These Broken Wings
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**These Broken Wings**  
by [FandomLastsForever](http://archiveofourown.org/works/9292019)

**Summary**

Magic, romance, grand displays of heroism. All of these and more are depicted in the legends of Remnant, as varied as the world itself. But one thing all the stories have in common are four relics of immense power.

James finds himself in possession of one of these relics, and as the world around him begins to crumble, it's up to his butler Qrow to escort him away from the dying kingdom in the north, coming across various colorful characters as they fight to survive, and face their demons together.
Chapter Summary

Earl James Ironwood awakes from a nightmare. Qrow has some unexpected visitors.

_The winds bore down on his flesh. Pain was ebbing away in time with the beat of his heart. He couldn't breath. He couldn't move his body. He could only scream._

"It's cold."

"My Lord, are you okay?"

"It's too dark."

"Wake up, please."

"Where am I?"

"Hey."

"Help me."

"My Lord, please!"

"Someone please. Help me!"

"JAMES WAKE UP!"

James' eyes flew open as he gasped for air. Sweat clung to his forehead, plastering his hair to his face. At his bedside, sitting on the edge of the mattress, was a man in a well tailored suit, with a pair of red eyes gazing at him in concern.

"Qrow?" James mumbled groggily.

"I'm here," the man replied worriedly."What's wrong? You were crying in your sleep, and you were tossing and turning pretty badly."

"Crying?" James slowly sat up, running his metallic fingers through his hair as he tried to get his breathing under control. His lips tasted like salt. "I'm fine, Qrow. It's nothing."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure," James sighed. "Can you prepare the bath for me? I need to wash up."

"Yes, My Lord," Qrow replied calmly as he stood.

"And Qrow?"

"Yes?"
"Cut the "My Lord" part, please. Just James will do when we're alone."

There was a pregnant pause. Qrow stared at him for a moment, taken aback by the request. It was a little unorthodox, James had to admit. But if it was just them, he didn't mind if he used his name. If anything, James preferred it over the usual "My Lord".

"Sure, James," Qrow agreed hesitantly. "If that's okay with you, I'll stick with that when we're alone." He gave James a quick bow, then turned on his heel to draw the bath.

James nodded and watched as his butler made his way out of the room and down the hall. Pinching the bridge of his nose, he threw off the blankets and slipped on his favorite bathrobe.

How did things get like this? he asked himself. Things had changed so fast he couldn't keep up. Over and over, it played in his head. The day Qrow came to live with him.

"Starting today," Ozpin had said, "you will have a personal assistant. A Butler of sorts. Meet Qrow Branwen."

"A butler? Ozpin, what are you planning?" James had asked. He never did get an answer to that question. Ozpin just left Qrow there, saying to just let him do his job. James never wanted a butler. He just wanted to be alone.

At least, he did at first.

James made his way slowly out of the master bedroom, making his way down the long hallway. The walls were bathed in the silver moonlight, casting shadows across the floor. It was probably very early in the morning. Perhaps 2:30am at the latest. A strange time to get into the tub, but he couldn't care less. He needed it.

"The bath is ready," Qrow said as James came in. "If you'd like, I can also have some hot cocoa prepared for you as well."

"That sounds good," James sighed. "Thank you, Qrow."

"No problem, Ja-" Qrow froze, eyes narrowing.

"Something wrong?" James inquired.

"No, James," Qrow assured him. "Just some insects. I'll take care of it. You enjoy your bath, and I'll have the cocoa taken to the parlor when you're ready."

"R-right." James watched him leave the bathroom, waited just one minute, and then locked the door. Whatever had caused that look on Qrow's face, James didn't want to see it.

He had had enough nightmares for one night.

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Back-flip, kick, lean left.

"Dammit! He's too fast!"

Swing once, twice, three times.
"Shit, let's get out of here!"

"He's a monster!!"

_EscAPE._

"Oh God! No! No!!"

_Last one._

Without a second thought, Qrow struck down the last intruder. There had been a total of ten goons. He took off their masks, picking them up and inspecting them closely. White visor style with intricate red markings, reminiscent of the beasts.

"So," Qrow hissed. "They've taken to Grimm Masks...How pathetic."

"You would know all about being pathetic, wouldn't you Qrow?"

Without a second to spare, Qrow spun on the tip of his toes, swinging his blade at an angle to remove the legs of his opponent. But there was no one there.

"Too slow."

A blow to the wrist, a grab of his collar, and with a single motion, Qrow was thrown to the ground and pinned down by a woman in a full faced Grimm mask, her hand tightly clenched around his throat.

If it were any other circumstance, any other opponent, he'd be terrified.

But this didn't terrify him at all.

"Hello Raven," he choked. "Those goons yours?"

"No," the masked woman sighed. "If they were, you'd be far more exhausted." She slowly stood up, letting go of his neck and pulling Qrow up with her by his hand as she did. "You looked as if you didn't break a sweat."

"They weren't really worth the effort," Qrow grumbled. "What do you want, Raven?"

Raven let out a snicker as she removed her mask. "Can't a girl visit her family?"

"She can," Qrow hummed. "But you're not. So why are you here?"

"You're not happy to see me."

"I'm kind of busy. If you make an appointment, _maybe_ we can talk."

Raven's smile faded into a harsh grimace. "I came here to bring you home. You don't belong here, brother."

"That's where you're wrong, sister," Qrow growled. "I've got a purpose here, and I'm not leaving until it's fulfilled."

"But a butler?"

"Better than a bandit."
"Qrow-"

"Look Rae," Qrow sighed as he picked up his sword, "I've got to go. I'm supposed to have hot cocoa ready for the Lord and I can't keep him waiting. Now get going."

"But Qrow-"

"If you don't leave willingly," Qrow warned, "I'll have to force you."

Raven stared at him for a moment before slipping on her mask once more. "Very well. But someday soon, Qrow, you're coming back with me." She drew her blade, crimson as their eyes, and in one swing summoned the swirling void, vanishing into the darkness of night as she entered.

"Yeah," Qrow scoffed. "I'm sure I will."

James was sitting in the parlor, curled up in his favorite chair as his eyes skimmed across the page of his favorite novel. Violet's Garden always made him feel calm after a bad night. He wasn't sure what about the novel made him feel better, but it was a comfort he treasured greatly.

Sadly, he was pulled from the world in its pages by a knock on the door.

"James?" Qrow called. "Your cocoa is ready."

"Come in."

Qrow slowly entered the parlor, carrying a silver tray with two mugs of hot cocoa, along with a plate of cookies and a small bowl of marshmallows. He set it on the table by James' chair.

"Thank you, Qrow," James said gratefully.

"Sure thing, James," Qrow replied. "Hope you don't mind the cookies and marshies. I wasn't sure if you wanted either."

"A few marshmallows sound good," James said with a smile. "What's with the second mug?"

"I thought you might want a second cup," Qrow shrugged. "It's my in-law's recipe. Too good to have only one mug."

"Why don't you have a seat?" James offered. "Enjoy the cocoa with me."

"I-I-I don't think that's appropriate," Qrow stammered.

"Would you do it if it were an order?"

Qrow raised an eyebrow at him. "Are you seriously ordering me to have cocoa right now?"

"Maybe?" James slowly removed his glasses as he reached over to pick up a mug. "If I remember right, you're my employee, and have to do as I ask regardless of the request."

It took a moment, but Qrow finally let his posture relax, huffing out a long breath as he took the seat across from him. James was rather happy to see him finally cut loose, even if it were a little.
The two of them added their fill of mallows to their drinks, with Qrow pulling out a flask to add to the mix as he sipped away. James set his book down and reached for a cookie.

"So tell me," James hummed. "Who was it outside earlier? You were gone for about a half hour."

"White Fang," Qrow grumbled. "Ten of them. Not very good fighters. Chances are they were scouts."

"And you-?"

"Disposed of the trespassers," Qrow added simply. "I've arranged for their remains to be properly laid to rest."

"Was that all?"

Qrow didn't answer right away. That was not a good sign.

"Qrow," James urged. "Was it just the White Fang outside on the grounds?"

"No," Qrow answered. He took a swig from the flask. "My sister also popped up. Tried to take me back with her."

"Your sister?" James queried. "Back where?"

"It doesn't matter," Qrow mumbled. "James...there's some things you don't need to know...and things you should never know...Please..."

_Some things I should never know_, James pondered. _What is it that you're hiding from me?_ He decided not to push it further. There was a time and place for questions, and as he watched his companion down the entire contents of his flask, James agreed this was neither. Both of them were tired, and such a topic was best saved for when both of them were fully capable of talking about demons without fear.


"But?"

"Promise me, someday, you'll tell me about your past. Only when you're ready though."

Qrow contemplated this request as he loosened his blood red tie. James took a sip of his cocoa, trying hard not to stare. His eyes caught the gleam of a cross dangling from his butler's strong neck. He had never pegged Qrow as a very religious man.

"Alright," Qrow sighed. "Someday, I'll tell you. But only if you'll tell me about your nightmares, when you're ready."

"Sure," James said. "Someday."

"Someday."

The two of them finished their snacks in silence. Once James had his fill, Qrow collected the tray and placed it in the dumbwaiter. James started making his way to the door, stopping only a foot from it as his breathing began to quicken. The room seemed to vanish momentarily, replaced by the dark, cold wasteland of his nightmares.

"No," he whispered.
"James?"

"Not again."

"James, look at me."

A pair of hands came to rest on his cheeks, snapping him out of his daze. Red eyes were gazing worriedly at him. His cheeks were damp. *Had he been crying?*

"Qrow?"

"I'm here, Jim," Qrow said softly. "I've got you. I've got you."

James took a deep, shaky breath, trying to remain calm. The nightmares weren't frequent, but when they hit, they hit hard, and they were as cold and unforgiving as ever.

"Come on James," Qrow whispered. "Let's get you back to bed."

"Okay," James mumbled. James felt the hands fall from his face, and Qrow's left hand gently took hold James' metal right, giving him a reassuring squeeze to let him know that he's not alone.

"Perhaps," Qrow said gently, "it might be a good idea to reschedule the appointments you have within the next twenty-four hours. You need your rest, and in your condition, meeting with Schnee would be more of a hindrance than a help."

"That might be a good idea," James agreed. "Can you take care of that for me come daybreak?"

"Of course."

"And be sure to warn them to be on the lookout. If the White Fang came here, they'll probably be after the others too."

"I'll be sure to inform them."

They made it back to the master bedroom and James crawled under the covers. Qrow gently tucked him in, making sure that he was as comfortable as possible.

"I'll bring you breakfast in bed come morning," Qrow promised. "With freshly ground coffee. The nice roast from Vacuo. And maybe a light fruit salad too. Sound good?"

"Sure," James mumbled. He couldn't care less about breakfast.

"Well, I better go," Qrow said. "Sleep well James."

"Wait!" James gasped, grabbing Qrow's hand tightly. He wasn't sure what came over him, but he couldn't bear the thought of being alone in that giant room with only his thoughts.

"James, what's wrong?" Qrow asked.

"Please," James whimpered. "Don't go."

"Do you..." Qrow began slowly. "Do you want me to lay with you until you're fully asleep?"

James lightly nodded. It was humiliating, he thought, to be showing himself in such a weak state. But Qrow didn't seem to think so. He curled up against him, lightly wrapping an arm around James' broad shoulders. James was on his side, his head now resting against Qrow's chest as he slowly
began drifting to sleep. He could feel fingers slowly running through his hair, a mellow lullaby filling his ears, and the strong, soothing beat of Qrow's heart. Soon, James had fallen into a deep slumber.

The first peaceful rest he'd had years.

Qrow awoke the next morning just before sunrise, still curled up in James' bed. At some point in the night, the two of them had ended up forehead to forehead, their limbs tangled together. A hot flush crawled across his neck as he gently made his out of the embrace so as not to wake James. He hurried quietly out of the room to his own quarters, quickly rinsing off in the little shower that had been installed for him.

"It doesn't mean anything," Qrow told himself. "It was a moment of weakness. We all have them. That's all it was, nothing more." He hopped out of the shower and quickly dried himself off. In no time flat, he was fully dressed in a clean suit and on his way to take care of his duties.

First, he noted, is to call all those upper crusts he was supposed to meet today.

Qrow went to the office first, calling all of James' acquaintances he was supposed to meet with that day. When the help answered the phone, they passed the message along to their employers. The Countess, a kind woman by the name of Glynda Goodwitch, was very understanding, as was the visiting Chief of Menagerie, Ghira Belladonna. Both had wished James a speedy recovery, agreeing to hold their meetings tomorrow rather than this afternoon. The only one left to worry about was The Baron, Lord Jacques Schnee. He was typically not a patient man.

If he's even a man at all, Qrow thought silently. He stood at the phone, waiting for someone to answer.

"Schnee Residence," came a cheery voice.

"Klein?" Qrow asked. "That you old chum?"

"Qrow!" Klein gasped. "How are you?"

"I'm good," Qrow chuckled. "I'm calling on behalf of Earl Ironwood. Can you give your boss a message for him?"

"Certainly."

"Can you tell him the Earl isn't feeling well enough for meetings today and would like to reschedule for tomorrow? Same time as before?"

"Of course," Klein agreed. "I'll be sure to tell him."

"Also, Klein?"

"Yes?"

"We had a bit of an intrusion last night as well," Qrow explained. "Might want to beef up security. It's the White Fang. They've taken to wearing Grimm masks, so be on the lookout."
"Oh goodness," Klein muttered anxiously. "Thank you for the warning. I'll make arrangements to increase security. Do stay safe."

"You too Klein. Talk to you later."

He finished the call and made his way down to the kitchens to prepare breakfast. As much as he trusted and appreciated the cooking staff, he thought it might be best if he made it for James himself. He had an idea of what to make that might help soothe his nerves. A nice blueberry salad with orange slices and a small side of granola. Hopefully, he'll have enough of an appetite. Qrow brewed a pot of coffee, preparing the breakfast tray and making sure that it had all the fixings that James might want.

"Working hard I see."

Qrow looked over to the window. A warm smile grew over his face as a pair of golden eyes with pearly hair climbed in and strolled over to him. "Oz, long time no see."

"Far too long," Ozpin agreed. "How are things?"

"Good, I think," said Qrow. "James is still in bed. We had a bit of an intrusion last night, but otherwise, I think we're okay here."

"An intrusion?"

"White Fang. Ten of them," Qrow bragged. "Took care of them. And Raven showed up too, but I scared her off."

"Qrow-"

"That last one was a joke. She left willingly."

"I see..."

Ozpin's smile had vanished, a look of concern replacing it, making Qrow's own beaming face falter fearfully. "Oz? Everything okay?"

"Mh? Oh, of course," they replied. "I'm just making a note of things I need to take care of."

Their smile returned as they gently caressed Qrow's cheek. "You're doing well, My Qrow. Keep up the good work."

"Of course Oz," Qrow murmured contently, gently nuzzling into the touch. "Anything for you."

A delighted blush crossed his cheeks as Ozpin ruffled his hair. With a quick peck on the cheek, the bespectacled charmer hurried out the window from whence they came. Qrow let out an amused laugh as he finished preparing breakfast for his employer.

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Ozpin quickly returned to their estate on the far end of town, deep within the only forest that had the determination to grow in such a frozen continent. It was a far deal smaller than the rest of the homes of the Kingdom of Atlas, but it was cozy. It was warm, welcoming, and well maintained. It was a place they could call home.
But they knew, deep down, that this place wouldn't be home forever.

Ozpin entered the house, locking the front door and all the windows, closing the curtains as they did so. They scurried to the kitchen and flew down the stairs to the cellar where, behind the large wine cabinet, was the vault lay in hiding. With a grunt, they pushed the cabinet aside, turned the dial to unlock it, and pulled the door wide open. Inside, glowing softly from its glass case, were four small stones.

"Still there," they sighed in relief. "For now." Oz locked the vault again, placed the cabinet back, and hurried back upstairs. They had to hurry. If the White Fang was here, there wasn't a moment to lose.

They climbed upstairs and slid into their office, taking a seat at the desk and setting to work. Their golden gaze only flickered up for a moment to glance at the framed photographs by the old glass lamp. There, smiling back at them, were friends and loved ones, with the brightest eyes gazing at them coming from a photo of rusty eyed corvid on the windowsill.

"I'm sorry," Ozpin whimpered quietly. They flipped all the photos down, and returned to work.

*There was no time to waste.*
Chapter Summary

Plans are made as shadows loom close.

_Excruciating pain shot through every nerve. There was a light sizzling noise, and a momentary flash of blue. His aura had broken._

_"This is it," he muttered to himself. "This is where I die."_

_He sat at the bottom of the cliff, having managed to drag himself over to a nearby rock that was perfect to lean on. He propped himself up to help his breathing and assessed the damage. A few cracked ribs, a dislocated shoulder, and even a few gashes on his left side. Those beasts were more fierce than he had realized. He could see the small red stains in the snow from where he had landed. At the top of the cliff, his comrades retreated, leaving him to die alone._

_Slowly he closed his eyes, waiting for death’s sweet embrace._

_"You’ve had quite the nasty fall haven’t you?"

_He opened his eyes to see who it was that spoke to him. The source of the voice stared down at him, golden eyes kind and welcoming. They weren't as harsh as his mentor's eyes had been. These eyes were strange. They were weathered with experience._

_They were glowing bright as the sun._

_"I'm glad you're still alive," the voice sighed. "I was worried I didn't make it in time."_

_A hand reached over to touch his shoulder, but he flinched away._

_"Don't be frightened," said the voice. "I'm not here to hurt you._

_He wasn't sure what it was, but he felt he could trust them. They seemed...honest, for lack of better words._

_"Tell me," the voice said quietly, "can you hear me? Can you see me?"

_He smirked at the person kneeling beside him and nodded, ignoring the pain in his throat as he asked, "Are you the Grimm Reaper here to take me away?"

_"No," said the voice. "Not the Grimm Reaper. But I am here to take you with me. Come, let's get those wounds of yours healed, friend."_

It was late in the afternoon when James walked out to the veranda with his guests. Despite some major grievances, everything seemed to go smoothly. The plans to erect a new embassy building
for the diplomats from Atlas in Menagerie would be going ahead, as well as the arrangements to allow trade between the Schnee Dust Company and the Goodwitch Trade Association in Vale. James would see about getting in contact with Merlot Industries, who would be in charge of building a new transport train to aid in the delivery of goods between the two.

_Things seemed to be going well for Schnee_, James noticed.

The only thing that did not turn out in Jacques' favor, however, was being allowed to attempt mining in the far deserts of Menagerie's territory. Ghira had been very adamant about the nature there being left alone. And after the hell that had been unleashed upon the far Kingdom of Vacuo, James was inclined to agree with Ghira. Ozpin, who had decided to attend a meeting for the first time in months, took down all the agreements and set to work preparing the contracts.

At some point in their meeting, the topic of Qrow's run in with White Fang intruders became quite the gossiping point. Ghira had complimented Qrow on his ability to hold his own against ten men, which caused the butler blush ever so slightly. Glynda expressed some concern for James' wellbeing, suggesting perhaps a temporary relocation to one her summer homes in Vale would be best for him. But James assured her that he'd be fine. He could defend himself, and he had someone who he felt confident would have his back. Qrow tried to remain professional, but he wasn't used to getting so much praise, and was rocking back and forth on his heels in embarrassment.

Jacques, however, was not impressed at all by Qrow, expressing distaste for him and claiming Klein was superior, much to everyone's chagrin.

_Of course_, James thought. _Jacques always has to have the best to brag about._

And now here they were. Having finished their discussions they all were outside, watching as their personal assistants lined up in preparation to fight. Something James hated almost as much as entertaining Schnee. Both left an unbearable ache in his metallic joints.

"Are you sure this is a good idea?" Glynda asked James nervously.

"Not in the slightest," James sighed. "But Jacques insisted we have them all spar at once."

"If they are truly competent help," Jacques boasted, "then a simple sparring match is not of any concern."

"You just want to take the winner for yourself," Ghira spat. "The only reason we agreed to this is because Ozpin said it'd be interesting."

"Interesting indeed," Jacques chuckled. "I can assure you, my Klein is the finest combatant in Atlas. I doubt the rest will be able to keep up."

"You shouldn't underestimate any of them," Ozpin warned him. "Do not forget, I was the one who brought them all to you."

James turned his stare to Ozpin who, for some odd reason, seemed more distant than usual. They never usually visited during the day, and certainly never when the Baron Schnee was baring his teeth.

Something must be on their mind.

"Are you four ready?" Ozpin called.
"Yes, Your Grace," Klein responded with a bow. James took note of how short Klein was in comparison to the other attendants. The balding man's mustache twitched as he stood back straight, adjusting his tie.

"As am I," Qrow chirped. He seemed to be a little giddy. James couldn't help but think his was rather cute.

"On your orders," said the tall, burly butler Ghira had accompany him. The way his hair had been combed, James couldn't help feeling this man was rather feline in appearance. Like a puma. *What was his name again?* James thought. _Tukson, that's it._

"We're ready," called Amber. She was the youngest, and the only woman, but she was very skilled. James had had the honor of observing her once before when he visited Glynda in Vale. Out of all of them, she was the one he was most curious about.

"On your marks," Ozpin called, adjusting their scarf. "Get set-"

"FIGHT!" Jacques bellowed.

"Jacques!" Ghira growled. James held his right arm out in front of him, keeping his visitors from mauling each other while they watched the sparring match in progress.

All at once, Amber, Tukson, and Klein went for Qrow, who had his hands in his pockets as he slouched forward. Tukson swung first and Qrow ducked, coming back up to head butt him right in the chest, knocking the wind from him. As Tukson backed away Amber went for a kick to Qrow's head. Qrow leaned back just in time, the edge of Amber's boot heel barely brushing the tip of his nose.

Tukson regained his breath and went in for a low kick, accidentally bringing Klein's legs out from under him instead and sending the stout man scrambling to the ground. Amber threw a few punches, only managing to land one on Qrow's chin. No matter how hard she tried, she couldn't keep up with his pace. Qrow removed his hands from his pockets and caught Amber's next punch. He grabbed her arm and threw her over his back and onto the ground.

Qrow took a few steps back before running right at Klein. The man was slowly standing up, which gave Qrow the perfect stepping stool to use to get a quick drop kick on Tukson's shoulder. *Compared his opponents,* James noted, _he lacks the overall brute force, but Qrow easily makes up for that in speed and skill._

Qrow stepped back after landing, shaking the slight discomfort from his ankles before hopping back into the fray.

"He's good," Glynda commented.

"He's fast," Ghira muttered.

"He's drunk," Ozpin chuckled. Everyone stared at them in shock, but Ozpin merely raised an eyebrow. "What? You didn't know that he's always drunk?"

"I had a suspicion," James admitted. It was rare he'd see Qrow without a flask on hand.

Turning his full attention back to the fight, he saw Tukson and Klein had separated from the group to go one on one, while Amber had Qrow on the ropes with her kicks.
"Too slow," Qrow mumbled as he caught her foot. With a single twirl, he managed to throw Amber towards Klein and Tukson, putting his hands together so he could crack his knuckles seconds after.

"Oh my goodness," Glynda whispered. "That's the second time he's caught her."

"Must have a lot of experience," Ghira mused. "Something Amber is still lacking."

"He is rather impressive," Jacques conceded hesitantly. "All three are really...Perhaps I'll have them come work for me."

"Qrow will not be leaving to work for you," James hissed, his blue eyes shooting daggers at the Baron. Jacques stared at him in shock, but James paid his look no mind. "You have plenty of subordinates Jacques. You don't need to try to take ours."

"Besides," Ozpin interrupted, "it looks like Klein is the victor. No need to bring in more help at Schnee Manor."

"What?"

They turned back to the fight, where Klein had Qrow pinned face down on the ground. Amber and Tukson were laying limp, their chests heaving as they tried to catch wind.

_We only turned away for a second_, James thought. _How did that happen?!_

"Excellent!" Ozpin called. "The fight is over! Well done Klein!"

"Thank you, Your Grace," Klein responded cheerfully as he stood. He reached out his hand and helped Qrow to his feet before going to do the same for the others.


"Indeed," murmured Jacques. "Well this was fun, but I think my business is done here."

"Leaving so soon?" Glynda inquired.

"I feel content with things," Jacques shrugged. "Best to return to my family for the night."

"Before you do," Ozpin began, "might I have a word with your butler?"


"Thank you."

James escorted his guests back inside, watching as Ozpin trailed behind to talk to Klein. He wondered what business they had with him.

"Do not forget," Ozpin had said. "I was the one who brought them all to you."

James couldn't help but feel there was more to this than Ozpin was letting on. Hopefully, he'd be able to pull them aside to ask.

He escorted his companions to the foyer, having Qrow bring Jacques his coat and hat, and the group bid the Baron goodnight. Klein hurried to catch up, and took his place in the driver's seat of the grand white car.

"Farewell friends," Jacques chuckled. "I do hope I'll be able to see you all at the party on Friday."
"Wouldn't miss it," Glynda said dully.

"It was good to see you, Jacques," James responded. "Stay safe on your drive home."

"Always, James. Always."

James watched Jacques crawled into the back seat. The doors shut, and the car drove away with a gentle hum. Everyone waved as they watched it head down the road. No one said anything until it was beyond sight.

"I really, really, don't like him," Ghira groaned.

"Neither do I," Glynda sighed. "He's truly a despicable man."

"Despicable indeed," James huffed. "But sadly, he's a powerful man. We have to put up with him. For now."

"For now, indeed," Ozpin agreed as they rejoined them. "Now, I don't know about you, but I am feeling rather peckish. How about we all have something to eat?" They turned their attention towards Tukson, grasping his hand firmly to shake. "I've been dying to try your Mistrali specialties for a while Tukson. Would you make something for us, please?"

"Of course, Your Grace," Tukson beamed. "It would be my pleasure."

"Allow me to show you the kitchen," Qrow offered before turning to Amber, who had a small gash just above her left eye. "And let's take care of that cut. The first aid kit is in the kitchen cupboard."

"Yes sir," Amber mumbled.

"Then why don't we go have a game of billiards in the parlor?" James offered. "It'll help pass the time until dinner."

"Sounds perfect," Glynda agreed. She gently adjusted her glasses with her pointer finger, her lips curled in a playful grin. "It has been a while since I've had the opportunity to decimate you in a game, Ghira. I hope you're up for it."

"The day you beat me at billiards," Ghira chortled, "is the day I beat James at darts."

"I'd like to see you try," James chuckled. He took his friends to the parlor, grinning from ear to ear as he listened to Ghira and Glynda taunt each other over who had the better aim. Ozpin walked with closed eyes, letting out a deep breath as they let their shoulders droop.

"It's nice to be able to relax without Jacques here," they muttered.

"That it is," James murmured. The heavy atmosphere had dissipated, and the dull ache he'd been feeling in his right side seemed to be lessening.

The stress always seems to slowly melt away the moment Schnee's chilly presence was gone.

Qrow had Amber sit at the staff table while he pulled out the disinfectant. It was rather difficult to clean the cut when Amber would wince away every time the cotton swab made contact. It
reminded him of his nieces back in Patch when they were young children, and his eyes sparkled in the nostalgia.

"Can you hold still for ten seconds?" Qrow asked in fond annoyance. "The sooner we take care of this, the sooner you can get back to Glynda."

"This wouldn't have happened," Amber grumbled, "if you two hadn't signaled me to hold back. Uncle Qrow, honestly. Why did we have to fake it?"

"You know why we had to," Tuksen reminded her. He was busy preparing the fried rice, so he didn't see the scowl she threw in his direction.

"I know," she sighed dejectedly. "It doesn't make it any more irritating. Who does that guy think he is anyway? I'm surprised Ozpin hasn't kicked him and his stupid mustache yet."

"Ozpin may be many things," Qrow hummed. "But they aren't the kind of person to waste energy on a kick to Schnee's stache."

"Besides, Klein has the same mustache," Tuksen said. "You saying it's stupid too?"

"It looks good on Klein!" Amber groaned. "God, you people are insufferable at times."

"Insufferable?" Qrow laughed. "You've been hanging around Goodwitch too long. Your vocabulary is too big."

"Says the drunk that managed to say vocabulary," Amber huffed.

"Guess that makes me-"

"Don't you dare-!"

"Your Drunkle Qrow!"

"Ha!" Tuksen croaked. "You walked right into that one, Amber!"

"Oh shut up!"

They all had a good laugh and Qrow was able to finish patching up Amber. She thanked him, straightened her blouse, and proceeded out of the kitchen toward the parlor. Tuksen had the kitchen under control, so Qrow was free to pursue his duties. He put the kit away, washed his hands, and then set to work preparing the dinner table in the dining hall.

"We're having East Mistrali cuisine," he muttered as he set the plates. "Where do we keep the chopsticks again?" He walked over to the cutlery drawers, searching for the box that held them. They seemed to have vanished.

"I believe you're looking for these?"

Qrow jumped and let out a small "eep!", completely caught off guard by Ozpin, who now stood behind him. He had to take a few breaths to steady himself as he turned around. "Oz, don't sneak up on people! You scared me!"

"Me?" Ozpin gasped teasingly. "Scare the great Qrow Branwen? Why, who'd have thought!" With a soft laugh they handed Qrow the box that kept the chopsticks. "Thank you for indulging us earlier...you didn't get hurt, did you?"
"Me? Hurt?" Qrow scoffed. "That was nothing."

"You're sure?" Oz asked worriedly.

"Very few things hurt me anymore Oz," Qrow assured him. "What about you?"

"What about me?"

"You've been kind of quiet all day. Even in the meeting earlier, you barely talked to Glynda. I thought she was, like, your BFF or something." Qrow gently placed a hand on their shoulder, his red eyes gentle and welcoming to his comrade. "If something's wrong, you can tell us. You know that, right?"

"I know," they sighed. Ozpin gave him an exhausted smile as they ruffled his hair. Qrow knew that face too well. Danger was around the corner.

"Oz," he murmured. "What's going on? If there's trouble, maybe I can help."

"I will need your help," they sighed. "But not right now. There's some things I need you to take care of for me starting tonight."

"Why?" he asked.

"I can't say it here," Ozpin apologized. "But I need you to trust me...the stakes are too high this time..."

Too high? Qrow thought. That's not good.

"Will you trust me?" Ozpin asked.

"With my life," Qrow said.

"Alright," they said. "Here are your instructions."

Klein made his rounds that night in silence. The unwelcoming white walls of the manor seemed to have a stronger presence than usual. A constant reminder that he had no true home here. And that feeling was only amplified by the memory of his conversation earlier that afternoon. Over and over again, those words played in his mind.

"Klein, you need to prepare to leave," Ozpin told him. "You'll be leaving in a week to go to Vale, where it's safe. I'll have a ship ready to take you that night."

"Why?!" Klein asked them. "Ozpin, what's going on?"

"I can't explain right now. I just need you to trust me."

"Trust you," he hummed. He'd put his trust in Ozpin for years. Ever since the day they met at the bottom of the cliff. They had always come through for him. But to tell him he had to leave Schnee Manor? Surely this had to be some mistake. He couldn't leave. He may not like Jacques, but he had people here he cared too much for to just leave behind. There were a few people here that needed him. That would miss him.
Klein came to a stop at the end of the hall, turning around to see two young adults with snow white hair standing in their night clothes. He smiled and walked over to them.

"Weiss, Whitley," he greeted softly. "What are you two doing up and about this late at night?"

"We...couldn't sleep," Weiss admitted softly as she pulled at her braided hair.

"We were hoping," Whitley explained, "if maybe you'd be willing to tell us one of those old fairytales. Like when we were little kids..."

"Of course," Klein answered fondly. "Anything for my dear little snowflakes." He began to escort them to the library, beaming when they each took his hands in theirs. It had been quite a while since they had moments like this. It made Klein feel as if they were his own children. "Which story would you like to hear tonight?"

"Can we hear the one about the two brothers?" Weiss asked.

"Aw, I wanted to hear the Four Seasons," Whitley mumbled.

"We can read both," Klein chuckled. "Just like when you were kids."

"Not exactly," Whitley laughed.

"We're a bit too big to sit on your knee," Weiss giggled.

"True," Klein sighed. "But that doesn't mean we can't share the sofa."

The three of them made it to the library and Klein went over to the bookshelf to grab the book of fairytales. He sat in the middle of the large couch and both the Schnees took a spot on either side of him. He turned the pages to the first tale and began to read. His eyes flashed various colors as he did so, adding life to the characters as his voice fluxed in tone. Eventually they had gone through the entire book. Whitley had fallen asleep at the very end of the Four Seasons.

"I think it's time to head back to bed," Klein whispered. Weiss took the book and placed it back on its shelf while he gathered the young lad in his arms to carry him back to bed. He was thankful their rooms weren't too far from the library. He was still sore from the sparring match. Klein tucked Whitley into bed before doing the same for Weiss.

"Klein?" Weiss muttered sadly.

"Yes, Snowflake?"

"Promise you won't leave like Winter did...please...?"

And like that, a thorn caught itself in his heart. Klein bit back tears as he kissed her on the forehead. "I'll never leave you, Weiss. I'll always be there to look after you and your brother. I promise."

Weiss smiled softly and drifted to sleep, muttering a soft "thank you" as she did. Klein quietly left the room, treading carefully so as not to wake her. He felt a heavy weight on his shoulders. He made a promise he couldn't keep, and it hurt worse than any battle wound would. Trying hard not to dwell on it, Klein returned to his rounds, hoping to find anything that could convince Ozpin to let him remain at Schnee Manor. As he made his way through the halls, Klein began to pass
Jacques' office, only to freeze in place when he heard a shout.

"You can't do that!"

Willow? Klein thought. What is she doing up this late? He leaned in close to try and listen.

"Willow," Jacques said. "Silence, please-"

"No!" she screamed. "You're not marrying Weiss off to that no good Marigold crook!"

"Henry," he stressed, "is a viscount, and his family has a very heavy influence on trade in Vacuo. The merging of our families would benefit us greatly."

"You mean benefit you greatly! That family is as rotten as apples in a swamp. What do you intend to do if Weiss doesn't want to marry him?"

"Oh believe me, darling. I have plenty of ways of convincing her."

"You despicable man!"

"This is for the good of the SDC and the Schnee family name."

"A name you had to marry into to get your filthy hands-"

There was the sound of a slap, a loud thud, and the sound of someone whimpering.

"You will not raise your voice to me," Jacques warned. "Unlike Winter, I've got a tight leash on Weiss and Whitley. Don't think I won't do the same to you."

Klein felt his blood run cold. He quietly hurried away, making it to his room and picking up the phone. It only took two rings.

"Ozpin speaking."

"Oz, it's Klein," he croaked. "I need a favor."

"A favor?"

"You want me leaving for Vale in a week. How about we make it in three days?"

"That's the night of the charity ball," Ozpin muttered. "Klein, what's going on?"

"I'm taking the children with me."

---

The shattered moon shone down on the ruins of Mantel as a lone scout scampered through the dilapidated remains of what was once the capitol building. His mask's red paint gleamed in and out of the shadows as he scurried up the stairs. His worm-like tail twitched side to side as he twisted and turned through the halls. Once he reached the main office door, he knocked three times.

"Enter," came a woman's voice.

The scout slowly came in, jumping slightly when someone kicked the door closed behind him. He
kneeled down so as not to look at the people in the room. A woman with eyes like fire stared at him, her coal black hair draping her shoulder as she leaned forward from her seat on the old desk.

"So," the woman cooed, "what news do you have to report?"

"Ozpin is in Atlas," the scout divulged. "It is believed they have the items you seek. No full confirmation on that yet though."

"Really?" groaned a silver haired man near the window. "You came all this way to tell us that?"

"There is more," the scout insisted. "The mage they took in a year ago. She's a maid at the Goodwitch estate."

"I see," the woman said. "So this is the place she's been hiding. A dying kingdom for a dead girl walking...how fitting..."

"What about the others?" came a growl from the masked man in the corner of the room. "The rest of your scouting regiments. Where are they?"

"All are at their assigned locations," the scout replied hesitantly. "Except for...Squad One, sir."

"What happened to Squad One?" asked another person, a young woman with minty hair.

"Killed in action. All ten of them. They were caught and slain. By who or what, I know not."

"They were seen?!" screamed the masked man.

"Yes, but the rest haven't been fou-"

The scout never had the chance to finish his remark. The mask cracked as his head fell to the floor and rolled away, his tail twitching as the blood covered the floor. The scout's body slumped to the side as the masked man sheathed his sword.

"What should we do Cinder?" asked the mint haired woman.

"Nothing, Emerald."

"Nothing?"

"Nothing. We stay the course. They have no idea who we are, so we have no need to fear." Cinder turned her attention to the man by the window. "Mercury, make sure the broadcast system is prepared for Friday night. We have a fun evening ahead of us."

"Will do," Mercury chuckled.

"And you," Cinder said, turning her eyes on the masked man. "Make sure the rest of your troops here on Solitas are more competent so as not to lose them? We're down eleven poor scouts. Let's not have any more get caught. Understood Adam?"

"Yes Cinder," Adam growled.

"Good." She looked over at Emerald. "Tomorrow, you and I are going to town to gather the rest of the supplies. This operation must go smoothly, and you're vital to that."

"Yes ma'am."
"Perfect."

Cinder hopped off the desk and proceeded to make her way out the door, the glass heels on her feet tinkling like bells in the night.
Chapter Summary

As pleas of trust are thrown about, the wheels of fate are set in motion.

Chapter Notes

I rewrote this ten times. I hope it's okay.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The wind danced through the trees as she ran through the woods. With staff broken and Aura in the red, she didn't have any other choice. The shouts were growing louder as she ran, the pain searing through her lungs with every breath.

She knew it was only a matter of time-

"Over here."

She froze, her eyes darting about uncertainly. She could have sworn she heard a voice.

"The left. Take the left path through the brambles."

"Brambles?" she whispered. "Why?"

"Trust me."

Without waiting to see if the voice could be trusted, she took the left path. The thorny vines dug into her skin as she moved, but she didn't turn back. She grabbed at the vines and pulled him aside, crawling her way down the path until the greenery reseeded. She found herself in a small cave, well hidden and warm. Beside her on the ground was a small wooden crate, sparkling with resin in intricate patterns.

"Hold your breath for as long as you can," said the voice. "Try to count to ten. Your assailants will be gone soon."

With a nod, she took a deep breath.

One, two, three-

"Where did she go?!" came the voice of a young woman.

"She ran off," said a man.

"Cinder isn't going to be happy about this."

Cinder? Four, five, six-
"We better keep looking."

"Let's try this way."

Her assailants left. Seven, eight, nine.

"You can breathe now," said the friendly voice.

"Ten," she sighed. "Whoever you are, thank you."

"My name is Ozpin," said the voice. "Wait here in the cave. My friend Qrow and I will come for you once the sun is down. That crate there should have food and water so help yourself. I hope you don't mind dried meats and fruits. What is your name, young lady?"

"My name?"

"Yes," said Ozpin. "Everyone has a name, surely you have one too?"

The girl looked around, trying to think of an answer. In truth, she had no name. At least, not one she was proud of. She looked down at the crate, lost in thought.

"Is everything okay?" Ozpin asked.

"Amber..."

"Pardon?"

"My name is Amber..."

Qrow stood at attention while James had his breakfast, trying very hard to keep his eyes open. The night before had been restless. No matter how hard he tried, Qrow couldn't stay asleep. And the conversation with Ozpin before dinner the day before didn't help matters any.

"I need you to pack things for you and James," Ozpin had said. "I'll be preparing a ship for you two. You'll be going to Patch as soon as Schnee's party is over."

"Patch?" Qrow asked. "Why are you sending me home? And with the Earl?"

"Safety. And I'll need you to let me fully unlock your Aura before I leave here today. Preferably now since we have a moment."

"Oz, you know I love you," Qrow stammered, "and I trust you as much as the next guy. But unlocking the rest of my Aura? You know what'll happen if you do! Why do you need to-"

"My Qrow," they sighed desperately. "I wish I could tell you everything. Please, trust me on this."

"...Okay. Do it quickly then..."

"Qrow?"

"Huh?" Qrow snapped from his thoughts and looked over at the table. James was staring at him with concern. "I'm sorry, I spaced out. What was that?"
"I was wondering if you're feeling okay," James said. "You seem worried about something. Do you need to sit down or anything?"

"I'll be fine," Qrow shrugged. "Just gotta finish waking up is all. I'll be fine once I start in on the laundry."

"You're sure?"

"Positive." Qrow gave him a playful smirk. "And speaking of laundry, please don't try and hide anything this time. Kind of hard to do my job if you keep stashing away your boxers."

"Q-Qrow!" James gasped, his face turning pink. "That-that's nothing you need to worry about."

"Kind of is. It's my job to be a butler, so let me be "butlery" to the best of my ability."

James let out a disgruntled sigh of defeat, trying hard to keep his composure. "What else is on the agenda, besides laundry?"

"You have a doctor's appointment at ten," Qrow reminded him. "And then a fitting at the tailor's just after that for your dress blues. You were also invited to the Menagerie Embassy in the capital city to have tea with Lord Belladonna when you're done."

"Right..."

*That doesn't sound good*, Qrow thought. James was usually excited to go to tea with Ghira. Something was very wrong. "James? You okay?"

"I'm fine," James muttered. "Can you call Ghira and tell him I can't make it? I have someplace else to be today after the fitting."

"Really?" Qrow asked. "Where?"

"The Fallen Guardians Memorial site."

"Oh," Qrow said. "That made things a lot clearer now. "Don't worry, James. I'll let him know."

"Thank you, Qrow...for everything."

Qrow gave him a soft smile, his red eyes half hooded in both fondness and low stamina. "No need to thank me for anything. Just doing my job."

"Right," James chuckled, taken slightly aback by Qrow's response. "How long have you been working for me again?"

"About three years now I think?"

"Only three years? Feels like it's been longer."

"Oh, really?"

"Yeah," James laughed softly at himself. "These days I keep forgetting you're my assistant."

"Don't you dare," Qrow teased. "You can think of me however you like, but don't forget I'm under contract. You're putting my nieces through school."

"I know, I know," James said. "The contract runs out in two years, right?"
"Yeah, that's right."

"Would you-" James paused, glancing away as he stood up. "Never mind...I better go get ready for that appointment."

Before Qrow could say anything, James hurried out of the dining room. He expected as much. He'd been around the man long enough to know that when he planned a visit to the Memorial, he wouldn't be acting in his usual calm demeanor. James had quite a history in the military, though to what extent, Qrow wasn't so sure.

"I hope he'll be okay," he whispered. He made it a note to ask James what he was about to ask. If he knew him as well as he hoped he did, chances are James wanted him to stick around longer.

_But that isn't possible_, he thought.

Qrow went over to the phone to call Ghira as James had requested. It was a bit of a lengthy wait. The Embassy phone lines were very busy during the day, so it wouldn't surprise him if no one picked up. If need be, he'd call Ozpin and have them pass the message along. Though that might not be a good idea in and of itself in all honesty. Ozpin was busy with their own troubles.

_Troubles I wish they'd trust me with_, Qrow thought. After about ten minutes waiting on the phone, the line made it through to the main office. He expected some random secretary, or even Tukson to answer.

"Belladonna speaking."

Qrow didn't expect Ghira to answer the phone personally.


"Qrow, good to hear from you," Ghira said pleasantly. "How're things going at Ironwood Manor?"

"Things are okay here," Qrow answered. "Lord Ironwood asked me to call you to say he can't make it to tea this afternoon."

"Is everything okay?"

"I think so..."

"Liar. What's he doing instead of tea?"

"He's...going to the Memorial..."

"Say no more."

"Pardon?"

"If he's heading there, no need to worry. You take care of your duties, alright? I'll take care of James."

"Th-thank you, My Lord-"

"Please, call me Ghira."

"Ghira...right...thank you."
James pulled his scarf over his nose to try and stay warm. The brisk winter air tried hard to nip at his skin as he walked up to the Memorial. The doctor's appointment went over as well as it could have gone, but something wasn't right. Something in his life was broken, and James was sure it wasn't his prosthetics.

"You're parts are still up to date," Dr. Polendina assured him. "You won't need any upgrades or the like for a while, as long as you don't overdo it. However, when the time does come for the update I'm afraid I won't be here."

"What?" James gasped. "B-but why?"

"I'm moving," Polendina said. "Retirement, you see. I'm thinking of heading to Vacuo. Or maybe Mistral. I haven't decided yet."

"But there's no other doctor I trust with my prosthetics," James said. "Who in all of Atlas am I going to see now?"

"I'm sure you'll be fine," Polendina sighed. "Believe me, by the time you need a new doctor, you'll find yourself somewhere other than Atlas. If you'd like, I can see about finding someone I feel is competent enough to handle everything."

"Somewhere other than Atlas," James whispered. There wasn't really anywhere else he wanted to be. Atlas was his home. He had fought for his kingdom. He lost everything for it. It wouldn't be right to live anywhere else.

He adjusted his coat as he reached for his little pocket notebook, a golf pencil, and looked over the names on the wall of the marble statue's foundation that stood at the center of the small crater just outside the borders of the ruins of Mantel. The statue, depicting five Atlesian soldiers kneeling in a silent prayer, looked as emotionless as ever. Over the speakers nearby, the recording played in the same, uninterested tone it always played when visitors came.

"Here we have the Fallen Guardians Memorial" the voice repeated. "The names of the brave men and women who were lost to us in the Battle of Peace during the Great Civil War.-"

James suppressed the urge to scoff at the name and went over to the list of those who were reported M.I.A. He opened to a blank page in his notebook and proceeded to lightly sketch the names of two men listed under the last name "Frasier". They were the last of the names that James had taken to storing away in his pocket. Brave men and women he had the privilege of serving side by side with.

Friends and comrades he would never see again.

"I'm sorry," James whispered mournfully.

"You miss them dearly, don't you?"

James turned around, blue eyes meeting with amber as a man in a long violet trench coat walked
"Ghira?" James asked. "What're you doing here?"

"A little birdie was worried about you," Ghira chuckled. "Though he'd never admit it. When he called to tell me you weren't coming to tea, I figured I'd come spend time with you instead." Ghira looked over the names on the statue walls. "I take it you knew many of these people?"

"Yes, I did," James muttered. "Some I considered to be my brothers and sisters, in a way."

"I know that feeling," Ghira sighed fondly. "Whose names did you sketch in today?"

"Twin brothers. Donald and Douglas. They were in my division back during the war. They were quite the pair of troublemakers, but definitely the kind of people you wanted on your side."

"Sounds like we'd get along great," Ghira said. "If you don't mind me asking...how did they get their names on here? Any idea what happened to them?"

"Missing in action," James whispered, clenching his fists. "That's all...that's all it was..."

"I'm sorry, James." Ghira adjusted the fur collar of his coat, trying to protect himself against the winds. "I didn't mean to pry."

James didn't say anything. He was frozen in place, his breathing shallow as the snow fell from the skies. The memorial was starting to fade. Ghira vanished from his vision for half a second. All James could see was the crimson darkness of his nightmares. There was screaming filling his ears as waves of razor sharp pain overtook his right side.

*Help me.*

"Are you okay?" Ghira asked softly.

*It hurts.*

"James?"

*Someone help me!*

"James, are you-"

*HELP ME!*

"I-I have to go," James stammered. "I have to go back home."

"Do you want a ride?" Ghira offered.

"...Yes please..."

"Come on. My car is this way. Let's get you home."

"Thank you."

James followed him to the car and slid into the back seat, closing his eyes as he tried to calm down. Ghira sat beside him and made sure he was properly buckled in. Soon the car was off, heading back to Ironwood Manor.
"James?" Ghira asked softly. "Can you hear me?"

James lightly nodded, trying not to burst into tears. The cold wouldn't go away.

"You know how to play the Game of Letters?" Ghira asked.

"G-game of what?"

"Game of Letters," he repeated. "I used to play with the new hunters back home. I'll say a word, then you say a word starting with the last letter of my word. No repeats, or you lose. It's a pretty good mental exercise. Want to try it?"

"Sure...anything is better than this right now..."

"Alright. Let's start with foods. Apple."

"Eggplant."

"Tomato."

"Orange."

James and Ghira continued the game for the rest of the drive. It helped a little bit, and soon James' breathing was back to normal. The nightmare slowly faded away as reality took hold once more. There was a sharp ache moving through his right side, and his head was throbbing with a horrible migraine. The pain was unrelenting, and made it hard to focus.

Pain is better than a nightmare though, James thought.

When they pulled up to the front doors, Ghira helped James out personally. The pain made it hard to walk straight, so James ended up leaning on the taller man. Ghira seemed not to mind. The Faunus murmured soothing words of encouragement as they clamored through the door and up the stairs. James ended up needing to direct Ghira towards the master bedroom. The house always did felt more like a labyrinth than a home.

"You going to be alright?" Ghira asked worriedly.

"Yes," James mumbled. "Just need a couple pain killers and I'll be right as rain."

"You're sure?"

"I'm sure. And besides," James assured, "I have Qrow on standby, and you're on speed dial on my scroll. If it turns out I'm not alright, I'll call."

"Promise?"

"Promise."

"Alright," Ghira conceded. "Though, I can't guarantee I'll be able to swing back myself. I'm supposed to leave later tonight to go back home."

"I'll try not to trouble you-"

"James," Ghira said firmly. "Don't you ever think you're trouble. You're one of my closest friends, and one of the few people in Atlas I trust. You never have been, nor ever will be, any kind of trouble." He gave James' left arm a playful punch. "I can see myself out, so go rest up. You'll need
all your strength to put up with Jacques' party face."

"Don't I know it," James sighed. "Thank you, Ghira. And..."

"And?"

"If you ever need anything, call me. Okay?"

"Will do."

James bid his friend farewell and entered the bedroom. Removing his coat and scarf as he limped to the bed, he couldn't help but feel apprehensive. Twice in one week the nightmare had bled into the real world. Why would they appear like this? The last time James had such frequent occurrences, it had been after he received his title. Not long after the war.

James stripped his clothes until only his undershirt and slacks remained, and reached for the painkillers on the nightstand. As tempting as it would have been to just switch into his pajamas and sleep, he knew that going to bed now would mean being up all night. And being up all night would lead to very worried friends and staff.

"No," he sighed. "Sleeping is a bad idea." He popped two pills into his mouth, fell back onto the bed and stared up at the ceiling, waiting patiently for the medication to take effect. Closing his eyes for but a moment, James let his mind wander, only to be drawn back to the world by a knock on the door.

"James? You okay?"

*It's only Qrow,* James thought. "I'm alright. Can you make some of that cocoa you made the other night? I'll have it in here."

"Sure, I'll get right on that. Be right back."

James could hear the pitter patter of Qrow's shoes walking down the hall and he couldn't help but smile. He was going to miss that sound when the contract wrapped up. It was nice having him around.

And James wanted him to stay around. Ozpin bringing Qrow here was probably the best thing that had happened in James' life.

"I need to tell Oz thank you," he mumbled.

"Don't go thanking me for anything."

"Huh?" James stood up and looked around the room. Same old window. The same oak furniture. And just him, standing alone beside the king sized bed.

"That's weird," he muttered. "I could have sworn-

"That you heard my voice coming from beside you?"

With haste, James reached for the drawer handle on his nightstand, pulled out his favorite pistol, and prepared to aim. He was alone. He knew he was alone. Ozpin wasn't there.

It was just him in the room.

"Who's there?!" James demanded. "Whoever you are, come out with your hands up!"
"Now I don't think that's really necessary, James. Put the gun down."

"Ozpin?" James called. "Is that you?"

"Indeed it is, James. I'm afraid I have a favor to ask you."

"Where are you?" James asked as he checked the closet. "Are you hiding in here somewhere?"

"I'm currently at Glynda's if you must know, but I have many ways of being in two places at once. Now, put the gun down and look on your windowsill."

"Why?"

"There should be a little box there with something inside. I need you to keep it hidden for me."

"Why me? What do I need to keep hidden?"

"Check the box and you'll understand."

James glanced over to the window. There, vibrant blue against the snow on the sill, was a small velvet box, just the right size to house a pocket watch. Hesitantly, James set his pistol on the nightstand and walked over to it. He picked it up, looking it over in his hands.

"Oz? Why do you need me to keep this safe?"

"Because I trust you, and I know you can keep it out of harm's reach."

"What is it exactly?"

"Open the box and find out."

James slowly opened the box. Inside was a small stone, white as the snow on the ground.

And it was glowing.

"Ozpin?" James asked as he removed the stone from its box, holding it up to the light in his left hand. "What is this? Some kind of rare Dust?"

"I'm sorry James. Please forgive me."

Before James could ask anything more, the stone's glow began to grow. Blinding light filled his sight. There was a deafening high pitched screech, and a slow, agonizing pain coming from his left hand. He dropped the box and clutched his wrist in his mechanical hand, squeezing to the breaking point to try and stop what was happening.

"What the hell is this!?" James screamed.

There were harsh winds whipping his back.

"What's going on?!"

Roars from creatures now closing in from every direction.

"OZPIN!!!"

"Relax James," said Ozpin calmly. "Relax, and take a deep breath."
James felt weak in the knees, struggling to calm down as he opened his eyes. The once peaceful bedroom was now a bloodied battlefield. There were people running past him as he remained in place. Soldiers, civilians, people he didn't know were screaming as they landed in the snow. Explosions caused the ground to shake. Strange creatures flew overhead, some grabbing and tossing innocents into the air. Fear filled every nerve and gear of James' body. His breathing was shallow.

