A young man from a world set on fire arrives in one experiencing a long period of tenuous peace. The people of Remnant will soon find that even in a world of bloody evolution, war...war never changes.
A Fortunate Tragedy

Chapter 1 - A Fortunate Tragedy

Sunbeams fell as heavily as rain on the bare head of a lone walker. The oppressive heat of the day caused shimmering heat haze all along the horizon. Nothing except cacti grew in the blasted desert of the Mojave. Its sands partially concealed many of the remaining structures, entombing the monuments to a bygone era. The solitary figure continued his swift march through the inhospitable landscape as wind gently pelted him with sand and fluttered his duster. Even in the face of the intense solar radiation hitting it through the weakened atmosphere, the two headed bear emblazoned on the back of the duster remained uncowed. As the trail the man left in the sand became obscured by soft, durling gusts no greater than ankle height, an observer might wonder at the identity of this peculiar individual and how he had ended up in this simultaneously desolate and picturesque landscape. The answer to that question was a story that consisted mostly of death.

Markus Friedrich was a man of many names. Few knew his given name, even fewer used it. In the Capital wasteland he was dubbed the Lone Wanderer, in the Mojave he was known as Courier Six, or simply as The Courier. His enemies gave him their own names. The Legion called him Thanatos, the god of death, and they feared him even more than they did the Burned Man, as there was no question of whether he lived. The Enclave had designated him “Apollyon”. The Biblical Angel of the Abyss was perceived nearly as ambiguously as he was; considered a Lucifer by his enemies and a Messiah to those he allied with. Despite hailing him as a hero, the NCR high command remained wary of him, realizing that if he turned on them, their days would be numbered and thus attempted to get him out of their affairs as soon as possible.

In the days following the NCR's victory at second battle of Hoover dam, the Courier found himself spending increasing amounts of time in the Big Empty. As one of the brightest minds of the twenty-third century, he, with the aid of the Think Tank, pushed the boundaries of science further than they had ever gone before. Now that the war with the Legion was firmly in the hands of the NCR who were more than capable of finishing off the dying empire, the Lone Courier had turned his attention to less violent ways of improving the universal standard of living. Of course, the Courier's strict morals imposed on them prevented many of the Think Tank's less ethical ideas from harming the people of of the Mojave wasteland. Still, science flourished once again in the crater that was the Big Empty, and not long after the Courier's arrival, a prototype Transportalponder was ready to be tested.

This Transportalponder Mk. II would form the basis for a revolution of transportation in the wasteland. The new version would be able to take a person from the place of activation to a set point, in this case the sink, and back to the initial position of activation. In addition to this, the range would be increased to cover the entire continent. It was easy to imagine the benefits of such a technology. Such technology would allow the NCR to more efficiently maintain a vast nation without a network of infrastructure that was virtually impossible to rebuild without industrial centers. These devices could put the entire continent decades ahead of where it was now and speed the eventually rebuilding of civilization through unification of all the isolated pockets of humanity.

The most difficult feature to implement had been extended range. Therefore, in order to test this, the Lone Courier left Big Mountain began to the trek to the pre-war train station that ran between the Mojave and Capital wastelands.

The NCR had largely forgotten about Courier after the award ceremony and he, for his part, was
content to be forgotten. He had no real investment in the NCR, he supported it merely because he had found it the most moral option. Not that there was much competition. The corruption and inefficiency that were the vices of the NCR paled in comparison to the detriments of the other options. The brutality and backwardness of the Legion made the organization’s very existence a crime against humanity. House’s plans for a dictatorial police state ruled by a man on life support and an army of robots was also an unattractive alternative.

The Second Battle for Hoover Dam, and the conflicts preceding it, had left the Courier hardened and cynical, having a pessimistic view of human nature. Yet, he still retained the belief that one man could change the course of history. That particular lesson was one taught to him by the other Courier Six, Ulysses. The Lone Courier still had not checked up on him following the Battle of the Divide. Nor had he returned to Zion to see the progress of the tribes now that the White Legs had been eliminated.

He still felt guilt about the fate of the members of the Happy Trails Caravan. Both the lives he had taken and those he had failed to save weighed heavily on the shoulders of one too young to bear them. Despite his successes, the ordeals the seventeen year old had been through left him with permanent mental scars and issues that he had no way of resolving. It was true that in the heat of battle he felt little emotion in killing. The Burned Man had once told him that killing when done righteously, was a chore. And in battle, he agreed with that sentiment. However, once the dust settled and there was no threat to his life, he felt sympathy and towards those he had killed, not knowing whether they were evil or merely victims of the circumstance. This was accompanied by an immeasurable and not entirely rational guilt.

His fairly routine reflection on his own psychological state was interrupted by his arrival at his destination. The train station was in much the same condition that he had left it in. That is, dilapidated and dangerously decayed. Some feral ghouls had taken up residence in the area. They were hardly a threat to the Courier, and six rounds from A Light Shining in Darkness later, six bodies were on the floor. Each had a single bullet wound in the exact center of its forehead.

A sudden wind caused the Courier's duster to flutter much like the flag which was emblazoned on its back. His sunglasses shielded his eyes from the dust of the Mojave that the draft blew through the desolate train station.

It had been months since he had first arrived in the Mojave. Unfortunately, as a result of a near fatal dose of acute lead poisoning, he had forgotten all events that had occurred between boarding the train in the Capital wasteland and waking up in Goodsprings. While some would be concerned by the loss of memory, he was merely thankful that the loss had not been more extensive. He could have easily woken up with no idea who he was.

Once he had boarded the train he sat down and prepared for hours of boredom as the automated vehicle traveled across the continent. Eventually, lost in his thoughts, he drifted off into an uneasy sleep plagued by nightmares and phantoms of the dead.

The piercing squeal of the brakes brought him out of his unconscious self torture. Drawing A Light Shining in Darkness, he stood, and cautiously approached the door. He stopped and listened for a moment. The telltale growls of feral ghouls greeted him. The Courier slammed the door open and activated VATS.

His Pip-boy sent electronic signals to his brain that caused time to appear to have stopped. He could still move, albeit extremely slowly. Four targets sighted. Three were on the ground level while one was on the upper level of the train station. He targeted them on his Pip-boy. Four suppressed rounds discharged. Four bodies hit the floor. All created a singular dull thud. It was
over in less than a second. Quickly swapping mags, he then surveyed the area for additional targets. He saw none. Now that the location appeared to be clear, the Lone Courier prepared to test the new and improved transportalponder MK. II.

Despite his pleading (or as he insisted on calling it "well reasoned arguments") with the Think Tank to rename the transportalponder to something less silly, or at least with less syllables, they were adamant that its name remain the same. The Courier eventually gave up (realizing that attempting to reason with them was a foolish idea in the first place) and settled on renaming it without their knowledge if it ever went to mass production.

Atomizing A Light Shining in Darkness and summoning the transportalponder MK. II in its place. He held the device at about shoulder height and depressed the trigger. The new version, owing to its more powerful nature required a nearly half a minute to activate. While this was an inconvenience, the Courier was not overly concerned as he did not use it in combat situations to avoid it being damaged. As soon as the transportalponder started charging, with a large amount of dramatic irony, he suddenly heard someone yell,

"It's him!"

His head snapped to the source of the exclamation. Metal helmet, weird bug eyes, there was no doubt who it was: the Enclave. An Enclave squad had wandered onto the upper level while he had been absorbed in using his Pip-boy he had failed to notice them enter the area. There was one officer, two hellfire troopers, and one with a Tesla, who had identified him.

"Damn, those Enclave bastards just don’t know when they’ve lost," the Courier thought to himself, "Well, time to add four more to my body count."

Despite this confidence, the Lone Wanderer was aware that he was in an undesirable situation; he was not wearing any significant armor. This was an experiment after all, not a combat mission. While he was confident that he could operate his Pip-boy one-handed, once he had equipped his armor he would not be able to wield a weapon as long as the transportalponder was activating.

His plans were thrown into disarray when the transportalponder started to glow with blinding light forcing the Courier to avert his eyes even though he was wearing sunglasses. Seeing this, the Enclave troopers began to blind fire at the Lone Wanderer. While the projectiles missed, even near perfect luck can take one only so far as, much to the Courier's horror, the Tesla cannon beam collided directly with the transportalponder. The device began to glow green and became hot in his hand. The beeps became more frequent and intense. The Lone Couriers last words before being sucked into the portal were, "Oh son of a…"

Despite the efforts of many individuals and organizations in both wastelands, the Lone Courier was not to be found. That did not however, stop the Brotherhood of Steel and the Outcasts from massacring the Enclave in retribution. Despite others having given up the search, the Brains in the Big Empty continued to search for their CEO and missing technology, experimenting with portals of decreasing stability and increasing power.

This incident would further prove Ulysses right. Not only could a single man change the course of history, but the Courier could change two worlds.

AN: This character is a result of a heavily modded playthrough I did. Notable mods include TTW (Tale of Two Wastelands), Project Nevada, Weapons of the New Millennium, as well as several more perk mods. This character is a "Lone Courier", meaning that the Lone Wanderer and Courier
Six are the same person. I will be ignoring the time gap between the two games as it has no practical effect. The Lone Wanderer also left Vault 101 at seventeen rather than nineteen in this universe so that he is the same age as the other students at Beacon.

Complete list of stats and items has been moved to Chapter 22.

Here is a list of stats that the character possesses. This can easily be ignored if it's too boring for you. Its main purpose is for the reader's reference.

Character Stats:

Gender: Male

Name: Markus Friedrich

Race: Caucasian

Alias: The Lone Wanderer, Mr. 101, "that kid from vault 101", the Courier, Apollyon

SPECIAL Stats:

Strength: 10(+)

Perception: 10

Endurance: 10

Charisma: 10

Intelligence: 10

Agility: 10

Luck: 9

Skills:

Barter: 80

Energy Weapons: 90

Explosives: 100

Guns: 100

Lockpick: 100

Medicine: 100

Melee Weapons: 100(+)

Lockpick: 100

Medicine: 100
Melee: 100
Repair: 100
Science: 100
Sneak: 100
Speech: 100
Survival: 92
Unarmed: 90
"...bitch!" The Lone Courier finished as he was violently thrust from the portal and onto a surprisingly soft and very green surface.

Once the blinding light from the portal had subsided, the Courier could see where he had landed. The surface he had landed on was lush, living grass with the deep brown of wet soil underneath it. Upon looking up, he realized that he was in a forest. Not a series of burned husks or diseased pines, but an honest to God living healthy, forest. His first question was where this all had come from.

This place was healthier than Oasis or Vault 22 and seemed entirely peaceful. He heard nothing, nothing at all. Not that this place couldn’t be hiding danger, but his first impression of this place was that he was in Eden.

The revelation of his location caused mixed feelings. While he was in the wonder at the sheer amount of life surrounding him, he was also worried as he now had no idea where he was. What was worse, was that upon checking his Pip-boy, he found that it could not establish a connection to a satellite. This further worried him as Rob-co satellites were supposed to have global coverage.

This meant that either the area he was in was being jammed, or something had happened to one of the satellites. The second option was the more likely. It had been two hundred years after all. There was plenty of time for something to have happened. This still left him with the problem that until he either entered the range of another of the satellites or found a paper map, he would be wandering aimlessly.

The density and health of the foliage suggested extensive use of a, or multiple, GECK(s). He could not see very far in any direction beyond the clearing he had landed in. Innumerable tree trunks and thick undergrowth blocked his vision. To the Lone Wanderer, it was unthinkable that this much life existed anywhere naturally. As much as he hated to admit it, Vault-tec seemed to have done some good.

Since he had not heard of any area such as this while travelling through the Capital wasteland or in the Mojave, he deduced that he was no longer in North America. Rumors of this place would have certainly reached him if it had been on continental America. It was much more likely he was in what was once Europe as the species of trees were not consistent with those native to Asia, Africa, or Australia.

Since he was no longer anywhere familiar, he felt his ultimate goal would be to find a way back. Despite how lush the land is, he felt a responsibility towards the people of the wastes and his companions not to abandon them. As well, there was not much for him to do in a forest, as nice at it was being there. There were problems that needed solving back in the Mojave. Pondering his return, the Courier turned his gaze towards the Transportalponder MK. II. that was still smoldering on the ground near him.

The plastic casing had melted in some places and the circuit boards were sparking. To attempt to use it in this condition would likely do nothing except damage it further. Digitizing the heavily damaged device, he drew his silenced M14.
His first order of business in finding his way home would be to find and make contact with any civilization that was in the area. Any attempt to repair the Transportalponder would require specialized equipment and advanced technology. Civilization was the only place where he could acquire either of those.

While it was entirely possible that the residents of this place did not speak English, the Courier had learned several of the European languages (Intelligence 10) including German, French, Russian, Latin, Spanish, and a little Greek as well as Asian languages such as Chinese due to a surprising amount of surviving literature being in languages other than English. His lingual ability meant that should the locals speak either a pre-war language or a derivation of one (like the tribes of Zion) he should still be able to communicate well enough for his purposes.

The Lone Wanderer decided to set off south from his point of arrival. It was as good a direction as any, and exploring was genuinely his best option at this point. The local map function of his Pip-boy remained functional and recorded his path.

The height of the trees obscured the sun making it difficult to estimate the time of day. However, the fact that it was getting slowly darker indicated it was the early evening.

The trees were spaced so that the Lone Wanderer had adequate line of sight to use his scoped M14. Eventually, he found a swift river of decent width and depth. It was strange for him to see so much pure water naturally. Even the water in the Mojave wasn't entirely radiation free. The rushing sound of the water was harsh to his ears and contrasted strangely with the utter peace he saw.

The Lone Wanderer knew that many cities and settlements were built along rivers in order to have a source of fresh water. Therefore, he felt that his best bet would be to follow the river. The only question was whether to go upstream or downstream. The purity of the water indicated that if there was a settlement it would be downstream. So the Courier adjusted his course to follow the river downstream.

It was concerning to the Lone Courier that he had yet to encounter any wildlife. Typically in both the Mojave and the Capital wasteland even if he couldn't see any animals, he could certainly hear them. If GECK’s had been used, he should have encountered the local fauna by now. The lack of sounds of nature filled him with a sense of foreboding. He kept his M14 shouldered.

The rush of the river was briefly interrupted by a howl in the distance. In an instant he raised his rifle in the direction of the sound and shifted to a crouch. To the Courier it sounded much like a coyote. However, he knew that assuming he was in Europe like he suspected, it was probably a wolf or a mutated version of one. The initial call was answered by others. All sounded directly in the path of the Lone Wanderer.

He advanced silently, wraithlike in the long shadows of the evening. Then, he stopped abruptly, what disturbed the otherwise tranquil forest now in his sight.

To the Courier, the strange creature looked like a mix between a deathclaw and a Yao Guai. However, it appeared to be far weaker than either. It lacked the long claws and nearly bulletproof skin of a deathclaw as well as the sheer mass of a Yao Guai.

He scanned the creature with his AR scanner implant. The augmentation confirmed that the animal was both a low threat and hostile towards him. No surprises there.

He looked down his scope and aligned the beast's head in its crosshairs. Through the scope, he noticed a bone "mask," a kind of exoskeleton that covered its face. Other similar protrusions covered the creature’s body. While this caused him to pause briefly to consider whether the mask
would impede the round, he ultimately concluded that it was not thick enough. Bone was not a very bullet proof material as over penetration would attest to.

He exhaled, steadying his aim, and squeezed the trigger. The .308 full metal jacket round tore through the air. The subsonic ammunition lacked the kinetic force that standard ammunition possessed in exchange for also lacking the sonic boom that gave away the user’s position. He did not want to draw more of them to him.

The bone mask was shattered by the hot lead before it messily exited the creature's skull, tearing a fist sized hole in its cranium, and tumbled through the air before embedding itself into a tree.

The Lone Courier cautiously advanced towards the downed animal with his weapon trained on it to confirm the kill. The creature made no movements. However, as he approached the body it suddenly started to dissolve. Not turn to ash or goo like from an energy weapon, but actually disintegrating independently. This defied all science that the Lone Wanderer knew of. Within a few seconds, the body had disappeared entirely. While it was nowhere near the strangest thing he had seen, it added further mystery to this land that he found himself in.

Despite the fact that his weapon is suppressed, it quickly became evident that the death of the creature had not been unnoticed by its fellows. For lack of a better name, the Courier came to mentally call the creatures Guaiclaws. While he realized that the name was terrible and uninspired, he decided to go with it until he found a better one. In his mind, the name was still better than those the Think Tank came up with. Not that he was bitter about that or anything.

Definitely not.

Several of these Guaiclaws came into view of the Courier.

Realizing that there were an unknown number of these creatures that were hid by the foliage, the Land Wanderer switched from his Courier duster into his elite riot gear. In the dull green colored armor, he was nearly invisible against the vibrant flora of the background. He switched to the infrared vision setting on his helmet and he quickly saw that his choice was a good one. The area behind the Guaiclaws that were visible with the naked eye was crawling with activity of more creatures that were of a similar size.

There was only one way this would end. He summoned his ZM LE-300 and detached the suppressor. He then switched to 5.56 hollowpoint rounds. It was time to go loud.

"Let's get this started." He thought to himself as he switched off the safety and flicked the dial to burst fire mode.
Chapter 3 - Shaken Legend

Chapter 3 - Shaken Legend

The sound of the unsuppressed supersonic fire was deafening in comparison to the ambient noise that the Courier had become accustomed to during his wandering since his arrival. Even with the guaiclaws’ constant howling and snarling, the loud retort of the ZM LE-300 bursts drowned out any other sound. If the Courier had not worn his helmet, even he would likely have found the noise uncomfortably loud.

Three bursts of 5.56 hollowpoint rounds struck the three lead guaiclaws in their torso (Perk: Center of Mass). The impact left gaping wounds in the creatures who instantly collapsed their momentum carrying them another meter forward, blood pouring from the massive rends in their flesh. Gallons of blood spilled before they started to disintegrate.

Once the Courier had stepped out of concealment, all the guaiclaws had simultaneously turned to face him, and charged into his gunfire with total disregard for self preservation.

The Lone Wanderer’s gun fired with no perceptible delay between bursts. A guaiclaw fell with each burst, yet the beasts charged over the bodies of their fellows into the hail of bullets. Despite the amount of guaiclaws he gunned down, they were steadily gained ground towards him. The ground was painted crimson in their blood and the air was filled with the pink mist of destroyed tissue. While the quadstacked magazine he used meant that he could sustain fire for an extended period, he knew that he would have to reload soon, and that when he did, these things would close to melee range.

The amount of cadavers sublimating increased to the point that the Lone Courier was forced to switch his helmet to infrared vision in order to even see his foes. This momentary delay was all that the animals needed to close to melee range. However, the Courier was ready.

Reacting faster than one could see, he switched to his ballistic fist, and brought the ridiculously heavy weapon down onto the foremost creature’s head and crushed its skull into a bloody pulp. The pressure plate on the gauntlet activated which triggered the three barrels (hydra config. WMX mod) to discharge their hyper-lethal projectiles. The slugs hit a guaiclaw behind the one initially targeted by the Lone Wanderer, creating mortal wounds in its chest and cracking its bone faceplate.

Now that only a few of these creatures were left, the Lone Courier decided to test the strength of these things. As the one closest to him swiped at him he braced himself and allowed the attack to connect. The claws of the guaiclaw did not even scratch the pauldron of the bulletproof elite riot gear. Still, it had a decent amount of kinetic force and did hurt, so he could not take hits forever.

After crushing his assailant’s ribcage, the Lone Courier assessed his four remaining opponents. These creatures seemed larger and smarter than their more aggressive comrades. They circled the Courier, staying a significant distance out of the range of his fists. This proved to be a poor decision, as he simply drew A Light Shining in Darkness and placed a double tap into two of their heads. The other two saw the deaths of their fellows and initially started to slowly backed away before breaking into a full fledged run. This proved to be in vain as the Lone Wanderer simply sent another pair of .45 auto rounds through the back of each of their skulls as they fled.
As he saw no more heat signatures on his infrared, the Courier disabled it and switched back to his scoped M14.

As the adrenaline wore off, he drained a bottle of scotch, and examined the area. There was hardly any evidence that anything had happened here. Most of the corpses and blood were gone by now. Aside from the odd body, all that remained was some damage to the area from overpenetration, shell casings, and powder burns. He made sure to digitize his shell casings. If anyone was in the area, they would have certainly heard the fight. He therefore made sure to remove anything that could be used to identify him. Besides, he could use the casings to manufacture additional ammunition. If he was unable to find civilization, he would need to count his bullets to survive. However, he was not overly concerned as he had large reserves of most types of ammunition, so running out was not an imminent concern.

The Courier continued along the river as the last of the guaiclaws sublimated behind him, its particles drifting into the swiftly darkening sky. He no longer attempted to move particularly stealthily. If anyone was in the area, they would have certainly been alerted by the unsuppressed gunfire and slaughter of a few moments ago. At this point, it was in the Lone Wanderer’s best interest to simply create as much distance between the battleground and him as possible.

The sun set quickly as the Lone Courier continued to jog along the river. The sun soon disappeared behind the tall trees, leaving the sky a light pink color. The color gradually continued to darken until the he had to switch to night vision mode on his elite riot helmet in order to see properly. While he had superb unaided night vision, darkness still limited his line of sight, and with a scoped weapon that was a severe tactical hinderance.

The presence of these creatures concerned the Lone Wanderer. They were likely the explanation for the lack of previous encounters with wildlife. However, the guaiclaws did not seem dangerous enough to challenge a mutant like a centaur or deathclaw. The creatures were also clearly not around pre-war as there would surely have been records of this species.

In addition, the boney protrusions and mask did not appear natural, nor did they appear to be the result of radiation or the FEV. Both resulted in far less even changes. The sublimation that the guaiclaws underwent upon death was also unexplained. They also did not act like most animals would. The majority lacked the self preservation evolution should have beaten into them. They chose to attack even after having seen dozens of their brethren being gunned down. In his mind, these traits meant that they were probably engineered. Maybe a failed military experiment? It wouldn't surprise him. Governments had done stranger things pre-war. He supposed he should consider himself lucky; guaiclaws were a walk in the park compared to the other experiments he had dealt with. They were far weaker than Super-mutants and Deathclaws.

He wasn't sure how he would feel should he encounter either type of creature. On the one hand, it would be reassuring as they were familiar. On the other hand, Deathclaws and Super-mutants were dangerous even in power armor.

The origins of the guaiclaws were of greater interest to him due to the unique qualities they exhibited.

The Courier was primarily interested in how the sublimation occurred. It seemed that shortly after death both the body and blood would become an invisible gas that was lighter than air. Helium was the most likely candidate. Methane or hydrogen would have ignited. Flammable gases don't mix well with firefights. How a living creature became helium upon death was a mystery to him, as did
the question as to why someone would design these things to sublimate in the first place. The only thing he could think of was for the purpose of deniability. No bodies, no evidence. But, the beasts weren't exactly subtle.

In the end, the Lone Courier figured that he would simply have to hope to find a proper explanation once he reached civilization. Speculating about how's and why's was of no use to him.

Eventually, the Courier realized that he should stop to sleep for a while. It wasn't strictly necessary, but being as he was in no hurry and no danger, it was a luxury he could afford. In order to do this, knew that he would need a location that would shelter him from both observation, and attention from the local wildlife. "Guaiclaw" was not his preferred method of awakening. He doubted it was anyone's.

The terrain had maintained a consistent elevation with only minor variations along the river, offering no location for him to set up a conventional shelter. Eventually, he concluded that he would need to find an alternate location; the terrain gave no indication of changing. This left him with limited options, the most viable solution being to find a tree to rest in.

Elevation would provide him with concealment and ensure that should any of the local fauna attempt to eat him he would wake before they got to him. However, due to his increased weight (as a result of him being practically a walking armory) he would first need to find a tree that was strong enough to hold his weight.

Fortunately, this proved not to be overly difficult as the trees that grew along the river were stronger and larger than most of the others that he had seen in the forest. Thus he had found a suitable one after only a few minutes of searching.

After scrambling up the tree with the agility of someone who could walk on water, the Lone Courier found a bough sturdy enough to hold his weight and sat down for a long night.

Rather suddenly, he saw something that caused him to panic. Him, the Legendary Courier Six, the Messianic Lone Wanderer, angel of the abyss and bringer of the apocalypse was panicking. One would wonder at what would cause such a normally stoic individual to panic. The answer to that was currently shattered into lots of pieces of varying sizes.

The Courier’s first coherent thought (after a series of incoherent “what?”’s and “how?”’s) was:

“*What the FUCK happened to the moon?!*”

Roughly two thirds of the moon was shattered into countless tiny pieces. Worse still, he could only think a few ways that it might have occurred, and all of them involved aliens or super weapons or both.

Immediately he set about rationalizing this revelation to himself in a way that would not cause him to have a mental breakdown. Right. He knew that the moon was not shattered before he tested the Transportalponder MK. II. Therefore, it seemed that some time had passed from when he had disappeared from the old train station to when he had first arrived in this lush forest. It was mid morning when he left and based on the position of the sun, it was late afternoon when he had arrived. The transit time was incalculable. He could have been gone for six hours or ten million years. He worried that the lack of satellite connection was a result of the destruction of the moon, or worse, the decay of time. He took some small comfort in the fact the debris had not yet spread out throughout the moon’s orbit, indicating that its shattering was a recent event. The conclusion that he had come to was that it was probably the result of a battle with the Zetans and thus resolved to check up on Mothership Zeta as soon as he got back. And so the Lone Courier fell into a deep
sleep, tormented by the gory sight of those he had killed and those he had let die, all under a shattered moon.
A Silenced Greeting

Chapter 4 - A Silenced Greeting

The Lone Wanderer was in a familiar location. One he had been in hundreds of times before. Yet the familiar sounds of creaking pipes and the distant sloshing of the tidal basin were anything but comforting. It was the Jefferson memorial, Project Purity. It was a symbol of freedom, liberty, and mankind’s tenacity and will to survive despite the odds.

And he hated the place with every fiber of his being.

At night his mind regularly took him there, where he heard his father’s last words and re-experienced the guilt of watching helplessly while the final member of his family died inches from him. This time, he was back in the room again. He watched for the umpteenth time as his father activated the purifier, martyring himself. Sometimes his father’s face would morph into his own and he would feel the seizures that accompanied lethal levels of radiation poisoning. Like he always did, after the Project had been activated, his father placed his hand on the glass and spoke to him, “...run..”, he said, “Run!”'. In the reflection of the glass was a shattered moon stained crimson. The Lone Wanderer woke as he usually did, in a cold sweat.

He could no longer remember the last time he did not have a nightmare when he slept. With the amount of things that he had seen it was really no surprise to anyone. The Courier was certain that he had a host of mental health issues, and he would be capable of diagnosing them all. Getting them treated on the other hand would be nearly impossible; finding a psychologist was difficult in a nuclear wasteland. He didn’t think that the Rorschach test that Doc Mitchell administered really counted. Especially since the Doc didn’t know what the results meant. It didn’t help that he knew enough about the subject to write a textbook on it. As well as that, those who were in fact qualified, would find it difficult to dissect the mind of a traumatized genius to say the least. While ordinarily the term “genius” might seem pretentious, when one considered that the Think Tank were also considered such, it became much less flattering.

Courier Six simply soldiered on, doing what was right by any means necessary. He had no qualms or hesitation when it came to the extermination of the morally bankrupt, only many not entirely rational regrets.

Dismissing these musings on his psychological state, the Courier disabled the night vision mode on his helmet so he could actually see something. As the color returned to his vision, he was pleasantly surprised to find that it was shortly after dawn. He had successfully made it through the night without any external interruptions to his rest. Evidently the tree had done its job. The Lone Wanderer decided that he should cover as much distance as he could in hope that he would find civilization, where he could find out where he was and what, in the name of all that was holy and unholy, had happened to the moon and when.

After he downed a bottle of whiskey (the contained alcohol promptly filtered out by his artificial
heart), the Courier jumped down from the tree. He allowed his reinforced bones to take the hit and continued to follow the river downstream, albeit much more quietly than he had the previous night. He needed to ensure that first contact with the locals would be on his terms. He had been ambushed too many times to let it happen again. Besides, he looked fairly intimidating in his elite riot gear and if he was discovered it was likely he would be met with drawn weapons in a best case scenario. In a worst case scenario he would be met with rockets and artillery fire from a European equivalent of the Boomers.

The wind had been almost imperceptible while he had been in this forest, it was only barely noticeable when he had climbed the tree. Previously, the breeze had been wafted gently downstream, leaving the Lone Wanderer upwind. Fortunately for him however, the wind suddenly gusted strongly in the opposite direction. This almost entirely random phenomenon provided him with the most crucial information he had received since his arrival in this strange land.

Through the deactivated filters on his helmet, he smelled the unmistakable scent of smoke. Smoke was a near definite sign of human habitation. The fact that the smoke was not visible in the sky proved to the Courier that the source of the smoke was not a forest fire, as an uncontrolled blaze would have caused more noticeable effects. There was, or had recently been, a controlled fire somewhere downwind of him. Since the scent was only noticeable once the wind had started blow towards him indicated that he had chosen correctly in his decision to head downstream.

The Lone Courier recognized that he would likely soon make contact with the locals. As such, he decided to do some reconnaissance first. After all, it was better to be safe than dead; or worse, responsible for civilian casualties. While he was difficult to see in the green colored riot gear and would be practically invisible to even the most observant of beings, he was taking no chances. After all, why settle for being practically invisible when you can be literally invisible.

One of the first things that the Courier did after reacquiring his brain was to transplant the stealth field generator from his Chinese stealth armor, which he had received from the VSS armory after he completed the Anchorage simulation, onto the Stealth Suit MK. II (much to the delight of the Suit.) This along with upgrades to the energy weapon resistance led him to dub this version the MK. III.

After he equipped the suit, it said its customary greeting of "did you miss me?." To this of course, the Courier responded with his customary silence. Talking to a computer was a rather fruitless endeavor.

The Courier dropped into a crouch which activated the stealth field generator. Now that he was invisible, he continued to creep forward in hope of discovering the source of the smoke. As he advanced, he saw that the trees around him gradually began to thin out. This indicated to him that he would soon approach a clearing or the edge of the forest, two logical spots for an encampment to be. He slowed his pace further as the trees became sparser. The mid morning light that filtered through the trees meant that he could not locate the source of the smoke from the ambient light that a fire would produce as he would if it were night.

The clearing, as it was revealed to be, was large, nearly eighty meters across, and irregular in shape. Much to the disappointment of the Lone Wanderer, the area seemed to be devoid of life. He switched the helmet of his suit to infrared vision. Multiple objects were of high temperature. None were over a meter tall.

At the opposite end of the clearing, close to the river, the remnants of a fire still smouldered. Some small dots appeared in the trees which the Courier assumed to be birds. In the treeline a large, short bright red heat signature moved. It was far shorter than the guaiclaws that he had seen the previous
day. However, since the being did not appear to be bipedal it was almost certainly an animal. Whether it was hostile remained to be seen. As his AR scanner implant required line of sight, he swiftly crossed the clearing. Fortunately for him, the creature came out from behind the foliage that concealed it. It looked similar aesthetically to the guaiclaws in that it had a white and red mask that covered its face, and multiple bony plates that covered various parts of its body. However, while guaiclaws had a skeletal structure similar to that of a deathclaw, this new creature appeared to be shaped more like a pre-war boar.

Scanning...Threat: Low...Disposition: Hostile. That was all the Courier needed. He assessed that despite the increased thickness of the faceplate, it was not likely that it would stop even a subsonic .308 round. He sighted the creature, put the crosshair over its head, at such close range he had no need to adjust for elevation or wind, exhaled and squeezed the trigger twice.

Much to the surprise of the Lone Courier, the creature still stood. Blood flowed from cracks in the creature's mask. Evidently, this animal was capable of surviving two rounds to the head. This was a claim that only a few creatures (including the Courier) could make. It made tortured squeals as it searched in vain for its assailant. The Courier put another three round into the mortally wounded animal and silenced it.

The similarities between the guaiclaws and this new creature disturbed him. Their species were entirely different in structural form yet they appeared aesthetically similar. This all but confirmed that both this thing and the guaiclaws were engineered. This brought him even more questions such as who made them and for what purpose as well as how many different species there were. The fact that they were hostile to (presumably) all humans deepened the mystery further. It seemed strange to engineer a creature that would try to kill everyone. Since no answers seemed to be forthcoming, the Lone Wanderer set off with a renewed desire to make contact and get some answers.

After the Lone Wanderer deactivated the stealth field, he decided that his next order of business would be to discover which direction the people who had previously camped here had gone. Now that he had dealt with any hostiles in the area, he approached the remains of the fire to search for any clues that would provide information on where the only sapient life he had seen any sign of had gone.

From what he could tell, the fire was relatively small, as was the amount of disturbance to the floor of the clearing which meant that there were likely no more than four people who had stayed here. The path that they took when they left was obvious even to the casual observer. It was clear by the fact that those who had been here did not bother to cover their tracks, that they either did not fear reprisal, or did not expect anyone else to be here. He did not know which was more likely.

The condition of the fire indicated that they had not left long before the Courier had arrived. He determined that they had at most a four hour lead on him. Therefore, he set off at what he would consider to be a jog. The Lone Wanderer was confident that he would overtake his quarry before nightfall. A pace that would be considered grueling for most was handled with ease by the Courier. This was due not only to the extensive amount he ran daily, but also due to his more efficient artificial heart and cybernetically augmented lungs. Despite the speed at which he moved, the Lone Wanderer was silent. It was a technique he had perfected through numerous infiltrations and covert takedowns of enemy positions.

Time passed quickly for the Courier as he was distracted from his usual brooding with questions about the new place he found himself in. What had happened here? What was the story behind those creatures? Why had it taken so long for him to find evidence of sentient life in a place as nice as this? Was what he pursued even human? These ponderings kept the Courier distracted for most
of the day, he only paused periodically to drink a bottle of one of the various hard liquors he carried with him. As usual, the alcohol was correctly identified by his artificial heart as a poison and therefore filtered from his bloodstream, which prevented him from becoming intoxicated.

As the sun dipped back behind the trees, the Courier noticed something that brought him crashing back to reality: voices. The sound would have been imperceptible to the average human from this distance, but it was unmistakable to him. While he could not yet make out distinct words, it sounded like English. While he theoretically was capable of speaking several languages, he was not excited to try to speak a language he had never heard before.

The Courier slowed his pace to ensure he would not make any noise that would give away his position and activated his stealth field generator. The voices had stopped by now, this would have concerned the Courier had he not been invisible. At this point, it would have required divine intervention for him to have been detected.

The Courier switched his helmet to infrared. Three human shaped heat signatures appeared about seventy meters in front of him. They were obscured from conventional observation by the thick shrubbery that blanketed the forest floor. Courier Six silently approached his quarry. He now had a line of sight. It was the moment of truth; the results that his AR scanner delivered his would determine his next course of action.

To the naked eye, his quarry appeared at first glance to be human, both in height and shape. However closer observation revealed that they all appeared to have animalistic features; some had tails, others had a second pair of ears on the tops of their heads. To the Lone Courier, this suggested either FEV exposure or genetic experimentation, presumably by those Vault-tec bastards.

On a less promising note, they wore masks similar to those that were worn by the guaiclaws and the creature he had engaged in the clearing. It was a bad sign if ever there ever was one, especially when one considered that everything that wore one of those had previously tried to kill him. However, on the offhand chance that they were taken as trophies, he made sure to scan them. He was not overly surprised when his scanner reported that, like everything else he had encountered so far, they were both hostile and a low threat to him.

The Courier sighed in resigned fashion. It seemed that unless they carried holotapes that detailed the geography and history of this place since the bombs fell, he would simply be left with more questions. He looked down his scope and activated VATS. In less than a second, he sent a silenced round directly towards each of their heads. They all simultaneously collapsed lifelessly to the ground. The clichéd simile of a marionette with its strings cut was no less appropriate because of its overuse.

The Lone Wanderer switched to A Light Shining in Darkness and advanced towards the downed figures in order to confirm the kills and search for any intelligence that they carried.

However, as he approached the bodies, he noticed something peculiar. There did not appear to be any blood or injuries of any kind on the bodies that one would expect from gunshot victims. In fact, on closer inspection, the mutants(as he had designated them) appeared to be breathing. This was by far the most perplexing thing that the Courier had ever seen, and he had seen some pretty strange things. Somehow, the .308 rounds, rather than splatter their grey matter over the forest floor, merely knocked these things unconscious with no apparent damage.

"Well, at least there's a bright side to this," thought the Courier as he restrained the unconscious mutants.
Now he had a means to finally acquire some information about this place. It was time for the Lone Courier’s brand of “enhanced interrogation.”
As the Courier was securing his prisoners, the first things he noticed were the peculiar weapons that the trio had carried prior to their sudden collapse. They were far brighter colored than those he had seen in the wasteland and even more so compared to those used by the pre-war militaries. He also did not recognize the models, nor did they contain any manufacturer's marks that he could identify. This was surprising when one considered how familiar the Lone Courier was with the weapons of the world (Perk: Gun Nut.)

This left two options: Either the weapons were manufactured post-war or, they were custom made. If they were custom made, these people had access to very high tech manufacturing. Either way, it indicated that there was a highly developed civilization (or at least an arms manufacturer) in the immediate area. This inspired hope in the Lone Courier that he would eventually manage to leave this Godforsaken forest before he died of old age.

The Courier also searched his captives for any objects of interest that they might have carried. Between the three of them, he found some paper money a various denominations, strangely colored ammunition, and each of them had a very strange device.

The “paper money” was not actually made out of any kind of paper, but was rather made of a rigid plastic. This further supported the theory that a civilization was developed at least to the level of the NCR in the vicinity. The currency itself appeared to be termed “Lien” and issued by an entity named “Vale”.

The spare ammunition was of varying calibers and was brightly colored like the weapons and appeared to also be slightly luminous. However, without knowledge of the design and chemicals used in the construction of the cartridges, he was not comfortable with an attempted disassembly of them without any specialized equipment as he was rather fond of his fingers, and so simply digitized them for later study.

The devices were the most peculiar though. They varied slightly in size but all consisted of two parallel grips. When a small amount of force was used to pull them apart a glass pane unrolled in the center, reminiscent of a scroll. This glass then started to display words, much like a terminal would. This was without a doubt some of the most advanced technology he had seen. For a computer to be simultaneously this small and powerful was virtually unthinkable. Not even Big Mountain had this level of technology. It seemed to him that unless this technology was manufactured post-war (which seemed unlikely to him) there was another party that had independently developed and mass produced highly advanced miniaturized computers that appeared to function via a touch-screen, something that even Vault-Tec had been unable to do.

The Courier digitized the "scrolls", as he had dubbed them, and resolved to disassemble and analyze the workings of these devices at the first available opportunity. His mind already teemed with ideas for potential upgrades to his Pip-Boy.

While the Lone Wanderer would have loved to continue to examine the objects, as he was convinced that they held more secrets, he prioritized the interrogation of the prisoners. Their numbers would work to his advantage as that meant that each of them were expendable, and he would make sure that they knew that.
Despite the Courier's many morals, he had no qualms about violently interrogating someone who would shoot him on sight. However, he would avoid killing them in cold blood if at all possible. It was difficult enough reconciling killing those that gave him literally no choice. Killing someone who posed him no threat would give him immeasurably more difficulty. His captives did not need to know that however.

Two of the mutants had second pairs of ears on the tops of their heads, while the other one had a tail. One of the two mutants with four ears was female, while the other was male. The Courier only hoped that they were both sane and intelligent enough to answer his questions. It wouldn't be much use to him if he had captured whatever this place’s equivalents of Fiends were.

The first step in his plan to extract information from his captives was to unmask them. Without a mask to hide behind, he hoped they would be more compliant than otherwise. Then again, it might not, but it couldn't hurt.

Once the Lone Wanderer had unmasked his captives, he examined their faces. They were surprisingly young, only slightly older than he was. Fortunately for him, they did not appear to be ravaged by the effects typical of long term drug addiction.

The lack of scars and the apparent youth of his captives made the Courier optimistic about his chances to break their will without resorting to physical torture. He did not want to try to waterboard someone with vodka. After all, he only had a limited supply. He would simply settle with scaring the living shit out of them.

His strategy in the interrogation would be to hood all three prisoners and gag two of them. The gags would be enough so that they could not talk, but could still make pained noises. The sounds of the suffering of one’s comrades would serve to further demoralize the interrogee. The hoods would help disorient them. Fairly standard procedure for this kind of thing.

He decided to interrogate the male one with four ears while he would threaten the female. Hopefully, unwillingness to condemn one’s fellows to death and pain would force his captive to talk. A misguided sense of chivalry in the sense of a desire to protect women would also work to his advantage, although he wasn’t banking on it.

Each of the prisoners were propped against their own tree, all facing an arbitrary central point. The two gagged ones were placed adjacent to one another while the one the Lone Wanderer would interrogate was opposite the other two. He equipped the Blackhawk and his elite riot gear. The material he had made the hoods from had been “acquired” from his captives and was somewhat translucent, allowing the barest amount of light through. If he was lucky, the only thing that they would be able to see was the infernal glow of his lens. Besides, he was rather good at intimidating people (Perk: Terrifying Presence.) The Courier removed all the bullets from the Blackhawk and materialized a bottle of dirty water. Someone was about to get an irradiated awakening.

