the kid being out for the day to come spend some quality time with yours truly.”

Yang scowled. “Well if you guys are gonna get all gross and smoochy, stay in your room to do it. It’s gross .”

“Hey, I’ll get gross and smoochy wherever I want to,” Qrow shot back, punctuating his point by sticking his tongue out at Yang (who replied in kind). “Anyway, that’s what’s up. I’m going back to bed, send Jimmy my way when they all get here.”

“Hey, he’s my friend too,” Tai objected. “Maybe I want to actually spend some time with him myself.”

“Hmph. Well.” He stuck his tongue out again. “I guess I’ll just wait for him to come find me, then.”

-/-

Winter and Mercury were the first to make it to the rink, but they’d only just had time to rent a pair of skates for Mercury (Winter owned her own, of course) before another girl approached. She had hair cut boyishly short and a tattoo circling one bicep- a real tattoo, which Mercury was grudgingly impressed by. She gave him a once-over when she approached.

“So this is the kid you mentioned?”

“Yes. Vernal, this is Mercury, he’s an old… friend. Mercury, this is Vernal. She is a… newer friend.”

Mercury raised an eyebrow and returned Vernal’s once-over. “So when you said your friend was like you in some ways and not like you in others, what you meant was, she’s an even bigger lesbian than you are.”

Vernal bristled. “Just what is that supposed to mean?”

“I should have thought that’d be obvious. Do I need to spell it out for you? It’s D, y-“

“You little punk!” Vernal made to swipe at him, but Winter, with surprisingly practiced ease, grabbed her and pulled her back. “Let go of me, Winter! I’m not gonna be talked down to by some tranny punk!”

Mercury’s nostrils flared, and he huffed. “Yeah, Princess. Let ‘er go.”

“You are not getting us thrown out of yet another establishment,” Winter said, not letting go of Vernal’s arm. “If you two are going to fight, take it outside.”
Vernal looked fully prepared to do so, but Mercury wasn’t paying attention, craning his neck a bit to look somewhere off in the distance, a real, genuine smile hitting him. He slid his gaze back to her.

“As much fun as that sounds, I’m gonna have to raincheck. Later bitch- and thanks for the alibi, Princess.”

He hurried away at that, waving at someone across the rink as he did. Vernal made to follow him, but Winter held her back once more.

“Let him go, Vern.”

“You’re friends with that little rat-faced punk?”

“Sort of.” Winter sighed. “I had hoped the years might have mellowed him somewhat. Obviously I was wrong.”

“Yeah well if he talks to me like that again I’m going to scrub that smirk right off his stupid fucking face.”

“Go ahead, just go outside before you do.” She glanced over, and saw Mercury talking to a tall girl with green hair. She pursed her lips, and then slipped an arm through Vernal’s. “Come on, the others will be here soon. Forget Mercury. He doesn’t matter.”

-/-

Mercury was so glad to see Emerald again that for a long moment he just stood there, looking her over and committing her to memory. Who knew how long it’d be before he saw her again? He had to make it last.

She looked the same, more or less, but also different. A little happier. His heart made a funny noise, and he forced his face back into his usual cocky smirk.

“Took you long enough to get here.”

“Nice to see you too, you ass,” she said, punching his arm. “Anyway, I’m here, aren’t I?”

“You sure are.” He looked her over once more. “You changed your hair.”

“You like it?” She shook the bob around her ears, and grinned. She’d gotten her ears pierced, too. “Hazel asked around until he could find me a good hairdresser. She’s been showing me how to style it myself, but this is my favorite. I wanted to show you.”

“That sounds complicated. I just chop mine off when it gets too long.”

“And then add twenty pounds of goop until you think it’s artfully styled to look like you just rolled out of bed,” she added. “I lived with you for a year, Mercury Black, you can’t hide your grooming habits from me.”

“Oh, whatever, at least I never wore stupid pigtails.”

“Don’t lie to me, I’ve seen your Kindergarten pictures.”

“That doesn’t count, that’s not me in those pictures.”

“No, I guess not.” She grabbed his hand, and dragged him toward the rental counter. “Come on,
you promised to take me skating. We can argue some more once I’m on wheels.”

James arrived about the time Tai was giving up on grading papers. The girls hurried off to Ruby and Nora’s room, but Tai caught James before he could head back to Qrow’s.

“Stay out here with me for awhile,” he said. “We never hang out, and also it will annoy Qrow and that’s funny.”

James considered this, and, “All right,” took the offered seat.

“Besides, I wanted to ask you something.”

“Sure.”

Tai hesitated, before, “Does Qrow spend his Fridays with you?”

James raised an eyebrow. “No, he doesn’t. He’s told me he’s got a standing arrangement and is unavailable.” He added, sheepishly, “I assume he’s going out drinking and doesn’t want to tell me. It’s not something he likes talking about.”

“Yeah, it’s a touchy subject,” Tai agreed. “But since he always goes to Junior’s and doesn’t drink around the kids, I try to leave it alone. But I ran into Roman getting groceries yesterday and he says Qrow hasn’t been by in months.”

“Torchwick,” James said, scowling. In the near year since they’d met, he had yet to have a pleasant encounter with Qrow’s so-called friend. “Why are you trusting his word, anyway?”

“Because he’s never given me a reason not to.”

“He hits on you literally every time you two see each other.”

“I didn’t say he’s not an ass, I said he’s never given me reason not to trust him. I’ve known him for a long time, and he’s always done right by us. If he says Qrow hasn’t been going to Junior’s, I believe him.”

“So… what? You think he’s found somewhere new to drink?”

“That’s what I’m worried about. Which, I know, he’s a big boy and he can take care of himself-but when I asked this morning, he dodged the question and then stormed out. It’s not just that he may be drinking somewhere besides Junior’s, he’s actively hiding something from me.”

“Ah.” Understanding dawned. “So that’s the issue.”

“Oh, don’t give me that look. I just mean if he thinks it’s something he has to hide from me- James, he’s not just my little brother, he’s my best friend and my roommate and the second parent to my kids. If he thinks he has to hide this from me, that says… a lot more than if he’d just tell me.”

James considered this, then folded his arms and frowned. “You know… there’s something you have in common with Glynda. It’s that the only time the words ‘little brother’ ever come out of her mouth, it’s because she thinks I’m doing something stupid and if I’d only listen to her things would be better.”

Tai leveled him with an unimpressed look. “This isn’t about me being condescending,” he said.
“You don’t know what you’re talking about, you haven’t seen what Qrow is like when the failsafes he uses aren’t in place. There’s a reason he drinks at Junior’s, there’s a reason I don’t allow alcohol in the house, there’s a reason Summer made him swear to never drink on a school night. And I’m worried because I don’t want to see him like that again. Ever. I mean, hell, James, why do you think I asked him to move in with me?”

James opened his mouth to reply, to say something in Qrow’s favor, and then closed it again. A thought was occurring to him, something he’d never considered before. He stood.

“I’m… going to go see Qrow,” he said carefully. “I’ll ask him about Junior’s.”

“You don’t have to-” Tai began, but James was already passing through the kitchen, so he sighed and shook his head. “All right, sure.”

Qrow had dozed off again by the time James tapped on his door, but he was expecting him so he just called a muffled entry without bothering to get up. When James slipped into the room, he raised his arms and gave James a hopeful look.

“There’s the man of the hour,” he said. “Come here, I miss you.”

“You just saw me yesterday,” James chided him, but he wasn’t going to argue with an invitation like that, and stepped out of his shoes before settling down beside Qrow, letting the other tuck the light blanket around them both before plastering himself to James’ front.

“Yesterday was too long ago,” Qrow said, once he’d got comfortable. “I wanted to see you again sooner.”

“As I understand it, you wouldn’t have been able to anyway,” James said. “Tai says you didn’t come home last night.”

James could feel all the comfortable relaxation fall out of Qrow when he stiffened at the words.

“Oh. So Tai tattled on me.”

“Back off, all right?”

“Where do you go on Friday nights?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Qrow said. “It’s not important.”

“Well he doesn’t have to be.” Qrow rolled over and away, swinging his legs onto the floor and sitting up. There was tension in his shoulders where he hunched over; James regretted the loss of their cosy little nest so quickly, but as long as he’d started-

“Why are you so secretive about it?”

“Because it’s my business and everyone’s in it.” He pushed to his feet and fumed over to the door, making an irritable noise when James followed. He rounded on him as he reached the living room.

“I’m not going to stay in your room without you,” James pointed out. “And I thought we were talking.”
“We were talking. Now I’m walking away. Go gossip with Tai if you wanna talk to someone. I’m going for a drive.”

“Qrow-” But Qrow was already crossing the room to the front door. James sighed and rolled his eyes. “All right, I’ll see you later, I guess.”

Qrow’s only response before slamming the door was a disbelieving ‘tch’, and then he was gone. James looked around the room awkwardly and his gaze landed on Tai, still sitting on the couch where he’d left him, watching him with amusement.

“Get any answers?” he asked, as James dropped irritably into the chair and shot him an annoyed look.

“I’m not saying you’re right,” he said. “But now I’m worried, too.”

-/-

Chapter End Notes

I hope none of y'all are expecting an explanation about Qrow any time soon, I'm playing the long game with that reveal.
Qrow has a squabble with Roman.

Hayley, during the first installment: Write more Torchwick.
Me: Well, if you insist.
(As if I needed the encouragement.)

This is the end of Act I! Act II will be a bit of a wait; I don't know yet if I mean to write the whole thing before I start posting but I would like to get a few chapters under my belt before I do. If I can keep my current writing pace up it shouldn't be too long a way, though. We'll see what happens.

Qrow wasn’t really sure where he was heading. The confrontation from first Tai and then James had roused the creature in the back of his mind, and it leered over his shoulder while he drove. He ignored it best he could, but it was ever present and the dark thoughts accompanying did little to help his resolve.

After driving for awhile he eventually ended up near Simple Wok. He pulled his old pickup into the nearest available spot and walked down the street toward the noodle stand, but just as he began to cross the street that creature raised its head, and he spun on his heel and instead turned toward the Crow Bar just behind him. As he reached for the door, it opened, the bell jingling merrily, and a hand pressed into his chest, pushing him back until his knees collided with a car parked in front of it.

"Torchwick?" he said, incredulous. "The hell, man."

Torchwick it was. He let go of Qrow once they were stopped, and folded his arms over his chest with a frown.

"I could ask you the same thing," he said. "I was just looking for you, in fact. And since I know you wouldn’t want to disappoint your family with your first relapse in, oh, nine months? I thought I’d do what I always do, and intervene."

"Oh, whatever," Qrow said. The creature in his mind purred- it loved confrontation. “Spare me your martyr complex- just who asked you to get involved, anyway? It’s none of your business.”

“No? Well, maybe not, but that hasn’t really stopped me before, now has it? I’ve always been one
to put my nose where it doesn’t belong. Anyway, I know where you’ve been going on Fridays and I wanted to talk to you.”

“And how would you know?”

“Because I lack the scruples necessary to not have someone spy on you when you’re being shady,” he said. “I have to say, I’m rather impressed, but I can’t imagine why you wouldn’t just tell your family about it. They would be pleased, you know, if they knew.”

Qrow scowled. “I really don’t remember asking your advice on this.”

“You really should have.” Torchwick picked idly at a piece of dust on his coat, not looking up at Qrow. “I would have been more than happy to cover for you to anyone who asked, if you’d bothered to let me in. And for that matter, I would have been pleased to know, too.”

Qrow bristled. He was already feeling irritable from his lack of sleep, and his now third confrontation on the matter of his goings on. He jabbed a finger at Roman accusingly. “Why would I tell you? It’s no more your business than theirs. You’re not my friend, you’re just my bartender.”

The hurt that flashed across Torchwick’s face at this had to be imagined, because at the barest hint it had already been replaced by irritation, and then, before Qrow quite knew what was happening, a fist had collided with his jaw and he found himself sprawling on the pavement, Torchwick looming over him.

“I’ve spent eight years taking care of your sorry ass,” he spat. “Eight years! Do you think I do that for every drunk bastard draped across my bar? But if we’re not friends, then fine. Next time I’ll leave you passed out in the gutter. It’d be more than you’ll deserve anyway.”

Qrow sat up, rubbing his jaw in astonishment. “Jesus,” he said. “I’m sorry, Torch.”

“As well you should be,” Torchwick said, folding his arms and watching impassively as Qrow hauled himself to his feet. He rubbed his jaw again.

“Since when can you throw a punch?”

Torchwick snorted. “I’ve been working behind a bar since I was sixteen. Do you think I’d have survived this long if I couldn’t take care of myself?”

“Oh.”

Silence descended. After a few breaths, Torchwick rolled his eyes.

“All right, come on. Let’s get some lunch and you can tell me about it. If nothing else it’ll be a novelty not to wait on you while you fill me in on all the hot gossip.”

“You’re a real piece of work, Torch,” Qrow said, earning himself another derisive snort as the two began to make their way across the street.

“I’d say I’m in good company then.”

-/-

“So what’s going on with Weiss?” Tai asked, after the subject of Qrow’s doings had been quietly agreed to not be talked of. “Something must be up, if you’re grabbing her on short notice.”

“Oh, that.” James pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed. “Her mother is kicking her father out,
apparently. Going by what Winter said this morning, I thought it might be a good idea if neither of the girls were around the house today.”

“What about the little one?” Tai asked.

“I don’t know.” James considered. “He’s about Oscar’s age, right?”

“I think so. Think it’s worth giving Oz a call?”

“Honestly I’d be surprised if he didn’t already know.”

Tai laughed. “You’re starting to sound like the kids.”

“Yes, well. He definitely gives off the impression of omniscience. I can see how the kids would draw that conclusion.”

“I’ll give him a call,” Tai said, getting up to seek out his phone. “If only to find out if he already knows.”

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Ozpin was, at the time Tai called, engaged in a high-stakes battle of wills with a lady of his long acquaintance. The two stared each other down across the table, the tension of their choice in move weighing both of them down. A bead of sweat trickled down Ozpin’s brow; it was too much to hope that his companion failed to notice it.

“Any… threes?” Ozpin said finally.

She smirked. “Go fish, dear Ozpin.”

“Damn,” he said, drawing a card from the shrinking pile, and was interrupted from the subsequent contemplation of his draw by the tinny sound of Fully Clothed Gentlemen’s *A Full Seven Days* being played on a cell phone speaker. “A moment, my dear.” He touched the speaker on the phone. “Ozpin.”

“Hey, Oz,” came Tai’s voice.

“Taiyang, what a pleasure,” Ozpin said, giving his lady friend a quieting look when she made to speak. “Is there anything wrong, or is this a pleasure call?”

“The first, I’m afraid. Is Oscar good friends with Whitley Schnee, do you know?”

“Judging by the black eye Oscar gave the boy last week I’d say they’re either bosom buddies or sworn enemies,” Ozpin said. “It’s very hard to tell at that age.”

“Ah. That might make this difficult.” There was a pause, while Tai spoke to someone off to one side, and went on, “Jacques and Whitney are fighting and it seems like the kids should probably be out of the house today. We’ve got Winter and Weiss accounted for but Oscar’s the only kid we know of Whitley’s age.”

“I catch your meaning,” Ozpin assured him. “All right, I’ll see what I can arrange. I’m sure Oscar won’t mind rallying around for a fellow boy in need, even if they are sworn enemies.”

“Thanks, Oz.”

He hung up, and Ozpin turned his attention back to his lady friend, who was watching him
carefully. It was she who broke the silence.

“Are Oscar and this young man friends?”

“Oh, no, my dear, they loathe each other, but I’ve been working at getting Whitney away from Jacques for some time and I’m not going to let a bit of schoolboy rivalry stand in the way of that. The children will just have to make the best of it for a few hours. Best if you aren’t here, though,” he added. “I don’t care for the rumors that might spring up otherwise.”

“Very well,” she said, though obviously bitter about the dismissal. “We can finish our game at another time, then, since your charges are clearly so much more important to you than I am.”

“Now, Salem,” he said reassuringly. “You already know I like them better than you, there’s no reason to be passive aggressive about it.”

-/-

Qrow and Roman didn’t speak again until Shopkeep had set their food in front of him. Qrow nodded his thanks and grabbed his chopsticks, and, “So what in the world was Junior doing putting a sixteen year old kid behind the bar, anyway?”

“I didn’t leave him much choice,” Roman said. “I owed him a debt of gratitude and at the time I was too proud not to repay it. He decided putting me behind the bar was preferable to my other offer.”

Qrow turned a sharp look on him at that, squinting a little, and then, “Jesus, Torch, what the hell happened to you?”

“That’s none of your business, baby bird. Suffice to say it worked out in the end.”

“So, what, you can keep secrets but I have to spill my business to everyone?”

“I didn’t say you had to spill them, I said you were stupid not to. There’s a difference there.” He turned to Qrow. “Why are you keeping it secret, anyway?”

Qrow shrugged. “Just don’t wanna get their hopes up.”

Roman rolled his eyes at this, and said, around the noodles halfway into his mouth, “You’re even more stupid than I thought, then.”

“Thanks a lot.”

“Oh, spare me. Do you really think you could possibly disappoint them like this? Besides,” he added, “You need a support network for something like this. Can’t be done alone, trust me, I know.”

“I guess you would, wouldn’t you?” Qrow shook his head. “It doesn’t matter. I can’t tell them.”

“Well, more fool you, then. Still, you’re a big boy, you can make your own mistakes.”

For awhile, there was little more conversation; it was, again, Qrow who broke the silence.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I kind of abandoned you for awhile.”

“I can certainly understand why you haven’t been coming around anymore. And I’m proud of you! This would have been since, what, February?”
“January. I didn’t stop coming to Junior’s straightaway.”

“That means you were keeping this from me for a whole month! How rude!”

“Yeah, well,” Qrow waved his hands around vaguely. “Didn’t wanna disappoint you, either.”

“Oh, it’s no skin off my teeth either way.”

“Tch, *spare me*.” Qrow rolled his eyes. “Ten minutes ago you punched me for saying we weren’t friends, you can’t affect an uncaring air *now*. Besides, you’re right, you’ve spent the past, what, eight years? taking care of me. That’s way above and beyond just being a good bartender.”

“What can I say, I’m a slut for a hopeless cause.”

“You’re a slut for any man with a pretty face.”

“One wonders how I got so attached to you then.”

“Hey!” Qrow looked indignant. “I am a TEN. Thank you.”

Emerald, it turned out, was not a *particularly* good skater; Mercury was somewhat better, but years out of practice. When Emerald struggled to keep her feet under her, he held her hands and pulled her around the rink, laughing every time she let go and wobbled on her own.

“It didn’t look this hard when I was watching everyone else,” she said.

“Eh, you just need practice. Not like we’ve had much opportunity for any of *that* but Uncle Qrow used to take me out to do stuff like this all the time.”

“Well maybe I can start learning now. Hazel said he doesn’t mind me going and doing things, and he has *money*, Mercury- I’m not just some source of income for him, he actually... *wants* to do nice things for me. Or, so he says,” she added, when Mercury’s face got more and more unimpressed with every word.

“You’re too trusting,” he sneered. “When are you gonna learn, nobody gives a shit about kids like us?”

“It sounds like your Uncle Qrow did,” she protested. “Everything you’ve told me about him, it sounds like he really took care of you. Maybe- maybe Hazel can be like that for me.”

“Yeah, your precious Hazel might *seem* great, but the first time taking care of you turns out to be an inconvenience-“ He sighed. “*Look*, it’s not like- I mean, obviously people *do* care. They just don’t care *enough*. We’re not *their* kids, they don’t have any obligation to us, so they do what they have to and when you need more than that it’s too much. We’re better off on our own. At least on our own we don’t have to worry about anyone else.”

“Maybe.”

She let go of his hands and rolled unsteadily along till she reached the edge of the rink, then used it to guide herself over to one of the entries and sat down. When he followed suit and sat beside her, she leaned over and rested her head on his shoulder, surprised when he actually allowed this.

“Have you heard from Cinder?” she asked quietly, already knowing the answer and already guessing what his response would be. She was not disappointed; after only a brief pause, he’d
shoved her off of him and stood, rolling away a few feet.

“Cinder’s gone,” he said, not turning to look at her. She could just see the edge of his profile, the deep sneer tightening his expression when he added, “And good riddance, too.”

-/-

Qrow got home to find the girls sprawled around the living room watching Cats and Concatenations. He stood for a moment to watch with them, taking the chance to study Weiss minutely in his periphery. She didn’t seem particularly upset; she was sat on the couch braiding Yang’s hair, paying little attention to the social machinations being worked on screen.

“You know, he was my first crush,” Qrow said, as Mr. Parsley appeared.

“Really?” Ruby asked, delighted by the juicy gossip. “But he’s such a grump!”

“I mean, he gets better. Besides, I was not much younger than you, I only cared about a pretty face on a well-put-together man. Speaking of which,” he added, when James poked his head into the living room. “You kids enjoy your show. In here, Jimmity-jams.”

He pushed James back into the kitchen, relieved when Tai was in there as well, but James stopped short as soon as they were past the threshold and brought a hand up to touch Qrow’s jaw.

“What happened?”

“Torchwick decked me,” he said, and added, when James looked irritable, “I had it coming, I swear.”

“How could you have possibly had this coming?”

“Cause I was being an ass and needed some sense knocked into me.” He took James’ hand in his own and brought it around to press a kiss to the knuckles, then turned to encompass Tai in what he had to say. “And, I was being an ass to both of you, too. I’m sorry.”

“Of course, but Qrow, what happened? What’s going on?” Tai looked at a loss, no less so when Qrow gave him a weak smile.

“I can’t tell you yet,” he said. “I’m not- I’m not ready yet. You’ll know eventually. Just, right now, I need you to trust me.” He hung his head. “I know I haven’t exactly done anything to deserve it, but believe me, nothing I’m doing is going to put this family in danger.”

“Qrow, you ass,” Tai said, standing and moving over so he could slug Qrow in the shoulder. “We’re not worried about you hurting this family, we’re worried about you hurting yourself. But, well.” He glanced uncomfortably at James. “I trust you. Whatever you’ve got going on, if you don’t want me to know about it, it’s your decision. I won’t push you to tell me until you’re ready. I might die of curiosity,” he teased, earning a small smile, “But I won’t push.”

“Heh. Thanks, Tai.”

The three of them moved over to the table to sit down, and Tai added, “And if James tries to push you let me know and I’ll deck him.”

“I’d hope that wouldn’t be necessary,” James said.

“Hey, let me have this. I need to at least pretend I’m doing something to protect his honor.” He
winked, and, “He is my little brother, after all.”

“I am only ten months younger than you, asshole!” Qrow protested, jabbing his finger accusingly at Tai. “There’s a whole two months out of the year where we’re the same age!”

-/-

By the time Winter and Mercury returned, James had already brought the girls home. Weiss and Penny were sitting in the kitchen doing homework (well, they had their homework out in front of them, anyway) while James made dinner, occasionally joining in their conversation or reminding them that hadn’t they intended to do their homework right now?

Mercury stood in the doorway for a few minutes, watching as Penny launched herself at Winter for a hug before dragging her over to sit with them, then turned and stalked upstairs without a word.

James watched him go thoughtfully, listening to the heavy footsteps and then the slam of his door, the tell-tale thump of him flinging himself onto his bed. He frowned, and then wiped the expression away before turning back to the girls, to Winter.

“So did you kids have fun at the rink today?”

-/-

Mercury didn’t come down to dinner, citing a lack of hunger, so once they’d finished eating, he left the girls to clean up and mixed a glass of Ovaltine, then headed upstairs.

When he knocked on Mercury’s door, he got a muffled entry and pushed the door open to find Mercury sprawled on his bed, covers kicked halfway across the room, lights off and lamp on.

“Hi,” James said. “You seemed upset about something so I brought you some Ovaltine.”

Mercury didn’t sit up when James came in, but at his words he did, giving him a bemused look.

“Why?”

“Because my mother used to bring me Ovaltine when something was bothering me.”

“And I guess that makes everything better, huh?” Mercury took the offered glass, though, staring down at it thoughtfully while James tried to decide whether he should go or not.

“The Ovaltine is just a comfort,” James explained. “And an ice breaker, in case you want to talk but need the excuse.”

“I don’t need to talk,” Mercury spat. James shrugged.

“All right, as you like. By the way, Winter told me about your friend at the rink-”

Mercury glowered. “Is every goddamn person going to go tattling to you every time I do anything?”


“...what did Winter tell you?”

“She told me that you ran into a friend of yours at the rink. I meant to tell you that if you wanted to invite her over, you would be welcome to. Was there something else?”
Mercury squinted at him a moment, and, “No, I just… assumed you’d be the sort of guy that only wants me hanging out with people you’ve met.”

“Ah.” James smiled. “Not entirely the case. I would like to meet the people you’re going to be going out with, but I do not require you to introduce me to everyone you know before you hang out with them.”

“Why do you gotta meet ‘em at all?”

“Because I’m trusting these people with you, and I’d like to assure myself that they can be trusted.”

“I can take care of myself, you know.”

“I’m sure you can, but at present moment taking care of you is my job, not yours. I would appreciate if you let me do it.”

This garnered more close scrutiny, and then Mercury snorted. He set his half-drunk Ovaltine aside and lay back down, turning so his back was to James in a clear dismissal.

“Night, General.”

James looked as if he wanted to say more, but then shook his head. “Good night, Mercury. Sleep sweet.”

-/-

Mercury didn’t go to sleep immediately. Instead he lay there staring at the wall, and then the ceiling, and then for a change of pace the floor. His legs itched; he considered detaching the prosthetics, and then thought better of it, and didn’t. His arm fell asleep where he lay on it, and he spent several moments shaking it to restore circulation.

He checked his phone. It wasn’t late at all.

He drunk the rest of his Ovaltine. It had gotten warm, and wasn’t as nice.

He listened to the house, to the sounds of Penny chattering loudly to Weiss and Winter down below, to James’ comfortable voice when he occasionally joined the conversation. To Weiss’ laughter, and Winter’s surprised shriek at one point.

Eventually he listened to the front door open and close, and then fifteen minutes later, it opened and closed again, and he listened to the deadbolt click into place, and the sound of footsteps on the stairs as James and Penny ascended to their rooms.

He listened to James telling Penny goodnight, their low voices carrying across the hallway, the words unintelligible but the comfort in them tangible. He rolled over again and curled in on himself, wishing his covers were still on his bed so he could burrow into them.

There was, after several long minutes of quiet, a tapping on the door. Mercury said nothing, closing his eyes and feigning sleep when the door was carefully nudged open.

He waited. Listened. Heard footsteps approaching- waited-

-his blankets were laid gently over him; his lamp clicked off. His phone, on the floor where it had fallen, was picked up and placed carefully on the bedside table with a faint ‘thnk’. The empty glass
was retrieved; it scraped slightly on the wood when it was picked up. There was a brief pause, and then the footsteps moved away, the door closed quietly.

Mercury opened his eyes, stared at the blackness that was his wall. Listened to James move down the hallway to his own room, close his own door, and then the house was quiet.

-/-

End Act 1

-/-

Chapter End Notes

Me, writing this: Gosh Mercury's hearing sure is good.
Me:
Me:
Me:
Me: ...oh.

(My narration in no way captures how utterly catty the pleasantness between Oz and Salem is here. Have you ever seen a soap opera where two society ladies were constantly sniping at each other but, like, in a civil way? It's like that.)
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Time skip shenanigans.

Chapter Notes

This is the beginning of Act II!

As I said on Tumblr, the reason for the wait was so that I could get the whole thing written before posting, in part so that I could put all of the content warnings for Act II in one single author's note, rather than a new one every chapter. So, content warnings for act ii include:

-References to child abuse and neglect, bullying, ableism, racism, transphobia, alcoholism, and suicidal ideation, as well as multiple panic attacks and one brief nsfw scene late in the arc. These warnings range from single mentions to ongoing discussions, but all of these, apart from the nsfw scene, are references to past occurrences, rather than anything that happens on screen.
-If you would like specific warnings before any of these things, feel free to ask me here, on Tumblr @grifalinas, or on Dreamwidth @wyomingsmustache.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-/-

The month that followed passed in much the same way. Mercury skipped school when he felt he could get away with it, but tried not to do it so much that James would be forced to “deal with it” in some way.

(“He’d probably just ground me,” Mercury said, when discussing this with Emerald. “But what good would that do? It’s not like he can enforce it.”

“He might make you do work,” Emerald suggested. “I lived with a family once who used housework as a punishment.”

“He already makes me do housework,” Mercury reminded her. “I’ve washed so many dishes since I got here.”

“Oh you poor thing,” Emerald teased. “Your fingers are going to get all wrinkly and then you’ll have to replace those, too.”

“Ha! I’d be more machine than man, then.”

“I think the fractions would still be in your favor. Legs and fingers? That’s two fifths at best.”)

Not long after he’d arrived, Penny came to him with her newly-purchased Dungeons Dungeons and
More Dungeons handbook and asked if he wanted to come play with her and her friends sometime. He’d refused point-blank, but that didn’t discourage her from telling him all about her own adventures in the world of Remnant, the fantasy world their sessions took place in. They had yet to get a regular table-master, but by the sounds of it they were enjoying the huge variety in storytelling methods that came from changing tms every time they played.

(“You wanna be their tm don’t you?” Emerald asked, knowing smile dripping from her voice when he told her about it.

“Shut up, of course I don’t. They’re a bunch of dumb kids, who cares about their dumb game?”

“You should offer. I bet they’d love you.”

“They’d probably have nightmares if I was their tm.”

“That sounds like motive enough for you, too, for that matter.”)

Mercury went out with Winter twice more, once to see a movie they’d discovered they were both looking forward to, once to Transpired so he could get a new binder, since his old one was wearing out too much. The latter he’d only gotten her involved with because she had a car and he didn’t want to ask James.

Neither of these events her other friends had been invited to join them for, but Mercury didn’t mind. He didn’t exactly like her friends very much, for all that he grudgingly admitted Vernal was pretty cool.

(“How in the world did you make friends with her?” he asked. “I mean, she’s a cunt but she’s also cool? And you’re? ...you?”

Winter gave him a stony look, and, “We got into a fight in gym her first day of school last spring. We’ve been friends ever since.”

Mercury considered this, and nodded. “That checks out. Did you win?”


True to his word, James took Mercury to see his own physician, who gave him a full physical along with refitting his legs. Mercury stayed quiet for the whole appointment, only speaking when asked a question and only giving the shortest answers he could when he did. Dr. Thorne was patient with him, but he could tell by the end that she was glad to be done with him.

Just before she told him he could get up, he broke his vow of silence, not quite planning to.

“Are you really Dr. Ironwood’s physician?”

“Hm?” She turned back to him, startled. “Yes, I am. Why?”

“For awhile?”

“Nearly from the beginning.”

“Is that why he picked you for me?”

She smiled at him, a little more knowing now. “Ah. Yes, that’s why. He felt you might trust me with your body more willingly if he knew he trusted me with his.”
“Are you sure? Not just… you know, cause it was convenient?”

She laughed. “Yes, I’m sure. We spoke about the matter when he made the appointment.”

Mercury said nothing more after that, just frowned and glared at the floor while she released him. He said nothing more on the ride home, either, answering James’ questions with monosyllabic responses until he got the hint and said nothing more.

(“Why are you so upset?” Emerald asked him on the phone later. “It sounds like he was really putting in the effort.”)

“Yes, it does,” he spat. “What’s his game? What’s he playing at?”

“Taking care of you, maybe?”

“You’re not stupid, Emerald, don’t act like it.”

“I think he just wants you to know you can trust him.”

“I know!” He tossed his free hand in the air and huffed. “So why?”)

His new legs came less than a week later. He locked himself in his room to change them over, and then had to sit back down immediately when he stood up. Dr. Thorne had said they were going to be longer than the old ones, to account for the growth on the rest of his body, but he wasn’t prepared for how tall he was now.

He set one of the old ones against the new ones, and let out a low whistle. He’d put on a full four inches of height since his last fitting, by Dr. Thorne’s calculations. No wonder James had been so insistent that he needed to be refitted.

...He was probably as tall as Emerald, now. That thought alone had him grinning, and rather than call her, he flung his door open and dashed down the hall to James’ workroom. He burst in without knocking, startling James enough that he nearly put a screwdriver through his hand in surprise. Mercury ignored his stunned look, and hung from the doorjamb when he said, half-breathless,

“Can I invite Emerald over for dinner?”

James’ eyebrows went up, and he studied Mercury over the tops of his glasses for a moment before smiling.

“Of course. Any requests?”

“Burgers are fine!” Mercury called, running back down the hall to retrieve his phone, tripping over his own feet in his excitement.

-/-

Later, while Mercury tried to decide on what to wear to dinner, Penny sat on the end of his bed and swung her feet lightly while she offered her opinions.

“Is Emerald your girlfriend?” she asked. Mercury half-spun from glowering at all of his pants, now too short for him, and glowered at Penny instead.

“Don’t be stupid, of course she’s not.”

“Do you want her to be?” Penny asked, giving him a shrewd, knowing look that he didn’t like one
bit.

He huffed. “That kid that was here yesterday- Son Goku, or whatever. Is he your boyfriend?”

“No.” Penny giggled, and added, “But I would not mind if he was.”

Mercury wrinkled his nose. “Ugh. You’re eleven.”

“So?”

He rolled his eyes, and turned back to his closet. It wasn’t exactly packed as it was, and he was wondering if he’d have to wear shorts to dinner.

“Anyway, Emerald’s just my friend. My best friend. Just cause she’s a girl and I’m a boy doesn’t mean there has to be anything romantic there. Girls and boys can be friends, come on, squirt, we’re living in the twenty-first century. Get with the program.”

“I only asked because you are making a very big effort to look nice for her,” Penny said. “Father does this sometimes before he goes out with Mr. Qrow, but he usually decides on whichever shirt is too small for him.” She giggled again. “He likes that Mr. Qrow stares at his arms when he does that.”

Mercury let out a startled bark of laughter at that. “What do you know about that?”

“It is not a big secret. If it was, they would not say it when I am within earshot.” She added, mischievously, “Though they usually do not realize I am paying attention when they say these things.”

This got her a shrewd look, almost approving, and a smirk. “I may have miscalculated you, squirt.”

“Many people do,” Penny said sagely. “It is because of the way I speak, and how easily I get excited, and because I am young. Many people assume this means that I am simple-minded. But Father says that is more their loss, and they will learn on their own not to underestimate me.”

“You speak fine,” Mercury said, turning back to his clothes, and added, “So, I have a problem.”

“What is wrong?”

“...none of my pants are long enough anymore.”

-/-

When Emerald arrived, escorted by a frankly enormous man he could only assume was Hazel, Mercury threw the door open before she could even knock. She stared at him in surprise, then narrowed her eyes at him.

“All right, since when are we the same height?” she demanded.

“Since I had a growth spurt this morning,” he said, holding one leg up for her inspection and feeling suddenly glad he’d been forced to go with the shorts.

Her expression swapped from suspicious to pleased. “Oh! Your new legs came in!”

“Yep! Turns out I should have been getting a refit every six months to accommodate for my growth, but ha ha, who cared about that, right?”
“It sounds like good old General Hardass did,” she pointed out. “Oh, this is Hazel.” She gestured at the enormous man standing behind her, arms folded, watching them with some small amusement. “He wanted to meet you.”

“Sup.”

This got him a polite nod, and then Hazel turned to Emerald. “I’ll be back to pick you up at eight. If you’d like to leave sooner, just call.”

“Okay! Thanks for the ride.”

She waved while he walked back to his van, and then followed Mercury into the house, looking around with wide eyes.

“Wow,” she said, stopping in the entry. “This place is huge.”

“Tell me about it,” he agreed. “Me and Penny and the General have our own rooms and he has a separate workroom and there’s still a spare bedroom downstairs.”

“Damn. That’s a lot of rooms for just three people. This place is crawling with space.”

“It’s definitely not crowded, that’s for sure.” He led her up the stairs, and down the hall to his own room. “This one’s mine. Penny’s across the hall and the two at the end are the General.”

Inside, she stood in the middle of the room and looked around with wide eyes.

“Wow,” she said finally. “This room is bigger than the one we were sharing between us.”

“Right?” He laughed, a little incredulously, and flopped onto his bed. “I’ve never lived anywhere this big.”

“It seems really nice.” She sat beside him, and drew one knee up to her. “So why are you always complaining about it?”

“Are you kidding?” He laughed again. “Emerald, this place is fantastic! And every day it seems better and better- how long until the universe comes along to demand the price of all this? And how big is that price tag gonna be?” He mirrored her motion and drew both legs up to hug them. “I don’t know if I can afford it when it does.”

“Oh, Mercury,” she began, but was interrupted by James appearing at the door. Her mouth fell open, and then snapped hastily closed, accompanied by an eyeroll from Mercury.

“Sorry to interrupt, but were you planning to introduce me to your friend? Or let me know she’d arrived?”

“Oh, yeah, that.” Mercury shrugged. “Emerald, Dr. Ironwood.”

He gestured between them, and seemed to think this was introduction enough. After a moment, James gave him an indulgent smile and shook his head.

“All right, fair enough. It’s nice to meet you, Emerald. I’ll have dinner ready in about fifteen minutes. We’re having hamburgers and crinkle fries, unless you have any other requests?”

“No, that sounds fine, thank you.”

She said nothing more, and both teens sat staring blankly at James until he got the point and
walked out, shaking his head again. Emerald turned back to Mercury.

“He seems nice.”

Mercury side-eyed her suspiciously, and, “Your guy is huge .”

“Oh my gods , right? My first week I was terrified to piss him off, but he’s pretty chill actually.”

“You sure?”

“As long as I stay out of the shed when he’s working out, he’s fine.” There was more squinting, so she punched his arm. “I did not test this, it’s what I was told.”

/-/

He took her downstairs for dinner not too long after that, and found Penny in the dining room setting the table for them.

“So you’re Penny,” Emerald said, when they’d been introduced. “You are… ridiculously cute.”

Penny beamed. “Thank you!”

“I’m not sure that was a compliment.”

“That is okay. I like being cute, so I will take it as one.”

“All right, more power to you, I guess.”

She exchanged a look with Mercury, while Penny dashed over to play hostess, and pulled a chair out.

“You may sit here. It is right next to Mercury and right across from me, so we may talk to you freely during dinner.”

“Can’t I talk to your dad, too?” Emerald asked, taking the offered seat. “Or is that not good manners or something since he’s not my immediate neighbor?”

“No, you may talk to him as much as you like,” Penny assured her, pulling out Mercury’s chair as well. “If we were a large party it would be rude, but since there are only four of us there is no need for such ceremony.”

“Penny’s been reading Cats and Concatenations,” Mercury said, by way of explanation, when Emerald looked confused. “So she’s got all these ideas about polite society. I find it best to just ignore her and do what I want.”

“Oh, I see.” Emerald gave her an amused look. “Well, I don’t care about polite society. So I’ll talk to who I want to.”

“As you like,” Penny said cheerily, and dashed off to the kitchen to help James bring in the food. “It is just for fun, anyway.”

/-/

Over dinner, Penny dominated the conversation, the two teenagers only wanting to talk to each other but not willing to do so with an audience. She started off talking about Cats and Concatenations- she was reading it alongside her friends, and had gotten so delighted with the
current place that she’d read a few pages ahead and was now waiting anxiously for her friends to catch up.

“See, Em?” Mercury said suddenly, when Penny brought up the changes happening in Mr. Parsley. “In a romance novel, it’s the girl’s job to fix the guy. Even the ultimate romance novel agrees with me.”

“Oh, that is not true at all!” Penny objected. “Mr. Parsley changed on his own, because he wanted to be worthy of his love, even if she didn’t reciprocate. She barely had anything to do with it at all.”

“Except the part where she ripped him to shreds for being a dick,” Emerald pointed out, giving Mercury her smuggest look. “I would be happy to rip you to shreds for being a dick, if that’s what you’re getting at.”

“Language, please,” James said. “And Penny is right, even though Mr. Parsley’s changes were prompted by Lisa’s actions, the burden of checking his behavior was never placed on her shoulders.”

“Has everyone read this dumb book?” Mercury asked, looking between them all. “Seriously? Even you, General?”

James laughed. “I haven’t read it since college, but yes, I do know the story quite well. Mr. Parsley in the old miniseries was my first crush.”

“Oh!” Penny laughed. “That is the same thing Mr. Qrow said!”

She found this delightful, but at the mention of Qrow both James and Emerald gave Mercury a careful side-eye. It was too much to hope he wouldn’t miss it; he put his burger down angrily.

“Oh for fuck’s sake,” he said (“Language, Merc,” Emerald teased), “I’m not gonna fall into lamentations or whatever just because you mention him!” He scrubbed his hands irritably through his hair, and, “Look, I had a bad experience and I don’t want to see him, but I am perfectly capable of acknowledging his existence!”

“I’m sorry,” James said. “I didn’t mean-”

“I know what you meant! I’m just- Agh!” He pushed his chair back and stood, storming out without a backwards glance. The remaining three occupants of the table looked between each other, all wondering what to do.

After a few seconds, Emerald spoke up. “Um, sir? I know you meant well but…”

She trailed off, but James gestured for her to go on. “Please. I could use anything you’re willing to tell me.”

“He doesn’t like being coddled,” Emerald said. “And he sees anything that involves considering his needs as coddling.”

“That’s silly,” Penny said. “Father is responsible for him. He is supposed to be considering his needs.”

Emerald shrugged. “I don’t know what to tell you.”

“It’s all right, Penny,” James said. “I think I understand.”
“Do you?” Emerald asked, disbelief dripping from her tone. “I don’t think you do.”

James snorted. “I can make out enough, at least. Thank you for telling me what you did.”

She huffed, “Whatever,” and pushed her chair back to follow Mercury.

-/-

She found him out on the front steps, knees up and hunched over, glowering out at the street. She sat down next to him.

“So… not to be that guy about this, but…”

“Yeah, yeah, I fucking know, all right?”

Emerald sighed. “I miss the old days.”

“Tell me about it. Tyrian was the worst but at least he didn’t-” He gestured vaguely with one hand, not sure how to articulate his thoughts. He let his hand drop back down. "You know?"

“Yeah,” she agreed, and mirrored his pose. “And we had each other. And-”

“Don’t,” he said, cutting her off. “Just don’t, okay?”

“…okay.” She hugged her knees and leaned against him, resting her head on his shoulder and, this time, not saying something that would drive him away.

-/-

Late that night, after Emerald had gone home and the kitchen had been cleaned up and the kids had gone to bed, James was himself trying to get settled when his phone lit up. It was Qrow, so he left it ringing while he finished tucking himself in, and then grabbed it.

“Ironwood,” he said.

Qrow sucked in a breath. “I swear you do that on purpose,” he said.

“Hi, Qrow.”

“Never mind all that, what are you doing right now?”

James glanced over at the book he’d been reading lately, and, “I was just getting into bed, actually.”

“Ooh, what are you wearing?”

James could hear the eyebrow waggle in his voice, and rolled his eyes. “You know very well I sleep naked.”

“Oh, that’s not just for my sake? Wait, no, stop distracting me. I’m taking Nora out for dinner tomorrow, want to come with us?”

“I can’t, I’m taking my two clothes shopping tomorrow.”

“Yeah?”

“Mercury had a growth spurt and needs new pants.”
“How did he… all right, sure, why not.”

“Rain check?”

“Sure.” Qrow sounded disappointed, and mumbled, “Just thought the four of us could use some us time, is all.”

James was glad Qrow couldn’t see the look of absolute fondness that came over his face, because he’d surely be made fun of for it, and said, “Yeah, we really haven’t had much of that lately, have we?”

“You know what it’s like this time of year,” Qrow said weakly.

“It seems to always be that time of year,” James replied. “If it’s not one thing, it’s another. We’re busy people, Qrow. We knew this going in. But it’s still… hard,” and then, because he knew Qrow, “Don’t say it.”

“I wasn’t!” Qrow protested.

“Uh huh.”

“You were thinking it too.”

“Qrow.”

There was a long silence, and a quiet, “I miss you.”

“I miss you too,” and after a pause, “I love you.”

“...I know.”

-/-

Chapter End Notes

It doesn't really happen on screen, but it actually takes a little getting used to for Mercury not to trip over his own feet after his growth spurt.

Mercury showing off his new prosthetic: -sticks m'leggy out really far-
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

Mercury's insides are doing things he doesn't approve of.

Chapter Notes

I'm intending to keep to my "not updating till I get the next chapter written" rule, but I made y'all wait so long for the fic to start updating again that I can spare one chapter from my buffer. Anyway, enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-/-

On the playground that Monday, Penny faithfully reported the events of dinner the previous Saturday. Nora listened intently, and when Penny had done, Nora folded her arms and furrowed her brow, deep in thought.

“This isn’t going well,” she said. “How are Uncle Qrow and Mercury supposed to make up and be happy if Mercury won’t even hear Uncle Qrow mentioned?”

“Father says we must give them time,” Penny said. “Even if it takes a long time, we must not force him.”

“But it’s so dumb!” Nora protested. “Everyone would just be happier if Mercury would just get over himself! Ugh. Why’s he being so horrible?”

“I do not think he is horrible,” Penny said, frowning. “He is very angry, but I do not think he is cruel. And he is not mean to me. He teases me, but only as much as any boy might, if he were my older brother- even if he is only my pretend older brother.”

“Well I think he’s being mean!” Nora stomped her foot to make her point, and hiked her folded arms up farther. “Ozpin went through all that trouble to set this up and he’s ruining everything!” She huffed. “And our dads don’t even get to see each other much since he’s being so rotten.”

“He is not being rotten!” Penny said, stamping her own foot. “Anyway, Mr. Qrow is the one who hurt him. He should be the one making overtures.”

“But how can he, if Mercury won’t even give him the chance?” Nora’s face fell. “Penny, don’t you miss us?”

“Of course I do! Nora, I have barely seen Mr. Qrow since Mercury came to live with us, and I only see you at school and ddnmd nights. I miss our sleepovers, very much! But I want Mercury to be happy, and if seeing Mr. Qrow would make him unhappy, then he should not.”

“But… what about my happiness?”
“But you have so many things to make you happy,” Penny said slowly, trying to sort out her thoughts as she stated them. “I do not think… Mercury is happy with anything. And he is unhappy with so many things.”

This sounded more fair than Nora liked to admit, but she was not one to stay angry long, at least not at someone she loved. She flung her arms around Penny’s neck.

“Oh, Penny,” she sighed. “You’re an angel. I’m sorry I yelled at you.”

“I am sorry, too.”

“I’d say let’s never fight again, but that would be a really stupid thing to promise.”

Penny laughed. “Yes! Sisters fight often, and we are very nearly almost sisters.”

“Well we won’t even be very nearly almost if we can’t get Mercury and Uncle Qrow to get their,” and whispered, “shit,” out loud, “together.”

“Nora!”

“What?” She laughed, a little flustered. “I’m right.”

“Yes, but still.” Penny giggled nervously. “What if someone heard?”

“They’d remind me to watch my language and that would be it.” She shrugged. “This isn’t A Story About Christmas, it’s not like anyone is going to wash my mouth out with soap. Uncle Qrow isn’t like that.”

Penny found that thought delightful, but eventually the girls’ laughter tapered off, and Nora gave Penny a very sober look.

“Penny. Will you try to convince Mercury to see Uncle Qrow again? Please? For all our sakes? Even his? I think maybe it would be good for him.”

“Maybe,” Penny agreed. “But how could I convince him?”

“I don’t know. We’ll think of something, okay?”

Penny nodded. “Okay. I will do my best! For all our sakes.”

-/-

“I daresay the Halloween program will be more enjoyable for you than the Thanksgiving program was,” Ozpin said.

Qrow snorted, and sprawled back in his chair. “You practically read my mind. Kids in costume? Spooky stories? Candy? Halloween is way better than Thanksgiving.” He frowned in thought and rubbed idly at his jaw, considering his options. “And I know some pretty spooky stories…”

“Don’t get too ahead of yourself,” Ozpin told him. “The school board has given you some restrictions. They seem… reluctant… to let you go into this matter untethered.”

“Spoilsport.” Qrow folded his arms. “Why do we work for those fun police, anyway?”

“Because the education of children is our greatest desire.” He said it with a straight face, but Qrow didn’t miss the twinkle in his eyes. “That said, I have managed to secure you some loopholes that I
assure you I will delight in watching you navigate.”

“Yeah, yeah, thanks a lot.” Qrow sat up properly. “So I heard you had the youngest Schnee kid this weekend.”

“Oh, yes.” He looked amused. “Ever since their impromptu playdate several weeks ago, Oscar and young Whitley have been the closest of pals. Which of course means I spent the entire weekend separating them.”

“Ha! I’ll just bet you did.” A grin cracked Qrow’s face. “Are you sure they’re friends?”

“No, I’m not. But they enjoy themselves greatly, so who am I to stand in the way? Besides, I think it’s good for them. Oscar is a child entirely too easily pushed around, and Whitley is used to getting his way in everything.”

“Then why are they fighting?”

Ozpin’s eyes twinkled again. “Because Oscar is learning there must be a line drawn between being agreeable and being a doormat, and he is drawing that line by teaching Whitley he is not the center of the universe.”

“Ahh.”

“Qrow.” Ozpin steepled his fingers and eyed Qrow over the top of his glasses. Qrow rolled his eyes.

“Here we go. All right, what did I do?”

“You have done nothing, I’m sure.”

“You’re looking at me like I did.”

The look persisted, and Ozpin finally said, “How are the elder Schnee children doing with everything that’s happening?”

Qrow shrugged. “All right, I guess. They’re neither of them really eager to stick with either parent, one way or another. You’d have to ask Jimmy for details about Winter, she sees more of him than me, these days. Well. Everyone sees more of him than I do, these days.”

He wasn’t able to keep the bitter look off of his face, and Ozpin just looked amused.

“Your self-imposed exile getting to you?”

“I am a man of constant sorrow,” he said flatly. “I just wanna be with my man. Of course it’s getting to me.” He folded his arms, pouted. “But what else am I gonna do? The kid doesn’t wanna see me, and he takes priority.”

“What indeed.” Ozpin steepled his fingers again, and gave Qrow a knowing look. “Well, I’m sure you’ll think of something. You’re an intelligent man.”

-/-

Penny wracked her brain all day- more than once Mr. Port had to remind her to pay attention to her lessons- and by the time she boarded the bus for home, an idea was forming in her head. As soon as the bus dropped them off, she hurried to follow Mercury to his room, taking her usual place at the end of his bed to watch him while he dropped his bag and settled at his desk.
After a few minutes of silence, Mercury doodling on his desk with a black marker and Penny tapping her feet softly against the edge of the bed, he pushed his chair back and turned to her knowingly, twirling his marker idly.

“All right, squirt, out with it. What do you want?”

“Why should I want anything at all? Perhaps I only wanted to enjoy your company.”

“Yeah, sure.” He rolled his eyes. “I’m great fun to be around, everyone says so.”

“I have never cared what everyone says. I think you are fun to be around.” She kicked her feet a bit more. “In fact, I think you are so much fun to be around that I would very much like if you took me trick-or-treating for Halloween next month.”

He cracked a grin at that. “I knew you wanted something. Why me, why not your old man?”

“Oh, Father usually would take me,” she said. “But all of my classmates are going with older siblings or neighbors, and I would not want to be the only one of my friends to go with my parent.”

Mercury snorted. “Thought you didn’t care what everyone else said?”

“Well… I care a little,” she said shyly. “Will you take me trick-or-treating?”

“I don’t know. Maybe. Who else are you planning to go with? I’ve never known a kid to like trick-or-treating alone.”

“Oh! Um, last year I went with my friend Nora, and Sun, who you met, and Ren, and Ruby, who you must know.”

“Yeah, I know her.”

“Well.” She considered. “Sun will not be able to join us, because he and Jaune are going with their brothers and one of Jaune’s sisters. But I do not know about Nora, or Ren, or Ruby. And it is possible that Weiss may wish to go with me, if her sister cannot take her.”

“Jesus, you want me to take a whole party of munchkins on, don’t you?”

“We can have a very small party,” Penny assured him. “Perhaps just myself, and Nora, and Ruby?” She sent up a silent apology to Ren for leaving him out, but she was sure that he could find someone else to trick-or-treat with- maybe he could go with Jaune and Sun?

He looked unimpressed at her while he weighed the idea, and then shrugged. “All right, but only if Emerald can come with us. I’m not wrangling a bunch of toddlers on my own.”

Penny brightened at that. She had liked Emerald. “Oh, of course! So you will come with us?”

“Yeah, yeah, all right. It’s not like I have anything better to do.”

She bounced excitedly. “Thank you, thank you! I will go call Nora and Ruby right away, and ask if they like the idea!” She hopped up, and without warning flung her arms around Mercury, who froze at the sudden contact. “I do not care what anyone else believes, I think you are the very best boy that there ever was!”

And dashed off, leaving Mercury frozen in place at his desk for several minutes after she had gone.

-/-
It was Tai who answered the phone, but when Penny begged him to get Nora and Ruby he conceded easily enough and took them the phone. They were in their room, and they shooed him away before closing the door and putting on the speaker so they could both hear.

“What’s up, Penny?” Ruby asked. “Dad said you said it was important.”

“It is very important! What are your plans for Halloween?”

“Penny, it’s September.”

“Only for another few days! Listen, I have asked if Mercury will take us trick-or-treating, and he has agreed, if he can bring his friend Emerald, who I like very much so I do not mind very much at all.”

Ruby was confused, but Nora lit up immediately. “That’s perfect!”

“But he will only take a small group, so it must be the three of us only.”

Just as quickly as she lit up, Nora faded. “But what about Ren? We always go trick-or-treating together!”

“I know! I am very sorry, Nora, it was all I could think of! Maybe… he will not mind if we ask very, very nicely?”

“Um,” Ruby said, looking away shyly. “If Ren wants to go, he can take my place. Um.”

“What?” Nora looked even more put out. “But why?”

“Well I don’t think Mercury would want to see me very much, but also, um.” She looked ashamed, a little. “Um, Weiss said she would see if her sister would take me with them. And I wasn’t going to say anything but then… I mean, if Mercury will only take three people then… you know… And this way you can go with Ren!”

It was probably not physically possible for Nora to look any more crestfallen than already, but she was making a fair attempt at it. “What? But…” She groaned and flopped back. “Everyone’s splitting up. Oh, that Mercury! He’s ruining everything! Again!”

“It is not his fault, Nora,” Penny said. “I do not think it would be fair to ask him to be responsible for so many children at once anyway.”

“But I want to go with Ruby,” she said. “And I want to go with Ren!”

“Well,” Penny said slowly. “If you would like to go with them, that is alright. I will ask… someone else…”

“Penny-” Ruby grabbed for the phone, but Penny went on.

“I am sorry to have upset you. I will leave you alone now.”

“Wait, Penny-”

But she’d already hung up. Ruby and Nora exchanged a look. It was Ruby who spoke first.

“What was that all about?”

“Oh, geez.” Nora rolled over so she was sprawled facedown. “I really hecked it up, didn’t I?”
Mercury called Emerald to tell her Penny’s invitation for Halloween, which she took with all the amusement and mockery he was expecting from her.

After he’d assured her he wasn’t going soft and then let her go, he got up to go to the bathroom and stopped short on his way past Penny’s room when he heard her crying. Her door was ajar; he poked his head into the room to find her lying on her bed, curled around one pillow.

Awkwardness clenched at him. He leaned on the door, more casually than he felt, and, “You know I don’t think I’ve ever seen you unhappy in all the time I’ve known you. What’s with the waterworks, squirt? Your favorite show get canceled or something?”

Penny sat up, and scrubbed her tears away with one corner of her blankets. “My friends are upset,” she said.

“Oh, is that all.” He folded his arms. “What’s it to you?”

“They are my friends. And anyway, it is my fault. I should have asked them what they wanted to do for Halloween before I asked you, and I did not.”

“That’s what this is about?”

Penny nodded, sniffling. “Ruby wants to go trick-or-treating with Weiss, and Nora wants to go with both Ruby and Ren, and she cannot go with both of them if they go with me. But if Nora and Ren go with Weiss and Ruby, then there is no one to go with me, because Sun and Jaune are already going with their brothers.”

“I sure wish I had your problems. Imagine having so many people who like you that you’re not sure which ones to hang out with first?”

Penny sniffled again, and curled around her pillow once more, burying her face in it and saying in a small voice, “Okay, Mercury.”

Something unfamiliar and uncomfortable clenched inside of Mercury, something he wasn’t quite sure what to do with.

“Well,” he began, and realized he wasn’t sure where he was going from there. He tried again. “It’s not really any skin off my teeth who goes- I just don’t want a whole gaggle. So just let me know which munchkins I’m escorting.”

This didn’t seem right either. He decided retreat was probably best, and fled.

Twenty minutes later, Penny was woken from a light doze by the sound of her bedroom door closing. When she looked around in confusion, her room was empty, but there was a glass of Ovaltine on her bedside table.

Taped to the side was a bit of paper with a smiley-face drawn on it with black marker.

Chapter End Notes
I have no idea what I'm going to do with Qrow's Halloween program and I'm in the arc where I have to figure it out. Hmmm...
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Mercury has a bad day.

Chapter Notes

This is the part where those warnings start to come into play.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

On the playground the next morning, Penny explained her plan to her friends a little more.

“And I thought that if Ruby and Nora went with us, then he might have to see Mr. Qrow, for a minute at least. And even if he did not, perhaps seeing Ruby might be like a baby step toward being willing to see Mr. Qrow again.”

“Why didn’t you say so, Penny?” Ruby demanded. “We could have talked about it like that, instead of making plans like normal.”

“Well… I did not know if you would be willing to go into a scheme with me, given how badly our last one failed.”

“I don’t know that it went badly,” Ruby said. “I mean, Nora got adopted and Uncle Qrow is dating Uncle James and they’re gonna get married any day now, so I’d say it was a success.”

“I do not think they are going to get married any day now,” Penny said, and got an eyeroll from Ruby.

“Of course they are, they’ve been dating for over a year now.”

“It hasn’t even been a year,” Nora reminded her.

Before they were able to have another discussion about Ruby’s questionable relationship with the passage of time, Sun- hitherto occupied by the swings- launched himself into the air and half-landed, half-rolled over the woodchips toward them.

He straightened up, shaking woodchips from his hair, and beamed at them.

“Okay, I’m bored with swinging. What are we talking about?”

“We’re trying to decide whether our plan from last winter was a bust or not,” explained Ruby, the only one of the three not suddenly very interested in her hands or the ground. Sun folded his arms and considered this, then nodded.
“It might not have gone the way we expected, but we got what we wanted in the end.”

“Yes, but-“ Penny glanced at Nora, “The price was almost too dear to pay for it. If Nora had been hurt because of our plans, I would never have been happy again.”

“Aww, Penny…”

“I wouldn’t either,” Sun agreed, and Nora’s face was scarlet now, “but that was just a miscalculation. I think it would have ended fine either way.”

“But in the end it turned out we should have just talked to Uncle Qrow to begin with,” Ruby pointed out. “Maybe we could try just talking to him to begin with now?”

“We already know what he’ll say, though,” Nora said. “He’ll say, ‘Sorry kiddo, it just has to be that way.’ You know I’m right.”

“That was a really good Mr. Qrow impression,” Sun said, at the same time that Penny said, “But perhaps… if you really talked to him about it? Instead of just asking? Perhaps that would help.”

“I guess we could try,” Ruby relented. “We’ll talk to Uncle Qrow tonight. You talk to Mercury, okay? Maybe it will help?”

“Oh.” She nodded firmly, and took on a determined stance. “We will make it work!”

-/-

There weren’t words in all of Mercury’s vocabulary to describe how much he hated being in school. Everything about sitting in that stupid classroom with the stupid motivational posters on the wall and the stupid chatter of his stupid classmates and the click-click-click of Glynda’s heels on the tile while she paced and lectured- all of it grated against his brain and made his skin itch until he knew he wasn’t going to last the whole day.

Lunchtime was the easiest time to slip away. There were too many kids coming and going from the cafeteria for anyone to notice one loan student strolling through the halls, and by the time he had slipped out the back door no one would have noticed him anyway.

There was a chain-link fence that ran behind the staff parking lot. It was high and not completely sturdy, but he had enough practice climbing it that he could generally get over it pretty quickly, duck into the small copse of woods behind the school, and come out behind the gas station on the other side, and no one would care. Who would notice a stray teenager wandering around town on a school day? No one on that end of town, certainly.

He made his way through the lot at a quick pace, but as he neared the space he usually hopped the fence he spotted a figure leaning against it, arms crossed and a look of pure judgment on her face.

He slowed to a halt, and folded his own arms.

“What are you doing here, Blondie?” he demanded. “Not skipping school, are you? A good little girl like you?”

“You’re going to get Uncle James in trouble,” Yang said. “If you keep being truant from school Child Services will look into his case.”

Mercury mouthed ‘Uncle James’ and scoffed, then moved over to the fence.

“That’s it, is it? You come out here to scold me?”
“Actually, I wanted to talk to you.”

“I’m not stopping you.” He half turned from his hand-holds on the fence to look at her. “Well? Make it quick, Blondie.”

“I think you should stop avoiding Uncle Qrow.”

Mercury gave her an unimpressed look, and then turned back to the fence, hooking one foot into the links and pulling himself up. “Not gonna happen.”

“Are you seriously that selfish?” she demanded. “Can’t you see how badly you’re hurting our family? Do you even care?”

“Not really.” He let go with one hand and twisted around to face her. “Besides, how am I hurting ‘your whole family’?”

Yang rolled her eyes. “Duh. You won’t see Uncle Qrow, which means Uncle James and Penny can’t come over to visit unless you have plans, we can’t go visit them unless you’re out of the house, and Uncle Qrow and Uncle James can’t just sneak off to see each other like usual.”

“Oh spare me the sob story, willya?” He went back to climbing. “Like I care about any of your stupid feelings anyway.”

“You used to care about Uncle Qrow’s feelings,” she said, and he froze.

“I did,” he said quietly, and then dropped off of the fence. He approached quickly; he was taller than her now, only by just so much but it was enough to make her take a half-step back, and he used that moment before she’d braced herself to hiss, “And look where that got me, huh.”

Her eyes narrowed; she reclaimed the half-step she’d taken and squared herself up. They were going to fight, he knew it. This was how it had always gone: one of them picking and scraping at the other until one of them swung. He wondered which of them would start it this time.

“It’s your own fault you had to leave,” she spat. “You were told you couldn’t stay if we kept fighting but you just couldn’t leave well enough alone, could you? You brought it on yourself.”

“You started as many of those fights as I did, Blondie.” He sneered. “But you always had the upper hand in the end, didn’t you? Because he didn’t exactly have the option of throwing you away, did he? You had a father and a sister and a home, you had a family who loved you- and what did I have? I had a man who swore he’d take care of me, and then gave up when it got to be too much. I got to go live in a house with twelve other kids and guardians who never bothered to even do a headcount.”

Her mouth was open. She looked like she wanted to say something; he didn’t let her, and kept talking. He hadn’t meant to tell her this, to tell her any of this, to tell anyone this, but as he’d started, he might as well finish. “And then, when even that was too good for me, I was sent to live with a man who was probably a serial killer and definitely a creepy cultist, a man who delighted in finding and pushing every single button in my brain, and then knocking me over and laughing when I snapped and swung on him.”

His fists were clenched at his side, as much so he’d be ready to swing when she did as to still the quaking. In his mind’s eye he could still see Tyrian crouched over him, giggling that manic giggle of his. As much to shut the phantom up as anything, he went on.

“A man who, when he got arrested, swore to us that he’d find us once he was out, because we
belonged to him and his queen now, and couldn’t be allowed to escape. Did I deserve that, Blondie? Huh? Did I bring it on myself, do you think? Shoulda been a good little boy, huh? Shoulda just done what I was told so I wouldn’t deserve that?"

She wasn’t going to hit him. He could see it in her face, in her eyes, wide and horrified and so like her uncle’s. He sneered, and spun back to the fence.

When he was at the top, he paused and called over his shoulder, “Go back to class, Blondie. Go back to class and be a good little girl so you can deserve all the nice things you have.”

And then dropped down from the fence to land on the other side in a roll, and took off like a spooked rabbit into the trees.

-/-

It didn’t take long to get through the copse, a minute or two at best, but he wasn’t aware of any of it. He reached the gas station on autopilot and ducked unnoticed into the tiny bathroom at the back. It was miniscule, a pedestal sink and a toilet that rose only a foot out of the floor, both under a bare bulb that gave the bathroom a slightly orange tint to it.

He caught sight of himself in the dingy mirror over the sink, a pale, wide-eyed boy breathing heavily and shaking, and sank to the floor rather than face himself, arms curled around himself and knees drawn up to his forehead.

-/-

Yang felt sick.

She walked back to class in a daze, feet carrying her while her mind was a thousand miles away. She was late back from lunch; she mumbled an excuse to Glynda about getting held up in the bathroom and got an understanding nod as she slipped back to her seat. That was one thing to say in Glynda’s favor: she was pretty forgiving about bathroom emergencies. As long as it wasn’t overused, it could be a very useful tool.

Blake watched her back to her seat and, once she’d looked up, mouthed, ‘Are you okay?’

Yang shook her head, but couldn’t bring herself to answer. Her thoughts were miles away, years away.

She’d known it probably wasn’t good, of course. Uncle Qrow had said there couldn’t be many good prospects out there, not in a county that was willing to give a foster license to a known alcoholic. She’d heard enough from Nora, and from his past kids as well, to know that good foster families in their area were slim pickings. It was one of the reasons Uncle James had been so adamant about getting his license, on top of the other reasons.

It had never occurred to her just how bad it could get. That so much could slip through the cracks so easily.

Poor Mercury. How in the world could such a man have gotten his license in the first place? Even Uncle Qrow had had to work to keep his; she’d overheard him explaining it to Uncle James awhile back, that it was only through Dad and Glynda and Ozpin’s testimonies that he had his drinking under control that he was allowed to keep his license, and even then, only because Mr. Lionheart, who ran the local dfacs office, was an old friend of his.

So a creepy cultist? A probable serial killer? A cruel man who triggered his ward on purpose, for
fun?

How?

Yang didn’t take in a word of Glynda’s lesson, and when the rest of the class was dismissed to go to gym, Glynda held her back.

“A word, Yang?”

“Sure.” She made her slow way to Glynda’s desk while the rest of the class filed out, and once they were gone, Glynda closed the door and joined her.

“You don’t seem like you’re feeling well,” she said gently. “You were very pale when you came back from lunch. Are you sick?”

“I feel a little sick,” Yang said quietly, pulling her hair around her shoulder and twisting it anxiously. A thought occurred to her, then, and, “Um, you were Mercury’s teacher last year, weren’t you?”

“I was.” Glynda studied her thoughtfully for a moment, and then gave a knowing smile. “You weren’t held up by a bathroom emergency, were you?”

Yang shook her head, a little ashamed. “No, I- I followed Mercury when he ducked out,” and quieter, added, “We argued,” and then so low even she could barely hear it, “I don’t know what I was expecting, really.”

“Why did you follow him?”

Yang shrugged, still playing nervously with her hair. “I don’t know. I guess I… I told him if he kept skipping school, he could get Uncle James in trouble.”

Glynda gave her another of those smiles. “You let me worry about that, Yang. James has wanted this for too long; I’m not going to be the thing that takes it away from him.”

“I know.” She shrugged again. “I think really I just wanted the chance to convince him to see Uncle Qrow again.”

Yang was staring very firmly at a spot on the blackboard, so she didn’t see the brief softening of Glynda’s expression before she schooled herself and went on, “Don’t worry about that, either,” she said gently. “I know it must be frustrating, but this is much, much bigger than you kids can imagine.”

“I think I can imagine a little better now,” Yang admitted. “Mercury, um. When we were arguing, he said- look, you were his teacher last year. How much do you know about his last placement?”

This time she was looking, and saw the change in expression: the worried furrow of her brow, the way her hand came up to cover her mouth briefly. “I… I know a lot more than a lot of people,” she said. “I was trying get him removed from his previous guardian’s custody long before the arrest happened.”

“Really? Why didn’t you say anything?”

“Should I have? Qrow relinquished his concern for Mercury when he gave him up- not to mention at the time he had his own worries to deal with. Nora, you recall? She doesn’t exactly have a good history, either, and she needed his undivided attention.”
“I know, but-” Yang sighed. She didn’t really have an argument, it was just frustrating. Mercury had been hurting, bad, and her uncle- and she- had been indirectly a cause of that.

( Why had she needed to fight him so constantly? Why couldn’t they have just silently tolerated each other?)

“Yang.” Glynda drew her out of her guilt spiral with a gentle call. “Don’t stress about this. I know it’s upsetting, but Mercury’s burden is not yours to carry. There are enough adults in his life willing to help him bear the weight. Worry about your own burdens.”

“Isn’t there anything I can do? Anything?”

A softly indulgent smile touched Glynda’s lips, and, “You can start by not scolding him about skipping school. That’s my job.”

-/-

Mercury wasn’t aware of how long he sat curled up on that grimy bathroom floor, but he eventually climbed shakily to his feet and slipped out of the station, heading down the street on autopilot. He didn’t know where he was going; he was vaguely aware that he was walking in the direction of home, maybe. Vaguely.

He’d made it about two blocks when his phone vibrated in his pocket. He blinked at it. It was Winter.

“Hello?”

“Where are you?”

“Uh…” He looked around. “I’m like two blocks from the school, why?”

“Because I’m coming to pick you up. Wait there.”

“Why are you-”

But she’d already hung up ( rude ). He gave his phone a baffled look, then stuck it under the strap on his binder and got back to walking. Winter would find him, or not. It didn’t matter to him either way.

He made it another block, and pushed the button for the crosswalk. There was another person standing at said crosswalk; he ignored them until the person turned to give him a once-over and a familiar voice said, “Well, well, well! If it isn’t little old scooty booties!”

Mercury’s eyes widened. Well, that had woken him up, at least. He gave the man an incredulous look.

“ Roman Torchwick ?”

“One and the same~” He twirled his cane up and gave an elaborate bow before leaning on it and looking Mercury over thoughtfully.

“Well now, this is interesting,” he finally said. Above them, the light flicked green; Mercury hurried to cross, and Roman swept up his cane and hurried after him. On the other side, Mercury turned a glare on the man.

“What’s interesting?”
“This. You.” He waved a hand in a motion encompassing all of Mercury. “What are we calling you now, scooty booties?”

Mercury gave him a mistrustful look, and answered a sullen, “Mercury.”

“Mercury, huh? Not bad, not bad.” He draped what probably was, to him, a companionly arm over Mercury’s shoulder. “A little obvious, but not bad.”

Mercury shrugged his arm off and moved away, putting space between them. “I don’t remember asking for your approval.”

“Then my apologies.” He bowed again. “I shall rescind them, if you would prefer thus.”

“Oh gods you’re such a fucking tool.”

He was, fortunately, spared from further conversation by Winter’s familiar car pulling up alongside them. She let the window down to address him.

“You were supposed to stay put.”

“I didn’t make it far. Later, Torchwick. I will hopefully not be seeing you around.”

“Bye, scooty booties,” Torchwick said cheerily, while Mercury slid into the passenger seat. “Nice to see you, princess.”

Winter pulled away without a word to him, but once she was away, said, “Why is Princess everyone’s go to with me?”

Mercury snorted. “Hey, if the tiara fits…”

-/-

They were just approaching the walls that surrounded their community when Mercury finally broke the silence.

“So what’s this all about?”

“Yang came and found me after school,” Winter said. “She told me that the two of you had argued and she may have crossed a line before you parted ways. She asked me to check on you.”

“Oh.” Great, and now he’d have to deal with Yang’s guilty conscious on top of everything. Fucking great. He sank down into his seat. “So you decided to just come rescue me cause of Yang’s bleating?”

Winter shrugged minutely. “Yang is my friend. You are my friend. She was worried, and seemed to have good reason.” She spared him a glance. “Are you okay?”

Mercury had, up until that point, been slowly working his way back to his usual mood, but at her words everything inside him froze. He realized he was fisting his jeans and tried to force his hands to relax.

“Let me out,” he said quietly, calmer than the boiling anger in his blood would have expected. “I’m walking home from here.”

“We are not far from-”
"Godsdammit Winter if you don’t let me out of this car right fucking now-!

Her eyes widened, and her expression hardened, but she nonetheless pulled over. He threw the door open and then kicked it closed when he was free, ignoring her shouted admonishments as he stormed down the sidewalk, opposite the direction she’d been going. He wasn’t far from the bit of wall that ran behind the Ironwood house, he thought, and he wasn’t exactly in a hurry to get home, so it didn’t matter either way.

-/-

He did, eventually, make it home, after hopping the wall twice, several fences, and a row of hedges. James’ car was in the garage, which meant it wouldn’t be long before it was time for another lecture on how important his education was, and his bag was sitting just inside the door, which meant that Winter had dropped it off and most certainly tattled on him, which meant more lectures.

Great. Just fucking great.

He shouldered his bag and wondered if he could sneak up to his room unnoticed, but no such luck: Penny was at the kitchen table reading, and when she saw him, she lit up.

Something inside him fractured. No one had ever lit up to see him before.

He forced a smile he didn’t feel. “Hey, squirt. What’s up?”

“I wanted to talk to you,” she said. “Will you let me?”

“Oh, I mean…” Just walk away, just walk away. “I’ve probably got an incoming lecture from your old man, I don’t know if I can handle two serious conversations. What do you want to talk to me about?”

“Well, if you do not want to talk about it right now, that is fine. I want to ask why you will not see Mr. Qrow, is all. But we can talk when you are feeling better.”

Mercury’s vision went white, just for a breath, and when it cleared he had apparently punched the wall. His fist had gone through the plaster, and was throbbing from the impact; across the kitchen, Penny was staring at him in wide-eyed fright. He retracted his fist slowly, clutching it with the other, and sagged a little.

“I’m- I’m- I’ll- be in my room.”

And hurried upstairs before anything else could stop him.

-/-

Chapter End Notes

Me: I need a reason why Mercury will just accept a ride from Winter when he's in this mood.
Torchwick: No worries, I've got this.

When I was telling Hayley about some of this, she asked how Tyrian ever got his
foster license, and instead of handwaving it as I originally did, I decided to just go ahead and make it a plot point. Turns out the entire system is in shambles in Vale! Isn't that fun? :D
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

Actions have consequences.

Chapter Notes

Looking at my lore, as of this chapter we now know the identity of all but two of Qrow's past kids. This is largely irrelevant, but I do need to keep track just to make sure I don't accidentally establish more names than the number.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-/-

After dinner, Nora and Ruby cornered Qrow when he was watching tv, settling in on either side of him and making it clear they wanted to talk. He looked amused from one to the other, then reached for the remote and turned the tv off.

“All right,” he said. “What’s up?”

“We wanted to talk to you about Mercury,” Nora said. “We want to know why he has to keep our family apart.”

“Kids, we’ve been over this,” he began, but Ruby interrupted.

“No we haven’t,” she said. “We’ve been over the fact that it’s a thing, but you’ve never explained why.”

Qrow looked between them, and then glanced up at Yang as she came into the living room to join them.

“All right,” he said. “All right. You all know what happened- I’ve told you that much, right?” he added, glancing at Nora, who nodded. “Yeah. That alone is plenty to justify the kid not wanting to see me, but it goes beyond that.”

“Are you guys talking about Mercury?” Yang asked, settling down on the other side of Nora.

Ruby nodded. “We’re trying to understand why we can’t see Uncle James because of him.”

Yang looked uncomfortable. Qrow considered her expression for a long moment, then went on.

“Anyway, Mercury has been shuffled around a lot in his life. He’s a difficult kid- deliberately difficult, for his own reasons. A lot of people have given up on him when he proved to be too much trouble.”

“But you said not every kid is a fit for every home,” Ruby reminded him. “When Neon left- I mean-”
But Qrow shook his head. “Not the same thing,” he said. “Neon left because she had religious needs that we couldn’t meet, and a different family was found who could meet those needs and wanted her. Mercury had just been passed around from home to home because no one was willing to put in the time to help him with his issues. And anyone who ain’t willing to do that doesn’t need to be a foster parent. It’s like seventy-five percent of the job description.”

“But you were putting in the work,” Ruby protested. “You were working really hard!”

“Sure, but in the end…” he trailed off, and looked at Yang. She was staring at her lap; she looked like she was going to be sick.

“It’s not fair,” she said, clenching her fists into her shorts. “It’s not fair. I started as many of those fights as he did, so why is he the one who had to leave for it?”

“And there we reach the crux of the matter,” Qrow said, and nodded. “Because it wasn’t fair. Because I made a promise and had to break it. Because I couldn’t think of a better solution, because I gave up. Any progress I’d made was undone and I probably did a lot more damage than I’d repaired. Because I betrayed the kid’s trust. Anything that happened to him after he left here is in part my blame-and reading between the lines of what Glynda has very carefully not told me, I’d say it’s a hefty blame.” He looked between them, gave them a weakly reassuring smile. “Hey, come on. Listen, I can’t do much about Jimmy, but how about we invite Penny to spend the weekend here with us? Won’t that be fun?”

“But what if he never does?” Nora asked, hugging her knees to her chest. “What if he just goes on living with Mr. Ironwood forever and ever and never asks to see you again?”

“Then I guess I’ll figure out how to live with a long-distance relationship,” Qrow said, and shrugged. He ruffled her hair and gave her a smile he didn’t feel. “But I wouldn’t worry about that. Let the adults take care of it, okay?”

“That’s what Glynda told me,” Yang said, pulling one of her own knees up and resting her chin on it. “She said it wasn’t up to us to shoulder Mercury’s burdens for him.”

“You should listen to her, then. She’s a smart woman, our Glynda.” When they still looked upset, he gave them a weak smile. “Hey, come on. Listen, I can’t do much about Jimmy, but how about we invite Penny to spend the weekend here with us? Won’t that be fun?”

“I guess,” they agreed, Ruby finally joining the knees-up club and tilting over into Qrow’s side. “But I still miss having the whole family together.”

“Yeah?” Qrow looped an arm around her, raised his other so Nora could scoot in as well. “I know I’ve said this before, but I’m really glad you guys like James so much.”

“Of course we like him!” Nora said, and Ruby nodded and added, “Yeah! He’s great! Real uncle material.”

Qrow let out a startled bark of laughter. “All right, all right! Don’t get ahead of yourselves and go marrying us off already.”*

-M-

Mercury locked and bolted his door as soon as he was in his room, and sank down to curl against it. He heard footsteps after awhile, and there was a knock on the door, but he ignored it, and after a
few minutes the footsteps went away.

There was another knock, much later, when the sun had sunk down and darkness crept into his window, but he ignored it until it, too, went away. He let out a long, slow sigh of relief. All right.

All right.

-/-

Mercury fell asleep curled against his door, and when he woke it was late morning; the high sun lit his room up brilliantly, and his room was a bit warmer than he liked now. He frowned, and got up to go out and see what was going on.