He was panicking.

He couldn't move.

"Help me," he whimpered, shutting his eyes. "Someone please..."

"James," came a new voice. Low, slightly gravelly, a soothing whisper.

"Help-

"James, calm down."

"I can't-"

"Yes you can. Just focus. Breathe. Count to ten, and then open your eyes. Trust me, it'll be okay."

Shakily, James took a deep breath, counting softly with each exhale.

"One...t-two...three..."

The noise stopped. All was quiet once more.

"...four...five...s-six..."

The light faded.

"...seven....eight....nine..."

The winds halted. The cold wasteland vanished. Warmth filled the room.

"...ten..."

James slowly opened his eyes.

Ozpin sat at the window in Glynda's parlor, arms crossed defensively as they watched Amber's work. The young mage sat quietly, hands folded delicately as she focused her Aura.

"What's the status of the white stone?" they asked her.

"It worked," she said softly. "It connected to him. James Ironwood's Aura has stabilized to it. A perfect match."

"And what of the other three?" Ozpin asked solemnly.

"The other three haven't connected to anyone yet," Amber replied. "The black stone is on its way to
"Menagerie though, so it'll be out my pursuers' reach...wait...the red stone has connected. Not to the intended candidate though."

"Who?"

"The candidate's daughter. She seems to have a natural affinity to it..."

"Which one?"

"I can't tell...the younger, I think."

"That won't go over well with Qrow," Ozpin sighed. "Where is the yellow stone?"

"Still in its box. On its way to Mistral it looks like."

"I thought Polendina was going to Vacuo."

"He is. He's just not taking the typical route. Probably planning to sneak there via cargo ships. It'd give him a chance to scavenge for parts and help those who need medical attention but can't pay."

"That," Ozpin sighed, "sounds a lot like what he'd do. I guess I'll need to trust he knows what he's doing."

"You know," Amber teased, "for someone who needs people to trust them, you seem to have quite a bit of doubt."

"I suppose I do," they chuckled. "Though it's not towards any of you, I promise. It's more towards myself." They watched as Amber's glow stopped before helping her stand. "I'll be busy until the party but...I'll need you to take Glynda and leave tonight. For your own sake."

"But what about you?"

"I'll be fine. Now grab what you need and go. The ship is ready for you. Head to Vale, ask for Hei Xiong. He'll help hide you and Glynda until I return for you."

"Alright."

Amber wrapped her arms around Ozpin, catching them off guard. "Stay safe, Nini...I love you."

Ozpin could feel their heart breaking in two. They returned the embrace, placing a soft kiss on her temple. "I love you too, Amber. I'll see you sooner than you think, I promise."

They both reluctantly let go, and Ozpin watched Amber run out of the parlor, for what could very well be the last time.

James woke up to find himself in his own bed. There were low candle lights casting shadows in their amber glow. His entire body felt heavy, his head was spinning, and he couldn't shake the sense that he'd forgotten something. Something important.

"You're awake."

He turned his head to the right. There, in his usual perch at the edge of the bed, was Qrow. He
wasn't fully dressed though. His tailcoat had been tossed, along with his vest and tie. His shirt was wrinkled and partial unbuttoned, allowing full view of his chest. Qrow's once kept hair was now haphazardly strewn about, giving him the appearance of a frightened bird. His eyes were sunken, like he'd been awake for the last three days.

"How're you feeling?" Qrow asked.

"Like I just got hit by a train," James mumbled groggily. "What happened?"

"You fainted."

"Fainted?"

"Yep," Qrow said, making a light popping noise at the end. "And you were sweating like a sinner in church. I called your doctor and he rushed right over. Good thing Polendina takes house calls, huh?"

"Yeah," James sighed. He tried to sit up but Qrow gently lowered him back down. "Where is the doctor?"

"Home already," Qrow explained. "He said you just pushed yourself too hard today. Take tonight and tomorrow off and you should be okay enough for Schnee's party."

"You sure?" James asked, clenching his fists.

"Positive." Slowly he stood up. "I have to do my rounds, but I'll be back to check on you in an hour or so, okay?"

"No."

"No?"

"You need to sleep Qrow," James said bluntly. "You look half dead. Lay here and get some sleep."

"I can't. It's not appropriate-"

"Qrow, please. Get some sleep."

Qrow looked toward the door, the muscles in his body tensing as he debated going or staying.


"But-"

"That's an order."

And just like that, Qrow let out a disgruntled moan, letting his entire body go limp as James let him into the bed. He watched as his butler's eyes slid shut the moment his head hit the pillow.

Qrow must have been working himself sick, James thought. He needs a vacation...Maybe I can take him to see his family. I think he'd like that. James gently brushed his fingers through Qrow's hair, smoothing out the mess so it was somewhat close to its typical state.

And that's when he saw it.

There, embedded in the back of his left hand, was the white stone.
Chapter End Notes

Well...that was a thing.
Let me know what you think!
The Party is Over

Chapter Summary

Plans are set in motion.

Chapter Notes

WARNING: Not for the squeamish. If you don't like violence, you really won't like this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It had been a hard balancing act. The children remained unaware of what was going to happen. The ship was almost fully stocked with what was needed. The plan was almost ready to be put into motion.

But he had to make sure. Ozpin was giving him one shot at this. They couldn't afford to wait. And Klein knew Ozpin was just as terrified as he was.

The plan in and of itself was simple. Ozpin's associate, who Klein wouldn't be introduced to until take off, would create a scene that would make Jacques demand the children be removed from the party. Klein would step in to take them to their rooms, only to sneak them out to the back doors, where a car would be waiting. They'd be driven to the airfield in Mantle, and from there, fly to Vale.

Klein sat alone at his desk, the candlelight giving off an ethereal sensation as it danced off the walls as he wrote in his journal.

Tonight was his last chance to make sure all was prepared.

"Let's see," Klein mumbled. "I have a case of Lien, a week's worth of clothes, my weapons, plenty of food and water-"

"Klein?"

The stout man froze. He hadn't heard the footsteps, no knock on the door. Slowly he turned to look at the visitor in the doorway. Her hair was in a low bun, her blue eyes dull and listless, and a cut on her right cheek weeping from the red handprint left behind from her most recent argument with the head of the household.

"Mrs. Schnee," Klein gasped as he hurried to her. "What happened?"

"Nothing," she muttered. "Can you heal it? It won't look good if I show up to the party like this tomorrow..."

"Of course, My Lady," Klein replied. "Here, have a seat at the desk."
Klein led her to his hair and let her rest, his light-brown eyes switching to a soft pink as he placed his hand over the injury. A soft blue glow began to emit from his fingers, and he watched as the swelling carefully reduced.

"So is it true?" she asked quietly.

"I-is what true?" Klein asked bashfully, a light blush protruding as he tried to stay calm, though the slightly pitched tone in his voice made it rather difficult.

"You're planning to take my children away from here during the party."

"Wh-what-?"

"I'm not the simple minded drunk most people expect me to be," she sighed. "I noticed Whitley's violin went missing. He doesn't go anywhere outside without it, so I figured you might be planning something."

"My Lady-"

"Please, Klein. Call me Willow. We've known each other for years, you can say it when we're alone."

"Willow," he stammered. "I-I know this seems bad, b-but I swear, I'm only doing what I think is best for them and-"

"I know," she said calmly. "To be honest, I was hoping you would."

"You were?"

"Yes..." Her eyes closed, her mind deep in thought. "My father would be horrified to see what Jacques had done to our company. To our family name. I do not want my children to suffer under his thumb any longer. Whatever you're planning, I promise to help. I can keep Jacques occupied while you make your escape."

"You...You don't have to stay here either, Willow," Klein mumbled. "You can come with us. Escape from here-"

"No," she growled. "If I leave, he will come after the children as well as me. You know that."

"B-but-"

"If I stay, he at least has a true Schnee to keep hold of the company with. And Weiss and Whitley won't have him hunting them down. Not...Not when I'm still around..."

As much as it pained him to admit, Willow was right. As long as he had Willow, Jacques would see no reason to pursue them. But to leave her behind? Have her be a sacrifice? That was too much. He couldn't do that to her.

But he had to.

Just this once.

"I'll come back for you," he whispered. He removed his hand and his eyes changed back to their typical earthy shade now that Willow's cheek now fully healed.

"What?" Willow asked. She looked at him, perplexed. "What do you mean?"
"Once it's safe to do so," Klein elaborated, "I'll come back for you. You shouldn't have to suffer under his megalomania either, Willow. I, Klein Sieben, will return for you. So until I do...don't give up hope. And don't let him take your smile from you."

Willow stared at him, her vacant expression regaining some semblance of life as tears filled her eyes. He pulled her close, giving her a shoulder to cry on as she finally broke down. He lightly rubbed her back, letting her release all the years of pain she'd kept bottled up. He wanted to cry with her. He wanted to tell her it was going to be okay. But he couldn't promise that it would be. And he couldn't let himself falter. Willow, Whitley, Weiss, they all needed him to be strong now.

They needed him to help them become stronger.

Soon, Willow had cried herself to sleep. To keep her from further injury at the hands of his employer, Klein picked her up and carried her to the master bedroom. Her soft breathing smelt of wine, and her cheeks were still flushed from her tears. It wouldn't be hard to play this off as him being the responsible butler returning the missus to bed. It wouldn't have been the first time.

Like the rest of the manor, the master bedroom was large, cold, and distant. There was a portrait on the far wall of Jacques and Willow. The fireplace in the room hadn't been lit in ages. The sheets looked like they'd never been slept in. Which made sense, since Jacques rarely came to bed these days. He preferred to rest in his office instead of the master suite, leaving Willow all alone most nights.

It was soulless.

It was alienating.

*And it made Klein sick.*

He gently tucked Willow in, making sure that the room would be warm enough for her. He softly brushed the loose hair from her face, lowering his forehead to hers as he started to glow a soft blue. He would have to do the same for Weiss and Whitley, once he was sure they were asleep.

"*For it is in passing,*" he whispered, "*that we achieve immortality. Through this, we become a paragon of virtue and glory to rise above all. Infinite in distance and unbound by death, I release your soul, and by my shoulder, protect thee.*"

He placed a gentle kiss to her forehead as he pulled away, watching as the soft white light that had surrounded Willow faded. Klein slowly stood, walking towards the door as he kept his composure. What he did wasn't much, but it was just enough to keep her safe from the minor wounds she would most likely endure once they departed. Before leaving the room, he glanced once more at the woman who would be all alone once more.

"Be strong Willow," he prayed. "I'll get you out of here someday."

Without another word, he closed the door.

The lights were low in the room as they gathered around. Cinder stood proudly in her sparkling black dress, a stark contrast to the rubble surrounding them in the ruins of city hall. Fire danced in her gaze as the three scouts knelt before her, masks low as they awaited their instructions.
"What news do you bring us?" she purred softly.

"The Chief returned to Menagerie," said the first scout. "Somehow he managed to slip away undetected, despite our members watching the man like Nevermores on the hunt."

"The mage and Goodwitch have also fled," the second scout divulged. "We even had a spy in the house, and they still somehow escaped."

"Polendina fled as well," murmured the third. "He never returned home from work, and his lab was completely destroyed. We don't know how."

"You lost track of all those people in such a short amount of time?" Mercury whined from his corner of the room. "You really aren't very good scouts."

"They're the best in my command," Adam snapped warningly.

"We're sorry, sir!" the scouts decreed in unison. "We have failed you."

"So what now?" Emerald asked, leaning against the doorframe.

Cinder looked around the room at her comrades, beckoning them to come closer. "Do we have the video feeds prepared?"

"Yes madam," said Mercury dully.

"And the invitations into the ball?"

"Right here," Emerald said, holding up a pair of tickets.

"And the troops are prepared?"

"Yes," Adam affirmed. "I just need to join them, on your command."

"Then I shall inform the Queen about our little missteps," Cinder informed them. "We shall proceed as planned. By midnight, the Kingdom of Atlas will fall. And then Mistral shall be next." She turned her attention to Adam. "Take the scouts with you and put them to good use. I'm sure they'd be pleased to make up for their incompetence."

"Yes Cinder," he grumbled.

"Now, finish preparing for tonight. It should be a night to remember."

Cinder watched as her associates dispersed before walking over to the window. The sun was slowly preparing to set.

"Tonight," she hummed, "we will take back what is ours."

Qrow stood silently at attention near the doors, his red eyes watching attentively. Ozpin sat next to James' left, who had the misfortune of having Jacques on his right with Whitley slightly behind him. Klein stood beside him at the doors as they watched the young heiress from the balcony. He couldn't help but feel bad for the young girl. She looked so small on that grand stage, so frail and
gentile. But that song. *That voice.* She might be small, but she was a warrior at heart. And she was fighting with the only weapon at her disposal.

"I'm not your pet, not another thing you own, I was not born guilty of your crimes."

It reminded him a lot of himself when he was younger.

"You riches and your influence can't hold me anymore-

He could almost see the kind of person this Weiss Schnee was going to become.

"I won't be possessed, burdened by your royal test-

And Jacques has no clue.

"I will not surrender. This life is mine!"

*This girl's going places,* Qrow thought. He resisted the urge to applaud as he watched James and Ozpin rise to their feet to do so. Klein tapped him on the shoulder, alerting him to get ready to head to the ballroom. Playing bodyguard and food server for Schnee was not how he wanted to spend his evening. He wasn't on Schnee's payroll, so why help please him? Qrow knew the answer, but it still pissed him off.

"Weiss has a lovely voice," Qrow sighed as they went on ahead. "She's gonna go far."

"Farther than you think," Klein mumbled.

"What?"

"Nothing."

"Klein," Qrow said. "Are you okay?"

"Never better!" Klein chirped, eyes flashing a pale lime green for half a second. "You'll be on drinks tonight. Though you're not allowed to have any."

"No kidding," Qrow groaned.

"You going to be alright?"

"Sure. Just have to get blackout drunk when this is done. After tonight, I'll be able to."

"Really?"

"Yeah."

"Same..."

The two left it at that as they entered the ballroom, making their way to the kitchens to retrieve their trays. Qrow delicately balanced the silver platter upon his gloved fingers, resisting the urge to down a few glasses of the champagne. His scythe was folded into its travel setting, perfectly hidden under the tail of his coat and out of the path of anyone who might want to bump into him. A pastime of the wealthy Atlesian aristocracy; bumping into the help just to have a reason to knock them down a peg. He'd been to enough of these parties to recognize this fact. And all it did was make Qrow despise every one of them.
Okay, he thought, watching Ozpin and James enter side by side. Maybe I don't hate all of them.

The crowd flowed in, the chatter filling the air as the orchestra began to play. A young man with a trumpet began his solo, and Qrow began his walk around the room, admiring the lovely art pieces for sale along the far wall. Whispers peaked his interest as he served the drinks.

"Look over there!"

"It's The Potentate!"

"The person in the emerald robes?"

"That's the one!"

"They're with The Iron General!"

"The retired war hero?"

"Yes!"

Qrow let his eyes wander over to where Ozpin and James stood, both tall and proud. James had on his long white coat, adorned with medals and tassels that held a lot of power. Both hands were gloved, shoes shone like the fine crystal, and despite everything that had happened the last few days, he seemed to be relatively attentive.

Ozpin, however, looked as if they were a wizard. A mage that ascended from the pages of a fairytale. Their emerald robe's coat sleeves were long bell shapes, detailed in intricate golden leaves and vines. Their silvery hair seemed to have been dusted in fine glitter, and instead of their usual silvery cross pin, a gold one sat upon the collar of their shirt. Between the two of them, James and Oz gave off a sense of power and respect that was unmatched by anyone else in the room. They were something more.

And it made Qrow feel just a little smaller. A nagging feeling began to worm its way into his stomach. He didn't belong here with people like them. He wasn't a really butler. He was a hunter. A bandit without a home. And no amount of fancy suits, late night talks, and words of praise could change that.

Maybe Raven was right. Maybe I shouldn't have come here.

"Excuse me!"

Qrow snapped from his daydreaming, his red eyes meeting with a sickly green pair from the nobleman in front of him. His shoulders were damp, and it took Qrow only a moment to realize what happened.

He hadn't been paying attention.

He accidentally spilt drinks on someone of higher status.

He was in big trouble.

"I'm sorry-" he began.

"Sorry?!" the nobleman yelled. "You no good lowlife. Sorry doesn't pay my dry-cleaning!"

Qrow took a deep breath, preparing for the back handed punishment as the nobleman's hand began
to rise. He shut his eyes, bracing for impact.

But it didn't happen.

Qrow slowly opened his eyes. There in front of them was James, holding the wrist of the man who was about to strike. There was a flicker of something in James' gaze. Something akin to protectiveness, though what it was exactly he couldn't tell.

"My apologies," came Ozpin's familiar voice. "This man is a close associate of ours. He has been working various jobs for James and I over the last week, and we might have overworked him. Please, do not strike such a hard working man."

"O-of course, Your Grace!" the nobleman stammered, turning to Qrow as James released his hand. "Please, forgive me for my actions. I had no idea you were close with-"

"I-it's fine," Qrow murmured. "Just...don't go hitting people, okay? It's not nice."

"Come on, Qrow," James said, gently holding out his hand. "There's a table over near the buffet. Let's get you something to eat."

"Right...thank you..."

Qrow took James' hand and followed him to the table, keeping his head low as he did so.

Klein continued his duties through the party. It was hard to keep up the front of loyal butler when Jacques was oblivious to the truth. Willow made it a little easier though, grabbing glass after glass of wine to give to her husband, drinking several herself and letting slip one or two tidbits on various attending patrons that Jacques might find interesting. Weiss and Whitley had migrated over to the paintings, Whitley in awe of the one resembling one of the finer musical institutions that had once stood in Mantle, while Weiss was making small talk with the trumpeter from the orchestra.

_Ozpin's associate will be presenting their opportunity any moment now,_ Klein reminded himself. _I have to keep a close eye out for it._

"Well if you ask me, Mantle had what was coming to them!"

Klein turned his attention to the woman now speaking. The children had also seemed to catch wind of her, their blue eyes narrowed in annoyance. It wasn't unusual. There was always one of those kinds of people attending events like these. Klein did his best to ignore her. He had more important matters to attend to. He had to wait for Ozpin's associate to act.

"Honey," said the nobleman beside her. "Please, don't make a scene."

"You were saying the same thing just last week," she giggled. "If they were so foolish as to think they could rebel against the crown, then I say it's a good thing The Blast took that city and turned it to rubble. They deserved it!"

"SHUT UP!!!"

Jacques was being distracted by a woman with coal black hair when it happened. Weiss stomped
her foot hard on the ground as Whitely grabbed a nearby plate and threw it to the floor so it could shatter. Jacques turned his attention to them just as the trumpeter fled.

"Children-" Jacques began.

"You don't have a clue!" Weiss screamed. "None of you do!"

"Excuse me?!" the woman gasped.

"You have no idea what you're talking about!" Whitley bellowed. "Thousands of innocent people died that day and you think they deserved it?!"

"How would you like it if your friends and family were blown to bits right in front of you?!" Weiss cried.

"Children, enough," Jacques growled, gripping their wrists tightly in warning.

"Let go!" Whitley screamed.

"You're both embarrassing the family!" Jacques hissed. "Now stop." Jacques turned his glare over to Klein. "Please take the children to their rooms before this gets any worse."

Klein nodded, wrapping his arms around their shoulders as he hurried them out of the party. Jacques would be spending the next hour trying to save face. This was probably part of the escape plan. He hurried the children away from the ballroom. Out of sight and out of earshot of their father.

_It was now or never._

"Klein, let go!" Weiss cried.

"No," he said soothingly. "You need to stay quiet. We have to go. Now."

"What?"

"You two are coming with me to Vale. I don't have time to explain. Please trust me."

"We're leaving?" Whitley asked. "What about-"

"I already have everything you need. Now please don't argue."

"And mother?" Whitley asked. "She's coming too, right?"

"Later," Klein said. "I have to come back for her another time. She's going to keep Jacques distracted. That's all I can say, now be quiet and hurry."

"Okay," they said in unison.

Klein smiled, removing his arms from their shoulders to take their hands.

And they ran.

They ran fast down the halls, flying down stairways and sliding around corners as they hurried to the back doors near the lower levels of the house. Outside were two black cars. The one for them was already on, with someone in a pair of sunglasses leaning on the door, trumpet in hand.
"Flynt!" Weiss gasped quietly.

"You know him?" Klein asked.

"He was the trumpeter in the orchestra," she explained. "His father painted the picture of the music hall. We were talking before."

"We kind of exploded," Whitley chuckled nervously. "Flynt's idea. Said it'd be fun."

*One of Ozpin's friends*, Klein deduced.

"Pleasure to be spiriting you away tonight," the young lad hummed. "Now in you get. We only got about ten minutes before the next guard shift swings by, and Neon and I aren't exactly the most subtle defense squad."

Klein opened the door and let the kids into the back seat before getting in himself, holding out his hand as Flynt handed him two things from the back seat. A box, and his trusty pickaxe.

"What's that?" Whitley asked.

"My weapon," Klein said fondly. "Diamant Apfel. She's gotten me out of a few scrapes. As for the box?" He opened it, smiling as he reached in and removed a silver necklace and a berry red scarf. "I think your mother might have had these snuck out for you." He handed the necklace to Weiss, and wrapped the scarf around Whitley.

"We're going to come back for her," Weiss said. "We're not going to abandon her."

"I promise, we'll come back for Willow," Klein assured her. "Now why don't you two try and sleep. We've got a long flight ahead of us."

The two nodded and snuggled close to him, resting head to shoulder as they closed their eyes. Once they were in Vale, Klein planned on asking Flynt about what happened. But for now, he sat as guard, weapon at the ready as they fled to Mantle.

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Ozpin stood alone on the balcony just outside of the ballroom. They watched as a car drove out of sight, a saddened smile upon their face. At last, the Schnee children were all free. Though there would be much ahead they weren't prepared for. Ozpin pulled the collar of their robe closer, feeling the chill of the wind tingling the back of their neck.

*They have Klein*, they thought. *They'll be fine until I get there, I'm sure.*

But they didn't know for sure.

And that worried them greatly.

Ozpin's golden eyes closed as the weight of what was about to happen finally sank in. The Queen was almost certainly going to make a move tonight. As for when that would happen, no one could know for certain. Regardless, they were on guard.

"Ozpin?"
Ozpin glanced to the side as they saw James' broad frame pull into view. "James, what brings you out here?"

"You kind of walked out of the party," James chuckled softly. "I came to see if you were alright."

"I'm quite fine," they mumbled. "Just a little tired. It's been a long week. What about you?"

"I'm...fine...I suppose," James sighed hesitantly. "Just stress from the past, but I'll be alright."

"Don't hesitate to ask for help if you need it James," Oz reminded him. "You might be a war hero and a noble, but you're not invincible."

"Neither are you," James returned. "Oz...you've been acting differently since I last saw you. Is there something going on?"

Ozpin said nothing. They just turned their gaze to the gardens below, wondering how they'll ever be able to explain what was happening.

"Ozpin?"

"I'm sorry, James," they said solemnly. "I've instilled a great burden upon you all. But I had no other choice."

James looked at them, confused for a moment. Then his right hand flew to his left, covering the back as if to hide something. "You mean that wasn't-"

"It wasn't a dream," Ozpin affirmed. "James...there's something going on that I've been meaning to tell you all, but-"

"There you are!" came a voice.

The host had found them.

"Jacques," James mumbled. "We'll continue this talk later. After the party. Okay?"

"Alright," Ozpin agreed. "Also, James?"

"Yes?"

"Go dance with Qrow. His favorite song is coming up and I think he'll appreciate it."

Confused but deciding not to question it, James nodded and hurried inside before Jacques can talk to him.

"Hello Ozzy!" Jacques called.

Oh fuck it all, thought Ozpin as they put on their best mask and greeted Jacques as he joined them on the balcony. This man has no sense of dignity.

"Where did James runoff to?" Jacques asked incoherently. "I could have sworn he was with you."

"He was hiding from the bachelorettes," Ozpin lied. "I told him to dance with his butler. That'll help stave off the greedy."

"Oh, how scandalous!" Jacques laughed. "Ozzy, you're a right funny imp, you are."
"You're drunk," Ozpin said dryly.

"No, just tipsy," Jacques slurred.

"I see." It was hard not to chuckle. The only good thing about Jacques was he never could, and never would be able to hold down more than half a glass of bubbly. Made for quite a laugh when the man wasn't around. Out of everything about him, that seemed to be the only part of Jacques Schnee Ozpin actually cared for.

Jacques continued his babbling while Ozpin glanced inside. James and Qrow were twirling around the floor, and by the looks of things, Qrow seemed to have taken the lead. It was a habit of his with this song. The two of them were talking about something, though from their position on the balcony, Ozpin couldn't make out what it was. But whatever it was, it seemed be something pleasant.

_That's where he belongs, Ozpin thought. Qrow belongs on the dance floor. In the arms of someone who can make him happy._

"You alright, Ozzy?" Jacques asked curiously. "You're awfully quiet tonight."

"I'm alright," Ozpin sighed.

"You always say that!" Jacques cackled.

"Well it's true," Ozpin said simply.

_I'm always alright._

______________________________

"Get into position."

"Squads one and two are en route to the throne room."

"Be ready to move."

The security was minimal at best, though most of it was nonexistent. It made sense, seeing as everything in Atlas relied heavily on tech. The King thought that with the security systems he had in place, then everything would be fine.

_Oh how wrong he was._

Adam slipped through the shadows undetected. His teams surrounded and killed anyone who tried to stop them, offering those who surrendered the chance to join their ranks. Standard procedure now that the White Fang was working with Cinder. It made him feel disgusted, but the results have proven that this was the best possible option.

"Adam," whispered one of his comrades.

"Ilia?" Adam responded.

"Cinder is calling you," Ilia said, handing him her scroll.
Reluctantly, Adam took it from her. "Yes?"

"Vale is falling," came a soft purr. "Be sure to make this job as gruesome as possible for the broadcast."

"Will do."

The other end of the line went "click", and Adam handed the scroll back. "Have the Lieutenant gather any nobles still in the castle into the throne room. It's about time he put that upgrade to use."

James leaned against the wall with Qrow by his side, smiling as the two of them snacked on a plate of brownies Qrow had swiped from the dessert table. It was nice being able to relax in such a social setting for once, despite the looming feeling he had in the back of his mind. Qrow was telling him all about his home life in Patch. From the sound of it, it was a nice place to live.

"And then Tai ended up falling out of the tree," Qrow laughed. "And when we went to check on him, Zwei spun so fast he ended up knocking the wind out of him. And that's why we don't train dogs anymore."

"A pity," James chuckled. "We would have appreciated your expertise if the Canine Units were still in use."

"Eh, better for everyone if pets stay off the battlefield."

"Definitely." James swiped another brownie, finishing it in one bite before speaking again. "So, Patch. Sounds like a place you'd love to be right about now, huh?"

"God yes!" Qrow groaned, mouth full of chocolate. "I'd do anything for a chance to see the family right now."

"Well, I was thinking of a quiet vacation," James said. "If I pick Patch as the location, would your family be willing to give me a tour? And are there any inns I can stay at?"

Qrow nearly choked on his food. James gave him a light pat on the back, reaching over to the table nearby to grab him something to wash it down. Qrow took a long swig of the bubbly before regaining his composure.

Maybe that wasn't the most tactful way to put it, thought James.

"Y-you want to go to Patch?" Qrow coughed. "You, a rich general who can go anywhere in the world, wants to go to a little island off the coast to spend vacation?"

"I wouldn't be the only one on vacation," said James. "I'd give you the entire time off. And if you wanted, I'd be more than willing to pay for whatever you needed while we're away."

Qrow stared up at him in shock. James gave him a patient smile, trying not put the slender man on edge. Qrow had been working hard. And James knew how much his family meant to him. It wasn't fair that he couldn't see them as often as he wanted. This would be good for him.

"You're serious?" Qrow queried.
"No, I'm James," he said dryly. "So what do you say? Vacation in Patch?"

"Sure," Qrow said. "Why don't we leave tonight?"

"Tonight?"

"Yeah, after the party."

"But I don't have anything-"

"Leave it to me. Excuse me."

James was left standing there, dumbfounded, holding a tray of brownies as Qrow hurried off in the direction of the doors. The man seemed a little eager to get this vacation on the road. Almost _too_ eager.

"Sounds like he's excited for something."

James looked to see Ozpin had joined him in Qrow's place. "Yeah, he's getting things ready for us to head to Patch."

"I see," Oz hummed. "Going on vacation?"

"...Yes," James said slowly. This was starting to feel too suspicious. "Oz...how much of this have you planned?"

"Just enough," Ozpin sighed. "I was going to explain everything when we get to Vale. But...well, it doesn't matter. Just...whatever happens tonight...promise me you'll look out for Qrow. He needs a friend like you."

"Of course," James promised. "Oz-"

"Excuse me," Ozpin interrupted. "I'm being summoned." They pulled out their scroll and hurried to a quiet corner of the room.

"Something's going on," James whispered, "and I don't think I like it."

---

Ozpin pulled out their scroll, leaving James behind to his own thoughts. Oz wasn't expecting any messages tonight except from Klein's escape ship.

But this call was coming from Vale.

From Glynda's scroll.

"Ozpin speaking," they answered.

"Nini!" came a terrified screech.

"Amber?" A chill ran down their spine. Amber was crying, there was the sound of screeching tires, and the roar of a beast. "Amber, what's going on?!"

"Grimm!" she screamed. "They're everywhere in downtown! Mr. Xiong-Junior is taking us out of
the city but Glynda is hurt and I-

"Calm down, Amber," Oz said steadily, trying not to panic. "Where is Junior taking you?"

"Someplace safe," she whimpered. "Something about heading west to Vacuo. Said he has friends there that'll take care of us."

"Alright," they said. They knew where Junior planned to take Glynda and Amber. Sending them to him had been the best choice. "Amber, I need you to be ready to fight. You'll make it to Vacuo safely, but you need to be prepared for the worst. Do you have your staff?"

"Y-yes."

"Good. Now, I'll join you as soon as I can. You'll be alright, I promise. Be strong."


"I will, I promise."

"See you soon. Love you."

"Love you too."

Click.

With a shaky hand, Ozpin slipped their scroll into their pocket and hurried over to James. "We need to go. Where's Qrow?"

"He ran off," James reminded him. "Remember?"

"That's right. Call him, and follow-"

Fanfare began to play.

"Quick!" Jacques called from nearby. "Lower the screen! An announcement from the king!"

"This isn't good."

Ozpin saw Qrow hurrying over to them. "Where have you been?"

"Prepping the car," Qrow muttered.

"What car?" asked James. "We got a ride here from Klein."

"It doesn't matter," Ozpin said. "We have to go. Now."

The lights in the room began to dim as they headed to the door. A screen had lowered from a compartment in the ceiling and the crest for the kingdom of Atlas appeared. Ozpin's scroll buzzed and they pulled it out just as several party attendees screamed. The message they received said "Ship 1 FUBAR, waiting at Ship 2."

"Oh god," James breathed.

"No," Qrow whimpered. "Not them, please god not them!"

Ozpin turned to the giant screen, eyes wide in fear and disgust.
Images played on the screen of the destruction of the entire Kingdom of Vale, people being attacked not only by Creatures of Grimm, but also soldiers in Atlesian Military Uniforms. Mixed in was footage from the Civil War, and stills depicting some of the mines belonging to the SDC. In every frame, someone was bleeding out, convulsing, screaming in pain as they were torn limb from limb by the great beasts or machinery. And through the whole thing, a woman's voice could be heard narrating.

"This is not a tragedy," the woman's voice. "This was no accident. This is what happens when you turn a blind eye to the world around you, and entrust your safety, your children, to those who claim to be our guardians and protectors, but are, in reality, nothing more than selfish cowards."

Ozpin slid their scroll back into their pocket before grabbing James and Qrow by the wrists and whispering, "We need to go."

"The Atlesian Nobility wield more power than most companies and militaries," the voice continued. "And some of them even had the audacity to try and control both. They cling to this power in the name of peace, and yet, what do we have here? Hundreds of innocent civilians being brutally slaughtered by an invading army, and thousands more being tortured in the mines of a greedy business man."

"Come on," Ozpin pleaded. They dragged the two men to the door, only to stop when White Fang sentries blocked the path.

"Hunters, soldiers, nobles who are meant to serve and protect. They should carry themselves with Honor and Mercy, and yet I have witness neither from the Kingdom of Atlas. Why would a kingdom that prides itself on being a pioneer of peace and the future of humanity behave in such a barbaric fashion? Perhaps it's due to the fact that the dust supplies in their own territory have begun to run dry and they plan to take from other territories. Or maybe it's for the same reasons Atlas declared war on Mantle ten years prior. A show of power to the weak that Atlas will not fall, and that if you don't stand with them, you shall not stand at all."

Ozpin stared at the screen. They couldn't believe what they were hearing. Whispers were filling the air.

"How can the dust mines be running out?"

"I thought Mantle was the one to strike first."

"Have we been played?"

"Oz," Qrow asked quietly. "What's going on?"

"I don't know," they whispered. They were honestly shocked.

Just how much has been going on under my nose? Ozpin wondered.

"Honestly," said the woman, "I haven't the slightest clue as to what is the right answer. All I know is that this "peace" you've all been living has been a lie. A lie that has finally run its course, as the leaders of our kingdoms begin preparation to protect what they believe is theirs. As someone who hails from Mistral, I can assure you that the situation there is equally undesirable. Our kingdoms are on the brink of war, and yet we, the citizens, were left in the dark. But not anymore."

Ozpin felt Qrow get pulled from their grasp as they and the rest of the party goers were shoved to the center of the ballroom. The workers, the musicians, the guards that weren't fighting back, were all pulled to form a ring around them. Jacques, in his drunken stupor, shoved his way to the Faunus
"Now see here you disgusting brute!," he shouted. "This is no way to treat a Baron-!"

The man smirked and thrust his tail forward, embedding the stinger deep into Jacques' chest. He laughed manically as his tail pulled back, leaving a gaping hole where the man's supposed heart once was.

"And so I ask you," the woman concluded, "now that the first shots have been fired-"

Jacques slumped forward, falling to the ground as he bled out.

"WHO DO YOU THINK YOU CAN TRUST?"

The video cut to the throne room of the King for the last ten seconds. Standing there was a Lieutenant, holding a chainsaw in one hand, the head of the king in another, and his tall form was surrounded by mangled bodies.

The video vanished.

The screen returned to its compartment.

And then the lights returned.

"So then," the scorpion repeated playfully, "who DO you think you can trust?"

Ozpin turned their glare to the scorpion, and then to Qrow, who gave him a playful smirk as he slipped his scroll out of his sleeve.

Now or never.

"I believe," Ozpin said flirtatiously, "that you won't be able to do the same to me that you've done to Lord Schnee!" They slipped off their outer robe, revealing their cane in the loop of their belt.

"What was your name, sir?"

"Why, you wish to know my name?" the man gasped. "And SIR? Oh, how wonderful! The Wizard has manners."

"Indeed. My name is Ozpin. You?"

"Why friend, my name is Tyrian," the Faunus greeted. "And I'm afraid I won't be killing you tonight. On the contrary, I'm here to whisk you away with me!"

"Wouldn't you rather have a good old fashioned fight? One on one? I bet you'd be quite the competitor."

"I would love that," he sighed. "However, I have strict orders from Her Grace to wipe out the Schnees and to capture you alive. So that is what I must do." His yellow eyes dilated slightly. "One does not upset the Queen."

"Well then," Ozpin said, "why don't we go and you let all these men and women leave?"

"You're...giving up willingly?" Tyrian asked, surprised.

"Of course," Ozpin answered. "You heard the woman on the intercom. Nobles and hunters are to act with honor and mercy. I'm doing the honorable thing. Giving myself up in exchange for the
"Freedom of everyone here."

"How brave! I'm afraid that's not part of the plan," Tyrian laughed. His eyes flashed violet. "I think we've had enough talk now, don't you?"

"Quite."

With a swing of their cane, a bright green light filled the room. Ozpin knelt down, stabbing the cane into the ground, and remained frozen in place.

"Ozpin?!" James called. "What're you doing?"

"Watch," they answered. Ozpin closed their eyes, focusing all their Aura into this moment. The light in the room started to surround the intruders, keeping them from moving.

"Alright everyone!" Qrow bellowed as he got off his scroll. "If you don't want to die, I suggest you get the hell out of dodge and to your homes. Those who have a way off Solitas and to someplace else, great. Those that don't, please head to the docks. I called in a favor from a buddy of mine, and he'll take you to Vytal."

"Should you be yelling that?" asked one of the waiters.

"They can't hear us," Ozpin assured them. "Nor can they see us, or chase us. Now hurry. I can't hold them for long."

"You heard them!" James spoke up. "Everyone, single file out of the manor and to where you need to go."

"The boat leaves in 2 hours!" Qrow added. "So if you have family you need to get on it, call them now."

Ozpin stayed still, sweat rolling down their nose as everyone left. It took almost a half an hour to evacuate the entire manor. But soon the grounds were cleared, save for themselves, James, Qrow, and one other.

"What exactly are you doing?" James asked them. "Is this magic?"

"Very powerful magic," Qrow answered. "Now Jim-"

"James."

"James, go to the car out back. It'll take you to the airfield in Mantle and from there, to Patch."

"I'm not leaving you and Ozpin here alone."

"You won't," Ozpin said. "We'll have to go together. The ship Klein was supposed to take was sabotaged. We have to travel together to Vale, and then make our way west."

"I'm coming too."

"Willow-" James said.

*Willow Schnee, Oz realized. She's still here!*

"Get to the car you three," Ozpin groaned. "I'll join you in a moment. Now hurry!"
"Right," Qrow said. "This way! Out the window we go!"

Ozpin listened as they ran out of the ballroom through the window. Once the car started driving away, Ozpin opened their eyes, panting softly as the spell broke and the intruders were mobile once more.

"Are you sure you should be on the roof?!"] James called to Qrow.

"I'll be fine!" Qrow shouted. "Besides, the driver ran off, and your gun won't do much damage unless they're close enough. And I can at least catch up if I need to play distraction!"

James sighed and didn't question it any further. Now wasn't the time to argue. They had to escape while they had the chance. And they had to get to Vale. If things were truly as bad as they were on that broadcast, then the poor man was probably worrying badly about his family.

"We're almost there," James murmured. He could see the airfield coming up, as well as a ship being loaded with the remainder of supplies. The car bounced, and came to a sudden stop. "Shit."

"We got company!" Qrow bellowed. "James, get the missus to the ship!"

"But-"

"Just go!"

James got out of the car and hurried to let Willow out. The woman wouldn't be able to run in the dress and heels, so he lifted her up into his arms and started sprinting down to the ship. He glanced back only for a moment to see Qrow going head to head with a woman with minty green hair.

"Over here!" Klein shouted.

James set Willow down once they reached the ship, making sure Klein got her on board before darting back to help Qrow, who was now toe to toe with a man with silver hair. He drew his pistol from its holster, got in close, and shot.

The man with silver hair recoiled just before the shot could hit him, causing it to ricochet off of Qrow's sword and fly towards the minty woman, hitting her square in the shoulder.

"James!" Qrow growled. "Get back to the ship!"

"I'm not leaving without you!" He took aim at the man, only for him to vanish from his line of sight. The airfield was disappearing.

"James, come on!" Qrow shouted, fighting their assailants.

James was frozen in place.

_Not now,_ he told himself. _Focus!_ He took a deep breath and fired. There was a scream, and the man fell to the ground clutching his leg. The woman was sent flying by Qrow's incoming kick.

"Nice one! Now come on, Jimmy!"
James snapped back fully to reality when Qrow grabbed him and they ran back to the ship. A familiar pair of golden eyes was standing there to greet them.

"Cutting it close," they panted.

"Oz!" Qrow sighed. "Thank god you're okay!"

"Come on. We have to take off."

"Once we land," James panted, "you're telling us everything. Like how you got here so fast."

"I will, I promise," Ozpin said. "Now let's go."

They boarded the craft, which slowly began to ascend into the sky and fly in the direction of Vale. James looked to see who was at the controls, surprised to see a snowy white bun poking up from the captain's chair.

_It couldn't be._

"Winter?" James asked slowly.

"At your service, sir!" the woman in the chair said proudly.

"How soon can we get to Patch?" Qrow asked desperately.

"It'll be a few hours," said Klein. "Flynt and Neon already ran all the calculations. If we make no stops and go straight there, we'll make it before morning."

James could see that answer didn't please Qrow whatsoever. It would never be soon enough. He gently wrapped an arm around him, keeping him steady as Qrow's lips quivered. "We'll find them, Qrow. I promise."

Qrow simply nodded, staying quiet as they began to make their way south.

James took a second to try and calm his nerves. They had escaped. It should be smooth sailing until they made it to Vale.

At least, that's what he had hoped anyway.

There were several bright lights, a high pitched whine, and soon everything went dark.

Chapter End Notes

Atlas is dead! And now I can really get to the good stuff.

Let me know what you think.
When James opened his eyes again, he felt weightless. There was a burning pain in left hand, and a slight ringing in his ears. His cerulean gaze scanned the area, trying to make sense of what was happening. The interior of the ship was gone, replaced with a dark void. And he was floating.

And that's when he remembered. Winter had been flying a ship. They were escaping a hostile takeover of Atlas. The ship was blown to pieces.

The ship had blown up, but they were somehow *still alive*.

"Where are we?" he whispered.

James looked in front when a bright golden glow appeared, thinking his mind was playing tricks on him. Ozpin was there, eyes completely taken over with light. There appeared to be a halo made of gears and cogs swirling around them. And their wings-

*Wait*, he thought. *Wings?!*

"Oz, don't do it!"

James looked to his right. There was Qrow, eyes streaming with tears as he tried to reach them. Ozpin seemed to be keeping him in place with their magic.

"I'm sorry," Ozpin said softly.

"Oz, what's going on?" James asked.

"Qrow, take James out of the North," Ozpin said. "Protect that stone. Keep it out of Her reach. And keep each other safe."

"Ozpin, please!" Qrow begged. "It doesn't have to be like this! You can come with us!"

Ozpin ignored his pleas, raising their hands as four of the gears from the halo flew upwards. James followed their flight, watching as they connected and started to change color.

*Red, white, black, and yellow.*

"Goodbye," Ozpin whispered.

James and Qrow began to float towards the white gear

"*OZPIN DON'T!*" Qrow screamed.
James grabbed hold of him and pulled him close, turning Qrow so he couldn't see what was happening. The wings on Ozpin's back began to glow and crack as they all floated upwards.

"Let me go!" Qrow cried, trying to wriggle away. "James let me go! Fucking listen to me! LET ME GO!"

James didn't let go, whispering a soft "I'm sorry" and watched as Ozpin sent the others upwards towards the other colors. There was the sound of glass breaking, and just as the void began to vanish James saw the wings shatter and fizzle out. There was a flash of white, and the void was gone, replaced with a snowy forest in the middle of the night.

Qrow finally pulled himself out of James' grip and flew to his feet, looking around frantically as James sat up. James watched him silently while he tried to get his bearings. Pain was shooting through every nerve of his body. His medication had probably worn off.

"They're gone," Qrow whispered. "Klein, Willow, the kids...Oz...All gone..."

"You're still here," James reminded him. "And so am I. So they can't be gone per say. Probably ended up someplace else."

Qrow turned to him, eyes narrowed in annoyance. "And where is here exactly? Do you realize what just happened?!"

"Better than you probably think," James groaned. He slowly got to his feet. "Ozpin sacrificed themselves to get us out of danger. The Kingdom of Atlas has fallen. Vale is being torn to pieces. Jacques Schnee is dead. And whoever it is that's responsible for all that's happened, is after this."

He held his left hand up to show Qrow the stone. "I may not have all the details, but given what's happened, I think it's safe to say we're going to war."

"Understatement of the century," Qrow sighed. "Oz knew something was up. They shouldn't have chanced...they shouldn't have done it if-"

"I do hope," James interrupted, "that you'll be telling me everything you know about what happened back there. Like why Ozpin had wings?"

Qrow rubbed his hands over his face before stuffing them into his pockets. James looked him over, taking in the tattered look of Qrow's waist coat. The pants legs were torn apart, and he was missing a shoe. He looked at himself, analyzing the damage. His clothes weren't as badly ripped, but still enough to where it would be problematic should it get any colder.

"How about," James suggested, "we find someplace to rest for the night, then in the morning we can talk. Sound good?"

"Sure," Qrow sighed. "I'll fly up and get a look at our surroundings. You stay put."

"Fly? Qrow what are you-"

Qrow jumped upwards and, before James could blink, became a black corvid no bigger than a shoebox and took to the sky. James felt his mouth fall open. His butler was a bird.

"Q-Qrow is a crow," he rambled, shaking his head. "H-he's a literal crow. Wait, why am I so surprised by this? I just saw my best friend freeze a ballroom of terrorists and sprout wings. This should be the least strange thing I've seen tonight."

James looked around the area, trying to get a sense of where they could be on the ground. There
was quite a bit of snow, but it seemed to be thinning out. And based on the vegetation, it was safe to say they weren't on Solitas anymore. There was a faint smell of salt in the air. Wherever they ended up, it was near a beach. James noticed something shining in the moonlight, and saw Qrow's weapon stuck in a tree with a large suitcase hanging on its handle.

Removing the suitcase, James attempted to retrieve the sword, from its hold. It took a few pulls, and when it finally slid out of the wood it nearly sent James falling to the ground. He was holding it in his metal hand, and yet it was still incredibly heavy.

"How the fuck does he lift this so easily?!" he hissed. "It weighs as much as I do!"

"Actually," Qrow said as he landed, "it's lighter. And it took me years to master, so please don't touch Huginn."

"S-sorry," James mumbled. "So what's the sitch?"

"First, you said "what's the sitch". No one says that anymore. And two, we're about a forty-five minute walk from the abandoned settlement of Asagao."

"Asagao? Are you saying Oz dropped us on Anima?"

"Specifically," Qrow grumbled, "we're on the Dragon's Head peninsula. Far enough from Atlas to be safe for now, but we're gonna have to head south fast if we're going to get to Patch."

"Patch?"

"Yes, Patch. I have to find my family. We've lost Oz, and I'm not losing Ruby, Yang, and Tai. And since I have to escort you with me out of the north, might as well kill two Nevermores with one slice. Now-" Qrow took the suitcase and his weapon from James, giving him an apologetic smile. 
"-why don't we get walking? We can scavenge the town for whatever we don't have in the case in the morning. Maybe find a map, and if need be, I'll hunt for food. For now, we need to get someplace warm and get changed."

"I can carry the case-" James started.

"No, I'm doing the heavy lifting," Qrow insisted. "Atlas might be dead, but I'm still your butler. So let me butle, or whatever the word is. Now come on, it looks like rain, and I do not want to be out in it when we're still this far north."

"Yeah," James agreed. "Last thing we need is to catch pneumonia."

"You got your pistol?"

James checked his holster, smiling softly when he saw it was still in place. "Got it."

"Good. Now let's go."

James followed Qrow, glancing at his scroll every so often to see how long it's been. Time was moving far too slow, and the silence was unbearable.

"Ever heard of the Game of Letters?" James asked innocently.

"The Game of Letters?" Qrow grumbled. "I've played it before. Why?"

"Might help pass the time. Unless you want to walk another forty minutes in complete silence."

"Snake."

"Elephant."

"Tiger."

"Rabbit."

James smiled, and they continued onward.

Tyrian sat still in his favorite chair, his tail wrapping itself around his middle as they waited patiently for their Queen in her throne room. His smirk traveled around the room as he eyed his comrades, expecting high praise for his work. He giggled softly as Cinder's minions stood behind her, shoving each other in an attempt to get closer. Watts, the man with green eyes and horrible facial hair, rolled his eyes as he put his scroll away. Tyrian loved watching him get annoyed by such trivial things.

"Do keep your...posse, under control, please," Watts groaned. "We don't have time to put up with incompetents here."

"Emerald and Mercury are hardly incompetent," Cinder spat. "We were simply outsmarted by a wizard of many skill sets."

"But this isn't the first time," Watts reminded her. "Ozpin has outsmarted you thrice now. And this time, they've even put Tyrian to shame."

Tyrian's tail unwrapped, stinger poised to strike as he replied. "Excuse me? The Wizard hardly shamed me!"

"Then where are they?" Watts asked. "Cinder at least completed her task this time."

Tyrian said nothing, kneeling down in preparation to lunge.

"Silence," Watts sighed. "That's a first from you."

"Why you-"

The doors swung open, cutting Tyrian off before he had the chance to attack. Everyone rose to their feet as SHE entered the room. Her skin white as bone, delicately detailed with deep obsidian swirls that perfectly enhanced her beauty. Her radiance seemed enhanced by the soft lilac glow dancing off the walls from the candlelight. Tyrian's body began to relax, his face beaming with joy as his Goddess walked to her throne.

"Watts," she said calmly. "Do you find such malignance necessary?"

Tyrian stifled a laugh as she motioned for them to be seated. It felt so good when someone was being berated by Salem. And even more so when that person was Watts.

"My apologies, My Queen," Watts responded respectfully. "I'm just not particularly fond of
"Then I see no reason for your antagonistic jabs towards your fellows," she stated. "They have done well, despite the setbacks. Atlas has fallen. With both Jacques Schnee and the King gone, we're one step closer to reclaiming our rightful place. To what failures are you referring to?"

"Well," Watts stammered, "Tyrian was tasked with retrieving The Wizard alive, as well as eliminate all of the Schnees. Sending an explosive at the ship carrying both didn't exactly ensure both tasks completion."

"The Wizard is most likely still alive," grumbled Hazel, green eyes leveling on Tyrian. "It's unlikely they'd let the people they were escaping with die with them."

"That is true," Salem agreed.

Tyrian started to feel nervous. Ozpin had escaped him, it's true, but surely his Queen would forgive him for such a hiccup. He slowly glanced at her, his yellow eyes meeting with her blood red jewels. They were as unreadable as ever.

"Make no mistake, Tyrian," Salem assured him. "you did well. This failure was not of your doing. It was a miscalculation on our part. Which is why I am giving you a special task."

"A special task?" Tyrian asked excitedly.

"Yes. You will be heading to Vacuo for find The Mage. She's fled for the desert. We'll need her if we are to locate the Relics. If you come across the remaining Schnee family, dispose of them."

"Oh, yes My Queen!" he snickered. A special task, just for me! Oh, how proud she'll be when I return!

"And what of The Wizard?" Hazel asked.

"Most likely," Salem mused, "they have made their way to a safe haven. Someplace no one will find them. As of now, they have completely vanished from our sight."

"Then what is our next course of action, Your Grace," Watts asked.

Tyrian watched as Salem placed her hand to her chin in thought. It was a rare sight to watch her ponder something.

"Dr. Watts," Salem finally replied. "You will head to Vale as planned to help the citizens rebuild and establish a strong presence there. Hazel, you will go on ahead to Mistral to deal with the troublemakers there."

"You're having me go after The Gold Blade?" Hazel asked, perplexed.

"Yes. They've been a nuisance for some time. Going forward, they might prove to be meddlesome. Best to snuff out those embers before they can burn." Salem turned her gaze to Cinder, eyes glowing for only a moment. "You've done well, Young Cinder. This would not have been possible were it not for your efforts. I'm sending you to Vale as well, and you will be tasked with retrieving Ozpin. If you start your search there, you will most likely come across clues to their whereabouts."

"Yes, My Queen," Cinder replied.

"Good," she said. "Now go rest. Come morning, everything will be prepared for your journeys."
However-" She narrowed her eyes at all of them, and Tyrian couldn't help but feel a tingle roll up his spine. "-failure in these tasks will not be taken lightly. We cannot afford failures now."

"Yes, My Queen," they said in unison. Tyrian watched Salem rise first, smiling proudly as he started to giggle.

*I will make My Goddess happy*, he thought to himself. *I will retrieve The Mage.*

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The heavy rain pelted the rooftop of the inn as Amber sat guard in their room. Her staff at the ready, she felt a sharp pain pulse through her to the very core of her being. She bit back the tears, pulling the hood of her green cloak closer to her eyes. She couldn't take her eyes off Glynda right now. Her elder lay on the bed across the room from her chair, laying on her stomach so as not to irritate the gashes on her back. They weren't deep, but Amber knew that just keeping them clean and bandaging them wasn't going to work forever. They needed more than simple first aid, and this small village outside of Vale didn't have their doctor on hand.

Amber remained silent as she kept silent vigil over her employer. She didn't flinch nor turn to look up when Junior and his daughters returned.

"How is she?" the gentle giant inquired. "Has Glynda's condition improved?"

"Still asleep," Amber said solemnly. "Her Aura is slowly restoring itself, and you did a good job on the first aid. But she'll need a doctor soon. Either that, or Klein's healing spell."

"The nearest doctor from here is the next town over," Melanie, the twin in the white dress, whined. "Will Glynda even make it?"

"She has to," Amber mumbled.

"But she was hit pretty bad," Miltia, the red-dressed twin, whimpered. "Taking a Beowulf to the back was pretty reckless."

"She saved us," Junior reminded them. "We're going to make sure she makes it through."

"How long until we get to your friend in Vacuo?" Amber asked.

"About another five days until we reach the border," he sighed, tugging at his beard. "Then another two weeks until we get to Sakaba."