His captive awoke to the strange dual sensations of cold and burning. The water was cold, and the radiation burned. The hood disoriented the captive and aided in the drowning feeling that his prisoner experienced as he awakened. The prisoner sputtered and spat in an effort to expel as much of the water as possible.

Initially, he was unable to speak and merely gasped in an attempt to acquire some much needed oxygen. Finally, he spoke.

"Is anyone there?" His voice shook slightly but quickly became steadier.

"Where am I?" His voice still retained a note of fear. Good.
This initial exclamation told the Courier much about his captive. Any information that his captive revealed to the Courier could be used to better interrogate the him.

The high pitched and fearful voice indicated that they were neither well trained nor were they hardened veterans. The coherence in the response was a good sign as it meant that they would likely be capable of understanding his questions as well as providing useful answers. This determined his strategy in his interrogation of the prisoners.

The lack of training meant that they would break relatively easily under threats of violence. So, he decided, his best option would be appear as evil as he could be. If he appeared to be a sadistic bastard, they would believe that he would not hesitate to end any of them and so, would be more inclined to talk. From this decision, the Lone Courier derived his response.

"Due to the incompetence of you and your little group, you are now my prisoner. I, am going to to question you. And you are going to go tell me what I want, or not, which would be more fun."

The Courier's voice was colder than Anchorage in winter and terrifyingly calm. It sent shivers of fear down the spine of the only conscious prisoner. However, the prisoner's pride and fanaticism prevented him from caving immediately.

"I'm n-not telling you anything you fuck," he stammered "we'll fucking kill you for this!"

The Courier chuckled maliciously, an engineered sound that would have unnerved even the most grizzled of veterans.

"You don't understand," he said "as far as anyone else is concerned you're already dead."

The Courier walked to the other side of his captive silently. The prisoner's head remained facing his previous position.

"This is how this is will work." The prisoner's head snapped towards the sound of his voice, startled by his silent change in position.

"We, are going to play a little game," he said, with the psychotic glee of sadist in his voice,

"It's called Russian roulette," he said as he opened the Blackhawk which made an ominous click, "I'm going to put a single bullet into the chamber and spin it."

The Courier did just as he had said he would and ensured that his captive heard every action. Despite what he told the mutant, he felt no need to load an actual bullet. While he knew that if he actually killed one of them, the other two were more likely to talk, he would prefer to get the information without killing anyone, something that he was confident in his capabilities of. Therefore, unbeknownst to his captive, he had actually loaded a spent cartridge into the chamber.

"Now, I'm going to ask you a question," the Courier continued with a psychopathic level of happiness, "and if I don't like the answer, I will pull this trigger. There is a one in six chance you die each time this trigger is pulled."

The Courier constantly circled his prisoner as well as varied the volume of his voice and the distance between him and the prisoner as he spoke in order to disorient him.

"If you live, we do it all over again until you give me what I want. If you die...I move on to your friends."

He changed his tone back to one of deadly seriousness and lethal threat. The change from a sadistic
psychopath to cold gestapo agent would serve to convince his prisoner that he was utterly insane and unstable enough that he was willing to kill him at the drop of a hat.

"This is not a matter of whether you will break or not, as I know for certain: you will break. It is only a question of how long this will take. Answer my questions, and you will walk away from this."

“I have two other prisoners I can interrogate. If unwilling to cooperate, then I will kill you and start on one of the others."

This was said with a totally calm and matter of fact tone, making it clear he had no problem summarily executing prisoners. While that was not true, the Courier’s voice gave no indication of that.

“Let's start with a simple question: what are you?”

Tense seconds passed. Despite the imminent threat of death, the mutant remained defiantly silent. The Courier raised the Blackhawk and pushed the barrel into the forehead of his captive. After a couple seconds, he pulled the trigger and of course, the handgun clicked. Still no reaction. Time to escalate.

"Willing to die for your pride?" asked the Courier rhetorically, "Since you evidently don't care about your own life, let's change things up a little. How about I play this game with your little girlfriend over here?" The Courier kicked his female captive as lightly as he possibly could as he knew that the average kick from him would crush the ribcage of a normal human.

The female let out a whimper of pain through the gag. Both of the gagged captives had been awake for a while. Their comrade’s yells had awakened them. This was beneficial to the Courier as they also believed they were dealing with a psychopath.

The pained noise that the female made was a success in the opinion of the Courier as it meant that the prisoner he was interrogating was aware both that she was there, and that she was suffering because of him.

“Get away from her you bastard!” yelled his hooded captive in a fearful rage. The Courier now knew that he had guessed correctly in his assumption of misguided chivalry. The naivety amused him.

“How about we add some ‘variation’ to this game?” the Courier said, ignoring the impotent fury of his captive, the Courier opened the Blackhawk once again and digitized the spent cartridge and rematerialized another one. “This is a jacketed hollow-point cartridge, hollow-point means that upon impact, the head of the bullet will flatten out tearing an enormous hole in the tissue of the target.”

“Instead of aiming this at your head, I will be aiming it at her abdomen. This will ensure a slow gruesome death of blood loss. It can last as long as fifteen minutes.” The Courier spun the cylinder and said, “So, are you ready to talk?”
The prisoner's head sagged in defeat. All resistance abruptly ceased as he resigned himself to his captor's questions, unwilling to risk a tortuous death for his female comrade. Everyone knew gut wounds were a bad way to go.

"Yes," he said quietly, "I'll answer your questions, just...please don't kill us."

The Courier was inwardly jubilant that his threats had worked. If his prisoner had continued to refuse to cooperate he would have had to take "drastic measures". He would rather keep his hands clean. In this instance at least, he had no delusions about the blood on his hands. This way no one would send (more) assassins after him.

"You know the rules," the Courier drawled as he attempted to sound as disinterested as possible, “Answer my questions, and you leave here alive.”

“So,” he continued “Let’s try this again: What are you?”

This question was not the Courier’s highest priority as in the end, it was likely irrelevant what manner of creature he was interrogating. However, the information was probably viewed as harmless and would get his captive talking. Establishing a precedent of cooperation would make it easier for him to draw out further information. The act of giving him information would cement the surrender in the mind of his captive.

"Faunus," muttered his prisoner in a voice quiet enough that, had the Courier not been as Perceptive as he was, he would have missed it entirely.

"Did you say something?" the Courier asked innocently, "I'm sorry but you're just going to have to **speak up.**"

The Courier added emphasis to the last two words and audibly cocked the hammer on the Blackhawk. "F-Faunus," the prisoner said desperately, this time slightly louder than normal speaking volume. He heard fear. Good.

"And they are?" asked the Courier referring to the other two captives.

“Also Faunus.”

While the captured Faunus had many questions (such as who in the world didn't know what a Faunus was) he didn't dare voice them for fear of endangering his friends.

For his part, the Courier recognized the word as the Roman equivalent of the Greek god Pan. While this Latin equivalency initially concerned him due to the language's association with Caesar's Legion, he quickly dismissed the concept of any affiliation. Scientists typically named new species Latin names which made it entirely more probable that the mutants he had captured were engineered rather than evolved naturally. Besides, Legion members required a different strategy to break.

“And what is the definition of a ‘Faunus’?” the Courier asked.
“Humanoids with the physical characteristics of animals” answered the prisoner in an unusually erudite fashion, sounding as if he was quoting from something.

The revelation further supported the Courier’s idea that they were a result of genetic modification or a pre-war experiment. It sounded like an attempt to make superior humans through genetic splicing.

It did sound like something the Think Tank might try on Chinese prisoners or something. It was only now that he worried what the Brains might do while he was gone. They really lacked morals. Without him to focus their abilities into projects beneficial to humanity, he worried they might do something disastrous. Like release robo-scorpions into the world to kidnap and lobotomize people. He needed to stop thinking about this, worrying would do him not good. He refocused on the interrogation.

The Courier's next question would hopefully reveal information critical to his subsequent actions that involved these "Faunus." The question would of course be slightly confusing to the prisoner, by that of course, he meant that it would sound totally insane.

"Why would you have attacked me on sight?" Courier Six asked, fully aware of how irrational he sounded.

He did not think it likely for him to get a coherent, useful answer from such a seemingly strange question. After all, asking why they would have done something he should have had no idea they were going to do would seem nonsensical. Therefore, he was pleasantly surprised when his prisoner, either out of fear or intelligence, actually answered his question usefully. The answer itself was both disappointing and unsurprising to him. "You're human aren't you?"

"Arguably," the Courier responded without a trace of humor in his voice.

He meant that both literally and metaphorically. Many of his enemies would argue that he was a god, demon, or other eldritch abomination that slaughtered hundreds of soldiers in the dead of night. This was an image he did nothing to dispel. He knew there was considerable value in his reputation.

He had also replaced and augmented much of his body with cybernetics. All of the upgrades were internal because to visibly be a cyborg would have attracted too much attention. Not to mention all his mutations. Technically, he was part giant fire ant. All these changes led to him occasionally questioning his own physical humanity and how much of it he had given up in exchange for power to pursue his goals. Yet, if his prisoner was surprised by his answer he did not show it and continued,

“That would be reason enough for us.”

While the Courier was a genius, it certainly did not take one to deduce the reason for these Faunus’ hostility towards humans. If he had learned anything from history it was that every society will create an “us” and “them” mentality if an ethnic or racial group was present. While issues of race and sex had largely been resolved pre-war and remained as such in the civilized parts of the wasteland, the creation of the ghouls led to a rebirth of prejudice and discrimination. While naturally the Courier could not sympathise with their cause, he did empathize with them. He had seen first hand how righteous anger could lead to radicalization.

With that in mind, he supposed that the masks were indicative of an organizational affiliation. Whether it was a religious one or a political one he could not tell. He instinctively leaned towards the latter based on past experiences. Religious fanatics were rarely this coherent or willing to
cooperate, even under the threat of torture, and especially under threat of death. After all, most religions involved an afterlife of some kind and a fanatic does not fear death because of it.

Furthermore, if these mutants were numerous, it was likely that they would have formed different factions much as humans did. The Courier also realized that he was not presenting a favorable depiction of humans to his captives. If they were not radicalized before, they most certainly were now. He was also very much aware that it was entirely possible that this patrol’s (as he assumed this group was) absence would be noticed and a search team might be deployed.

As a precaution, he decided that he should wrap this up before he was found. While it was entirely possible that no one was looking for his prisoners, he had not survived for as long as he had by taking unnecessary risks. Now, there were only two things he needed to know before he could leave.

“Now, tell me how you three each took a bullet to the head without any permanent damage.”

The relatively civil tone that the Courier now used to interrogate the prisoner both made him believe that he would survive and made the instances in which the Courier used a harsher tone more effective due to the contrast. The calmness with which the Courier threatened death would also serve to unsettle his captive, making him more cautious about antagonizing him. He found cold violence to be more effective at intimidation than passionate aggression.

The Faunus responded with more confidence and less fear than he had previously.

“Our Aura stopped it. It seems that it took too much out of us and we passed out.”

“Aura?”

The Faunus thought it very strange how ignorant this human was. However, he was aware of how risky it would be for him to question his lack of knowledge for fear of antagonizing him. Any perceived slight or sign of defiance could mean one of his friends died. Slowly.

“A physical manifestation of our souls, mostly used defensively, however some can use it offensively.”

This confused the Courier nearly to no end. There was no evidence to support that what his prisoner said was not what he truly believed. Whether it was true or not, his captive certainly believed it. There was none of the tell-tale signs of a lie in his voice and he was clearly not trained to resist interrogation from an expert.

When the Courier attempted to entertain the very idea of aura, he found that his scientific side almost instantaneously rejected it. There was no empirical evidence to support the idea of an entity such as the soul, and the concept of it manifesting physically was virtually unthinkable. The only logical idea he could come up with that he could reconcile with his knowledge of science was the use of force fields like he had seen at Big Mountain miniaturized for use by personnel and that his captives had been deceived by whomever told them about this “Aura” concept. This was a matter that he could investigate later. Until then, he would simply use a higher caliber against humanoids he wanted dead.

“In which direction is the nearest city?”

The Courier now simply decided to leave as soon as possible. He did not want to be here when rescue for his prisoners came. Besides, once he reached civilization, he would be able find more reliable answers. He was well aware that torture was notoriously ineffective in terms revealing
reliable strategic information. This was one of the reasons that he made sure not to ask his captive any information that would be detrimental to his captive’s organization and instead only asked things that would be common knowledge. Now, it was time to make contact with the more civilized denizens of this new land.

“Vale is about eleven hours northwest of here,” the Faunus finally revealed. The Courier analyzed the tone in order to ensure that he was being told the truth. Satisfied, he responded,

“Thanks for the info,” as he walked in direction ensuring that his prisoner could hear that the distance between them was increasing.

“You’re not just going to leave us here like this right? right?!” the prisoner yelled desperately.

The Courier merely chuckled darkly as the Faunus’ yells and curses slowly died out as he entered the forest. He felt slightly dirty after having acted the part of a psychopath. His first-hand experience with that type of person left him with a strong distaste that carried over even into pretending to be one of them. But, it needed to be done. And he always did what needed to be done, no matter how distasteful.

That said, there had been no point to him leaving the prisoners tied up. He just thought it would be funny. He didn’t feel too bad about it. They would have killed him if they could after all. The Courier did not have much sympathy for those wanted him dead. Besides, the prisoner he had been interrogating would realize in about ten minutes or so that his hands were not properly tied. If he didn’t, well, natural selection.
Chapter 7 - A Crimson Vista

The Lone Wanderer was now in a much better mood overall. He had an objective and more than enough alcohol to get him there. Things were starting to resemble normality, albeit his surroundings were far more visually appealing. Towering trees that flourished with life easily beat the radiation-blasted husks of the Capital Wasteland and the soft grass was preferable to the coarse sand and sparse grass of the Mojave. He resolved not to get used to this. Being accustomed to being uncomfortable for long periods of time was a useful skill. How else would one bear wearing armor in the desert?

The sun indicated that by now it was late afternoon and the Courier knew that he would not be able to reach the settlement he had been informed about until the following day. He began to pay more attention to his surroundings as he became bored of the incessant running. The trees around him were shorter than those that were closer to the river. However, the green behemoths were still impressive compared to what he had seen in the wastelands. Not even Oasis could compare with the grandeur of this forest.

An hour into his journey, the Courier noticed that he was walking up an incline. As his elevation increased it soon became evident that he was climbing a hill. This only furthered his good mood in that he hoped to get a better view of the landscape and potentially his destination once he reached the summit.

Another hour in and the incline became far steeper. The Lone Wanderer knew that a commanding view of the surrounding area could be crucial in determining his next move. After all, for all he knew he could at any moment walk into the main group of those “Faunus” he had previously captured. He doubted that even he could talk his way out of that one.

Not that such an encounter would entail talking. They would shoot on sight after all. The Lone Wanderer knew that he didn’t even know how many of Faunus were out there or where they were. He hadn’t wanted to risk the prisoner becoming uncooperative if he inquired into things that would be “military secrets”. Torturing someone to diminish risk to himself was not something he was willing to do.

Slowly the hill became steep enough that it became slightly difficult for the Lone Courier, in that he needed to be more careful in order not to fall. Not that even a large fall would be unlikely to seriously injure him, the concern was more that he would have had to reclimb the whole hill.

While there were many hills in the Mojave, the Courier reflected, he very rarely climbed them. Most people didn’t. After all, it wasn’t safe to be silhouetted against the horizon. Who knew if there were snipers about? There were enough raiders and fiends with hunting rifles and surprisingly competent aim that in the open ground of the Mojave, snipers were a real concern. Even the Fiends were good shot, better than they had any right to be given the condition of their bodies.

However, in an area as densely wooded as this, the Courier did not need to worry about being seen; visual range was no more than twenty meters in any direction. He was safe from any long range observation. In the unlikely event that he did encounter something, he would rely on his enhanced reaction time to act first, either fighting or fleeing as he determined prudent.
A few hours passed, and the sky began to change from its usual blue to take on a pink hue as sunset approached. As the incline of the hill began to level out, the trees began to thin slowly and the Lone Courier could soon see light stream through gaps in the horizon of trees in front of him where he could previously only see an infinite darkness of foliage. As he approached the summit, light became increasingly abundant even as the sun set rapidly.

The color became a deep red as time went on and the blue vanished from sight. Soon the trees became sparse, isolated silhouettes against the horizon. The Courier was forced to shield his eyes with one hand from the blinding light while they acclimated to the sudden brightness. His elite riot armor was bathed in the red light of swiftly setting sun. The crimson glaze clashed with the dulls green of the Courier’s armor and weapon.

Suddenly, the Courier found himself outside of the tree line, for the first time since he had arrived in this strange place, he saw something other than foliage in front of him. For him, it was the one of the most beautiful things he had ever seen, second only to Earth from space.

The first thing he noticed was that the hill he had climbed was bluff. On the face that led down into the forest below ancient rough-hewn steps were set into what would have otherwise been a nearly sheer cliff.

Beyond the bluff the trees continued to the sight that stole the Courier’s breath and dominated his vision.

In the distance, roughly fifteen miles away, was a city in all it’s pre-war splendor, nearly the size of New Vegas. In its center, raised upon a sheer cliff, a tall strangely shaped building of many spires reached into the evening sky. A series of green lights shown from the tallest of the central towers in this structure. The lights of a busy city illuminated the area, making the fresh stars difficult to see in contrast. And even beyond the city lay a vast shimmering expanse of water, large enough to be the ocean. The shattered moon and faint stars reflected dully off the choppy waves.

As he cradled his M14, a slight breeze blew the duster of the Courier’s elite riot armor and it fluttered at the wind’s gentle prompting. Above this dramatic vista, the shattered moon still hung, now in its crescent form.

The Courier decided that it was best to start towards the city in the morning. People were less suspicious during the day. Besides, even he was willing to admit that he functioned better with regular sleep. So far he had not found any cybernetic implants or genetic mutations that would allow him to forgo sleep. Unfortunately. Accepting what had to be done, he began his usual process of ensuring his safety while he slept.

Once he had reached the top of the tree, he gazed once again at the magnificent scene that stretched out before him, before turning his back on it to view the area behind him. Beneath the bluff where the tree he was on was located, the forest stretched on seemingly endlessly towards the horizon. In the distance, he could see the light of a fire and a plume of smoke silhouetted against the backdrop of the numerous stars. It was likely those “Faunus” he had captured earlier.

He felt a bit better knowing that they weren’t eaten by guaiclaws. The Courier hoped that they would not come after him. He would hate to have more blood on his hands. He had enough events to keep him traumatized for several lifetimes. Fortunately, they appeared to have moved in a different direction than he had, potentially heading back to wherever the larger body of their organization was set up.

As the Courier prepared to sleep, he considered his next course of action. It seemed to him that his lack of knowledge of the society he had seen meant that simply knocking on the front door seemed
inadvisable. The walls that surrounded the city were also curious. As far as he could tell, there was nothing that constituted enough of a threat out here that would necessitate the building of such a defensive structure.

The only two options he could think of were xenophobia, which would be problematic for him, or that these creatures that resided in the forest were more numerous and of a larger threat than he had realized. He therefore resolved to reconnoiter the city in his stealth suit before revealing himself. Then he could decide whether or not to reveal his origins and formally introduce himself to the regional power. He did not look forward to getting involved with the politics of this place. It was clear to him that even disregarding his abilities, purely by virtue of being the sole representative of what’s left of continental America he would be the subject of more interest than he wanted. A better idea might be to just establish formal contact between this place and the NCR. Then he wouldn’t really need to get too involved.

As well, the Lone Wanderer only hoped that this metropolis shared the NCR’s Old World values instead of the authoritarian ones of Mr. House. Engineering a revolution would not be fun. As he thought of how one might overthrow a dictatorship and successfully replace it with a republican government with the least amount of death, slowly the Lone Courier fell into a deep sleep filled with memories, not all bad, of things he had seen and places he had been. It was the best sleep he’d had in weeks.
The Courier had a particularly rude awakening from the relatively peaceful sleep he had been enjoying. The first thing he noticed upon opening his eyes was that it was still dark. This immediately pissed him off; sleeping through the night should not be too much to ask.

The second thing he noticed was a giant bird, wearing one of those masks that everything in this damn forest evidently wore. And by giant, he meant giant. This bird was easily fifteen feet tall. It was perched on the tree directly adjacent to his. He was marginally surprised that the tree had not broken under its weight yet. Its presence pleased him as he now had a target towards which to direct his frustrations. The bird screeched a challenge at him, an ear shattering, high pitched sound. Its inarticulate sound of aggression soon morphed into one of pain as the BOUS (Bird Of Unusual Size as he had termed it) was interrupted by the equally earsplitting sound of a magnetically accelerated projectile being discharged from the YCS-186. The this was followed by two other rounds, the Courier's hands a blur as he rapidly reloaded the weapon. Within a few seconds, the BOUS was dissolving like all creatures he had found so far. The Lone Wanderer idly wondered whether faunus would also sublimate upon death. His mind went to dark places when he was rudely awakened.

Coming back to reality, the Courier was aware that he had likely brought the attention of every being that possessed ears in the entire forest upon his location. He would not have been surprised if people all the way in the city had heard the discharges of the Gauss rifle variant. He knew that he could not stay where he was, and get the sleep he much desired. Since he was not able to get more sleep, he felt that he might as well get to the city as soon as possible.

Based on the sky, he could estimate that it was some time in the early morning, with still a few hours left before dawn. Having once again put on his Stealth Suit Mk. III and re-equipped his M14, the Courier swiftly descended the tree upon which he had been resting. Once at the bottom, he enabled the stealth function on his suit once again and became almost totally invisible. He then returned to the edge bluff where he had admired the panoramic overlook only several hours earlier.

The moon was now behind Lone Wanderer, and the sky was now completely black save for the stars. He could see no light sources that would indicate the presence of others in the black mass of trees that he faced. He slowly began to descend the uneven steps hewn by long-dead hands. The Courier switched his helmet to night vision mode which caused the lenses to glow an ethereal green color. All any observers would have seen was two green lights slowly descending down the face of the bluff.

Upon reaching the bottom, the Courier decided to switch to infrared vision in order to see any enemies before he had direct line of sight on them. Even with night vision, the density of the flora at the bottom of the bluff meant that he would likely not see any hostiles until he tripped over them. Even being invisible only went so far. Fortunately, he saw no contacts upon activating his infrared and subsequently made his way into the stifling forest ahead of him.

An hour had passed of the Lone Wanderer creeping swiftly through the thick undergrowth. The infrared vision was not nearly as effective as the Courier had hoped it would be. The density of the foliage still limited his visibility. From the rare patches of sky he was able to glimpse through the
nearly impenetrable canopy above him, he could tell that dawn must have been breaking, as the sky rapidly shifted from its black and dark blue to a pinkish color. Very suddenly, he no longer saw trees in front of him. Rather than any thinning of forest the, the thick brush cut off sheerly. He knew that he had not traveled long enough to have reached the city he had seen. Though, after what he saw ahead of him, he sincerely wished he had been wrong.

The clearing he had entered was bright red with his infrared vision activated. The Courier froze then slowly switched back to night vision. In front of him, the clearing was filled with scores of guaiclaws. The Lone Wanderer instantly made a decision: he was going to continue to use his stealth armor and utilize the tactics of the Chinese Crimson Dragoons to take these things out. He equipped Jingwei’s shocksword and crouch-ran towards the nearest animal. The creatures appeared to be aware of his presence but not of his location. They moved around periodically sniffing the air and howling. Their heads and eyes were constantly looking for the barest sign of movement. The Lone Courier found this strange as even the most perceptive creatures of the wastelands were unable to detect his presence when wearing his stealth suit. Despite this heightened awareness, none of them paid any attention to a slight shimmering in the air.

The Courier stood up briefly from his crouch, breaking the stealth field, and slashed the shocksword through the guaiclaw’s neck, causing it to spurt crimson. It dissolved into a pile of goo, just like other things he killed with energy weapons. He was glad to see that certain things stayed the same, no matter how far he was from the familiar.

Upon his breaking stealth, all the guaiclaws instantly turned towards him and charged. The Courier of course, promptly disappeared again. He reappeared behind one of the guaiclaws and quickly reduced it to a pile of goo. He continued this process mechanically and methodically.

The animals were incapable of both finding him and hitting him. The Lone Wanderer appeared behind a guaiclaw, killed it, and disappeared again. He avoided the creatures’ clumsy swipes at an opponent that they couldn’t see with almost contemptuous ease, eliminating his opponents one at time. The Courier’s movements around the clearing were impossible to track. The guaiclaws milled around confusedly as they were slaughtered. The Lone Wanderer would have appeared to be teleporting around the clearing, as he sowed death and confusion among the creatures.

Within two minutes, the clearing was filled with guaiclaws sublimating, at a scale that made it nearly impossible to see. The Courier switched his helmet back to infrared and, seeing that there were no more heat signatures, disappeared into the forest, determined to reach the city he had seen from the bluff before anyone could come across the site if the battle.

Dawn had long since broken by the time that the Lone Courier reached the walls of the city, and the sky was once again a crimson hue. He found it strange how vibrant the sunrises and sunsets were in this place. Turning his attention to the object in front of him, he noticed that the walls did not appear to be designed to keep humans out, as they had many grooves that could be used as handholds for a skilled climber.

After the Courier climbed the wall, he was greeted with a sight that depressed him despite his half expecting it. The area he had reached was this place’s equivalent to Freeside. Basically, a slum. The buildings were run down, there were beggars in the streets, and the entire district had a grey depressed atmosphere about it.

The Courier was not overly surprised that this city had a poor district. He knew that all pre-war cities did, and that it was likely that even in this seemingly utopian place poverty would still exist. At least this confirmed that this city had not fallen to the Red Menace.

What the Lone Wanderer found most interesting was that most of the residents of the slum were
Faunus. While not everyone appeared to be one, the vast majority were. This suggested that either the population of the city was generally skewed more towards Faunus or, what the Courier found more likely, the faunus were an oppressed underclass in this society. The Courier favored the latter option as it would answer the previously unexplained hostility towards humans that was held by the Faunus in the forest that he had "met". It also fit with the usual pattern of people hating things that were different. There was enough historical precedent in similar situations for him not to be even remotely surprised.

From what the Courier knew of Freeside, he was unlikely to find many answers to the questions he held in the poor residential district. He determined that his best bet would be to head towards buildings of administrative or governmental importance. Therefore the Lone Wanderer set off across the rooftops towards the cliff that held the many towered complex. The noise of a city awakening was heard below him as he gradually left the slum. He thought for a moment how peaceful the lives of those below him must be. It struck him that it was likely that the vast majority of them had never taken a person's life. They were all like he was before he left the Vault. Innocent and naive. Most would not survive a day in the wasteland.

The Lone Courier briefly contemplated settling down somewhere, not caring about the troubles of the world and simply enjoying life. He scoffed at the idea. It would be immoral; he would be guilty through inaction. If he learned anything, it was that while the quote “The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing” was true, it was more that all anyone needed to triumph was for everyone else not to do anything, and in the wasteland, very few people seemed inclined to do anything.

The purpose of this reconnaissance was also to allow the Lone Wanderer to develop an accurate picture of the society he had landed in. So far, first impressions were not great. The slum indicated a stratified society, or at least one with severe economic issues. The disparity in the proportion of Faunus to humans in the slums compared to the areas he had more recently entered (as well as the violent Faunus he had encountered in the surrounding area) suggested a history of racial tensions and the potential for a future race war.

The lack of gate in the city wall was also telling. This meant that this society was very much closed off from the rest of the world. A wall kept things both in and out. The only way to leave the city appeared to be via vertibird variations he had seen periodically. They most often flew to and from the complex on top of the central cliff, however some occasionally flew into the surrounding forest. The presence of abstract sculptures in the more developed part of town that he had entered and the variety of clothes that the people wore helped assuage his fears that this place was some kind of neo-fascist enclave.

Now that the Courier had reached the upside of town, he decided to go with a more hands on approach to his investigation. He jumped down into a secluded alleyway between two marble governmental buildings of unknown purpose, allowing his reinforced bones to take the impact. He changed from the Stealth Suit Mk. III into Benny’s suit, put on some gold framed aviators, and placed Maria inside his jacket pocket. Now, all he needed for some answers was to act normal. Easier said than done.
Chapter 9: A Case of Created Identity

As the Courier pushed his way through the packed boulevards of the central district of the city, he was not given a second glance by most. A suited man in sunglasses was more than invisible in the bustle of city life. Even this early in the morning, the streets were packed with people walking to work or running errands. Evidently New Vegas was not the only city that never slept.

The Courier continually glanced around him without moving his head, the movements of his eyes concealed behind his sunglasses. The governmental buildings became less common as he ventured further into the metropolis. A building to his right read "Royal Library of Vale."

This told him several things. Firstly, this place was called Vale. Whether that was the name of the country or the city he could not be sure. Secondly, the word "royal" indicated a monarchy of some sort. While ordinarily this would have worried him, from what he had seen of the city, oppression typical of a totalitarian regime did not appear to be an issue. Therefore he thought it more likely to be a constitutional monarchy such that was common in Europe prior to the Resource Wars. Finally, this meant that he had finally located a potential source of information. The Courier decided that he would pay this place a visit later on in the day when more people were there or using the stealth suit.

For now he turned around, not wanting to end up in the less populated upper class residential district where his presence might be questioned, and headed towards the downtown commercial district. The Lone Wanderer was aware that he would likely need to stay here for a while and would likely need "resources." Of course, he had a plan.

As the Courier once again pressed through the crowds that routinely covered the sidewalk in busy cities, he made sure to carefully observe his surroundings. While many of the buildings were built in a modern or even futuristic style, many others were made in styles that would have been considered old by pre-war standards. Whether these structures were actually from the 19th century or were merely built in the romantic style was unknown.

The Lone Courier glanced at the headline of a newspaper he passed. "Dust Heist by Faunus Extremist Group White Fang." The picture underneath the headline showed a faunus wearing one of the masks that everything in the forest wore. The Courier was glad to see that the Faunus he had interrogated were considered extremists by the public. The word "Dust" used in that context was unfamiliar to him and the context itself told him nothing. Dust could easily be some type of chem or volatile compound or even a form of currency or bullion.

The fact that a group with political goals was orchestrating heists seemed odd to him, as that behavior was more typical of a crime syndicate than a bunch of fanatics. However, as the "White Fang" did not appear to be a major threat (at least by wasteland standards), he put the issue out of his mind for the time being. He did not have time to worry about some second-rate terrorist group right now. Local forces should be sufficient for dealing with this kind of thing.

Now that the Courier had reached the commercial district, he was no longer quite as invisible as he had been previously. Occasionally, he would be appraised by someone with less than honest intentions. However, the Courier’s height and build (Perk: Heavyweight) as well as the lethal aura he exuded put off any attempts to bother him.
There was a matter that had been troubling him for some time: The Lone Courier felt largely without direction.

Typically, upon entering a new area he looked for problems to solve i.e. threats to eliminate. In the Mojave, he had seen the defeat of the Legion as his goal. Everywhere he went, he had solved problems, and did all he could to “fight the Good Fight”.

In this location, his intervention would be entirely unnecessary, and likely unwelcome. His skills were meant for battlefields and wastelands, not for a city wealthy and civilized enough to rival those of pre-war America.

Therefore, he decided that the best course of action would be to attempt to repair the Transportalponder or, if worst came to worst, construct another one. From there he could inform either the Brotherhood or the NCR (probably not both) of Vale and give them a Transportalponder. The NCR could take it from there. This meant that he would need materials and most importantly, time. Lots of time.

There was, however, one problem. While the Courier may have been the most intelligent man alive, however he had no idea how the Transportalponder operated even on a theoretical level. He had tried to get the Brains to explain it to him but within ten minutes it had devolved into a bicker-fest that had lasted four hours. He was certain that the majority of headaches he had experienced in his life took place during the short period in which he had interaction with the Brains.

While he was confident that rebuilding the Transportalponder was doable, attempting to reverse engineer a fried prototype would make progress slow at best. The process could take a year at worst. This meant that the Lone Courier would need to acquire some form of at least semi-permanent residence. To do that he would need more of the local currency, which was why he was in the rundown part of the commercial district.

While the Courier may have been one of the richest men alive back in the Mojave, he doubted that a civilized society such as this would still use bottle caps when they had their own printed money. Nor did he think they accepted NCR or Legion money. It was for situations like this (as well as his inability to find anyone with sufficient caps to purchase them) that the Courier had some of the treasure of the Sierra Madre on him at all times. The majority of it was in the safe in the Sink, however the Courier had two ingots of pure gold. The ingots were unmarked (at least by Vale standards) so if he tried to sell them in a richer area it might have raised uncomfortable questions. In a less economically well off area, such as the one he was currently in, people would be less inclined to look too deeply into gold being sold at a (relatively) cheap price.

Ten minutes and a bribe later the Lone Wanderer was a couple dozen kilograms lighter and several million lien richer. Now he had the capability of staying in this place almost indefinitely. All he needed was a residence and a way to prevent people from asking questions. The best idea that the Courier could come up with was to rent an apartment in the upper class district and play the part of the reclusive prodigy. This however was not without its problems. He would likely need some form of identification to rent a residence as well as some justification for a seventeen year old to be on his own. In order to reside in Vale for any amount of time, he would need to create an identity for himself, and there was only one place he knew of to do it.

Even after all he had seen, the interior of the Royal Library still awed the Courier. It was not only the neoclassical architecture or the intricate furniture that impressed him but the sheer amount of knowledge in one place. Both the Followers of the Apocalypse and the Brotherhood of Steel would have loved to get their hands on this place. The latter would have killed for it. Being a member of both organizations, the Lone Courier did as well. However he forced himself to prioritize his
original purpose in coming here. If this ordeal was going to take as long as he thought it would, he would have plenty of time for research.

The first step would be to find a terminal. He had quickly discovered even from his brief examination of the scrolls that they all seemed to be networked together in something called an internet. While the concept of a network of computers had been utilized to a limited degree pre-war, this internet appeared to encompass all devices. This technology was yet another unsolved mystery to the Courier.

The Courier’s plan was to hack the government records to make it appear as though he had always been here. Even if this place was ten times better managed than the NCR was, they would never notice. Old World governments had notoriously inefficient bureaucracies. Besides, an extra face would never be noticed in crowd of millions.

Within minutes of sitting down at a terminal, the Lone Courier was in the government records, changing census data, and forging birth certificates. In the end, this was the story that the Lone Courier concocted:

His name was Markus Friedrich, no need to lie there, his age remained the same and his parents were both named as they were in actuality. He had forged a death certificate for his mother stating she died of complications from childbirth. Being an orphan presented the Lone Wanderer with a dilemma. As he was not over 18, he was technically not considered an adult and would need a guardian. The Lone Courier, murderer of over a thousand people, needed an adult. He had to stifle an involuntary laugh. The cruel irony of the world.

His solution was to simply say that his father was alive and living in a fictional estate for health reasons. Of course, he also needed to justify his wealth and explain his Pip-boy. To that end, he did what considered most distasteful out of all the forgeries he had just committed.

His father was now the founder, and sole owner, of a company called Vault-Tec. The new Vault-Tec specialized in the military sector and created experimental technology. Profits were high and almost everything was classified.

Due to his father having a terminal illness and him almost coming of age, he increasingly managed the company in his father’s absence. Courier Six had created a bank account for the company and filled it with currency that he had “acquired” from the bank accounts of the White Fang and various organized crime syndicates.

The Courier supplied that he lived in Vale, had been privately tutored (with the forged transcripts) and for current schooling, went with the only option of Beacon academy, totally oblivious of the mess he had landed himself in.
The Lone Wanderer was in the Royal Library again. He was once again sat down at the same terminal as before, in the same uncomfortable blue plastic chair. The spartan appearance chairs and terminals stood out in odd contrast to the otherwise grandly decorated interior. He had spent several hours here, searching through information he could find regarding anything he would consider relevant.

Despite the amount of information available on the internet, he found that little of it was any use. Most scholarly information was in the more traditional medium of paper books which the Courier tore through voraciously. He had prioritized current information over subjects such as history. Through the course of his research, he had discovered many things. Firstly, from the maps that he had consulted, he was in a place called the Kingdom of Vale which was in a place called Remnant. He also did not recognize the location relative to North America. There appeared to be no maps that encompassed more than the region designated “Remnant”. Whether this was the result of simple isolationism, or something more sinister, he had no way of knowing. He did find it peculiar however.

Secondly, he had discovered the "correct" names for all the creatures he had encountered in the forest. The creatures on a whole were known as “Grimm.” Likely a reference to the eponymous German brothers.

Guaiclaws were known as Beowolves (strangely enough), the boar-like thing was called Boarbatusk, and the bird of unusual size was in fact called a Nevermore.

Things then became far stranger. Aura and Dust. Those were two four letter words to the Lone Courier. Neither made any sense.

Dust was a highly volatile compound that had a myriad of uses. From what he could find, it was used as gunpowder in this society as well as being able to be controlled by Aura. There appeared to be different kinds of Dust that produced various seemingly magical effects. Still stranger, was Aura. There appeared to be scientific studies that supported that aura was a physical manifestation of the soul. It protected the user from death, but could cause them to collapse from exhaustion if depleted. It could also be used offensively in conjunction with Dust, however this appeared to be extremely difficult requiring enormous concentration.

This whole thing left the Courier baffled. The best scientific explanation he could find for Aura was mentally controlled nanobots that everyone in this area was infected with. However, even he knew that this theory was weak.

The lack of organized religion surrounding Aura meant that there was no motive for deceiving the population if nanobots were in fact being used. Furthermore this place was more than advanced enough to detect microscopic robots.

He decided to perform his own experiments later, and pass the results on to the Brains in the Think Tank for analysis.

In the three days since he had assumed his new identity, the Lone Wanderer had spent most
his time modifying his Pip-Boy with the scrolls he had captured so that it had the functionality that they did. The process seemed to take forever, largely due to the differences in technology. However, the end result was that his Pip-Boy could now do everything that a Scroll could, thereby avoiding awkward questions.

He had also created all the accounts and registered for all that a person such as himself would have had as well as spending late nights hacking each site to fake a history of activity on them. If he was going to be stranded here, his story would need to be airtight; he could not afford even the slightest suspicion to be cast on him.

The Courier had purchased large amounts of Dust based ammunition in all calibers that he utilized. From his research, he discovered that dust based bullets did not break the sound barrier and in fact traveled significantly slower than their conventional counterparts. However, the Dust made them extremely effective against soft targets as the shape of shell impacted in a particularly brutal manner. The projectiles fared far less favorable against armored enemies or robots.

In that vein of thought, the Lone Wanderer had also discovered that most of the military was robotic. Peculiarly, the units were bipedal and looked generally rather humanoid. Fortunately, none of the units appeared to be sentient. He knew from President Eden, as well as the Institute, that bad things came from sentient AI. His Brotherhood of Steel side mandated that he keep a close eye on AI and weapons research to ensure that these people did not destroy the world again. An AI induced apocalypse would likely be more permanent than the nuclear one.

The educational system seemed very strange to the Courier, it appeared that a significant portion of children went to “combat schools” where they trained to be “huntsmen” and “huntresses”. Contrary to the standard denotation of the words, huntsmen and huntresses primary purpose was to hunt not animals, but Grimm. The word choice of “huntsman” was strange. It was an archaic word, not ordinarily used and never in this context.

In addition, said huntsmen also fulfilled roles similar to pre-war SWAT or Germany’s GSG9 in assisting law enforcement. He was not at all comfortable with this idea. While the wasteland was merciless to children, to him it was abhorrent that a apparently civilized society would use what amounted to child soldiers. Starting military training at so young an age was effectively indoctrination and something he found reminiscent of the Legion or the Agoge of ancient Sparta. Yet, things here gave no indication of a heavily militarized society.

This also meant that when he had created records and transcripts stating that he had been privately tutored, these were records largely of combat training.

The Lone Courier felt that his plan of integrating into this society and hiding in plain sight until he could get the Transportalponder working was proceeding well. So far, he had given no one any reason to suspect him of being anything other than the paperwork said he was. He was confident in his abilities to construct lies in the moment or deflect questions if someone tried to pry. Still, he did his best to avoid social interaction, mostly observing the habits of others. One of the strangest things about this place was that the vast majority of people he saw were happy.

While happiness was not rare in the wasteland, it was by no means the norm. Most likely due to the depressing atmosphere of the post-apocalypse, the majority of people had become pessimists. Burdened with the knowledge that they had been born into a destroyed world and believing that they would die without any positive change.

In Vale, it appeared, that everyone was the physical antithesis of this attitude. From their brightly colored clothes to the cheerful tone with which they spoke, the residents of Vale were overall far happier than existence than those of the wasteland. And why shouldn't they? They had a far higher
standard of living than virtually anyone in the Wasteland. As well, they did not need to worry about their safety. Even with the ever-present threat of the Grimm, the citizens of Vale were still safer than the McNamara Brotherhood in their bunker.