The house was still while he made his way downstairs, but when he reached the kitchen he found James there reading something on a tablet. When Mercury appeared he looked up.

“I was wondering if you were going to stay in your room all day,” he said, and stood. “All right, come on.”

Mercury stood frozen on the bottom stair at his words, balking visibly. “Where are we going?”

“First,” he said, “I’m going to show you how to replaster a wall.” He nodded at the hole in the wall. Mercury cringed. “And then we’re going to talk.” He moved toward the garage door. “Come on. I keep the plaster out here.”

Mercury was still hesitant, but he followed this time, watching James curiously as he did. “So, um. I am in trouble, right?”

“Oh, absolutely.” They’d reached the closet at the back of the garage; James showed him which things he’d need, and led him over to the sink in the corner. “What for or how much I won’t know until we’ve talked. But you’re definitely in trouble for punching the wall, which is why you’re taking responsibility and repairing it.”

This felt a bit more right, so Mercury let James talk him through how to prepare the plaster, one ear focused on his words and his thoughts buzzing at the fact that James, for all his sternness, was still being gentle with him. When Mercury fumbled the instructions, he didn’t yell, or scold, he just corrected, and talked him through the steps again. It was… unsettling. He felt like his world had tilted on its axis.

He didn’t know how to deal with it, so he said nothing more while James led him back inside and talked him through repairing the hole he’d put in the wall. Only when the plaster was drying and they were putting away the tools did he speak again.

“Why are we doing this?” he asked.

“Because I’m not having a house with holes in the wall and it’s too much trouble to get a professional to do it when it’s easy enough to do on your own.”

“No, I mean…” He gestured vaguely, not sure what he was trying to convey. “Why aren’t you…”

James smiled knowingly. “What you want to know is, why am I doing this instead of yelling at you or punishing you?”

“Yeah.”
“Well, for a starter, you are being punished. Or did you think that I made you fix the wall for fun?”

“That’s not a punishment.”

“Did you enjoy it?”

Mercury scoffed. “No. Of course not.”

James nodded, and gestured as if to say, there, you see? “I believe that punishments should reflect what you did. That’s how consequences work. I could ground you, but that doesn’t teach you anything except that I have authority over you. Authority is important, but this way you realize that punching the wall has consequences, and maybe next time you think before doing it.”

“I don’t usually think at all,” Mercury muttered, and when James beckoned for him to follow, did after only a brief hesitation. He didn’t know what was going on- nothing about this situation was familiar for him at all- but he wasn’t getting yelled at (or worse) and he wanted to know what would happen next.

“As for yelling at you,” James said, leading Mercury to his workroom. “I don’t believe in yelling at children. If you want to instill obedience, it’s very useful, but I find it far more valuable to instill good behavior. Besides,” he added, and stood aside so Mercury could enter the room first. “When you start yelling, you lose yourself in the release. There’s better ways to release my temper than yelling at people I’m meant to be responsible for.”

Mercury frowned, and turned to give James a baffled look. James, for his part, looked amused, and reached over to take one of the framed blueprints off of the wall. Mercury had been in the workroom several times since coming here, and he’d always thought that particular blueprint had seemed oddly placed; now he saw that behind it was the tell-tale scar of a wall that had been replastered. Mercury’s eyebrows shot up, and James returned the blueprint before gesturing for Mercury to have a seat. He did, if only because standing was requiring more of his attention than he could spare right this second.

“You’re not the only one in this house with a temper,” James said, and pulled his desk chair over so he could sit near Mercury, leaving plenty of space between them. Mercury glanced instinctively at the door, but it was open, and James had pulled his chair over so that Mercury was closer to the door.

Mercury blinked, and stared at the door. Now that he thought about it- James always did that. And with that thought came others: the shiny new bolt on his bedroom door, the one he’d spared a moment’s confusion for and then ignored when he first moved in, the way he never entered Mercury’s room without invitation (barring that one night all those weeks ago), the space he put between them if Mercury was feeling even a little tense-

-Winter’s trust in him, when his sternness should have put her against him-

-waiting until he’d calmed down to reprimand him, always letting him walk away without protest-

-and it hit him, something he probably should have realized ages ago, if he’d bothered to pay attention. He turned an incredulous look on James.

“...you get it, don’t you?” He gestured vaguely around at the open door, at the space between them, and repeated, “I mean, you really get it.”

James gave him a weak smile. “My parents split up when I was a small boy, but it wasn’t for
another decade before Mother managed to win full custody of me.” He looked away, and then back. “My father gave me very little in the time I spent with him, beyond a temper I’ve worked hard to control, and an ability to recognize an abused kid when I see one. I don’t thank him for it, but at least it’s something I’ve been able to put to use.”

“...oh.”

-/-

Yang had hoped to talk to Mercury at school that morning, to- to what? Apologize? She suspected (rightly so, if she’d only known) that her apologies would be unwelcome. But she wasn’t satisfied with Qrow and Glynda’s assurance that the problem was theirs, not hers, and that she shouldn’t worry about it. There must be something she could do- surely there was something? If she’d controlled her temper just a little better at the time, Mercury wouldn’t have gone through any of what he had. Uncle Qrow could have carried on working with him and maybe by now, he’d be okay.

But we wouldn’t have Nora then, a treacherous part of her brain pointed out. And you like Nora so much more.

Which was true. Yang loved Nora in a way she would have never been able to love Mercury, even if he had stayed. Was that wrong? Uncle Qrow had always taught her that kids like Mercury deserved to be loved too. But it was hard to like Mercury, and as much as she wanted good things for him, she knew she would never be able to love him.

Which, she suspected, was something she’d need to learn at some point. She’d sat in on some of her parents’ and Uncle James’ conversations while James was preparing for his first foster parent, and she had heard enough to know that adoption was a very strong possibility- even moreso now that he was determined to give Mercury a say in his future, and she doubted he would decide to leave any time soon.

No, Yang was sure that Mercury would be a part of James’ family permanently within the year-which meant that he would be a part of her family within the year, too. (There was no doubt in her mind whatsoever that Uncle James wasn’t planning to propose soon. He was too much of a romantic, too deeply in love with her uncle, to just go on dating forever.)

So, what it boiled down to, was Yang wanted to talk to Mercury and find some kind of even footing for them (perhaps not using those words, maybe) because from what she could see of the future, they were going to be family whether they liked it or not.

Except Mercury wasn’t in school, and when she asked Glynda if everything was okay, Glynda had assured her he was and then reminded her that it was Uncle James, not she, who needed to worry about that.

“Right, mind my own business,” Yang muttered to herself as she left the room, hurrying to catch up with the rest of her class on the way to the library.

-/-

“I have to commend you,” James said, a little while later. “You’ve managed to gain the loyalty of not one, but two of the most no-nonsense people I know. Both are determined to let me know if something is going wrong but equally determined not to tell me any more than the absolute bare minimum they need to.”
“What?”

“I got a call from Glynda yesterday,” he elaborated. “All she told me was that you’d argued with Yang, who may have crossed a line. Then Winter turned up later and told me the same thing, and added that she might have made it worse. Neither of them told me more than that.”

Mercury shrugged. He was exhausted, mentally anyway, and he’d fallen silent after their discussion earlier. James hadn’t pressed for further details about yesterday, and Mercury had stayed where he was while James worked, for once more interested than worried about what might come from being in James’ company. This was the first James had spoken in awhile, apart from the odd phone call to someone with a name straight out of a porno, presumably a colleague, although at this point Mercury wasn’t ruling out the possibility of James being friends with a porn star.

“I got another call concerning you, actually,” James went on. “Your friend Emerald. She wants you to come spend the weekend with her.”

Mercury looked up, startled. Emerald had said she was going to work it out, of course, but he had honestly expected it to come of nothing. He tried not to look too hopeful- James hadn’t said he could go, and he may well decide it wasn’t a good idea. Emerald lived in the next county, after all, and he might not want to hand Mercury over to someone else for an entire weekend.

“I told her I’d talk to you about it. Would you like to go? You can if you want to, but you don’t have to. It’s up to you.”

“I—- the whole weekend?”

“I was thinking I’d drop you off after school on Friday and then pick you up sometime Sunday. I have some work in Argus, I can easily put it off for Sunday and pick you up on my way home.”

A whole weekend. Really a whole weekend. Mercury could hang out with Emerald for ages, no deadline hanging over them- and, too, he really needed to get away from here for awhile.

“I- um- yeah, I wanna go. Yeah.”

“All right. I’ll call up Mr. Rainart later and make the arrangements.”

“Yeah. Okay.” Mercury slouched down lower in his seat. He was really tired, he realized. He glanced back up at James, who was watching him thoughtfully, and squirmed uncomfortably.

“And. Um. Thanks.”

It was a while before James was able to call up Hazel and arrange for the weekend plans, as Hazel worked afternoons and didn’t get off till later, but it didn’t take long overall. Once they were all clear, Mercury went back to his room, sprawling on his bed while he talked to Emerald on the phone. She couldn’t wait for this weekend, she said. She couldn’t wait to show him everything.

Once Mercury had left, James called up Qrow.

“Branwen.”

“Since when do you answer the phone professionally?”

“Oh, hi, Jiminy. I thought you were someone else. What’s up?”
“I wanted to talk about your invitation to steal my daughter for the weekend.”

“Yeah?”

“Is there room in that invitation for one more?”

-/

“Damn,” Mercury said, fruitlessly checking his many pockets once more. He’d left his marker in James’ workroom.

He stood and broadcast his annoyance to the room with a long-suffering sigh, then headed down the hall to retrieve it. Outside the door, he hesitated, trying to decide whether or not to knock, and then stopped when he heard James talking.

Mercury knew it was wrong to eavesdrop, of course, but he also knew that it paid to know what was going on around him when he wasn’t there. So he had no qualms about leaning a little nearer the door and listening to James’ side of the conversation.

“-you behave?” James said, and judging by the pointed sigh, was ignored. “If you keep that up I’m cancelling our weekend.”

There was a long silence, and then James laughed. “All right, you called my bluff, I wouldn’t cancel for the world. I’m looking forward to it as much as you are,” and more silence, and, “yeah, it was a really convenient invitation. The timing couldn’t have been better.”

Mercury nodded, and backed away from the door. He’d had no doubt that James would take advantage of his absence to see Qrow, of course- but to hear it spoken of as a convenience fractured another part of him.

He shouldn’t be surprised, he reminded himself. And he wasn’t, not really, and in a way, that hurt a little bit more.

-/

Chapter End Notes

*Joke's on you, Qrow, they've been doing that since day one.*
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

Tai and James spend some time together.

Chapter Notes

I know I implied to some of you that chapter 11 was going to be especially painful, but that's because I forgot my sequence of events. Chapter 12 is going to be the painful one; 11 is just fine.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-/-

Over the next three days, Mercury retreated back from the ground James thought he had managed to gain, locking himself in his room as soon as he got home and only coming out long enough to eat dinner and shower and make a pass at doing his chores.

Frustration didn’t even begin to cover the things James was feeling as a result. He’d thought he’d managed to make some progress; obviously not, and he might have lost what progress he made.

“Give him time,” Tai said, when James related this to him. “Qrow was the same way when we got him, he probably just got spooked by actually letting you in that much.”

“I’m trying to be patient.” James sighed. “Maybe the weekend away will be good for him. He was different when Emerald was here.”

“There you go, look on the bright side.” There was a creaking sound followed by the rattle of a desk chair moving across the floor, and Tai added, “Speaking of the weekend, the girls have demanded that I ask if you would be willing to tm their dungeons game this time.”

“Oh, I guess it is my turn soon, isn’t it?”

“You’re the only parent that hasn’t done a game yet. Well, you and Qrow, he’s very insistent that he’s not getting sucked into the nerd trap like the rest of us. And Li, but he gets a pass because he’s out of the country again.”

“I think I could manage that,” James said, thoughts drifting back to the hours he and his friends had spent playing as children. “It’s short notice, but I could probably throw something together.”

“Great! I’ll drop the campaign notebook off with you in the morning, so you can go over it.”

-/-

Penny was starting to miss Mercury. She had, in the past few weeks, gotten used to hanging out in Mercury’s room with him while they worked on homework or just talked or even did their own
thing. For the past few days, he’d refused to let her in, for all that she knocked every evening just in case.

This time, when he didn’t respond, she sighed and leaned back against the door. A thought came to her, and, jokingly, she half-sang, “Mercury… do you wanna build a snowman?”

There was a long silence, and she was debating whether an, “Okay bye,” would be appropriate, when she heard the sound of the bolt sliding and before she could stand, the door opened and she toppled back into the room. She lay on the floor staring up at Mercury, arms folded while he gave her a deeply unimpressed look.

“Did you seriously just try to use a Disney song to get me to talk to you?”

“Well…” She scrambled to her feet, and beamed. “It worked.”

He continued to glare down at her, drummed his fingers on his arm. Sighed. Scowled. Glowered. Sighed again.

“All right, come on in.”

He moved aside to allow her entry and she beamed; rather than take her now-accustomed seat at the end of his bed, though, she smoothed down her dress shyly and said, “Um, I wanted to apologize.”

“What for?”

“Because I upset you the other day. I did not mean to, but I did, and I would like to ask what it was that I did, so that I may avoid doing it again in the future. If that’s okay.”

He gave her another unimpressed look, then snorted and turned to his desk. “Wasn’t your fault, squirt. I was already in a mood.”

“I know. Winter dropped your bag off and said she had upset you. Looking back, probably I should have known that asking about a touchy subject would be bad right then.”

“It definitely didn’t help things,” he agreed.

“Anyway, I am very sorry. I will try not to do it again.”

Mercury shook his head, annoyed. “Why are you like this, squirt?”

“What for?”

“Like what?”

He rolled his eyes, and gestured at all of her. “You know, being nice to me.”

She looked genuinely baffled. “Because I like you.”

“Nobody likes me.”

“I like you,” she repeated, more firmly this time. “Father likes you. Winter likes you. Emerald likes you. Aunt Glynda likes you.”

Okay,” he held up a hand to stop her, “You, cute little kid who makes friends with everyone? I can buy you liking me. But you can’t seriously sit there and expect me to believe that all these people like me. Your old man and Glynda only care about me conceptually. Winter is… complicated. Emerald I’ll grant you, but that’s circumstantial.”
“What does conceptually mean?"

“It means they care about the poor abused cripple kid they have to take care of, not Mercury Black, the asshole who punches walls and skips class whenever he feels like it.”

There was so much bitterness in his tone that Penny tasted it, and she frowned and considered this for a long time before speaking.

“I do not think that is true.”

“It’s the truth, whether you believe it or not. I’ve seen it a hundred times over. Everyone always claims to care about me but as soon as I don’t fit into their neat little box and turn out to be not what they were expecting, they get sick of me and give up. It happens with all of them, and mark my words, it’ll happen with your old man, too. You’ll see.”

“I do not think that is true, either.”

“Yeah, well, you’re a dumb little kid,” he scoffed, and spun his chair away. “What do you know about not being wanted?”

Penny frowned, and then grabbed the little footstool from the corner of Mercury’s room, and dragged it over so she was sitting right in front of him.

“Listen,” she said firmly, and only when he looked at her did she go on. “At my old school, my classmates did not like me very much. They never played with me without being told to, and when they did they made it clear that I was not welcome. From Kindergarten all the way to fourth grade, I never had any friends. I was very unhappy. I do not think my classmates even understood why they hated me, they just did. It was… lonely.”

Mercury shook his head. “I don’t believe that for a minute. Cute little girl like you? You’d have had friends out your ears.”

“It is the truth,” she told him. “Whether you believe it or not. Besides,” she added, and hesitated. There was no reason to be nervous about this part; he wasn’t exactly in a position to judge her, but all the same, her hands were trembling a little when she went on, “They did not know I was a girl at the time.”

He stilled. After a long pause, “…ah. Huh.”

“Mercury?”

“You ever feel like your life has too many coincidences to be coincidence?”

She shrugged. “Mr. Ozpin says there is no such thing as a coincidence. Besides, I am certain I am a side character in a romance novel, so any coincidence is merely a plot contrivance.”

He let out one of those startled barking laughs that she sometimes got from him. “Got it all figured out, huh? Why aren’t you the main character in your own romance novel?”

Another shrug. “Being a side character is more fun. Besides, I cannot think of who my leading other would be.”

“Not your little monkey friend?”

“Oh, no, Sun is not interested in me. I do not believe he is interested in anyone, and by the time we
are old enough to be romantic leads I will probably not be interested in him, either, anymore.”

Mercury gave her a baffled look, and then an amused snort. “You’re a weird little kid, squirt.”

“Yes,” and her smile now was mischievous. “I am a very weird girl.”

-/-

Tai stopped by the house early that morning on the way to the college. Mercury was in the kitchen spreading jelly on a slice of toast when James called him entry; he froze when Tai came into the room, following the sound of the voice. James glanced up from preparing his own breakfast, and realized his mistake instantly, but Mercury spoke before either of them could.

“Hey, Uncle Tai,” he said, turning his attention back to his toast. He set the knife back in the jar and grabbed up his backpack from the floor. “I’m gonna go wait for Winter out front. See you, General.”

-and took a larger-than-necessary bite of his toast as he pushed by Tai and headed out the door. Tai watched him, then turned to James.

“General?”

James snorted. “I’m afraid to ask,” he admitted. “It’s better than Torchwick’s names for me.”

“What, ‘stud’ not a good nickname?” Tai teased, coming over to lean on the counter while James finished slicing his oranges.

James rolled his eyes. “It’s better than ‘dad bod’, I guess.”

“I mean, I do have a dad bod,” and when James paused to flicker his gaze over Tai appreciatively, rolled his eyes. “Oh come on. You’re as bad as Qrow.”

“I really hope you realize he only says those things to annoy you,” James said. “Also, I’m not as bad as Qrow, because I’m not your brother.”

“Might as well be.” Tai swiped an orange slice from James’ bowl, and laughed at James’ sigh. “Oh, don’t give me that, you know what I mean.”

“You? Yes, I know. Everyone else…”

“Ah. The girls still at it?”

“And Dad. And your mother,” James said after a nod.

“Ha! She’s just teasing you, don’t let her get to you. We’re just not used to Qrow being serious about anyone. Besides, she likes you.”

“She told Qrow she likes that he’s dating a ‘nice Chinese boy’.”

“Yeah, we’re, like, eighty percent sure she’s kidding about that. Or, I mean, she never had a problem with Summer or Raven.”

“I know, it’s just… frustrating. It seems sometimes like everyone is trying to rush me back to the altar, barring maybe you and Glynda.”

“Yeah, well.” Tai fidgeted with his wedding band. “I’m not exactly in a position to judge. At least
you can handle dating.”

“I just got lucky enough to run into a man I was incredibly attracted to who was willing to be patient with me,” James said. “If you ever do reach the point of wanting to date again, I’m sure you’ll get lucky too.”

“That’s the thing, though. I want to date again. I’m lonely. I’m tired of being alone. I just- can’t seem to cross that last hurdle.” He sighed. “Maybe I’ll get Kali to set me up with one of her friends, that usually goes well.”

“Didn’t the last one turn out to be a lesbian?”

“I mean… yeah… but we had a fun night, at least. She said she liked that I didn’t try to kiss her. Wait…”

James laughed, and grabbed the notebook Tai had brought, flipping through it to the last summary page. The unspoken rule of the table masters was that the session summary couldn’t take up more than one side of a page, and most of the summaries were just a bullet list of events. He skimmed the page.

“It says here that last week they swam through lakes, climbed up trees, and caught fish, bugs, bears, and honeybees.”

“Jaune’s brother was their table master, he likes non-battle based sessions. His other session they went scuba diving and mining.”

James hummed an acknowledgment, and skimmed through past sessions while Tai peeled another orange. A moment later, Penny came downstairs, and chirped a greeting at Tai when she saw him.

“Hi, sweetie,” he said, raising his arm so she could hug his side before going over to the fridge to hunt up her own breakfast.

“Did Mercury leave already?”

“He went to wait for Winter outside.”

“Aw, but I wanted him to ride the bus with me.” She pouted, then grabbed her own bag off of the table and headed outside to wait for her bus with him while she ate her yogurt.

Tai watched her go, then turned to James. “How are those two getting along?”

“Pretty well, actually. She’s doing better than I am, he even lets her hang out in his room with him.”

“Well, that’s not surprising, Penny is a sweet kid.”

“You’re saying your two aren’t?”

Tai snorted. “Yang is abrasive and it’s easy to get on her bad side, and Ruby tends to bowl everyone around her over in her excitement. They’re good kids, but if either of them is being sweet it’s a ploy.”

“True.” He sighed, rubbed the back of his neck in frustration. “I wish I was getting through to him as easily as Penny is.”

“You’re doing fine,” Tai assured him. “And you’ll get there. Just wait.”
Mercury was leaning back against the mailbox frame as casually as possible, playing on his phone while he waited for Winter, who was generally willing to give him a ride to school in the mornings. Penny came out to join him, sitting on the low stone wall that ran between their home and the neighbor’s. For awhile, things were quiet between them, while Penny ate her yogurt and Mercury pretended to have not noticed her.

“Did you come out here because Mr. Tai is here?” she asked eventually. Mercury shrugged.

“I just didn’t feel like talking to him, is all.”

Penny nodded, accepting this, and added, “I was hoping you would ride the bus with me this morning.”

“I don’t usually ride the bus in the mornings.”

“I know. But I was hoping you would this morning.”

He sighed, and put his phone away. “All right, I’ll bite. What’s so special about this morning?” he asked, mimicking her tone perfectly.

“You are going away for the whole weekend this evening,” she reminded him. “I will not see you again until Sunday night.”

“Still not following here, squirt.”

Penny frowned, and looked down at her feet, kicking them softly against the wall. “It is unimportant,” she said. “Do not worry about it.” Around the corner, the bus appeared, and she hopped off of the wall, picked up her bag, and dropped her yogurt cup into the trash bin before hurrying across the road to wait at the actual bus stop.

Mercury watched her go, a deep frown on his face that was still there five minutes later when Winter arrived.

Qrow might have made plans for his weekend, and he might want to spend every moment he could with James, but he still had his standing appointment, so once he’d run a few errands after school that evening, he headed out without bothering to stop at home.

Realistically, he knew that James was probably still making the drive up to Argus to drop Mercury off, but on the off-chance he was there, Qrow wasn’t risking running into him and then not being able to bring himself to go.

Whitney was there when he arrived, which surprised him- he usually got there first, after all.

“Hey, Whit,” he said, shoving his hands into his pockets as he approached her. She looked up from her hands in her lap- she’d been picking her nails again; he could see from here what a ragged mess they were- and then back down. Qrow sat down beside her. “Rough week?”

“Rough year,” she replied, and brought her hand up to bite through the nail she’d been pulling at, before, “I had a meeting with my lawyer today.”

“How is all of that going?”
She shook her head, reached up to bite the corner of one nail before picking at that one. “Jacques has good lawyers.” Fidget, fidget. Bite. “I never should have married him.”

“Hey, no arguments from me, I can’t stand the bastard.” He draped an arm over the back of her chair, not exactly around her but offering nonetheless. “How strong is his custody case?”

“Shaky.” She gnawed on her nail again, and one foot began jiggling. “His case against me is solid, but mine is just as good. We both have allies to speak up on our behalf. I can only hope that my allies being connected to my children ahead of me will at least work in my favor. Jacques’ allies are all his friends. They barely know the children at all.”

Qrow nodded, but didn’t speak, and after a moment Whitney stopped jiggling her foot and leaned against him, taking the offering at last. Eventually, her hands stilled in her lap.

“I’m afraid,” she said quietly. “Not for myself- anything that happens after this point is my penance, for what I’ve put my children through. I’m afraid for them. If this all goes south- if Jacques wins and keeps them- what am I going to do then?”

Qrow chuckled. “I wouldn’t worry about that,” he said. “There’s enough people out there waiting for the chance to get those kids away from Jacques. You fail here, that’s when we bring in the cavalry.” He smiled grimly. “You and Jacques have been so embroiled in your own personal war all these years that you’ve missed the part where your kids are gaining allies of their own.”

“I’ve missed a lot,” she agreed. “I don’t know if I can ever make that up to them.”

Qrow was silent again. He couldn’t say that for sure himself, and he’d made it a point to never lie to her. And really, what chances did she have? Winter, for one, was sixteen- in two years she’d be going off to college; assuming Whitney won custody, the next two years would be spent in undoing all of Jacques’ damage so she didn’t have a nervous breakdown the first time she was on her own. Weiss and Whitley were younger, they had a better chance- but she still had ten and seven years of neglect and indifference to make up, and that was not an easy road to walk down.

“Hey, Whit?” he finally said.

“Yeah?”

“Let’s take this one step at a time, okay? We’ll worry about what you can do for the kids once you get them away from Jacques, okay?”

She sighed, and began picking her nails again. “Okay.”

-/-

Chapter End Notes

I felt bad that in the last story, even though James was supposedly making friends with Tai too, he never really spent any time with him. This was due to a variety of reasons, but I decided to fix it in the sequel and leave it at that.

One day I’m going to explain how their family’s running gag ended up being "my brother is super hot", but for the moment rest assured it’s just a joke.
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

Emerald and Mercury are best friends, but they have some very key differences in their philosophies.

Chapter Notes

Hey remember a few weeks ago when I got really mad at RWBY for practically lifting some planned dialogue for the fic for canon? This chapter has the scene I was talking about.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-/-

It was an hour drive to Argus, another half hour to navigate the backstreets to find the little house where Emerald lived with Hazel. James commented with approval about the neighborhood- some of the yards had children playing in them, and none of the houses looked to be in ill-repair; it wasn’t a classy neighborhood, but it was a nice one. The sort of place he had no qualms about leaving his charge at over the weekend.

“I’ve lived in some pretty terrible neighborhoods,” Mercury pointed out when he said this. James nodded.

“You’ve also lived with some pretty terrible guardians. The two aren’t mutually inclusive nor exclusive, but a bad neighborhood has more hazards than a good one, and I’d be hesitant to leave you somewhere you might be in real danger.”

“Run-down houses doesn’t mean everyone there is a criminal,” he objected. “It just means they’re poor. And I can take care of myself.”

“And I would prefer you not to have to.” James double checked the gps, and pulled into the drive it was indicating. “Still, as I said, this looks like a nice neighborhood. Is that Hazel?”

This last was because an enormous man had come out onto the front porch when they pulled up. Mercury side-eyed James, grinning mischievously.

“Guy makes you look normal-sized.”

“This’ll be a novelty, at least. I’m not used to looking up when I talk to people.”

“You think he’s got some kind of gigantism?”

“I think it would be impolite to ask.”

“I’ll ask Emerald, she’ll tell me.” He got out of the car and grabbed his overnight bag from the
back seat, then hurried up the walk without waiting for James. He stopped only a moment to speak
to Hazel, who told him Emerald was in her room, and to go on inside, before doing just that.

It was the work of a moment to find Emerald’s room- the house was split level, with two bedrooms
upstairs. The one on the left had a sign with “Emerald” written on it in fancy green letters; process
of elimination suggested that one was probably hers. He’d barely knocked than she threw it open.

She’d changed her hair again. A wide braid twisted around the crown of her head, a green cloud of
hair puffing out behind it. He stared.

“...okay, okay, stop looking at it,” she said, weirdly self-conscious. She pushed her hands back over
her hair, then grabbed his hand. “Come on, I want to show you the house.”

“-oh. Right.” He let her pull him along, though she let go of his hand almost immediately. “...it
looks good,” he added, shoving his hands into his pockets. “I like it.”

/-

James was only halfway up the walk later when the door was flung open and a high voice shouted,
“Uncle James!”, his only warning before a solid red mass collided with his knees. He looked down
at Ruby, amusement tugging at his lips.

“Hello to you too,” he said.

Ruby pulled away, and held up her arms in an ‘up’ motion. “Pick me up, pick me up! I want to be
tall again!”

“Ruby, don’t be rude,” came Tai’s admonishment, as he followed his daughter out of the front
door. “You can ask without demanding.”

But James had already lifted Ruby onto his shoulders, undermining Tai’s words. Ruby folded her
arms on top of James’ head.

“Don’t be the fun police, Dad.”

“Yeah, Tai,” James echoed, trying not to laugh. “Don’t be the fun police.”

Tai looked unimpressed. “I can’t believe I ever wondered how you and Qrow could be
compatible.”

“That was hurtful,” James said, still fighting to keep a straight face. Above him, Ruby nodded.

“Yeah, Dad, that was really uncalled for.”

“I’m sure it’ll be fine.”

“You don’t get to make that call though!” Ruby folded her arms across her front and pouted; James
adjusted his grip on her ankles, lest she unbalance and fall. “When you hurt someone’s feelings,
you don’t get to decide you didn’t!”

Tai looked from Ruby to James, who hastily schooled his face into the most hurt expression he
could muster, and then back to Ruby. “This is my penance for raising good kids, isn’t it?”

“You really did walk right into this,” James agreed.

“All right, all right! I’m very sorry I ever implied you were too sensible or mature for my brother.
“Happy now?”

James leaned his head back slightly to address Ruby. “What do you think?”

“I don’t know, it felt a little backhanded to me.”

“I think it’s the best I’m going to get.”

“Jesus Christ,” Tai muttered. “I’m going inside. Don’t spoil my daughter too much, I’m the one that actually has to live with her.”

“That’s kind of the point!” James called after him, then tilted his head back again, because Ruby was rummaging into her hoodie for, he guessed, her notepad. “Well?”

“Okay, now that the fun police has gone, I have questions.”

“Ask away,” he told her. “I’ll answer what I can while we look for the others.”

“I think they’re in the back yard,” Ruby said helpfully, so James directed his steps that way. “Okay, first question. We watched a movie a few weeks ago with a half-robot man in it.”

“Cyborg,” James corrected. “A cyborg is someone with a more-or-less even mix of living and artificial parts. A robot would be fully artificial, and an android is mostly artificial, with some elements of organic construction.”

The notebook was set on his head to brace it while she scribbled this, and then she went on. “So, anyway, the cyborg man got hit with an electric shock, and it fried his systems! But I was thinking, if an artificially constructed body part is weak to electric shock, shouldn’t there be some kind of defense in place to prevent it?”

“There usually is,” James told her, pushing open the gate to the backyard. “But it can only withstand so much, so anything beyond what it can withstand would still have an effect.”

Unfortunately, the others weren’t in the back yard as predicted. James set Ruby on the porch and picked up a pecan from the bucket sitting there.

“Here, think of like this. You can’t crack a pecan open with your bare hands, right?”

She took the pecan from him and tried, squishing it between her little hands as hard as she could before finally shaking her head.

“No. My hands are too soft. Dad can, though!”

“I just bet he can,” agreed James, who had on more than one occasion been distracted by Tai’s arms*. “The pecan’s shell is like a failsafe- it’s there to protect the seed inside until it’s ready to grow, just like failsafes are there to protect the body systems from electric shock.”

He took the pecan from her and squeezed it carefully between the finger and thumb on his artificial side, until it cracked down the middle. He handed it back to her, and she eagerly began digging the meat out.

“The shell can only withstand so much, just like a failsafe can only withstand so much. So if I put enough pressure- or if there’s enough electricity- then the failsafes… fail. And the pecan cracks and the systems fry.”

She frowned. “You’ve got good failsafes, right?”
His smile grew fond. “Yes. The failsafes we develop at the lab are very good, and mine are the best we can make, since I’m at more of a hazard than the average prosthetics user.”

“Right, cause you need yours to live.” Ruby took his hand and pulled him toward the back door. “If they’re not out here, they must have come inside.”

“How long were you waiting at the door for me?” He pushed the sliding door open, and found Nora, Penny, and Yang in the kitchen, surrounded by a mess and the smell of brownies.

“I don’t know, like two hours?”

“It was ten minutes,” Yang corrected, and added, “She was supposed to keep you busy until we got the brownies out of the oven and hidden. They were going to be a surprise.”

“If you give me one now I’ll pretend I didn’t know about them later.”

“They’re not even ready yet!”

“Just how long were you expecting Ruby to distract me?” he asked, and then turned to Ruby, who was holding up her notepad pointedly. There were questions scrawled down both sides, some even crammed into the margins. “Ah.”

“It’s been ages since I saw you, I had to write all my robot questions down,” Ruby said, climbing up to the table and setting her notepad down. She flipped to a new page and started scribbling down James’s explanation to the first. “You don’t have to answer them all right now, though.”

“We’ll see if we can get through the lot this weekend,” he promised. “Or as many as we can, so you can start writing down some new ones.”

“Hey, don’t neglect the rest of us while you’re here!” Nora protested, folding her arms and mock-glaring. “We’ve all got a lot of time to make up for so you’ll just have to divide up evenly.”

“You said it,” Yang chimed in, though judging by her look of amusement she was just going along with the group.

James laughed, and took a seat at the table near Ruby. As soon as he sat down, Nora claimed the chair on his other side, kneeling on it so she could be more level with him. From the counter, where Yang and Penny were cleaning, Yang tossed a damp washcloth at her pointedly.

“I wish I’d been this popular when I was in school,” James teased, while a grumbling Nora got up to help clean.

“Weren’t you?” Ruby asked, but Yang grinned.

“I bet you were that smug kid that knew everything and that all the other kids hated,” she predicted, prompting a sheepish smile from James.

“The phrase teacher’s pet was thrown at me more than once in school,” he admitted. “You wouldn’t have liked me very much if we’d been in school together.”

“I would have liked you,” Ruby said loyally, at the same time Yang said, “I probably would have beat you up on principle.”

-/-

Mercury only saw Hazel a little bit on his tour of the little house; he saw him momentarily while
James said goodbye and reminded him to call if he needed anything, and then again a little later when Emerald led him down to the garage that made up the lower half of their split level. He was working on a motorcycle on blocks in one corner, and they only stayed long enough to decide what to do for dinner.

(They decided to order pizza, which James had done exactly once since Mercury had moved in, preferring to cook their meals himself. Mercury, who had eaten mostly take-out and instant up to this point in his life, had complained about this to Penny once, and she’d told him that James had dietary needs that meant it was better for him if he or someone who knew about them prepared his food. This, at least, had explained his obsession with asking Mercury what he wanted to eat, and reminding him repeatedly that he had options. But Jesus, he could have just said.)

“So has he got some kind of gigantism going on or something?” Mercury asked, ten minutes later when they were walking around the block so Emerald could show him the neighborhood.

“I haven’t asked,” Emerald admitted. “He could just be big.”

“He has a motorcycle,” Mercury observed. “That’s pretty cool. Why did you get the cool guardian? I can’t imagine General Hardass ever riding a motorcycle. Probably too dangerous or irresponsible or something.” He snorted, amusing himself with a mental image of how James would react to a motorcycle.

“He got it not too long before I moved here,” Emerald said. “He said if I’m still with him when he finishes building it he’ll show me how to ride it.”

“Jesus.” Mercury was impressed, grudgingly so. He couldn’t imagine James having a motorcycle, let alone teaching him how to ride it at fourteen. “You think you’ll still be here by then? How long does it take to build a motorcycle?”

“I don’t know, but- um-” She chewed her lip thoughtfully. “Listen, I want to tell you something that happened the other day.”

Mercury got a bad feeling in the pit of his stomach. He knew that look in Emerald’s eye. “Yeah?”

“Okay, so, we were at Mrs. Coal’s, and she was showing me how to-” She gestured at her hair, “- and she said that this is the sort of thing that my mother should have been teaching me since I was little.”

“You’ve never had one of those,” Mercury pointed out, already souring to this Mrs. Coal. Did she think that it was Emerald’s fault no one had ever taught her how to braid her own hair?

“I told her that! And then she looked at Hazel and said that, well, at least my dad had sense enough to get someone to teach me eventually.”

Mercury’s stomach twisted more. He’d known this conversation was going to happen sooner or later.

“He’s not your dad.”

“I know, Mercury,” Emerald scowled. “I started to say that, I was going to correct her- it’s never really come up that I’m a foster kid, you know? But before I could really tell her that Hazel interrupted and asked if there was anything else I should have been taught, if she was going to be like that, and…” She shrugged, and chanced a sidelong look at him. “...say something.”

“You’re not stupid,” he spat. “Don’t act like it.” He kicked at a rock in the road, sending it skidding
across the asphalt.

“I’m not. I’m just…” She rubbed at her temples, and said, “Look, I’m not- I’m just saying. That’s what he said. He didn’t have to say that, he could have corrected her first, he could have let me correct her- I’m just saying, what if- what if-” She broke off, and shrugged. “You know.”

“I know,” he muttered. He kicked another rock; it shot across the road and disappeared into a ditch.

“Why are you like this, Emerald? You always get your hopes up- you always get disappointed. You were like this with Cinder, too, and look where that got you.”

“Cinder loved me!” she protested.

He chanced a glance at her, eyes flickering to her hair, and then scowled. “Cinder was using you. When are you going to grow up and realize that? She didn’t care about us! She didn’t care about you! And I don’t know what Hazel is getting at, but he’s not gonna adopt you! They don’t do that! Not for problem kids like us! You’re not gonna get some magical happily ever after, and the sooner you realize that-”

“What?!” She rounded on him, fists up instinctively. “What?!” she spat again. “The sooner I realize it, the sooner I’ll be as miserable as you? Maybe I don’t want that!” Her hands were shaking, he realized. She lowered them, clenched at her side. “Not everyone is your dad,” she hissed. “Not everyone is Tyrian, and not everyone is Qrow fucking Branwen.”

She stopped, and took a long, deep breath, and let it out slowly.

“You’re right, I’m not stupid. I know that most people aren’t going to give a shit about me. You think I haven’t learned that the hard way?” Another shaky breath. Her ire seemed to be rising again. “I know that my odds of a happy ending are slim to none. But I have to- I need to believe that there’s someone out there who can love me. I won’t survive if I can’t believe that.”

She blinked hard, then, and like a punch to the gut Mercury realized she was on the verge of tears.

“So don’t you dare talk to me like a naive goddamn fool, Mercury Black, just because you’re too afraid to let someone care about you!”

The fractures inside of Mercury spread. He had never seen Emerald cry before. Never for Tyrian’s carefully constructed taunts, not when Cinder ran away, not even when they were separated.

He wanted to say something reassuring. He wanted to tell her not to cry, or that she was scaring him, or that it wasn’t like he wanted her to be rejected. He wanted to tell her that it was going to be okay, that even if no one else in the world ever loved her he still would.

He wanted to tell her how scared he was that she would give up on him too.

He wanted to say a lot of things. What he actually said was: “Well fine. If you want to live in your stupid little fantasy world then- then- don’t involve me in it!”

And then, without another word, spun on his heel and stormed off down the road, and when he heard her footsteps moving behind him to catch up, took off at a run.

-/-

Mercury had always been a good runner. Even after losing his legs, it was one of the first things he relearned once he had his prosthetics. He felt safest when he was running.
But even he couldn’t run forever. He slowed to a jog and then to a walk after awhile, looking around uncomfortably when he realized he had no idea how to get back to Emerald’s.

He’d ended up at a park, one he vaguely remembered passing on the drive here. He headed over to one of the benches dotting it and sank down into it, shaking slightly from exhaustion and from anger, anger that was slowly fading to be replaced with misery.

This was it, wasn’t it? He’d found the line with Emerald. He’d made her cry. Even Tyrian hadn’t managed to do that, and he’d tried.

She probably hated him now. Of course she hated him now. She had every right to. Gods, what was wrong with him?

His fists clenched in his jeans, and he leaned back and shouted all his rage and frustration and despair at the sky. The sound echoed around him, but no one appeared to ask why he was screaming, and after a second he leaned forward instead, fisting his hands hard into his hair and willing everything to stop hurting.

-/-

Chapter End Notes

*What? It's not his brother.

(James and Ruby's relationship in this world gives me life. CRWBY, please, I know I ask you for so many things, but please just give me some Ruby and James bonding next season.)

(My d-key chose a very unfortunate place to stick in the above sentence.)
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

Message erased unsent.

Chapter Notes

This is why you don't take advice from random old ladies on park benches.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

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Emerald had made to go after Mercury when he stormed off, but then he’d started running, and she’d stopped. There was no way she’d catch him, and even if she did, that was a quick way to get hit. He only had one response to getting caught when he was running; anything that happened to her if she tried it would be her own blame.

Instead she turned around and trudged home, trying and utterly failing not to keep crying. She hated feeling like this, that moment when her anger turned to tears, but more than that she hated being witnessed. She’d always managed to hide it before; when Cinder left, when Tyrian’s words cut too deep, she’d swallowed the sobs until they’d made a stony weight in her chest and waited until she was alone to let them out, waited until no one would know.

The night she and Mercury were separated she’d curled over in the shower at her temporary home and cried herself out until the water was ice on her back, and then gone downstairs to eat dinner with her temporary guardians like nothing at all had happened.

But Mercury was always going to be the exception, wasn’t he? He was too close- too deep- he knew all the cracks in her armor, knew how to dig in and put all his weight behind a few choice comments. It was always like that with them: they sniped at each other, barped words, sharp words, all carefully calculated to draw blood. Why should this be any different?

This was it, wasn’t it? The end. Their friendship was never meant to last- she could see that now. When Cinder was around she’d pushed them together, made them a team, kept them focused on her goal of escape-

(Emerald had always assumed that escape was meant for all of them)

- and when she’d run away left, they’d had to work together to survive Tyrian’s wrath. He hadn’t responded well to the loss of his favorite plaything , and falling apart then would have been fatal.

But now she was with Hazel, and Hazel was good to her (he was so good to her, she hadn’t told Mercury even a tenth of it, he wouldn’t understand, he refused to understand), and he was with Dr. Ironwood and underneath the heavy layer of sarcasm and mistrust she could see that he was good to Mercury, was good for Mercury, and they weren’t together and didn’t need each other anymore.
and-and-

-and that was where it ended. Their friendship was based on a mutual need to survive and relationships built in duress could never last and he was her *best friend* and she loved him she *loved him* but when it really came down to it-

-she wasn’t sure he felt the same.

-/

Hazel was just ordering their pizza when she made it home. He took one look at her and the obvious tear-tracks on her face and hung up midorder.


She shrugged. “We argued. He ran off. I don’t know where he went.”

“Emerald…” He caught her shoulder, oh-so-gentle, and looked her over carefully. She’d been afraid of him, at first, but- he was always so gentle with her. “We should find him. Ironwood won’t trust me with him again if I let him run off the first time I have him.”

“I don’t think he’ll want to come back anyway,” she said, and tried not to start crying again at how much that thought hurt. She forced the feeling down, and rolled her shoulders back, trying to regain some semblance of her usual self. “But, yeah, we should find him. He doesn’t really know the neighborhood so he could be anywhere.”

-/

Mercury was suddenly aware of a figure passing in front of him, and looked up to see a small elderly woman leaning heavily on a cane.

“Um… hello?”

“Hello!” she chirped, and kept going until she was able to hop up onto the bench. “Sorry to interrupt your brooding, young man, but these old bones aren’t what they were and I need to rest.”

“It’s uh, it’s fine.” He scrubbed his hands through his hair and sat up straight. “And I’m not brooding!”

“Well I don’t know what you call it but from where I’m standing, it seems very much like brooding to me.”

“Well I don’t remember asking you.”

She smiled, and nodded. “Hm, well, there is that. I’m Maria, by the way. In case you’d like to know who you’re sassing.”

“Oh god.” He rolled his eyes. “Yeah, sure, okay. I’m Mercury.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Mercury.” She took a brown paper bag out of her shirt and held it out in offering. “Would you like some cashews?”

“Uhhh.” How. Was he supposed to respond to this woman.

He reached in and took a handful of cashews. “Thanks.”
“No problem, young man. I have plenty where those came from.”

He looked down at the cashews in his hand, and then at the bag she was now rummaging in, and then at the front closure on her shirt, and wondered at that comment. And then decided not to ask questions he didn’t want the answer to. He focused instead on his cashews, and his stomach, at the first sign of food, chose that moment to remind him that it had been quite a while since lunch. He was starving.

Beside him, Maria smiled. “Sounds like those cashews came at the right time, hm?”

“I’m famished,” he said. “We were going to have pizza tonight- um…”

They probably still would, but no doubt Emerald would want him to go home. Instead of sitting around eating pizza and watching terrible tv, he’d likely eat in silence while waiting for Dr. Ironwood to-

( cut his weekend with Qrow short so he could drive a second three hour round trip to pick up his inconvenient charge after all the trouble they’d gone through to arrange this visit in the first place )

-arrive.

Maria nodded. “Are you not going to have pizza now?”

“I mean, we probably will, just not, like we were.” He groaned and resumed his previous position. “I was really looking forward to this weekend. Now she hates me.”

“Oh.”

He glared. “Ah what?”

“Just Ah. Why do you think she hates you?”

“How is that any of your business?”

“It’s not,” she said. “But you’re the one that brought it up. I’m just being polite. We can sit quietly if you like; it’s all the same to me.”

“Oh. Good.” He clamped his mouth shut pointedly and went back to not brooding, while she turned her attention to her cashews and, to all appearances, ignored him entirely.

I won’t survive if I can’t believe that. Mercury had been turning that comment over and over in his head while he sat there. It had scared him, more than anything else about their fight: he didn’t like the implications.

How long had that been a thing? He knew she’d taken Cinder’s abandonment hard, but he’d assumed it was because she’d left them behind, not because she’d left them at all. Had she really thought Cinder loved her? He’d always assumed she knew they were just tools to their older housemate, a means to an end.

He’d assumed a lot, actually. Everything he knew, or thought he knew about Emerald, he’d just assumed. Had he ever asked? Had he ever bothered to find out?

“Gods,” he said. “I’m an asshole.”

“Are you talking about in general, or just now this moment?”
He startled; he’d forgotten Maria was there. He turned back to her to tell her to leave him alone.

“That’s why she hates me,” he found himself saying instead. “Because I’m an asshole. I’ve been so busy unloading my problems onto her I never bothered to ask how she was doing.” He dug the heels of his hands into his eyes until spots popped in his vision. “I don’t deserve her.”

“Ah,” came the response again, amusement touching it. “Well now. It sounds to me like you’re learning a very important lesson about relationships here. How lucky you are.”

“Lucky?” he snapped. “You call this lucky?”

“Yes. Many people make it all the way to adulthood before they realize that relationships are necessarily reciprocal or they won’t work.”

“Your meaning?”

“I mean,” she said, turning to face him, “that no one owes it to you to care about you. That you have to actually put work into relationships instead of expecting everyone to give you what you need and never returning the effort.”

“...oh.”

Well, that was something to think about, at least.

He should probably call Dr. Ironwood to come pick him up. He took his phone from his pocket, but after staring blankly at it for a minute, he pulled up his text-chat with Emerald instead.

I’m so

I’m an asshole

There was a long pause while he waited, and then the reply appeared.

You are an asshole

I’m sorry

I’m s

I should have li

I should have a

How long have y

He sighed.

I’m sorry

There was another beat, and then the typing dots appeared. They vanished almost as quickly, and were replaced with more, which pulsed for what felt like ages before vanishing again. This time the reply came after less than a second.

Where are you, dickhead?

-/-
Mercury and Emerald didn’t talk much while they ate their pizza, old Pals reruns playing in the background while Hazel asked Mercury questions about himself.

He waved them away after dinner and assured them he’d clean up himself, and they headed up to Emerald’s room in equal silence.

He showered. She showered. They both took a long time to return. Neither of them had much to say.

It was uncomfortable, this awkward, hurt silence that hung over them. It was nothing like the weekend they’d looked forward to, nothing like the weekend he’d been hoping for. He just sat there playing on his phone while she drew in her notebook.

-/-

Back when they were living with Tyrian, they’d gotten into the habit of sleeping in shifts. Though he rarely bothered them at night, preferring the sanctity of his basement, neither of them had felt entirely safe without any warning system to let them know if he was approaching. Separated, there’d been no way or need for this, though Mercury still found himself waking up in cycles and trying desperately to return to sleep once he realized he was safe in his room in James’ house.

Now, after Hazel bid them good night, he slipped off of the air mattress they’d put him on for the weekend and nudged Emerald until she scooted over, raising her covers to let him in.

“Hey,” he murmured, when she rolled onto her side to face him.

“Hey.”

More silence. It was agony, but it looked like she was going to make him be the one to break it. He did, eventually.

“I’m. Um.” A break, he started again. “What I said to you. I shouldn’t have.”

“No, you shouldn’t.”

More silence. She was waiting for something, but he wasn’t sure what. What did she want from him? He’d apologized. He’d acknowledged he was wrong. What else could he say?

“I didn’t, um.” He scrubbed his hands irritably through his hair, and tried again. “I thought you were just being delusional. I thought you were setting yourself up for heartbreak and it didn’t, um. I didn’t realize you were, that you needed to. Um.”

She finally took pity on him, reaching up to cover his mouth with one finger. “Okay, that’s enough. I get it.” She brought her hand away, and spent a long moment watching him thoughtfully. “I’m sorry, too. I never should have… said that.”

“No, you were right. I’m-“ He hesitated, and took a deep breath. He needed to say this, and if he didn’t say it now, in the dark, when she was just a shadow in the moonlight that peeked between the slit in her curtains, he wouldn’t be able to say it at all. “You’re my best friend,” he said in a rush. “And I’m really scared that you’re going to- that- that you’ll leave me, too. And I don’t really know how I’d deal with that.”

She was quiet after that; in the moonlight, she had a slightly ethereal quality to her, she almost seemed to glow, or maybe it was just his imagination running away with him. Suddenly she grabbed his hand and scooted closer, close enough they were nearly flush, hands clasped between
them. She leaned her head forward and rested her forehead against his.

“I am never, ever going to leave you,” she said. “Okay? Whatever happens. We’re not going to lose each other again. We’re a team- we have to be. Maybe it’s not so urgent anymore, but I still need you. I think you need me, too. So we’ll always have each other, whatever it takes. Okay?”

He nodded. “Okay.” And then, in the darkness that had always kept their secrets for them, he said, very quietly, “I love you.”

-/-

It was weird sleeping in Qrow’s bed without him, but when James pulled back the covers, there was a note pinned to the pillow in Qrow’s messy hand.

*See you soon, Tinman. Keep the covers warm for me ;)*

James’ expression softened into fondness and he set the note aside before slipping in between the sheets, settling down and hoping Qrow didn’t stay gone too long.

-/-

It was a couple hours later before James woke to the sound of the door opening and then being latched closed. By the faint moonlight seeping in through the blinds he could make out the unmistakable silhouette of Qrow emptying his pockets and moving over toward him. The mattress dipped slightly then, and fluttering kisses were peppered over his face.

He smiled sleepily and reached up to rest his hand against Qrow’s cheek.

“Oh,” he murmured, and got a tired, “Hey yourself,” in response.

“I’m gonna go shower real quick,” Qrow went on. “I won’t be long.”

James hummed a vague acknowledgement and let his eyes drift closed again while he waited.

-/-

Contrary to Qrow’s words, it must have been at least forty-five minutes, if not an hour, before he finally emerged from the bathroom. Once more the mattress dipped and then Qrow was under the covers with him, trying to find a comfortable position without waking James too much.

Not likely. James rolled over and found Qrow’s head with his hands, holding him still long enough to press a few of those fluttering kisses to his cheeks before pulling back to study him closely in the half-light.

Even in shadow he seemed exhausted: ragged and rough around the edges. James shifted his hands up to smooth at the worried creases in his forehead.

“You okay?”

Qrow smiled weakly and leaned into his touch. “I’m just tired,” he said. “I’m getting too old to stay out this late.” He forced a laugh as weak as his smile. “I’m nearly forty, you know. It’s up there on my horizon. Looming.”

James hummed his disapproval. “Yes, well. Kindly remember that I’m six years older than you, hm? Forty might be looming on your horizon, but it’s a blip in my rearview mirror.”
“Yeah, yeah, whatever you say, you old man.” Qrow’s smile was a little closer to genuine this time, and then faded. “You’re aging better than me, at least.”

“You’re aging just fine.”

“Nah. I’ve drunk away most of my brain and my liver’s probably shot to all hell. Going gray already- in my thirties, Jim.”

“I have implants in my brain, my liver’s artificial, and I’ve had a gray streak since college,” James reminded him. “What’s this about?”

Qrow shrugged. “Just feeling my mistakes, is all. Got a lot of ‘em. Nearly forty years of ‘em.” He sighed, and burrowed close, burying himself in James as much as he could. “You were supposed to be asleep when I got home,” he said, neatly deflecting the topic. “I was gonna sneak in and slip in and wake up with you in the morning. It was gonna be romantic. I had it all planned out.”

“Ah, but you forgot to account for one thing.”

“And what’s that?”

“I don’t sleep nearly so well without you with me. Of course I was going to wake up when you got here.”

“Silly me, should have caught onto that.” He tilted his head back and forced a smile, and, “Um, can I-...”

“Hm?”

There was a beat, and Qrow shook his head. “Nothing. Never mind. Get some sleep, it’s late and I’m exhausted and I’ve been looking forward to sleeping next to you all week.”

“Qrow, is everything okay?”

He smoothed his hands over James’ chest and forced that smile again. “Everything’s fine. You’re here now. Why wouldn’t it be fine?”

James studied him for awhile, watching the tired lines that creased his face and the droop of his eyelids, and finally nodded. “Okay. Get some sleep, then.” A kiss to his forehead, and, “I love you.”

Silence, apart from a sleepy acknowledging hum. Qrow’s eyes had already drifted closed, and as James watched, his breathing evened into true sleep not long after.

-/-

Chapter End Notes

Seriously, don't take advice from little old ladies on park benches.
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

Making up is hard to do.

Chapter Notes

Content warning: There's fade-to-black sexual content at the beginning of this chapter! It's not exactly explicit, but it does toe the line. It's the first scene if you want to skip it.

(A lot of this chapter is just filler, but I needed to cover the whole weekend, so)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-/-

James woke to sunlight and Qrow half-hard against his hip, and because he saw no reason not to do something about that, Qrow woke up very soon after that fully hard, with James’ lips on his neck and hand on his dick.

He hummed and stretched out to lay languorously while James saw to him. “Mmm, now this is a way to wake up,” he said, content for the moment to just leave James to his work. James stopped sucking a mark on his collarbone and leaned up to kiss him deeply, and got a pair of hands tangling into his hair for his efforts.

“Missed you,” James said, and Qrow decided it was time to become an active participant in his own ravishing. He moved his thigh a little, searching, and was rewarded with a pleasant noise from James, a noise that Qrow happily swallowed up in another kiss.

He grinned, “Well, we’re awake now,” and got to work.

-/-

Mercury woke to a heavy thump on the door. He startled and gasped, and inhaled a mouthful of hair in the process. He choked, but it had the side effect that he stopped panicking before he even started, and by the time he’d stopped gagging had otherwise calmed down.

“The hell?”

Emerald sat up- she’d been awake for a bit, he judged. She stretched lazily. “Hazel believes in early mornings,” she said, and yawned. “But we can go back to sleep if you want, it’s a Saturday so there’s nothing important to do.”

He sat up as well. “Nah, I’m awake now.” He eyed her in his periphery. He’d woken in the night and, out of habit, stayed awake for awhile watching over her while she slept. It had given him time to think, and now he made up his mind. “So, um. This thing with your hair.”
She reached back to touch her hair self-consciously. “What about it?”

“It’s really important to you,” he said. “I can tell that, but I’m not- I don’t know why.”

She sighed. “I guess you wouldn’t get it, would you?”

“So make me get it. Um, it’s important to you, so- so it’s important to me. I want to understand.”

She gave him a sharp, searching look at that, but she must have approved of what she saw because she nodded. “Okay. It’s, um, it’s like this. So, most of my guardians- all of my guardians, really- they all didn’t really- they said that- that it was too much trouble to really do anything with my hair. They didn’t know, um, they didn’t know how to take care of it and they, they said it didn’t matter to learn because I wouldn’t be with them long anyway. Or, that was the gist of it, really.”

Mercury’s lips curled into a sneer. “Ugh.”

“Yeah.” She sighed. “Most of them made me keep it short so it wouldn’t be ‘unmanageable’, but the one before Tyrian let me grow it out as long as I kept it straightened. And then- well- you know about what happened then.”

He nodded. He knew, yes- had gone with her and Cinder every couple months to touch up the perm where it was growing out at the roots. Where they got the money for it was anyone’s guess; he suspected they’d probably stolen it. None of them had any particular scruples about that, at least, and Emerald had the quickest fingers.

And then Cinder had left and--

(He’d never really thought of it. Everything had gotten worse when Cinder left, so what did it matter that she’d gotten frustrated and taken a pair of scissors to her hair? Hell, he’d done the same thing at his last home, when it had finally clicked in his head what the confusing things he’d been feeling ever since puberty kicked in had really meant. So so what if she cut all her hair off? With everything as bad as it was, what was one more tiny little thing?)

(And why did he never, ever ask?)

“And anyway,” she went on, hugging her knees to her chest. “After I came here it was starting to get all ratty again, and Hazel took one look at it and said he’d find me a hairdresser as soon as he could.” She shrugged. “He asked around. Found out I didn’t know how to do anything with it and then looked for someone who would teach me instead of just doing it and moving on.”

Things were starting to make sense in Mercury’s head. It was a lot of trouble to go through- if that was an example of Hazel’s guardianship, it was no wonder Emerald was so over the moon about him.

Emerald reached over and grabbed her pillow, shoving it into his hands. “He got me this, too- the pillowcase, I mean. It’s satin. Mrs. Coal told him that was better for my hair, and he just- he said okay and got me one. I mean.” She took the pillow back, and rubbed her hand over it slowly. “I know it doesn’t sound like much-”

“No, I get it. At least, I think I get it.” He rubbed the back of his neck. “I never realized- you never said.”

“You never asked.”

“...yeah.” He hung his head, refused to look at her. “I think I’m guilty of a lot of that.”
“Well.” She considered, and, “We’ve got all weekend ahead of us.”

-/-

When James and Qrow finally emerged from Qrow’s room later, they’d showered and dressed and been made aware that they were both very hungry- for something other than each other- now.

The rest of the family were already in the kitchen. The girls were sitting around the table, a roll of paper spread out between them, while Tai washed the breakfast dishes. When they came in, they got an idle glance before everyone returned to what they were doing, but before they could do something about food, Ruby said, very loudly, “Uncle Qrow has a hickey!”

Qrow’s hand slapped over the mark on his collarbone, where his shirt had inevitably slipped down, and he jabbed a finger of his other hand at her in admonishment. “Hey, hey,” he said. “Any hickies I may or may not have are none of your business, got it?”

Everyone was paying attention now. A blush was spreading up James’ neck.

“Maybe you should put on a different shirt,” he murmured, close enough that only Qrow could hear, and Qrow murmured back, “No point, none of ‘em go high enough up.”

And then, because James was every bit as devious as Qrow claimed and no one else believed, he went on, “You could borrow one of mine.”

Qrow’s knees honest-to-gods buckled. He spun on his heel and disappeared back into his room, returning a moment later in one of James’ t-shirts, which hung loose around his frame but the collar went high enough to cover the marks James had left.

“All right, so now that we’re done with that unnecessary conversation-” He patted James’ chest. “You go sit down, big guy, I’m making you pancakes.”

Suddenly they had everyone’s attention again.

“Why are you making him pancakes?” Nora demanded.

“Nepotism,” Qrow said, moving over to the kitchen.

“You always say that. You should make us pancakes, too.”

“What? Come on, I’m trying to be romantic here.”

“That is pretty romantic,” Nora agreed. “I would probably marry a boy if he made romantic pancakes for me.”

“It would be more romantic if you made pancakes for all of us,” Ruby said.

“How so?”

She rolled her eyes. “Duh. Because we want pancakes, and it would make us happy, and Uncle James loves us so much he wants us to be happy, so he would be happy if you made us pancakes. Right, Uncle James?”

She turned her sweetest look onto James, who raised an eyebrow at her. “I feel like I would be digging myself into a hole if I disagreed with you.”

“What about the hole you’re digging with me if you agree?” Qrow demanded.
James made a show of considering this, looking from Qrow to Ruby, and back to Qrow. “Sorry Qrow,” he said, shrugging. “The kids take priority.”

“Oh, what- oh, come on!” He huffed. “All right, smarty-britches, you win this round. I’ll make you all some pancakes.” He turned away, dumping flour into the bowl and muttering to himself while he got to work.

While Qrow worked to make second breakfast, James came over to see what the girls were doing.

“We are working on the map for our dungeons game,” Penny explained, scooting over so that James could stand between her and Nora. “We are trying to figure out how far we have traveled since we began our campaign.”

“I’ve been reading your campaign notebook,” James said. “I’m impressed with how creative you guys have gotten.”

“You’re gonna be our tm tonight, right?” Nora asked, and he nodded.

“I have something fun planned for you. I hope you’ll enjoy it.”

Qrow looked up from the pancake batter he was mixing long enough to call, “Neeeeerd!”

-/-

Emerald took Mercury out into the neighborhood after a breakfast of leftover pizza. She’d been getting friendly with some of the local kids, and they ran into one of them while they walked, an older teenager that Emerald introduced as Terra Cotta, which Mercury privately thought was the stupidest name he’d ever heard, apart from maybe Roman Torchwick.

After they parted, Mercury folded his arms in thought. “What I wanna know is, why do I meet so many lesbians, like, constantly?”

Emerald looked impressed. “Forget that, what I wanna know is how you have such good gaydar. How do you know about Terra?”

“Oh come on, it’s really obvious.” When she looked disbelieving, he tilted his head. “Really? You can’t just tell?”

She shook her head. “Maybe it’s because- you know, you’re always making sure you don’t accidentally send lesbian signals. Maybe that’s why you know what all the signals are.”

“Maybe.”

-/-

Ozpin stopped by after lunch to discuss Qrow’s Halloween program with him, sending Oscar off to play with the girls while they talked. Qrow watched him run off, and once he was gone put voice to a thought that had occurred to him recently.

“Hey Oz.”

“Yes?”

“Oscar’s been living with you for like two years now, right?”

“Something like that, yes. Why do you ask?”
“It’s just- you never explained what he was to you. He just turned up one day. What gives?”

Ozpin raised an eyebrow at him. “Ah, I see. He’s- let’s see-” He considered. “My brother, maybe?”

“What?!”

“Or was he a cousin…?”

“You don’t know?”

He stroked his chin thoughtfully at this, and then shook his head. “My family is quite large, you know, it’s not easy to keep track of.”

Qrow held up a hand. “I’m sorry, back up and explain to me again the part where he *could* be your brother. How could he be your *brother*? You’re like, my age. I think. How old are your parents?”

There was a silence, and then Ozpin looked Qrow right in the eye and said, “Older than me.”

-/-

Hazel had a date that night, apparently, so he left after dinner. Before he left, he reminded them to keep the doors and windows locked, and that Ms. Calavera was home next door in case of an emergency.

“Enjoy your date,” Emerald said, and then they were alone. Once he had pulled out of the driveway, she turned to Mercury with a grin. “Wanna drag the air mattress down here and sleep in the living room?”

“Absolutely.”

-/-

After getting the mattress set up they dug out Hazel’s boxset of the nineties Vampire Mummy Werewolf cartoon and spent several hours laughing themselves sick over the goofy writing and bad *bad bad* animation, before falling asleep in a tangle of limbs and blankets with real smiles on their faces.

They woke up a while later to an animatronic shark woman making a dramatic speech while behind them, the deadbolt on the door clicked slowly. Mercury was on his feet in a second, eyes darting around the room before he’d even properly woken, but Emerald just took his hand and laced their fingers together, other hand coming to his shoulder.

“Breathe,” she whispered. “It’s just Hazel coming home from his date.”

The door opened, and it was indeed Hazel. He looked confused to see them there.

“What are you doing in the living room?”

“We were watching tv and we fell asleep,” Emerald said. Her thumb moved, rubbing circles on Mercury’s knuckles. “How was your date?”

“Not great,” he said. “We probably won’t go out again. Are you watching the Vampire Mummy Werewolf cartoon?”

“Yeah! Mercury’s never seen this one before. Wanna watch it with us for awhile?” In her periphery she could see that Mercury had schooled his expression into his usual disinterested contempt, but
his hand was still shaking in hers.

“Sure.” Hazel settled onto the couch, while Emerald dragged Mercury back down to sit on the air mattress with her. She wasn’t the only one watching him, she realized; Hazel was watching him carefully, thoughtfully, and she hoped he wouldn’t ask- well, anything, really, but then- “Is there any popcorn?”

Emerald carefully didn’t let out a relieved sigh, but in her heart she felt it.

-/-

James didn’t really want to leave the comfort of the Xiaolong-Branwen household Sunday afternoon, but he had a meeting scheduled at the Argus Military Base, and he’d put it off long enough as it was.

The leader of the base wasn’t his favorite person in the world, but he didn’t have much choice in the matter. The Polendina Foundation Scholarship Fund was Josef’s legacy, a way to give brilliant young minds the chance to nurture that brilliance, and like hell James was letting Cordova turn away potential candidates just because she didn’t see them having anything to offer the military.

Still, by the time he finished up at the base and went to pick up Mercury, he was tired and cranky and just wanted to be home-

-well, no, not entirely accurate. He wanted to be in a home he shared with Qrow, where Qrow could kiss away his exhaustion and smooth away the tired edges until he was just sleepy. That he couldn’t have that- not right now, and possibly not ever- just made him feel more exhausted, more cranky.

Mercury looked as tired as he felt when he arrived to pick the boy up.

“We had a late night,” Hazel said, by way of explanation, while the kids yawned. Mercury had at least already packed his overnight bag when James called, so there was little need to wait around. They only stayed long enough to share a few niceties before they were able to leave.

“Well?” James asked. “Did you have a fun weekend?”

“Hm? Oh.” Mercury had been staring out the window since they turned back onto the main road. “Yeah, it was good.” James wasn’t expecting any details, but Mercury went on with, “We watched the old Vampire Mummy Werewolf cartoon.”

“Oh? Sixties or nineties?”

“Nineties. It was really bad.”

James smiled. “It was. I remember watching it with my sister when we were your age, we laughed ourselves sick over some of the writing.”

Mercury looked amused. “Seriously? Sorry, but I’m calling bullshit on that. Not only can I not imagine Glynda ever laughing at anything, I can’t even imagine her being my age.”

“She was a kid once, you know.”

“No she wasn’t. She sprang into existence fully formed as a stuffy old lady.”

“Really? Then who in the world was that hellion I grew up with?”
James grinned, and, well, why not? He launched into the story of the time Glynda had snuck out to a Starship concert when they were not very much older than Mercury.*

Mercury had enjoyed the anecdote about his younger teacher, and the two that followed about both her and James, but as they drew nearer Vale, he went quiet again, staring out the window in thought as they drove. James watched him with concern, but there wasn’t much he could do when Mercury was back to monosyllabic answers, and honestly he was too tired to press anyway. He decided to let it go.

As they drew nearer to Patch Circle, he said, half-apologetically, “I just need to stop by and pick up Penny. We won’t be long.”

“What?” Mercury looked around again, and only just then seemed to realize where they were. “Oh…”

“Sorry.”

They pulled up to the house, and James reminded Mercury that they’d only be a minute before getting out and heading up the walk.

He was halfway there when he heard the car door slam, and turned around to see Mercury coming up behind him. He raised an eyebrow.

“Are you sure?”

Mercury shrugged, hands jammed into his pockets and gaze fixed forward.

“All right. If you’re sure.”

End Act II

*The alternate punchline to this joke is her parents' bafflement when she said she had snuck out to see Fullyclothed Gentlemen.

Shoutout to my coworker for listening to my explanation of Emerald's backstory and helping me understand the logistics I was working with.

(Answer the question, Oz.)

This is the end of Act II! Act III will be a bit of a wait; while I have finished writing it (it is in fact the same length as this one), I would like to get a dent into Act IV before I start posting it, as elements of III may need to be changed as a result of my plans for
Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

Halloween is fast approaching.

Chapter Notes

Act III begins! I'm now about eleven chapters ahead of y'all so I can't remember much of what was going through my head when writing some of this, so no forenotes this time, let's just jump right into it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-/-

Mercury had a lot to think about on the ride home. He enjoyed the interlude of listening to James talk about Glynda and himself as children, but the distraction only worked for so long, and in awhile he found himself drifting off into his thoughts, staring out the window as they drove and barely acknowledging James’ words when spoken to.

He was thinking about Emerald, mostly. And Penny. And the family that he’d found himself inserted into, and the sheer number of people who had been inconvenienced by his petty demands.

As they drew nearer to Vale, and turned down the familiar roads that led to Patch Circle, the weight of those demands was beginning to bear down on him, the sheer magnitude of how inconvenient he’d been.

When they stopped, while James headed up the walk to collect Penny, he came to a decision, sudden and sharp and as much a surprise to him as James.

“Are you sure?” James asked, that carefully searching look in his eyes.

Mercury shrugged, and shoved his hands into his pockets. No, he wasn’t sure. He wasn’t sure of anything right now. But if he didn’t do it now, he probably never would.

“All right,” James went on. “If you’re sure.”

-/-

Mercury had not taken two steps into the house before a familiar shriek pierced his hearing and a shape collided with him without any more warning than that.

“Mercury! You’re here!” Ruby cheered, wrapping herself around him while he stiffened at the sudden, unexpected contact. “I saw you coming up the walk!”

Just as soon as she appeared, Ruby was peeled off of him, and Mercury forced himself to relax. Tai was in front of him, holding Ruby under the arms.
“You’ve been told about doing that,” he scolded, and said, to Mercury, “Hi, kiddo.”

“Hi-hi.” He shoved his hands back into his pockets, and looked around nervously. The house looked more or less the same as he remembered. “Um, we came to pick up Penny.”

“She’s in Ruby and Nora’s room.”

“Right.”

“I’ll go get her,” James said, pushing past Tai and Ruby to go collect his daughter. Tai was still holding Ruby; when Mercury moved deeper into the house, he followed, still hanging onto her. Mercury wondered if he just hadn't thought to put her down, or was trying to prevent further hugs.

Mercury wasn’t really sure what he was looking for. He just wanted to see the house, he supposed, the first- and last- place he’d ever felt truly at home. It hurt a little that it should still look the same, but he wasn’t really sure why.

He made his way to the kitchen, standing just inside the doorway and looking around. Qrow’s room was beyond it- the door was closed right now. He wondered if Qrow was in it. Napping, maybe? He tended to rest on Sundays, since Saturday was one of his drinking nights.

Mercury turned to walk back out of the kitchen, unwilling to risk being there if Qrow came out of his room, and then stopped when he spotted the growth marks on the jamb. Instinctively, his eyes swept over it for his own marks, and then he froze again.

“What-?”

“It was Ruby’s idea,” Tai said, correctly guessing the line of Mercury’s thoughts. He finally set Ruby down. “When Qrow told us about running into you, she said it wouldn’t be right to leave your old name up instead of the one you were using.”

“One of my classmates came out a year ago,” Ruby chirped. “So we learned all about it together as a class.

“That’s- um- yeah.” He freed one hand to rub uncomfortably at his neck, eyes glued to the marks on the wall rather than look at either of them. It had never even occurred to him to think about. “I, uh. Thanks. I guess.”

“Are you sure you want to be here, Mercury?”

His hand went back into his pocket. He shrugged. “I’m really. Not sure about anything right now.”

“Well I’m glad you’re here,” Ruby said. “Does this mean Uncle James can come see us more often?”

He shrugged again. Possibly Ruby wasn’t the best person for him to talk to first time back in this house; she was overwhelming at the best of times, and he was feeling too drained for anything of her level.

While he considered this, James emerged from Ruby’s room with Penny and the girl he’d seen with Qrow last Christmas- Nora, he supposed. Qrow’s current foster child. It seemed odd that she was still living here, placements didn’t tend to last that long.

“Are you ready to go?” James asked.
He shrugged again. He was starting to feel like this might have been a mistake.

“We’ll go, then. Got everything, Penny?”

“Yes, Father~” she chirped, and then took Mercury’s hand very gently and led him to the door. “Come on, you can tell me about your weekend. I want to know how Emerald is doing.”

-/-

Mercury pulled out of his funk for the ride home enough to tell Penny about his weekend. He talked about Emerald showing him around the neighborhood and about staying up to watch the Vampire Mummy Werewolf cartoon, but left out the part about the fight and the small breakdown he’d had.

“We talked about Halloween this weekend,” Penny said, when he’d run out of things to tell her about. “Ren is going trick-or-treating with Sun and Jaune and Neptune and their brothers, and Nora is not invited because it is a ‘boys’ night’ and there are no girls allowed. And Winter is taking both of her siblings and Oscar, so she will not be able to take Ruby after all. So it will be me, Ruby, and Nora. Three, just like you said. Um, if you are still willing to take us,” she added.

He was about to protest, but her hurt face Friday flashed through his mind, and he found himself saying, instead, “I said I would, didn’t I? If they can live with the disappointment of going with me and not Winter or ~Ren~ then I don’t care either way.” He added, with a glance at James, “You did ask your old man about this, right?”

James chuckled. “She did, yes. All parents are perfectly all right with you and Emerald supervising, provided you stay in the selected neighborhood.”

“Ooh, such freedom,” Mercury teased. “The whole neighborhood, huh?” When James looked unimpressed, he rolled his eyes. “Relax, I’m just messing with you.”

-/-

With Halloween just a few weeks away, and the kids’ plans for trick-or-treating solidified, the conversation at recess and before school turned mostly to costumes. They were almost all of them in double-digits now- barring Ruby, who would turn ten on Halloween- and that meant that they needed to go all out on their costumes. They were not mere children anymore; storebought or cardboard costumes would no longer do.

They needed flash. They needed flare. They needed pizzazz. They needed… ideas.

“What about a dragon?” Nora said, holding up her hands as claws and roaring at Penny, who giggled and thrust an imaginary sword at her. Nora clutched her chest and pretended to fall over, only to pop back up immediately. “Or superheroes! I’d make a great X-Ray.”

Suddenly, Ruby’s eyes lit up. “Oh! We could wear themed costumes! Penny could be Vav and I’d make a great Mad King!”

Nora pouted. “Aww, why do you get to be the Mad King?”

“If you want to be the Mad King why didn’t you say so, instead of X-Ray?”

“I don’t know, I think I just didn’t realize he was an option.”

Behind them, swinging slowly for once, Sun perked up. “Man, I wish I’d thought of that first,
being the Mad King would be super fun.”

Penny giggled. “I am beginning to think that we should all go as the Mad King. It would be funny.”

“We three Mad Kings,” Ruby added, giggling as well. “Okay, okay. If we’re doing themed costumes we have to actually talk about it.”

“I dunno,” Nora said. “I kinda like Penny’s idea. Let’s just all be the Mad King.”

Penny put in, “I will be the Mad King if everyone is the Mad King, but if I were to be anyone from X-Ray and Vav I would like to be Hilda. She is my favorite.”

“Really?” Ruby asked.

“There is something about her that I just… like,” Penny said. “I cannot put my finger on it.”

Ruby considered this, and nodded. “I bet you’d be a great Hilda!” she said. “Aww, now I want you to be Hilda. Maybe let’s just be X-Ray and Vav and Hilda? I can be Vav, that would be fun too!” Her eyes lit up again. “Oh! I have that ORF plush that I won from Jaune’s biggest brother! You could borrow her!”

“When did you win an ORF plush?”

“Oh, like, three weeks ago? He bet me I couldn’t get him with my nerf gun and I could have the plush if I did.”

“Did you?”

“No, but I accidentally broke a vase he hated so he gave it to me anyway. Also, turns out? Nerf guns do not make good sniper rifles.”

-/-

For most of the year, Mercury had been toeing the line in terms of skipping class; he tried to have his staying days outnumber his skipping days, though he’d been getting worse at it lately.

Today he stayed, and by the time last period rolled around and it was time to dismiss them for gym, he was regretting his decision. He was debating whether he could sneak away on the way to gym when Glynda called on him, pulling him out of his thoughts.

“I’d like to speak with you about your book report,” she said. “I’ll send a note to Coach letting him know you won’t be in class.”

“He’ll be more surprised by the note than my absence,” Mercury pointed out, but she handed a note to Blake as the rest of the class left, all the same.

Once the rest of the class was gone, she took a bucket of cleaning water from behind her desk and moved over to start cleaning the blackboard. “You’re not in trouble,” she said, when he moved to sit at a desk near the front. “I really liked your report. You’ve got a long way to go in terms of grammar and composition, but your ideas are actually very well-thought-out.”

Mercury shrugged. He grabbed a spare cloth from the pile she kept near the board and got to work cleaning the other end. “I just really hate The Garden Nobody Knows About.”

She gave him a small smile. “I do too, actually. They make me put it on the list, but if I could take
“I would.”

This was news to Mercury- he’d assumed teachers just didn’t care one way or another how the students took the books they were assigned. “It’s not even that it’s a bad story,” he added. “It just always bugged me that the cripple kid wasn’t really cripple- it was all in his head.” He sneered. “Where are the books about kids who just are disabled and they’re always going to be and no amount of fresh air and exercise will change that?”

“Not on the board-approved classroom reading list, unfortunately.”

He sneered again at that, but didn’t respond.

“I actually wanted to ask how you’re settling in with James,” she said, after a few minutes of cleaning in silence.

“What, you can’t just ask him?”

“I have asked him,” she said, leveling one of her stern looks on him. “Now I’m asking you.”

He rolled his eyes, and then shrugged and tossed his rag into the bucket. “It’s not so bad. I’ve had worse but, you know…”

“That’s not exactly a high bar to clear,” she agreed, and then waited for him to go on.

“I don’t have any real complaints,” he said, eventually. “I mean, I have lots of complaints, but like… they feel like normal complaints. Like, he has a shitton of rules for me to follow, all the time, kind of complaints.”

“That’s not exactly a bad thing,” said Glynda, who herself kept her students on a rather short leash, and expected them to act like the adults that so many of them believed they very nearly almost were.

Mercury rolled his eyes. “You know what? I can’t believe I didn’t just immediately realize you two are related.”

“You couldn’t see the family resemblance?”

There was an unfamiliar something glinting in her eye when she said that. Mercury stared, and, “Oh! You’ve got jokes!”

“Hm.” A tiny smile touched her lips, for just a moment. She dropped her own rag in the bucket and gave him a smug look. “No one will ever believe you.”

Mercury’s eyes narrowed. “You sick son of a bitch,” he breathed.

“Language, please,” which prompted him to let out a long, loud groan.

“There’s that family resemblance!”

If she was amused, she gave no indication; she put the bucket of water away to be dumped later, and took her seat behind her desk before setting a paper on top of it. When Mercury followed and looked, he could see that it was his own. It was covered in red pen; for all that she’d claimed to like it, she’d clearly found plenty of flaws in it.

“I would like you to redo this,” she said. “This time with the grammar in tact. The writing is fine; the structure needs work.”
“Aww, man,” he groaned. “I thought you said I wasn’t in trouble.”

“Would you rather go to gym instead?”

Mercury considered this for a long time, eyeing her suspiciously, and then grabbed the paper and went over to dig in his bag for his notebook and his borrowed copy of *The Garden Nobody Knows About*.