"It'll be nice to see Roman and Neo again," Miltia sighed. "I wish it were under better circumstances though."

"Me too," Amber agreed. "Is this Roman guy really trustworthy?"

"Yeah," Junior assured fondly. "He may be a thief, but I trust him with my life. And Oz wouldn't have let us head that direction if they didn't feel the same."

Amber's lips began to tremble at the name. She kept her head low, staff clutched tightly to her chest.

"How long until Ozpin meets up with us?" Melanie asked.
"They won't," she whispered. Amber could feel everyone turning their eyes to her in fear. She had to tell them eventually, now might as well be the time.

"How do you know they're not coming?" Miltia demanded. "Oz never breaks a promise. They promised to come back for you and-"

"Their Aura," Amber whimpered. "I can't track it. They...Nini...Nini isn't coming...

She didn't know when her staff fell from her arms. She never looked up from under her hood to see who it was that threw their arms around her first. She didn't try to push them away. Instead, Amber went limp, wrapping her arms around the large shoulders of the bartender, burying her face in his vest as the three of them held her. She bawled heavily, repeating "Nini" over again and again until it was the only sound in the room.

"I know sweetie," Junior said soothingly. "I know Nini meant a lot to you...But we have to be strong now...Nini needs you to be strong..."

"Nini's gone," Amber sobbed, shaking slightly. "They're gone and not coming back...I'm alone again..."

"No you're not," Junior said. "You have us. We're family. We'll keep each other safe, and we'll find everyone again. We'll keep Glynda safe. We'll keep you safe."

"We're family," the twins said in unison. "Now and forever."

"Now and forever," Junior agreed. "We may not be Nini...but we're here for you, Amber...You're not alone..."

Amber lightly nodded, unable to talk anymore. Her breaths were shallow and shaky as they all left the embrace. She didn't protest to Junior lowering her hood to dry her eyes. She just stayed silent, nuzzling into the touch as Junior's gloved hands wiped the tears away.

In the back of her mind, though, she silently prayed for her Nini's return, however slim the chances were that they were still alive.

"Mother? Winter? Klein, where are you? Whitley?"

Weiss had awoken in the middle of an abandoned town. The buildings were dilapidated, brimming with mildew and claw marks. She remembered seeing a bright light before falling asleep, and when she awoke, she was alone, in a torn apart ball gown, broken heels, and nothing but her mother's necklace in her hands.

And it scared her.

She wandered around the town, searching for any sign of life as her long hair fell from its place on the side of her head. Her heels were broken, and made it hard to walk.

"Klein! Winter, please!" she called. "This isn't funny! Where are you?!"

There was a low growling coming from one of the nearby buildings, and Weiss didn't want to stick around to see what it was. She kicked off her heels and ran, not looking back to see the Ursa that
was barreling toward her.

"Help me!" she screamed, unaware of the bright blue light that was surrounding her. "Someone help me!"

"Duck!"

Weiss fell to the ground and covered her head, shutting her eyes tightly as the source of the voice flew over her. There was a loud roar, the sound of gunfire, and then a soft hiss. Once she was sure it was safe, she slowly turned around and looked up at her rescuer. It was a girl, roughly around her age. She was wearing a long violet coat with a high collar and gold detailing, black thigh high boots, and if Weiss wasn't mistaken, protruding from her black hair were a pair of cat ears. Slowly, she got to her feet, panting softly as she tried to steady her nerves.

"Thank you," Weiss said. "For saving me."

"What were you thinking?!" the girl growled at her."Don't you know this place is an Ursa hot-spot?!!"

"No, I didn't," Weiss spat, taken aback. "I woke up here after the ship blew up! Where am I anyway?"

"What ship?"

"The escape ship," Weiss grumbled. "Klein was supposed to take us to Vale, and then the ship didn't work and-"

"Wait a minute," said the rescuer, looking her over. "You're...You're Weiss Schnee."

Weiss narrowed her eyes in suspicion, unsure how to react. "Yes, I am. And you are?"

"Blake," she said. "And I'm on my way out of here. I have to get to the top of the mountain before the next Grimm shows up." She looked Weiss over. "I'm guessing you've never used your Aura before?"

"Aura?" Weiss looked at herself, gazing in awe at the soft blue glow as it faded away. "When...when did I-"

"Probably when that Ursa was chasing you," Blake sighed. "Come on. I've got clothes back at camp you can change into, and come tomorrow morning, I'll take you to the next town."

"Excuse me?"

"Do you want to stay here and wait for the next Ursa in those rags?"

"...No...Lead the way, Blake..."

"Alright, but hold on tight."

"Wait, what?"

Blake quickly wrapped an arm around Weiss's waist, throwing her weapon in the direction of an old clock tower and propelling forward. Weiss' arms flew to Blake's torso and she held on tight, stifling a yelp as they flew through the air. It was rather exhilarating.

"So," Blake said as they swung towards the mountainside, "what's an Atlesian Noble doing this far
"Depends," Weiss squeaked. "How far south am I?"

"You're in Erika," Blake told her. "A good month from Mistral by foot. A few days by train."

"Mistral?" Weiss gasped. "I'm that far from Atlas?"

"Yeah. How'd you get here anyway?"

"You...you don't know what happened?" Weiss looked at her, confused. Surely the rest of the world knows, right? They saw the same broadcast she did, right?

"No, I don't," Blake said dryly. "The towers went down somewhere last night, so most global communication stopped. Why? What happened in Atlas?"

"It...was overrun by the White Fang..." Weiss explained sadly, trying to push back the nausea. "At least, I'm pretty sure it was them. I saw it on the ship. There was a woman on this broadcast narrating and the end of the video showed the king dead. His head being held by someone in a Grimm Mask with a chainsaw-"

"Chainsaw?!" Blake screamed as they landed at the mouth of a cave. "What happened to the Kingdom? Where is everyone now?!"

"I-I don't know!" Weiss snapped. "Ozpin was helping us to escape-"

"What about the Chief?!"

"Chief? H-hey!" Blake grabbed Weiss' shoulders hard enough to bruise, shaking her slightly.

"The Chief of Menagerie! He was there on diplomatic business for the last two months! Please tell me he's not still there!"

"He's not!" Weiss screamed. "He went home the night before! Father was furious he and Countess Goodwitch cancelled their attendance! Now let go!"

Blake removed her hands and hurried into the cave, slumping into the corner against a large sleeping bag, tugging at her hair, mumbling, "This isn't good. This is really not good."

Weiss slowly approached her, kneeling down so they were eye to eye before asking, "Why did you need to know about Chief Belladonna? Are you two close?"

"Very," Blake sighed. "If he made it out and is on his way back home, I need to get to Menagerie."

"How?" Weiss asked. "We're still too far up north."

"If...If I can get to Mistral," Blake muttered thoughtfully, "I can hijack a Sky-Boat and fly there. Or I can travel by ferry. Either option is a moot point though. By the time I get back, it might be too late."

"Too late?"

Blake turned her honey-eyed stare toward Weiss, allowing the heiress to get a good look at the young girl's face. She was deathly pale, and her eyes had dark circles around them. She probably hasn't been sleeping for days. If she was going to Menagerie, she needed someone to go with her. The poor Faunus looked half-dead.
"Let me come with you," Weiss said. "I can help."

"You can help?" repeated Blake skeptically. "You couldn't even outrun an Ursa."

"I have some worth," Weiss sighed. "Look, we both have people to find. I need to locate my family, and you need to find the Chief. If we travel together, we can help each other."

"No offense," Blake said, "but you're not exactly at the top of my list of people I trust to watch my back."

"Noted. But I can help. I may not look it, but I know how to fight with a sword. I can sing, and there are plenty of villages that'll pay for a singer to perform for the night, so I can earn us some Lien. And I can carry your things. I'll...I'll even become your maid, if you want. All I ask is you let me come with you."

Blake looked at the ground, weighing her options. Weiss held her breath, anticipating an answer and praying for it to be yes. If she had the tools, she could fend for herself. But given the current circumstances, she couldn't chance it.

"If you want," Weiss bargained, "I'll also give you my share in the SDC."

"What?" Blake gasped.

"Each of my siblings got a share," Weiss explained. "I can give you my share of the company to do as you please with. Just please, let me travel with you!"

Blake remained quiet for a moment more before reaching into her bag and pulling out a spare set of clothes and tossing them to Weiss. "Like I said before, we'll go to the next town tomorrow morning. We'll find you a good battle outfit and maybe see about a sword. We have a long way to travel."

Weiss smiled fondly. "Thank you, Blake."

"Sure," Blake sighed, grinning. "Just get dressed and then get some sleep."

"You too," Weiss said. "You look like you need it."

"Yeah."

Weiss quickly changed into the shirt and jeans she'd been provided, using torn pieces of her gown to fashion a belt and to tie her hair back in a braid, slipping the necklace on and storing it under the shirt collar. Blake laid out the sleeping bag so that both of them could lay on top, and soon Weiss fell asleep, curled up beside her new companion.

---

The woods were alive with the sound of spring. Animals were slowly making their way out of their nests and hiding holes, greeting the season warmly as they scurried about to find food. The river bubbled and babbled along the brook as the ice continued to melt. The wind hummed softly along the grass.

They loved walking through the woods this time of year. Vale rarely looked this nice after the winter, and they wanted to enjoy the transition into spring before returning to the north. Softly they
sang, listening to the sound of the world around them.

"Deep in the forest, the wizard sat.
Alone in his home, with his favorite hat.
Looking out the window who would he see,
sitting there beneath his tree?
Winter was her name and she,
was waiting on her sisters three.
There she sat, still as could be.
In absolute tranquility."

"CAW!"

They stopped for a moment, looking up into the trees to see if they could spot the source of the noise. When they couldn't locate the perpetrator, they continued on their way, singing once more.

"He joined her rest, and cleared his mind
Meditating on her peculiar kind
When he woke once more, there in his sight
Was sister Spring in the new sunlight."

"CAW CAW!"

There it was again. Only louder this time. It sounded pained, desperate, and scared. And it came from the clearing just up ahead. Deciding not to dawdle any longer, they sprinted forward, hurrying to find the one calling to them.

When they reached the clearing, they searched the trees, looking for the little friend in need.

"CAW CAW!!"

They turned their head fast in the direction of the sound, brow pinched in worry as they ran to the far end of the clearing. There was a gilded cage hanging from the tree. Inside was a crow, it's left wing bent horribly out of shape. In place of straw or old papers, there were several yellow carnations lining the floor of the cage. Carefully they lowered the cage to inspect it closer.

"How cruel," they hummed. "Who would leave an injured angel alone in a cage?" They slowly opened the cage door, settling themselves beneath the tree and waited for the bird to leave willingly. "If you want, I can heal your wing so you can fly again. But I can't unless you come out."

The crow hesitated, turning its rusty red eyes up at them before slowly coming out of the cage.

"Good," they said. "My name is Oz. Do you have a name?" The bird didn't reply. "Then I think I'll call you Prosper for now. I hope that's alright."

The bird remained still as Oz put their hand to the broken wing. It was painful putting it back in place, but once their hand started glowing softly, all the pain floated away, and the wing was usable once more.

"There," they sighed. "That should do it. Now-" they slowly stood. "I'm heading home soon. Do you want to come with me?"

The crow stared at them momentarily, letting out a soft garble as it nodded.

"Wonderful," Oz beamed. "Then let's go."
Qrow awoke the next morning feeling sluggish. When they had arrived in Asagao, James had suggested staying at the old inn, but Qrow convinced him that the city hall building would be wiser, since there were more places to hide. He did, however, check the inn for blankets, and was lucky to find one that was relatively decent. Their suitcase had one set of clothes for each of them, and enough Lien to retire in style, but nothing that would help them in travelling great distances. He'd have to look around for supplies.

He wiped the sleep from his eyes as he thought back to the dream he had. It had been a long time since he had thought of the cage, the phantom pain in his arm reminding him that it was not something he could easily wash away. Qrow sighed, trying to push the memory away. Now was not the time to reminisce on his Prosper days.

Just as he was about to stand, Qrow felt a light squeeze of metal around his left hand. He looked down and saw James, more relaxed than he'd ever been back at Ironwood Manor, sleeping peacefully in the makeshift bed beside him. There was a small notebook on the ground beside him.

Curiosity getting the better of him, Qrow picked up the notebook and skimmed the pages. There wasn't much in it. A few photographs here and there, but most of the pages were filled with names that had been sketched in.

"Ocean Ried," Qrow read softly. "Gilda Stadtfeld, Lucien Adaire, Donald Frasier, Douglas Frasier, Marie Appleby..." Qrow closed the book and set it back. He recognized a few of the names. He shouldn't have peeked inside. He hoped James wouldn't be angry with him for it.

He slipped his hand from James' grip and went to search the area. If they were going to travel south, they'd need more than just Lien. Qrow adjusted his cape, feeling somewhat relieved he didn't have to wear the stuffy butler suit anymore. He never did feel comfortable in it. Qrow much preferred his favorite grey button up and slacks.

"And the red cape of course, he thought cheerfully. Qrow Branwen isn't Qrow Branwen without his cape. He continued searching the town, making his way to what appeared to be the shopping district. All the stores appeared empty, though. That didn't bode well.

"We'll need some camping gear," he mumbled to himself. "Sleeping bags, backpacks, knives...there's got to be something around here..."

"Maybe I can help?"

Qrow froze in place, slowly turning around to meet eye to eye with the person who had spoken. Long black hair, red eyes, and her hands on her hips as she raised an eyebrow at him.

"Raven," Qrow growled. "What the fuck are you doing here?"

"Same as the last time I saw you," she cooed. "I'm here to bring you back to the tribe."

"And like I said the last time," Qrow spat, "I'm not going back to those murderers and thieves."

Raven scoffed, smirking. "You call your family thieves, yet here you are stealing from an abandoned town."
"It's not stealing if people left it for over ten years," Qrow said. "I believe a little birdie told me that when we were kids."

"Qrow-"

"Tell daddy dearest I'm not coming back," he grumbled. "I have more important things to do."

"Father is dead," Raven scowled. "I lead our people now. And as leader, I'm bringing you back home brother. Back to our family."

"You have a very skewed perception of that word," Qrow snarled. "You consider bandits family, but not your own daughter. Are you aware Yang's in the middle of a warzone?"

"What?"

"Vale was attacked last night. And Atlas has fallen. Though maybe if you didn't walk out on Tai, you'd know that." Qrow turned on his heel. "Once the Lord and I get some supplies, we're heading back to Patch. If we're lucky, we'll find them safe and sound."

"Lucky?" Raven huffed. "That's a bold statement coming from you, Qrow."

Qrow stopped, ears twitching as he heard the sound of a blade being drawn. "You really want to do this now?"

"Either you come with me and we find them together," Raven said, "or you come with me, and I locate them alone. Either way, you're coming back."

"No, he isn't."

Qrow spun around to see James, dressed in his old combat suit from his youth, his pistol aimed at Raven's head. "My Lord, please-"

"This is the man you've been tasked with protecting?" Raven asked. "Why would you..." She fell silent, glancing at James' left hand.

"I suggest leaving," James said warningly. "Unless you really intend to fight here and now."

"No," Raven said. "We're almost done here." She looked at her twin, eyes narrowed. "If I find them before you do, will you come back?"

Qrow stared between them, debating on what his answer should be before deciding.

"If you find them first," Qrow promised. "I'll come back to the tribe. But-"

"But?"

"James is part of the deal. Where I go, he goes, and vice versa. Do we have a deal?"

Raven pondered this, glancing back at James who still had his weapon pointed at her. "Very well."

She pointed to one of the empty bakeries with her blade. "I keep a stash of supplies in that building. Take what you need. I'll head to Patch and see if I can track them."

"Thank you, Rae," Qrow said reluctantly.

"Don't thank me," Raven said. "Consider this your "one save". I'll see you back at camp when I find them, My Bad Luck Charm."
With a swing of her blade, she opened a portal and entered, leaving the two men behind as it closed.

"So that's Raven," James sighed, lowering his gun. "I can see why you didn't want to talk about her."

"She has a view of the world that I don't particularly agree with," Qrow mumbled. "That, and she's dangerous. Very, very, very dangerous." He turned and began to walk toward the old bakery. "Come on. Rae said to help ourselves to the supplies. We have to get moving if we're gonna find Tai and the girls before she does."

"Hold on."

Here it comes, Qrow thought. "Yes?"

"What did she mean by "Bad Luck Charm"? What does that have to do with anything?"

Qrow could feel the wind blowing softly through his hair. He kept his eyes closed, breathing steadily as he made his choice. He knew it was a matter of time before he had to tell him.

"Promise me," James had said, "someday, you'll tell me about your past. Only when you're ready though."

Qrow wasn't ready. There was no way he could ever be ready.

But it didn't matter now.

"Tell me James," Qrow said. "Did you know crows are a sign of misfortune?"

Chapter End Notes

Well, now we know that they aren't dead! Well, most of them at least. Next chapter will reveal what happened to the rest of the group.

Let me know what you think!
Lives are scattered, friends are separated, and some must think on what is to come.

Warning: I might have created a crack-ship in here somewhere.

It had been years since Raven had been back at the little log cabin in the woods. The Xiao-Long homestead was once a vibrant place filled with love and life. But now, as she walked through the mess in the living room, it was nothing but emptiness. The furniture was charred and broken, the window had been blown out, and half the kitchen wall was missing.

"The damage is recent," she deduced softly. "But there seems to be no sign of them..."

She made her way up the stairs, closing her eyes as she instinctively made her way. She hadn't been there since Yang was barely a year old, but most of the house was relatively the same. The master bedroom was on one end of the top floor, the children's room on the other, with a few other bedrooms and the upstairs bath scattered in between. As she made her way to the master bedroom, she felt something crunch under her boot. Leaning down to check, she picked up a photograph of Taiyang, his arms wrapped around his no-so-little girls, blue eyes twinkling in the sunlight as someone (most likely Qrow, if Raven knew them well enough), took the picture.

Yang looked almost exactly as Raven did as a teen, but her hair burned like the sun, and her eyes were a soft lilac color. A perfect blend of her and Tai's eyes. Ruby, if she remembered correctly, was the spitting image of Summer.

Raven slipped the photo out of its frame and slid it into her pocket. She continued on in her search, ignoring the chilling atmosphere surrounding her.

"Hey dad," the note read. "I'm sorry, but I have to leave. There's a lot I know about the world now, thanks to the stone. So I'm going to Mistral. Uncle Qrow will be there, and he'll need my help. I'm going to go find him. I promise I'll be home soon, so please don't worry about me. I love you all. You and Yang take care of each other. Love Ruby. P.S. I took mom's cloak. Mine was too small, and I'll need a bit of mom's courage. Wish me luck."
"Oh Summer," Raven sighed. "She really is just like you..."

"I think I heard something."

Raven glanced toward the door, listening close to see if she could make out what it was. Intruders? Survivors?

"Search upstairs. I can sense their presence."

"Who?"

"Ozpin. And one of the Stones."

No, Raven realized. Enemies. She hurried out the window, careful not to make a sound. She hung from the windowsill, listening as the people inside were talking. She wished she had more time to transform, but she had waited too long.

"There's no one in here, Emerald."

"There was, Mercury! I could tell!"

"Enough you two."

Three people, Raven assessed. One man, two women. The "Emerald" person is clearly not the ringleader. Most likely it's the other one.

"Ozpin was here at one point," Emerald said. "But it's faint. I think it's been a few days, Cinder."

"Mh..."

"Hey guys," said Mercury. "I think I found something."

"A note?"

Raven tried not to let out a hiss. I can't believe I dropped it! Without a second though, she pulled herself back in and swiped the note faster than they could blink.

"Stop her!" yelled Cinder.

Raven kicked the man aside, running out the bedroom door, drawing her blade and opening a portal just as she jumped off the second floor. Raven made it just as it closed, the enemy only seconds too late.

When Raven reappeared, she was on a cliff side. It wouldn't be long until the intruders attempted to locate her. She couldn't afford to let them get the note, so she reached into her pocket to grab her lighter. She didn't smoke, but Taiyang did mention that having one on hand would come in handy someday. She took Ruby's letter and burned it, making sure that not even a single pen stroke remained legible.

"They've most likely gone to Mistral," she whispered. "Tai wouldn't let Ruby head there alone. Hopefully they'll be alright until I find them...I'll need to tell Qrow...But I should check Vale
first...can't leave any stone unturned..." Raven prepared to leave, pausing for a moment when her eyes fell upon the gravestone before her. Shakily, she knelt down, placing her hand upon the rose emblem.

"Summer Rose," it read. "Thus Kindly I Scatter."

"Summer," Raven whispered. "Please forgive me for leaving them alone..."

Biting her lip Raven stood, slipping on her mask once more as she departed.

---

"Is he still alive?"

"He's breathing."

"Hey, kid. Wake up!"

With a soft groan, Whitley tried to tune out the noise. His body ached in places he didn't know he had, and he was freezing cold and wet. He felt a gentle hand brush his hair back, and slowly he looked up.

"Klein?" he muttered. "What's going on?"

"I'm not sure who Klein is," came the salty voice, "but you're on my ship. We just pulled you out of the water. Come on lad, let's get you inside and dried off."

Two sets of arms lifted him slowly, and Whitley's arms fell around the shoulders of his rescuers. By the smell, he must have ended up at sea. He blinked slowly, trying to focus his vision so he could at least see the faces of those around him.

"What happened to you?" asked a softer voice.

"Ship crash," Whitley replied. "At least...I think it was..."

"What's your name, kid?" asked the salty voice.

"Whitley...Whitley Schnee...Where are we? Geographically wise?"

"Well Whitley," said the salty voice, "we're a few days travel from Vacuo. You can travel with us until we get there."

"Vacuo? That just can't be right, he thought. I was supposed to head to Vale. "Where's everyone else? Did you get them out of the water too?"

"It was just you, kid. You and a broken violin case."

"Come on. We're getting you dried off," said the soft voice. "And something to eat. Then we'll talk more, okay?"

"Okay..."

Whitley stayed quiet for a while as his new acquaintances helped him get settled. The Captain,
who told him to simply call him "Captain", was a seasoned veteran of the ocean who seemed used to bringing strangers aboard when they were stranded. The first mate, a charming worker named Matte Skye, brought him a spare uniform, and once he was dried off Whitley put it on. It hung loosely on him, but he didn't mind. It was warm, and that's all that mattered.

"So lad," Captain sighed, "what caused you to end up in the middle of the ocean?"

"I don't know," Whitley admitted. "I was fleeing Atlas with my family. Our butler was helping us escape my father...And then we saw the broadcast on the news and-"

"Broadcast?" Matte asked. "What broadcast?"

"Wait, you don't know?" Of course they don't, he thought. Being sailors, they've probably been out of communication for weeks. "Atlas has fallen. The White Fang took over. And based on what happened last night, I think it's safe to say the SDC is currently under their control."

"By the gods," Captain groaned.

"How did you escape?" Matte inquired.

"It was relatively simple," Whitley mumbled. "Klein, our butler, helped my sister and I out of the manor during a party, just before the takeover. Then one of father's associates followed in suit not long after the broadcast with mother in his arms. Like out of those cheesy romance novels." He nodded politely as he was given a bowl of soup, taking a small sip before continuing. "Then, as we took off, the ship exploded. I don't remember much after that. When I came to, I was here."

"Well," Captain huffed, stroking his beard. "If you were able to survive the crash, there might be a chance your companions have as well. If you'd like, you can travel with us, and we can keep an eye out for them as we travel."

"I have nothing, I'm all alone."

He glanced out the corner of his eye, his sight resting on the red scarf that hung from the chair nearby. His grandfather's scarf, which had seen more of the world in a year than Whitley ever had in a lifetime. The only thing he had that reminded him that he was a Schnee.

"How about you rest here below deck?" Captain suggested. "Think about it a bit. Matte will come down to check on you later, once you've had a chance to mull over things."

"Sure" Whitley replied tiredly. "I think I'll do that. Thank you." Whitley watched them get up to leave, taking light sips of his soup to try and warm up.

"Hey, are...you okay?" Matte asked cautiously.

"You seem a little...out of it, is all," they said. "If you need someone to talk to...feel free to ask, okay?"

"Sure," Whitley said. A small smile appeared on his face. "Thank you."

Matte gave him a thumbs up, and then made their way up top. Whitley felt as if he were going limp, so he finished whatever he could of the soup before sauntering to the small cot in the corner of the room to sleep.

---

He was putting away a box of used comics when the mustachioed customer came in. Tucson set the box down and hurried over to the counter to greet him.

"Welcome to Tukson's Book Trade! Home to every book under the sun. How may I help you?"

He'd practiced that line hundreds of times, yet hearing it in practice was a far cry from saying it as his proper greeting. Leaving the White Fang a few years back had been a great risk, it's true, but it was a risk he was happy he made. He had finally achieved his dream. He had his own business, selling and trading books. New or old, common or rare, normal or supposedly enchanted, he had them all. And he was proud of that.

"I'm looking for a specific book," the man said. "I was wondering if you had a copy of Violet's Garden. First Edition?"

"I sure do," Tukson said. "It's over in the case there. I can get it for you."

"Oh, thank you!"

Tukson froze for a moment, looking the man over. Their eyes seemed to change from brown to gold, and their voice was of a higher pitch now. He brushed it off, ignoring that nagging feeling in his gut.

"Anything else I can help you with today?"

"Yeah," the man said, his voice now low and threatening. "You can drop to the floor or get shot."

"What-"

Before he could move, the man jumped over to him and tackled him to the ground. Just as he was about to push him off, there was the sound of gunfire, and bullets tore through the windows, tearing apart all of the books on the displays, sending showers of paper scattering all over the floor.

"Come on!"

The man clamored off of him and dragged Tukson out the back door to a car hiding in the alleyway. After he crawled into the back seat, the man took the wheel and drove off. Tukson looked out the back window as the store was set ablaze.

"What the hell?!" he screamed.
"Tell me," said the man. "Were you ever in the White Fang?"

"Y-yes," he replied slowly. "Quite a while ago. Been working my shop the last four years."

"Well, I think they've figured out where you've been hiding."

"That store was my life," Tukson sighed. "Now I have to start over."

"Well," said the man, "a friend of mine of mine would be willing to set you up with a job someplace safe if you're needing to save up. They've been good to me, and they'll be good to you."

"How do you know?" Tukson asked.

"They saved my life, and they sent me to save you. Will you give us a chance?"

"I might...if I knew your names..."

"I'm Klein," the man said, smiling. "Ozpin is looking forward to meeting you."

"You are my star, you are the one, you make me smile when the world's come undone-"

Tukson was dancing about, singing along to the music on the radio as he cooked dinner. Ghira and Kali had asked him to make something special, so he had pulled out an old cookbook with a collection of pasta recipes. With the newest shipment of fresh tomatoes, he decided to make a simple angel hair dish with basil picked from Kali's herb garden.

He loved days like this. The world seemed at peace, his friends were safe and happy, and he didn't have to worry about holding back his talents or the skills he learned from Klein and Ozpin.

That was what he hated most about Atlas. As much as he appreciated Ghira's efforts to improve Human-Faunus relations there, having to hold back and let Klein win the sparring match just to please Schnee still left a sour taste in his mouth.

But if I didn't fake it, he reminded himself, then Jacques might have tried to buy out our contracts. And that's a kettle of fish we don't want to open.

Jacques always had to have the best. And that was why his best friend was still there.

Trying not to let that feeling consume him, he took the pot of water off the stove and walked over to the sink to strain the pasta. He could give Klein and the others a call later. For now, he had dinner to make.

"What am I supposed to do? Just sit here and not fall in love with-"

CRUNCH!

CRACK!

THUMP!

Tukson nearly dropped the pot when the sound of breaking branches and something heavy landing
in the trees filled the air. He set it on the counter and turned off the radio as he looked out the window to try and find the source of the disturbance. Hazel eyes widened as he jumped out the window and into one of the nearby palms, hurrying to stop the object from hitting the ground. His hand reached out and he caught it.

Or rather, he caught **HIM.**

"Klein!" Tukson called. "Klein, are you alright?!"

The stout man said nothing. His eyes remained shut, his breathing was shallow, and there was a deep cut on the upper half of his left arm as well as several burn marks across his body. Tukson carefully climbed down and hurried him inside the nearest room, which happened to be the home office. Tukson lowered onto the sofa before hurrying over to get the first aid kit.

"Master Ghira! Madam Kali!" he bellowed. "Call the medics!"

Ghira came running at the sound of his call, freezing in the doorway at the sight of Klein. "What happened?!"

"I don't know," Tukson said. "But I think we'll need more than my basic first aid. He lost a lot of blood."

"Kali!" Ghira called. "Fetch the medics!" Ghira hurried over to help Tukson, and the two of them set to work on getting Klein stable enough for the doctors to arrive.

"Don't worry, old chum," Tukson sighed. "Help's on the way."

Ghira paced back and forth outside the office, glancing over at Tukson and Kali sitting on the davenport as they waited for the doctors to finish. All three of them now had sunken eyes, and their muscles ached from how much of their own Aura they had to pool together to keep Klein stable.

"I hope we weren't too late," Kali whispered. "How did he get here? Atlas is a good two days away by airship."

"I don't know," Tukson muttered. "Those injuries though...they're consistent with an explosion..."

"I'm going to the main hall, where it's quiet," Ghira said. "I'll call Oz, and I'll see if they know anything about what's going on. Hopefully they'll have an explanation."

"You think they even know Klein is here?" Kali asked worriedly. Her cat ears lay flat as she spoke.

"I don't know," Ghira admitted. "But it's worth a shot. Both of you keep an eye on him, okay?"

"Yes, Master Ghir-"

"Tukson, please," he groaned. "We're not at Schnee's. You can call me Ghira."

"R-right. Sorry Ghira."

Ghira smiled fondly as he gave Tukson a playful ruffle of his hair before turning to go to the main hall. There had to be a reason as to what happened. And if anyone could give him an answer, Ozpin
Ozpin always has a plan, Ghira mused. They probably made it so Klein ended up here.

But if that was the case, why?

Reaching the main hall, Ghira pulled out his scroll and dialed Ozpin's number. They probably weren't expecting a call at this hour, but there wasn't much else Ghira could do.

"The number you have dialed is unavailable or is out of range. Please try again later."

"That's odd," Ghira muttered. "Oz always answers when I call...Maybe James might answer..." He dialed James' scroll, tugging anxiously at his beard.

"The number you have dialed is unavailable."

"What in the name of-" Ghira tried for Glynda. Then Qrow. Then anyone else outside of Menagerie he had in his contacts. Over, and over, and over again. The same message played.

"The number you have dialed is unavailable or out of range. Please try again later."

"What's going on?" he growled. "What happened to everyone?" He put away his scroll and proceeded back to his office, trying to ignore the burning feeling in his left hand. One Klein was stable and awake, he was going to get answers. He lost too many friends in one lifetime, and Ghira would be damned if he lose any more.

"Wait for me, everyone," he whispered. "I'll get to the bottom of this."

James followed silently behind Qrow as they walked down the road, limping at a safe distance as per requested. It had been six days since they had left Asagao, and things had just been awkward since that talk Qrow had with him. Qrow had told him the truth about his past, and it made him feel rather horrified, but he felt he understood the man a little better.

"My Semblance isn't like most, Qrow confided. "Some people can make clones of themselves, or they can absorb every force thrown at them. But not me. It's not exactly something I 'do'. It's always there... whether I like it or not. I bring misfortune. It got the people around me into all kinds of grave situations, so I was banished. Oz found me, took me in, and...well, now I'm here."

James couldn't imagine how that must have felt. To be sent away from your home because of something you couldn't control? It was no wonder Qrow drank. Why he carried that cross around his neck. Everyone close to him was hurt by his abilities.

And it just made James want to keep him by his side even more than before. Qrow might not want to chance it, but James was willing to if it meant Qrow wouldn't be left alone like he once was.

Qrow had also told him everything he knew about Ozpin's plan to flee Atlas with them. How Ozpin was involved in something big, but he didn't give too many details. James wasn't sure if this was because Oz had asked him not to, or because Qrow genuinely didn't know. With the way he talked sometimes, it made it hard to get a straight answer.

That is, up until the topic of the stones came up. Qrow was as blunt as ever on the matter.
"Oz has been involved in the more 'magical' side of Remnant for most of their life," Qrow had explained. "But it wasn’t until the day you were at the memorial that they trusted me enough to tell me about some of it. They had these four stones that contain a strong amount of power. Each one has a different set of abilities, and unlike normal magic in Remnant, the stones don’t need Dust or Aura to power them. To use them, though, someone has to be...compatible. It takes a certain type of person to be able to use them. You just happened to be one of those special people."

"Compatible? "James had asked, gazing at his hand. "What makes me compatible for this?"

"I’m not sure," Qrow admitted. "Oz promised to go over everything in full detail once we got to their safe house in Vale but...well...we're kind of up shit creek without a paddle now."

That was a major understatement, James thought.

"Hey James," Qrow called back to him.

"Yes, Qrow?"

"We're coming up on Nettle Town. We can get a room at the inn there."

"Sounds good."

"Just one problem though."

James froze in place, rubbing his hands over his face in exhaustion. "What's the problem?"

"Atlesians aren't exactly welcome in this particular town," Qrow explained. "And I don't exactly have a good reputation here either. So we've got to do a bit of disguising to get you in so you can rest. And you'll need me to sit on your shoulder."

"Come again?"

"Ugh! Just come here and trust me on this."

"You sure?" James asked as he approached. "Back in Asagao you were pretty adamant about me not coming too close."

"Well, things have changed for now. Now stay still while I give you a makeover."

James slowly sauntered into town, carrying their bags as Qrow sat on his shoulder in bird-form, holding some Lien in his beak. Qrow's cape was now wrapped around James' head to give him a sort of hood, while his outer layers had been packed into the bag and a makeshift cloak was made from one of the older blankets. A few bandages were wrapped around his left hand to hide the stone, as well as some on his head to cover the metal plate and his right eye. On first glance, people might mistake him for a thief.

"Remember," Qrow had told him. "If anyone asks, your name is Rheneas Low, and I'm your pet, Prosper. You're half blind and need me to see. Do not make eye contact, and talk as little as possible."

He sounds as if he’d done this before, James thought.
James tried hard not to look around too much, but out of his peripheral vision, he could tell this used to be a kind of mining town. The buildings weren't as nicely laid out as other cities and villages he'd been to on Anima. No, this was a town of boxes stacked on top of each other. The only nice looking buildings were the inn, the town hall, and the SDC office. There were groups of people picketing outside of the town hall, demanding the SDC leave.

_No wonder they hate Atlesians_, he realized.

Qrow lightly nipped at James' hood, in the direction of the inn before flying off and cawing softly. He followed in suit, trying to make it seem as natural as possible. But he couldn't help but feel apprehensive.

_Please let this work_, he prayed.

James entered the inn and followed Qrow up to the counter. The innkeeper looked him over, raising an eyebrow as Qrow set down the Lien.

"Name?" the innkeeper asked.

"Rheneas Low," James answered softly.

"You need a room?"

"Room for two. For myself and Prosper here."

"Ha!" the innkeeper laughed. "You named a crow 'Prosper'? What a loony." The innkeeper held out the key to the room, which Qrow promptly took. "Look at that. Pretty well trained for a nasty creature."

Qrow managed to garble his annoyance at the insult as he flew up the stairs, leading James to their room. With a bit of a stumble, they went in and closed the door, locking it so no one could come in. James set the bags down as he slumped onto the bed.

"Alright," James whispered. "You can change back now."

Qrow switched back, rolling his shoulders as he stretched his neck, glancing at the feathers on the floor. "I'll clean those up," he said softly.

"Thanks," James sighed. "What now?"

"We need to get a map before we go," Qrow said. "And some different clothes. It might be a hassle, but changing clothes every so often will help keep us from being tracked. We'll also need to stock up on some medicine. You've been limping for the last two days, and that's not going to get better."

"Alright. Then how do we go about getting all that?"

"Tomorrow we'll go into town and make purchases. I'll fly around tonight to plan a route so we can keep up the ruse."

"Speaking of which," James said, "where did you learn to do this? This whole "seeing-eye-bird" thing?"

Qrow's eyes softened, a pleasant smile on his face. "I had a lot of adventures before coming to work for you, James. I learned a few tricks." He walked over to the window, getting ready to fly.
"It's how I learned to be one devilishly amazing butler. Now, you wait here. I'll be back in an hour or so."

Qrow changed back into a bird, and flew out the window with a small flip. James curled up on the bed, deciding to rest as his butler was working. He closed his eyes and-

"Hello there friend! Can you hear me?!"

James sat right up, looking around as he mumbled "not again" under his breath. There was a voice he didn't recognize. He knew there was someone nearby.

"Hello?" he whispered cautiously.

"Oh good!" said the voice. It was high pitched, slightly squeaky, and rather cheerful. "I was worried you wouldn't hear me. This trick is pretty nifty, huh? Only you and I can hear each other, so don't worry about people listening to us."

"Who are you?"

"Oh, I'm a friend," said the voice. "My name is Ruby. Have you seen my uncle?"

Chapter End Notes

Here's chapter six! I hope it was an okay chapter.

Whitley's story is going to be at sea. I probably should have mentioned Whitley isn't that much of a Shitley in this universe. If that isn't your thing, that's okay. That scene with Tukson and Klein...I think I might have accidentally created a crack pairing.

This story is probably a bit of a slow burn, I know, but I really appreciate all of you who are tuning in to read. I'm having a lot of fun writing this story. Let me know what you think!

Also, to every one of you who have given this story a chance, I'm truly grateful. You're all amazing guys, gals, and non-binary pals, and I would not have kept writing if it weren't for amazing people like you.
Never thought I'd be back in this place, Qrow thought. It had been a long time since he'd been to Nettle Town. He remembered when it was still a small settlement, freshly inhabited when the dust mining was new. Qrow once considered this place a town of potential home for himself and Raven. But that changed pretty quickly when the tribe had set their sights on the dust mines.


Qrow flew around the town, taking note of every street sign and storefront. There weren't many places they'd be able to purchase anything decent. There was an ammunitions shop, though the most they seemed to carry were Wind crystals. Better than nothing, he supposed. There was a tailor's outlet on the far end of town. If they stayed for an extra day, they could get something of decent quality.

Qrow landed on top of a streetlamp for a moment, glancing at the bulletin board outside one of the grocery stores. On it was a line of wanted posters. His face and name were among them, listing a reward of five-hundred thousand Lien for his capture.

In giant letters over his image were the words "DEAD OR ALIVE".

Glad to see they haven't changed here, he thought to himself. He looked the picture over closely before flying off. They still can't get my nose right.

He circled around the town once again, trying to figure out the best route to take. If they were going to keep up the ruse, they had to make it look natural.

A simple point A to B walk wouldn't cut it, he assessed. But Point A to C to B might-

A pebble came flying at him from nearby. Qrow was barely able to dodge it as it nearly hit him in the tail. He made a sharp turn, gliding downward in the direction of the culprit as he left out a soft call. A familiar masked figure appeared in from the bushes just behind city hall. Red eyes glowed in the shadows as the figure removed the mask.

Raven! Qrow changed and landed, kneeling as he looked up at his sister, eyes narrowed in annoyance. "You find them?"

"No," she sighed. "They weren't on Patch, and they aren't in Vale. They're on their way to Mistral."

"What?" Qrow gripped at his hair as he stood, trying to make sense of the news. "Why would they be on their way there?"

"There was a note," Raven divulged. "Ruby said that she knew more about the world because of a stone, that you'd be in Mistral, and that she took Summer's cloak."

"You have to kidding me," Qrow huffed. "Th-this has to be a joke."

"It's no joke. Ruby said in the note-"

"I heard you," Qrow spat. "You're sure they're headed to Mistral?"
"Yes. I'll be heading that way. With the tribe, I can cover more ground."

"If they so much as lay a finger on them-"

"They won't bring them harm, brother. Not while I'm around."

"Oh, like how they wouldn't hurt me the last time I went home with you?"

"Qrow, this isn't-" she stopped, clenching her fists as she looked away. "This isn't the time to be bickering about that...Someone is after Oz and those stones..."

Qrow looked her over, taken aback, brows furrowed in confusion and anger. "What do you mean?"

Raven motioned for him to follow, nodding in the direction of the woods nearby. "Over here. You don't want riff-raff to overhear us."

Hesitantly, Qrow followed, hand resting on the hilt of his blade all the while as he and Raven walked. Him being out in the open like this was risky enough. He couldn't let his guard down about Raven.

Once they got to a clearing, Raven climbed up to a branch on a nearby tree, her hair perfectly blending against the dark leaves above them. Qrow didn't follow. He stayed on the ground, watching as Raven made herself comfortable. "So, what happened when you went back?"

"For starters," Raven mumbled, "the house was a mess. By the looks of things, they packed up what they needed and left before people ransacked the place. I found the note upstairs in Ruby's room." She leveled her eyes on him. "What exactly are the stones Ruby was referring to?"

"Not important," Qrow hissed.

"Fucking important," she spat. "Ruby said in the note that she "knew more about the world because of the stone". It's obvious she has one, and if I'm correct in assuming, the Earl has one too. There are people after those dumb rocks, and that means they'll be after Ruby. I've seen firsthand what they've done, Qrow. They cannot get their hands on Ruby."

"Wait," Qrow said. "What do you mean "seen firsthand"? What happened?"

Qrow watched as Raven pulled her left knee close to her chest to rest her chin. He'd only seen her make that pose once before. His body relaxed, the scowl faded to concern, arms at his side. A chill ran down his spine in time with the singing of the breeze.

"Rae," Qrow said softly. "What happened in Vale?"

Raven let out a sigh, eyes closed tightly as her hands shivered.

---

Raven appeared in an old courtyard not long after leaving Patch. It didn't take long to figure out where she had ended up. The giant statue that greeted her as the portal closed was a familiar landmark in the deepest corners of her memories. Memories of days she'd spend passing the Beowolf with a glare. Of days when a little girl in a white hood would stare at the woman in her likeness.
Back then, the world was brighter. People smiled, the sun shone brightly. Beacon Academy stood proudly at the top of the world. Life felt almost, for lack of better words, perfect.

But this wasn't the school she once knew. The once proud and shining school for hunters in training was now a dilapidated husk of its former glory. There were craters where walkways once were. And the statue's two guardians had been knocked to the ground.

Vale had fallen, and with it, its shining Beacon.

"Truly is saddening, isn't it?"

Raven turned around, looking at the person who had spoken, blade at the ready. But she relaxed, smiling fondly at the portly man before her. His grey hair was as disheveled as the rest of the grounds, and his clothes were covered in dirt from fighting for hours.

"Headmaster Port," Raven greeted. "It's...been a while..."

"Far too long," Port chuckled. "It's good to see you Raven. Though I wish it were a better time."

"What happened here sir?"

Port looked down at his axe, moustache twitching as he resisted the tears in his eyes. "A lot has happened...We don't know why but...Atlas invaded and-"

"Atlas has fallen," Raven corrected. "I just spoke with Qrow. He managed to escape with the Iron General."

"You're serious?"

"Yes. And right now, I need to find Tai and the girls. Have you seen them?"

"I'm afraid I haven't," he sighed. "I've been fighting hordes for the last few hours. I'm waiting to meet up with Barty. We're supposed to meet here-"

The ground shook heavily, knocking both of them off their feet. Raven quickly scrambled to stand, pulling Port up with her as she saw what caused it. A Goliath stomped hard upon the ground as it chased after what few hunters that hadn't fled the battlefield. Its trunk swung about, knocking away a young man carrying a mace. She prepared to fight, running off towards the beast, trying to shake the feeling that this wasn't a normal Grimm.

There was something off about it. It was larger, faster, and there was a strong smell of chemicals as she began to slice it. In place of the bright red glow, there was a sickly green.

"What on earth is this thing?!" she screamed.

"Look out!"

A giant ball of fire flew in her direction and she jumped up to get out of the way. With a quick tuck and roll to the left she managed to avoid the tusk of the Goliath, just in time to see a bright flash of green and brown zoom over at breakneck speed.

"Nice going Bart!" Port called, taking aim with his Blunderbust. "I'll take it down!"

"I'll distract it, Peter!" Bart replied rapidly, standing atop the beast, setting it's back ablaze with his thermos. "Ms. Branwen, if you could tack care of the tusks!"
"Got it, Doc!" Raven bellowed. She sheathed her sword, switching from the usual red to a deep violet. The Goliath's trunk swung at her legs, but Raven jumped and landed on top, using the momentum from the Grimm to send her up into the air. With a hard spin, she came crashing down, her sword making contact and cleanly slicing away the tusks before pinning it to the ground, her sword embedded in its trunk as she moved away.

"GET DOWN, Oobleck!" Port cried. His companion hopped off just as the bullet flew through the air. It hit the Goliath right through the left eye, increasing in heat until there was a resounding explosion. Raven let out a sigh of relief as she retrieved her sword.

"Well done everyone!" Oobleck proclaimed. "Now we need to hurry up and get out of here. There's more on the way from the subways."

"More?!" Raven screeched. "What the hell was that thing?!"

"I don't know," Oobleck admitted. His eyes were sunken from hours of fighting. "A Goliath it looked like, but it seems to have been mutated. There are plenty more where that one came from."

"Did the city get evacuated?" Port asked.

"Everyone is on their way out of the main city," Oobleck sighed. "The King is seeing to it personally. I'm afraid Vale is beyond saving at this point."

"I'm not leaving," Raven said. "I have to find Taiyang!"

"I saw him a few days ago."

Raven stared at him, mouth ajar. "Really?"

"Oh yes," Bart hummed. "He said he was going after Miss Rose. Apparently the young trainee felt the need to leave for Anima, so they're heading there to find her."

"Great," Raven groaned. "Looks like I'll need to go back to look for them." She looked between the two of them, smiling fondly. "Are you two going to be alright?"

"I think so," Peter sighed. "We just need to rest. We'll be heading to Sakaba soon, so we'll be able to get a good sleep and a good ale."

"Alright," she said. "I'll...I'll look through the city once before I go...Just to make sure."

"We would join you," Bart said, "but we need to go back to the evacuation site. Hopefully, we will see you again soon."

"Me too," she said. She turned and slowly started to walk toward the city.

"And Raven?" Port called.

"Yes?"

"It was nice to see you come home."


"It was nice to be back home," she whispered and walked away.
"I checked the entire city," she concluded. "Every single street was torn to shreds. Every building was broken. There were corpses decorating the sidewalks. And every ten feet, those green Grimm were roaming the streets. I flew around for hours, trying to sense them. Their Auras were not anywhere nearby. But those people from the house, Cinder, Emerald, and someone else I didn't get the name of, they tailed me during my search. And they're probably on their way to Mistral as we speak."

Qrow's eyes were widened in horror as he listened to Raven's account on Vale. His home was destroyed. There was no Vale to return to. His world, his home, his friends and family. All scattered and stolen from right under him again.

"I warned you before I left," Raven mumbled. "I warned you all that relying on the kingdoms was foolish. I warned you that they would crumble. Ozpin was wrong, Qrow. There's no hope for the kingdoms of Remnant."

"Oz...was wrong?..." He stood there, frozen in fear. It was a phrase he'd heard only a few times, but every single time he did, Ozpin would fly in and show the doubters that they knew what they were doing. Ozpin would prove everyone wrong.

But Ozpin wasn't here anymore.

Was Raven right?

Was there really no hope?

"There's always hope, Qrow," Oz once told him. "There will be some moments where you'll have to make it yourself, but there's always hope."

"Oz." Qrow snapped out of his frightened state, turning to hurry back into Nettle Town.

"Where are you going?!" Raven called after him.

"To tell James the change in plan!" he shouted. "There's still hope! Just gotta make it!"

"You idiot!" Raven hopped out of the tree and chased after him, grabbing his wrist tightly. "You're going to get killed for some stupid ideals your so-called 'Wizard' drummed into you?"

Qrow turned a glare on her. "You can mock them all you want, but you once trusted them too." A smirk crawled across his lips. "And I can tell, deep down, you still believe in them."

Raven was about to say otherwise when there was a thunderous explosion from nearby. Qrow looked back toward the town just in time to see the smoke rising from town hall.

"JAMES!" He struggled to get free of his sister's grip. "Let me go, Rae!"

"Qrow, listen to me! You'll never make it back in time." Raven swung her blade twice, opening two portals at once. "Take the left. I've got to get back to the tribe. Don't fucking die, you hear me?"

Qrow looked at her in confusion for a moment, before giving her a genuine, loving smile. "Thanks sis."

"Don't get sappy," she groaned. "Just go." She threw him into the left portal and hurried into the
James sat there silently as he removed parts of his disguise. There was no way this was possible. He shouldn't be hearing Qrow's niece in his head. It was unnerving, hearing a voice of someone you'd never met, especially since it raised more questions than answered. Could she see him? Is she speaking only with her mind? Did she have the same abilities Ozpin did?

"Did you hear me?" the voice said again. "I'm Ruby. Oh, I forgot. What's your name, Friend?"

"Um...hello, Ruby," James replied slowly. "I'm James."

"Nice to meet you!" Ruby greeted. "You sound like a nice man."

"Oh, uh, thank you," he stammered.

"Why are you so quiet?" Ruby asked. "Where you asleep? I didn't wake you did I? Or are you someplace dangerous?"

"A bit dangerous yes." He still couldn't believe this. "How are you talking to me?"

"Oh, um," she paused. "You...you have one of those magic relics in your hand, right? Like I do?"

"Do you mean a white stone?"

"Yeah, but mine's red. It was supposed to go to my dad, but it 'wasn't compatible' or something. I picked it up just to look and- oh shoot, I'm getting distracted. My uncle, Qrow. I'm looking for him. Have you seen him?"

"Tall?" James asked. "Red eyes, smells like whiskey and hot cocoa? Giant sword-"

"That turns into a scythe!" she squealed. "You have seen him!"

"I'm travelling with him," James sighed. "We're in Nettle Town."

"That's pretty far from where I am."

"Well, where are you?"

"Um...hold on."

There was a long moment of silence. James was starting to wonder if Ruby had left. Just as James lay back down, she spoke again.

"I'm at...Eye-k-Bane-Ah? I think that's how it's pronounced."

"Ikebana," James corrected pleasantly. "It's the only known livable village left standing from the first battle of the Great War, just off the coast of Sanus."

"Wow, you're really smart!" Ruby proclaimed. "Are you a teacher?"

"No, I used to be a General. Anyway, Ruby-"
"Oh no, I gotta go! Beowolf pack approaching the town. I'll meet you in Mistral! Tell my uncle I'll love him and I'll see him soon, okay?"

"Ruby, wait-!"

But the cheery voice of Qrow's beloved niece was silent once more. James was alone once more, left to his own thoughts.

Ruby has a red stone. He has a white stone. Thinking back to Ozpin's disappearance, he wondered if the other two were black and yellow respectively. Ruby seemed to know more than he did about this. Maybe if he was lucky, he'd hear from her again.

"I'll meet you in Mistral!" she had promised.

"So I just have to get to Mistral, huh?" he muttered. "Let's hope Qrow agrees."

James curled up under the blankets, sleep tugging at his eyelids as his head hit the pillows. Qrow would be back before morning, and before they ran their errands, he'd tell him about Ruby. He couldn't help but grin, imagining the look of relief on Qrow's face when he learns she was okay. Those thoughts allowed him to drift into a light sleep, with gentle voices echoing from the memories of his time as a new recruit. His lips twitched upwards as he remembered one of the more peaceful days of his youth.

"Ock, Donny. You got us lost again."

"I didnae! Ocean was the one in charge of the map, Douggie. I'm on Ration Duty."

"Aye, and you need tae learn portion control! I dinnae wantae have tae scrape peanut butter off the roof of my mouth every time I want a sandwich!"

"Enough you two," James mumbled, floating between memory and reality.

"Wheesht you! If you dinnae wantae see us fight, then pay attention tae what's going on around you!"

CRASH!

Eyes flew open, the covers fell to the floor, and James reached for his pistol just as the explosion hit town hall. He jumped out the window, and with a quick roll began running in the direction of the noise. Their cover would be probably be blown, but if there were people in need of help James wasn't about to leave them in dire straits.

Civilians were running from the building, screaming bloody murder as James got closer. Figures in long golden hoods zoomed in and out of the fire that burned proudly in the center of town. James managed to stop a man running toward the SDC building.

"What's going on?!" James asked.

"The Gold Blade!" he screamed. "They're insane! Flee while you can!!!"

"The Gold Blade?" James looked over at the hooded figures. They must be it. He raised his gun and began to take aim. But he didn't fire. The hooded figures weren't attacking people. They dragging people out of the blazing heat, carrying them away from town.

No, James realized. It wasn't just any people. They were Faunus.
They were children.

"JAMES GET DOWN!"

James turned around just as Qrow tackled him to the ground. A giant hammer flew over them just as they hit the ground, lodging itself into the SDC wall.

"Qrow-"

"You idiot!" Qrow screamed. "You could have lost your head!"

"This isnae time for a lovers' quarrel, lads."

Qrow scrambled to his feet, pulling James up with him before drawing his blade. The man that threw the hammer walked over to fetch it, hood lowered over his face so James couldn't make it out. He kept his finger close to the trigger.

"Now you dinnae have tae aim those my way," said the hammer man. "We're just gonna finish clearing out the building, and then ye can have a go at me. Now, if you'll excuse me." He turned toward the roof of a nearby building. "Douggie! Put the fire out would ya?"