Despite his best efforts, the Courier could not help but resent them for their obliviousness. While it was not the fault of Vale that millions of people a world away were suffering, the stark contrast in the quality of life felt unjust. He hoped that the technology that these people possessed could be brought back to the wasteland. It could help both the NCR and the Lyons Brotherhood to rebuild civilization. Technologies that were taken for granted here would be invaluable in the wasteland.

The Lone Courier was awakened from his brooding by an unfamiliar noise that appeared to originate from his Pip-boy. It took a second for the Courier to realize that the sound was a result of him integrating the "scrolls" with his Pip-boy. In order to cease the dirty looks he was receiving, he tabbed into "data" and then into then went into the new "messages" section.

"Message: REMINDER: New student of Beacon Academy, please report to the Beacon skyport tomorrow at 2 pm for the start of the school year."

The Courier was aware that he was, quite frankly, totally screwed. He had not paid much attention when selecting his current educational enrollment and was now paying the price. At the time, it was merely another box to fill. It was meant only to deceive those that checked his records, not have any tangible impact. Now, Beacon was aware of his existence. Great.

In his research, he had learned two things about Beacon: one, that it was a prestigious combat school. Two, that it was the many towered complex on top of the cliff in the center of the city. Now, with term apparently starting tomorrow, he had painted himself into a proverbial corner. Withdrawing from a prestigious school a day before the school year started would be highly unusual and most draw large amounts of unwanted attention from whomever dealt with administrative affairs at Beacon.

The problem with going to Beacon is that it would mean giving up most of his freedom. He would be constantly under observation and have to maintain an act twenty-four hours a day for however long he stayed there for. On the plus side, he would be receiving information about this new place and would remain in the city. Escaping observation should also not be too difficult. While it might slow his progress towards repairing the Transportalponder, it shouldn’t hinder him too significantly. But that was besides the point. All in all, he really had no choice. The Lone Courier would be attending Beacon academy.
Chapter 11 - Back to School

The Lone Courier knew that if he was actually going to attend this "Beacon" place tomorrow, he had his work cut out for him. Preparing to properly interact with an virtually unknown society in less than twenty-four hours was a tall order. Fortunately this place seemed nearly culturally and sociologically identical to pre-war civilization. That said, this would be by no means easy. He was after all, accustomed to the post apocalypse, not civilization. The closest thing to civilization he had experienced was back in Vault 101. The subject brought him nothing but bad memories. He sincerely hoped that Beacon was nothing like his Vault education. The Courier realized that he did not have time to think. He had much to do before he had to depart for Beacon.

Firstly, he would need to find out what was expected of him. A basic understanding of his obligations while at Beacon would be critical towards avoiding suspicion. He had no idea how much or how little scrutiny his story could endure. False paperwork would only go so far. If anyone sought more material evidence in regards to his background, this entire charade would be up. It was therefore imperative for him to give no one any cause to doubt him or perform even the most superficial looking into his past and identity.

Secondly, he would need to determine who he would be. Naturally the Courier could not act as his normal Wasteland self in context of a school, even a combat one. Bitterly cynical do-gooder was not the best face for infiltration. He therefore needed to decide what kind of persona he would be adopting.

There were two principal types of personalities, introverted and extroverted. Both had advantages and disadvantages to his objectives. Extroversion would allow him to deflect suspicion by being everybody’s friend. By adopting the personality of one who it would be unthinkable to have any kind of meaningful secret he could discourage any investigation in regards to his past. Acting extroverted would also allow him to fight the Good Fight directly, even on the micro-level it would be reduced to in a school setting. However adopting an extroverted person had major downsides. He would end up having to give away more personal information than he was comfortable with sharing. While he had no real intention of giving away the truth, inquiries into his personal life would eventually lead to a web of lies that were largely created on the fly. His new identity needed to be well thought out, no made up on the spot. If he ever contradicted himself the game would immediately be up. So he found it preferable to give himself the least possible chances of failure.

Perhaps even more significantly, he would simply be outright more noticeable. The more people he interacted with, the more likely one of them would do some digging as to his background. This entire plan hinged on the idea that no one too smart or with too many resources became suspicious. Thus putting himself out there by befriending everyone was counter-intuitive.

The other option, introversion, had some benefits as well. Due to this being what he considered to be an extended covert operation, he would have more success if his assumed personality was closer to his actual one. The closer a lie was to the truth, the easier it was to sell it. The Courier knew that
he was anything but a natural extrovert. He had a cynical and paranoid view of humanity as a whole. As well, by remaining quiet and not interacting with too many people, the Courier knew that he could limit the risk by limiting his exposure. The less people who know about him, the less people think about him, the less likely someone gets the idea to investigate his past.

However the Lone Wanderer also knew that if he was too quiet and antisocial he would attract even more attention than if he was extroverted, and of a more dangerous variety. If he was too quiet, someone might consider him “mysterious” and thus worth investigating. Which was exactly what he needed to avoid at all costs.

On the bright side, the fact that his father supposedly ran a company that specializes in classified military technology would explain certain things as well as give him the "that's classified" excuse. While this could also explain the technological level of some of the weapons he possessed, it would not be prudent for him to walk through the front door wearing his Winterized T-51B power armor and holding the Sprtel-Wood 9700. He would limit himself to conventional projectile weaponry and would use Dust based ammunition. While in his research he determined that Dust rounds used the same calibers as conventional rounds and the only real difference in utilization was that Dust rounds would wear out the barrels of his weapons quicker. Overall, a small price to pay to avoid questions.

His story was the most critical part of this whole deception. He needed to know every detail cold. He had been privately educated by a variety of tutors as well as his father. His mother had died giving birth to him. His father was terminally ill and his health had deteriorated over the last few years. This provided the excuse for the Courier to have involvement with the fake company and for his father not to appear publicly. He decided to leave the nature of his father’s illness intentionally vague. The topic was not one that would come up even in highly personal conversations. The story also played a role in determining details of his persona. His background meant that he was well educated, which he was, even by pre-war standards. If there was one thing he could sincerely thank Vault-tec for it was for his education. Fortunately in the case of Vault 101, Vault-tec hadn't decided to mess with the education aspect, preserving much pre-war knowledge that would have otherwise been lost. Of course, the Courier had supplemented this basic education by reading just about everything he could get his hands on. The archives of both the Brotherhood of Steel and the Followers of the Apocalypse in addition to pre-war libraries held enough knowledge for the Courier to have a fairly in-depth understanding of most subjects. This included history, leading to him having a very dim view of human nature.

As for what weapons he should use, based on the threat the "Beowolves" he had fought posed, he was more than fine with only Maria and his trench knife. The Grimm were far more fragile than animals of the same size would be. They sublimated after being fatally wounded despite the fact that an animal would have still been entirely capable of fighting for minutes longer. .45 ACP and 9mm Parabellum should have barely annoyed beasts that size. Instead, virtually every shot was a kill-shot.

However he recognized that his habit of shooting creatures that size in the head due to past experiences with Yao Guai left him with a skewed sample size. The effectiveness of pistol caliber bullets to the center of mass on these creatures was an entirely different question altogether and might be more inline with what he had expected.

One thing that the Courier had learned in his readings on the Grimm was the sometimes literally unbelievably massive sizes they came in. Therefore in the event he encountered larger creatures or harder targets, he decided that it was a good idea to keep his Anti-Materiel Rifle with him. While the rugged and battle-worn appearance of the weapon did not fit with his image as having an incredibly wealthy background as much as say, Maria did, he had no alternative for firepower and
materializing weapons was something he needed to avoid if at all possible. The Courier was aware that the digitization ability that his Pip-boy possessed would draw unwanted attention. Therefore, much to his own displeasure, he resolved to use this function as little as possible. If he was going to materialize and dematerialize things it needed to be in controlled conditions in which he could be certain he was not going to be observed. The heat of battle, was anything but that. The resolution to not utilize his Pip-Boy brought its own set of problems. The transportation of everything he needed would have to be done the old fashioned way.

With his newly acquired wealth, the acquisition of luggage took virtually no time at all, especially considering that . However, the time it took to purchase and pack the things that Beacon required of its students (a list found through less than honest means) meant that it was early evening by the time this simple task was completed. The Lone Courier was running out of time.

The Courier had rented a pre-furnished apartment in the up-side of town entirely remotely several day ago, immediately after setting up his identity; though he had spent virtually no time there. He had intentionally gotten a residence as close to Vale’s Library, anticipating the vast amount of time he would spend absorbing the accumulated knowledge the building held. Of course, the whole “Beacon fiasco” forced him to abort his prior long term plans. With the exception of repairing the Transportalponder of course. Attending Beacon would slow his progress towards that goal, but hopefully it might prevent questions being asked. As it was, he could bear essentially no scrutiny and would have to rely on luck to not give the game away.

Now back in the apartment, the Courier now had to work on the most difficult task he had so far encountered. There seemed to be little information on the function of Aura and even less in the way of scientific data that pertained to its activation. Despite this, he had found out that it was something that was done at an early age, and someone such as himself would be expected to have it. Therefore, he would need to figure out how to activate it. Tonight.

As far as he knew, there were only two ways to activate a person’s Aura: have someone else unlock it for them, or unlock it through deep concentration and discipline. While this was not much to go on, the Courier was determined to make it work. He had to.

Hours dragged by uneventfully. The Courier did not feel he was making any progress. His efforts to clear his mind seemed futile. For every memory he put out of his mind, another took its place. He typically always kept his mind active in order to prevent the feelings of guilt and regret that plagued him when left to his own thoughts. Despite this, he preserved. The hours passed with the Courier acutely noticing the passing of time. He had to force himself not to count the minutes.

Eventually, the Lone Wanderer stirred from his meditations, convinced that his efforts were futile and a different approach needed to be attempted. He was surprised therefore to discover an ethereal glow of a silvery sheen surrounding his form.

Initially, he was jubilant; it had worked! As the excitement faded however, he noticed that the glow seemed to be flickering. Even more damning than that was a feeling that his Aura was weak. Despite the lateness of the hour, the Lone Wanderer immediately set about diagnosing the issue.

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Despite a lack of a definitive answer to his Aura deficiency, the Courier’s best guess, was that it had not activated properly or entirely. In this stage, it felt nowhere near capable of stopping even a .22 round much less saving him from a high powered rifle. In the end, the Lone Courier hoped that this would be enough to satisfy the people at Beacon. He really didn't have the time to attempt to strengthen it before he had to leave. He had spent the entire night and morning getting as far as he had.

If he wanted to improve the strength of his Aura he would either need to continue with meditation
exercises or find someone that he trusted enough to activate his Aura for him which he felt was unlikely.

He concluded that having weak Aura should be of little issue for him tactically. He had always previously fought without it and often against much more durable opponents without much in the way of armor.

He remembered his early days in the Capital Wasteland, shooting Super mutants with a bolt-action rifle wearing nothing but his Vault-Suit for protection. He had no nostalgia for those days. There was nothing but constant danger and fear of death that he had willingly subjected himself to because he wanted to play hero. He didn't regret it at all though, but it was beyond him to look back fondly on his own suffering.

At this point, all he could do was pack his things and get on the airship to Beacon. He had done all he could in the amount of time he had. The rest of it was up to luck.

The Lone Courier stood with his feet shoulder width apart and his hands clasped loosely behind his back as he watched the city of Vale pass slowly by through the viewport of the airship. The experience of watching a thriving metropolis pass below him was a surreal once to say the least, though his face showed no indication of his thoughts.

He was wearing his typical Vale attire of Benny’s checkered suit and gold framed aviators. So far, he had not been bothered. Mirrored lenses tended to put off conversation. People milled around, conversing with one another or simply admiring the view, as he was. A sense of nervousness and anticipation filled the vehicle. The Courier, of course, did not share these feelings. He was far too jaded to worry about something this trivial. Instead of worrying, he made plans. That was how one survived in the Wasteland.

His silent observation was interrupted by a hologram (the technology of this place continued to impress him) delivering the news,

“The robbery was led by nefarious criminal Roman Torchwick (the Courier made sure to remember that name), who continues to evade authorities. If you have any information on his whereabouts, please contact the Vale police department. Back to you Lisa.”

The Courier directed his attention towards the hologram and turned fully to face the broadcast. A silver haired woman continued,

“Thank you Ciril. In other news, this Saturday’s faunus civil rights protest turned dark when members of the White Fang disrupted the ceremony the once peaceful organization has now disrupted-” the broadcast cut off suddenly, to be replaced with a blonde, middle aged, bespectacled woman of a stern demeanor.

“Hello and welcome to Beacon,”

this new figure started, “My name is Glynda Goodwitch. You are among the privileged few who have received the honor of being selected to attend this prestigious academy. Our world is experiencing an incredible time of peace (the Lone Wanderer mentally scoffed at that statement) and as future huntsmen and huntresses it is your duty to uphold it. You have demonstrated the courage needed for such a task, and now, it is our turn to provide you with the knowledge and the training to protect our world.”
The broadcast quickly faded. The Courier thought that if these hunters and huntresses were active in the wasteland, his job as peacekeeper might be more manageable. However, upon looking around him, the kids that he saw did not look like they would do well in the Wasteland. Sure, they might be able to take down packs of raiders on their own, but no matter their combat prowess, it would not save them from betrayal or bad luck. They simply did not have the mentality required to fight what was effectively a constant war, both for ideals and survival. The whole Aura thing meant that it was likely none of them had taken a human (or Faunus, he reminded himself though he was reasonably certain Faunus were technically human) life. The ability to kill was critical to survival and something that could not easily be taught.

As the airship climbed higher, there was a collective ooh of appreciation for the vista that was seen through the viewports. The Lone Courier meanwhile, took the time to examine his fellow occupants. He needed to prioritize practical information. Most seemed utterly unremarkable, a conclusion supported by his optical scanner’s analysis of low threat for most of them. Those that were not a low threat were further scrutinized by the Courier.

A male student of Asian descent and a female with orange hair and Nordic features both registered as moderate threats. They were standing close together and conversing though the conversation seemed rather one-sided. Their mannerisms indicated they knew each other well. Another pair was exhibiting similar familiarity. A tall blonde with purple eyes and a girl a head shorter than her with red-tinted hair also were designated as of moderate strength. The Courier would keep a close eye on the individuals he had discovered. Both as a source of potential allies, and a list of potential threats.

Another as of yet unexplained peculiarity was the prevalence of unnatural hair and eye colors. He was not sure whether they were the result of regional mutations or dyes and colored contacts. The Courier worried briefly whether or not his lack of such colors would counterintuitively make him stand out. However, upon closer inspection of various individuals around him, there were enough with what he considered “normal” colors for his own features not to stand out. Besides, it wasn’t like he could do anything about it at this point.

While the density of the crowd prevented observation of the majority of the students, one in particular stood out to him. And worried him. A roughly six foot tall red-headed girl was determined to be a high threat by his implant. This concerned the Courier because the last thing to be considered a high threat to him was the Legendary Deathclaw. That had gone relatively poorly, and he had the scars to prove it.

He would need to watch her carefully in order to find both the reason she was so dangerous as well as her motivations. Motives were as important as capability. If she was simply another student, her potential threat was irrelevant. However he would need to ensure this beyond any doubt. A person of considerable threat with ulterior motives was incredibly dangerous. He considered simply befriending her to mitigate the potential for conflict. Allies were preferable even to vanquished enemies. However he knew that an alliance with the powerful was never to be trusted. It was why the NCR were so wary of him after all. It was also the only reason the NCR had an alliance with the McNamara Brotherhood. The imbalance of power in favor of the NCR meant that they had nothing to fear from aligning with the Brotherhood.

And so the Lone Courier stood in the company of a bunch of highschoolers and determined which was the most dangerous and how he would kill them.
The Rekindled Beacon

Chapter 12 - The Rekindled Beacon

As the airship began to dock, the Courier, for the life of him, could not figure out how the things worked. By now he was seriously worried about how advanced these people were. Despite using (as far as he had seen) exclusively kinetic weaponry, they had technology that appeared to indistinguishable from magic, and even they did not know how it worked. This entire scenario was a bigger recipe for disaster than the Megaton bomb. There was little more dangerous than mysterious technology. In his experience, they all to often ended up being super-weapons.

He prayed Remnant did not have nuclear weapons of their own. Their ignorance in regards to technology was enough to cause most members of the Brotherhood of Steel to have an aneurysm. The proliferation of unresearched technology was the antithesis of the organization. The Lone Wanderer merely knew that he and the Think Tank would have a lot of work to do if-when he managed to repair the Transportalponder. Re-establishing contact was the priority. Then he could reverse engineer these things. For now, he would simply keep an eye on the technological discoveries that Vale made to ensure that history would not repeat itself. He would do his best to prevent a second nuclear holocaust.

While most of the group continued on into the main building, the Courier (along with a few other students) paused to admire the view of the academy.

Attempting to tune out the conversations around him, the Courier set about analyzing the complex. The structure was most certainly impressive. The architecture was certainly unique. It seemed to have little in common with other architectural styles that the Courier knew of, suggesting that the structure had been built post-war. It appeared entirely unmarked by time, meaning that it was either built recently or was subject to regular enough maintenance to keep it in immaculate condition. There were a multitude of arches that were simplistic in shape and seemed to serve no purpose other than aesthetics. Surrounding the doors to the academy were large windows with elements of perhaps gothic design. Further away, the Courier could see a multitude of towers with several dozen spires as well as a large Byzantine dome. The Courier also took note of the victorian styled street lamps that lit the path to the main buildings. Hanging off the were teal banners with the outline of a clear circle in the center of them. From what he knew of vexillology these flags likely had no significance and were only present for aesthetic purposes.

The size of the place in comparison to the amount of students in attendance indicated a level of opulence reserved for the palaces of Sultans and Emperors. The amount of facilities here could house and train a large army even by pre-war standards. The Lone Courier felt a peculiar mix of disgust at the decadence, and awe at the aesthetics and skill at engineering required to create such monumental architecture.

The grandeur of the “school”, if it could even be called that, appeared to be indicative of either a massive wealth gap or a misuse of taxes based on the fact that poverty was still a major issue in Vale. The central tower held numerous luminous orbs; presumably from which the academy derived its name. What the purpose of said orbs were however was still anyone’s guess.

Next, the Lone Courier examined the structure from a tactical standpoint. Despite its resemblance to a castle, it was clearly not built for medieval defense due to the lack of secondary walls and thoroughly modern design. The entire place did not seem to be reinforced and a lack of security
cameras and turrets indicated that if it had capabilities of defending against a modern military assault, they were well hidden. The absence of surveillance cameras meant that the Courier could move freely, even without using the stealth suit. This provided him with greater freedom than he had planned for. He had assumed he would be under constant observation. The lack of it meant that it was likely he could repair the transportalponder in less time than he anticipated.

The fact that the entire compound was built on a cliff as well as the fact that airships and knockoff vertibirds appeared to be the only way on and off worried the Courier. It meant that should his cover be blown, his escape options would be limited and more messy than he was ethically comfortable with. He was aware that even if the students of Beacon were hostile towards him they were (as far as he knew) morally innocent. Shooting his way out of a school was the farthest thing from desirable.

On the bright side, the cliff did give the location some very good natural defences. That in conjunction to the high amount of combatants here would mean he should never be in any real danger. However the word “should” was anything but a guarantee. The Courier would remain as paranoid as ever when his life was on the line.

As per usual, the Courier was snapped from his reverie by what one would classify a rude interruption. More unusually however, this particular one not only was not trying to kill him, but was in fact not even directed towards him; he was merely interrupted due to proximity.

Once the Courier became aware of his immediate surroundings, he quickly found himself in a situation that he had no experience dealing with and really wanted no part in. A few feet away, two teenage girls appeared to be arguing. Upon closer inspection, arguing was revealed to be the wrong word. One of the girls was yelling while the other, appeared to be desperately trying to apologize. The Lone Courier recognized the one being berated as the that had been standing next to the tall blonde in the airship. She was designated as a moderate threat if he remembered correctly. Now, the girl lay on the ground looking thoroughly chastised as an unfamiliar girl dressed entirely in white whined incoherently at her. From what he could tell, the one in white had about a dozen suitcases around her, some on a trolley and some on the ground. It seemed slightly excessive. However, the Courier realized he wasn’t exactly one to talk considering how much stuff he had in his Pip-boy. If he had to empty the contents into suitcases, it would probably have been near twice the amount. Still unsure of what to do in this situation, the Courier just stood there, contemplating simply walking away and leaving them to it, while doing his best to pretend not to notice them.

BANG

A massive explosion shattered the reclusive tranquil atmosphere of the outskirts of the academy.

The Lone Wanderer immediately dropped to the floor prone, face to the ground to shield himself from shrapnel. His heart raced a million miles an hour, his adrenaline pumping, his brain suddenly in combat mode. He felt a wave of heat and an accompanying shock wave impact him. The second it was over he bounded back to his feet, his ears still ringing.

“Ohmygoshareyouokay’msosorryareyouallright?” the red one said.

It took Lone Wanderer a significant fraction of a second to comprehend the stream of consciousness that had been directed at him.

Realizing that despite the conditioned response his body had performed, he was not under attack; the Courier started to attempt damage control for his seemingly strange reaction.

“I’m alright. What caused that?”
The one wearing white responded,

“*She* did!”

and promptly turned back to the other girl and continued her ruthless tirade.

“Unbelievable! This is exactly the kind of thing I was talking about!”

This went on for a few more sentences that the Courier simply ignored while attempting to be as invisible as possible. Both attempting to ensure that his reaction was forgotten and not get involved. Any more involved than he already was, that is. Fortunately, the two kept their attention focused on the other.

The fact his mind remained in combat mode did not help things. This was compounded by the fact that he was surrounded by armed unknowns and he had not yet ascertained the cause of the explosion other than a vague accusation of the one in red by the one in white. This level of twitchiness was entirely involuntary and uncontrollable. And it was very dangerous. Both to his cover, and those around him.

His attention was regained when he simultaneously heard soft footsteps behind him and the one in red finally yelled back.

“Hey, I said I was sorry, princess!”

While the Lone Courier had not met a princess during his travels he was sure that the girl in white would fit the archetype. The Courier had intentionally not faced the source of the footsteps behind him, though it took much willpower not too. If he appeared to be too perceptive he might draw attention. He needed to refrain from displaying any unusual skill. His current state of mind made this difficult however, as it caused a drastic increase to his paranoia. He continually imagined the worst possible scenarios as to who it might be, many of them entirely irrational.

"It's heiress, actually."

All three of the people present turned to face the new arrival,

"Weiss Schnee, heiress to the Schnee Dust Company. One of the largest producers of energy propellant in the world."

While it took the Courier a second, he quickly comprehended that the girl wearing all white was named “white snow” in German. He assumed now that he was correct in his hypothesis that he was now in Europe, as even though the pronunciation was butchered so badly that in the Old World everyone who used it would be tried at the Hague for crimes against humanity, it would be too big of coincidence for a girl named white snow to be wearing entirely white.

The new figure wore entirely black and white (though weighted heavily towards the former) with a large bow atop her head, making it difficult for one to see her cat ears. She had strange, luminous amber eyes with enough resemblance to those of a cat for the Lone Wanderer to question whether they were a result of her being a Faunus or mere coincidence. He realized that so far she was the first Faunus he had met who did not want to kill him.

Weiss (as the Courier now knew her to be named) responded smugly,

“Finally, some recognition!”

The Courier found it distasteful how proud White was of her parentage, something that was
entirely out of her control. In any case, she was immediately shut down by the one in monochrome who stated,

“The same company infamous for its controversial labor forces and questionable business partners.”

White became flustered and left in a huff. Significantly, the Courier noted, she never actually denied any of the allegations. It appeared that even here, companies as morally bankrupt as Vault-Tec and Poseidon Energy thrived. This interaction had, if nothing else, gained him some very useful information.

The Lone Courier worried that his own position in the upper strata of society might put him on the wrong side should a class war break out. From what he had perceived, the disparity in wealth distribution and evident corrupt corporations made the potential for conflict real. There seemed to be enough of a middle class to prevent a communist revolution, but the current state of affairs ensured a bare minimum of civil unrest. There was anything he could or would do about any of that.

This also provided the Courier with an indication of Human-Faunus relations. The Faunus acted quite confidently and showed no signs of being an oppressed underclass. Nor did either of the two humans act at all differently towards her or bring up her race. Although, the Courier allowed for the possibility that they simply did not make out her second pair of ears as her bow did an excellent job of concealing them. The phrase “second pair of ears” caused the Courier to resolve to research Faunus anatomy and how that would work.

The Faunus left only a few seconds after White did, which the Courier took as his cue to leave, heading towards where all the other students went leaving the girl in red on her own.
Chapter 13 - The Least Sinister of Plans

As Ruby Rose let out a sigh of defeat and slumped to the ground, she reflected on how she ended up here. Ruby was not having a good day. She had been equal parts nervous and excited about attending Beacon, and her day so far indicated that she had been right to be nervous. Yang had abandoned her almost instantly and so far she had made one enemy and two...acquaintances? She wasn’t even sure she could call them that. She didn’t even know either of their names! The girl in black and the boy in white had both left before she could ask them. So much for making friends. Ruby couldn’t believe that she had already managed to literally blow herself up. Not to mention simultaneously managing to blow up the boy in white and the heiress. Ugh. It was so embarrassing.

They both dressed very similarly, both with the exact same color pallette. Though, the other girl also wore black and white. Why did everyone she had met so far wear black and white? The two in white seemed to be totally different in terms of their actual personalities though. At least, based on their respective reactions to the explosion. The boy seemed to have gotten the worst of it, given his reaction, but did not seem to hold it against her. At all actually. Ruby found that a bit strange, but she certainly wouldn’t complain at not having another person mad at her.

Deciding she had spent enough time on the ground wallowing in self pity, Ruby picked herself up and began to wander towards the main entrance. After all, with how bad things had been, things could only get better right? Ruby, as ever, remained optimistic.

It was not difficult for the Lone Courier to play the part of a clueless new student. He had chosen the role carefully. Due to either mismanagement or user error, most students in fact initially had no idea where they were going. Therefore, through a healthy combination of eavesdropping and following the crowd, the Courier managed to get all essential administrative tasks completed without drawing attention.

All his information had checked out (much to his relief). While he had no reason to believe that anything would go wrong, he knew it was better to prepare for the worst and hope for the best. In all his interactions the Lone Wanderer took care to use unusually erudite vocabulary yet maintain a friendly tone and demeanor. He needed to appear both well educated enough to befit his status and friendly enough to not appear aloof. Acting like that "Weiss" girl would only serve to estrange him from the basically everyone. Being an outsider was noticeable. And being noticed was specifically what he was trying to avoid.

The Lone Courier was becoming concerned about his progress towards his objective. While Beacon would provide him with information about Remnant and Vale, none of it would matter unless he was able to fix the transportalponder. While this place would be a nice one to retire to, he could not afford rest on his laurels when the rest of the world was in such a miserable state.

The Courier waited by himself in the great hall for some minutes, totally oblivious to the world around him. Well, as oblivious as he could be, what with his unfortunate combination of hyper perception and paranoia. While they served him well enough in situations that necessitated both, in a crowded room they made life hell. Anyone moving or looking towards him or even in his
general direction caught his attention, forcing him to track their movements and be constantly on edge for any potential threat.

His attention was captured once "Glynda Goodwitch" appeared once again, this time in person, next to a gray haired man wearing perfectly circular glasses with lens that seemed far too small to do their job. The Lone Wanderer assumed that this was the headmaster of the academy based on his bearing and prominent position. The hall became silent as he began to speak.

"I'll... keep this brief. You have traveled here today in search of knowledge, to hone your craft and acquire new skills, and when you have finished, you plan to dedicate your life to the protection of the people. But I look amongst you, and all I see is wasted energy, in need of purpose, direction."

As he said this a murmur of whispers pervaded the room.

"You assume knowledge will free you of this, but your time at this school will prove that knowledge can only carry you so far. It is up to you to take the first step."

The Courier found this entire speech to be highly peculiar. It was not very motivational, especially not to a bunch of kids who were the very embodiment of wasted energy. It seemed the headmaster was advocating for professionalism? The subsequent part about knowledge not freeing one from a state of inefficiency was true. Technical knowledge was not a substitute for wisdom and experience. Moira Brown was the perfect example she was quite smart, and gifted technically. However she would not last any time outside the safety of Megaton. It was why she had recruited the Lone Wanderer after all.

The next part of the headmaster’s speech, "It is up to you to take the first step," seemed to simply mean that as this was not a military, discipline would have to be derived from internal sources rather than external requirements. It seemed this would be more like ordinary school than he had anticipated.

As the headmaster walked away, Goodwitch delivered the next instructions.

"You will gather in the ballroom tonight; tomorrow, your initiation begins. Be ready. You are dismissed."

The word "initiation" had some massively negative connotations to the Lone Courier. The ones that came to mind were the time that he had to dodge artillery fire, and that time he had part of his brain removed (not to be confused with the time he had his entire brain removed, which was an entirely separate instance.)

Even in a civilized place like this he was still suspicious. A feeling that was further reinforced by the whispers of the others as they walked that indicated that they also did not know what this initiation was. That was a bad sign. There couldn't be any positive reason for keeping the contents of the initiation a secret.

While the Courier had done many things that others would classify as reckless, even suicidal, he was out at the first sign of hallucinogens. He was not willing to endure a repeat of Point Lookout. The Datura root incident in Zion was bad enough. Based on what he dreamt about, he didn't even want to think about what he might see if he was drugged again.

Of course, this assumed that his artificial heart either would not recognize or simply nullify the chemical. In a worst case scenario the heart might mistake a hallucinogen for a chem, with the heart distributing them for maximum efficiency.
The headmaster himself had felt a bit...off for lack of better term. There was something about the man that didn’t feel right. The Courier found the feeling difficult to identify. He wasn't sure what it was, but the Courier would certainly not trust the headmaster until he knew more.

The Courier was now uncertain of what to do. There were no clear instructions given or major objective that he could pursue at present. Of course, his masterful poker face gave no sign of his internal doubt. To the rest of the world, the Lone Wanderer appeared entirely stoic. After a brief mental deliberation, the Courier decided that he would do what he normally did and started to explore the campus. He would do so until nightfall, when he was expected to report to the ballroom.

While the world map function on his Pip-Boy was still useless due to lack of a Robco satellite, the local function that created a map from places that he had been was still operational. A thorough knowledge of the area he would be staying in for an extended period would provide him with a home field advantage against an exterior assault and at least even the odds against an internal one.

Not having any real idea of where the ballroom actually was, the Lone Courier followed the crowd, taking special care to be lost in it, which was difficult, all things considered; his considerable height and checkered suit was more atypical in what amounted to a glorified high school than it was on the streets. Still, all the infiltrations performed throughout his wasteland career provided him with the ability to largely escape notice and hide effectively in plain sight.

The Lone Courier felt that he was in a unique (for him) dilemma as he knew that in addition to exploration, he needed to create some social connections in the form of, if not friendships, at least casual acquaintances. As he had considered earlier, if he was too much of a loner, he would be the object of curiosity while, if he had too many friends, the same would happen. He would also need to be careful not to create "deep" friendships where the other party might become interested in the finer details of his past. He didn't want actual friends, he wanted people to think they were friends. Going native wasn't somethings he had time for.

He momentarily thought back to the only interaction he had had that remotely resembled a conversation. In hindsight the Courier realized that the explosion incident was both a missed opportunity and an embarrassing failure at socializing. In the end, the only person’s name he learned from that incident was White’s, and he figured that a friendship with her would likely do more harm than good.

"Speak of the devil and he (or in this case she) shall appear,"

the Lone Wanderer thought to himself as he spotted the distinctive white clothing of White.

While his cybernetic eye implant was invisible when inactive, it emitted a slight glow when he used its scanning function. The concealment of this effect was one of the reasons that he wore sunglasses. A glowing eye was not the most subtle of qualities. The Courier now scanned the girl.

Threat: moderate.

The Lone Wanderer noted that despite the White’s arrogance, she evidently had the skills to back it up. Still, while she was a cut above the rest, based on his analysis, she was only as dangerous as Red and Yellow were. She had no business acting superior.

Thus, the Lone Courier continued to walk among the students of Beacon plotting relationships with a deviousness that would be appropriate in the most corrupt of feudal courts, all while the students gossiped and joked about inane subjects typical of teenagers in the first world, blissfully ignorant of violence and chaos that awaited them.
Pyrrha rounded the corner and walked directly into a wall. She had taken the first opportunity to escape from the harassment (or endless praise, depending on who you asked) of her innumerable fans.

She did not know the layout of Beacon well enough to know where exactly she was going, but, if it lacked people to bother her it was good enough. It had been over an hour since she had left the clutches of the other students and had been pleasantly surprised to find no one else in her wanderings.

Now however, the famous champion was in the thoroughly undignified position of having fallen down after walking into tall solid object. Upon closer inspection, the object in question appeared to be wearing a black and white checkered suit. As the disorientation faded Pyrrha became aware that the person she had collided with was speaking to her.

“Are you alright?” the stranger repeated. She shook her head to clear it and sat up.

“I’m alright, thank you,” Pyrrha said in her typically formal manner. She took the man’s proffered hand and rose to her feet.

“My apologies, Miss…”

Pyrrha was surprised by his formality. It was unusually, almost painfully formal for someone their age. They also did not typically wear suits, she thought wryly. The entire situation was both intriguing and peculiar largely because, whoever he was, he did not seem to recognize her. She responded quickly,

“Nikos, Pyrrha Nikos.”

“Markus Friedrich,” the Courier said,

“My apologies for running into you. I was not paying attention to my surroundings.”

The Lone Courier was really starting to regret his choice in identity. All of his sentences sounded overly formal and painfully stilted. Before he could attempt to say something that was more casual, Pyrrha responded.

“It’s not your fault, I wasn’t paying attention either.”

“So, where were you going?” Markus asked, attempting to make casual conversation as they both walked in the same direction. He decided that it might be prudent to dial back his formality; it made conversation awkward.

“Just wandering; trying to escape the attentions of the crowd. What about you?”

"The same but for different reasons,” he responded.

The Courier was wary of her due to her high threat assessment. He noted that she appeared far more professional in demeanor than most of the others seemed to be; even more so than White,
who was an heiress and would thus be expected to have a degree of professionalism. The remark about "escaping the attentions crowd" indicated some level of fame or infamy that she was uncomfortable with but accustomed to. While the statement could be seen as arrogant in most contexts, Markus knew from her tone and nonchalant manner with which she stated it that she was not attempting to brag. Her name was also intriguing. Now, in addition to a German name, he had found a Greek one. While this supported the idea that he was in Europe further, it did little to determine where on the continent he was.

While her potential threat made him inwardly wary, he showed no sign of it. He suspected that her celebrity status was directly related to her combat prowess. He decided to risk asking about the subject. While he might appear suspiciously ignorant, he could always come up with some reason that he was too busy to pay attention to what she was famous for. Besides, even if Pyrrha thought his lack of knowledge to be strange, she would not set out on a massive investigation to find out his life story.

"'Attentions of the crowd'?

Pyrrha was glad to see that at least one person did not know who she was though she was curious as to why.

"Winning tournaments draws far more attention than one would like. It's hard to find anyone who doesn't know of me."

Pyrrha was conscious of the difficulty inherent in both informing him of her fame and not sounding arrogant. The last thing she needed was yet another sycophant. That said, she cringed internally at how she had phrased it. She had never been very good at this kind of thing and it was showing.

Markus noticed the difficulty with which Pyrrha had constructed the sentence. Her awkwardness in how hard she tried not to appear arrogant was somewhat amusing. Unfortunately, he now had to provide a plausible explanation for his ignorance.

"I don't typically have the chance to pay attention to tournaments. Especially recently due to...family troubles."

The Courier's inflection on the phrase "family troubles" indicated that it was something that was best left unmentioned. It all but manipulated Pyrrha into feeling irrationally awkward and guilty for having brought the subject up.

Pyrrha felt a bit guilty for having asked about something that was clearly painful for Markus. Therefore, she swiftly changed the subject.

"Do you know anything about the initiation tomorrow?"

"She was not actually looking for an answer rather than simply attempting to change the subject as quickly as possible and said the first thing that came to mind.

He shrugged.

"Only what they told us. You?"

It took Pyrrha a second to realize that she had been asked a question.

"Just rumors. From what I've heard, it's supposed to split us into teams."

"Teams?" asked Markus. He was not thrilled at the idea of being assigned to a team. Typically, that
ended quite badly for his teammates. Lethally badly.

"Supposedly a small group that we remain with for all four years. It's all rumors though; nothing confirmed," Pyrrha said.

This worried him further. Depending on how much time they were expected to spend together it would make it difficult for him to covertly work on the transportalponder. It was also likely that they would also be expected to be close friends making prying into his past virtually inevitable. He would need to flesh out the background of his identity. His memory and acting needed to be impeccable in order to avoid suspicion. Any even momentary lapse was enough to ruin the entire thing. Overall he was not entirely comfortable with his odds if the teams were small and intimate.

They continued walking together, neither having anything to say nor any reason for their paths to diverge. The silence however was not awkward. Both were rather quiet people, and were perfectly content not making inane conversation for its own sake.

Naturally during this seemingly companionable silence the Lone Courier was constantly analyzing. This development was entirely unexpected. He had truly not been paying attention as he had not expected to meet anyone else during his wanderings. Markus felt that his first proper conversation gone rather well. He had acquired information without revealing anything significant about himself and felt that he had made an acceptable first impression. Things were far more nuanced here than they were back in the wasteland. While manipulation was still as easy (if as morally dubious) as always, casual conversation was never his strong suit, especially with people as sheltered as these. He evidently had a likable persona and was gifted in public speaking as well as debate due to his charismatic nature (Charisma 10.) Despite his considerable abilities with people, the psychological damage he had sustained meant that he was very withdrawn and quiet. As per usual, the Courier was interrupted from his musings.

"What's that on your arm?" Pyrrha asked, indicating his Pip-Boy.

The Lone Wanderer mentally sighed. He had anticipated this question. Now, he had to hope that his answer was sufficient explanation.

"It's a prototype Personal Information Processor. Essentially a ruggedized scroll."

Markus explained.

"It has other functions, but I'm not really supposed to talk about them."

He made sure to sound slightly apologetic in order to further deflect suspicion. He prepared himself mentally for the inevitable secondary question.

"Where did you get it?"

The Lone Wanderer had his explanation ready.

"My father owns a high end R&D company. It does a lot of classified projects. This is basically a field test for it."

Now all he had left to do was pray that it made sense.

To Pyrrha, this revelation made everything make sense. His overly formal language was likely due to his privileged upbringing and extensive education. His strange device was a prototype given to him for field testing by his father's company and the reason he did not know of her was that she suspected that sons of wealthy businessmen did not typically have the time to pay attention to the
outcome of tournaments, even important ones. As her train of thought ran its course, Pyrrha noticed that it seemed to be far darker than it was when they had met. A quick glance at the sun confirmed her suspicions. The sun was swiftly disappearing beyond the horizon.

“We should get to the ballroom soon. Do you know where it is?” Markus nodded.

“I found it earlier. Shall we?”

He gestured in a direction that Pyrrha presumed was that of the ballroom.

And so Pyrrha Nikos and Markus Friedrich walked in silence towards the ballroom. Pyrrha happy she had succeeded in making her first friend and Markus happy to have successfully held a conversation. And, more importantly, without drawing suspicion.
Peace and Nightmares

Chapter 15 - Peace and Nightmares

Markus and Pyrrha parted ways involuntarily upon rejoining the mass of people headed towards the ballroom. Markus had preemptively drifted slightly away from her in order to prevent being trampled in the inevitable mobbing. Still, he couldn't help but empathize with the girl; he knew the burden of fame all too well. He couldn't even go to the New Vegas anymore because of all the drunk (and even some of the sober) members of the NCR.

While his involvement with the nation’s military campaigns had largely ended, that did not stop the incessant hero-worship from the citizens. They didn't seem to grasp that if he was in Vegas, it was not for pleasure but rather that he actually had something important to do. The civilian women were the worst however.

While the soldiers (of both genders) would simply buy him a drink (which the Courier didn't have a problem with) the civilians had become entirely ridiculous and quite frankly fanatical. They did insane things such as asking to name their offspring after him. Not "Markus" mind you, they didn't know his actual name, these lunatics wanted to name their child "Courier" which was basically child abuse.

He had even heard rumors of cults both among Legion slaves and the civilians of the NCR. The Legion slaves viewed him not only as a vengeful spirit like the Burned Main, but also as a symbol of hope for liberation. While this was not an issue and may prove to be beneficial, the obsession from NCR civilians was another matter entirely. That was a problem that he had no idea how to even begin to solve. It was not a problem that you could shoot, talk, or hack your way to the solution. He hoped that the NCR would handle it internally, unlike everything else. Still, while he empathized with Pyrrha, he noted that it was far more amusing when it happened to someone else. First world problems made for the best schadenfreude.

The Ballroom's interior was just opulent as Beacon's exterior was. The amount of wealth required to construct something of the magnitude of the academy in comparison to the economic state of Vale meant that the concentration of wealth required for its construction was either the result of more prosperous days or, more likely, extensive economic exploitation, similar to that of Old World corporations. He already knew of one Snow Dust Company that engaged in shady business practices. It was likely this place was built by an equally dubious party.