“That why you kept me out, then? Trying to protect me or something?”

“No. I just thought that getting out of gym might be a nice incentive for you to be more willing to rewrite your paper.”

He continued to eye her suspiciously, but nonetheless he took his things over to the classroom computer and got to work rather than argue.

For a few minutes the classroom was quiet apart from the clacking of the keys on the ancient computer Glynda kept for student use or the scratch of her pen while she went through his classmates’ papers, but after awhile Mercury spoke.

“So how’s Snow doing?”

“Good. She misses you, I think. She was pleased when we found out you were with James. She thinks he’ll be good for you.”

He shrugged, not sure how to respond to that, and, “Does he know I lived with you for like a week last spring?”

She shook her head. “I didn’t mention it at the time because I didn’t want to make him keep things from Qrow, and it doesn’t seem very relevant now. Are you going to tell him?”

“Nah, I think I’ll keep it to myself.” He looked smug. “I only get to tell him once, there’s gonna be a moment where it’ll be prime. I’ll save it for then.”

/-/

Later, much later, after the students had gone home and Glynda still remained behind to grade papers, there was a knock at her door and Qrow sauntered in without bothering to wait for an answer. She glanced up when he came in, and turned her attention back to the paper in her hand.

“Qrow.”

“Glynda.” He leaned back on the desk nearest hers. “Well, I’m here. What’s this about?”

“Hm.” She pursed her lips irritably, and took her phone from her shirt. A moment to unlock it, and she passed it to him. “I got this text this morning, from your… friend, Torchwick.”

“You know you and Jim have the exact same tone for referring to Torchwick?” he said, and there was a brief pause while he read. When he’d done, he groaned. “Dammit, Torch. The hell.”

Glynda held out her hand for her phone, which he handed back to her. “First questions first, how does this man have my number?”

Qrow shrugged, and dropped down into the desk to sulk instead. “I don’t know. Probably snooped through my phone when I was drunk. He does that sometimes. S’how he got everyone else’s number.” When Glynda took off her glasses to pinch the bridge of her nose in exasperation, he
gave her a defensive look and said, “Hey, it’s pretty apparent he doesn’t have scruples or anything, betraying a confidence like that.”

“Yes, I gathered that.” She put her glasses back on. “Which brings me to my next question. Is this true?”

He looked away, ashamed. “...yeah.”

“And you haven’t told anyone? Except-” She waved her phone pointedly. He shrugged, and didn’t answer. “Qrow, why would you…?”

“Cause I don’t wanna disappoint everyone, okay? If they knew- god , I can’t…” He buried his face in his hands, only for a moment to pull himself together, and ran his hands through his hair. “Gonna tattle on me?”

“Qrow,” she sighed. “I’m not planning on it.”

“But...” he prompted, and she went on.

“Qrow, you are my friend . Contrary to how we sometimes act, I want good things for you. I want stability for you, I want this for you. I’m happy for you.”

“But ,” he repeated, more firmly this time. This time, she relented.

“But , James is my little brother, and his stability is my priority. I’ll keep this quiet, but if this secrecy starts to hurt James, then I will tell him myself.”

“Still convinced I’m gonna break his heart, huh.”

She leveled an unimpressed look on him. “I’m convinced that watching him tear himself apart after losing Josef was hard enough, and I refuse to watch him experience that level of pain a second time.”

“Hm.” Qrow stood and began toward the door. “You’re as bad as Tai with that little brother shit,” he said. “He’s a big boy now, doesn’t need you protecting him.”

“Qrow-”

“See ya around, Glynda.”

-/-

Chapter End Notes

I listened to the audiobook of The Secret Garden recently. I actually like the book, but there’s a lot of era-specific racism and ableism inherent to it that bugs me, and I realized Mercury would probably have more reason to dislike it that me.
Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

Mercury's learns a little bit about the paths he missed.

Chapter Notes

I'm a little sick right now, so the next chapter is taking its own sweet time being written. Oh well, that's what the buffer is for.

Emetophobia content warning for this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

—-

Torchwick was trying to fix his sink when his phone buzzed. He checked the text- it was from Qrow.

You got me in trouble with Glynda

Coffee?

More for the excuse to get out from under the sink than anything, he shot off a quick, Release the Grounds in 30?, then grabbed his hat and cane from the table when he got a y in return. Explaining himself to Qrow wasn’t high on his list of things he wanted to do today, but it was higher than fixing his sink.

He’d be better just making Junior do it anyway.

—-

“Before I yell at you, do me a favor and delete Glynda’s number from your phone,” Qrow said, when he joined up with Torchwick thirty minutes later, before he’d even sat down.

Torchwick rolled his eyes, then made a great show of taking out his phone and going through each step to deleting Glynda’s number. Qrow took a seat.

“Thank you. Now, why did you go blabbing to her about my business?”

“I thought maybe if you won’t let me talk you out of being stupid, you’ll let her.”

“Yeah, well, unfortunately for you, Glynda might be a lot of things but unscrupulously nosy isn’t one of ’em.”

“I have scruples!” Torchwick protested. “They’re just not the same as yours,” and when Qrow gave him a disbelieving look, went on, “Or, you know, as numerous. ...And easier to ignore when
they’re inconvenient. All right, I’m pretty unscrupulous. Guilty as charged.”

“You’re an ass, Torch.”

“I’m an ass who has your best interests at heart. So Glynda isn’t going to make you tell everyone the big secret, huh?”

“No! Because she’s not you!” He made a frustrated noise. “Why does this matter to you so much?”

“Because you need them, baby bird. Like it or not, this isn’t something you can do alone.”

“I’m not doing it alone,” Qrow said. “That’s kind of the whole point, you know?”

“I mean, you need your family.”

“That still doesn’t say why you care so much.”

Torchwick just looked unimpressed. “Do I really need to spell it out for you? All right, fine. Because I care about you. Gods help me for my terrible judgment, but I actually like you. And I’ve spent eight years watching you tear yourself apart and now—” He huffed. “Listen, Qrow, because I’m not saying this again, and I will deny it in a court of law if asked. I like. you. You’re one of my closest friends. Your happiness and stability are actually important to me.” He gagged. “Ugh. You’re the worst, baby bird.”

Qrow stared, trying to grab the thread of the conversation as it retreated from his grasp. He snatched at the first thing he could. “How can I be one of your closest friends?” he demanded. “I know jack fucking shit about you!”

“You know more than most people.”

“I know you’re not a natural redhead and you’ve been working the bar since you were sixteen. That ain’t much to know.”

“That’s a lot to know about me.” He shrugged. “What can I say, I like my privacy.”

“You’re an enigma wrapped in a mystery wrapped in bullshit, Roman Torchwick.”

“Yes, well.” He shrugged again. “So about how you’re going to tell your family this very important thing you’re keeping from them.”

“Give it a rest, Torch. I’ll tell them, I will. Just not yet. M’ not ready yet.”

“When will you be ready?”

“I don’t know!” He tossed his hands in the air and sighed. “Ugh. January, okay? It’ll be a year January. If I—” He scrubbed his hands over his face, pushing his bangs back up. “If I make it to January, I’ll tell them. Can you leave it alone until then?”

“Hmm…” Torchwick nodded. “All right. January.”

“Thank you.”

They were silent for a few minutes, Qrow trying to rewrite his perception of Torchwick in light of his new revelations, Torchwick trying to reorient himself after willingly unveiling some of his emotions for actual display. After a few minutes, he rested his chin on his folded hands and gave Qrow his most flirtatiously bullshit face.
“So, how’s the family? The kids all right? Keeping their grades up? How’s Tai doing? Does he ever ask about me?”

Qrow slapped his palm to his forehead. “Seriously? Why would Tai ask about you?”

“I don’t know, maybe I’m so dashingly sexy that I make him question his sexuality. It’s possible.”

“You’re delusional.”

“Oh, come on.” He pouted. “You don’t know how lucky you are, baby bird. Your dream man walked into your classroom and not only was he gay, he was available! And attracted to you too! Love at first sight actually worked out for you!”

Qrow laughed. “What? Jim’s not my dream man. I mean, he is now, don’t get me wrong, but I mean- when we met I mostly just thought he was handsome and didn’t really think beyond that. If the kids hadn’t pushed us together as hard as they did to begin with we would have stayed passing acquaintances. It wasn’t exactly love at first sight.”

“Tch,” was the response, and they fell into silence again, this time with Qrow staring out the window, thoughts drifting unbidden to James until a piece of the conversation inserted itself very loudly into his conscious realization. He shot his gaze around to Torchwick so fast that his neck popped, his eyebrows climbing up as he did.


“What are you…” and his own eyes widened. “Oh no.”

“Seriously?”

“Oh gods.” Torchwick’s head thumped onto the table. “Well, might as well just kill me now. I’m going to die of embarrassment anyway.”

Qrow snorted. “Melodramatic baby.”

“I know how to make your death look like an accident, you know.”

“I guess I really do know more about you than most people.”

“Why do I like you again?”

-/-

The girls had decided to be X-Ray, Vav, and Hilda for Halloween, so after school Penny followed Mercury up to his room to ask for his help making her costume.

“Most of her costume is just regular clothes,” she said, “but I will need help making her ray gun.”

“Really going all out on this, huh?”

“It will only be recognizably a costume while I am with Ruby and Nora,” Penny pointed out. “So I need some indication that I am dressed up.”

He agreed to help her, but only a little bit, and once she had extracted the promise of his aid she went on, “Do you have any ideas for your costume? You could go with the theme and be the Mad King. You are nearly handsome enough.”
“Laying it on kinda thick there, squirt.” He graced her with a half-fond smirk. “Anyway, I’m not wearing a costume. I’m just there to supervise you little kids, I’m not wearing a costume myself.”

“Why not?”

“Cause I’m too old for that little kid stuff. I’m practically fourteen.”

“You are thirteen,” Penny reminded him, and he waved that away.

“My birthday’s like the first week of November, I’m as good as fourteen. Way too old to go dressing up.”

“Oh! I did not know it was your birthday soon!” Penny clapped her hands together. “Are you going to have a birthday party?”

Mercury gave her a pointed look. “You really missed that whole ‘way too old’ thing, didn’t you?”

Penny frowned. “I do not think it must be very nice to get older. You cannot enjoy anything fun anymore.”

He shrugged. “That stuff’s lame, anyway. So what about your costumes? Why do you get stuck being Hilda while your pals get to be the superheroes?”

“I wanted to be Hilda,” Penny said. “She is my favorite character.”

“Really? But she’s just a grouchy smarty pants. What’s so great about her?”

Penny gasped. “What is there not to like?! She is so smart! Just like my daddy was, and when she was lonely, she just made a whole friend! And so many other interesting things, too! And when things were very bad, she was willing to work to stop them from happening!” She twiddled her fingers nervously. “I like her, grouchy smarty pants or not.”

“All right, all right. I think we’ve established at this point that you’ve got weird taste.”

-/-

Nearly an hour later, Penny was still in Mercury’s room. She’d been sprawled on his bed for awhile, reading, but then she had gotten distracted telling Mercury about her last birthday party, and mentioned being six months older than Nora.

“When we are sisters, I will be her big sister, because my birthday is in August and her birthday is in February.”

“What?” Mercury turned his full attention on her. “Sisters? What?”

Penny lit up. “Oh! Yes! When Father and Mr. Qrow finally get married, Nora and I will be sisters!”

She kept talking after that, but Mercury didn’t hear anything she said. His ears were ringing at her words, at the implication of her words; his stomach was rolling and he felt like he was going to throw up. He struggled to focus on Penny, who was looking worried.

“-look ill. Are you okay?”

He, very fortunately, made it to the bathroom before being sick. It was hours since lunch; there was nothing to come up but bile: it burned the back of his throat and brought pained tears stinging his eyes.
He was a fool, a goddamn idiot; he heaved again, squeezing his eyes shut, willing away the weakness of having ever thought that-

should have been me should have been me it was never going to be me too much trouble problem child inconvenient idiot idiot why would you ever think that he’d ever want a kid like you when he could have a nice girl with no problems instead that should have been me should have been me

-he could have had a happy ending, if he’d only behaved himself.

There was a tapping on the door and a concerned, “Mercury?” His knees hit the tile with a metallic thunk. He forced out a strangled, “Go away!” and folded himself over until his forehead was resting on the rim of the toilet. A few seconds, and the sound of retreating footsteps. He rocked back onto his heels and dug his hands into his eyes, willing away every bad feeling in him, every weakness that would drive him to feeling this way.

Idiot.

-/-

He showered while he was in the bathroom, letting the near-scalding water crash against his back while he tried not to look down too much, tried not to think about all the ways he’d ruined his own life, tried not to think about how he had only himself to blame for his troubles-

Why couldn’t he have just stopped picking fights with Yang? He’d found literally the only button Qrow’d had and pushed it over and over until he’d had no choice but to get rid of him, and then spent the three years since blaming Qrow for breaking his word. What was wrong with him? Why couldn’t he just- just work?

When he finally did come out of the bathroom, he only made it as far as his room before James leaned into the hallway and said, “Mercury? Come in here, we need to talk.”

Mercury considered, just for a moment, refusing, just carrying on into his room. He knew, understood now, that James would not push. Would leave him to his space, and let him be until he was ready to talk.

But that would be-

Inconvenient

-rude, he guessed, so he turned and shuffled down the hall to James’ study.

“I’m starting to really dread hearing that phrase,” he said, dropping himself onto the couch while James took his usual seat in his desk chair. A part of him was relieved by James’ usual courtesy with leaving the door open, and not putting himself between Mercury and it, but another, louder, angrier part was just pointing out this was one more silly little weakness that James had to cater to. He folded his arms and slouched down into his seat, trying to adopt some semblance of his usual cocky disinterest.

Judging by the concerned way James was studying him, this wasn’t working.

“You don’t like being asked if you’re okay,” James said, after a long silence.

Oh. Penny must have blabbed. Mercury shrugged. James went on.

“Is it the words, or the sentiment? I can avoid the words easily enough, but if it’s the sentiment we
have to find other ways to ask after your wellbeing that don’t set you off. I can’t take care of you if
I don’t know when you need to be taken care of.”

It was so different than Mercury’s experience that he choked on a bitten off laugh at the absurdity.
Tyrian had been delighted when he found out Mercury was so weak to just a simple inquiry; it had
been such an easy way to provoke him and he’d loved it. James, he knew, would never: he was too
sensitive to his responsibility. All the same, Mercury couldn’t help the instinct to lie, deflect, don’t
let him see your weakness.

Mercury’s eyes flickered to James’ arm. In short sleeves, it was more apparent than usual that it
went all the way up. He’d understand, wouldn’t he? If anyone would, it was him.

“I was eight,” he said, barely above a whisper, and thumped one leg for clarification. “They took
me from my dad after that, and mom had ran off ages ago, so I didn’t. Um.” He clenched one hand
in his pajamas. “I stayed in the hospital after that. For nearly a year. Recovering. And I couldn’t. I
couldn’t.” He broke off, scrubbed his hands through damp hair until he knew it was sticking up. “I
used to be really speedy. I was fast. I had to be. And then I. I couldn’t get around on my own at all.
And I was—” He shuddered. “Fuck.”

He broke off, leaned on his knees and dug his hands into his hair, staring at a spot on the floor
rather than look up and see the pity he just knew would be in James’ eyes. After a few minutes,
though, he pulled himself together and started again.

“I was scared,” he said. “I was weak and I was scared and no one would listen to me and they
hovered and coddled and I told them not to touch me but they had to because they had to take care
of me, and I couldn’t run away and all they ever said was ‘Oh are you okay, sweetie? Are you
okay? You’re shaking, dear, are you okay?’ I hated it. I hated them.” He shuddered again, and
folded himself up with his forehead to his knees.

After, once more, pulling himself together, he said a quiet, “It’s just the words that I hate,” into his
knees.

After all, it would be easy for James to avoid the words.

-/-

Mercury fled a moment later, not giving James a chance to reply. James heard the slam of his
bedroom door and stayed as he was, staring thoughtfully into the middle distance.

He’d suspected, of course. And he understood.

There was something else niggling at the back of his head. A burrowing thought of why had
Mercury told him all of that?

He didn’t have to. James had been careful to ask in a way that wouldn’t seem to be pressing for
more information than necessary, than was comfortable. But Mercury had opened up anyway,
given him the context for his feelings that would make it easier for James to anticipate his needs.
He’d been… helpful. Carefully so, and painfully so, judging by that breakdown, but he’d made the
decision to let James in, however briefly.

A small smile touched James’ lips. Was he finally getting through to the boy? It was possible, he
supposed.

It also just felt… easy. Way too easy.
James frowned. Something was wrong.

Mercury bolted his door and slid down to sit with his back against it. He rolled his phone from hand to hand for a few minutes, considering, and then dialled up Emerald.

It took her forever to answer. He had to hang up and redial twice before she finally picked up, sounding a little breathless.

“Sorry!” she said hastily. “We’ve got company and I left my phone in my room. You’ll never believe what’s happening! You know that empty house across from ours?”

He vaguely recalled that from his tour. “Yes…”

“Well some lady just came by to look at it! She wants to move into it! She came over to talk to Hazel about the neighborhood, and MERC. Get this. She is GUNNING for him.”

“What?”

“Yeah! Like, Hazel’s a handsome dude, right? Like, this lady thinks so, she has her eyes SET on him, and she is aiming for the plates. And she is NOT being subtle.” She laughed. “I don’t know if Hazel’s having it or not but he hasn’t made her leave yet. Actually, hell, I don’t even know if he likes women at all, he’s never said and he never talks about his dates much. Man. It’s too bad you’re not still here right now, you’d love this.”

She stopped and waited for his reaction, and when he remained silent, “Merc? What’s up? What’s wrong?”

“I’m not-” he tried, and stopped, and tried again. “Qrow-” Oh gods, he was an idiot.

“What did he do? Mercury? Talk to me, come on.” More silence; and a worried, “Hey, I’m here, okay? I’m here.”

He opened his mouth to tell her everything, and stopped, swallowing his words back down. How could he have been so stupid?

For a long time, there was mostly silence. He could hear her breathing, sometimes, could, if he strained, make out the idle tapping of her fingers against her belt? It sounded like leather, anyway. Shoes, maybe. She hummed softly a few times, flat and tuneless and probably intended so that he could hear that she was still there more than anything.

After a while, he found his voice again, albeit rather hoarse, and said, “I uh. I found out that Qrow
adopted Nora. The foster kid. The girl I saw him- saw him with last. Um. Last Christmas.”

The soft *oh* she breathed in response to that told him that at least he didn’t have to spell out how stupid he’d been.

“...I’m an idiot,” he finally said.

“You’re not.”

“Kids like us don’t get happy endings,” he went on, ignoring her. “I don’t know why I… thought anything else...” He sighed. Decided to change the subject. “S’my birthday next month.”

“Yeah it is! Our little boy is finally growing up!”

“Shut the fuck up, Em, you’re only four months older than me.”

“Tch, whatever.”

He didn’t exactly smile, but his expression loosened, just a tiny bit. Barely any at all.

“Thanks, Em,” he said softly.

“Of course, Merc. You know I’m here for you.”

-/

Chapter End Notes

It occurred to me that no one had bothered to tell Merc about Nora.
Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

Life keeps living, even when you want it to pause for awhile.

Chapter Notes

We are now entering a stretch of chapters I like to call "I had no idea what I was going for at this point so I just wrote whatever I thought of and hoped something would come up", also known as the soft chapters. This will carry on for the rest of the arc, so you guys can relax for a bit while the story gets back on track.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

On Wednesday, James finished his work early, and drove to the school to see Qrow. He had a rare free afternoon; assuming Mercury had stayed at school, he tended to go off with Winter more often than not, and Penny had been invited over to her new friend Ciel’s house for a few hours.

He arrived about halfway through last period, and was directed to the auditorium, where Qrow was working on the Halloween program. He had his back to the doors when James came in, and so he didn’t notice he was there until several students spotted him and waved. He looked around, and even from this distance his smile was apparent: part of James was smug enough to think that smile was for him, but he knew better, knew it just meant Qrow was enjoying himself.

“Take five, guys,” Qrow said, coming down from the stage to join James halfway down the aisles. “What’s up, big man?”

“I didn’t mean to interrupt your rehearsal. I’ve got a free afternoon, I was going to catch you once school was out.”

“O–oh, free afternoon, huh?” He glanced around at the kids- mostly sitting in their little clusters talking, though Neptune and Ruby were entertaining their classmates by throwing exaggerated faces at James and Qrow’s backs. They swapped to expressions of pure innocence when Qrow turned around; he shot them suspicious looks, and turned back to James. “All right, I gotta get back to this lot. Have a seat, you can watch our rehearsal.”

James moved toward the fifth row, glancing around the auditorium. “Are you the only adult here?”

Qrow scoffed on his way back to the stage. “What, you think my colleagues ain’t gonna jump at the chance to dump their kids on some other sod for forty minutes?” When this got protests from the kids, he added, “Teachers need breaks too, guys.”

-/-
Once the final bell rang, most of the kids headed off to meet the buses, a few high-fiving James on their way by, and Qrow joined him in the seats while the dozen or so waiting on parents played on the stage.

“So what have you got planned for this free afternoon?” Qrow teased. “Apart from staring at me while I work, I mean.”

“Was I staring at you?”

“The kids noticed. They were making fun of you, by the way.”

“And you didn’t stop them?”

“Who do you think started them?”

James rolled his eyes. “You’re a menace to society.”

“Hey, you knew what you were getting into when you asked me to go steady*,” Qrow reminded him. “I might be a menace but you love me, and I think that says more about you than it does about me.”

“Are you calling my taste into question?”

“I’m calling something into question.” He paused to call back Neptune, who had disappeared behind the stage, and went on, “I got an idea, how about we go to Sockhop? We can split an ice cream soda and then make out in the bathroom like horny teenagers.”

“Qrow, I am not making out with you in the bathroom of an ice cream parlour where anyone can walk in on us.”

-/-

There was a bug going around school. Despite efforts to the contrary, the Branwen-Xiaolong household managed to get hit: Nora, fortunately, was one of those people who just plain never got sick, but first Ruby and then Yang came down with it. Nora was moved into Qrow’s room for the duration to temporarily quarantine her just in case, and Yang and Ruby missed two days of school to recover.

On Friday, Tai went up to the school to pick up Yang’s homework from Glynda, and was surprised to see Roman storming out of the principal’s office at the same time he was passing through the lobby on the way out. They both stopped short in surprise. Tai spoke first.

“Roman? What are you doing here?”

“Yelling at teachers,” Roman said, and jerked his head toward the office. “And anyone else who needs it.”

Tai frowned, confused, and then understanding dawned and he said, “Ah. Junior must be busy.”

“Oh, well, you know.” Roman shrugged lightly. “Being a criminal kingpin* doesn’t leave much time for,” and here he raised his voice and directed his comment over his shoulder, obviously meant to be heard in the office, “yelling at incompetent administration!” Tai laughed nervously at that, and Roman went on more normally. “What about you? Goldilocks isn’t in trouble, is she?”

“No, nothing like that. She’s come down with the flu, I came to pick up her homework.” He held
up the large binder Glynda had supplied him with, and frowned at it. “...she will not be doing all of this, I think.”

Roman stuck an arm through Tai’s, companionable and all charm. “Poor goldilocks, this flu season is rough, isn’t it? Come on, you can buy me coffee and tell me about it.”

“Roman, I’m not—”

“As a FRIEND,” he said. “Jesus, you hit on a guy a few—”

“-hundred—”

“-times and never live it down.” He pouted, and whacked Tai lightly in the chest with his cane. “Come on, it’ll be fun. I never see Qrow anymore so I’m behind on gossip about your family.”

Tai rolled his eyes. “All right, we can get coffee. But we can’t be long, I have two sick girls at home to take care of.”

“Of course, of course! Just give me half an hour of your time, that’s all I ask.”

-/-

“So who’s with the girls right now?” Roman asked, when they reconvened at Release the Grounds ten minutes later. Contrary to his words, he’d paid for their coffee himself, and left a generous tip in the tip jar as well.

“I got Mrs. Wukong to come over and look after them while I was at work,” Tai said. “She can work from anywhere so she makes a good go-to when we need someone.”

“Wukong, Wukong. That’s the weird little monkey boy who hit me with a stick at your new year’s party, right?”

“That’s Sun. Why did he hit you with a stick?”

“Do I look like I understand the inner machinations of children’s minds?”

“Fair, fair.” Tai took a thoughtful sip of his coffee. “I thought you said you wanted me to pay for these.”

He waved that away. “There was a bachelor party at the bar last night, I made some really good tips. And got the best man’s phone number. I’m in a generous mood. If it’s a problem, you can always get the next one.”

Tai considered this, and then nodded. “All right. Next one’s on me, then.”

-/-

By the time Tai made it home—only a little bit later than he’d planned, thankfully—Nora and Sun had gotten off of the bus already, and were in the living room playing Mud Mummy Invasion while Mrs. Wukong worked on her laptop.

He waved at the three in the living room, and went to the back to check on Ruby and Yang. They were both in Yang’s room, watching a movie on her tv.

“Hey, kiddos,” he said, coming to sit on the bed beside Ruby, who immediately whined and scooted over to cuddle pitifully against him. “How are you feeling?”
“Baaaaad,” Ruby said, and curled around to rest her head on his thigh. He gave her a fond smile and brushed a hand over her hair gently, then turned to Yang.

“What about you?”

“I can’t breathe,” Yang said through heavily stuffed sinuses.

“You sound terrible,” Tai teased. He reached over to feel her forehead, giving a nod of approval that her fever seemed to have faded a bit. “But you don’t feel as warm as you did. Sit up for a second, Ruby,” he added, and repeated the process with her. She, too, seemed less warm, though still moreso than Yang. “Hm.”

“I’m tired of being sick,” Ruby whined, and curled back up, half in his lap. He traced soothing fingers along her face and hair.

“How about I make some ginger garlic soup for you tonight, huh? Just like Yehyeh used to make for me when I was a little boy and had a fever, okay?”

“That sounds nice,” Ruby mumbled into his thigh, and Yang nodded her own agreement, so he peeled Ruby off of him and tucked her back in next to her sister, then headed out.

-/-

Mrs. Wukong and Sun left not too long after that, but not before Sun and Nora managed to get into a wrestling match over the results of their game, which were apparently disputed. Once they’d left, Nora followed Tai into the kitchen, eyeing the rug burn on her arm thoughtfully and trying to decide how much it hurt.

Not much, she concluded, and climbed up to sit at the counter while Tai began rummaging through the drawer for his recipe cards.

“Well, looks like it’s just gonna be the two of us tonight, sweetie. Ruby and Yang are still out for the count and your dad won’t be home till late.”

“What are we doing for dinner?”

“Well, I’m making ginger garlic soup for Ruby and Yang,” he said, and, “A ha~” when he found the right card. “It’s good for fever, or so my father told me every time I had one. What would you like? If you want soup too, you’ll save me some trouble.”

“I’ve never had ginger garlic soup,” Nora said, eyeing the recipe card with all the mistrust of a ten year old eyeing a recipe card for a dubious sounding dish she’s never had before. “Can I have something… with it? In case I don’t like it?”

Tai chuckled. “How about you and I have soup and sandwiches?”

“What kind of sandwiches?” she asked, squinting suspiciously at him.

“Garlic, of course!”

“Ugh...!”

“I’m kidding ,” he assured her, reaching over to ruffle her hair. “I’ll grill you a cheese instead, okay?”

“That sounds way better.”
…”with garlic.”

“Uncle Tai!”

-/

Tai and Nora decided to stay up watching a movie, and ended up watching the whole Men Who Wear Black Suits trilogy. Nora fell asleep early in the third, and by the time the credits began rolling, Tai had dozed off as well, not fully asleep so he could listen out for his daughters but still resting soundly enough that when Qrow got home and went looking for his own daughter, he didn’t immediately wake up at the footfalls through the kitchen.

Qrow gave them a sleepily fond look for a moment before leaning over and nudging Tai gently.

“Hmnah?” He woke up and looked around blearily. “What? Qrow? What time is it?”

“It’s past midnight. Hey, kiddo,” he added, because Nora had woken as well.

She sat up and rubbed at one eye, and yawned. “Did I fall asleep?”

“Yeah you did. Come here.” He held out his arms, and she let him lift her up, nestling against his shoulder sleepily. “Come on, let’s get you to bed, kay?”

-/

Qrow got Nora tucked in and settled, and sat with her for a few minutes, humming softly and stroking her hair till sleep had claimed her once more. He got up and slipped back into the kitchen.

By the time he emerged, Tai was cleaning up the few dishes leftover from their movie and dinner. Qrow took a seat at the counter, and after a moment to steel himself, spoke.

“Hey Tai? Can I talk to you for a second?”

“It beats doing dishes.” Tai took a seat across from him. “What’s up?”

“Um, so.” Qrow fidgeted restlessly. “I mean, this may not come to anything anytime soon, but uh. I don’t want it to take you by surprise when it really comes up- so I just- um…” He rubbed his neck nervously. Looked away. “So, uh, before this Mercury thing started, me and Jim were talking seriously about, uh… me and Nora moving in with them.”

“Wow.” Tai stared. “I didn’t… realize you guys were so serious.”

Qrow shrugged. “I mean, I don’t really see myself with anyone else,” he said. “I’m about as committed as I can get here. And I…” He trailed off. Flushed.

“Qrow?”

“Those weekends they spend here. When I wake up and Jimmy and Penny are here and we’re all together, and I just.” He buried his face in his hands for a second and gave a hoarse laugh. “It just feels so right and then they have to go home for ages and I’m- god, Tai, I just. I’m tired of him having to go home. I want us to have. The same home.”

Tai laughed. “Wow, you’re in really deep, aren’t you?” He reached out and took one of Qrow’s hands, folded it between his own. “Qrow, this is your life and your relationship. If this feels like the right next step for you, then take it.”
Qrow gave him a small smile and turned his hand to clasp it with Tai’s. “I don’t know if it’ll happen,” he said. “I mean, this whole Mercury thing kinda threw a wrench in our plans for awhile. But I just. Wanted to let you know. This affects you, whatever decision we make- I don’t want you to be blindsided or anything.”

“Qrow, for the past twenty years we’ve not lived together for three of them. Total. If you being happy with James means losing you in my home, I’ll take those seventeen years and treasure them and wish you the best. Okay? Don’t worry about me.”

Qrow’s face was still flushed; he rubbed the back of his neck with his free hand and said, a little sheepishly, “Ha ha, you love your brother.”

-/-

Qrow slept in the next morning, and woke to his phone buzzing under his neck. Nora had snuggled against him in the night; he tried to find it without waking her, contorting himself into positions he hadn’t been able to hold in a decade before finally putting it to his ear.

“Branwen.”

“Seriously, who are you expecting to call you?”

“Oh, hey, Jimmy~” he chirped softly. He eyed his arm, wondered if he could free it from Nora’s grasp, and then gave it up for lost. “No naughties, Nora’s with me.”

“Good to know, that’s absolutely why I was calling.”

“Jim! My kid is sleeping right here!” he hissed. “Another time, a’right?”

James laughed. “I’m kidding, Qrow. I was calling to invite you two to lunch today.”

“Yeah?” Qrow perked up; beside him, Nora rolled over and he took the chance to free his arm and sit up. “Merc must be out today.”

“He’s got plans with Winter. I thought I’d take advantage of the situation to spend some us time.”

“I can’t imagine Nora will object.” He looked over at her; despite his best efforts, she had woken up, and now she was stretching and trying to find a new comfortable position. At the sound of her name she gave him a quizzical look, which he met with a fond smile. “Morning, sweetie. Feel like getting lunch with Jimmy and Penny today?”

She nodded, stretched again, and then sat up and pulled his phone hand nearer so she could say, “Good morning, Mr. Ironwood.”

“Morning, Pumpkin,” he said. “How do you feel about lunch today?”

“Can we get pancakes?”

James laughed. “We’ll talk about it when we’re all together, okay?”

“Okay. But I’ll love you twenty percent more if you take me out for pancakes~”

“Good to know,” he said, and she pushed the phone back to Qrow so she could slide out of bed and pad out of the room, still yawning. Qrow flopped back onto his bed for a second, then stood and headed toward his bathroom, grabbing his clothes on the way.
Winter came over for breakfast before she and Mercury left. She sat ramrod straight at the table, taking dainty bites of her yogurt while across from her, he slouched over a bowl of Pumpkin Pete and glowered- not at her, just a general early-morning glower.

“What have you kids got planned today?” James asked, taking his own seat with his own bowl of cereal. Mercury raised an eyebrow at Winter; she hadn’t actually told him, just asked if he was free.

“The Malachite twins are having an impromptu gathering at the gazebo,” she said. “They invited me, and said that I could bring a plus one, if I wished.”

“The Malachite twins?” Mercury dropped his spoon in shock. “You’re friends with them? Seriously?” He made a sound not quite a laugh. “Jesus, Princess. The Malachites, Vernal… are you friends with anyone who’s not a future criminal?”

She gave him a cool look. “I’m friends with you, aren’t I?”

“Ha! I’m not your best example for that one. I am absolutely destined for at least one prison sentence.”

“Or we could not joke about that kind of thing,” James said. “Who are the Malachite twins?”

“Miltia and Melanie Malachite,” Winter said. “Mercury isn’t wrong; one or both of them are destined to inherit their father’s place at the head of Vale’s criminal underworld.”

“And you’re… friends with them?”

“That’s what I said!” Mercury cackled. “What gives, Princess? How do you attract these people?”

“Hm.” Winter shifted primly, turning all her attention to her yogurt with an almost idle, dismissive air before giving Mercury a knowing sidelong look and, “Surrounding myself with suspicious people makes it easier to avoid the notice of authority.”

“I knew it,” Mercury said, lighting up with almost malicious glee. “You’re a devious motherfucker, Princess.”

“Language, please,” James reminded him, and turned to Winter. “I’m not sure that’s a good attitude to have toward your friends, Winter. Not to mention your association with criminals could reflect poorly on you instead.”

“Relax, General, she’s just messing with us,” Mercury scoffed. “She’s friends with them because she’s a big ol’ lesbian and they’re pretty.” She shot him a glare, and he grinned toothily. “Tell me I’m wrong. Go ahead, lie to my fucking face.”

“Language, Mercury.” James raised an eyebrow at Winter, who sighed.

“…he’s not wrong.”

“Ha!”
After the pair had left, James was left to make a choice between doing dishes, or getting another bowl of cereal so he could put it off a little bit longer. While he decided this, Penny finally came downstairs, stopping behind him and staying there for a long moment.

He half turned to her. “Can I help you with something?”

“You have a scratches on the back of your neck,” she said.

His hand came up immediately to cover them. “Ah- yes- well-” He cleared his throat. It had been a few days; he’d have thought they’d healed by now. He made a mental note to talk to Qrow about trimming his nails. Again. “I wouldn’t worry about it, Peanut. How do you feel about lunch with Qrow and Nora today?”

She took the change in subject without struggle, and lit up in delight. “Can we get pancakes?”

James bit back a laugh. “There is a very good chance of pancakes in our future, yes. We’ll pick them up around noon, so be ready by then, okay?”

“Okay, Father!” She kissed his cheek and hurried off to get breakfast, and said, from the fridge, “You should probably tell Mr. Qrow to trim his nails; those are very bad scratches.”

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Chapter End Notes

*Yes, that is exactly how he phrased it. Qrow is never letting him live that down.

**Hei Xong. King of Vale’s underworld, successful business owner, and noted family man.

(They totally made out in that bathroom.)
Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

Everyone has a really nice day where nothing bad happens.

Chapter Notes

I originally wrote this chapter as a precursor to a really mean chapter, but then I ended up moving some plot beats around and the one intended for nineteen was moved to a later arc. So I wrote the nothing bad ever happened chapter for nothing.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-/-

“Seriously though,” Mercury said, after they’d left. “How are you friends with the Malachite twins?”

“I’m not,” Winter said. “A friend is, and I can only assume my invitation came at his instigation.”

“Which friend?”

Winter glanced over at him, and then looked away quickly. “You don’t know this one,” she said. “He’s a student at the college, we knew each other several years ago and reconnected when he started school this year.”

“I wanna meet him.”

“What? Why?”

Mercury rolled his eyes. “Come on, Princess! Every friend you’ve introduced me to since I got here has been a girl. I didn’t think you had guy friends but me. This guy is the exception, and I wanna meet him.”

“I do have guy friends,” she said. “I have plenty of guy friends.”

“And another thing,” he went on, ignoring her, “He’s in college? How do you know a college boy? Why are you friends with a college boy? What’s going on? I am dying to know, there’s an interesting backstory here.”

“There is no interesting backstory,” she said. “He is… related to a friend of my sister’s, and we played together often during playdates. And I have many friends several years older or younger than me- you, for example.”

“Two years ain’t that much.”

“Nor is three.” She sighed. “You are making something extravagant out of something that is
nothing, Mercury.”

“So why did he get you invited to the Malachites’, then?”

“I don’t know. I’m only assuming it was his interference, as he is friends with them and I am not.”

Mercury gave her a suspicious look, and folded his arms. “There’s something you’re not telling me here.”

She rolled her eyes. “All right, if you must know. The truth is, I’m not a lesbian, he’s actually my secret boyfriend, and the Malachites’ gathering is in fact our secret wedding. We’re eloping. You’re going to be best man.”

He looked baffled, and then squinted at her. She looked over, nervous.

“What?”

“Just trying to figure out if you’re doing that thing where you say the true thing but in a way that I think it’s a lie so that I’ll tell you I don’t believe you.”

Another eyeroll. “I’m not. I’m just trying to show you how ridiculous you sound.”

“Okay, good.” He dug his shoulders into the seat, slouching down pointedly. “Because so far my gaydar has a one hundred percent success rate, and I’d rather you didn’t ruin it by turning out to be secretly straight.”

“I assure you, that is not the case.”

-/-

Since the kids had unanimously asked for pancakes, it was decided that they would get lunch at Pancake Palace*. While they were waiting to be seated, Qrow knelt and whispered something to Nora, who nodded eagerly and buried a laugh in her hands. When Qrow stood again, James gave him a questioning look.

“What was that about?”

“Nothing, nothing. Don’t worry about it.”

James looked suspicious, but he didn’t have long to wonder because their waitress appeared then. Qrow nudged Nora as she did.

“Hi, guys,” the waitress said. “Would you like a booth or a table this afternoon?”

Before James could say anything, Nora piped in with, “Can we sit on one of the balconies?”

“Oh, sweetie.” She knelt. “Our balconies are for the evening crowds. We don’t open them at lunchtime.”

Nora hung her head, and James was almost taken in except that he’d seen how Nora acted when she was genuinely heartbroken, and this was very clearly an act. “Okay,” she said, playing with her hands and contriving to look as shattered as possible. “That’s okay then.”

“I’m really sorry, hon.”

“No, it’s fine!” She said hurriedly, managing to make her reassuring smile look both forced and still
heartbroken. “This is just the first time we’ve been able to go out in ages and I thought… that it would be nice,” she finished, letting her shoulders and her expression fall at the end.

It was an Oscar-worthy performance, and their waitress must have agreed because when Qrow, probably on cue, put a hand on her shoulder and started to assure her that they could still have a nice lunch together, she said, “Oh… hang on, lemme go ask my manager.”

“You don’t have to.” Qrow began, but she waved him away.

“Don’t worry about it, sir. I grew up with busy parents, I know how it is when you finally get a chance to go out. Just give me one moment, I’ll be right back.”

Once she was gone, Nora gave Qrow a hopeful look, and he flashed her a grin and a thumbs up.

“That was great, kiddo,” he said. “Real tearjerker.”

She beamed. “I just remembered what you said about using as much of the truth as possible.”

James shook his head. “Are you seriously teaching your daughter to con wait staff?”

“Well I mean… look at her,” he said, gesturing at Nora, who took that as her cue to look as cute and innocent as possible. James had, at this point, known her long enough to know that it was bullshit. “If she’s gonna insist on being this cute, I’m gonna take advantage of that.”

“You menace,” James said, and then stole a quick kiss as their waitress came up and attention was diverted to her.

“My manager says it’s cool,” she said. “If you’ll follow me I’ll get you seated and you can start thinking about your orders.”

-/-

The gazebo, as it was known, was what remained of an old park near the edge of town; mostly overgrown or sold off as private land by this point, what had once been a big park with plenty of space was now a small patch of high grass and shrubby trees surrounding a run-down gazebo. The only reason this bit of the park hadn’t been absorbed as the rest had was due to a dispute about ownership of the land, and its semi-seclusion had made it the perfect gathering place for teenagers wishing for a bit of privacy to hang out.

Winter parked in the lot behind the tiny sporting goods store, her pristine white sports car looking out of place among the battered and muddy pickups and jeeps sprinkled around the rest of the lot. Also out of place was the shiny black convertible at the edge of the lot; this, Mercury knew, belonged to the Malachite twins, who had at best a passing acquaintance with the word subtle.

It was a short walk to the gazebo, but once they got near they could hear talking and laughter, and when they came out of the footpath they could see about two dozen or so girls scattered around the park. On the gazebo itself there was a cooler, and the Malachite twins standing together looking over everything with distant satisfaction.

“Those two creep me the fuck out,” Mercury whispered, and got an elbow in his shoulder for his trouble. He looked around. He knew these other girls mostly in passing, and all of them were in high school, making him the youngest there, and the only guy as well. He frowned. “This ain’t a girls only type deal, is it?”

“Not to my knowledge,” Winter said, but at another glance around, her footsteps picked up pace
and in a second, she was standing in front of the twins. Mercury was impressed— they’d taken a position that would ensure anyone wishing to address them would be talking up to them, rather than on their level.

“Power move,” he whispered, and was elbowed again.

“Hello,” Winter said. “It didn’t occur to me to ask this before, but is this a girls only gathering? I brought my friend Mercury as my plus one, and he’s a boy.”

Mercury waved. The twins exchanged a look; it was the one in red (he’d never bothered to find out which was which) who answered.

“It’s not girls only, most of our guests just tend to be ladies. You’re welcome to stay.”

“Well, that’s good, I don’t wanna have to walk home.” He folded his hands behind his head and, addressing Winter more than the twins, said, “You think any of these girls will be into a middle school guy?”

The one in white laughed into her hand. “I would really love to see you try hitting on any of them,” she said.

“All lesbians, huh? Well, you’ll be happy here, Princess. All right, all right, I’ll be on my best behavior.” And with that, he gave a two fingered wave and walked away.

-/-

There were four balconies that circled the upper level of Pancake Palace; their party was led to a corner table on the far balcony. Qrow noted as they made their way up the stairs that this not only put them nearer the kitchen, but also out of immediate sight of the dining room below. It looked like they were the Palace’s dirty little secret.

Still, their seat, as all balcony seats, had a great view of the street below, which was why he liked eating on the balcony anyway. He said as much to James, once their waitress had taken their drink orders and left them to peruse the menu.

“I had a feeling that was it,” James said. “You do like your bird’s eye view if you can get one.”

Qrow shook his head. “I swear I can’t understand why people think you don’t tell jokes,” he said.

“Kali once asked me how I liked dating someone with no sense of humor.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, Qrow,” James said, picking up his menu.

“I like the balcony too,” Nora said, sitting up on her knees so she could lean on the sill and look at the street down below. “I like looking down at people for a change.”

“Hands off the glass, kiddo,” Qrow said, and Nora pulled her hands away guiltily. “People gotta clean that and we’re putting our waitress through enough extra trouble as it is.”

“You mean you care?” James asked, and Qrow waved that away.

“Trust me, she’s getting a good tip outta this. I ain’t heartless or anything. Besides, she’s the one that volunteered.”

“Because you emotionally blackmailed her into it.”

“Nothing Nora said wasn’t true,” Qrow argued. “We just laid out the facts and let her make her
own choices.”

James rolled his eyes. “You really don’t think that was at least a little bit morally dubious?”

“It would only be morally dubious if we weren’t tipping hella well. Besides, look how happy the kids are to be up here!”

He gestured at the girls, who took the cue to smile broadly at him. James made an exasperated noise.

“You are a terrible influence on my daughter.”

/-/

Mercury ambled back over to Winter eventually, grabbing a drink from the cooler and sprawling near her and the two other girls she was talking to.

“So the twins were wrong, only some of these girls are lesbians.”

“They never said they were, only that it would be entertaining to watch you attempt to romance them. Which, I agree.”

“Oh, you just wait. One day I’m gonna get my real puberty and I’m gonna be so hot even you’ll question your sexuality over it.”

“I highly doubt that,” Winter said.

“Oh, we’ll see.”

/-/

Their food arrived to Penny and Nora debating which classes offered the better advantages for magic users in ddnmd, with James occasionally countering their points and Qrow mocking James mercilessly for knowing their ‘nerd game’ so well. The discussion was interrupted by their waitress, and there was a brief break while they got their meals going. James flipped over the jelly packet to read the nutritional information, while Qrow dumped half a bottle of syrup on his stack of pancakes and took a bite without hesitation.

“Oh, too hot,” he said.

“Hot damn,” James said automatically, without looking up from his jelly packet.

The kids- who had hitherto never heard him swear- looked surprised, but that was nothing to how wide Qrow’s eyes got in surprise.

“What,” he said, face splitting into a grin, “did you just say? You got memes, Jimbotron?”

James gave him an unimpressed look, and busied himself spreading jelly on his own stack.

“What do you mean, ‘Do I have memes’?”

“That is not how I worded that.”

“Of course I have memes. I have been on the internet, you know.”

Qrow shook his head. “The rumor come out: does Jimmy has memes?”
“Qrow, we can’t keep doing this.”

“Sure we can! Don’t believe me, just watch.”

“I need to leave right now immediately.”

While this exchange went on across from them, Nora leaned close to Penny and whispered, “Do you have any idea what they’re talking about?”

Penny shrugged, equally baffled. “I think they have been apart for so long that they are going mad,” she whispered back. “Or possibly it is just a sign of senility.”

-/

Mercury ended up wandering away from the gathering eventually. As much fun as he was having needling Winter, there was only so much he could take- while he wouldn’t say he was socially awkward, Emerald had been happy to say it for him more than once, and he figured that was as good an explanation as any.

His easy amble found him by the edge of the river, in a place where the grass was too overgrown to make the bank accessible. A pink hunter’s ribbon tied to one branch alerted him to the presence of a trap line, and he toyed with the idea of letting any fish in it out just for fun before deciding against it. It would be a lot of trouble to get to that part of the bank, and one wrong move could end in a dousing.

There were some turtles sunning themselves on an overturned tree off the bank. He grabbed his phone to snap a picture of them to show Penny, and then nearly dropped his phone when it started buzzing midway through.

It was Winter. He rolled his eyes. “What’s up?”

“Where did you go?”

“Calm your tits, Princess, I just went for a walk. I’m near the river. There’s turtles.”

“I’m coming to find you. It’s time to go.”

“Sure, whatever. I’m gonna go back to looking at the turtles.” A movement caught his eye, and he added, “There’s a bird now too. You think it’s gonna eat the turtles?”

“What kind of bird is it?”

“Do I look like a bird encyclopedia? I don’t know. I think it’s a heron or something. Do herons eat turtles?”

“No idea. But probably.”

“Aw, dang.”

-/

They decided to talk to the bookstore after lunch; it was only a few blocks away, and after the lunch they’d had, a long walk seemed like what the doctor ordered. Penny and Nora ran ahead, and had to be constantly called back when, as they put it, the adults took too long.

At one point, they were overtaken and passed by two young ladies- no more than sixteen, if that,
holding hands and laughing as they dashed through the light foot-traffic. James tracked them with his gaze for a moment until they were out of sight, then brought Qrow’s hand up to his and pressed a quiet kiss to the thumb.

Qrow raised a quizzical eyebrow at him. “Nickel for your thoughts?”

“Just thinking how much has changed in my lifetime alone,” James said, and nodded in the direction of the building the girls had ducked into. Qrow made a soft ‘ah’ of understanding. “If you had told me, when I was their age, that all of this—” He raised their joined hands pointedly, but Qrow suspected that wasn’t the extent of his meaning, “—would be possible, in my life at all, let alone while I’m still in my prime…”

Qrow nodded. “Jesus. Yeah, I get what you mean. When I was a kid we were still calling things gay cause we didn’t like ‘em.”

“Josef and I were together for years before we could even legally marry,” James went on, gesturing wide with his free hand. “Can you imagine that? I was ready to start my life with the man I loved, and we just. Couldn’t. And then we could. And did. Almost immediately. Not to mention the hoops we had to jump through to adopt Penny, even when her birth parents approved us personally.”

“You knew them?”

James hummed an affirmative. “They spent the last couple weeks of her pregnancy with us. They were young- mistakes happened, choices were made. We got the child we wanted, and they- hopefully- were able to finish growing up and make a good life for themselves.”

They’d reached the bookstore now. The girls hurried off to the gaming section to look at the ddnmd books, while Qrow moved over to see if any of the gothic horror caught his eye and James, after a quick look around to ensure he wasn’t being watched, ambled toward the romance section.

He grabbed the first book he found with a cowboy on the cover and went over to pay for it before Qrow could see it and make fun of him, and then took a seat at one of the tables at the front of the store to read while he waited for the others.

(The book was called Legato Clouds. The premise looked promising, and he found the steampunk-esque setting appealing. It would be a satisfying before-bed read for the next week or so, or so he hoped.)

Qrow appeared while he was still on the first chapter, and he hurried to close the book and tuck it away before it could be spotted.

No such luck. Qrow gave him a knowing smile. “Another one of your romance novels you pretend you don’t read?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Sure you don’t, sure you don’t. What is it this time? Werewolves? Pirates?”

“...cowboys.”

Qrow laughed. “Of course it is.” He enjoyed a good chuckle over that, and then reached over to touch James’ hand. “Hey, listen, I want to talk to you real quick, while the girls are busy.”

“Everything okay?”
“It’s fine, it’s fine, I was just, thinking. Earlier, when you mentioned Josef…” He hesitated, and laced their fingers together. “You never really talk about him. And I saw you stopped wearing your ring awhile back. And I notice these things and I just…” He took a deep breath. “I worry, all right? That you’re holding back cause you don’t want to, I don’t know, make things awkward or something. You know?” He turned James’ hand over and started tracing the silver joints with his thumb, not looking up. “Anyway, I just wanted to say that it’s okay if you want to talk about ‘im sometimes. I know you’re mine now, but there’s a part of you that’s always gonna be his, and I don’t mind if that part wants to come out once in awhile.”

“Qrow…” James turned his hand around and folded it around Qrow’s. “Thank you.”

Qrow’s ears burned. He shrugged, and put his focus on their joined hands rather than look up at James’ face. “I mean, s’not a big deal, really. He was… he was your husband. He was Penny’s dad. That doesn’t change, you know? Even if we- I mean, I know we’ve kinda agreed to put a pin in this topic for now, but if we do get married, none of that changes what you had. And, you know, I don’t say it too good but I do love you, and I don’t want you to go burying a piece of yourself for my sake. So if you want to talk about him- I mean, it’s up to you, just don’t not for my sake. You know?”

James nodded. “I thought it might make you uncomfortable,” he admitted. “But I stopped wearing my ring because it felt like the right time to. Because I realized that even though I do still and always will love him… he wasn’t the first in my heart anymore.”

Qrow’s blush spread from his ears across his cheeks and nose. “…oh,” he said, a little hoarse. “You never said…”

“I did.” James brought Qrow’s hand up and kissed the joint of his thumb. “You just weren’t listening for it.”

“Yeah? Well I’m too brainless to be subtle with like that, you gotta spell shit out for me.”

-/-

Chapter End Notes

*Welcome to Pancake Palace, where we have pancakes and also things that are not pancakes.

**Inflation gets everywhere.

It’s gonna be a really long time until we get payoff for that whole thing about Winter's college boyfriend. Don't worry about it for now.

4/18 eta: Story is currently on hiatus until I get the RWBY itch again. Should be late summer/early fall if the pattern holds- see you guys then, and sorry for the wait.
Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

Something something Roman Torchdick. Also, James gets some insight on Qrow.

Chapter Notes

And we're back! Y'all miss me?

I finished the last chapter of the fourth act today so y'all finally get more updates. We're starting off with Torchwick, because I'm addicted to that asshole.

Also! A very important note: things are at this point too far gone for me to replace Josef with Pietro in Hallmarks without doing some rewriting- though, pleasingly, Pietro is only a few cosmetic details away from Josef, right down to appearance and manner, so in future fanfic I'll definitely be using Pietro. Just for now bear with me? I'm actually really in love with Josef as I created him for Hallmarks so I don't want to give him up just yet.

(Funnily enough Pietro was the name I'd originally picked out for Josef, but I dismissed it because it was too obvious. Imagine if I'd kept it? Y'all'd've been hailing me as psychic even more than usual.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-/-

Ruby was watching tv alone in living room when there was a knock at the door. She was still feeling kind of bad, so it took her a minute to throw her blanket around her shoulders so she could shuffle over to the door. She opened it to reveal Roman Torchwick, cane poised to tap at the door again just as she did. He met her stare for a second, then swapped into a disarming smile and bowed low, sweeping his hat off as he did.

“Little Red,” he said, adopting the haughty air of a gentleman. “Feeling better, I hope. Is your dad home?”

“Yes. Are you here to solicit him again? He doesn’t like it when you do that.”

“Solicit?” He raised an eyebrow and put his hat back on. “My my, who in the world keeps teaching you all these saucy words?”

“Jaune’s biggest brother is a treasure trove of exciting new vocabulary words. Most of which I’m not allowed to repeat.”

“Ah.” He considered this, scratched his head with his cane tip in thought. “Jaune’s brother… the one that looks like a ferret, right?”
“That’s him! You know, I told him you said that. He said that was rich coming from someone who looks like one of those words I’m not supposed to repeat.” She looked around with a conspiratory suspicion, then beckoned him close. He leaned down, fascinated, and she whispered, “It was penis.”

She giggled nervously at that, while above her, Torchwick straightened up and stared upward, the crook of his cane pressed against his mouth. She got the impression he was trying not to laugh.

“As charming as this banter is,” he said, after a very long time, “I would like to speak with your father now.”

“Oh, right,” she said, and then turned and called back into the house, “Daaaaad! Mr. Torchwick is here to see you! Should I kick him in the knees or just let him in?”

A pause, and Tai appeared. Ruby looked back up at Torchwick, but he was no longer paying her any attention; she was debating kicking him in the knees anyway when a hand landed on her shoulder.

“Ruby,” he said. “What have you been told about kicking people in the knees?”

“Only if my life is in danger, and only to slow them down while I run to you or another trustworthy adult,” she chirped, giving Torchwick her sunniest smile as she said it.

“And do you feel that your life is in danger from Mr. Torchwick?”

“No,” she continued to chirp. “He knows if he ever hurt me you’d break him in half and there’s nothing he could do about it.”

And with that, and one last sunny smile for Torchwick, she headed back to her room. Just before turning the corner, she gave him the universal expression for ‘I’m watching you’, and was gone.

“Sorry about her,” Tai said, once they were alone. “She’s not usually like that.”

“Oh, well, you know how archnemeses are,” Torchwick dismissed with a wave of his hand. “I wouldn’t expect anything less.”

Tai looked unimpressed. “Your archnemesis is a nine year old girl?”

“Nine? I thought she was ten by now.”

“Not for another week.”

“Oh.” He considered this while he followed Tai into the dining room and sat down, and, “Still, she’s close enough to ten, so it still counts.”

“Ha!” Tai shook his head. “Don’t rush her! I’ve got a whole ‘nother week on my midlife crisis, let me get through it before she hits double digits.”

“Midlife crisis?”

“She’s my baby, Torch,” Tai pointed out. “My baby is ten. I’m old enough to have a ten year old baby. I’m getting old. I even found a grey hair the other day.”

“Hm.” Roman pursed his lips and stared thoughtfully at his cane, tapping one finger on it minutely before, “Well,” he said slowly, “look at it this way. Would you rather have a ten year old daughter and be young? Would you like to have a ten year old daughter at twenty-eight, instead of thirty-
eight?”

“Christ,” Tai breathed. “Wow. You’re right. That is- that is a much scarier thought.”

“Mm hmm, that’s what I thought.”

“God, I can’t even imagine having a child that young. I’d be- dang, I’d have been eighteen. That’s- that’s way too young.”

Roman pursed his lips again, but any reply he’d meant to make was apparently discarded, because in a flash he was in Tai’s personal space, peering closely at his hairline while his fingers brushed oh-so-slowly through the hair at his temple.

Tai’s breath froze in his lungs. “Uh… Roman?”

“You said you had a grey hair,” he said, combing farther back. “I want to see it.”

“What? Hey, back off!” He shoved him away. “You could have asked.”

“My way’s more fun. Anyway, you can’t just tell me you got more attractive and then not expect me to be intrigued.”

Tai sighed, and raked his fingers through his hair before shaking it all back into place. “Did you just come here to hit on me?”

“No, that’s just a perk. I actually came here to talk to you about something important.” He folded his hands in front of him, leaned forward, and said, “…I want to go back to school. College, I mean. Or, just go, I guess, I never really went before so I… I can’t really go back, if you know what I mean…”

Whatever Tai was expecting, that wasn’t it, but by the time Roman trailed off, he’d processed what he’d said and was smiling in delight.

“Roman, that’s great!”

“You think so?”

“Yes?” Tai laughed sheepishly. “I mean, I’m a college professor, I kind of- you know, I’m a little biased, but I think that’s why you came to me. I think it’s a great idea. It’s never too late to start, you know, and it’s- if it’s something you want, there’s nothing to stop you. Do- do you have a major in mind, or do you just want a general degree? Or…” He laughed. “Just tell me what you’re thinking.”

For just a moment, while he spoke, Roman watched him with an uncharacteristically soft smile, before snapping out of it and turning his attention to his cane again. He rubbed at an imaginary spot with his thumb. “Well, I was just- you know, thinking. I’m a high school dropout, you know. Never finished my education. Got my GED, Junior made me get that, but college was just- not an option. Well, I imagine if I’d wanted to go Junior would have made it happen, but at the time- well- anyway, I was thinking, maybe- maybe I should. Try.”

“Are you thinking of a career change?”

“Oh, gods no. I love being a bartender, and I make enough money to support my lifestyle, so I don’t really- I don’t need anything more. I just, I just.” He shrugged, seemed to struggle a little, and switched tracks. “Anyway, I was thinking of getting a business degree. I’ve been helping run
the bar for over a decade now, but I might learn, I don’t know, some way of doing better, and of course if anything happens to Junior before the twins are old enough to take over someone has to be there to hold their hands until they are.”

“Is that… a possibility?” Tai asked, raising an eyebrow. Roman snorted.

“He’s a criminal kingpin, Tai. Yes. It’s a possibility.”

Tai studied him in silence for a long time, and then gave him a reassuring smile. “All right. Do you need anything from me? Or did you just want someone to talk to?”

“Oh, right!” He perked up. “I need tutoring. I haven’t done anything academic since I was a teenager and even then I was far more interested in cute boys and petty online discourse to really, you know, do anything academic. I need someone to get me back up to speed.”

“Oh. Well, I can help there, no problem. Just find out what you need help with, and we’ll set something up.”

“Excellent!” He perked up, clapping happily. “It’ll be like living in my own personal fanfiction! Except I’m a man in my thirties and not a teenage girl. Important distinction, that.”

Tai laughed. “This isn’t a fanfiction, Roman.”

“True. If this were a fanfiction, halfway through the year you’d realize you’re not as straight as you think and fall into my arms like we were always meant to be.”

“…right. Like I said. This isn’t a fanfiction.”

-/-

Mercury and Winter were already back by the time James and Penny finally arrived home. They were, supposedly, watching a movie, but judging by the low volume and the loud arguing, they weren’t paying much attention to it. James tapped on the living room door as they came in, while Penny darted over to sit beside Winter on the couch.

“We’re home,” he said. “Staying for dinner, Winter?”

“No, sir, I’m expected home within the hour. Another time, perhaps.” She spared a fond look for Penny, and added, “Thank you anyway.”

He headed upstairs after that, and Mercury gave Penny a questioning look. “He okay?” he said, jabbing a thumb behind him. “He seemed… off.”

“Maybe he is tired,” Penny said, frowning in the direction he’d pointed. “We did a lot of walking today, and he is not as young as he once was.”

“…Maybe.”

-/-

In his room, James sat down on his bed to take his boots off and then, after spending a moment staring into the middle distance, he reached over and took his wedding band from its resting place, hung carefully in one of the curls of vines on a picture frame holding a photo of himself and Josef at their wedding.

He turned the ring over in his hand, still staring off into the middle distance while his fingers
traced the edges. It was a pretty ordinary ring on the outside, just a plain gold band, but inside there had been engraved the inscription my heart’s treasure and the date 6*29 alongside.

After a long time, he returned the ring to its resting place and stood to go. He had work to do; there was no point dwelling in the past.

-/-

It was much later that night, when the house was quiet with everyone getting settled for the night, that Mercury strolled down the hallway to James’ room, hand trailing along the wall. James was not long out of the shower, judging by his still-damp hair; he was far less intimidating with his hair fluffing in about four directions at once.

He was sitting on the end of his bed with his phone in his hand, but he didn’t seem to be engaged with whatever was on it, because he was staring off at nothing. When Mercury tapped on the door, though, he looked up.

“Hey. What’s up?”

“I was just- um- I just wanted to say goodnight,” he said lamely. “So uh. Goodnight. I guess.”

James studied him for a moment, and then a smile softened his features. “Goodnight. Oh- actually, while I’ve got you here. I’ve been ordered very sternly to remind you that it’s Ruby’s birthday party next Saturday, and you are more than welcome to attend if you so choose. But,” he added, amusement dancing in his eyes, “I’m also ordered to assure you that attendance is not mandatory. It’s up you whether you go.”

Mercury was silent for a long time, staring at a spot on the carpet, and then said, “It’s a slumber party, right?” He thought Penny had said something about that.

“Yes. Ruby usually has a sleepover before her birthday, apparently, so this year she just decided to have the party and the sleepover at the same time.”

“Are you going?”

“I’m planning on it. If you don’t want to go, we can make arrangements- I can probably fix something up with Mr. Rainart, or I could just not go, if nothing else.”

Mercury stared at the floor. “I’ll, uh, I’ll think about it. He shoved his hands into his pockets and turned to slouch away. “Night, General. See you in the morning…”

-/-

The next day, James took Penny to the mall to shop for a birthday present for Ruby and the last pieces she needed for her Halloween costume. Mercury tagged along, but he was very firm that he was neither birthday present shopping or buying anything for a Halloween costume.

“I’m saving up my money;” he said, when Penny asked if he was shopping for something else. “I’m only going because it’s better than being cooped up in the house all the time and I don’t exactly have any friends to hang out with.”

“You have Winter,” Penny pointed out.

“Yeah, full offense to Winter, but I don’t wanna hang out with her two days in a row. Besides, her friends all hate me.”
“All of them?”

“Well, some of them. Vernal definitely.”

“I like Vernal. Why does she hate you?”

“Cause I called her a dyke the first time we met.”

“That’ll do it,” James said from the front seat, glancing at him in the rearview mirror. “Why did you do that?”


“Because you like ruffling people’s feathers,” James said. They’d reached the mall by now; he turned his attention back to navigating the lot in search of a parking spot.

Several minutes later, after circling the entire parking lot twice, they’d managed to find a place near enough the mall entrance that it wouldn’t be too much of a walk. Mercury whined about the distance anyway.

“Don’t I score you handicapped parking or something? I’m pretty sure that’s a thing.”

“Do you need us to park closer?” James asked. “You walk farther and longer most days, so I didn’t think it would be a problem. We can park closer if you need to.”

Mercury rolled his eyes, and kicked irritably at a rock.

“I don’t need to. I just don’t wanna walk that far.”

James laughed. “You’re starting to sound like a normal teenager.”

“Hey, fuck you!”

A passing woman gasped; Mercury flipped her off, and James reached over to gently push his hand back down.

“Language, Mercury.”

-/-

The mall was crowded when they got into it; James lifted Penny up onto his shoulders rather than lose track of her.

“Where shall we go first?” he asked.

“Ruby is my very best friend ever,” Penny said thoughtfully. “I want to get her something special. But I do not have any ideas.”

“Can we go to Casey’s Audio while she decides?” Mercury asked. “I want to see if they got anything new in since the last time I was there.”

“Sure,” James said, and they headed in the direction of the music store.

Casey’s was mostly empty when they arrived, apart from a man discussing a stack of old records with a young woman at the counter. Mercury beelined over to the guitars when they arrived, but only stayed there for a minute before disappearing into the stacks at the far end of the store.
James set Penny down to browse on her own while they waited, and then found his way over to a rack of records. It had been a long time since he’d been anywhere that carried any, but as far as he knew his mother’s old record player still worked, and he had the vague idea that Penny and Mercury might enjoy the novelty of it when they visited over Thanksgiving.

He was flipping through the selection when the song came over the speakers. He didn’t even register what he was hearing at first; his brain made the connection before he did and he froze, the record he’d been looking at slipping slowly back into place. He knew that song; Qrow had hummed it into his skin a hundred, a thousand times, so much that he knew the melody physically as much as he knew it by sound.

He’d never known it was a real song. He’d always assumed Qrow was just humming.

He’d never heard the words before.

The song faded out before he could really listen properly. His fingers uncurled, he fidgeted. Turned back to the records, but his ears were ringing, and he couldn’t focus on anything.

He strode up to the counter. The cashier was going through the stack of records from before, but the man had disappeared.

“Excuse me,” he said, voice faltering slightly. “That— He cleared his throat. Got himself back under control. “That song that was just playing. The one about crows. Can you tell me about it?”

“Oh, that one!” The girl perked up. “I’m always happy to introduce someone to the Blackbird, hold on.”

She disappeared into the back. Penny appeared at James’ side, her face asking a question, and he rested a reassuring hand around her shoulder. After a moment, the girl returned with a cassette tape in hand.

“Miss Blackbird!” she chirped, handing over the cassette. “She was a local singer, not a professional, though everyone said she could have been. Used to do, like— you know, small performances. Open mic nights, karaoke, library programs, that kind of thing.”

James took the cassette from her while she spoke. He’d never heard the name Miss Blackbird in his life, and he’d never seen a photo of the woman in question, but there was no mistaking her on the picture: her son looked too much like her, had the same eyes, the same jaw, the same bony shoulders.

“She mostly just did covers,” the girl chattered on, either not noticing or not caring that James was frozen in place, and barely listening. Beside him, Penny, deeply curious, pulled his hand down enough to see the picture herself and gave a tiny gasp of recognition. “This was the only song she ever wrote herself and she never performed it if her husband wasn’t there— wrote it for him, you know. Her brother-in-law convinced her to make a recording of one of her performances, which is lucky because she died not too long afterward. Her and her husband both, they were killed in a car crash. They went together though. It’s kind of romantic, if you think about it.”

“Tragic, more like,” James found himself saying. Qrow never talked about his parents, had only mentioned their deaths once, but James had seen the ripples that it had caused in their world. “They left two small children as orphans. There’s nothing romantic about it.”

“You knew them?”
“I’m acquainted with the family,” he said coldly. His thumb traced the edge of the picture. She wasn’t particularly beautiful- attractive, he supposed, in a vague sort of way. Rather plain, apart from the bright red eyes.

She was young. Younger than Qrow now.

It put some things in perspective, things he hadn’t considered about Qrow before but now understood on a deep level.

“Can I buy a copy of this?”

“Oh, no, I’m sorry, we have the only one, and we’re not allowed to copy it. It’s for store use only.”

“How did you… come by this?”

“My step dad was a friend of hers,” she said. “He managed to get hold of the recording after her death and lets us play it here to keep her memory alive. He says it was a crying shame she never went professional, she really was good enough, you know. But she was too dedicated to her research and her family, it wasn’t what she wanted.” She shrugged. “So what can you do?”

“What indeed,” James murmured, and handed the cassette back. “Could you- play that again? Please? I just want to hear it, just once more.”

“Sure, I could listen to her music all day if Pop would let me.”

She disappeared into the back and after a long moment, the song playing cut off and was replaced by the familiar tune. James stilled, trying to take in the lyrics. Trying to understand Qrow a little bit better than he had before.

*Crows mate for life*, the lyrics crooned. *Let’s you and me attempt a murder*.

It was such a cute song. More upbeat than James had ever heard it, but- but it would be, wouldn’t it? James covered his mouth, hiding a smile at the barrage of blackbird puns.

He got the feeling he would have liked her.

-/-

They left not long after, James deep in thought while Penny held Mercury’s hand, since James was distracted and, according to her, it was very crowded in the mall.

(Mercury suspected she just wanted to hold his hand.)

After a few minutes, Mercury said, a little hesitant, “So, I don’t know what it’s worth to you, but, uh… well, here,” and unclipped and handed James one side of his earphones. Once James held it to his ear with a clear question in his eyes, Mercury looked away, furtive, and hit a button on his phone.

It only took a second for James to realize- the sound coming out of the earpiece was a low-quality, muffled recording of the song. James listened for a few seconds longer, and passed the earpiece back to Mercury slowly.

“You…”

“Look, I know it’s a shitty recording, but, like, I mean, it’s better than nothing. I can send it to your phone if you want it. It’s no big deal.”
James hesitated— they’d said they didn’t want the song copied, right? But then, if it was for her son—and it was hardly a high-quality recording, they couldn’t exactly make money off of it— and, well. It was for her son. It was… different, than if he was just some rando off the street. He nodded.

“I would like that, yes. And, Mercury?”

Mercury grunted in acknowledgement, attention on his phone while he sent the file attachment to James. James reached over and gave his shoulder a quick squeeze.

“Thank you.”

He shrugged, and reached up to run his hand through his hair. “Whatever, it’s not important. Hey squirt, you figured out what stupid present you’re getting your friend yet or what?”

-/-

Chapter End Notes

Okay first things first: while I have read through the backlog chapters a couple times in the past month in preparation for picking the story back up, I can't remember anything specific about what happened when so uhhhh the next few updates are going to be almost as much of a surprise for y'all as for me.

Also, covers! This is now officially a trilogy, and I made matchy matchy covers for the whole lot.
The next three days were a bit of a blur for James; he went through his usual routine, but there was an ache settling in his middle. He wanted Qrow- wanted, needed, to see him, to spend more than just a few snatched hours with him, to be alone with him, without their families around.

By Wednesday, the ache was burning under his skin, so he shot off a quick text for Qrow to call him when he got the chance, and waited, trying to work but slightly distracted. (Fortunately all he was doing was organizing his notes on their latest experiment. Contrary to Ruby’s charmingly childish assumptions, his work involved a lot of note taking and not a lot of explosions and bitchy ais.*)

He didn’t have to wait long for Qrow to call. He grabbed the phone and shut his office door.

“Ironwood.”

“There’s no way you didn’t know that was me. I knew you did that on purpose!”

“Other people do call me during work, you know.”

He leaned back in his chair, face softening at the sound of Qrow grumbling on the other end.

“Well, what did you want? I left the kids doing a worksheet, but I haven’t got a whole buncha time before I have to get back to class.”

“If I can get Glynda to stay with the kids tonight, would you be willing to get a room somewhere and spend the night together?”

“Ohh~hh, a sexy getaway in the middle of the week, Jimboree? Naughty.”

James laughed softly. “I know, I know. I just really… need to see you. I don’t want to wait until the
weekend and also…” He sighed. “I love your family. You know that.”

“Yeah. Honestly I’m pretty sure they like you more than me, so…”

“Untrue, but I just mean… look, as much as I love them, I would like the chance to make love to you without having to look them all in the eye over breakfast the next morning.”

Qrow snorted. “‘Make love’,” he mocked. “The day will come when I introduce the word fuck into your vocabulary.”

“But today is not that day,” finished James. “So are we on for tonight?”

“For an illicit night in a seedy motel?”

“I was thinking of just the regular place-”

“Shhh, I’m fantasizing. Now where was I?”

“Seedy motel.”

“Right, right. We arrive at different times, so they don’t know we’re together, but of course they know.”

“Qrow.”

“We’re just two strangers who could be meeting for any thing- except of course we’re meeting to carry on our illicit affair, and everyone knows.”

“Qrow…”

“But it’s fine, because we give them false names. You’ll tell them your name is Nick Chopper-”

“Qrow.”

“-and I- I will be… Fiyero.”

“Qrow!”

“Whaaaaat?”

“You’re not subtle.” On the other end, he could hear Qrow chuckling, and laughed as well. “I was thinking we could get a room at Bed, Breakfast, and Beyond, but if you want to go to some seedy motel…”

“Nah, they charge by the hour, and I have way more hours in me than that.”

“That’s not all you’re going to have in you.”

Qrow let out an indignant squawk. “How come you get to make those comments and I don’t?!”

“Nepotism.”

“That’s not-!” He broke off, and James could hear him grumbling on the other end before going on with, “B and B and B sounds good. What time do you wanna meet up?”

“Around eight? I have some things to take care of, but after that I’ll be free.”
“Eight sounds good, I’ll see you then. And hey, Jim?”

“Yes?”

“I’m gonna fuck you till you forget everything that isn’t my name,” and then hung up before James could reply.

James set his phone down very carefully and then leaned back in his chair with a long, low groan. Tonight was not going to come fast enough, not with that promise in the back of his mind**.

-/-

Glynda was passing out practice tests when her phone buzzed at her desk. She finished passing out the tests and checked; it was James, asking that he call her when she got the chance, alongside a reassurance that it wasn’t urgent.

She waited until lunchtime to call, locking her classroom door so she could have some privacy.

“Ironwood.”

“Why are you using your sexy phone answering voice?”

“Oh, Glynda. Sorry, thought you might be Qrow.”

“Caller id exists for a reason, James.” She shook her head. Honestly. “What did you need?”

“Do you mind watching the kids for me tonight? Qrow and I have, uh, impromptu evening plans… overnight plans…”

“Sure. No problem.”

“I know it’s short notice, but- oh. You said yes.”

“Yes.”

“It’s just that I had a whole sales pitch planned…”

She sighed, glad he couldn’t see how fond she looked when she did. “I am capable of understanding that you need some alone time with your boyfriend sometimes, you know.”

“You are?”

Glynda pinched the bridge of her nose. “Yes, James. You know, there is a reason Snow and I have foregone having children.”

“You said it was because you were selfish.”

“Yes. Selfish enough that I want my wife all to myself- that I don’t want to have to make complicated arrangements so that we can spend a night of passion together. You and Qrow… aren’t selfish. You’re family men. You revolve around your families, and your children, and that makes you happy, and that means it’s good.”

“It does,” James said. “I love our families-”

“But you are also still men,” she went on, before he could start justifying a perfectly justified desire. “You have needs, and you need the chance to meet those needs away from your family. And
there’s nothing wrong with that. So yes, I will watch your kids for the night so you can do so.”

There was a silence, and then she felt the burn of his smug look even through the phone. “You’re warming up to us being together,” he said. She rolled her eyes.

“I can’t say I’m exactly… happy … about it, but, yes, I am starting to feel that my initial judgement was… inaccurate.”

“Aww.”

She went on. Might as well. “It was a miscalculation. I worried that he would be bad for you, and never expected that you would be so good for him.”

“We’re good for each other,” James corrected, and once more she was glad she couldn’t see her expression, given how satisfied she was. “You really think I’m good for him?”

“Well, in all the time I’ve known him, he’s dated a handful of people, some more seriously than others, and none of them have ever-”

And then broke off, because what none of them had ever done was not a confidence she could bring herself to break- for all that she desperately, desperately wanted James to know. (Despite knowing that if he knew, it would cement their relationship more permanently than anything else had yet.)

“Glynda?” Damn, she’d been silent too long. “What have none of them ever?”

“He’s more stable with you,” she said, instead. “More stable than I’ve ever known him. You did that.”

“You are warming up to us.”

“Well,” she relented. “Maybe a little.”

“And it hasn’t even been a year. You didn’t even warm to Josef that fast.”

“You were in the hospital, James!” she snapped. “For two years! I had more important things on my mind than liking the man my baby brother was over the moon for!”

He had the audacity to laugh at that. “It’s not his fault I had the world’s biggest crush on him.” He said nothing while she sulked, and then, when it was clear she would not respond, “I love you too.”

“You’re the worst .”

-/-

Bed, Breakfast, and Beyond was a tiny little bed and breakfast not too far from their neighborhood. It wasn’t hard to book a room on short notice, so James texted their room number to Qrow not long after lunch.

It was a long day after that; Qrow did his best to focus on work, but a part of him was distracted with just wanting to be with James. Rehearsal for the Halloween program was a nightmare, and he ended up releasing the kids to gather their things a few minutes earlier than usual rather than try to force himself to keep paying attention.

The hours that followed were just as torturous, but finally he was able to give the girls a round of good night hugs and kisses and go.
James’ car was already in the lot when he arrived, but when he went to sign in on the guest book, the last name on the page was not James but ‘Nick Chopper’, written in a bold, slightly blocky hand that was not James’ usual elegant script.

Qrow bit back a laugh, and scrawled a messy ‘Fiyero’ below it, laughed, and waved at the receptionist as he went by. He and James came here often enough, whether for getaway nights or just for dinner, that they were known; if James had arrived before him, she was probably expecting him soon anyway.

There was a do-not-disturb sign on the doorknob; Qrow ignored this and pushed the door open. James was indeed already there, lying on the bed with his tablet in hand and his reading glasses on his nose, but while he was definitely working, he was also… hm, how to describe it?

He was trying.

And, like most things he tried, he was succeeding. Qrow clicked the lock behind him as he pulled the door closed, and then crossed the room in two short strides, took the tablet and set it aside, and pinned James’ shoulders down so he could kiss him soundly, all in one fluid motion.

“Hey,” he murmured, pulling back just enough when James’ hands came up to cup his jaw.

James hummed and kissed him again. “I hope that’s a sign of things to come,” he said. “You made me a promise earlier, I intend to hold you to it.”

-/-

Much later- much later- Qrow curled into the comfortable nook that James formed with his arms, the one that Qrow swore had been shaped with him in mind. They were a bit of a mess; they’d need to shower soon, and James would probably ensure that it was very soon, but for now Qrow just wanted to lie together and feel good.

Emotionally good. He already felt damn good, physically speaking. All fuzzy and a little high. And the world had gone pink and soft, as was its wont when James held him like this.

He burrowed closer, nuzzling the spot on James’ chest where flesh melded to metal, and started humming, content and easy.

“Oh,” James said suddenly. “That reminds me.”

“Hm?” He broke off humming, and James rolled over, half crushing Qrow while he leaned over the edge of the bed and rummaged for his pants. “Hey!” he squawked. “Some of us have actually squishable organs, you know!”

“Sorry.” James rolled away hastily, phone in hand. “I wasn’t thinking- I wanted to show you something.”

“All right, all right. Just don’t go squishing me unless you’re gonna, you know, go somewhere with it.”

“I think that was supposed to sound sexy, but I can’t figure out how.”