"Right oh, Donny!" cried the man on the roof. He jumped down from, rolling three times and running off toward the flame while his hood fell back to reveal ginger curls and large wolf ears. He pulled out a deep blue crystal, bit down, and chewed it thoroughly before taking a deep breath. Eyes glowed a soft red as he exhaled, sending the water to douse the flames, putting them out as his comrades rushed in and out of the building.

James couldn't believe what, or rather who, he was watching. He knew that trick. He knew those ears.

I know those names, he realized.

"My Lord, come on!" Qrow growled as he began to drag him back to the inn. "We have to get out of here!"

"Wait," he insisted, turning back to the hammer man as he stood up straight, arms folded behind him as he leveled his eyes on him.

"You wantae be doin' this now?" the hammer man asked. "Well, cannae say I won't be happy tae oblige-"

"Officer ID: SDR-57646?" James asked smugly, a renewed vigor in his voice. The man glared at him, red glowing beneath his hood warningly, but James stood his ground. For the first time in years, he felt like the General he once was.

"How do you know my number?" the man growled, charging toward him. "No one is suppose tae know that!"

James held his hand out to stop Qrow from jumping in front, giving the attacker in the golden cloak an amused, yet heartbroken smirk. "Do you still put too much peanut butter on your sandwiches, Donald? Or have you finally learned portion control along with vigilantism?"

He watched as the hammer man stopped his approach, lowering the hammer in his hand as he reached for his hood. James couldn't help but beam as he saw a pair of curled horns appear from the shadows. The red glow vanished, and soft hazel eyes were looking him over in confusion.
"Jimmae?" the man asked. "Is tha' really you, man?"

"Wait," Qrow interjected. "You mean he's-"

"Look out, ladie!"

James and Qrow ducked once more as Donald threw the hammer again. When James turned around to see where it landed, he saw it knock over the sheriff of the town, who had had his rifle aimed at Qrow.

"You alright Qrow?" James asked.

"I'm fine," Qrow grumbled. "But we gotta go. NOW!"

"But-"

"Ock, just go!" Donald groaned, an exasperated grin protruding from his beard. "We'll clean up here and meet up later. Dinnae get your asses shot tryin' tae play catch up now." He threw up his hood once again, hurrying to fetch his weapon. "I'll distract 'em, you get outta here! Head south, and we'll meet you along the rails!"

"My Lord, come on!" Qrow bellowed.

Reluctantly, James followed Qrow back to the inn to fetch their gear and flee, passing by the wanted posters as they did so. They ran through the front door, flew up the stairs, and hurried into their room.

"So you knew him?" Qrow asked, grabbing the back packs.

"Yes," James panted. "He was a friend of mine, back from when I was in the military. He, and his brother were in my unit."

"How'd they go from military to raiders?"

"I don't know...They're supposed to be dead..."

"I suppose miracles can happen," Qrow grumbled. "Come on. We have to head-"

"To Mistral," James interrupted. He saw Qrow's eyes widen in confusion, and he couldn't help but chuckle.

"You know-?" Qrow started.

"Yes, Qrow," James replied. "I'll explain once we're out of here." He picked up the suitcase and began to head out the door. "And by the way. Ruby says she loves you, and she'll see you soon."

The wind blew harshly against his back as he watched the rampage through Vale from the top of Beacon Tower. Flashing lights of red and green clashed, smoke filling the air as one by one, his Queen's creations were slain by the new beasts.

"Dr. Watts," came a voice on the wind.
"Without turning his head from the carnage, he replied, "Lady Salem. To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"Have you met with The King yet?" she inquired. "Your week's worth of silence has me concerned."

"Vale has fallen beyond rebuilding," he reported. "I do believe we went a tad too far, sending both Grimm and Atlesian defectors."

"Are you not able to dispose of the excess forces?"

"The soldiers have been disposed of. However, we might have another obstacle."

"Explain."

"There are blasphemous abominations roaming the streets. Grimm with a toxic jade glow are destroying your creations."

"Are you positive?"

"Yes, My Lady."

Watts waited as his mistress pondered on their current predicament. He could see three figures hopping from the rooftops heading east. Cinder and her little friends, no doubt tracking whatever was left of Ozpin's Aura.

*Closed off Aura is incredibly hard to track, he thought. I do hope that Cinder won't disappoint.*

"Dr. Watts," Salem finally spoke.

"Yes, my Lady?"

"Dispose of the foreign creatures here as much as you can," she ordered. "Then proceed back to Atlas and infiltrate the Schnee Dust Company's Headquarters. You know what to look for. And leave no witnesses."

An obnoxious smirk wormed its way from beneath his moustache. His eyes took on a violent electric glow. All noise ceased. The clouds became darker as Watts walked close to the edge of the roof.

"*Yes, Your Majesty.*"

Chapter End Notes

Yep. This happened. People back from the dead. Only time will tell if this will turn out to be a blessing or a curse for James.

For anyone curious about Donny and Douggie's speech patterns, I based them heavily on my dad and his side of the family. Thick Scottish accents.

Hope you enjoyed the chapter!
Tukson sat quietly beside the medical bed that had been set up in the office, watching over Klein as the man was resting. It had been three days since he had landed there, and yet there were still no stir from him. He, Kali, and Ghira took turns watching over him. When Kali was with him, he and Ghira would be trying to get a hold of their friends back in Vale. Communication between the kingdoms had always been rocky, but between Menagerie and only one kingdom was harder to keep going.

"Something pretty bad must have happened," Kali had said. "It's a miracle he survived."

"It's not right," Tukson mumbled. "Klein's a good man...why would he be this beaten and battered?"

"Probably because he took on an explosion."

Tukson's sunken hazel eyes zoomed in the direction of Klein's face. His eyes were half open, a bright crimson hidden beneath the pain, but that smile on his face told Tukson that he was okay. He let out a sigh of relief as he gently took hold of Klein's hand, biting back tears.

"You're finally awake!" he exclaimed. "We were worried about you."

"Keep yer voice down," Klein teased hoarsely. "I'm fine. Just a bit sore."

"What happened to you?" Tukson croaked. "You just fell out of the sky without warning."

"Atlas," Klein sighed. "Atlas and Vale are gone. Jacques is dead. The King. The White Fang have completely taken over." He winced as he tried to sit up, only to be gently laid back by the gentle Faunus. "Where's everyone else?"

"It was just you." This isn't good, thought Tukson. "What's the last thing you remember?"

Klein's brow furrowed in concentration, trying to focus on what had happened. "I was on a ship...Winter was the pilot...The children...Willow...These two kids, Flynt and Neon, I think...James...Qrow...Oz...All of us on that little ship..."

"Okay," Tukson said softly. "What happened?"
"We took off...And there was an explosion...Oz..." Klein's eyes opened wide, flashing green as his hands began trembling. "Ozpin tried to absorb the blast for us...they almost got killed trying to save us..."

"Almost?"

"I-I panicked and...Diamant Apfel...I struck them in the shoulder and they...I..." He shook his head. "I took half of it...and then there was a flash and I...I woke up here...the children...Oz...Willow...gears...giant gears...crown...w-wings..." His breathing became shallow, and Tukson knew by the look on his face what was happening.

The same thing happened to him, not long after they had met.

"Klein," Tukson whispered soothingly. He didn't pull back when the man pulled him close, and he gently wrapped his arms around him as Klein had his button up in a death grip. He whispered soft, encouraging words to let him know he was alright, lightly rubbing his back as Klein's eyes began flashing in a kaleidoscopic fashion. They stayed like that for what felt like years, and Tukson felt helpless as he held his friend close, trying his best to soothe him. Soon, Klein's grip lessened, and his breathing returned to normal as his eyes closed once more.

Once Klein had fallen back asleep, Tukson carefully tucked him back into bed, tears running down his cheeks as he got up to tell Ghira what happened. It wasn't possible. It just couldn't have happened this way.

Where was everyone else?

Tukson dried his eyes before knocking on the door to the master bedroom. There was a moment of silence before Ghira beckoned him entry. Tukson took a deep breath, and stepped inside.

"Klein woke up for a bit," he stated solemnly.

Ghira looked up from the book he'd been reading, eyes peaking out over the half-moon glasses resting on his nose, gleaming in relief and concern. "How is he?"

"He...had a bit of a panic attack...And he told me some things you need to hear..."

Ghira motioned for him to sit, and hesitantly, Tukson took perch on the edge of the bed, careful not to wake the still sleeping Kali. Through stammered breathes, Tukson recalled everything that had happened from the moment Klein had awoken, to the moment that he had returned to slumber. He still couldn't make sense of it all himself.

Gears? Wings? What had Klein seen?

Ghira removed his glasses, rubbing his eyes gently as he processed this information. "Tukson?"

"Yes My L-, um, G-Ghra?"

"Can you pack me a travel bag? I'll be leaving tomorrow afternoon. I'll be heading towards Mistral."

"Mistral? Ghira was leaving? Now of all times? "Why?"

"I get the feeling," he divulged, "that if we want answers, I have to go there. I'll be leaving Kali in charge here."
"Sir, are you sure that's wise?"

Ghira looked at his sleeping wife, giving her an affectionate grin. "She can handle a lot more than people think. But, I am going to need you here to watch over her. And to help in Klein's recovery. Can I trust you to watch over them?"

"Of course, sir," Tukson assured him. Though by the sound of his voice, he wasn't so sure himself. "I'll do everything I can."

"Thank you. Now, go get some rest. I'll watch over Klein now."


Tukson hesitantly got up and made his way to his room, setting his alarm to wake him up early so he could prepare what Lord Belladonna will need for his trip. As he curled up under the covers, he thought back to the words Klein had been saying with such fright.

"Gears," he repeated. "Giant gears...crown...wings...God Klein...what's happened to our world?"

Ghira stood by the window, gazing up at the shattered moon, holding the family portrait as he reminisced on a time when things were simple. How once upon a long ago, he was able to spend his days relaxing with his friends.

He missed the days when he could play simple games with Glynda and bet on who can beat the other in a round of darts. He longed for the days he could sit under the trees with Kali at his side and their daughter in his lap while he read from whatever interesting novel Ozpin had brought them. And he wished, with all his heart, that things could go back to the way they once were.

But there was no way that could happen. To go back to those days would to go back to a time when Atlas was torn apart by a civil war. Back to the times before he met James, Tukson, and Klein. Back to when he wouldn't have even been able to set foot outside Menagerie.

"No," he muttered. "There's no looking back. It's time to move forward." Ghira's eyes flitted between the little girl in the photo and the shining black stone in the back of his left hand, voices of the past ringing in his ears as he walked over to his desk, where his daughter's favorite children's book rested.

"Papa?" she had asked. "Why did the two brothers add "destruction" to the gifts to mankind? It seems really weird compared to the other three. Isn't destruction a bad thing? Why do we need it?"

"Destruction is important," he answered. "It isn't always a bad thing. Take the seasons for example. The cold seasons are a form of destruction. The weather of late fall that leads to winter may destroy your gardens, but they also allow the land to rest, and once spring comes again the land has the strength to grow new crops and care for animals. The gifts for mankind work together like the seasons. You can prefer one over another, but you need all four to have a healthy world."

"Oh, I see. That makes sense."

His eyes twinkled in the nostalgia as he began to reread the story one more time.
"Once upon a time," he whispered, "there were two brothers. One was a man of the Light, the other-"

"A man of Darkness!"

Ghira's ears were pricked, and he glanced around the room. That wasn't a voice he recognized. "Hello?"

"Hello!" said the voice. "I'm Ruby. What's your name? Are you a friend of my Uncle Qrow like James?"

James and Qrow!? "My name is Ghira Belladonna. A-and yes, I am a friend of theirs. Have you heard from them?"

"They're in Nettle Town, I think," she said. "I haven't checked back yet to see if they're still there. I was off fighting Beowolves."

"How...how are you able to-?"

"Talk to you? Oh, the stones. I've got red, and James has white. If you're able to speak to me, you've got one too, right?"

"Yes," Ghira affirmed. "Mine is the black stone...Ruby, was it?"

"Yes."

This is very strange. "I'll be heading to Mistral soon to find an important book...I'm guessing you'll be going there too?"

"Yep! How'd you know?"

"Call it a hunch. Can you...do me a favor, on your journey?"

"Sure. What do you need?"

"Can you keep an eye out for my daughter? When I last heard from her, she was somewhere on Anima. She has long black hair, bright honey-gold eyes, and a pair of cat ears."

"Oh boy! Looks like I'll make a new friend. What's her name? If I find her, I'll ask her to come with me to meet you!"

Ghira let out a fond chuckle. "Her name is Blake."

"Blake. Got it!"

"Also," Ghira added, "can you let James know Klein is safe and sound here on Menagerie? And that he and Qrow are more than welcome here?"

"Okay," Ruby agreed. "I can do that right now, if you want."

"Thank you," he purred. "And perhaps tomorrow, you can teach me how you're able to talk to me like this."

"Sure. I think I can, maybe. I'm still trying to figure it out myself, but I'll see what I can do."

"Alright. You go rest, alright young one? I'm sure we'll meet each other soon."
"Okay. Good night Mr. Ghira!"

"Good night."

Ruby's voice faded away, and soon Ghira was left in silence. A wave of relieve flowed through his veins. He now knew where two more of his missing friends were, and he had someone else on the lookout for his daughter. If his luck kept up, he'd be able to bring everyone back together again and keep them safe. He could put the puzzle pieces together.

"Don't worry everyone," he promised. "I'll find you. Just have faith in me."

Weiss followed Blake as they entered the town, carrying her bags as they passed by the giant statues of figures in hoods. The sky was clear for the first time in a while, allowing her to gaze at the dazzling blue as she took a good look at the buildings. Most of them appeared more like temples and monasteries than actual homes or markets. Everywhere there were buildings decorated with psalms that had been worked into intricate detailing. People bustled about, wearing long cloaks fashioned with crosses, robes with shining beads strung along their hands, and many carrying intriguing looking books bound in leather and gold.

"What is this place?" Weiss asked, mouth wide in awe.

"You're in Hinagiku," Blake said. "It's probably the most religious village on the planet."

"Hinagiku," Weiss repeated. "Seems like a nice place."

"It is," Blake said. "Despite all the varying viewpoints and beliefs here, everyone treats each other like equals. It's a place of education and spiritual learning primarily, but there are plenty of smiths and tailors specifically catered to Hunters." Blake looked over her shoulder to look Weiss over. "I have a friend that owes me a favor, so they can make you a sword however you like. But as for clothes, food, and shelter, we're going to need to earn some more money. The inns here aren't cheap, and whatever you get as a weapon will take a few days at the least."

"Alright," Weiss agreed. "I can look for work after we meet with the blacksmith friend of yours. I'm sure I can find something."

"If you're sure," Blake shrugged.

"You don't seem too confident in me."

"Let's just say, I don't exactly have high expectations of nobles."

"Noted," Weiss groaned.

"Also..." Blake hesitated, pulling her collar closer to her face.

"Blake?" Weiss chirped. "Is everything okay?"

"Yeah," Blake shrugged. "Just thinking we might need to get you some training too."

"I don't think I'll need training for a weapon," Weiss quipped. "I've had plenty of training back in Atlas-"
"I meant for your Aura and Semblance!"

"Oh. That."

"Honestly." Blake shook her head and picked up her pace, causing Weiss to try and hurry to keep up. "Come on, we gotta hurry if we're going to get Daichi's before closing."

"C-coming!" Weiss picked up a brisker pace, trying hard to keep from losing Blake in the crowd. The Faunus' legs seemed to gain a further reach with every step, fueling a slight burn of jealousy in her veins.

_Curse me and my short legs!_ she thought. Within twenty minutes of entering the town, they had found themselves in one of the least busy sections. There were a few stalls for trading goods, with about three smiths working with intense heat. At the end of the street was a grand building with a lotus statue out front. Judging by the steam coming from the roof, Weiss assumed it was a bath house.

"Over here," Blake called, leading them into the more secluded of the smiths. "Hey Yatsuhashi, long time no see."

Weiss nearly fell back as Yatsuhashi approached them. He towered over them by nearly three feet, and by the look of those arms, she was sure he could rip an Ursa in half without breaking a sweat.

"Blake," he greeted softly. "It is good to see you. Are you looking for Velvet? She and Coco are at the baths right now."

"Actually," Blake started, "I'm here to see you and Fox. My acquaintance needs a weapon, and I have a favor to cash in."

Yatsuhashi's dark eyes flicked between Blake and Weiss, setting the young heiress on edge while Blake remained completely calm. "Are you sure she's able to hold her own in a fight?"

"Won't know until she's armed," Blake confessed. "But I think she at least has potential, since she survived a ship explosion and all."

Weiss raised a brow at her, taken aback by the sudden compliment. _Potential._ No one had said she had potential in years.

"Well," Yatsuhashi sighed. "I've got to wait until Fox gets back with the shipment of metal. He'll be back first thing tomorrow morning, so swing by then with the specifics of the weapon you're wanting. Then we'll see if it falls in a fair range of that favor I owe you."

"Sounds fair," Blake agreed. "First thing tomorrow."

"In the meantime," he added, "there's some new postings on the board off of Cypress Street, near the old town hall. In case you need any extra Lien."

"Thanks for the heads up, Yatsu."

"No problem."

"Come on, Weiss. Let's go find an inn, then we'll get to work."

"Okay," Weiss muttered, following her further into the town. "Which inn?"

"The cheapest is the CFVY House," Blake explained. "Coco's been pretty good about giving me
cheap housing when I come this way."

"I guess you come here often?"

Blake didn't answer. Instead, she just walked, carefully avoiding people as they got to a more crowded street. Weiss decided to let it go for now. She would find out eventually what was going on in Blake's head.

"Well, this is a fine kettle of fish, isn't it?"

"It better be tuna."

"Blake!"

Looking over the job flyers again, Weiss tried to find something she could do for work. Most of the flyers were high difficulty hunting bounties, or jobs requiring skills she didn't have yet, such as animal care. If they were going to earn money from the postings, Blake would be doing all the work.

And Weiss refused to be a burden on her.

"I can't find anything," Weiss groaned. "There's gotta be something-"

"How about this one?" Blake asked. "The old dinner theater needs someone to do odd jobs. Might be good for you."

"Maybe..." Weiss looked at the flyer Blake was pointing to, uncertainty plastered across her face. The flyer seemed far more weathered than the rest, and the post date in the corner was for a month ago.

But it was worth a try.

"Come on," said Blake. "I'll take you there. Then I'll take one of the hunting jobs. Worse comes to worse, we'll chance you working with me in the field."

"Sounds like a plan." Weiss followed Blake to the dinner theater, taking the flyer with them just in case. Hopefully there would be an opening.

When they entered the theater, the tables had been set with black table cloths and silver candelabras. The stage was spars, save for the group standing there tuning their instruments while arguing. A monkey Faunus was getting into a heated quarrel.

"I'm telling you for the last time," yelled the blue-haired man, "we are not going on stage tonight without a singer!"

"And I'm telling you," bellowed the Faunus, "we can't put off the performance anymore! They need someone for the service tonight!"

"Looks like luck is in our favor," Blake hummed.

"Looks like it," Weiss agreed as they approached the stage. "Um, pardon me?"
The group on stage turned their eyes toward them, and the Faunus jumped off the stage to run and hug Blake, screaming cheerfully. "**BLAKE'S BACK!**"

"**BLAKE'S BACK!**" the group cheered as they joined him. Weiss backed up so she didn't get trampled. Blake stiffened at first, but relaxed and let out a soft giggle as she rolled her eyes, snuggling into the group hug.

"Hey guys," she sighed. "Didn't realize you'd be here."

"Of course!" said the blue haired man. "We're performing for a veteran hunter's birthday."

"But Sun forgot to find a singer," grumbled the redhead.

"Did not!" Sun, the Faunus, spat.

"Well," Blake stared. "If you're needing a singer-

"Are you going to sing for us?" Sun asked teasingly.

"No!" Blake groaned. "My friend here is a singer." She escaped the group hug and walked over to Weiss, putting an arm around her. "This is Weiss. She and I are staying here for a few days to earn money and get equipment, then we're heading to Mistral."

"P-please to meet you," Weiss stammered. "I'm Weiss."

"Hey Weiss!" Sun greeted cheerfully. "I'm Sun." He had everyone line up, patting them on the head as he introduced everyone. "This guy here is Neptune, the cool one. This is Scarlet, they're pretty chill. Sage, Arslan, and Bolin, super strong bunch. Reese and Nadir are the clever ones."

"And this is Sun," Reese repeated. "He's not exactly the brightest banana in the bunch."

"**Hey!**"

"So Weiss," Sage interjected, "I'm guessing you're wanting to earn money singing with us then?"

"For now," Weiss admitted. "Tomorrow we'll be ordering me a sword."

"Think you're up for a performance tonight?" Neptune asked. "I know it's last minute, but we really need someone."

"Um, maybe?" Weiss mumbled. "What songs are you performing?"


"Wait," Weiss interrupted. "Those are my songs."

"Your songs?"

Weiss silently cursed herself for letting that slip. "I-"

"Wait a minute," Arslan spoke. She walked over to look Weiss right in the eyes. "You're Weiss Schnee?"

Weiss felt a blush run across her cheeks as Blake smacked her palm to her forehead. "Y-yes, I am-"

"Prove it!" Sun declared.
"Excuse me?" Blake asked dryly.

"Prove you're the Schnee!"

"Excuse me?" Weiss asked, mimicking Blake's tone.

"You heard the monkey," Nadir chuckled. "Up on stage and I'll start playing the piano. Can you sing 'Mirror Mirror' for us?"

"Sure," Weiss said proudly. "I'm not afraid of a little performing." Standing up straight, she followed Nadir up on stage, trying hard not to stare at his blossom pink hair. He motioned for her to stand in the center while he took the stool near the back at the baby grand. Bolin stood on the floor in front, holding a small baton in his hand as he counted them into the song. Weiss took a deep breath and began.

"Mirror, tell me something. Tell me who's the loneliest of all?"

Blake sat on the rooftop, looking out over the horizon as the music drifted up through the windows of the theater. Coco had managed to put together an outfit for Weiss in exchange for the sapphire earrings she had been wearing. It was a simple dress that went down to the knees, accompanied by a black leather jacket with matching wedge boots. The dress was a soft powder blue with silver music notes sewn into the trim of the skirt. While a dress and heels didn't appeal to Blake personally as combat attire, Weiss seemed more than able to move in the outfit, which would help when they moved on toward Mistral.

"Hey. Mind if I sit with you?"

Blake turned her head toward her feet to see Sun, poking his head out the window and smiling like a doofus. She gave him an affectionate eye roll and silently motioned for him to join her. He might be overbearing at times, but out of all the friends she had, Blake was grateful to have him included in that very short list.

"So," Blake sighed, "you're not performing tonight."

"Nope," Sun mumbled, rubbing the back of his neck. "I forgot to practice for "Cold". So Arslan's in my spot tonight. That's the rule."

"Then start practicing your music more, and your witty battle banter less."

"But how am I supposed to beat Donny at his own game if I don't improve on that?"

"Wow, everyone's right."

"About what?"

"You really aren't the brightest banana in the bunch."

"Hey!"

Blake gave him a playful nudge. "Button your shirt, Sun. Winter isn't over yet."
"Yes mom," he teased, buttoning the oversized button up. "So...Blake?"

"Yeah?"

"You really planning on going back to Menagerie after Mistral?"

*There it is,* she thought. She figured he'd figure it out. "I have to Sun...If I don't, the White Fang will take over...Like they did in Atlas..."

"Why not come back to the Blade?" he asked sincerely. "I mean, the Frasiers will be back in three weeks, I think. Maybe sooner. Ask them for help and they'll have everyone rallied and ready to head down to keep the island safe."

"I don't have that kind of time, Sun. None of us do."

There was a long, unbearable silence between them, only filled with the soft hum as Weiss began the final number.

"*There's a point where it tips, there's a point where it breaks-*"

"Then I guess we'll have to come with you and Weiss then."

"*There's a point where it bends and a point we just can't take anymore.*"

Blake stared at him in confusion. "You can't do that. The Blade needs you guys here-"

"Team CFVY is more than enough for this sector," Sun assured her. "The only reason we're here is because we weren't needed this mission. Or the last five. We're essentially useless at the moment."

"You and the others aren't useless. You're needed here, Sun-"

"You'll need someone to help train Weiss, right?" he asked. "Sage and Scarlet are killer at the sword like you, and Arslan and Bolin can help her with Aura. Leave the unpredictability and basic camping training to me and the rest. That way you can rest when you need to. Have a little faith in us. Let us come with you."

Blake looked up at the stars, debating on his offer. As tempting as it was to have a small group of fighters and friends with her, she didn't want to chance taking this village's only means of protection should the Grimm make their way in.

"*Now it's time to say goodbye to the things we loved and the innocence of youth-*"

There was no other options in her mind.

"*How the time seemed to fly from our carefree lives and the solitude and peace we always knew.*"

"In two days," she said, "we're going to leave to get to Mistral. I promised she could tag along, as long as she pulls her weight. She's doing that. Once we've earned a bit more, we'll take the train to Mistral."

"And how are you going to get to Menagerie from Mistral?" Sun inquired.

"There's only one ferry right now," Blake mumbled. "So probably hijack a sky boat?"

"Those things need a crew of at least four, Blake. And what if you get caught?"
"I won't."

"Okay, what if Weiss gets caught?"

Blake's ears went flat. That was a very likely possibility, given her inexperience in the field. And being a noble and an heir to a company would paint a giant target on her back. Getting to her feet, Blake pulled the collar of her coat closer.

"I can't afford to fail," she affirmed. "If Weiss gets caught at any point in the mission...I'll act however the situation calls for it..."

Sun gave a half-hearted shrug, hands resting behind his head as he leaned back. "Something changed in you, Blake. You haven't been the same since the Sagisō mission." He raised an eyebrow, tilting his head to the side slightly. "You know we're here for you, right?"

"I know," Blake replied, giving him a gentle smile. "Thanks Sun."

The audience gave a round of applause as the music faded out, signaling the end of the concert and for the two of them to rejoin the others in the theater. Blake followed Sun, taking one last glance at the shattered moon as she closed the window latch, Sun's words echoing in her mind.

"Something changed in you, Blake. You haven't been the same since the Sagisō mission."

Actually Sun, she thought, I never changed at all.

The moon shone brightly over the fields, a soft breeze passing over the grasses as they grew once again. The tight hold of winter was fading away to spring as hazel eyes observed the swirling constellations above through an old telescope.

"Oscar!" called a voice. "Come inside! Time to wash up for dinner!"

"What're we having?" Oscar replied, not taking his eyes away from the scope.

"Doesn't matter! You're eating it!"

"I never agreed to those terms!"

"It's in the "living under my roof" contract! Read the fine print and come inside before it gets cold!"

"Alright Auntie!" he chuckled. "I'm coming!" Oscar folded up the stand to his telescope and carried it back toward the barn, leaning it against the wall near the door inside before hurrying toward the house. His hand reached for the doorknob. The door slowly opened.

A bright emerald light caught his eye.

Oscar quickly turned around, just in time to see the light heading toward the fields nearby. Abandoning the house, he ran toward the fields, nearly falling over as the ground shook from the impact of something hitting the ground.

"Oscar!" his aunt cried, chasing him. "Get back here!"
"Something fell from the sky!" he screamed back excitedly. "I think it's a fallen star! Come on!"

His heart pounded hard against his chest as they both ran towards this "fallen star" that had left a crater deep in their land. Oscar's earthy stare looked down in disbelief as they got close to the edge.

Deep in the ground, there was a tuff of white hair caked in grime and blood. Tattered robes covered the lower half of the body, the upper half mostly bare, save for a single sleeve on the left arm. The right shoulder of the body had a decent sized hole in it, as if it had been struck by something sharp.

And for a moment, Oscar could see the golden glow of a pair of broken wings.

"That's not a star," his aunt breathed. "I think that's an angel."

"And injured angel," Oscar stammered. "We have to help them. Come on!"

Carefully they slid down into the crater, the wings vanishing as they approached. Oscar tore off the scarf he was wearing, pressing it to the injury on the angel's shoulder while his aunt tied it tightly. It wasn't much, but it would be enough until they got their new acquaintance back to the house. Each took an arm and very gently carried them out of the hole. Oscar nearly slipped back, prompting a slight groan from the angel as he regained his footing.

"Are you okay?" Oscar asked quietly.

The angel's eyes opened just slightly, enough to show they were conscious. "Wh-where...am I?..."

"You're at our farm," Oscar replied. "You fell, but we'll get you help. What's your name?"

"My name...It's...Oz-" the angel mumbled, letting out a harsh cough.

"Easy Oz," Oscar soothed. "We've got you. We're going to get a doctor, and we'll get you patched up. Okay?"

"Okay," Oz sighed.

And their eyes closed once more.

Chapter End Notes

OZPIN LIVES! I'm sure everyone saw that coming but I hope that's okay.

Chapter 9 is in the works.

Let me know what you think!
Take Care of Each Other

Chapter Summary

James and Qrow watch out for each other's back during a chance encounter.

Meanwhile, a sneak peek into the nature of Sakaba.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Qrow was in shock. He'd heard stories of the man before coming to the Manor. How General Ironwood, The Iron General, was a strong leader, a competent businessman, and a stickler for details. James Ironwood was said to be a man who could instill fear into even the strongest of hunters. The Hero of the Great Civil War, the sole survivor of the Battle of Peace, was a man whose talents were enough to make him a legend.

But as he entered the grand doors with Ozpin, watching them walk through the mess of broken glass and dismantled splinters that could have once been furniture, Qrow couldn't help but think that perhaps they had the wrong home. There were a few decorative suits of armor tossed haphazardly into the corner of the foyer, and the smell of bile and vodka was coming from nearby. A few bullet holes lined the walls and several of the steps. Curtains covered every window, making the open door the only source of light in the dreary halls.

"What the fuck happened here?" he breathed.

"Looks like it was a bad night," Oz sighed. "I'm sorry you had to see this, Qrow. I wasn't-"

"It's not your fault, Oz," he assured them. "I'm guessing the General didn't make it out of the war totally unscathed like the rumors say he did."

"He knows how to put up a front most days," Ozpin divulged. "But then nights like this happen..."

Qrow looked at them fondly, gently placing a reassuring hand on their shoulder, letting them lace their fingers with his before wrapping his free arm around them in a desperate attempt to help keep them steady. The look in Oz's eyes was full of unbridled concern for their friend's well being. Their breathing was slow, deep, and well controlled as they leaned into Qrow's embrace. It wasn't the first time Oz had nearly been flooded with the fear that they might fail at something, and if Qrow knew them as well as he hoped, he knew it wouldn't be the last.

"We'll get him out of this funk, Oz," he whispered soothingly. "Birds of a feather flop together after all."

"Don't you mean "flock together"?" they chuckled.

"Nope, I mean flop." Qrow hummed. "Deep down, we're all a bunch of flops. What matters is if we decide to flip back when the flop comes along."

"Did you drink before we came?" Oz teased. "Because as profound as that is, you sound silly saying flip and flop in the same sentence."
"Only a little sip," Qrow said, slurring his words in jest. "Just in case Schnee decided to show his ugly mug."

"Don't even joke about that, Qrow."

Their playful banter was halted by the sound of a door upstairs. Qrow let go of Ozpin and straightened out his suit before standing at attention like they'd practiced. His rusty eyes watched as a man came sauntering slowly down the stairs in nothing but an undershirt and a pair of striped boxers. By the way his hand was rubbing his temple, Qrow was certain the poor Earl had a migraine.

"Oz?" the man groaned.

"Hello James," Ozpin greeted cheerfully. "Sleep well?"

"Fuck no...had a few intruders last night...petty thieves didn't realize whose house this was."

"Are you alright?" Qrow asked worriedly.

"I'm fine," James sighed, not even realizing Qrow was the one speaking. "What're you doing here, Oz? I thought you wouldn't be coming back to Atlas for another three months or something."

"I'm actually here to help you," Ozpin explained.

James looked them over, trying to adjust his eyes to the bright light coming from the doorway. "Help me? I don't need help. I just need space."

"You and I both know that's a fat lie, Jim-"

"-and that's why I'm here. Starting today you will have a personal assistant. A Butler of sorts. Meet Qrow Branwen." They stepped back, allowing Qrow to step forward and bow, his right hand over his heart just as Oz taught him.

"Hello, My Lord," Qrow greeted politely. "It's an honor to meet you."

James stared at him with sunken eyes as if trying to find the best place to stick a knife into on his body, before turning his vacuous stare onto the wizard. "A butler?"

"Yes," Ozpin affirmed.

"Ozpin, what are you planning?"

"Nothing in the least," they assured him. "I just thought it might be best if you had someone around to do the caretaking. Now, I have things to do today, so I'll leave Qrow with you for the time being. I'll be back in a week to check on you two."

Ozpin quickly turned on their heels and scurried out the door before James could stop them. Qrow stood still, watching as James paced back and forth with a slight limp. The poor man's cheeks were hollow, and his entire left side was a sickly pale shade in comparison to the scars that joined flesh and metal.

James finally stopped to lean against the wall, resting his forehead to his left forearm as he took a few staggered breaths before speaking again. "So...I'm guessing you're not leaving any time soon?"
“Nope,” Qrow said with pop at the end. “I have a job to do. And that job is taking care of you and the house. At least for the next five years, according to the contract.”

Tension filled the air. Neither one of them said a word as the clock ticked onward. Neither of them moved. They just stood there, in the roaring tides of chaos that decorated the Ironwood estate. In the smell of alcohol and regret. In the weight of the demons that haunted this sad excuse of a home.

And every second of it made Qrow want to turn and fly back to Patch as fast as his wings could carry.

But he couldn't fly away. His Aura was locked to keep both him and James safe. And even if he could fly away, he wouldn't. He had promised Ozpin he'd look after James for them, and that's what he intended to do.

"Do whatever you want," James finally groaned, turning to climb back up the stairs. "I'm gonna go lay down for a while."

"Alright," Qrow answered. "I'll start cleaning up then. Oh, what would you like for dinner-"

"I'll order take-out," James spat. "Just...stay quiet and out of the way, okay?"

Those words stung, but Qrow kept his composure as he bowed once more to the man on the stairs. "Yes, My Lord."

---

James awoke to the sound of birds chirping up a storm. The enticing smell of eggs and bacon filled his senses as he slowly sat up, trying to ignore the pain in his left side. Trying to get a good sense of where he was, his tired eyes came to rest on Qrow, who was dressed in charcoal slacks with a matching vest, a grey button up that was several shades darker than the last, and appeared to be a new cape in a brilliant crimson hue. His hair was fluffed in its usual avian style, shining softly in morning light coming from the mouth of the cave they had taken shelter in.

"Qrow?"

"Good Morning, My Lord," Qrow greeted. "Eggs, bacon, and a slice of bread for breakfast. Sound good?"

"Sure," James answered, taken aback by the cheerful tone. "But...how did-"

"Oh, the clothes? And the food?"

"Yeah. Where did you get them?"

Qrow brought over the breakfast, handing James a mug of what appeared to be coffee, as well as two painkillers. "I went back to Nettle for a bit after you fell asleep. The entire town up and fled after your war buddies showed up."

"War buddies?" James asked as he took the pills.

"Yeah. One of them was called Donald, I think?"
And then it came back to him. The conversation with Ruby, the explosion at town hall, and the familiar curled horns that had aided their escape. "Where are they now?"

"Long gone," Qrow sighed. "The only things left of Nettle Town are the damaged buildings, some useless garbage, and a banner with a yellow sword on it." He walked back towards the entrance of the cave and began rummaging through one of the bags, pulling out the clothes he had procured for James. "Your old friend said to head south if you wanted to meet up with them again. Kind of fortuitous, huh?"

"I suppose," James said. "Maybe we'll run into them again on the way to meet with Ruby."

"You're...still okay with that plan?"

"Of course." James stared at him, eyebrow raised in confusion. Qrow's chipper demeanor was cracking. "Why wouldn't I be?"

"It's nothing," Qrow muttered, doing his best to stay smiling. "Here, I got you something better than your military suit. Won't stand out as much in this."

"Qrow? Is there something wrong?"

"Of course not, James. Why would there be? Now eat up. We have places to go."

James set his breakfast aside and limped over to him, placing a hand on the butler's shoulder. "Qrow, what's wrong?"

"Wh-what do you mean?"

"You're acting weird, and I'm worried. What's on your mind?"

Qrow took a deep breath. "It's just...If you want to go after your friends, we can do that...I'm sure they'd like to see you again so...If that's what you want to do, I'll help you find them..."

James was confused. Qrow was incredibly adamant on finding his family before, and they had a clear path to take now. Mistral was where Ruby was going, so that's where they should go to. Does he think I'm going to abandon the search to chase the dead? James let out a soft huff, shaking his head. "Why would I go chasing ghosts when we have a family to find?"

"Well-"

"You said it back in Asagao to Raven. We're a packaged deal. Where you go, I go. And that means I'm sticking with you and we're going to find your family. Together."

"But," Qrow mumbled, "those guys back there-"

"Are my past. And right now, you're my present. You're stuck with me- Why are you laughing?"

A smirk wormed its way onto Qrow's face as he tried to stop the throaty laugh that had erupted from him. "You just said I'm your present. Isn't that some kind of breach of confidence or something, My Lord?"

James felt a slight blush covering his ears as he gave Qrow a playful shove. "You birdbrain, that's not what I-"

The sound of howling invaded the conversation, prompting Qrow to draw Huginn as he threw the clothes into James' arms. James' free hand grabbed his pistol, preparing to follow Qrow to battle.
"Stay here," Qrow ordered.

"Stay?!" James spat. "Why?!"

"You just took painkillers and until that limp goes away, you need to sit tight."

Before James could argue further, Qrow changed form and flew off toward the source of the noise. James watched as the bird vanished into the surrounding woods, a gnawing sense of panic filling his chest as he threw the clothes aside to follow him, ignoring the screams of protest his muscles were giving as he gave chase. He leapt over fallen logs, scurried around boulders, keeping the small black bird in his sights up until they reached the stream that separated the forest from the white heather fields.

And James froze.

There before him was a pack of nearly twenty Alpha Beowolves, all standing on their hind legs as they snarled at him. This was unbelievable. A small pack with a single Alpha was a normal occurrence through most of Remnant, and James had expected as much when he heard the howling. But this? He hadn't seen that many Alphas in one spot since...since...

Wait, he thought. *I've seen this before. But...where?*

"James, you idiot!"

The shout from above snapped James out of his confusion just in time for him to see a flash of red appear before him, slicing one of the Grimm in two with no effort. "Qrow-"

"Didn't I tell you to stay put?!" Qrow screamed at James, unaware of the creature lunging at him. James' eyes went wide as he shoved Qrow aside, and without hesitation he took aim and shot the Alpha right between the eyes. "Now isn't the time, Qrow!" Ignoring Qrow's scowl of annoyance, James pressed forward, taking out another two Alphas with no effort.

A third, however, caught him by surprise and back-handed, or rather back-clawed him, sending him flying towards the center of the fray.

"JAMES!" Qrow screamed as he jumped into the air, using the Alpha as a step stool to propel himself higher.

James scrambled to his feet just in time to see Qrow press a switch on his sword. There was the sound of gears, and as he fell back to the ground, Huginn changed from a sword to a scythe, slicing three of the enemies as he landed.

"Come on!" Qrow bellowed, grabbing James' hand, dragging him out of the group and back toward their camp. "There's something not right about this!"

"What do you mean?" James inquired.

"Look at them!"

James looked back, wondering what Qrow was talking about. Two of them had taken to chasing them, but the remaining Beowolves simply stood there, watching them with burning eyes.

"They're...not attacking," he realized. "Why aren't they moving?"

"Don't know," Qrow panted. "And I don't care. Whatever the reason, we're not sticking around to
Both of them came to a sharp halt just before the tree line. Among the branches of the trees, crawling out of holes in the ground, were the glowing eyes of Grimm. Golden stingers poised for the kill.

*The Beowolves had been acting as bait.*

"Death Stalkers and Beringels," Qrow groaned. "Why did it have to be fucking Beringels?" He glanced around, seeing the Beowolves coming closer to cut off their escape. "How many bullets you have left?"

James quickly checked the chamber, hissing a curse under his breath as he checked his coat for spares and loaded them into the empty slots. "I've got six Fire bullets loaded. The rest of them are Wind, and I think I have twenty of those on me."

"Then we'll need to make them count," Qrow mumbled. "Keep an eye out for the Silverback. Chances are, that's the one calling the shots here. Hit him in the eyes."

"Right," James muttered. "Which one is the Silverback?"

"You serious?" By the look he gave him, it was clear to James that Qrow was resisting the urge to smack him.

"Didn't exactly get a chance to see one in the military," James sighed. "Didn't get to see most types of Grimm on Solitas really."

"It's the one with the most armor," Qrow explained. "Probably hiding in the trees."

James nodded, lowering his stance slightly as he scanned the tree line, gun aimed and ready. His hands followed his line of sight as he searched. The eyes of the Death Stalkers followed his gun. For a brief moment, he brushed it off, thinking it was his mind playing tricks on him. But then he noticed the glowing from the branches. The Beringels were watching James. They were watching his hands.

And then everything clicked.

"They're after the stone," he breathed.

"What?" Qrow asked.

James turned and shot one of the Beowolves, clearing a spot for him to bolt out of the fray and further into the heather, prompting all of the Grimm to chase him. He glanced back for only a moment to see Qrow switch Huginn back to sword mode and start slicing some of the Death Stalkers with rapid strikes. Beringels fell from the trees and passed Qrow by, seemingly indifferent to his presence as they stormed toward James.

"James!" Qrow bellowed as he followed. "Where are you going?!"

"They're after the stone!" James called back. "I'm drawing them out into the open, so kill as many as you can!"

"Got it!"

James continued running, making a harsh turn left as he shot at the ground, setting the grass ablaze.
to distract some of the smaller Grimm. Qrow leapt into action, slamming his blade down in with enough force to create a small crater where the Death Stalkers once crawled. He continued his assault, killing the monsters with more strength than James had ever seen Qrow display.

*Wonder how long he's been holding back during those sparring matches,* James thought as he shot down an Alpha. That left him with three Fire bullets left.

"James duck!" Qrow screamed.

James fell toward the ground. Glancing up he saw Qrow spin once. Twice. Three times. The raw power of those strikes sent a quick flash of light his direction, cutting down the Alpha pack along with several Beringels. James continued to fire, taking out three more of the apes with the remainder of his Fire bullets. As he switched to Wind, the air around them began to feel heavy. Smoke filled his lungs as the fires grew, his muscles burned from overexertion, making it hard for James to focus as he continued to shoot, sending what few creatures that continued after him flying back into the flames. Most of the remaining Grimm were retreating back toward the nearby valley.

Key word being *most.*

As the rest of the Grimm scattered and fled from the heather fields, a single behemoth sauntered through the flames. It stood nearly twenty feet tall on its legs. A toxic green glow emitted from its right eye and along patches of its neck and left arm. Its back was completely covered in a thick armored layer from the base of its neck to the tailbone. The elongated teeth covered most of the face when it kept its jaw closed, acting as a kind of mask to shield its eyes.

"Holy shit," James whispered.

The monster turned its stare to him, grunting as it approached. James took aim and fired right at the chest, but the creature didn't even flinch. He shot it in the shoulder, the legs, trying to send it flying with the bullets. When he ran out, he refilled, backing away as fast as he could. The tightness in his lungs continued as he tried to hit it in the eyes, but the teeth made the bullets bounce away from the Beringel's face. James searched his coat in preparation to reload. Nothing. He checked his belt pouches. All empty. He kept pulling the trigger until it stuck, refusing to fire anymore.

James was out of bullets.

"Dammit!"

The Beringel pounded its chest as it roared, preparing to slam its giant fists down upon him. James flipped his revolver around. If he couldn't shoot, he'd have to bludgeon, even if that seemed useless. He braced himself, anticipating the force of the hands to crush him.

But the fists never came.

The Beringel turned around, having felt what it probably thought was a slight sting in its leg from where Qrow had stabbed it.

"Over here you fucking freak!" Qrow screamed, trying hard to make some kind of dent into the armor and draw it away. "You wanna fight somebody?! Come and-"

Without even a sound, the Beringel backhanded him, sending Qrow flying backwards toward the fire. Qrow threw his sword, embedding it into the ground and landing on the handle to stop himself from getting burned. He threw his hands about, yelling obscenities at the Grimm and goading it toward his perch, giving James a small wink as he did. The Beringel hurried toward him at breakneck speed.
James knew exactly what Qrow was doing.

"That's right you damn dirty ape! Come and get me!"

Qrow was acting as the bait, trying to give him a chance to escape.

"Here monkey, monkey, monkey!"

James chased after the beast. He wasn't going to turn tail and run.

"That's right, fucker! Come at-"

The Beringel grabbed Qrow by the head.

"QROW!" James screamed as he sprinted toward him.

Qrow's hands flew up to try and pry the hand off as he was lifted from his sword and tossed about like a ragdoll. His body was thrown onto the ground several times, and it took everything Qrow had to keep his bones from shattering. Just as James was about to hit the beast's leg, it threw Qrow into him, sending them both back towards the trees, landing flat on their backs. There was a soft crackling noise and James saw a flash of red in the corner of his eye.

Qrow's Aura had broken.

"Qrow!" James bellowed. Qrow didn't reply, prompting James to shake him. "Qrow, answer me! Get up!"

"James," Qrow groaned painfully. "Just go. I'll be-"

James' eyes flew open wide as the Beringel stormed over, grunting as its fists hit the ground. Without a second thought, James pulled Qrow into his arms and hunched over in a desperate attempt to protect him. He shut his eyes tightly. Everything was burning. His lungs, his muscles, the fields they were in, his left hand. Everything burned as the ground shook. The roar of the Beringel filled his ears as the toxic green of their death etched deep into his memories.

Death.

"Help me."

He was going to die.

"It's cold."

Qrow was going to die.

"It hurts."

He was going to die like they did.

"Someone please."

And there was nothing James could do to stop it.

"HELP ME!"

"James!"
James opened his eyes and looked down at Qrow, whose free hand was wiping away the tears that had begun to fall. The fierce red glow of the fires had vanished, replaced by a soothing silver glow coming from his hand. He looked around, shock and confusion plastered across his face as he saw a wall of snow white gears standing between them and the Grimm, who flailed against the barrier in a futile attempt to exterminate them.

"H-how did-" James started.

"I don't know," Qrow muttered. "But this might be our one shot."

"One shot?" James looked and saw a single violet bullet in Qrow's other hand.

"Not sure if my ammo is the same caliber as your gun," Qrow sighed. "But hopefully it'll work." He gave James a reassuring smile. "Think you can make the shot?"

James let out a small huff, the edges of his lips curling upwards as he took the bullet. "I'll do my best."

James let go of Qrow and opened the barrel of his gun. He loaded, and let out a small sigh. The bullet was just the right caliber.

James took aim with trembling hands, preparing to shoot the green monstrosity in the right eye. He took a deep breath to steady himself, trying to focus on the task and not the numbing tingle shooting through his nerves. The Beringel continued to punch and slam against the barrier.

And James' hands kept shaking.

"James, stay calm," Qrow soothed. "You got this."

_I got this_, he repeated. Qrow was counting on him to make the shot. His hands began to still, his muscles relaxed, and his eyes focused on one of the gears. There was a hole just close enough to the eye of the beast. He waited until the Beringel opened its mouth to roar once again.

James pulled the trigger.

The effect was instant. The wall of gears vanished as the bullet flew through it, embedding itself deep into the right side of the monster's head as the violet glow took over. The beast threw its hands to its face as it began to shrink and collapse on itself. Then with a loud bang, the ape's head exploded. The body collapsed to the ground, dissolving into smoke.

"Way to go James!" Qrow praised as he tried to stand.

A wave of relief overtook him, and James fell backwards as he tried to catch his breath. All the adrenaline was finally wearing off. The fire that had taken over the heather had vanished. The Grimm were either dissolving or retreating. His blue eyes watched as Qrow retrieved his sword. They had survived.

_Qrow was still alive._

And as his vision faded to black, James couldn't help but laugh as he heard Ozpin's last words ringing in his ears.

"Keep each other safe."

He was alive.
Qrow was alive.

They were free to live another day.

For once in his life, James felt he was able to do something right.

"And to think...When we first met you wouldn't give me the time of day...Now you're chasing after me in battle and using magic you don't understand to protect me...You're a dummy."

Qrow continued rambling to himself as he carried James on his back all the way to the cave after retrieving his weapon. Or rather, he was dragging him back as best he could. The Earl was nearly five inches taller than himself, and his broad frame and heavy prosthetics didn't make the trip easy. But Qrow brushed off the discomfort. He could still feel the motions of being thrown about like a stuffed animal, but pushed back the aching desire to fall asleep where he stood. He had a job to do.

"Get Jim out of the North," Qrow repeated. "Protect the stone. Keep each other safe..."

Ozpin's last words to him. It gave him a hollow feeling deep in his chest. Oz always put others first. They didn't care if they died, so long as the ones they cared about most were safe and sound. They risked their life to save him and James.

And now Qrow had to walk alone, protecting his charge as he was asked and making sure She, whoever that was, didn't get Her hands on the stone.

Qrow returned to the cave and tucked James into the makeshift bed. The sun was high in the sky. It would have been a perfect chance to keep moving had James not passed out on the battlefield. The General was strong, but in terms of combat the poor soul was very out of practice. That was something Qrow made a note to fix. Once they reached the next town, they'd have some sparring practice.

He tucked James in, gently brushing the hair from the man's face before going to tidy up the camp as best as he could. The fire would need to be relit before the sun went down. Qrow would have to figure out what to do for dinner. A throaty chuckle left his throat as he thought back to one of the camping trips he took with Taiyang and the girls. Ruby and Yang had been reenacting one of their favorite fairytales, and didn't want to stop for dinner.

"We may be on the run for the forces of evil," Taiyang joked, "but that doesn't mean we skimp out on meals."

A harmless one off comment, but Oz had agreed that it was an important thing to take into account.

Oz...

"Oz isn't here anymore," Qrow whispered, clutching his shirt tightly so he could feel the cross dangling from his neck. "I have to keep moving forward. I can't...I can't let my feelings get in the way of the mission..."

Qrow had a job to do. Get James out of the North. Protect the Stone. Keep James safe. And as much as it pained him, he couldn't afford to mourn. Not now.
"To protect and serve," he said bitterly. "That is the Hunter's Way."

The winds blew fiercely as he stood atop the old brewery. The sand in his shoes was irritating, but he would live. This was more important than a mild rash in his socks.

The man laying tied up before him trembled in fear as he approached, cane in hand. Their Grimm mask failed to hide the fear that had overtaken them. It was rather amusing, he thought. Seeing a large man with a lizard's tail tremble before him like he was a Griffon out for blood.

"So," he sighed. "You're one-hundred percent certain that Atlas is dead? And Vale is too?"

"Y-yes!" the man whimpered. "And Jacques Schnee is dead! I-I heard it right from the top before Beacon Tower fell!"

"And what about Marigold?"

"H-he never attended the party. He lives, still. P-Probably on his way to his villa in Nagisa as we speak. Now please, Mr. Torchwick. Please spare me."

Green eyes narrowed as he pressed the end of his cane against the lizard's head, a wicked grin shining in the moonlight as he kicked the mask off him. "Oh, I would love to Lizzy, really I would. But I recently heard about what the Sakaba branch of the White Fang have been doing with all the little orphaned human children around here. "Free" labor in exchange for Dust?" He licked his lips. "Now, I may be a criminal, but even Roman Torchwick has standards. Right now, as we speak, the Lanterns are collecting all the children you and your goons spirited away, and they'll be heading to Seren House Orphanage where they will be fed, clothed, and given loving families. While you and your little posse will be lucky if your bones are ever found out in the desert."

"Please," the man cried, his cornflower eyes blown wide in fear. "Have mercy."

"Mercy?" Roman glanced over his shoulder at the young girl who had accompanied him. "After what you tried to do to Neo? After you tried to kill my baby girl?" His smirk turned to a deathly glare. "For trying to kill my daughter and sending children to work in Marigold's mines? You expect mercy? Fuckers like you don't deserve mercy."

"PLEASE! DON'T KILL ME!" the man begged. "ROMAN I'M BEGGING YOU! Spare-"

"Rest in Hell," Roman spat. "And may the Gods have mercy upon thy family and thy name."

He pressed the button on the cane. There was a loud BANG! and where the lizard man's head had once been was now a puddle of blood and grey matter. He turned and walked back to Neo, hand glowing orange as he gently brushed her cheek, healing the deep cut that had been oh so graciously given to her by their now dead friend.

"You okay, Neo?" he asked fondly. He let out a gentle laugh when she nodded. "You know you could have taken him out yourself. Wouldn't it have been more satisfying?"

"No," she signed, her eyes switching from pink to brown. "I wanted to see him begging and screaming for his life. I honestly think you went too easy on him."
"Hey, like I said," Roman laughed. "I've got standards. He wasn't worth the Torchwick Treatment. Now come on. We have to prepare for when Baby Bear gets here. We've gotta be ready leave."

"Where are we going?"

"Nagisa. I hear the beaches there are lovely this time of year."

The two of them turned and headed toward the fire escape without another word.

Chapter End Notes

So sorry for the wait everyone! IRL was a pain, but I FINALLY got this chapter done. I hope it was worth the wait!