The Lone Wanderer reminded himself to keep an eye on the SDC’s activities and, by extension, those of its heiress. He intended to ensure that a immoral company would not destroy this haven. If the company showed any indication of becoming an existential threat to society then he would have to deal with it. Preventing this place from being destroyed was as, if not more important than getting the Transportalponder fixed. There was no pressing need for him to swiftly return to the wasteland. Preserving one of the few functioning civilizations in the world was priceless. Of course, it didn't seem likely he would actually have to do anything of the sort while he was here. This place had its own protectors who appeared to have things well in hand.

As for watching the heiress, that would allow him to determine the long term development of the company. As the word “heiress” implied she would inherit, her actions could give him insight into both the future of the company, and the man running it. Like daughter like father. So far, the Courier had a poor impression of both.
On this train of thought, the Courier remembered that he needed flesh out Vale's Vault-Tec Corporation that his father supposedly owned. While currently, the information available would hold up under scrutiny, he needed to ensure that once the matter digitalization properties of his Pip-Boy were revealed, the company would provide a plausible explanation. The publishing of false research papers with experiments that either took years to complete or cost inordinate amounts of money would prevent both the dissemination of the technology and prolong his secrecy.

The Lone Courier knew that it was merely a matter of time before someone would get suspicious. While government classification would provide reasons that most people would be unable to find out about Vault-Tec, eventually someone with high enough clearance would notice its existence. Therefore either he could simply delay the inevitable, as well as hope that the person who became suspicious lacked the power needed to thoroughly investigate his past or, as an alternative create an actual company with all the facilities that a corporation like Vault-tec would possess.

The second option would be virtually impossible however as he was basically stuck at Beacon. In addition, the simple fact remained that he was not keen to introduce technology to this place that it was not responsible enough to handle. If the Great War had taught humanity anything, it was that the Brotherhood of Steel were right in worrying about where technology ended up. As a rule, the more advanced technology was, the more dangerous it was.

After he had retrieved his luggage from where it had been unloaded from the airship, Markus analyzed in his typical fashion the arrangement of the occupants of the Ballroom. The prospective students appeared to be preparing for bed. The room was informally divided in half by gender.

Naturally, he immediately searched for the most secluded corner on the correct side. He trusted no one in this place yet and had no idea of how secure the school was in general. Besides, he had had enough social interaction for one day. The less people that knew him, the less people would question him. Seclusion would provide him with the advantage should anything happen. He didn't expect anything to, but he prepared for it nevertheless.

Setting up did not take him long. He then spent most of his time just staring into space yet constantly alert in regards to movement towards him. He eventually sought to distract himself from his memories and started to analyze those that he recognized. Pyrrha was not visible from where he was, potentially because she was thronged by adoring fans or because she was avoiding them. Both were equally likely.

Red and Yellow appeared to be together again, though they didn’t seem to be doing anything significant. Neither did any of the other moderate threats.

Since the majority of people appeared to be attempting to sleep, any movement caught the Courier’s attention. Therefore he was instantly alert when Red and Yellow got up and approached Black. Black appeared to have had the same idea as Markus did and had found the most secluded corner on her side of the room. This was evidently not enough to prevent the interruptions of others. The Lone Courier watched disinterestedly as Yellow and Red attempted (and failed) to hold a conversation with Black. While he could have listened, he simply could not find it in himself to care enough. Black’s overly large bow seemed strange to Markus. It was quite unusual as it did not fit with the fashion that appeared to be prevalent nor did it serve any practical purpose he could see. Of course, the Courier assumed that it was likely unimportant and that she was most likely just an angsty teen trying to be nonconformist. Even he had a degree of self-awareness of just how paranoid he was. Sometimes a bow was just a bow. However, distrust couldn't kill him while betrayal might.

Markus’ attention was recaptured by yelling. Evidently White was complaining again which
escalated into a full on argument between White, Red, and Yellow. The incessant bickering was getting annoying. Thankfully, Black had the presence of mind to snuff out her candle which, being the last remaining light source, plunged the room into total darkness and finally ended the argument. Now, the Lone Courier was left in the dark with naught but that which he feared most: his memories.
Earlier

Contrary to her expectations, Ruby’s first day at Beacon had not gotten any better. She had spent most of her time lost and lonely. She entered the Ballroom despondently and maintained the bearing as she settled down in her sleeping bag and started writing. The nostalgia of writing to her friends who were back at Signal eased some of the disappointment that came from the dubious achievement of having made a grand total of negative one friend. Ruby had become so engrossed in her writings that she almost didn’t notice Yang plopping down next to her. Almost.

“It’s like a big slumber party!” the blond exclaimed, ignorant of the contrast between her exuberance and her sister’s misery.

“I don’t think Dad would approve of all the boys, though,” Ruby said.

“I know I do!” Yang responded, either intentionally disregarding or not noticing her sister’s gloom.

Yang spent a while ogling the shirtless male students. Eventually, she got bored and returned her attention to Ruby.

“What’s that?” Yang asked.

“Oh, just a letter to the gang back at Signal. I promised to tell them all about Beacon and how things are going.”

Yang squealed in an embarrassingly sisterly manner.

“Aw, that’s so cuuuute!”

The noise was promptly stifled by the impact of a pillow to her face.

“Shut up! I didn’t get to take my friends with me to school! It’s weird not knowing anyone here!” Ruby said, bemoaning her utter lack of a social life and so far total failure at acquiring one.

“What about…” Yang tried to think of anyone that her sister might know, but so far Weiss was the only person she knew of.

“Weiss is basically the only person I’ve even spoken to, and I’m pretty sure she counts as a negative friend.”

Seeking to comfort her sister, the blonde said,

“Look, it’s only been one day. Trust me; you’ve got friends all around you! You just haven't met them yet!”

Their discussion was interrupted due to their mutual distraction by the ignition of a candle nearby. As they examined the source of the illumination, Ruby remembered the morning, as well as the painfully awkward incident that had occurred.
“That girl…” said Ruby. “You know her?” the blonde asked.

“Not really. She saw what happened this morning, but left before I could say anything.”

This also brought back memories in the boy in the checkered suit who had done the same. Ruby briefly scanned the room attempting to locate him. Before she could make much progress, her sister grabbed her by the arm and started to unceremoniously drag her towards the girl in black while Ruby resisted entirely futilely.

While the conversation was not initially promising, upon Ruby’s expression of her love for reading Blake, as they found out her name to be, opened up more to them and actually engaged in conversation.

“I love books,” Ruby said, “Yang used to read to me every night before bed. Stories of heroes and monsters… They’re one of the reasons I want to be a Huntress!”

Blake laughed almost derisively at that,

“And why is that? Hoping you’ll live happily ever after?”

This however, did not damage Ruby’s ever-present optimism in the slightest.

“Well, I’m hoping we all will. As a girl, I wanted to be just like those heroes in the books… Someone who fought for what was right, and protected people who couldn’t protect themselves!”

Blake’s cynical nature asserted itself as she said,

“That’s… very ambitious for a child.” Her face fell mid sentence,

“Unfortunately, the real world isn’t the same as a fairy tale.”

Still, Ruby’s attitude refused to be dampened by cynicism. She was too convinced to be dissuaded by naysayers.

“Well, that’s why we’re here! To make it better.”

It was why Ruby had always wanted to become a huntress after all. She had always wanted to be a hero, someone fighting to make the world a better place, helping those that couldn't help themselves.

This declaration was followed by a bone-crushing hug from Yang. A brief fight between the sisters, and an argument with Weiss later, and all the lights were out. All the students began trying to sleep, even Markus, despite how much he dreaded the dreams.

The next morning, Markus completed what one would consider to be a normal morning routine with legendary efficiency. Despite his fears, the dreams had not been anywhere near as bad as usual. Perhaps being somewhere that wasn’t an irradiated hellhole was good for his mind though he suspected it more had to do with the lack of constant assassination attempts here. Even in the Sink he was forced to maintain a healthy degree of paranoia. It wasn't exactly secure, and at one point a lobotomite managed to get in. It took ages to get the smell of blood out of there.

His speed meant that he was the first one in the room of weapons lockers. They had been assigned earlier, prior to the headmaster’s speech. The choice of which weapon to store in his luggage (and
by extension the locker) had been a difficult one. Putting his handgun and trench knife in was out of the question, as he needed to be prepared at all times. He had not yet assessed the security of the school and in any case had no confidence in anything other than his own capabilities.

Maria was only 9mm and, as he knew first-hand, had relatively low stopping power. He needed something that would be able to deal with the larger Grimm he encountered. While he could explain most weapons in his arsenal by either stating they were made by himself or his father’s company, something like a Gauss rifle or Esther would cause inquiry regardless of his excuses. This was one of the few situations he had been in in which overkill was not desirable. It was because of this that he had chosen to pack the Hécate II Anti-Materiel Rifle. It was a weapon that he knew the people here had variants of, and had a large enough caliber for anything he would likely encounter and was precise enough that he could safely use it everywhere except urban areas. Even hollowpoint and Dust based .50 cal had substantial danger of over penetration. Civilian casualties were something he would avoid at all costs.

Markus walked slowly towards his locker, waiting as others slowly filtered past him. He was in no rush. The redheaded moderate threat appeared to be incessantly bugging the Asian moderate threat. However, the Lone Courier overtly paid no attention to them. Their conversation appeared to be largely inane and one sided, but it supported Pyrrha's intel that they would be split into teams. In his mind, Pyrrha was now consider the most credible source he had here.

Further down he walked through an argument between Red and Yellow, raising an eyebrow at them but not stopping. From what he overheard, without making an effort to overhear, Red was apparently not very socially apt. “Who would have thought,” he thought sarcastically. On a more serious note, her position of both being younger than everyone else here (if White had been correct) and being socially inept meant that it was likely she could be easily manipulated. Essentially, this meant that he could interact with her relatively safely. It was people with significant social skills he needed to worry about. They were the ones that might find something off about him.

The Courier then began to consider which attachments he would use on the weapon. While a suppressor would prevent the attraction of attention towards his locations, he suspected that subtlety would not be an option. Grimm did not require the sound of gunfire to determine his position. Besides, using a suppressor would doubtlessly cause questions. It wasn't something typically used by those not involved in covert operations. It had no real purpose other than to kill people quietly. Having a suppressor indicated that he had done so. The last thing he needed was suspicion. So, he would do this without his suppressor. This was going to hurt his ears.

Having arrived at his locker, he was totally engrossed in the assembly of the Hécate II. He naturally used the lighter carbon fiber frame for purposes of increased mobility and easier recoil management. Since he did not know what challenges he would face during initiation he did not want to hobble himself unintentionally by increasing his weight more than necessary.

Markus also used the custom bolt. The increase in rate of fire would be needed if he faced multiple targets at once, an eventuality that was quite likely should he face the Grimm. He very wished he had managed to get his hands on a Barrett M82. The semi-automatic fire capabilities would have been useful in helping prevent him from being swarmed. He acknowledged that more realistically a Browning M2 would have served him better against a horde of hard targets however he didn't carry one given its rate of fire and the scarcity of .50 cal ammo.

In a matter of seconds, the assembly of the Anti-Materiel Rifle was completed. After slinging it across his back, the Courier realized there was but one thing expected of him. Everyone else was doing it, and there was nothing else he could do right now. Markus sighed resignedly as he realized
that it was time to socialize.
“So, Pyrrha, have you given any thought to whose team you’d like to be on? I’m sure everyone must be eager to unite with such a strong, well-known individual such as yourself!” Weiss said sycophantically, ignorant of how transparent her attempt at flattery had been.

“Hmm… I’m not quite sure. I was planning on letting the chips fall where they may,” Pyrrha responded noncommittally.

“Well… I was thinking maybe we could be on a team together.”

“Well, that sounds grand!” said Pyrrha, ignorant of how awkward her diction sounded. Weiss, ignoring the other girl’s eccentricism in favor of her own internal plotting, thought

“This will be perfect! The smartest girl in class combined with the strongest girl in class! Together we will be unstoppable! I can see it now! We’ll be popular! We’ll be celebrities! We’ll get perfect grades! Nothing can come between us now!”

Of course, with the universe’s sense of dramatic irony, the heiress was rather politely interrupted during her scheming.

Initiating meaningless small talk was not something that Markus had much experience with. Typically, when he spoke to someone, he had a clearly defined purpose in doing so. In this instance, his only objective was to appear sociable. While he was capable of starting a conversation, without a specific topic preventing it from lapsing into an awkward silence would be the challenge.

“Pyrrha, Ms. Schnee,” The Courier said nodding at them in turn.

“Markus! A pleasure to see you.” Pyrrha said.

Markus noted that Pyrrha spoke very oddly. Not only were the words she used unusual but she had an unnatural cadence to her speech. He wondered why. Perhaps she had limited social experience? Her fame provided a plausible reason that she would not have had a normal childhood.

“You two know each other?” White asked.

“We had encountered each other previously,” Pyrrha said.

“As have we,” said the Courier, turning to address White,

“Although the circumstances were…less than formal.”

After White displayed a somewhat puzzled expression Markus clarified,

“The incident involved an explosion.”

The momentary confusion was immediately dispelled upon this revelation and replaced by a look
of recognition.

The Courier found he could not overstate how much of an utter pain it was to maintain this persona. It actually hindered his ability to communicate properly. Hopefully once he had become more familiar with everyone he could plausibly tone down the awkward formality.

Meanwhile, White’s recognition was immediately replaced with anger. Fortunately, her rage was not directed at him but towards Red, despite her not being present.

“That absolute dolt! She almost killed all of us!”

Both Pyrrha and Markus simultaneously took a step back from Weiss. Suffice to say, this was not what the Lone Wanderer intended, though he thought that her reaction was a result of her own problems rather than anything that he had done. Normal, well adjusted individuals (at least the few that Markus knew) did not have such violent outbursts over so petty an issue. In order to switch the subject to something less likely to result in a murder, Pyrrha turned to Markus and said,

“We were just discussing teams earlier.”

While the Courier really had nothing to say, he decided to put the proverbial ball in Pyrrha’s court and put the onus on her to keep the conversation going. Besides, he was likewise quite keen to change the subject.

“Have you found out anything more about the teams?”

“Yes. I have been recently informed that the teams will consist of four people each.”

Unsure of what to say next, the trio lapsed into a somewhat awkward silence. Fortunately, this only lasted a few seconds before they were saved by the intercom.

“Would all first-year students please report to Beacon Cliff for initiation? Again, all first-year students report to Beacon Cliff immediately.”

As Pyrrha and Weiss ambled towards the exit that presumably led to Beacon Cliff, Markus turned to retrieve his Anti-Materiel Rifle from where he had leaned it against the nearby lockers.

He had only walked a few steps towards it before he noticed Red basically ogling the weapon and Yellow vainly trying to pull the far smaller girl towards the exit. The Courier somewhat hesitantly picked up the Hécate II making eye contact with Red and raising an eyebrow.

“Is that yours?” Red asked, her voice a disconcerting mix of awe and reverence.

“Yes.” he said with a tone of implied finality.

Naturally, this did not dent Red’s exuberance.

“What is it?”

“Fifty caliber Anti-Materiel Rifle.”

The Courier was no longer speaking as verbosely as he typically did at Beacon. Now he spoke almost laconically, keen to end this conversation before it started.

Red basically melted, drooling at the specifications for the weapon. The action was unsettling to Markus. No one should be that happy about an implement used exclusively to end lives. Weapons were tools used for a very dirty job. While it was true that many people became affectionate
towards their own weapons, this was due to reliance on them for survival. It was an entirely natural response to grow an attachment to a piece of equipment that one’s life depended on. The Courier however used too great a variety of weapons to grow attached to any one in particular.

Red’s reaction stemmed from a different source. It was not affection towards a piece of gear responsible for saving her life time and time again. No, this almost a philia for a weapon she had set eyes on mere moments early. This kind of attitude towards a tool for dealing death was something the Courier could only comprehend as sociopathic in nature. This was what happened when you made soldiers out of children.

Red pulled something from her belt. This “thing” unfolded into a seven-foot long scythe with a with a four-foot long blade.

“Mine’s not as high caliber.”

Upon closer examination the scythe appeared to have a rifle component and magazine. The weapon was far taller than the girl was and the longer even than the Hécate II.

“You plan on assassinating moon people with that barrel?” the Courier asked drily.

The barrel length seemed inconveniently excessive, to say nothing of the enormous scythe blade attached to the barrel. The Courier hadn’t realized how Aura would impact the development of weapons in Remnant. Seeing a five-foot tall girl wielding a scythe significantly taller than she was with a blade almost as long as she was tall put things in perspective. Combat here would be entirely different from what he considered conventional. Weapons designed to be used in conjunction with Aura opened a whole world of possibilities.

Yellow interrupted the conversation,

“We really got to get to Beacon Cliff.”

The Courier nodded in assent.

“What’s your name anyway?” Yellow asked.

The Courier thought she seemed quite happy and more sociable than anyone else he had met. She seemed the most like he would imagine a person living in a place like this.

“Markus Friedrich, what are yours’?” said the Courier, addressing the pair.

Introductions. They were a good start to having a solid cover. Knowing people was always beneficial regardless.

Yellow responded once again,

“Yang Xiao Long, and that’s my sister Ruby Rose.”

“Pleasure to meet you two,” the Courier said with his painful formality.

Slinging his rifle over his shoulder, he walked towards the exit followed by Ruby and Yang.

All of the first years were standing on platforms on the edge of Beacon Cliff, overlooking another damnable forest. Markus was the furthest on the right from his own perspective with Ruby on his left. The Headmaster and Professor Goodwitch were standing a little to the side of the students. The
Headmaster began to speak,

“For years, you have trained to become warriors, and today, your abilities will be evaluated in the Emerald Forest.”

The Professor now started to speak,

“Now, I'm sure many of you have heard rumors about the assignment of ‘teams.’ Well, allow us to put an end to your confusion. Each of you will be given teammates... today.”

To his left, the Courier heard Ruby say,

“What? Ohhh…”

Evidently she didn’t have as good sources as he did. Pyrrha’s information had proven to be reliable.

The Headmaster resumed speaking,

“These teammates will be with you for the rest of your time here at Beacon. So it is in your best interest to be paired with someone with whom you can work well.”

This was not good news to the Lone Wanderer. Spending a lot of time with others would make repairing the Transportalponder surreptitiously difficult at best and impossible at worst. Furthermore, any attempt at getting to know him intimately would but more stress on his falsified background than he was comfortable with it bearing. Ruby groaned to his left, echoing his feelings.

“That being said, the first person you make eye contact with after landing will be your partner for the next four years.”

Markus found this to be an oddly specific and arbitrary determination for something so important. It was an entirely random method of pairing people that no professional organization would ever adopt. However, he shrugged it off. There was nothing he could do about it. He would most likely be paired with someone he had never met if based only on statistics. If his luck held out, he might get someone who would keep to themselves. Their combat ability was of secondary importance.

“After you’ve partnered up, make your way to the northern end of the forest. You will meet opposition along the way. Do not hesitate to destroy everything in your path... or you will die.”

This seemed very dark compared to everything else he had seen in this otherwise civilized society. The idea of sending children to their deaths was not something even the Legion did lightly. For something as simple as an initiation into an academy (albeit a combat academy) the stakes were very high. Though, the Courier was accustomed to high stakes.

“You will be monitored and graded through the duration of your initiation, but our instructors will not intervene. You will find an abandoned temple at the end of the path containing several relics. Each pair must choose one and return to the top of the cliff. You will guard that item, as well as your standing, and grade you appropriately. Are there any questions?”

No one spoke.

“Good! Now, take your positions.”

Everyone struck a pose, with the Courier drawing Maria and the trench knife. The knife was held in a tactical reverse grip with the blade parallel to the gun’s barrel and his left elbow at a 90 degree
angle. The barrel was kept aimed slightly downward off the cliff with his finger resting on the nickel plated ivy of the trigger guard.

From down the line the platforms they are standing on send students flying one by one. While Markus did not have a plan for the fall, he knew that at this point it was out of his hands. Besides, his bones were reinforced enough that he was not even sure that they could be broken. And his newly unlocked Aura, weak as it was, should help. A bit.

Of course, nearly all of his confidence was lost upon being launched into the air and seeing nothing but a verdant canopy beneath him. It was time to improvise a “landing strategy.”
Improvising a landing strategy was far more easily said than done. Especially when you were forty feet above the treetops. The Courier’s best bet would to be to slow himself as much as he could via contact with branches as he fell. It would hurt, but hopefully he wouldn’t sustain enough damage that it would be suspicious for him to survive it. While Stimpacks meant that he was in little danger of death, coming back covered in his own blood would be inexplicable.

Markus supposed that the way that the way the headmaster intended the students to land was by using their Aura. He, however, had little confidence in his own. As he fell, he spread himself out in what one would consider to be the typical skydiving position in order to slow his velocity. Swiftly the blue edges of the Couriers vision became filled with the green of the forest below. 3...2...1... Impact.

As he passed the tip of the trees he shifted into an upright position and attempted to slow himself by stabbing the trench knife into the nearest tree, saw edge down. It half worked. After colliding with (and destroying) a few branches, the blade became dislodged from the trunk of the tree it had penetrated. The Lone Courier instantly stabbed the tree again, this time keeping his weapon firmly embedded in the unfortunate plant. By the time he had done this, the thick branches were above him and those below him only slowed him by a negligible amount.

A few meters above the ground he felt a sudden sharp pain in his shoulder—it must have dislocated. As soon as he registered what had happened, he pushed off from the tree and jumped to prevent further damage. Landing with a roll more graceful than anyone with a dislocated arm had any right to have and a grimace that was slightly more pained than usual, he straightened up and examined his Pip-Boy to inspect the damage he sustained.

Somewhat surprisingly, his legs were in very good condition. The cartilage between the joints was slightly damaged, but it was nothing that his implants couldn’t handle. Minor injuries would fix themselves in a matter of minutes. Unfortunately, he had been correct in his assessment that his shoulder had been dislocated. This was something that had to be fixed manually. If he didn’t relocate it, with his accelerated healing, it would heal badly.

Steeling himself, he pushed his shoulder back into its socket. It made a simultaneously disgusting and satisfying pop as it went back in. Fortunately, the Courier had developed a ridiculously high pain tolerance as a side effect of having been unfortunate enough to have been shot, stabbed, burned, had every limb crippled, irradiated, and electrocuted multiple times. He therefore didn’t expect the arm to impair his ability to function.

Markus examined himself, checking for any other damage. Benny’s suit was still in pristine condition. The thing was bullet resistant after all. The trench knife looked no worse for wear. He wasn’t sure what had went into making it, but it was in contention for the most durable thing he owned.

He raised his weapons into the position they had been prior to his launch, and examined his surroundings. There was nothing particularly remarkable about the Emerald Forest that he could see. It looked the same as the one he had arrived in initially. Still, even after having previously spent several days in a forest, the Courier found it to be a somewhat novel experience. The wet
earth and dewy plants were something that he was not accustomed to. The Mojave wasn't like this, even before The War, and DC was far too irradiated for anything this green and healthy to grow anywhere except Oasis. However now was not the time for sightseeing. He had a mission.

Speaking of his mission, the instructions were not very clear on where to find these "relics" that they were supposed to retrieve. Therefore, the Lone Courier took his best guess, and determined that the most logical place would be in the direction that they had been launched. He set off, deeper into the forest, at a half crouch. He might have taken a chance and thrown caution to the winds by sprinting towards his objective, but decided it was better to allow his joints to recover. Extensive stress would mean the healing might take hours or even lead to permanent damage. The technology was experimental even pre-war and the Courier knew it was risky to use. However with how often he was injured, he had determined it was worth the risk. That said, there was no reason to make it any more dangerous than it already was.

Markus flicked off the safety on Maria but kept his finger off the trigger; there were friendlies around after. A 9mm was not the best introduction. Despite anticipating meeting one of the other students, he was very much aware that Grimm had a significant presence here, and was therefore constantly scanning for movement.

The Courier's biggest worry was that the 9mm dust rounds he was using would lacked the stopping power needed to deal with anything he might encounter. Frontal headshots were a risky option. The bone plate could prevent the round from penetrating the skull. While he could attempt to hit parts that weren’t covered by the supernaturally tough carapace, it was by no means a sure thing.

Enraged animals were notoriously hard to kill, a fact that was known even in the Old World with the creation of so called "elephant guns". Most of the larger calibers were designed for defence against animals such as bears, elephants, and rhinos. Should 9mm not be sufficient to deal with the Grimm he would encounter, he could surreptitiously switch to the Blackhawk by using some slight of hand to disguise the matter digitalization. That would only be necessary if Maria proved to be totally ineffective against the vast majority of targets he encountered. His first resort would be to use the Hécate II if he came up against smaller numbers of harder targets.

The .50 caliber round was intended to be an anti-aircraft round upon its inception. It was used extensively by tanks as a coaxial armament pre-war and was even the main armament on some tanks during the early phases of the Second World War. Based on the creatures he had previously encountered, the Courier felt certain that his choice in secondary weapon was overkill. Markus had previously handloaded some empty .50 caliber cases with dust. According to the calculations he had done, Dust, when used in the place of an equivalent amount of smokeless powder, produced less thrust, but sort of detonated on impact like a more extreme version of the effect of hollow point ammunition.

A significant facet of this difference was that all Dust based ammunition was subsonic. While this was fine in more covert operations, with an Anti-Materiel Rifle, it was all about stopping power. Still, the Lone Wanderer was keen to see how the custom ammunition performed. The cartridges had not been designed with Dust in mind.

He had been walking for a while now and yet he had yet to see any opposition. As the Courier walked, he unconsciously avoided stepping on sticks or dry leaves. His presence was totally silent. His knees no longer felt as though the patellas were being grinded on by both his femurs and his tibias. That was a good sign as it meant that the damage to his cartilage had likely been regenerated enough for him to move at a faster pace. The Courier was keen to do so as so far he had neither met opposition nor made any visual progress; his surroundings looked much the same as they did where he had landed. Therefore, he forwent stealth in favor of speed, flicked Maria’s safety back
on, and set off at a steady jog.

Despite his increased speed he made very little noise. He habitually avoided stepping on things that would give away his presence. For a few minutes, everything was totally peaceful. His Pip-Boy detected no contacts. He was just wondering when he would meet the "opposition" the Headmaster had spoken of when a hostile contact appeared. It was far ahead of him, still concealed by the dense trees. Despite the fact that his weapons were unsuppressed, the Courier began to move stealthily towards the blip.

As the contact was singular, he hoped to eliminate it without drawing attention to his location. His lack of automatic weapons meant that he was in a less than ideal situation for dealing with large groups of hostiles. If constrained to his current set of weapons, being swarmed was a real danger.

The Courier took cover behind one of the trees and peered past it towards where the contact was supposed to be. There it was. A solitary Beowolf. Eliminating it would be easy. Unfortunately, it was sniffing the air, apparently aware of his presence. That ruled out using the trench knife; he would never get close enough to something that had his scent. As neither of his weapons were suppressed, he would need to go loud.

Two painfully loud cracks later, and two 9mm rounds were hurtling towards the unfortunate creature at just subsonic speeds. As the Beowolf had not pinpointed his location, it was not currently facing him. That meant that both rounds were heading directly towards the back of the beast’s head.

The impact was visually unimpressive, with only small spurts of crimson fluid spilling from the Grimm. A split second later however, and the Dust rounds exited the Beowolf in countless fragments, each followed by a thin stream of hot blood. The creature fell to the ground, making a sickening gurgling growl, its skull holding nothing but shrapnel shredded mush. Within a few seconds, the body had dissolved in its typical fashion, leaving no trace behind.

Markus was not overly pleased with how that encounter had gone. The Dust rounds had proven to be far louder than he would have liked. Without a suppressor, the sound of the propellant igniting echoed seemingly for miles even without the sonic boom that accompanied conventional ammunition.

He held his breath, waiting to see whether his presence had been detected.

Waiting.

Nothing.

Then, a contact.

One, directly in front of him, then another, then another. The Courier began to run forward at a 45 degree angle to the contacts. Soon, they were too numerous to count. Markus changed magazines and racked the slide. This was going to get messy.
Markus caught his first glimpse of one of his pursuers between the tree trunks. Its low profile and four legged gait distinguished it as an Ursa. Strange, he thought it was Beowolves that typically moved in packs. With his limited arsenal, dealing with this many hostiles would be a challenge. Typically, an automatic weapon would make short work of a crowd of animals. His lack of one such weapon meant that he would have to get creative.

The Courier was sprinting now, he hoped to find a clearing before he was forced to fight the group. There he could better engage the Grimm that pursued him. His tactics against a large amount of unskilled opponents would require room enough to maneuver to avoid being surrounded.

An Ursa burst from the foliage on his right only to be met with two 9mm to the head. At near point blank range its cranium shattered gorily as it slumped to the ground, sublimating quickly. He never stopped moving. The trees started the thin, and he felt optimistic of his chances of engaging on more favorable ground.

The break from the treeline was sudden and unexpected. Despite the thinning of the forest, at no point previously had he been able to see past the wall of trees. The area in front of him was clear for about a hundred meters before a sheer cliff towered up in his path. There was a small rise at its base that led to cave, too deep in shadow for him to see the interior of. Fighting with his back to the cliff would limit his options of retreat but the area in front of it ensured he would have the space he needed.

Analyzing the terrain, Markus determined that he should put as much distance and as many obstacles between him and his pursuers as he could in order to allow him to take down more before they reached him. He sprinted towards the rise. The height advantage would be useful.

The Lone Wanderer had gotten thirty meters from the treeline before the first Ursa became visible over his shoulder. This one was far larger than the other one had been and judging by the thickness of its bone mask, headshots were not an option. Attempting to hit a moving target as small as the unarmored portion of the creature’s head was more than likely a waste of ammunition.

Only half turning, the Courier sent four rounds at its abdomen. The Courier did not look to see their effect. From the noises her heard, they had thoroughly disemboweled the creature.

The Courier checked over his shoulder once again to see more Ursi break from the treeline, the contacts still innumerable. Markus turned back blind fired behind him, aiming low, hoping to slow the creatures. Once again not turning to check the effect the fire was having, he continued towards high ground. Forty meters later, he turned to assess the pack he was facing.

There were six Ursa majors and about twenty minors visible, the lead of which was a mere twenty meters away. Two cracks echoed above the growling of the Grimm. Nineteen. He needed to do his thinking and shooting at the same time.

The Lone Wanderer made the decision to prioritize the larger ones. They would be a far greater threat in close combat than the small ones were. In his experience, the bigger something was, the less knife wounds bother it. Trying to deal with an Ursa major with a seven inch blade was not an
appealing prospect.

The majority of the group was now sixty meters from him and closing slower than he had expected. The Lone Courier proceeded to simply put as much lead and Dust their way as he could as fast as he could. The need to reload occasionally barely slowed his rate of fire.

Markus was not happy with his progress. Five of the Ursa majors remained standing at thirty meters. Ursi, both major and minor took a frustrating amount of punishment to put down. While he had focused on targeting the neck and center of mass in an effort to induce fatal wounds, he now found himself often aiming for the legs, settling for immobilizing the creatures.

Too many major were involved for his liking. He hadn't been able to focus his fire on them as much as he would have liked due to the need to pick off minors who were ahead of the pack. Once one of the Ursi closed to melee range it would become purely a melee affair. Fighting both a close range and long range battle simultaneously was something that was beyond his skillset.

Now that there were only a dozen minors left he decided to take out the majors at all costs. If he could kill them before the minor came into melee range he was confident with his odds. In order achieve this objective he holstered Maria and the trench knife, knelt, and unslung the Hécate II in a single, smooth motion.

Thirty meters was extremely close range for ten times magnification. At this distance, the Courier could literally put a bullet through the eye of the Ursa majors. So he did. Five rounds through five Grimm in as many seconds. The lead Ursa minor was now only ten meters away, not enough time to reload and take out the last major. He therefore reslung his Anti-Materiel Rifle and drew Maria and his trench knife.

While the lead Ursa never got close to him, the one following him would have to be dealt with at point blank range. The second Ursa leapt at him. The Courier side stepped to the right, impaling it on his trench knife while gouging its throat in mid air. The creature was not dead upon landing and made a pitiful gurgling noise as it drowned in its own blood. Still, it was combat ineffective. Ten left.

The nearest Grimm received a 9mm through the chest though this served only to stagger it. The trench knife, still in a reverse grip, through the top of the skull mortally wounded the Ursa. Despite its fate being sealed, it lashed out in its death throes, forcing the Courier to dodge backwards, bring the knife with him thereby tearing a gaping hole in the Grimm's skull, the blade only sliding out as it scraped over the back of the faceplate. Nine.

Much to his advantage, in his maneuvering, Markus had created some distance between his opponents and himself. He exploited this instantly before attempting to empty his magazine into the swarm. Two minors went down. Seven left. He easily dodged the swipes of the nearest and blinded one eye with a stab before firing point blank into its skull. This left him open to an attack by the other that had reached him forcing him back yet again. Still the major had not yet closed to melee range. Fortunately, its size also meant reduced speed. Realizing that a delay to reload would be risky, the Courier opted for the simpler option smashing the Ursa in the face with the knuckle Dusters on the trench knife. The small spikes punctured the creature's face and sent it reeling in pain as the force behind the blow cracked its skull.

This provided him with the opportunity to slap another magazine into Maria and fire two rounds into the chest of the Grimm he had struck. Five. The Courier virtually ran rings around the remaining minors, peppering the creatures while almost effortlessly evading their strikes, staying just out of range. When there were two left, the Ursa major finally closed to melee range.
As the Lone Wanderer prepared to finish the fight, he perceived four more Ursa majors and six more minors appear from the treeline on his left. This, was a problem. He had no way of dealing with that many majors. Suddenly, he had an idea. He finished off one of the minors of the original group and stabbed the other as it tried to cut him off from retreating from the solitary major.

After a reload he once again fired into the crowd of Ursi hoping to thin the number of minors. Within a few seconds, the Courier had reached the relative safety of the cave. While the majors could not fit through its narrow entrance he would have little room to avoid attacks if minors closed to melee range. With what he was wearing, he could not afford to take hits. He therefore methodically eliminated them with precise 9mm rounds. There was enough distance between him and them for the Courier to take the time to place lethal shots on the targets.

With only the majors left at fifty meters away, he switched to the Anti-Materiel Rifle and reloaded before tearing massive holes in each of the remaining Ursa majors. The deafening boom of the .50 cal echoed through the otherwise quiet forest as death groans of the Grimm subsided.

With no more contacts the Courier reassessed his plan. Proceeding in his original direction was now impossible. The sheer cliff impeded any progress. His best option was to continue deeper into the cave and hope that this was where the relics that he was supposed to retrieve were or that the place had another exit.

This could take an impractical amount of time but there was no alternative. With only his enhanced vision to guide him, the Courier crept forward into the darkness of the cave. There appeared to be cave paintings along the walls. Markus wondered whether they were actually ancient or the result of more recent tribes like those of Zion. His thoughts were interrupted by a sound behind him. He instantly turned 180 degrees and acquired his target. What he saw made his exhale resignedly.
Pyrrha had not been entirely telling the truth when she had said she had not put much thought into teams. In fact, she had probably put more thought into it than most others had. Despite this, Pyrrha was not worried about who she might end with. She knew that her own skill would mean that it would be largely irrelevant to her combat performance who she ended up with. She had past the point of being concerned about who she might end up with and was resigned to the fact that she would have to spend four years partnered by someone who was utterly starstruck by her and placed her on what amounted to an altar.

Of course, in this scenario, the very idea of social interaction that would be considered normal for the average person would entirely out of the question. This pessimistic inevitability changed however upon her chance encounter with Markus. Importantly, he had not known who she was. This meant that they had been capable of maintaining a “normal” (if fairly awkward) conversation. Regardless, Pyrrha considered it a major victory. As a result, it had quickly become her top priority to become paired with him.

This was not due to an attraction, or personality. Far from it. In fact, Pyrrha found him to be formal and somewhat cold. She viewed this simply as an opportunity to avoid being stuck with someone who could not view her as a human. An opportunity that would be pursued at all costs. She would not miss the chance to have something she had never had before. Pyrrha had no idea what she was getting herself into.

From the initial launch, Pyrrha had kept her eyes glued to her quarry. She tried to angle herself towards where she anticipated his trajectory to land him. Since she had launched first, she attempted to slow herself down as much as she could to allow him to get ahead of her. Using her shield, Akoúo, to slow herself using air resistance she landed on the bough of a particularly tall tree and deftly rolled to a halt. If she was to have any hope of finding him Markus would have to be in her path to the relics. Drawing Miló, and gazing down its scope, she tracked Markus’ flight. Evidently she had not needed to slow herself as he had been launched far further than she had. Damn. She would have to move quickly if she didn’t want to be saddled with a fanboy/girl for four years. Losing this opportunity was something Pyrrha was not willing to allow. And if there was one word that was the antithesis of Pyrrha Nikos, it was losing.

At the pace Pyrrha was moving, she felt that she wouldn’t detect any Grimm before she ran into them, which was not something she intended to make a habit of. Running into something once was embarrassing enough. The trees were virtually a blur as she ran by, all of her senses alert for any sign of Markus. Branches that would have cut the face of a normal person whipped by as they were deflected by her aura.

She knew that this would be a difficult thing to accomplish. Not only did she need to find him and catch up to him, she also needed to do it before he made eye contact with anyone else. Or anyone else made eye contact with her.

After having ran for roughly ten minutes in the direction of where she had seen Markus land, Pyrrha found what she presumed to be his landing zone. A particularly tall tree had two massive vertical rents in it, each at different heights. Most of the branches on one side of the tree were snapped off. Not the most elegant landing. Despite this apparently crude landing strategy, there
were no visible tracks that indicated which way her quarry had gone. The surrounding foliage appeared utterly untouched.

While pondering her next move, Pyrrha very distinctly heard the sound of gunfire. She was familiar enough with firearms to tell that it was of a caliber that might be used by Markus’ pistol. While it was by no means a sure thing, it was still a far better lead than she had had before. Which had been absolutely nothing. Besides, as far as she knew, there was no one else who had landed near here. At least she had that in her favor.

Sure enough, after a few minutes of pursuing the sounds of combat, Pyrrha found what was clearly the result of someone moving at what (from her perspective) was a sprint. The size of the tracks indicated that they were made by someone of Markus’ stature. With increased vigor that came with her renewed faith that she was going in the right direction, she now started sprinting. The shots were louder but still in the distance.

Five booms echoed exponentially louder than those that preceded and succeeded them. Probably the massive rifle that he was carrying, she deduced. There was a sudden pause in the firing before it resumed with increased speed. Then, there was another pause and, Pyrrha being much closer now, heard the nearly deafening boom and corresponding echo of the enormous rifle firing another five successive shots.

Ninety seconds later, she entered a clearing, just in time to see the last of the Ursai evaporate. So that was what Markus was fighting. The main thing of note that Pyrrha saw in the clearing was a cave at the base of the cliff directly opposite her. She decided that that was her best bet for locating Markus. He appear to be going the same direction the entire time and the cave was in the same path. Since she saw no other disturbances to the foliage other than those made by the Grimm, the cave was her best option. Despite the fact she had been previously unable to track Markus for a while, her intuition led her to believe that. Assuming that there was only one exit Pyrrha walked rather than ran towards the opening in the cliff face. There was no reason to exert more energy than necessary. She did not know how long this initiation would take and did not want to become fatigued before it had even properly begun.

The cave was dark. As she had no means other than the residual glow of her active aura of generating light Pyrrha could only see a few feet in front of her at most. This was not helped by the winding passages of the cave. The last thing she needed was to be lost in here. Then, her exploration came to an abrupt halt when she heard a very distinctive sound.

Having heard movement behind him, the Lone Courier disengaged the safety and spun around. He exhaled softly as his sights came to rest on the smiling face of Pyrrha Nikos, less than two feet away. Markus pointed the gun at the floor literally quicker than was humanly possible, even with the assistance of Aura. It was extraordinarily bad manners (and unsafe) to point a gun at someone.

Both Pyrrha and Markus looked at each other awkwardly for a few seconds, neither sure exactly where to go from here.

“I suppose that we are partners now,” Pyrrha said in her usual jovial tone.

“Yes,” said the Courier unemotionally.

“Odds that the relics are in this cave?” he asked laconically.

“It seems unlikely, however I do not have any idea of where to look,” Pyrrha responded.
“We might as well check, this can’t go on forever.”

Just before Markus turned to continue their search of the caves for their objective, Pyrrha wordlessly pointed to something over his shoulder. Understanding that she likely had a good reason to be silent, he slowly turned his head. With his enhanced vision, the Lone Wanderer saw what he could only describe as a Grimm, organic version of Dr. Mobius’ giant robo-scorpion. If this one was anywhere near as durable, he was in for a tough fight. Markus held up three fingers. Two. One. They both sprinted through the cave, as they moved, so did the Deathstalker, keeping hot on their heels. Markus was careful not to outpace Pyrrha. He did not know what maximum “normal” speed for these people. Appearing obviously superhuman would certainly cause questions. He was mindful of keeping up appearances even when being chased by a Grimm large enough to kill him in a single blow.