“I dunno, big man, my brain is fried, all right?”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.” James kissed his forehead playfully, and tapped a button on his phone. Qrow tilted his head to listen as muffled, slightly inaudible music began playing, but after a
moment his eyes widened and his heart was being squeezed in a vice.

“Where… where did you get that?”

“Casey’s,” James murmured. “It came over the sound system. I- I never realized the song had lyrics.”

Qrow felt like he was being squished again; his heart had broken out of the vice and was threatening to crack through his ribs. He shook his head and burrowed into James’ chest, buried himself in the nook of his body and tried to remember how to breathe. Above him, the music was turned off and the phone clicked as James set it on the table and began rubbing gentle circles onto Qrow’s back.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered into Qrow’s hair. “I thought it might- I thought you might like it.”

“Shoulda warned me,” Qrow mumbled. “Wasn’ prepared.”

“I’m sorry,” came the repeated answer.

Qrow shuddered, and, slowly, pulled himself together. “Can… can you play it again?”

“Are you sure?”

“Please, Jim. I want to- I want to hear her.”

“All right.”

James reached over- carefully this time- to retrieve his phone. He turned the music back on and passed the phone to Qrow, who clutched it to his chest and resumed his position curled into the nook that was James.

It had been thirty years since he’d heard her sing, but he was amazed to find that he still knew every single note, every hitch, every jump, even the part where she stopped to hum to herself while she played her guitar. He knew her song like he knew his own mind; it was a piece of him, running deep into the parts of his brain he’d tried to drink into oblivion and reminding him that he was, no matter what else, his mother’s son.

James cupped his jaw in his big, beautiful hands, and brushed a thumb over a tear Qrow didn’t even remember shedding. “Hey,” he murmured. “You okay?”

Qrow sniffled. “I really miss my mom, Jim.”

“I’m sorry. I thought that-”

“No!” Qrow clutched the phone closer, protectively. “No, I- I’m really- I’m really-” He sniffled again. “Look, I’m not- I’m not- I’m not upset. I mean, I’m not, I’m glad, I think. I’m just. I’m just. Look, it’s my mom, okay? My mom who died thirty years ago and she used to sing to me all the time and I barely have anything left of her and I’ve missed her and I just, I just, look, just let me, I’m, I just, I really miss her, okay?”

“Okay.”

James brushed a few more tears away, and leaned forward to kiss the little wrinkle between Qrow’s eyebrows, then wrapped him up again, letting Qrow burrow close again. Between them, he hit play on the phone, and once more the muffled song began playing, his mother’s song.
James dozed off holding Qrow, listening to his mother’s song and the occasional sniffle. He wasn’t so far gone that he didn’t hear when Qrow eventually spoke, though.

“She wrote this song for Dad, you know.”

James hummed an acknowledgment. “You never talk about them.”

Qrow shrugged against him at that, and then shifted back so that they were face to face. James’ hand came down to rest on his hip, tracing a slow arc against his skin, reassuring and comfortable.

“Dad was a romantic,” he said. “He used to tell us that he knew from the moment he met Mom that he was going to marry her one day.”

“Yeah?”

“It was a good story. He was doing something stupid, he said- it was always something different every time he told the story, so it must have been really stupid if he didn’t want to tell us. And she came over to tell him off for being so dumb, and he asked her to marry him right then and there.”

James let out a startled laugh. “And that worked?”

“What? No! Of course it didn’t, they were like- eighteen or nineteen, something like that. They were still kids, of course she wasn’t gonna marry him just cause he asked.”

“Then how…”

“They were friends, after that. He was always doing stupid things, and she was always there to either keep him in line or egg him on, she said it always depended on how she felt that day. And he kept on loving her, real quiet like, I mean he wasn’t That Guy about it, and one day she realized she loved him too.”

“And they got married,” James finished for him.

“And they got married,” Qrow confirmed. “And had me and Raven, and for a few years at least they were real happy.”

“I’m sorry,” James said, kissing the worried wrinkle between his eyebrows. “It can’t be easy, losing your parents at such a young age.”

“At any age, I imagine.”

James nodded slowly, and reached up to touch the crooked cross at Qrow’s throat.

“You said this was his?”

“Wh- oh, yeah.” Qrow touched it as well, and then laced his and James hands together. “He was a real magpie when it came to shiny shit.”

“Hmm, sounds like someone I know,” James said, stroking his thumb pointedly over one of the many rings Qrow sported.

Qrow laughed. “Yeah, I definitely got that habit from him. But you should be thanking him, Mr. Shinypants.”
James laughed as well, and for a moment they were silent before Qrow started speaking again.

“It used to tickle her about their names– she’s the one that decided to name me and Raven like that, so we’d fill up her little murder. That’s why she wrote the song the way she did– you know, crows mate for life. She wrote it for Dad, and she’d only ever sing it if he was there, cause she’d only ever sing it for him.” He stopped and took a shuddery breath before going on. “Wh-when I was a kid, she’d sing in the house at night, after we’d gone to bed. I used to lie there listening to her until I’d gone to sleep, and she sang so many beautiful songs, but that one she’d only sing if Dad was home too.”

James considered this, considered all the times Qrow had hummed that song for him. He’d joked that crows sang to their mates, and James had never even considered that it might be a real song, or that it could have such a deep meaning for him– without warning, he caught Qrow’s jaw in both hands and pulled him in for a kiss, deep and needy and packed with as much affection as he could fit into it.

When they pulled apart, Qrow gave him a glassy, dizzy sort of smile. “What was that all about?” he asked. James kissed him again, so chaste after their previous kiss.

“I love you too,” he murmured, and kissed Qrow again.

-/-

Chapter End Notes

*Though the lab's resident ai did tend to sulk when they didn't laugh at her jokes.

**James, on the other hand...
Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

While James and Qrow have their night away, Glynda takes the time to see Mercury's improvement for herself.

Chapter Notes

This chapter is the end of Act III! Since Act IV is only a few chapters long (I split what was originally going to be one act into two), I'm going to try to rebuild a bigger buffer before I start posting Act IV. This may not hold, though, given how much I'm itching for y'all to read some of the future developments. Especially since I love the next chapter so much. Hmm.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-/-

Glynda brought over a stack of pizzas for dinner when she came over that night, which was a plus since they rarely got pizza, but she brought them from that very fancy gourmet pizza place near her neighborhood, which, in Mercury’s opinion, rather defeated the purpose of pizza.

“The point of pizza is that it’s bad for you,” he said, around a mouthful of shrimp-and-mushroom with parmesan. “This place always uses, like, healthy ingredients and shit to make their pizza.”

“Language,” Glynda said. “And don’t talk with your mouth full.”

“Were your parents like this?” he said, and swallowed pointedly. “Is that where you got it from? The constant scolding thing, I mean. Because you both do it, and it’s annoying.”

“No, they are very nice,” Penny said. “You are spending Thanksgiving with us, are you not? You will see then. They are very sweet.”

Mercury frowned, and turned to Glynda. “How accurate is her impression? I mean, she’s their only grandkid, right?”

“For now. And yes, her impression is… different… than mine and James’ would be. Mother was a very stern woman, though she’s rather mellowed with age. But Dad is a troublemaker. You’ll like him, I think.”

“It’s, uh…” He took another bite of pizza, and at her pointed look, finished it before speaking again. “It’s your dad and his mom, right? Or is it the other way around?”

“No, that’s right. There are photos on the wall,” she added, gesturing at some of the portraits hanging around the living room.

He shrugged. “Yeah, I saw, but I’ve been in enough mixed families to know that’s not the best
indication. And you don’t really look like your dad.”

“No, I take after my mom’s side of the family, not dad’s.”

“She still in the picture?”

“That’s not a polite question to ask.”

“Why not? People ask me about my parents all the time, when they find out I’m a foster kid.”

“It’s not polite for them, either. Do you like it when they ask that?”

The answer was “not really”, but rather than give it, he took another bite of pizza and stared at his plate while he chewed slowly. By the time he’d done, Glynda answered.

“She left,” she said. “I haven’t seen her since just before Dad remarried. Last time I heard from her she was living in Nevada, but that was several years ago. She may have moved again since then.”

“Oh. Huh.” He started to take another bite, and then hesitated, and said, “My mom ditched me too,” before shoving half his slice into his mouth so he wouldn’t have to say anything else.

-/-

The trouble with having his teacher watching them for the night was that she wasn’t going to believe him if he said he had no homework tonight. Admittedly, James never believed it either, knowing his sister as well as he did, but Glynda not only knew he had it, she knew how much of it he had.

He threw his pencil aside and raised his hands to yell at the ceiling in frustration, then folded his arms over his chest and leaned his chair back, glowering at the world in general and Glynda in specific. She looked up from the papers she was grading at the other end of the table, the picture of calm.

“Are you having trouble, Mercury?”

“You are the worst,” he said. “Why can’t you just give your classes the same exact assignments every year?”

“Because unscrupulous students like to make money selling answer sheets to students, who take it as a chance to get out of putting in the work to understand the material.”

“I know, I made bank when I was living with Qrow doing that. Used to take test answer sheets out of his bag and sell ‘em to his students. Quick way to make a few dollars and he never caught on.”

Penny looked up from her math homework with a frown. “That is not very honest,” she said, and was waved away by Mercury. She looked back down at her homework. “Though… an answer sheet is very tempting right now.”

“If you’re having trouble~” Glynda began, and then stopped, because Mercury had already stood and was leaning over Penny’s shoulder to look at her work. After a moment, he reached over and grabbed his abandoned pencil.

“Here’s your problem,” he said. “You just~” and then began explaining to her carefully, going through an entire problem step by step, and then two more, before she felt that she’d understood and could handle it herself.
He returned to his seat and resumed glowering at his own math book. Glynda folded her own arms.

“Penny, does Mercury often help you with your homework?”

“Oh yes!” Penny chirped. “He is very smart.”

Mercury rolled his eyes at this, and when Glynda turned her gaze to him, repeated the motion. “Don’t give me that look, teach. It’s sixth grade math. It’s not exactly—” and here he gestured at homework, “You know, rocket science.”

“Neither is basic algebra,” Glynda said. “But that’s not what I was thinking about.”

“Then what were you thinking about?”

“I was thinking about how much James hasn’t been telling me.”

He bristled. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing important. Don’t worry about it.”

This only got him glowering again. “You’re thinking something sentimental, aren’t you? I can always tell when adults do that. Stop it! It’s rude.”

“You’re hardly one to talk about manners,” Glynda said, but she nevertheless schooled the thoughtful look off of her face. “Better?”

“You’re the worst.”

-/-

Glynda was sitting on the living room couch, still grading papers, when Mercury appeared in the doorway. He had a blue blanket draped around his shoulders, trailing behind him on the ground. She glanced at the clock. It was past one.

“Don’t you sleep?” he grumbled, shuffling over to sit on the other end of the couch, stifling a yawn as he did.

“I have papers to grade, unfortunately. The more work I give my students, the more grading I have to do.”

“That sounds like a good reason not to give us homework,” he said, yawning again and leaning into the nook of the couch.

“You have to learn somehow,” she said, not really paying him any attention. “What are you doing up?”

“Couldn’t sleep. Thought I’d see if the couch did better.”

“Ah. I can grade elsewhere, if you’d prefer some privacy.”

“Nah, you’re good. I’m probably not going to actually sleep anyway.”

He snuggled a little deeper into his little nook, and for a long time it was quiet, broken only by the sounds of their breathing and the scratch of her pen, the shuffle of her papers.

“You said for now,” he said suddenly, and she got the feeling that they were getting to the real
reason he’d come down here. She looked up, a question on her face, and he went on. “Earlier, when I asked if Penny was your folks’ only grandchild. You said ‘for now.’” He side eyed her suspiciously. “Something you wanna share with the class?”

“Cute,” she said, and, “No, that’s not what I meant. Snow and I have chosen to remain childless, so any grandchildren they get will be through James.”

More silence. Glynda frowned at the test she was grading, and then began shuffling through the already graded ones.

Mercury broke the silence again with, “You think he’s going to marry Qrow, don’t you? And then ~Nora~ will be their grandchild too.” When she hummed vaguely at that, he bristled and said, “Well what else could you have meant?”

“What indeed,” she said. She’d found the test she was looking for, and set it and the other one beside each other.

“Can’t get married with me around keeping them apart,” he muttered, and tightened his hold on his blanket, shrinking into the couch more. Glynda stilled, eyes still on the two identical tests but thoughts turned to Mercury. What was going on in that head of his, she wondered.

“Mercury--” she began, but was interrupted by Penny appearing in the doorway, sleepy and rumpled. “Oh, Penny. Is something wrong?”

“I heard voices,” Penny said, rubbing sleepily at her eyes.

“Sorry, squirt,” Mercury said. “I was just having a chat with your old auntie here--”

“Old?”

“I didn’t mean to wake you up.”

“That is all right. May I stay down here?” This directed at Glynda, who gestured at the couch in welcome, for all that she would have preferred both children returned to their beds. She couldn’t exactly tell them where to sleep in their own homes, after all.

-/-

By the time Glynda finished grading the last of the tests, and made a note reminding her to have a little chat with Winchester and Lark about cheating, both children had fallen asleep, Penny’s head not-quite-but-almost pillowed on Mercury’s thigh and his hand resting oh-so-very-close to her shoulder.

Glynda considered the image before her, and all the things James hadn’t told her.

“Oh yes, what indeed,” she murmured, and then took out her phone and snapped a picture before disappearing into the guest bedroom for some much needed sleep.

-/-

There was a knock on the door after dinner, while Nora and Ruby were washing dishes and Tai was helping Yang with her algebra homework. Yang was complaining about Glynda’s mountains of homework, so when she heard the knock she hurried to answer it, if only to get away from algebra for a minute.
It was Roman Torchwick, leaning very casually on his cane and giving the door his most winning smile. When he saw it was Yang who answered the door, though, he frowned, downright pouted, she’d say.

“Oh, it’s you, goldilocks.”

Her dad came up behind her. “Hey, Roman. Come on in.”

“Hello, Tai~” he chirped, crossing the threshold and almost completely ignoring Yang, who moved aside while Dad showed him where he could hang his coat. “Your brother around, or is it just you and the munchkins tonight?”

“Just us, I’m afraid. Qrow’s out with James getting some much-needed alone time.”

“Good for them,” Torchwick said, and half-turned to Yang to say, a little conspiratorially, “Alone time is very important in adult relationships, you know.”

“I know,” she said, folding her arms and trailing behind them to the kitchen. “What are you doing here? If you’re here to hit on my dad again-”

“So suspicious! I’ll have you know I’m here at his very invitation. Isn’t that right, dad bod?”

“If you could not antagonize my girls while you’re here, I’d appreciate it,” Dad said. “But yes, Yang, Roman is here at my invitation. I’m helping him with… something.”

“No need for secrecy, hon,” he waved away, and turned to Yang again. “Your dad is tutoring me so I can start taking college classes in the spring. Isn’t that so nice of him?”

“Oh!” Yang perked up. “That’s actually really cool! My friend Pyrrha’s mom is going back to college, too, she always wanted to be a writer and now that Pyrrha’s a little older she said that she can spare a little time for the classes.”

Yang had meant the comment to be friendly, but something hurt crossed Torchwick’s face before he beamed at her. “Well good for her! You’re never too old to start, right?”

“Exactly,” Dad said. “I’ve had students older than me, even. All you need is the willingness to learn.”

“And a few thousand dollars to drop on tuition,” Yang added, resuming her seat and propping her hand on her fist. When Dad gave her a Look, she added, “What? It’s true.”

“I mean, yes, but still…” He sighed. “Never mind. Yang, honey, can you handle yourself alone for a few minutes while I get Roman started?”

“Sure, no problem. I’ll redo the problems I already did, to make sure I understood them.”

“That’s a good idea. Smart girl~” He ruffled her hair fondly, and sat down to look over the papers Torchwick had taken out of his suit jacket.

-/-

The kids had finished their homework and gone to their rooms long before Tai and Roman had finished going through a rundown of all the things he needed catching up on. Roman had, officially, a ninth-grade education, though he’d finished part of tenth grade before being forced to drop out.
“Not that I was paying much attention while I was there,” he’d added. “Fifteen, you know. I had more important things on my mind.”

He’d gotten his ged a few years later, but as he put it, he’d studied to the test, and forgotten most of what he’d learned at the time. In his seventeen years behind the bar, he’d learned a lot about making drinks and running a business, and quite a lot about crime and interpersonal relationships, but he’d forgotten just as much about anything academic.

In short, he had a lot of studying if he didn’t want to get stuck doing remedial classes before he could even start working toward his degree.

“I know it’s a pain,” Tai said. “But classes build on each other, and the things taught in one class benefit others- you don’t want to fail on your first science paper just because you can’t remember how to write an essay, right?”

“Oh, will I have to take a science class?”

“Well you’ll need at least one science credit as part of your core classes, so yes.”

“Oh,” he pouted, and then perked up. “Wait, don’t you teach science?”

“I do teach a few core-level classes, but I’m not sure if you’d be allowed to take any of my classes. We’re friends, so there would be the possibility of bias. It’s a question of ethics.”

“Huh. So those rules about relationships between teachers and students go beyond just not fucking the students?”

Tai laughed, a little sheepish. “I mean, that’s the big one, but yes, there are lots of other ways that a student-teacher dynamic can be unbalanced by an outside relationship of any kind. It’s not completely unavoidable, of course, especially with non-traditional students, but in general we try not to have our friends or family as our students.”

“Damn, I was looking forward to playing hot for teacher.”

He waggled his eyebrows suggestively, and Tai sighed. Drummed his fingers irritably on the table. Looked away, counted to ten.

“Why do you always do that?” he said, looking back.

“Do what?”

“Flirt. Hit on me. Bring everything back to being attracted to me. Why do you do it? You know it makes me uncomfortable. Even my kids have noticed. Why can’t you just… drop it?”

Roman looked surprised, and then shrugged. “I’m just having fun. I’m a flirt. I like flirting.”

“Well I don’t like being flirted with. Do my boundaries not matter to you? Is that it? Because I thought we were friends, but if my own comfort is so unimportant to you-”

“I told you, I’m just having fun. What’s so bad about being flirted with? I flirt with everyone.”

“No you don’t, and even if you did, what’s so bad about just respecting that I don’t want you to flirt with me? How would you like it if a woman was flirting with you, even if she knew you were gay, and had already rejected her a hundred or more times?”

“Oh I definitely would have dealt with her before she made it that far.”
“Is that it, then? Should I have you dealt with?”

Roman looked as though he’d been struck at that; his hands moved like he was reaching for his cane, and, when he remembered it was leaning against the wall beside his hat and coat, aborted the movement and picked up a pencil instead, fidgeting with it before schooling his expression back into his usual casual disregard.

“I suppose if you’re going to put it that way…”

“Roman, you’re my friend.” Tai reached over and rested a hand on his shoulder, coaxing him to look up so Tai could catch his eye before he went on, firmly, “You’re a good guy, better than you let on, and I like having you around, but I also deserve my comfort, not to mention I’m trying to set a good example for my kids. If you can’t respect my boundaries, I’ll have to ask you to stop coming around, and I don’t want to do that. Okay?”

For one moment, Tai wondered if Roman was going to walk out; he certainly fidgeted as though he meant to, and then he turned his gaze to Tai’s hand and his shoulders sagged. He gave Tai a weak smile.

“I suppose I don’t have much choice in the matter, do I?”

“There’s always a choice,” Tai reminded him. “You can choose to go on being an asshole, or you can choose to be the good guy I know you are deep down.”

There was another silence, while Roman carried on looking at the hand on his shoulder, before he reached over and folded it in his own.

“You really are wasted on women,” he murmured sadly—and pulled Tai’s hand away, pushing it back across the table almost pointedly.

-/-

James got home as Glynda was getting the kids into her car for the drive to school. Penny detoured over to him from the front walk to fling her arms around his middle.

“I thought that you would not get home before we left!” she said. “Did you have a nice night with Mr. Qrow?”

“I did,” he said, returning the hug. “And I’m glad I got home in time to see you off to school.”

He hugged her tightly once more, before letting her go so they could leave. Mercury, meanwhile, had been hanging back, looking away uncomfortably, but now he approached. James gave him a teasing smile.

“Do you want a hug too?”

Mercury rolled his eyes. “No, that’s stupid.” He pushed his bangs back, and shoved his hands into his pocket. Kicked at a rock in the drive. “Look, tell Ruby I’ll be at her stupid birthday party, all right?”

“Are you sure?”

“Ugh!”

“All right, all right!” James held up his hands in surrender. “I’ll let her know. But listen- if at any
point you want to come home, let me know. You don’t have to stay the whole night if you’re not up for it.”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever.” He spun on his heel to stalk over to the car, holding up one hand in an absent farewell.

Like hell was that going to happen.

/--

End Act III

Chapter End Notes

This chapter features the scene I wrote this entire fic to be able to write, but I’m not telling you which one it is.
Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

James and Tai attend Qrow's Halloween program, and Yang apologizes to Mercury.

Chapter Notes

I'm struggling to make the next chapter happen because I'm at the scene that I basically don't want to write because it hurts my feelings, so I'm hoping posting a chapter might motivate me.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-/-

Friday was Qrow’s Halloween program; James took off work early to go see it, both for Qrow’s sake and for the several kids who had asked on his last visit whether he was going to come see it on ‘opening night’.

The auditorium was mostly filled with the other grades already when he arrived, but he spotted a familiar golden mop among the public seats and made his way over. Tai looked up from his program to greet him.

“This seat taken?”

“No, go for it,” and added, a little dejected, “It’s not like I have anyone to come to these sorts of things with anyway.”

“You could always invite Torchwick,” James joked, and Tai rolled his eyes.

“Please, I just got him to agree to stop hitting on me. I’m not going to go playing with fire.”

He handed James the program some of the kids had been handing out at the doors. The front cover read ‘Signal Elementary Fifth Grade Productions Presents: The Hall of the Pumpkin King’, with ‘written by Ruby Rose, Neptune Vasilias, Reese Chloris, Arslan Altan, and Sage Ayana’ underneath and, below that, near the bottom, ‘Producer: Qrow Branwen; Casting: Qrow Branwen; Directed by: Qrow Branwen’ in small letters. Tai laughed.

“I think he was bitter about getting saddled with doing everything himself.”

“I didn’t realize the kids had written it,” James said, and Tai hummed an affirmative.

“He was telling me about it. Apparently they all wrote a short story about Halloween and then the kids voted on which ones to base their productions on. Then got into groups to put each one together.”

“That’s actually really clever.”
Tai nodded, and flipped through the program. The rest just listed the different acts, and which kids had done what to aid the production. Since participation was mandatory for all students, this has necessarily a long list.

The play started after an introductory word from Ozpin, who had adorned himself in a green velvet tailcoat and a matching velvet wizard’s hat in the Halloween spirit. There were whispers among the students as he came onto the stage; for many of them, this was no less than a confession, meant to taunt them with their continued lack of proof over his obvious immortality.

After he walked off stage, the curtains came up, and the lights went down, and the spotlight pointed at Ruby, dressed in orange and black, with a crown shaped like a pumpkin, an orange cape that trailed behind her, and carrying a scythe twice her size. As the ambient music started in the background, she crossed the stage to an improbably large throne at the far end.

(“So that’s where my orange tablecloth disappeared to,” Tai whispered.)

Halfway across the stage, she stopped to address the audience.

“I…. am Pumpking, the Pumpkin King, King of Halloween!” she shouted, and then made a great show of sneezing very hard. “...and I have a terrible cold,” she went on. “And on this, tonight, Halloween night, the most important night of the year!”

She carried on across the stage and sat on the very large throne, slouching down.

“Now all of my minions cross the world are wreaking havoc and scaring mortals, and I’m stuck here, suffering. Oh, woe! Oh, alas! Oh, alack! Oh, other words that mean pouting!”

(Tai practically had to stuff his fist in his mouth to stop from laughing too loudly at that.)

“Worry not, my king!” shouted another voice from the other end of the stage, and the spotlight shone on Neptune, wearing a red bathrobe that was only far too big for him. It dragged on the floor behind him. “For I, Count Dracula, your oldest and most loyal servant, have foregone my Halloween revelries to attend you, while you suffer through this most tragic of tragedies!”

(James joined Tai in stifling his laughter at this. They weren’t the only ones; other parents around them, unsure about how deliberately funny this production was meant to be, were erring on the side of ‘very serious’.)

“Count!” Ruby shouted. “I am in misery! Entertain me, to distract me from my misfortune!”

“I shall do exactly that, my liege! I shall tell you… a story.”

“Just one?”

“Um… I think I’ve got time for four before the bell rings.” The ripple of suppressed laughter in the audience turned into a roar at that; there was no way this line was not meant to be laughed at. Neptune winked at the audience, and went on, “The bell that tolls the end of Halloween, that is!”

“Oh my god,” Tai whispered, sinking down a little in his seat, almost in tears from suppressed laughter. “Oh my god. These kids went full ham. How did Qrow not tell me any of this?”

“I’ve actually sat a couple of rehearsals and I didn’t even know.”
“This is so amazing. This is the greatest show I’ve ever seen.”

-/-

By the time the play ended, James and Tai were in physical pain from both laughter and suppressed laughter: while they had figured out very quickly that Ruby and Neptune’s framing scenes were safe to laugh at, the stories that made the majority of the play were varying levels of serious, and they couldn’t bring themselves to hurt the feelings of the kids who were, it had to be said, doing their best.

They were among those clapping loudest for the cast’s curtain call, and Tai let out an ear-piercing whistle when Qrow was manhandled onto the stage to take his own bow.

They let the crowd disperse a little before making their way down to the door that led backstage. A red-headed boy stood in the doorway with a clipboard, a very official looking pencil tucked behind his ear.

“How do you spell Xiaolong?” Tai asked, exasperated. “Scarlet, you’ve been to my house. I have fed you.”

“With a different alphabet,” Tai groused. “Seriously, Scarlet, just let me in.”

“I’m sorry, Sir and/or Madame, but unless you’re on the list, you don’t come in.”

James covered a smile behind his hand and said, “Scarlet, am I on the list?”

“Oh, sure, Dr. Ironwood!” Scarlet said, not even looking down. “You can go right in.”

“Excellent!” He pointed at Tai. “He’s with me.”

“Well, in that case, you can go in, too, Professor.” Scarlet opened the door and stepped aside; James pushed Tai through before him.

On the way by, he glanced down at the clipboard in Scarlet’s hand; there wasn’t even a paper on it.

Qrow wasn’t hard to find backstage, by virtue of being about three feet taller than everyone else. He spotted them over the chaos and began navigating his way through the crowd of kids toward them, reaching them just as Ruby crashed into Tai’s legs with a delighted squeal.

“Hey, guys,” he said. “What’d you think of my show?”

“Tai said it was the best show he’d ever seen,” James said, before Tai could respond. Tai laughed, and then jerked his head in the direction of the door before picking Ruby up and setting her on his shoulders.

“What’s with your doorman over there?”

“Oh, I stuck him out there to put off anyone trying to get back here. There’s enough chaos without adding a bunch of proud parents to the lot. How’d you make it past him?”
“Nepotism,” Tai grumbled, gesturing at James. Qrow cackled.

“I will never understand your near-universal popularity with the twelve-and-under crowd.”

-/-

When Mercury set off to sneak out of school that afternoon, he once more found Yang waiting for him by the fence. He sighed, and folded his arms.

“Seriously? Come to stop me again?”

“No, not this time. I just wanted to talk to you, somewhere private.”

There was silence. Mercury stared at Yang, waiting for her to break it; she pulled the mass of her hair around her shoulder and played with it rather than speak.

“I haven’t got all day,” he said eventually. “Spit it out.”

“I wanted to apologize,” she said. “You were right. I started as many of those fights as you did and- and it wasn’t fair, because the consequences were never going to be as big for me, no matter what.”

There was more silence. Mercury didn’t really have anything to say, and Yang seemed to be waiting for him to say it. After a long time, he moved toward the fence.

“Okay,” he said, grabbing it.

“What?”

“I said okay. You apologized, so okay.”

“Okay? That’s it? That’s all you have to say?”

He sighed, long and loud, and turned around to glower at her. “What else am I supposed to say? ‘I forgive you’? ‘You don’t have to apologize’? ‘Sure, let’s be best friends now’? You’re sorry, and that’s great, but sorry doesn’t change anything that happened, and it doesn’t change what I’ve been through, and it doesn’t change the fact that if I hadn’t had to leave then- then-”

He broke off, and shouted a frustrated noise to the sky. Yang frowned thoughtfully. “Then what?”

Mercury shouted again. Scrubbed his hands through his hair. “That should have been me,” he spat. “If he was ever going to adopt one of his kids- it should have been me. That should be my family, my home, my- my…” More frustrated noises. “Look, that that kid is living my life and you being sorry doesn’t change that. So okay. That’s all you’re getting. Okay.”

Yang’s frown deepened. “I don’t… think it works like that,” she said. “You would have had to change homes eventually and Uncle Qrow wasn’t really ready to be a real parent at the time.

He sneered. “Yeah, I know. It’s not like I expected it, you know- I’m not stupid. Just- if I’d stayed longer-“ He trailed off. He wasn’t sure how to articulate how the logic was working, except that he knew, deep down, that if he’d stayed, if he’d been with Qrow when they’d eventually decided to move him, Qrow would have adopted him rather than see him go.

“I don’t know what to say,” Yang said. “I’m sorry it happened. It sucks, and it’s my fault, and I wish I could make it right, but I can’t really change the past, and I’m not sure…”

She trailed off rather than finish her sentence, but she didn’t really need to. Mercury knew what she
was thinking.

“Go ahead and say it,” he ordered.

“I’m not sure… if I would,” she finished quietly. “Not because I don’t care about what happened, but… I love Nora. And I don’t want to wish, even idle wishes, for a reality where she’s not in my family.”

“Yeah.” He stared at her in more silence, then turned to the fence and started climbing. “See you around, Blondie.”

-/-

Yang didn’t get the chance to talk to Qrow until the next morning. She waited until he disappeared into his room after breakfast and followed, tapping on the door and slipping inside once he’d called entry.

“Hey, kiddo,” he said, when she came in. He was folding up his bed, but he stopped to talk to her. “What’s up?”

“Can I talk to you about something?”

“Sure, always.” He tossed his bedding into a pile on the floor and gestured for her to have a seat on the now-couch. She did, and for a long moment she sat fidgeting with her hair while he folded his blankets.

“It’s kind of a weird question,” she said. “I’m not really sure how to ask it.”

“Take your time.”

She did, stress-braiding a lock of hair while she tried to put her thoughts into words, but finally she began, “If Mercury had stayed here…” She broke off, and combed out the braid, and started again. “Do you think you would have eventually adopted Mercury, if he’d still been here when it was time to transfer him?”

“Ah.” Qrow stilled, hugging his half-folded blanket to him. “Honestly, I’m not sure. I like to think I would have, because I really never wanted to give up on that kid, but then I don’t know how I would have felt at the time. It’s only been the past year that I felt like I was in the right place to actually become a full-time parent, you know. But that might have changed, if Mercury’s future had been in question.”

“And-” She played with her hair a little more, and, “What about Nora? If you’d adopted Mercury, we wouldn’t have Nora, would we?”

This didn’t get a hesitation; Qrow shook his head, and sat down. “No, I’d have stopped taking in new kids after that, so I could work with Mercury full time. Nora would have gone somewhere else instead.”

Yang sighed at that, and pulled her knee up, resting her chin on it and staring thoughtfully at the wall for awhile. Qrow got back to folding his bedding, waiting for her to get her thoughts in order.

“So it’s a rock and another rock, isn’t it?” she said finally. “If we say you shouldn’t have sent Mercury away, then you’re saying you shouldn’t have taken Nora.”

He said nothing, but after a few minutes he finished his bedding and sat down, raising his arm
invitation. She scooted over and leaned into him.

“Listen,” he said. “Shit happens.”

“Dad says you’re not supposed to say those words to us.”

“Yeah, well, there’s not another word for it. It’s a real bad situation all around, cause you’re right, if I hadn’t dropped the ball with Mercury I wouldn’t have Nora, and I don’t like to think about that possibility. But it’s not fair to call that a silver lining, cause Mercury is the one that paid for it.”

“But Nora needed us. So which one is the right answer?”

Qrow snorted. “The right answer is having more foster parents willing to put in the work for these kids, and better screening processes so folks like his last guardian don’t slip through to do more damage. There’s a lot more kids in this town that need someone, you know, and I’m just one man. Jim’s just one man. There’s only so much any one person can do, when it comes down to it.”

Yang frowned, and twisted around so that she could look at him closely. “Wow. That was… really well put.”

“You sound surprised.”

“Well you’re usually more… you know, more self-deprecating. That actually sounded rational.”

“Really know how to flatter a guy, huh?” He raised a hand to ruffle her hair. “Maybe I’m just getting better at catching the self flagellation before it takes hold, huh?”

“If you are, that’s good. It’s not cool to be so hard on yourself.”

“Yeah, yeah.” He ruffled her hair again, and planted a kiss on the top of her head before standing up. “We should probably go help get set up for the party tonight. Feeling better?”

“A little, I guess.” She stood as well, and followed him into the kitchen. “Thanks Uncle Qrow.”

She walked away then, leaving Qrow in the middle of the kitchen. He went out onto the back porch, where Nora was winding a string of Christmas lights around the porch rail.

“Tai got you decorating?”

“Yes.” He looked on while she carefully applied her hammer to one of the nails they kept hammered into the porch for just such occasions; she looped the light through it, and gave it a good hard whack to knock it back against the wood.

She was doing much better than when she got the thing; there’d been a lot of bruised fingers and hands and knees and egos when she’d started, and not many smooth nails in the end.

Something warm and pink raised its head inside his chest, and he couldn’t resist; when she stood to move on to the next nail, he scooped her up around the middle and blew a raspberry against her cheek, setting her giggling and wiggling in his arms until he let her slip free. She scrubbed at her cheek.

“That’s so gross! What’d you do that for?”

“Thought it would be funny,” he said, messing up her hair as well, and then his face softened into a fond expression. “I’m really glad you’re here, Nora.”
“It’s Ruby’s birthday, where else would I be?”

“Not really what I meant.”

“Oh.” Her cheeks colored; she rubbed at the back of her neck, and shrugged. “I’m, I’m really glad I’m here too.”

-/

Mercury didn’t come out of his room until lunchtime the day of Ruby’s party. And after lunch, he disappeared back into his room rather than sit around making nice with James and Penny.

He spent some time at his desk, working on one of his puppets (it was the Emerald puppet he’d made last year; one of the eyes had come loose, and he’d been meaning to change the hair as well, now that she didn’t have that dumb ponytail anymore), and then, because he could only stare at Puppet Emerald’s red button eyes for so long without needing to talk to the real thing, he called her up and put her on speaker while he worked.

It wasn’t long before he’d told her what he was doing that night. She made a sympathetic noise that he’d have hit anyone else for.

“You sure about this?”

He grunted. “Not really. But I mean… I don’t have much choice. If something doesn’t give soon then, you know. Something’s gonna give.”

“That’s stupid.”

“I didn’t think my sentence through, all right?”

“No, I mean… it’s stupid to do something you’re not ready for just because you think you have to.”

“Yeah, well. I’m stuck between a rock and another rock here. I’m sick of being like this, and I’m sick of being moved around. If staying here means I learn to be okay with hanging out with Qrow again then- then so be it.”

“You really like living with the General, huh?”

The question was casual, but there was a searching undertone, and he spent a moment glowering at his now-repaired puppet before saying, “It’s not that I like living here. It’s not bad- better than some places- it’s that I don’t want to leave again. I’ve just about got all the- you know, I know how to- I’ve just about got the General worked out, okay? I don’t want to have to- to start over. Again.”

Emerald was silent, and before she said whatever was on her mind there was a knock on the door. Mercury shoved his puppetry things into his desk and grabbed his marker before calling entry.

It was James. “We’re going to leave in about an hour,” he said. “You should probably get ready soon.”

“Oh- yeah, okay. No problem.”

“And listen-” Mercury had already tried to turn back to his desk, but he stopped and half turned in question. “You’re taking a big step here. I hope it will go well for you, but if at any point you want to come home, just let me know. Okay?”
Mercury snorted, and turned back to his desk. “Whatever. I need to throw my bag together.”

“All right. See you in an hour.”

The door clicked shut behind him, and Mercury sighed, and looked back at his phone. After a long silence, he huffed, and uncapped his marker. “Still there, Em?”

“I was just thinking,” she said, “that it really sounds like it’s super urgent for you to deal with your Qrow problem.”

“Oh shut up, nobody asked you.”

-/-

Chapter End Notes

No Mercury, it’s totally not creepy that you have a sock puppet of your best friend or anything.
Chapter 23

Chapter Summary

It's Ruby's birthday! Also, Mercury gets the chance to talk to Qrow.

Chapter Notes

Posting that previous chapter had the desired effect so I was able to get back to writing. Hooray!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-/-

Mercury didn’t see Qrow immediately when they got to the house. He was out back grilling burgers for dinner, and Mercury didn’t even make it that far before he got waylaid by Ruby, who stopped shy of pouncing him before dragging him off to her room to show off her costume for tomorrow.

“Penny says you’re not wearing a costume,” Ruby accused, once he had expressed what he hoped was enough approval.

He rolled his eyes and folded his arms. “I’m too old for that dumb kid stuff,” he said. “Just cause I’m escorting you guys doesn’t mean I have to wear a costume.”

“But Dad and Uncle Qrow always wear costumes when they take us,” she protested. “Uncle James even wore a costume last year, and he didn’t even know we were trick-or-treating together until the last minute.”

“They’re parents though,” Mercury reminded her. “People see them wearing a costume they go, oh, what good parents they are, wearing costumes for their kids. People see me wearing a costume they go, oh, look at that little kid, wearing a costume.”

“Winter’s older than you, and she’s wearing a costume.”

“Winter’s a girl.”

Ruby sighed. “I think it must be not very much fun at all to be a boy or a teenager,” she said. “You don’t get to do anything fun.”

“What would you know, anyway?”

“Well.” She folded her arms and considered. “Yang sometimes says that she can’t do certain things because she’s very nearly almost a teenager. And Jaune will sometimes say he can’t do something, or has to do something a certain way, because he’s a boy, and boys aren’t supposed to do those things. So I think being a teenage boy must be the worst thing in the world, because you don’t get to have any fun ever.”
He rolled his eyes. “You’ll understand one day, kid.”

She sighed again. “I know. I’ve only got three years left of having fun before I’m a teenager. Then I don’t get to have fun again until I’m thirty.”

There was a long pause after this, while Mercury debated asking her logic, and then he decided he didn’t care, and turned around to walk away. He rounded the corner into the kitchen—and ran straight into Qrow, on his way to let in whoever was knocking at the door. They both froze; Mercury was dimly aware of Ruby answering the door in the background, but his attention was pinpointed on Qrow, who, it had to be said, looked as uncomfortable as he felt.

“Oh,” Qrow finally said. He rubbed the back of his neck uncomfortably. “H-hey, kiddo. Good to… good to see you.”

“Yeah. You too.” Mercury shoved his hands into his pockets and stared at a spot on the carpet, trying to find anything to say in a mind that had suddenly gone blank.

“I should—” Qrow began, at the same time Mercury finally said, “I was—“

They both stopped, and more uncomfortable silence reigned. Mercury sighed.

“I’m going outside,” he said, and hurried away before anyone could stop him.

Qrow watched him go, and then leaned back against the wall and scrubbed his hands through his hair. He’d meant to say something to the kid when he saw him, to try apologizing or at least assuring him that—well, something. He hadn’t actually gotten that far in his plans. He’d been too distracted by his anxiety about just seeing him again at all.

Imagine how he must be feeling, whispered the dark creature in the back of his mind, and he shook the thoughts away before they could take hold. This wasn’t the time or the place for anything like that.

But gods he could use a drink right now.

-/-

After Mercury left, Ruby hurried off to find Nora and Penny, to tell them about what had just happened.

“So they’re still not talking?” Nora said. “Then what was the point of inviting him?”

“Well I mean, I wanted him here too,” Ruby pointed out. “It wasn’t just so he could maybe talk to Uncle Qrow.”

“Well, yeah, but…” Nora sighed. “I just want them to be happy. Uncle Qrow’s been moping again, it’s not fair.”

“But it is also not fair to push Mercury when he is not ready,” Penny reminded them. “He is taking a very big step just coming here, so we should respect that and let him set his own pace. That is what Father says.”

“But what about us?” Nora huffed, and kicked irritably at the ground. “I wish he’d never come here. Everything was a lot more simple before he turned up.”

“But I like Mercury,” Penny said quietly, while Ruby patted Nora’s shoulder and assured her that
things would go back to normal eventually.

After everyone had eaten their fill of food and cake, it was time for Ruby to open her presents. It was much the same haul as she usually got: books, a lot of toys, not as many as usual. Several family friends and some relatives on her mother’s side had sent her cards, and Dad had saved them to open with everything else.

She was, admittedly, a little disappointed that so many people seemed to have decided that “double digits” meant “too big for toys”, but this thought was driven from her mind when she got down to the end of the pile, the two biggest gifts. One, long and narrow and heavy, came from Dad and Uncle Qrow.

This gave her pause, and she considered it while she shook the gift and listened to the tell-tale rattle of “lots of small pieces”. Her parents rarely went in together on gifts, unless they were getting something pricey- the tv in her room from two birthdays ago had been a joint gift, and of course Zwei had been a joint gift for all three girls.

That meant whatever was in the box had to be something good. Something double-digit worthy. She held her breath and began slowly peeling off the paper, almost afraid to see what it was-

-it was a toolset. But unlike Nora’s hammer and screwdrivers et al, these were small. The sort of tools for working with small, fiddly parts. The sort of tools for working with robot parts. Her eyes goggled as she flipped the box open, looking over every piece. Now if only she could find something to use them on! There had to be something in the attic, right? Dad still had that… orb… thing that one of his old students had given him, right? The one that had sounded like him before it broke? Maybe he’d let her have it to tinker with?

She was drawn out of this by Dad nudging her elbow. He knelt next to her. “You still have one left,” he said, indicating the final gift, a big box about half her height with Uncle James’ name on the tag.

“Oh. Right.” One last delighted look at her new toolbox, and she set it aside so she could pull the big one to her. “Oh, it’s heavy…”

She ripped the paper away more quickly this time, cut through the tape on the box with no ceremony, and then had to stand up to look into it.

She stared.

Squeezed her eyes shut, and when reality had not reasserted itself, stared some more.

“I thought you might like something to use those tools on,” Uncle James said, exchanging a glance with Tai, and then, with an ear-splitting squeal, Ruby had flung herself over the pile of paper and boxes and into his arms. She was dimly aware of a high-speed repetition of ‘thank you’ coming out of her mouth, but her brain was not forming coherent thought right now.

“You like it?” he said, finally.

“It’s perfect,” she squeaked, dropping back down to pull her newest treasure out of the box.

It was a robot. A real robot, or at least the shell of one. It was shaped a bit like a long egg, with a single eye; it was mostly hollow, but there were more parts in the bottom of the box, including a set of spidery limbs. She turned it over and over in her hands, hardly believing her luck- a real robot,
albeit a broken down one, for her to tinker with to her heart’s content. How lucky could she be?

“I don’t understand though,” she said hesitantly. “This must have been a lot of trouble to get.”

“Not really,” Uncle James said. “We used them to pad security at the lab a few years ago, and when they all, er, broke down, we threw them into storage. Mostly we just cannibalize them for parts or experimentation, but when I told the quartermasters that I was trying to nurture a budding interest in robotics they told me to take what I wanted.”

Ruby squeaked again, and clutched the robot to her chest. “This might just be the best double-digits birthday any kid has ever had.”

/--

It was late. Most of the adults had gone home, with only the Mrs. Wukongs remaining; they would be staying to help look after the baker’s dozen kids who would be spending the night.

The kids were out in the yard, many of them playing the loudest game of hide-and-seek that Mercury had ever witnessed. His attempts to find a quiet corner and just text Emerald were going to pot, but it didn’t matter, because he wasn’t getting any replies from Emerald anyway.

He made his way up to the porch instead, where James had been given charge of the youngest Wukong boy. He was scowling in James’ lap, fighting a losing battle against the sleep desperately trying to claim him. Every time his head nodded, he’d jerk it back up and go back to scowling out at the night.

Mercury took a seat at the top of the porch steps. “So,” he said. “Do you always big-league everyone when it comes to birthday presents, or is Ruby just special?”

“I wouldn’t call it big-leaguing—“

“I would.”

“I just wanted to nurture her interest in robotics.”

“And made sure that she wouldn’t remember any other present she got this year to boot,” Mercury added. “Face it, you like being the favorite.”

“That’s not it at all. I just wanted to make her happy on her birthday.”

“Yeah, well… I’m onto you.”

“There’s nothing to be onto. It’s her birthday. She deserves to be happy. And you,” he added to the toddler in his lap, because he’d started fussing irritably, “deserve to be asleep.”

There was a lull in the conversation then, while James tried to coax the toddler back to calm so that he’d sleep, but Mercury personally doubted anything would come of it. It was too loud outside, even with the noise safely out in the yard.

“He’d probably calm down inside where it’s quiet,” Mercury pointed out.

“Probably, but I don’t want to leave him unattended.”

“You are such a mother hen, oh my god.”

“A bit, but in this case this specific toddler tends to get into things the second you take eyes off of
“I’ll take him then,” Mercury said, sensing an opportunity. “I’ll stay with him and make sure he doesn’t get into anything.” James looked dubious at that, so Mercury added, more pleading, “Come on, I was looking for an excuse to get away from the noise anyway.”

James sighed, and stood. “All right,” he said. “Come on, little man, let’s get you settled somewhere you can sleep properly.”

-/-

Tai had gallantly given up his room to the chaperones for the night, so James put the baby in there, where he calmed down more readily now that he was somewhere quiet. Mercury grabbed Tai’s desk chair and made himself comfortable, glad to finally have the excuse for some peace himself, at least for awhile.

He checked his phone again while James put the baby down, and something of his discouragement must have shown on his face because before he left James said, “Nickel for your thoughts?”

“Em’s not answering my texts,” he said, before he could stop himself. He checked once more, then made a disgruntled noise and tossed the phone over onto the bed. “It’s probably nothing.”

It would have to be nothing, because he’d vowed not to use her as his emotional crutch anymore. If she wasn’t answering, that was her business, right?

“It’s kind of late,” James assured him. “She may just be sleeping.”

“Yes, maybe.” He shrugged. “It doesn’t matter. Go back to the party, the whole point of coming back here was so I could be alone.”

“All right. I’ll be outside if you need anything.”

“Whatever.”

James left after that, and Mercury gave it a whole five minutes before retrieving his phone and checking again. His texts weren’t even marked as read, which at least meant that whatever was going on, she wasn’t ignoring him- unless, of course she was ignoring the alerts entirely.

He groaned, and tossed his phone aside again. He needed to stop second guessing. She’d said she wasn’t going to leave him, and he had to trust her to have a perfectly good reason for not answering her texts.

He glanced over at the baby for the distraction. “You’re really lucky, kid,” he said. “Got a whole damn army of people who would go to war if anyone hurt you. I’ve just got one.” He grabbed his phone, and checked, and sighed, and let it slip to the floor as he sank down in the chair. “Maybe.”

-/-

The party was winding down. The kids had retreated to the two bedrooms, and the Mrs. Wukong’s had come into Tai’s room to settle for the night, prompting Mercury to leave rather than be bothered. He made his way to the living room instead, and hesitated when he found the three remaining adults there.

“-that a Prometheus?” Tai was saying. “I recall something about those being pulled off of the market because they had a tendency to view anything living as a threat.”
“I wouldn’t worry,” James said. “I emptied out the cartridges and removed any of the firing mechanisms. The worst case scenario if she accidentally reactivates the security protocol is that it spooks her a little.”

“Probably for the best you removed the firing mechanism,” Qrow said. “Knowing Ruby she’d try to turn it into a sniper rifle.” He looked up and spotted Mercury hovering in the doorway. “Oh, there you are. Was wondering where you’d disappeared to.”

Mercury stiffened, and folded his arms before shrugging. He forced himself to breathe— in, out, nice and slow— and kept his expression neutral. He needed to make this work, couldn’t let them know his heart was threatening to pound out of his chest.

“I was watching the baby,” he said. Did his voice waver? He couldn’t tell. “I, uh. Where am I gonna sleep tonight?”

“Well unless you want to brave the floors in one of the bedrooms—“

“Absolutely not.”

“we were thinking of just setting up the couch for you,” Tai finished. “You probably still fit, it’s a long couch.”

“If I don’t fit I know where to shave off a few feet,” Mercury said drily, dropping onto one end of the couch, opposite Tai.

“It shouldn’t come to that,” Tai assured him. “James can just about fit if he scrunches, so you should be fine.”

“I mean it was just a joke, but whatever.”

He debated going to get his bag so he could lay out his sleeping bag and change into his pajamas, but he wasn’t actually sure how long they were going to be up and he’d rather not sit around in his pajamas with an audience. Meanwhile, the three of them seemed to be having a conversation of expression without him. He wondered what that was about, but before he could remark (they couldn’t possibly think he hadn’t noticed), Tai stood.

“I think I’m going to go to bed,” he said. “Good night, Mercury. Sleep sweet.”

Mercury might have said a vague good night; he wasn’t sure, because he was watching Qrow give James a pleading look before James, too, stood.

“I need to shower before bed. See you in the morning, Mercury.”

He followed Tai out, while Qrow glowered after him and called a panicked, “Traitors!” after his back. James ignored him, and they heard the tell-tale click of Qrow’s bedroom door. Qrow sighed, and sank down into the chair.

“...they want us to talk,” he said.

“Oh, gosh, you think?” Mercury folded his arms and slouched, glowering at the room in general and Qrow in specific. “So much for letting me take the lead with things.”

“Hey, you want me to leave you say the word, I’ll walk out right this second.” He rubbed the back of his neck and looked away. “They just reckon a chance’d be a fine thing, or something.”
“Whatever.” He said nothing else, though, so Qrow stayed put, and after awhile Mercury huffed. “I’m listening.”

There was more silence, and finally—“I’m sorry,” Qrow said. “I know I let you down and I- listen, I was between a rock and another rock and I thought I was making the right choice but I—there’s a lot I ain’t been told, all right, but I ain’t stupid. I can read between the lines. I made a call and it was the wrong one and you ended up paying the price for that and I’m— I’m sorry. I know it don’t mean much. I can’t turn back the clock and change how things happened. Sorry’s kinda worthless on top of that.”

Mercury nodded, because yes, that was true, and then said, “Would you?”

“What?”

“Turn back the clock. Change things. If you could, knowing what you know now- knowing everything you know now- would you?”

“I—“ he began, and then broke off. He didn’t say anything else, but he didn’t have to: his thoughts were written all over his face.

“Yeah,” Mercury said, desperately trying to mask the waver threatening, the lump forming in his throat. He pushed to his feet and headed toward the door. “That’s what I thought.”

His bag was hanging beside the door, on the hook that had at one point been his hook for his bookbag; he grabbed it and threw the door open, struggling against the instinct to slam it as hard as he could and wake everyone in the house.

“Where you going?”

“I’m just going outside,” he said. “Don’t get your panties in a twist, I’m not going anywhere. I just don’t wanna be here anymore.”

“All right, well…” Qrow sighed. “I’ll, I’m going to bed now anyway so- so when you wanna come back in I won’t be in here. So… you know. So.”

Mercury stood in the open doorway for a long moment, free hand shaking at his side, blood roaring in his ears. He clenched his fist to still it, and then pulled the door shut with a final, and near-soundless, click.

-/-

Tai was in Qrow’s room making up the camp bed; Qrow could hear the shower going in his bathroom. He pulled the door closed and leaned against it, and wished he had a drink or seven. Tai looked up from the blanket he was laying out.

“How’d it go?”

“…I fucked up, Tai,” he said quietly, and staggered over to collapse face-down onto his bed without another word.

-/-

Chapter End Notes
James' relationship with Ruby is one of my favorite ones to write and I wish canon reflected it but whatever, who cares, not me. /I say, as I care deeply
Chapter 24

Chapter Summary

The kids go trick-or-treating. Qrow takes a step.

Chapter Notes

I'm stuck on my current chapter again so I'm doing that thing where I post a chapter early in the hopes that it will unstick my brain. Enjoy!

(Also, I hit on an unexpected idea and the current arc is rewriting itself in my head whoops.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-/-

Mercury woke up with his cheek scrunched against the arm of the couch, a crick in his neck, and a dog drooling on his face. He groaned and shoved his head under his pillow, and when this didn’t dislodge the dog, shoved it away. The dog flopped to the floor and lay there looking up at him while he sat up and gave the room a groggy, confused look.

Oh. Right. He huffed and lay back down, and was subjected to the dog trying to jump back onto the couch with him. The thing managed, after a lot of kicking of its back feet and determined panting, to get up. It hopped up onto Mercury’s chest and sat looking at him, tongue hanging out.

Mercury lasted all of a second before sitting back up and shoving the dog once more aside. “Dog breath,” he groused, and glared at the dog. “What are you doing, anyway?”

The dog, being a dog, said nothing, just remained looking up at him like it had nothing better to do. He stared back for a long time. When did they get a dog? He reached down and picked it up, holding it eye level and just… staring.

“How do you belong to…?”

The dog, unsurprisingly, continued to say nothing. Mercury frowned, and set it down. “Well whoever you belong to, go to them. I don’t want anything to do with you.”

Much to his chagrin, the dog stayed put. He sighed, and lay back down, pulling his sleeping bag up as far as it would go. “Go away.”

The dog just yipped and jumped up again. Mercury huffed, and gave up.

-/-

The dog had made itself comfortable on top of Mercury’s chest and seemed to be in it for the long haul when James emerged from the kitchen a little while later. He leaned over the couch and
“Hi,” he said.

“Hi.”

“Want some breakfast?”

What Mercury wanted was to go home, and he felt a little piece of him fracture further when he realized he thought of the Ironwood house so readily as home, but-

James probably wanted to see Qrow a bit more before he left. Penny probably wanted to spend a little more time with her friends. If he let on how much he didn’t want to be here, they would leave, and it would be just a few more straws on the pile before they’d had enough with him.

He shrugged. “Breakfast sounds good.”

They finally went home around noon, after all of the other kids had been picked up. Mercury was able to find out that the dog was named Zwei, and he belonged to all three girls shared, which made him feel a little bit better than if he had belonged to Nora.

(Not that he wanted a dog himself, but he wasn’t stupid. He knew why people bought pets for their foster kids.)

Penny remained behind when they left, so that she and her friends could finish getting their costumes ready, and James and Mercury headed up to Argus to pick up Emerald. Hazel would be picking her up later that evening, but Mercury wanted to spend some time hanging out with her before they had to babysit a bunch of little kids.

Besides, he wanted to know why she hadn’t answered any of his texts last night.

Not that he thought she was wrong not to, he hastily reminded himself. She didn’t have to answer him, she could ignore him if she wanted to, it just wasn’t usual for her to, and he wasn’t wrong to be curious, was he? No, he just wanted to know what was up.

She was waiting on the front steps when James pulled up, and he made the kids wait while he went to tell Hazel he was taking her. She threw her bag into the backseat with a huff.

“Is he always like this?” she asked, folding her arms and tapping her feet.

“He says he doesn’t like taking a child without letting whoever is responsible for them know,” Mercury said. “It’s so annoying.”

“I told Hazel I was taking off as soon as he got here.” She huffed again. “What gives? Ugh, this is taking forever.”

“Welcome to my world.” He leaned back against the car and folded his arms as well. Okay, he could do this. Casual, just ask casually. “I texted you a couple times last night, you never answered.” Nope, too accusing. He dialed back and added, “Anything up?”

She shifted uncomfortably. “No-o, not really.” She shrugged. “I was out with a friend, we went to the movies. I had my phone off so your texts wouldn’t have gotten through.”

“What friend?” Okay, that was definitely accusing, and judging by the way she was bristling, she’d
caught it too.

“Just a friend. Does it matter?”

“Of course it doesn’t matter, but you’ve never really mentioned having any dedicated friends here in Argus so you can’t get mad because I’m curious.”

“I can get mad when you ask like that. Maybe I would be more willing to talk about my other friends if you didn’t act like I’m abandoning you every time I talk to someone else.”

His jaw tightened at that, and he forced himself to calm down. He wasn’t going to have another fight with her, they weren’t going to even start this pattern. “Whatever, I was just asking. You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to.”

They fell silent, and while they stood there pointedly not glowering at each other, James came out of the house. They slid as one into the backseat, continuing to say nothing until he’d pulled out and was navigating the back streets to get back on the main road.

“It was just Mrs. Coal’s son,” she said. “He invited me last time I was over there. I didn’t think it was a big deal or I’d have said something.”

What he wanted to say, what he was thinking was, if it wasn’t a big deal, why not bring it up? Why not tell me you had made plans? If it wasn’t a big deal, why didn’t it come up? It’s not like we haven’t had plenty of chances.

What he wanted to say was, who is Mrs. Coal’s son? Who are your friends? Why haven’t you talked about them? About him? Are you keeping it from me, or do I really make you that uncomfortable? Do I really act like that? Am I still holding you back?

What he wanted to say was, do you like him more than me? Is that why you didn’t say anything?

What he said was, “So what you’re saying is… you didn’t want to tell me about your new boyfriend.”

Emerald scoffed and shoved his shoulder. “Shut up, you brat, you know that’s not it.”

“You’re right, you’re not acting nearly obnoxious enough to be dating someone.”

“Okay, you can go back to being pissy any time you want to, dickhead.”

“Hey, I’m just saying…”

“I hate you so much.”

-/-

“So what’s in the bag?” he asked, when they’d made it back to the house and James had disappeared into his room for a nap.

She looked down at the bag she was carrying. “Oh, it’s just my costume.”

“What- pump the breaks, costume? You’re wearing a costume?”

“Uh. Duh? We’re going trick or treating, of course I’m wearing a costume.”

“No, we’re escorting a bunch of little kids while they trick-or-treat. We are teenagers. We don’t
“So you’re telling me you’re not going to take advantage of the chance to dress up and scare little kids just because you’re thirteen.”

“Hey, I’m like a week out from fourteen, okay.”

“Which means that right now, you are thirteen. And you’re being stupid. Come on, costumes are fun! You do know what fun is, right?”

“Of course I know what fun is! I just don’t see what’s fun about playing pretend with a bunch of little kids.”

“Ugh, you’re so boring. You’re gonna look dumb trick-or-treating without a costume.”

“I’m not-“ He sighed. “I’ve still got those fake fangs I lifted for last year. If I wear those, will it make you feel better?”

“A little, but you’re still going to be pretty boring in just your clothes.”

“Well that’s something you’ll have to learn to live with,” he said. “Because I’m not wearing a costume.”

“Booooring.”

-/-

James came out from his nap a couple of hours before they were slated to leave. They had a quick dinner of sandwiches, and then headed over to the Xiaolong-Branwen house to meet up with the group. As soon as they arrived, James disappeared into Qrow’s room to change into his costume, leaving the kids to talk. The girls were all gathered in the living room, all four in costume and ready to go.

“All right,” Emerald said. “Which one is which?”

Mercury pointed, and said, “The one over there about to vibrate out of her chair in excitement is Ruby, the redhead with the stupid spiral glasses is Nora, and Blondie over there is Yang. Everyone, this is Emerald. She’s cooler than you.” To Yang, he added, “Why are you wearing a costume?”

“Um, because it’s Halloween and I’m not boring?”

“Ha!” Emerald punched his arm playfully. “Told you.”

He punched her arm back. “Oh, shut up, it’s not like I care.”

Ruby finished vibrating out of her seat and bounced over in front of Emerald with a grin. “Hellooo! I’m Ruby.”

“It’s nice to meet you,” Emerald said, in what Mercury recognized as her ‘you have no idea this is meant to be condescending’ voice. “Mercury has told me so much about you guys!”

“All good things, I hope,” Ruby said.

“Wellll…”
“That’s okay,” Yang said, “We know what Mercury’s like.”

“Hey!” Mercury elbowed Emerald. “You don’t have to go broadcasting stuff like that.”

“I know I don’t have to…”

Their conversation was broken off by the adults joining them. All three were in costume, to varying degrees: Tai was dressed in a frog onesie, and James was dressed as a lumberjack, rubber axe and all*. Qrow, on the other hand, was wearing his normal clothes with the addition of a cat ear headband. Tai and Qrow were arguing about their costume choices.

“You look stupid, Tai,” Qrow said.

“It’s Halloween and I’m wearing a costume. You’re the one who looks stupid.”

“Uh, hello? Ears?” He pointed with both hands at the headband. “I am very clearly in costume.”

“Nekomimi are not a costume, they’re an accessory. You don’t even have a tail. It’s lazy.”

Emerald elbowed Mercury. “See? Everyone agrees about this but you.”

“I’m not taking advice on how to not look stupid from someone in a frog onesie,” Qrow said, at the same time Mercury said, “Like I care about the opinion of a girl dressed like a space pirate.”

The room went still. Mercury fumed silently, unconsciously slipping backward toward the door; Qrow cleared his throat. Looked away.

“Uh, you guys should get going. You’re gonna miss all the good houses.”

“Yeah, of course,” Tai said. “All right, everyone in the van. Qrow, are you sure you don’t wanna come?”

“And miss the chance to have the house to myself for a change? Besides, someone’s gotta take candy duty. Might as well be me.”

“All right, well…” Tai shrugged. “See you in a few hours.”

-/-

Mercury didn’t say anything for the entire ride to the Belladonna house. He was fuming silently, staring down at a spot on the floor and dimly registering Emerald’s conversation with Ruby beside him.

The Belladonna’s lived in a neighborhood called The Menagerie; Blake was having a Halloween party with some of her friends, and James and Tai were hanging out to help keep an eye on things while the kids all trick-or-treated.

“Make sure you all stay in this neighborhood,” James said. “We’ll be here if you need anything-Mercury, you have your phone, right?”

“Duh.”

“Good man. You kids have fun, then.”

“Whatever.” Mercury turned and headed down the drive, trusting that the others would catch up. Sure enough, they soon appeared around him.
“All right, ladies!” Ruby said, and added, “and Mercury,” as an afterthought. “I talked to Blake about the best route to take in this neighborhood for the best candy distribution. We’re not little kids anymore, we need to be thinking about this strategically and maximizing our haul.”

“All right, all right!” Ruby grabbed his hand. “We’ll go, come on.”

“Wh- h-hey! I don’t remember agreeing to any hand holding on this escapade!”

“Also you’ve got a bet on with Sun,” Nora put in.

“...also I’ve got a bet on with Sun,” she agreed, and added a fuming, “That whole ‘boys’ night’ thing really boils my biscuits!”

Mercury folded his arms. “Sometimes boys need to hang out with boys. What’s the big deal?”

“The big deal? The big deal?!” She sighed. “The big deal is that Sun and I have always gone trick-or-treating together ever since we were babies, and now if he wants to have ‘boy time’ that means he’s at That Age.”

“What age?”

“You know!” She waved her hands vaguely. “That age. The ones grown-ups are always talking about, when kids stop having fun and start worrying about...” More vague handwaving. “...I don’t know, taxes, I guess.”

“Taxes.”

“Yeah, taxes. Next thing you know he’ll be as boring as you!”

“You sure know how to flatter a guy. Maybe he just wanted to hang out with his guy friends. Nothing wrong with that. If I had guy friends, I would absolutely hang out with them.”

“You don’t have friends at all,” Emerald said.

“I have friends. I have you. And Winter. Sort of.”

“Wow, two friends. That’s way more than I would have expected.”

“I’ll be your friend,” Ruby said. “Then you’ll have three friends.”

Emerald hid a laugh inside her hand. “Wow, Mercury, you’re moving up in the world.”

“I hate all of you,” he said. “Are you midgets gonna trick-or-treat or stand around talking? Because if you’re just gonna stand around talking, I’m going back to the Belladonna place and I’m crashing the girls’ party.”

“All right, all right!” Ruby grabbed his hand. “We’ll go, come on.”

“Wh- h-hey! I don’t remember agreeing to any hand holding on this escapade!”

“-/-

Though James and Tai had stayed to help Kali keep an eye on the dozen or so preteens now crowded into her living room, when they arrived she brought them into the parlor, where Ghira, Glynda, and Snow were sitting at a table draped with a cobweb-style tablecloth. All around the room were a few dozen lit candles, and on the table was a spirit board. Kali shoved both of them into the room and closed the door behind her.

“I thought we were here to chaperone,” Tai said, giving her a pointed look.
“You’re here if there’s an emergency, but honestly, the kids will all be fine without us hovering over them. They know where to look if they need us and Blake is trustworthy enough to come to us if something comes up.”

“And this?” Tai asked, gesturing at the spirit board.

“Oh, I thought it might be fun to commune with the dead. The veil is weaker on the night of All Hallow’s Eve, you know- hmm.” She looked disappointed. “Qrow didn’t come?”

“He said he didn’t feel up for a party,” James said. “And he wanted to take advantage of the house being empty for a change.”

“Hmm. That’s inconvenient, I was hoping to have seven people for this. Oh well, I guess we can do it with six.”

“Are you sure it’s a good idea to meddle with the spirit world?” James asked.

“Don’t be a party pooper, it’ll be fine. Besides, aren’t you a scientist? Aren’t you curious?” She took her seat at the head of the table, and gave him what she probably thought was a beckoning look. “Aren’t you intrigued by what could happen?”

“If you’re proposing I approach this as a scientific experiment I’m going to make things really boring and start writing things down.” All the same, he took a seat beside Glynda, Tai taking his other side.

Tai leaned around him to address Glynda. “So what’s your deal here? Doesn’t really seem like your kind of thing.”

“No? I’m actually pretty interested in the occult. My family has a long history- it’s right there in the name, you know. Goodwitch.”

“My family name is Xiaolong, that doesn’t mean I’m a literal dragon. And James is Ironwood, that doesn’t mean-“ and then broke off, redfaced.

Kali snorted. “We all know about James’ iron wood, Tai.”

“Alleged iron wood,” Ghira said. “He still hasn’t confirmed one way or another.”

“And I never will,” James said. “So if we can stop talking about my genitals and summon a ghost already…”

“Is there an option?” Kali teased. “Can we pick one?”

There was a chorus of nos from half the table; Kali pouted for a second, before getting them started. The lights switched off- spooky, if any of the guests were unaware that they were remote controlled- so the six of them were sat around the circle in dim candlelight. They joined hands, and for a long moment there was just Kali chanting nonsense before they placed their hands on the planchette.

“Are there any spirits in this room?” Kali asked.

There was a long pause, long enough that they began to wonder if they were being silly, and then gradually the planchette began to move, slowly, over to the ‘YES’ in the corner.

A delighted shiver went through the group. “I don’t want to alarm any of you, but we have made
contact with a spirit,” Kali said. “So it’s too late to pussy out if any of you are afraid.”

James gave her a disbelieving look. “Are you really a spirit from beyond the veil?”

Once more it moved; over a short way, and back to ‘YES’. James frowned.

“Well, I’m convinced,” he said, and got an elbow in his side from Glynda.

“What is your name?” Kali asked, slightly hushed. There was another pause, and the planchette once more began to move. “D… e… s… e… n… u… t…”

“Glynda!” James shot his sister an accusing glare. The planchette stilled. “Really?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” she sniffed. “Our ghostly friend just has a bad sense of humor, it seems.”

“Why would it be Glynda?” Tai asked. “Out of everyone to screw around with the board, she’s the last one I would expect.”

James shot her another glare. “It’s almost as if she’s wearing a carefully cultivated facade as someone who doesn’t tell jokes or something.”

-/-

Once his family had left, Qrow took a seat on the front steps to wait. He didn’t have long; it was only about fifteen minutes before Whitney Schnee arrived. Her heels clicked on the walk as she hurried to join him.

“Hey, Whit,” he said. He set the candy bowl down next to the door, and let her inside. “Come on, then.”

She followed him through the house, through the kitchen and to his bedroom, deep in thought, but when they reached his room she said, “Are you sure about this?”

He shrugged, and moved over to his closet. “Not really, but it feels like the right choice. There’s a creek about a ten minute walk into the woods, I figure that’s the best place for what we’re doing. I snuck out earlier and set everything up for us.”

“I guess I’m not really dressed for the woods, huh?” she said, glancing down at her clothes. He was moving some things aside on the top shelf in his closet, but he stopped and turned to look her over. She was wearing a rather elegant dress that he knew, for her, was casual wear, and heels. He snorted.

“You really ain’t. Here.” He grabbed a hoodie from the pile on his closet floor and tossed it to her. “There’s some mud boots by the door, they’re probably too big for you but they’ll do better than what you’ve got on.”

While she pulled the hoodie on and discarded her heels, he went back to rummaging in his closet. After a moment, he emerged with a six-pack of beer and a mostly-drunk bottle of whiskey. He passed the six-pack to her, and then fell silent, staring down at the whiskey in his hands. His hands were shaking, he noticed dimly, and the dark creature in his mind was purring up a storm.

Tai would be furious if he knew this was in the house. It was his one rule, the one exception to his insistence that it was their house, whoever had his name on the deed. Not in the house. Not around the kids. He could do what he wanted but he wasn’t gonna bring it around the kids.
Well... soon it wouldn’t matter.

He passed the whiskey to her as well and then grabbed the hunting rifle from the rack in the back of his closet, grabbed the box of shells from its shelf, and took a deep breath.

“All right,” he said. “Let’s go. We’ve only got a couple hours before my family get home.”

-/-

Chapter End Notes

*You all know the punchline at this point.
Chapter 25

Chapter Summary

Trick or treating two, electric boogaloo.

Chapter Notes

This is the end of Act IV, aka the Halloween arc!

You know that scene in Volume 3, Episode 1 where Emerald compliments Ruby and Ruby gets all bashful and blushy over it? Behavior that she has literally NEVER shown before or since?

I ended up having to rework the chapters I was working on which means I technically finished a chapter which means update time!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-/-

“I really like your costume, Emerald,” Ruby said shyly, several stops after they left the Belladonna house.

Emerald adopted her ‘I swear I’m not patronizing you’ voice and said, “Thanks! Your costumes are all really great, too. I can tell you all worked hard on them.”

“Oh- well- you know,” Ruby mumbled, burying her face in her hands in embarrassment, and then, loudly, “Hey look isn’t that Mr. Junior’s house Blake said he gives out full bars let’s go!”

And took off running, the other girls hurrying to catch up. Mercury stared Emerald down as they followed at a more dignified pace suited to teenagers who were absolutely not trick-or-treating.

“What?”

“This is why you don’t use your phony voices on people. Now a ten-year-old has a crush on you.”

“Oh gods that’s what’s happening, isn’t it?”

“I cannot wait to see how this plays out.”

“Eurgh.” She sighed. “I was going for cool big sister.”

“You are so bad at being a person it’s bypassed sad and shot straight to funny.”

“Oh shut up.”

They’d reached the door now, where the girls were gathering into a set of poses they referred to as
the ‘money shot’, before shouting “Trick or treat!” as loudly as possible. Mercury reached over
them and smacked the doorbell, and less than a minute later, the door opened to reveal not Junior,
as advertised, but Roman Torchwick, dressed as a cowboy. When he saw them, his face split into a
wide grin.

“Well! If it isn’t the Qrow kids!” He nodded at each of them. “Little red. Sparkplug. Robot girl,”
and when he turned his attention to the older kids, looked somehow even more delighted. “And
scooty booties is here too!”

“Oh great,” Mercury said. “Roman Torchdick.”

“That really the best you could come up with? I mean, it’s not very creative. You’re definitely not
the first person to use it, after all.” He stroked his chin. “I’ll give you… a d-. Points for effort, but
there’s an overall lack of creativity that I just can’t bring myself to reward.”

“What are you doing here, Torchdick?” Mercury asked, refusing to take the bait. Torchwick
shrugged, and leaned casually against the door.

“Halloween party. It’s my turn on door duty. Who’s your friend? She looks fun.”

“This is Emerald. Em, this is Torchwick. I told you about him.”

“Oh, the asshole!”

“Ouch. Though I’m flattered to learn that you talk about me to your little friends.”

“Sure do,” Mercury said smugly. “I told her all about what a prick you are.”

Roman tutted. “Should you really be using that kind of language around all these little pitchers?”

“They’ve heard worse.”

“It’s true,” Ruby piped up. “Jaune’s biggest brother uses worse on a daily basis.”

“Why in the world do people keep letting that kid around children?”

He was met with three identical shrugs from said children, who found nothing objectionable about
the man in question. He shook his head.

“Well, I suppose I’d better give you kids some candy or something.” He rummaged into the candy
bowl and took out a handful of- as advertised- full-size candy bars. “One for little red- one for the
robot girl… four for you, sparkplug, you go sparkplug. And none for scooty booties.”

“Hey, fuck you, man.”

“You’re not even wearing a costume,” Torchwick said, handing Emerald a candy bar as well. “No
costume, no candy.”

“Well I don’t want your stupid candy anyway.”

“Good.” He handed another one to Penny, who took it a little hesitantly. “See you around, kiddos.”

He waved, and as they turned to head back down the walk- glowering, in Mercury’s case, and
deply uncomfortable on the part of the kids- he reached into his pocket and took out a cigar. A
quick patdown of his pockets, and-
“Wait, where did-“

He looked up, still rummaging, and saw Emerald lagging behind the group, one hand raised in a one-finger salute and the other flicking his lighter behind her back. He folded his arms, and squinted after her.

“Hmm. Interesting.”

/-

They walked in silence until they’d made it back onto the main walk. Nora looked down into her bag at the pile of bars she’d been given, then dropped one into Ruby’s bucket and held out another to Mercury.

“Here,” she said. “You can have one of mine, since he didn’t give you any.”

For a split second, Mercury was surprised, even touched, and then he scowled. “Keep it,” he spat. “I don’t need handouts from a runt like you.”

“What..?” Nora frowned, hurt. “But you didn’t get any and that’s not fair.”

“Who cares? I can get my own candy, and you giving me one of yours doesn’t change the fact that he snubbed me. So keep your stupid candy bars. It’s not important.”

“But he only didn’t give you any cause you’re not in costume, it’s not like-“

“He didn’t give me any cause he’s a prick. The costume thing was just an excuse.”

“But-“

“I said it’s not important!” he huffed, and half turned away, while the girls all exchanged looks.

“You don’t have to be so mean about it,” Ruby said. “She was just trying to be fair. It’s not her fault Mr. Torchwick is such a butt.”

“Well I didn’t ask for anyone to be ‘fair’. Just drop it.”

“But-“

“Augh!” He turned on his heel and stormed off, in the direction of the next house, ignoring them entirely. The girls all exchanged looks, and gave half-hearted shrugs before hurrying to follow.

/-

Mercury’s mood was a damp cloud hanging over their next couple of houses, as he lagged farther and farther behind the group. By the time they reached the end of the block, he was lurking at the end of the driveways while the rest of the group approached without him.

Emerald hung back with him. “Hey,” she said quietly. “What’s up?”

He leaned against the mailbox, arms folded while he glowered at the group at the door. They seemed to know the occupants of the house; they were laughing and chatting familiarly. He shook his head.

“This was such a bad idea,” he said. “Why did I agree to this?”
“Don’t ask me, I’ve been wondering that since you invited me. Why did you agree to it?”

“I don’t-“ He shrugged. “I guess I just… wanted to try just being a normal kid for a change.”

“And a normal guy would take his little sister trick-or-treating with her friends,” Emerald finished.

“She’s not-“ he began, and then sighed. Looked away. “Yeah, something like that, I guess.”

Emerald hummed an acknowledgment, and leaned back against the mailbox with him, mirroring his pose. “You know, you seemed like you were having fun for a little while there. Was it that Torchwick guy being a dick that killed your mood, or Nora being nice?”

He gave her a sharp look, and then snorted. “Six of one,” he said. “Torchwick is always a dick and that’s a mood-killer but I don’t want the reminder that…”

He trailed off, and looked away again, until a soft touch to his elbow brought him back to the conversation.

“If it’s worth anything, I like you better than her.”

He managed a small smile at that, and then cracked his usual cocky grin. “Please, I’m your best friend. Of course I’m your favorite. You’re contractually obligated.”

“I said I like you better, not that you’re my favorite. And don’t get a swelled head, it’s not exactly a high bar to clear.”

“What? You mean you haven’t been taken in by their charms?”

“Ugh, are you kidding? They’re so-“ She made a frustrated noise, and moved her hands as though she meant to strangle the air in front of her. “Happy. It’s ridiculous. How do you even.”

“Try living with it. I have literally never heard Penny say a bad word about anything. She’s always so nice. She likes everyone. Even me.”

“Ah.”

“Ah what?”

“Nothing. Come on, let’s get the next street. The sooner we get through the neighborhood the sooner we can go back to the Belladonna’s and go home.” The kids returned as she said this; she switched to her ‘I absolutely do not think I’m smarter and cooler than you in every way, no really’ voice and said, “Hey guys! Did you get a good haul?”

“No,” Nora groused. “They gave us carrot sticks. Who gives out carrot sticks on Halloween?!”

-/-

Yang always liked Blake’s parties; though her parents usually had a few chaperones over, the adults were usually content to occupy themselves away from the kids and leave them to have their own fun. They felt less like a part of the events and more like a safety net if something went wrong. Far different from last night’s party, where her parents and the chaperones were all very much in attendance with the kids.

They would never have been allowed to play spin the bottle at a party at her house.

It was currently Fox’s turn; Ilia was burning a brilliant crimson while he gave her the tiniest,
chastest kiss on her cheek before returning to his seat.

“I’m not sure I like this game,” she mumbled.

“I’m not that bad, am I?” Fox teased.

“No, you’re fine, just…” She shrugged. “I don’t really…”

“If you don’t want to play you don’t have to,” Blake said. “It’s supposed to be fun, if it’s not fun for you there’s nothing wrong with sitting out.”

“Are the rest of you going to keep playing?”

“I am!” Yang said. “My dad’s just a couple rooms over and he has no idea what we’re doing! It’s the most delicious kind of rebellion!”

“I don’t really want to play either,” Pyrrha put in. “Come on, let’s go make some popcorn.”

“That sounds good.” Ilia jumped to her feet and hurried to the kitchen, Pyrrha behind her. The others turned back to their game.

“So do I redo my turn now?” Fox asked.

“I’ll take Ilia’s turn,” Yang said. “Might as well make sure I get a go before dad comes out and catches us and puts the kibosh on the whole thing.”

-/-

By the time the kids trudged back to the Belladonna house, tired and full of candy, the girls’ spirits had picked back up, while Mercury had settled into a moody silence. Mercury hesitated approaching the door, unsure if they should knock or not, but Ruby just threw the door opened and called out, “We’re back!” to the house at large.

The remainder of the preteens all greeted her cheerily, and the little kids threw themselves into the group, chattering excitedly about the various costumes they had seen, and the decorations on the houses, and comparing notes about the neighborhood’s candy distribution.