Looks like we got some magical mumbo jumbo going on here. Oooooh~! Neo and Roman have been introduced. Time to get the ball rolling.

Stay tuned for chapter 10. I'll try and have it up as soon as possible, but as for when that'll be, I don't know. I'll keep you posted.

Let me know what you think~!
It was a few hours before daybreak when Tukson was awoken by a gentle hand on his shoulder. Blinking the sleep from his eyes, he could make out a pair of cat ears twitching and moving around, and a gentle pair of eyes looking down at him.

"Kali?" he asked groggily.

"Morning sleepy-head," she greeted. "Come outside once you're dressed. I want you to spar with me."

"You want me to what?"

"Spar with me."

Tukson shook his head as he sat up. "You sure about this?"

"If I wasn't," she teased, "I'd have let you sleep. Now hurry up. Don't want to let the birds see the sun first."

With a tiny whine, Tukson nodded and began to get up. "I'll be out in a moment."

"Perfect!"

Kali gamboled out of the room before Tukson could say another word. The puma dragged his hands across his face, wiping the sleep from his eyes as he walked over to his closet and slipped on one of his favorite short sleeved shirts and a pair of sweatpants. If they were going to be sparring, it'd be best not to do so in his uniform. It was hard to get the dirt out of the dress shirt most of the time.

"She can handle a lot more than people think," Ghira had assured him. He had only been gone about two days, and in that time, Kali was rather quick to pick up where he left off. In the first day of him being gone she had completed all the paperwork he had yet to finish, rescheduled all the meetings that needed moved around, and still had time to help care for Klein.
It was a little unsettling, if he had to admit it.

Pushing the thought aside, he made his way out of the house and towards the backyard. The tiled path that wound out toward the palms nearby lead to a small grove that Ghira had taken to using as a sort of training grounds for new Hunters. The shade from the canopy of branches kept it cool, there was a second path on the other side that lead to the beach, and the ground around him was perfect for hand to hand combat training. From time to time, Ghira would ask him to join in a lesson, or to simply go one on one to help relax after hours of paperwork. Kali almost never joined them, unless it was to help with first aid.

"She can handle a lot more than people think."

Over and over, those words played in his ears, and Tukson couldn't shake the feeling he was about to learn something about Kali not many people were aware of.

And he was right.

Kali was standing there waiting for him in the center of the grove, wearing a mauve tracksuit and holding a staff in each hand as she watched him approach. She gave him a tender smile. "You made it!"

"Of course," he muttered. "So you want to spar?"

"Yep!" Kali giggled, tossing him a staff. "One on one, three points to win. No holds bars."

Tukson's earthy eyes widened as he caught it. "You want me to come at you? No holding back?"

"Yes."

"But I'm not that good of a-"

"Klein told me about you and the others letting him win," Kali interrupted. "I understand why you did, but I want to see what you're really capable of." She gave him a light nudge to the arm with her elbow. "I want to be sure that should something happen, we can have each other's backs. Don't worry about holding back. Okay?"

Tukson wanted to protest. He wanted to say no. It didn't feel right. Kali was like a mother to him. He couldn't bare the thought of her coming to harm, let alone should he be the one to harm her. But she was asking for this. She wouldn't have woken him for it if she wasn't sure, right?

"Okay," Tukson stammered. "First to three wins. I'll try not to hold back."

"Good," Kali purred. "Let's get started."

The two of them stepped back, clicking their staffs together in greeting, and lowered into fighting stance.

"One," Kali called.

"Two," Tukson replied.

There was no three.

Kali came forward faster than Tukson had ever seen her move. The end of her pole came on his left. Deflected. Lower right. Blocked. Upwards. Spun and shoved back. It was all he could do to keep up and stay composed.
Was this really the same Kali Belladonna he'd come to know?

Kali jumped back, allowing Tukson to come forward with a strike from above. Kali blocked and twisted around to kick him in the side, causing him to stagger. She took the opportunity to hit him dead center in the chest, and he fell back. If he wasn't at full Aura, that would have cracked a few ribs.

"That's one!" Kali declared. "Not bad Tuk. But you're still holding back. Don't be afraid to hit me."

This can't be the same Kali, he thought. Tukson forced himself to stand. "Kali, I-"

"Uh-uh," she said. "I don't want to hear any "I can't" out of you, Tukson. Fight me."

Great, she's a mind reader too. With a groan Tukson moved forward, coming in from the right.

Click, click, click!

They had barely started, and again, Tukson was thrown to the ground, this time face first. It had been a while since he'd ended up like this.

"That's two," Kali sighed in disappointment. "Maybe we should stop..."

And that was what brought Tukson back to his feet. Kali was never disappointed, or rather if she was, she never said it. She was always the kind of person not to let the negative emotions seep into her speech.

But it happened here.

And Tukson was not happy about it one bit.

"Let's try again," he insisted. "I won't hold back this time."

"Promise?" she asked.

"Promise."

"Alright. Once more."

Kali stepped back and Tukson prepared to defend. She ran toward him, going straight for the left leg. Block. Right side. Defended. Overhead. Stopped. Over and over, they twirled, kicked, and danced around each other in an attempt to make a hit. It wasn't until the sun was shining through the horizon that he finally managed to get behind her and strike her in the back, sending her flying and falling face first into the dirt.

"Oh my Gods!" he gasped, hurrying over to her. "I'm so sorry, Kali!"

Kali burst into laughter as he helped her up. "Well done! That's what I wanted to see!"

"You're...not mad?"

"Of course not!" she extolled. "I told you not to hold back, didn't I? You did great!"

Tukson felt a surge of pride run through him, and he couldn't help the grin that was overtaking his face. "So that's 2-1, right? We said first to three?"

"First to three," she agreed. "Let's go again. And how about a wager?"
"Wager?"

"Loser cooks breakfast."

"Deal."

Tukson stepped back toward the center of the grove, and they continued their sparring match until the sun had finally risen above the ocean. By then, they proceeded back to the house for Tukson to cook. Despite how hard he tried, despite having fun and not holding back, Kali had won.

But only just.

"Spar with me."

Qrow was setting up a lean-to when James had made the request. It hadn't been long after the encounter with the Silverback, but his Aura had already made a decent recovery. James seemed to have gained a bit more confidence as well.

Although whether or not that was going to be bad news for Qrow, he'd have to wait and see.

"You want me to what?" Qrow asked.

"Spar with me," James repeated. "Once we're done setting up camp."

"I don't think that's a good idea," Qrow cautioned. "I'm bad luck, and you nearly broke down against the Grimm-"

"Which is exactly why I want to train." James let out an exasperated breath, lightly rubbing his neck with the metal hand. "We're not sure exactly what or who we're up against...and until I can learn how to use this-" James limply held up his left hand "-I need to be able to hold my own hand-to-hand as well as my gun. That's not exactly something I've done in a while. And maybe going up against someone who I know has an advantage might help."

Qrow mulled it over. James had a good point. They had no idea what they were up against, and it was better to be prepared than not. It wasn't until he almost finished the lean-to that he conceded. "Alright. Let's get the firewood, then we'll get started."

"Great," James agreed, grinning pleasantly. "I'll go on ahead. Thanks Qrow."

"No problem, My Lord." Qrow continued setting up the shelter, pondering on how this training session should go. He didn't want to just go head first into this, but James wasn't new to fighting.

He might be out of practice, Qrow assessed, but he's still strong. And pretty fast. But he's off balance physically and mentally. Do I dive head first or do I ask what he can do? What can he handle?" Taking a deep breath, and finished making sure that the shelter was ready for the night. If he was going to be training as well as travelling, he had to know what James was currently capable of.

And there was only one way to find out.
James had gone on ahead to make sure they had plenty of firewood for the night. Qrow had told him before when they started travelling that "setting up camp isn't a job for a Noble". But James insisted, and after some pestering, Qrow had relented.

"He works too hard," James grumbled. "That's supposed to be my thing."

_Crack!_

James froze in place, scanning the trees in an attempt to see where the sound had come from. There was the sound of wings flapping, and James dropped the bundle of sticks in his arms as a crow came flying at him.

No, he realized as he stumbled back. It wasn't a crow. It was Qrow.

"What are you doing?!" James bellowed, leaning left to avoid a punch.

"You said you wanted to spar!" Qrow replied coyly, going for an uppercut. "I'm just seeing what you're made of, My Lord!"

"Qrow!" he groaned, crossing his arms to block the punches.

"James!" Qrow mocked, dropping low and kicking his legs out from under him.

James' hands quickly threw his hands out to catch himself and push back up, a playful smirk worming its way onto his cheeks.

If Qrow wanted to play dirty, then he'd play dirty.

Getting into fighting stance, James rushed forward and made a go for the right. Qrow's left leg came up for a kick, but James made a quick spin and held up his right arm. There was the slight feeling of vibration as he felt a foot make contact with his palm. He grabbed hold and spun, sending Qrow up into the air.

"Woah!" Qrow squawked, twisting around so he can catch a nearby branch, dangling from the tree as he worked the soreness from his ankle. "I think I made a huge mistake sneaking up on you."

"You did," James chuckled. "Now help me pick up the sticks-"

"HI JAMES!!!"

James winced slightly, garnering a worried look from Qrow. "Ruby, too loud."

"Sorry!"

Qrow dropped from the branch, brow furrowed in worry. "Ruby? Is she okay?"

"Is Uncle Qrow with you?"

_Seems like Ruby really can't hear him._ "Yeah, he's here. Are you alright?"

"I'm okay," Ruby replied. "I found another person to talk to besides you. The person who has the black stone."
"You found who has the black stone?"

"Yep. It's your friend Ghira. He's on his way to Mistral too."

James looked at Qrow, smiling brightly. "Ruby's fine. Ghira's on his way to Mistral."

"Who're you talking to?" Ruby asked.

"Can she hear me?" Qrow asked, softly.

"No, Qrow," James sighed. "Ruby can't hear you."

"Alright," he muttered. "You two talk then. I'll wait till your done."

"Thank you." James turned his full attention back to Ruby. "So how's Ghira?"

"He's fine," Ruby said. "He asked me to keep an eye out for his daughter Blake, and that you and Uncle Qrow are welcome in Menagerie. Oh, wait, where are you guys? Are you still in Nettle Town?"

"No, we're not," James divulged. "We're heading south. I think we're a few days from...Where are we going, Qrow?"

"Kigiku," Qrow answered.

"Kigiku," James repeated. "Where are you, Ruby?"

"About two days from a little place called Asphodel. I'm hoping to find an airship or something to get to Mistral. The one I took to get to Anima wouldn't take me all the way. I got as far as Wisteria before they had to let me out." She let out a soft gasp. "Oh dear. Smoke. I better go check it out."

"Alright. Try and stay safe okay?"

"Will do."

James looked over at Qrow, who had falling into his typical "butler in waiting" pose, red eyes turned toward the ground as he waited. "And Ruby?"

"Yes James?"

"Qrow says he loves you, and he'll see you soon, okay?"

Qrow's eyes darted upward to look at him, a thankful glint in his stare as his lips curled upwards.

"Tell him I love him too! See you later!"

"See you soon."

James waited for a moment longer, just in case. When Ruby didn't speak up again, he let his shoulders drop and walked over to pick up the firewood.

"So," Qrow began slowly. "What's...What's Ruby up to?"

"She's on her way to Asphodel," he explained. "She saw smoke, so she's going to investigate. Ghira has the black stone, is on his way to Mistral, and we've got a home in Menagerie."

"Why's he going to Mistral?"
"Probably off to Haven Archives," James theorized. "If there's a place with answers, it's The Great Library." He handed Qrow half of the wood, lightly brush his cheek with his left hand. "She loves you, and she'll see you soon."

James couldn't help but smile when Qrow instinctively nuzzled into the touch. "Come on. Let's go back to camp."

"Yes, My lo-"

"Qrow."

Qrow let out a breathy chuckle. "Yes, James."

"Alright, here's your weapon."

Weiss stood at the counter with Blake, looking over the rapier that Yatsuhashi had forged for her. There it was, laying on the counter in all its glory. A long, thin blade, a revolving chamber in the ricasso, surrounded by four prongs. He had even taken the time to add the etchings and details to the handle. There was a fine shine from the polish it had been given.

"It's perfect," Weiss breathed. "How were you able to finish it in one day?"

"Yatsu has a lot of experience in quick work," Blake explained. "It's part of the team CFVY skill-set."

"Team what?" Weiss asked.

"Never mind," Blake sighed. "Pick it up. Give it a feel."

Weiss reached out and gently picked it up, eyes widening at the weight. It was heavier than she expected, but not unusable. She popped the chamber open to examine it, smiling proudly. "It's wonderful. Thank you, Yatsuhashi."

"No problem," he chuckled. "What are you going to call it?"

"What do you mean?"

"It's an old superstition," he said, "but many hunters believe that naming your weapon makes it stronger."

"Well," Weiss muttered. "What should I call it?"

"Something that represents you," Blake suggested. "A weapon is an extension of your being after all."

Weiss pondered on this for a moment, looking at the blade. An extension on my being. Something to represent me. Her icy gaze wandered slightly around the room, stopping to rest on a vase in the window, with a small bouquet of white flowers. A feeling of warmth overtook her senses.

"A good name," Yatsu said.

"Now to see if you can wield it," Blake said. "Want to go test it out?"


"Might want to wait on that."

Weiss turned to the door of the smith shop to see Scarlet standing in the doorway, a gold colored hood on their shoulders and cutlass in hand. "Is everything okay?"

"Just got a message," they said. "Hinagiku needs to evacuate and we need head to Sagisō. Tonight."

"Got it," Yatsuhashi muttered. "I'll alert the Mayor."


"You're not-" Scarlet started, but the bit back, deciding not to say. "It doesn't matter. If you're done with your business, then I recommend hurrying to Mistral before the train tracks get ripped up."

"What?!"

Scarlet pulled the hood over their hair before turning to leave. Weiss looked between Blake and Yatsuhashi, trying to get a grasp on the situation, but the two of them had gone to muttering about something amongst themselves.

"Come on, Weiss," Blake growled. "We've got work to do. We're going to train."

"Huh?" Blake grabbed her by the hand and led her out of the shop, dragging her away from town despite protest. "Blake, what's going on?"

"We have to get you trained as best we can," she muttered. "Whatever is causing them to evacuate, we have to be ready for."

"Wait," Weiss shrieked. "I don't think this is a good idea-"

Blake took a sharp turn to glare at her, cat ears flat in intense aggravation. "You were the one who wanted to travel with me. You were the one who said you had some worth. Time to prove it. You're going to spar with me."

Weiss' eyes met with Blake's. She could feel her anger, the frustration, the fear radiating off of her. It was a familiar kind of feeling. She'd seen if almost every day back in Atlas herself, every time her father would call her to his office, or when he'd finally decide to join them for dinner some nights. It was the air of a person being cornered and having the control taken away from them. Weiss gripped the hilt of her sword tightly, trying hard not to panic.

Whatever had Blake on edge, it couldn't have been good.


--

"Not bad. Now try and focus. Imagine an enemy coming toward you. Your back is against the
Blake held her sword up high, carefully placing her steps as she instructed Weiss on activating her Semblance. The Heiress was a fast learner, and had grown accustomed to Myrtenaster's capabilities fairly quickly.

But it isn't enough.

"Alright," Blake said. "I'm going to come at you again, and I want you to try and use your Aura, your Semblance, anything but your sword to stop me. If I get within an inch of you, you fail. Got it?"

"Got it," Weiss panted.

And with that, Blake ran forward, sword poised to strike. Weiss' ice blue eyes widened in fright and she stumbled backwards.

Typical, Blake thought. She's not cut out for this after all.

Blake leaped into the air, and prepared to strike.

But she stopped mid air.

Looking around she saw Myrtenaster on the ground. Weiss' eyes were shut tightly, hands open and aimed upwards, a soft blue glow surrounding her. There was the feeling of something tight around Blake's waist, and swirling patterns of snowflakes and chains holding her in place. She'd never seen a Semblance like this before. She could sense the raw power behind it.

I guess I was wrong about her. She does have potential.

"Weiss!" Blake called, smiling brightly. "Weiss look what you did!"

Weiss slowly opened her eyes, only to go slack jawed at what she saw. "Oh my goodness, I'm so sorry!"

"Don't be!" Blake assured. "This is amazing. It can really come in handy."

"R-really?" Weiss stammered, lowering her hands.

"Yeah." Blake felt herself being slowly lowered back to the ground and the glyph began to fade. "We can definitely work with this on our way to Menagerie."

"I didn't hurt you, did I?" Weiss inquired.

"I'm fine," Blake sighed. "Your glyph just stopped me. It didn't hurt."

"You're sure?"

"Positive." She gave Weiss a gentle pat on the head. "You did great."

A soft pink tinted Weiss' cheeks as she smiled. "Thanks, Blake."

A slight pang of guilt struck her, and Blake couldn't help but feel like she might have been a bit too harsh on the heiress. "I'm sorry for snapping at you earlier."

"Apology accepted," Weiss assured. "Although...if we're going to travel together, we'll need to be open about what's going on. So if...if there's anything troubling you...please tell me, okay?"
Blake nodded, albeit semi-distantly. As much as she might want to be open about her mission, she couldn't risk it being out in the open. Not right now.

"Later," Blake bargained. "Once we're on the road again."

"Fair enough," Weiss conceded.

"Come on. Let's go back to town-"

**CRASH!**

Blake and Weiss looked back toward Hinagiku, smoke flying into the sky from the tree line. Blake's ears went flat, trying to block out the screams.

"Come on!" she barked. "Grab your sword and follow me!"

"Right behind you, Blake!"

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"*I'm looking for The Gold Blade. Where can I find them?*

"*I heard they hail near the main kingdom."

"*Try looking toward Hinagiku. The Magician Town is a place many merchants claim to have seen their yellow cloaks."

"*I've seen them before. Followers of the Grimm Reaper. Bloodthirsty and cruel."

"*Rumor has it they have factions in Vacuo as well, most prevalent in Nagisa."

"*I heard they burned Nettle to the ground."

All of the rumors gave him various locations. He couldn't pinpoint anyplace that seemed like a solid headquarters. These mercenaries seemed to wander everywhere, much like The White Fang. Hazel disembarked from the train as he arrived at Olwen Station, listening to the harsh whistle as the locomotive bustled away. Hinagiku felt like the most likely of hiding places for a group such as this. If they weren't there, he'd simply try again, looking for the meddlesome fools he was ordered to eliminate.

While he was sure he could manage fighting them, but he wasn't about to take a chance on running in head first. He needed to be cautious, well prepared, tactful. If this really was where they were located, then he'd be in for a heavy battle.

Luckily, he was more than prepared. When he had informed the Queen as to where he was heading, she had provided him with a small token. A silver coin that bore her mark. Once the train was gone, he pulled it from his pocket, flipping it over in his hand several times.

The tracks began to groan, lifting themselves up into the air and tearing itself apart, melting and morphing, a pain gasp escaping as the pieces began to take shape. First armored arms, then the legs. A helmet. Chest plate. Slowly it lowered itself to the ground.

And a blood red glow in intricate patterns akin to veins embellished its body.
"Come," Hazel ordered calmly. "We have a Blade to dull."

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 10! Done!

Okay, so I had to kind of rearrange the villain's chapter a bit. Mostly due to pacing and technical difficulty. So the next few chapters I'll be spacing out the villains plot.

Also, I've made the decision that if "These Broken Wings" goes past 45 chapters, I'll be splitting it into volumes. So chapters 1-40 will be volume 1 of Wings, and anything beyond that will be volume 2.

Hope you enjoyed this chapter! Let me know what you think.
Salem stood there by the window, eyes glowing softly in the blood red gleam of the night sky that blanketed her kingdom. Her eyes scanned the horizon for any sign of her Four Generals. They were always so matriculate, timely, and left her feeling confident that they could handle any task given to them.

But it had been a while since she had heard from two of them. Cinder kept her updated constantly on their progress, sending reports every night before settling down to rest. She had managed to pick up a faint trail of Ozpin's Aura somewhere in the direction of Anima. If Salem knew them as well as she thought, they'd probably ended up far in the countryside. Once a farmhand, always a farmhand it seems. She had no doubts that Cinder and her subordinates would complete the task they had been given.

Watts had been silent for a short period of time, but once she finally contacted him, he began to be a bit more frequent in his reports. The King of Vale had taken the survivors out of Sanus, but as for where they've gone, no one knew. It was unusual, she had to admit. It wasn't everyday that an entire country's Aura vanished from her view. Nor was it common for the Creatures of Grimm to be clad in such a verdant glow.

If those creatures, those abominations that dared call themselves Grimm, were not prowling the world in tandem with her creations, then Watts might have been successful in his endeavor of putting a foothold in Vale. But instead, the man was heading to Solitas to search for something that could help them set everything back to the right path.

Hazel remained silent in his quest to destroy The Gold Blade. He had alerted her only once to his whereabouts. He was on his way to their presumed headquarters in Hinagiku. Hearing that was their main station did put her a little on edge. It was one of the largest collections of magicians in the world, perfectly safe against her creatures due to its high concentration of magic, as well as its strong sense of unity against the controlling laws from the main kingdom of Mistral.

But Hazel was strong. His calm nature and raw power were unmatched by anyone she had met before. And with the token she had bestowed upon him, she was certain he would not fail her.

That left Tyrian. The Faunus she had taken in at a very young age, who worshipped her to an
unhealthy degree. Most days she found him endearing, though there were plenty of times where his obsession with her was rather unbearable.

But this silence was rather unheard of from Young Callows. He always kept her updated on his progress. His silence made her worry. Even when she attempted to make contact, he remained quiet. Surely there would be word from him by now?

Unless he had failed her.

But this was Tyrian. He was not the kind of person to fail a task, especially one as simple as retrieving an inexperienced fighter like The Mage.

Her ears twitched, a gentle smile crawling across her face as an electric yellow portal appeared in the sky. Watts had returned from his mission. Watching him fall from the portal and toward the window, she stepped away, allowing him entry as she held a pale hand toward him.

Watts' feet touched the floor, and his legs gave out from beneath him. His suit was tattered and covered in blood and ash. His breathing was shallow and pained as his Aura finally fizzled out. A book, or rather half of one, was in his hands.

"Dr. Watts," Salem greeted. "Your task. Were you successful?"

"There was...a slight mishap," he panted. "I could only retrieve part of the book." He held out the book, hands shaking as Salem took it from him. "I'm sorry my Queen."

Salem's eyes narrowed, looking over the half of the book he had given her. "This is most unfortunate." She turned her eyes toward him. "What happened?"

Watts shivered, taking a deep breath as he recounted what happened.

The building had been relatively empty upon his arrival. Jacques had always preferred to rely solely on the use of machines to protect his valuables, and he kept his most precious items close by. What few guards he did have had long since been disposed of by the White Fang, who now controlled Atlas as their own little kingdom.

At least, that was how it was supposed to be. Adam Taurus had returned to Anima with his main squadron, leaving behind several of his high ranking officers to rebuild here. Those officers were the best of the best, well suited to the climate of Solitas, and Salem had been assured that they had everything under control.

But upon entering the SDC's Headquarters, it was clear that this was not the case.

"RUN! EVERYONE GET OUT!"

"HE'S INSANE!"

"RUN FOR YOUR LIVES!"

Watts nonchalantly walked toward the elevators, his grey suit taking on a metallic sheen in the moonlight as he moved under the grand window ceiling. The White Fang guards were scattering
like roaches in the light, screaming bloody murder, ignoring the shouts from their commanding officer as they tried to flee from some unseen apparition. His left eye twitched in annoyance. Surely they had better control over the Solitas branch than this?

"Leave no witnesses."

The words from his Queen rang through his mind once more, as a gentle smile graced his cheeks. He was to leave no witnesses. If anyone saw what he was attempting to retrieve, he could kill them on sight. And with all the poor Faunus running around like chickens with their heads cut off, it would most likely be a necessity.

"I'll deal with them when I come back," he hummed. Watts entered the elevator and pressed the button for the final floor in the sublevels. "Twenty floors beneath the surface? What were you hiding here old man?"

A stupid question to ask. He already knew.

The elevator slowly descended. As it reached the lowest levels, a keypad and a needle appeared, with a voice speaking hoarsely over the intercom.

"Please provide needed blood identification."

"I'm afraid not," Watts sighed. With a snap of his fingers, a Black Queen chess piece appeared on the screen of the keypad, changing the icy blue glow of the lights to a lovely shade of crimson.

"Authorization approved. Welcome Willow Schnee."

"The wife? How interesting."

The elevator came to a halt on the last floor. The doors opened to reveal an expansive hallway, with walls that towered over him that were bathed in an emerald sheen. The floor was covered in tiles of obsidian, arranged in different shades so patterns of gears appeared every few feet.

And Watts ran forward, a harsh electric glow in his eyes. The green abominations from Vale were here in the Vault, standing between him and his prize, and they were poised to kill. Silverbacks lined the walkway. Nevermores were perched upon the intricate lamps protruding from the grand walls. Ursa Majors stood near the safe at the end of the hall. Alpha Beowolves crouched low, preparing to lunge.

All of the Grimm, in their vile glow, were ready and waiting to attack.

But they didn't.

Watts skidded to a halt as he made it to the end of the walkway, the soles of his shoes making a soft squeak along the tiled floor. The Ursai crawled away, allowing him space to approach the safe.

These abominations behave very strangely, Watts assessed. Perhaps it would be wise to capture a few for study. He approached the safe, putting a hand to the keypad and sending a bright yellow shock through it. There was a soft click, and the door to the safe slowly opened.

"Why hello, old friend. How wonderful it is to see you again."

Watts scrambled back, a vicious glare covering his face as he saw the abomination crawling toward him. Eight mechanical legs made of black metal, accented with red and white akin to the creations of his Majesty. Bright red light glowed from the left eye, looking over Watts with intrigue.
as the robotic right hand pulled at his beard whose greying strands stood out against the wine coloration of the lab coat. Watts knew this face. Anyone with half a mind would. It was a face the general public hadn't seen in over a decade.

"Merlot," he growled. "What are you doing here?"

"Got stuck inside while searching for something," the mad scientist chuckled. "The security system I set up for old Nick doesn't seem to be as kind to my new form as I would have hoped. So tell me, Arthur, what brings you here?"

Watts eyes darted about, taking in every little part of the man before him. The coat, the robotic legs, the book in his flesh hand.

Wait.


"What book?" Merlot asked.

"That book in your left hand," Watts spat. "Give it to me."

"You mean this?" Merlot inquired, lifting the book up in the light. It's spine was bound in an unnatural looking leather, there was faded parchment in between the covers, the mark of the Queen on the back while a golden gear adorned the front.


"I'm afraid I can't do that, Artie," Merlot cackled. "I've got plans for this." With what should have been an impossible snap of his metal fingers, the green Grimm slowly approached Watts. "My beauties will keep you company as I make my escape."

"Your 'beauties'!?!"

Merlot's mechanical legs launched him into the air as the Grimm attacked, leaping over him and pitter-pattering up onto the walls like the spider on death row. Watts ducked as the claws came toward him.

Snap.

A burst of electricity sent the beasts flying away, allowing Watts to run back toward the elevator. He reached into his pockets, pulling out what appeared to be small marbles and throwing them to the ground behind him. Grimm trampled over them, causing them to crack, and a dark slime began to cover the floor, halting their approach.

"Damn madman," Watts cursed, hurrying to catch up with Merlot. Sparks started to fly from his footsteps, setting the traces of gunk alight with flame. A sharp pain was filling his ears as the Grimm began to dissipate, but he pressed on.

Merlot made it to the elevator first, tearing the doors apart with his front legs and ripping the metal box out of the wall, a high-pitched laugh echoing through the hall as he began to crawl upwards. Watts reached behind him, drawing out a small pistol to shoot down the Nevermores that flew toward the exit, ignoring the sharp cuts that were forming on him as he ran through their razor blades of feathers. He had to hurry. If he failed, he'd never hear the end of this.

"I cannot fail," he muttered.
Without a moment of hesitation, Watts entered the ruined elevator shaft. With a hard clap of his hands, a giant spark formed at the end of each finger, allowing him to place his hands on the walls and use the electricity to send himself flying upwards. Merlot was crawling upwards fast, zooming right past all the other floors, kicking the doors out with every step and allowing Lesser Grimm to fall. Green and toxic, the smell of chemicals and ash filled the space as Watts did his best to dodge and kill.

"Still fighting for knowledge I see!" Merlot jeered. "You should come back and work with me, Artie. We'll accomplish so much together!"

"I'd rather burn in hell!" Watts spat.

"That can be arranged!"

Merlot exited the elevator shaft on the main floor. Watts tried to keep up, using the back wall to spring forward, every step he took now generating large amounts of thunder and lightning. The White Fang soldiers were fending off the abominations in a futile attempt to survive. The entire building was filled with the sounds of Grimm and shattered Auras. Arthur soon ran out of ammo, and tossed his gun aside as soon as he was within reach of a Fang soldier's blade.

"Catch me if you can, Watts!" Merlot proclaimed as he left the building. Watts followed in suit, switching between his sparks and the blade as he cut down several Beowolves that attempted to block his path. With one last push, Watts launched himself into the air and landed on Merlot's back, his hand reaching for the book as the madman tried to shake him loose.

The snow fell heavily, blocking out the world around him and allowing Watts to focus on the task at hand. He slipped the sword under Merlot's arm, and with one quick movement removed the appendage.

Merlot screamed in agony as he watched his remaining human limb fall away. Watts made a grab for the book, only to have Merlot catch half of it in his robotic hand. Watts heard the sound of paper tearing, what felt like a boulder make contact with his forehead, and before he knew it, Watts was on his back in the snow. Merlot scurried toward the docks as the lank doctor attempted to make chase once more.

"I followed him as far as the shore," Watts stammered, trying hard to keep composed. "Despite managing to remove his arm, I'm afraid Merlot got away with the latter half of the book."

Salem remained silent as Watts finished his tale. Rage pulsed through her veins, giving the thin black lines along her skin a sinister shine. The half on its own was useless to her. The book only contained a portion of what was needed to achieve their goal.

"This endeavor was fruitless," she hissed. "You've disappointed me."

"I'm sorry, Lady Salem," he muttered, head low in shame. "I accept whatever punishment you have for me."

Salem remained silent, debating on her next move before a soft clicking noise came from the nearby doorway, drawing her gaze away from Watts.
The Seer had returned.

"Come," she beckoned. The Grimm glided over to her, lifting a tentacle and gently wrapping it around her finger, cooing softly. A smirk graced Salem's lips. "So that's where he hid it. The fool." She turned her attention back to Watts. "Arthur, would you like a chance to redeem yourself?"

"Of course," he replied. "Anything for you, My Queen."

"Go heal yourself," she ordered. "The Chief of Menagerie is in Mistral visiting our friend at the Archives. Once you're better, go forth to Anima and bring him to me, alive. And you are not to return until you have him. Take the new recruits with you as well. It's about time they have proper battle experience."

"As you wish," he complied. "I'll do so right away. Thank you, Your Majesty." With a slight stagger, Watts began to limp away.

"And Watts," Salem added.

"Yes, My Queen?"

"Failure will not be tolerated," she chided. "Do not disappoint me again. I shouldn't have to remind you what will happen if you fail."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

Salem watched him leave, the Seer's tentacle releasing her hand and gliding away. She looked at the book, her porcelain fingers tracing over the golden gear. She would have to locate the other half quickly.

_The rest better not fail me._

Amber stood guard as the others made an attempt to clear the road. Several trees had fallen, and the path to Sakaba was a clear shot once they made it to the other side of the blockage. Glynda was still drifting in and out of consciousness in the back seat of Junior's van, but her injuries were finally starting to heal, and her Aura was finally restored to the point where it helped the process. All that was left was to get her out of the car and into a proper bed again.

Even so, Amber couldn't help but feel a deep ache in her chest. Her home was gone. What was left of her family was scattered, broken, and in danger. Her Nini was not going to be able to look out for her anymore, and she was still a novice when it came to her powers. She'd have to learn to use them the old fashioned way and hope for the best. Although, if she was lucky, maybe Junior could help her find someone or something to aide her. Many a hunter claimed that Junior had connections everywhere, whether it was directly or not.

_Maybe, just maybe._

"Dammit all!" came a groan.

"Everything alright?" Amber inquired.
"No!" Melanie and Miltia grumbled as they came back, carrying two long branches in their arms.
"We need to leave the van."

"What?" This isn't good, Amber realized. "What's happening?"

"The trees aren't budging," Miltia groaned. "We have to make the rest of the way to Sakaba on foot."

"And we have to carry everything we have the rest of the way too," Melanie mumbled.

"Are you sure that's a good idea?" Amber asked.

"Doesn't matter," Junior sighed as he came back. "We're not going to get anywhere unless we can fly."

"Why don't I try burning a way through?" Amber suggested.

"In this heat that'd be asking for trouble. We'd risk setting fire to everything around here, and we don't have any water or Water Dust to spare to put it out."

"Good point," Amber groaned. "So how're we going to go about this?

"We take what we need," Junior said. "I can carry Glynda on my back, hold her up with one hand, and carry my weapon in the other. I'm afraid you three will need to carry our supplies."

"Sounds easy enough," Melanie grumbled. "But it's going to get dark soon."

"The next town is a few hours by foot," Miltia mumbled.

"But the next town is Sakaba," Amber reminded them. "So let's just suck it up and get moving. The sooner we move, the better. And who knows, we might get lucky and meet up with other travelers that'll help us."

"That's the spirit," Junior chuckled tiredly. "Let's get moving."

"Right behind you, Dad," the twins monotoned.

Amber helped Junior lift Glynda onto his back, removing her cloak and tying it around him so it could act as a sling to help carry her. Melanie and Miltia took a bag each, and Amber lifted the remainder of their gear into the duffle bag. A slight moan caught her attention. She looked over at Junior, a wave of relief overtaking her.

"Glynda," Amber breathed.

"What's going on?" Glynda moaned. "Are...are we there yet?"

"Almost," Junior soothed. "We've gotta climb over some trees in the road and walk the rest of the way. Might be a bit uncomfortable for a while."

"My crop," she muttered. "Where is it?"

Amber ruffled through the supplies quickly, digging it out from the duffle bag before handing it to her. "Here Glynda. Safe and sound."

"Good," she sighed. "Now I can keep you safe..."
"No," Amber asserted. "You're going to rest. We'll be keeping you safe, your Grace."

"Amber-" Glynda started.

"No. You rest. Let me do my job. I'm your maid remember? Protecting you is part of my job."

A gentle fondness shined in Glynda's eyes, and before she could say anything else, she drifted back to sleep. Amber couldn't help the smile appearing, and she set out ahead.

"Come on," she beckoned. "We have a town to get to."

There was a strong smell of alcohol permeating the air as Tyrian stood in the middle of the road several meters away from the abandoned brewery, watching as the silhouettes slowly approached him on the outskirts of Sakaba. He kept his tail wrapped around his torso so as not to startle the group ahead of him quite yet, pulling his coat closer as he began assessing who his opponents would be.

The tallest silhouette appeared to be carrying someone on their back. They wouldn't be too difficult to dispose of. There were two other silhouettes walking at an eerie synchronized pace, with blades on the arms of the left one. They might prove more of a challenge, but he was sure he could overtake them.

That left the one on the far end. The one carrying what appeared to be a staff signaled the group to stop. They lowered the bags they were carrying and set the person on the tall one's back down beside them before hurrying in his direction.

The target was coming right for him.

Time to act.

Tyrian waved pleasantly, a cocky grin on his face as he greeted the group. "Why, hello friends." It took everything he had not to laugh at their confusion. "Expecting someone else?"

"You're not-" the man began, but shook his head as he changed his words. "Who are you?"

"Why friend, my name is Tyrian," Tyrian introduced, left hand on his hip and right covering his heart as he gave them a bow. "No need to tell me your names. Tall, well dressed, ruggedly handsome, you must be Hei Xiong. Oh, but everyone calls you "Junior", do they not?"

"What of it?" Junior growled.

He's on edge, Tyrian assessed. This should be easy. "Nothing really. Just making conversation before I kill you and the twins. Melanie, isn't it? And Miltia Malachite?"

To Tyrian's surprise, it wasn't Junior to step forward first. Nor was it the green eyed dolls the man called his children. It was instead the girl with the staff, hood fallen so that her fiery eyes could glare at him in the pale moonlight.

"You will not lay a finger on them," she warned. "Not if you want to live."

Tyrian let out an exaggerated gasp. "The Mage has courage. Oh, how interesting. What was the
"name you're known by these days? Amber, right?"

"What the fuck do you want?" Melanie spat.

"Because if you want a fight," Miltia added, "you've come to the right place."

The Faunus shook his head, letting out a harsh cackle. "What I'm after doesn't matter to you, your sister, or your father here. And I think we've had enough talk now."

Amber threw her cloak aside. "You took the words outta-"

Tyrian didn't let her finish. He charged forward briskly, closing the space between him and the target, dodging the ball of fire that erupted from the crystal and began to shoot his gauntlet-guns. Amber held out her hand, and the bullets hit what appeared to be thin air. This allowed Tyrian the chance to kick, hitting the girl right in the face and sending her to the ground.

"BASTARD!" the twins screamed. A pair of red claws flew in from his left, a pair of white knives to the right. There was a sound of clashing metal, and Tyrian twisted around, sending the girls flying off to the sides. Without even stopping to see who was coming next, Tyrian crossed his arms just as something, (a bat perhaps?), came at him from above. From this angle, Tyrian could clearly make out the bags under Junior's grey eyes. The poor bartender was exhausted.

"Haven't been sleeping well?" Tyrian taunted.

"Shut up!" Junior spat as he jumped back from Tyrian's bullets. Using this to his advantage, Tyrian swung his blades in rapid succession, making several scrapes against the bourbon colored Aura. There was the sound of fire behind him, and Tyrian leapt out of the way, causing the fireball to send Xiong flying.

"Well, if that wasn't ironic," he breathed. A heavy gust of wind came his way, and he spun around, throwing off his coat as he somersaulted toward Amber. The twins joined her and soon he was fighting the three of them, leaning back, spinning, kicking, elegantly dancing around them as he lay scratches and blows to their Aura.

When the three girls jumped back, Tyrian spun around, tail uncoiling and spinning in rapid succession to send them back towards the brewery. Junior came at him again from above, and the armor plates were more than enough to stop the bat.

"SURPRISE!" Tyrian squealed giddily.

"A scorpion?!" Junior gasped.

Tyrian shoved him back, thrusting his tail forward as he burning sensation of his eyes took over. The girls all screamed in fear as the stinger made contact with Junior's head.

CRASH!

Hei Xiong shattered into thousands of little glass shards before him.

Tyrian spun around in confusion, trying to find where his targets had gone, and say the girls running back to their supplies. He gave chase, thrusting his stinger forward at the twin in red as they attempted to pick up their gear.

CRASH!
The entire group shattered into glass, and Tyrian felt a hard tug on his tail. He swung his blades to try to hit whatever it was, but his arms were caught as well. And then his legs. Tyrian felt the invisible hands pull him upwards to the roof of the brewery, and soon he was pinned down on the roof on his stomach, unable to move.

"Well, well, well!" came a cheery voice. "What do we have here? A little scorpion who bit off more than he can chew?"

Tyrian struggled against the restraints as he looked up. The shattered moonlight cast a malicious glow upon the three figures before him. One was carrying a riding crop, her legs slightly shaking as beads of sweat coated her messy blonde hair in an attempt to keep him pinned down by the arms. There was a tri-colored youth holding an umbrella, the ferrule of which was sharpened to a deadly point.

And then there was a man, standing tall and proud as he placed the end of his cane to Tyrian's forehead. His ginger locks covered the right side of his face, kept in place by the bowler hat upon his head.

"If you're going to kill me," Tyrian hissed, "I suggest you do it now. Your friend might not be able to hold me for long. Then you'll be in for it."

"Hm, that does sound tempting," said the man. "I take it you know who I am then?"

"Torchwick," Tyrian spat.

"Smart and deadly!" Roman cheered. "My favorite type of recruit."

"What?!" the blonde cried. "You want him to join us?!"

Tyrian looked between the three figures before him, perplexed. *Roman Torchwick wanted him to join his group?*

"Why not?" Roman argued. "I see something in him. I think he'll make a great ally."

The tri-colored girl shook her head, hands moving rapidly as Roman watched her. Tyrian had no idea what she was attempting to say.

"I know he tried to kill Baby Bear," Roman whispered. "But there's a chance he-"

"I'll never join you," Tyrian growled. "And the moment you let me go, I'm going to kill you."

Roman tilted his head as he removed his hat, allowing his hair to fly freely with the wind as he removed his cane from the Faunus' forehead, kneeling down and holding Tyrian's chin so he could clearly see his face. Tyrian stopped moving, eyes wide in horror as he saw what the hair had been hiding. Something not even his beloved Queen would have bestowed upon someone.

Where Roman's right eye should have been was a bright golden flower.

"You-" Tyrian began.

"Can't kill someone that's going to die soon anyway." Roman whispered. He pressed his forehead to Tyrian's, a soft orange glow covering the two of them as he began the spell.

"Stop!" Tyrian screamed. "What the fuck are you-!"

"*For it is in mortality that we achieve redemption,*" Roman hummed. "*Through this, we become a*
vessel of wisdom and strength to journey towards paradise. Finite in distance and bound by fate, I lock your spirit, and by my path, forgive thee."

When Roman stepped away, he straightened his hair and put his hat back where it belonged to hide the cursed bloom. The orange glow vanished, and Tyrian was left shaking in fear, a feeling he hadn't truly felt in years.

His Aura was locked.

"Glynda," Roman said. "Toss him to the other side of town. And watch your aim. Make sure he lands in a hay bale. I want him to live and learn."

"Are you sure?" Glynda asked cautiously.

"As sure as Nini was when they told me I looked good in eyeliner. Toss him."

Before Tyrian could protest, the arms lifted him into the air and threw him all the way across the town out toward the farmlands. He flailed about in panic, knowing his Aura wouldn't protect him this time. When his landing platform came into view, he wrapped his tail around himself and curled into a ball, holding his legs tightly to his chest as he landed in a large stack of hay.

When Tyrian crawled out of the stack, he could feel slight bruising along his spine, making walking rather difficult. He closed his eyes, trying to pinpoint the Aura trail that his opponents left behind.

But he could sense nothing.

Tyrian could feel his heart racing, the anxiety gnawing at his very core as he staggered back into town. Pain and exhaustion weighed his muscles down as he tried to activate his Aura to ease the aches.

But he couldn't use it. He couldn't sense anyone's Aura. He couldn't get rid of the pain.

He stumbled into an alley, trying to call back to his Goddess.

"My Lady?" he cried. "My Queen, please, answer me. I found the Mage. I'm going after her as we speak. Please tell me you hear me!"

But no one replied.

Tyrian fell to his knees, hands curling into fists as the tears began to fall. He was alone. His Goddess could not hear him any longer. He was alone, untraceable by his Queen.

*He had failed her.*

A choked wail erupted from his throat as he covered his face, trying to focus and reactivate his Aura. He needed that purple glow. He needed to be seen by Salem.

"Oi, get back here you thief!"

Tyrian didn't look up. He didn't notice the little cloaked shadow limp past him and fall over. He didn't notice the two sets of footsteps walking up to him. He blocked out the entire world until a hand grabbed his braid and tossed him aside.

"Move you fucking trash!" the brute bellowed as he grabbed the little cloaked figure's wrist. "And you! You're going to pay for that!"
"Let's take her to Torchwick," said his companion. "He'll have a place for her."

**TORCHWICK!**

Tyrian felt something snap in the back of his mind. His tail unwrapped and struck down the man holding the thief. He then leapt on top of the man that said Roman's name, and stabbed him with his wrist blades. Once. Twice. Thrice. Left and right. Left and right. Over and over through the tears as they slowly melted to laughter. He continued this until he was covered in blood, and his victim was left as a slab of meat.

Tyrian’s laughter died, and as he began to walk away from his recent kills, the exhaustion overtook him, and he fell to the ground just inches from the thief. As darkness overtook him, the last things he remembered were a pair of gentle hazel eyes staring at him, the palm of a tiny hand on his head, and the gleam of a stinger in the moonlight.

The smoke rose into the starry sky, blocking out the moonlight and casting the village in shadow. Raven's red stare scanned the area from the roof of the inn as the people scattered. The tribe members she had brought with her on this expedition had made their way back to camp already. She would have to reprimand them again. Raven's orders were to take what they needed, and to not destroy anything.

Then again, she should have known better than to bring her along.

Raven let out a sigh and closed her eyes. She had to be sure that her family wasn't there in Asphodel. Staying focused, Raven tried to pinpoint their Aura. Asphodel burned slowly before her. Grimm filled the streets. Screams filled the air. Death loomed close by from the villagers. Taiyang was nowhere nearby. Yang wasn't anywhere close. Ruby was nowhere in sight.

Another dead end.

"Time to search elsewhere," she whispered. She drew her sword and prepared to leave.

"Red like roses fills my dreams and brings me to the place you rest..."

Raven halted, slowly removing her mask from her face as she looked up. Rose petals fell from the sky in a gentle flurry of red and white. The haunting melody filled the air, slow and hypnotic.

"White is cold and always yearning, burdened by a royal test..."

There was the sound of gunfire, a shriek of a Nevermore. All the Grimm running about had stopped their rampage.

"Black the beast descends from shadows..."

Raven switched to her Gravity Blade, preparing to fight whoever was approaching.

"Yellow beauty burns gold."

A flash of white fell from the sky and crashed upon the local church roof. Raven shook her head, trying to convince herself that it wasn't who she thought it was. The cloak's hood fell back,
revealing long black hair with tips red as blood.

"Summer?" Raven whispered.

"HYAH!"

The cloaked hunter flew forward, scythe in hand as the Grimm approached her. Bullets were fired rapidly, cuts were made. All filled with raw power, but still very much like a novice.

"Not Summer," she realized. "That must be Ruby."

The young hunter hopped along the rooftops, shooting down Creeps with ease with fire. Petals flew from her, covering the ground in a sea of silk and blinding the monsters that were unlucky enough to fall behind her. Raven donned her mask once more, hopping from the inn roof to aid the fight.

If I can get close, she assessed, I can bring her back with me.

Raven rushed forward toward a Beowolf, cutting it down in one strike. And again with a Creep. Over and over, trying to catch up with the cloak.

"Look out!"

Raven turned around just in time to see what hit her. A giant paw tossed her aside, sending her flying into a set of trash cans. She quickly recovered, running back towards the creature that had attacked her, only to skid to a stop.

This wasn't a Grimm she'd ever seen before. It was around the same size of an Ursa Major, but its features were like that of a lion, with white bones dotting its pelt like spots. Its tail was covered in a hard shell, a bright golden flame alight on the end. The tail swung from side to side, throwing balls of fire in every direction, burning everything it touched.

And there was Ruby, standing between her and the creature, left hand aglow like a Grimm gaze.

"Ruby-" Raven started.

Ruby didn't move. She seemed frozen in time. The beast lifted itself onto its hindquarters in an attempt to strike her down, roaring in anger. Raven moved forward, using the force of her blade to send the beast back.

"Ruby!" she screamed. "Ruby move!!!"

But Ruby didn't move. Raven saw her eyes were glazed over in pain, and there was a soft whimper under her breath.

"Ruby-!"

The Beast came back, pinning Raven to the ground on her back. Her sword fell from her hand as it roared. The mask hid the fear in her crimson eyes.

I'm going to die, she thought. I'm sorry. Taiyang, Yang, Ruby...Summer...

"Leave her alone!"

The Beast turned around, slowly removing itself from Raven. Raven scrambled to get up, her pale fingers reaching for her sword and swapping the purple blade for blue. The Beast began to lunge toward Ruby, who had finally snapped out of it and was zooming away, heading toward the
"Over here you ugly Rampant!" Ruby screamed. "Come and get me!"

So it's called a Rampant, Raven thought. She made sure to keep that in mind for the future, and charged, slicing at the tail. Steam hit her face when the blade hit the flame, making her back away. She could hear the crackling of her Aura. She was on the edge of breaking.

"Get out of here!"

Raven looked and saw Ruby shooting the creature with everything she had.

"Rub-

"I'm gonna do something stupid!" Ruby screamed. "So get out of here if you wanna live, Auntie!"

She knows!? "Ruby-!"

"JUST GO!!!"

Raven groaned and turned away, switching to her red blade and opening a portal, hopping through it and reappearing a few feet away from the flaming ruins of what was once Asphodel so that she could retrieve the young girl. She knew what Ruby was going to attempt.

Summer had done the same, way back when.

There was a silver flash, a high pitched scream, and when it all faded away, all that was left was smoke and ash.

The pain faded away as she closed her eyes. Her thoughts were spinning violently, images of the past, present, and future clouding her ability to process everything. She gripped her scythe tightly, leaning on it as a support. Her hand burned fiercely, making it hard to stay steady. She couldn't stop the weak feeling overtaking her. And this time, her uncle and her father weren't there to help her.

And that thought terrified her.

Though she'd never admit it.

_Breath Ruby, she told herself. Breath. You can do this. Uncle Qrow needs you. You have to keep moving forward._

_"That was reckless."

Ruby looked up, her silver gaze staring at the woman approaching her. Her hair was tied back, pluming out like feathers. The way she walked, her posture, the fire in her eyes. It was familiar. It was just like Yang.

"You're...really her," Ruby muttered. "You're Yang's mom..."

"That's right," Raven affirmed. "It's nice to finally meet you, Ruby Rose."
"Right..." Ruby looked her over, trying to decide what to do. On the one hand, she was family. Raven was her sister's mother. She was Qrow's twin. She could help with her search, surely? Between the two of them, they could find Qrow and bring him back to Patch.

But on the other hand...

"Why are you here?" Ruby asked slowly.

Raven tilted her head, staring her down. "What do you mean?"

Qrow's voice echoed through Ruby's thoughts. "She's a bandit," he had told them. "She has a way of looking at the world most people don't particularly agree with. And she's dangerous."

"You heard me," Ruby grumbled. "Why are you here in Asphodel?"

"I could ask you the same thing," Raven hissed. "Why are you all the way out here?"

"I'm on a mission," Ruby gestured around her at the ruins of the town, trying to keep her voice from cracking. "This town, the one I was supposed to come to for rest and supplies, it couldn't have gotten like this for no reason. And Uncle Qrow didn't exactly have the nicest things to say about you the last time he was home. I'm putting the chippies in the cookies and guessing you had something to do with it. So...why are you here?"

Raven took a step forward, and Ruby stepped back. Raven moved forward again, and Ruby walked back. Again and again until Ruby could feel the charred wall of one of the buildings behind her.

"I'm here for you Ruby," Raven answered. "I'm also on a mission. My mission was to find you." She held out her hand. "Come with me. Now."

Ruby could feel the raging scowl overtaking her face. "You destroyed a whole village to find me?"

"That's not -"

"Don't lie to me," Ruby growled. "I may be young, but I'm not stupid. Destroying towns is what bandits do. Or are you not a bandit like Uncle Qrow said?"

"Ruby-"

"I saved you from the Rampant. Now get lost. I will not be coming with you. And if I ever see you again, I'll-"

"You'll what?" Raven interrupted. "Are you trying to threaten me?"

Ruby tried to figure out how to get out of this. She was cornered, and the only route was straight ahead.

What would Uncle Qrow do?

Raven reached for her.

What would mom do?

A hand touched her shoulder. A portal appeared behind Raven.

What should I do?
"Let's go, Ruby."

*No!*

Ruby smacked Raven's hand away, quickly folded her scythe as she swung it, and winced as she heard a sharp crack as the metal hit the mask and knocked Raven out of the way. Before she had the chance to recover, Ruby ran forward and into the portal, scattering petals behind her as it closed.

When Ruby reappeared, she found herself in the middle of a forest that was very unfamiliar to her. There was a slight fizzling sound, and a flash of red. Everything was spinning around her, and the sudden weakness in her legs caused her to fall. The last thing she recalled seeing as darkness overtook her, was four pairs of eyes in vibrant colors; Blue, Turquoise, Vivid-Green, Magenta. And a soft voice. A gentle, soothing whisper, smoother than silk.

"*Do you believe in destiny?*"

Chapter End Notes

So I was gonna post it today, bumped it back to Sunday because of an impatient anon, and then decided "F*ck It, it's my fic and I'm gonna post for all the nice people who were patient." So, TADA!

Watts will be out for blood the next time he runs into Merlot, mark my words. Tyrian....oooooh boy. I'm really nervous about this storyline. Please don't hurt me for hurting him.

Now, who on Remnant could Ruby have run into....

Hope you enjoyed it! Let me know what you think, and stay tuned for another exciting installment of "Who's gonna cry and who's gonna die!"
"All ashore that's going' ashore!"

Whitley stood on the deck as they pulled into the docks of the port town, a little place Captain called Barret. His clothes were pretty much ruined, so Matte agreed to let him keep the uniform until they could find him something else. He had removed anything that could be traded for money off of them. Silver buttons, the cufflinks, belt buckle. It wasn't much, but it was a start.

The scarf was the only item that was left relatively undamaged, and it gave Whitley a small sense of comfort. He slung it over his right shoulder and tied it off by his left hip, making a sash out of it, unaware of the Captain walking up behind him until the man spoke.

"So lad," Captain greeted. "Have you decided what you're doin'?"

"I'm going to go ashore," Whitley stammered. "M-maybe try to trade what I have to get a bit of Lien...Although..."