Hoping to end this before it began, Markus reached into his suit’s jacket where he materialized a stick of lit dynamite. He threw this behind him just before they cleared the cave. By this point, they had managed create some distance between them and the titanic Grimm. A few seconds later, the dynamite detonated, shocking Pyrrha, who had not seen the explosive thrown and sealing the cave. Everything had worked perfectly. Until the Deathstalker burst through the rubble, that was.
A Most Cunning Plan

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The Lone Courier's reaction to the Deathstalker crashing through the debris would have been easily predictable to those few who knew him well. In fact, even those who knew only of his reputation would have had good odds of predicting his response. The Courier unslung the Hécate II and fired a singular round at the abdomen of the creature. Of course, he did not expect this to stop the gigantic Grimm, rather the attack was intended to gauge the effectiveness of his weapons. The Dust based round made a soft ping as it impacted the carapace of the Deathstalker. For a split second the Courier wondered whether it had even penetrated. However, any doubt was erased upon the pained screech that oversized scorpion had made. Despite the seemingly significant effect that the bullet had produced, once the smoke from the Dust round's detonation had cleared, the wound, despite the reaction of the recipient, was almost imperceptible. The bloody hole was only the size of the round. Painful, but nowhere near lethal. Maria probably wouldn't even pierce the carapace. As he and Pyrrha continued to flee from the terrifyingly large scorpion, Markus idly concluded that the Grimm's carapace would act similarly to sloped armor on tanks. Its curved nature would mean that smaller caliber bullets would bounce. All in all, to him, this meant that he would need to get creative.

As far as he could tell, they were not going in any particular direction and he was unwilling to abandon Pyrrha to being eaten by an oversized scorpion so he simply followed her. As there had not been any significant change in scenery, and the Deathstalker was gaining, Markus worried that he would need to resort to more reckless measures. Just as he was contemplating how long Pyrrha could survive without his intervention he noticed that the trees were thinning. Therefore he bided his time knowing that change was imminent that could provide him with new options. At this point however, both the Courier and Pyrrha were dodging the swipes of the pincers. He needed to put some distance between them and the Grimm. The Anti-Materiel Rifle was out of the question, unslinging it would take too long, so he turned only his torso and without stopping fired three 9mm rounds into one of the Deathstalker's eyes. Another squeal pierced the air as the Grimm reeled in agony at having one of its eyes blinded. The Courier turned back and saw the contents of the clearing.

This clearing appeared to contain most of the other students. Only White seemed to be missing out of all those he had so far identified. Behind where all the kids stood, there was a dilapidated ruin. While clearly ravaged by time and nature its walls and columns still remained upright in some sections. Markus' enhanced eyes spotted chess pieces of various colors on pedestals. He presumed this was the mentioned temple and artifacts they had been searching for. They were lucky to have found it by running in a totally random direction.

And then White appeared. She seemed to have fallen from the sky, using some form of Dust based witchcraft to break her fall. But then, if she had fallen from the sky, what had she fallen from?

Markus and Pyrrha had managed to get nearly a dozen meters between them and the Deathstalker before the pair reached the group.

"Great," Yang said with almost uncharacteristic mix of pessimism and sarcasm, "the gang's all here. Now we can die together."

Not likely, the Courier thought. Even the worst case scenarios in his ended with no one dead. A giant scorpion wasn't that much of a threat. Before he could voice any objection to the fatalistic
view, Ruby spoke.

"Not if I can help it."

And with a battle cry that was exactly as one would expect from a fifteen year old girl, she charged at the Deathstalker so fast that she appeared to have a motion blur.

"Ruby, wait!," her sister yelled. Ruby of course, ignored this. The Lone Courier was interested in seeing how combat effective these kids were. Just from his impressions of their outfits and weapons he did not have high hopes. Both reeked of the opulence of a long peace. Practicality and efficiency were both sacrificed in favor of aesthetics. Still, Aura gave them an undeniable advantage. Such as being able to move at speeds which caused them to blur slightly.

The impact with the scorpion caused Ruby to merely bounce off rather pathetically. While Markus considered helping, no one else felt the need to, and Ruby appeared fine.

"D-Don't worry! Totally fine."

She yelled back to them, turning to face the Grimm. She fired a round from her weapon directly into the faceplate of the Deathstalker. Of course, it ricocheted, causing no damage. She started to run. Yang started to run towards her. As far as the Courier could see getting closer to the Grimm would not help in the least. His contemplation was interrupted by an earsplitting caw. He looked up and saw where he assumed White had come from. The mother of all Nevermores had arrived. This one was roughly twice the size of the one that had disturbed him previously, and this time he couldn't use his Gauss rifle. Unfortunately.

The titanic bird cawed before flapping its wings several times sending loose feathers nearly as tall as the Courier down in dozens. One appeared to have pinned Ruby's cape while the others had blocked Yang from reaching her.

Really, thought the Lone Wanderer, A cape. Who did she think she was? A superhero?

It quick glance revealed that none of them wore armor except Pyrrha, and hers was almost entirely decorative. Some of them wore heels. Heels! It was almost humorous how unseriously they approached matters of life and death. Aura must be more potent than he realized if these kids could afford going into combat with nothing other than it for protection.

Just as the Deathstalker tried to stab the red themed girl, White used an arcane glyph to propel herself into range of assistance and then another to erect a wall of ice. And she appeared to be lecturing the girl. While there was no doubt Ruby deserved it for her utter thoughtlessness in her attire, White was not exactly one to talk in that regard.

At least she appeared to be marginally competent, unlike Ruby who had so far only managed to nearly get herself killed. Even if it was through the use of sorcery.

They appeared to be conversing, while neither of the threats were eliminated; the Nevermore circling and the Deathstalker thawing.

Of course then Yang hugged her sister. The Courier ignored all of this with a resigned air. Not a stone’s throw from them was a giant scorpion and they were having a moment of sororal bonding.

They had all gathered once again, the Deathstalker seemingly contained. For now.

"Nevermore is circling back. Ideas?” Markus asked.
He could not make any plans as he was ignorant of the capabilities of others present. Without knowledge of the resources available to them, he could not formulate a method to eliminate the Grimm.

"Our objective is right in front of us, no sense in dilly-dallying." White said.

The Courier had to resist the urge to roll his eyes. Chess pieces would not kill the bird or the scorpion. And he knew they would need to die sooner or later. Preferably sooner.

"She's right," Ruby said, "our mission is to grab an artifact and make it back to the cliffs. There's no point in fighting these things."

Markus had to resist rolling his eyes again. A giant killer bird that could fly faster than they could run was not just going to leave them alone. They were going to have to deal with it one way or another.

Regardless, it wasn't his life that they were risking. No matter what happened, none of the worst case scenarios ended up with him dead. On their own heads be it.

Markus grabbed the nearest chess piece, a golden rook, as Ruby grabbed the one next to him, a golden knight. He was eager to get out of here. Working with amateurs annoyed him. It was clear these kids had no real idea of what they were doing and were just making it up as they went along.

The ice holding the Deathstalker's pincer started to crack as it began to struggle more vigorously.

"It's time we left," said the quiet, green wearing guy.

The Lone Courier sighed mentally (he had been doing that a lot lately) and resigned himself to this "plan." If they were going to do it, they would have to do it quickly. Good tactical sense would dictate that they all focus their fire on the giant scorpion while it was still trapped and kill it while it was incapable of defending itself. It was too late for that now in any case. Perhaps the ice might give them enough of a head start to lose the Deathstalker. He doubted it.

Chapter End Notes

AN: The Lone Courier, as a man of science, is mildly annoyed by Dust and semblances, thinking of them as basically magic and not liking anything he doesn't understand.

There is no real way that I could write the characters as essentially professional elite soldiers when they wear heels. Instead, I will be writing this story under the concept that this period of peace has led to aesthetics over practicality. With weapons designed to fight Grimm, not wars. The mains are the equivalent of the "summer knights" from A Song of Ice and Fire; born in a time of peace and plenty, know nothing of war and hardship. And, even in canon, RWBY's (metaphorical) Winter is Coming.
AN: This is not a proper chapter, rather a small scene which is not much more than a retelling of canon and a repository for the Lone Courier's stats and items. This should make chapter 1 less cluttered.

Si Vis Pacem

Prologue

In the near future at Beacon

A large and ominous airship descended upon a landing pad. Two Bullheads flew over the main causeway as ant-like masses of people swarmed on the paths around Beacon. At the peak of the highest tower, veiled in clouds, clockwork mechanisms functioned ceaselessly over the headmaster's office. Professor Ozpin and Glynda Goodwitch stood facing out the window of his office, watching the orchestrations.

"Ironwood certainly loves bringing his work wherever he travels," Goodwitch said.

"Well, running an academy and a military makes him a busy man," the headmaster said as he overlooked three more Bullheads flew in,

"But yes, those are a bit of an eyesore."

A chirping sound emanated from his desk.

"Come in," the Headmaster said.

The doors to his office opened, revealing General Ironwood.

"Ozpin!," said Ironwood cordially.

Ozpin stood at attention.

"Hello, General," he said rather stiffly.

"Please, drop the formalities."

The two men approached and shook hands as Goodwitch also approached.

"It's been too long," said Ironwood, "And Glynda! It has certainly been too long since we last met."

The severe professor responded almost mockingly, "Oh, James" She gave a personable wave and then dropped all pleasantry.

"I'll be outside."

"Well, she hasn't changed a bit," said Ironwood, not entirely surprised by how the conversation
Ozpin turned to his desk and said,

"So, what in the world has brought you all the way down from Atlas?"

The Headmaster of Beacon picked up a kettle and cup, pouring as he spoke.

"Headmasters don't typically travel with their students, for the Vytal Festival."

He turned and offered the cup to Ironwood.

The mug changed hands making a clink as it did so.

"Well, you know how much I love Vale this time of year," Ironwood said as he produced a canteen from his inside coat pocket and poured its contents into his mug.

"Besides, with you hosting, I thought that this might be a good opportunity for us to catch up."

Ozpin walked around to his desk, kettle and a new mug.

"I can certainly appreciate the quality time between friends, however, a small fleet outside my window has me concerned."

"Well, concerned is what brought them here." The General said.

"I understand that travel between kingdoms has become increasingly difficult," said Ozpin, feigning ignorance.

"Oz, you and I both know why I brought those men," said Ironwood frankly.

Ozpin took a drink and set down his mug.

"We are in a time of peace, he said, "Shows of power like this are just going to give off the wrong impression."

"But if what Qrow said is true..." said Ironwood.

"If what Qrow said is true," Ozpin said, interrupting the other man, "then we will handle it tactfully. It's the Vytal Festival. A time to celebrate unity and peace. So I suggest that you not scare people by transporting hundreds of soldiers halfway across the continent."

"I'm just being cautious," justified Ironwood.

"As am I. Which is why we will continue to train the best Huntsmen and Huntresses we can."

"Believe me, I am." Ironwood said as he turned to walk away. He stopped near the door and turned back to Ozpin.

"Do you honestly think your children can win a war?"

Ozpin looked tired, very tired.

"I hope they never have to." Little did he know, one already had. Twice.

Here is a list of both stats and items that the character possesses. This can easily be ignored if it's too boring for you. Its main purpose is for the reader's reference.
Character Stats:

Gender: Male

Name: Markus Friedrich

Race: Caucasian

Aliasi: The Lone Wanderer, Mr. 101, "that kid from vault 101", the Courier, Apollyon

SPECIAL Stats:

Strength: 10(+)

Perception: 10

Endurance: 10

Charisma: 10

Intelligence: 10

Agility: 10

Luck: 9

Skills:

Barter: 80

Energy Weapons: 90

Explosives: 100

Guns: 100

Lockpick: 100

Medicine: 100

Melee Weapons: 100(+)

Lockpick: 100

Medicine: 100

Melee: 100

Repair: 100

Science: 100

Sneak: 100

Speech: 100

Survival: 92
Unarmed: 90

Perks:

Abominable(3) Damage bonus vs abominations
Adamantium Skeleton Limbs receive 50% of normal damage
Alertness +2 Perception when crouched
Almost Perfect
And Stay Back Chance to knock enemies with shotguns
Animal Control(3) Damage bonus against animals
Ant Sight 25% fire resistance and +1 perception
AR Scanner Project Nevada eye implant
Barkskin +5% damage resistance
Big Brained head cannot be crippled 10% more resistant to damage and addiction
Booster Shot 10% radiation resistance
Center of Mass +15% more damage in VATS when targeting the torso
Child at Heart
Commando better accuracy using a rifle
Cyborg +10% radiation and poison resistance +5 DT and Energy weapons
Demolition Expert
EMP Generator fires EMP pulses from hands recharges at a rate of 1 per hour with a maximum of 5
Explorer
Finesse
Gray Matters take 25% less damage to the head
Grim Reaper's sprint.
Grunt damage bonus with military grade weaponry
Gun Nut
Hand Loader
Heartless cannot be poisoned robots cannot target well
Heavyweight
Hit the Deck +25 DT vs explosives
Implant M-5 40% faster
Iron Fist +5 unarmed damage
Jury Rigging
Kinetic Accelerator faster reload and general arm movement
Knife in the Shadow attacks from stealth with a 1 handed weapons are lethal
Lady Killer
Lessons Learned
Lord Death(3)
Melee Hacker(2) hack faster
Miss Fortune
Monocyte Breeder regenerates
Mysterious Stranger
Nanobionic Weave right leg regenerates
Nerves of Steel
Ninja
Pitt Fighter +3% damage and radiation resistance
Poker Face
Power Armor Training
Professional Courier
Quick Draw
Rad Regeneration radiation causes regeneration
Ranger Takedown
Rapid Reload
Razor Nails
Reflex Booster
Reinforced Spine +2 strength and damage resistance
Run ’n Gun
Scribe Counter
Scrounger find more ammunition
Set Lasers for Fun more laser damage

Sharpshooter aim is increased the further a target is

Silent Running

Sniper better chance at headshot

Solar Powered gain health and strength in sunlight

Special Ops. acquired controls to an automated missile silo (not currently usable)

Stonewall +5 DT against melee attacks and cannot be knocked down

Strong Back

Sub-Dermal Armor +4 DT

Superior Defender +5 damage and +10 armor while standing still

Survival Expert

Swift Learner

Swing for the Fence

Synthetic Lungs longer sprinting and water breathing

Tag!

Terrifying Presence terrify a mob of enemies

Them's Good Eatin' Any living creature has a 50% chance of dropping thin red paste or blood

Sausage

Thought You Died +100 health

Tough Guy stronger bones

Toughness +3 DT

Trigger Discipline fires 20% slower but 20% more accurately

Warmonger can build custom weapons

Wild Wasteland

1071 People killed

Exhaustive List of Equipment:

Weapons:

.50 Desert Eagle

25mm Grenade APW
A Light Shining in Darkness

ACR Carbine
Anti-Materiel Rifle
AA-12
Ballistic Fist
Transportalponder
Blackhawk
C-4 Plastic explosive (6)
Christine's COS Silencer Rifle
Codac R9000
Cryo Grenade (2)
Detonator
Dress Cane concealed blade
Dynamite (30)
Elijah's Advanced LAER AA
Esther
Fire Bomb (3)
Flare Gun
Flash Bang (14)
Frag Grenade (14)
Frag Mine (16)
CAWS
USP Suppressed extended mag, compensator
MP5A4 silenced
Incendiary Grenade (14)
Jingwei’s Shocksword
Laser Detonator
Long Fuse Dynamite
M14
Maria
Mercy
Molotov Cocktail
Old Glory
Plasma Grenade(12)
Plasma Mine(7)
Pulse Mine(8)
Red Glare Far Sighting
Remote Pipebomb
SWAT Flashbang (22)
Satchel Charge, Remote(18)
Shock Baton
Sprtel-Wood 9700
Trench Knife
YCS/186
ZM LE-300
Apparel
Balaclava
Benny's Suit
Combat Backpack
Courier Duster
Dragon Combat Helmet
Dragonskin Tactical Outfit
Elite Riot Gear
Elite Riot Gear Helmet
Night Vision Goggles
Rebreather
SWAT Gear
SWAT Gloves
SWAT Neck Wrap
Stealth Suit Mk III
Sunglasses
Winterized T-51b Power Armor
"Right, let's go," said Ruby setting off at far slower than her normal speed, with Markus following closely, and the rest of the group trailing behind.

A few minutes later and they encountered more ruins, to their left and right rose what looked to the Lone Wanderer to be something similar to the dilapidated highways that he had encountered in DC. Overhead the Nevermore circled, following them with ease. Sometimes he hated being right. How the hunters have become the hunted, he thought dryly.

Far in front of them, a ruined tower rose high against the cliff face, the clearance between the sheer rock and the once proud building indeterminable due to perspective. All of the students ran to cover, each with their respective partner. The giant bird landed on the tower, clearly having spotted them.

"Well that's great," said Yang, giving voice to everyone else's thoughts.

Just then, the Deathstalker burst through the trees actually toppling several of them as it advanced. It was time for desperate measures.

"I have a plan," the Courier said. "Follow me." he commanded, running left, further under the ruins. His voice carried easily, accustomed to having conversations over a barrage of gunfire.

Despite having no reason to, the students found themselves trusting Markus, and followed him into cover (Charisma:10.)

"Nora, distract it!," said the one wearing green.

Nora, as her name apparently was, dodged the feathers of the Nevermore and fired what appeared to be a M32 Multiple Grenade Launcher at the bird as the pair crossed towards the rest of them. While it did not do any damage and only a couple of the Dust rounds hit, it did its job in suppressing the creature and allowing Nora and her partner to reach Markus.

"So what's the plan?" asked Yang somewhat nervously as the Deathstalker began to rush them. "Lure it towards us, collapse the columns on it and trap it in the rubble. Then kill it while it's trapped."

"Who's going to collapse the columns?" asked the black themed girl.

As the Deathstalker neared them Markus said laconically, "Whoever can."

While the roof of the structure was too low for the scorpion's stinger to be utilized, there was just enough space between the pillars for its claws to be used. They all executed some form of dodge or leap to avoid the (relatively) clumsy swipes the scorpion made, the limited space allowed for the much smaller humanoids to avoid their pursuer.

"Yang!," Ruby said, "the support!"

Her sister let loose a series of punches and discharged her gauntlets with an effectiveness that even the Courier appreciated. She was starting to seem like a younger, less disillusioned Veronica.

Nora on the other hand, needed no prompting, she happily set about smashing the pillar to bits with
the hammer her weapon apparently transformed into. The cheerfulness with which Nora smashed
the stonework disconcertingly reminded the Lone Wanderer of Moira Brown. While Moira would
not last ten seconds in a combat situation, she too was far too happy at times in which the severity
of the situation should prohibit positive emotions. Snapping back to the present, Markus realized
that he would need to prepare to move as in a matter of seconds, the structure above them began to
groan.

"Now what?" said Weiss. "Run."

While the heiress was not happy with this plan, she could come up with no alternatives. She briefly
considered having them all run to the ancient tower but quickly discarded the idea. Being out in the
open when there was a gigantic Nevermore hunting you was a recipe for disaster. Besides, there
was not much a rapier could do against a bird even with the use of Dust, and the Nevermore could
continually bombard them with feathers while they tried to fend off the Deathstalker.

Once they had escaped the collapse, they turned back to the trapped figure of the Deathstalker,
keenly aware that the time they come safely spend in the open was limited. It would take less than
a minute for the Nevermore to realize they were exposed again.

They needed to kill this thing, quickly. The pincers and head of the Deathstalker were totally
covered by rubble. A few of the hind legs were visible, as was the stinger. It flailed desperately,
trying in vain to free itself. The guy wearing green, whose name Markus still didn't know, jumped
to an Aura enhanced height, landed on the scorpion's stinger, and began firing his two handguns
into it at point blank range. At this range, even with the (relatively) poor armor piercing
capabilities of the pistols, they appeared to be doing significant damage as was evidenced by
another screech from the creature. Unfortunately, this move caused it to increase the vigor of its
flailing, sending the kid flying.

"Ren!," yelled Nora, for once not her psychotically happy self. He had crashed against the opposite
side's supports, his Aura depleted. Easy pickings for any giant bird that happened to be flying
around.

"Finish this, I'll get him," the Lone Courier ordered before turning to sprint towards the prone
figure. He needed to get him out of the way before the Nevermore got involved.

Markus was across in an instant. He began to drag Ren, as he recently learned his name was, under
cover. He had impacted with his back against solid stone and yet there appeared to be no spinal
damage. The Courier dragged Ren with them both facing the Deathstalker, the poor kid was out
like a light. He observed the rest of the students engage the immobilized Grimm.

Ruby was using the recoil from her sniper rifle to aid in delimbing the creature, appearing almost
manically happy at the grisly work. Pyrrha threw her shield at the now weakened stinger, severing
the business end. The device boomeranged back to her, much to the curiosity of the Lone Courier.
As he was contemplating how that was possible without any visible propulsion, he had just drawn
Ren under cover when a flash of black in front of him blocked his view. Evidently the Nevermore
was in the fight. Just in time, Nora smashed the carapace of the Grimm with her hammer, giggling
all the while appearing certainly psychotic.

The rest of the group ran over to where Ren and the Courier waited in cover. Nora immediately
went to wake Ren.

"Ree-en!" She sang. He opened his eyes with a resigned sigh, presumably as a result of Nora's
continued antics.
"I'm fine," he said, getting to his feet, somewhat laboriously. Now that the immediate threat was dealt with, they all turned to assess the situation.

"What shall we do now?" Pyrrha asked in Markus' direction.

Now that the immediate danger had passed, Markus felt a need to distance himself from the limelight as quickly as possible. Taking a leadership role would draw more attention than he wanted. He had only done so initially because he had no intention of watching kids die today.

"I doubt I have enough ammunition to take down the Nevermore by myself, who else can hurt it?"

While the Courier did have enough ammo, firing more rounds than he should be able to carry would be extremely suspicious. Especially considering that they were under constant observation. Rather than answer, all of the students struck a dramatic pose, facing out of the ancient structure. Markus sighed audibly this time. This was like herding cats. Not that he had ever met one but, according to an Old World saying, it was pretty difficult. For now however, he simply assumed that their very presence at Beacon meant that these kids had the skill to compensate for their lack of professionalism and unslung his Anti-Materiel Rifle.

All in all, the fight with the Nevermore was fairly anticlimactic. The bird was not as fast in terms of reaction time as even the least of them were and the ancient structure provided cover when it decided to rain giant feathers from the sky. Eight heavily armed people, two with rifles, and one with a fifty caliber, and another with a grenade launcher, as well as Weiss' extensive use of Dust meant that the Nevermore took a beating in a very short time. And unlike the Deathstalker, it had little in the way of natural protection against bullets other than size. Within a few volleys, the Grimm crashed to the ground in front of them, very dead.

"Well that was a bit anticlimactic," said Ruby as the giant Nevermore began to dissolve.

Everyone just looked at her, even they recognized how childish that statement was, causing her to pout slightly.

"Let's just get back," said Weiss, as they all turned to head back to the cliffs. Now, it was time for the part that Markus dreaded most: the assignment of teams.
"Russel Thrush. Cardin Winchester. Dove Bronzewing. Sky Lark. The four of you retrieved the black bishop pieces. From this day forward, you will work together as Team CRDL, led by... Cardin Winchester!"

The audience, faces largely concealed by darkness, applauded politely. As the four boys left the stage, Markus and those who would be his teammates ascended to stand before the headmaster. Markus had not known that each team would have a leader, though he really should have figured it out.

"Markus Friedrich. Lie Ren. Pyrrha Nikos. Nora Valkyrie. The four of you retrieved the white rook pieces. From this day forward, you will work together as Team MRPN(Marchpane)."

The auditorium once again erupted into applause. Amid the clapping, Nora giggled and gave Ren a hug. The headmaster continued,

"Led by... Markus Friedrich!"

Instantly, Markus felt the sinking feeling of despair. Despite this, his countenance betrayed nothing. He responded to the headmaster with a polite nod. It was all the appearance of acceptance he could muster at the moment. He feared attempting to be any more enthusiastic would come off as forced.

"Congratulations, young man," said the headmaster, before moving on.

Characteristically pessimistic, all the Courier could think was, You have no idea what you just did.

His brooding was interrupted by a grinning Pyrrha giving him what he assumed to have be a friendly shoulder bump. Unfortunately for her, Pyrrha had misjudged both her partner's stature and the amount of force she put into the gesture. As such, when she attempted it, she bounced back, barely maintaining her balance. Meanwhile Markus remained entirely unmoved, not responding for half a second (Perk: Stonewall). He attempted to return her smile, but barely managed a flicker of one. Right now the Courier's mind was whirring at a rate that precluded him paying enough attention to pull off any convincing acting.

This was a contingency he had not prepared for. As the newly formed team walked off the stage, Markus assessed the current situation and how he would need to adapt his doctrine around this new development.

To the Courier, being appointed team leader was one of the worse things that could have happened. While it was not by any means the worst thing that could have happened, it meant that he would have to be more social, interact more with the staff, and be responsible for the safety of three kids, all without any real authority to back his commands.

It wasn't that he couldn't do it, he recognized that he was more qualified than anyone else for the position, but rather being a leader, and a good one, was highly conspicuous. He would be forced to change his strategy. No longer could he simply hope not to be noticed.

That said, he was relatively satisfied with the composition of his team. Pyrrha was professional in demeanor and supposedly an excellent fighter though he had yet to see it demonstrated. In addition, she was socially awkward which would hopefully prevent her from prying too much.
Ren, while he did seem to be the least durable of them. He was even more quiet than either Pyrrha or he himself was. This alone was enough to make the Courier somewhat suspicious of him. It was rare for people to be that quiet without a good reason. He would be wary of him until he ascertained the reason for his near total silence. However, he knew that in this context the answer was more likely innocent than not. Ren was not likely to be a problem.

Nora however, was a more major concern. Her attitude and persona seemed to indicate a severe case of Moira-itis. If she asked him to help write a book, he was running in the opposite direction. If Moira, who had no experience with violence, wanted him to get crippled and irradiated, he shuddered to think what Nora would request. More seriously, Nora seemed reasonably competent in combat by the standards of this place, but her personality and mental state were difficult to comprehend, much less describe. If she was capable of following orders, it wouldn't be a problem, but the Courier did not have high expectations of professionalism for any of his teammates.

Still, the team overall seemed unlikely to pry into his background more than superficially. None of them seemed particularly socially adept, making it unlikely for them to question him. Despite this, he felt a need to increase the plausibility of his story and ensure it would survive scrutiny if things went badly. One could not be too careful when selling a lie this big. His story would need to be bulletproof. He could not afford for his deception to be exposed. There was no contingency he could make for that. As such, his best bet was to make sure he was never found out.

In addition, there was a far more personal reason that Markus did not like the fact he had been made leader. Being responsible for the lives of others was not something that the Courier liked. In fact, he hated it. Markus felt utterly incapable of defending others. Either they could handle themselves (like his traveling companions) or they died. It was bad enough when his responsibility was implicit in the NCR or Brotherhood, now that it was explicit, he was directly responsible for the lives of his team. Anything that happened to them would be on his conscience.

Naturally, the Lone Courier did not remember his many successes in protecting people in combat. After all, it is not successes that typically weigh on one's conscience. The amount of missions that he ran that most would consider suicidal meant that those who accompanied him often had low survival rates. As he led them (de facto, of course) he could not help but feel responsible, even if in reality there was nothing he could have done.

The Courier also knew that he had to convince the other members of the team that he deserved to have his position, and that they should follow his orders without question. Markus knew that he would have to get the team to feel as though they were in his confidence. Getting them to trust him would provide him with enough goodwill to exercise his authority in combat situations though that was still a far cry from the blind faith needed.

The easiest way to obtain said confidence, was to let the others in on a meaningless, in the sense that the fact it was currently a secret was meaningless, secret. It would also serve as a test of Nora's presence of mind.

All jokes aside, her psychological condition was of serious concern. Been saddled with a combat liability was far from ideal. But then again, he supposed he was not exactly one to talk in terms of psychological condition. But at least he was functional, he rationalized to himself.

The Lone Courier had noted that Pyrrha seemed overly happy with his appointment as leader. As far as he could tell, there was no rational explanation for this. Even if she had been relieved at not being given the burden of leadership, beaming was hardly a normal expression of relief over something so trivial. Not knowing his partner's motives concerned him. While he was reasonably sure that he did not need to worry about Pyrrha literally backstabbing him, Markus only truly felt
comfortable in an alliance if it was one of mutual self interest, or if he knew the character of the other party well enough to trust them. At the moment, he did not know Pyrrha's aims, nor was he extremely familiar with her character. While from what he could tell, he should have nothing to fear from her, he was nevertheless slow to trust as a rule.

All in all he appeared to have a highly peculiar team. Then again, he supposed everyone was strange once you knew enough about them.

Pyrrha, for her part, was glad that she had not been chosen as leader. More fame and praise was the last thing she needed. Besides, any accolades bestowed upon her would forever be doubted in her mind, as she could not tell if they were legitimate or that people saw her as good because they assumed that she was. There wasn't really anyone from whom she could receive an honest opinion.

It was also nice to see that Ozpin did not view her as perfect and wasn't biased towards her. In fact, acknowledgement that she was not flawless in battle was something so refreshing that she felt elated. Perhaps at Beacon she could at the very least be judged by teachers who weren't star struck by her, even if the students were.

The walk to team MRPN's newly assigned dorm was only auditorily accompanied by the relatively quiet babbling of Nora to Ren. Despite the fact it was little more than an excited stream of consciousness, Nora seemed to sense the atmosphere enough to keep her voice down.

In a dark room, far from Beacon Academy, Roman Torchwick put down his scroll with a sigh. His employers were not happy with his progress. Between the rate of Dust acquisition and the recent "ghost hack" as it had been dubbed, his position was appearing increasingly insecure. He slowly raised and lit a cigar as one of the masked members of the White Fang wheeled a seemingly innocuous black trunk into the room. Lien was exchanged.

"Open it," Roman ordered.

A movement of a crowbar later, and the glittering of Dust crystals filled the otherwise dull room.

Inspecting one he said, "We're gonna need more men."

Turning to the member of the White Fang he said, "Any news on the hacker?"

"Not yet, progress is slow, whoever it was it was certainly a professional," the emissary responded.

"Don't worry," Roman said calmly, "he can't hide forever."
Evidently the rest of team MRPN had been drained from the initiation as even Nora did not speak much for the rest of the evening. In contrast, Markus was nowhere near exhausted. He was accustomed to far longer days than this. Some firefights could take hours, depending on the scale of the engagement. Compared to the amount of action he typically saw in a day, the initiation was a very short battle.

The dorm that his team had been assigned was almost directly across from team RWBY’s. He saw no other teams he recognized. The Courier was found it mildly interesting that Beacon used coed dorms. While he was quite familiar with such an arrangement due to the attainment of absolute equality of treatment between the sexes by the NCR, he was surprised to find it in Remnant. After all, the only reason the NCR was so egalitarian was as a result of its founder being female.

The room itself was comfortably furnished, though it leaned more towards spartan design than extravagant. Ren, Nora, and Pyrrha all set about preparing to sleep as the sun had set a few hours earlier. The Courier did the same. While he had no intention of going to sleep, he made sure to go through the motions, intentionally appearing only slightly less exhausted than the others.

With the rest of his team slumbering, the Lone Courier decided to complete some of his more clandestine objectives. Namely, shoring up his identity.

As a result of being appointed team leader, Markus had revised his strategy to one which would draw more attention to himself. Because of this attention, he would need to further flesh out his created identity in order to better weather the almost certainly inevitable questioning. So far, he had done everything that one could in terms of documents. On paper, Vault-tec was as real as any other corporation. The only thing he could do now, would to organize physical endeavors that would support his story. The narrative that his father was chronically ill and stayed in a countryside estate year round would allow him to forge orders from his non-existent father electronically and use the newly incorporated Scroll functions on his Pip-Boy to send them with the authority of the owner of a company. To actually do this was risky of course; unless there were tangible facilities and products, the charade would be up eventually. And that was something he simply could not afford. He would need all the resources Remnant had in order to repair the Transportalponder.

The Lone Wanderer used his Pip-Boy to change into the Stealth Suit Mk. III and snuck his way to the roof; well “snuck” to the extent that sneaking is necessary when almost perfectly invisible. Regardless, he easily found the stairwell he had taken note of earlier. Once on the roof, the Courier parkoured until he had reached a comfortable position where he could safely change back out of his Stealth Suit and into his Courier Duster. While being invisible was useful, it also had the detriment of making his Pip-Boy exceedingly difficult to use. Besides, the Courier was wary of the side effects of invisibility. While to his knowledge only nightkin seemed to suffer from insanity, with the amount of mutations and modification he had done to himself, he preferred to limit his exposure.

Now that the Courier was more familiar with the value of Lien, he was aware that he had stolen a highly significant amount of money from the White Fang and their associated organizations. This meant that he had yet another group interested in his identity. The second look he had taken at the accounts he had stolen from told him that none of the money had been properly laundered meaning that there was no legal means that the White Fang could attempt to trace the funds. While he did not fear reprisals (he was accustomed to far more dangerous groups after his scal,) if they managed to trace the hack to Vault-tec, it would not take long for them to realize that it didn’t exist, thereby
blowing his cover.

The creation of fairly simplistic arms manufacturing plants was well within his financial and technical capabilities, even from his Pip-Boy. To his advantage, Vale appeared to be experiencing something of an industrial boom right now, meaning that the acquisition of real estate for warehouses and manufacturing plants was far easier than Markus had anticipated. Rather than individually hiring personnel to run the factories, he simply hired people to do that for him. The less involvement he had, the better. Delegating responsibility was incredibly beneficial. He intended for the company to virtually run itself. It was meant to aid him, not burden him. Still, it would be awhile before Vault-Tec started running, much less shipping products.

The biggest question was what exactly to have these places make. His narrative was that Vault-Tec made highly advanced and military products. However, due to his Brotherhood of Steel membership, Markus was wary about providing this place with technology that they weren't ready for. Therefore smokeless propellant and nuclear energy were out of the question.

As well, nothing too revolutionary could be invented; that would cause too much attention. That put most medical options were out as well. After a lengthy search on the "internet," and much deliberation, the Courier settled with creating a couple products each with moderate innovations that would be directly beneficial to him but none of which would put the spotlight too heavily on Vault-Tec.

Due to his intimate knowledge of the design of standard ammunition, it was not difficult for him to adjust the ratio of Dust to that of gunpowder in order to increase total acceleration. As Dust was a less efficient propellant than cordite he would need to increase the amount of Dust. This meant that longer bullets would be capable of traveling at supersonic speeds. An hour later, and the Courier had sent schematics of supersonic rounds as innovations from the "research team." His second idea was far simpler. He simply sent schematics of hollowpoint rounds. Their reduced penetration would make them useful for law enforcement and against soft targets. Still, he expected only a limited market for them. The inherent fragmentation properties of the standard Dust based round made them nearly as effective at antipersonnel as hollow points are.

In order for these things to be actually implemented, the Courier also needed to modify the designs of existing machines for the manufacturing of ammunition to fit the new dimensions and schematics of ammunition he was having made. Once again Remnant's network of terminals proved useful. Adapting the existing designs took only a small amount of time, especially compared to how long it would have taken for him to design the machines from scratch. He sent the schematics to specialized third party companies that would have the machines manufactured and delivered to where they were to be used.

The last thing he needed to do was to acquire a source of raw materials. Naturally, with their practical monopoly, Snow Dust company was the only option. As much as he found them to be suspicious in both their business partners and practices, anything else would cast suspicion on him. Actively going out of his way to avoid purchasing from the SDC would be unusually enough to spark curiosity from somebody or other. Interestingly enough the company was capable of supplying him with both the Dust and the brass he needed. For having the word "Dust" in their name, the company had done a surprising amount of diversification. Markus was surprised that they had not yet renamed to something more accurate and representative of the variety of products and divisions they possessed.

That was about all the Courier felt he could accomplish at the moment. While Markus desired to assemble one of the higher caliber weapons whose schematics he had retrieved from the remnants of a USSOCOM base near D.C., he knew that he did not have the materials, tools, and the time to
build a weapon from scratch. Still, it was a priority for him. The fact that his Anti-Materiel Rifle caused nowhere near lethal damage to the larger Grimm was of major concern to him. The only reason the initiation had gone as well as it had was his ability to drop several tons of stone on his enemy. His surroundings weren't always going to be on his side after all. He shelved his thoughts however. There was nothing he could do for the time being, and thusly there was no use in dwelling on it further.

The Courier decided to head to bed. A tired Courier was one that was not operating at optimal capacity. If he was not operating at optimal capacity, he was far more likely to make mistakes he could not afford. He sighed to himself as he changed from his Duster back into his Stealth Suit and made his way back to the dorm. He reminisced to himself about the days when things were simpler; when he knew what he should be doing and his problems could be solved by shooting at them. While it wasn't that he didn't appreciate the (relative) peace here, it was that everything was now far more complicated. He had never been undercover this long before. Unlike most other times he had been undercover, it was quietly likely he would remain so for months. The Courier slipped into his bed soundlessly with his mind a million miles away switching from his stealth suit into his sleepwear before closing his eyes. Slowly, the Lone Wanderer's thoughts turned to less technical aspects as his mind wandered. He wondered briefly about the classes that he would have the next day. At least none of the teachers would be as bad as Mr. Brotch. Or so he thought.

The transition to sleep, and the dream that followed, was sudden.

For once, the Lone Courier did not recognize his surroundings. His dreams mostly took place in the past in locations he knew well. Of course, his mind at rest, he would not realize this until after he had awakened. His surroundings were entirely obscured by shadow, however from the silhouette of the horizon he was in a coniferous forest. The sky was a purgatorial gray, foreboding, but not indicating a future storm nor a recent one. The dream was entirely silent. Of course, he was in a clearing. Dark dreams always take place in clearings. As Markus was not a lucid dreamer, he was entirely at the mercy of his subconscious. Forced to watch, unable to shut his eyes from his dream or interact in any form but emotions. The woods started to glow red. Not a blood red, a pale red. From the edge of every object the same ghastly glow emanated. Each individual pine needle pulsed with the same illumination. Suddenly, all light disappeared as a shadow was cast over the sky. Involuntarily, Markus looked up. Covering the residual light of the overcast sky was a Nevermore of colossal proportions. No light could pass it. It was scores of times larger than the one that they had encountered at initiation. And just as suddenly as it appeared, it vanished. The light returned, brighter. Harsher. The clouds were gone, in their place hung a shattered moon, drenched in flowing blood, pouring its crimson torrents like at waterfall. There were no stars in the sky. Only infinite dark. As physics do not exist in the land of one's dreams the blood acted in a two-dimensional manner, falling directly onto the hands of the Courier. As he looked up from his blood covered hands he was greeted by a far more horrifying sight. In the center of the clearing three figures stood. Perhaps "stood" was not the correct word, "hung" would be more accurate. From left to right, Pyrrha, Nora, and Ren hung from crosses. Crucified. The dried blood indicated that they had been hanging for a while. In a few seconds, their bodies rapidly decayed, leaving nothing but mummified corpses. Their heads simultaneously looked up at him, empty sockets staring a silent accusation at him. Markus' gaze returned to his hands. They were now stained crimson. Deep cuts along both palms read, "How many more?"
The Lone Courier awoke the same way did everyday since he was ten years old and had first gotten his Pip-Boy. The device injected acetylcholine directly into his bloodstream, either as a result of the inbuilt alarm or the detection of enemies. This caused him awake far more abruptly than normal humans did. While this feature was touted by Vault-Tec (the Old World one) it more often than not was a burden to Markus. It prolonged his dreams. One could not wake from a nightmare when sedated. It also meant that should he ever not have his Pip-Boy, his sleeping and awakening would be highly irregular.

Markus was relieved to awake from his dream. Even someone who knew nothing about psychology would be able to discern at least some of the causes of his nightmares. As he performed his new morning routine, he was troubled by his mental state. Evidently, the burden of leadership was troubling him far more than he thought it was if he was dreaming about it already. Of course he did not rationally think that he was going to get his team killed. Nor could he determine why their deaths particularly bothered him so much. People around him died all the time. While it was not something he liked or was overly callous about, and it damaged him more than he was willing to admit, in the wasteland, death was merely a fact of life. The fact that he was having nightmares about it was what was peculiar. Perhaps it was because they were so young that it bothered him more so than normal? In any event, he had more pressing issues. He had no time to play psychologist in a mirror.

The others had begun to wake up. Pyrrha as was subdued as usual, though seemingly not entirely awake. Nora was bouncing around waking Ren up by literally singing his name. The Courier was beginning to understand how the Misfits felt. At least his team was competent though. Markus thought he heard a whistle through the walls. He was unsure if anyone else was capable of hearing it, so he didn't mention it. If there were no other sounds following it, it was nothing to worry about. Should, however, it be followed by more alarming sounds that could indicate hostile intent then he could-

"Good morning!," said Pyrrha cheerily addressing the entire room.

The shattering of the Courier's silent introspective jolted him from his fears. The interjection of a lively voice served to make Markus more optimistic about the future. Interaction with others always served to break the power of nightmares and the self-doubt that had encompassed him.