Mercury and Emerald exchanged a look packed with meaning, and stepped back out onto the front porch. The Belladonnas had a porch swing; they settled onto it while Emerald checked her phone.

“Hazel isn’t going to be by to pick me up for awhile longer. So we’ve still got time to hang out.”

“Cool.” He’d dropped back into his moody, surly silence; Emerald studied him for a minute, and pulled her knees up. With her feet off the ground, he was free to start pushing the swing, swaying them slowly while they sat.

“What are you doing for your birthday?”

He shrugged. She frowned.

“Okaayyy… how about you come spend the weekend with us, then? I’ll ask Hazel when he gets here, but I’m sure he’ll say yes. It’ll be fun- I didn’t get to show you around town last time you visited.”

It went unsaid that he’d ruined his last visit with his tantrum, but he felt it hanging over them anyway, and shrugged again. “Sounds good. Get me away from the happy brigade for a couple of
days, at least.”

“That’s the spirit!” She slugged his shoulder, and dropped one foot to sway the swing as well,
pushing them sideways while he kept his back-and-forth motion, pushing the swing creaking in
odd directions and pulling a small smile out of Mercury.

When Ruby peeked out the door a few minutes later, they’d fallen into a playful wrestling match,
but at Ruby’s appearance Mercury looked up, distracted just long enough for Emerald to get the
upper hand and shoved him off of the swing. He hit the floor with a grunt as he was winded, and
glanced up again to find Emerald giving Ruby a slightly forced smile of greeting that nonetheless
had Ruby turning as crimson as her name.

“What’s up, sweetie?” Emerald asked.

Ruby somehow managed to verbalize a keysmash into her hands before saying, uncharacteristically
timidly, “We’re going to tell scary stories. Do you want to come in and join us?”

Mercury gave Emerald a wicked look and said, “Absolutely. I absolutely want to come in for scary
stories.” He spun around and twisted his feet under himself- less gracefully than he imagined the
motion must look- and grabbed Emerald’s hand, pulling her up. “Come on, you’re not getting out
of this.”

Emerald laughed- a genuine laugh, not the phony laughs she’d been putting on for the kids all
evening, and, it must be said, a rather nasty laugh as well. She knew that look from him.

Mercury plonked down into the circle between Yang and Blake, leaving Emerald to choose her
own seat- she took the place across from him between Nora and the rabbit girl whose name
Mercury had never bothered to learn, and was unsurprised when Ruby sat beside her. Over Ruby’s
head, she caught Mercury’s eye, and he smirked before turning to Blake.

“So can anyone tell a scary story here, or did someone else already plan everything out?”

Blake gave him a knowing look. “Would you like to tell us a scary story, Mercury?”

“Yes. I would like to do that very much.”

He saw her pass a look over his shoulder to Yang, but ignored that, and took the flashlight she
proffered him, switching it on as she flipped the room’s lights off with the remote.

“All yours,” she said, and gestured for him to get comfortable while the kids shuffled a little closer
in anticipation.

“Right,” he said, and took a steadying breath. He wasn’t the best at talking to a crowd, even a
crowd of little kids [1]. “Right. So. Close your eyes.”

They did so, Penny and Ruby obeying instantly while the others hesitated, looking between each
other to see if they would follow before their own closed, but soon everyone in the circle barring
Mercury and Emerald had their eyes shut. Emerald took advantage of this to wink at Mercury and
nod; he nodded back.

“Now open the eye of your imagination and look around. You’re on the shore of a lake. It’s a big
lake, a still lake; it stretches out into the distance seeming unending. In the moonless, starless night,
it looks more like a void than a lake, absorbing even the faint glow of the moon behind the clouds.

The only light around is the tiny campfire you and your companions have made. Look at them.
They’re as broken and exhausted as you, frightened and jumpy, but there’s a triumph in their eyes. You have, for just one moment, won. In the morning you will worry about the lake; for now you are too tired, and all that matters, in this moment, is that you are free of the monster’s hold.”

“Monster?” Ruby squeaked, opening her eyes, and Mercury glared at her until she whispered, “Sorry,” and closed them again.

“Monster,” he repeated. “For all of your lives, you and your companions have been kept prisoner in his lair. He’s kept you trapped, not letting you see the sunlight or taste the fresh air. You’ve never rolled laughing down a hill or splashed about in the shallows of the lake- you’ve never known the feeling of of a summer rain, run through the tall grass while it whips your legs, or jumped into icy puddles for the sake of being noisy and making a mess. For all of your lives, you’ve lived in the dark, cramped room in the deepest part of his lair, but today- today you are free.”

(Beside him, unnoticed, Yang opened her eyes a slit and peered at him thoughtfully before closing them once more.)

“This morning, you saw your chance, and trapped the monster in his own cellar and all day you’ve been making your way through the woods in search of safety. You know, you and your companions, you all know that soon the monster will be free and he will come after you- but for now you all lay on this dark stretch of lakeshore and breathe the free air.”

Almost as one, the kids in the group all surreptitiously breathed deeply, and Mercury felt a surge of pride. He’d written the story for creative writing and then handed in something a lot different on the grounds that the actual story would probably get him sent to the guidance counselor for being troubled- or worse, Glynda would keep him during gym again and ask him carefully veiled questions about how he was adjusting. It was nice to have an appreciative audience for it all the same.

“You and your companions lie in silence, still and too exhausted to sleep, so all of you hear the footsteps approaching. You all sit up, huddling close together for safety, looking out into the dark of the trees. The monster is near, you know he is.

A shadow moves in the trees- you look to it, but already it’s gone- where is he?

You can smell him. The sick-sweet smell of decay, the putrid reek of rotted flesh. Steam surrounds you, acid-yellow turned to burnt gold in the dying embers of your campfire. It raises in the air and presses you closer together, makes it harder to breathe. Your lungs fill with the mist, and you choke, desperately trying not to make a sound.

You hold your nearest companion close, helplessly clinging to whatever source of warmth you can, and then you hear it— the hollow rattle and crack of a bony shape moving through the grass. Over your companion’s shoulder you see a shadow rise and then she’s ripped from you, yanked away and pulled backward through the grass. You try to hold onto her but the mist has made you weak. Your grip falters and then she’s gone. Another arm snakes through- you see it this time, an inky black shadow with shiny white places you don’t like to think about— and now your other companion is gone, vanished into the mist like so much smoke. And now you are alone.”

A shudder went through the group, and Mercury saw more than one huddle in on themselves, none of them seeking the comfort of the bodies mere inches on either side of them. He smirked.

“The footsteps are coming closer. You can hear them clearly now, four heavy thuds on the wet grass, thump, thump, thump, thump, you can hear the forest being parted and then the mist clears
and there he is.”

He paused, and gave them a moment to anticipate.

“How Picture your worst nightmare of a horse,” he went on. “Now make it bigger. Now give it a carnivore’s mouth. The head of the creature appears first, and you have long since learned not to think of it as a horse even as that is the easiest word for what the creature is. Its head hangs low in front of it, mouth split into a wide grin all the way back to its ears. It honestly seems like nothing but mouth, a gaping maw of teeth after teeth after teeth beneath empty eyes and shredded ears and a limp, dank mane.

As it approaches, slobber drips from its teeth, hitting the ground where it curls up into that acid mist.

But you barely have time to take in the head before the body follows: a big bloated barrel shape that heaves and heaves with the effort of slogging itself through the forest. Rotten flesh is peeling off of it, curling up like dried paper and revealing polished bone beneath. More of that putrid black fluid drips from the openings and curls on the ground.

This, all of this, is just a distraction, though. Because on the back of the horse is the real monster. The rider, tall and skeletally thin. His legs where they cling to the horse beneath him are half-rotted away and fused to the flesh; it is impossible to tell where rider ends and horse begins. His right arm, too, is tangled and fused with the creature’s mane where he hunches over its shoulders.

The head of the rider droops from the shoulders, a curtain of lank, limp hair parting to reveal a single lidless eye that gleams yellow in the dark, and a row of fangs peeks out from behind a face torn to shreds, grinning and giggling over the fear in your eyes.

It is the arm, though, that you have learned to fear. Long and long and longer, nothing but sinew and bone, the skin having long since decayed, and it bends— it bends in far too many places. A large clawed hand hangs from the end of it, dragging on the ground, but you know in a moment the hand will come for you.”

Mercury paused, and let a shudder of anticipation ripple through the group. He caught Emerald’s eye and carried on.

“You want to run. Your mind is screaming at you to run. Even as you try to move your legs feel as though they’re fusing to the ground. And then you hear it. The rattle of the arm reaching for you. You stare on in horror as it comes closer— not quickly, it has no need to reach quickly, because it knows you will never escape. It has taken your companions— in a moment it will take you— it is so close, and then—“

As one, he and Emerald both lunged, grabbing Ruby from fore and behind as they did. She shrieked in terror; the light switched on and the door to the parlor burst open, pouring adults into the room.

Emerald and Mercury fell back and laughed uproariously as the other kids looked around at each other, trying to come down from that place in their imagination where they’d been until a moment before.

The adults had calmed on realizing that there was nothing truly frightening, but Ruby jumped to her feet and hurried over to her dad, burying her face in his middle and trembling until he picked her up.
“What in the world is going on here?” he asked, stroking her hair reassuringly as he did.

Mercury finished cackling and cocked a grin at him. “We’re telling scary stories,” he said. “Think I got ‘em.”

“You sure did,” Yang admitted, hugging herself and rubbing rough hands up bare arms. “Did you make that up yourself?”

“Nah, I mean, sort of. I based it on an existing legend and kind of embellished it.”

Another shudder took the group. A few of the kids had taken to sitting nearer one another, seeking the warmth and reassurance of another body, but with the mood shattered they were starting to feel better and were now enjoying having been so scared.

Only Ruby still seemed shaken. She buried her face in Tai’s shoulder. “Daddy, can we go home now?”

“Of course, sweetie. Yang?”

But Yang had already recognized that it was time to go, and was retrieving her jacket and Ruby’s candy so they could leave. She paused by Blake and shared a brief conversation of murmurs. The two giggled, and then Yang waved at her friends and hurried to catch up to her family.

Nora and Penny had claimed James’ hands, both chattering up a storm about their trick-or-treating adventure, while Mercury and Emerald hung back, staying several paces behind the family to make it seem as if they were only an incidental addition. As she went by to catch up with her father and sister, Yang overheard Mercury say, “I think that took care of it. You owe me one for this, Em.”

“Don’t pretend you did that for my sake,” Emerald replied, shoving his shoulder and laughing. Yang frowned, and caught up with her dad just as he was putting Ruby into the van. She seemed to have calmed down, at least- Yang ruffled her hair fondly as she piled into the van beside her, leaving room for James to hoist Nora in on the other side.

“I have to get this one back to meet her guardian,” James was saying to Dad, and gestured at Emerald. He said his goodnights to the rest of them, and herded his group over to his car; Yang murmured a goodnight in return and then turned her attention to Ruby.

“You okay?”

“I’m fine,” Ruby said, and Yang squinted at her. She still seemed shaken, and not quite herself, but her usual cheer seemed to be returning. “It was a good story, I was just— scared.”

“That was mean,” Nora said. “He shouldn’t have scared you like that.”

“Aw, Nora, it’s not that big a deal. It was a scary story, they were going to scare someone with the ending.”

“They didn’t have to, though!” Nora said, and folded her arms to sulk down in her seat. “I think that Mercury is just mean. I don’t like him.”

“I have to admit I don’t like him much either,” Yang said, and noticed Dad watching them in the rearview mirror. Beside her, Ruby sighed.

“I like him,” she said morosely. “But I don’t think he likes us very much.”
“You’re too nice,” Nora said. “Mercury’s just a bad hat. He’s mean even when we try to be nice to him. We invited him to go trick-or-treating with us and we tried to include his friend even though we only just met and I even tried to give him my extra candy when Mr. Torchwick was being a dick—“

“Language, Nora,” Dad said, and, “What about Torchwick?”

“He was on candy duty at Mr. Junior’s house when we stopped there,” Ruby explained. “He was really mean, he gave Nora a bunch of extra candy bars and wouldn’t give Mercury any. He said it was because Mercury wasn’t wearing a costume but I think that was just an excuse to be mean. And after that Mercury didn’t have any more fun. But he was being nice before then!” she added firmly. “Well, nice for him.”

Yang frowned. “You mean Torchwick singled out Nora and excluded Mercury?” In the rearview, she saw Dad turn his eyes skyward with a sigh, and she reached over to squeeze Nora’s shoulder reassuringly.

“It’s okay if you don’t like Mercury, Nora,” Dad said. “You don’t have to like anyone you don’t want to. But try to be understanding, okay? He’s going through a lot, and progress isn’t linear. He’s not always going to seem like he’s doing better. But I genuinely think James is the best person for Mercury right now, which means the rest of us need to be patient.”

“But we’ve been patient,” Nora said. “It’s been ages.”

“It’s been two and a half months,” Dad corrected. “It might not seem like it to you kids, but that’s hardly any time at all.”

-/-

By the time they made it home, Nora had convinced herself that they were all just ganging up on her, and ignored them in favor of flinging herself at Qrow in hopes of being coddled. As long as none of them said what she was sulking about, he’d probably deliver, so she acted sleepy so he’d take her to bed without speaking to anyone else for long.

She buried her face in his shoulder and mumbled about being tired, and then frowned. He smelled like he’d been drinking— she’d learned to recognize the smell of the cheap whiskey he favored, though he’d never even been around the house after drinking since his relapse last Christmas. She clung tighter and wondered if everything was okay. Or maybe this Mercury thing was getting to him more than she’d thought.

Suddenly Nora realized her exhaustion wasn’t feigned. She really was tired, deep down to her bones.

“All right, let’s get you to bed,” he said, carrying her to her bedroom with Ruby trailing behind.

He didn’t make her shower before bed, on the condition that she’d shower before school next morning, and he hung up her X-Ray costume while she changed into her (coincidentally, X-Ray) pajamas, and then tucked her in. Ruby was still showering; Nora had about five more minutes to have Uncle Qrow to herself.

“Everything okay?” he asked, once she was snuggled in her blankies. “Did you guys have fun trick-or-treating.”

“I guess,” she said, and after squirming admitted, “I don’t think Mercury likes me very much.”
“Oh, kid,” he said, and brushed her hair back from her face with a sad smile. “It’s not you he doesn’t like. It’s just… really complicated. I’m sorry if he’s upset you.”

“He hasn’t upset me… very much,” she said. “I just wish things were better.”

“You and me both, kiddo.” He leaned over and gave her a goodnight kiss. “Try to get some sleep, okay?”

“Okay.”

She snuggled deeper into her covers, at the same time that Ruby came out of the bathroom in her own pajamas. Qrow hoisted Ruby into her own bunk and said his goodnights to her, too, and then left. Just before he flipped the light off Ruby squeaked out a halt.

“Hn?”

“Um.” Ruby twiddled her fingers nervously. “Um, can you plug in the old nightlight, please?”

“Thought you were too old for nightlights,” he reminded her, but he obligingly plugged in the little crescent moon nightlight that had kept the shadows at bay for so long, until Ruby had decided that she was too big to be scared of the dark anymore.

-/-

Late, late that night, long after the family had gone to sleep, Ruby woke up in a cold sweat from dreams haunted by swirling mist and a gleaming, lidless yellow eye. She sat up in bed, sucking in deep breaths of cool air, looking around the dimly-lit room all of its reassuring warmth and familiarity.

“Just a dream,” she murmured, and heard Nora stir beneath her.

“Ruby?” she mumbled. “S’matter?”

“Nothing, Nora,” Ruby sighed, and swung herself onto the ladder. “I just have to use the bathroom, that’s all. Go back to sleep.”

Nora mumbled some kind of affirmative at that, and rolled over to do just that, while Ruby slipped into the bathroom the girls shared. Once in the privacy of the bathroom, she sat down on the toilet seat and hugged herself. Okay. Just a nightmare. Okay.

“It’s just a nightmare,” she whispered to her reflection. “Get yourself together.”

She gave herself a few minutes to do so, and eventually began to feel that she’d been a bit silly. She took a deep breath and headed back to bed.

“Just a nightmare,” she thought- but she still checked the nightlight was on before pulling her blankies up over her head, just in case.

-/-

Chapter End Notes
[1- Mercury was in fact the same age as several of the occupants, but shh, no one tell him that.]

Fun fact! This chapter is the one where I started writing again! As of the scene on the front porch, you are no entering into the bit of writing I did this fall, instead of last spring. For this reason, there's going to be a quality shift.
Chapter 26

Chapter Summary

Mercury makes plans for his birthday, and it looks like he might actually be starting to enjoy himself living with the Ironwood-Polendinas.

Chapter Notes

There are like three random pop culture references buried in this chapter, whoops.

This is the beginning of Act V!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-/

Hazel was amenable to having Mercury over for the weekend to celebrate his birthday, so he called up James and made the arrangements. James agreed that Mercury could go if that was what he wanted, and hid his disappointment when his charge chose to spend his birthday away from home, when he’d been hoping to surprise him with something fun.

“So what would you like for your birthday, Mercury?” James asked over dinner.

Mercury rolled his eyes. “Don’t worry about it. Birthday presents are dumb.”

“Really? There’s nothing you want, or anything you’d like to do?”

“Didn’t you say you were saving up for something?” Penny mentioned. “If you tell Father what it is, he might get it for you.”

“No!” Mercury said, and at their surprised looks, huffed and said, “Look, I am saving for something but don’t worry about it. It’s not important. And I’ll get it. I don’t need handouts.”

“A gift is not a handout,” Penny said, but James stilled her with a soft touch to her shoulder.

“If you want to save and get it yourself, that’s fine,” James said. “But I would like to do something for you for your birthday. How about we go out for dinner? We can go wherever you like.”

“Wherever I like?” Mercury said, raising an eyebrow and smirking. “What if I pick the most expensive place in town?”

“That would be… let’s see, Chez Platypus?” James said. “It would depend on if I can get a reservation on such short notice, but if that’s what you want, I’ll do what I can to make it happen.”

“Hmph. What if I wanted to go to some two bit dive that should have been shut down for health code violations ages ago?”
“Then I would definitely question your judgment, but if it’s what you want, we could still make it happen. It’s your birthday, Mercury. You should get the chance to enjoy it.”

Mercury ‘hmphed’ again, and slumped over his food, glowering at it like it had personally offended him. James pinched the bridge of his nose and said, “Just think about it, okay?”

He shrugged, and conversation between James and Penny drifted while Mercury carried on playing with his food. They were having mushroom ravioli tonight; it was, Mercury had to admit, delicious, but deliciousness aside, it mostly just made him think longingly of all the nights he and Emerald and Cinder had ordered in pizzas because Tyrian could rarely be bothered to cook and pizza was the quickest, easiest way to feed three hungry teenagers.

It hadn’t always been terrible. And Emerald and Cinder had made it almost fun.

“Could we go to The Slicery?” he said suddenly, halting a conversation about Penny’s latest dungeons dungeons and more dungeons adventure.

“The Slicery?” James asked. “Not sure I know that one. What sort of place is it?”

“It’s a pizza place,” Mercury explained. “It’s kind of a dive but it’s clean. It’s where teens go to hang out but it’s not just kids. There’s foosball tables and an arcade and a jukebox—“

“It sounds fun,” James said. “No reservation, I assume?”

“I think if you tried to make reservations at the Slicery they’d laugh you off the phone.”

Penny giggled at that and gave him a fond smile. “May I come with you to the Slicery?”

Mercury snorted. “Course. I need a buffer in case anyone cool asks why I’ve got you guys with me.”

“Why would you need a buffer?”

“Are you kidding?” He adopted an expression of mock-horror. “Can you imagine if one of the Malachites saw me and thought I’d brought my family with me voluntarily? Nah, anyone asks it was your idea, all right?”

She giggled again. “Okay! But I do not think it will be that embarrassing to go out for dinner with your family,” she said.

Mercury stopped mid gesture at her words, a blush crawling slowly up his cheeks. He blinked, and snapped his mouth closed, and returned to hunching over his food without a word.

-/-

Emerald was amused by his Slicery plans when he told her about them on the phone later.

“If you keep on like that I’m going to start thinking you actually like it there.”

“Oh, shut up. It’s just the only time I’m ever going to get pizza while I’m living here. I think this family has some kind of aversion to pizza or something. But at least the Slicery does personal pizzas, so old General Hardass can make a pizza he can actually eat without interfering with mine. So that’s something.”

“Say pizza again,” she said, and then laughed when he scoffed down the line.
“All right, all right, whatever. So what have you got planned for my birthday visit, then?”

“Well, nothing so extravagant as going out for mediocre pizza with the hardass and a little kid,” she teased, and then went on with, “I have to pull a couple hours during the rush at the shop on Saturday, but after lunch I should be free.”

“Perfect Hazel putting you to work, huh?”

“Eh, it’s not my favorite but it’s not a big deal. It’s the holiday season and one of his shop girls quit so he’s a little short staffed. I’m just covering a few rushes here and there until he can get her replaced. Good way to make a little extra cash, anyway.”

“Wow, he’s actually paying you? Figured he’d find some legal loophole around that.”

“Nope, I make minimum wage same as anyone.”

“Cool, that means you can afford to buy me a birthday present. Speaking of which, what have you got planned for after you get off work?”

“Lunch, and then my friend invited us to a movie with him.” This last was said hesitantly, and then she added, much more quickly, “He said he’d even treat you, since it’s your birthday.”

Mercury’s mood dropped in an instant. He glowered at his ceiling, and, “Why?”

“Because he knows you’re my best friend and he wants to meet you,” Emerald said. “I talk about you, you know. Sometimes. And because I want you to meet him.”

He could recognize the gesture for what it was: an apology, though if he was being honest he wasn’t sure which of them actually owed the other. He didn’t have a right to interfere with Emerald’s social life, right? If she wanted friends other than him—

On the other hand, it was his birthday, and he couldn’t stop the unhappy bubbling under his skin over the thought of this stranger stealing away some of his friend’s attention on his birthday. Why did he want to go shoving in on their time together? Couldn’t he be satisfied with seeing her all the time anyway? Couldn’t he give her up for one weekend?

“Mercury?”

He’d been silent too long. He huffed. “Okay, fine, you can introduce me to your new boyfriend.”

“Shut up, he is not my boyfriend.”

“Whatsoever you say, Em.” He grinned, even though she couldn’t see it, because he knew she was glaring at the phone, and found himself saying, “And hey, since this is apparently how we’re celebrating my birthday, why not make a party of it? Mind if I invite my friend Winter to meet us for the movie?”

“Winter?” She sounded like she was frowning. “I guess, if you want. She’ll have to buy her own ticket, though. Flynt only offered to treat me and you.”

“Ooh, big spender,” he teased. “Nah, Winter’s practically Scrooge McDuck when it comes to cash, she could buy out the whole theatre if she wanted.”

“Good, then it won’t matter. I look… forward to meeting her.”

“Great! I’ll call her now and let her know.”
“Wh… yeah. I’ll talk to you later, I guess.”

Mercury agreed and dropped his own vague farewell, stomach plummeting at the hurt in her voice. He forced himself not to feel bad— it served her right, for replacing him. See how she liked it.

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Winter seemed confused about why Mercury was calling her; he wasn’t exactly surprised, since it was— as he realized only after he’d called- just past one in the morning.

“Do you have any idea what time it is?”

“Relax, Princess, it’s only like one. What, are you some kind of old lady? What are you doing Saturday?”

“Mother is taking my brother and sister to the mall to see Santa, and I have been asked to accompany so we can take a family photo together.”

“That sounds incredibly lame.”

“You have a better offer?”

“I’m going to the movies with my friend Emerald and her friend, like, Flynn or something? I don’t know, anyway you wanna come? It’s in Argus so it’s kind of a drive.”

“Oh. That actually does sound fun.”

“You sound surprised.”

“I would enjoy joining, so long as it doesn’t overlap with my previous engagements. What time will we be meeting?”

“No idea, but I can talk to Em about going to a later showing so you have time to get there, no big deal. So long as Flannegan or whoever doesn’t have an early curfew it should be fine.”

“Very well, then I accept your invitation. I look forward to it.”

“You’re so lame,” he snorted.

By the time they’d hung up, he was grinning. He pulled his sleeping music up on his phone and shoved it under his pillow, tucking himself in and feeling a sense of unexpected contentment over his upcoming birthday plans.

Maybe birthdays didn’t have to be so dumb.

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Across town, Ruby woke with a whimper and burrowed deeper into her covers.

“Just a nightmare,” she whispered to herself, curling into a tight ball as she tried to reclaim sleep— hopefully peaceful this time.

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“Halloween was less than a week ago,” Qrow said, unimpressed, watching the mall crew set up the Santa’s Sleigh in the center of the mall. Beside him, Nora shrugged.
“People need time to find out what their kids want for Christmas,” she said. “Do you think it’ll be Ozpin again this year?”

“You kids aren’t supposed to know that was him,” Qrow said, taking her hand as they headed toward one of the many clothing stores that made up the majority of options in their mall. They’d dug the winter clothes out now it was November and Nora had- to the surprise of no one- outgrown all of her things again.

“Come on, Uncle Qrow,” she said. “It was really obvious.”

“You weren’t even a little bit fooled?”

“He’s my principal. I see him every day. He’s been over for dinner. It’s not like he was some stranger I’ve never seen before who could, feasibly, be Santa, if Santa was real. It’s Ozpin.”

“Yeah, yeah, all right, whatever you say.” He shoved her hood forward teasingly. “Anyway, it’s not him this year, I already asked. Apparently it is a friend of his doing it, though.”

“They should get Mr. Port to do it,” she said. “At least he looks the part.”

“There’s more to Santa than being fat, kid,” Qrow reminded her. “Anyway, the fat thing is only a recent affectation.”

“That’s what Ren said.”

“I know, who do you think told me?”

She giggled at that, and pulled him over to look at a blue bomber jacket that he agreed was perfect for her until he saw the price tag. He winced, and set it back on the rack.

“Sorry, sweetheart,” he said. “Money’s kinda tight right now.”

“It always is,” she sighed, and let him steer her to the clearance racks.

-/-

“I feel like I can’t even provide for my own kid,” Qrow told Tai later, while the pair were making dinner.

“You provide for her just fine,” Tai assured him. “She has everything she needs, and a lot of things she wants. Just because you can’t afford one overpriced jacket-”

“No, I know that, I’m just… I don’t know. I just wish I could afford to buy her overpriced things sometimes. She deserves it.”

“She seemed to love the jacket you did get her,” Tai pointed out. “What’s the big deal?”

“The big deal is that this kid has grown up never being given anything extra and I just really want to get her something unnecessarily expensive. Without getting my rich beau involved,” he added, because in fact Nora had been given quite a lot of extra since James became a part of their lives— the man had a habit of spoiling the girls whenever he could, which Qrow had mixed feelings about but couldn’t bear to put a stop to when he saw how happy it made both them and James.

“Ah, so this is about you, not Nora.”

“What? No it ain’t.”
“Of course it is.” Tai passed him a tomato and knife pointedly, and he got to dicing. “You want to be able to spoil your daughter and it grates against your pride that you can’t.”

“Don’t be stupid,” Qrow said to his tomato dices, because, of course, Tai was entirely correct. “It’s just not fair. Kid deserves a pop who can spoil her.”

“All kids do,” Tai agreed. “But there’s this little thing called ‘capitalism’, you may have heard of it, and it’s set up to ensure that most people can’t really spoil their kids the way they want to.” When Qrow continued to glower at his tomatoes, Tai added, “Look, why don’t we have a yard sale? We’ve got a lot of junk collecting dust in the attic and the garage, it’ll clear out some clutter and give us a little extra cash to spend on the girls for the holidays.”

It sounded like the best option he was going to get. Qrow paused in dicing his tomatoes to give Tai a small smile. “All right, we can do that. This weekend’s no good for me; Merc’s visiting a friend for his birthday so I’m hanging out with Jim. Weekend after that?”

“Yeah, that’ll be the weekend before Thanksgiving, that works. And I bet the girls will have fun.”

“The girls will have fun with what?” Ruby asked, coming into the dining room on the tail end of their conversation. She set her construction paper booklet and a pencil box of crayons and color pencils on the table and climbed up, watching them quizzically the whole time.

“We’re thinking of having a yard sale,” Tai said. “To clear out some clutter from the attic and get a little extra cash for the holidays.”

“That does sound fun,” she agreed, kneeling over her booklet while she flipped through, trying to decide on a color. “Is this cause you couldn’t get Nora that jacket today?”

Qrow’s face fell. “Oh. Heard about that, did you?”

“Nora is sad, but she’s trying not to show it, because she thinks if she wants too many things you’ll have second thoughts about adopting her.” She fixed him with a pointed stare, and he sighed. “We told her she was being paranoid, but you know how little girls are.”

She sounded more like an old auntie sits-by-the-fire than a little girl herself, so Tai turned back to the stove to hide his amusement. Qrow returned to dicing tomatoes and suppressed a smile with, “I’ve been made aware. What are you making there?”

“I’m making a birthday card for Mercury,” she said, and finally selected a blue sheet. “Penny says he’s going to stay with Emerald for his birthday instead of having a party, and that he thinks birthday presents are dumb, but I think he can’t complain about a birthday card. That’s not a real present unless it has money in it.”

“I’ll be sure to let your relatives who only sent you cards know how disappointed you were,” Tai said to the pasta, still hiding his amusement.

“I mean it’s not like they ever come visit me or hang out or call, they could stand to send more than a birthday card with no money in it,” she said, completely unfazed by the targeted remark. She made a great show of choosing between four, to them, identical black color pencils, and got to work, humming to herself and completely ignoring them in favor of her work.

Tai and Qrow exchanged meaningful looks. “I’ll talk to her after dinner,” Qrow murmured to Tai, and missed the small, satisfied smile from Ruby at his assurance.
Yang was waiting beside Mercury’s locker when he came in Friday morning, arms folded with a manila envelope in one hand. She was leaning against the lockers and staring off into the middle distance like she thought she was cool or something, but when he approached, she turned her attention to him.

No hoping she wasn’t there to see him, he thought, and groaned. He scowled to let her know she wasn’t welcome and opened his locker without a word.

“Good morning to you too,” she said, sounding more amused than he felt she had the right to.

“What do you want, Blondie?”

“Relax, I’m not here to start anything. Ruby asked me to give this to you.” She handed him the envelope and resumed her previous pose, watching him this time. He stared at it. His name was written across it in what was probably meant to be an elegant script but looked a bit more like chicken scratch.

“What is it?”

“It’s a birthday card,” she explained. She still sounded amused; he scowled harder, and opened the envelope warily, like he expecting something other than a card to be in it. (With good reason, honestly. It wouldn’t be the first time Ruby glitterbombed him.)

All that was in the envelope was a card, though, a bit of blue construction paper folded over and hand-drawn. Several multi-colored paper stars had been pasted on the front, and the inside featured a glitter-pen drawing of what he could only assume was himself, leaping across a river of glittery crocogators astride a glittery tiger made of lightning. Squeezed into the bottom, in cramped, glittery writing, it read ‘Happy Birthday!, with ‘Love, Ruby’ crammed in under it.

“What a dork,” he said, folding the card and slotting it carefully back into the envelope. He turned to head to class, and scowled when Yang fell into step beside him. “Tell her I said thanks or whatever,” and, because she didn’t seem to be leaving him, added, “Why are you following me?”

“We have the same homeroom, Scooty-booties,” she said, and then laughed when he punched her arm and stormed ahead.

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Chapter End Notes

The jacket Nora wanted was the one from the RT site that is based on her canon jacket, obviously.

Little kids acting like wise and sage elders is my favorite trope.
Chapter 27

Chapter Summary

Ruby has an encounter with her archnemesis. It's not so bad.

Chapter Notes

Literally this entire chapter is just Ruby and Torchwick interacting, with a little bit of Tai at the end. Enjoy it, it's the last Torchwick or joy you're going to get for awhile.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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It was rare that Ruby was the only kid home these days. She and Nora shared the same circle of friends; an invitation for one was generally treated as an invitation for both of them. But Nora was sleeping over at Ren’s for some best friend time, just the two of them, and Yang was out at a movie with Blake and Ilia and Pyrrha, which Ruby was trying not to be jealous about because Pyrrha had technically been her friend first and it was only a trick of timing that she was Yang’s age instead of Ruby’s, so shouldn’t she hang out with Ruby more than the other bigger kids?

However, when she’d mentioned this to Dad, he’d just said that they were at ‘that age’ and it would pass. It seemed to Ruby, the youngest of her circle, that her older friends were always at ‘that age’ and that she was always waiting for it to pass, so she didn’t bother arguing.

(She’d consulted Neptune, the only other close friend her same age, and he’d agreed with her assessment, though he’d pointed out that things were getting worse as they all started hitting puberty. The one or two year divide between them and their friends had yawned into a chasm over the course of just two years, it seemed lately.)

In any case, normally Ruby would be glad to be the only kid home on a Friday night, because Uncle Qrow being… well, wherever he went on Fridays would normally mean that she’d get some time to have her dad all to herself.

This Friday, unfortunately…

“So do you live here now or something?” she asked, upon wandering into the kitchen for a snack and finding Roman Torchwick at the dining room table, for the third night in a row.

“Hello to you too,” he said, not looking up from his phone.

She retrieved a juice box and a pack of crackers and took a seat at the table to stare at him. He was surrounded by textbooks and a notebook, and he was supposed to be studying. She said as much.

“I’m taking a break,” he said. “It’s allowed.”

“I guess.” She carried on staring for a moment, then reached over and pulled one of his textbooks
to her. She was expecting to find something adulty and advanced and complicated, and was surprised when she recognized it. “This is just basic algebra!” she said accusingly. “Yang can do this!”

“Good for her,” he groused. “Because I’m struggling, and your dad wants me to review this building block stuff before we move on to the other stuff.”

“Don’t you run a business? How can you run a business if you can’t do math?”

“I can do math. I do math at the bar all the time, not to mention the other jobs I do for Junior. What I can’t do is performative math.”

“What’s performative math?” she asked, returning the textbook to its place.

“Showing your work,” he explained. “When you have to write down your process, and the process is more important than whether you got the right answer.”

“Oh, I know about that! Uncle Qrow said it really makes it hard to teach, because there’s only one way he’s allowed to teach the math and not everyone thinks about numbers the same way.”

“I know, I’ve been your uncle’s agony aunt for eight years now and he spends a lot of time bitching about the public education system.”

Ruby frowned. “You shouldn’t use words like that around me. I’m just a little kid.”

He gave her an unimpressed stare. “So when that ferret-faced on-fire-garbage-can does it he’s a well of fun new vocabulary words but when I do it you’re just a little kid?”

She shrugged, and gave him an angelic smile while he grumbled and returned to his work. She rested her chin on her folded arms and started swinging her legs, watching him in silence while he worked. Eventually, she spoke.

“You’re in love with my dad, aren’t you?”

Torchwick stilled, and gave her a wide-eyed stare. “Of course not, what sort of man do you think I am?”

She sniffed. “Dad says you’re the sort of man who carefully obfuscates your personality so that you can control how people perceive you, because then you get to be the one to decide if people like you or not.”

His visible eyebrow climbed up into his hairline. “Wow,” he deadpanned. “When I said I wanted him to nail me, that wasn’t what I had in mind.” When she continued to stare innocently at him, he said, “Where’d you come up with a question like that anyway?”

“Dad said you stopped soliciting him.”

“Hitting on someone doesn’t mean you’re in love with them. Not hitting on them definitely doesn’t.”

“Um.” She huffed. “Um, he said you stopped soliciting him because he asked you to, and that you respected his boundaries once they were laid out for you.”

“Very true.”

“But that doesn’t really sound like you, so I figure you must have some kind of ulterior motive.”
“So you figure the only reason I could possibly have is if I’m in love with him?”

“Well, that and the fact that sometimes when he’s not looking you stare at him like this.” She rested her chin in one hand and stared off to one side, adopting a simpering look that he would deck an adult for implying he ever made. “So I figure it’s a pretty good guess.”

He mirrored her pose and glared at her, while she continued to smile up at him, and finally he sighed and swept his bangs back—they fell right back into place—before saying, “Your father has been very good to me, little red. Not a lot of people have, and it’s meant a lot to me, especially after the thankless task of babysitting your uncle. Not that I have to do that anymore, not now that he’s apparently fired me.”

He turned and glowered at the kitchen counter, and for one moment Ruby fancied she could see past the obfuscation Dad was always talking about and down to the man he insisted was underneath—but then he turned back and grinned cocky at her and the moment was gone.

“So what will your silence cost me, then?”

“Nothing,” she said. “I’m not a teller, you know. I just wanted to know if I was right.”

“Hmm.” He squinted at her, and slowly turned back to his study, still keeping half a wary eye on her as he did.

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Roman was just about starting to wonder where Tai had got to when Ruby spoke again. She’d slipped down farther in her chair until only her fingers and the top half of her head was visible over the table, and the shy aura was such a change up from what he was used to that he startled visibly when she finally did speak.

“Mr. Torchwick?” she asked. “Can I ask you something?”

“I can’t stop you in any way that won’t get me thrown out of your house,” he said, brushing his bangs back again. “Ask. I don’t promise to answer.”

“Hmm.” She slipped her hands into her lap and stared down at them. “Do you ever get really scared by things?”

“Conceptual or tangible?”

“What?”

“What’s got you scared, little red?”

“Oh. Well.” She fidgeted a little, mumbled a little. Brushed her bangs back and let them fall back around her face. “Um. I heard a really scary story on Halloween and um. I keep having nightmares.”

“Oh, is that all?”

“Yeah,” she deadpanned. “That’s all.”

“Don’t give me the eyes, kid, that’s not what I meant. I just mean that not all monsters are easy to get rid of, but at least with nightmare monsters all you have to do is be scarier than them.” He considered, and, “Anyone ever teach you how to fight?”
She shook her head. “Jaune’s biggest brother wanted to teach us how to do some cool knife stuff, but his other brother wouldn’t let him.”

Roman scoffed. “What, does he hate fun? Well, the fun police isn’t here to stop us, so come here. I’m going to show you how to throw a punch.”

Possibly he should be alarmed by how eagerly she dropped out of her chair and come over to him, but if he was doing this better to have an enthusiastic pupil. He pushed his own chair back and moved into the open space between table and kitchen counter, grabbing his cane as he did.

“And do me a favor and don’t tell your folks about this, okay? I don’t think they’d mind you knowing some slight self-defense, but I’m going to show you how to fight dirty and I doubt they’d approve.”

“You mean like aim for the balls?” she said excitedly, and far, far more enthusiastically than he liked. His eyes narrowed.

“Who taught you that?”

“Uncle Qrow.”

“Hrm, sounds about right. Now. Give me a fighting stance.”

She did, posing like an anime character about to throw an energy attack. He circled her, using his cane to adjust her stance until he was satisfied that she wouldn’t be more of a danger to herself than anyone trying to hurt her, and stood up straight.

“There, that’s better. You need to find your center of balance or it will be knocked out from under you- and forget what your uncle told you. You can’t tell at a glance who actually has them, and if someone is planning to fight they could be wearing protection from just that sort of attack anyway.”

“Is that a thing?”

“A discreet form of protection for a vulnerability half the population shares? Naturally. Mind you getting the same sort of protection for the other half- ah well, not important.”

“What?”

He shrugged. “Ask whoever your dad gets to tell you things your mom would if she was around, kid, that’s not my place. Anyway, there’s other weak points to exploit when you’re fighting dirty and those are a lot more consistent and therefore reliable.”

And then he knocked her feet out from under her with his cane, watching impassively as she fell back with an ‘oof!’ of surprise. She pushed up onto her elbows.

“What was that for?”

“So you’ll understand what I mean about balance. On your feet, little red, let’s try this again. See what you remember.”

The forty-five minutes that followed were rough. Roman showed her two things: how to throw a punch, and how to keep her feet under her, but at the end of that forty-five minutes, she didn’t feel like she knew anything more than when she started, and her backside and elbows were sore from how many times he’d knocked her over. He did, at least, tell her the best places to throw a punch at
before running, which didn’t sound like anything Uncle Qrow had taught her.

“With all due respect to your uncle, he’s never had to fight sober, and he’s never had to fight sober people. And he’s never had to fight anyone who was genuinely trying to kill him. Swinging a few punches when you’re both too plastered to see in a straight line is very different than fighting for your life because a con went sour.”

“Um, what?”

“Just trust me when I say I know a little bit more about fighting dirty than Qrow, okay?” He gestured for her to return to her seat. “Anyway, that’s enough for tonight, I don’t want to overload you.”

She climbed back up to her seat, clearly confused. “Do you really think showing me this stuff in real life will help me fight a monster in my dream?”

He shrugged. “Who knows? Maybe. But on a more practical level, I think wearing you out will get you through rem sleep to deep sleep quick enough to not worry about monsters.”

“I don’t think wearing myself out is a good long-term solution to nightmares,” she said.

“I dunno, always works for me,” he joked, and then frowned when her face fell. “I’m kidding. Lighten up, kid.” When she just sighed, he added, “Why haven’t you told your dad or your uncle about this? Pretty sure they could help better.”

She shrugged. “Mercury was the one who told the story.”

“...ah.”

“I just don’t want to bring it up because every time we talk about him we end up arguing. Nora hates him, Yang does too but she’s trying not to, and Dad just keeps telling us to be patient. I don’t even like to mention him to Uncle Qrow. And I just want to be his friend but there’s so much bad stuff and he’s always pushing.”

“Ah, you’re a good kid, little red,” he said. “But this isn’t Amazing Technicolor Space Equines: Spreading Harmony In the Universe. You can’t just sing a song and hit someone with a magical friendship lazer beam and everything is okay.”

“I wish it was that easy.”

“I know. But the kid has been hurt a lot, by a lot of people- and once you’ve been hurt enough times, it gets hard to trust anyone... even a little girl who just really wants to be friends.”

“I guess even Glitter Stardust would have her hooves full with a case like Mercury.”

“I know you’re going to really hate hearing this, but your dad is right. You have to be patient with the kid.”

She groaned and slouched back down in her chair. “You’re right,” she said. “I really hated hearing that.”

Roman laughed, and pulled his textbooks back to him. “That’s life, kid. We all have to hear things we don’t want to hear.”

She stuck her tongue out at him, and then sat back to watch him resume his studying, wondering.
where her dad was and why he hadn’t come back yet. After a beat, she spoke again.

“Hey Mr. Torchwick?”

“What now, kid?”

“Why did you drop out of school?”

“Didn’t have much choice,” he said, not looking up from his notes. “My parents kicked me out. Suddenly school didn’t seem that important.”

Ruby gasped, horrified. “But- but parents aren’t supposed to do things like that!”

“Yeah, well, what can I say? You’re old enough to understand what your uncle is dealing with with some of his kids- and not everyone ends up in the system when their families give up on them.”

“That’s terrible, though.”

He shrugged. “The world is full of monsters. Not all of them have the decency to broadcast that. Ah, it’s not all bad, hon. I’ve had a pretty good run of it the last eighteen years. And I wouldn’t know your uncle or your dad if all of that hadn’t happened. That’s a pretty good trade, isn’t it? Even if Qrow seems to have forgotten all about me.” This was punctuated by a scowl, and he added, “Look, you’ve got better things to do than feel sorry for me over something that happened almost two decades ago. Okay?”

“Okay,” she said, and, without warning, slid down from her seat and flung her arms around his middle. It was awkward given his position, and she banged her elbow on the table in the process, but after a tense second he patted her shoulder reassuringly and she pulled away.

“What was that for?”

“For helping me. And for listening. And because you seemed like you needed it.”

“Why in the world would I need a hug?”

“Everyone needs a hug sometimes,” she said, and, because her dad had finally walked in, “Right, dad?”

“Sure,” he said, ruffling her hair fondly. “Sorry to be gone so long, I ran into some problems with those papers I was grading. Have you guys been behaving while I was out of the room?”

Ruby smiled innocently up at him, and said, “Yes. By the way, what does it mean when you want someone to nail you?”

Roman’s eye widened, and then hardened into a glare. “Traitor,” he hissed, while she gave him a cherubic smile. “And after we had a bonding moment!”

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Tai decided after that that it was time to put Ruby to bed, and when he eventually returned he found Roman had packed his books up and was leaning on the kitchen doorframe, playing nonchalantly with his cane.

“So how long were you standing there?” he asked, not looking up from his task.

“I turned up about the point where you said you were going to teach her some basic self-defense,”
he said. “You seemed like you were actually getting along so I didn’t want to interrupt, but I also wasn’t going to leave you unsupervised while you were basically kicking my daughter around.”

He gave a relieved sigh, and finally looked up. “She’ll be fine. A little sore, but fine.”

“I know. I don’t mind her learning how to protect herself, you know.” When Roman shrugged, Tai reached up and put a hand on his shoulder. “Roman, really. Thank you. I had no idea she was having nightmares at all.”

“It was nothing, really.”

Tai snorted. “You know, for someone who claims to hate kids, you sure do pretty well with them when there’s no one around. We haven’t forgotten you taking care of Nora for us last December, you know.”

“It’s nothing. Really. Honestly, I’m just doing you and Qrow a favor- not that he cares, mind you.”

“No?”

Roman sighed. “Your sweet baby brother seems to have completely forgotten I exist, now that he-” He broke off, and, “-well, now that he doesn’t need me anymore. I’m not his bartender, so I guess that means I’m not his friend, either.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. Just a wasted investment, that’s all. Eight years I spent looking after him- that’s gratitude for you.”

And then suddenly Tai’s arms were around him, wrapping him up in a hug. He stiffened, and Tai could feel him tensing, almost shaking.

“You okay there, buddy?” he asked, letting go to find Roman looking aside, the eye not hidden by his bangs facing away from him. “Roman?”

“Your arms,” Roman said shakily, “Are just so big.” He rubbed a hand over his face, took a deep breath, and turned back to him. “What was that for, anyway?”

Tai gave him a small smile. “You seemed like you needed it.”

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Chapter End Notes

I identify with Roman Torchwick because I too want Tai to hug me, like, constantly.
Qrow didn’t go home after his appointment that night—instead he headed to James’, letting himself in and slipping as quietly up to his room as he could. It wasn’t the first time he’d done this in the near-year they’d been together, but it was the first time he’d done it since Mercury turned up.

In James’ room, he shed his clothes like pie crust between the door and the bed, and peeled back the covers to find James stirring, opening his eyes and staring sleepily into the dark room.

“Hey, big man,” Qrow said softly.

“What?” James mumbled, and then grinned when Qrow leaned in to kiss him to full waking. He hummed pleasantly. “I wasn’t expecting you until tomorrow.”

“I wanted to surprise you.”

“I’m surprised.”

James sat up and pulled Qrow into his lap so he could kiss him properly; Qrow brought his hands up to cup his jaw, to deepen the kiss, and then pulled back.

“Hold the phone,” he said, and leaned over to flip the lamp on. He squinted at James, who looked blearily at him in the sudden light. Qrow ran both hands over his jaw, over the thicker than usual stubble growing on it. “When was the last time you shaved?”

“Last weekend?” He had the audacity to look sheepish about it, which Qrow thought was very unfair given how cute it made him. “Just thought I’d try something new. I haven’t worn a beard since I was in my twenties.”

“Is that so,” Qrow said, still running his hands over the stubble, fascinated. James gave him a fond smile.

“You don’t mind?”

“Yes, your face.” He leaned in and nuzzled said face gently, stealing another kiss before pulling away
and adopting a more suggestive expression. “I am going to have so much beard rash now.”

“You’re one to talk,” James said, reaching up to run one pointed hand over Qrow’s carefully-maintained five-o’clock shadow. “At least I do intend to grow past the awkward scratchy stage.”

“You don’t want me growing a full beard, Jimbalaya,” Qrow said. “Trust me, it doesn’t look right.”

“You’d only say that if you knew for sure. Which means that somewhere in one of Tai’s photo albums there are pictures of you with a full beard.”

“And if he knows what’s good for him he’ll never show them to you.”

James just grinned at that, which was also unfair, because it made his eyes crinkle at the edges and Qrow could never resist kissing him when he did that. Certainly not this time, and a moment later he’d slipped aside and pulled James down on top of him, alternating between kisses and nuzzling, both trying to keep their laughter- and eventual other sounds- muffled in deference to Penny sleeping just across the hall.

-/-

Mercury’s first night with Emerald managed to go better than last time; they had tacos for dinner, and watched more of Hazel’s old film collection while they threw popcorn at each other and cracked jokes. Hazel joined them from time to time, but mostly left them alone, working out in the garage on his bike to give them some privacy.

“He’s not so bad,” Mercury said, and ducked a handful of popcorn. “Leaves you alone, at least. General Hardass is always trying to ‘get to know me’ and ‘spend time with me’ and ‘let me know he’s there for me’. It’s such a pain.”

“Overbearing guardians are the worst,” Emerald agreed, and caught a bit of popcorn in her mouth. “It’s like, come on, man. I’m not your friend, I’m your, like, pseudo-kid. We’re going to know each other all of a year and a half, max, and then I’ll be out of your life forever. Chill. But Hazel’s pretty good- he hangs out with me, but, like, he leaves me alone if I’ve got friends over or just want to be left alone.”

“You have friends?” he asked, throwing in a disbelieving snort lest she take it as another attack. “As in plural?”

“Well I have you and Flynt, and that’s plural.”

“Don’t forget Ruby,” he said, because he didn’t want to think about Flynt.

She groaned, and forgot to dodge the popcorn he’d just thrown at her. “I cannot believe I went and got a ten-year-old crushing on me. I mean, I can’t blame her, but still.”

Mercury laughed so hard at that he snorted, and clamped his hands over his mouth in embarrassment, prompting Emerald to laugh until she fell backwards onto the nest of pillows and blankets she’d dragged down from the linen closet for their movie party.

After a moment she sat up, leaning forward enough to hug her legs to her and watch him thoughtfully.

“I really like it here, though,” she said quietly. “I wish…”
She trailed off, and impulsively he reached over and took her hand in his, lacing their fingers together and just holding it like that between them.

He wanted to say that if anyone deserved to have a nice place like this, where she could be happy, it was her. He wanted to say that if he had his way they never would have been separated. He wanted to say that he felt the same way about where he was, but if he tried to even think about that the words got stuck in his throat.

He wanted to say, anywhere would be perfect as long as they were together.

But none of those words seemed willing to shape themselves, so he said nothing at all.

-/-

Hazel, it transpired, owned a sweet shop. It was called The Witch’s Cottage, and was done up to look like a gingerbread house- Mercury stood outside staring up at it while Hazel unlocked the chains to let them in.

“What. The hell,” Mercury said, following Emerald in and staring at the wall-to-wall, floor-to-ceiling sweets. “When you said he owned a shop-“

“I know, I had the same reaction,” Emerald said, amused. “But I mean… the man has a serious sweet tooth. It makes sense.”

“Makes sense? Emerald, this man is eight feet tall, is building his own motorcycle, and his arms are like tree trunks. In what world does it make sense for him to own a sweet shop?”

“You shouldn’t judge people on appearance,” Hazel said, coming in behind them. “Especially when they’re standing behind you.”

“Jesus Christ,” Mercury said, half exasperated, half-startled, and then, “Well, as long as I’m chewing on both feet anyway, mind sharing with the class why you’re so big?”

“If you tell me how you lost your legs,” Hazel said pointedly, and Mercury scowled.

“All right, point taken, it’s personal.” He folded his arms. “So what’s on the agenda today, Em?”

Emerald looked to Hazel, who gave her a soft smile. “Missy said she’d cover the opening shift, so you’re free for the morning, but I do need help getting the baked stuff ready for the racks.”

“Oh good, that’s the only job that doesn’t suck,” Emerald said. “You can’t actually help cause labor laws or whatever, but you can hang out while we work. It’ll be fun, I promise.”

“Watching you work while I legally cannot be asked to?” Mercury smirked. “That alone sounds fun. What are you making, anyway?”

“Cupcakes, brownies, cookies- you know, that sort of thing.”

“We’re rolling out the hazelnut fudge starting this week too,” Hazel added.

Mercury raised his hand as if in class. “Hey quick question, has anyone ever-“

“You’re fourteen, that’s inappropriate,” Hazel reminded him. Mercury lowered his hand and shrugged.

“Had to try.”
They stayed at The Witch’s Cottage until it opened, after Mercury spent a good hour and a half watching Emerald and Hazel teasing each other while they got all the baked goods ready for the morning. Something twisted in Mercury’s heart every time Hazel gave Emerald that fond look, and when he held her face in one surprisingly gentle hand while he carefully dabbed the flour from her face with a wet cloth—her eyes were sparkling, he noticed, and stood to leave in disgust. If Emerald noticed, she said nothing, but she did join him a few minutes later, leaning on the counter and peeking over at him.

“Hey,” she said.

He grunted in acknowledgement. Over him, she sighed.

“Please be happy for me,” she said, a desperate, pleading tone in her voice, and now he sighed, too.

“It’s not that I’m not happy for you,” he mumbled. “I’m just scared. I hate to see you get hurt.”

“Can I tell you a secret?” She moved around the counter and slid down to sit beside him. “I’m scared, too. I’m scared Hazel is playing a long game, or that he’ll get bored, or that something else will happen, and I’ll have to go away. I’m scared Ironwood is doing the same with you. I’m scared that next time we’re separated we won’t end up with guardians cool enough to let us keep hanging out like this, or that we won’t find each other again at all. But I’m also so, so scared of missing that chance. I’ll risk getting my heart broken a hundred times if it means finding someone who cares enough to care about me.”

“I care about you.”

“I care about you too. That’s why you’re here for your birthday, because I cared enough to get you away from the happy brigade for a weekend.”

He laughed, a little startled, and she stood, pulling him to his feet. “Come on, you dweeb. Let’s go hang out. Hazel! We’re taking off!”

This last was called to the back, and Hazel came out of the kitchen long enough to wave them away and wish them a fun morning.

“And you don’t have to worry about picking us up cause Merc’s girlfriend is dropping us off.”

Mercury snorted. “I’m telling her you called her that.”

“Aw come on, why doesn’t it annoy you?”

“Because it’s gonna be more fun redirecting it to Winter.”

It wasn’t until after lunch that they headed over to the Coal’s place, an apartment that sat over a music store. A man behind the counter waved them through, and she led him through the backroom to a staircase that led up to the apartment.

“Flynt?” she called, once they hit the top of the stairs.

“I’m back here,” came a voice in reply, and Emerald led him to a bedroom where a boy about their age was polishing a trumpet in his lap. He looked up when they came in. “Hey, Em. I wasn’t
“expecting you for another hour.”

“Missy came in and covered the shift so Hazel didn’t need me after all.” She gestured at Mercury. “This is Mercury.”

“Good to meet you, man,” Flynt said. “Hang on a second, let me just finish this up. Have a seat. Make yourself at home.”

Emerald complied, tossing herself onto the end of the bed while Mercury, after a brief look around, decided to take the desk chair, sprawling in it in a way that would have reminded several people of Qrow when he was posturing, if any of them were there to draw the comparison.

“So you and Emerald are friends, huh?”

“Yeah, my mom does her hair and we’ve got a couple classes together at school, too. She seemed cool, so I thought, better get on that.”

Mercury bristled. “Get on what, exactly?”

Flynt tipped his head and winked at Mercury over his sunglasses- which Mercury decided he didn’t like in the least. “You don’t miss a chance to be friends with someone cool, my man. Besides, she seemed like she could use a few friends.”

“She has friends,” Mercury said, folding his arms and leaning back in the chair.

“Then she seemed like she could use a few more.”

“All right, all right,” Emerald said. “You’re both pretty, can we stop with the dick-measuring contest please?”

“Sure,” Flynt said, turning his attention back to his trumpet, and said, so low that only Mercury heard, “I’d win anyway.”

Mercury shot to his feet, glaring down at Flynt before forcing himself to take a breath and calm down. “I thought we were going to a movie, not watching your new boyfriend polish his trumpet.”

“Boyfriend?” Flynt glanced at Emerald, who merely facepalmed. “News to me, but whatever. Sure, we can head out. What time are we meeting up with your friend?”

Oh. Right. Mercury sat back down. Winter wasn’t due to meet them at the theatre for another hour and a half. He sighed and jiggled his foot.

“Anyway, we can at least hang out somewhere besides here. Emerald, come on, you said you’d show me around the town.”

“Sure,” she said, standing along with him. “We can hang out in the mall until the movie starts.”

“You don’t have to come with us,” Mercury said. “You’re clearly busy, we shouldn’t have even bothered you before we were supposed to meet.”

“No, it’s cool.” He set his trumpet into the open case at his feet. “My parents worked pretty hard to afford that for me so I like to take care of it, but I’m done now. We can hang out.”

Mercury bit back a smartass remark and followed as he led them out of the apartment, but there was murder in his eyes when Flynt tossed an arm around Emerald’s shoulder once they were down on the street. He waited for her to toss his arm aside, but all she did was adjust her stance to
accommodate the added weight.

“So where do you wanna hang out, birthday boy?” Flynt asked. “We’ve got plenty to do up here in Argus.”

“Emerald said something about the mall,” Mercury reminded him pointedly, and turned his attention entirely to her, dismissing Flynt as much as was possible.

“Oh boy,” she sighed. “It’s gonna be a long night.”

-/-

As the time dragged on, Mercury got more and more annoyed by everything Flynt did or said. It wasn’t even that the other boy was being particularly cruel: he had an attitude problem, but Mercury honestly preferred being around people with attitude problems. It was at least better than being around the happy brigade.

But every time Flynt tried to talk to him, or did something nice for him, or was just friendly in general, it rubbed him the wrong way—and the arm that frequently found itself around Emerald’s shoulder when he spoke to her was like a kick in the stomach every time.

By the time they had to meet Winter, Mercury was gritting his teeth against all the things he wanted to say.

“Winter!” he called, hurrying forward to greet her. “Come meet my friend—this is Emerald. Emerald, Winter. And, uh, Flowers, I guess.”

“Flynt,” he corrected, holding out his hand to shake Winter’s. “So you’re a Schnee, huh?”

“I am.”

“Huh. Never would have expected a Schnee to mingle with us small folk.”

“I hardly see what’s unusual about it. I mingle with anyone that it interests me to.” Slightly uncomfortable, she added, “What movie are we seeing?”

“What’s playing?” Mercury asked, glancing at Emerald, who had already taken out her phone to check the listings.

“According to this, Frozen 9, Avengers 15, and Ice Age 37.”

“Thirty seven?” Flynt said. “When did thirty six come out?”

“Last summer.”

“Huh, must have missed that one.”

Mercury sighed. “I really hate that Frozen is the best option on that list.”

“They say Elsa might have a girlfriend in this one,” Emerald pointed out, as the group turned and headed in the direction of the theatre.

“That’s what they always say. Face it, Em, they’re never gonna have a lesbian princess.”

“Well obviously she’s not gonna be a lesbian, she’s had like four boyfriends by now, she’d be bi.”
“Keep holding your breath, I’m sure they’ll get there eventually.”

“I guess this is the part where I admit that I actually kinda like Frozen?” Flynt asked.

“You would,” Mercury scoffed.

Flynt shrugged. “It’s got its problems, but I have fun watching it.”

“Well you’re gonna have a blast tonight, then.”

“We don’t have to go to the movies. We could always do something else, if the movies don’t suit you. It’s your birthday, man, your call.”

“I’m sure you’d like that, wouldn’t you? Gets you out of paying for our tickets.”

“What? Look, I said it’d be my treat, if we do something else it can still be my treat.”

“Yeah, because I definitely need your handouts.”

“What? What is your problem?”

“My problem? What the fuck do you think is my problem? Oh! Maybe it’s the guy who invited himself to my birthday weekend like he was actually wanted! Ooh!”

“Whoa.” Flynt raised his hands in what was probably meant to be a calming motion. “Look, Em is the one who suggested this, I figured I was welcome. If not- then sorry, I’ll get out of your hair now.” He gave Emerald an apologetic smile. “I’m gonna take off, not gentlemanly to stick around where I’m not wanted. See you around, Em.”

He swaggered off after that, waving over his shoulder, and once he was gone Mercury turned to the other two and gave them a cocky smirk.

“That’s him rid of, then. Should have tried that way s—“ And cut off because Emerald’s fist had collided with his shoulder. “Ow! What was that for?”

“You dick!”

“Oh, come on! You can’t have possibly thought I would like someone like that! What’d you go inviting him for anyway?”

“I thought that if you met my friend you might feel a little bit less like I was leaving you every time I mentioned him! I thought you might like him, even! I do!”

“Yeah, I noticed! Anyone else touched you that much you’d have broken their arm.”

“Well, I—“ She broke off and hugged herself, shrugging a little. “I’m trying to be better. That means friendly touches. Sometimes.”

“Or you could just tell him to get his fucking hands off of you.” Mercury sneered. “Anyway why could you have possibly thought rubbing your new friend in my face was what I wanted for my birthday?”

“Me? The fuck?! What exactly did you do last weekend? You made me go trick-or-treating with a whole gaggle of little kids! How the fuck is this any different? At least this was about you, I thought you’d like that! Everything else fucking is!”
“Hey, I invited you to that because I didn’t want to hang out with a bunch of little kids on my own! Different situation!”

“Yeah, super different! You volunteered for that! You could have turned the little brat down and then invited me to hang out doing actually fun stuff!” She made a frustrated motion in the air and let out a half-strangled yell. “God, you’re such an asshole.”

“Yeah! Newsflash, Emmie! I’ve always been an asshole! This isn’t new and isn’t gonna change any time soon!”

He saw her flinch at the name: saw her jaw tighten and her expression harden to stone. Part of him wished he could grab the word, all of his words, out of the air and stuff them back into his mouth, part of him wanted to apologize, to beg her to forgive him, to swear he was trying to do better—

—and then her shoulders tightened, and she said in a low, dead voice, “I think maybe you should just go home.”

“Em…”

She ignored him, turning and trudging down the street in the direction Flynt had. He made an aborted motion like he meant to reach for her, and let his hand fall. Balled it into a fist.

“Fine!” he shouted, and spun on his heel, storming vaguely toward Winter’s car, still parked a little farther down the street. “Fine,” he spat more quietly.

-/-

The ride home was quiet, but as they drew nearer to their neighborhood, Winter caught his attention with a faint touch and said a quiet, “Emmie?”

“S’what Tyrian used to call her when he was playing,” he said, turning away to lean his forehead against the window. He squeezed his eyes shut, and wished he could take back everything, and just go back to enjoying his weekend. He groaned and hunched deeper into his seat. “Thanks for bringing me home,” he mumbled.

-/-

Chapter End Notes

This chapter feels short given how long it took me to write it.
The family are starting to feel the strain of meeting Mercury’s needs.

This chapter is an argument either for or against writing while horny, but fuck if I know which.

It amused me that a couple of people mentioned the idea of Mercury and therapy after last chapter, given that this chapter actually brings up why it won’t be happening.

Before going any further, let’s take a look at a few other people’s plans for the weekend.

Li was back home from traveling, so he’d decided to take his son to the zoo in Mistral, and invited Nora and Jaune to join them. Mistral was far enough away that it would be late at night before Nora returned home.

Penny had been invited to go see Frozen 9 with Ciel, and then sleep over. She wouldn’t be back until Sunday, probably sometime in the afternoon.

And Mercury, of course, was away at Emerald’s.

Or to put it another way, James’ house was empty of kids and Qrow’s daughter was also accounted for.

They were, therefore, taking full advantage of the rarity of an empty house, by doing the sorts of things that they couldn’t do when there were children present.

Qrow stretched out languidly and flopped back down to sprawl alongside James. They had ended up on the living room floor at some point, as James had some sort of objection to having sex on the couch where his children watched tv, but the floor had more room to stretch out than the couch did anyway, so Qrow had decided not to complain.

“I have beard rash on my ass,” Qrow said conversationally, rolling so that he was half sprawled on top of James now. James snorted.

“It’s your own fault.”

“Was I complaining? No!” He wiggled his hands up to clasp either side of James’ face and stared into his eyes with a firm look. “You have a wickedly talented tongue and it would be a crime to…”
He trailed off, there, because they’d heard a key in the front lock. Qrow swore and grabbed the quilt James had had the foresight to bring down earlier, throwing it over them both just as the door flew open and Mercury stormed in, followed just behind by Winter. Both kids ground to a halt by the doorway for the living room.

“Nice timing, kid,” Qrow began, and then on seeing Mercury’s expression, “Christ, what happened? What’s wrong?”

Mercury looked from one of them to the other, then swore and turned to hurry up the stairs. After a second or so, they heard his bedroom door slam, and gave their attention to Winter instead. She had pointed her gaze ceilingward after her shock wore off.

“Winter?” James asked.

“He had a fight with his friend,” she told the light fixture. “She asked him to leave.”

“Ah, shit,” Qrow breathed, and after a brief glance around, realized he was at an impasse. He couldn’t get up with Winter standing there. “Uh, d’you mind?”

“Right. Of course. I’ll- I’ll just- I’ll go.”

She fled; no sooner had the front door closed than James pushed Qrow and the blanket off of him, rummaging around on the floor for their clothes. Qrow managed to find his underwear, then wrinkled his nose.

“Why do you always use my underpants for clean up?”

“Because then you can’t put them back on,” James said distractedly, fishing his undershirt out from under the couch and slipping it over his head. “Just throw them in the laundry, I was going to get a load going tonight anyway.”

“Well when you do see if you can find my shirt and throw it in too.” Qrow grabbed James’ shirt instead, and went looking for his pants. When James hummed a vague affirmative, Qrow reached out to catch his hand and his attention.

“Hey, talk to me. What’s up?”

“What’s up? Qrow, my son just came home early from a visit he was really looking forward to and I have no idea how long it will take him to recover from whatever it was that happened. What do you think is up?”

“Oh. Huh.”

“What?”

“You used the son word.”

“Wh-” James sighed, and pinched the bridge of his nose. “I did, didn’t I?”

“You did. Does Merc know how you feel?”

He shook his head. “He gets spooked at even the idea of having a place here long-term, I don’t like to think what… what more would do.”

Qrow chuckled. “It was only a matter of time, I guess.”
“Your meaning?”

“Come on, Jim. Remember when I said not everyone is cut out for foster care? I wasn’t just talking about people who should never be put in charge of children. I also mean that… some people just fall in love with every kid that needs ‘em. That’s all. You got a big heart, this was… kind of inevitable the minute they handed him to you.”

James sighed, in part because he wasn’t sure if he was being made fun of, and in part because he knew Qrow was right. There was no other possible outcome from putting in his care a boy who had been through that much and that he had the means to help heal. He gave Qrow a weak smile.

“Sorry. I know we had plans that didn’t involve me taking on a child who doesn’t even like being around you…”

“It’s fine,” Qrow assured him. “The kids take priority, every time. We’ve made it work so far—we’ll keep making it work as long as he needs.” He finished putting on his pants. “In the meantime, I should get going. You go take care of your kid.”

“Thank you,” James said, and pulled Qrow in for a tender kiss. “For being so patient, I mean. I love you.”

Qrow gave him a half-hearted smirk. “Hey, you’ve always been patient with me. See you around, Jimmy.”

-/-

The family were surprised when Qrow arrived home early, having not expected him until Sunday evening at the earliest, but he wrote them off with a vague assertion than “something came up” before disappearing into the dining room to get to work on lesson plans, just for something to do.

It was much later, after the girls had gone to bed, when Tai joined him, setting a juice box in front of him before taking a seat.

“So,” he said. “What came up that you had to cut your weekend short?”

Qrow shrugged. “Merc got in a fight with his friend. Came home early. Figured I was better off leaving Jim to take care of him.”

“Ah.”

When nothing more was forthcoming, Qrow sunk deeper into his seat and took a long sip from his juice box, wishing it had a much higher alcohol content as he did. As in any at all.

“Jim used the son word about Mercury earlier,” he said dully.

“...ah.” Tai reached over and touched his hand. “Well. We knew this was the most probable outcome. You know how James is.”

“Yeah.” Qrow gave him a lopsided half-smile that didn’t reach his eyes. “He’s a sucker for a sorry case.”

“He cares. A lot.”

“He’s a good man,” Qrow agreed, and hung his head. After a second, he sniffled, and scrubbed one hand over his eyes. Tai frowned.
Qrow sniffled again. “I am trying to be patient,” he told the table. “I am doing my damnedest to give that kid all the space he needs and let him heal the way he needs and— it’s the literal least I can do. But gods. I miss them, Tai. Both of ’em. I want them with me, I want to wake up with James every morning and— and do really soppy domestic things with our kids. And we were gonna have that! And now we can’t!” He scrubbed his eyes one more time, and took another long drink from his juice box. “I’m being stupid.”

“Well, you’re in love.” Tai reached over and patted his shoulder. “Being stupid comes with the territory.”

“Well.” He took a moment to pull himself together, then flipped his bangs out of his eyes. “Have I missed anything good around here?”

“Torchwick taught Ruby some self-defense stuff. Apparently ‘go for the balls’ isn’t that reliable as advice.” When Qrow snorted in amusement, Tai added, “Speaking of Torchwick… I think you should call him. Not right this minute, I mean in general. He misses hanging out with you.”

“Why? Not like we ever hung out much before.”

“No, but you did spend several hours together every weekend for eight years. Now that you’re going wherever you’re going, you aren’t.” He shrugged. “I think he thinks you forgot about him.”

“I literally just saw him Thursday.”

“Yeah, but that was when he was here studying with me. Look, I’m not telling you what to do, but he’s your friend. You shouldn’t abandon him just because your dynamic has shifted.”

“Why do you care, anyway?”

“Because Roman is my friend, and I don’t like seeing him hurting. You know you mean more to him than he lets on.”

Qrow snorted, and shook his head. “Tch. One of these days I’m going to see the man you do. You sure you don’t have a crush on him?”

“I’m sure. I just know there’s more to him than he lets on.” He poked Qrow in the shoulder and gave him a playful glare. “Come on, you know I’m right. You don’t just ditch a friend because you don’t need him anymore. That’s not how friendship works.”

“All right, all right!” Qrow wiggled away from the finger poking him again. “I’ll call him up. Jesus, what is this, Space Horses?”

“Please, Glitter Stardust would have her hooves full with a guy like Torchwick.”

“Nah, she’d just hit him with a rainbow lazer.”

“You think he’s big bad material?”

Qrow wobbled one hand. “Early season big bad. You know, before we really find out much about the world and what sort of threats are really out there. He’d get either killed or reformed by the third season. Kinda like Qaos was.”
By the time Li brought Nora home, the pair had moved into the living room and were watching one of the old Space Horse episodes. (While both were glad the girls were enjoying the new reboot, they were agreed that gen four was the best.) Qrow got up to let Li and Nora in; Nora stopped to look at the scene they’d paused on, then realized Qrow was there and flung herself at him.

“I thought you were going to be at Mr. Ironwood’s this weekend!” she said, once Li had left to take Jaune home.

“Change of plans,” he told her. “Something came up. Come on, come sit with me and Tai, tell us about your zoo trip. Did you have fun?”

“Yes!” She scooted delightedly into the space between them, always ready to take advantage of a little time to have them both to herself. “Mr. Ren said for each of us to pick the thing we wanted to see most, and then we figured out our route from that. I picked the lemurs, but the lemur enclosure was closed down for renovation, so I picked the screaming hairy armadillo, which was in the small mammals house. And Jaune wanted to see the elephants, and their enclosure was a biiiig part of the zoo, so it was really easy to find them. And you know what? You know what?”

She was practically vibrating in excitement. Qrow stilled her with a hand to her shoulder, and, “Don’t leave us in suspense.”

“The elephants. Have HUGE tonkers!” She bounced some more, oblivious to the stunned looks being passed over her head, and went on. “They’re prehensile! That means they can move them around on their own! And they use them for balance and scratching their stomaches and all sorts of cool things!”

“Was that… part of the guidebook?”

“No, we just kind of noticed, and then Ren told us. He’s sooo smart. I think sometimes he must know everything.”

“Including about elephant tonkers,” Tai said weakly, while Qrow turned away to hide a smirk.

“Yeah! I think he read it in a book somewhere. Oh! And you know the screaming hairy armadillo? Apparently it’s such a deep sleeper that you can’t even wake it up by hitting it with a broom!”

“Who hits an armadillo with a broom?”

“Scientists.” Her eyes lit up again. “Oh, oh! And we watched a sea lion do tricks! It was sooo cute! And it waved at us! And went harnk harnk! Harnk!” This impression was insufficient; she bounded to her feet and did her best physical impression of the sea lion as well.

“Whoaah, whoaah.” Qrow caught her shoulders and steered her back to the couch. “Keep the noise down, Ruby and Yang are sleeping. How about you go get ready for bed? You can tell us all about the zoo tomorrow when everyone’s awake.”

“Oh, all right.” She heaved herself out of the couch with a sigh. “And Ruby’s for sure asleep?”

“As far as we know. Why?”

“Because if she’s asleep I can turn the nightlight off. I can’t sleep if the lights are on.”

And with that she hurried off to bed, peeking into her room before flashing them a thumbs up and disappearing into it. Tai and Qrow exchanged a look, but after a moment it was clear that she wouldn’t emerge. Qrow sighed and flung himself back onto the couch, one hand over his eyes.
“Okay, I knew Ruby was sleeping with the nightlight again—“

“She’s been having nightmares,” Tai explained. “That story Mercury told at Halloween.”

“Ah. Shit.” He lowered hand. “And Nora can’t sleep with it on.”

“And Ruby doesn’t want to bring up her nightmares because it will start everyone arguing about Mercury again.”

“Yaaay, more problems,” Qrow deadpanned, waving one hand in mock victory. “This whole situation is shit.”

“Fortunately I think we can probably work out a compromise for Ruby and Nora, at least,” Tai said. “Shouldn’t be too hard to fix a set of black-out curtains onto the bottom bunk.”

“True.” Qrow considered this a moment, and then snapped his fingers. “Would it be possible to put some over the top bunk, too?”

“I guess. Why?”

“Cause those two are about to hit the age that they start to want more privacy than they get sharing a bedroom. Just thinking ahead.”

“Yeah?”

Qrow snorted. “Me and Raven always shared a room before we split up. They’re gonna start chafing soon. Too bad we don’t have an extra room anywhere,” he added. “That’d solve our problem.”

Tai snorted. “I guess this isn’t the ideal house for raising two families in.”

“It is kinda small,” Qrow admitted sheepishly. “It’s always suited cause we swapped out which of the girls had to share her room but with Nora here permanently now…”

“I know.” Tai shrugged. “It was supposed to just be a starter house while we got our feet under us. Then Raven got pregnant, and then Summer, and we had to focus on the girls. And then…”

He trailed off; Qrow reached over and gave his hand a quick, reassuring squeeze.

“It would be perfectly fine if you didn’t have me and Nora underfoot.”

“Don’t you dare say that.” Tai grabbed the hand that had just retreated and held it firm. “I’d rather have you here in a crowded house than lots of space and have you gone.”

Qrow smirked. “What happened to taking the time and treasuring it?”

“That was before I knew the moving in conversation was being shelved indefinitely. Come on, Qrow, you know I don’t want you going anywhere. I know it’s not really conventional, but short of the actual mothers of my children I can’t think of anyone I’d rather raise my kids with.”

“Jesus, Tai, come on.” He reached over and shoved his shoulder, prompting Tai to throw an arm around him and squish him close. Qrow wiggled and flailed, trying to escape the crushing embrace, eventually managing to slip free when Tai finally loosened his hold. He stuck his tongue out and blew a raspberry. “That is not playing fair.”

Tai grinned. “But I’m just trying to show you I love you~”
“By squishing me with your big muscley body?” He huffed and poked Tai in the arm. “And you wonder why Roman creams himself over you.”

Tai pouted. “All right, moment’s dead.”

“Yeah, that’s what I thought.” He grabbed Tai’s arm and lifted it so he could lean back against him, draping it more comfortably around himself with a content noise. He closed his eyes. “We’ll talk to the girls about blackout curtains tomorrow.”

Tai hummed an affirmative, and for a long time they were silent, lost in their own sleepy thoughts. It was Tai who broke the silence.

“We could afford to move, you know.”

“Hm?”

“To a bigger house. Somewhere Ruby and Nora can have their own room, and where Yang wouldn’t feel quite so much like we’re always over her shoulder. I’ve thought about it, looked at the budget. It wouldn’t be much bigger, but it would be big enough for all of us.”

“Yeah?”

“It’s just that…” Tai sighed. “Qrow, I started my family in this house. And we always meant to move on but. We were going to move on together. Moving now would feel like leaving behind everything we had.”

“That’s dumb.”

“Thanks.”

“No, come on.” Qrow twisted around to look up at him. “You guys built something real special together but the house was never the part that mattered. You know that.”

“Do I?”

Qrow poked him, and grinned. “When you’re not being dumb. Tai, you’ve got two amazing daughters who have the best parts of their moms in them, do you really think the house is the important bit? You’ll never leave what you had as long as you have the love of those girls. Even when they eventually grow up and leave us. That’s how it works. You know that’s how it works. So stop being dumb.”

“Huh.”

“What?”

“That was… really well put.”

“Why does everyone keep saying that?” There was another silence, and then Qrow said, “Look, it’s your house, you make the call that feels right. I’m just saying. Staying here just cause you don’t wanna leave behind a relationship that ended nearly a decade ago is… well, it’s dumb.”

“Yeah, yeah, okay. You’re right.”

“That’s more like it.”

“I’ll give it some more thought. In the meantime. Blackout curtains?”
James couldn’t get a response out of Mercury when he knocked on the door after Qrow left, nor any of the times he went to check on him later that night. Late, late at night he heard the door open and then the kitchen light went on downstairs; a little while later he heard Mercury’s door close again, and sighed.

Space. He just needed to give him space.

Hazel called up James that night, to discuss this new issue.

“Do you know why they fought?” James asked.

“No idea,” Hazel said. “When she came home early and alone she told me he was a cunt-shriving son of a bitch who only cared about himself and she never wanted to see him again.”

“Jesus.”

“Then she threw his bag into a drainage ditch and said if he didn’t like it he could eat her entire asshole, slammed the door to her room, and locked herself in. She hasn’t come out of her room since.”

“Same with Mercury, honestly.” James sighed. “Speaking of his bag-”

“It’s fine. I fished it out of the ditch- it only had clothes in it, so no harm done. I’ve washed them and put them away, you can pick them up whenever you like.”

“Right. I’ll try to make it by sometime this week, then. Thank you.” James leaned his chair back and covered his eyes with one hand. “What are we going to do about the kids?”

“I told you something like this was going to happen. They need each other, and they live too far apart.”

“I would love to hear any ideas you have about how to fix that.” There was a long, thoughtful silence on the other end of the line, and James said, “...Hazel?”

“Just considering our options. For now I think they just need time to cool down. They’ll find their way back to each other on their own. If we try to push them, they’ll push back.”

“I know.” James scrubbed one tired hand over his forehead. “I wish there was just some way of making them understand they’re not dealing with this alone anymore.”

“They’ll get there eventually. This isn’t the sort of problem that can be solved overnight, but it will be solved now that they have the resources to solve it.”