"Although?"

Whitley stood up straight with his hands firmly at his sides, taking a deep breath to try and prepare himself for whatever might come.

"I was wondering," he started. "If...um... Why am I getting so nervous about this? I was never this nervous around nobility. "If I can't figure out where to go...I'd like to come back on board...but as part of the crew."

Captain raised an eyebrow at him, looking him over as he walked around him. Whitley stood very still, ignoring the feeling of his ears turning pink. His icy stare nearly wavered when the captain ended his inspection.

"Well," Captain sighed. "You're not exactly the sea-faring type, Whitley. Do you know how to fight? How to read a map? Or bargain for goods?"

"I can't fight," Whitley admitted. "I was taking geography and learning about SDC trade routes before Atlas fell, so I can read a map enough to figure out where I am, and I can try to bargain for things."
"I don't know..."

"Please!" Whitley begged. "I doubt I'll find any of my family here in Barret, and like you said, we might find them if I travel with you. I'll do anything, so please!"

Captain stroked his snowy beard, smiling fondly as Matte walked up behind him. "Matte? Mind taking young Whitley with you ashore?"

"You sure?" they asked.

"Aye. Take him with to get the ship parts and the ammo for the heavy cannon. See how he fairs in the market, then report back. Got it?"

"Aye, aye, Captain!" Matte saluted.

"Good." Captain gave Whitley a light ruffle of his hair. "Let's see how you fare on this errand lad. If it goes well, I'll let you on the crew."

"Th-thank you," Whitley stammered gratefully.

"No worries lad. Now let's get you the Lien you'll need for this errand."

Whitley followed Matte into the weapons store, keeping his head low as he watched them walk up to the merchant. There was not a lot for him to do on this errand, so he did what a Schnee child did best. Stayed quiet and out of the way, and observed as Matte did business.

"What's up, Jack?" Matte greeted.

"Matte!" the merchant greeted. "Back from sea I see?"

"Yes sir. Came for the ammo for the heavy cannon. You got new shipments in right?"

"Yeah," Jack sighed. "But I'm afraid we got some trouble with the current arrangement."

Whitley glanced around as Matte and Jack talked about the current payments. The shop was lined with cases of dust cartridges, various forms of shotguns and pistols, swords of different shapes and sizes. There was a section labeled "specialty", with weapons that looked more like everyday household items than actual Grimm killing tools. Each one had a note card handing off them giving a list of capabilities as well as Hunter Rank.

Whitley was about to turn back to Matte when his eyes came to rest on the weapons at the very end of the rack. One was a silver violin, with strings woven from Dust, and what appeared to be a trigger near the top of the neck, labeled as a weapon for a hunter of a rank three. The other weapon was a pickaxe with a small apple engraved near the handle, labeled as a rank ten.

*Diamant Apfel!*

"What kind of shady business are you running here?!"

Whitley's blue eyes darted back to the counter when Matte started shouting.
"Look," Jack groaned, "Marigold's practically the new SDC, and he's taxing the hell out of things. I can't sell the normal amount for that price. I can give you a half at best, nothing more."

"Look you little-"

"Excuse me." Whitley walked over to the counter, ignoring the increasing nausea in his stomach. "I'm sorry, I just wanted to say, I'm impressed at the collection of weapons you sell here."

"Whitley?" Matte asked.

"Ah," Jack said. "You're a hunter?"

"In training," Whitley divulged, hoping the merchant didn't catch onto his lie as he laid on the sickly sweet charm. "I must say, I've never seen a collection of this caliber. You must be quite the expert."

A pleased smile crawled across the merchant's face. "I'd like to think so."

"Then you must know," Whitley said confidently, "that selling weapons of a rank four or higher requires a hunter's license of the same rank of the highest weapon you're selling, regardless of Kingdom, yes?" He nodded to Diamant Apfel. "A rank ten? You must be a legend. That's the hardest rank to attain. Do you mind if I see your I.D.?

And Matte smirked as the color drained from Jack's face.

"Um," Jack stammered. "I-I uh-"

"Oh," Whitely gasped. "Are...are you not a hunter at all? Then you shouldn't be selling most of this stuff." He let out a soft "tut, tut, tut" under his breath. "We might need to find ammo elsewhere Matte. And we better alert the authorities-"

"Please don't!" Jack cried. "This shop is all I got. I can't go to jail. You don't know what prison is like in Vacuo, I'll die in there!"

"Then how about this?" Whitley looked to Matte, who nodded their approval, and then back to Jack. "You sell us the original ammo amount with a fifteen percent discount, and you hand over the pick axe and the violin over there." A wicked grin crossed his face. "Anything you want Matte?"

Matte glanced around at the merchandise, settling on a pair of swords with diamonds at the base of their hilts. "Those. Those swords."

"Alright," Whitley said. "The Diamond Blades, the violin, the pick axe, and the ammo. All for the original price minus fifteen percent," He leaned over the counter, eyebrows raised. "Do we have a deal? Or do you need to hit the road, Jack?"

Jack growled and nodded in agreement. "Alright. You can have it all. Just please, don't turn me in."

Whitley held out a hand to him, his face softening as they shook on it. "Pleasure doing business with you."

Whitley carried the violin in its case as he walked away from the weapons shop and toward the
ship repair ward by the docks to get the parts. Whitley had questioned Jack about where he found
the pick axe. The poor sap didn't know where it came from, claiming it fell from the sky and hit his
roof not long after communications between kingdoms halted. There were no sightings of a stout,
'balding butler with a moustache anywhere in the little port town of two hundred.

So Whitley crossed this town off the list. Klein wasn't there, nor his sisters or mother. He'd have to
search elsewhere.

The feeling of dizziness had eased up since they left the weapons shop after arranging to have the
ammo taken to the ferry, and Whitley couldn't help the embarrassed smile on his face as Matte
looked over their prizes, of which they carried the sword and Diamant Apfel, since Whitley was as
strong as uncooked pasta.

"Wow kid," Matte chuckled. "I didn't realize you had it in you to bargain. Not bad."

"Th-thanks," Whitley muttered. "To be honest, I was terrified he'd see through my lie."

"What lie?"

"Me being a hunter in training?"

Matte lightly ruffled his hair, shaking their head as they patted the sword on their hip. "Don't worry
about it. Lying in these parts to get what you need isn't anything new. There's really only one rule
in Vacuo, and I think you mastered it pretty well already."

"One Rule?"

"If you can survive here, you're welcome here."

Whitley couldn't help wincing at that. It sounded a lot like his father's views on aristocracy. "So
what do we need to do now?"

"We need to get the new sail setup," they explained. "The ferry has an emergency set of sails we
use when the engine isn't working, or if we run out of fuel. Last time we went to Menagerie we had
to use it, but it got ruined. Barret is best in terms of ship part quality as well as price."

"Right...Can I just wait in the corner or something and look over the violin?"

"Sure," Matte said. "You did more than enough already. The Captain will be very impressed."

Whitley smiled as he watched them hurry inside the main office of the repair ward before finding a
place nearby to examine his prize. Sitting against the wall of the building, he opened the case and
gently removed the instrument from its velvet lining, gently turning it over in his hands to get a
better look. There were gentle engravings of seashells and waves along the sides. The back had an
elegant image of a lighthouse on the edge of a cliff surrounded by seagulls.

"Fine craftsmanship," he mused. Whitley looked at the scroll at the end of the neck, noticing there
were two buttons near the top. Curious, he pressed the one on the E-string's side. There was the
sound of gears moving, and the fingerboard slowly opened. The dust strings slowly lowered into
the space, being replaced by normal ones as the fingerboard closed again. With an excited grin, he
quickly tuned it, resting the violin on his shoulder, placing his chin on the rest, and standing tall as
he took the bow in hand.

Whitley closed his eyes and began to play. He remembered one of the new songs his sister was
writing before the party, songs that she wanted to do at a faster tempo, with less piano and more
guitar. It was a rather dark and depressing song, but it still had a tinge of hope to it that he had to admit was contagious. And he couldn't help but hum the lyrics.

"There's a day when all hearts will be broken, when a shadow will cast out the light, and our eyes cry a million tears. Help won't arrive..."

The sound was clear as a summer sky, sending waves of comfort through Whitley's bones. It had been a long time since the sound of a violin made him feel peaceful. The rhythm moved through his muscles, and he soon found himself dancing, spinning and leaping as music filled the air around the repair ward. Laughter took over as his voice grew louder, completely unaware of the audience he was attracting.

"I may fall, But not like this – it won't be by your hand!
I may fall, Not this place, not today!
I may fall, Bring it all – it's not enough to take me down!
I may fall-"

"You really will if you don't come down!"

Whitley stopped playing and opened his eyes, noticing that the building had vanished. He could have sworn he heard Matte shouting at him.

"Down here Whitely!"

"Down?" Whitley looked down, and nearly had a heart attack. He was standing on a glyph a good twenty feet over the building. "How the hell did I get up here?!"

"Beats me!" Matte cackled from the ground. "Must be your Semblance! Just focus on coming down and stay calm!"

"Easy for you to say!" Whitley screamed. "You're not several stories off the ground!!!"

"Just focus! If you fall, I'll catch you!"

"...Promise?..."

"I promise!"

Whitley took a deep breath and tried to focus. He wasn't sure what it was he did to get up there in the first place. He thought about how he could get down.

Parachute? Nope. Elevator? No. Fall? Hell no! Stairs-

Another glyph appeared in front of him, just a few inches lower than the current one. Hesitantly he took a step forward. Once the one behind him vanished another appeared in front, lower than before.

He stepped forward again.

"There you go!" Matte cheered. "Keep going! You're doing great!"

Whitley tried to stay calm and repeat the motions. Glyph, step, repeat. Glyph, step, repeat. The salty wind billowed through the shirt, nearly blowing it and the scarf off him. His vision was fading.
There was a soft fizzling sound, and a flash of icy blue in front of his eyes.

And he was falling.

Matte paced back and forth as the Captain checked Whitley over, a gentle sea green emitting from his hands as he helped bring the young Schnee's Aura back to a stable level. Matte could feel their heart racing heavily from the panic. They ran their fingers through their short brown hair, trying to breathe. The adrenaline from running to catch Whitley took quite an unexpected toll on them.

"Sit down," the Captain groaned. "I can't heal when you hover like that."

"S-sorry, Sir," they mumbled, walking over to the stool nearby. "How is he?"

"He'll be fine," the Captain assured. "He's never used his Aura or Semblance before, but even a beginner shouldn't crack as fast as he did..."

"So is he going to be okay to travel?"

The Captain let out a gentle "mh-hm" as he halted his healing. "He can still travel, provided you can stay calm long enough to tell me how shopping went."

"Oh, you should have seen him," Matte huffed. "Jack tried to sell us half the amount of ammo for full price, and Whitley there hustled him so fast it was amazing! If Ollie wasn't such a nice guy, I'd have had Whitely do the same for the sail set. I really like this kid's spunk."

"Really?"

"Yeah. And he can play that fiddle there pretty well. Could make for a good entertainer for the passengers."

"I see..."

Matte tilted their head, perplexed. "Captain? Is something wrong?"

"Well," he sighed. "Whitley's kind of a glass canon...we can train him, but it'll need to be in small increments. If we go too hard, the poor kid is gonna spark out like he did earlier...I'll need to look through my library to see if I have that old journal Nick gave me back in the day. There might be something in those notes..." He looked Matte over, a gentle smile on his face as he pat his beard. "If he's going to travel with us, he'll need someone to show him the ropes. Can I count on you to do that?"

Matte's face burst into joy as they hopped off their seat and ran to hug the captain. "Yes sir! Thank you! I won't let you down-"

"Alright," Captain chuckled, giving them a pat on the back. "No need to get all sappy, Matte. It's about time you learned to do this kind of stuff. Now, go put your new toys away and I'll see about getting the lad a proper fitting uniform."

"Aye, Aye, Captain!" Matte scurried out of the room, leaving Whitley alone with the Captain to finish healing.
"Matte's been wanting an apprentice," he chuckled. "About time they got one." The Captain went back to helping Whitley's Aura recover, their mind wandering as the processed the day's events.

He'll need help, the Captain thought. But I don't doubt he'll make a great shipmate. Just like Nick used to be.

"God dammit all!"

The rain pelted down as the Beowolf cornered them. They leaned against the wall of the ruined church, cane gripped tightly in their hand. There was no way out of this. Ozpin knew that. They knew coming here was a mistake. But they had to see if the rumors were true. They had to see if there really were "talking Grimm" in the old ruins of Mountain Glenn.

There were not.

Just regular ones.

The small crow they had taken in flew above them, their only sign of comfort in their dying moments. Prosper was always so protective of them. Ozpin was grateful for that. They had so few friends, and even fewer who were able to travel as freely as they did. Prosper had been a blessing, a shining beacon in the lonely nights going from village to village, kingdom to kingdom, all in search of knowledge.

Their only bright spot in their recent string of bad luck. If they were going to die, that little crow was going to be the last thing they wanted to see. Not the rain. Not the Beowolf's claw. Their little friend, Prosper.

Ozpin's golden eyes closed, as they waited for the claw to strike them.

"GYAH!"

Ozpin's eyes flew open to see a man now stood before them, with hair black as the storm clouds above, one hand braced against the wall so he didn't fall over. His free hand reached around and drew a sword, quickly running it through the chest of the Beowolf. He pushed off the wall, shoving the Beowolf back as he spun around, dragging the blade upwards diagonally, splitting it in open. The beast fell, letting out a hiss as the smoke filled the rain.

"You okay?" the man asked, panting slightly and wincing from the pain as they leaned on the sword.

Ozpin leaned on their cane, a soft smile on their face as they searched the sky for Prosper, who had vanished from their sight. "I'm alright. Thank you for rescuing me."

"No problem." The man tried to stand properly, cursing under his breath. "I'm glad you're safe. That's all that matters."

"Here, let me heal you."

"You don't have-"
"I insist." Ozpin limped over to him, gently placing their hands on the wounded fighter's back as a soft emerald glow began to cover them both. "My name is Ozpin. What's your name?"

"Name's Qrow," the man grunted, looking at him. "But my best friend calls me Prosper."

Ozpin looked at the man, perplexed. There was no way it was possible. This man couldn't be their beloved travel companion. But those eyes. That bright red stare that was filled with warmth and love.

They were the exact same.

"Prosper?" they asked in disbelief. "Is that...really you?"

"Yeah, it's me," he sighed.

"But...how-?"

"You saved me from that cage. You cared for me. You protected me." A tiny smile crawled across his face. "Figured it was time I start returning the favor...And I think I owe you an explanation..."

"That would be nice," Ozpin agreed. "But let's get you out of the rain first."

Oscar awoke that morning with a throbbing headache, the dream from the night before still fresh in his mind. The same one, repeating night after night for the past few days. It wasn't the strangest dream he had ever had, but it was certainly the most detailed. The chill of the wind, the mud on his hands, the burning eyes of Prosper. Or was it Qrow? Oscar wasn't sure which. What Oscar was sure of though, was that it wasn't just a dream. It had actually happened. Not to himself. But to the angel that now occupied his bed.

Was that a memory of theirs?

"Oscar?"

His hazel eyes looked up, a smile greeting him as he sat up on the couch that had been his bed for the night. "What's up, Auntie?"

"I'm going into town for a few days," she explained. "I have to pick up what we'll need for the new harvest. Will you be alright looking after the farm while I'm gone?"

"Sure," he yawned. "I can handle things around here."

"You're sure?"

"Of course." Oscar stood up and stretched, working the knots out of his neck and shoulders. "The only things I'll have to do are care for the cows and our friend Oz. And the doctor will be stopping by to check on them again soon anyway. I've got things totally under control."

"Okay," she sighed. "I'll try to be back soon. Just...stay safe okay?"

"You too, Auntie."
With a quick hug and a kiss goodbye, Oscar watched from the porch as his Aunt took leave, waving farewell until she was out of his line of sight. Once he was sure she was gone, he hurried upstairs to check on Oz. He walked toward the bedroom, lightly knocking on the door so as not to wake them if they weren't awake yet.

**Knock, Knock, Knock.**

"Come in," came a raspy voice.

Oscar slowly opened the door, taking a deep breath as he entered.

Oz sat there calmly in the bed by the window, wearing a spare set of pajamas his aunt had on hand, smiling fondly as they watched the sun begin to rise. The orange light bathed them in its loving glow, giving them a soft ethereal tint to their skin. It wasn't until Oscar closed the door that they turned to look at him.

"Hey," Oscar greeted. "I came to check up on you. How're you feeling?"

"I'm alright," Oz sighed. "I'm sorry if I caused you any trouble."

"Don't be," Oscar assured them. "We do what we can for everyone. It's no trouble at all."

"You're too kind." They turned their golden eyes back towards the sunrise. "What was your name again, young man?"

"Um...Oscar...Oscar Pine..."

"A fine name," they hummed sagely. There was something distant in their voice, something filled with pain and yearning. "Tell me, Oscar...What is your favorite fairy tale?"

Taken aback by the sudden question, Oscar tilted his head, holding his chin as he thought on this. "Um...I don't know...I suppose the Four Maidens, if I had to pick."

"I see," Oz said. "A tale of compassion and kindness towards others...A classic if there ever was one..."

Oscar lightly rocked on his heels, feeling a little awkward. "Um...I've got to feed the cows. But I can make you some breakfast first, if you're hungry. Or, if you eat at all, that is."

"Just some toast will be fine," Oz chuckled.

"Alright. I'll go make it for you."

"Thank you, Oscar."

"No problem, Ozpin." Oscar turned toward the door, only to be stopped by a hand on his shoulder. "How did you know my name?"

Oscar swallowed hard, trying not to panic. There were only two people in the house, and since his hands were clenched tightly into fists, it only made sense the one on his shoulder belonged to Oz. Hesitant, cautious, and taking a shaky breath, Oscar looked behind him.

Oz's face was contorted in a mix of pain and trepidation, golden eyes burning with wisdom and
compassion. They slowly removed their hand, stepping back to give them space. "How did you know my full name?"

"It...um..." Oscar didn't know how to answer. There was no real answer he felt he could give without coming off as completely out of his mind.

"Oscar, please," Oz begged. "I need you to tell me how you knew-"

"I saw your memory!" Oscar blurted, his hands flying up to mask his face.

"You...saw my memory?"

"In my dream, I think," he blabbered, heart racing. "These past few nights I-I saw you cornered by a Beowolf. It was raining a-and there was Qrow, o-or Prosper, or whatever his name was and you healed him and I don't know how I knew this and you probably think I'm crazy right now but-"

"Calm down," Ozpin soothed. "It's alright. You're perfectly sane."

"I saw into your head!"

"I didn't say you were normal, I said you were sane. There's a significant difference, trust me."

They slowly began to pace across the room, hands behind their back in thought. "Where is your family?"

"It's just my aunt and me," Oscar muttered. "She's gone to town. Won't be back for a few days."

They nodded their acknowledgement. Oscar tugged at his collar, trying to find some semblance of comfort in the heavy atmosphere of the room. There was a long silence before Ozpin spoke again.

"I'm afraid," Oz lamented, "I'm going to have to ask you for help, Oscar..."

"Help?" he echoed. "Help with what?"

Oz came to a stop, their back turned away from him so Oscar couldn't not see their face, their body a mere silhouette in the morning light. "The world as you know it is coming to an end."

"W-what?"

"The world of Remnant is on the brink of war," they divulged. "And whether we like it or not, we're the ones who have to stop it." They walked back over to Oscar, kneeling down as a knight would to a king. "You and I, together."

"M-me?!" he cried, trying to wrap his mind around what he was being told. "Wh-why me?!"

"Because you, Oscar Pine, are next in line. You will take my place, and become the next Wizard."

Chapter End Notes

Okay, so I've got a lot of stuff coming up the rest of the week and I'm not going to be able to work on things the way I want to. In order to make sure my writing schedule stays on track, the chapter is being posted now.
Also, sorry if this chapter is shorter than the last one, but it's a bit more dialogue heavy, and it's mostly a transition chapter for the next part of the story as well as the official starting point of Whitley's journey of self discovery and Oscar's start on the road to magic lessons.

Still, I had a lot of fun writing this chapter.

Next time, we'll get the monochrome fight as well as some moments with Ghira and check in on Qrow and James.

Let me know what you think.
Magia

Chapter Summary

Ghira visits a friend in Mistral.
Blake, Weiss, and the others fight to survive.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The dust flew lightly through the air as Ghira wandered through the doors into Haven Archives. The pillars that held the ceiling up were adorned with golden leaves and vines, perfectly blending into the sunset hues of the walls. The marble tiles clicked softly under the heels of his boots. The draft was rather unpleasant, and the hard surfaces didn't help matters. If he had his way, there'd be more wood and carpets instead. Something that was more silent under his stride.

But regardless of the pitter patter his feet made, Ghira was still able to sneak around in the archives. It didn't take much for him to sneak. A location and a target. That's all he needed.

And today's target was his dear friend Leo Lionheart.

Ghira adjusted his coat and gloves as he entered the West Wing, letting his Aura blend into the surroundings to mask himself while he set out to track the librarian. The sensation of souls lingering through the pages on the shelves mixed with his essence, allowing him to blend into the surroundings unnoticed. His footsteps became lighter, and his color became monotoned. Soon, Ghira Belladonna was invisible to all.

Slowly he crept about in search of Leo, keeping an eye out for the wispy lion's tail that was always in motion. Ghira couldn't help but wonder if Leo still wore the little pink ribbon on his tail when at work.

It was rather precious, if he had to be honest.

And that precious detail was what helped him in locating the poor man over by the section for beginning magicians, restocking shelves while humming softly as his curly golden mane bounced in time with his movements.

Bingo.

Ghira snuck as close as possible to Lionheart. He watched. He waited. After all, it was rude to spook someone who was putting books away while singing.

"As the fires paint the sky, silence fills the mountains high,
The kingdoms fall, the soldiers too, as the heavens regain their tender blue.
And if, my love, you'll follow me, down to the shore of the Shallow Sea,
I promise we will stay together, safe from all the tyranny."

Once a bard, always a bard, Ghira thought. He watched as Lionheart put the last book on the shelf and then reached forward, giving his tail a light tug while going "Boo!"
"Gyah!"

Ghira let out a soft laugh as he allowed himself to return from the shadows, the violet of his coat returning, the gold embroidery glimmering, and eyes twinkling in the light of the lamps. "Sorry about that Leo. I couldn't resist."

"Dammit Ghira," Leo huffed. "There's a reason people think this library is haunted, and it isn't your sneaking tactics. Don't scare me like that, please."

"Never again," he promised. "It's been a long time, my friend."

"Far too long," the brown eyed man agreed, smiling fondly. "How have you been?"

"I've been alright," Ghira assured. "And what of you been up to, Mr. Potentate?"

Leo's paw-like hand moved to the back of his head, scratching in embarrassment. "You've heard about my new Title?"

"It's hard not to have."

"I suppose so," Leo chuckled. "Care for some tea?"

"Tea would be lovely."

"Right this way then."

The two of them made their way out of the library and toward the courtyard of the school. Haven Academy stood proudly, its autumn pallet gleaming in the sun as spring made its way through the sky. There were students studying outside, taking advantage of the good weather to get as much fresh air as possible. Some students were working on spells, causing illusions to fly through the air in graceful curves and spins, while others were floating notes back and forth between them in order to collect the most information possible. One girl sat by the marble fountain, red tinted glasses aglow while the pages of her textbook flew rapidly forward. And through the walk, Ghira could hear every little detail.

"Magicians have a high tolerance to pain that outshines that of the average Hunter."

"Magicians Aura tends to run out faster when put in high stress situations compared to the average Hunter."

"Not all Hunters are Magicians, but all Magicians are Hunters, as per article 23 of The Hunter's Code-"

"Due to the use of Magic, Magicians are able to live twice as long as the average citizen when encountered with a curse-"

"Your students are rather boisterous in their studies," Ghira observed. "First years?"

"Most of them," Leo beamed. "Some are here from Sanctum for additional lessons, others are Beacon transfers awaiting their applications to attend classes, but they're staying in the empty dorm buildings. We had quite a few drop outs as well as graduates this year."

"Drop outs?" Ghira queried. "But I thought Haven was the highest ranked Hunter's Academy in Remnant."

"Sadly that is a reality," Leo sighed. "Regardless of how grand a school is, there is only so much
one can learn in its walls. Sometimes people learn better in a different class, or in no class at all. However, I do make it a point to let all my students know that they are welcome back here anytime. Haven is a Home to all who are needing it. Much like Beacon was for you and I, not long ago."

"Very true," Ghira hummed. "You've done well for yourself, Leo."

"Not as well as I would like," he groaned, holding the door to the main hall open for Ghira. "Being Mistral's Potentate takes me away from my students. I had to hire on a couple of secretaries just to keep up with all the paperwork while I have to go around to all the nobles and explain why they can't park their sky-boats in the middle of a public park." Leo smacked his hand on the elevator button in annoyance. "I don't know how Ozpin does it. They have the patience of a saint, I swear."

"I know," Ghira agreed. "That's why I ended up punching Jacques in the face instead of them."

"You did what?" Ghira couldn't help but smirk when Leo's mouth turned in on itself in an attempt to hold in laughter. "When was this? You never told me you lived the dream!"

"It was some time ago," Ghira laughed. "Jacques was being particularly nasty to Oz that day, during a meeting no less. I wasn't in a particularly good mood either, and he didn't help matters any. I punched him hard enough to knock him out, James stood up and told everyone that if Jacques asks, he got a slug from The Iron General."

"Oh I wish I could have seen it!"

"So do I, friend."

The two of them laughed as they ascended upwards in the small metallic box toward the top of the tower, Ghira leaning against the wall in a relaxed pose.

"So what brings you to Mistral?" Leo asked. "Things alright back in Menagerie?"

"Everything is fine," Ghira assured. "However-"

Ghra slammed his left fist onto the emergency stop switch, causing the elevator to stutter to a halt. The lights dimmed to the soft emergency yellow.

"Ghira!" Leo gasped. "What are you-"

"Gambol into the shroud of fate," Ghira chanted rapidly. "Mask thy voice as we descend from the shadows of the past into the future."

The color of the elevator vanished. Their movements were muffled. The only sign of color and light came from eyes of gold and brown. Ghira's left hand grabbed hold of Leo's tunic and pulled him close.

"What is wrong with you?!" Leo growled. "A cloaking spell? On the elevator?! Do you realize how much trouble we'll be in if-"

"Listen," Ghira soothed. "How much do you know about the current state of Atlas and Vale?"

"Atlas?" Leo stammered. "Vale? I-I don't know, actually. Communications have been down for awhile. The council said it was routine maintenance-"

"Bollocks," Ghira hissed. "You and I both know it isn't maintenance, Leo. You're smarter than
"Let me go Ghira. Please."

Ghira dropped him, ignoring the slight shake it caused. "Atlas and Vale have fallen. Schnee is dead. The White Fang took over."

"What?!"

"You wanted to know why I'm here," Ghira reminded. "I'm here because Ozpin is gone. James is somewhere on Anima, and at this point in time, I can't get a hold of anyone else to see if they're okay."

Ghira watched Leo shift on his feet, leather boots squeaking slightly against the carpet as he adjusted his shirt. "Then why come here instead of looking for them?"

"Because I need information," Ghira answered. "Information I know Ozpin trusted you with, about something magic related that I'm not privy too. Or at least-" He held up his left hand, pulling off the glove to show the back- "I'm not as privy as I should be."

Leo's eyes widened in confusion as he gently took hold of Ghira's hand, closely examining the trillion cut stone embedded there. "Impossible..."

"If it were," Ghira sighed, "I would be home with Kali."

Leo let go of Ghira's hand, running his fingers through his golden curls as he tried to process this new development. Ghira stepped back, allowing the lion-tailed man to pace back and forth for as long as need be. They stayed there in silence for what felt like years before Leo finally came to a halt.

"I um," he began slowly. "I have a notebook...A diary, more like."

"A diary?" Ghira asked.

"Yes. Oz...they said it was vital that no one got their hands on it should they...should they disappear...but...if things are really getting like this...I'm pretty sure they'd want you to have it...I'll get it out of my vault once we reach the main office. I'll have Fennec and Corsac go home for the day and then you can cloak the office while we go over the specifics..." He let out a shaky breath, trying hard keep his nerves. Ghira couldn't blame him. This was a lot to take in.

"We better head up then," Ghira said. Pressing the button again, the elevator began its rise to the top once more while he undid the spell. Color slowly returned to the both of them, though Leo's face still seemed paler than before. "Leo-"

"Ghira," Leo muttered softly. "Does this mean my children have to win a war?"

Ghira slipped the glove back on before wrapping his arm around Leo's broad shoulders. "I don't know...There's a possibility, if we can't get things in motion...Why? Do you think they'll be able to even fight a war?"

Leo's eyes were pricked with tears.

"I pray that they never have bare that cross."
"Quick! To the left!"

"Duck!"

"Bad day! Bad day! Bad day!"

Weiss followed Blake as they entered Hinagiku, eyes wide as she saw the entire village beginning to burn. People were scattering. Spells were flying. Hunters were hopping from rooftop to rooftop in an attempt to shoot down incoming swarms of Nevermore. Sun and Neptune were fighting off what appeared to be a giant suite of armor with blood red veins decorating its body.

"Over here!" Sun cried as he spun, golden hood lighting up and shooting a bolt of lightning at the enemy as he did so.

What the hell is going on?! Weiss wondered.

"Weiss, take cover!" Blake ordered. "I'm going to go help Velvet!"

"Got it!" Weiss ran in one direction while Blake to another, and she found shelter at one of the nearby temples, along with several other villagers incapable of fighting, though she stayed near the front in case she had to hurry out to help. She watched as more people came running in an attempt to avoid the onslaught of the armored menace.

Blake was swinging around it from the rooftops, vanishing as it attempted to swat at her with its hands. Besides its feet was a man as tall as Yatsu in an olive green coat with dark brown hair, easily fending off Sage and Scarlet with his bare hands, easily grabbing the blades and tossing the hunters away before fidgeting with something in his hand.

"He must be controlling that thing," Weiss assessed. She glanced around, trying to find a weak point in the armor. The smoke was filling the air too rapidly for her to get a good view, and all the sparks and lights of the magic didn't help.

"Wait...magic..."

"I've got it!" Weiss muttered. She left the safety of the temple and hurried into the fray, looking for Blake.

Blake found a perch atop the roof of the inn, firing shots rapidly at its helmet in an attempt to distract it. Behind her Velvet and Bolin cast incantations in an attempt to slow it down.

"How long until you can fight it, Velvet?!" Blake cried.

"Too long!" she replied, rabbit ears twitching anxiously. "I can't get a good read on how it fights! There's too many things going on!"

"Dammit," Blake hissed. "How're we supposed to kill this thing?!"

"Blake!"
Blake’s ears when flat as she glanced at the ground. Weiss stood there waving at her to come down. With an loud groan she swung down and grabbed Weiss by the waist, pulling her back up to the roof with her. "What do you want?"

"Blake, that guy down there!" Weiss bellowed over the noise. "He's got something in his hand. I think it's controlling the armor!"

Blake raised an eyebrow at her before glancing down at the man by the armor now going toe-to-toe with Nadir and Arslan. He kicked them away before messing with the object in his hand. Her eyes widened with the realization.

"We have to get that item," Blake declared, looking at Velvet and Bolin. "Gather CFVY and ABRN. Weiss and I will get SSSN. Focus all attention on that man!"

"Yes ma'am!" they replied, hopping from the roof to the ground below.

"Weiss, back to back," Blake said, slipping off her jacket as Weiss pressed her back to hers. She began tying it around herself and the heiress like a rope. "I need you to watch my back. Can you shoot at the Grimm while I move?"

"I'll do my best," Weiss promised.

"Perfect."

Blake made sure that the jacket was secure, tossed her sword, and began her decent. She kept a close eye out for the blue hair of Neptune, watching as Weiss carefully aimed her rapier, beheading the small Nevermores that attempted to attack them.

"Neptune!" Blake screamed. "Sun! Scarlet!"

"Over here!" Neptune called, fending off an incoming horde of Beowolves with Sage near the main street. "The big guy kinda made an opening!"

"Weiss, I need you to slow our decent!"

"How-" Weiss began.

"Glyphs!"

"Got it!"

The feeling of something grabbing her waist returned as she pulled the sword back, undoing the jacket and letting it fall to the ground as she and Weiss lightly touched down. "Nice going."

"Th-thanks," Weiss panted.

Getting tired, Blake assessed. Figured as much. "Come on, we have to keep going."

Grabbing Weiss’ right hand, the two of them hurried to Neptune and Sage, with Blake shooting as many Grimm as possible. "Where's Sun and Scarlet?!"

"On the armor!" Sage bellowed, pointing to the monster's shoulders. "We can't make a dent in it-"

"Focus on the man beside the armor!" Weiss panted. "H-he's got something that's controlling it!"

Neptune let out an exasperated groan. "This would be much easier if NDGO and JNPR-"
"They're not here," Blake growled warningly. "Now focus and get that guy!"

"Got it!"

Blake watched them hurry off to join the onslaught, a tired smile on her face as she saw everyone beginning to surround the man. She glanced at Weiss, who was staring wide eyed at something. "Weiss-"

"Look out!"

Weiss grabbed Blake around the waist just as Blake had turned to see the Ursa Major, eyes wide in shock as they suddenly flew back to avoid the claw. There was a line of snowflakes on the ground fading as the Grimm tried to charge at them.

Another half a second, she would have been dead.

Blake felt Weiss' arm let go of her, and she turned and saw her leaning on her sword as a support. Her icy blue aura was starting to flicker. Not broken, but close to breaking.

"Are you okay?" Weiss asked.

"Yeah," Blake said. "Weiss, are you-"

"Go help the others," Weiss interrupted. "I've got an idea. Just keep that guy distracted while I get ready."

"Alright," Blake said. "You know what you're doing?"

Weiss gave her a pleasant smirk. "Not in the slightest. But trust me on this."

Before Blake could ask her to elaborate, Weiss took off in the direction of the village entrance. Blake let out a sigh and joined the main squad.

*Time to step up again, Blake.*

"Eclipse!" she screamed.

Sun hopped from the armor instinctively and clapped his hands together, glowing a bright gold as images of himself erupted from him and joined Blake. Blake ran forward with them, using them as stepping stools to get a good drop kick on the man. He grabbed her ankle, but before he could throw her she reappeared behind him with a solid kick, sending him flying as the shadow evaporated in his hand. The Sun clones began their attack as well, only to vanish when the man recovered.

"Sword Bros!"

Sage and Yatsu sprang into action, running forward in an attempt to catch the man on either side. They missed his arms as their swords came down in harsh slices, shattering the ground and causing the assailant to jump out of harms reach.

"Demo Tape!"

Without another word, Reese grabbed hold of Velvet's hand and pulled her up onto their hover board. Velvet leapt forward once she was close enough and managed to land right on the back of the man, gripping rightly to his olive green coat as she twisted around and threw him back to the ground. Reese dived in close to catch her.
Just as Blake was about to call out again, she saw something fly out of the man's left hand. It was small, silver, and would have been easily missed if they weren't focusing on retrieving it. A small coin that landed several feet near the village entrance. The man scrambled to reclaim it.

"Eye patch!" Blake called.

Scarlet pressed the button on his pistol that released the grappling hook, sending flying at Fox, who managed to catch it without turning his head. With a sharp tug, a quick swing, Scarlet tossed him in the direction of the olive coat, the force of the throw allowing Fox to tackle the man to the ground, and for a flash of white to glide in and retrieve the coin.

Weiss zoomed past the man on the ground and skidded to a halt in front of Blake, beaming proudly as she handed it to her. "Got it."

"Uh, guys!" Neptune screamed. "The armor's acting differently!"

The Hunters all turned their eyes to the armor, which had gone ridged before reaching a hand up and begin to lower it in their direction.

"SCATTER!" Blake screamed.

Everyone rushed out of the way as the hand landed on the ground, shattering what little pavement had been remaining of the main square. A bright red cross appeared on its chest as its fingers dug into the earth. There was the distinct smell of melting ore coming from the ground. The man that had accompanied it bucked Fox off his back and hurried away just as the metallic hand pulled a giant sword from the ground.

The monstrosity was free, and ready to kill without command.

"Oh shit," Arslan hissed.

"Blake!" Coco called, her Gatling gun shooting at incoming Nevermores. "We can't fight this thing anymore. We have to finish the evacuation!"

"But-" Blake started.

"Wait," Velvet cried. "I have an idea. Hand me the coin."

Blake held out the coin, allowing her to quickly examine it. Velvet quickly tossed it back after checking it. "Well?"

"I can work with this," Velvet said, turning to Coco. "Can I?"

"Sure," Coco sighed. "Just make it count. You only have one shot."

"Yes, ma'am." Velvet turned her earthy gaze to Weiss. "Stay still."

"Wait, what-" Weiss started.

Velvet pulled out her camera from her side pack and took a photo of her, causing a velvet red glow covering the two of them, freezing them in place.

"What is she doing?!" Blake demanded.

"Just watch," Coco assured, only to wince when her bullets finally ran out. "On second thought, distract the armor." She turned her attention to the rest of the group. "Everyone else, get the
remaining civilians out of here!

Blake turned her attention back to Weiss and Velvet momentarily before hurrying to try and distract the armor.

For a moment, everything seemed to vanish. The world around her faded to white, noise became but a light din in her ears. There was nothing. Nothing but herself, the young rabbit girl, and the giant suit of armor. Velvet slowly approached, holding out her hand.

"What are you doing?" Weiss whimpered.

"I need to share your body for a moment," Velvet explained. "Between the two of us, we can stop it from killing everyone. But I need your consent. Please."

Weiss didn't like the idea one bit. It sounded crazy, and the thought of another person sharing control over her body made her shiver in fear.

"If you want to back out," Velvet muttered, "I understand...It's scary...but I promise, I'll give your body back as soon as we kill that monster."

"...You swear?"

"On my life."

With a shaky breath, Weiss muttered a soft "Okay" and began to relax, taking old of the extended hand. With a gentle smile and a melodic voice, Velvet began her spell, pulling Weiss' Aura close and beginning to merge.

"Everyone is entitled to their own sorrow, for the heart has no metrics or forms of measure. And all of it... irreplaceable."

There was a sudden weightlessness surrounding her, and Weiss' vision was soon filled with a soft lavender hue. Velvet's body slumped to the ground, only to be retrieved by Coco as the world returned to focus.

"You ready?" a voice in her head, Velvet's voice, asked.

"As ready as I can be," Weiss muttered. "Let's go."

"Alright," said Velvet's voice. "Sing something while I move, okay? I need about three minutes."

"Okay."

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Blake kept the armor distracted, slicing at its legs and shouting obscenities to keep its attention on her and away from the evacuating citizens. The armor seemed to be faster than before, now that it
wasn't bound to its previous controller. Over and over, shadows of herself fell to the metal beast, the sword rapidly striking down upon the ground. At one point the blade caught into the ground, and Blake attempted to use that moment to try and climb it, only for its left hand to send her flying into the old library building.

Blake staggered to get up, wincing as she looked herself over. Her Aura had thinned from the strain of leaving the shadows, allowing several large splinters and various scraps of wood to embed into her right arm and her lower abdomen. There was a familiar burning sensation on her back. She knew she had to hurry and go back into the fray.

*But there was no way to win this.*

*But there had to be.*

*But there isn't.*

"How're we supposed to kill it?!" she hissed.

And then, as if a silent prayer had been received from above, a gentle hum filled the air.

"Mirror, tell me something, Tell me who's the loneliest of all?"

Blake limped out of the library to try and return to the fight, eyes wide as she saw her. There was Weiss, sword in hand, leaping about from snowflake to snowflake. Dust was filling the air, ice covered the ground, and the sword tried its damndest to make a hit.

"Mirror, tell me something,
Tell me who's the loneliest of all?
Fear of what's inside of me;
Tell me can a heart be turned to stone?"

"Blake!"

Blake turned to see Bolin and Nadir running over to her, eyes wide in fear. "Just in time you two. I need you to heal me."

"You're not going back out there-" Nadir began.

"I have to!" she insisted. "Now hurry!"

"You heard her," Bolin sighed.

Blake stood still as navy and blossom pink overtook her vision. She could feel the debris leaving her body as the wounds began to close. Turning her honey gaze back to armor, she saw a fist ram forward, sending the heiress flying.

"Good enough!" Blake screeched and took off, just as the rest of the wounds had begun to close. She switched to her last magazine as she stepped between Weiss and the armor, firing Gravity Dust at the sword to keep it from slamming down. Silently she counted down as the bullets drained away.

"Magic Trick!" called a distorted voice.

Blake's body went limp as she leaned backward instinctively before rapidly moving forward again in a quick front flip, leaving replicas in her wake as she moved in a quick circle. She spun back,
expecting to see Velvet standing in the center like they had practiced so many times before.

But it wasn't Velvet.

It was Weiss.

Planting her sword into the ground, the force caused the clones to evaporate, surrounding the heiress in a billowing cloud of smoke before she reappeared in the sky.

*But how did Weiss know that trick?*

*Unless-

"There's no way," she muttered.

Weiss landed on the sword just as it swung around to hit her.

"*Mirror, mirror, what's behind you? Save me from the things I see! I can keep it from the world, Why won't you let me hide from me?"*

Blake watched as snowflakes began to encompass the monster, binding it in place. Its hands were only able to move from the wrist down. Using her last bullet, Blake shot at the one holding the sword, forcing it to let go as Weiss leapt into the air.

"*Mirror, Mirror, tell me something. Who's the loneliest of all?"*

Myrtenaster lit up, a brilliant snow white, and the warrior plummeted down, setting the armor ablaze before turning to see it shatter into tiny shards of glass.

"I'm the loneliest of all..."

Blake hurried over to her, watching as a red light left her body and flew in the direction of the evacuation team. Weiss staggered and fell forward, only for Blake to catch her.

"Weiss?!" Blake croaked. "Weiss, are you?"

"I...might not be singing for a while," Weiss mumbled, smiling. "Did we kill it?"

Blake let out a soft sigh, lifting Weiss' right arm over her shoulders to help carry her back to the others. "Yeah, it's dead. You did great. Never knew you had it in you to do all that."

"Velvet's idea," Weiss hummed. "She kinda...used me like an Atlesian Paladin...It was strange..."

"I can imagine. Now come on, let's get you to safety."

It was several hours before the Grimm and the smoke had cleared. The villagers were making the long trek north while Blake and her comrades stood in silence at Olwen station that evening, staring in horror at the torn up dirt where the tracks had once been. It hadn't taken long to deduce where the suit of armor had come from. And Blake felt the burning heat crawling across her back
from beneath her tattered coat.

*Yet another checkpoint on the road of disaster, she thought.*

"So," Reese sighed. "What do we do about this? We can't exactly hijack a train if there's no tracks."

"We'll need to default to plan B," Sun groaned. "Find another route. I think the next station is a two week hike to the west. If we book it though, we could make it there in a week."

"That's not how travel works, love" Neptune chuckled tiredly.

Blake resisted the urge to glare at the laughter. While this wasn't the time for jokes, it was understandable why some of them might laugh. After all, they all nearly died today.

"Who was that man though?" Scarlet pondered. "And why did he attack us?"

"I think it's pretty obvious," Arslan hissed. "Mistral probably sent him to dispose of our branch of the Blade."

"Wouldn't be the first time," Bolin agreed.

"I don't think so," Velvet piped up. "If that were the case, he'd have been in uniform. Or at least carrying something with the kingdom's emblem on it. All he had was that coin."

"And there's no data about the symbol on it," Nadir mumbled. "It's something new, or so old it was forgotten."

"That narrows it down," Sage muttered drily. "So what now?"

"The nearest town from here is Saboten," Fox said. "It's a three day hike northbound. We can probably steal an airship from there, if they have any at the moment."

"You have to be kidding me," Blake groaned. "The Honeymoon District? You want to try going there?"

"It's better than risking our necks for a train that'll never come," Yatsu stressed. "It's probably our only bet if we're going to get to Sagisō."

"And if you're going to get to Mistral," Sun added.

Blake pondered this for a moment. It was a risk making such a drastic detour, but if there was even the slightest chance at finding transportation...

"Okay," Blake sighed. "Tomorrow morning we'll all head to Saboten."

"Sounds good," Coco yawned. "Now, I don't know about you all, but I'm tired as fuck all. Let's go take a scrub if the bath house is still standing and then get some sleep."

"A bath does sound good," Weiss muttered, looking at Blake. "You want to go?"

Blake looked at her, taking note of all the dirt that had caked onto their faces. Weiss' hair had taken on an oily grey sheen, and the left side of her face was still covered in blood from where she had gained a not so subtle cut across her eye. Velvet's "Candid Possession", as Fox had described it to her, seemed to need a bit of work still. If it had been cast properly, Weiss wouldn't have gotten hurt.
Then again, a cut was nothing compared to death.

"Sure," Blake relented, looking at the others. "Let's go get washed up."

"Yeah!" Sun cheered. "Bath time!"

"Uh, I think I'll sit out-" Neptune began to stammer, only to be lifted over Yatsuhashi's shoulder.

"Thanks Yatsu," Sage chuckled. "Bath time Neptune."

"No," the blue haired man whimpered.

"Is he okay?" Weiss asked, trailing behind with Blake.

"Neptune?" Blake giggled. "He's afraid of the water. He'll be fine once Sun's in nothing but a towel, trust me."

Blake felt her body relax as Weiss burst into laughter. Tomorrow they'd head north to find a way home.

Tonight, they were going to relax and enjoy this small victory.

Chapter End Notes

Editing got away from me. Couldn't fit Ironqrow moment I wanted in cleanly. Will reappear next chapter.

Enjoy!
Roman sat quietly in his chair as Ozpin cleaned up the dinner dishes, holding the small child he had found laying in the woods against his black tank top. It was lucky that Oz had some spare clothes and a baby blanket at the cabin, though Roman wondered if it was coincidence or just paranoid planning.

Then again, it was Remnant. Finding little orphans was a very common occurrence.

Roman couldn't put the little child down. Barely old enough to sit up, she clung tightly to his shirt, one pink eye and one brown eye gazing up at him as a silent huff left her mouth. Even after going over her with a healing spell, they wouldn't be able to hear her speak.

But Roman didn't mind. As long as she was happy and healthy.

"So," Ozpin said, not taking their eyes off the sink of dishes. "You're sure about wanting to adopt her? You wouldn't prefer I took care of her? She could be your little sister, if you wanted. You've got plenty of time later in life to be a parent."

"I know, Nini," Roman mumbled, his bright green eyes staring at them from behind the mascara. "But...I don't know how to explain it...I just feel...Like it's supposed to be me who raises her, you know?"

"I understand," they said fondly, turning to look at the two. "However I do urge you to think this over for a few days. It'll take some time for me to get the paperwork together. You'll need to find work. And a home. Though you can always use my little cabin here as a home. You'd be raising her alone while I'm in Atlas too, you realize."

"I know," Roman groaned. "But that's another reason I should stay and you should go. You really think they'll listen to me up in the north? If anyone is going to prevent a war up there, it's you."

Ozpin's golden eyes shined brightly in the candlelight. "You really think I can?"

"I know you can," Roman cheered. "And I know you'll be made Potentate for it."

"Now you're just teasing," Oz huffed.

"I'm not!" Roman insisted. "You'll stop Atlas and Mantle fighting, become Potentate, and find your successor. And Neo and I will cheer you on while we wait here for you to come home."

"Neo?"

"Yeah. Short for Neopolitan."

"You're naming her after ice cream?" Ozpin chuckled.
"Look at her!" Roman cooed, holding the baby up so they could see her, his voice becoming rubbery and high pitched. "Look at that hair! Those eyes! She's a widdle ice cweam twuck, yes she is! Look at the pwescious darling!"

Ozpin burst into laughter, their face turning redder than Roman's hair as little baby Neo start giggling in approval of the name. Roman tried to say "Stop laughing Nini!", but the words wouldn't leave his head.

Instead, there was only the sound of loving laughter.

Roman sat quietly in his chair as Amber ate. The atmosphere was awkward enough as it was, Roman didn't want to make it worse by attempting to speak. He had asked Junior and Glynda if it'd be alright for the two of them to have dinner alone that night. The two of them seemed hesitant about the idea at first, but with a little coaxing from Neo and the twins, the two adults relented. It was a special moment that Roman and Amber should experience alone.

After all, he thought, it wasn't everyday you met your little sister for the first time.

Amber glanced at him with a hesitant look in her eyes, unsure what to make of the ginger man. Again, understandable. Roman did let one of her many assailants go free just the day before. But he had a reason for that. A reason he didn't want to get into. And of course, it hadn't taken long for Amber to pick up on his little abnormality. Strike three on any attempt to gain her trust without playing the sibling card.

Trusting me is hard, he began to realize. If I weren't me, I wouldn't trust me either.

And so, dinner remained quiet. Roman decided that he'd let Amber make the first move, and waited patiently for her to attempt small talk. He took a few bites of his salad, trying hard to ignore the itching sensation within his right cornea. As much as he hated it, he could sort of understand why it did that. Plants need sunlight after all.

"So," Amber mumbled after a while. "What's with the flower?"

Time to bond, thought Roman.

"A curse," Roman divulged nonchalantly.

"A curse?"

"Yeah," Roman sighed. "Not a pretty one at that. At least, I don't think so. It's a pretty flower, but it itches something awful." He let out a soft chuckle. "Better than writer's rash though, am I right?"

"I see..."

Unimpressed stare, Roman assessed. She's learned that from Goodwitch.

Amber set her utensils down and took a sip from the water she'd been provided before letting out a heavy breath. "Why did you want to eat with me?"

"Well," he began, taking a sip from his glass of wine. "I thought it would be nice to chat a bit before we begin travelling together...get to know each other a little..."
Amber's namesake eyes narrowed at him in suspicion. "That's not all...why else?"

"Oh, smart cookie," Roman chuckled. "Nini was right about you. Very quick on the uptake."

"Nini?"

Roman couldn't help the fondness that overtook his face as Amber began to relax. "Yeah, Nini. They wrote to me often, keeping me up to speed on things."

Amber looked him over, brow furrowed in confusion. "You mean...did they-"

"Adopt me? Yeah. About eighteen years ago. I was already an adult but there are no rules saying you can't adopt adults legally. They taught me everything I know about magic."

"You two were close?"

Roman removed his hat, setting on the table and lightly tracing the rim absentmindedly.

"Yeah...very close...What about you two?"

Amber's face melted into an adorable smile that made Roman's chest fill with warmth. It was the same kind of face Neo made when she received her parasol for the first time.

"Yeah, we were close," Amber muttered shyly. "We only knew each other for about a year though..."

"It doesn't matter how long you know someone," Roman assured her. "What matters is the strength of that bond over time."

"That sounds like something Nini would say..."

"Yeah?" Roman couldn't help but feel pleased to hear that. "How is Nini? I last heard they were in Atlas-"

Amber froze, her lower lip quivering as she tried to stay calm. Roman felt all the joy melt away into fear. He knew that look. He'd seen it quite often there in Sakaba when visiting Seren House.

The face of a child who had lost someone dear to them.

"Oh Gods," Roman breathed. He knew there was a chance, but for that chance to be reality? Roman never thought in a million years Nini would actually vanish. "W-were you-"

"I wasn't there," Amber said softly. "Nini sent Glynda and me back to Vale a few days before The Fall. I've tried to pinpoint their Aura but...it's gone..."

Without waiting to be asked, Roman moved to her side, sitting beside her and holding her close as she tried to regain composure. He could feel one of her hands grip tightly at his favorite coat. They sat there in silence, Amber letting out a shaken sigh while Roman held back the tears.

Nini wasn't going to join them at the moment.

They wouldn't be coming back anytime soon.

"Amber," Roman said softly. "How much magic training did you get form Nini?"

"Not much," she whispered. "Just enough to defend myself if I have to but...it's still not
enough...They promised to finish training me once they returned to Vale..."

And Roman knew that meant he had to pick up the pieces. He had promised Ozpin that if anything happened, he'd look after Amber. It shouldn't be that hard. Training Amber would be like training Neo, only with way, way more magic. He could do this.

Right?

"Then how about this?" Roman inquired. "You don't give up on Nini, and I'll train you in magic."

Amber looked at him, perplexed. "You? Train me?"

"Only if you promise not to give up hope on Nini," he stressed. "They'll be back. They promised to help me plan my wedding. I'm supposed to get married next spring and dammit, I ain't walking myself down the aisle."

Amber rolled her eyes, a tiny smile crossing her face. "You really think they're still alive?"

Roman smirked, wrapping his arm around her neck so he could use his free hand to noogie her. "I don't think. I know they're still alive. Have a little faith, Amber. Nini wouldn't give up on you if the roles were reversed, so why start doubting them now?"

"Stop that!" Amber giggled. Roman let her go, smiling as she went to fix her hair. "Okay. If you say Nini is coming back, I'll trust you..."

"Good. That's my little sis."

Tomorrow, Roman would gather his gang together and make arrangements leave for Nagisa. He would have to leave someone in charge. He'd go around and ask tomorrow. But who? Laila could probably take care of everything while he was gone. Yeah. That should work. He'd gather the gang and tell them Laila Samara was in charge until he got back. He'd gather supplies, set up a caravan, make sure he had all the notes Nini left him on training Amber. If he planned carefully, they could be in Nagisa in a month.