"Good morning," echoed the rest of the team with varying degrees of enthusiasm.

"So," said Pyrrha, "What shall we do first, Markus?" The Courier answered instantly.

"First, we need to unpack."

The impression of knowledge and confidence would inspire both. Nora giggled as they all separated to empty their respective luggage. The Lone Wanderer was beginning to feel that that was her default state. Still, it didn't bother him too much. He had learned to enjoy the company of eccentric companions.

As the rest of team MRPN emptied their suitcases the Courier, as nonchalantly as possible, digitized his luggage. Simultaneously all the other occupants of the room turned towards him with a similar looks of shock and confusion on all their faces.

"What was that?" asked Ren.
Markus turned to Pyrrha and tapped his Pip-Boy.

"Remember how I said this had 'other functions'?"

"You did not mention… this."

Pyrrha and the others were not quite sure what they had seen.

"That's because technically I'm not supposed to tell anyone about this."

Pyrrha was confused now.

"Why are you telling us then?"

"My father sent a lot of prototypes with me for field testing. Most of which are classified due to contracts. I haven't technically told you anything. Besides, it's not like you guys would tell anyone. I can't tell you what it does, but it should not be too hard to figure out yourselves."

Still, seeing a couple of suitcases vanish after being surrounded by a slight glow did not provide any real clues. After about a minute of silent contemplation between the three others, the most unexpected thing happened.

Nora said, "It turned the suitcases into numbers!"

Silence reigned for about thirty seconds.

"Matter digitalization," Ren interpreted slowly.

The Courier nodded but said nothing. It seemed that Nora was more like Moira than he had expected.

"We seem to be finished unpacking," Pyrrha said, somewhat unnecessarily.

"Next, we need to get to class," said the Courier. Checking his Pip-boy he found that, "our first class starts at nine. And it is…"

"Nine fifty-five" finished Ren.

"Well, time to run," said the Courier.

As they set off, he made sure to trail slightly behind Pyrrha. Even with the others' Aura enhanced speed and his weak Aura, his bionic enhancements more than made up the difference, allowing him to outpace anyone save Ruby in a sprint to say nothing of endurance running. On that front his time as a Courier had given him an immeasurable advantage. Only a few meters in front of them, team RWBY appeared to be in a similar situation. What their excuse was, he had no idea.

While the rest of the students were entirely oblivious to their surroundings, the Courier did not fail to notice the Headmaster sipping his coffee, somewhat amused at the sight of eight seventeen year olds running with varying degrees of desperation.

Well, in this instance, Markus would be the first to admit that he had been wrong. Professor Port was somehow more boring than Mr. Brotch. How such an incompetent teacher had gotten a job at such a prestigious academy, he had no idea. At least Mr. Brotch taught things. Professor Port merely regaled the students with anecdotes about his life filled with so much embellishment that nothing useful could be discerned.
Markus was actually quite disappointed by the so far poor quality of education that Beacon provided. When deciding to actually attend Beacon he had hoped to actually learn when there. Now it appeared that all the time he spent there would be wasted.

While the Courier was only half paying attention, with an brain such as his (Intelligence:10) this would be more than sufficient to get perfect marks in a joke class such as this. He only really heard the words the "teacher" was saying after he at one point cleared his throat. Evidently it had been to quiet those who had begun to become distracted by the monotony and had begun to talk amongst themselves.

"The moral of this story? A true Huntsman must be honorable!"

The Courier mentally scoffed at that. Honor was a concept that had led to more blood spilled that it had spared. Now that he was paying attention, he had nothing better to do than tear apart this poor excuse for a lecture. Much blood had been shed merely due to someone important feeling that their precious honor had been stained. Case in point, the Legion claimed it was honorable and believed wholeheartedly too.

For the Lone Courier, honor was a limitation on the means he could use to achieve his ends. This was unacceptable as the ends for which he fought were of such a nature that failure was not an option. It was a moral imperative that he achieved his objectives and he while he would seek the most moral way to accomplish said objective using, if it came down to it (and it often did) he was willing to use any means necessary. After all, if failure was an option, then there was hardly a need to fight in the first place. If his loss was a morally acceptable result, then he really had no business killing people over the issue in the first place.

"A true Huntsman must be dependable!"

Was this man a teacher or something who had to come up with motivational posters for elementary schools? Advising someone to be dependable was hardly practical information, nor did it have anything to do with being a Huntsman specifically. People in general should, and often do, strive to be dependable.

"A true Huntsman must be strategic, well-educated, and wise!"

While this advice was technically sound and was likely the first applicable information given, it simply amounted to "be virtuous!" which was about as useful as telling someone to be better.

"So, who among you believes themselves to be the embodiment of these traits?"

If any of these kids believed that they were wise, well, they would have problems in the future. He wondered if they even knew what the word philosophy meant. While that was largely a joke, he did realize that it didn't seem the sort of thing that would be in the curriculum of combat schools. While the Courier realized that he was considered by many highly respected people to be the literal embodiment of those traits, he would never, under any circumstances say so himself. The only type of person who would declare themselves the embodiment of those traits would be someone with nothing but a total lack of humility, tact, and knowledge of social convention.

Naturally, White raised her hand.

"I do, sir," she said confidently.

Of course she would, exhibit A of hubris and affluenza here ladies and gentlemen. Port's voice halted the Courier's thoughts of disdain and characteristic snarkiness.
"Well, then, let's find out! Step forward, and face your opponent!"

Markus sat up straighter in his seat. Opponent? Now there was something worth paying attention to. "Well at least this should be interesting."
From a cage, the two demonic eyes of of a Boarbatusk glared angrily out. The Courier had difficulty even thinking that sentence without snickering. Boarbatusk. Really? That was possibly one of the least intimidating names anyone could possibly come up with for a psychotic boar. Still, he watched with interest as White took up a position facing the cage containing the growling and squealing killer pig. Her teammates were cheering her on from the sidelines.

This should not be too difficult. The creatures aren't armored enough to stop even 9mm rounds. Still, she didn't have a 9mm. She had, quite stereotypically for someone of the upperclass, a rapier. To be honest, it looked more like a spike, though the cylinders of dust in the handguard caused Markus to delay his verdict on its practicality for the time being. He had seen what she could do with dust in the fight with the Nevermore.

"Yeah represent team RWBY!," he heard Ruby yell excitedly. White lowered her "sword" and turned to her leader,

"Ruby! I'm trying to focus!"

"So much for moral support," thought Markus. He idly wondered why her voice was so... bratty. Either she did it intentionally, it was a result of her upbringing, or it was something she was born with. In the case it was the latter he pitied her, if it was the former, she was clearly sadistic, and if it was a result of her upbringing he still pitied her, just not as much.

"Alright! Let the match...begin!"

The professor smashed the lock off the cage with his axe. The Boarbatusk charged directly at White, the second the cage was open.

"Either going for a quick kill or overcome with bloodlust," the Courier surmised. Despite all that he had learned in his time here, Markus had so far not found any information on how intelligent the Grimm were. When he had read the name of this class ("Grimm Studies") he had anticipated that he would learn that here. Instead he found that the time was wasted with an old man reliving his glory days and sexually harassing seventeen year olds.

Still, he decided to find a scientific study on the psychology of the Grimm or, if one did not exist, write one. "Know thine enemy" after all. The more he knew about the Grimm, the better he could predict them. In his travels, he had found that animals became extremely predictable once you understood their method of thinking on a theoretical level. Creatures of instinct naturally followed predictable patterns. If the same held true with Grimm, things would be a cakewalk.

White had managed to deflect the initial charge with her rapier and rolled to the side, taking up a fighting stance. Markus frowned slightly. While her technique was impeccable, she was treating the entire thing like it was a duel. This should have been over already. The longer the fight lasted the more chances Murphy's law had to take effect.

The fact that this fight was not over was a testament to either the limits of White's weapon or her fighting style or perhaps both. Had she used any form firearm she would have been able to gun down the creature as soon as it left its cage. Had she attempted to finish the fight as soon as possible she could have skewered the boar on her rapier in the manner that was classically done with spears in medieval boar hunts. Yet, she did neither of those and instead took a course of action that did nothing to bring her closer to winning the battle.
The Grimm maintained a distance between itself and its opponent. Evidently it had been going for a quick kill and it was now strategizing after that tactic had failed. The Lone Wanderer was somewhat concerned by this development. Very few creatures he had encountered displayed this level of intelligence. That Grimm had the ability to learn and act tactically was an important revelation. If the rest of the Grimm were comparable in intellect then these kids would have their work cut out for them.

"Ha-Ha! Wasn't expecting that, were you?" The Professor exclaimed.

"She really should have expected that," the Courier reflected, "charging was something boars had a reputation for."

"Hang in there Weiss!," Ruby yelled.

The Boarbatusk began to charge again. White then actually ran to meet the charging Grimm, rapier pointed directly at the center of the creature's armored forehead. As far as Markus could tell, there were three possibilities. Either that rapier was stronger and sharper than it looked, White was going to use dust, or, this was going to end badly.

As the rapier connected with the beast's carapace, and slid, it became evident that the latter was true as the situation rapidly deteriorated. White's weapon had become stuck between it Boarbatusk's well, tusks. Now she was holding on to the hilt for dear life as the creature thrashed around trying to dislodge her. Markus noticed that despite this, no one seemed particularly concerned. Aura he supposed. With it, things that would ordinarily be considered criminally dangerous bore hardly any risk.

"Bold, new approach. I like it!"

On top of everything else, Port seemed to be totally ignorant of the combat, entirely unaware that this was not intentional. Ruby once again tried to encourage her partner, "Come on Weiss, show it who's boss!"

The heiress turned, while being dragged, and glared at Ruby.

The feat was frankly impressive in terms of the agility in movement and presence of mind required to perform the maneuver while in such a precarious position. Unfortunately this was undercut by a sudden jerk from the Boarbatusk which sent the rapier flying out of the girl's grasp to land on the other side of the arena.

"Oh-ho!," said Port, more amused than he had any right to be, "Now what will you do without your weapon?"

For the Courier, while his Pip-boy largely negated his need for a sidearm, he knew that there was a reason that 9mm pistols were standard issue in the NCR in addition to their service rifles. Now that White was disarmed of her primary weapon, she was defenseless.

Fortunately for her, White looked up at the last second and rolled, narrowly avoiding getting smashed by an angry mutated boar. Even more fortunately, the Grimm was incapable of halting its momentum and careened into a desk. The girl rushed to her sword and managed to snatch it before the creature could recover.

"Weiss, go for its belly," yelled Ruby, "there's no armor underneath!"

As White possessed functional eyes, she was understandably bothered by this redundant information.
"Stop telling me what to do!" White yelled back.

The Courier had become concerned in regards to the functionality of team RWBY. Did White not understand that as team leader that was literally Ruby's job? Not that she was qualified, but she certainly had the institutional power to lead. Dissent in the ranks this early made him worry about his own position. He simply hoped that his team—he looked at Nora—most of his team, he amended were capable of acting rationally. He didn't think he could handle wrangling a bunch of emotional, hormonal teenagers. The irony that they were all the same age was not lost on him.

Still, at least this set the bar low for expectations of his leadership. Note to self: Don't start a fight with your subordinates on the first day. Still, if the conflict between the members of team RWBY was inevitable then it was best for it to be resolved early. Besides, if Ruby could resolve it herself it would boost her authority and respect immensely within her team. Based on the hurt and crushed expression on her face, Markus did not have high hopes however.

The Boarbatusk did something...interesting for lack of a better word. It jumped in the air and executed a continuous forward roll. While this allowed it to gain momentum and would likely be useful against light, numerous enemies, it did nothing to protect it from gunfire or, as it was about to find out, glyphs. The glyph sent the animal flying and almost immediately propelled White after it at a much more controlled pace. As the creature lay disoriented White impaled it through the abdomen. It seemed that she was lucky enough to hit something vital as with a dying squeal the Boarbatusk began to sublimate. And so the fight ended, x minutes and y seconds after it had started, x minutes and y-10 seconds after it should have ended.

"Bravo! Bra-vo! It appears we are indeed in the presence of a true Huntress-in-training!"

White stood at attention from her exhausted position. The Courier had to keep himself from snorting derisively. Almost killed by an oversized pig.

While her technique was impeccable in terms of precision, her weapons, tactics, and fighting style left much to be desired. The only thing that she demonstrated in that fight was that the melee capabilities of her weapon could not penetrate bone and that she possessed a reasonable reaction time.

The use of glyphs was the most confusing thing to Markus. If she had used them from the beginning the fight would have been over in an appropriate amount of time. This entire fight had been an exercise is confusion.

"I'm afraid that's all the time we have for today. Be sure to cover the assigned readings, and... stay vigilant! Class dismissed!"

White glared and turned away, striding purposefully towards the exit, brushing past her teammates.

"Sheesh, what's her problem?" Asked Yang, voicing the feeling of all those present. Markus merely shrugged.

"Problems. That's more than one."

He turned to Ruby.

"Good luck with her."

"You'll need it." he thought to himself.

"Just remember that her problem does not stem from your actions. Nothing you did warranted that
reaction. Besides, if she can't fight with distractions that's another problem."

This was partially actual compassion and partially manipulation to keep things running smoothly. The better things went for team RWBY the better would go for him. Based only on their respective schedules they would be seeing a lot of each other. A dysfunctional team would be a liability on him as well. Or so he told himself. After all, everything he did nowadays was calculated, wasn't it?
Requiem for a Dream

The Lone Courier was on the roof again. Weeks had passed uneventfully since the initial day of classes. The internal troubles of team RWBY had apparently been resolved without much difficulty or flare. As for his own team, they remained surprisingly quiet and professional compared to virtually all the other students. Of course, this was all with the notable exception of Nora. Ren seemed to keep her under control though. Still, that did not prevent her from regaling them daily with her ridiculous dreams. If he tried the same, the Courier reflected, the rest of his time would all likely end up needing therapy.

On a similarly positive note, the rest of the teachers seemed to be vastly more competent than Port was. Markus would have been disappointed if these classes had proven to be a universal waste of time. Oobleck, while eccentric, seemed to be highly competent and well educated. Goodwitch was more what he had expected from a prestigious combat academy. Strict and professional to a near military degree was the best way to describe her.

As far as interactions with his team went, there were none of note. The Courier made sure to maintain a friendly but professional demeanor. His primary concern was preventing anyone prying into his past. To this end, he made sure not to say too much nor too little. He managed to generate the requisite amount of small talk needed between himself and Pyrrha as well as, to a lesser extent, the other members of the team. The small talk was about entirely inane thing that had no relevance. It was simply conversation for its own sake, and all parties were satisfied by that.

The Courier had to admit that he was having an embarrassing amount of difficulty trying to have casual conversations. Fortunately, Ren was generally occupied dealing with Nora meaning that he rarely had any opportunity or reason for speaking too much with either of them.

Markus could not accurately express how glad he was that Ren and Nora had been paired. While hyperactivity and strange mental disorders were things that the Courier could effectively deal with, he found them substantially harder to live with.

In the course of the classes, the Courier had not had any opportunity to demonstrate his skills. This was a double edged sword, as while this meant that his command would not be second guessed, it meant that he also had no opportunity to gain the respect needed to increase his authority. He supposed it didn't really matter. Pyrrha, for whatever reason, was far happier than he was with his appointment as leader. Ren, didn't seem to care, and Nora, well, was Nora. He wasn't even sure if she knew she was supposed to listen to him.

Still, Markus was happy with the composition of his team. He had really gotten lucky. All of them were quiet or insane enough to prevent problems like those that had faced team RWBY to arise. There did not seem to be any internal division. Pyrrha and Nora were both too good-natured to generate conflict and Ren was too stoic and downright quiet. Having to resolve problems between his teammates was something he was more concerned about than any enemy they might face. The truth was that the social capabilities and interests of his team mattered more to him than their combat prowess.

"As long as they don't get killed."

The thought came into his mind unbidden, and he dispelled it as quickly as he could. They all had magical force fields, they were going to be fine, he told himself. But doubt remained.

The Lone Courier now turned his attention to more pressing concerns and reason that he was on
the roof. He had spent so much time adjusting to this place and setting up his identity, that he had almost forgotten the transportalponder. The construction and hiring in Vault-tec was nearly completed. Production would start soon. A significant amount of his time was spent ensuring that no one important became aware of the massive business expansion he was undertaking. Markus also understood that his ability to manage the company and ensure everything ran smoothly (or ran at all for that matter) was inconsistent and limited while he was at Beacon.

There was also a large amount of various bureaucratic issues that needed to be dealt with in both the setting up and running of the company. To this end the Courier had, over the past couple of weeks, recruited executives to operate and manage the various parts of the company. While he still had absolute authority, the company would run itself for the most part. This hands-off approach was justified by the supposed illness of his father, as well as the fact that he was attending Beacon. He justified the simultaneous hiring of multiple top officials through the narrative that Vault-Tec was expanding from R&D into manufacturing.

Returning his attention to the present, Markus materialized the transportalponder from his Pip-boy before dropping it instantly. As it smoldered where it sat on the roof, the reason for his reaction was clear, the device was still red hot from being fried by a Tesla cannon. If the Courier's skin were not augmented by various means to be extremely resistant to damage, as well as the effects of the fire ant DNA, he would have certainly had enormous burn marks on his hands. As it was, there was slight red discoloration. However, with his enhanced rate of healing, the marks would be gone before he even left the roof.

The light of the shattered moon made his enhanced vision almost entirely unnecessary as he inspected the damage the tesla cannon had done. The state of the moon still unsettled him. Assuming that the damage was caused by the aliens and that he had not been flung far into the future, he worried for the crew of mothership Zeta. He took some consolation in the fact that if the aliens had won, there would not be a civilization still around. The crew were probably fine.

Returning his attention to the smoking wreck on the ground in front of him, he distinctly smelled the fumes of burning plastic. As the smoldering died down, he could see that the plastic body had melted, dripping onto the circuits. While this was something that he could repair in a relatively short amount of time, even with no knowledge of the device's internal workings, it required spare parts, which he had an abundance of, and specialized tools, which he had less of an abundance of. The damage was not something he would be able to repair on the roof of a school without precision instruments. He supposed it was a good thing he had the means to acquire an entire electronics workshop.

Still, it would take a while. It did not seem he would be going home any time soon. While it wasn't that he missed the wasteland or even his friends there, (he had been gone for longer after all) he really wanted to get some answers from the Think Tank. He just hoped this Dust stuff wasn't fissile or else the Big Empty was about to get even emptier. With a sigh, he re-atomized the device and lept from the roof, making his way back to his dorm. He could make no more progress tonight. It was better to rest. "Time to roll the dice," he thought as he drifted into the domain of his subconscious.

Much to the Courier's disappointment, a dreamless sleep was not in store for him that night. However this dream would not be quite as ghastly as the previous had been. No, this type of dream was far more common. Instead of a future, Markus dreamt of the past.

The sky was grey, though the clouds were no threatening. The Lone Wanderer scanned the horizon for enemies. Seeing none, he lowered his 10mm.
"Thanks for getting me out of there, son."

Vault 112 was now behind them, Dr. Braun trapped in a virtual purgatory for eternity.

"Didn't enjoy being a dog?"

"While having four legs had its perks, I do admit to having missed opposable thumbs."

The two shared a comfortable chuckle before continuing. They needed to get to the citadel as soon as they could.

"I heard that you defused that bomb in Megaton. I just want you to know, I'm proud of you."

The praise made Markus feel slightly awkward.

"It wasn't exactly safe to have an undetonated nuke in the middle of a town, it was just the smart thing to do."

"That doesn't make your accomplishments any less impressive. Your actions may have saved the entire town. Never undersell the value of someone willing to do the smart thing. The world would be in a lot better shape if we had more people like you."

Of course, the pleasant memories would not last. The scene faded to one of more traumatizing proportions. Once again, he saw his father flood the radiation chamber, and once again felt the pain of an ordinarily lethal dose of radiation. As his body was racked with mind fracturing pain, he involuntarily, as one acted in dreams, turned his gaze downward, towards his hands. As usual, they dripped with blood. It did not take a genius to realize what was meant by blood covered hands as he watched his father's death throes.

Markus woke spasming in pain. In his long career of Lone Couriering, he had been, shot, stabbed, poisoned, exploded, and had every single body part crippled. Nothing compared to what he had felt when he had activated the purifier. The continuing effects were something that technology did not seem to be able to cure as his case, as far as he knew, was unique. No one else had ever survived receiving so much radiation without becoming ghoullified. Despite the radiation resistance provided by his power armor, as well as the copious amounts of Rad-X and the continual usage of Radaway, the Lone Wanderer had received far in excess of the lethal amount of radiation. He had not known the symptoms when he walked into that chamber. Previously, he had followed his father's last command so never saw exactly what happened to him. The bleeding from every orifice. The cancers and sores. It was virtually divine providence that he had survived.

Ever since his father's death, Markus had been wracked by guilt, no matter how many times he determined that there was nothing he could have done. He had analyzed and agonized over every detail of what had happened and determined that there was nothing he could have done, with the knowledge he had, that would have prevented his father's death. In the end, this was of little comfort. Emotions rarely listen to reason. Of course, this was not an excuse to act irrationally. Listening to one's emotions was a choice after all.

Apparently no one had noticed his spasms, or at least they weren't mentioning it. It had occurred early enough in the morning that everyone likely should have been sleeping.

Now, they were in the classroom of Professor Goodwitch. The word "classroom" was inaccurate. Arena would be a better term. Apparently this was where combat training took place. The rest of his team sat around him. Pyrrha to his left and Ren and Nora beyond her. Nora was excited at the prospect of future combat while Pyrrha and Ren maintained their calm exterior demeanors.
Markus returned his attention to the teacher's speech as her voice raised in volume.

"For our first match we will have Cardin Winchester and…” The Courier could swear she paused for dramatic effect,

"...Markus Friedrich."

Well, it was bound to happen sooner or later. He supposed that sooner was better than later. Defeating Winchester would be good for his credibility. While his team seemed to be stable, if trying times were ahead then he would need every last advantage he could get.
Double Tap

Now, the Lone Courier had analyzed all significant players at Beacon, both teachers and students. He knew that Cardin was, quite simply, a bully. He had seen his type before in Butch from his childhood in Vault 101 and far worse in the raiders of the wastelands. He had long since accepted that people such as him were a simple fact of life.

Still, he had not failed to notice the continual abuses perpetrated by the various members of team CRDL.

"Ozpin, really dropped the ball on that one didn't he?" he thought to himself.

This wasn't helped by the fact that they were also all racists. What Ozpin was thinking by putting them all on one team was beyond him; a form of quarantine perhaps? Still, had they been spread out throughout the teams, while they would have annoyed the other members, they stood a better chance of becoming decent human beings simply through osmosis or an intervention.

Regardless, Ozpin was headmaster. He, or one of the other teachers, should have intervened by now. It's not like CRDL were particularly subtle about it. Ozpin had absolute authority as well. It seemed that none of the staff were really paying attention to what the students did or simply didn't care.

The continual offences and injustices committed by Cardin would have caused most to feel a burning hatred towards him, or at least intense disgust. The Lone Courier, felt none of these things. He was so used to seeing humanity at its worst, that while he found Winchester to be despicable, it induced nothing more than an aloof, apathetic, contempt for him. With the kind of things he normally dealt with, racist bullies were far down his list of priorities. They were something that virtually everyone had the power and ability to deal with.

Literally anything that Markus could think of spending his time on would be more valuable than Cardin was. If he attempted to have a civil conversation, that would likely go awfully. Any attempt at making him a better person would be equally doomed to failure. He knew Cardin's type, at best, he could scare the kid into line. That would only work temporarily and invite future conflict, potentially in the form of teenage revenge plots.

It was with these thoughts in mind that Markus entered the arena. He deliberately wore his aviators in this class so that he would be able to utilize his cybernetic eye to determine the threat level of any opponent he was matched against. Cardin's was, unsurprisingly, low. Either Goodwitch did not know this and the participants were random or, she either underestimated him, and overestimated Cardin.

It was because the Courier felt no strong emotions about Cardin that he did not plan to humiliate him publicly in the fight or concoct some elaborate scheme that would lead to his morally beneficial humbling. His overly pessimistic view of human nature meant that he had very low expectations for him.

Now that they had both reached the "stage" for lack of a better term, Markus had the opportunity to analyze the equipment that Cardin would use. He appeared to have a kind of mace that was mostly hollow. The fact that it was hollow caused the Lone Courier to doubt its viability as a weapon. The lack of weight on the business end would make it difficult to swing with too much force, even accounting for aura.
His armor, while present, (which was more than he could say for most students attending Beacon) was reminiscent of late medieval partial plate. Its combat value would likely be negligible. Crucially, he lacked any form of head protection. A plan began to form in Courier Six's mind as he switched Maria from his right hand to his left. As long as Cardin was as incompetent and arrogant as he looked, there would be no problems.

"...Begin" Goodwitch ordered.

The Courier did not move. He had no need to. Reacting would be sufficient for this fight. With a battlecry, Cardin charged towards him, swinging his mace over handedly intending to end the fight in one swing. Exploiting the weakness of the mace, the Courier sidestepped before his opponent could react and slammed the knuckleduster of the trench knife into his face. While Cardin was protected by his Aura and the Lone Wanderer was holding back, it still was enough to devastate his Aura and put him flat on his back. The Courier's servo enhanced muscles were more than capable of crushing the skull of a normal human.

With a groan, Cardin slowly started to rise, only to go back down again after the impact of two 9mm rounds to his center of mass. Professor Goodwitch called the match there.

Already Markus could hear the murmurs of the crowd. A quick glance to his left showed Pyrrha beaming. She way far happier than she had any right to be about this. He heard Ruby whisper to her team,

"Do you think that's his semblance?"

But any further discussion was inaudible. His little feat of strength likely garnered attention.

"Markus, that's enough."

Goodwitch's tone was not chastising but rather had an approving inflection. This indicated to him that she was likely aware of Cardin's status as a bully.

"As you can see, Mr. Winchester's Aura has now dropped into the Red."

The Courier wondered whether that was something that needed explaining weeks into classes but continued listening.

"In a tournament style duel, this would indicate Cardin is no longer fit for battle, and the official may call the match."

"Remember everyone, the Vytal Festival is only a few months away!" Professor Goodwitch announced.

At this, most of the room broke out in excited celebration.

"It won't be long before students from the other kingdoms start arriving in Vale, so keep practicing. Those who choose to compete in the combat tournament will be representing all of Vale."

The bell rang as she finished her sentence.

If Markus had a choice, it was highly unlikely that he would participate in something like a combat tournament. While he had done similar things in the past, he had always had ulterior motives and a higher purpose than mere glory for its own sake. Generally speaking, he had better things to be doing. As it was, with Pyrrha having a background as a champion tournament fighter and Nora being as enthusiastic as she was, it was likely he would have little choice in the matter. While he
was loath to throw matches, it could become necessary if doing otherwise would cast suspicion on
him.

Markus descended from the stage and rejoined his team as they exited the hall. Despite the fact the
fight took mere seconds, Nora managed to keep a running monologue narrating in a style more
appropriate of an eight year old and describing how "awesome" it was for the next few minutes,
preventing anyone from getting a word in edgewise.

By the time they had taken their seats for lunch, no one could remember anything that they had
wanted to say and so Nora turned on a dime and launched into another story. In her most dramatic
voice, she narrated.

"So! There we were, in the middle of the night..."

Ren interrupted, "It was day."

Nora, now addressing Blake who was reading a book and Yang who was totally absorbed in the
story literally one sentence in, "We were surrounded by Ursai..."

Ren interjected once again, "They were Beowolves."

"Dozens of them!" she yelled as she stood. Ruby, Pyrrha were watching with an expression of
polite confusion, while the others, save Ren, were preoccupied, or, in Yang's case, totally
enraptured by the tale. The Courier was looking at his Pip-Boy.

"Two of 'em."

But despite Nora's dramatic retelling, she had lost the attention of two of her audience. Ruby and
Pyrrha had turned their attention to Markus. He was radiating an icy malice that was palpable to
most present though his facial expression gave no sign of it. Had either of them been asked what
gave it away they would not have known. Nora continued, oblivious anything had changed.

"But they were no match...And in the end, Ren and I took them down and made a boatload of Lien
selling Ursa skin rugs!"

By now, only Yang was paying any attention to Nora's story. Ren sighed resignedly. He had seen
this too often to be exasperated anymore.

"She's been having this recurring dream for nearly a month now."

Pyrrha looked at her leader.

"Markus? Are you okay?"

"Fine, why are you asking?" His tone was even, unsettlingly so. It was absolutely devoid of any
emotion whatsoever.

Ruby was likewise disconcerted. "It's just that you seem a little...not okay..."

"Do not worry, everything is entirely fine. There is nothing you need to concern yourself with."

Nobody was buying a word of what he was saying. His tone was too emotionless and robotic to be
at all natural. Fortunately for his sake, their attention was diverted to a more immediate scene.

The members of team CRDL were standing around a rabbit Faunus and mocking her. Much to the
relief of the Lone Courier, any change to the subject was welcome at this point. They all look over
as the laughter of team CRDL grows in volume, interspersed with cries of pain from the girl with rabbit ears. "Ow! That hurts!"

Her accent was quite curious to the Courier. It was Australian if he remembered correctly. He had not heard much of that accent as even in holotapes it was rare. How she had an Australian accent would have caused him maddening curiosity if he did not have far more important things currently on his mind.

She stopped struggling and merely grimaced.

"Please, stop…"

Markus wondered why she didn't defend herself. It's not that she didn't have the capabilities. She was at Beacon after all. Cardin continued to laugh sadistically.

"I told you it was real!" One of his teammates commented.

"What a freak!"

Cardin finally released her ear and hurried away, head bowed, hiding her face in what one presumed to be shame.

"Atrocious," Pyrrha said contemptuously, "I can't stand people like him."

Blake added, "He's not the only one…" she glared at Cardin with hate filled eyes. The Courier had noticed weeks ago she was clearly a Faunus. After all, why else would her bow be twitching? Why no one else noticed he was not entirely sure, perhaps he was comparatively more perceptive than he had thought.

"There will always be racists," Markus said cynically. "People will always create factions and hate the groups that they aren't in."

His tone was still unsettlingly emotionless. There was nothing he could do about that, but creating a conversation about something other than himself would be helpful. Yang, seemed not to notice anything unusual about him. She leaned her head on her hand.

"It must be hard to be a Faunus."

While she had been speaking, Markus stood up, glanced at his Pip-boy, pressed several buttons, and left the hall, striding purposefully from the chamber, his fury unabated.
Two days earlier:

Roman Torchwick was once again pouring over a map of Vale. His scroll vibrated. He picked it up.

"Yes?" he asked testily. There was a pause before he spoke.

"You got him?" Another pause.

"Never heard of it."

"Buying from Schnee Dust Company?" He chuckled sadistically.

"Well I know where our next raid will be. It's time to send a message."

Present day:

Markus barely paid attention in history. He only barely made out the words the hyperactive Professor Oobleck was spewing.

"This is prior to the Faunus Rights Revolution, more popularly known as the Faunus War!"

Markus was pretty sure that revolution denoted a change in government which had not occurred and rebellion would be more accurate. At this point, he was merely attempting to keep himself occupied.

"Humankind was quite, quite adamant about centralizing Faunus population in Menagerie." He pointed at the map of said-area with his stick.

"Now! While this must feel like ancient history to many of you, it is imperative to remember that these are relatively recent events! Why, the repercussions of the uprising can still be seen to this day!"

Yet, there was no mention of a Great War two hundred years ago.

"Now! Have any among you been subjugated or discriminated because of your Faunus heritage?"

The Courier was reasonably sure that he was using the word subjugated wrong, though at this point he was searching for mental diversions more than anything else.

A smattering of hands rose, including that of the rabbit faunus they had seen earlier.

"Dreadful, simply dreadful! Remember, students, it is precisely this kind of ignorance that breeds violence!"

The Courier saw more prejudice and bias than ignorance but generally agreed. He noted that in his experience most racists were either had psychological issues or lacked a moral code.

"I mean, I mean, I mean just look at what happened to the White Fang! Now, which one of you young scallions can tell me what many theorize to be the turning point in the third year of the War?"
Someone raised their hand.

"Yes?"

Markus was disappointed that Oobleck had not gone into greater depth about the White Fang. That was information that would be useful.

White answered the question.

"The Battle at Fort Castle!"

What an original name, creative enough to rival the English in creativity.

"Precisely! And, who can tell me the advantage the Faunus had over General Lagune's forces?"

Naturally, at the first opportunity he had gotten, Markus had looked up the combat significant physiological differences between humans and Faunus.

One of their traits was being nearly as perceptive as he was, as well as many being able to see perfectly in the dark, something that not even he was capable of doing unaided. Of course, he was in too foul a mood to even consider answering the question. Even with all his experience of maintaining his composure, his seething rage was barely contained. Cardin flicking a paper football at him did not help. The kid seemed to be bitter about his loss, and stupid enough to try and pick a fight. Fortunately for Winchester, the Lone Courier had both enough presence of mind to not go on a murderous rampage (yet) and had more important things to do than deal with him.

Naturally, the impact of a triangular piece of paper garnered no reaction from the stone faced Courier. Cardin and his teammates nevertheless erupted into poorly hushed laughter. This logically caught the attention of the professor.

"Mr. Winchester! Perhaps you would like to share your thoughts on the subject?"

"Well I know it's easier to train an animal than a soldier." Not only was that racist, it was factually incorrect. The Courier could train an army, training a deathclaw was another matter entirely. Oobleck merely shook his head.

"You're not the most open-minded of individuals, are you, Cardin?" Pyrrha said. The Courier despaired internally. Her sense of justice would cause her to pick unwinnable fights. Not physically of course, but ideologically there was virtually no chance of turning CRDL into decent people. Still, he fingered the grip of Maria. Best to draw first if trouble started.

"What? You got a problem?" Cardin postured.

"No, I have the answer! It's night vision. Many Faunus are known to have nearly-perfect sight in the dark."

In Markus' opinion, this was not a fact that one should be particularly proud of knowing. It should be something that these people knew merely due to their extended contact with Faunus.

Blake now chimed in.

"General Lagune was inexperienced, and made the mistake of trying to ambush the Faunus in their sleep. His massive army was outmatched, and the general was captured."

As Markus recalled from Clausewitz's On War, large battles were to be avoided at night as the
defender an innate advantage, even without having night-vision. The correct way to have done it would be to attack from the east in the early hours of the morning with the sun at your back. Logically, if the Faunus could see in the dark because their eyes were more sensitive to light, then they would be far more blinded than ordinary humans would be.

Blake turned to Cardin,

"Perhaps if he'd paid attention in class, he wouldn't have been remembered as such a failure."

The Courier was still hung up on how this massive military disaster had happened in first place. He found it hard to believe that none of Lagune's advisors or his aide de campe would have failed to mention the Faunus' night vision to the general. This was a failure on multiple levels. Somehow an entire army lacked information on something that was supposed to be common knowledge.

Cardin stood up with his fists clenched. Markus leveled Maria in his jacket and flicked off the safety, ready to fire.

"Mr. Winchester! Please take your seat!" The tension was diffused by Professor Oobleck, "You can see me after class for additional readings. Now! Moving on!"

The Courier tuned out the rest of the lesson, surreptitiously watching Cardin for any hostile actions. Idiocy and indignant rage make even cowards brave.

As the class ended, Markus left with the rest of his team. Pyrrha was angry as well, though her emotion was as a candle to the sun in comparison to the Courier's murderous rage.

"I cannot stand Cardin," she fumed.

Nora had a very violent (and very effective) solution,

"Let's break his legs!"

The Courier, even though his fury was not directed at Cardin, was having dark enough thoughts to agree.

"We would need to do it in a way that it would not be clear we did it and preferably that it was anything other than an accident," he mused.

Ren and Pyrrha took a slight step back from the other two, Pyrrha's own anger momentarily forgotten. Nora was still grinning maniacally. Markus' voice was still liquid nitrogen. Everything he said was entirely dispassionate.

"Are you sure you're okay?," Pyrrha asked, worried by her partner, for the second time that day.

"I'm fine," he said forcefully but still unconvincingly, the tone was still there. "I'll catch up to you guys later," he said, disappearing into the crowd.

The remaining members of team MRPN looked at each other, Nora still wearing her psychotic smile.

Markus was heading to the roof. This was something he needed privacy for. He focused on his objective with single minded determination. He reached the roof and started interacting with his Pip-Boy. Data...Messages... "Headline: Another Dust Robbery. Dust purchased from Schnee Dust Company was stolen from a warehouse owned by the company Vault-tec after the building was stormed by suspected White Fang operatives. Personnel staffing the building are as of yet missing..."
with the police reporting signs of a struggle. It is unclear whether further investigation will take place."

The Courier was familiar enough with how these things worked to know that the police had almost certainly been bought off, with the few not overtly corrupt scared into inaction. No help should be expected from them. The fate of his employees, was enough in itself for him to take bloody retribution on the White Fang. The other message he had received gave him cause to wipe them out.

The other message was from a source known for being untraceable. It had no text, but was instead a photograph. There were hostages, nineteen of them kneeling, each holding yesterday's newspaper save the central one who held a sign displaying the ransom demand. What drew far more attention was that each warehouse was staffed by twenty-five people. The remaining six were representing in the foreground, their bodies held up by a White Fang member, several conspicuous dark spots around the center of each of the victims' chests. Despite the poor quality of the image, the Courier saw the bloodstains on the wall

This evoked a visceral mixture of fury and self-loathing in Markus. Fury at the murder of innocence and guilt as he felt that by employing these people he was responsible for their safety and therefore indirectly responsible for their deaths. The worst of it was that he felt entirely impotent. He did not even know if he could trace the message. He shook the pessimistic thought from his mind. He would be able to find the source, it would only be a matter of time. He would avenge them. Fortunately, based on the way these things worked the kidnappers would not be expecting a response for weeks at least. He would have time to plan.

Unfortunately for several people, the Lone Courier had been far too absorbed to notice that Pyrrha had followed him to the roof, concerned for the mental state of her leader.
In their dorm, the members of team RWBY were in deep and insightful discussion regarding the social interactions that had occurred during the course of the day and their potential consequences.

In plain English, it meant that they were gossiping.

Even those training at an elite combat school to one day protect the world were not immune to the stereotypical teenage vice of gossip, and the events of the day, specifically those regarding team MRPN, were interesting enough to warrant this sort of attention.

So far, the leadership conflict in team RWBY had been resolved and currently everyone was coexisting happily, all hoping for a lack of future internal conflict, something that even they knew was inevitable. So, drama in other teams was interesting partly because they were simply glad it wasn't happening to them.

"What do you think's gonna happen with Pyrrha and Cardin?" Yang asked her team.

"Hopefully not much," answered Blake, "as much as I would like to see that jerk get what's coming to him, he's not worth getting in trouble over."

"What about Markus?" asked Ruby.

"Ice Prince?" asked Yang.

Weiss huffed indignantly in the background. The teasing had been incessant. A cold rich guy wearing white had made the metaphorical fruit hang far too low to be missed by her team. Snow angel and ice prince, a match made in the minds of sadistic teens.

"Was it just me or did he seem...colder than usual?" the team's leader asked.

"You would need to have been both deaf and blind to have not noticed," Weiss said.

"He is normally very reserved," observed Blake, "this behavior is highly uncharacteristic of him."

"I wonder what got him so mad," said Yang, "Do you think it was Cardin?"

"Not from what we saw in their fight," said Weiss.

With that, the topic changed to the events of the duel. All four of them.

"That was the quickest fight I've ever seen!" said Ruby excitedly.

While this statement was slightly undercut by the fact that she had not seen that many duels, she was too exuberant to care.

"He sent Cardin flying!"

The rest of team RWBY, save Weiss who was largely indifferent, had to admit that the sight of Cardin being punched in the face was a gratifying one.

"He must be very strong in order to do that. Cardin is not a lightweight," Blake said, continuing her trend of dispassionately making observations, "The most logical explanation would be that his Semblance is strength."
"If you had noticed how he's built, it is clear that it is entirely plausible he possesses the strength naturally," said Weiss. (Perk: Heavyweight.) Of course, this comment from the heiress led the entire discussion to devolve into teasing her.

Therefore, despite their curiosity regarding the issues of team MRPN, none of the members of team RWBY ever drew any conclusions except that Weiss had a crush on Markus, despite her vehement protestations to the contrary.

Meanwhile, the Lone Courier had come to the realization that his revenge would not be immediate. It was a dish best served cold as the saying went, though in this case that was something not entirely in his control. It would take time to trace the message and determine where the hostages were being held. This would require both hacking and potentially in-person reconnaissance. In the meantime, he would play for time on the diplomatic front.

While negotiating with terrorists was strategically a bad move, he could pretend to be willing to pay in order to buy time or force them to move the hostages into a more vulnerable position. He would need to be patient. With these revelations his fury receded. He became resigned that justice would be put on hold for the time being. The emotions still existed, but were simply no longer at the forefront.

The rage no longer occupying his mind, all he was left with was the crushing guilt that his actions resulted in the deaths of civilians. While the White Fang were ultimately responsible, he knew that the deaths of his employees could have been prevented if he had acted differently. Their deaths were on his conscience.