“Do they have the resources to solve it? What if we’re just making things worse with everything we try? What if we’re just contributing to the problem?”

There was a thoughtful rumble on the other end, and Hazel said, “Have you brought up the idea of therapy yet?”

“Not yet. I feel like if I mention it now he’ll just retreat more than ever. I’m going to give him a
little more time. You?”

“She said she wasn’t interested in having her head shrunk. I don’t think she’s ready either.”

“Oh.”

“So, until they have a trained professional helping us figure out what they actually need, the best we can do is our best.”

“I suppose.”

“They’ll be okay. It’s just going to take time.”

-/-

It was much later by the time Qrow finally went to bed. He started shedding his clothes on the way to the bathroom, and then hesitated when he realized he was still wearing James’s shirt, a lovely dark blue flannel that was one of Qrow’s favorites. It hung off of him like a circus tent; he hugged himself, then grabbed his phone and took a quick selfie.

You won’t be wanting this shirt back, right?
Att: img

He turned on the shower and sat on the toilet to wait; he didn’t have long before a reply.

Why aren’t you wearing pants?

Qrow stared at the phone, stunned, and, fuming, sent off a reply: You are the WORST boyfriend in the world I want a refund

Just for that I’m keeping this shirt forever. It loves me more than you do

He gave it a minute or so longer, and: Oh no, now I have no boyfriend and no shirt.

Look, see? All alone, boyfriendless and shirtless.
Att: img

Qrow eagerly opened the image; it was James, snuggled into his pillows, blankets pushed down to reveal both his bare chest and the empty bed beyond him. He grinned.

That is truly a pitiful site

Sight?

Sight.

Anyway it breaks my heart

What are you going to do about it?

I GUESS I’ll keep you

How sorry are you?

Incredibly.
I’ve learned my lesson, I promise.

Xxx

All right, I’ll forgive you this time, but you’re on thin fucking ice

Now what have we learned?

Don’t question pantlessness when it lands in my lap.

So to speak.

Good boy

Now say good night, I have to shower

I was sleeping, you know.

Well lucky you, having such a good boyfriend to send you nice pictures to carry off to dreamland with you

Lucky me.

Good night, you menace to society.

Love you <3

<3

-/-

Chapter End Notes

I want it noted that because James was covered by Qrow and the quilt, Mercury still doesn't know that James is a cyborg. It is important to me that you know this, because the longer I put off writing that scene, the funnier it gets.

For the record, James threw Qrow's shirt behind the couch while he was undressing him, so that Qrow would have to wear his shirt instead. He does this kind of thing often. The times he doesn't are the times when Qrow does this so he has an excuse to steal James' shirt.
Chapter 30

Chapter Summary

Mercury's mood continues to spiral, and the adults start talking solutions.

Chapter Notes

I took a writing break and then got sick, so it's going to be a bit of time before the next chapter is done. Fortunately I have a buffer but that buffer is being slowly whittled away. (I went from a seven chapter buffer to four after posting this. But I think once I get you guys through this arc I'm going to just keep writing my way to the end, cause I'm on the last arc now.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-/-

James didn’t get a response from Mercury Sunday morning, either, though the plate he left outside the door vanished while he was in his workroom. When Penny got home, she knocked on the door, but got no answer either, and eventually gave up.

James kept half an eye on Mercury’s room throughout the day, but apart from coming out twice to use the bathroom, he remained where he was. At lunch, James left another plate for him, and again at dinner, and when he was getting ready to head to bed the plates and glasses were stacked neatly outside of his door.

He sighed, and took them downstairs.

-/-

James was expecting a few more days of Mercury’s isolationist behavior, but when he came down Monday morning, Mercury was sitting at the kitchen table in his school clothes with his algebra book open in front of him. He grabbed an orange from the bowl and took a wary seat across the table, and started peeling it.

“I wasn’t expecting to see you out of your room for a few more days,” he admitted.

“Yeah, well, I’ve got school,” Mercury said, not looking up from- apparently- his homework. “You know what a stickler Glynda is about attendance.”

“True.” The orange in his hand squirted juice on the table; he grabbed a paper towel and carried on eyeing Mercury in his periphery while he cleaned it up. Finally: “Do you want to talk about it?”

“There’s nothing to talk about.”

“There is. But you are allowed to say you don’t want to. Do you not want to talk about it?”
Mercury made a frustrated noise and slammed his book shut, stuffing book and notebook into his bag before standing, not looking at James once through all of it. “I have to go, Winter’ll be here in a minute. See you around, General.”

“Mercury, wait.” When Mercury halted in the doorway, not turning around, James said, “If you do want to talk, I’m here. That’s all. Have a good day at school.”

“Don’t pretend you care,” Mercury muttered, and headed out, leaving James to his orange slices.

-/-

Winter, fortunately, didn’t bother Mercury about what had happened, though she, too, reminded him that she was there if he wanted to talk. Mercury huffed and slammed the car door in response, ignoring Winter’s parting remark while he trudged across the high school parking lot to the middle school wing.

He’d just made it to the classroom door when he heard his name called behind him. He turned. It was Yang.

“Morning, Mercury!”

“What.”

“Grouchypants,” she teased. “Anyway, I just wanted to know if you wanted to hang out with me and my friends at Release the Grounds after school. We’re mostly just gonna be working on homework but you’re welcome to join us. It’ll be fun.”

“Why.”

“Uh…” She shrugged. “You just seem like you need some friends.”

Inside, he bristled; his jaw clenched, and he said, tightly controlled, “I don’t want your pity invites.”

“It’s not a pity invite. I just… you know, I feel like we should make peace. We’re practically family. I want us to get along.”

“You want,” he muttered, and took another breath. Shoved his fists into his jacket pockets. “Why do I care what you want?”

Her face fell. “I’m just trying to be friendly.”

He took a deep breath. Another, and another, and something tight twisted in his chest, and: “I don’t want your goddamn friendship you stupid fucking bitch! Can’t you take a goddamn hint already? I don’t want anything to do with you!”

“Hey, cool it!” Blake said, moving over to them. Their classmates were starting to take an interest in the conversation, now that it had turned into shouting. Yang held out a hand to stop Blake.

“What the heck is wrong with you?” she demanded. “I messed up! I get it! I can’t change the past, I can’t change what happened! I’m just trying to make things better! Would you just— would you just actually fucking cooperate with someone for once? Every time someone tries to be nice to you you push them away! Can’t you just… eurgh, can’t you just let someone in? Literally anyone?”

Mercury’s vision was wobbling by the end of her outburst, his hands tingling with raw nerves,
knuckles white inside his jacket. He was vibrating, he realized, or maybe the whole world was
trembling under him.

He took a deep, deep breath.

“Fuck you,” he spat, and turned to walk away.

“Hey, where are you going?”

Yang reached out and grabbed his wrist as he turned: the world screeched to a halt in his head and
his ears were ringing, and his fist made a satisfying crunch when he spun and knocked Yang to the
floor.

.SQLite

Tai made it to the school not long after James; the other was seated in the lobby, and looked up to
meet his eye when he came in. Tai sighed, and took the seat beside him.

“I guess it was going to happen sooner or later,” he said, and attempted a weak smile. James carried
on glaring at him, and his face fell. “Sorry.”

James half-shrugged one shoulder, then leaned forward on his knees and pressed his hands to his
eyes. “What am I going to do with him?”

“The same thing you’ve been doing.” He gave a brief, reassuring touch to James’ shoulder, and
went on. “Progress isn’t linear, James. The kid is… he’s hurting. That’s not going to get better
overnight.”

“I know, I’m just. Frustrated.” He let out a slow breath. Behind them, the door opened and Glynda
appeared. He sighed. “All right, let’s get this over with.”

.SQLite

In the office, the parents took a moment to take stock of the children’s situation. Yang was nursing
a nosebleed; Mercury’s cheek was swelling, and both of them looked fairly battered. In the chair
farthest from the door Yang was sitting ramrod straight, fists clenched at her sides with a stony
glare on her face. A few feet away, Mercury slouched down as deep into his chair as he could,
hands shoved into his pockets, shoulders hunched, glare pointed somewhere around the point of his
knee.

James and Tai exchanged meaningful looks with Glynda, then took their own seats while Glynda
moved to stand beside the principal’s desk.

(James wasn’t really sure what to expect from the principal. Glynda sometimes referred to her as
the ‘wicked witch of the west’, and according to the kids she was an ancient and deathless force of
chaos and darkness in the world. But she looked like an ordinary woman to him, albeit an
incredibly pale one. On the other hand, she was a middle school principal.)

“Well now,” she said, folding her hands in front of her on her desk. “Fighting in the hallways. I’m
sure you’re all aware that we have a zero tolerance policy in this school, but I’m prepared to be
lenient if I feel the situation calls for it. Who can tell me what happened?”

“What’s to tell?” Mercury said, folding his arms and sinking further down in his seat. “Blondie
here was annoying me so I swung on her.”
“That’s not true, actually,” Yang said, turning her gaze to the floor. She glanced sideways at her dad before telling the carpet, “Mercury and I were arguing, that’s true, but he tried to walk away when things started to escalate. I grabbed him and tried to make him stay because I wanted to have the last word. The fight was my fault.”

“Oh spare me your martyr complex,” Mercury scoffed. “I don’t need you taking the fall for me, I’m the one that swung first. Get over yourself.”

“I’m not trying to take the fall, I’m trying to take responsibility for my actions!”

“No, you’re doing what you always do and sticking your goddamn nose where it doesn’t belong! I swung first! End of story!”

“And I provoked you when you tried to walk away!”

“What were you fighting about?” Tai interjected, and both children stopped bristling and froze. Mercury folded his arms and slouched again, and said, “Something stupid,” at the same time that Yang looked back down and started playing with a lock of hair and muttered, “Nothing important.”

“If it’s not important, why were you fighting?” James asked.

“Because it seemed important at the time,” Mercury snapped. “Obviously.”

“All right,” James said gently. “Neither of you wants to tell us.”

“I just don’t think it matters.”

“Obviously it does,” Tai said. “But it’s not something that’s going to be resolved in one meeting with your principal and your teacher and your parents staring you down.”

“S’not my parent,” Mercury muttered.

Principal Salem tilted her head. “What was that? Can you speak up, please?”

Mercury’s shoulders tightened, and he snapped, “I said he’s not my fucking parent! He’s just some guy who got stuck taking care of me until I get shuffled off again! God! Why does this even fucking matter? Just fucking suspend me already and move on!”

A tense silence fell over the group. James schooled his face into a carefully neutral mask, while Tai caught Glynda’s eye in an exchange packed with meaning. Glynda nodded.

Principal Salem looked from one child to the other, one defiant, one stunned, and said, “Clearly this is an issue that goes much deeper than one argument. I understand from Mrs. Goodwitch that the two of you have a history of antagonism, which suggests to me that putting you in the same classroom was an oversight on an administrative level. I will look into possible solutions; I may have to move one of you to a different homeroom. In the meantime, both of you are suspended for one week effective immediately. I suggest you take that time to reflect on the issue at hand, and I expect you both to be more cooperative when you return next Monday.” She gave that a moment to sink in, and added, “That will be all. Both of you are dismissed to collect your things. Dr. Ironwood, I’d like to speak with you privately, please.”

Mercury stormed out after that; Yang and Tai hung back long enough to give him a headstart before trailing out, and Glynda last. She gave James’ shoulder a reassuring squeeze on her way by, and then James was alone with Principal Salem. She stood and moved around to stand in front of
her desk instead, hands folded neatly in front of her where she stood.

“While the issue has not been brought directly to me, I’ve noticed that young Mr. Black has a bit of a truancy problem.”

“I’m aware,” James said. “Glynda and I are… working with him.”

“So I understand. When he returned to this school district, she requested him for her classroom specifically. She believed he would cause trouble in anyone else’s hands.”

This was news to James, and his expression must have said as much because Principal Salem said, “You didn’t know?”

“We didn’t know at the time that Mercury was going to be put into my care,” he said.

“Well. I have already spoken to Glynda about this, but it’s only fair to warn you as well. If the boy continues to cause trouble, he may be looking at expulsion.”

James sighed. “I understand. Thank you for telling me.”

-/-

“Go get your things,” Glynda told Yang, once they were in the foyer. “I need to talk to your father alone.”

Yang headed off to do that, and Glynda pulled Tai aside to speak with him privately.

“There’s a very good chance that this will result in one of the children being moved out of my class,” she said. “Given the circumstances, if it does come to that, it will probably be Yang.”

Tai sighed. “I assumed as much.” He pinched the bridge of his nose. “There’s something you should know, something Qrow told me. Mercury had a fight with his friend over the weekend and came home early and- Qrow says James used the son word.”

Glynda frowned. “It’s sooner than we expected.”

“Yeah, no kidding!” He shook his head. “But it’s got me thinking and I’m… I’m not sure if James is the best place for Mercury to be right now.”

“No?”

“I know, I know, I just… keep thinking of when we sent him away in the first place. We didn’t just make that decision out of nowhere, Qrow genuinely felt that we weren’t the best guardians for him. And he was right.”

“But that decision made things worse in the long run,” Glynda reminded him. “And I think Mercury is more content with James than you give him credit for.”

“More content with James, maybe. But James doesn’t come vacuum sealed. He has a family to be considered.”

“Mercury and Penny get along just fine.”

“Penny is not the only child James has to consider!” When she raised an eyebrow at him, he scrubbed his hands through his hair and started pacing, and went on, “And Mercury isn’t the only kid with abandonment issues here. Nora needs the love and support of a stable family just as much
as Mercury does- she needs her parents to be able to be there for her, she needs all of her parents.”

“Nora is not James’ child.”

“Yet!” Tai tossed his hands up. “Gods, Glynda, for someone incredibly smart you sure are acting stupid! Have you spent any time around James and Nora together at all? You know we’re watching a clock tick down, don’t even pretend you don’t!”

“Then what do you propose we do, Tai?”

“I don’t know. I don’t have all of the answers- I barely know all of the questions! But we can’t start to address a problem until we agree on what the problem is and… and I’m not going to sit here and watch my family be torn apart. My kids deserve better than that.”

There was a long silence, while she watched him with lips pursed in thought, and finally nodded, once. “I’ll consider what you’ve said.”

“Thank you.” Tai scrubbed his hands through his hair again. “Look, I want what’s best for Mercury as much as you do. I just don’t know if a family with a man he can barely stand to be in the same room as and a girl he’s constantly on the verge of swinging on is what’s best. And keeping everyone apart for his sake isn’t what’s best for the rest of them. I just feel like maybe we should start considering whether we’re not making things worse in the long run.”

“-not going to sit here and watch my family be torn apart. My kids deserve better than that.”

Mercury froze in place, the fractures that he’d almost thought were starting to heal cracking anew and spreading, spreading until he was shattering- he couldn’t breathe, his eyes were burning, his vision swimming-

His knees were going wobbly. He turned and staggered off in the direction he’d come from, hand against the wall to steady him, not quite sure where he was going but needing to be somewhere no one would find him.

His fingers brushed over the handle to the custodial closet. He let himself in without a thought and finally let his legs give out from under him, sliding down the wall and burying his face in his knees. His body shuddered from top to tip as a sob wracked through him, and then another- the third he didn’t even fight, just let it come. What did it matter? What did anything matter?

“-by the time James finally finished his meeting with Principal Salem, Tai and Yang had left and Glynda had returned to class, and Mercury was sitting outside the office with his bag beside him and his hood pulled up to obscure his face. When he stood to go, James reached for him, intent on checking the swelling in his cheek before doing anything else, but Mercury just batted his hand away and spun toward the door.

“It’s fine, it doesn’t matter,” he said flatly, and headed out before James could respond.

James followed, trailing behind him on the way to the parking lot so he could watch him thoughtfully. As they neared the car, he made a decision and rested a hand on Mercury’s shoulder, startled when he realized the boy was shaking under his hand.

“Mercury?”
“What.”

“If you want to talk-”

“There’s nothing to talk about.”

“There is.” James let his hand fall with a sigh, trying and failing once more to look him in the face, and gave up. “And I mean it. If you want to talk, I’m here.”

For one moment, for just one moment, James wondered if Mercury was going to talk to him—his shoulders rose and fell like he was steeling himself—and then he opened the door and slid into the passenger seat in the car.

“There’s nothing to talk about,” he repeated, in that curious flat tone.

James sighed. “All right. I won’t push if you’re not ready.”

-/-

It wasn’t often Yang got up to the college. She’d visited some, of course, and she knew the campus and faculty better than the average seventh-grader, but it was always a treat to get to see where her father worked.

Usually she wasn’t in trouble when she did. She trailed after him through the corridors, for once not goggling at all the students who were so much more relaxed and carefree than her own classmates.

(She’d mentioned this to Tai once, who’d laughed so hard he couldn’t breathe before wheezing “College kids… relaxed….”.)

There was a woman around Tai’s age in the classroom when they got there; while Yang took a seat, Tai exchanged a few brief pleasantries with her. Once she was gone, he came over to sit on the desk across from Yang.

“So. You wanna talk about it?”

She scowled at her desktop for a good long moment, and said, “It was really dumb. Like every single bit of it. It was just dumb.”

“So you keep saying.” He gave her a weak smile, and met her eye when she chanced a look up. “But it’ll help if you talk about it.”

She sighed. “I invited him to hang out with me and my friends after school. I thought— I don’t know what I thought. We’re never going to get along. What’s the point?”

“If you’re never going to get along, why invite him out?”

“I don’t know!” She tossed her hands in the air in frustration. “I just… he always seems so miserable, and I think Winter and that Emerald girl are the only friends he has and she lives super far away and it’s my fault about all the things that happened to him—”

“Whoa, whoa.” Tai held up a hand to stop her. “Yang, it is not your fault. None of this is your fault, okay? The people to blame are his previous guardian and his father. Not you. Never you.”

“But I picked just as many fights as he did—”
“Yeah! Because you were two traumatized children with anger issues sharing a bedroom barely big enough for one person! Yang! You were nine! Nothing about anything that happened is your blame and you have got to stop trying to shoulder the burden of healing that kid!”

“But-”

“Yang.” He took her face in his hands and made her look at him. “Look at me. There are two grown men, adult men with full control of their lives and choices, who decided to take their issues out on a little kid completely dependent on them for his care. At least one if not both of them violently. They are to blame, Yang. Not a little girl.”

“But Mercury…” She pulled her head free and cast her gaze downward.

“Blames you,” Tai agreed. “And Qrow, and me, and pretty much any adult who’s taken on his care since the day he was taken from his father. A lot of adults have dropped the ball with him and that’s our blame, but at the end of the day all of this is just deflection because Mercury can’t point his anger at the two men who deserve it. Thankfully because they’re both in jail where they belong,” he added bitterly.

“I thought you didn’t like the prison system,” Yang said. “You said it was just a legal loophole to recreate institutionalized slavery.”

“It is, and our criminal justice system needs a huge overhaul in this country, but there are some people who don’t belong in the public sphere and-” He broke off, considered his words, and changed direction with, “Look, let’s just say I know some details of Mercury’s history that he wouldn’t appreciate me telling you, okay?”

“Okay…”

“Yang.” He reached over and took her hand. “I know how frustrated you are. Trust me, I am too. But you can’t keep blaming yourself. It’s not your fault.”

“Okay,” she sighed, in a way that suggested she didn't agree but also didn't want to keep talking about it, and said, in a small voice, “Dad? Uncle James is going to adopt Mercury, isn’t he?”

It was Tai’s turn to sigh. “I think… he wants to.”

“What’s going to happen to our family if he does?”

He shook his head. “Honestly? I don’t know. But I am not going to let this family get torn apart. You kids- all of you, Mercury included- deserve better than any of this.”

-/-

It took Mercury an embarrassing amount of time to realize that they weren’t headed to the house. He straightened up in the car and finally, finally looked around at James, trusting his hood to continue hiding the dried tear tracks on his face and more in James’ ability to take a hint and pretend not to notice them if that failed.

“Where are we going?”

“Mantle,” James said. “I’m working in the lab this week, and I can’t leave you at home unsupervised, so it looks like this week is bring your-” he broke off, and went on, “-foster child to work week.”
He seemed… hurt. Mercury watched his expression in his periphery, and tried to identify the weird tightening in his chest, and finally hugged himself against the pain until it went away.

“Is that even allowed?”

“Oh yes, there are enough parents- and guardians- at the lab that we have an established daycare system.”

“M’not a toddler,” he mumbled, turning back to staring out the window.

“Maybe, but you need supervision all the same, and I can’t watch you while I’m working.”

He seemed like he was expecting Mercury to fight him on this, and normally Mercury would, but it was like the fight had drained out on him in that custodian’s closet, because he just shrugged and said, “Fine, whatever.”

-/-

The drive up to Mantle was long- Mantle, where James’ lab was, sat somewhere between Vale and Atlas, closer to Atlas. Mercury felt a sudden stab of pity for James, who had to make this drive regularly. Penny had told him once that they’d originally lived in Atlas, that he’d moved them to Vale when she transitioned, when they ran into problems in the more conservative Atlas, so she could have a better chance to grow up happy and safe.

But there weren’t any robotics labs in Vale, and James wasn’t leaving behind his work.

That uncomfortable clenching feeling was back in Mercury’s chest, and he ignored it by asking, “Don’t you ever get sick of working so far from home?”

“Sometimes,” he admitted. “But we make sacrifices for the people we love. My work might be in Mantle, but my home is in Vale now. Besides, I couldn’t take Penny away from her friends.”

“Or her family,” Mercury mumbled, sinking down into his seat and returning his gaze to the window. “Still. A two hour drive, there and back, every day? That seems like so much.”

“It does get tiresome. Fortunately I’m able to work from home quite a lot.”

“Then why Vale? Why not Mantle?”

“Because when Glynda first started teaching, none of the schools in Atlas or Mantle would hire her. A school that wouldn’t hire a lesbian teacher isn’t the sort of school I trust with my transgender daughter. Besides, it was nice to be near my sister again.”

“Then why not get a new job? I bet you’d make a good teacher. Why spend four hours a day driving for work?”

“The work I do at the lab is built on the foundation of work begun by my late husband.” James gave him a brief glance, a softness around his eyes that Mercury had never seen, and turned back to the road. “Have you ever heard it said that a man is never dead until his work is done? Josef may be gone, but I’m able to keep his memory alive through the work he began, work we began together. That’s just as important to me as keeping our daughter safe and happy.”

“So you moved for your daughter, you do your work for your husband…” You’re killing your relationship for me, he added in his head. “When do you just get selfish and make decisions based on what you want?”
James gave him another soft smile. “I told you, we make sacrifices for the people we love. Besides, taking care of Penny, keeping Josef’s work growing, those are the things that I want. Not to mention, if I wasn’t in Vale, I wouldn’t have met Qrow and his family, I wouldn’t have the chance to build what we have together. I wouldn’t have met Winter, or have the chance to watch her become something amazing. And I wouldn’t have been there when you needed someone.”

Mercury’s breath froze in his chest, and he turned away again, pulling his hood back up. “Not worth making sacrifices for,” he mumbled, and wished he had his headphones so he could turn on his music and drown out the confusing mire of emotions bubbling under his skin.

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Chapter End Notes

I really need to do more with Tai and Glynda's friendship, there's so much potential there that I'm just wasting. (Oh well, that's what volume three is for.)
Chapter 31

Chapter Summary

Mercury sinks into apathy, and the boys take their kids to see Santa.

Chapter Notes

I wrote James finally saying a swear before crwby did.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-/-

The week passed like that— Yang went to the college with Tai, where she set herself up in an out of the way corner of his classroom or office, or in the library if he was unavailable, doing her homework under the watchful eye of the college’s librarian. Likewise, Mercury went up to Mantle with James, taking over the computer terminal in the daycare center and working on his homework in between goofing off on his phone.

James had predicted, and been right about, Glynda sending work over— she sent both Tai and James a lesson packet based on her lesson plan for the week, with plenty of homework to keep the kids busy and caught up with their classes. By Wednesday Mercury had blown through all of his; he’d already covered the material the year before, and it was familiar enough to be easy.

James was worried about Mercury. It was as if the fight had gone out of him: he was more agreeable, but not in any way that suggested he was agreeing with anything. It felt more like it didn’t matter— there was apathy in his ‘sure’s and ‘whatever’s that wasn’t there before, and more often than not a suggestion or question would be met with a disinterested shrug.

This apathy bothered James more than his aggression ever had; at least when he was being aggressive, James knew that he cared, that he was fighting and trying to protect himself, even if he was wrong about the threat he was fighting against. He even cancelled his trip to the Slicery for his birthday, citing that he just didn’t feel up for it anymore.

“He’s just...given up,” James told Qrow over the phone one night, after a half-eaten dinner and a shrugged good night had James increasingly worried for his young charge. “He’s not fighting me, but he’s not cooperating, either. He’s just going through the motions.”

“Have you managed to find out what he and Emerald fought about?”

“Not at all. I can barely get two words out of him in a row, and Winter is keeping her silence on the matter. Which is frustrating.”

“Hey, you’re the one always going on about mutual trust being important when people care about each other. Should have got in a few lectures about when it’s okay to break a trust while you were at it.”
“I didn’t say I didn’t find it admirable, I just said it was frustrating. I’m *glad* he has people willing to step up for him. I just want to be able to take care of him and he’s *not* letting me.” He sighed. “I thought we were… doing better than that.”

“Yeah, well, as Tai is so fond of saying, progress isn’t linear. Sometimes one step forward means five steps back. You gotta give it time. Be patient.”

“I *am* being patient. I just, you know. Wish I didn’t have to be.” He pinched the bridge of his nose and took a deep breath, then changed the subject with, “How are things going for your yard sale?”

“Pretty good, we’ve got a couple neighbors setting up in the yard too so we should have enough to draw people in. And the attic has been cleared out, too, I can’t believe how much junk we had stuffed up there.”

“Tell me about it. I didn’t realize what a packrat I am until we moved and I had to go through the attic. I was making runs to the secondhand shop for weeks.”

“Heh. Well, hopefully our yard sale goes well and I can do my Christmas shopping Sunday. Speaking of which, we’re taking the kids up to see Santa while we shop, wanna join us and make a date of it?”

James hummed thoughtfully and turned his gaze up to the ceiling, and said, “Qrow, do you ever stop and notice just how domestic our relationship is?”

“Sometimes.” James could hear the grin in his voice when he went on, “Is this because I just suggested making a date out of taking our kids to see Santa?”

“It’s not exactly the usual date night fare.”

“Maybe, but according to you I spent our first date talking about Nora, so it’s not like you didn’t know what you were getting into.”

James frowned. “That wasn’t our first date.”

“What?”

“That was our fourth date. Our first date was when we went out for drinks. Remember? We played twenty questions and I told you about my reconstruction.”

“Was that a date?”

“I thought it was. What did you think it was?”

“Drinks. Drinks isn’t a date, it’s drinks.”

“A night out for one on one time with someone I’m interested in pursuing a romantic relationship with? We made out on your bed.”

“To be fair, it was a couch at the time. And that’s still not a date. We were just talking, just testing the waters. A date is explicitly in a romantic context, our first date was when we went out for dinner and got a hotel room.” He gave a mischievous chuckle. “Or are you upset because that means you put out on the first date?”

“Given how many times I was this close to bending you over the nearest available surface even before then, I’m a little surprised I made it to the *fourth* date at all.” He heard Qrow whimper on
the other end, and smirked. “You know, this actually brings up a really important question.”

“What are we calling our anniversary? Regardless of which date was our first date, it’s coming up.”

“Wow.” Qrow sounded stunned. “It really has been a year, huh?”

“Three hundred sixty five days,” James said. “Depending on where we start counting.”

“I just don’t think of going out for drinks as a date,” Qrow repeated, and then a thought came to him. “Wait, what was date three?”

“You said that was our fourth date. I assume you’re counting coffee as our second date, so what’s date three?”

“Ah.” James flushed, suddenly self-conscious, and shrugged. “It doesn’t matter.”

“No— hang on—” James waited in silence while Qrow, presumably, went over those glorious early days of their relationship, and could hear the moment he realized. “Are you counting that dinner?”

“Well… yes. We made out on your bed that time, too.”

“That’s adorable. And… yeah, we’re pretty domestic, aren’t we? God.”

James chuckled. “If we can’t decide on what counts as our first date enough for our anniversary, we could always count it toward when we first went official.”

“You mean the day you asked me to go steady?”

“I’m never going to live that down, am I?”

“What? It’s cute!”

“I got nervous. I panicked.”

“It’s cute. And why in the world were you nervous? I think I’d made my feelings pretty clear by that point. Dunno why you even needed to actually ask.”

“It just felt better to make it official. So do you want to mark our anniversary with that, then?”

“Sounds best. Puts it in January, though. That’s kinda disappointing. I was looking forward to you pampering me for our anniversary.”

“That just means I have an extra month to plan something.” He grinned, and waited, and added, “You know… even if we’re not celebrating our dating anniversary, there’s always some kind of anniversary we can mark. Like the first night we made love.”

“Fuck, Jimmy. God, it will not kill you to say a swear, you know.”

“Qrow,” James said, dropping his voice to a gentle murmur, making sure he had his attention. “Qrow, I love being with you. I love the way we feel together, I love those moments before and
after when the whole world disappears and the only thing that matters is you and me. I love you. Now tell me, Qrow. Why in the world would I take something so beautiful to me, and reduce it to something as crude as fucking?”

“Gods,” Qrow breathed on the other end, and then made a frustrated noise. “You’re not playing fair, Ironwood.”

“No idea what you’re talking about.”

“I mean, I want to make fun of you but that was actually really sweet.” There was a pout in his voice which brought a grin to James’ face. “I— yeah, okay, let’s do something special for— well just in general. Actually, I have an idea. Don’t make plans for uhhhhh— I’ll check the date and get back to you.”

“That sounds ominous. I can’t wait to find out.”

“You’ll like it, I promise.”

On Sunday over breakfast, James told Penny and Mercury about their plans for the afternoon.

“You don’t have to come along if you don’t want to, but if you don’t, I’ll need to drop you off somewhere. It’s too long to leave you at home without adult supervision.”

He waited expectantly for a sarcastic remark that never came: instead, Mercury shrugged and said it was fine, he’d go. James frowned, and turned his attention to Penny instead.

“Are you excited to see Santa, Penny?”

“Yes!” she chirped. “We have much to discuss, and my requests may be somewhat time consuming to achieve, so the sooner I speak with him, the better.” To Mercury, she added, “Are you going to tell Santa what you want for Christmas?”

Mercury opened his mouth to respond, and then closed it and shrugged. “I don’t want anything.”

Penny’s face fell. “But you must want something,” she insisted. “Everyone wants something.”

“I learned not to want things a long time ago,” he mumbled, and got up to put his breakfast plate up before disappearing up the stairs. Penny frowned after him.

“Father—“

“I know, Peanut,” he assured her. “I’m worried too.”

“I wish Mercury would be happy again.”

“So do I. But I think until he sorts out whatever is happening with him and Emerald, this is going to continue.”

This prompted a thoughtful look from Penny, who said slowly, “I do not… think it is just Emerald.”

“No?”

“The apathy is more recent, but he has not been himself since Halloween. That is an entire week
before he fought with Emerald.”

James considered this, and after a moment gave a slow nod. “You’re right, he was acting moody before then, too—I assumed he was just antsy over waiting for his visit with Emerald, but that might not have been it after all. Did something happen while you kids were out trick-or-treating? He seemed okay before then.”

“He was not, though,” Penny reminded him. “Remember? He was moody after the sleepover, too. Although…” She shrugged. “He seemed to be more cheery before we saw Mr. Torchwick…”

“You saw Torchwick? Where?”

“He was on candy duty at Mr. Junior’s house,” she said, and proceeded to tell him about their encounter. By the time she’d done, James’ jaw was clenched so hard his teeth were in danger of cracking. Penny shrank away a little nervously and concluded, “Nora tried to give him one of her bars to make things fair, but he yelled at her and stormed away.”

James forced himself to relax when Penny shrank away from him, and took a few deep breaths. “Okay,” he said. “Okay. I think I can see the shape of it now.”

“It was very rude of Mr. Torchwick to exclude Mercury like that. Even if he was not wearing a costume, he still should not have been left out. But Mercury also should not have yelled at Nora.”

“No, you’re right, he shouldn’t have, but I’m more inclined to lay the blame on Torchwick for this. One of them was an adult being cruel and the other was a child responding to being hurt.” He sighed and steepled his hands over his eyes, focusing on keeping his breathing even. “Right, well, I think I have a better idea of what’s going on. His fight with Emerald seems to be more of a breaking point than the entire cause. All right. I can work with this.”

“Father?”

She looked worried still; he gave her a weak smile and reached over to tweak her bow. “You don’t worry about it,” he assured her. “This is all grown-up stuff. Mercury’s my responsibility, not yours.”

This got him a mutinous glower, and then her face fell. “Mercury does not like Nora.”

“No, he doesn’t.”

“And Nora does not like Mercury.”

James sighed. “I suppose from where she’s standing he’s not doing much to endear himself.”

“But I love Mercury and Nora. Nora is my practically very nearly almost sister and I want Mercury to be my big brother. I feel like I am being torn in two.”

His smile faded entirely, and he held out his arm, inviting her to come over and settle into his embrace—she did, clinging to him like she did when she was much younger than now. He pushed away from the table and scooped her up, cradling her against him and wishing, just for a moment, that she was still small enough that the world wasn’t quite so complicated.

He sighed again, and rested his chin on her head. “I know this is all hard on you,” he murmured. “I’m sorry. I knew being a foster parent wasn’t going to be easy but I had assumed… well, I guess I assumed it would be something we could all approach together, as a family.”
“I wish Mercury and Nora could be happy,” she mumbled, and turned to bury her face in his chest. “And everyone else, too.”

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When they arrived at the mall and began approaching the Santa’s Sleigh in the middle of the main lobby, their first signal that the others had beaten them was the figure that collided with James’ knees, nearly knocking them out from under him. A startled hand reached down and found a head of hair more on instinct than anything, and he was unsurprised when he looked down and found Nora under his hand.

“Hi, Pumpkin,” he said fondly. “Where’s everyone else?”

“In line.” She took his hand and pulled him toward the line and the others, a group which consisted of Qrow, Tai, Ruby, and Ren.

“Where’s Yang?” he asked.

“She went off to do some shopping,” Tai explained, and Ruby butt in with, “She says she’s too old for Santa!”

“I see.” James was briefly distracted by Qrow taking his free hand and lacing their fingers together; beside him, Ruby had turned her attention onto Mercury

“Are you going to see Santa with us, Mercury?”

“What?” He had been staring off into space; he crashed back to earth and added, “Uh, no, I’m just here.”

“I’m glad you joined us,” she said hopefully.

“Yeah.”

Ruby’s face fell; James frowned, and tugged Qrow toward him.

“We need to talk,” he said.

“Oh… yeah, okay. I was going to do some shopping anyway. Join me?”

They turned to go, with instructions for Penny to stay with Tai, and Mercury to let him know if he was going to wander off and to stay in the mall if he did. This got him another shrug, and a worried look from Qrow as they headed out into the mall.

“Man, you weren’t kidding about the apathy thing.”

“That’s actually what I wanted to talk to you about.”

“Yeah?”

“Do you know what your friend did on Halloween?”

Qrow frowned. “Well… you only use that tone when you’re talking about Torchwick, so…” He shrugged. “I didn’t even know they’d seen him.”

“He was on candy duty at Junior’s when they stopped. According to Penny, he gave all of the children bars except for Mercury— and gave Nora four.”
“Jesus fucking Christ, Torch,” Qrow said. “That was out of line.”

“That’s one way to put it. Between talking to you at the sleepover, and then that—I still don’t know why he and Emerald argued, but dealing with that definitely left him vulnerable.”

Qrow sighed and rubbed at his temples in irritation. “I can’t believe he’d pull a stunt like that.”

“I can. He doesn’t exactly give off the impression of being the sort of man who cares about anyone else.”

“That’s cause you don’t know him like I do. And he’s usually better with my kids—and he took an interest in Merc, back in the day.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, he does that sometimes. Loved Tukson like it was going out of style, and you know how much he adores Nora. And Mercury— he— I dunno, they weren’t exactly close but he took a lot of interest. A little bit like me and Winter, I think. Kid didn’t have a lot of adults he could backtalk without getting in trouble for it.” He smiled grimly. “He said he saw a little bit of himself in the kid.”

“Mercury is better than that.”

“You really are just determined to hate him, aren’t you?” Qrow said, bristling a little irritably. “But he always let Merc start it with him, so I can pretty much guarantee he did that time, too. That’s how they’ve always been.”

“You’re not really doing much to plead his case. There’s a reason I don’t let that man around my daughter.”

“Yeah yeah yeah, whatever. He wouldn’t hurt her, you know.”

“He calls her robot girl,” James reminded him.

“Yeah! And he calls me baby bird! Weird and kinda condescending nicknames are his thing. Only two people I’ve never heard him nickname are Junior and Glynda.”

James pinched the bridge of his nose, trying to calm himself, and said, “I just. Don’t understand why you’re friends with him.”

“Because he looked at a shitfaced asshole draped over his bar and decided I was going to be his problem now!” Qrow snapped, pulling his hand free and drawing the attention of other shoppers. He took a breath, and said, more quietly, “Torch is an ass, I won’t pretend he’s not. But he’s spent eight years making sure I don’t get myself or anyone else killed and I’m not just talking about the fact he always pickpocketed my keys as soon as I walked into the bar. I wouldn’t trust him with a lot of things but I trust him with my kids and I trust him with my life, because he’s the reason I’ve still got both.”

James looked stunned; he looked as though he’d been punched, and said, quietly, “I— I didn’t realize…”

“Yeah, well.” Qrow huffed. “That’s cause you made it clear pretty early on that my drinking problem was a conversation you didn’t want to have.”

“I…” James made to protest, and then closed his mouth. Qrow was right. He’d always deflected if
he felt the subject was even drawing near to Qrow’s alcoholism. “You’re right.”

Qrow sighed, and took James’ hand again, giving him a weak smile. “Look, it’s not like I’m chomping at the bit to talk about what I disappointment I am or that I’m shitting on the memories of my parents and my best friend. But it’d be nice to have the option.”

“You should. You do. I’m sorry you didn’t before. That wasn’t fair.”

“Yeah.” Qrow squeezed his hand. “Look, you don’t have to like Torchwick. He’s a hard man to like, by design. But I need you to understand that he’s important to me. And, he wasn’t just being mindlessly cruel with Merc. He doesn’t know the situation, remember. He probably thought it was just more of their game.”

“It was still out of line.”

“It was, and I’ll talk to him. But in the meantime, Mercury is our concern.”

“So what do we do?”

“No idea.”

“Well. That’s helpful.”

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“Santa is a lady this year,” Ruby said conversationally, once James and Qrow had departed.

“Good for her,” Penny chirped, while Mercury leaned over and craned his neck to look.

Ah. Well. That was interesting. Santa was indeed a lady this year: an enormously pale blonde lady, to be specific. Mercury pinched the bridge of his nose and let out a slow breath.

“That’s my fucking principal.”

“Language, Mercury,” Tai said automatically. “And don’t be silly, that can’t be your principal. She’s self-evidently Santa Clause.” This was accompanied by a wink and a meaningful nod toward the three younger kids, who were looking at him in bafflement.

“No Dad, that’s pretty clearly Principal Salem,” Ruby said slowly. “I mean… it just is. Do you need to look again?”

Tai looked a little taken aback, and said, “Okay, smarty-pants, if she’s Principal Salem, why are we all here to see her?”

“Oh, duh. Because mall Santas have a line back to the North Pole? Santa’s one man, he can’t do all of the legwork.”

“You think a middle school principal has a direct line to the North Pole.”

“It’s her day job, obviously. She’d only work two months out of the year otherwise.”

“Well, I can see you’ve got this all figured out.”

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The line moved forward, a little bit at a time, and as they drew nearer they were startled by a
cheery shout and Oscar running over to meet them, followed by Ozpin. They all greeted the boy, Ruby scooping him into a hug and noogying him affectionately.

“Hey, Oz,” Tai said, clapping their friend on the shoulder. “Bringing Oscar to see Santa?”

Ozpin hummed in amusement. “I’m afraid after last year the poor boy has rather lost his wonder for Santa. In fact we’re just here because I need to speak to Salem about something.”

“Yeah, about that,” Tai said, glancing at the kids before going on. On determining that the girls were sufficiently occupied with talking to Oscar, and Mercury was staring at his phone, he dropped his voice and said, “When you said a friend of yours was doing Santa this year—“

“I realize friend is not exactly the word I would normally use for Salem—“

“According to the kids you’re mortal enemies engaged in a war older than humanity itself.”

“That is not factually correct,” Ozpin said. “But we do have a long and antagonistic history. In fact she even sent me this incredibly rude text this morning.”

He took his phone out of his jacket and showed Tai the text in question. Tai blinked.

“This is just your name misspelled and a picture of a butt.”

“Like I said. Incredibly rude.” He returned his phone to his jacket, and an amused smile tugged at his lips. “But I think she suits the role quite well, don’t you?”

Tai looked up at Salem, who had spotted Ozpin in the line and was glowering at him while the photography crew set up for the next child. Tai grimaced.

“That— yeah— okay, why not?”

Ozpin chuckled, and turned to the children. “So what are you young ladies going to ask Santa for this year, hmm? Nothing so complicated as last year’s campaign, I hope.”

There was a beat, and Ruby and Penny exchanged guilty looks before shaking their heads.

“I’m still holding out for my transforming sniper rifle scythe combo,” Ruby said. “But Dad says I’ll shoot my eye out.”

“I would like a sword,” Penny added, and sighed long and low. “But Father has similar reservations.”

Nora looked from one to the other, and rolled her eyes. “I just want my family to be a family again,” she said flatly.

“I think at least one of those requests might be achievable,” Ozpin said, eyes twinkling in amusement. “Swords are surprisingly cheap, after all.”

“The money isn’t the issue,” Tai said firmly, lest the girls get any ideas. “It’s more the issue of giving a sword to a little girl.”

“Why not? It’s educational.”

“She could hurt herself!”

“And that will be a very important lesson.”
When he went to bed that night, Qrow threw his clothes vaguely in the direction of his dresser and then paused when his gaze caught on a photo taped to the side: one of him and Roman, smushed together for the sake of a drunken selfie. Why Roman had gone to the trouble of printing it for him was anyone’s guess; Qrow assumed it was because the picture had turned out surprisingly well.

Qrow sighed, and picked up his phone. It was answered on the third ring.

“Torchwick.”

“Hey Torch, it’s Qrow. You uh. Wanna go get coffee tomorrow?”

There was a long silence on the other end, so long that Qrow wondered if Torchwick had put the phone down and walked away (wouldn’t be the first time). Finally, though, he spoke, and there was warmth in his voice now.

“I’d like that.”

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Chapter End Notes

Let Penny have a sword 2k31.
Chapter 32

Chapter Summary

Thanksgiving at the Goodwitch house. Mercury meets James' parents.

Chapter Notes

I think the biggest crime of Mercury's current mood is that he didn't even get to enjoy James finding out that he'd lived with Glynda at some point. Poor kid.

Please love Lanying and Guiles I love them so much and I want y'all to love them too.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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The leadup to Thanksgiving was a busy one. Mercury and Yang returned to school; they were still in the same class, as it was so close to the end of the semester, and Glynda and Salem were set to review the situation over winter break, to determine if one of them should transfer homerooms. In the elementary school, Oobleck had been given the Thanksgiving program this year, and Qrow was incensed to learn that he’d been allowed to reference the scene from Addams Family Values, albeit not recreating it exactly.

Tuesday evening, after classes let out for Thanksgiving break, James collected Penny and Mercury from school for the drive up to Atlas. On a good day, the drive was about three hours; with so much holiday traffic, it was likely to be closer to four, and he wanted to get to his parents’ home before it got too late.

Meanwhile, Tai and Qrow were taking the girls to Mistral to visit their own family. This was a rare occurrence, but Tai had discussed the matter privately with his mother, and they had agreed that this was likely the last year that Qrow would be with them for Thanksgiving, and decided to spend it together. Besides, it was the first year Nora had grandparents, and her new grandparents wanted at least one holiday with her before they had to share her with the Goodwitches.

Mercury looked up at the house curiously when they arrived. It was a big house, but the upscale kind of big rather than the display of wealth he'd expected based on what he knew of James’ childhood.

“So this is where you grew up, huh,” he said, following James and Penny up the walk.

“Home sweet home,” James replied.

“I was expecting… bigger. Like a— a mansion, or something.”

“Nope, just a house— albeit a very nice one. Ah, Snow,” he added, because the door had been flung open when they reached it and his sister-in-law was greeting them. “This is—“
“Mercury!” Snow grabbed him into a hug and spun him around, ignoring his flailing protest, and then held him at arm’s length. “Look at you, darling boy, you’re so much bigger now.”

“You. Know each other,” James said, incredulous.

“You didn’t tell him?” Snow asked Mercury, and then repeated to James, “He didn’t tell you?”

“Tell me what?”

“I stayed with Snow and Glynda for about a week last summer— after I left my last home and before they found a permanent one for me.” He added a murmured greeting to Glynda, who had come to inspect the ruckus.

“I had no idea. Why didn’t anyone tell me?”

“I assumed someone had,” Snow said, at the same time Glynda said, “He said he’d only get to tell you once.”

“How’d you beat us here?” Mercury asked, forcibly changing the subject.

“Snow fancies herself a racing driver,” Glynda said, pulling Snow aside so that the three could come inside. “Mother made cocoa— come into the parlor and warm up.”

Underneath his apathy, something in Mercury sniffed the air— he’d been curious about James’s mother since learning he and Glynda were related, and since realizing that James spoke of her like she was some sort of goddess, or possibly a sergeant major turned queen. He followed the family into a little room off the foyer that was decorated in stark white seats and carpets and gleaming mahogany cabinets and coffee table.

Mercury’s first impression of Lanying Goodwitch was that yes, this was definitely the woman who had brought up James and Glynda: she was tall, not as tall as her son but far more imposing, with a faintly regal countenance to her movements. Her eyes though— they were dark, dark brown, but otherwise the same as her son’s: including the obvious warmth gleaming behind the sternness. He took the hand that was offered as they were introduced, and part of him thought that, in another world, another time, he wouldn’t mind being a part of this woman’s family.

“It’s good to finally meet you,” she said, catching Penny as she flung herself into her grandmother’s arms. “Hello, dearheart. My, you’re getting tall!”

A touch to his shoulder drew his attention to James, who had grabbed Penny’s bag from where it lay abandoned. “Come on,” he said, “I’ll show you where you and Penny will be sleeping.”

The house was more comfortable than what Mercury had expected— he’d assumed a mother like the one James often spoke of would keep her home stark and cold, but while the place was kept meticulously clean, it also had an underlying warmth to it. He shoved his hands into his pockets while he trailed up the stairs after James, trying to reconcile this with what he already knew and realized it wasn’t even that difficult. James was warm. It was natural to assume his mother was, too.

“Dad’s at a doctor’s appointment, so dinner will be a bit late this evening.” James led Mercury into what Mercury could only assume was the spare bedroom, which had a set of bunk beds in one corner. “Would you like to come down and spend time with the family, or would you like some time to yourself?”

“Uh. I think I’ll stay up here.”
“All right. But if you want to come down, you’ll be welcome.”

“Yeah.”

James frowned, and made an aborted motion with his hand as though meaning to reach for Mercury, then turned and left. Once he heard footfalls on the stairs, Mercury sat down on the bottom bunk and stared down at his bag between his feet.

He sat there for awhile, listening to the drift of laughter from downstairs, to Penny’s voice carrying up occasionally when she got excited. Eventually he heard a door open and cheery voices calling greetings across the house, and he stood. That was probably Mr. Goodwitch, which meant that it would be time for dinner soon.

He came downstairs to find the family moving between the kitchen and dining room, getting the table set for dinner: an elderly man in a wheelchair, presumably Mr. Goodwitch, was carrying a stack of pizzas to the Snow, who took the pizzas and directed Mr. Goodwitch’s attention.

“This is Mercury,” she said. “Mercury, Guiles. You can just call him old man, he likes that.”

“I am not old,” Guiles said, elbowing his daughter-in-law. “I am merely well-seasoned by time. Good to meet you, young man,” he added, reaching out to shake Mercury’s hand.

Mercury took it, and was surprised at the vitality in his grip and in his gaze. He knew from James and Glynda that their dad was battling poor health, and hadn’t been expecting someone so… alive.

“Yeah,” Mercury said, and turned a sideways glance at the pizzas Snow was adding to a serving wrack made of several silver platters in a neat tower. “Pizza?”

“I’ve been in a doctor’s office all day and my wife has spent the evening getting the house ready for our children to visit. Neither of us really felt like cooking.”

“Makes sense,” Mercury nodded, and added, “We never really get pizza at home so I just assumed the General didn’t like it.”

“General?” Guiles asked, raising an eyebrow, and after a beat of thought, grinned. “Ah, because he’s such a hardass. No, James likes pizza, pizza just doesn’t like him very much. Pity, too, he practically lived off of it in college. Ah, James! We were just talking about you!”

James had just leaned into the dining room. “Good things, I hope. Mercury, what would you like to drink? We have water, tea, punch, and a selection of sparkling fruit drinks.”

“The tea’s unsweet,” Guiles said in a conspiratory whisper. “They won’t let me have sweet anymore.”

“Punch is fine,” Mercury said, and something twisted in him and he said, “I didn’t know you can’t have pizza.”

James raised an eyebrow at him. “You know I have dietary restrictions.”

“Yes, but your dad says you just flat out can’t have pizza.”

A glance at Guiles, and James shrugged. “I can, I just have to substitute or leave off so much that it hardly seems worth it. Does it matter?”

Mercury shrugged, and shoved his hands into his pockets, staring down at his feet. “You were
gonna take me out for pizza on my birthday.”

“Yes? That’s what you asked for.”

“Well yeah but-” Mercury tried and failed to articulate the weird twisting and tightening in his middle, and gave up. He shrugged again and mumbled, “Should have said.”

“It’s not important,” James assured him. “I’m sure the Slicery would have been able to make something I could eat.”

“Still.” He hunched his shoulders, trying to avoid the many pairs of eyes now turned on him—Lanying and Penny had come in carrying glasses, Glynda was likely not far behind, they were all looking at him— he shrugged, and turned to flee the dining room without a word.

He didn’t go far, just stopped outside the dining room and leaned back against the wall, letting his head fall back to thunk against the beautifully wallpapered foyer while he tried to get his thoughts to stop spiraling out of his control.

-/-

Once Mercury was gone, James ran his hands over his face, scrubbing them through his hair with a sigh. Glynda gave him a brief touch to his shoulder, and he met her eyes with a weak, desperate smile.

“I don’t even know what I’m doing wrong anymore.”

Guiles and Lanying had exchanged a few meaningful looks at Mercury’s departure, and now Guiles took James’ hand and patted it. “I don’t think the problem is that you’re doing something wrong. The boy’s just scared.”

“I know!” James snapped, and then immediately murmured a soft apology for the outburst before saying, more calmly, “I know he’s scared. I’m just at a loss at how to help him.”

“These things take time, James,” Lanying reminded him. “You know what happens if you rush him.”

James sighed rough, and scrubbed his hands through his hair again. “It’s just… very frustrating.” A deep breath, and another, and, “I’m going to go talk to him. At least find out if he’s coming back in for dinner.”

He pushed the door open and stepped into the foyer, and then stopped short when he saw Mercury sat beside the door, knees drawn up and face buried behind them. “...Mercury?”

“I’m fine,” he said, muffled, and then looked up when James eased himself down to sit beside him, carefully placing a noticeable gap between them. “What?”

“You know,” James said quietly, “I just really wish you’d talk to me.”

Mercury turned his gaze on him, searching for something, James didn’t know what, and then abruptly stood. “M’fine,” he repeated, and headed back into the dining room.

-/-

When Mercury got back to the guest room after his shower that night, Penny was sitting on the edge of the top bunk brushing her hair out, legs swinging and humming a cheery little song to
herself. When he came in, she broke off and gave him a smile.

“You will be all right sharing a bedroom with me this weekend, right?”

“I’ve shared bedrooms before, squirt,” he said, and wondered at the relieved smile she gave him. Did she think he was going to cause a fuss? “You’ll probably be a better roommate than some of the roommates I’ve had.”

He swung himself into the bottom bunk and sprawled, resting his chin on his arms while he listened to Penny go back to brushing her hair. It sounded familiar, and after a bit longer—

“Is that Qrow’s lullabye?”

“Yes! Sometimes he sings to us kids when Father and I sleep over, or when he and Nora stay over with us. It is a very pretty song.”

“Yeah,” he said, and something sad tugged at him. “He used to sing it to us too, when I lived there.”

“Father says that is because Mr. Qrow does not express his love through words, but that if I learn to speak his language, he is always telling me he loves me.”

“What does that even mean?”

“Father explained it to us. It is called love language, and it is the different ways people express their love for people. Mr. Qrow doesn’t say I love you, but he sings it. My love language is spending time with people. Father says that is also Ruby’s love language, and that is why we get along so well.”

An image of Penny standing outside his door asking him to let her in, of her lying on his bed while they both said very little, flashed through his mind, and oh, didn’t like that much. He rolled over and stared up at the underside of the bottom bunk.

“What about your old man?” he asked, though he suspected he already knew the answer.

“Mr. Qrow says it is the way he always thinks he has to be Atlas. But I do not know what that means.”

Mercury snorted. “He means your dad thinks he has to make everyone’s problem his problem.”

“What?”

“C’mon, squirt. Your dad uprooted and moved to an entirely new town cause your school was shitty and transphobic.”

“He says that is just what parents are like.”

Mercury let out a startled bark of cynical laughter at that. “Are you kidding? I’ve lived with a lot of parents, kid, the most you’ll get from the good ones is backing you up with the administration. Moving away? Moving three hours away?”

There was a thoughtful silence there, and then Penny’s feet disappeared and were replaced a moment later by her head, her hair hanging in a ginger curtain beneath her.

“Father says that any parent might have done the same thing if the means were there to make it possible.”
“Not any parent.” He thunked his knee pointedly and rolled over, putting his back to her and hoping she got the point that he didn’t want to talk about it anymore. After a breath, he heard her wriggle back up onto her bed, and the creak of springs as she lay down.

After awhile, she spoke again. “Mercury?”

“Yeah?”

“I am sorry you have never had a good parent before. But maybe…”

She trailed off; he huffed. “Finish that sentence and you’re dead to me.”

“Okay, Mercury.”

Her voice was so small, so obviously hurt. He hugged himself tight, willing away the painful clenching in his middle, and said, “Night, squirt.”

“Good night, Mercury. Sleep sweet.”

/-/

Mercury slept in the next morning. He vaguely recalled James and Penny waking him to speak to him early in the morning— something about somewhere they were going— but he was too gone to pay much attention and immediately went back to sleep, so when he finally woke around eleven, it was to an empty bedroom, and the smell and sounds of cooking from downstairs.

He found his way back to the kitchen, where Lanying and Guiles were— and here he felt a bit like a voyeur— flirting over a cake they were decorating.

“Uh… good morning?” he said, drawing their attention.

“Good morning, young man,” Lanying said. “Would you like some breakfast?”

“I’ll just eat a yogurt or something,” he said, edging over to the fridge. “What time is dinner?”

“Around one, maybe one thirty.”

“Right.” He dug a yogurt out of the fridge and went to track down a spoon, keeping half an eye on the two adults. “Where’s. Uh. Where’re the others?”

“Mm, James did say you might have been too asleep to really take anything in this morning. James and Penny went out for breakfast and then to the cemetery to visit Josef. They should be back by noon, though. And Snow and Glynda went to spend the morning with some cousins of Glynda’s, and they’ll be back around the same time.”

“Right,” he repeated, digging into his yogurt without really eating it. He was suddenly hyperaware that he was standing in an unfamiliar kitchen with two effective strangers who’d probably heard loads about him, wearing nothing but the sweatpants and t-shirt he’d slept in.

“Would you like to cook with us?” Lanying asked. “We’ve got a lot to do, and three pairs of hands will make the work move faster than two.”

“No, I— I don’t cook.”

“The tv room is on the other side of the dining room,” Guiles added. “If you want to spend a little time relaxing, I mean. You are on vacation, after all.”
“Yeah. Right. I’ll—“ He edged to the door, and mumbled, “Do that, then,” and fled.

Just as he closed the door, he heard Guiles tell Lanying, “Why James left him alone with us—“ and then they were cut off as he beelined for the tv room.

-/-

Snow and Glynda came home first; it was Snow who went looking for Mercury, and found him sprawled on the couch half-watching a marathon of Space Horses. She folded her arms and watched in silence with him for a few minutes before sighing.

“This new gen just doesn’t have the same charm as the one from when I was young,” she said. “Though I suppose that’s what fans of earlier gens said about mine when it came out.” She gave him a hopeful smile, and then sat down on the end of the couch when he tossed his feet out of the way in invitation. “How are you feeling?”

“Does it matter?”

“Of course it matters. I haven’t seen you in, oh, months and months, who knows how much you’ve changed in that time? For example I can’t help noticing you’re taller than me now.”

“Not my fault you’re short.”

“I’m not short! I’m compact.” She tossed her nose into the air, and added. “Anyway, it’s not so bad all the time. I mean, sure, I have a wife who is both tall and likes wearing heels, and it’s hard to kiss her when she’s all the way up there, but on the other hand, I’m just the right height to lay my head on her bosom, and it’s a nice bosom, so, you know, silver linings.”

Despite himself, he felt a smile twitching at his lips. “What do you want, Snow?”

“I just wanted to see how you’ve been. I’ve been hearing all about you from Glynda and James and never getting to see you. I missed you.”

“You knew me for a week.”

“And what a nice week it was.”

He sighed, and threw a dramatic arm over his face. “This family is so goddamn weird.”

“Well get used to it, baby boy, because I don’t think James is giving you up anytime soon. You’re stuck with us now.”

A weighty silence descended. Mercury let out a long, slow breath. “I know.”

-/-

Chapter End Notes

There's one more chapter left on the current arc! After that you get three chapters of breathing room while I tie up some loose threads to get everything in place for the finale, which means we're entering the final lap. It's all coming together.
Thanksgiving dinner was nice. The table was loaded with more food than Mercury had ever seen in his life, and there was more laughter, more warmth, more joy than he’d expected from a family that had produced the hardasses he knew James and Glynda to be.

“Maybe next year you’ll bring your young man and his little girl with you,” Guiles told James at one point.

“Qrow is spending Thanksgiving with his family, Dad,” James said.

“And next year he can spend it with his other family.”

“We’ll… talk about it then,” James said. “Who knows where we’ll be next year?”

“I think just about everyone but you knows where you’ll be next year.”


“I just want to see my boy settled and happy,” Guiles said. “I don’t mean to push.”

“I am settled and happy,” James said. “But marriage, especially the second time, is a big decision, and in the grand scheme of things… a year together is really not enough time to decide on something like that.”

“Which is a nice change of pace from when you started planning your wedding to Josef five minutes after you met,” Glynda pointed out, amusement coloring her tone.

James had the decency to flush in embarrassment, and said, “I was twenty-two, emotionally vulnerable, and naive enough to believe in love at first sight.”

“Wasn’t it though?” Mercury was surprised to find himself asking. “I mean… you married the
“It was infatuation at first sight,” James explained. “I was under a lot of emotional duress and a handsome man smiled at me. It only became love later when we made the choice together to put the work in. Besides, I was already seeing someone at the time, so I wouldn’t have been able to pursue my interest anyway.”

“At least Josef was a step up,” Glynda muttered bitterly at her turkey, and was ignored. Mercury frowned and glared at his sweet potatoes, trying to figure out exactly what he was feeling, and said, “So you seriously expect us to believe that you’re not planning to marry Qrow, then.”

James shrugged. “For the moment, yes. It’s been a year—circumstances change, feelings change. Who knows how things will continue to change? But what hasn’t changed is that neither of us is ready to take that step, and it would be nice if our families would stop planning our wedding behind our backs.” This accompanied by a pointed look at Penny, who gave him a sheepish smile. “I do love Qrow. I intend to keep loving him for as long as he’ll have me. But I don’t need to be married to do that.”

“If you do decide to get married,” Snow said, in an obvious attempt to lighten the mood, “I have dibs on best man. Glynda got to do it last time, it’s not fair if you pick her again.”

The conversation drifted from there, Snow’s diversion successful, and Mercury turned his attention back to his food, stabbing his fork irritably into his turkey and wishing he had his headphones.

Sometime after dinner, when the food had been put away and everyone was too stuffed to really function, Mercury found himself a little adrift. Penny had gone off with her other grandparents to pick out their Christmas tree, and Snow and Glynda had fallen asleep on the sofa in the tv room.

(It was cute. He kind of hated that.)

He ambled from room to room, trying to find something to do, and wondered what Emerald was doing. Was she having a nice Thanksgiving with Hazel? Or did she spend it with Flynt and his family? Was she still mad at him? Did she miss him at all? He’d at first expected her to text him at some point, but after two weeks of radio silence, it could only be assumed that she was waiting for the same from him, and he just… couldn’t bring himself to. Not yet.

(Besides, she was better off without him.)

His wanderings brought him into the glass room off the back of the house, a small room with glass walls and hanging plants, a coffee table and chairs on one side of the room, an electric fireplace on the other. The heater was up full blast, and James was settled into the easy chair with his phone in hand and a mug of cocoa on the table beside him. When Mercury came in, he glanced up and gave him a welcoming smile.

“Having a nice Thanksgiving?”

“Not so bad,” Mercury shrugged. There was an office chair at the other end of the table; he dropped into that, stretching his legs out in front of him and looking around at the plants. The room was lit by the sun and warmed by the fire; he could easily imagine James’ parents out here.

“I wanted to apologize,” James said, after a moment of uneasy silence. “I wasn’t thinking about Glynda visiting her cousins this morning, or how you might have felt waking up in a new
environment with only strangers around.”

“Wouldn’t be the first time.” He shrugged again. “It doesn’t matter. It’s fine. I’m fine.”

“Hm.” James glanced at his phone, then set it on the table, face down, and said, “You know, it’s okay if you’re not.”

“What.”

“Fine, I mean. You don’t have to be fine. And if you’re not fine, that’s… fine. It’s okay to not be okay.” When Mercury said nothing, just glowered at James’ cocoa mug, he went on, “Mercury, I’m trying really hard to give you what you need, but there’s only so much I can do for you when you won’t give me anything to work with. Just talk to me. What do you need?”

Mercury groaned and scrubbed his hands through his hair, dragged them down his face and rolled his eyes toward the ceiling. “What I need is for everyone to stop pretending they care.”

James frowned. “I’m not pretending anything. I care about you, I wouldn’t be trying so hard to take care of you if I didn’t.”

“Ugh!” He spun the chair slightly away, and glowered down to his hands. In his periphery, he saw James make another of those aborted motions like he meant to reach for him and changed his mind. He huffed and brushed a bit of hair behind his ear. “Look, I just— I know how it works, okay? You think I’m going to be one thing and then I end up not being what you thought I was and I’m harder work than you were prepared for so you pass me off to someone else. I get it. I get it! So just… stop pretending you care. Just, just stop it, okay, stop acting like you care about anything but your responsibility.” His shoulders hunched in on themselves. “It’ll make it easier for everyone when you give up.”

“I have no intention of giving up on you. I made a promise to you- you only leave my care when you decide to, and not a minute sooner. Whatever that ends up meaning—“

“I know!” Mercury snapped. He stood and started pacing, running his hands through his hair repeatedly. “I know what you promised! And I know you think you care about me, but you don’t! You can’t! The only reason you do is because you haven’t started looking past what I am in concept to accept what I am in person!”

“And what are you?” was James’ quiet response. Mercury took one look at the hurt sadness in his gaze and turned away, shoving his hands into his pockets and hunching his shoulders.

“I’m an asshole. Grade-a. I’m a cruel and cynical bastard. I even make the people I like suffer, and I enjoy it, okay? It’s not like I’ve got foot in mouth syndrome, I hurt people because I want to.”

“I see.”

Mercury peeked at him again, and then dropped himself into the desk chair, turning it away.

“Look, I know you think— you know, abused kid, amputee, queer— I know you think that means you gotta help me but I don’t. I don’t deserve that. I’m not the kind of kid people like. The sooner you realize that, the better. The sooner you give up, the better. It’ll just be easier for all of us that way.”

“I suppose that’s one way of looking at it,” James agreed. “You’re not an easy person to care about. I would certainly have grounds to change my mind about you… if that was where I meant to end that sentence.” He waited until Mercury looked up, baffled, and said, “You’re not an easy person to care about. I think a lot of that is by design, because you’ve been rejected so much that
it’s easier if you take control of that. But that doesn’t mean you’re not worth the effort."

“M’not worth it,” he mumbled, turning away again and brushing his hair back once more.

“Of course you are.”

“Have you even met me?”

“Have you?”

“Yeah, and the person I’ve met is an asshole!”

“Maybe, but I’ve taken the time to care about worse people than you think you are, so why can’t I care about you, too?”

“But you don’t! You care about me because it’s your job, you don’t care about me!”

“You keep saying that. Why are you so convinced I don’t care about you?”

“Because people like you don’t care about people like me!” He was on his feet, leaning on the table like he could drill the truth into James like that; he took a step back, and hugged himself against the penetrating gaze. “They start off thinking they do and then eventually the other shoe drops and I don’t matter! It always happens! Always! Even with…” He trailed off, and looked away, hugging himself tighter. “...even with Qrow.”

James sighed. “I’m sorry,” he said quietly. “You deserved better. And I won’t pretend that your history isn’t a part of why I’m so determined to help you— I’ve been where you are, at various points in my life, and I want so badly to give you that person that I needed when I was there. But just because I care about you as a concept doesn’t mean I can’t care about you as a person. I can care about the boy whose father pushed him off a second floor landing as much as I can care about the boy who has to wash a different set of sharpie doodles off his arm every night.”

Mercury stiffened, and dropped into his chair, staring at James with wide eyes. “I. Didn’t know you knew about that.”

He shrugged lightly. “Part of it was in your file. Glynda filled me in on the rest.”

“She shouldn’t have. That’s shit’s personal.”

James stared at him for a long moment, lips pursed in thought, and then held up his robotic arm. “Traffic accident,” he said, and when Mercury gave him an incredulous look, went on, “I was on my bike and a truck jumped the lights. Turns out in a fight between a motorcycle and a truck, the truck wins every time.” His lips twitched into a grim smile. “I know yours. It’s only fair if you know mine.”

Mercury looked away, gaze landing on a potted fern rather than look at James, who was back to watching him, waiting.

Eventually, James spoke again. “You know… we were so excited when they cleared us for adoption.” Mercury glanced up at him, and met a soft, distant smile. “We’d been trying for years but things were… different, back then. And finally we were approved, and a young woman had chosen us, and we were going to have our child. We were happier than we’d ever been in that moment. And before we’d even met the Penny's mother, I already loved everything about my child.”
“What are you getting at?”

“And then she was born!” James continued, seemingly ignoring him. “And they put my child in my arms and I thought, how could I have ever thought what I felt before was love? The entire gravitational center of my universe shifted in that single moment, and I knew what love was.”

“Why are you telling me this?!”

“And now she’s eleven and of course I love her because she’s my daughter and that’s the only thing I need, but she’s also so wildly different than the child I ever expected in all my years of daydreaming and she’s growing and changing in so many ways and I get to know her a little more every single day that goes by and love her more and more. And I’m telling you this,” he said, leveling a stern stare onto Mercury, “because I need you to understand that it’s impossible to separate people from the context we know them in, but that doesn’t mean we can’t care about the person they are beyond that. I love my daughter. I love the person Penny is. Those two things don’t cancel each other out.”

Mercury’s eyes widened, and then he spun the chair away, folding his arms and hunching over again. His heel tapped on the floor. James gave him a moment, and went on.

“The person you are without your trauma doesn’t exist. He never got a chance to, and that’s not fair. But the person you are with your trauma deserves a chance to find out who he can be.” He sighed. “I’m not asking you to trust me. That kind of thing doesn’t happen overnight. All I’m asking is that you believe me when I say I do care about you— no matter how impossible you think it is.”

He was silent, then. Mercury swiveled his chair in tiny little quarter circles, glaring at a cabinet of gardening supplies while James waited for some kind of response.

He wanted to believe him, that was the most upsetting part. He wanted to open up and tell him all the things that were bothering him, all the confusing feelings he was struggling to understand and the tightly wound rubber band ball of fear threatening to burst with every action. He wanted to trust him— but the tight feeling in his middle had his tongue in a vice, so what he did was stand abruptly and spin on his heel to leave.

“Whatever,” he mumbled, and refused to look around to see how James responded to his departure.

-/-

In the guest room, Mercury flung himself onto the bed and wrapped himself into a burrito of blankets, muffled music pouring out of the phone stuffed down his shirt while he tried to get his thoughts to calm down. At some point he must have fallen asleep, because he woke to the door opening and Penny calling softly into the room.

“What’s up?”

“More or less,” he mumbled, fumbling inside his blankets for his phone. He turned his music off and wiggled his head out the top of the burrito. “What’s up?”

“Father said you might be napping. I did not want to wake you up.”

“I was, but it’s fine. Did you have a fun time with your grandparents?”

“Yes.” She climbed up the ladder to her own bunk; he heard her changing clothes, and then she was back on the floor in a more comfortable around-the-house dress. She knelt beside his bed and
lay her folded arms on the edge of his mattress so that they were face to face. “Mercury?”

“Yeah?”

“Are you happy living with Father and me?”

He looked her in the eye for a long moment, taking in the earnestness of her gaze, and then gave her a weak smile. “As happy as I get, at least.”

She matched his smile with a sad one of her own. “Well, I suppose that is something. But I hope one day you will be able to be happy without qualifiers.”

“The dream,” he agreed dryly, and sat up, emerging from his cocoon and running one hand through his hair. “I’m gonna go shower, it’s getting kind of late.”

-/-

By the time Mercury had finished showering, he knew what he had to do. He sat down on the edge of the tub and stared down at his phone screen, at the number he’d been avoiding calling, took a deep breath, and hit dial.

It wasn’t until about the eighth ring before there was an answer, long enough that he wondered if maybe she just wasn’t going to pick up, and then-

“Mercury?”

He didn’t give her time to say anything else. “I am the biggest asshole in the world.”

A beat, and, “…true.”

“But I don’t want to be.” He took a deep breath; he could feel his throat closing around the words he wanted to say, but this was important; and said, “You’re my best friend, and I miss you, and I’m sorry.”

There was another silence, a long one, but he waited, waited to see if she’d say anything or just hang up, and finally she spoke. “You really hurt me, Mercury.”

“I know. I wanted to. I shouldn’t have.”

“You’re right, you shouldn’t have.” She sighed. “Why did you finally decide to call me?”

“Because…” He shrugged, wondering if he was even close to wording his thoughts well, and tried: “Because one of us had to, or we’d always be stuck where we were.”

He could almost hear her smile on the other end as she said, “You can’t move forward until you open the door.”

“Something like that.” Something in him loosened, and he found the words coming more easily. “I’m sorry, Em. I don’t wanna be the kinda guy who hurts you on purpose. I don’t like that guy any more than anyone else does, I just… I don’t know how to be anyone else.”

“Well… maybe I’ll give you a chance to figure it out.”

-/-

Saturday night, Mercury finally joined the family in the parlor after dinner, lounging beside Penny
with his cocoa in hand while he tried to enjoy the friendly family atmosphere.

Late in the evening, Guiles reached over to pat Glynda’s hand. “Darling, bring my fiddle from the cabinet. It’s been so long since I’ve heard you play.”

“Yes, Dad.” She moved over to a beautiful cabinet at the edge of the room: among other things, it held a violin case, which Glynda brought down now, and began unpacking the violin inside.

Mercury perked up—he preferred modern electric stuff, but he liked the more traditional stuff, too.

“I didn’t know you played,” he said, while Glynda worked with each string to test the instrument was ready for use.

She hummed an affirmative. “I grew up listening to Dad play since I was young, so I picked it up myself when I was old enough.” She placed the violin under her chin and ran through a set of warm-up scales, then added, “What would you like to hear, Dad?”

“Something I can tap my toes to,” he said, and patted his hand on his lap in time when she bled out of her scales into a rather up-beat tune. After a few bars, Snow started clapping out a counter, and then a few bars later jumped to her feet, grabbing one of Penny’s hands and pulling her out into the middle of the parlor.

“Come dance with me sweetheart~” she said, and twirled her laughing niece in time.

It took until the chorus for Mercury to realize he knew the song, and he found himself drumming his fingers in Snow’s established counter long before he put the cues together in his head. He caught Glynda’s eyes over the edge of her violin, and smirked: she raised an amused eyebrow in return.

As the song came to a close, Snow parted from Penny with a low bow—Penny curtsied in kind—and the two collapsed giggling back onto the couch while Glynda ran through a few cooldown bars before handing the violin over to Guiles.

“How’s that a dirty song?” Mercury asked.

“Only if you sing the lyrics,” she responded.

“That’s a drinking song,” he went on. “Why do you know how to play drinking songs? I’d have thought you’d like, I dunno, Telemann or Monteverdi or, you know, opera. Something with culture.”

“Folk music is culture too,” she said. Beside her, Guiles had started running through a few warmup bars of his own.

“You know what I mean.”

“I do know what you mean. But there’s more to culture than classical. It’s a poor student who only learns one discipline. Besides,” and here she gestured at James, “when you grow up with this overachiever—”

“I am not an overachiever.”

“—then everything becomes a contest of measuring dicks, and you start to be an overachiever yourself.”
“Glynda!” Lanying scolded, and nodded pointedly at Mercury and Penny. “There are children present! Mind your language, please.”

Glynda looked properly chastised, and the situation was so absurd that Mercury couldn’t help the snickering that escaped him: this dissolved into giggling, and then an embarrassingly loud snort. He stopped abruptly and slapped both hands over his mouth, staring wide-eyed at the rest of the family, a blush crawling up his cheeks in horror.

“Ah,” Guiles said, still playing softly despite the interruptions. “So you do laugh. Wonderful! I had wondered.”

-/

Chapter End Notes

This chapter brings my buffer down to three chapters, but once I reach the chapter I’m up to now I'm going to stop posting as I write, since that will be the finale arc and I want to write the whole thing before I start posting it. So it's all good. (I have two threads to tie up and they're both connected and will resolve in the same chapter, and then we're in the home stretch. Can y'all believe it? I can't.)

By the way, the glass room is modeled on the one in our house, but a little big bigger cause their house is a lot bigger than ours.
Chapter 34

Chapter Summary

Roman comes over for dinner, and gives the boys a little context they didn't know about Mercury's past. Also, Tai's dad is an absolute troll.

Chapter Notes

I know it's a bit soon for a new chapter, but since I'm going on hiatus once I get to the finale arc I don't think the buffer matters anymore. Anyway, this is a Roman chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-/-

With Thanksgiving behind them, it was time to get ready for the end of the semester at school. Torchwick's exams had been right before the break, and he'd passed, thanks to Tai's help. A couple days after Thanksgiving break, they had him over to dinner to celebrate.

The girls gathered in the dining room while Tai and Qrow put dinner together.

“So Mr. Torchwick is going to be a student at the college now?” Yang asked.

“Yep. He’s starting next semester.”

“I’m really proud of him,” Ruby said, back in sage auntie-sits-by-the-fire mode. “He’s working really hard to resume his education and I think that’s very brave of him at his advanced age.”

“Hey!” Qrow and Tai both said, then exchanged amused grins. Tai added: “Just what do you mean advanced age?”

“He’s in his thirties, Dad.”

“You know me and Tai are both older than him, right?” Qrow asked. “If Roman is advanced, what are we?”

“You guys are ancient,” Ruby said. “But you’re SUPPOSED to be old! You’re dads. Whoever heard of a young dad? Mr. Torchwick isn’t a dad, he’s just a guy. So he’s just regular old.”

“Okay, but I only became a dad this year,” Qrow pointed out. “So was I advanced before then?”

“Don’t be stupid, Uncle Qrow, you’ve been a dad forever.”

Qrow looked startled. “Did you just call me stupid?”

“She did, and now she’s going to apologize because that was very rude of her,” Tai scolded. Ruby hung her head sheepishly.
“Sorry, Uncle Qrow. But all I mean is that just because you weren’t a permanent dad didn’t mean you weren’t a dad at all.”

Qrow squinted at her. “All right, I’ll allow it, but you’re on thin ice, young lady.” He hrumphed and turned back to his work, while Ruby had the decency to look ashamed of herself for a few seconds.

“Do you think he’ll stop working for Mr. Junior once he has his degree?” Yang asked.

“He says not,” Tai answered. “I think he just wants the degree for himself, to say he did. But he likes running the bar, so I doubt he’ll leave anytime soon.”

“But do you think he’ll stop doing extra jobs? You know, the other work he does for Mr. Junior?”

Tai and Qrow exchanged looks again, this time concerned, and Qrow said slowly, “What do you know about that?”

Yang shrugged, shrinking a little. She could sense that this was one of those grown-up topics that the kids weren’t supposed to be aware of.

“I just… you know. Winter said that Mr. Torchwick broke a couple of ribs over the summer doing a job for Mr. Junior and ever since then he’s been using his cane more often.”

“Why does Winter know?”

“She hangs out with Vernal, and one of Vernal’s friends hangs out at the bar, so sometimes Winter hangs out at the bar too. She says Mr. Torchwick is annoying but he also always makes sure none of the barflies bother them. Once he even threw a guy out because he kept making inappropriate comments, and Vernal says she thinks he might have broken the guy’s arm.”

“That doesn’t sound like a very safe environment for a bunch of teenagers,” Tai said. “I’m not sure I like Winter getting involved with that sort of thing.”

“Might be good for her,” Qrow put in. “Kid’s got a stick up her… butt. Needs to relax a little. Bend the rules. Stop trying to be such a robot.”

“What’s wrong with being a robot?” Ruby asked, looking up from the piece of hers that she was working with. (She’d dubbed the robot her orb wife, which as near as they could tell was a reference to some comic book or other.) “Uncle James is half robot.”

“Not exactly,” Qrow said, “and that’s not really what I mean, either.”

“I like robots.” Ruby held up the piece of her orb wife and peered closely at it. “One day, I’m going to build a whole robot person who will be my friend.”

Qrow laughed. “I bet Jimmy’ll be happy to help you there. That’s the main focus of his research up at the lab.”

“I thought he built prosthetics,” Yang said. “That’s what he told us.”

“He does, or at least he works on design and testing, but his research is focused toward building and developing a fully-functioning robot capable of human levels of thought and emotion. He and Josef started the work together, and when Josef got sick he had to take over more and more of the legwork. Now he’s keeping the program going to keep Josef’s work alive.”
Ruby bounced excitedly. “Do you think if he’s still working on it when I grow up, he’ll let me help him?”

Qrow gave her a half-cocked grin. “I think very few things would make him happier.”