But that was tomorrow.

Tonight, it was bonding time. He'd get to know his little sister, reconnect with his fiancé, and finish healing Glynda. He'd play darts with the twins and sing Neo to sleep.

Tonight was family night.

There it was.

The palm of a tiny hand gently resting upon his forehead for but a moment.

And there it was not.

The hand has vanished. Replaced by the soft sound of a little tin flute.

The world seemed to fade, and he could feel the ground vanishing from beneath him. It was as if he was floating, being slowly dragged along through the air by someone. The breeze felt soothing
against his skin, and he couldn't help but wish this lighter than air sensation could last forever.

After all, there wasn't much else he had to look forward to now. He had no control over his Aura. His Queen could not see him. He had failed.

These thoughts swirled in his mind as he allowed himself to fall deeper into the darkness of slumber.

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There it is again.

The palm of a tiny hand.

There's something in it. A cloth, softer than feather down, damp with cold water brushing along his cheeks, his chin, his forehead. Gently wiping away grime and blood that had most likely found its way upon his face. Whose hand was this? Who is it that is providing such comfort for him? Surely it wasn't his Queen. Nor could it be the others of her court. The hands were too small for it to have any of them.

He dared not open his eyes. He didn't want to awaken to find that he was back in Her palace, only to find her gaze staring at him in shame. He did not want to find that his comrades were snickering at his incompetence to do a simple job.

He let out a soft whimper, and the dull ache in his muscles pulled him back to sleep.

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There yet again.

The palm of a tiny hand.

Or rather there were two.

In one hand was something long, with very thin teeth. In another was something with an elastic quality to it. There were a mix of fingers and teeth running through his hair, undoing the braid and lowering every strand into what felt like water. It was warm, most likely recently heated, and there was a faint floral scent to it. What was it? It wasn't lavender, but something similar. Lilacs perhaps?

He paid it no mind. If he could, he would swat the hands away. But his muscles still ached from his landing, and it felt as if his eyes were sewn shut from exhaustion.

So he let the hands do what they wanted, letting the smell of the floral waters seep into his memory.
Oh, it's back again.

The palm of a tiny hand.

This time it held his head while something touched his lips. There was a cool sensation as he realized it was a glass of water. Slowly, drip by drop, the water sloshed its way down his unbearably dry throat. There was a faint smell in the air. Light, slightly meaty, almost like turkey, if he had to venture a guess.

The glass of water vanished and a spoon gently took its place. There was a creamy texture to this, and there were bite sized strips of noodle among the broth. Slowly and surely, the two alternated.

Water, soup. Water, soup. All until he could have no more and refused to eat another bite. Soon the hand vanished, as did the smell of turkey.

The warmth of the soup aided him back to sleep.

Well, hello again, he thought.

Hello there, tiny hand.

This time it was undoing the straps on his boots and removing his gauntlets. He could slowly feel the return of control. His muscles weren't nearly as sore as before, and his eyes weren't as heavy. He could tell his hair was still down, left undone after the hands had washed the sweat and blood away. There was a gentle thud, and he knew, somewhere, his boots and weapons were elsewhere in the room.

There was a light shuffling sound, and soon he began to feel weightless once more. The lovely sound of a little tin flute filled the air again, and he could feel the clothes on his back being slowly removed. A damp cloth ran over the parts of his body where the blood had seeped through the fabric, and soon he was being dressed in something clean.

His pale yellow eyes opened briefly, just long enough to make out the back of someone's head. They had long black hair, much like himself. Their arms were upwards in a strange manner. They must be playing the flute.

As his eyes closed once more, he could have sworn he saw the gleam of a stinger.

When Tyrian finally awoke, he felt as if he had been asleep for a century. He slowly sat upwards, trying to get a sense of his surroundings. He was laying on what appeared to be an old sofa under a thin pink blanket, wearing brown silken pajamas, his hair removed from its usual braid. The room was relatively clean, despite its clearly abandoned interior. There was a bookcase in the corner of the room, a small desk covered in papers and books, and a lamp that gave off a gentle glow.

"What the fuck happened?" he muttered. "Where am I?" He threw off the blanket and slowly
stood, sauntering around the room and examining his surroundings. The bookcase was covered in
dust, bearing only a few textbooks and a few photographs in rusty frames. He picked up the one
that had a family portrait in it, brushing off what little dust it had accumulated.

The photo was of a family in their Sunday best. The mother had a second set of ears, one black and
one white much like her hair. They seemed like a bear of some kind, adorable and deadly. Her
evergreen eyes stared forward, giving off a caring disposition that Tyrian couldn't help but despise.
The father had a pair of antlers protruding from his dark brown hair. His hazel eyes were more
distant, hidden behind a pair of half moon glasses, but his smile was just as sickly sweet as the
mother's.

But the little girl between them did not smile. Her hair was in a pair of twin braids dangling against
her shoulders. Her eyes, much like her father's, failed to hide the sadness in her heart. And sticking
out behind her was a very familiar tail.

Tyrian set the picture back on the shelf and moved toward the desk to see what was on the papers.
Nothing of particular importance at first glance. Some nature sketches, a few notes on Aura,
nothing that you wouldn't be surprised to find in a student's notebook. He picked up a small
leather-bound journal and skimmed through it.

"Briar still doesn't talk," Tyrian read softly. "She just sits around and stares at the little musical
toys I made. She's healthy, and incredibly smart. But she doesn't seem to want to do anything. I
thought taking her out of school might help, and it did to some degree but...well, I'm just hoping
she'll be responsive soon."

Confused, Tyrian flipped to another page.

"Briar seems to be a little more lively now. Buying that tin flute was the best thing I could have
ever done. She's taken to playing it every chance she has. She has a true talent for music, and it
definitely seems like this makes for a good distraction for the pain in her tail. This will be the
second time she's lost her armor, but at least she's not in as much discomfort this time. Maybe next
school year she'll be up for attending again. One can hope."

Tyrian continued to look through the notebook. There were numerous entries talking about this
silent child. All of them documenting her progress up until the halfway point.

"She accidentally struck both of us," it read. "Liling called for help, but it was too late. If she had
been stung lower, she might have lived. I've taken the anti-venom, but again, too late. I'll be gone
soon. Hopefully, someone will look after Briar. She's a good child. A precious angel. She didn't
mean to do it. She was scared. Anyone would be after a break in...If you're reading
this...Please...someone...anyone... look after my little girl..."

That was all that was left.

Tyrian tossed the book back on the desk and wandered out of the room into a dimly lit hallway. His
ears pricked up when he heard the sound of a familiar tin flute. He followed the sound down the
hall and took the left doorway, squinting as the sunlight hit his face.

There before him was a little girl, no older than ten if he had to guess, sitting at the table in the
kitchen playing the flute while keeping her eyes focused on a book. On the table lay his wallet, his
fake hunter's license, freshly prepared clothes, and a regiment of tin soldiers, each with a different
instrument and taking turns playing along with her. Swirling about in the air were several cloths,
each one carefully washing his blades. There were small brushes working their way into the tiniest
crevasse, making sure no speck of dirt would be left behind. There were also knives cutting
vegetables, and a pot of water boiling what he could have sworn was a chicken.

"Excuse me," he grumbled. "Where am I?"

The girl said nothing as she continued to play, her light brown tail uncurling from her waist as she pointed to the clean clothes.


Hazel eyes glanced at him momentarily before what appeared to be a nameplate came flying in from the broken window by the table and right up to his face.

"Ah...'Maverick Family Home'," Tyrian read aloud. "'Home to Hedley, Liling, and Briar.'" He glanced at the girl, who simply nodded. "Then you must be Briar?" The girl nodded again, turning her full attention back to the book as well as all the items floating around her. The clothes floated off the table, taking the place of the nameplate before him.

Tyrian watched as the garments unfolded, revealing a pair of tight fitting black cotton pants and a soft violet shirt that was loose in fit. There was a dark brown leather vest and a matching belt as well.

"I'm not wearing this," he snarled, tail raised defensively. "I want my clothes and weapons back right now."

Everything slowly came to a halt. The toys stopped playing their tunes. The knife finished cutting the vegetables. The gauntlets lowered themselves to the countertop. Briar set her flute down as the clothes made their way back to the table. Now that everything was still, he could focus on the girl before him.

Her hair was far shorter than the photograph he had seen, and not nearly as well kept. She wore a dirty blue dress that had a hole for her tail, and there was a small line of pink flowers embroidered on the trim of the skirt. Her eyes were hollow, as though she hadn't slept in days. Her dark skin was covered in patches that were reminiscent of acid burns. There was a small crack upon the carapace of her tail, near the point of the stinger.

As much as he didn't want to admit it, the sight of this little girl was a bit unsettling.

Briar got up from her chair and walked over to the corner of the kitchen where a dingy trash bin stood. She reached in and pulled out his clothes, which had been washed as best they could, but were still forever stained in blood.

That was when he remembered what had happened that night.

"Never mind," he mumbled, walking to the table. "I'll take those." Briar nodded, throwing the old clothes away as Tyrian took what she had provided. "Where did you get these? Your dad?" Briar shook her head. "Stole them off someone?" Another shake. "You bought them?" A nod. "Right...I'll just...go get changed then..."

Briar scurried ahead of him and back down the hall, tapping a door across from the room he had awoken from. He hesitantly followed, leaning in to open the door to reveal a decent sized bathroom. The floor inside was covered in black and white tiles, there was a small shower in the right corner, and next to the sink was a full length mirror. Briar gave him a light pat on the arm before scampering away to give him some privacy.

Tyrian let out a huff of annoyance and went inside, locking the door behind him. He could hear the
flute start up again as he undressed himself. He tried to ignore it and focused on trying to locate The Mage.

Once again, he sensed nothing.

"Lady Salem?" he called quietly. "My Queen, can you hear me?"

Once again, there was no answer.

Tyrian bit back a sob as he slipped into the trousers. They were a little snug, but nothing a little walk couldn't fix. The shirt was decent, and there was already a hole specially cut and sewn for his tail. The same for the vest. She must have taken his measurements while he was sleeping. Once dressed, he returned to the kitchen to find Briar playing the flute over the stovetop while the chicken deboned itself.

"So," he sighed. "You have telekinesis for a Semblance?" A nod, a shake of the head, then another nod. "Something like telekinesis, but not exactly. Got it." He took a seat at the table and collected his wallet and license. "How long was I out for?" To his surprise, one of the tin soldiers, a little robotic looking man with a baton, walked over to him and gestured for Tyrian to lower his hand. Reluctantly he did so, and the soldier began to trace letters over his palm.

"You've been drifting between being awake and being asleep for a week. I've been taking care of you since you rescued me from those thugs."

"A week?!

"Do you know how to unlock someone's Aura?" Tyrian asked. Briar nodded. "Can you unlock mine for me?" A shake. "Why not?!"

The little tin soldier tapped at his palm. Tyrian's yellow gaze flicked to it as it began to write again.

"I tried. It's not the same kind of lock as the normal method. Only the person who locked it can undo it. And since that's the case, I'm guessing you ran into Roman."

"You know him?" he snarled.

"Everyone in Sakaba knows Roman Torchwick. His gang take care of everyone who can't care for themselves. Minus myself."

Tyrian raised an eyebrow at that. "Why not? They hate Faunus?"

Briar shook her head, floating over a small bowl of soup for him while the tin soldier wrote, "Only White Fang Faunus. They help everyone else, just not the Fang. I choose to be alone. I can handle myself."

"Those thugs in the alleyway would beg to differ," he scoffed, prompting Briar to accidentally snort out the last few notes, nearly toppling the bowl of soup over. "Careful you little brat!"

"Sorry," the soldier wrote. "It's hard to concentrate when someone makes you laugh."

Tyrian rolled his eyes and watched as a spoon carefully landed beside his meal. "How much do I
owe you for all this?"

"What if I did it because I'm nice?"

Tyrian let out a soft cackle. "A little orphan like you feeding a murderer you pulled off the street? There's no one in their right mind who'd think like that. You're after something. Everyone wants something."

Briar finished playing her flute and began walking over to one of the cabinets. She opened the one that held the plates and pulled out a small map and a postcard before walking over to the table, laying both out flat so Tyrian could see. There was a point near where the Shallow Sea was rumored to be, marked with a small heart shaped sticker. The postcard, though yellowed with age, had the image of white sands and rolling tides, and a gentle cursive headline in the corner that read, "Nagisa: the place where dreams become reality."

"You want me to take you there?" Tyrian groaned. "That's a good month's journey by foot from here at best, two months at worse. And that's with little to no stops."

Briar returned to playing her flute, watching as the little soldier began to speak for her once more.

"I overheard Torchwick's Gang in the market this morning. One of them was saying he left for Nagisa three days ago. I thought since I need to go there, and you need your Aura unlocked, we should travel together. Keep each other safe since I can't fight and you can't heal."

Tyrian looked at her for a moment before letting out a small grumble.

"Very well," he sighed exhaustedly. "But the moment I find Torchwick is the moment we part ways. I'll take you as far as I can until then. Deal?"

"Deal."

Briar sat back down at the table and put her flute down, picking up the book to read while Tyrian ate. The soup tasted pretty decent, though Tyrian wouldn't admit it.


Tyrian turned to his soup, letting the veggies and the broth warm him to the core. About halfway through he felt something on his arm. He looked and saw it, the palm of a tiny hand, giving him a gentle pat on his forearm before heading off in the direction of the hallway.

An odd bond has been formed, he thought silently. Strange little girl.

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For once in his life, things were going right.

At least, that's what James was thinking.

Things James Ironwood expected on their journey included; bandits, Grimm, massive amounts of injury, and possible death. Things that one would normally expect on the battlefield.

What he didn't expect was ghosts, surviving sentient green monsters, voices in his head, and hot springs.
Kigiku was a rather large village to say the least. It was well protected with its mountainous terrain and several trained Hunters at every post. But it had a strange kind of atmosphere to it. Everything looked regal. The walls of buildings were painted in beautiful shades of reds and golds, the tiles of the rooftops glimmered like jade. It was an amazing sight, but it left James feeling very small. On the upside, due to the more noble atmosphere, James was able to forgo the blind traveler act.

The cloak and the fake name stayed though.

Qrow had carried their gear all the way to the inn, a quaint little establishment by the name of Moonflower. The staff took their bags to the room as Qrow signed them in.

"Welcome Mr. Low," the innkeeper greeted. "I'm afraid the honeymoon suite is the only room available. Will that suffice?"

"Huh?" James felt the hairs on the back of his neck begin to rise. "Uh, yeah. Yes, that's...that's fine."

"Wonderful," the innkeeper replied cheerfully as she escorted them to their room. "Dinner will be brought to you later this evening, and your room is right beside one of our baths for your own private use. I'll have the staff bring a second futon for your-

"That won't be necessary," James said, a little too quickly. "The one in the room will be plenty."

The innkeeper looked between the two of them, face slightly flushed. "Very well, Mr. Low."

James could tell Qrow was holding back a snicker.

The two of them followed the innkeeper towards the very back to the honeymoon suite. The room was rather spacious. There was a closet off to the right, a king sized futon with deep scarlet bedding, and there was a soft pink tint to the walls and floor. The wall that connected to the room to the outside was opened, allowing James to get a good view of the smoothed rock path that lead to a pool of water.

"Everything you'll need for the baths is in the closet," the innkeeper instructed. "Towels and bedrobes have been provided, as well as moisturizers, massage oils, and other toiletries. There's also a private bathhouse for your use right beside the main pool if you prefer indoor bathing. If you need anything else, feel free to ask."

"Thank you," Qrow said gratefully. "We greatly appreciate your hospitality."

The Innkeeper politely bowed and scurried out the room to make sure dinner was prepared. Once the door was shut, both men allowed themselves to relax, with James throwing off most of his outer layers. The room was rather warm as it was, and the cloak and jacket didn't make it any cooler. Qrow took no time at all at collecting the garments.

"So," Qrow huffed. "You wanna hop in first or should I?"

James looked Qrow over, taking note at how stiff the Hunter was moving. As much as he wanted to just relax in the soothing waters, he didn't want to if it meant denying Qrow a moment to relax. And knowing Qrow was still in "butler mode" meant he wouldn't let himself go before the Earl.

"How about we both take a dip?" James suggested. He could tell by the slack jawed expression that Qrow was not expecting that. It was rather amusing if he had to admit.

"James, are you sure you're okay with that?"
"Qrow, we've known each other for three years," James said. "You know how extensive my repairs go. I don't mind hopping into the baths with you. And besides, the innkeeper probably thinks we're a couple already."

"But wouldn't it be overstepping-"

"It wouldn't be overstepping any boundaries if we were to play up the act. And what better way than to hop into the water together?"

Qrow pinched his chin in thought, the tip of his tongue sticking out in concentration. "I suppose...If you're sure you're okay with that...we can play up the couple's act for our stay..."

"Totally okay with it," James assured him. "You go on ahead. I need to grab my tool kit first."

"Um," Qrow stammered. "Sure. I'll go on ahead then."

"Okay. I'll grab the towels from the closet for when we're done."

"I can do that-"

"You've been working too hard. Just relax for tonight. Please?"

Qrow scratched at the back of his neck, a sheepish smile on his face. "Okay. Just don't freak out at what you see, okay?"

"I won't, I promise." James gave him a tender smile before turning away, allowing the butler to strip in peace. James dug into one of the pouches on the smaller back pack to pull out his tool kit as he heard the sound of light splashing coming from over his shoulder. He didn't need them going into the bath, but he wanted to make sure the tools were there so he could make adjustments to his prosthetics immediately after if the need should arise.

Quickly grabbing two towels from the closet, James quickly stripped out of the rest of his suit before hurrying outside to join his friend, a grin covering his face from ear to ear.

But the pleasant smile faded quickly when he saw him.

There was Qrow, sitting in the water with his back turned to the door, his entire body limp and relaxed. His black hair was completely soaked and pushed back; he must have gone completely under the water after getting in. His skin seemed to glow softly in the steam, and his muscles twitched slightly as all the tension from the last couple of weeks slowly ebbed away. Qrow's face was slightly flushed from the relief.

But that wasn't what had James frozen in place.

It was the scars.

All across Qrow's back, James could make out the pale marks of a Beowolf claw injury that had been healed by magic, the few darkened patches where bullets had burned into Qrow's left shoulder, and the most terrifying was the thick, crisscrossing patterns that were very clearly whip marks. At least a hundred of them, possibly more, with some peppering the upper arms.

What in the hell has Qrow been through?

"Qrow," James croaked.

Qrow's ears pricked slightly hearing James say his name, but he didn't turn around. "You getting in,
or am I going to have to enjoy this all by my lonesome?"

James shook his head, trying to regain his composure as he set the towels down nearby before slipping into the water about three feet from the other man.

The effect was almost instant. James's entire left side began to melt, the stiffness slowly pulled away from his joints and the knots in his back were being undone. Letting out a low groan, James completely immersed himself under the water, allowing the scalding waters to work their magic.

"No bad, huh?" Qrow chuckled when James broke for air.

"Heavenly," James moaned. "Why couldn't we have these back when I was still a Major?"

"Probably the same reason we didn't have them at Beacon," Qrow hummed. "No one would want to leave."

"I think you're right."

James glanced over to him, his blue eyes looking Qrow over from the front. Qrow's torso was covered in burn scars and knife marks, and there was a tattoo of his emblem on his left pectoral, just close enough to the heart.

"So what's with the tattoo?" he asked. It seemed like as good a place to start a conversation. And with luck, James could learn more about him.

"Oh, this?" Qrow asked, tapping the black gear. "I got this just after graduating Beacon, before...a lot of things happened. Tai's idea. Said everyone should get one. I got mine right after Tai got five of them in one go."

"Seriously?!"

"Yeah," Qrow laughed. "One of his emblem on his right arm. There's a golden dragon on his back, a raven on his left forearm, a crow on the right leg, and a white rose with the names of everyone he loves in every petal right over his heart. He got another dragon on his left leg not long after Yang was born, and a red rose on his neck for Ruby."

"That'll make it easier to recognize him," James hummed, not taking his eyes off his avian friend. "Do you have any photos?"

"In my wallet," Qrow sighed. "I'll show you after dinner." Qrow looked at him, eyebrow cocked as a smirk crossed his face. "My Lord, are you staring at me?"

James glanced away, silently cursing himself for ogling his friend like that. "Sorry."

"Nah, it's okay," Qrow chuckled. "Pretty sure this is the first time in a while I've let anyone see me like this. I kind of expected a few raised eyebrows."

James looked back towards him, very softly asking, "Qrow...where did those scars come from?"

Qrow's cocky demeanor vanished as quickly as it had arrived. His caring voice was replaced with something hollow, and it left a harsh chill in James' spine.

"Let's just say," Qrow mumbled, "I didn't exactly have a good upbringing and leave it at that."

"I'm sorry," James stammered. "I didn't mean-"
"Don't worry about it," Qrow said, a bit of life returning to his tone. "That was the past. Let's focus on the present. Okay?"

"Okay," James smiled. "So, what's the plan?"

"Stick around for a couple of days," Qrow said. "Rest up and make sure we have everything we need. It'll be about a week from here to the next town, but hopefully it'll have either a working airship or a train station. If there is, it's a clear shot to Mistral from there. If not, we'll have to keep walking."

"We're really that close already?" James asked. "Feels like we're still so far."

"That's because Anima's big, and we've been through shit," Qrow chuckled. "It's still a long ways off, but it'll be within our reach soon. As long as luck is on our side..."

He didn't know when it had happened, but at some point the distance between the two of them had vanished. James felt Qrow's head resting against his metal shoulder, fingers laced together gently beneath the water. It wasn't much, but it was enough to make James' heart skip a beat. He couldn't understand it, but something about this felt so right. The two of them, relaxed, pressed close like this. It filled his heart with a warmth he hadn't felt in a long time.

Though the silence made him a little uncomfortable.

"Have I ever told you about my time in the military?" James asked, wanting to fill the air with something other than the sounds of the springs.

"No," Qrow hummed contently. "But you don't have to if you don't want-"

"Actually, I have a story you might like," James mused, untangling their fingers so he could wrap his arm around Qrow's shoulders. "Let me tell you about when my unit and I were cadets. I think you'll enjoy hearing about "The Great Food War" that destroyed the mess hall."

James awoke just as the moon was high, but for once it wasn't from a nightmare. It was a pleasant memory of his youth. He resisted the urge to laugh at how reckless young James Ironwood was. As fun as the Food War was, he probably should have prevented it from happening in the first place.

But it was too much fun.

Though the officers in charge didn't seem to agree.

In hindsight, he thought, I shouldn't have thrown that vending machine in the direction of the drill sergeant.

James was about to sit up when he felt something heavy on his chest. He glanced down and saw Qrow in a deep slumber, his cheeks slightly pink from the tears that had formed. Beside the futon was Qrow's scroll, an empty flask, and his open wallet, with a string of photos of everyone in Qrow's life hanging from one of the pouches. He carefully reached over and picked it up, making sure he didn't wake the tired spirit.

At the start, it was a collection James kind of expected to see. The first photo was of Qrow and his
sister, standing by a tree with their weapons in full view. They had to be at least in their late teens by the look of it. Beside Raven was a blond haired lad with a metal guard plate over his shoulder, who James had learned earlier was Taiyang, leaning against the tree with his arms crossed. On the other side of the tree was a young woman in a white hood with eyes of silver stars, who Qrow had introduced as Summer Rose. Qrow was the only one not smiling in this photo, keeping his eyes trained on those to his right.

The next photo was of Qrow and Ozpin, faces covered in frosting as Qrow held what appeared to be a slice of birthday cake with the number thirteen written on it. Behind them was his niece Yang, who was holding the rest of the cake over them in preparation of smothering them to death with sugar, a bright "Birthday Dragon!" button dangling from her sunny yellow tunic.

The third was just of his nieces. Yang was almost a year older than she was in the birthday picture, but something was different. Her right arm, which had so proudly held the cake, was replaced with something monochromatic. Ruby stood beside her, hugging Yang’s left arm as they smiled into the camera, and a corgi resting on their shoulders.

The one after was of Taiyang, standing tall and beaming next to a man with spiked green hair and round glasses. There was a stout gentleman in maroon with eyebrows as thick as his mustache, as well as a well dressed man in a suit his arm wrapped around the shoulders of a ginger haired companion in a bowler hat. There were also three young girls, a set of twins and someone the color of chocolate, vanilla, and strawberries.

Then there was a photograph of Qrow, taken just the year before when Amber had begun working for Glynda. He stood there, attentive in his tailcoat while Tukson stood beside him, with Amber and Klein standing in front of them. In the center was Ozpin, sitting in a chair with a loving smile on their face, with four sets of caring hands on their shoulders as everyone smiled for the camera.

The last photo was one James didn’t expect.

It was a photo of himself, standing there with Glynda, Ghira, and Ozpin as someone took their photo in front of Ironwood Manor. He remembered when this was taken. Not long after the meeting that had given him the close friends he held so near and dear to his heart. Ghira stood on his right, with Ozpin standing in the middle just in front of them with Glynda in a chair beside Ozpin’s cane.

And on Ozpin’s shoulder was a calm, precious corvid that had followed them everywhere that year.

James put the wallet back where he found it, smacking himself mentally for prying into Qrow’s personal belongings. He hoped Qrow would forgive him for that.

"James..."

James froze, worried he had awoken his companion with his movements. He felt shaking, the stuttering of breaths, the white knuckled death grip the man now had on his robes. His red eyes glowed softly in the moonlight pouring into the room, glistening with fresh tears.

"Qrow," James whispered. "I'm sorry, I didn't to snoop, I just-"

"Can't sleep?" Qrow asked.

"Y-yeah," James mumbled. "You okay?"

"Nothing serious," James mimicked, eyebrow raised. "You've got me in a death grip and you say it's nothing serious?" Before Qrow could pull away, James gently pulled him closer, wiping the tears away as he brushed the bangs from Qrow's face. "Qrow...you don't have to be strong all the time around me..."

"But I'm your employee."

"You're my friend, Qrow," James stressed. "Have been for a long time now. You've seen me at my lowest, and you've been there for me when I needed it. Whatever is troubling you, you don't have to hide it." His metal hand gently caressed Qrow's cheek, and James couldn't help but smile at the way Qrow leaned into the touch. Much like a bird would. "You've been there for all of us...so if there's anything troubling you, you can tell me..."

"It's not that I don't want to tell you," Qrow whispered. "I just...I can't-"

"Put it into words?" James inquired.

"Exactly."

"That's fine. You don't have to figure out the words yet. And we've still got a long way to Mistral, so there's plenty of time to figure it out." Slowly lower Qrow back onto the futon, James rolled out from under the covers and walked over to the closet, asking cautiously, "Do you mind me seeing your back?"

"Why?" Qrow asked, eyes narrowed in suspicion.

"You're tense, and I don't think either of us is getting any sleep anytime soon. I can give you a massage."

"You don't have to," Qrow said.

"I know I don't have to," James replied. "But I want to. It's the least I can do after all you've done to take care of me." He pulled out a bottle of oil from the shelf before turning back to the futon. "Unless you don't want me to, which I understand."

Qrow let out a deep breath, a tired smile across his face. "Actually, a back rub does sound pretty good...thanks..."

Qrow threw off the rest of the blanket before sliding off the top half of his robes before turning onto his stomach, swiping James' pillow to help support his head before letting his arms lay at his sides. James sauntered back over to him, debating on how to go about this.

"Just do what you gotta do," Qrow hummed instinctively. "I can take it."

"Okay," James said. "But if you want me to stop at any point, just say so."

"Sure thing, Jim."

With a tender smile, James knelt down beside him, slicking his hands with the oil before beginning to lightly rub his palms across Qrow's back in a figure-eight motion, his body moving in time with his arms as he slowly transitioned into a gliding stroke.

"Damn, that's nice," Qrow moaned. "Where'd you learn this?"

"I used to have a life before the war," James chuckled. "Learned a few things. You'd be surprised
"How often this came in handy on long missions."

"Oh yeah? How?"

"Happy Soldiers, No Grimm." James switched to kneading the muscles, careful not to add too much pressure as he switched from his palms to his knuckles.

"Fuck," Qrow groaned. "And here I thought I couldn't feel anything there anymore."

"I'm not hurting you, am I?"

"No, quite the opposite actually." He turned his eyes up as best he could to look at James, pupils dilated slightly. "You've got the magic touch, handsome."

James rolled his eyes in embarrassment, holding back a laugh. "Qrow, you're drunk."

"Yep," Qrow sighed, letting out a soft "pop" on the end. "But what's that gotta do with anything?"

"Handsome?"

"Well, you are," Qrow hummed. "And smart. And a damn good shot- Ah, Fuck!"

"You okay?" James asked, removing his hands.

"Dammit, Jim!" Qrow whined. "Do that again, please?"

Hesitantly, James placed his hands back near the coccyx, kneading the muscles firmly with thumbs in a circular motion.

"God, that's nice," Qrow moaned.

James let out a throaty chuckle as he shook his head, continuing working out all the knots in the Hunter's back. By the time James was finished, Qrow was starting to drift back to sleep. After quickly cleaning up, James crawled back under the covers, letting Qrow snuggle close against him as he pulled the blanket over them both.

"Hey," Qrow whispered.

"Hey," James replied. "Feel better?"

"Yeah...thank you..."

"You're welcome." James leaned in to press a light kiss to Qrow's forehead.

"James..."

Realizing what he did, James pulled back, ears burning. "I-I'm sorry, I-"

But before James could finish, a pair of lips met his own.

Chapter End Notes

WOW I bet no one saw this coming.
Okay, maybe you did.
Pretty sure someone did.

I kind of had to post early due to IRL stuffs. I'll try not to make this a habit but, eh, life happens you know? Chapters will usually go up on Mondays from now on, but this Monday's chapter is, well, posted now. But chapter 15 WILL be out on Monday, April 10th for sure.

Oh, just a heads up. I'll occasionally have opportunities open for name dropping OCs readers create if that interests you. I'll alert you when those chances are available on my tumblr.

Big shout out to rubyisms for their awesome OC, Laila Samara!

Hope you enjoyed the chapter! Let me know what you think.
The shattered moon glowed softly through the stained glass windows in the spiral tower, bathing the room in a soft kaleidoscope of colors as the electric light flickered. Watts stood tall adjusting his tie as he waited for the new recruits to join him at the portal. He had opted for a black suit as opposed to his usual grey, though the golden shirt and maroon vest remained.

Salem had told Watts to bring the recruits with him on his mission to retrieve Belladonna, believing that they should see time on the field. Watts knew better though. This was part of his punishment for failing to stop Merlot from stealing the book.

I do not want to take these children, Watts thought silently. They aren't ready for this level of combat. They'll only hold me back.

"You really think we'll hold you back, papa?"

There was the feeling of something landing on his head, and when he lifted a hand to see what it was he let out a hiss of distaste.

It was a crown of daisies.

Watts ripped the flowers off his head, green eyes narrowed in frustration. He looked up to the rafters, watching as someone floated to the ground. A young woman with eyes of sunset stood before him, red and white hair tied up partially to resemble ears, and an armored dress of white and gold.

"Do not call me 'papa', Käse," Watts warned. "Just because I grew you out of a test tube doesn't mean I'm your 'papa', got it?"

"But you've always wanted students of your own," the woman teased, walking up to him with twinkling eyes. "Isn't that what we are?"

"You haven't the slightest clue as to what I want."

"Not us, apparently."

A young man slid out from the shadows, brown eyes dull in contrast to his brilliant white suit. His
platinum blond hair was tied back in a long braid that trailed halfway down his back.

"No," Watts affirmed. "Definitely not the two of you."

"Oh papa," Käse whined. "You're making Lloyd sad. And he went to all the trouble to repair your favorite toy."

The man in the suit pulled out a small box, handing it over to Watts with a look of boredom. "I know it isn't to the standard you hold, I'm sure, but I am trying my very best Doctor Watts. Should be working now." He shook his head, letting out a sigh of displeasure. "That thug Merlot sure did a number on you and your weapons."

"At least I got a fun sword out of it," muttered Käse, patting the blade against her hip.

Watts raised an eyebrow at them before taking the box forcefully, opening the lid to look inside. There were his favorite pair of gloves with the dart shooting capabilities, laying over various Dust-potion vials, along with a row of fine needles strapped into the lid of the box. Taking the gloves out to inspect them, he noticed the trigger was no longer rusted from the last use, and there was even two more slots that allowed for a higher chance of hitting targets and a lower risk of stopping to reload.

He hated to admit it, but it was rather impressive.

"Everything appears to be in order," Watts hummed. "You've made some upgrades I didn't approve of."

"I'm sorry, Doctor," Lloyd sighed. "I know I shouldn't-"

"You have outdone yourself," Watts interrupted. "Perhaps you aren't so useless after all."

Lloyd's eyes appeared to light up at the praise, and a smile grew across his face. "Thank you, Sir!"

"I said 'perhaps', Lloyd. Do not go letting this expand your ego."

"Don't worry, Lo," Käse purred as Watts began walking to the portal. "Papa thinks it's impressive."

"Enough you two," Watts growled. "We've got a mission. And failure is not an option this time. Understood?"

"Yes, father," Lloyd cooed.

"Coming papa!" Käse cheered.

I regret making those two, Watts thought.

"Doctor Watts."

The three of them stopped, turning around in unison to be greeted with the crimson gaze of their Queen. The two recruits knelt in respect, heads low so as not to stare. Watts bowed politely as he greeted her.

"My Queen," he said. "To what do we owe the privilege?"

"I've just received word from Hazel," she explained coldly. "He's trailing members of The Gold Blade to their hideout. He will alert you when he has found it. The Blade will take priority the moment he contacts you."
"May I inquire as to the reason for this change, Lady Salem?"

"It seems there is a rabbit with a unique affinity for magic in their ranks, along with a Schnee and Belladonna's daughter. I want you to bring the rabbit to me along with the Chieftain."

"And what of the Schnee and Belladonna's child? What shall we do about them?"

A proud smile greeted the silence as Salem turned away.

"Understood," Watts said, turning to leave.

"What does this mean?" Lloyd asked innocently.

"Isn't it obvious?" Käse giggled.

Watts turned to them both and beckoned them to rise, entering the portal as his "children" began to chant in sing-song voices.

"Kill the spares."

"Where are you taking me?"

Briar had changed into a vivid blue dress with black stockings and leather boots, with a long violet cape and a daisy crown before dragging Tyrian out of the Maverick family home that afternoon. She still said nothing to him about their plans to leave the brewery town, only beckoned him to follow with her tail.

Given that he was stuck with her, Tyrian begrudgingly followed her into town, carrying the suitcase that contained her little tin marching band as well as a basket of flowers. They kept to the alleys and remained relatively unnoticed by the people walking about.

"Where are we going?" he asked again. "If we're going to catch up with Torchwick, we need to leave by tomorrow morning at the latest."

Briar simply nodded in acknowledgement.

Annoying little brat, Tyrian thought.

Briar came to a halt at the fire escape of one of the local inns before turning and taking the suitcase from him. She pointed to the ladder with her tail, hazel eyes bright and expecting.

"What, you want me to climb to the roof?" he mocked, only to get a nod in return. "Why on earth would you want me up there?"

She gave him an angry pout, pointing to the ladder again as if to say "wait and see."

"Is this important to our travels?" he asked her. A nod. "And all you need is for me to sit on the roof?" Another nod. "Fine. but if this is a waste of time, I'll kill you."

Briar nodded and watched as Tyrian reached up and began to climb, leaving the basket on the ground. Once he reached the top, he found a place to hide that wouldn't obscure his view, and
would allow him to see where his little "friend" was heading.

From the roof, Tyrian saw the busy market place below, with stalls filled with luxury items, various types of Dust and ammunition, food, medicines, and just about anything else someone would need to a long trek through the dangerous wastelands of Vacuo. Peering over to look in the alleyway, he saw the form of the little girl opening the suitcase before beginning to play. The soldiers stood and began to march out of the case, following their leader while stepping in time to the music. The flowers floated all around her, daisies of various hues spinning vibrantly in gay abandon. As Briar marched out of the alley, the basket floated up to Tyrian and landed beside him.

"What is she doing?" he whispered.

As Tyrian watched her, he began to notice the flower stems tying themselves together in the same style as the crown on Briar's head. They landed on various patrons, drawing the attention of everyone in the market place to see where the lovely headwear was coming from. Parents began to follow Briar in an attempt to stop their children from touching her tail. Shop keepers tossed her a few Lien here and there as a way to say thank you.

But while everyone was turned to the music of the little scorpion girl, items slowly floated out of sight of the general public. Medicines vanished from apothecaries while dried fruits and meats were spirited from their respective shelves. And Dust crystals of all sorts floated away, unseen by the people hypnotized by little Briar Maverick.

Tyrian looked to the basket beside him, a maniacal smirk curling on his face as the stolen items appeared there.

"Distracting them with music and flowers!" he laughed, the noise of his amusement drowned out by the crowd below. He couldn't believe what he was seeing. A little orphan girl swindling an entire town this way? Oh, how exciting this was! No wonder those thugs he killed were chasing her that night.

"I truly underestimated her," he cackled.

Briar circled around and quickly vanished into another alley across from the roof of the inn, the music fading just enough to where she was no longer seen nor heard. The people continued along their merry way, admiring the flower crowns they had been given by the magical flute player.

"Perhaps this journey won't be as difficult as I once thought," Tyrian hummed.

The sun had begun to set when they had returned to the house. Briar had set to work making dinner for the two of them, and Tyrian began sorting through everything the little girl had procured for them.

*Mostly raw Dust crystals,* he assessed. *Some cartridges, bullets, fine powder. Plenty of water-type. Two large sacks of dried fruits, different types of jerky, and fruit leathers. Anti-venoms, burn creams, disinfectants, bandages...she's well equipped it seems.*

"You're quite the sneaky one, aren't you?" Tyrian chuckled. Briar simply nodded, focusing on her music as the smell of fried rice filled the air of the kitchen. Tyrian continued to go over their supplies, noticing that there was quite a lot more than what they could properly carry. "How do
you intend to carry all this? You can't play nonstop you know, and we'll get tired if it's just the two
of us."

Briar’s tail pointed outside. Tyrian went over to the window to see what she was pointing at. Not
too far in the distance was a caravan, surrounded by merchants and travelling performers. It was all
Tyrian could do to hold back the bile in the back of his throat.

"You're not seriously saying we travel with the circ-" he stopped, looking back to her with
yellowed eyes narrowed in suspicion. "You've already made arrangements, haven't you." The flute
playing stopped for a moment, and a playful smirk crossed her face. "What did you tell them,
Briar?"

Ignoring his question, Briar went back to performing her tune and cook dinner, eyes focused on the
stove while a flower crown flew over to Tyrian, securing it on his head.

"Get this off me!" Tyrian groaned, trying to remove it. Every time he removed it, the ring of
daisies would land on his head again. Eventually he gave in and let the flowers stay, slumping into
the chair at the table in annoyance. Watching Briar float over a plate of rice for him, he couldn't
help but notice the crack along her carapace had gotten a little larger. "You sure you're fit for
travel?"

Briar gave him a nod and set her own plate on the table, taking a seat beside him as she set her flute
down. Her portion was far smaller than his own.

"You've lost your armor before, right?" Tyrian asked, only to receive a nod in response. "You able
to handle the pain alright?" Another nod. "Fine then."

They spent the rest of dinner in silence. Once he was finished, Tyrian went to wash up in the
bathroom, finally being allowed to remove the flower crown once he locked the door. Before
removing it though, he took a good long look at himself. His hair was no longer in its usual high
braid, having opted for a low ponytail tied off by a black velvet band. He'd never admit it, but he
rather liked the color of the shirt Briar had procured for him. It complimented his eyes very well.

She's a very sneaky one, he thought. And quite powerful too. Perhaps once I kill Torchwick and
retrieve Amber, Her Majesty would allow me to keep the child.

Of course, that was assuming She'd want him back after such a humiliation.

But of course She would. He was Her piece in this game. Her Knight to play. There was no way
he'd be cast out once he returned.

He had to believe in Her kindness.

"My Queen," he whispered to the mirror. "I will retrieve The Mage for you. It is my special
mission. I will. Not. Fail."

Tyrian removed the flower crown, throwing it into the trash under the sink before returning to
pack.

They had to be ready to join the caravan by tomorrow morning.
"I can't believe you got us cleaning duty, Ironwood."

James let out a sigh, pinching the bridge of his nose as he tossed the bags into the dumpster. This was only day one of their week long punishment, and he knew he wasn't going to hear the end of it. He didn't even realize he had grabbed the vending machine until Douglas blew it into the ceiling.

"I'm sorry, Lucien," he grumbled, looking at the blue haired soldier. "I didn't mean to get us into this much trouble."

"You should have been more careful though. You're our commander after all."

"Shut ye geggie!" bellowed Donald as he swept. "It wasnae his fault the drill instructor came a running."

"No, it wasn't," Lucien agreed hostility. "It was your brother for bailing on us and tattling."

"Oi, you leave Douggie outta this!" Donald warned. "After all, yer the dobber tha' threw his dinner at the Red's table!"

"Delano asked for it!" Lucien spat.

"Delano is the best grenadier in our class," came a voice from behind James. "You should have known better than to start a food fight with him."

James turned around and saw two smiling faces walking over to them with water bottles as well as something hanging off their arms. "Marie, Ocean. Where have you two been?"

"Went to where they keep the good stuff," said Marie, pulling her brown hair back into its usual ponytail. "We're gonna be cleaning this hell hole for a week, might as well make it look good."

"And while we were waiting," Ocean giggled, "I snuck off to the General's private greenhouses to make these." Her sea foam green eyes glittered as she reached to her arm and removed one of the things hanging from it, a floral crown made of white tulips, and placed it upon James' head. "Since she doesn't have much use for the flowers, I thought we should enjoy them."

"I'm no' wearin' that," Donald grumbled, only for a ring of harebells to fall upon his horns.

"You're wearing it," Marie ordered.

"F-fine," Donald stammered, his apple cheeks taking on a rosy hue.

"Ye look good in blue, Donny," hummed Douglas as he came in, carrying the cart of supplies over his shoulder and a giant sunflower between his ginger wolf ears.

"You all look ridiculous," Lucien groaned. "Not proper soldiers at all."

"May I?" Donald asked Marie.

"Be my guest," she snickered, handing him a ring of pink amaryllis.

"No," Lucien said fiercely. "No, Frasier! No!"

"Ock, come on!" Donald laughed. "Ye look grand in it!"

"No! I'm not wearing pink!"
"It's lightish-red!"

James held back a laugh as the two ran about the mess hall, leaping over the toppled tables as sounds of their cat and mouse chase filled the air.

"Which do you think I should wear?" Ocean asked, holding up two of the remaining rings. One was a crown of lilies, white as the freshly fallen snow, while the other was made from deep red roses.

With a fond smile, James took the one with the lilies and placed it upon her head, careful not to get the stems caught in her sparkling teal bun. "There. Now you really look like an ocean, Ocean."

"Jim!" she huffed, giving him a playful shove.

"Sorry," he chuckled. "What's with the flower crowns anyway?"

"Spring is almost here," Ocean sighed. "And since I'm not going to be able to go home for The Maiden's Light celebrations, I figured why not bring a bit of home to my team."

"Did ye know that flower crowns are used decoratively on Anima?" Douglas hummed. "Like for holidays and special occasions."

"Now they are," Marie said. "Before the great war they were used to denote someone's status."

"Now that I never knew," Douglas said, an enchanted look in his eye. "Marie, yer a smart lass, ye know that?"

"One has to be when putting up with troublesome twins."

"SPITE DOUGGIE WOULD YE? TAKE THAT!!!"

"DOUG, GET YOUR BROTHER OFF ME!!!"

Everyone turned to see Lucien with the crown askew on his head while Donald had him in, what Marie liked to call, a "tickle-hold", trying to stop the laughter that was erupting from his throat.

"There's more coming, should ye misbehave!" Douglas laughed.

"ME?" Lucien cried through teary smiles. "I'm older than you!"

"Only by one year," Marie grumbled, rolling her red eyes in annoyance.

"Come on everyone," James chuckled. "Enough dilly-dallying. Let's get a dent in this before lights out."

"Yes, General!" the all responded.

"I'm not a General," he groaned, rolling his eyes.

"But you will be," Ocean assured him. "Once you've had more experience."

"And, you know," Marie said, "when you're old enough to buy alcohol."

"Come on, enough playing around," James said. "Let's get to work."
Flower Crowns. Flower crowns everywhere. Kigiku is full of them. They brought back fond memories he had long since forgotten. Days when his friends would tease him for his inability to see people were flirting with him. Days where he'd have to split the twins from their field medic to keep them quiet on stealth hunts. Days when Ocean would teach them how to sneak into the greenhouses along the borders.

Days before the Civil War.

"Maybe I should get a crown for myself," he muttered. "It'd be a nice change from the hood."

As James walked through the market square, hood up high so his metal plate was covered, he couldn't help but be grateful to be reminiscing on days gone by. It was a nice way to pass the time as he completed the shopping for the next stretch of their journey. He had left Qrow back at the springs, placing a note on his pillow to let him know where he went. The poor man was still exhausted from the night before, so James decided he'd take it upon himself to do the supply run. It gave him a chance to stretch his legs at least.

And a chance to think about anything other than the night before.

Anything but the sound of Qrow's voice, the photographs, the feel of the scars, the-

James stopped himself from thinking any further. He couldn't focus on that. He had to finish supply shopping. He had to make sure they had enough ammo, order new clothes, get a new bottle of pain killers. He couldn't think about the softness of Qrow's-

"Stop it James," he muttered. "It was probably just a thank you or something. He was drunk and not in a good mental state. You've been there before. That kiss doesn't mean anything."

"Then why are you thinking about it?"

James froze in place, turning around to see the turquoise eyes of a young girl with bright ginger hair decorated with a crown of daisies and primroses. She bore a mark with a hammer struck by lightning on her letterman jacket, and she barely came up to his chest in height.

"Can I help you?" James asked.

"You're not from around these parts," the girl cooed, eyebrow raised in anticipation. "You're a noble right? Any military experience?"

"Yes," James said. "I'm an Earl and I was a General, but-"

"Perfect!" she cheered. "I need your help. Come with me!"

Before James could protest, the girl grabbed him by the hand dragged him toward the outskirts of town via a nearby alleyway. For such a small girl, she was incredibly strong.

But not strong enough.

James drew his hand back, silently thanking the gods for allowing his glove to remain on, and skidded to a halt just as the girl turned around to glare at him. He stood tall, hands folded behind his back under his cloak, allowing himself to slip into The Iron General's voice once again.

"Do you mind telling me," James inquired, "where you are taking me and why you need my help?"
"My friend, err, bestie, cohort, " the girl stammered rapidly, her face contorting into fear as she rambled. "Look, my friends are in trouble, I have no money, and the person who is supposed to be looking after us while we're here is busy at the hospital tending to the girl we found in the woods while Pyrrha is calling in an airship and if I don't hurry everyone is gonna be sent off to some creepazoids in the main city and I'm going to have to explain to Pyrrha how I got my Aura locked off and-"

"Calm down," James blurted. "You're going way too fast. What're you talking about?"

"You don't get it?" she screeched. "I'm about to lose my family to a bounty hunters and I need your help!"

James was taken aback. "Why me?" he asked calmly.

"Because you're the only stranger in town!"

"What does me being a stranger have to do with anything?"

The girl let out a heavy breath, eyes pricked with tears.

"The nobility here in Kigiku are from the Capital, and my family and I, well, we aren't exactly well liked in the main capital. We're fugitives, but for good reasons, I swear. The people who ambushed us are going to take them back to the main city. I have no money to bribe the bounty hunters with and if I don't save them soon they'll die!"

James felt his blood run cold. "You mean-"

"You get it," she sighed. "I can't trust anyone in Kigiku other than Pyrrha and she's busy getting us a ride south. I can't just go and break some legs because those jerks locked off my Aura and took my weapon. There's too many of them and I can't do this alone." She grabbed onto his coat, holding him in place as she tried not to cry. "Please. Help me."

James took a moment to look the girl in the eyes, Kigiku vanishing for but a moment as the image of the toppled tables and monotoned walls took over. There was a slight burning sensation in his left hand as the ginger girl turned into the young cadet that would fight by his side every battle, teal hair sparkling in the light as she screamed.

*Help me!*

James shook his head, trying to keep the gnawing sensation away.

*It's cold!*

*The cadet vanished, replaced with the girl once more.*

*It's too dark!*

*I-"

*James, help me!*

"What's your name?" James asked, biting back the panic in his voice.

"Nora," said the girl. "Nora Valkyrie."

"James Ironwood," he said. "Where are your friends?"
Nora's face slowly lit up with a smile as she let go of his coat. "This way!"

James took a deep breath and followed her out of Kigiku.

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Two days. They'd been walking almost non-stop for two days. They stopped only to sleep, taking turns on guard duty. And Weiss couldn't help but let her mind wander as she sat at attention under one of the giant trees that night while she stood watch.

_Around this time, Klein would be bringing in dessert, Weiss reminisced. Father would return to his study. Mother would wander off to refill her wine. Whitley would be complaining about all the extra studying he has to do, as always. Klein would ask how my fencing is coming along, both he and my brother ask about my music..._

Where is everyone?

Where did they go?

"Here, take this."

Weiss looked up from her post in their camp, gently taking the cup from Blake's hand and giving her a gentle smile. "Thank you. Coffee?"

"Tea," corrected Blake as she sat beside her. "We need to talk."

"About what?" Weiss asked.

"Our plan for when we get to Saboten."

Weiss took a sip of the tea, glancing at Blake in confusion. The plan was to find transportation to Mistral. If not, they walk. Simple enough, right? So then why would Blake want to talk it over?

"Care to elaborate?" Weiss asked.

"The way things work in Mistral aren't the same in the rest of the world," Blake disclosed. "When we get to Saboten, we're going to need to put that maid offer of yours into play." She reached into her bag and pulled out a crown made of silk flowers. _Myrtle_, Weiss noted. "You'll need to wear this. Try it on."

Weiss set took the crown and placed it on her head, carefully adjusting her ponytail through it to keep it in place. "How's this?"

"Perfect," said Blake, tying a black bow over her cat ears. "Velvet's writing down a guide for your glyphs. We should give her something in return."

"Wait," Weiss said. "She's making me a guide?"

"It's part of the Team CFVY skill set," Blake sighed. "Velvet will give you a guide to your glyphs so maybe some sheet music would be a fair-"

"What's this "team" thing, anyway?" Weiss interrupted. "You keep saying teams and skill sets like it's common knowledge but I don't understand what you're talking about."
Blake stared at her as if she were staring at a stranger, confused by Weiss’ outburst. *Why was Blake acting as if Weiss had heard all of this before?*

"You're...you're right," Blake muttered, turning to poke at the ground. "You don't know anything about this..."

"Care to tell me?"

"Nope."

Weiss let out a groan, finishing off her tea as she tried not to let herself get annoyed. There was a lot going on she wasn't in the know about, but that wasn't anything new to her. It was something she got used to back in Atlas under her father's "guidance". Know what you need when you need to know. That was how things were.

The key word being *were.*

"Come on," Weiss said, standing up. "I want to do some hand to hand training. We can talk while we train."

"Sounds good," Blake agreed. "Sun's coming to take your post anyway."

"Good." A coy smile slithered across her face. "How about a wager?"

"Wager?"

"For every match I win, I ask a question, and you have to answer. Every match you win, you get to ask me something. Sound fair?"

Blake's ears lay flat as she mulled over the offer. Weiss doubted she'd be able to win many matches against her, but it seemed to be the best way to get answers to her questions. Like why Blake acted so distant. Or why she wanted to go find the Chieftain so badly.

*Remember Weiss,* her father had said. *Life is a game with no rules. You have to adapt in order to win.*

The only *useful* piece of advice he'd ever given.

*If I'm going to get anywhere in this game,* she thought, *I have to know the playing field. And what better way to learn than this?*

"Alright," Blake agreed. "If you can beat me three to five, I'll answer anything you want to ask me. But if I win, I get to ask you things."

"Perfect."

*Let's hope I get some answers.*

"That's two. Maybe we should stop."
Weiss staggered to get up, grumbling under her breath at her loss. "One more."

"Weiss," Blake sighed. "You can't beat me as is. You have good balance but you keep letting me near your right side."

"You keep reaching for my hair!" Weiss argued. "It's not fair-"

"You think the people who took over Atlas care about fair? You have a weak point, they'll exploit it. Simple as that."

Weiss felt her blood boil in anger. "Fine. Let's go again then. I promise you won't grab me again."

"You sure?"

"Yes."

"Alright. Let's go again then."

Weiss took a deep breath, clenching her fists and holding up her arms in defensive position. Blake struck first with a high kick, but Weiss ducked low to avoid it and came back up with an uppercut, which was evaded by a quick lean back from Blake. The two alternated, taking turns going offensive and defensive, kicking, punching, tuck and rolls. Over and over again, they would attempt to land a blow, but never quite getting there.

"Nice moves," Blake grunted. "Guess they didn't skimp out on self defense back in Atlas, huh?"

"Klein taught me everything I know," Weiss said. "He was the best guard in the entire kingdom after all."

"You'd think he'd tell you to cut your hair. Or at least put it in a bun."

"Like you're one to talk!"