It was in this state that Pyrrha had found him on the roof.

Markus, of course, had heard her coming long before she deigned to speak. Pretending not to notice her was what he had determined the best course of action. Displaying superhuman perception would result in suspicion being cast on him, even if Pyrrha was the only witness.

Pyrrha was in search of her leader, determined to discover the cause of his sudden change in attitude. While Pyrrha realized that she didn't know Markus that well, nor was she terribly adept at dealing with emotions and social situations in general, she felt that it was her duty as his partner to help him. From what she could tell, he had gone to the roof, she went apprehensively, lacking confidence in her ability to deal with whatever would make her normally stoic partner act as he had.

She noticed him standing silhouetted against the night sky, interacting with his Pip-Boy, turned away from her.

"Markus?," she asked.

"Yes?"

His voice was not longer as icy as it was before. Now, it was merely resigned. To Pyrrha, this was initially confusing, however she quickly determined that this was a turn for the worse. Anger was motivation, resignation was a sign of defeat.

"Whatever is bothering you, you can tell me, I will do my best to help," Pyrrha said resolutely.

"While I do not doubt your desire to help, there is little you, or anyone else for that matter, can do to better the situation," Markus said dismissively.

"At least tell me what's wrong," she said, desperate for some explanation.
Markus now turned to face her.

"You don't want to know. If you did, you would wish you didn't," he said flatly.

Naturally, this statement only made Pyrrha more determined to help.

"We're partners, we're supposed to trust each other," she said earnestly.

The Courier realized that this was the result of naivete. She truly trusted him entirely. It actually made him feel somewhat guilty about his false identity. Returning someone's earnest belief with total deception made him feel dirty. But, it was what needed to be done. It's not as though he could tell Pyrrha the truth. Well, he supposed he could, just not all of it.

"It's not that I don't trust you, it's that this is something I don't want you involved in for your own sake. If anything were to go wrong, I would be responsible. I don't want your death on my conscience. Besides, at this point, there is nothing to be done but wait."

"Why do you think that I would be in more danger of death than you are? I can fight well enough," Pyrrha said.

Markus's tone now became solemn.

"The risk is not in combat. The danger is a knife in the dark, poison in your food, a sniper in the window. These are things I've had to live with, consequences of my family's business and status. This information is not something I would tell anyone I didn't want dead. And I prefer you stayed alive."

As he said this he started to walk towards the steps. He turned towards Pyrrha.

"Make sure to get some sleep, don't worry about me, I'll be fine by morning," he said before walking away, leaving Pyrrha standing alone on the rooftop.

The Courier was very pleased with himself. This had gone about as well as he could have hoped it would.

Well, aside from the entire conversation being painfully awkward, but that didn't really matter in the grand scheme of things. All her questions had been deflected with explanations that did not reveal anything. While she likely had known he was keeping secrets he had now implied of what nature they were, hopefully satiating her curiosity for the time being. The last statement was carefully calculated in order to assuage her worries about him. By showing concern for her wellbeing he turned the tables to imply that he had reason to be concerned for her. Hopeful everything had had its intended effect. He would hate to have accidentally caused a depressive episode or something. As he approached their dorm, he materialized a whiskey bottle, downed it in one and continued into the room. He had forgotten how taxing infiltrations were.
Eternal Autumn

Pyrrha gazed out the window of their dorm contemplatively, while Ren loaded Stormflower, and Nora jumped on her bed.

"How come Markus gets back so late?" asked Nora, still bouncing on her bed.

"He's become rather scarce since... well, you know."

Everyone understood. It required no further explanation. All members of the team remembered the most eventful day since initiation. While Markus had returned to normal the next day, they had failed to gain any information from him regarding what had caused his sudden change in attitude.

"That's weird... Doesn't he know we have a field trip tomorrow? We need our rest!" As Nora said this, she performed a flip in midair before landing on her back in the bed.

"I'm sure our leader knows exactly what he's doing." Pyrrha said coolly.

This was not said with any bitterness or anger. Her tone was one of contemplative curiosity. She was sure he knew what he was doing, but she was also sure he was the only one who knew exactly what he was doing. Pyrrha was trying to figure out exactly what their leader was doing and how it was so dangerous that he would not tell her for her own protection.

"Mmmm... I guess so," Nora said before she and Ren exchanged glances.

Pyrrha had considered telling Nora and Ren what Markus had told her but something stopped her. She felt that what

The Lone Courier did not return to the dorm until late that night. He was used to operating on far less sleep.

Markus and his team, along with teams RWBY and CRDL, were being led through a forest of dull gray trunks and uniformly crimson leafs. The Courier was only half paying attention to Professor Goodwitch's long winded rambling. Long nights of hacking through unfamiliar systems made him quite irritable.

"Yes, students, the forest of Forever Fall is indeed beautiful. But we are not here to sightsee. Professor Peach has asked all of you to collect samples from the trees deep inside this forest, and I'm here to make sure none of you die while doing so."

How inspiring.

"Each of you is to gather one jar's worth of red sap. However, this forest is full of the creatures of Grimm, so be sure to stay by your teammates. We will rendezvous back here by 4 o'clock. Have fun!"

Yes, fun collecting sap. The glamorous profession of the huntsman.

Markus joined Pyrrha as everyone informally split into pairs. While sleep deprivation made his internal commentary more cynical and embittered, it did nothing to damage his facade. In truth, the Courier was by no means displeased or resentful of the task set for them. A simple and safe task such as this was far preferable to any of the alternatives.
The exchange of pleasantries and small talk were more formal than they were before the incident, Markus being aware of Pyrrha's piqued curiosity. Still, there was no actual hostility between them. They set to work on finding a tree to tap with optimal efficiency.

The task was a short one. The sap drained quickly and there were no signs of any hostile presence. Not that they would have any difficulty should they encounter Grimm. There were enough of them that it would take a very suicidal Grimm to bother them. Even with Nora stealthily drinking their jars, the entire task would take an estimated ten minutes at most.

Markus became aware of something of an anomaly in the area. There were four silhouettes on the hill. Not looking directly at them so that he would not indicate his knowledge he assessed what this told him. The fact that they were prone indicated they were trying to hide. The fact that they were silhouetted showed they were amateurs. It was basic knowledge to avoid high ground when attempting concealment for that very reason. The outline of a human is a very recognizable shape. If they were professionals, they would have deployed on the slope facing him to avoid being silhouetted.

There was one other important thing he needed to know. He turned three hundred and sixty degrees by pacing back and forth. No where he went did he see a glint. That was a good sign. It meant that if any of the observers were armed, none of them had a scope. It would have gleamed with the sun at this angle. Still, he kept moving, not entirely sure that they did not have hostile intentions. They were close enough that scoped weapons would not be necessary. However it was uncommon for assassins to forgo the use of them, unless intending an incredibly close range assault.

Markus would have mentioned it to his team, except since no one else noticed them, it seemed that they were beyond the range that ordinary human senses could perceive. As he (as far as he knew) was the only one who had reason for assassins to be after them, the others would be safe. There were not enough of the mysterious contacts to try and eliminate all witnesses. Besides, he knew of hardly any assassins who would attempt a hit in a situation like this. Every member of this group was capable of defending themselves if one of their number came under fire.

Suddenly, the Courier felt a sensation that had been honed in both wastelands: that of an object flying in his general direction. He turned one hundred and eighty degrees and activated VATS. Without pausing to identify his target, he put a single round from Maria through it. He heard glass shatter. His aim instantly shifted to the contacts on the hill. They were gone.

Once the adrenaline had worn off, he took the time to determine what exactly he had shot. It was a jar of sap, and it had been headed towards Pyrrha. It didn't take a genius to figure out who was responsible. There was only one team not present after all.

Before anyone even had time to say anything, three members of team CRDL ran through the group yelling, "Ursa! Ursa!"

The green one (Markus couldn't be bothered to learn their names) collided with Yang who hoisted him by the lapel.

"What? Where?"

"Back there! It's got Cardin!"

While Cardin was a stain on humanity, he had not committed any crimes deserving of being Ursa food and was by no means irredeemable. So, somewhat reluctantly, he prepared to go save a racist. Not something the Lone Courier did everyday. Most of them tried to kill him for one reason or another.
Ruby gave orders to her team.

"Yang! You and Blake, go get Professor Goodwitch."

The Courier took note of Ruby's leadership skills. She appeared to be competent at projecting authority and had a passable tactical mind in his opinion, and overall he could not fault Ozpin's decision to place her in command. Deciding for a multitude of reason to follow her lead, Markus decided to split his team as well.

"Nora, Ren, go with them. We don't know how many, or where they are."

That left Pyrrha, Ruby, and White to go with him to rescue Cardin. It only took moments for them to find him. He had been disarmed and was attempting to escape the monstrous bear. It swatted him to the ground. Aura made people amazingly resilient, Markus observed. That would have broken... well everything a normal person. He seemed to be fine.

"Crap, crap, crap," Cardin said as he crawled away desperately.

"Oh no," said Pyrrha.

She was far more concerned than her partner was. Between the four of them a single Ursa would not be much of a problem, even if it was larger than even the normal Ursa majors. If she was worried about Cardin's safety well, all of them (except White) had guns. Distance would not be an issue.

Seeing that no one else was reacting quickly enough to save Cardin, Markus unslung the Hécate II, knelt and fired into the creature's neck. While it did not kill it instantaneously, it hit an artery. This, along with the kinetic force imparted by the barely subsonic dust round, caused it to stagger away from the downed boy, a crimson tide flowing from its neck. Next to him, Pyrrha and Ruby opened up with their respective weapons. White merely waited, rapier tip in the ground, realizing her involvement was entirely unnecessary. The combined fire of three guns was more than enough to take out a soft target, even one of that size. It was an almost pitiable sight. Such a grand beast laid low in the undignified manner of receiving continuous hot lead, incapable of even remotely threatening its attackers. Despite its futile attempts of desperate determination.

As soon as the Ursa had sublimated, the four of them slowly walked over to the downed Cardin. As they approached, the Courier addressed the downed team leader.

"You know, I've heard throwing jars of sap at people is a good way to make enemies."

"I-," Cardin tried to respond but was cut off.

"I've also heard that people typically don't save their enemy from Grimm attacks." Markus said this all in a cheerful tone, as though commenting on how nice the weather was that day.

"It seems that if you continue like this Cardin, well, you'll have no one to save you from Ursa attacks. And we wouldn't want you to get eaten by an Ursa now, would we?" Throughout his sentence, Markus maintained the cheery tone, before his voice hardened on the last two words.

"Let's report back to Goodwitch shall we?" he said to the others, not waiting for Cardin to respond. They walked away with him still on the ground.

While Markus did expect not much from Cardin, a near death experience had induced dramatic change on more than one occasion before. Perhaps here, it could grant Cardin the necessary measure of perspective to become a decent human being. While he hoped it would, he did not
expect it.
As Markus was walking through Vale in the company of seven other people, all speaking familiarly with one another, he found himself thinking about just what had gone wrong—and right—that he had ended up in this situation.

In the Courier's experience, it was a rule that if you pretended to be something for long enough, eventually you stopped pretending and simply became that thing.

It was a rule that had exceptions, as all rules did. This was something the Courier was grateful for as it was not a rule he particularly liked. He had good reason not to be particularly fond of it. His endeavors often required him to pretend to be someone he would rather avoid becoming. However this instance appeared to be one in which this tendency of psychology was one he was unusually thankful for.

It was a rather novel experience for the Courier to have to act natural by just acting naturally. There was little particular behavior he needed to affect, and for the most part, he could act, well, normally. Even among his many companions that had traveled with him through the wastelands, there were very few he could truly speak freely with. Even with those few, he still felt the need to maintain the appearance of the utterly cold Courier that he had cultivated for practical purposes. Namely creating a figure for his reputation and his own sanity. Pretending to be someone he wasn't made it easier to dissociate himself from his own actions. This brought it back to his least favorite rule.

He desperately feared becoming nothing more than he pretended to be. It was, in the end, the primary reason he had companions at all. He was confident he could manage alone. He had done so enough times in worse situations. Besides, allowing anyone to accompany him automatically put them in an unprecedented level of danger. But he didn't care. All that mattered was making enough of a human connection to still feel human.

Markus had not intended to befriend team RWBY. He had certainly not intended to do so genuinely. He hadn't even planned for the friendship with his own team to be anything more than an aid to his cover with the advantage of increased combat effectiveness. Nevertheless, he now found himself able to talk almost entirely comfortably and freely among not only one team, but two. Even as they did little more than walk through the city of Vale, there was an unspoken feeling of camaraderie between the teams.

They had ended up in all the same classes and lunches, meaning that they were virtually forced to interact with each other.

One thing that took some getting used to was the sheer energy and enthusiasm possess by half of the team. Compared to the almost universally grave and dour inhabitants of the wasteland, it was a stark contrast. Even Cass and Veronica, despite their good humor, were enduring more than their share of suffering. Their level of cheerfulness, considered totally ordinary here, felt anomalous to him. Markus realized that it reminded him of being back in Vault 101, and he wasn't sure how he felt about that.

There was no doubt that the two sisters of team RWBY were far more energetic than any of the members of team MRPN except Nora, who made up for it through an at times annoying level of energy. However, Nora was not the driving force on team MRPN. Her energy was constrained to the personal sphere. By contrast, Ruby, as leader of her team, brought her team with her. Despite the differences in leadership style, the two teams got along well.
Ruby was initially obsessed with the Hécate II and had begged to see it disassembled. Apparently high caliber weapons were rare and not found often outside of military settings.

In the Courier's mind, this meant that his choice of weapon had been a mistake, though ultimately it had proved to be a rather harmless one. The issue was hand waved by the information about "his father's company." He only managed to convince her that he would show her at some indefinite point later. Her curiosity, he felt, vindicated his decision not to use any of the more advanced weapons at his disposal. Not only would it have caused more questions, it would have meant that allowing inspection of his weapons would be out of the question. As it was, there was little danger in regards to allowing the design of his weapons to be scrutinized. There was nothing that Remnant could learn from them.

In time he had felt the need to reveal the Pip-boy functions of matter digitization to team RWBY and through this bring them into his confidence. By now, the Courier had spent enough time with them that he considered them basically an extension of his team by this point. Of course, not in terms of practical matters, but in terms of mutual trust and association.

Analysis of the various members of the team revealed little in the way of their character. That would be seen by how they acted when under stress. Yang, constantly talking as they walked, appeared to be the archetypal teenage girl. Cheerful and carefree, she was another one the anomalies he had not seen since he had left the Vault.

On the tactical side, her Semblance was interesting. The ability to gain power from receiving hits and then retaliate with proportional force had interesting potential. To utilize it to its fullest potential was inherently risky. The danger of misjudging the strength of a strike was omnipresent, and given how little was known about the technical details of how Aura functioned, not an unlikely occurrence. While the Courier did not expect to have to face Yang in combat, outside the sparring matches of course, he nevertheless came up with a means to effectively counter her Semblance, as he routinely did when encountering a novel threat. His ordinary fighting style was quite effective to that end. With Yang especially, it was critical to win the fight quickly, in a single offensive action, if not a single strike. It was necessary to maintain the initiative, preventing her from making any use of her Semblance by stopping her from getting a hit off.

Yang's care for her hair was a peculiarity. Not the fact that she did, that was expected, but the level of importance she put on it and how any damage to it seemed to enrage her.

That was another thing. Her anger. As he had previously noted, she seemed prone to unusual outbursts at things that would be considered by most to be fairly benign. Her apparent instability was concerning.

Her sister, on the other hand, was a different story. Ruby, while childish, seemed to be in control of herself and capable of taking things seriously (if naively). She also seemed to be a fairly competent tactical leader. As far as teenage girls went, she had surpassed his highest expectations for leadership. Though, considering what he knew of all of their prior education, his expectations perhaps needed some adjustment. Overall though, she appeared to be one of the more effective leaders and fighters. Still, Markus found is slightly disturbing how interested a fifteen year old was in weapons. She liked them almost as much as he did for Christ's sake and she didn't have the excuse of living in an irradiated hellhole.

White was interesting. Her name was in German. Because Markus had learned the language, as well as several others, in the Vault half out of boredom and half out of curiosity, the Courier understood her name well enough to automatically translate it to his native language but not well enough to keep the word in its original form along with its meaning.
His trade with her family's company and their common enemy of the White Fang made her a potential ally. The actions of the terrorist group were, after all, tantamount to a declaration of war. Allies in the form of Remnant's most powerful company would not be unwelcome on that front.

However, the unethical practices of the Snow Dust Company made him hesitant to approach it, and White's stereotypical prissy rich girl attitude made him hesitant to speak to her in anything other than cordial conversation. While she had on occasion seemed more ordinary, especially when talking to Ruby, he was still not confident enough in her personal ability to assist him in a covert war against a terrorist organization.

The constant comments about the two of them from Yang did not help either. She did not need more ammunition.

Finally, there was Blake, the quiet, secretive, Faunus. As Markus had heard, "It's always the quiet ones you need to watch out for." She was quiet, and she had a secret.

The secret of being a Faunus was, from his limited understanding, a strange one to keep. While many Faunus were bullied for their race, she did not seem to be the kind to be targeted by bullies. While she was quiet, even from the first time he had met her, she was self assured enough to put White in her place.

There was no reason to hide that information from her team certainly, unless she didn't trust them. The Lone Courier made sure to keep a close eye on Blake. Secrets were dangerous.

The hypocrisy of this statement was not lost on him.

It took a particularly loud statement from White to jolt Markus back to the present.

"The Vytal Festival! Oh, this is absolutely wonderful!"

He must have been zoned out for nearly twenty minutes. This worried him. His nearly sleepless nights must have been taking a greater toll on him than he realized. While it was not uncommon for him to have long trains of thought analyzing things, much of this one was completely redundant. Virtually everything he had thought about was something he had already analyzed to death. Letting his mind wander for extended periods was a killer for situational awareness.

"I don't think I've ever seen you smile this much, Weiss." said Ruby; she frowned slightly, "It's kinda weirding me out..."

It was strange to see White so happy about things. He supposed this gave them some rare insight into her personality. Her composure appeared to have melted into genuine sincerity.

"How could you not smile? A festival dedicated to the cultures of the world! There will be dances! Parades! A tournament! Oh, the amount of planning and organization that goes into this event is simply breathtaking!"

And apparently the personality she was hiding was an unimaginably boring one.

The Courier wasn't exactly sold on the use of all this planning, organization, and resources. It smacked of bread and circuses. An easy means to distract the masses from the presence of a fanatical terrorist organization that has the potential to start a second race war and the omnipresent threat of genocidal creatures that filled the rest of the world.

Yang sighed, "You really know how to take a good thing and make it sound boring."
"Quiet, you!" said White, trying to sound annoyed, but being too excited to properly pull it off.

The Courier just laughed slightly at that.

The group continued towards the docks. They stopped as multiple foghorns were heard in the distance.

"Remind me again why we're spending our Friday afternoon visiting the stupid docks?" Yang asked.

She was really getting bored.

"Ugh, they smell like fish!" Ruby said, holding her nose.

The smell reminded Markus of Point Lookout. Not a pleasant memory.

The decision to come to the docks seemed to be an appeasement measure towards White as a cranky heiress was a recipe for boundless pain and annoyance. Markus was beginning to feel a bit guilty about suggesting his team accompany RWBY on their little excursion. If he had known it was going to be this tedious, he would have just bitten the bullet and come up with something appropriate for the team to do on his own.

"I've heard that students visiting from Vacuo will be arriving by ship today. And, as a representative of Beacon, I feel as though it is my solemn duty to welcome them to this fine kingdom!" It was clear that she didn't believe a word she said, making it hard for anyone else to.

Pyrrha had remained quiet throughout this exchange while Ren was managing Nora and her questions, which was a fulltime job. Nora seemed to be more excited than White about the arrival of the students but kept her comments to Ren, something that Markus was grateful for. While it was not blatant, there was a feeling of tension between the members of team RWBY that even Pyrrha seemed to be aware of. All of them, except Nora of course, were quieter than usual, subconsciously unsettled by the tension.

As White started to walk away, Blake revealed the heiress' motives.

"She wants to spy on them so she'll have the upper hand in the tournament."

Pyrrha raised an eyebrow at this, while the Courier was mildly annoyed at the pointlessness of the endeavor. However, by some miracle, something interesting happened.

"Whoa," said Ruby, looking to her right.

The group followed her gaze and saw a building with shattered window and a door full of yellow caution tape of the Vale Police Force. They all followed Ruby as she approached the detective at the front.

"What happened here?" she asked.

"Robbery. Second Dust shop to be hit this week," answered the officer, "This place is turning into a jungle."

This was interesting. A robbery in what seemed to be a nice part of town was not terribly common, and the officer's comment seemed to indicate that crime was on the rise.

The detective's partner now spoke. "They left all the money again."
This set off alarm bells in the Courier's mind. There weren't a lot of organizations for whom money was considered irrelevant.

Ruby was confused. "Huh?"

The first detective spoke again. "Yeah, just doesn't make a lick of sense. Who needs that much Dust?"

"I don't know, an army?"

"You thinking the White Fang?"

The first detective's partner removed his sunglasses. "Yeah, I'm thinking we don't get paid enough."

Corruption? Or indifference? The Courier supposed it didn't matter. In either case, Vale's authorities could not be relied upon to act against the White Fang, assuming they were the one's really behind this.

"Hmm! The White Fang." White crossed her arms indignantly. "What an awful bunch of degenerates!"

The Lone Courier felt she was simply stating the obvious. Evidently, Blake disagreed.

"What's your problem?"

"My problem? I simply don't care for the criminally insane."

"The White Fang is hardly a bunch of psychopaths. They're a collection of misguided Faunus."

It was true that people did tend to dehumanize the enemy over the course of a war, and the Snow Dust Company had been at war with the White Fang for long enough for that to happen twice over, however, the difference between being misguided and psychopathy were motivation. Motivation mattered less than the crime. The Legion wasn't made up of psychopaths or the criminally insane. None of that meant they didn't need to die.

"Misguided? They want to wipe Humanity off the face of the planet!"

That was in the end the crux of the matter. The White Fang were very clear in their aims and in the lengths they were willing to go to in order to achieve those aims. They needed to be stopped by any means necessary.

"So then they're very misguided," retorted Blake, "Either way, it doesn't explain why they would rob a Dust shop in the middle of downtown Vale!"

While her argument remained as weak as ever, Blake brought up an interesting point. What motivated this attack?

Ruby gave voice to his thoughts. "Blake's got a point. Besides, the police never caught that Torchwick guy I ran into a few months ago... Maybe it was him."

Torchwick. He would need to remember that name. It was a lead, if a small one.

"That doesn't change the fact that the White Fang are a bunch of scum," White continued, "Those Faunus only know how to lie, cheat, and steal."
Markus's racist alarm went off.

Before he could say anything, Pyrrha responded to White's heated statement.

"Been spending time with CRDL have you?" she said archly.

Before this could escalate further a commotion was heard.

"Hey, stop that Faunus!"

The group rushed towards the sound to see a Faunus with a monkey tail escape from two sailors pursuing him.

"You no-good stowaway!"

The Faunus responded. "Hey, a no-good stowaway would've been caught! I'm a great stowaway."

The initial detective from before threw a stone at the Faunus.

He attempted to make a quick getaway, rushing directly towards the group. While Markus considered stopping the Faunus, he didn't really want to get involved.

As the Faunus disappeared into the distance Yang turned to White.

"Well, Weiss, you wanted to see the competition, and there it goes…"

Weiss responded energetically, deep seated racism apparently forgotten.

"Quick! We have to observe him!"

Before anyone could object, the heiress ran after the Faunus, forcing the rest of the group forced to follow at a similar pace. No one else was remotely pleased by having to humor the antics of the heiress though there was a sense of relief, both at avoiding the imminent argument about race, and in the end to the even more intolerable boredom.

As they rounded a corner, White bumped into someone and tripped as the Faunus disappeared behind a building. Everyone else stopped, relieved that they no longer had to be running at top speed through a city like idiots.

"No, he got away!" said White.

She seemed entirely unaware she had run into someone.

"Uhh...Weiss?," said Yang as she pointed to the girl underneath her teammate. She finally noticed the girl, who had a smile plastered across her face. This unnaturally rigid smile startled White and caused her to jump to her feet.

"Sal-u-ta-tions!" said the altogether far too happy girl.

"Um...hello," said Ruby.

"Are you...okay?" asked Yang, as the girl was still on the ground.

"I'm wonderful! Thank you for asking."

The group exchanged glances. Even Nora was totally focused on this new development. Pyrrha
shrugged at Yang who spoke again. No one else really wanted to engage with this strange girl.

"Do you...wanna get up?"

The girl appeared to think about this for a moment.

"Yes!"

She leaped to her feet with unusual agility. This girl was the embodiment of uncanny valley. Team RWBY took a step back. MRPN had no need to as they already were far enough from the strange girl that all of them felt comfortable making a retreat with the buffer that they had, should it be necessary.

"My name is Penny! It's a pleasure to meet you!"

"Hi Penny. I'm Ruby"

"I'm Weiss."

"Blake."

"Are you sure you didn't hit your head?" said Yang before Blake elbowed her, "Oh, I'm Yang."

"Markus," he said as neutrally as possible.

"Pyrrha,"

"Ren."

"and Nora!" Nora matched Penny in cheerfulness.

"It's a pleasure to meet you!" Penny said.

"You already said that," said White.

She paused.

"So I did!" Her cheerfulness was becoming increasingly disturbing. And annoying.

"Well, sorry for running into you!"

They all began to walk away, eager to forget the encounter had ever happened. Not the Lone Courier of course. Penny interested him. He had some preliminary suspicions but was unwilling to voice them without conclusive evidence. Her entire demeanor was off in a way that indicated that something was afoot.

"Take care, friend!" yelled Ruby.

When they were far enough away Yang said, "She was...weird…"

Weiss spoke. "Now, where did that Faunus riff-raff run off to?"

Penny suddenly appeared in front of Weiss.

"What did you call me?"

Yang, believing Penny heard her comment apologized.
"Oh, I'm really sorry, I definitely didn't think you heard me!"

"No, not you." She walked through the group and leaned down to Ruby. "You!"

"Me? I-I don't know. I, what I, um, uh…"

Ruby squirmed under her unblinking gaze.

"You called me 'friend'! Am I really your friend?

"Uuuum…" Ruby looked over Penny's shoulder for advice. Everyone except for Markus, Nora, and Ren were shaking their heads emphatically. Nora was staring at Penny, more interested in her than the conversation. Ren was as quiet as ever, giving little indication as to his opinion on these matters. Markus merely cocked an eyebrow, interested in how this was going to go.

"Y-Yeah, sure! Why not?" said Ruby.

While the Courier was suspicious of this girl and her demeanor, he was actually glad Ruby had chosen to "befriend" her. She didn't seem like she could really do that much harm, and this provided him with a much better opportunity to see what exactly the cause for her abnormal mannerisms were.

Penny, for her part, looked overjoyed at Ruby's acceptance.

"Sen-sational! We can paint our nails, and try on clothes, and talk about cute boys!"

While what she said was highly typical, her delivery remained strange. What she said also sounded more stereotypical than entirely made sense. Her identity was still a question that needed to be answered.

"So...what are you doing in Vale?" asked Yang.

"I'm here to fight in the tournament," declared Penny.

This drew White's attention. "Wait, you're fighting in the tournament?"

Markus supposed she looked as combat capable as any of the members of team RWBY, which was not a difficult feat.

Penny snapped a salute. "I'm combat ready!"

The phrasing was strange as was the salute. Either she was military or, he hoped, mimicking a military salute. If Vale's military was made up of people with the attitude of Penny he feared for this place's national security. As well, she looked far too young to be a soldier of any kind. If she was, well the Courier wasn't too fond of the idea of child soldiers. However, the Courier was in a unique position to verify exactly how "combat ready" Penny was.

Weiss said, "Forgive me, but you hardly look the part."

A totally non-hypocritical statement there.

"Says the girl wearing a dress?" said Blake.

"It's a combat skirt!"

She and Ruby high fived.
The Courier scoffed. Adding the word combat did not add combat value. A skirt was a hindrance in concealment and the material was not bulletproof. To him, it was a very clear sign that none of them took this seriously. It was better they understood that this was a matter of life and death before they had to learn those lessons the hard way. However, it was around then that he received the information that Penny was categorized as a high threat. While Pyrrha was also categorized as such, she was world renowned as a champion fighter. He would need to research Penny to see if she had any similar accolades.

"Wait a minute," said White, "If you're here for the tournament, does that mean you know that monkey-tailed rapscallion?"

Rapscallion. The word, while technically accurate, was archaic. Even more so than dolt. Why did White have such an archaic lexicon?

"The who…?" asked Penny, understandably confused.

"The filthy Faunus from the boat!"

"Why do you keep saying that?!" Blake was (with the Courier's knowledge) understandably angry about this but she seemed incapable of knowing the value of silence when trying to keep a secret.

Weiss was now confused. "Huh?"

"Stop calling him a rapscallion! Stop calling him a degenerate! He's a person!"

Both of them were wrong to a degree. Blake was wrong in that he was in fact a rapscallion, which was something that even the boy in question would not likely dispute. He was also a degenerate depending on one's moral values. White did not say that he was not a person, merely one that made poor life choices.

White of course, was wrong in her prejudice against an entire species. Still, the argument continued, with the rest of the group watching in despair. No one wanted to get involved and everyone wanted it to end.

"Oh, I'm sorry. Would you like me to stop referring to the trash can as a trash can? Or this lamppost as a lamppost?" said White.

"Stop it!" said Blake.

"Stop what? He clearly broke the law. Give him time; he'll probably join up with those other Faunus in the White Fang!"

The was a ridiculous generalization. Petty crime to terrorism was an unusual path to take.

"You ignorant little brat!"

"How dare you talk to me like that! I am your teammate!"

"You are a judgmental little girl."

The Courier couldn't argue with that.

"What in the world makes you say that?"

"The mere fact that you would sort that Faunus boy with a terrorist group solely based on his species makes you just as much of a scoundrel as you believe him to be!"
"Um, I think we should probably go..." said Yang

"Where are we going?" said Penny, still smiling.

"So you admit it! The White Fang is just a radical group of terrorists!"

Regardless of whether the Faunus in the White Fang were misguided or not it did not change the fact that they were terrorists. Blake was consistently wrong on that very crucial point. Given the Courier's very personal experience with the organization, he thus found it difficult to sympathize with her.

"That's not what I meant, and you know it," said Blake.

The argument would continue for the better part of the day. Eventually, even the Courier's sniper's patience would run out.
Priorities

It had been over four hours and they showed no signs of stopping. Pyrrha, Yang, Ruby, and even Ren had tried to subtly get them to stop or change the subject. Even now that they were back at Beacon, Blake and Weiss were still making snide comments at one another. While the argument had not been continuous, the hostile feelings were. The entire time, everyone present was exceedingly uncomfortable. Any attempts at addressing other subjects were redirected with astounding efficiency.

At times, they were arguing normally. Then, they would spend vast amounts of time snarking one another. Both parties were clearly biased, though neither without cause, and neither knew how to argue effectively. Most of the argument consisted of generalizations and simple, or more commonly veiled, insults. While debate and argument was often a healthy process through which one could better understand the other point of view, this was not that. They were more hurling words at each other than trying to out-reason the other.

Ultimately, this continued even as they returned to the dorm. The group gravitated to team RWBY’s room. Unfortunately, none of team MRPN managed to think of an excuse with which to extricate themselves from the situation and make it entirely team RWBY’s problem.

In a transparently desperate attempt to shift the subject, Pyrrha had managed to get a separate conversation going with Yang and Ruby about Penny. It was carried in low voices and it was painfully forced. The palpable tension remained. Both teams were worried about how far this argument would escalate. Yet, no one was confident enough in their peacemaking skills to step forward and actually address the problem head on.

The Courier knew this could not go on forever. Something would have to be done. The only thing was, he hated the idea of getting involved as much as anyone else. Perhaps even more so, considering his imperative to avoid a massive degree of scrutiny. While it would not be a hugely public action, whatever line of reasoning he chose in his intervention, as well as the fact that he chose to intervene at all, would undoubtedly provide at least some level of insight regarding his personality. While that was far from ideal, he was frankly running out of patience.

A substantial part of the problem was that there was no way that anyone could actually win this argument. Both sides were far too emotionally invested side to ever concede the point. This was never anything that even resembled an honest, open minded debate. These were issues that could not be resolved by a reasonable compromise or argument. Simply, neither side was actually looking for a solution. Which made presenting one substantially more difficult.

"I don't understand why this is causing such a problem!" White said.

In a way Blake was responsible for this entire debacle. It could have been avoided had she not decided to keep her species a secret. He supposed that keeping secrets had a price. Wasn't that a bad sign. If anyone had dangerous secrets, it was him. For his own sake, he hoped the trend of secrets causing problems stopped here, but he knew better than to expect it.

"That is the problem!" Blake said heatedly.

"You realize you are defending an organization that hates Humanity, don't you?" White asked rhetorically, getting up from her bed, "The Faunus of the White Fang are pure evil!"

Blake now too got to her feet.
"There's no such thing as pure evil! Why do you think they hate Humanity so much? It's because of people like Cardin, people like you, that force the White Fang to take such drastic measures!"

The Lone Courier knew for a fact that Blake was wrong there on several counts. Nothing that White or even Cardin did justified violence. The entire time he was here he had never encountered a single instance of Faunus being killed by humans. Far worse examples of ethnic conflict had been resolved without resorting to terrorism. The only real action he had seen against Faunus was some bullying. The White Fang had killed civilians.

True evil did effectively exist. Whether or not it technically did was a matter of philosophy. While the majority of the White Fang were not psychopaths, they nevertheless chose to join a terrorist organization and were complicit in the act of mass murder. The total destruction of the organization and its members was simply the only option available with which to address the White Fang. It was not a moral judgement, but simply a matter of necessity.

At the moment, Markus was unable to determine whether the White Fang were driven by revenge and blind rage or genuinely believed they were doing the morally correct thing. Either way, it did not overly matter. They were his enemy. They would kill him if they had the chance. In war, it was kill or be killed. And the Lone Courier had no intention of being killed. No matter how righteous his enemies thought their cause was.

"People like me?!" White said.

Markus had almost forgotten that they were still arguing.

"You're discriminatory!" Blake said.

"I'm a victim!" White finally yelled, causing a few moments of blessed silence as she leaned in closer to the other girl.

The tension increased dramatically. The Courier's attention was fixed totally on the actions of Weiss and Blake.

"You want to know why I despise the White Fang? Why I don't particularly trust the Faunus?"

White leant against the window,

"It's because they've been in war with my family for years. War, as in actual bloodshed. My grandfather's company has had a target painted across its back for as long as I can remember. And ever since I was a child, I've watched family friends disappear; board members executed. An entire train car full of Dust, stolen. And every day, my father would come home, furious. And that made for a very difficult childhood."

Markus had not realized how similar his assumed identity was. The difference was, her father was running the company. Her statement insinuated that she had very controlling, potentially abusive parents. This further complicated resolving the argument.

White shared the enmity he himself held for the terrorist group, and for similar reasons. However, she was powerless to retaliate. This frustration had been directed towards all Faunus rather than merely the White Fang, making Blake's anger as understandable as White's racism.

Ruby went over to comfort her partner. An admirable attempt, but poorly timed. "Weiss, I-"

"No!" the heiress turned back to Blake, "You want to know why I despise the White Fang? It's because they're a bunch of liars, thieves, and murderers!"
Blake responded instantly. "Well maybe we were just tired of being pushed around!"

There was a second of deathly silence.

To say that this was unexpected would be an understatement. While Markus had suspected something, that a quiet teenager was part of a terrorist organization was something he had not anticipated. Evidently he had seriously underestimated what these presumably sheltered kids were capable of. He supposed he was lucky that his error in judgement had not proved more costly.

After the moment of stunned silence elapsed, Blake rushed out of the room, pushing past the members of both teams in an instant. Markus very nearly stopped her but ultimately decided against it. Physically restraining her would not be an appropriate measure considering the circumstances. He doubted either of the teams would be up for interrogating Blake. Though, he privately doubted that Weiss would object.

"Blake, wait! Come back!" yelled Ruby. Even Ruby, mindlessly optimistic as she was, had little hope that Blake would return.

There were another few seconds of uncertain silence after Blake disappeared. A mix of shock and disbelief filled the room. Everyone looked at everyone else with uncertainty.

"So what now?" asked the Courier, jolting everyone out of their shock.

"I guess we just wait for her to come back?" said Yang.

This even vaguely optimistic sentiment was enough to snap Ruby out of her momentary despondency.

"Yes! We'll wait for her to come back."

"What if she doesn't?" asked the Courier flatly.

"Then we'll find her!" she said, with unwavering confidence.

The Courier saw no need to introduce Ruby to the reality that finding a terrorist who did not want to be found was one of the more difficult tasks one could set himself. It's not as though she would do anything with that information.

The Blake crisis, would have to wait for the time being. His own plans took precedence. All the pieces were in place for his first counterstroke against the White Fang. That Blake was now counted among their number meant little. Perhaps it would be useful later in turning the teams to his advantage, but for the time being, he had his own concerns.

Now, he needed to defer his involvement in this matter and give a convincing excuse to disappear for a while. The former was easier than the latter. For once, maintaining his cover wasn't the most important thing. Despite Markus's better judgement, vengeance took precedence.
The Kolokol Raid

The Lone Courier was on a roof overlooking his target. Currently, he was doing little more than watching and waiting. The target in question was a nondescript warehouse in Vale's shipping district. It was here he knew the hostages were being held. He had personally reconnoitered the place earlier, his stealth suit making it child's play. This was a major hub of terrorist activity. A front owned by White Fang sympathizers owned what was essentially a complex of buildings in this area. From rosters he had found, easily twelve hundred hostiles were stationed here.

It was a matter of fact that the Courier could have accomplished the rescue of the hostages without a shot fired. However, he had no intention of doing so. To quote Joshua Graham before their assault on the White Legs, "Make no mistake. This is an extermination." He would exterminate the White Fang, just as he had the White Legs. As with the White Legs, he would show mercy once they were beaten, but the road to that victory would be littered with bodies.

Markus was no longer wearing his stealth suit. Instead, he was wearing a dragonskin combat outfit. It was a pre-war artifact, specialized for this sort of work, being made of of kevlar, matte black, and holding large amounts of ammunition in bandoliers. It had been used extensively by pre-war special operations and SWAT units. He also wore custom goggles, capable of night-vision, infrared, and seeing the electromagnetic signals that were outputted by both organic and synthetic life. It was the latter of these modes that he was currently using. In addition, wore the respirator he had found in the Divide. While the respirator was stiflingly uncomfortable, it was utterly crucial to his plans.

Fortunately for him, the White Fang had decided to keep the hostages in a room with an exterior facing wall. Had they been concerned about an assault, they would have placed the hostages far from the point of any forced entry. While that would not have stopped the Courier, it would have complicated matters. The relative carelessness with which the terrorists treated the hostages gave the Courier a strong indication that they felt safe at this location. This was supported by the fact that there were very few ways in which the exterior of the building was being watched. There were no guards, though that was unsurprising considering the low profile this base of operations was seeking to maintain, but also few security cameras. The White Fang were clearly not expecting an attack. That expectation was something the Courier would exploit.

At this hour of the night, the majority of the residents of the complex should be sleeping. Despite the ability of Faunus to see in the dark, He had seen the layout of the room that the prisoners were held in during his reconnaissance and committed it to memory. The prisoners were on the ground in the center of the room while guards sat at the two entrances. Despite the number of prisoners the White Fang evidently did not consider them to warrant more than a couple of guards. Clearly no attempt at escape was expected.

Memorizing the position of the guards' electromagnetic signatures, the Courier raised his goggles to rest atop his head and squinted down the scope of his Anti-Materiel Rifle. He exhaled before firing two suppressed rounds from the Hécate II. The high caliber rounds tore holes in the wall at both points of impact allowing the Courier to see the devastation the projectiles had wrought. The guards dropped almost simultaneously with a muffled thud, blood streaming from the gaping holes in their torsos. The Courier vaulted over the ledge that bordered the roof he was on, dematerializing his rifle while falling. He landed with a forward roll to reduce the sound of his impact and materialized his MP5KS while he ran silently towards the wall.

Upon reaching the structure, he materialized thermite cord and attached it to the wall. Already he
could hear the shocked screams of some of the prisoners who did not have the presence of mind to stay quiet at the death of their guards. The thermite had been easy to make. An R&D company meant that no one asked questions when acquiring potentially deadly components. The compound burned through the wall in a matter of seconds. Now that his presence was no longer secret, every second mattered. First, he needed to get the hostages out of harm's way. In order to do that, he needed to convince them to cooperate. He spoke loud enough that they could all hear him but in a hushed tone.

"This a rescue. Remain calm and follow all instructions."

The respirator he wore distorted his voice enough that even someone who was familiar with him would be unable to identify him. His voice was naturally deep enough not to betray his youth.