-/-

It wasn’t long before there was a ring on the bell. Nora jumped up and ran to answer it before the others could, throwing the door open to Roman Torchwick, leaning on his cane in a cocky pose that Nora was all-too-familiar with. She beamed up at him.

“Hi, Mr. Torchwick. Can I take your hat and coat?”

“Aren’t you a good little hostess, sparkplug.” He slipped out of his coat and dropped it in her arms; it nearly swallowed her up, and distracted her enough for him to plonk his hat onto her head as he pushed past her.

Nora hurried to hang both up on the coathooks, managing on the third try to toss his hat up onto the out-of-reach hook and giving up on his coat the fourth time it landed on her. She hung it on one of the backpack hooks instead, and hurried after him into the kitchen.

“Hey there, college boy,” Qrow was saying just as she came in.

“That has a nice ring to it,” Torchwick replied, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. He made a motion with his hands like he was spreading a banner in midair. “Roman Torchwick, College Boy. I’d make a joke about it getting me all the honeys, but I was up at the college earlier to talk to my adviser and did you know college students are children?”

Tai laughed. “Not all of them—“ He gestured at Torchwick as example, “But yeah. What did you expect?”

“I mean, obviously the new ones are kids, they’re just out of high school, they’re practically babies. But the older ones! They’re in their twenties but they’re just kids! Who authorized that? Don’t their parents know they’re out there on their own?”

“Man, your thirties hit you hard,” Qrow said, patting him on the shoulder as he came over to start setting the table. “You wanna talk about it?”

“No, I’m fine. Just, you know, facing the reality of the passage of time and the toll it demands of us all. It’ll pass. So how was your Thanksgiving?” This was directed at the girls, who had begun clearing away their things in favor of dinner.

“It was great!” Ruby said, bouncing. “Yehyeh was in a musical with the local community theatre and they opened on Friday so we got to go see it!”

“Oh, musical theatre is fun. What show did they do?”

“The Trail to Oregon.”

Her own expression was cherubic; Torchwick blinked once, twice, and then turned to Tai, bringing a pot of stew to the table. “So, the whole ‘that’s inappropriate, not around the kids’ thing. Is that just for me? Am I the only one expected to live by that?”

“Pop didn’t tell us what the show was gonna be ahead of time, just that it was a ‘pioneer adventure’ and a musical.” Qrow set a plate of gopher biscuits and a bowl of butter onto the table, then took
his seat along with everyone else. “So the first we knew what was going on the lights were coming
up and our pioneer family were singing and it was too late.”

Torchwick laughed. “Props to your pop, that is a remarkable prank to pull.”

“I just wish he’d warned us,” Tai said, helping the girls with their plates. “It’s not really the kind of
thing we’d have taken the kids to if we’d known.”

“That’s probably why then. He wanted his grandkids to see his show, so he fibbed a little. No harm
done.”

“Yeah, you didn’t make a five hour drive with three tweens singing ‘Caulk Your Wagon’ at the top
of their lungs,” Qrow said, amused, and then gave them all a warning glare when it seemed that
they might be taking that as a cue to start singing.

“What about you, Mr. Torchwick?” Yang asked. “How was your Thanksgiving?”

“Pretty good. Nice and quiet, and my younger brother came by to visit, so there’s that.”

“I didn’t know you had a brother.”

“I have three,” he counted on his fingers thoughtfully, and, “Yeah, three. My bio-dad got around a
bit. Don’t really have much to do with them, honestly, but little brother calls me once in awhile and
drops by if he’s passing through.”

“I used to want a brother,” Nora sighed wistfully.

“Used to?”

“Well now it looks like I’m going to get one, so now I just try to be careful what I wish for.” She
cut a little too exuberantly into her biscuit and stew, glowering at her plate while she ate.

“Nora, we’ve been over this,” Qrow admonished.

“Yeah, I know. You keep saying we don’t know for sure what’s going to happen, but let’s face it,
we all know what’s coming. Mr. Ironwood is going to adopt Mercury, and then he’ll marry you,
and we’ll be stuck with him.”

“What’s wrong with that?” Ruby asked, before Qrow could get out whatever reply he was about to
make.

“Because he is literally the worst boy I’ve ever met. He’s mean to everyone and he punched Yang
and he yelled at me when I was trying to be nice!”

“Nora—“

“You weren’t exactly the nicest ever when we got you either! You bit me the first day we met!”

“Ruby—“

“I was scared!”

“So is Mercury!”

“Guys—“
“He’s tearing our family apart! I just got one, I don’t want to lose it so soon!”

“He’s not tearing anything apart!”

“Would you two stop fighting!” Yang’s hands came down hard on the table, enough to make her plate jump and her glass wobble. “I am so sick of this!”

“That’s enough,” Tai said quietly. “From all of you. Look—“ He sighed, and scrubbed a hand over his forehead, and raised both hands in surrender. “I don’t know what to tell you. I feel like a broken record over here.”

As one the girls cast their gaze downward, and Nora rubbed awkwardly at her arm. “‘M sorry,” she mumbled.

She looked on the verge of tears; Qrow reached over and looped an arm over her shoulders, pulling her against him in silent reassurance.

“I’m sorry too,” Ruby told her half-eaten stew. “I know Mercury isn’t very easy to like, I just…” And shrugged, unsure of how to complete her sentence.

During all of this, Torchwick was sitting quietly, and now he drummed his fingers on the table, and said, “Well… this is extremely awkward.”

A nervous laugh rippled around the table, and Yang, with a hesitant glance at Nora, brought up the upcoming middle school dance, and her and Blake’s plans to get Ilia a date to cheer her up, since this time of year was always such a downer for her.

While she went through their reasoning for various of their middle school friends (“We’re gonna try for Coco, we thought she was going with Yatsuhashi but he’s going with Velvet, and Coco is cool—“) Tai caught Torchwick’s eye over the table and gave him a grateful smile.

-/-

After dinner found the girls watching cartoons until time for bed, while the three men migrated out to the back porch for a little adult time. Torchwick took a seat on the steps, carefully downwind, and took out his cigar case and lighters.

“I know neither of you indulges, but I have to offer anyway,” he said, holding out the case a moment and then returning it to his jacket when both refused. He leaned back against the railing and went through the process of lighting up and taking that first drag; he blew a cloud of smoke out into the yard and turned his attention back to them. “Sounds like this Mercury problem is even bigger than either of you bothered to tell me.”

“To be honest it’s bigger than either of us realized,” Qrow said. “Speaking of which, Halloween—“

“Spare me, Tai already gave me the whole lecture.”

“Oh.”

Torchwick flicked a bit of ash aside, and said slowly, “Has anyone considered that maybe Jimmy-boy isn’t the best guardian for the kid?”

“I have,” Tai admitted, and Qrow gave him a startled look.

“What? But Jim—“
“Is doing his best, but he has more kids to consider than just Mercury. We’re all trying so hard to accommodate Mercury’s trauma but Nora has trauma to deal with too and keeping her away from one of her parent figures isn’t helping. You know how bad her separation anxiety can get.”

“You know Jim isn’t gonna give up on the kid.”

“I know. But I’m not sure if that’s a good thing.”

“Why wouldn’t it be?”

“Because not every home is right for every kid. When we sent Mercury away we made the right call—we weren’t a good fit for him. The part where we messed up was in not making sure that where he went was going to be a good fit. We trusted Leo to put him somewhere he was going to be taken care of but we knew how bad the system was, we dropped the ball when we didn’t try harder to make sure he was going to somewhere good for him. If we’d done better then he would never have ended up with Tyrian, but giving up wasn’t the part where we messed up.”

“Wait, what?” Torchwick stubbed out his cigar and moved up onto the porch to rejoin them properly. “Who did you say?”

“Tyrian?” Qrow said. “Mercury’s last guardian.” He eyed the way Torchwick’s entire expression had shifted, and frowned. “...you know him.”

“I know of him. Jesus, no wonder the kid is messed up, if that’s where he’s coming from.”

“You wanna share with the class or just keep being cryptic?”

“Let’s just say this: Tyrian Callows is the kind of criminal that hardened killers think should maybe tone it down a little bit. He has a reputation for being a little… unhinged. Also there’s rumours that he’s a cultist. I’ve never met the man myself of course but I do know there was a lot of relief when he was arrested last spring. Poor Mercury, no one deserves that kind of life.”

Tai and Qrow exchanged concerned looks. “Shit,” Qrow breathed. “I had no idea. I knew he’d mistreated the kids but I didn’t know…”

“I’d wager it went a lot farther than just mistreatment. Tyrian’s the sort of man who likes to make people suffer. I doubt those kids were any exception.”

-/-

Picture this: a jail cell in the dead of night. The cell is bathed in shadow; a lean, wiry figure sits on his haunches in the dark, while the other half of the cell, a flashlight bathes a set of three school photos in the light of a guard’s flashlight.

The guard the flashlight was taken from lays in a crumpled heap on the floor of the cell, ignored by the occupant.

A giggle escapes the figure in the shadows, a manic, delighted giggle, and in his mirth he moves away from the shadow, the light playing across a limp shank of hair and a grinning yellow eye.

“Soon, children,” the figure tells the photos. He picks up the flashlight and steps across the guard’s body to brush a hand over the pictures. “We’ll be a family again soon. Just wait…”

-/-
In a house in Vale, Mercury shot awake with a start, then looked blearily around for what had woken him— his phone, buzzing insistently while filling the room with a dim blue glow. He fumbled for it, and closed one eye against the painful light to read the text from Emerald displayed on his alerts.

*Bad dreams,* the text read, and the follow up, *Are you awake?*

Mercury flipped his lamp on and scrubbed a hand over his eyes to wake himself, then hit dial without a second thought. He only had to wait one ring before the answering click.

“Em? Talk to me.”

-/-

Chapter End Notes

So the next three chapters will be a matter of tying up a few loose threads, and then we'll get to the finale arc- I think at this point you should have *some* kind of idea of what kind of arc we're looking at for the finale, but we'll see how right you are in a few. See you around.

One of these days I should have Ma and Pop Xiaolong be onscreen characters, but the trouble is that I don't really have characterizations for them the way I do with Lanying and Guiles. Oh well, we'll see what happens; Tai is a focal character in the next volume, so maybe we'll get a few chats with his folks thrown in.
Chapter 35

Chapter Summary

Trouble might be brewing far away from home, but here and now the kids are all right.

Chapter Notes

This is the first of three chapters that exist solely to tie up some loose threads that I need to deal with before I can get to the finale arc. Let me reiterate because I know y’all are worried after that last bombdrop, this and the two chapters after it are going to be nice. You’re not allowed to feel sad when you read these chapters, okay? Save all of that up for the finale arc.

Chapter content warning for discussion of past abuse. (Yes I am aware of what I just said.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-/-

The weekend after Thanksgiving break, James invited Emerald and Hazel over for lunch. Emerald had been to the house a couple times before, of course, but apart from dropping her off, Hazel hadn’t. Mercury was, admittedly, a little curious to see how he’d get along with James, who he’d only interacted with in passing up to now.

Tai and Ruby had dropped by earlier; James and Penny were walking them to the door when Hazel and Emerald arrived. Penny hurried forward to throw the door open, chirping a cheery greeting as they came in. Up to that point, Ruby had been chatting up a storm about- as near as Mercury could tell from his spot just beyond the living room door- optic leds, but when she saw their guests her chatter stuttered to a halt and her face turned an embarrassing shade of pink.

“Hi,” she squeaked out, eyes glued to Emerald.

“Hi, sweetie,” Emerald said, adopting her ‘big sister’ voice. “Are you going to be joining us for lunch too?”

Ruby got out a very bashful no, and added, “Dad just needed to talk to Uncle James about something. We’re on our way out now.”

“Aww, that’s too bad. Oh well, I’m sure I’ll see you another time.” And she gave Ruby a sisterly and very condescending smile, which only served to embarrass Ruby more.

By the time Tai and Ruby finally left, Ruby had gone a brilliant shade of crimson. Mercury leaned against the doorjamb and folded his arms.
“You are really terrible, you know that?”

“Oh come on. I was sure if I was condescending with her she’d get annoyed at me not thinking of her as grown up and move on.”

“Yeah right.”

They were interrupted by Penny then: she barreled into the conversation with a greeting.

“Emerald!”

“Hi, Penny.”

“I am very glad to see you! I missed you very much when you did not come over for awhile.”

“That’s Merc’s fault, point the pouty face at him, not me.”

“It is all right. You are here now, and that is what matters.” She gestured into the living room. “I was going to watch a movie while Father finished preparing lunch. Would you like to join me?”

“What are you watching?”

“The third Aladdin movie! I have never seen it, but Ciel loaned me her copy.”

“King of Thieves, huh?” Emerald sighed. “Not even Aladdin’s hot dilt dad could save that movie. Maybe another time, kid, Merc and I have to talk in private.”

“Well, all right.” Penny tilted her head thoughtfully, and added, “What is a dilt?”

“A dad I’d like to….” Emerald trailed off, and cleared her throat. “Be… friends… with?” She forced a smile, and grabbed Mercury’s elbow, pulling him with her as she backed out of the room. “Let’s, um. Come on.”

She got him to the base of the stairs before he stopped needing to be pulled, and then he turned to follow her up to his room with a smirk. “Smooth. Very smooth.”

“I’m not going to be the one to corrupt the kid.”

“All right, but I’m blaming you the next time she refers to one of her friend’s dad as a dilt because she wants to befriend them.”

“Oh, god.” Emerald huffed. “This is why I don’t interact with children.”

/-/

In his room, Mercury sprawled in his desk chair while Emerald took the bed, and wasted no time saying, “Okay, we need to talk.”

“I was afraid you were going to say that.” He sighed, and dug around in his desk, pulling out his old Cinder puppet as he did. “At least make yourself useful while we talk and pull the eyes out of that.”

“I can’t believe you still have this thing.”

“Only because I haven’t gotten around to repurposing the materials.” He tossed her a second thing—a pocket sized plastic case with sewing supplies in it. “Everyone needs a hobby, Em.”

“Your hobby is creepy,” but she opened the case and got to work safely removing the eyes anyway.
“You want the hair taken off too?”

“Nah, I’m making a Ruby puppet, they have the same hair color. Just the eyes and the dress.”

“And why are you making a puppet Ruby?”

“So Puppet Emerald can have a friend, obviously.”

“Oh you asshole!” She grabbed his pillow and threw it at him; he caught it and tossed it back, and sighed.

“That’s what you wanted to talk about, isn’t it?”

“Yeah.” She echoed his sigh and flipped Puppet Cinder inside out, as much to have easier access to her seams as to not have to look at her anymore. “I just… if you didn’t want to hang out with Flynt, why didn’t you say so?”

“I don’t know,” he shrugged, and then, since that was a lie, tried again. “I’m… I wanted to hang out with just you for my birthday. I never get to see you, and then you were talking about bringing other people too. And I just… it felt like if I objected, it’d be like trying to keep you from your new friends.”

“Oh, Mercury.” She rolled her eyes. “You’re an idiot. You wanting to hang out with just me isn’t keeping me from anyone. It’s when you start trying to stop me when you’re not even there, that’s what’s not cool.”

He didn’t bother pointing out that he kind of wanted to anyway. He suspected she knew, and he also knew that he never would. At least, he’d do his best not to. Which brought up the other thing they needed to talk about, the thing he really didn’t want to. So he dug out a bit of red felt and started cutting it into the shape of a hood, if only so he wouldn’t have to look at her while he said the next thing he said.

“Emerald, I’m really scared. Not of the things you said—being separated, going to someone worse, or Hazel and Ironwood not turning out to be what we think. I mean, those things are pretty bad things, but I know we can survive something pretty awful, and I know if we’re separated there’s nothing that will keep me from finding you again. I’m just… I’m scared of the day you decide you don’t want me to. When you realize I’m so much of an asshole that I’m not worth the trouble to have around. It’s not that I’m afraid of losing you, I’m afraid of driving you away. And when you have other people, that’s just that much faster that you realize how much better you deserve.”

“What I deserve?” She looked up from Puppet Cinder’s remains to glare at him. “What I deserve? Mercury, my parents gave me up as soon as I was born because they thought I deserved a better life than they could give me, and I’ve spent the past fourteen years being shuffled from home to home because nobody wanted me. Who are you to decide what I deserve? What did I do to deserve that? To deserve any of that? It never mattered what I deserve.”

She stood, and moved over to loom over him; she pulled the felt and scissors from his hands and took both in her own, but the tender gesture was undone by the way she was glaring down at him.

“We walked through hell together. You and me, and no one else.” She paused and both of them looked at the puppet that lay half-destroyed and forgotten on the bed. “No one who gave a shit, anyway. And the only reason I survived that walk… was because every time I stopped walking, so did you. You were the one who was there to make sure I kept walking. So I don’t care how much of an asshole you are, or what you think I deserve. I wouldn’t be here if not for you. You’re what I
deserve. I decided that.”

“And if you undecide it?” he asked quietly.

And then her hands were gone from his, bracing her on the chair’s arms instead, leaning close, so close that their foreheads were nearly touching.

“I won’t.”

The world stilled. She meant it, he knew it, but-

—there was a knock on the door, and Penny pushed it open, just enough to peek her head in.

“Um, am I interrupting something?”

“Just knocking some sense into Merc, sweetie,” Emerald said, standing up slowly, as if she hadn’t just a moment ago been looming over him. “What’s up? Do you need something?”

“Father said to tell you that lunch is ready.” She looked over at Mercury, who had hidden his sewing things away while her attention was on Emerald and was now fiddling nervously with his marker. “Do you need a minute?”

“Actually, yeah. Tell your dad we’ll be down in a second.”

“All right.” She pulled the door closed and they heard her thumping cheerfully down the stairs. They turned their attention back to each other. Mercury scrubbed a hand through his hair.

“Do you remember that time I pulled a knife on Tyrian?” Emerald said suddenly. He nodded; she went on. “I was ready to destroy him but as soon as he came near me I froze. I don’t know when I’ve been so scared and then you were there beside me. You didn’t have to get involved with that, you could have walked away, he wouldn’t have even noticed, anyone else would have and you… stayed. I know you’re an asshole. But I also know you would never leave me, and I’m not going to leave you either.”

He did remember that day. Emerald, trembling from head to foot but the knife in her hand steady as a rock and gleaming sharp in the neon kitchen light that flickered periodically on and off on one side because Tyrian could never be bothered to fix the short in the wiring. The smugness in Tyrian’s smile as he leaned close, honeyed taunts daring Emerald to follow through on her threats and the terror that had ripped through him at the thought that she might. That she might actually use that knife and they would both be powerless to stop whatever Tyrian did to them in retaliation.

And he also remembered all the times the positions were reversed: the times that Emerald was always there at his side when he lost his temper. A small smile twitched the corners of his lips.

“Okay,” he said quietly.

She held her hand out; he took it, and let her pull him to his feet. Before letting go of his hand, she said, “We make this walk together, or we don’t make it at all. Got it?”

“Yeah.”

“Good.” She dropped his hand and added, as they turned to leave, “And if you ever call me Emmie again, I will cut off more than just your legs.”

“Understood.”
Downstairs, James was bringing the last of the food to the table while Penny chatted to Hazel, who was paying rapt attention to her summary of the first twenty minutes of Aladdin and the Prince of Thieves. As Mercury and Emerald appeared, she got to the part about the reveal that the leader of the thieves was Aladdin’s father, and added, “And you were right, Emerald! Aladdin’s father is a d*%!"

Emerald stopped short in shock, and Mercury crashed into her, while James turned a wide-eyed look on his daughter.

“Penny. Honey.” He glanced at Emerald, who had buried her face in her hands in mortification (and behind her at Mercury, who was trying to bite back his laughter), and said, “What do you think that word means?”

“Emerald says it means a dad I would like to be friends with.” Penny sat up straighter, and Mercury suspected he was the only one who recognized the gleam of mischief in her eyes. “I would like to be friends with Cassim. I think he needs one.”

“God you’re cute,” Emerald muttered, and carried on to take her seat at the table. Mercury ruffled Penny’s hair on his way by, earning him a fond grin.

“That’s… factually correct,” James said, shooting Emerald another look—she’d gotten over her mortification and swapped over to sheepish amusement, “but it means you want to be friends in a very grown up way. Not just friends in a general sense.”

Penny tilted her head to the side at that, considering his words and the implication, and then beamed once more. “Oh! The f means fuck!”

This time neither teen was able to keep their laughter in, and they were joined by a rumble from Hazel that vibrated the table in front of him.

Once lunch was over, the kids disappeared into the living room to finish Penny’s movie with her, while the adults remained in the dining room. James finished stacking the dishes to take to the kitchen later, and took his seat back.

“I’m glad they made up,” he said, and nodded toward the living room, where they could just about hear the movie being restarted. “It’s nice to see Mercury smiling again.”

“Emerald’s barely left her room since they fought,” Hazel agreed. “But you know it’s going to keep happening, right? They’re too far apart. It… makes it harder to bear. When they do see each other again, that rises to the surface.”

James held his hands out, faintly pleading. “If you have literally any suggestions I would love to hear them.”

“I don’t have any, not yet. But until we think of something, we need to be prepared for this sort of thing to keep happening.”

“I suppose we could try to let them see each other more,” James said. “I’m keeping Emerald this weekend— how do you feel about taking Mercury next weekend? If the kids are up for it, I mean. It’s better than nothing.”
Hazel chuckled. “I would like that. I enjoy having Mercury around, when he’s not making Emerald cry.”

“That’s something, at least.”

“You and Penny can come over for dinner, too,” Hazel added. “Maybe if the kids feel less like their families are separate it’ll feel less like a great distance. And it will give me a chance to cook for someone other than a teenager who only wants to eat fast food.”

James let out a startled bark of laughter at that. “You too? Mercury eats what I put in front of him but I can always feel him judging me because we don’t eat out more.”

-/-

In the living room, Emerald and Mercury exchanged a startled look at the sound of laughter from the dining room. Mercury rolled his eyes.

“Those two are getting along.”

“This is all so surreal. Who would have expected that?”

“I did,” Penny said. “Father has been calling Mr. Hazel regularly, so they must have something in common apart from loving you.”

Discomfort passed over both teenagers, and Emerald cleared her throat rather than address her remark.

“They just give off different vibes, that’s all. Hazel is this, like, really chill laid back guy, and your dad is so tightly wound it’s a wonder he hasn’t broken yet.”

“Hazel takes very good care of you, though. And Father is only tightly wound because he has more children to look after.”

“Two isn’t that much more demanding than one.”

Penny frowned. “Mercury and I are not Father’s only children, though. He also has Nora, and Ruby, and Yang. Just because we are not one household does not mean we are not one family.”

“Parenthood doesn’t really work like that, kid,” Emerald said. “He and Qrow aren’t even married, and Ruby and Yang aren’t Qrow’s, so why would they be your dad’s?”

“Because they are Mr. Qrow’s. He has been coparenting with Mr. Tai since Ruby was a baby. He raised them. How is he not their parent just because he is not their father?”

“That’s just… not how families work. And your dad doesn’t become their parent just because he’s dating their uncle, even if that was the case.”

“I think you are wrong,” Penny said, folding her arms. “Families do not have to be shaped just one way to be families.”

-/-

By the time Hazel left—leaving Emerald behind for the weekend—she and Mercury had returned to his room, leaving Penny behind to watch her movie alone in solemn, thoughtful silence.

In Mercury’s room, Emerald sprawled on the bed while he worked on Puppet Ruby’s felt hoodie.
“So what’s the real reason you’re making a puppet Ruby?”

“It’s a present for Penny,” he said, shrugging nonchalantly. “I was sick of looking at Puppet Cinder and I hate not repurposing my materials, and Ruby’s hair is the right color. Besides, I can’t really afford Christmas presents since I’m saving all of my allowance.”

“Okay, well you better be getting me a real present and not one of your creepy puppets.”

“Relax, I’d never split up Puppet Emerald and Puppet Mercury.”

-/-

Chapter End Notes

I wish I’d done more with Mercury's puppetry hobby but the kid is really tightlipped about his hobbies and I just didn't have enough chances to bring it up.

(The joke is that Emerald is Aladdin. I wonder if Em has a hot dild dad running around somewhere? Other than Hazel, I mean.)
James and Qrow go out for what can technically be considered their anniversary depending on when you start counting.

Chapter Notes

Hey, how are you guys enjoying all these nice friendly chapters where nothing really sad happens? Really liking that happy chapter energy?

Just a note since she comes up: Whitney, like Josef, was a placeholder oc created to fill a role that already existed in canon but had not yet been elaborated on. As with Pietro, Willow will be used in all future fics that use those roles, but for Hallmarks specifically I will continue to use Whitney.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Later that same evening found Qrow and Tai in Tai’s bathroom while Tai tried to tame Qrow’s hair into something passably sophisticated that didn’t look, to quote Qrow, ‘stupid’.

This mostly involved so much hair gel that Qrow’s head was shiny with it, but Tai was still failing to achieve the desired result.

“You’d think a man as vain about his hair as you are would be able to do this himself,” Tai said, combing Qrow’s hair together so he could try a side parting.

“But if I could do it myself, why would I need the bestest big brother in the whole wide world?”

“Wonderful.” Tai made a frustrated noise and wet his comb again.

Beside them, Yang was perched on the edge of the tub, watching the entire process with delighted fascination. Usually she was the one whose hair Tai was fighting; it was nice having someone else on the receiving end for a change.

“Why don’t you just wear it down?” she suggested. “I heard Uncle James say that he likes your hair before you put it up.”

“I don’t like it down,” Qrow reminded her, and added, “Anyway, it’s not about what Jimmy wants, the place I’m taking him has a strict dress code. They won’t even let me in the door if I’ve got a hair out of place.”

“How did you even get reservations at a place that fancy?”

“Whitney owes me some favors,” was the only response he’d offer.
“Well you might have to cancel if I can’t get your hair to behave,” Tai said, moving his head back into place when he turned to talk to Yang. He chewed his lip thoughtfully and started combing the hair back instead. “Why do you want to take him somewhere so fancy anyway? You’re not going to be comfortable and I don’t think even James will be comfortable going that overboard.”

“I dunno, Dad, he’s pretty stuffy.”

“Not that stuffy.”

“It’s not about the place, it’s about what it offers. The restaurant is just the price of admission for the private dining room I booked.”

“What’s so great about the private dining room?”

“The glass dome roof.” Qrow gave Tai a toothy grin in the mirror, and realization dawned.

“Oh- oh, I get it. That’s actually a really great gift.”

“What’d I miss?” Yang asked, looking between them.

Qrow turned to her; Tai made a frustrated noise and moved his head back, and said, “Beacon Tower is the tallest building in Vale by several storeys, which means the light pollution is much less intense in the restaurant portion than anywhere else in or around the city. It has the best view of the night sky in Vale.”

“Jimmy’s old bedroom back in his parents’ place has star charts covering the walls.” Qrow shrugged. “So I figure I’ll take him stargazing, and Beacon Tower Restaurant is the only place I can do that without going out of town to somewhere isolated.”

“Which, if you still wanted to do that, you could probably talk Bart and Peter into letting you use their cabin up in the mountains for a weekend. You know, at a later date.”

“Hmm…” Qrow made to rub his chin in thought, and Tai moved his head forcefully back into place, then sighed.

“I can’t do anything with this, Qrow. Your hair is just too long straightened out. When was your last haircut?”

“I dunno, before school started?”

Tai rolled his eyes and reached over to turn the hot water on. “All right, I’m washing this gunk out. I have a better idea.”

What followed was Qrow leaning over the sink with his head under the hose-faucet while Tai attempted to clean all of the gel out, and Qrow whining loudly about Tai getting water up his nose.

“If you would hold still--!”

“I am holding still! Watch where you’re pointing that thing!”

“Do you want to do this yourself??”

“No, I just want you to do it right!!”

What followed that was an impromptu wrestling match, which ended with Tai putting Qrow into a headlock and shoving a handful of hair gel suds into his face. Qrow sputtered and shook his head
hard, sending water flying everywhere, including right into Tai’s face. He whined.

“Qrow!”

“That’s what you get!”

“I think I got your hair in my mouth. Bleh.”

Yang stifled her giggles with one fist, but poorly, and said: “You’re acting like me when Dad does my hair.”

“Yeah well.” Qrow huffed good-naturedly. “You get it honest, Mom used the act the same way when Dad did her hair.”

Tai and Yang both went still and quiet at that. Qrow looked between them.

“What?”

“Nothing,” Yang said. “Just… that’s the first time you’ve ever told me something about them without me needing to beg.”

“Oh. Sorry.”

“You never really talk about them. That’s all.”

“Maybe I should.”

“You don’t have to.”

“...I think I do.” He fell silent then, contemplative, and Tai took the opportunity to turn the hairdryer on him. For a long time there was only the sound of the hairdryer, until Qrow’s hair hung in a fluffy, shaggy mess around his face.

Now that he was paying attention, it was apparent that it had indeed grown out in the past few months. It hung in his eyes, and over his ears, and onto the back of his neck: he shook his head, trying to clear his bangs, and pouted.

“I need a haircut.”

“I can get the clippers.”

“Not tonight!” His hands flew up to cover his hair protectively. “I can’t get my hair cut right before a date, I’ll look stupid. It needs at least a week to settle. I’ll just have to do something else tonight.”

“Relax, I’m going to try a different idea.” He grabbed the water spritzer and started combing through Qrow’s hair again, carefully separating out the bangs while he combed the rest back to the back of his head, where he looped an elastic around it. “There, what do you think of that?”

Qrow squinted at himself in the mirror, turning his head this way and then that, before finally relenting. “All right, I’ll allow it.”

“You look fine.” He turned to Yang. “Sweetie, do you mind going out so Qrow can change?”

“Sure.”

She bounced up and trotted out, while Qrow rolled the kinks out of his shoulders from staying in
place for too long. He grabbed the garment bag with his suit from the back of the bathroom door and gave Tai a pointed look.

“Hope you’re not planning to dress me, too.”

Tai rolled his eyes, and then folded his arms. “How are you affording to rent the private dining room at Beacon Tower?”

“I told you, Whitney owes me a favor.”

“That’s some favor.”

“Yeah, well, I’m making sure she gets to keep custody of her kids, so I think that makes us even.” When Tai still looked unimpressed, he sighed and added, “Look, we’re just—we have an understanding, okay?”

“Last time I checked, you didn’t even like Whitney. Suddenly you’re helping her custody case and she’s owing you favors?”

“We… found some common ground.”

“Qrow—“

“Don’t ask me to explain, Tai, that’s not even close to being something I can talk about. Just… let it go, okay?”

Tai sighed, but relented, and turned around to give Qrow some privacy while he changed.

“So how did Jimmy take it this morning, when you talked to him?”

Tai shrugged. “Six of one. He agrees with our points, but he’s holding firm on his previous stance. Mercury doesn’t leave until he makes the choice to, and if that means he stays with James until he ages out of the system, then so be it.”

“Well that’s only four years,” Qrow said, bitter sarcasm lacing his voice.

-/-

The girls were in the living room playing Mud Mummy Invasion when Qrow and Tai came in. Qrow was wearing a dark grey suit and a red waistcoat, both undone, with a red tie hanging loose around his neck; his hair was pulled back into a short ponytail rather than spiked as was his usual wont. Ruby whistled teasingly.

“Wow, Uncle Qrow, you look really handsome,” she said, while Qrow sat down to pull his boots on. “I bet Uncle James won’t be able to keep his hands off of you when he gets a look at you.”

“Yeah, because that’s something he needs incentive for,” Nora muttered. Qrow paused in lacing his boots.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“She just means Uncle James gets really handsy around you,” Yang said. “Especially when you haven’t seen each other in awhile.”

Qrow’s ears had turned pink. “All right, well. All right.”
“Relax, he never does anything inappropriate,” Tai said, beckoning Qrow over so he could tie his tie for him. “He’s just touchy. It’s cute.”

“Are you calling me cute?”

“I’m calling you and your boyfriend cute. Positively adorable. Tilt your head back.”

“You know I only just let Jimmy get away with calling me cute, I’m not extending you the same privilege.”

“What are you going to do about it?” He finished off the tie and waited for Qrow to button his waistcoat and jacket before fixing that and his pocket square, too. “There, you’re all pretty for your date.”

“Tch. Call me pretty again and I’m going to sit on you.”

“Yeah. That’s definitely a threat I take seriously.”

James needed less help putting himself together for the evening, but this didn’t stop Penny from climbing up onto the couch, precariously balanced while she made sure he was immaculate. With one last twitch of his lapel, she beamed and let her hands fall.

“There! Nice and straight!”

“Not that straight,” Emerald murmured, getting a snort from Mercury and an amused smile from James.

In the distance, there was a knock on the door; James called, “It’s open!” in the direction of the foyer and then turned to the kids. “Are you all sure you don’t mind staying here on your own this evening? I can call Glynda or someone else to come stay with you if I need to.”

“Gotta cut that umbilical cord sometime, Jimbles,” Qrow said, sauntering into the room on the end of his sentence. He stopped to look James over appreciatively, and went on, “Ready to go?”

“In a minute.” He turned a questioning eyebrow on the kids, the elder two of whom rolled their eyes and stood.

“We’ll be fine,” Mercury said. “Seriously.”

“Hazel leaves me alone when he goes on dates all the time,” Emerald added. “We’re not little kids, we can handle ourselves.”

“Fine, fine.” James shook his head. “Okay. Keep the doors and windows locked at all times. Emergency numbers are on the fridge, you both have my and Glynda’s numbers in your phone, if anything happens that you need immediate attention go next door; Kline knows you’re on your own and promised to keep an ear open if you need him.”

“We will be fine, Father,” Penny assured him.

“Penny…” He pinched the bridge of his nose. “Are you sure you don’t want me to drop you off with Tai? Or sleep over with Weiss?”

“I am very sure. Emerald said she would braid my hair and we are going to watch movies and I am looking forward to it. But you have to leave so we can.”
“I just… would feel better if you had adult supervision. You’re eleven. What if something happens?”

“Oh for fucks’-” Qrow huffed and held out his hand to Mercury and Emerald. “Gimme your phones, I’m going to put my number in. Anything to get us out the door faster…”

Hesitantly, and watchfully, they unlocked and handed over their phones, both keeping a close eye on Qrow until he handed them back.

“There, you’ve got the number to my phone, the restaurant, and the public line for the building the restaurant is in. If anything comes up that you can’t reach us you can still reach us through those channels.” He raised an eyebrow at James. “That good enough?”

“Well-” he began, and then looked around with a start. During the conversation, they had been slowly herding him to the door, and now he was standing with Qrow on the front step. He frowned. “If anything comes up, call me immediately.”

“Whatever you say, General,” Mercury said, and closed the door on him.

-/-

In the truck, James immediately took his phone out and began checking it: that it was on, that it was charged, that it had service… Qrow eyed him in his periphery as he drove, and finally said, “It’s gonna be fine, Jim. They’re not gonna burn your house down the minute your back is turned, they’re good kids.”

“It’s not that I don’t trust them, I don’t trust the rest of the world. Anything could happen while I’m gone.”

“And if something happens, they’ll handle it.” They rolled to a stop sign; Qrow paused before moving on to reach over and touch James’ hand reassuringly. “Trusting them on their own isn’t just about trusting them to not get into trouble, it’s also trusting them to handle themselves if trouble gets into them.”

“They’re kids.”

“They’re fourteen and eleven. You let Winter look after Penny when she was fifteen, that’s not much of a difference.”

“Only in emergency situations, or for a brief time. Never for a whole evening.”

“Do you want to go back? Say the word and I’ll turn around right now.”

James looked over at Qrow, looking into his gaze for any indication he was bluffing. Above them the light turned green, and cars behind them honked loudly in protest, but Qrow stayed where he was.

Finally James shook his head.

“No, I— I think I need to at least try.”

“All right. Good.” He gave James a cocky grin. “Cause I went through a lot of trouble for tonight and I don’t want that wasted.

James chuckled. “I still can’t believe you managed to get reservations at Beacon Tower Restaurant
“Hey, important people owe me favors. Don’t worry about it.”

His smile while he drove was secretive; James suspected there was more to their evening than just a table at the most expensive restaurant in town. He watched Qrow with a soft and pink feeling in his middle, and a sense that he was in for a good night.

And not just because Qrow looked amazing dressed up to such an extent.

Qrow seemed to be thinking along the same lines; after they arrived and got into the elevator to the restaurant on the top floor, he took a moment while they rode up to look James over appreciatively. James gave him a small smile, a blush crawling up his neck at the scrutiny.

“See something you like?”

Qrow grinned, and hooked a finger around his tie, pulling him down and pressing a kiss to the corner of his mouth. Then he broke the kiss and said, low enough that James strained to hear, “It’s a crying shame I have to have you home by curfew. I’d love the chance to peel you out of that suit. What do you think? There’s a hotel in the tower. We could extend our evening…”

It was a tempting offer. They parted, and James took a moment to take Qrow in with an appreciative once-over of his own, gaze lingering on Qrow’s narrow hips, perfectly accentuated by the lines of his suit. He closed his eyes and shook his head.

“As tempting as it that is…”

“Yeah, I figured.” He pulled away completely, and took James’ hand as the lift halted. “Come on, at least I get to look at you over the dinner table.”

-/-

Qrow made James wait while he took care of their seating, speaking to the maitre d in low voices for a moment before a young woman in waitstaff uniform came over to them. James realized immediately that something was off; rather than take them to a seat in the restaurant, the young waitress led them to a small lift that only moved in the restaurant itself.

This one was made of glass and rose up the outside of the building, offering a stupendous view of the city, but that was nothing on the view when they stepped out of the lift into the private dining room, whose glass dome roof offered no obstruction to being able to see in all directions.

James’ gaze lingered on the city only a moment, magnetically drawn upward to the stars above him. This deep in the city, there was still too much light pollution to truly see the stars in their full wonder, but they were more visible here, above the lights, than they were from the ground.

A weight leaned against his shoulder. He looked down, startled; Qrow had leaned into him, resting his head on James’ shoulder while he joined his view.

“I wanted to take you stargazing,” he explained. “But there’s not really anywhere to go without going out of town. This was the best I could come up with.”

James chuckled. “I can’t imagine how many favors you had to call in for this…”

“I’d have called in a hundred more if I had to.”
“Qrow—“

“Uh-uh, no protests. You’re not the only one who can make sacrifices, understand?”

“What are you—“

“Cause it occurred to me, every time we do something big it’s always you. You’re the one that always makes the plans and makes the arrangements and foots the bill and covers the expenses and.. and that ain’t fair.”

“But I like doing those things for you.”

“I know you do, and I like having them done for me. God, being treated like the most important thing in the world? It’s amazing. Which is why I… wanted to do that for you. I want you to feel as— as cherished as you always make me feel.”

“You don’t have—“ James began, and then cut himself off, and smiled. “Thank you.”

“There you go, that’s better.” He pulled away but only to turn, slipping his arms around James’ waist and leaning into him, pleased when James’arms came up to return the embrace. He put his head over James’s shoulder and said, “Tonight, I am going to make you feel like the only thing in the universe that matters.”

-/-

After they made their way to their table, and after they’d given their food orders, and the sparkling grape juice had been poured, James rested his head on one fist and watched Qrow across the table with a soft, pink expression on his face that had Qrow blushing furiously.

Eventually, he spoke, and said, “You know, Qrow… maybe it won’t hurt the kids to stay overnight on their own after all.”

-/-

Penny had gone up to shower, leaving Mercury and Emerald alone for awhile, when Mercury had a text come through from James.

Qrow and I are getting a room for the night at the Tower Hotel. Will you kids be all right overnight?

We can raincheck if you’d rather I come home when I said.

Mercury rolled his eyes and shot off a message that no, seriously, they would be fine, no need to worry, seriously, then showed Emerald the text.

“Looks like we’ve got the night after all.”

“Oh, fun.” She grinned mischievously and said, “You know that’s so they can fuck, right?”

“I was trying not to think of the implications of that text, thank you for putting that in my head.”

“Hey, it’s not like it’s my dad.”

“He’s not my dad!”

“Whatever, you know I’m right.” Mischief twinkled in her gaze again. She waited till he’d gotten
himself into a big huff and added, “Your dad is hot.”

“Shut-!” And then he whacked her with a pillow while she cackled in glee. When he didn’t whack her again as expected, she sobered a little. “Merc, you… you do realize that’s what’s coming, right?”

He hunched over on himself and stared at his feet. “I’m… trying not to think about it.”

/-/

Chapter End Notes

I headcanon the Branwens as having hair like mine, ie very thick and very fine, which makes it both incredibly fluffy and prone to misbehavior.

For the record, James changed his mind about leaving the kids alone all night because it seemed like Qrow needed him to be there more than the kids did.
The Schnee's finally get a ruling in their custody case. Qrow comes clean.

This is the last pre-finale chapter! Also the end of my buffer. The fic will be on hiatus from this point on, as I intend to write the entire finale before posting. Hopefully I'll get this done soon, but I make no promises. Cross your fingers?

By the way you're allowed to be sad during this one if you want. I think it's a happy chapter, but it's a very melancholy sort of happy and not everyone is into that.

The week that followed was a pretty good one. Making up with Emerald and then spending a weekend with her— a weekend without James looking over their shoulders, bonus— had brightened Mercury’s spirits considerably. Winter said as much when the pair went Christmas shopping— or more accurately, when Winter went Christmas shopping and Mercury tagged along.

“Well, you know.” He shrugged, and couldn’t think of anything else to say.

Winter gave him one of her private smiles. “I’m glad. I was worried about you.”

He shrugged again. “Whatever. It’s no big deal.”

“If you say so. You’re going to Argus this weekend?”

“Yeah, the General and Hazel are trying to let me and Em see more of each other, I think.”

“That’s nice of them.”

“I guess.”

“Mercury?”

“What?”

“Are you happy living with Dr. Ironwood?”

Mercury snorted. “Honestly, Winter, I don’t know what I am anymore.”

The Monday after that was a big day: it was the day the judge would finally rule in the Schnee’s
custody case. The morning of the court date, James and the kids walked across the road before leaving for school and work to wish them luck.

The children were in the foyer, dressed in their Sunday best, faintly sick looks on the girls’ faces and a pout on Whitley’s where he sat at the foot of the stairs.

“Where’s your mother?” James asked, and was directed to the drawing room, where Whitney Schnee stood staring at an empty bottle of Seven Swans sitting on her bookshelf, a handful of long-wilted flowers drooping around the neck.

“James?” she asked, without turning.

“It’s me. I wanted to wish you good luck.”

“Hopefully I won’t need it.”

“Qrow is confident,” he tried, after an awkward silence. “He says you have a strong case built.”

“I owe him a lot,” she said. “I owe you a lot, too.”

“I haven’t really—“

“I’m not blind, you know.” She finally turned and gave him a weary smile. “I’ve seen the changes in Winter since you moved in. You’ve been good for her- better for her than her father and I, certainly.”

“All I did was give her a place to go. She did the rest herself.”

“If you say so, James.”

-/-

As they were leaving not much later, Weiss voiced the worry on all of the kids’ minds and said, “What happens if Judge Khan rules in Father’s favor?”

“Then we start on plan b,” James said firmly, earning another weary smile from Whitney.

Mercury stage-whispered to the kids, “Plan B is the one where Winter takes advantage of having two future mob bosses crushing on her,” and then gave Winter a cocky grin when she turned crimson

“That is not a single word in that sentence that is accurate.”

“Still haven’t decided, huh?”

“That is a false read of the situation calculated to embarrass me.”

“Because I’ve been thinking about it and I don’t think you should have to choose, know what I mean?”

“If you do not shut up right now—“

“I mean, they’re twins, right? Probably used to sharing things.”

“I will punch you in the throat. Do not test me.”
“I would love to see you try,” he taunted, and then ducked away when she swiped at him. He grinned and stuck his tongue out. “Gonna have to do better than that if you wanna catch me.”

-/

After dropping Penny off at the elementary school, Mercury jumped up to shotgun and said, “Okay, now that the kid isn’t here, what’s the big secret?”

“You think there is one?”

“There has to be. No matter how good Mrs. Schnee’s case is, she’s a drunk. No judge in the world is going to give her custody of her kids without a really good reason, and her number one character witness is also a drunk. Khan knows Qrow but, you know, that’s not necessarily a good thing. So there must be some secret weapon somewhere.”

“You’ve given this thought.”

“Winter is my… friend, I guess, for lack of a better word. I’ve considered the implications,” and then added, “Sienna Khan was the one who ruled to take me away from my dad. She’s not gonna put Winter and the others with their mom without a miracle of some kind.”

James sighed. He’d considered the same things, honestly, but Qrow was confident and he wanted to believe that they could pull off a miracle. Still. Qrow was being pretty tight-lipped about the case, and he and Whitney weren’t close enough for him to press her for information, no matter how invested he was.

“Honestly, I don’t know what the plan is. I know that there is one, and that’s about the extent of it.”

“So today might not go well?”

James gave him a weak smile. “No. It might not.”

-/

The Schnees were a tension surrounding everyone who loved them that day, but James had other things to worry about as well. After dropping Mercury off at school, he drove around to the mall and went up to Casey’s, the music store that he knew Mercury frequented- at least judging by the familiarity with which he’d addressed the staff the few times James had been there with him.

There was an older man behind the counter when James arrived, lounging in a desk chair behind the counter, tapping out a counter-rhythm to the song playing over the speakers. When James approached, he got to his feet with a welcoming smile.

“Welcome to Casey’s, what can I do for you?”

“I was wondering if you could give me some advice about a Christmas present I need to get. Do you know Mercury Black? He comes in here a lot…”

“The kid that keeps lifting sharpies? Yeah, I know him.”

“…I didn’t know he did that. I can have a word with him-“

“I’d appreciate that. What did you need help with?”

“I wanted to get him some music for Christmas, but I don’t really know what he listens to.”
"Ah, you were hoping I’d fill you in? Unfortunately I only know the kid in passing, so I can’t tell you anything. My daughter might be able to, though- Maggie!" This last was called through the door to the back, and then the young woman he’d spoken to his first time in the store came out.

"Yeah?"

"This gentleman wants to know what kind of music Merc is into."

"Hm…" She considered the question. "Honestly? Music he hasn’t heard before."

"What?"

"I know, it’s a weird way to categorize, but that’s what he always asks about." She considered the question a moment or two longer. "This is for a Christmas present, I assume?"

"Yes. He’s kind of tight-lipped about his interests, this is the best lead I’ve got."

"No no, it’s a good idea. Try introducing him to music you like, that he wouldn’t have heard on a classics station."

"Not a bad idea." James thought through his music tastes, and nodded. "I can think of some things he might like being introduced to."

-/-

"There’s something else," James said, after spending a little time going through their selection. "When I came through here a few months ago you told me about Blackbird, and said you weren’t allowed to copy the tape. I was wondering if I could convince you to reconsider."

The girl- Maggie- raised an eyebrow at him, while the older man stood to join the conversation.

"I’m afraid that’s not possible," he said. "My husband is very adamant that Blackbird’s tape not be copied— partially to avoid damaging it, and in part to respect her wishes about distribution."

"I understand that, and under normal circumstances I wouldn’t ask, but in this case- it’s for her son. I think maybe an exception can be made for her son, can’t it?"

"Her son? You know him?"

James nodded, and took out his phone. He unlocked it and held it up to show them his homescreen wallpaper— a picture of Qrow, sprawled on the couch with Penny asleep on his shoulder. He’d objected to the picture being taken, but James had long since learned that the noise Qrow made when he was caught being domestic was just that.

"He’s my boyfriend," James explained. "I think giving him the chance to hear his mother sing again would be worth an exception, don’t you think?"

"I’m inclined to agree," the man said quietly, staring at the picture in James’ hand, and then shaking his head. "Look, you make a good case, but it’s still not my call. I’ll talk to my husband about it— come back tomorrow, okay? I’ll either have a recording for you, or… not. That’s the best I can offer."

"All right. I’ll come back, then."

-/-
That night, they all gathered at the Schnee home— James with Penny and Mercury, Tai and the girls— and waited for Whitney and Qrow to get back with the news. It was a tense wait: though the younger children were merely worried for their friend, James and Tai knew full well the odds against Whitney’s success, and judging by the uneasy furrow in Yang’s brow, she’d come to the same conclusions Mercury had.

There was a weary cloud hanging over Whitney when they all finally arrived, but after a moment of the two groups staring at each other a moment in anticipation, she gave them all a tired smile and said, “That man… will never come near my children again.”

It was like a the storm had ended. Everyone could breathe easily again, and smiles went around the room. They had won.

-/-

Ten minutes later found James deep in conversation with Winter; despite the day’s victory, she was uneasy about something, and he was wondering how to coax it out of her without actually prying. A tap at his shoulder distracted him, as did the slightly dazed look Winter shot behind him, and he turned to find Qrow there.

“I need to talk to you,” he murmured, eyeing Winter in her periphery as he did. “Tai, too. Come into the parlor?”

“Of course, but—” James turned back to Winter, who put in hastily, “Go ahead, it’s fine. I think… I think I need to be alone right now anyway.”

And with that, she spun on her heel and strode out, hands clasped tightly behind her back.

-/-

It didn’t take long for Qrow to get Tai into the parlor as well; he took a seat across from James at the table and two looked expectantly at Qrow, who held up a hand to halt them while he steeled himself to say what he needed to say.

He didn’t want to. He sort of never wanted to. A part of him wanted to hold onto this forever, but as he thought that, the dark creature in his mind smiled, and as much to silence it as anything he blurted out, “I quit drinking.”

The expectant expressions on their face swapped from curious to stunned, and for a long time they sat staring up at him— an eternity in the blink of an eye.

It was Tai who spoke.

“You… you quit…”

“I uh.” He cast his eyes down to the floor, and rubbed his elbow nervously. “Yeah. Back in, well, I started working on it in January, but it was March when I really… stopped.”

“Qrow, that’s… that’s wonderful,” Tai said. “I’m so proud of you.”

Qrow shrugged, and turned his attention to James, who hadn’t said anything yet. “Jim?”

“Why didn’t you tell us?”

“I just— I figured—“ He scratched at his arm, suddenly ashamed of his decision, and said meekly,
“I figured it was only a matter of time till I relapsed again. I didn’t wanna disappoint you when I did.”

“Qrow…” James sighed. “You should have said something. This isn’t the sort of thing you do on your own. It’s not the sort of thing you can do on your own.”

“Yeah, well, I think we’ve established how brainless I am. But I wasn’t doing it on my own—that’s the thing I’ve been keeping from you. I’ve been going to group therapy. Every Friday night at Two Brothers on Eastside, you know they’ve got that community conference room? There’s about a half dozen of us who meet there. I knew I couldn’t do this on my own, I’ve tried that, so I found a group of people who were going through the same thing I was.”

“Does anyone else know?” Tai asked.

“Roman and Glynda,” Qrow said, and held up a hand to stop James’ protest before the betrayal had even settled into his eyes. “Roman had me followed and he blabbed to Glynda and I swore her to secrecy. She wanted me to tell you, I just couldn’t yet.”

James seemed to accept this, albeit reluctantly, and said, “So why are you telling us now?”

Qrow sighed. “Because today I had to stand in front of a courtroom full of people and tell them everything Whitney has done to be able to take the kids away from Jacques and I realized I was tired of you guys not knowing.”

Tai and James exchanged glances, and Tai said, “Whitney quit too?”

Qrow nodded. “Last year, around August. She wanted to leave Jacques but she knew he wouldn’t let her take the kids if she didn’t have a solid case, so she started going to the meetings. But she couldn’t let anyone know because if word got to Jacques he’d know something was up. When I started going to the meetings she let me in on everything. We’ve been having each other’s backs through this whole thing. It’s helped.”

Tai and James exchanged another glance, and once more it was Tai who spoke. “Qrow…” He sighed. “I love you. And this is something… that I have wanted for you for- for so long. I wish you’d told me. I understand why you didn’t. And no matter what happens— if it sticks or if you relapse, that doesn’t matter. I’m proud of you either way.”

“Heh.” He scrubbed his hand through his hair, and realized it was shaking. “I uh. I know you’ve always worried about me. I’m sorry for that. I’m going to do better, now. I’m going to… I’m going to be someone you don’t have to worry about.”

Tai snorted. “Please, I’m never going to stop worrying about you. You’re my little brother. It’s my job.”

“I am not that much younger than you!” he snapped automatically, and then grinned as relief washed over him. He sagged at the shoulders. “Thanks.”

-/-

Mercury waited a short time after Winter fled to go looking for her. The room was down to Whitney and the kids now, and he was feeling uneasy over how not-at-all relieved she’d seemed since arriving at home.

He found her in what had up until a few months ago been her father’s study, a hand on what had once been his desk, staring at some point on its surface. He tapped on the door as he came in, and
she startled and spun around, eyes wide, before her face swapped into an impassive mask.

“Just me,” he said, hovering just inside the doorway. “Um, I know if our positions were reversed I’d deck you for this, but are you okay?”

She watched him for a moment, and then turned away, burying her face in one hand before seeming to steady herself. “Mercury, I don’t know what happens next.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, in five months I will be seventeen, and a year after that I will be eighteen. That is two years- two years against sixteen. How am I supposed to heal sixteen years worth of harm in mere two? What do I do now?”

“Well, um.” He shrugged. He was out of his depth here; this was something he’d spent a lot of time thinking about himself. He tried the only thing he could think of. “Why do you only have two years?”

“I will be an adult then.”

“I mean, yeah, but— Winter, your mom isn’t going to just throw you out the minute you’re an adult. I mean… she stopped drinking for you, didn’t she?”

“How do you…”

“I guessed. It’s the only way Judge Khan would have let her keep you guys.”

“You’re right.” Winter moved over to the couch and half collapsed into it, returning her face to her hands. A shudder ripped through her, and Mercury took a step back. This was definitely beyond what he knew how to deal with. “And for my siblings this is wonderful. They’ll have a mother who will be able to be attentive to them, and guide their growth, and help them become, but me—“

“It’s not fair,” he cut in, and sat next to her. His hand hovered over her shoulder for a moment, and then he dropped it into his lap. “If she could do that for them, why couldn’t she do that for you?”

Another shudder, and, “Yes.”

There was silence. Mercury stared down at his hands in his lap, trying to figure out what to do—what would James do, how would he comfort her? He would know what to say, Mercury was sure of it. He certainly wouldn’t be so uncomfortable himself.

“You may leave, if you want to,” Winter said eventually. “I know this is outside of your comfort zone.”

“I- um—“ He twisted his hands together. “Do… do you want me to leave?”

“No.”

“Then- then I’ll stay. If that’s okay.”

Her shoulders sagged, and her voice was small, but he could hear the relief in it when she said a soft, “Thank you.”

-/-
I had Qrow quit drinking first AND I did it better fight me
Chapter 38

Chapter Summary

Mercury has a good month. Ozpin has a good party. Then the fun begins.

Chapter Notes

I know I said hiatus, but I'm a slut for instant gratification so have a chapter anyway. (The main reason for the hiatus is so that I can know where to chop up chapters anyway, so there's not much lost in me posting one now.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-/-

The next few weeks were… okay. At times, Mercury would even call them good. He spent the weekend with Emerald, and then the weekend following as well, because the Argus Theatre Company was opening their winter production of A Christmas Musical, and Emerald wanted to see it. Besides, Mercury preferred visiting Emerald to having Emerald visit him either way.

“What?” Emerald asked, mock surprised when he mentioned this. “Do you mean you don’t like having the General and the kid on your dick all the time?”

“Yeah, amazing, local teenager prefers privacy,” Mercury shot back, rolling his eyes while she snickered. “I don’t know. It’s just… I don’t feel like a problem around here. That’s all.”

At school, they were approaching exam time, and then it was exam time, and then school was out for winter break, and Mercury was fairly certain he’d scraped up a passing grade for the semester.

The weekend after school let out it seemed it was James’ turn to play host again, and Emerald came around again, once more accompanied by Hazel for dinner before leaving. She cheerfully informed them that she’d only barely passed for the semester, because of chronic ‘not doing her homework’ problems.

“I wish I could have that problem,” Mercury sighed. “But I’m living with my teacher’s kid brother and she tattles on me if I don’t behave myself.”

“Probably the most condescending way of saying she keeps me informed of your classroom behavior,” James said, amusement lacing his tone.

Generally speaking, Mercury didn’t care about Christmas, and this year was no different, but it was still kind of fun hanging out with James and Penny while they got ready for the holiday, and twice more he went with Winter to do her Christmas shopping, even going so far as to buy a few cheap token gifts for James and Penny and Winter and Hazel, and an actually decent gift for Emerald—an old figure from a nineties anime she loved called ‘Crystal Space Guardians: Constellations Fight! An Adventure Through Space!’ . He found it in a second-hand shop and immediately knew
she needed to have it.

“It even has all of its old armor pieces,” he explained to Winter, rearranging the transforming figure from one of its three forms to the next in sequence. “Emerald’s really into this show, Hazel has all the episodes on DVD and she’s on, like, episode 257 or something I think. I’ve tried watching it and I have no fucking clue what’s going on at any point, but Em’s super into it.”

“I suppose one would have to watch the episodes in sequential order to keep track of the plot,” Winter suggested. “If you come in in the middle of any story it would seem odd. Why, if someone were reading the story of your life and for some reason they picked up on a scene of you playing with a toy from an anime with a ridiculously long title, they might also find it hard to follow.”

“Nah, I think it would be pretty straightforward.” He finished transforming the figure one last time, and returned it to his bag. “Are you guys going to Ozpin’s solstice party tonight?”

“Yes. Mother is trying to get more involved with our support network now that Father is out of the picture. Are you?”

“Yeah, I guess.” They’d reached the food court by now; he dropped to sit at one of the tables and rubbed at the connectors for his leg with a grimace. “I think I need to get refitted, these are getting tight.”

“It’s been four months. Is that normal?”

“Hey, I’m a growing boy, what can I say?” He shrugged. “I’m supposed to get fitted about every six months anyway. I’ll talk to the General, he’ll set me up.”

“Ah. Hmm.” She gave him one of those private smiles. He bristled.

“What hmm?”

“Nothing. Just thinking that four months ago you would not have suggested going to Dr. Ironwood about your medical needs with so little reserve.”

“Yeah, well, I think of all people he’d be the one to understand about a tight connector.” He folded his arms and turned away with a huff, while Winter carried on smiling her own private smile.

-/-

Ozpin’s solstice party was packed, as usual. Parents and children filled every room in the house and spilled into the backyard; Ozpin moved around his guests, stopping here and there to speak with them as they enjoyed the gathering, or stood at second-floor landing and surveyed the crowd with satisfaction.

James was trying to decide if the end result would be worth talking Qrow into dancing with him (Qrow liked dancing, but not around crowds) when the front door opened and every head in the living room turned to see Principal Salem enter. There was a beat while she merely stood in the doorway, framed by moonlight with her head held high, and then she swept through the crowd and up to where Ozpin stood at the top of the stairs.

They spoke in murmurs, quiet words for them alone, and then Ozpin took a sip of his drink, nodded, and turned on his heel in the direction of his study, Salem striding regally behind him.

The crowd exploded into murmurs. Qrow muttered to James, “Hachi machi, did you see her dress?”
James hummed an affirmative. “I wonder where she found the material for it— it’s so black she’ll be hearing from Anish Kapoor’s lawyers any day now.”

Qrow turned slowly to James, incredulous. “Really, Jimmy? The color? That’s the part you picked up on? Also, seriously, Anish Kapoor? That reference is so dated it’s old enough to vote.”

“It’s a very dark material,” James said defensively. “What were you picking up on?”

“Oh, I noticed she had a cleavage window but I didn’t really…” He shrugged, neck burning in embarrassment. Qrow grinned.

“Uh, the titty window big enough to see from space?”

“Yeah yeah, I’m done.” He held out a hand. “Come dance? I’ll make it up to you.”

“I can live with that.” He took the outstretched hand and let Qrow pull him into the throng of dancers, glad that he hadn’t needed to talk him into it after all.

-/-

The crown was fairly plain, as crowns went. It was wood, and looked oddly as if it had grown on the tree exactly in that shape, and merely been plucked away. Dried brown vines curled around the prongs, and as Ozpin lifted it from the box Salem held, the last of the leaves fell away. He set it on a dais on his desk and turned back to Salem, steepling his hands on the desk in front of him.

“Well my dear,” he said, “I can only assume you made this delivery in person in order to extract some form of vengeance for the Santa thing, but I have to admit, I’m struggling to understand exactly how this qualifies as vengeance.” His eyes moved briefly but pointedly to the open window on her dress, and back up. “Tell me, how do I come off the worse for this?”

“I suppose that all depends on how you look at things,” she said. “It is a nice view, isn’t it?”

“Magnificent.”

“Mmm, yes, well, I hope you enjoy it,” and here she moved around his desk until she was behind him, and leaned in close, close enough that he could feel the warmth of her on his back, her breath on his ear, when she whispered, “Because it is the only view you get tonight.”

She stood, and moved to leave. At the door, she paused, and said, “Take care of my crown. I’ll be back for it.”

And left. Ozpin sat still for a long moment, eyes closed, then reached out to the chess game half-played on his desk and tipped over the king. He took a long, slow, deep breath, and then began restoring the game to a beginning state, a smile touching his lips, and moved one of his knights.

“And so the game begins again,” he murmured to the empty room, and leaned back to wait.

-/-
Somehow—and he was not really sure how—Mercury had been roped into helping Ruby sneak up to the attic to search for proof that Ozpin was an immortal wizard. This amounted mostly to standing watch to make sure no adults found her doing something so dangerous, but it also meant boosting her up to grab the string that hung from the attic hatch.

“That’s kinda weird,” he said, dropping her gently once the hatch was lowered and the ladder unfolded. “You’d think a house this size would have the sort of attic you get proper stairs with.”

“Our attic at home just has a hatch you lift up,” Ruby said, and scrambled up the ladder. Mercury followed.

“I know. And we have one of these at home, too, but Ozpin’s house is way bigger than either of ours. I wonder why his attic just has a hatch?”

“Maybe he has two attics.”

Ruby scrabbled around carefully, looking for a lightswitch, and then a beam of light appeared from Mercury’s phone. He shone it around, but there weren’t any light fixtures, or anything, really. Just a lot of pink insulation and a couple boxes of Christmas decorations that had seen better years.

“Don’t touch the insulation,” he warned her, and moved carefully around the attic to shine his light into nooks and crannies, looking for—anything, really. “This is a small attic. You might be right about there being two.”

“You think the other attic has all his wizard secrets in it?”

“If I was an immortal wizard with a spare attic, that’s where I’d put all my wizard secrets.”

“We should meet up with the others and tell them about the secret attic, then.” She began picking her way carefully to the attic hatch, Mercury’s phone the only thing to light her path, and added, “Hey Mercury, have you ever found anything here in the past?”

“The year I lived with you guys was the only year I came here,” he said, following her down the ladder once she was safely on it. “I wasn’t really into the search, so I didn’t look.”

“It’s too bad you didn’t stay with us, then. I bet you’d have found something by now. You’ve only been doing this for five minutes and we’ve already found evidence of a secret attic.”

They’d reached the bottom; he hoisted her up again so she could fold the ladder, and then they hit an impasse when they realized it was too high up to actually close. He set her back down.

“Sure you wanna go wishing something like that? Might not have got your precious Nora if I’d stuck around.”

“Mmm… nah.” She began searching around, peeking into various doors in search of a stool or a chair or something.

He folded his arms over his chest and watched her with a scowl. “What do you mean, nah?”

“I mean the universe obviously wants us to have both of you, so I think if you’d stayed with us, it would have figured something out. Aha!” She threw open the closet door she’d been peeking in, to reveal a stepladder. She carried it over and unfolded it; it was tall enough that standing on the top rung Mercury would be able to reach the hatch to close it. “See? The universe always makes sure things work out.”
He glowered at the ladder, and then at Ruby. “Whatever, just hold this thing steady. Last thing I need is to lose any more limbs.”

“Is that why you don’t like Nora? Because she took your place?”

“Hrmph. I don’t like anyone.” He steadied himself on the ladder, and pushed the attic door closed.

“You like me.”

“No I don’t.” He took a deep breath before looking down so that he could climb down from the ladder, and then closed his eyes at his precarious position, and hopped from the top, landing in a crouch and standing up as nonchalantly as possible. “Don’t do what I just did. I have built in shock absorbers, you’ll just get hurt.”

“Why do you care? You don’t like me.”

He glared again, then turned to put the ladder up. “If you get hurt Penny and the General will be upset and that will just make my home life harder.”

“Whatever you say, Mercury,” she said, grinning at his back while she followed him downstairs. She had a lot to tell the other kids, and privately, she had a lot to think about.

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Mercury tired of the party long before it was time to go, and slipped back upstairs in search of somewhere quiet to hang out until it was time to go. As he rounded the corner, he spotted Ozpin coming out of his study, and froze. Ozpin just smiled.

“Hello Mercury. What brings you up here? The party is meant to remain downstairs.”

“I know.” He drummed the toes of one foot on the carpet nervously. “I was looking for somewhere quiet to hang out— I don’t really, um…”

“Ah, I understand. Hmm…” He looked around thoughtfully. “Let’s see… oh, that will work. Why don’t you come into the library? It’s nice and quiet in there.”

Mercury shrugged, and followed him into a room that proved to be a small library, a little more cramped and less showy than the grand library downstairs. This one, unlike the main library, seemed more oriented for work and study rather than simply pleasure and comfort, evidenced by the fact that many books were not even on shelves, and instead relegated to stacks tucked away in corners and against the walls, and more sitting open on every surface in the room.

“It’s probably for the best none of the children know I have a second library,” Ozpin said, amusement lacing his tone. “I daresay this one would set the rumor mill turning lightning quick.”

“Should I not tell anyone about it, then?”

“I’ll trust your own judgment for that one.” He winked, and then his expression took a more serious turn. “While I’ve got you here, I’d like to ask how you’re settling in with James. I haven’t gotten as many opportunities to look into your situation as I would have liked.”

“You could be a little less creepy when you say things like that. Why do you care?”

“I was a social worker before I was a educator.” He moved over to the window and sat down on the window seat, watching Mercury thoughtfully. “I’ve never really gotten out of the habit of
looking after the children who slip through the cracks, even when they leave my purview.”

“That’s a little less creepy.” Mercury didn’t like standing while adults were sitting; he grabbed the nearest chair and evicted the stack of books in it before sitting as well, mirroring Ozpin’s pose. “Why’d you change careers?”

“My children needed me elsewhere. Well? Are you settling in with James?”

He shrugged. “Honestly? I don’t know. I… I like it there, but I just—“ He shrugged again. “There’s this— itch, in my brain. It’s not right, not the way I— I don’t know how to explain it, but I don’t… I don’t belong there.”

“How so?”

“They’re all so—“ He made a motion in the air, like he was trying to pull the answer from the space around him, and then tossed hands in the air with a frustrated huff. “They’re so nice.”

“Ahh.”

“What ah?”

“Just ah. I think that’s an informative answer, that’s all.” He stood, and gave a tiny little bow. “I’ve pried into your affairs deeply enough, I think. I’ll leave you to your solitude now. Happy Solstice.”

“Whatever,” Mercury muttered, already reaching for his phone.

-/-

Ozpin passed on Mercury’s whereabouts to James, so Mercury was left upstairs until it was time to leave. He was quiet on the drive home, but Penny filled up the silence with her account of searching the library with Sun, pulling books and nudging ornaments in hopes of activating a secret passage.

“I hope you didn’t make a mess,” James said.

“Of course not!” Penny responded. “We were very careful that anything we touched we put back exactly as we found it. We are searching for proof of Ozpin’s immortality, not destroying his home.”

“That’s good. I’m not sure how I feel about you kids doing that much, but at least you’re being responsible about it.”

“He encourages it,” Mercury said, looking up from staring out the window at the passing night. “He practically told me to tell everyone about his second library.”

“I’m sorry you felt the need to disappear,” James said, glancing up at him in the rearview. “Did you have a nice time otherwise?”

“It was fine. I just can’t handle parties for too long, but the library was nice and quiet.”

“Then I’m glad you found somewhere.” They had reached the house; there was a car sitting in the road in front of the house, a figure sat in the driver’s seat. As they approached, the figure got out and headed up the walk. James frowned. “Who could this be?”

As the headlights swept over the car and the man in question, Mercury’s eyes widened and he pressed his hands over his mouth.
“Oh gods,” he said, muffled against his hands and stilted around breathing that was suddenly coming far too heavy. “Oh gods, not him, not him.”

Penny reached out, stopping just short of touching him, and said, “Mercury? What is wrong?”

“Detective Pickerel,” Mercury spat out, just as James pulled the car into the garage. He killed the engine and turned around to address his young ward.

“Who is Detective Pickerel?”

“He’s the guy that arrested Tyrian,” Mercury said. “He’s the guy that decided me and Em needed to be separated.”

“What is he doing here?” Penny asked.

James looked Mercury over, then glanced up in the direction of their front door, where it could be assumed Detective Pickerel was waiting for them. “I think that’s a very good question to ask.”

-/-

Chapter End Notes

Shoutout to that time Salem turned up at Atlas with a titty window big enough to put in a cathedral and I needed to have it pointed out to me.
Chapter 39

Chapter Summary

Mercury panics, and makes a decision. Fortunately Winter has his back.

Chapter Notes

I think I'm going to give up on my "not posting till it's done" idea. The main reason for that was that I wasn't sure how to chop the chapters up, but they're chopping themselves up nicely on their own, making it moot.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-/-

Ten minutes later, James led Detective Pickerel into his workroom and closed the door carefully behind him. He didn’t sit down, but he did gesture for Detective Pickerel to do so; once he had, James folded his hands behind his back and gave him his full attention.

“I assume that whatever brings you here has something to do with Mercury,” he said.

“Somewhat. Are you familiar with Tyrian Callows?”

“I know of him. What I’ve heard doesn’t impress me.”

“Believe me, whatever you’ve been told hasn’t even scratched the surface. We’ve been trying to keep things hushed up, but—“

He reached into his waistcoat and handed over a newspaper clipping. The picture at the top was a mugshot of a man with lank hair and a grin at odds with the nature of a mugshot. James skimmed the visible paragraph under the headline, but the headline itself told him everything he needed to know.

Three Dead, Seven Wounded in Prison Break

The article expanded on that— Collows had escaped prison during the night after murdering three guards on his way out, leaving two more guards and two prisoners injured as well. That had been three weeks ago. James handed the article back.

“He’s escaped,” James said. “Why am I only just now being informed of this?”

“We saw no reason to place any burdens on the children or their families unless it was necessary. We believed Callows was simply escaping, and didn’t believe the children would be relevant.”

“They had a right to know.”

“Perhaps. Perhaps not. I did not come here to argue the matter— I want to speak to the boy. He
may have some insight into his former guardian that can help us locate him and put him back behind bars before anyone else gets hurt.”

“That will be Mercury’s decision. If he wants to speak to you, I won’t stop him.” He moved over to the door and opened it, unsurprised to find Mercury on the other side of it, ear pressed to the door. He raised an eyebrow at the boy, who glared defiantly back at him. James’ expression softened. “Well? I assume there’s no reason to fill you in.”

Mercury nodded once, sharp, and turned his attention to Pickerel. “What do you want to know?”

Mercury was shaking all over. He shoved his hands into his pockets to disguise the motion and slouched over to the desk chair near the couch, straddling the back and hoping he came off more casual and disinterested than he felt.

“First things first,” Pickerel said, reaching into his waistcoat for a stack of photographs, “We found this in Callows’ cell. Many prisoners keep pictures of their family and children in their cell so we paid it no mind, but in light of recent events we think there may be more relevance to their presence.”

He handed the stack over. The top photo was a picture of presumably Tyrian’s cell, with three familiar school photos on the wall, and the rest were photocopies of the pictures in question. Mercury sighed.

“My hair looked really stupid that day.”

“I recognize the photos of you and Miss Sustrai,” Pickerel said, ignoring the remark, “But who is the third young woman? We don’t have any sort of record of a third ward.”

“No, I wouldn’t think you would.” Mercury stared down at the third photo. Even in black and white, her gaze was equal parts haughty and hungry. The sort of girl who would burn the world to the ground just to get what she felt was owed her. “Her name is Cinder. She was… I don’t know, really. She was there before me and Em were, and I think she’d been there most of her life. I don’t think she was Tyrian’s but… he was different to her than he was to us.”

“How so?”

“I don’t know, he just was! He— he wanted to break her. And when he couldn’t, he just… seemed to really love that. But then he’d get annoyed, and disappear into his basement. And— look, he wanted to break us too, but it seemed almost personal with Cinder. I don’t know! He was a sick fuck and she was his favorite toy. I can’t explain it better than that.”

“Where was she when we arrested him? There were just you two at the time.”

“She ran away. Uh, a couple months before that, actually. Tyrian used to go out looking for her, sometimes for days at a time. He said once someone belonged to his queen there was no escaping.”

“Is it possible he might be searching for her now?”

“Wouldn’t surprise me.” Mercury shrugged, and scrubbed his hands through his hair, took a few deep breaths to get himself under control. Detached, that was the key. Remove his personal connection from the equation.

“Do you know if there’s anyone he might go to for shelter? Any friends or contacts?”
“Uh…” Mercury rubbed the back of his neck. “Watts, maybe?”

James’ head shot up, gaze boring into Mercury, ignored by Pickerel, who said, “Watts?”

“Arthur Watts. When Tyrian would leave to go look for Cinder he’d get his boyfriend or whatever to watch us. I don’t know how to reach him, sorry.”

James pinched the bridge of his nose and let out a slow breath. Mercury raised an eyebrow at him. “All right over there, General?”

“I… knew Arthur Watts, once. I wish I could say I’m surprised he got involved with a man like that but— but I’m not. That’s all.”

“Do you know how to reach him?” Pickerel asked, and James shook his head.

“We fell out over twenty years ago. I didn’t even know he was still in the area.”

Pickerel nodded and wrote a few notes on his notepad. “It’s something, at least. We might have something about him in our records. As to the other girl— have you been in contact with her since her disappearance?”

“No, nothing. Far as I care she could have fallen off the face of the planet.” He snorted, and added, “Have you talked to Emerald yet?”

“No, Miss Sustrai was going to be my next stop.” He stood. “Very well, I think I have everything I need. If there’s anything else you can think of that will help me—“ He reached once more into his waistcoat and took out a calling card. “I assure you, Mr. Black, I am doing all I can to get Callows back behind bars.”

He handed the card to James, who clapped a hand to his shoulder and subtly steered him out of the workroom.

“Mercury, why don’t you get ready for bed? We can talk later if you need to. Detective Pickerel, I’ll show you out—“

Mercury nodded and gave them a moment to get downstairs, then darted down the hall and into Penny’s room. Her window was right over the front door; he ignored her query and pushed it open, straining for the sound of the door opening while waving Penny to silence.

“I’ll explain in a second,” he hissed, and fell silent as they heard James and Pickerel come onto the front step.

-/-

James closed the door carefully behind him, content that Mercury hadn’t followed him and would not hear the following conversation.

“Detective, do you believe the children are in danger from Callows?”

Pickerel nodded. “I didn’t want to say anything and alarm the boy, but based on reports of how he spoke of ‘his children’ I fully believe he intends to reunite with them.”

“And what do you plan to do to protect them?”

“For the moment I would ask that you maintain restricted movements during your day-to-day lives. I’ll have officers stationed nearby to keep an eye on you all, I’d ask that you cooperate with them.
It’s almost Christmas— take some time and hang around your home. We’ll let you know if we feel the need to do more.”

“All right,” James said, after considering this for a moment. “All right. I’ll work with you in whatever ways I can. But understand this, Detective. If that man comes near my son again I will do whatever is necessary to protect him. Do you understand?”

“I’ll be sure to catch him first, then.”

-/-

Upstairs, Mercury, working on autopilot, pulled the window closed, careful not to make a sound, and then hit the floor when his legs gave up on him. He pressed both hands over his mouth, trying to stifle his panicked breathing. The world blurred; spots popped across his vision, and he couldn’t breathe-

He became aware of Penny saying his name very insistently, and then the door closed downstairs, and, without quite making the decision, he sprang to his feet and dashed across the hall into his room, bolting the door closed before sinking down to curl against it.

There was a knock on his door, and a concerned voice that he couldn’t make out; he forced his breathing into desperate silence until he heard footsteps moving down the hall and choked on a stifled breath, gasping for air as more spots danced across his vision.

He could not say, even after calm, exactly what had set him off. He’d heard James’ words and terror had rocketed through him, terror deeper and more visceral than any he’d ever felt before.

Coherence returned slowly as he calmed down, a little bit at a time. His breathing evened out, eventually. His hands (finally) stopped shaking.

He was exhausted. He hurt all over.

As he came back to himself, a clarity took the place of his panic. He knew— somehow, he wasn’t quite sure of when he’d made the decision— what he had to do.

Across the hall, he could hear James talking to Penny. If he strained his hearing, he could probably make out what they said, but it didn’t really matter. He stood mechanically and stumbled over to his closet, throwing it open and digging out the duffel that had a few short months ago held everything he owned in the world.

He took a second to look around his room. Somehow he’d managed to accumulate a lot of stuff even despite his conviction of not letting James coddle him. Even his wardrobe wouldn’t fit in the duffel, let alone everything else.

Oh well, he’d done this before. He laid the duffel open on the floor and began dropping things into it— shirts, pants, underwear. All four of his binders, because somewhere along the way he’d become the guy who owned four binders.

His sewing kit. His markers. His puppets.

He hesitated with those, and grabbed Puppet Ruby from the bundle; he scribbled a quick note and pinned it to her front, then laid her gently on his desk.

Everything else he’d have to leave behind. It was better to break away entirely anyway.
One last thing. He fished his phone out of his shirt and set it on the desk beside Puppet Ruby. He couldn’t give James the chance to track him.

He’d snuck out enough times over the past few months that it was the work of seconds to get the window open and the screen removed so he could slip outside. He paused before pulling the window back down, though, and stared into the bedroom. Much as he’d tried to fight it, since coming here it had begun to feel like home. Leaving it like this—

—hurt more than he liked, but it had to be done. He let out a long, slow breath, and put a stranglehold on the emotions threatening to hold him back.

Then he’d made his way along the roof until he could drop down into the yard, and slipped away.

-/-

Winter was sitting in her window seat, staring out into the starry night, the book she’d been reading open and forgotten in her lap while she worked through and processed how the previous passage had left her feeling.

(The book was a steampunk western she’d borrowed from James’ library; she’d found herself somewhat fascinated by the young sheriff, who was clearly undermining her evil father’s decisions, despite everyone in town believing her to be in his pocket. The narrative spoke to something deep within her. She hoped the Sheriff survived to the end of the book. It would be nice if she got a happy ending, too.)

A tap-tap-tap pulled her out of her thoughts, and she looked around for the source before finally spotting Mercury down in her backyard, tossing gravel at her window. She rolled her eyes and pushed the window open.

“IT’S one in the morning,” she said. “Why are you in my yard reenacting a cheesy nineties teen romcom? This better not be a love confession,” she added.