The captives, civilians made meek by the constant threat of death complied easily enough. He gestured towards the newly created hole in the wall and they eagerly seized the opportunity to escape. Markus would have to risk that they were capable of staying alive for the time being. He had made sure that there were no vantage points from which the White Fang could gun down the fleeing hostages.

He walked over to the body of one of the guards and searched his corpse for a scroll. Finding one, he wiped off the blood and other bodily fluids and called emergency services to the scene. The time it would take to arrive would be long enough for him to execute his plan. He materialized and depressed a detonator that was linked to the air conditioning system of the complex. The entire building was quickly being flooded with a fentanyl based incapacitating agent. It was mostly non-lethal. By the time that government forces arrived, they would find large amount of unconscious Faunus and a smaller number of asphyxiated ones. Even the most corrupt of authorities would be forced to arrest obvious members of a known terrorist group.

Despite its effects of inducing unconsciousness, it was not true sleeping gas, as such a thing did not actually exist. The Courier had calculated that this compound would have an excess of a fifteen percent lethality rate. It was for this reason that the hostages had needed to be rescued prior to the distribution of the gas. While the Lone Courier was not morally opposed to a one hundred percent lethality rate that would have occurred in a conventional assault, he felt killing when capturing posed no additional risk was unjustified.

This was all despite his lack of confidence in law enforcement's ability to restrain the White Fang prisoners so that none would escape either in a prison breakout or immediately upon regaining consciousness. Markus also lacked confidence in the legal system. If the courts had been bought out, then it was entirely possible that the terrorists would go free. In any case, he was unwilling to deal death out of fear.

Another reason the Courier had opted against a direct assault was due to the fact that he had determined that there was no way for him to assault the building without being stuck in an firefight. The structure was simply too open. Add this to the fact that Aura made his enemies tediously difficult to kill, and he would have very quickly found himself swarmed. Besides, he wanted to leave no information about the perpetrator of this raid. A prolonged engagement would provide the enemy with ample time to identify him to at least some capacity. As well, it would cede the initiative to the foe by sheer virtue of numbers. This needed to be done quickly, and cleanly.

The Lone Courier retreated after the hostages, planning to return to his vantage point. As he did so however, he felt a strong impact on his back. One of the terrorists that had come in search of the noise had shot him in the back. Even with this specially concentrated form of the gas,
incapacitation would take at least sixty seconds. In regards to the bullet, not only did it not penetrate his ballistic armor, it did not hurt as much as it should have. His Aura appeared to be doing something, weak as it was. Markus turned and was forced to empty nearly ten rounds from his weapon into his target before he dropped.

The Lone Courier was beginning to appreciate the potential value of a properly unlocked Aura, even if he had no idea how they worked. A personal forcefield that enhanced his abilities would have considerable tactical value.

Once he had reached his original position on the roof, he returned to using his Anti-Materiel Rifle. He scanned visually for any White Fang that happened to be outside the building and those that were attempting to escape the gas, picking off all he saw with silenced fifty caliber rounds. Even with Aura, the projectile had too much force to withstand. At this range, with this caliber, headshots were a poor idea. Center of mass shots simply tore gaping holes in the torso of the targets, liquefying organs on contact.

Those that did not know the Courier well would be surprised to know that he preferred fighting masked enemies. Despite the fact his inability to read the emotions of his enemies put him at a disadvantage, Markus much preferred seeing a mask rather than a face. He preferred to see a lifeless object rather than the fear or anger held by the face of human. It was much easier to murder people that way.

As he saw the telltale flashing lights in the distance that indicated the authorities were arriving on the scene, he sniped the last of the White Fang outside the building before materializing his detonator once again. He depressed it twice this time, activating the last part of his plan. A massive, multicolored, and multi-(Aristotelian)element, explosion towered into the sky in the shape of a mushroom cloud. As Markus had no means of reacquiring the Dust that was stolen, he had done the next best thing: planted composite four on it. Asset denial. If he could not have a resource then his best move would be to destroy it, to prevent his enemy from using it against him.

So ended the Lone Courier's first battle with the White Fang in his personal war against them. While this satiated his desire for revenge, he had determined the destruction of the organization to be necessary, and would prosecute this aim to the end. As the much clichéd saying went, while the battle was over, the war had just begun. And, as the Lone Courier knew, from the Wastelands of D.C. and the Mojave, to the civilization of Remnant, war...war never changes.
Chess For Three

The RPN of Team MRPN were sitting in their dorm room with a host of questions however two stood above the rest: Where had Blake gone and Where had Markus gone? Blake had disappeared after her accidental revelation group, she had not been seen for a couple of days now. Markus had left not long after, citing family issues. Weiss had translated this to mean company issues, for the team. Weiss knew well the situation of being the heir(ess)apparent of a major corporation. While this answered his absence temporarily, when there was no sign of him for over thirty six hours, his team had begun to worry. Still, they were not worrying about Markus anywhere near as much as they were Blake. As far as they knew, Markus was with his father or somewhere with representatives from Vault-tec. As far as anyone besides Pyrrha knew, his greatest was being bored to death. More significantly, none of them had any idea what had happened to Blake or how exactly to feel that she was (at one point) a member of the White Fang.

There was not much conversation without Markus, not that there was ever much to begin with, but there was now a conspicuous silence. Nora and Pyrrha were the only ones who would initiate a conversation. The word "conversation" in regards to Nora was a bit of a stretch. It was more that others would humor her ideas and suggestions. Ren of course was a quiet as ever and schoolwork was not difficult enough to provide a lengthy distraction. This left Pyrrha with more time to think than she typically had.

She worried about Markus more than the others did. The reasons for this were twofold. Firstly, they were partners and therefore interacted more with each other than their other friends. Secondly, and more prominently, were the vague reasons for which he had said he would not tell her what he was doing and where he went. From those vague hints and clues, it was clear the White Fang was at war with his father's company just as it was with Weiss'. If Markus had been called away due to issues regarding the terrorist organization then there was no telling what danger he was in.

She still worried about how he and Weiss were dealing with the fact that Blake was a Faunus and a member of the White Fang. Finding out that someone you are supposed to trust implicitly was once a member of a terrorist organization that had been at war with your family for decades and had lied about her identity, on top of everything else, was a lot to deal with. No one was sure what to expect in the way of reactions from either of the Ice Heirs, Markus especially.

From what he had described on the roof, his life was almost constantly under threat. That alone was more than enough to make her worry for his safety. While Pyrrha understood his reasons for not wanting her to be mired in a war that was not hers, she was determined to help him. It was her job as his partner after all.

Of course, she had no idea how to go about this. Her total lack of social skills caused by her prior inability to interact with anyone who viewed her as a peer. Markus regarded her in the same way he did anyone else and viewed her as a person rather than an idealized image. She was not keen to estrange him by being too persistent in trying to pry into his personal issues that he felt she should leave alone for her own safety. However, her own safety was something Pyrrha quite often disregarded. Therefore, she sat staring out the window at the now full moon late into the night, contemplating the secrets of her partner and how best to coax an answer from him.

Ozpin sat in his office, late at night, staring at his scroll pensively. The events of teams RWBY's combat at the docks are displayed live on the device. He closed it, having see all he needed before opening communications with Qrow. There was a message. "QUEEN HAS PAWNS."

The headmaster hhmmed at this before opening another live feed. This one was an overhead view of
a warehouse at a different part of the docks, near where RWBY's battle had taken place. Now, 
police and other emergency vehicles swarmed the area. Both police and medical Bullheads 
hovered. Hundreds of White Fang were lead or carried out in handcuffs. Others left in body bags.

He swiped to a news channel. The volume muted, he read the headline. "Gas attack on White Fang 
by Unknown Party." So far there were one hundred and seventy three Faunus dead. The death toll 
was expected to rise. Kidnapping victims that were held there were rescued prior to the chemical 
attack. Evidently, while the perpetrator had no qualms about killing he/she has morals about 
civilians. No further information was available through public channels. He opened 
communications with Qrow again.

"THIRD CHAIR FILLED" he sent. This development complicated things. While this had resulted 
in a major base of White Fang operations being limited, it meant there was a third player in the 
game. This was an event that was truly unanticipated. And it would change a lot.

Roman Torchwick walked into a large warehouse with a poorly lit interior. This was the backup 
headquarters. Apparently the primary had been gassed while he was away. The entire goddamn 
operation was in shambles. It was pure luck he hadn't been at the HQ himself; the decision to 
oversee the raid himself was a last minute thing. He really had not expected to meet any 
opposition. All the skill in the world was useless if you were gassed. Still, those animals were 
expendable, virtual cannon fodder. They were however, useful cannon fodder which had just been 
wasted. So, this was scant consolation to him as he crossed the warehouse. He placed down a 
briefcase on a small table, well lit in contrast to the rest of the interior. "Well," he thought," at least 
this day can't possibly get any worse." But of course, it did.

"How very disappointing, Roman."

Roman turned around quickly upon hearing the voice.

"Whoa! Hehe... I wasn't expecting to see you guys so soon..." That was a weak lie. After a 
catastrophe this large, the arrival of the higher ups was hardly unexpected. At least this wasn't his 
fault. Of course, it didn't matter whose fault it was, only whose Cinder thought it was.

Cinder and two figures flanking her step out of the shadow.

"While we had low expectations for you, we did not anticipate this," she struggled slightly to 
articulate her feelings, "utter disaster." Her voice was still unnervingly smooth throughout her 
speech.

Roman laughed slightly before getting serious. "Hey! You were the ones who suggested working 
with those stupid mutts from the White Fang. And it's not my fault that they managed to get 
themselves gassed."

"We will investigate that incident. Personally. The involvement of another faction will not be 
anything more than a minor hinderance. Still, your performance at the docks was...less than 
satisfactory." She summoned a fireball in her hand and smiled sinisterly.

"We have big plans for you, Roman. All we ask is... a little cooperation." This did not comfort 
Roman.
Markus returned to Beacon in the early hours of the morning, long before anyone would be awake. Dawn was breaking and part of the shattered moon was still faintly visible behind in the rapidly lightening sky. Now that he no longer a personal score to settle, the late nights were catching up to him. No longer on a timer, he was keen to get some rest. With the late hours he had spent preparing combined with the fact that he had not slept for nearly twenty four hours meant he was supremely sleep deprived. It would take a few days for him to feel normal again.

As he had been using the stealth suit, none of the members of his team stood a ghost of a chance at discovering his return. After downing a bottle of scotch, he fell into his bed soundlessly, as he attempted to salvage as many hours of sleep as he could.

Markus awoke far later in the morning in a much better mood. He could not remember his dreams other than flashes of vivid nonsensical images. On a whole, it was a dramatic improvement from his usual fare. He got up with a stifled yawn, reveling in the feeling of both being rested and having the weight of the hostages' lives off his shoulders. Immediately after the raid in which the hostages were captured, he had taken reactionary precautions in order to both deter the White Fang and prevent their acquisition of hostages. A terrorist organization having leverage over him was something that could have disastrous consequences and was therefore no something he could risk.

The Lone Courier got up from the bed to see the rest of his teammates staring at him inquisitively. He had forgotten this part. They would quite reasonably expect something in the way of an explanation. Unsurprisingly, it was Pyrrha who broke the momentary silence.

"So… where have you been?"

Markus noted that she sounded a bit unsure of herself. Given that, he concluded that so long as he delivered a plausible answer with confidence, he would not be questioned further.

"As I said before leaving, my father called me away while giving no explanation. He is chronically ill so this was not entirely unusual."

The idea of having his "father" be chronically sick was working better than he had anticipated. It was far more useful than its initial purpose intended it to be. It would also make people guilty about prying as inquiring about one's terminally ill father was typically considered poor etiquette.

Markus continued after a moment's pause.

"This summons however, was not due to my father's failing health. Apparently my father has had the company start on large scale manufacturing instead of R&D. This manufacturing required large amounts of Dust. Naturally, this was sourced from Schnee Dust Company. While the White Fang have always been hostile towards Vault-tec they have now effectively declared war. While my father was briefing me on this, an ongoing hostage situation was resolved by a third party, the aftermath of which is responsible for my late return."

This explanation, while long winded, provided a lot of information that could explain his absence without really changing anything. None of the lies were actually relevant to his team and everything he claimed was unverifiable. Hopefully, this should deflect as much suspicion as possible. The verbose nature of the persona he was using also helped, no matter how pretentious he sounded to himself.
"Third party?" asked Ren in his typically laconic fashion.

"The hostages were rescued by unknown faction. Not Vault-tec and not the authorities."

Further discussion was prevented by the imminent need to get to class. An unintended consequence of the Courier maximizing the amount of sleep he got was the limited time it left for questions. In any case, the Courier felt he had answered all the questions he could be expected to know the answer to.

The consequences of the weekend further revealed themselves at lunch. Team RWBY was now able to explain the events of the previous couple of days on their end.

"So, tell us what happened," Markus said to Ruby, who eagerly launched into the events of the previous day.

"So Blake is a Faunus and has these really cute cat ears, and after she ran away she and the Faunus from the boat—who's actually named Sun and is really nice—spied on the White Fang and found out that they were working with Roman Torchwick and they got into a fight and Penny and I found them and Penny did some really cool things with her swords and wires but Roman got away and Weiss and Blake are friends now."

This was all said in a single breath with her words getting progressively faster and slightly higher in pitch as it went on. Markus had to a couple seconds to process this, repeating the words in his head until he could make sense of them. He had already known that Blake was a Faunus. The Faunus from the boat was named Sun, and was apparently now friends with Blake. The Courier resolved to find out exactly who he was and whether he posed any threat, either directly or indirectly.

That Blake spied on and actively fought against the White Fang indicated quite firmly that she was no longer affiliated. While spying on them alone would not be enough to rule out her being a mole or deep-cover agent, actively fighting them ruled it out. Instructing a deep-cover agent to actively fight against the White Fang in order to gain the trust of the organization she is embedded with would be a move of such subtlety and Machiavellianism that he put it past the capabilities of the White Fang. As far as he could tell, they were ideologically motivated thugs, largely devoid of the cunning needed to pull off actual covert operations. Smash and grab jobs appeared to be the height of their subtlety. Besides, there was hardly any strategic value for having a spy inside a school.

Markus was aware that this was an ironic statement, considering he himself was effectively a spy inside the school. However his motivations were essentially academic. He supposed it would be most accurate to describe himself as a student attending under false pretenses than a spy.

There was one other aspect that caught his attention: Roman Torchwick. Roman Torchwick, he remembered that name. Ah! It was from the airship to Beacon, seemingly an eternity ago. Roman had been on the news and was, quite distinctly, human.

"Why would the White Fang work with a human?" he voiced.

It was Blake who answered.

"I asked him the same thing, he said it was a 'business arrangement'"

The Courier, rather uncharacteristically, voiced his thoughts aloud.

"That doesn't make sense, why would the White Fang work with someone that was part of a group that they have clearly stated they want to exterminate?"
This time Yang spoke.

"It doesn't make sense to any of us either, and they didn't give us much in the way of an explanation."

The thing was, it did make some sense to the Courier, at the very least in the sense he could rationalize it. Roman must have something that the White Fang wanted desperately in order to get them to work with him. In return, when the White Fang's New World Order comes into effect Roman will be rewarded. Of course, it was far more likely that Roman, not being a fanatic, planned to simply betray the White Fang whenever it was convenient for him to do so. Both sides believed each had the upper hand over the other.

"Did you hear about the attack on the White Fang base?" asked Yang, "It happened last night, at the same time we were there, also at the docks."

"Why didn't we hear anything?" asked Ruby.

The Courier knew the answer to that question, and his team knew that he did. Nevertheless, he said nothing. He wanted to see who would speak if he didn't. As it happened, it was Weiss.

"The attacker used an unknown chemical agent to incapacitate the entire base in a matter of minutes. Police arrived to find about one hundred and eighty White Fang members dead, the rest unconscious. A further twenty have died from complications resulting from the chemical since. This is the first retaliation by a non-official entity against the White Fang. Public opinion has been mixed." This was partially her own words and partly read from a news article on her Scroll.

The Lone Courier could already see the argument that was brewing. He would need to find a way to either avert the conflict or act as damage control.
Markus knew what was coming, and he knew the difficulty inherent in his task. He would need to influence the conversation to cause all parties to arrive at the same conclusion he had if he hoped to have any allies at all. As much as he dreaded it, he acknowledged that a discussion on when use of deadly force was justified was always going to happen sooner or later. If he was going to be working with these kids for extended amount of time, he would have to do his best to ensure they were mentally prepared for war.

"Why did you say public opinion mixed?" asked Ruby.

"Some people support the use of deadly force against terrorists," supplied Markus.

He had tried to phrase that as diplomatically as possible, but the meaning of the sentence could only be softened so much.

"Just because the White Fang are criminals doesn't mean their lives don't matter," said Blake hotly.

Well, there went his best chance at avoiding this conversation. Blake was already up in arms about this. Weiss however, was doing anything but helping.

"I find it a bit hard to feel bad for people who would gladly kill me," she said archly.

While she did have a point, the very sound of her voice did her no favors. Despite the fact that she was justified in her sentiments, her self evident lack of empathy did her no favors. The Courier could see that supporting her in this argument was a sure path to failure.

"The Faunus of the White Fang aren't pure evil. They're just wrong. They don't deserve to die for being misguided!"

Blake was far too passionate about this to back down. She harbored surprisingly favorably sentiments towards a group that would put her blindfolded up against a wall just as eagerly as it would White.

Everyone else was quite wisely attempting to stay out of it now that those two were going at it again. Evidently the reconciliation they had had was one of affiliations and not ideals. The Courier wasn't exactly surprised. A lifetime of prejudice was not overcome in a matter of hours.

"Really, you of all people should know what they've done. Murderers deserve everything they get."

Funny how this had boiled down to the age-old capital punishment debate. While popular pre-war, practicality made it virtually forgotten in the post-apocalypse. It was not a question of morality but ability. Even the NCR lacked a robust court system that would be required for the administration of justice. Safety took priority when building a civilization. Keeping murderers locked up for the long term was both risky and a drain on resources that could be better spent on better people.

Ultimately, this was not an argument the Courier wanted to have. He had exactly one idea more chance of averting this, but after that, he was out of ideas, reasonable ones in any case.

Interrupting both of them, he said, "Stop arguing. Neither of you will convince the other, so stop wasting everyone's time."

His voice was a mix of bored and dismissive. Hopefully it would instill some sense of awareness at
the futility of this argument into the two girls. Both his words and his tone were partially designed to achieve a specific goal and partially an accurate reflection of Markus's actually sentiments.

"I would except somebody is trying to justify the murder of two hundred Faunus!"

"Well, I'm sorry that I don't feel sympathy when murderers are murdered!"

"Don't you see how this plays into what the White Fang say about humans?"

"Stop acting like an attack on a terrorist group is a hate crime!"

Well, he had tried. Out of ideas, he now needed to find new ones because this argument was still going on and—quite frankly—it was intolerable. On a list of annoying things, an argument between two people that weren't going to change their minds was up there with nails on a chalkboard and he had spent all his patience days ago. There was no way for him to intervene without actually becoming involved, something he had balked at doing previously for obvious reasons. Now, however, he did not really care anymore; he just wanted this to be over. At this point, the Courier was willing to take measures as drastic as necessary to resolve this, no matter how many bridges he would risk burning.

"Alea iacta est," he murmured. Quoting latin phrases was a rather annoying habit he had picked up from Arcade. No turning back now. He was going to have to do this.

"How about instead of spending the next twelve hours arguing, we establish some basic facts and move on with our lives?" While the sentence had an inquisitive inflection, the biting tone left no doubt that it was rhetorical.

There was a brief moment of silence. In contrast to his usual stilted eloquence and frequent silence, the stark change in attitude was enough to gain the immediate attention of everyone present, even Blake and Weiss. Ordinarily, the Courier would not have spoken quite so authoritatively, but he knew for a fact that any attempt to save the group from this fresh hell would have the instant support of the silent majority. Nevertheless, the Courier took a more conciliatory tone for his next question.

"Blake, is it accurate to say that the White Fang consider humanity the enemy?"

Blake hesitated. Both teams looked at her. There was a sudden tension in the air.

The Courier had calculated this question. Everyone knew the answer, but making Blake say it, and framing it as an admission, was crucial to weakening Blake's confidence in her self-righteousness. Markus also maintained unwavering eye contact with her as he awaited her answer. This was mostly due to the fact that everyone was waiting for the next movement. And he had a very good idea of what he wanted the next move to be, and he certainly wasn't going to be the one making it. The Courier was approaching the initial portion of his intervention with the characteristics almost of a cross examination. While this was risky, due to its slightly combative nature, it was a crucial step in his eventual consensus building.

Finally, Blakes eyes dropped and her whole demeanor took an almost defeated posture.

"It didn't used to be," she said quietly.

The question had been worded in such a way that Blake had no easy way out. Even this indirect answer left little room for sympathy with the White Fang. The implied admission that the White Fang considered all of humanity its enemy was probably enough. But the Courier nevertheless pressed the issue, though with a different approach.
"But it is now," he said softly.

Blake nodded.

There it was, what he was looking for: a direct answer. With this admission from Blake, he could maneuver the conversation into a position whereby she would hopefully be convinced that deadly force was justified against someone who was using it against you.

The Courier now addressed both teams, rather than Blake specifically. He made sure to meet all their eyes. Most of them looked worried and conflicted. None of them were sure how to feel, but they were all more concerned about stopping this fight between Blake and Weiss before it got out of hand. One emotion he hadn't expected to be able to find was hope. Nevertheless, it was there, mainly in the childlike gaze of Ruby. Hope that he could resolve this. The Courier had forgotten what dealing with an irrepressible optimist was like. He hoped her faith wasn't misplaced.

"It can be said that the White Fang have declared war on humanity. Despite the fact the White Fang want us all dead, it would be a mistake to assume that the White Fang is a group composed entirely of the criminally insane."

The Lone Courier spoke these "facts" flatly, rather than authoritatively. He was not trying to convince them, but rather establish common ground. His aim was not to tell them what to believe, but rather lead them to the conclusion that he wanted them to draw.

"Of course, there are obviously some real psychopaths in the White Fang, but for the most part, they're people who have been deceived. People convinced that we're evil. Most of them are operating under false assumptions. The vast majority of the White Fang are mislead."

The Courier had subtly transitioned to a less factual and more persuasive tone. At this point, the dominant emotion of his audience was confusion, especially from Blake and White. No one quite understood where he was going with this.

"But," the Courier raised a finger, "if someone is trying to kill you, does it make any difference if they're evil or just mislead?"

The Courier leaned back a bit, appearing to relax slightly. This was, of course, a calculated move. By asking a question-and not providing an answer-he had avoided the impression that he was trying to convince them of anything. The question hung in the air. The Courier watched each of them very closely, seeing if any of them would actually try to answer the question. He didn't expect any of them to, considering the fact moral questions normally take more than a moment's thought and he had no intention of giving them long enough to actually formulate a proper response.

"In any case," said the Courier with a dismissive wave of his hand, "this argument is pointless. Blake is sympathetic to the cause of the White Fang for deeply ingrained and obvious reasons. Weiss is hostile for equally obvious and equally personal reasons. Both of you are too invested in the subject for the other to change their mind. In regards to the raid, it gets even more complicated. The attacker, or attackers, rescued hostages. None of the hostages were at all exposed to the chemical agent." He paused for dramatic effect. "This was not just a raid. It was a rescue."

There was another pause while this information was digested.

"Who do you think did it?" said Ruby excitedly.

Ruby's unusually upbeat question about speculating on the identity of the perpetrator of a brutal raid did very successfully change the topic of conversation. Now that the conversation had taken an
entirely different tone, he could consider his involvement finished.

One thing that Markus had done that he could not be entirely sure the consequences of was bring up the possibility that deadly force could be justified, even against people that weren't evil. He was almost certain that the question would stick with all of them. Whether they would agree with or reject that idea he did not yet know.

Either way, the two girls were no longer arguing. Markus smiled internally, though he maintained an outward deadpan. Mission accomplished.
Following his raid on the White Fang, Markus had virtually given up making any progress on matters of interest while at Beacon. The lack of privacy made clandestine activities difficult. Even if he his stealth suit afforded him the ability to slip away whenever he wished, his absence and subsequent tiredness was noted by all.

It was because of this that he was forced to take things slowly. This was something alien enough to him to cause his baseless anxiety. For once, he was not on a timer. There was no impending doom that needed to be avoided. No Enclave with the purifier, no Legion across the river. Nevertheless, his perceived inaction was something he was highly uncomfortable with but there was no sense in blowing his cover in favor of ultimately unneeded haste.

Somewhat counterintuitively, he was also in no great hurry to return to the Wasteland. While there were things he could help with there, the NCR and Brotherhood should have it well in hand. The Lone Courier was beginning to develop a tentative idea that if he could alleviate the pressure of the White Fang and Grimm on the societies of Remnant he could reveal the plight of North America to them and convince them to aid in the reconstruction of society. Even though these "kingdoms" had relatively small populations in comparison to Old World nations, their resources and expertise would be invaluable in the rebuilding of the world.

Still, that did not mean that Markus was not trying to fix the Transportalponder. There were too many mysteries here that could not be solved by logic or his existing knowledge of the universe. These phenomena would need to be observed in laboratory conditions to be understood. The Think Tank were his best bet if he wanted the information needed to fully exploit the properties of Aura and Dust. He would remain where he was for the time being, but he wanted to be able to move back and forth freely.

It was because of this that the Courier was supremely grateful when he found that there would be a two week break between semesters. Not enough time to do everything he wanted, but enough to set things in motion.

Back in his rented apartment in Vale, he analyzed the condition of the Transportalponder further. Thankfully, the actual mechanism that created the portal appeared to be intact. He did not understand the mechanics the Think Tank had based their particular brand of teleportation on well enough to engineer another one. A key circuit board however, appeared to be fried. All parts were present and recognizable.

Having an idea, the Courier detached the fried piece from the rest of the shell carefully, and digitized it. He then searched through the files in his Pip-boy for the 3D schematics of the board. Markus spent the next few days separating all the components in the file that would need to be manufactured separately.

He then sent schematics of each of the individual parts to a different location to be manufactured. These would all be shipped to a warehouse which would ship them here. Different contractors from as diverse locations and backgrounds as were feasible would be used for each of these steps. Each was meticulously researched before being approved to contract the manufacturing job. By nature these were companies regularly used for military technology and would hopefully not be unused to secrecy. In any case, the decentralized manufacturing should keep the complete designs out of anyone's hands. This would ensure that no one knew how to make this piece of technology. While it may not have been useful on its own, the Courier was entirely unwilling to allow any uncontrolled leak of information.
The most significant drawback was the fact that he had no means to have the part shipped to Beacon. Despite this, and the sleep he had lost researching dozens of firms, the Courier was broadly satisfied with the progress he had made on this issue.

Now, he went on to examine the progress of the project he had initialized remotely. The manufacturing of the first order of supersonic and hollowpoint Dust rounds was complete. He authorized the shipping of them. One small crate full on various kinds was set to arrive at his residence with strict orders (and bribes) not to open it. While ordering ammunition was probably fine in this society, he wasn't chancing it. While he waited for the product to hit the market, he started his next project.

The Lone Courier had found a plethora of blueprints for experimental and prototype ballistic weapons in a USSOCOM research facility. While most were never utilized en masse due to the focus in research moving towards energy weapons, they were still deadly and effective. The Courier had assembled many of these himself. The primary reason was that energy weapons, while quieter than most guns, couldn't be silenced. Even worse, they acted like constant tracers, and tracers work both ways. One shot from a laser rifle and everyone for a mile knows where you are. The Courier did make substantial use of energy weapons, especially in situations of open combat, but given his preference for quiet solutions, ballistic weapons were the workhorse of his arsenal. Moreover, in Remnant he could not use energy weapons for obvious reasons. Therefore, he set about looking for something to suit his new needs.

The size of the Grimm he had encountered during initiation was a source of great concern to Markus. The fact was, the anti-materiel rifle, the most powerful weapon he was capable of overtly using, had done (comparatively) very little damage to the creatures. His other weapons were nearly useless against them. That battle might have gone a lot worse had the terrain been not as advantageous. So, the Lone Wanderer once again searched through the documents he had on various prototype weapons for something that might do the job better.

As it turned out, that weapon was the Barrett XM109. It was the highest caliber prototype he could find. It was classified as an objective sniper weapon and commonly known as the Payload Rifle. It fired 25 × 59 mm high velocity grenade rounds and-in testing conditions-was capable of eliminating light armor at a range of two thousand meters. This was the perfect weapon for the situation.

Over the next few days he worked eagerly, ignoring his fatigue, at changing the schematic into harmless parts that could be sent for manufacturing. He took extra care that no one would be able to recreate this. The measures he had used to ensure the secrecy of the chip were strengthened by hush money. He could not risk this getting out. Someone with one of these could take out an entire Brotherhood of Steel chapter.

The manufacturing of weapon parts would be finished much sooner than the more intricate electronics that he need to fix the Transportalponder. He should be able to get the weapon before he would have to return to Beacon.

It had been a few days since he had shipped the new ammunition types. The reverse engineering of the objects he wanted manufactured and his commitment to total secrecy cost him a significant amount of time. Now, he was looking at the results of his attempt to break into the ammunition market of Remnant. Sales were largely as predicted. The hollow point rounds had been marketed towards law enforcement and sales performed well in that sector. A few supersonic rounds had bought by the military (presumably for testing purposes) but the majority were purchased by retailers. While the release of these innovations did make the news, it wasn't frontpage/headline grade. New kinds of ammunition were not sensationalist enough for the media. Still, now the
important people knew the name "Vault-tec". Not the general public, but people in the political, economic, and military sectors were now likely aware of his company's presence.

Notably the ammunition seemed to have made at least some stir in the weapon enthusiast community for the novelty of supersonic rounds more than anything else. The phrase "supersonic" apparently made the product interesting enough within that niche to warrant attention. It was not something that the Courier had really thought much about. He supposed it didn't matter much, but had the benefit of ensuring Vault Tec had some sort of name recognition in even a small sector of the general public.

Now, the Lone Courier had done as much as he felt he was going to do during this break. There weren't that many days left and moreover he had no idea of what he needed to do. Therefore, he set about doing the only thing he could think of, hacking the White Fang, albeit at a more casual pace. While he had no intention of defeating the White Fang by killing literally the entire membership of the organization, knowledge of the location of their bases of operation would be invaluable. For now he settled with arresting their plans and preventing attacks. It was simply not feasible to attempt to kill a minimum of several thousand guerrillas all by himself while simultaneously attending Beacon. Unfortunately, what the Courier had found upon breaching the numerous platforms used by the White Fang to communicate was anything but good news. The initial hack had caused the reaction of widespread paranoia of further breaches. As such, it had been decided that virtually all levels of communication were to low tech in order to avoid leaks. While this meant that the White Fang quite likely now had a literal paper trail, something terrible for their operational security, the fact that the Courier was spending most of his time at Beacon, combined with his little knowledge of the operational trends of the White Fang meant that he was unable to exploit this.

The Courier was faced with the frustrating reality that his chosen target was temporarily beyond his reach. So long as he intended to attend Beacon, he could not effectively pursue the White Fang. And for numerous reasons, he was unwilling to leave the school to devote himself entirely to the destruction of the White Fang. He would content himself with making every effort he could from Beacon.

Unsatisfied but resigned to stagnation on that front, the Courier moved to setting up some of the more ancillary but still important aspects of life outside of Beacon that he had neglected.

The first thing he did was go shopping. This was something he had never really done in the conventional sense but, as it turned out, shopping for clothes was little different than shopping for weapons. While the Courier was accustomed to wearing the same thing for long periods, he was aware that in a fully functioning society that was considered at the very least odd. Especially considering his assumed place in said society. Benny's suit, Beacon uniforms, and various kinds of armor were not sufficient for interacting in wider civilian society.

To this end, he resolved to acquire several more suits, with most being at least a little more understated than the rather garish checkered pattern of Benny's Suit. As well, he would need some more "ordinary" clothes. Dressing formally brought attention, and should he need to avoid recognition, have clothes atypical of his usual wear would be helpful.

This effort by the Courier also revealed a weakness in his current logistical capabilities: he was forced to either walk or rely on public transportation. While he could of course acquire a vehicle with little difficulty, the fact was that he lacked the license needed to operate one. Getting one would not be terribly difficult, even were he to go entirely through the proper channels, however it would require a relatively large investment of time. The fact that he needed a physical object was where the primary difficulty lay. It was because of this that the Courier chose the perceived path of
least resistance. Vault-Tec was about to get its first proper employee.
The True Burden of Leadership

From the Courier's relatively limited understanding of upper class society, having a driver was a common symbol of status. In his case, a driver was doubly useful, being apart from the suit he had taken from a dead man—something that would materially support his story. Actual people would need to be involved in Vault-Tec sooner or later in a far more direct manner than he had previously utilized if it was to exist anywhere other than on paper. A driver would be a highly visible employee, something that would passively reinforce the existence of his company in the mind of anyone who met him.

Nevertheless, the first order of business was acquiring a vehicle that the driver would be driving. The first instinct of the Courier was to get whatever this place's nearest equivalent to an MRAP was. He knew ambushing vehicles carrying VIPs was a standard tactic in the playbook of terrorists. Given that he had just kicked the proverbial hornets nest then spat on it for good measure, reprisals against him from the White Fang were not unlikely. He did not want to die at the hands of some amateurs who had managed to get their hands on a mine. More importantly, he did not want to put his driver in that kind of danger. He was not putting civilians into the line of fire if he could help it.

But that brought up a better question. Why should his driver be a civilian? With the kind of pay he was willing to offer, he was confident he could get someone with at least some degree of combat experience.

This was also crucial due to the fact that the Courier doubted he could realistically justify acquiring and utilizing an MRAP—or Remnant's equivalent—no matter how much he bigged up the threat the White Fang supposedly posed to his family. He would need something more understated in its paranoia. Similarly, he would need something a bit more obvious in its wealth. He needed create as much of an indication as possible that this company existed and he came from a background of privilege rather than a literal hole in the ground.

As it turned out, the Courier did strike at least one lucky break. It seemed that he was not unique in his paranoia, or at the very least, less unique than he had expected, especially on Remnant. It appeared that there was already a market for luxury vehicles with no small amount of armor. The White Fang's history of assassinations and attacks targeting officials and high ranking employees of the SDC had led to there being a sufficient demand for armored status symbols to allow the Courier to acquire one without having to armor it himself.

While that was one stroke of luck, the matter of a driver still required resolution, and would likely be less easy than the rather straightforward process of acquiring a product sold on the open market.

While the Courier knew that there were means by which he could delegate the search for a driver, however considering the amount of trust requisite to the position, he did not believe the convenience of delegating the task was worth the cost of security.

Therefore the Courier began the tedious process of individually screening candidates for the coveted position of occasionally driving him from one place to another. His requirements were not particularly stringent. The problem was that the qualities he searched for were not commonly enumerated on a resume. Combat experience was easily found. The larger issue was that the Courier insisted on conducting background checks on any promising candidates. The primary characteristic he searched for was a lack of connection with organized crime and the White Fang.

If the Courier only had to account for the White Fang, he would have felt safe with any human driver that could handle themselves in a tight spot. But the fact that the White Fang was willing to
work with humans meant that this would not be enough. Therefore what the Courier was really looking for were candidates that would never betray him to the White Fang. Candidates that had a history that meant no matter what they were offered, they would never deal with the organization. The Courier was looking for someone who hated the White Fang.

Unfortunately, that was something people rarely put on their CV's.

It was because of this that the Courier was reduced to individually vetting each of the candidates by looking into their personal histories through every legal means available to him on Remnant's "net." What he was looking for was someone that had something personal against the White Fang, something that would make them unshakably opposed. By nature, this particular cross section was highly narrow. This did not perturb the Courier. If there was one thing he was uncompromising on, it was his paranoia. Therefore it was only a couple of twenty hour days later that the Courier believed he had found someone suitable.

Her name was Jennifer Albiona. From Atlas, and had attended combat academies for a number of years. She wasn't exactly the ideal candidate, from the Courier's point of view. That she was only a few years older than he was meant that her actual combat experience was likely to be limited. However, the Courier couldn't afford to be more picky than he already was. The fact that her parents had been killed only a few years ago by the White Fang was something Markus was uncomfortable with admitting made her an ideal candidate as far as security went.

How she had ended up as a driver, despite a promising early career in combat schools seemed to be related to the deaths of her parents. All academic information he could find on her ended in the same year. The Courier wasn't exactly surprised. Tragedy frequently derailed lives.

Well, the Courier supposed it would do. He wouldn't be making that much use of a driver in any case. All that was left was to make the call.

The next event of note was the delivery of the XM109. All the parts arrived on the same day, a mere two days before the new term started. Markus had been starting to worry that it would not arrive before he needed to leave. Putting it together took a little while. Even with his knowledge of weapons, weapon assembly was always difficult without practice.

He had ordered large amounts of 25mm dust rounds of all types. The Lone Courier had found no information on the commonality of large Grimm and thusly felt the need to prepare for engaging large numbers of them if necessary. To be honest, he did not really expect to use the XM109 frequently as most of his conflict would likely be with the White Fang, who were inherently softer targets. .308 would be sufficient from a high powered rifle. The Barrett was for harder targets such as ginormous Grimm if they came in greater numbers. He did not want to have to resort to Gauss rifles and Mini-Nukes. There was no way that he could use those without blowing his cover.

The break from Beacon was over sooner than he would have liked. Markus had not had the opportunity to act against the White Fang further. Frustrating the plans of the enemy was crucial to the art of war. Inaction meant losing the initiative. Still, he was pleased with his progress. He had set everything he needed in motion. All that was currently required was that for him to wait.

He had returned to Beacon one day before classes started in order to give himself some leeway in case things had happened. He was not expecting anything specific to happen, but nevertheless ensured he would have the upper hand if anything did happen.

Upon returning, the Courier found that Ren and Nora had not left Beacon during the break and that Pyrrha returned only shortly after he did. Everything was going very much as Markus had hoped it would go. Until lunch, that was.
They were sitting with team RWBY as always, with each team on one side of the table. Yan was catching grapes with her mouth that Nora flung joyfully at her with a spoon.

"Whatcha doing?" the blonde asked her partner.

"Nothing." Blake closed a book she had been absorbed in. "Just going over notes from last semester."

Yang caught another grape in her mouth. "Lame."

Out of seemingly nowhere, Ruby appeared, holding a massive binder. The Courier was certain she used her semblance to get around. Speaking of which, it disconcerted him just how fast she was. The speeds she was reaching were inexplicably high. While his initial inclination was to have the Brains examine her Semblance at some point, he realized he could not do so without risking her lobotomization.

His thoughts were interrupted by the enormous slam of Ruby dropping the binder onto the table. On the cover "Vytal Festival Activities, Property of Weiss Schnee" was crossed out with a red pen, a new title, "Best Day Ever Activities," was written underneath. Ruby cleared her throat.

She then proceed to give a speech that had far too many references to things that the people of Remnant evidently had no knowledge of. There were allusions to everything from Shakespeare to presidential speeches. He supposed that the lies Remnant was based upon might have incorporated the truth for believability. Still, he did not know why (presumably) Vault-tec had decided to change/obscure history.

"What are you talking about?" asked an understandably confused Blake.

"I'm talking about kicking off the semester with a bang!"

"I always kick my semesters off with a Yang! Eh? Guys? Am I right?"

Nora booed and threw an apple at Yang that hit her squarely in the face. Ruby ignored the pun and continued.

"Look guys, it's been a good two weeks and between more exchange students arriving and the tournament at the end of the year, our second semester is going to be great! But, classes start back up tomorrow! Which is why I've taken the time to schedule a series of wonderful events for us today."

"I don't know whether to be proud or scared of what you have in store," said White.

"Scared," thought Markus,"You should be very afraid." Hyperactive children were not famed for making the best of plans. Yang picked up an apple and threw it across the room. It hit an unknown person. Nora giggled.

"I don't know," said Blake, "I think I might just sit this one out."

"Sit out or not, I think that however we spend this last day, we should do it as a team!" said White.

"I got it!" shouted Nora in affirmation.

"I for one think that.." Weiss was interrupted by a pie, thrown from Nora, that impacted her directly in the face.
Ren face palmed while Pyrrha covered her mouth in shock. Markus was already looking for cover and exits and deciding between the two.

This was a difficult decision. He knew what was about to happen. He had had what one would consider to be a fairly normal childhood by pre-war standards in Vault 101, it was why his father had taken him there after all. It was evident that a full-on food fight would occur. Personally, he would have simply left the room as discreetly as possible however, that would appear antisocial and he would be abandoning his team. So, it didn't matter how he felt about the matter. The food fight was happening and he was stuck in it because his team was involved. So, as the food started to fly, his adrenaline spiked and the team ran to the far end of the room from the door. He flipped a table on its side and took cover behind it.

The Courier was nearly operating purely on combat instincts although he still maintained the presence of mind needed to keep things safe. He didn't want to hurt anyone. He hoped to increase bonds between the members of the team and show that he was capable of leading in a tactical sense, even if this was only in a mock engagement. There was no time for deep analysis in a fight such as this however. Instinct was the dominant factor. No matter what happened, one thing was clear, this was going to be messy.

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