“I need your help,” he said, ignoring her bait, and now she noticed the duffel bag thrown over his shoulder and the desperate cant of his eyebrows.

“I need your help,” he said, ignoring her bait, and now she noticed the duffel bag thrown over his shoulder and the desperate cant of his eyebrows.

“I’LL be down in a moment.”

-/-

It was barely a few minutes later when Winter joined Mercury out in the yard, a pair of jeans and a jacket thrown on over her nightshirt and a heavy coat draped over one arm. She handed him the latter with a noise of admonishment, and he shivered as he shrugged it on. His own coat was hanging by the door over at the house; he hadn’t wanted to risk getting caught to slip down and grab it, but now he was shivering violently in the freezing air.

“What do you need?”

“I have to get out of here. Can you give me a ride somewhere?”

“Where? And what happened? I’m sure that if you talk to Dr. Ironwood—“

“No! He can’t know I’m leaving until I’m well away. He’ll try to stop me.”

“What happened?”
He huffed and scrubbed his hands through his hair, pacing while he explained the evening in stilted, hurried tones, leaving out the conversation he’d heard on the front porch. He wasn’t ready to think about that.

When he was done, Winter folded her arms with a frown. “So you’re running away? Is that a wise choice? You’d do better to remain with Dr. Ironwood, where you’ll be safe.”

“No I— Agh! Don’t you get it, Winter? If Tyrian finds me while I’m still with James, what the fuck do you think happens to him? Or to Penny? If he finds me he’ll just take me back, and I can live with that, okay, I survived him for a year, I’ll survive him again if I have to, but if he finds me with them, he’ll kill them, or worse. What if he decides to drag Penny in too?” He started pacing again. “I’m not going to get them hurt, okay? I’m not going to bring that on them, they deserve— better. They deserve better. I won’t bring that down on them.”

Winter watched him pace, and he was dimly aware that her face had slipped into a more thoughtful expression, the sort she wore when she was considering a strategy while they played Mud Mummy Invasion and she was made commander: the look that meant she was breaking everything down into a puzzle, analyzing available resources and considering possible solutions.

He also recognized when she hit on an idea she liked. He stopped, and she took the cue.

“I do know of one person who may be able to hide you,” she said slowly. “It’s the safest place in Vale. You’re not going to like it, though.”

“Winter? I’m desperate.”

-/-

Roman groaned and wiggled out from under the arm tossed across his chest. It took him a minute to find his phone; it was in his pants pocket, and those had been abandoned near the bedroom door.

“S’go’n on?” came from the pile he’d left on the bed; he ignored this in favor of frowning at his phone when he finally realized who was calling him.

“It’s one thirty in the morning, princess,” he said. “I hope you have a good reason for calling me.”

He was silent while he listened to Winter explain herself, brow furrowing deeper and deeper with each word. Finally he sighed, long-suffering.

“All right, if you insist. I can be back at the bar in… call it fifteen minutes, all right? I’ll meet you kids there.”

There were no niceties to hanging up; the conversation done, he ended the call and began searching for his clothes. In the bed, his current boyfriend had finally woken enough to prop himself up and watch.

“Never as fun watching you put clothes on,” he said conversationally.

“Yeah, well, I have to wear clothes sometime. I had an undershirt…”

“Think it’s on my side. So what’s up?”

“Mm. Something came up with some of my kids. Gotta go take care of things.”

“Everything all right?”
“Right as rain.” He’d located one of his socks; he gave up on the other, and sat down to pull his shoes on.

“Gonna call me when you get everything done?”

“Nn, maybe. We’ll see. I’ve got a busy few days coming up.” He was completely dressed; he stood and leaned over, getting a sound kiss for his efforts. “I’ll call you when I get ready to. Tell the wife I said hello.”

“Sure.” He stretched and rolled over, already starting to fall back to sleep. “She left you a tin of Christmas cookies. Make sure you grab them on your way out.”

-/-

Minutes later, Roman sat astride his bike, helmet in front of him, and stared thoughtfully at his phone. After a few seconds he pulled up a contact labeled “Tiger Tail”, and sent off a quick text: *Need you to do some tracking for me.*

The reply was seconds later.

**Give me the name.**

-/-

Chapter End Notes

The scene with Mercury throwing gravel at Winter's window was one of the earliest scenes I planned for this story, and the reason I set out to have Mercury and Winter be antagonistic of each other- the idea was that they would be at odds and he'd go to her in his time of need, forcing him to open up to her and allowing them to bond over their trauma. I wasn't expecting them to end up being bros, but I think that worked out better anyway. Their friendship is complicated and confusing for everyone, including them, but they care deeply about each other and Mercury choosing to go to her when he needed help is more powerful for their friendship than if he'd disliked her.

Also, since people tend to speculate about identities when stuff like this happens, Roman's current boyfriend isn't anyone. In RWBY terms, he's just a silhouette. (Also no, he's not cheating on his wife. They have an arrangement. I figure you guys are smart enough to figure that out from context, but it never hurts to state things for the record.)
Mercury realized where they were when Winter pulled into a parking lot down the street from Junior’s. He looked around wildly.

“Okay, I know I said I was desperate—“

“I told you you wouldn’t like it,” Winter said, adjusting her mirror to watch the road behind them.

“Torchwick, though? He’s an asshole.”

“True. But Junior’s is the safest place in the city to be if he actually likes you, and one of the most dangerous if he’s decided you need to be dealt with.” In the street behind them, a motorcycle sped by. Winter made to get out, and gestured for Mercury to do the same. Once they were both out in the cold, she added, “I know it’s not ideal. But you don’t have a lot of alternatives.”

“I could just disappear. I have money.”

“That’s a short term solution.”

“And this isn’t?”

“Hopefully it only needs to be. Let’s go, he’s waiting for us.”

They were passing the alley beside the bar when Torchwick’s cane shot out of the darkness and stopped them. He stepped out in front of them.

“That car of yours isn’t exactly conspicuous, princess. And you don’t even check alleys before walking past them? My my my, you kids really do need my help.” He shouldered his cane and sauntered down the alley, beckoning over his shoulder for them to follow. “Come on, then. We’ll take the back entrance.”

They exchanged a look, and hurried after him: he led them to a door at the back of the alleyway, which led into the back area of the bar. A corridor lead to the front, with one door on one side and
three on the other. He pointed at the middle door.

“That’s the bathroom, if you need one,” he said, and led them through the first door on that wall, into the breakroom. It was a pretty simple room, with faded wallpaper, a worn couch, and a card table off to one side. In the corner a mini-fridge, a microwave, and a coffee maker sat on a table that looked like it had been put together by a teenager in woodshop. “You can stay in here for now. You’ll be safer down here than at my place, since Junior’s out on the front right now and no one’s getting past him. I’m actually going to go tell him you’re back here. Make yourself at home.”

And without anything further, he disappeared from the room. Mercury dropped his duffel beside the couch and dropped into it gingerly, joined a moment later by an even more ginger Winter, who sat at the edge of the couch and kept her elbows tucked close, as though trying to touch as little of the couch with her body as possible.

“This sucks,” Mercury said, flopping backward and folding his arms. “You know I was actually looking forward to Christmas for once?”

“Maybe you’ll be home in time,” Winter said, but her suggestion had no hope behind it, and then said, hesitantly, “You know I’ll have to tell Dr. Ironwood about you leaving.”

“Yeah, I figured. Just don’t tell him where I’m at. He’ll come try to drag me home or something.”

“He wants you safe.”

Mercury shrugged. “I want him safe. And Tyrian can’t do much to me he hasn’t already.” He sighed and leaned forward, burying his face in his hands with a huff. “I should have fucking known. Everything was too good. I was actually… I was enjoying myself. You know? That other fucking shoe. It’s always too goddamn big.”

-/-

Winter left once she was sure Mercury was in safe hands, when Torchwick came in with an armload of blankets and a few pillows. She exchanged a few parting barbs with both on her way out, leaving Mercury and Torchwick alone.

“Junior knows you’re back here,” Roman said, dropping the bundle of bedding on Mercury’s lap. “We only have one other employee not off for Christmas and we’re going to fill him in, but no one else will know you’re here unless you do something stupid like wander off. So don’t do that.”

“Whatever.”

“Hey, a little gratitude, kid, we’re keeping you safe. A thank you wouldn’t go amiss.”

Mercury folded his arms. The effect was slightly diminished by the pile of blankets on his lap. “Not until you tell me why.”

Torchwick rolled his eyes. “Because your girlfriend asked nicely.”

“Gross. And try again.”

They stared each other down, Mercury glowering while Torchwick just stared expectantly before smiling.

“Because Qrow is my best friend and you’re one of his kids. Your safety is my priority.”
Mercury bristled. “I am not one of Qrow’s kids.”

“You think so?”

“I don’t know what world you live in, but people who give up on kids don’t have claim to them afterward.”

“You think he gave up on you? Sure, why not. That’s why he’s putting his entire relationship on hold to make sure you get what you need.”

Mercury’s glare deepened. “That’s just the guilt talking. He didn’t care about me before—“

But Torchwick cut him off with a jab of his cane in Mercury’s direction. “You forget who he usually spills his troubles to, kid. He agonized for months trying every solution he could think of that didn’t involve giving you up. Guess who he agonized to? You had literally one thing to do, just one, and that was stop taking swings at his niece. That’s it. You could have committed cold-blooded murder and he’d have helped you bury the body but you had to go and plant yourself on the one button he had. He didn’t give up on you, he reasoned that you needed one-on-one attention that he couldn’t give you. So he decided you should be sent to someone who could. What happened after that isn’t his fault.” He shook his head. “Listen, kid, you have every right to feel whatever you feel about Qrow. He’d probably agree with you. But you don’t get to say he doesn’t care about you. You’re not the one that had to peel him off the bar after letting you go.”

“I’m supposed to feel sorry for him?”

“No. You’re supposed to grow some goddamn manners when you’re told someone is keeping you safe as a favor to someone who cares about you. I don’t care how you feel. But you’re the one who asked why I was helping you. That’s why. Because Qrow cares about you, and I care about Qrow.”

“Tch.” Mercury threw one of the pillows onto the arm of the couch and lay down, turning his back to Torchwick in a clear sulk. “What do you know, anyway?”

“You’re not the only one with a tragic backstory, kid.” Torchwick opened the door and flicked the light off on his way out, adding, “You’d be surprised how often there’s someone willing to help you climb up when you hit rock bottom. But you gotta be willing to take their hand when it’s offered. Sleep sweet, Mercury.”

And then he was gone, leaving Mercury to fume in the dark.

After a few minutes he got up and ran over to check the door was locked, then hurried back over to the couch.

Another few minutes he was up again, turning on the light so he could see to make the couch up properly and change into something more comfortable for sleeping in. Then he sat on the couch and stared into the darkness. He rubbed at the connector for his legs, wished he felt safe enough to take them off; he wished he had his phone, his music, to shut out the yelling in his brain.

He wondered if Pickerel had told Emerald yet.

He wondered if Winter had told Ironwood yet.

He wondered where he was going to go from here. Winter was wrong, this was just a temporary solution. But at least he had a starting point, and help, no matter how suspect the motives of that help.
“God,” he muttered, and flopped back onto the couch, hopefully to fall asleep this time.

Back at the Ironwood home, James was pacing his workroom while he explained the situation to Qrow over the phone. Qrow let out a low whistle as he drew to a close.

“That’s a goddamn bitch of a sticky situation.”

“You’re telling me. Can I ask a favor of you?”

“Sure, name it.”

“Do you mind taking Penny for a few days? If Callows is trying to find Mercury, and he does track him here, I’d rather not have Penny in danger, too.”

“Sure, no problem.”

“I know it’s Christmas—“

“Hey, it’s no big deal. You know we love her. She’ll just make our Christmas that much brighter.”

“Thank you.” He sat down on his couch, scrubbing his hand over tired eyes, and stifled a yawn.

“Course. I’ll come pick her up after breakfast, all right? Do you want me to tell the kids what’s going on?”

“Of course. They have a right to know what’s going on in their family, especially when it effects them.”

“Hmm.”

He sounded fond. James leaned back on the couch and threw his arm over his eyes. “What are you thinking?”

“Nothing, just like the sound of that. A family that has both of us. That’s all.”

“And you call me a romantic.”

“You’re rubbing off on me.” There was an expectant silence, and Qrow said, a little more worried, “It’s gonna be all right, Jim. No one’s hurting the kid again. Not on your watch.”

“True, but how much progress has been undone? He’s locked himself in his room and he won’t answer when I knock.”

“Could be asleep.”

“I hope so. Maybe he’ll feel better in the morning.”

“Maybe.” Qrow sighed. “Guess you’re not gonna be able to come to our Christmas Adam party tonight, huh?”

“I guess not. It’ll be a shame to miss it. Oh, I’ll have to call Hazel and tell him he doesn’t need to pick up Mercury— well, I’ll have to call him anyway, see what’s going on over on his end.”

“Emerald should be safe, at least. I expect Callows would think twice before risking the wrath of a
man that size.”

An image flashed through James’ mind, Callows’ mugshot and the grin he’d given the camera, like he was proud of himself. He dispelled the thought with a shake of his head. “Somehow I don’t think it’s that simple.”

“Maybe. Also, just to let you know, I’m calling Torchwick tomo- well, in the morning. Junior’s got resources the cops haven’t, they might be able to track Callows faster than Pickerel.”

James sighed. “As much as I don’t want to involve your criminal friends in something like this, I—okay. I don’t trust Pickerel’s judgment. All right. Do what you need to.” He stifled another yawn, and added, “If you’re going to be friends with the local crime family, you might as well get some use out of them.”

Qrow made another fond noise over the phone. “Get some sleep, Tinman. You’ve got a big storm ahead of you, you need to be rested for it.”

James opened his mouth to protest and was cut off by another yawn. He gave the phone a sheepish mumble. “All right. Good night, Scarecrow. I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Night. Sleep sweet.”

-/-

Mercury woke suddenly the next morning when he heard rapping on the door. He gave a strangled yell and toppled off of the couch, tangled up in his blankets and breathing heavily while he tried to remember why he was sleeping on a couch in a cold breakroom instead of at home in his comfortable bed.

The door opened and memory flooded back; before he could start panicking, a man with terrible sideburns- no, his mind corrected, a boy; he was barely an adult- came in, carrying a set of keys in one hand and a bag that smelled of fast food biscuits and gravy in the other. Mercury blinked rapidly, trying to regain his senses and hoping he didn’t look too silly in a pile of blankets on the floor.

“Good morning,” the boy said, ignoring his current state and moving over to set the food on the card table. “Roman came by last night and filled me in on everything, so I brought you breakfast. I hope you like biscuits and gravy, We Got Biscuits is the only place open this early without going out to the interstate.”

Mercury’s attention was drawn to the bag he’d set down; his stomach gave a loud rumble, and he remembered that he hadn’t eaten much besides party snacks since lunch yesterday. He untangled from the blankets and staggered over to the table.

“I eat what’s put in front of me. And I’m starving.”

“I thought you might be.” He began unpacking the food- two to-go trays with biscuits and gravy, sausage links, cheesy eggs- Mercury carried his own platter over to the couch and dug in. “I brought some books over too, in case you got bored. Winter couldn’t say what you like reading so I brought a selection.”

Mercury stopped with a forkful of eggs halfway to his mouth, realization hitting him. “You’re the college boyfriend, aren’t you?”

He paused in setting down the backpack he was carrying, and raised one bushy eyebrow at
Mercury. “You… you do know she’s a lesbian, right?”

“If I didn’t you’d have just outed her. No, I know, it’s just a dumb joke. Cause she said she was hanging around with a college guy and I was teasing her. Don’t be stupid.” He’d taken the edge off of his hunger now; he set his plate aside and came over to look in the backpack of books the man had brought. “Let’s see what you’ve got. Thief and the Butcher, aren’t they making a movie about that one?, Violet’s Garden- are you sure you meant to bring that? I’m pretty sure it’s lesbian porn.”

“It’s erotica, and, uh, it’s not for you.” He reached over to pluck the book away from Mercury, but Mercury moved it out of reach and started flipping through it.

“Tch, no pictures. Why are you reading lesbian ~erotica~?”

“It’s for one of my classes.”

“Hm. I may need to reconsider going to college, if this is the kind of stuff you get to read.” He handed the book over and dove back into the bag, while the man tucked the book into his pants pocket. “You don’t have Third Crusade, do you? I was reading that at home and didn’t bother grabbing it on my way out.”

“Nope, sorry.”

“Ugh, that’s so lame.” He grabbed his plate from the couch and came over to sit at the table to finish eating instead. “Who are you, anyway?”

“My name is Tukson.”

Mercury froze. “Ah.”

Tukson gave him a weak smile. “You know who I am?”

“You name is all over the growth wall in the kitchen back at Qrow’s. Yeah, I know who you are.”

/-/

After breakfast, Penny threw together an overnight bag, so that she could have everything she needed for a few days at Qrow’s.

“Even if we don’t get things sorted out in a few days, I’ll still figure something else out then,” James assured her. “This is just a short-term solution to keep you safe.”

“What about keeping Mercury safe?”

“It will be easier to keep Mercury safe if I don’t have to worry about you at the same time.”

“And you will make sure that man does not hurt him again?”

“You have my word.” Downstairs, the door opened and Qrow called a greeting up. James glanced in that direction and then back to Penny with a reassuring smile. “All right, time to go.”

“Hold on, I want to say goodbye to Mercury.”

She hurried over to his door, still locked and bolted after his panic attack the night before, and knocked. “Mercury? I am leaving now. Please come out, I want to say goodbye.”

They both waited, silent, but there was no response. James gave her shoulder a reassuring squeeze.
“I’ll keep at it,” he said. “Come on, Qrow is waiting.”

Downstairs, Penny hurried over and flung herself into Qrow’s arms as soon as she spotted him.

“Hey, sweetheart,” he said. “You good?”

“Mercury is not speaking to me,” she pouted.

“He’s locked himself in his room and won’t answer us,” James explained.

“You sure he’s okay in there?”

“No, I’m not.” James rubbed at his temples. “But I’m not quite ready to just break his door down because he waited too long to come out on his own. It’s very early. He could just be sleeping.”

“Yikes. Yeah, not a good idea when you’re trying to build trust with the kid. He hasn’t exactly got a track record of understanding extenuating circumstances.” He added, setting Penny down and grabbing her bag instead, “Ready to go, hon?”

“Winter is coming.”

“What?” Qrow shook his head and turned around to find Winter coming up the walk, hands folded stiffly behind her back in a way that suggested she didn’t want to be here, which was unusual enough in itself to concern him.

“Good morning, Winter,” James said. “I’m afraid now isn’t really the best time for visitors, unfortunately.”

“I know,” she said, stopping on the step and moving almost into attention. Alarm bells were going off in Qrow’s head— something was wrong. “Mercury told me everything. That’s why I’m here. I came to tell you he’s gone.”

By the time Winter had finished explaining- leaving out the detail of where she’d taken him-, James was barely holding himself together. He paced anxiously, and then rounded on Winter.

“Why didn’t you send him home?” he demanded. “Why did you help him leave?”

While she was speaking, Winter’s expression had become impassive, gaze fixed on a point somewhere above his shoulder. “Because if I didn’t help him, he’d have left anyway, and we might have never seen him again. At least this way we know he’s somewhere safe.”

“He was safe here!”

Winter took a careful step back, somehow tensing even more than she already was. “His safety wasn’t what he was worried about.”

James froze. “What?”

“He wasn’t worried about his own safety. He was worried about what might happen to you and Penny if Tyrian found him with you.”

“...what?”
“He heard what you said last night,” Penny said quietly. “When you told Mr. Pickerel that you would do whatever you must to keep that man away from him. He was listening at my window and he heard you.”

James looked as though he’d been hit by lightning, perhaps while getting off of a roller coaster. He raised his hands, and lowered them, and then raised them again to steeple against the bridge of his nose, taking a few deep breaths before breathing a soft, emphatic, “Fuck.”

-/-

Chapter End Notes

James, softly but with feeling: *Fuck.*
Qrow in the background: Hot.
Chapter 41

Chapter Summary

Everyone is playing the waiting game, but at least the company isn't so bad.

Chapter Notes

I think I was going somewhere with the Tukson thing and then sometime in the hiatus forgot what it was. Maybe I'll use him next volume. What am I saying of course I'm using him next volume, he's my SON and if I'm stuck writing Clover in a significant role you can bet I'm getting a trade off and writing Tukson too.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-/-

By the time he finished breakfast, Mercury had come to terms with Tukson’s identity, and the fact that Winter had kept it from him rather than just letting him know. It wasn’t like he didn’t know he had predecessors. It wasn’t the kids who came before him that he had a problem with.

“I think she figured it wasn’t important, and that you had enough on your mind without worrying about something that didn’t matter.”

“She could have just said. Like you say, it wasn’t important. The fact she kept it hidden makes it feel more significant than it was.”

“It also has to be said that I haven’t exactly broadcasted that I was back in town. Winter only found out by accident, because we ran into each other.”

“Why keep it secret? I bet Qrow’d be glad to know you were around.”

He shrugged. “I've done things I’m not proud of since leaving Vale. I’m trying to get back to right but until then, I don’t want to walk back into people’s lives and expect them to shoulder that load.”

“Oh. Yeah. I get that.” Mercury looked around. “So is Torchwick going to be here today, or are you on guard duty instead?”

“He said he had some things to take care of, but I’m not your only guard, Junior is here too.”

“What? Really?”

Tukson jabbed a thumb over his shoulder. “He’s in his office working on last-minute tax stuff.”

Mercury stood. “I— I need to go talk to him. Hold that thought.”

-/-
The office wasn’t hard to find— it was the room on the other side of the bathroom, and the door was open, revealing Junior at his desk, going over records with a computer in front of him.

It was hard to imagine this man, in his reading glasses and a comfortable sweater depicting a hibernating bear beside a Christmas tree, was the ruler of Vale’s underworld. Mercury tapped on the door and shuffled awkwardly on the threshold until Junior looked up at him.

“Mercury,” he said, slipping his glasses off. “It’s good to see you again.”

“Y-yeah. It has been awhile. I had long hair back then.”


“Um, I just wanted to, um, th-thank you. For helping me.” He rubbed his elbow uncomfortably, and was surprised when Junior smiled.

“Did that hurt you as much as it looks like it did?”

“I’m not used to thanking people.”

“But it doesn’t do to have a crimelord think you’re ungrateful, right?” He winked. “You’ve played your part now. No need to worry.”

“W-well, that’s not— I mean, I didn’t… um…” More awkward shuffling. “I just. Don’t see what you’re getting out of this.”

“Who says I’m getting anything?”

“You must be. You have to be getting something. Why else would you just… help me?”

Junior shrugged. “Roman asked me to. It’s important to him, and it’s something I can offer him, so why not?”

“Oh. Uh. So are you and him, like, you know. Like you’re his sugar daddy or something? Is that it?”

Junior stared Mercury down for a moment, something in his eye suggesting Mercury had crossed a line, and then smiled and looked back to his records. “You’re a lot like him, you know,” he murmured, and, “Let’s just say I have a soft spot for teenagers in dire straits, okay?”

“What?”

This time Junior said nothing, but after a moment he set aside his work and reached into his desk, taking out a photo, which he held out for Mercury. Mercury hesitated, then darted forward and grabbed it.

It was an old picture, a little faded, but the contents told a story: Junior, in his late twenties or maybe early thirties, caught on film putting a plump teenager into a headlock and ruffling said teenager’s bright red hair. Torchwick— and it could be no one else— was swatting at him, and whoever had taken the picture had snapped it just at the moment he’d burst out laughing. Mercury passed the photo back, a little surprised. Torchwick hadn’t been much older than him in it— sixteen, maybe seventeen at the most.

“You’ve heard me referred to as ‘noted family man, Hei Xong’, I assume,” Junior said, returning the photo to its drawer. Mercury nodded slowly. “Well, Roman is family. If keeping you safe is
important to him, it’s important to me. That’s how family works.”

It wasn’t, at least not in Mercury’s experience, but he didn’t want to argue that, so instead he said, “But he’s only helping me because of Qrow.”

“Is that what he told you?”

“Yeah.”

“Hmm.” He put his reading glasses back on and resumed going through records. Mercury waited, but nothing else was forthcoming.

“Uh… I’m—I’m just gonna go back into the other room now.”

“All right. Let me know if you need anything else.”

-/-

Winter got the bus to Junior’s this time; it would be easier to take her car, but Torchwick was right, it was too conspicuous. Besides, the way her hands were still shaking, she didn’t need to be behind the wheel.

She leaned her head back against the seat and closed her eyes, letting her mind drift back.

“It wasn’t just that,” James had said. “I— I used the son word again.”

“Ah shit,” Qrow had replied. “And he overheard you.” Their discomfort had been tangible; this was clearly something they had discussed, because after a few hesitant starts, Qrow added, “Look, maybe this is a good thing. Now you can talk to him and get you both on the same page.”

“Assuming he ever comes back.”

“He’ll come back.”

“You can’t know that.”

“No, but I can hope it awfully hard. Jim, come on.” He laid a hand on James’ shoulder. “He’s gonna come back.”

Winter shook her head to dispel the playback, and buried her face in her hands, taking a few even breaths to calm herself. It was unfair to feel this way, this bubbling, churning envy in the bottom of her stomach. She knew what Mercury had been through, knew more than most, and he’d been almost completely alone for it. He deserved to have people who loved him.

She let out one last long, slow breath, and let her hands fall to her lap, expression back to impassive and impartial. Her own feelings were not what mattered in this situation, and it wasn’t like she was without affection.

Dr. Ironwood had given her so much. She shouldn’t want even more than he was willing to offer.

-/-

When Winter arrived at Junior’s, Mercury and Tukson were arguing about the bookstore Tukson intended to open, once he’d finished his degree and saved up enough to start his own business.

“Look, I’m just saying, it is physically impossible for you to carry every book under the sun.”
“And I’m saying, it’s just a catchphrase. It’s not meant to be taken literally.”

“It’s false advertising!” He looked up when Winter came in. “Oh, hey, princess. Back me up here. Every book under the sun is false advertising if you don’t actually carry every book under the sun.”

“You aren’t going to get him to listen,” she said, setting the bag in her hand down on the table. “He’s stuck on that catchphrase, even though it’s a glaring lie.”

“See? She gets it. Wait, have you had this conversation already?”

“A few times. I brought tacos from Sheila’s. They’re probably cold by now, though.”

“There’s a microwave,” Tukson said, at the same time Mercury gagged and said, “Ugh, I think we might be spending too much time together.”

“I did think it was funny that you both jumped to the same argument.”

“Ugh.” Mercury sprawled on his belly, hanging double over the arm of the couch for a moment before the pressure on his middle forced him to flop back to sitting. “So how did things go at home? How did the General take it?”

“He…” Winter’s hands shook; she bit her tongue against the thoughts she wanted to get out, and set her bag onto the table. “I brought you a few things from Dr. Ironwood,” she said. “He sent over your coat. He didn’t want you getting cold.”

“Man, he just doesn’t stop, does he?” Mercury laughed. “I’m not even there and he’s trying to coddle me.”

Winter’s fists clenched. “Would you stop pretending you don’t care?!”

“Whoah! What the hell?”

“He loves you! You’re in a dangerous position and he’s powerless to protect you, and it’s tearing him apart, so he does what little things he can to help you and all you can do is mock him!”

“Where is this coming from?”

“You heard what he said about you! You know he thinks of you as a son, and you treat it like some big joke!”

“What?” Mercury rounded on her. “That’s none of your business, princess.”

Winter was shaking now, fists trembling at her side as she tried to regain some semblance of control. “Do you have any idea how lucky you are? Do you? He would do anything to make you happy! You’re… you’re so lucky…”

“Yeah, newsflash, Winter! I’m fucking aware of that! He’s put his entire goddamn relationship on hold for me since the minute I walked into his house! I know how far he’s willing to go for me! Stop projecting your daddy issues onto me like you know my situation better than I do!” He scrubbed his hands over his face, taking a few deep breaths before letting his hands drop, calmer now. “Let’s look at this rationally, huh. Let’s say I let him adopt me like he clearly wants to. The
way I see it, there are two options. Either I now have no choice but to find a way to be okay with being around Qrow, and Yang, and Tai, or he continues to put his relationship on hold for me indefinitely and eventually starts to resent me.”

“He wouldn’t—“

“He would. Eventually, he would. Maybe not tomorrow, maybe not next month, but sooner or later the fact that I can’t stand three fifths of his family is going to cause a rift. At least by not letting him adopt me it’ll be easier to give me up.” He folded his arms and turned away. “Besides, I… I really don’t want to be in a family with them. I literally can’t handle being around them for long, it hur- hurts too much.”

Winter sat down, anger dissipated. After a moment, Mercury sat beside her, leaning forward on his knees.

“I know how he feels about me, Winter. I just don’t want him to.”

-/-

It was late. Winter had gone home, Tukson as well, not long after. Junior, Mercury knew, was still in his office, though Mercury suspected that he’d given up on his work ages ago. Last time he’d looked into the office, the man had seemed to be playing some app game instead.

Mercury had dozed off at some point, but now he woke, uneasy of nerves and full of bladder. He rolled off of the couch and staggered in the direction of the bathroom.

Just outside the bathroom, he heard a voice, and froze. It sounded like Torchwick in Junior’s office.

“-re overreacting,” Torchwick said. “It’s just a little swelling.”

“It’s a lot of swelling,” Junior corrected. “You’ve been overdoing it again.”

“I do not overdo it. I’m the undisputed king of not overdoing it. Jesus christ, that’s cold.”

“It’s ice. It’s supposed to be cold.” Junior sighed, and then there was the noise of a chair rolling across the floor. “Have you had any luck yet?”

“He’s definitely in the city. Beyond that, who can say?”

“Keep looking. I want that kid back with his family in time for Christmas.”

“We’re doing our best. Don’t worry about it.”

“Good.”

There was more silence. Mercury’s bladder reminded him of why he was awake; he bounced a little and hurried into the bathroom, pulling the door closed as softly as he could to not alert them. He didn’t want them knowing he’d been listening.

-/-

Five minutes later, a much, much surlier Mercury tapped on the office door. They both looked up; Junior was sitting on the edge of his desk, while Roman took the desk chair and the spare chair both so he could prop his leg up. An ice pack sat on his knee.
“I need to go to the store,” Mercury said, voice dancing between a grumble and a sulk.

“What for?” Junior asked. “If there’s something you need—”

“I don’t—I mean, I can get it myself. S’easier.”

The pair exchanged a look, and Torchwick snorted. “Write down what kind you use and I’ll pick them up for you.”

Mercury bristled. “How do you—“

“Process of elimination, kid.” He set his ice pack aside and hauled himself to his feet, grabbing his cane from behind the desk as he did. “You came from the bathroom and you look like the world just threw you a suckerpunch. Not a hard conclusion to jump to.”

Junior reached over and pushed Torchwick back down into the chair. “I’ll go. You just keep off that knee for a bit.”

Mercury stared up at the enormous man in front of him—standing at full height, he was even taller than James, and twice as big everywhere else. The thought of this man buying pads for him sent Mercury turning a brilliant scarlet

“Y-you don’t have…”

“I have a wife and two teenage daughters,” Junior reminded him. “I’ve bought menstrual stuff before. Just write down what you need and I’ll pick it up.”

Once he was gone, it was Mercury and Torchwick; Mercury leaned against the doorjamb, while Torchwick leaned back in the chair and returned the ice pack to his knee before picking up his hat and setting it over his face.

It was a dismissal, and Mercury recognized it for one, but he didn’t want to go back to bed just yet, and anyway, he wasn’t going to be dismissed so idly.

“You’ve been out looking for Tyrian, haven’t you?” he asked, after a few awkward moments.

“Can’t have a wildcard like that running loose in the city,” Torchwick said, not removing his hat from his face. “Junior has things running the way he likes them; your old pal Tyrian is a spanner hovering over the works just waiting to ruin all our hard work.”

“Right…” Mercury considered his options, and said, “He’s probably looking for Cinder. I don’t know if that helps you, but… if you find her, sooner or later you’ll find him.”

Something in the air… changed. Torchwick, previously swinging his arm slightly, previously rocking his foot faintly, froze, and then, slowly, reached up to remove his hat from his face. He sat up.

“Cinder?”

“She lived with us. Ran away back in like January and Tyrian kept leaving to look for her before he was arrested. I think probably he’s looking for her again. He wasn’t happy about losing her.”

“No, I imagine not,” Torchwick murmured. He stared at his hat, and then the tension slowly faded from him and he gave Mercury a cocky grin. “Thanks for the tip, kid, I’ll keep that in mind.”
There was another of those awkward moments, and Torchwick said, “Anything else I can do for you?”

“Can I use the phone? I need to call Emerald.”

Torchwick reached onto the desk and handed him a cordless landline phone, then leaned back again. “Keep it with you when you get done, I need to get some sleep.”

“Don’t you live above the bar?”

He snorted. “I’m not making it up any stairs tonight, kid. Now take the hint and go.”

He dropped his hat over his face again, and this time Mercury took the hint and left, hurrying back over to the breakroom while he dialed Emerald’s number.

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Seconds after the kid left, Torchwick’s phone started vibrating in his pocket. He pulled it out to check. It was a text from a contact labeled ‘Superman’.

Think I found him. I’m following to make sure.

For just a moment, Roman’s heart jumped into his throat. Recon only, he texted back. Do not engage.

Understood.

I’m not exactly planning to put my life on the line for this kid.

Good. We’ll leave this one to the cops. Keep me updated.

-/-

It took four times for Mercury to get anyone to answer the phone, which was the point he realized it was three in the morning. It was Hazel who picked up, a grumpy rumble in his already-deep voice when he demanded to know who was calling.

“Hazel, it’s me, it’s Mercury. Is Emerald around?”

“Mercury! Where are you? Are you safe?”

He sounded worried. “I’m fine,” Mercury said, mouth suddenly dry. “I’m with people who… have motives for keeping me safe. Can I talk to Emerald?”

“She’s asleep. I can wake her—“

“No, don’t.” He scrubbed his hair back. “I just… needed to know she was okay. Don’t wake her up. I’ll, I’ll call back tomorrow, or something.”

“She’ll want to know you’re safe. James told us you’d run off. She’s been worried.”

“...I didn’t mean to make her worry…”

“Then you shouldn’t have run away. What were you thinking?”

“I… I don’t think I was thinking,” he admitted. He leaned against the wall and slid down to sitting,
burying his head in his free arm for a second. “I don’t think you—I don’t think anyone understands how terrifying Tyrian is. And the thought of him finding me, and hurting Penny and James just to get me back—I just. Had to leave.”

“You know,” and then Hazel was silent for a long time, before starting again with, “Mercury, there are people who love you. You’re not doing this alone anymore.”

Mercury said nothing to that, opting instead to bury his face in his arm again. He knew that—he did, for all that people seemed to think he didn’t. Everyone kept assuring him he was lo- cared for, as if that didn’t wrap him in an icy grip at just the thought.

Outside, the back door opened, and Mercury tensed and strained until he heard Junior call out to Torchwick that he was back, before sighing and relaxing once more.

“Listen,” he said, “I have to go. Just—tell Emerald I’m fine, okay? And I’m sorry I worried her.”

If Hazel said anything in response, Mercury hung up too quickly to find out.

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Chapter End Notes

Junior has no time for men who won't buy pads and things for their loved ones with ovaries. What, you're afraid people will know you have some basic decency? That your loved one's well-being is important to you? Junior scoffs in your direction.

Poor Mercury, he had the love word used on him twice in one day, how do you even begin to deal with that?
Chapter 42

Chapter Summary

For all the drama around it, the situation was resolved remarkably easily.

Chapter Notes

In James’ defense, they’re all incredibly lucky that the criminal kingpin who happens to be a family friend is also a pretty chill dude with a soft spot for teenagers in dire straits.

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James was restless with his kids gone— he’d sent Penny on with Qrow anyway, just in case Tyrian managed to track where Mercury was supposed to be, and turned up looking for him, but without the distraction he had nothing to keep his mind occupied and found himself prowling the house, replaying his conversation with Pickerel in his head over and over, replaying all of his conversations with Mercury, trying to figure out where he’d faltered. Trying to figure out where the boy had gone.

It was early in the evening that there was a knock at the door. He went to answer it— it was Torchwick.

“What are you doing here?”

“As icy as ever,” Torchwick said, pushing past James into the house. James closed the door behind him and turned, folding his arms behind his back and glaring expectantly.

“What are you doing here?”

“I came to tell you your boy is at my place right now—”

James wasn’t actually aware of moving; spots popped across his vision and he had Torchwick slammed against the wall with both hands. There was a slight thunk, and he looked down to find the end of Torchwick’s cane resting against his sternum. Torchwick stared coldly up at him.

“I would suggest putting me down.”

“What have you done?”

“Hmm.” Pressure was applied on the cane, and he was pushed slowly away. He took a step back, and another, letting his hands fall and folding them back behind his back for good measure. He carried on glowering, though. Once there was a respectable space between them, Torchwick went on. “As I was saying, he’s at my place right now. As for what I’ve done, what I’ve done is give him a safe place to hide while he was in trouble.”
“You should have sent him home.”

“Yes, because teenagers in a state of panic are so well known for making smart choices. If I’d turned him away, he’d be on the streets now. Instead he was safe, with food and shelter to weather the storm. You’re fucking welcome.”

“I am not going to thank you for kidnapping. He’s my responsibility, he belongs here, with me. Not in the hands of criminals.”

For another long moment there was silence; ill-disguised fury flickered across the careful mask Torchwick wore, and then he said, very softly and barely restrained, “Have you ever slept on the streets, James? Do you know what it is to look for the warmest spot you can find and settle for the one that mostly blocks the wind? Do you know how to find the places the pigs won’t bring you in and wonder if it would be worth it if they did? The kid came to me in need and I took care of him because the alternative was sending a teenager out to sleep on the streets in the middle of winter. I may be a criminal jackass but there’s lines even I won’t cross.”

James stared, unsure of where to even begin responding to that. Torchwick rolled his eyes. “If you’re thinking you might start feeling sorry for me, keep it to yourself. The criminals who took me in made sure I was taken care of.”

“And took the price out of you in blood, I would imagine. People like you don’t help people for free.”

“Who does?” He shrugged, and turned to go. “Pickerel knows where Callows is and he’ll have him in custody by the end of the day. Once he does, you’re free to come collect the boy. I imagine he’ll be glad to sleep in a real bed again, at least.”

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A little after six o’clock, James got a call from Pickerel assuring him that Callows was once more in police custody and would be shortly transported to Mistral, where he would stand trial for the murders he committed in his escape, among other things.

At the same time, at Junior’s, Mercury was playing cards with Torchwick, Junior, and Tukson when Torchwick’s phone started buzzing. Mercury peeked over without thinking; it was from a contact labeled ‘Cookie Dough’ and had two words: Got him.

Torchwick picked up the phone before Mercury could look further; for a long time there was nothing but the sound of Torchwick texting, and then he tossed his cards down and headed away.

“You guys can cannibalize my hand, I need to take this.”

Mercury grabbed the cards before the other two could, and took three of the cards. “That fucker, he said he didn’t have any sevens! He had three!”

“Oh yeah, Roman always cheats at cards,” Junior said, grabbing the cards Mercury hadn’t taken and handing half to Tukson. “Unless I miss my guess, that means Tyrian has been caught. You can go home now.”

Mercury sighed. “Are you sure I have to? Can’t you, like, I dunno, hire me or something?”

“I don’t hire kids. Go home, you’ve got a family that loves you. You should be with them.”

“You hired Torchwick,” Mercury protested, as Torchwick came back to the table. “Why can’t you hire me?”
“He hired me to clean the bar up after closing and wouldn’t even let me work during business hours until I was eighteen,” Torchwick corrected him. “Besides, I didn’t have a family who loved me. **You do.**”

Mercury folded his arms and looked away, missing the look that passed between Torchwick and Junior. Torchwick rolled his eyes.

“Listen kid, you won’t find anyone hates James Ironwood more than I do but even I can’t deny he loves you. Go **home.** You don’t belong here.”

“I don’t belong there, either. Look, whatever, it was just an idea.” He stood and pushed away from the table, abandoning his cards. “I’m going to go put my bag back together. Call me when the General gets here.”

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It wasn’t much longer before James arrived to pick Mercury up. Torchwick had disappeared; Junior and Tukson gave him taciturn goodbyes, and then he and James left. Outside, he shouldered his duffel a little nervously while they walked to the car and peeked up at James in his periphery.

“How much trouble am I in?”

James gave him a startled look, then looked away. He made an aborted motion with his hands before letting them fall, then brought them back up to scrub at his face, and said wearily, “Let’s just go home.”

“General..?”

“It’s been a long few days, and I still need to pick Penny up from Qrow’s.”

“What?”

James side eyed him and looked away again. “I had this wild idea that maybe she shouldn’t be around while there was a serial killer potentially looking for you,” he said drily. “Figured it would be easier to keep you safe if she wasn’t around. She’s been staying with Qrow the past couple nights.”

“Ah.” Mercury could feel the point of his remark, and said quietly, “She wasn’t the only one I was worried about getting hurt.”

“I know. Winter told me.” This, too, seemed to upset him; he took another steadying breath. “I would have done anything to keep you safe from him, you know.”

“Augh!” Mercury tossed his hands up. “Everyone keeps saying that! You have no idea what Tyrian is capable of! He’s not **human,** okay? He’s a monster! He’s not someone you can just swing on and he’ll go down, and if you got hurt because of me, I couldn’t—I couldn’t…” A lot of words tried to come out at the same time, so quickly that he nearly choked on them, and he scrubbed shaking hands through his hair. “I know it was reckless, okay? I know I was putting myself in danger. But… we all make sacrifices for the people we care about and I…”

“It is not **your** place to make sacrifices for **me,**” James snapped. “I’m the adult here, I’m your guardian. It’s my job to make sacrifices for your well-being, not the other way around.”

“You just don’t **get it.**” Mercury stopped in the middle of the walk and stared down at his shoes. How could he make James understand?
In his periphery, Mercury saw James raise a hand, and let it fall, and he sighed.

“You don’t have to keep doing that, you know. I w-wouldn’t mind if you…”

He trailed off, but James seemed to get the message; this time he raised his hand and took Mercury’s shoulder, giving him a reassuring squeeze—

—there was no warning, and Mercury wasn’t entirely sure the decision had been a conscious one on James’ part, and then he was being crushed in an embrace just this side of uncomfortable. He made to protest— he’d allow a touch, but this was just— and realized James was trembling. The hug tightened; Mercury stilled. He could allow it for… a few seconds, at least.

“I’m sorry,” James murmured above him. “I know you meant well, I just— I was scared. I’m supposed to protect you and when it came down to it, I wasn’t able to.”

Okay, this was long enough. Mercury pushed away, relieved when James dropped the tight embrace easily enough. He took a deep breath, steadying himself from the emotions rocketing through him. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d been hugged like that.

The walk the rest of the way to the car was silent. Mercury shivered a little, wishing he had a better coat. At least they would be home soon.

In the car, Mercury said to the window, “I’m not used to people giving a shit about me.”

“Hmm?”

“It’s stupid, but… for a long time I didn’t think even Emerald really cared, not really. Turns out I wasn’t giving her enough credit. Same story as usual, I guess. Now there’s… I know I was stupid. I just didn’t think anyone would… care.”

“It’s hard,” James agreed. “When you go from being the only ally you can count on to being surrounded by people who love you. Suddenly you aren’t existing just for yourself anymore. You have this power over people, you could hurt them so easily but if you ever did it would destroy you too. It’s scary, in its own way.”

Mercury turned to stare at James. A lot of things had slid suddenly into place about his guardian, and a smile tugged at his lips, startling him enough that he didn’t fight the laugh that bubbled up. He wasn’t sure what, exactly, he was laughing at—

—and then his laugh turned into a sob, and another followed, and then he was breaking down in his seat as the full weight of the last few days came crashing down on him.

Through the tide of tears he was aware of James pulling the car onto the side of the road; he waited for the unwelcome touch, the inquiries he wouldn’t be able to answer, but they didn’t come. Instead James reached over to turn the radio on, switching to a channel that played instrumentals, and took out his phone to focus his attention there.

The simple courtesy broke Mercury even further, and it was a long time before he’d calmed down enough to scrub his face clean in his shirt, uncaring that it was now gross and snotty after his breakdown.

A packet of Kleenex appeared in his view. Startled, he turned to find James watching him.

“Feel better?”
He took the Kleenex, a little embarrassed, and shrugged. “It’s been a rough few days.”

“I would imagine so.” He pulled back onto the road. “We’ll be home soon, though.”

Home. Mercury scrubbed his face clean and felt a smile, a real smile, touch his face. The idea didn’t seem so scary anymore.

Qrow answered the door when James arrived to pick Penny up. He sent Penny on to the car with the assurance he’d be along in a minute. Qrow reached up to rest his hand on James’ cheek; James leaned into the touch, and let out a long, slow breath, eyes closing as he centered himself once more.

“You gonna be okay?”

“I think so.”

They took a moment for this, just a moment, and James opened his eyes. Qrow didn’t lower his hand.

“Go take care of your kids, pretty boy,” he said eventually. “I’ll see you in a couple days.”

James turned his head slightly and pressed a kiss to Qrow’s palm; only then did his hand fall. “All right. I love you.”

“Love you too, big man.”

The first thing Mercury did when he got home was shower; he’d been taking turkey baths in the employee bathroom sink for the past few nights and while that kept him from being stinky, it didn’t hold a candle to the feeling of standing under the just-too-hot water with his head tilted back to let the spray pound against his head.

When he started to head across to his room, he found Penny waiting outside his bedroom door for him. She lit up at his appearance, and he halted.

“I wanted to say goodnight,” she said. “And to wish you merry Christmas. And to say that I am glad you are home…”

He gave her a weak smile, and reached out to ruffle her hair, to tweak her bow. “Yeah. It’s good to be back.”

In his room, with the door closed and locked (but not deadbolted), he sat on the edge of his bed and listened to Penny and James saying their own goodnights. On his way past- downstairs, not to his room or workroom- James tapped on the door and called a good night to Mercury as well.

The house was quiet. Mercury could hear James moving around downstairs, no doubt checking the house was locked up, and Penny was across the hall listening to the radio while she got ready for bed, but these were normal, background noises that he had grown used to.

He was safe here. The normal dangers of the world would not penetrate this bubble, and with Tyrian once more in police custody, the only thing he truly feared was no longer a threat.

He was safe here. James allowed him privacy and would not intrude in his room without invitation,
and Penny would follow his lead and extend the same courtesy.

He was safe here.

Mercury let out a slow breath. He was exhausted, weary down to his very bones, not just from today or the past few days but from the past few months, the past few years. But he was safe here.


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On Christmas morning, Mercury lay under multiple comforters listening to James and Penny cooking breakfast downstairs. By their tradition, presents came after breakfast, a carryover from when James’ husband was still alive and his ill health prevented him from rising and shining with any kind of speed. Instead James had kept their excitable child occupied by cooking breakfast in bed for him, and only once he was able to face the day would they go to the parlor to open gifts. Six years after his death, the tradition still held, so Mercury was allowed to stay in bed and listen to his f-

family’s?-

-laughter while the smell of pancakes filled the house.

Later, sometime in the afternoon, Hazel and Emerald would come by. They would join the family for Christmas dinner, and afterward Mercury would go home with them, so he could spend time with Emerald for the holiday, and so James and Penny could spend time with the rest of their family.

He was starting to get used to this ‘shared custody’ arrangement with James and Hazel, but it was kind of exhausting to plan. Still. It was nice to see Emerald more often.

A burst of laughter floated up from downstairs. Mercury rolled over and pulled his blankets up higher, somehow managing to sink even deeper into his pillows than before.


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Hazel and Emerald showed up around one, around the time James was putting the ham on the cooker and also around the time the light rain that had been drizzling down all morning started turning into snow. Mercury waited expectantly for Emerald to yell at him for running off, but all she did was punch his shoulder while calling him a dick and warn him he’d better not ever scare her like that again.

After that, Penny persuaded Mercury and Emerald to watch Lilo and Stitch with her; meanwhile, Hazel and James retreated to the kitchen on the grounds of needing to talk.

Halfway through the movie, Mercury decided they needed more popcorn, and headed into the kitchen. He stopped outside the door, just in time to hear James saying, “-understand what you’re saying, but that’s Mercury’s decision to make, not mine.”

“What’s Mercury’s decision to make?” Mercury said, drawing both of their attention to him. They exchanged a look, and James stood.

“Hazel has something he needs to talk to you about. I’ll leave you to it, unless you’d like to wait till after your movie?”

Mercury looked from one to the other. “This seems more important.”
“All right then.” He moved to leave, but hesitantly, and added, “Just.. the decision is yours, whatever you decide.”

With that, he gave Mercury’s shoulder a quick squeeze, and hurried out. Mercury turned to Hazel.

“So, uh. What’s up?”

“I have a proposal to make,” Hazel said. “I’d like James to transfer custody of you over to me.”

Whatever Mercury had been expecting, it wasn’t that. He stared. “Wh.. what?”

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Mercury stared. And stared some more. After a little while of this uncomfortable silence, he said, hesitant, “Can you… run that by me again?”

Hazel gave him a fond little smile, then pulled out his wallet and handed a small photo to Mercury. It was a standard portrait of a woman in her thirties who looked enough like Hazel that Mercury could only assume they were related; when he flipped it over, the back read ‘Gretchen’.

“My twin sister,” Hazel explained, taking the photo back. “I wanted you to understand where I’m coming from with this offer.” He was silent for a moment, collecting his thoughts, and went on, “When Gretchen and I were children, we were sent to live with a relative of our stepmother. Our father was ill and- well, she never wanted kids. It was…” He paused, searching for the right word, and went on, “Hell. It was hell. But. We got out. Eventually.”

He stopped again, focusing his attention on returning the photo to his wallet. Mercury gave him a moment, itching with curiosity over what this had to do with him, and wishing they could just get on with things. When he was just about ready to tell Hazel to get a move on, Hazel spoke.

“You and Emerald experienced a lot of horrible things, and the reason you survived those experiences was because you had each other. Separating you after it was over was an act of cruelty in its own way.”

Mercury still felt a little lost; he puzzled through the previous two sets of statements, and understanding dawned. “You and your sister…”

“We healed each other. We stayed together, and that was the defining factor. When I lost her later-” He broke off, and shook his head, and went on, “James and I have spent the past few months trying
to figure out a solution to let you and Emerald see each other more. You need each other, and
you’re both better when you’re together. Just having you call her that first time was a huge
improvement in Emerald, I know that much. But there’s only so much this shared custody
arrangement of ours can do. I think that having you both in the same household is the only solution
with any hope of working.”

Mercury continued to sit in silence, staring down at the tiled floor while he tried to process
everything. Hazel fell silent as well; his piece said, he had no reason to fill the silence.

“Does Emerald know?” he asked finally.

“She knows. I talked to her already. She’s all for the idea.”

“And what did James say?”

“You heard him. The choice is yours. I’m fine with that- if you decide to remain here, we’ll still
keep working things out. And you’ll still be welcome to change your mind later. It’s an open offer.”

When Mercury fell back into silence, Hazel reached over and gave his shoulder a quick squeeze.

“You don’t have to decide right away. Take some time to think things through. It’s your future.
You shouldn’t rush into the decision.”

“Right.” Mercury pushed to his feet, pacing a couple steps restlessly, and bounced on his heels.
“Right. I uh. I need to. I need- I need to go for a walk.”

And then he spun on his heel and walked out without another word.

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By the time Mercury made it all the way around the block, the rest of the family had come out to
play in the snow— Penny was perched on Hazel’s shoulders, flinging snowballs at James and
Emerald. Across the road, the Schnees were also coming out to play. Mercury reached the house at
about the same time Weiss spotted Penny and began dragging her mother over to visit.

“They’ve already got company,” Mrs. Schnee said, upon realizing that Hazel and Emerald weren’t
the usual guests. “We shouldn’t intrude.”

“It’s fine,” James assured her, halting their game. A snowball splattered against his chest; he
brushed it off and added, “This is Mercury’s friend Emerald, and her guardian, Hazel— we just
thought we’d have a bit of fun in the snow. You’re welcome to join us, of course.”

Penny tapped Hazel’s shoulder and he set her down gently. She pounced on Weiss.

“Weiss, you may be on my team. Between the two of us, and Mr. Hazel, I am certain we can claim
victory!”

There was a pause, as there often was when Penny jumped on someone and started proposing
ideas, but after a second or so the competitive fire lit up in Weiss’s eyes and she pumped one fist in
premature victory.

“Yeah! We’ll show them! Um, wait, it’s three on two now.”

“True, but we are at a disadvantage because Mr. Hazel is such a big target.”

“If one of the others wants to join our team, that will even things up,” James said.
Emerald glanced over at Mercury, leaning on the wall watching, and said, “Uh, actually, I’m gonna peace out, I need to talk to Merc. So you’ll need two more for even teams.”

She hurried over to join Mercury at the wall, ignoring the continued debate about teams. He scooted over so she could have some of his dry patch.

“Hey,” he said. “Having fun?”

“It would have been more fun if you had been playing with us.”

“How did you end up on a team with the General, anyway?”

“Penny attached herself to Hazel and wouldn’t let go.” She glanced at him in her periphery, and went on, “So, uh, I take you talked to Hazel, huh?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, um. Look, I know our place isn’t as big or fancy as this one, but I— I really think it’s where you belong. Or, anyway, I’d like it to be. Maybe it’s selfish but I really hate having you so far away. And you know you’re always so happy when you come over, so, I mean. Look, I just—” She leaned a little so that their shoulders were touching, “—I just really miss when it was us.”

Mercury sighed. “Look, I just— I need to think, okay?”

She looked a little hurt by that, but said, “Sure. Yeah. Okay.”

-/-

In the end, James turned the tide of what had been until then a losing battle by slipping up onto the porch awning and running along until he was over Hazel, at which point he shoved a pile of snow onto his head. He unbalanced in surprise and hit the ground with a grunt. James gave him a cocky smirk when he looked up, and then launched himself off of the awning to execute a perfect four point landing. He stood and brushed a little stray snow off of himself while Hazel hauled himself up to sitting.

“Superhero landings are bad for your knees,” Emerald said, as she and Mercury came over to join everyone now that the snowballs had stopped flying.

“My knees are built of pretty stern stuff,” James assured her, and reached down to help Hazel to his feet. He looked around for the others: Weiss and Penny had gotten bored of snowballs and were helping Whitley build a snowman, while Winter huddled on the porchswing with a book and Whitney had disappeared. “I guess the battle is over? With victory in our favor, of course.”

“Only because you cheated,” Hazel argued. “The snow you took me down with wasn’t in ball form. No balls, no win.”

“In war as in love, there are no rules to govern a win. Your team surrendered and you went down. I am the last man standing, therefore, I am the winner.”

“Your team also abandoned you. Was it worth it? You committed war crimes for the sake of your win, but now you stand atop your ill-gained victory alone.”

They were fortunately rescued from more of this weird-ass conversation by Whitney arriving from across the street.
“Why don’t you all come in for cocoa and brownies?” she said. “We’re all wet and cold, it’ll be a perfect way to warm up.”

At the word brownies Hazel’s attention was pulled completely from James. He took Whitney’s hand and bowed low over it. “Madame, you had me at brownies. I would love to enjoy your hospitality.”

“That’s his sweet tooth talking, lady,” Emerald said, when Whitney looked to be at a complete loss for words. “You’d think a man who owns his own bakery would get sick of sweets at some point.”

“Ah, I see. You must have high standards, then. I hope our work is up to meeting them.”

“He’s also not picky,” Emerald added, folding her arms and following as Hazel offered a very gentlemanly arm to Whitney and the group began making their way back to the Schnee house.

Once everyone was inside and had shed their wet outer layers, James halted Winter with a touch to her elbow.

“Do you mind if we speak privately? I need to talk to you.”

“Of course.” She led him into the drawing room off the foyer; there was a long moment while she switched on a few lamps and he settled into a stiff stance, back straight, hands clasped behind him. She unconsciously mirrored his pose and looked expectantly up at him. “What did you want to talk about?”

“I wanted to apologize for my conduct the other day. I shouldn’t have yelled at you. I’m sorry.”

Winter frowned, and her arms fell before coming to fold around her. She shrugged. “It’s fine, sir. I understand it wasn’t me you were angry at.”

“Honestly, that’s a strong argument for why I shouldn’t have yelled at you.” He took a deep breath. “I… also wanted to commend you on your handling of the situation. You were right- if you’d turned Mercury away, he’d have still run off, and wouldn’t have been somewhere safe while we waited out the storm. Instead you handled the situation in a way that meant he was still taken care of. You showed good judgment, and kept your head in a crisis- better than I did, certainly.”

She looked away. “It’s fine, sir. Really.”

He frowned. “Winter… you know if there’s something bothering you, you can talk to me. Especially if it’s something I’ve done, I can’t fix it if I don’t know about it.”

“It’s nothing you’ve done, I’m just-” She sighed. “…it’s stupid.”

“If it’s upsetting you, it’s not stupid.” When she continued to refuse to look at him, he said, “Winter?”

There was a long silence. James wondered if perhaps he should stop pushing, but then she took a deep breath and spoke.

“Mercury accused me of- of having father issues.” She turned and started pacing restlessly, while he waited patiently for her to go on. “He- sir, you know what my father is like. You know what I’m coming from. And ever since you moved into this neighborhood…” She stopped pacing and stood in front of him, steeling herself for the rejection she knew must be coming, but she could not stop
now that she had started. “I find myself envious at times. Of Mercury, of Penny, of what they have. I find myself wishing for things it is not my right to wish for.”

James considered this for a moment, watching her closely, and then gave her a soft smile. “You know... you are a remarkable young woman, Winter. Watching you become this past year has been a privilege. Any man would be lucky to have someone like you as a daughter.” She turned an incredulous look on him. He added, “Just because I care for Penny and Mercury doesn’t mean I can’t care for you too. I have t- well, I have one hand, but I know where to get a few more if I need to.”

A giggle bubbled out of her at the joke, and she covered her mouth in shock. When she looked at him again, he held his arms out in invitation, and smiled again. She took a step forward, hesitant, unsure, and then another, and then fell into the offered embrace with a noise of surprise. He was every bit as warm as she’d always imagined he must be, and she clung to his shirt as another nervous laugh burbled from her.

“I’m always here for you, Winter. Whatever you need from me- don’t be afraid to ask.”

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When Hazel and Emerald went home that night, Mercury went with them. Nothing more was said about Hazel’s offer: an unspoken agreement seemed to exist between them that they would say no more about it until Mercury brought the subject up himself, which he was glad of.

In the meantime, bedtime that night meant that Mercury and Emerald were alone, truly alone for the first time since getting the news about Tyrian. They forewent the air mattress- now a mere formality more than anything- and curled together under Emerald’s comforter, clinging tightly to one another. Mercury couldn’t tell if Emerald was shaking or he was, and he said nothing about the growing damp spot where her face was pressed into his shoulder. There were no words needed, not for this- they just held each other and let their relief absorb them.

-/-

Much, much later that night, Mercury lay awake, subconsciously falling back into their old pattern of keeping watch over each other’s sleep. Emerald lay half-sprawled over him, sleeping soundly and safely, and it occurred to Mercury that if he took Hazel’s offer, they’d be able to do this all the time. He always slept more soundly for knowing Emerald was watching over him; slept more soundly for knowing he was there with her.

If. Honestly, he wasn’t even sure why he kept putting off the decision. This was what he’d been hoping for, wasn’t it? He was happiest when he and Emerald were together, right? He felt more content with Hazel watching him. He was more content overall at the Rainart house. So why was he feeling so hesitant? He should have accepted immediately, but something in his brain was gnawing on him and he couldn’t figure it out.

With a huff, he carefully extracted himself from Emerald’s hold and slipped out of bed to head downstairs. Maybe he’d take a short walk around the block, try to sort out what his garbage brain was doing to him.

Hazel was downstairs in the kitchen. Mercury changed direction and ambled there instead.

“What are you doing up?” Hazel asked, as soon as he came into view.

He shrugged. “Couldn’t sleep. Was getting kinda restless, wanted to take a walk.” He looked at the
piles of ingredients around Hazel, and back up at him. “What are you doing? Baking at two in the morning?”

“I couldn’t sleep either. It helps.”

“Oh.” He came over and sat at the counter, folding his arms and resting his head on them to watch. “Why can’t you sleep?”

“Ill dreams. They plague me sometimes. I’ve found that the act of baking helps soothe my mind when it’s in turmoil.”

“Yeah? I like walking. Or running. Just get out and see where my feet take me. Clears my head.”

Hazel grunted an acknowledgement, but said nothing more, instead focusing on his work. Mercury watched, fascinated: he didn’t even really seem to need to concentrate much. His movements were automatic, carefully measured. Mercury could see how this would help him clear his head. Just watching was soothing him back into drowsiness.

“What happened to your sister?” Mercury said suddenly. He was aware he was probably treading on unsafe ground, but part of him wanted to see how Hazel responded, and part of him was just--restless. He wanted someone else to be upset instead.

Hazel stilled stirring the batter in his hands, but only for a moment, before he went back to his careful, methodical motions. After another moment, he spoke.

“She was a firefighter,” he explained. “About eight years ago, she got a call— a car accident out on the highway. Someone had gone off the road and wrapped their car around a tree.”

Mercury shuddered. Hazel was quiet again, the only sound in the kitchen the scraping of his spoon against the bowl on each turn as he stirred.

“I don’t really know the details,” he went on eventually. “According to the only survivor, they were trying to get into the car to get the victims out, to do anything whatsoever for them, and something— he couldn’t say what happened. But the car exploded when they got it open.”

Mercury, unfortunately, suddenly knew where this story was going. His mouth went dry; he was regretting asking for it. Once more they were silent; Hazel started spreading the batter in the pan in little blobs.

“The only person who survived that night was the officer on the scene, who was on the radio at the time. My sister, her partner, the two emt’s— all dead.” The batter was all gone. He moved to put it in the oven, and then took a seat across from Mercury at the counter. “My sister was the most important person in the world to me. For all the hell we went through as children, losing her was still the worst thing I ever had to experience.”

“I’m sorry I asked.”

“It’s fine. The pain… dulls, after a time. Fades. Eventually, you stop noticing it at all.”

“But it doesn’t go away.”

Hazel shook his head. “No. Even if you stop noticing the pain, the source is still there. The harm is still caused.”

Mercury nodded, only sort of understanding, and said, “I don’t really know what’s holding me
back. This is what I want- I know that. I’m just, I’m-- I don’t know.” He scrubbed his hair back. “Um, when- when I lost my legs. They had to amputate, you know? And I knew it was the right call, cause- man, you should have seen them after wh-what my dad did. It was for the best. But I still didn’t want them to. That’s how I feel now. I know this is the right call, but how am I… how am I supposed to…”

“Say goodbye?” Hazel guessed, and Mercury shrugged. “You don’t have to.”

“What?”

“I’m not proposing removing you from James’ family entirely. I’m only suggesting changing your living arrangement.”

“Well, yeah, but…” He shrugged again. “What if once he doesn’t have to care about me anymore he… doesn’t?”

“Hmm. I admit I’ve only known James for a few months, but I think you’re underestimating him. He doesn’t care about you because he has to. He cares because you’re worth caring about.”

“Everyone keeps saying that. How can I. be sure?”

Hazel snorted. “If you could hear the way that man talks about you, you wouldn’t have to ask that.”

“Oh. I. I didn’t know he talked about me.”

“If I were to list James’ top ten favorite topics of conversation, the first six would be you kids- you and Penny, and Winter, Nora, Ruby, and Yang.”

Mercury fell silent again. Nora and Yang. That was another thing, wasn’t it? If he took this offer- when- he wouldn’t have to worry about them anymore. And James could be with his family once more. That alone was reason enough to take the offer, right?

He sighed, and dropped his head to thunk against the counter. Now he just had even more to think about.

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It was a cold day, but in the Xiao Long-Branwen household, it was warm and cosy. On the floor, Yang and Nora sprawled across a nest of blankets and pillows and cushions they had piled up for comfort, while Penny and Ruby huddled under a huge comforter at one end of the couch. James had given all four of them copies of the new Pokemon game for Christmas (Adamantium for Ruby and Nora, Vibranium for Penny and Yang) and were working to coordinate their pre-game activities so that they could all take their first steps as trainers together.

At the other end of the couch, James had tucked himself into the corner with his long legs thrown over Qrow’s lap, but Qrow was paying less attention to him and more to the cassette tape in his hands. He’d been quiet since unwrapping it that morning.

“I don’t understand,” Qrow said. “Where did you even get this?”

“From Casey’s. I asked if he would make an exception to his no copies rule for the sake of her son- when I went back, he said his husband had decided the tape should be yours.”

“But that doesn’t make sense. How could he have gotten it? There was only ever one copy. Why
“Did this rando have it in the first place?”

“Casey said he knew the family. He wouldn’t tell me more.”

“I might have to look into this more. If he’s a friend of my parents, I… you know, might be worth seeing him. Be nice to talk to someone else who remembers them.”

“Can we listen to it?” Yang asked, setting her game aside and coming over to look at the tape as well. Qrow passed her the card inside, the one with Blackbird pictured on the front.

“Once Tai gets back with his old cassette player,” Qrow said. He flipped the case over and read the list of songs on the back. “Oh, I forgot she had the song with Dad on here…”

As he said it, Tai returned, carrying an old cassette player that he occasionally used for his classes for- well, some unknown reason. Qrow set it on James’ legs and set the tape in it, checking the timestamps on the back while he fast forwarded through the other song on that side- he wasn’t sure he could hear *Crows Mate For Life* again, not after what happened last time, but after some trial and error, he managed to find the beginning of the track.

Grainy, recorded laughter suddenly started playing.

“Would you at least try to act like a professional, Jack?”

“I’ve never acted like a professional in my life and you know it.”

“You rascal, you’re going to be the end of me,” she said, fondness radiating in her tone. A soft piano started playing as she spoke, and her guitar joined it, and then she started singing.

“Take it easy with me please~”

Jack joined her for the final chorus; Qrow had underestimated his ability to hold himself together, and as their final notes died out and the cassette clicked to a stop, he scrubbed away a few stray tears.

“Jesus,” he said. “I forgot what a terrible singer Dad was.”

“He didn’t sound bad to me,” Ruby said. “He sounded a little like you, except deeper. Um, maybe not as nice.”

“Yeah, you definitely got your nice singing voice from your mom,” Nora agreed. “But your speaking voice sounds more like your dad.”

“Huh.” He gave them a weak smile, then turned his attention to Yang, who had gone quiet ever since the tape had started. He reached out with one foot and nudged her knee. “Hey, you okay there, kiddo?”

She shrugged. “I’m fine. Just, you know. Wish I could have met them.”

“Yeah, you and me both.” He stared down at the card in his hand. The photo was a candid shot of Merla playing her guitar, an easy contentment in her eyes. God, he missed her- “You know, I haven’t been to see them since the funeral. I should… go back. Next time we’re in Mistral. I think maybe. That would be good.”

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Closer to lunch, everyone had settled. The girls were absorbed in their games, all four on the floor.
now. Tai had dozed off on the loveseat with Zwei curled up in his lap. Qrow had fallen asleep too; James still had his legs thrown over him, but he’d slipped sideways so he was curled up on James’ front. James had slipped an arm around him and brought his hand up to play with Qrow’s hair—free of product for once, and wonderfully soft and feathery to the touch—while with his free hand he held the book Tai had given him for Christmas, a romance novel about an aristocrat seeking to arrange a beneficial marriage beginning a dalliance with a servant, not knowing that the servant in question was actually the prince in disguise. It was getting good, but he hadn’t been able to focus on it in awhile, his thoughts instead drifting to Mercury and the choice the boy had to make.

“Nickel for your thoughts,” Qrow mumbled into his chest. His hand stilled, and dropped to Qrow’s hip instead.

“I thought you were asleep.”

“Just dozing,” he clarified, not moving from his cozy position. “Come on, big man, what’s on your mind? You’ve been on the same page for ages now.”

“I’m just…” James sighed, and told Qrow about Hazel’s offer, and Mercury’s reticence on the subject since then.

“Jesus,” Qrow breathed when he was done. He’d moved back to sitting by now. “That’s heavy. Do you think he’ll take it?”

“I have no doubts that he will,” James admitted. “Honestly, I’m not sure why he hasn’t already.”

“It’s a good thing, though, right?” Nora asked. “I mean, if Mercury goes to live with Mr. Hazel, then he’ll be happy, and we can all be a family again. Right?”

“I- I suppose,” Jame said, a little startled. He hadn’t realized the kids were paying attention. “But that’s not really…”

He trailed off there, because Nora looked like she’d been suckerpunched, like her heart was breaking. “But don’t you miss us?”

“Of course I miss you. Not being able to see you all the time has been one of the hardest things about all of this.”

“Then what’s the problem?”

“The problem is that if Mercury goes away, he’ll miss him, too,” Qrow explained, when James didn’t. He gave her a weak smile. “Hey, come here, kiddo.”

Nora set her GameBuddy aside and clambered onto the couch, squishing herself into the space between them. When James silently raised his arm, she tucked herself under it, limpeting into his side with a pout.

“I just miss you,” she mumbled. “It’s not fair.”

“I know, Pumpkin. I miss you too.”

“So if Mercury goes to live with Mr. Hazel, will that mean you guys are going to be able to move in together?” Yang suddenly asked.

James and Qrow exchanged wide-eyed looks. “How do you know about that?” Qrow asked.
“You guys aren’t subtle.”

James, at least, looked guilty. “That’s… something we’ll have to talk about once we know for sure what Mercury will choose.”

“I still think we should just all live together,” Nora grumbled. “I don’t want to leave Ruby and Yang and Uncle Tai.”

Qrow chuckled. “Doesn’t really work like that, I’m afraid.”

“But why not,” Nora demanded, at the same time Yang snorted and said, “Yeah, because we as a family have always been super concerned about doing things the way they work.”

“She’s got you there,” Tai said, sitting up and stretching out a few kinks from his nap. “A family that cares about how things normally work doesn’t generally have two brothers living together long term, for a start. And that’s not even getting into my actual marriage.”

Qrow smirked. “You saying you’re actually for the idea?”

“I’m saying I’m not opposed to it, and definitely not opposed solely on the grounds of ‘that’s not how things work’. I think it’s something that the three of us would have to talk about extensively. But I do like the idea. If only because it will force James to live with the consequences of spoiling my children.”

“Well I’m for the idea,” Qrow said. “If I don’t have to choose between my man and my brother, or any of my kids, I’m all for it.”

James became aware of six pairs of eyes fixed on him, most notably Nora’s hopeful gaze. He tightened his hold on her briefly, and said, “I’m… willing to talk about the idea. Once we know what’s going on with Mercury.”

“Well, that’s settled,” Ruby chirped, standing up and stretching as well before moving over to flop down beside her dad. After a second, as everyone settled again, she added, “Wait, what about your marriage?”

Tai chuckled and tweaked one of her braids. “Legally and traditionally, marriage is between two people, not three.”

“Well that’s dumb,” she huffed, and settled down into Tai’s side, switching her GameBuddy back on as she went on, “If you’re allowed to have more than one parent, and more than one best friend, and more than one sibling, and more than one child, why can’t you have more than one husband or wife if you want to?”

James picked Mercury up from Hazel’s the next morning, after a night where he actually got to hold Qrow while they slept and got to eat breakfast with his family. Something in his heart ached at this: he had missed this, but the only way he was getting it back was if Mercury left him, and that prospect was no more appealing than continuing to keep his family at arm’s length.

Still. It was Mercury’s decision.

It wasn’t until late that night that Mercury actually came to talk to him. He was in his workroom, answering a few low-priority work emails he’d been putting off, but something on Mercury’s face told him this was much more important. He saved his work and moved over to join Mercury at his
couch instead.

“So, uh.” Mercury rubbed the back of his neck, and looked everywhere but at James. “I’ve been thinking. About Hazel’s offer. And, um. I’ve made up my mind. I’m going to take it.”

“I thought you might,” James admitted quietly. “I can’t say I’m not sorry to hear that, but… I’m not surprised.”

“Yeah, it’s kind of… it’s kinda exactly what I need. But um, I don’t- look, if we were in a vacuum of- if Emerald wasn’t a factor, if Qrow and the others weren’t a factor, I- I think I could be happy here. And I don’t- want you to think that you did something wrong or that you- that I don’t like being here.” He hugged his knees to his chest, and rested his chin on them. “But I need to be where Emerald is. And I can’t be around Qrow, or any of the others, not without it hurting too much. I tried. I really thought I could learn to be okay with them, but I just can’t. And that’s not fair to you. You deserve to have your family. So- so this is the best option. Everyone can be happy this way. Anyway. That’s all.”

James nodded slowly, and sighed. He gave Mercury a weak smile. “Is it selfish of me to admit I wish you’d chosen to stay with me anyway?”

“I dunno. Maybe. But I mean. No one’s ever considered me the selfish option before.” He unfolded his legs and turned to James with a much more stern expression this time. “But I want you to promise me something, okay?”

“Name it.”

“Just because I’m leaving-” He chewed his lip, and took a deep breath. “I don’t want you to think you’re rid of me once I go. I’m still… yours, okay? You can even still think of me as your s-son, if you want.”

“You weren’t supposed to hear that,” James admitted. He smiled, more sincerely this time. “If you’re asking me to promise I won’t stop caring about you just because you’re not in my house anymore, you don’t even have to ask. That was never even an option.”

“Maybe.”

He shrugged. James shook his head, still smiling, and rested a hand over his heart. “Mercury, I swear to you, no matter what happens, you have a home and a family here as long as you want them. If there’s ever anything you need, you only have to ask, and you don’t have to wait until you need something to reach out.”

Mercury watched him carefully through all of this, and then smiled and nodded. “All right. Yeah. All right. That works.”

“I am going to miss you, though,” James said, letting his hand drop.

“Yeah. I’m kinda gonna miss this place too.”

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Chapter End Notes
Let James Hug His Kids 2k31

Ruby has no time for your enforced monogamy.

This ending has been in the works nearly since the beginning of this fic, and I'm so glad to have finally gotten the chance to share it. Apart from a short stretch where I thought I'd have to push it back to volume three, this has always been Mercury's endgame, but getting him here has been a long, trying road, and keeping it secret while still telegraphing/foreshadowing/setting it up has been its own special sort of writing challenge (but that's nothing to what I've had to do to set up volume three without giving the game away).

Roll credits!

Above all, I owe a huge thank you to Hayley (@directium on Tumblr) and my friend Wolfy; both were invaluable for throwing writing spaghetti at and for helping me sort out my ideas, or just cheering me on when I needed it. Mercury and his story would not exist in the shape that it does without either of them. If my writing is a love letter, it is to them above anyone else.

As for the rest of you, you all deserve my gratitude: everyone who read and commented and shared and loved my work, this ridiculous thing that has taken years of my life, that I only started because I wanted to write a story about Qrow adopting Nora for Christmas, it wouldn't exist without you. Seriously. Reading the comments on volume one was what inspired me to actually write down volume two.

So what's next? Those of you who follow me on the tumble will already be aware, but a moment of patience as I assume not all of my audience is shared: I do not yet have everything in place that needs to be for volume three, and I have some ideas that simply cannot be contained in the volumes themselves, so we're going to get a few shorts going. I have the list narrowed down to the seven most essential for setting up volume three, and I'm going to write my way through them before I start them, just so I can get a buffer going again. (So the next time I post, I'll have the prologue of volume three written ;).

Volume three will pick up in August of the next year from this one, and like the first two will run to Christmas and finish up the trilogy. Again, not news for followers, but Volume Three will move Roman into the spotlight as a main character and focus on his relationship with Tai; it will also introduce Neo, Cinder, and Clover, who will have their own plots interwoven with the two main ones. (Which will hopefully please the people who kept asking me about Neo- this has always been the plan! Sorry I couldn't give you ya girl sooner; hopefully the context in which she is introduced will explain her absence.) But don't worry! James and Qrow are still the centerpoint of this story, and will also be a major focus. I'm just expanding beyond just them.

Well, that's all! I hope y'all enjoyed this, and I hope you're psyched for the shorts and volume three!

(And if you're reading chapter by chapter, be sure to keep clicking through for the stinger ;)
It was the middle of the night, but Mercury was having trouble sleeping again, and had the vague thought that making some Ovaltine might make him feel better.

(He was thinking of Hazel’s baking tactic, and how the process of making seemed to calm him, and while he wasn’t interested in baking, Ovaltine was a process, especially the way James had shown him how to make it.)

The stove light was on in the kitchen when Mercury came down, and he could just make out the shape of James at the stove, the smell of Ovaltine and condensed milk and vanilla filling the kitchen.

“Couldn’t sleep either, huh,” he mumbled, scrubbing his eyes in the sudden light, and then froze, and stared.

Apparently James had come down straight from his bed, at least that’s what Mercury was inferring from him wearing nothing but a pair of grey sweatpants, everything else bare to the world and gleaming silver in the dim light. He took a step back and pointed, while James raised a baffled eyebrow at him.

“You’re a cyborg,” he said, and when James looked even more confused, “Don’t give me that look! You’re a fucking cyborg! Since when is that even a thing?”

“Since… ages? Mercury, you’ve lived here for four months. How is this news?”

“Well it’s not like you ever sat me down and said ‘oh and by the way I’m a goddamn cyborg! Just thought you ought to know!’ It’s never come up! Just how much of you is artificial, anyway?”

James shook his head and turned back to the stove, pouring up the Ovaltine in the waiting mug, then grabbing a second from the cabinet and pouring up a second mug for Mercury. Once he’d set it in front of him, Mercury took it automatically and sat down, feeling a little calmer now that the initial shock had passed. James sat across from him.

“My entire right side is metal, as well as several of my internal organs, most of my digestive system, and both of my lungs.”

“Damn. You didn’t just wreck your bike, did you?”

“I am extremely lucky to be alive.”

Mercury snorted at the understatement of that, and then for a moment there was silence as they sipped their Ovaltine. Suddenly, Mercury set his down and gave James his cockiest grin.

“So…”

“I’m not discussing my genital arrangements with a fourteen year old,” James said, not even stopping his mug on his way to his lips.
“Spoilsport.”

Chapter End Notes

Mercury has very good reasons for wanting to know about the possibilities of prosthetic dicks, but that doesn't mean he's not going to be a little shit in trying to find out what those possibilities are.

(I can't believe I managed to put this conversation off for this long. I was so sure it'd come up sooner.)

End Notes

Hey. You. Yeah you. Sitting there with the computer and/or other electronic device in front of you. You know you want to hit me up over on Tumblr. My handle is @grifalinas. Come join me. Cry about James Ironwood with me. You know you want to.

(I would promise it will be worth it but we all know that's a damned lie.)

Also apparently this is my 100th story posted to Ao3, which I think means that I'm contractually obligated to finish it.)

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!