Weiss reached out and grabbed a handful of black hair, using it to hold Blake in place as she thrust her knee upwards into Blake's stomach before letting go and backing away, watching as her trainer fell to her knees to try and catch wind.

"Not bad," Blake groaned. "A little harder and you'd have cracked someone's ribs."

"You okay?" Weiss asked.

"Ecstatic," Blake sighed. "I'll admit, I highly underestimated you. You're a lot stronger than you look."

"Thank you. You're not that bad of a mentor." She reached out her hand to Blake. "Now, if I remember right, that's 2:1. I have two more matches to win. Feeling up to it?"

Blake let out a soft "Mh" and took Weiss' hand, only to be thrown over her shoulder and flat onto her back a second after. "Hey!"

"You're the one that said 'you have a weak point, they'll exploit it', remember?" Weiss stated. "I'm just following your advice."

Blake blinked up at her, quiet as a mouse, only to burst into laughter. "I did say that. Geez, you're a lot quicker on the uptake than Jaune. I'm impressed."
"Thank you," Weiss giggled. "But who's Jaune?"

"Nope," Blake said, getting to her feet. "You have to beat me again before I go answering anything, remember?"

The two of them exchanged coy smiles, a fire burning in their eyes as they dropped into fighting stance. This time Weiss lunged first, going in for left-hook, only for Blake to dodge. Right-rook. Miss. Kick. Jumped over. Over and over again, unable to land a blow. When she went in for a drop-kick, Blake seized the opportunity to grab Weiss' hair yet again and attempt to throw her over her shoulder.

"Nice try," Blake sighed.

"Thank you," Weiss boasted as she reached out. Her intent was to grab Blake's hair, but instead her hand caught hold of a handle. She pulled it, drawing Blake's weapon from its sheath, and used one clean swipe.

Blake turned around just in time to see Weiss regain her stance, the flower crown now scattered on the ground, and what was Weiss' long white ponytail clutched firmly in her grasp.

"You cut your hair?!" Blake screamed. "With Gambol Shroud?!!"

"You left it on," Weiss pointed out. "If I hadn't taken off my blade, you would have done the same, right?" Weiss couldn't help but smirk. "Want to keep going? We still don't have a winner."

"You're an odd one," Blake purred. "Let's wrap this up then and get back to camp. That way Coco can fix that ghastly attempt at a pixie cut."

"Excuse you!"

The two of them dropped what they were holding and finished the sparring match, returning to the camp arm in arm and laughing not long after.

Weiss wouldn't be getting answers tonight.

"Over there."

James stood very still as Nora pushed the branches aside to reveal a hidden encampment in the middle of the woods. They kept their heads low so as not to draw attention from the men sitting by the fire pit.

"Which ones are your friends?" James asked quietly.

"Over in that cart," Nora whispered. "See the boy with the pink streak in his hair? That's Ren. And the blond guy is Jaune."

James looked over at the cart, thinking "cage" would be a far better descriptor. There were a total of about ten in there, all of them huddled close in their golden cloaks.

Wait. Golden Cloaks?
"You're with The Gold Blade," he whispered, looking at her in shock.

"It's not what you think!" Nora hissed.

"Were you the group that set Nettle on fire?"

"Yes, but it's not what you think! Look, I'll explain everything after we get them out, okay? You help me, I'll answer anything you want."

"Okay," James sighed. "So what's the plan?"

"I...I don't know..."

"You don't know?"

"Pyrrha, and Nebula always came up with the plans," she shrugged. "I'm...pretty useless without my Semblance, and none of the others can unlock my Aura for me." She looked up at him hopefully. "Can you unlock it?"

"Would if I could," James sighed. "But I'm afraid I can't."

"What? Don't have yours unlocked or something?"

"Something like that." Truth be told, it wasn't that his Aura wasn't unlocked. And it wasn't a matter of if he knew how. He did know how, and he did have his Aura. He just didn't have enough to spare on unlocking someone else's.

"Alright," Nora sighed. "Then the best thing to do is to get me Magnhild."

"Magnhild?" James asked.

"My hammer. It's locked up in that crate over there."

James looked back toward the camp, taking note of the area around them. The bounty hunters, about twelve of them, were all sitting and drinking what appeared to be some kind of booze. There was only one crate near one of the horses they had with them, marked "dangerous". The cage that held Nora's friends was made of metal by the look of it, and it would require either a key or brute strength. And the key was probably hidden in the pockets of one of the bounty hunters.

There was no way they could do this by themselves without making a scene.

*So make a scene we shall.*

"I've got an idea," James said. "But it's risky."

"Really?!" Nora gasped.

"Would you be alright acting as bait?" he asked her. "If not, we'll come up with a plan B to be safe-"

"We don't have time for safe," she said. "Tell me what to do."

"Okay," he said. "I'll need you to draw as many of the bounty hunters away as you can. I'll get your friends out of the cage and grab your weapons. Okay?"

"Okay. Oh, but first, you need the code."
There's a code? he thought. Seriously? "What is it?"

Nora smiled, pressing her finger to his nose. "Boop."

"Boop?"

"Boop," she affirmed. "Do it to Ren. He'll get it."

Nora ran out of the bushes, running right at the bounty hunters and kicking one of them in the head as she ran. The bounty hunters gave chase, leaving four of their men behind to guard the cage.

Perfect, thought James. Waiting until he was sure the rest wouldn't come back soon, James left his hiding place, pulling his pistol out of its holster and turning it so he could use it as a club. He snuck up behind the guards, and with one well placed strike, he knocked two of them out cold.

"What the hell?" screamed one of the guards, only to be silenced by James' gloved left hand to his chin.

With a quick kick to the last man, James looked up at the cage, smiling fondly as he put his gun away. "I'm here to get you out. Just stay calm. You're safe now."

"And why should we trust you?" asked the boy with the pink streak.

"Are you Ren?" James asked.

"Yes," he answered. "Why?"

James motioned for him to lean close. Reluctantly Ren did so, and James lifted a finger to his nose. "Boop."

Ren's gentle magenta eyes widened in surprise, and a smile crossed his cheeks. "Alright everyone, he's trustworthy."

"You serious, Ren?" asked a girl in a beanie.

"Very."

"Stand back everyone," James warned. The group hurried as far back as possible from the door, and James grabbed the door with his metal arm and gave it a sharp tug, shaking the cart roughly as he ripped it off the hinges. "Now let's hurry and get you out of here. I don't know how long Nora can distract them."

"We better hurry then!"

James stepped back, allowing the cloaked teens to hurry over to the crate to retrieve their weapons. And the moment he saw them his heart sank. Some of them looked a little dull in the blade, a few had rust patches, and some didn't even look like conventional weapons in the slightest.

"My prod still works," sighed the maroon haired lad. "Luckily."

"My knives are rusted," cursed a girl with black hair. "They damage our weapons and take our ammo...bastards..."

"How's Magnhild?" Ren asked, looking over his own guns.

"Still in good condition, I think," said the blond. Jaune, James reminded himself. I need to learn all
Jaune picked up what appeared to be a grenade launcher, looking it over closely. "Still in good condition. They probably planned on selling it. Here pal." He tossed it over to James, chuckling as it unfolded into its mighty hammer self. "Until Nora gets back, hold it."

"Sure," said James, holding the hammer tightly.

"Might want to put those back."

The group looked back to see the bounty hunters had returned, holding Nora by the hair and arms as she struggled to get loose.

"Nora!" screamed Jaune, hurrying toward her with his sword drawn.

"Jaune, don't-" Nora started, only to scream when Jaune was sent flying backwards towards the fire.

James reached out and managed to catch him by the skin of his teeth, helping him upright as he shot a glare at the perpetrator, the shorter bounty hunter with pale blue eyes. "What did you do?!"

"Just a simple shield spell," the hunter giggled. "Now, all of you, in the cage now. Or the little one here gets it."

"James, take the others and run!" Nora screamed.

"Quiet you!" grunted her captor, covering her mouth in an attempt to silence her.

James' eyes darted about as he tried to find an opening. Shield or not, there was always an opening. If they could get to it then-

There!

James saw a wavering movement in the shield, right above the hunter keeping it in place.

*One well placed blow and it will shatter like fine crystal.*

He ran forward, using the momentum to lunge himself into the air and swing the hammer down upon the wavering part of the shield, ignoring the pain shooting up his arms from the opposing force.

"Are you stupid-" the hunter started, only to be cut off by the familiar fizzle and flash of his Aura shattering in time with the shield.

Using the momentary shock as a window of escape, Nora bit hard on the hand of the person holding her and slid out of his grasp just in time to catch Magnhild as it fell from James' hold.

"Oh yeah!" she laughed, swinging it hard at the legs of two of the bounty hunters. "Let's break some legs!"

"You little brats!"

James turned in time to see one of the guards he had knocked out standing tall, holding a large missile-launcher styled gun on his shoulder aimed right at the teenagers. Without even thinking, he ran between them as the guard opened fire, reaching for his gun in a fruitless attempt to stop the deadly barrage of bullets. His eyes shut tightly as he braced for impact.
But the bullets never hit.

Opening his eyes, James discovered that his hands held no weapon. Instead there was a giant pair of white gears floating just a few inches from his arms, several of the bullets caught in between them.

"How did you do that?" Jaune asked.

"Don't know," James mumbled. "Don't care. You all alright?"

"I think so," Ren chuckled, watching as the bounty hunters ran in terror away from the camp and a wrathful ginger hunter. "Nora, come back please!"

"Coming Ren!" she cheered, hurrying over to him and Jaune, dropping her hammer so she could tackle hug them both. "I'm so glad you're all safe! Group hug everyone!"

As the group huddled together, James let out a contented sigh as he lowered his arms. The gears vanished and the bullets fell to the ground. The burning sensation in his left hand faded, and the pain slowly started to settle into his limbs.

What did I do? he wondered. That's the second time I did this. But how? He shook his head, trying not to get distracted. Best not think about it now. Nora has to answer some questions and I need to get back to Qrow. That's what I need to focus on.

"Guys, look!" Jaune cried.

James looked over at the teens before turning his eyes in the direction Jaune was pointing. Rising from the direction of Kigiku was black smoke being circled by several Nevermores.

"Pyrrha's still back there!" Ren cried. "Come on!"

"But our weapons-" one of the others began.

"Come on!" James ordered. "We have to stop the Grimm no matter what!"

"Yes General!" Nora replied. "Let's go teams!"

Together, they ran back toward the town. James tried hard not to let the panic overtake him. He had to hurry. No time to waste. Whatever was happening in Kigiku, Qrow was in the middle of it. He silently cursed himself for leaving him alone at the hot springs.

"Keep each other safe."

Over and over, Ozpin's words echoed in his head as he silently prayed he'd make it in time.

Hold on Qrow. I'm coming.

Chapter End Notes

So, here we are! Another 7k chapter! Finally fixed the windows problems, so expect longer chapters in the future.
For those who are curious, Watts' recruits full names are Lloyd Eledyr and Käse
Morana. Käse alludes to the Fox in the fable "The Fox and The Crow" and Lloyd...I forget what I based him off of, I gotta go dig through the notes.
Next chapter will feature Qrow's perspective, Ghira, and Ozpin.

Let me know what you think! Comments are love! You all are amazing! Fandom loves you all!
Moments of Weakness

Chapter Summary

Oscar learns more about his destiny, while Qrow ponders his interactions with James.

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the wait.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The tiny flame on the candle flickered as Ozpin gently tucked the children into bed. Taiyang and Qrow had left for a mission. Something about an influx of Grimm on the northern end of the island. They had asked them if they'd be willing to look after Ruby and Yang until they came home. Of course. Ozpin was more than willing. They loved the girls dearly, and they got along well with them. It was no trouble at all.

Once they were sure the girls were asleep, Ozpin blew out the lights and proceeded downstairs. They made their way to the kitchen and stared at the mess that had been left over from the attempt at making cookies. As fun as it was, it left them a rather large mess to clean.

Pushing aside their own exhaustion, Ozpin slipped on the green apron that Tai had in the closet for them, and proceeded to finish the chores for the night. Make lunches for school, clean the dishes, wash the countertops, mop the floors. Everything to make the kitchen like new.

They were tempted, oh so very tempted, to use a simple spell to clean the whole house from top to bottom. It would have made quick work of it all. But magic wasn't meant to be used that way. Ozpin knew this far too well. Magic was meant to enhance and help, educate and understand, not be used as a means to an end of simple chores. Last time someone had attempted such a thing, Roman had nearly drowned their cabin in laundry detergent.

"Oz! We're home!"

The sound of familiar voices pulled Oz from their work and they hurried to the front door to greet Taiyang and Qrow. Only to be frozen in place.

Taiyang had his arm in a sling, a bandage over the left eye, and several scars newly acquired from their escapade. Qrow was practically shirtless, only having a few minor scrapes in comparison but still decently banged up.

"Oh dear Lords," Oz breathed. "Come here, I'll heal you."

"We're fine-" the two tried to say, only for Oz's golden gaze to escort them to the couch. They sat still, watching as Ozpin placed a hand to their heads and a soft green glow surrounded them, slowly healing their wounds.
"Once we're done," Oz said, "I'll remove the bandages and such. Qrow, I'll need that shirt."

"Why?" Qrow asked hastily, constantly trying to keep it on to cover his back.

"Because it's nothing but rags. And you've got thirty more upstairs. I'll just dispose of that one."

"But-"

"You can borrow my shirt until you get upstairs," Tai assured him.

With a reluctant sigh, Qrow slipped off his shirt and helped Taiyang out of his sling so he could retrieve the orange garment. Ozpin finished healing them, and their eyes widened in fear.

"Qrow, where did those scars come from?"

Qrow threw the shirt on quickly, avoiding eye contact as he mumbled, "Childhood accident."

"An accident my ass," Oz retorted. "Those are whi-"

"Oz," Tai said firmly. "Drop it."

Soon, there was a heavy silence suffocating the room. Taiyang's mouth was pressed into a thin line, and all eyes were on Qrow, who remained curled up like a frightened bird, face as red as the roses in the garden.

"Why did you hide this?" Ozpin asked softly.

"I don't like questions," Qrow muttered, standing up. "That's all."

Before they could say anything else, Qrow hurried upstairs and to his room, locking the door behind him. And all at once, Ozpin realized they pushed too far.

"I didn't mean-" they started.

"Don't be too hard on yourself," Taiyang sighed. "Same thing happened when I first found out back at Beacon. He doesn't like bringing it up, so we never do. He's not mad at you or anything."

"But-"

"Trust me, he's not mad at you." He raked his fingers through his hair, blue eyes glancing at the photograph of Team STRQ on the mantelpiece. "I'm not exactly sure what he's feeling but...I kind of get it...He'll tell you when he's ready. Just give him some time."

Ozpin simply nodded, holding the torn apart shirt in their hands as they silently cursed themself for making Qrow upset.

"I'll never bring it up again," they promised. "Never again."

Oscar woke up that morning just before the sun came up. Another memory in place of a dream. This time, instead of the rain and the ruins, it was a home in the woods. Qrow had scars Ozpin had never seen.
"Scars they probably would never see again."

"Oscar?"

Looking over towards the door, he saw Ozpin standing there. They were dressed in a simple green sweater and jeans, with a dark leather vest with matching boots. There were two backpacks beside their feet, as well as two walking sticks made from old branches and pipes.

"Morning Oz," Oscar groaned.

"Are you alright?"

"I'm okay. Just saw another memory."

"You did?" they asked.

"Yes. It was...Qrow's scars..."

The color in Ozpin's face seemed to fade immediately. "I suppose it's best some of these get out of the way fast, then."

"Can I ask-"

"Later. Once we're off the farm." They lifted the heavier bag over their shoulders. "Are you ready?"

"I'll be down in a bit," Oscar said. "Just want to get changed."

"Alright. But do hurry."

"Yes Oz."

Ozpin left the room quickly, allowing Oscar to have a moment of privacy. He was going to need it. After all, there wouldn't be much of it on the road.

It had been a long discussion. A lot of it he didn't understand, but he got the general idea. He was chosen for a role, and Ozpin was his guide to mastering it. They had given him the choice of staying on the farm for his training, or travelling to Mistral to find Ozpin's journal. Both options had their own appeal, but leaving was the safer option. There were people after Oz. People who want something from them. And staying at the farm would put both Oscar and his Aunt at risk of death.

So Oscar had agreed to leave.

Though it wasn't an easy choice. He couldn't leave a note saying where he was going. He couldn't say when he'd be back, if he'd ever be back.

He couldn't say goodbye.

And in the end, it would be better this way.

But that didn't mean it wouldn't hurt.

Taking a deep breath, Oscar swapped out of his pajamas and into his Sunday best. Thick black slacks, forest green button up, black vest, boots. Meeting the Potentate of Mistral required one to look their best, and this was the best he had.
Reaching over and picking up the backpack left for him, Oscar hurried downstairs to meet with Ozpin, who waited outside.

"You sure you want to leave?" Ozpin inquired. "Because we can stay for your training if you-

"No, it's fine," Oscar assured them. "I mean, I've always wanted to go to Mistral anyway. And it'll be better for everyone if we go."

They nodded, eyes soft and lamenting. "I suppose so. You're making a bold sacrifice here, Oscar. Not many would take the path you're about to travel."

"You've traveled it before though...right?"

"Yes," they sighed. "It wasn't easy back then, but there will be far more hardship for you in comparison."

"I'm ready," Oscar said boldly, more trying to convince himself than his mentor.

"Alright, let's go then."

Silently, the two of them began the long walk from the farm. And with every step, Oscar felt as if a giant weight had been added to their shoulders. Oz clearly picked up on this, letting out a gentle sigh.

"I'm sorry," they said. "I know this is hard."

"It's not that," Oscar said. "It's just...how weird it all feels. Leaving home is crazy. Going to the city is crazy. Everything that's happened, everything that will happen, it's all completely crazy. But...it doesn't feel crazy. It feels like I'm doing the right thing."

"Well," Ozpin muttered. "I suppose that's good."

Oscar's brow furrowed in worry. His mentor was hurting just as much from this as they were, if not more so. He couldn't imagine what they could be thinking. They were going to be traveling for a long time, and Oscar wanted to be able to connect to them and be their support as well as their student. They wanted to see their mentor smile.

There had to be a way to make Oz smile, even if just for a little bit.

_Oh that's right_, he remembered.

"So what do I call you?" Oscar asked.

"Pardon?" Ozpin asked.

"Do I call you master or teacher? Or maybe "The Great Wizard"? What's the etiquette here?"

Oz let out a soft snort of laughter as they ruffled Oscars soft brown hair. "How about just Nini? That's what my students and children call me."

"You have kids?"

"Yes, a son and a daughter. You'll meet them soon enough. Now let's get going. The sooner we get away from the farm, the sooner I can fully unlock your Aura."

"Okay Nini."
When Qrow awoke the next morning, James was out running the errands, having left him a note saying to take the morning off. Although he was bothered at the idea of the Earl doing his work for him, Qrow wasn't too worried about whether or not he could manage it. James was a grown man, and he knew the gravity of their situation. And Kigiku was one of the safest places for them to hide out in at the moment. He didn't mind letting James go out to stretch his legs.

And besides, he thought. This was a good thing. It allowed Qrow a moment of peace, a moment to process his thoughts and push them aside. To slowly get over the splitting headache the hangover was beating into him. And a chance to mentally prepare for whatever bad thing might come their way.

This moment of peace was what he needed.

Deciding it'd be best to wash away the troubles, Qrow grabbed his toiletries and walked to the private bathhouse. As nice as the outdoor springs were, he wasn't in the mood to let anyone see him bare again anytime soon.

Especially after the last bath.

_He saw them, Qrow thought. He saw the scars and got upset. I knew he would. I shouldn't have let him talk me into this. I should have let him go first. I shouldn't have let him see them._

Though it wasn't the first time someone had seen his body like that. No, the first time anyone saw the full extent of these marks was his team. Raven always knew, by the Gods did she know, but Taiyang and Summer had no idea until after their first mission together. And the looks of horror were enough to make Qrow never want anyone else to see.

The second time was about a month after revealing himself to Ozpin. His shirt had been completely torn one mission, torn to the point where it was just bits of cloth. He had to remove it to change, and the moment Oz's eyes saw the scars Qrow wanted to fly away. But he couldn't do that to them. He couldn't leave them after everything.

Every time someone saw the marks, Qrow would get questions. Where did they come from? Why hide them? Why didn't you say anything? Every time. Every time someone saw them it was the same thing.

They'd press for details he didn't want to share. It was always the same. Everyone wanted answers he didn't want to give.

Well, _almost_ everyone.

Ozpin was the first to drop the subject after two questions. He asked where the scars came from, and why he hid them. And Qrow kept the answer brief. He didn't want people prying into his past prior to Beacon. Oz was more than understanding, and the topic never came up again. They never asked to see them. They never asked about them. They left the matter alone, because Qrow wasn't ready. And even when he was, Ozpin still never asked. In some way, it was a relief. Oz had enough to deal with in their life. They didn't need to hear about this.

James was the second to drop the subject, though not in the same way. After Qrow said "leave it at that", he apologized for prying immediately. That was a first. No one had ever apologized that
quickly, and it was a little jarring. But Qrow played it off as no big deal. It didn't matter after all.

At least, usually it didn't.

He wasn't sure why the nightmare took hold of him that night. Or rather, the memory. He couldn't really tell the difference anymore. And frankly, he didn't care if he ever did. The screams, the pain, the tears. The feel of leather and knives on his back. The shouts of a crowd in the middle of the town square. The wide eyed stare of red eyes, mirroring his own. It didn't matter if it was a memory or a nightmare.

For Qrow Branwen, they were one and the same.

When he had woken from that nightmare, James was quick to comfort him. It wasn't his job to be the support. It was his job to smile and look pretty while Qrow waited on him. That was what was expected. Then again, James wasn't like other Atlesian Nobles. He wasn't born into it. And he had seen hardship the others would never dream of happening to them. And just like the nights where James' terrors took hold and Qrow was there to bring him back to reality, James was there for him with a warm embrace and comforting words, and Qrow couldn't be more grateful.

But then that motherfucking massage.

Why the hell did James offer?

Why did Qrow accept?

James even gave him chances to back out. He wouldn't have gone through with it if Qrow didn't want it. But after all the shit he'd been through? Losing Oz, the search for a family that could possibly be dead, Raven and her insistence at coming after him, the Grimm, the relics. After all the stress, a massage felt like the best thing in the world.

And if you were to ask Qrow if he'd like another, he'd almost certainly say yes.

Almost.

The kiss to his forehead was unexpected, but not entirely unwanted. It was nice, having someone this close to him. It was a feeling Qrow hadn't had the luxury of enjoying in a while. But James was still his employer, even if his kingdom technically didn't exist anymore. It wasn't appropriate to cling to him like this.

Letting him massage my back isn't appropriate, he thought. Snuggling close like this isn't appropriate. Kissing him on the cheek was definitely not appropriate.

"Why does being a butler and his friend have to be so nerve wracking?" he mumbled. "Well, it doesn't matter. What's done is done. Tomorrow we'll leave and put this behind us. No more moments of weakness."

Qrow slipped into the bathhouse, praying the water would help clear his head.

"Over here."

Oscar quietly followed Ozpin as they snuck aboard the caboose of the train, his heart pounding
rapidly at the thought of being caught. The caboose was filled with crates of Dust though, so there were plenty of places to hide.

"You alright?" Ozpin asked.

"Kind of," Oscar whispered. "Are you sure this is a good place to be? And not, you know, in a main car?"

"I'm sorry, but with people after me, it's best we don't get seen. And besides, neither of us have money for tickets."

"Good point."

The two of them found a spot near the wall, perfectly hidden from view of any potential rail inspector, and made themselves comfortable for the journey ahead.

"I think it's safe enough," Oz mumbled. "Now hold still."

"Huh?"

"I'm unlocking the rest of your Aura."

"Oh, right."

Oscar closed his eyes and stayed very still as Ozpin gently placed their hands on his shoulders. There was a gentle warmth covering the both of them, and a soft emerald green wrapping around him like a blanket as Ozpin cast the spell.

"For it is in knowledge that we achieve enlightenment. Through this, we become a paragon of virtue and guidance to aid those to come."

This isn't the normal spell, Oscar realized. There was a gentle tingling sensation, and Oscar could feel his soul being pulled forward. There was a light pop in his ears, and a slight pain in his right eye.

"Infinite in distance yet bound by time, I release your soul and with my spirit, protect thee."

Oscar opened his eyes, wincing slightly on the right side, only to let out a soft gasp as he saw his reflection in Ozpin's glasses.

Ozpin's right eye was no longer a vibrant gold. Instead, it was a warm, earthy brown like freshly tilled soil in springtime. And Oscar's own hazel now bore no hints of green and brown.

"Nini?" Oscar asked. "What did you-"

"I used my Aura to unlock yours," they explained. "As well as transferred some of my magic to you."

"You gave me your magic? But...why?"

Ozpin looked away, turning the homemade cane over in their hand as they contemplated what to say. "I don't think you'll want to hear this story, Oscar..."

"Nini," Oscar said, placing their hand on Oz's knee. "Please. Tell me what you're planning."

Hesitantly, Ozpin looked around, reaching over to one of the smaller crates and snapped their
fingers. With a light spark, a few small Dust crystals appeared in their hand. "Do you have a handkerchief?"

"Oh, uh, yeah." He reached into his pocket and pulled out a patchwork piece of cloth, laying it flat on the floor as Oz crushed the crystals into a fine powder. The color seemed to fade from the world until only their eyes and the Dust retained their hue.

"Many eons ago," they recounted, "there were two beings." They dropped the powder onto the cloth and Oscar watched as it took the forms of two silhouettes. "The older was a being of light, and with their magic created the day. The younger, a being of darkness, created the night."

"Wait," Oscar said. "This is the Tale of the Two Brothers. Isn't it?"

"Yes," Ozpin said. "And no. This is the original tale, lost to the ages." They turned their attention back to the Dust, waving their hand over the powder to change the scene. "Both of them worked together to create the Remnant that we know today, side by side as allies and friends. However, when it came to mankind, they came into disagreement of their creation. The older believed that bestowing magic unto them would cause great devastation. The younger, however, believed otherwise. And the two began to fight."

Oscar watched the silhouettes move, bickering as figures like Grimm began to appear.

"Their anger, their fears, their sorrow, all of it flew from them and created the Creatures of Grimm. In hope of protecting their creations, both beings bestowed magic to mankind in an attempt to aide them in destroying the beasts. But alas, they could not undo what they had created, and the Grimm began to wipe out mankind."

"That's horrible," Oscar whimpered, watching the Dust play out the scene.

"It was," Oz agreed. "Feeling shame for what they had done, the two bestowed four relics to mankind to defend themselves, gave their powers to two guardians, who used the relics in ways the two never imagined was possible. Soon, the Grimm were driven back, and mankind began to rise. The Beings of Light and Darkness, realizing the error of their ways, left Remnant, and faded into legend."

"But...what does this have to do with your magic?"

"The guardians were created by them. A Wizard, chosen by the light. A Mage, born from the darkness." Oz's gaze met Oscar's, heavy with years of knowledge and pain. "I was chosen, much like you were, and in time you will gain all of my powers. For now though, you'll only have access to a small amount of it."

Oscar ran his fingers through his hair, feeling a mix of confusion and relief. "So then...what other powers will I gain?"

"Everything I have mastered," Oz explained. "Time manipulation, telepathy, healing, advanced cloaking. Those powers as well as the abilities of those that came before."

"That sounds pretty cool, actually," Oscar chuckled.

"It can be," Oz sighed. "However, you'll need to create your own abilities through your training, and though it isn't required, it's customary to focus on one of the four relics in your studies."

"You mean...The Gifts to Mankind, right?"
"Yes." The dust powder morphed and hardened momentarily, creating copies of the four stones. "Knowledge, Creation, Destruction, and Choice. Many of the previous Wizards believed picking one as their discipline helped with mastering magic."

Oscar looked between his mentor and the image, brow furrowed in concentration. "So I get to pick one and base my arsenal of magic around that?"

"Something like that," Oz chuckled. "You have plenty of time to decide on which aspect of humanity you'll focus on if you decide to go that route. You'll be learning everything I know in the meantime."

"What did you pick, Nini?" Oscar asked innocently. Ozpin's eyes darkened in sorrow, and he started to think he had asked the wrong question. "You don't have to tell me if you don't want to."

"No, I...I think you need to hear this." They snapped their fingers, causing the Dust to move once more. "When I was your age, I was chosen to be the next Wizard. My mentor came for me, and gave me the same talk you and I are having now. You're actually a lot like I was when I was your age."

"I am?" Oscar asked.

"Yes," Ozpin said. "When I started my training, I decided my discipline was Knowledge...My mentor was Creation...A dangerous combination if left unchecked."

"Wh-what do you mean?"

"When I was learning how to mix potions one day, we decided to try something new. What we were planning was creating a potent healing serum. We inadvertently created something else...something we could only describe as the Ultimate Evil..."

The Dust powder slowly moved to create the form of a woman with hair and skin like alabaster, dressed in smoke and the essence of death itself, with blood darker than the night sky pulsing through the veins swirling across her skin.

And her visage shook Oscar to the core.

The train car shook, the spells broke, and the image of the woman vanished.

"Who was that?" Oscar croaked, taking comfort in the return of the colors.

"My greatest sin," Oz whispered. "Born from my botched experiment. The Grimm Witch, Salem." They set to work cleaning up the Dust, tying it into the handkerchief. "My mentor and I worked hard to defeat her...and after a long battle, I managed to lock her far, far away. But she's grown in strength. She's gained followers, warriors who feel her reign will bring Remnant into a new era, with them at the top."

"So what's the plan then?"

Ozpin looked at him, eyebrow raised. "What do you mean? The plan is to get to Mistral and get you trained to be the next Wizard."

"I meant...for stopping Her." Oscar looked at them, a newfound sense of fear and concern for his mentor's well being. "You're planning on killing her, right? Salem?"

Ozpin slumped against one of the crates, letting out an exhausted sigh. "Not exactly...I don't...really
have a plan to defeat her, just...an idea to stall for time, really. And so far it seems to be working..."

*That doesn't sound good,* he thought. "...Nini?"

"Yes Oscar?"

"Are you going to be okay?"

Ozpin gave him a gentle smile and ruffled his hair. "I'll be fine."

"You sure?" Oscar asked, unconvinced.

"Of course," they assured. "I'm always alright. Now get some rest. I'll wake you when we get to Mistral, and we'll talk more then."

"Okay...but if you need to talk about anything...don't hold it in, okay?" Oscar gave them a timid smile, curling up beside them as they closed their eyes. "Good night Nini."

Ozpin chuckled and wrapped their arm around them protectively. "Good night Oscar."

---

When Qrow had returned from his bath, he was in a very good mood. The soothing waters were just what he needed for his hangover, and he felt more than ready to take on the next stretch of their journey. Once James was back, they'd discuss things further.

However, his *special talent* seemed to have other ideas.

When he came back to the room, there were ten men, dressed head to toe in black suits and Grimm masks holding guns, and the barrels pointed right at his nose.

*Of course,* he thought.

"You know," Qrow hummed, smirking, "it's rather rude to hold a guy at gunpoint when he's in nothing but a bathrobe."

"Where is she?" asked one of the masked figures.

"Who?" Qrow asked. "You looking for the innkeeper? Because I last saw her-"

"The Invincible Girl," growled the same figure. "Where. Is. She?"

"Never heard of her. Now if you don't mind, I gotta get dressed."

"Sir," said another of the soldiers, holding up Qrow's wallet. "This guy is a friend of The Iron General."

*James!*

"Oh really? How about-"

Before he could finish, Qrow swung his leg up and kicked the gun out of the goon's hand, grabbing him and using him as a shield as the rest began to fire.
"You know," Qrow huffed, "having your Aura can come in handy. Keeps you from dying from a pissed off butler." He threw the now dead man at the group and reached over to pick up Huginn. With a quick and forceful swing, he cut down the attackers, quietly cursing under his breath as he was splattered with blood.

"Dammit," he hissed. "I just got out of the bath." Qrow quickly changed into his uniform, grumbling as he packed the bags. He'd have to find James, and fast. They had to leave before-

"GRIMM!"

"EVERYONE TO THE SAFEHOUSE!"

"HEAVEN HELP US!"

"Oh, for fuck's sake!" Qrow bellowed, watching as everyone began to run out of the inn. "Just one day. Just one fucking day I'd like to travel across Anima without risking my fucking neck!"

He hurried out of the inn and saw the carnage. There were several White Fang units leading Grimm into Kigiku. Spells were flying from various directions, some shrinking the creatures while others destroyed them entirely. Looking overhead, there were several Nevermore flying in the direction of the city.

"Dammit all!"

Without a moment of hesitation, Qrow began to charge at the Grimm and White Fang soldiers, striking down everyone that attempted to shoot him down. Smoke filled his sight as he cut down Beowolf after Beowolf, but he didn't care. He had to hurry and find James.

But where is he? Qrow wondered. He's one of the tallest people out there, so he should be easy to find.

"LOOK OUT!"

Qrow felt a hard tug on his weapon, and just about every other piece of metal on him, and he was pulled up and away just as an Alpha was about to slash him in half. There was a loud explosion, and the Beowolf turned to smoke.

Turning to look at his rescuer, Qrow saw a young maiden with long hair of fire, her eyes a vibrant green, perfectly accented by the circlet on her head.

"Are you alright?" the girl asked.

"I'm fine," Qrow grumbled. "Thanks."

"No problem." She looked around, smiling fondly when a group of people in cloaks started running toward her. "My team. Gotta go."

"Wait-" Qrow started, only to feel a wave of relief.

James was leading the group toward them.

"Pyrrha!" screamed a girl carrying a hammer. "We need you to do a mass unlock stat!"

"What?!" The green eyed girl looked floored by the request. "Why?!!"
"No time!" panted the girl with purple hair. "Unlock now!!!"

"I'll cover you," Qrow told her.

"We will cover you," James corrected.

"Okay," Pyrrha sighed. "Let's go then."

Qrow and James gave a quick nod, and both of them rushed forward. Qrow took lead, slicing enemies that came close while James fired back up shots. When Qrow leapt backwards, James rushed forward, blocking a claw from an Ursa with his metal hand and shooting an oncoming White Fang officer in the kneecap. Qrow glanced back to see the group glowing a soft red hue.

"Friends of yours?" Qrow asked James playfully.

"Kind of," James chuckled. "They kind of burned down Nettle Town. Nora promised to tell me why if I saved her friends."

"Which one's Nora?"

"The shorty with the hammer."

"Gotcha."

"Qrow watch out!"

Qrow turned to see a Beringel leaping toward him, and before he could stop it, James got between the two and held out his left hand. A small dome of gears surrounded him and Qrow, and the Grimm was lunged backwards from the force.

"Woah!" Qrow cackled. "Where did you learn that?!!"

"Don't know, don't care," James sighed. "You okay?"

"Yeah, I'm good. You?"

"Of course. I got you here, don't I?"

"Alright, don't get sappy."

James lowered his hand and shot the Beringel the moment the dome vanished. Qrow saw the White Fang troops evacuating as the Grimm began to vanish.

"This was a little too easy," Qrow muttered. "Wait...where are your little friends?"

"I don't know," James said. "They've...gone?"

Qrow looked upwards, smirking as he saw the hammer girl, (Nora, Qrow reminded himself), channeling lightening as she rapidly swung her hammer to break the wings of the Nevermore. "Those little scamps."

"Qrow look!"

His red eyes followed James' finger, and his heart sank.

The cloaked teenagers were boarding an escape ship a good hundred yards away just as it was
taking off, carrying a few injured people with them.

And one of those people was a young girl with black and red hair and a flowing white hood.

Without even thinking, Qrow dropped his scythe and transformed, flying as fast as he could to try and catch the ship as it began to fly away. This ship wasn't like the others. It was faster, and had stronger engines. The force of take off threw him back and tossed him about, knocking some of his feathers off. He cawed loudly, trying to get the attention of the girl in the hood.

But she didn't hear him.

"Qrow!" James called, trying to follow. "Qrow, what's going on?!"

Qrow changed back as he landed, the ship now too far and too fast to follow.

"Ruby," he whimpered.

"Qrow-"

Qrow turned on his heal, his red eyes piercing right through the Earl. All the anger, frustration, and fear was festering in his gaze, causing James to freeze in place.

"Your little friends have Ruby," Qrow growled.

"They what?" James asked.

"They have my niece!" he bellowed, gripping James' shirt tight enough to stretched the fabric. "What the fuck did you do?! Sell her for fire power?!"

"Qrow, listen to me! I didn't-"

"She was here the whole time! We could have saved her! Ruby was here the whole time and your little war buddy's posse just ran off with her!"

"Qrow!" James said sternly. "I didn't know! I didn't exactly get a chance to ask them anything!"

"You're the one who can talk to her without a scroll, you bastard! You should have known-"

"You think it's that easy?! If I could talk to her anytime I wanted, I'd be on 24/7 until we get to Mistral!" James gave him a harsh shove, nearly knocking Qrow over. "Don't go taking your frustration out on me, Qrow. I. Didn't. Know."

Qrow felt his body shaking with rage. He stormed over to reclaim his weapon, pulling his cape closer to his chest as he did so.

"We're going after them," Qrow managed to choke out. "Those kids burned down an entire town, and now they have my family. We're going after them and we're getting her back. I've lost too much already. I'm not losing Ruby. Not now."

James nodded, straightening out his shirt. "I'll get our things-"

"No, Your Lordship," Qrow hissed. "You're going to stand still and look pretty. You're not going to do anything other than tracking Ruby. I'm going to do the heavy lifting." James reached out a hand to him, and Qrow flinched away. "Don't. Just...Just don't." He turned back toward the Moonflower. "We have to find those kids. Be ready to leave in an hour."
And Qrow walked back to the inn, dragging his sword on the ground slightly as he glanced around. Most of the nobles had retreated to the safe houses nearby. It'll be a while before anyone comes out.

Plenty of time to gather the rest of what they needed.

As he stumbled back into the honeymoon suite and set Huginn in the corner, Qrow felt as if his legs were about to give out. Everything felt like it was about to burst. All the fear. The anger. The loneliness. The weight of what had been asked of him. Everything was about to explode.

But he couldn't let it. Not now. Not while Ruby needed him.

So he took a deep breath, straightened his coat, and set to work.

"No more moments of weakness," he whispered.

Chapter End Notes

Well this was a rollercoaster to write. So for editing reasons, I had to move the Ghira part to 17/18. It just didn't seem to fit well in this chapter. And I know there was a lot of dialogue here, but for this I really wanted to explore a bit of the teacher/student dynamic with Oscar and Ozpin, and a lot of that was verbal. Things are going to be picking up now with them.

And that's really all I have to say here.

Let me know what you think!
"WATTS!"

Arthur froze in place at the counter, trying hard not to let himself lose control over his emotions as his awaited being reprimanded. In hindsight, this was probably inevitable. He knew there was a risk, but Merlot and Polendina had assured him that his research was of value. That was why he was left in charge of the labs while they tended to patients of the military.

And that was why Polendina's tone worried him.

"Dr. Polendina," Watts greeted, turning to look at his mentor. "To what do I owe the pleasure-"

"What in the name of the Gods have you been doing?!" Polendina screamed.

"I don't-"

"Don't play dumb with me! I've seen everything on your itinerary. Orders for human remains to be collected from our morgues; Grimm being shipped in from all over the globe; human test subjects?!

This isn't right, he thought. This wasn't what Arthur was expecting to hear from the kind doctor. There had to be a mistake. Why would he want dead bodies? Human test subjects? That had nothing to do with his research!

"Dr. Polendina," Arthur insisted. "I don't know what you're talking about. My research has nothing to do with humans."

"And the Grimm?!" Polendina screamed.

"I did order three Creeps," he divulged, "but you had signed off on that!"

"Then where did all the other orders come from?!"

"I-I don't know! My experiment doesn't even require remains."

"Arthur," Polendina sighed. "You're my brightest pupil. I gave you full control over this project..."
because I trust you to handle it in my place while I'm running the hospital."

"An opportunity I am eternally grateful for."

"But these records are making me reconsider everything! We assured The General that you had a way to enhance the Knights' fighting capabilities-"

"I have a theory," Watts corrected.

"And that theory is?" Polendina spat. "Arthur, no theory warrants these kinds of materials!"

"Materials I did not order," Arthur insisted. "Please trust me, Dr. Polendina. I am incredibly close to being able to succeed in this. I just need time to run tests and-"

"Time is something we don't have. And neither is patience for liars."

Arthur looked up at the nearby stairwell to see the glowing red eye of Dr. Merlot scanning him. In his hand was a tablet with the very familiar "M" logo on the back. His hair stuck up and all over, giving him a permanently exhausted look despite the robotic left eye.

"Liar?" Arthur stammered. "I'm not a liar-"

"I beg to differ," Merlot hissed, handing Polendina the tablet. "I was running scans, and I found a large number of forged documents and test results."

"How many?" Polendina asked, looking through the files.

"Not enough to get us shut down," he sighed. "But the order for a Nucklavee could-"

"A NUCKLAVEE?!!"

This was bad, Arthur thought. Why is this happening? He followed protocol, even if barely. His experiment was close to being ready for the testing phase! This was his ticket to the big leagues, and now?

Now it seems it's being taken away.

But why?

"Dr. Polendina," Arthur started. "I swear, I didn't-"

"All the evidence points back to your computer, Watts," Merlot spat. "The Nucklavee could get us shut down permanently!"

"Can you cancel this, Merlot?" Polendina asked calmly.

"Of course I can."

"Do it." Polendina's lime green eyes narrowed at Watts with confusion and confliction. "This is a very serious offence Arthur..."

"Sir, I swear-"

"I'll need you to clear out your office." He turned and hurried up the steps. "You have one hour."

"We'll have I.A. open a case," Merlot assured. "If it turns out you weren't the one forging
documents and ordering illegal materials, you'll be brought back. Being as understaffed as we are, I'm sure it'll take no time."

"But Sir, I never-"

"Watts," he interjected. "By law, we're required to turn you in for forgery and reckless endangerment. Polendina is doing you a favor by not doing that." A malicious smirk protruded from under his moustache. "I suggest you take it."

Merlot turned and began to make his way out of the lab, a soft chuckle under his breath as he moved. Arthur ran his fingers through his hair, his green eyes wide in shock, tears forming in the corners of his vision.

"It can't be.

"You set me up," Arthur realized.

Merlot looked over his shoulder, his red eye glowing fiercely.

"Progress has no place for the weak, Artie. The competition to improve the world is stiff, so those who can get ahead in the game better be sure to wipe out any ants in their way."

The door closed behind Merlot.

And there young Arthur Watts stood, all alone in the lab. His future was taken away. Even if Merlot was telling the truth about being let back into the company, he'd never be left alone again. He'd never be allowed to head any major projects, do solo research, or attempt to publish his own thesis through the Atlesian Military ever again. He'd be relegated to a glorified coffee maid helping others with their research. His work left unnoticed, unknown, unaccredited.

Arthur Watts had no place in the field anymore.

And it his blood boil.

"Merlot," he hissed. "I'll get you for this."

"It's too loud here. Can't we go somewhere else?"

Watts had to hold back a growl as he lead his 'students' up to the school, his green gaze set on the Headmaster's office. Käse had her hand gripped tightly on the hilt of her sword, trying to keep from lashing out at any of the students. He had expected this much from her.

"Käse," Watts muttered. "Just focus on either myself or Lloyd until we reach the main office. Once there, I'll muffle the outside of the room so you don't have to worry."

"Fine," she whined. "Lo, can you think that little song?"

"Sure," Lloyd said. "I can do that."

"Thanks."
Watts pressed his lips together in a thin line to prevent a smile and pushed the button to the elevator. There was a slight tingle coursing through his hand at the touch.

"Something wrong, Dr. Watts?" Lloyd asked.

"It seems someone used a muffling spell here recently," Watts explained. "Whoever cast it isn't used to using magic on a regular basis."

"Must not be a local," Käse mused. "Any idea who it was?"

"Only one person I can think of."

"That Belladonna person?"

"Yes."

The three of them entered the elevator, the younger fighters taking solace in the quiet the metal box provided. Watts pressed the button to take them to the top floor, raising an eyebrow when he felt a tug on his shoulder.

"What is it?" he groaned.

"Dr. Watts," Lloyd said, "Käse is wondering if you're planning on going after Merlot after capturing Belladonna and the rabbit magician."

Watts felt a slight twinge of anger deep in his chest, but brushed it aside.

"That isn't any of your concern," he chided. "Focus on the objective. We're going to see Lionheart, and I want you two to break him."

The students looked between each other, a malicious grin similar to Watts' own appearing on their faces.

"Yes, father," they said in unison.

"Are you sure you two will be alright alone?"

Taiyang stood on the porch, holding a sleeping Ruby in his arms as he watched Yang give Qrow and Summer their goodbye hugs. It was always a hard moment on them all, having to say goodbye.

Taiyang hated goodbyes.

"We'll be fine," Summer assured him. "We'll be able to handle this job no problem."

"Alkmene is a relatively safe place," Qrow chuckled. "I think we'll be fine."

"You sure?" Tai asked.

"Trust me Tai-Tai, I know that area like the back of my hand." Jokingly, Qrow squinted at the back of his left hand. "That's new."

"Qrow, please," Taiyang chuckled. "I'm serious, I can come with you if you want. Just let me get
"Tai," Summer giggled.

"Kidding." With his free arm he motioned for them to hug him, wrapping his arm tightly around Qrow while Ruby had Summer in a death grab. "Please, stay safe."

"We will," Qrow promised.

"We'll be home before you know it," Summer affirmed, kissing Tai on the cheek.

"Love you," came Ruby's squeaky voice.

"Love you too, Rubes," Qrow hummed.

"Love you too Ruby," Summer said.

There was the soft rumble of an engine running, a light breeze trailing across her face. Slowly sitting up, Ruby tried to get a bearing on her surroundings. She was in a small cot, with a group of people sitting together near her feet. They were about Yang's age, if she had to guess. There was a woman with long red hair pulled back in a high ponytail leaning slightly on the armored blond. On the woman's lap was a smaller girl with short ginger hair, and a man with long obsidian locks had his arms wrapped around the blond man's shoulder.

"I'm just saying, maybe she could help us."

"Pyrrha, we can't just adopt every stray hunter we come across."

"What if she's Mistral?"

"She's not. Her I.D. said Vale. And she has a scythe! You really think they'd let a scythe wielder into the secret police?"

"Still not as cool as a grenade launcher."

"Oh, she's waking up!"

"Act natural."

Ruby couldn't help the soft giggle as the four teens scrambled to sit properly, with the blond facing her on her left and the black haired one on her right and the red heads between them. The shorter girl had on a tight fitting navy blue blazer with a hammer and a thunderbolt pattern embroidered in pink thread over her heart, while the taller wore a high quality chest plate with a shield and spear design etched in the center. The blond wore light armor over a black hoodie and jeans, while the black haired man wore a green shirt with pink and gold lotus flowers on the left sleeve.

And around their shoulders, all had long golden hoods much like her mother's.

"Why hello, little treasure," the black haired man greeted, his magenta eyes bright with life.

"Um, hi?" Ruby greeted.
"How're you feeling?" asked the blond.


"Well," the ginger girl squeaked, "we did kind of find you collapsed on the forest floor with barely any Aura. A bit of soreness is kind of a given."

"We're glad you're alright though," said the blond.

"I'm sorry," Ruby mumbled, confused. "But...who are you people?"

"I'm sorry," said the tall red head. "We forgot to introduce ourselves. My name is Pyrrha Nikos." She gestured to the girl beside her. "This is Nora Valkyrie."

"Nice to meetcha!" Nora giggled.

"My name is Lie Ren," the man on Pyrrha's left introduced. "And the man beside Nora is Jaune Arc."

"Hey," said Jaune. "What's your name?"

"Ruby Rose," said Ruby. "Um..." She looked between them all before settling on Pyrrha, feeling most relaxed looking at her. "Where am I exactly?"

"On a ship Pyrrha stole from the Fang," Nora giggled. "Winter calls it 'The Falcon', but we call it Phil."

"We're on the way to our base," Ren explained. "We didn't know whether or not you'd wake up before then, given the situation."

"Base?"

"Long story," Pyrrha said. "Right now, we just want you to know, you're safe here with us. The Gold Blade is here to help."

"Um. Thank you?"

"No problem," said Jaune.

"So Ruby," Ren inquired. "What were you doing in the middle of the woods?"

"Um..." Ruby scrunched her nose in thought, trying to remember what happened. "I was travelling when I ran into a bandit...I was in Asphodel and then I jumped through a portal and-"

"Asphodel?!" Nora gasped. "That's nearly three months from Sagisō on foot! How'd you get to Kigiku so fast?"

"Wait, you found me in Kigiku?!" Ruby's silver eyes widened in fear. "C-can you take me back?!"

"No can do," Jaune grumbled. "The Fang was bringing Grimm into the town. We had to get you and the other patients out of there before-"

"But my Uncle Qrow was back there! Please, you have to take me back!"

The four looked between each other, with Jaune standing up to head to the cockpit and Nora following right behind. Ren stood up and made his way over to one of the windows, running his
hair through his hair.

"I don't think we'll be able to go back," Ren sighed. "But...if we can, we can see if we can allow you entry to one of the hideouts not too far from here. That should put you on the same path as your uncle."

"Though if you wanted," Pyrrha started. "You could-"

"Pyrrha, please." Ren interrupted. "She's fifteen. Don't go recruiting her."

"We were far younger when we joined up, Ren."

"That was different. We-"

"I'm sorry," Ruby whimpered. "I um...I'm really confused...What do you mean by recruit? And hideouts? Are you spies like Spruce Willis?"

Pyrrha was about to answer, only for Ren to shoot her a glare, silencing her.

"All you need to know," Ren said, "is that we're not your enemy."

*That doesn't help*, Ruby thought. *What's going on with these people?* She glanced at her left hand, half tempted to use the stone again. It wasn't the first time she had done so to get information she needed. But she didn't know who these "Gold Blade" people were. She also realized she didn't have Crescent Rose on her person. And Ruby was still tired from escaping Raven.

In the end, she decided it was best to stay put and stay quiet.

"Hey guys!" Jaune called, hurrying back. "We're to bring Ruby with back to the main base."

"Wait, what?" Ruby asked. "Why?"

"Well," Nora laughed nervously. "Do you know someone named James Ironwood?"

The gnawing feeling in her chest eased, and Ruby couldn't help the smile she was making. "I know someone named James, yes."

"Do you know all the places he's been so far?" Jaune asked.

"Um...Let's see...I know they're heading to Mistral, like me. They were heading to Kigiku when I lasted talked to them, and before that they were in Nettle Town-"

"Great," Nora cheered. "In that case, you're going home with us! Douggie said he wants a word with you about them." She turned her turquoise gaze to Ren. "And we're going to be preparing for the long haul mission."

"I'll gather everyone up then," Ren sighed. "What's our E.T.A.?"

"Two days."

"Okay."

"In the meantime," Jaune said to Ruby, "you can rest up here."

"How do I know I can trust you?" Ruby asked cautiously. As much as she wanted to trust them, she couldn't help but feel there were too many secrets being held.
"Well," Pyrrha hummed. "Is there anything we can do to show you we're trustworthy?"

"My scythe?" Ruby suggested. "You could show me where it is."

"Oh of course!" Pyrrha laughed. "I'll get it."

Ruby watched as Pyrrha lifted her hands, a soft, fuzzy black glow, and a light buzz filled her ears. She let out a soft squeal as she saw her weapon floating over to her.

"Oh my gosh! Pyrrha, how are you doing that?! That's so cool!"

"My Semblance is Polarity," Pyrrha giggled.

"That's way cooler than me. I can only run fast!"

"That's a useful ability," Ren commented fondly. "Speed has many uses."

"You mean besides swiping strawberries and cookies from the kitchen?"

"Definitely!" Nora chuckled.

"Stick with us, Ruby," Pyrrha said, "and you'll learn all sorts of things Hunters are all capable of."

As Crescent Rose fell gently into her lap, her hand began to feel warm. Not the same burning sensation she had felt when arriving in Asphodel. This was more like a hug. A gentle embrace filled with love.

"Okay," Ruby said softly. "I trust you. Take me to your leader."

Pyrrha gave her a gentle smile, her green eyes soft and welcoming.

"Welcome to The Blade," Pyrrha said.

It was getting close to late afternoon when Ghira finally looked up from his reading. It had been three days since Leo had given him Ozpin's journal, and trying to make heads or tails of the notes was quite the challenge. Half of the pages were in a code he couldn't decipher, while there were some pages where everything was in riddles. But from what he could make out, all of it was about the stones.

Basic abilities all of them have, he pondered, include telepathy with other wielders, summoning constructions out of gears, and an increased healing factor. Excessive use can cause a user to pass out. Each has their own set of abilities unique to the stone.

"But I can't figure out what those abilities are," he groaned. "Dammit Oz, I love you but you need to make notes that are understandable and don't need thirty ciphers to decode." Ghira closed the journal and slipped it into his coat pocket. "If only I could get in touch with Glynda. She knows this stuff like the back of her hand...What do you think James?"

There was no answer.

"Can't reach him...Ruby? Are you there?"
No one replied.

"I suppose she's busy," he sighed. "Maybe a tea break would help-"

*Knock, Knock, Knock!*

"Come in."

Ghira watched as the door to the study opened. Slowly, two men approached the desk with their hoods on. One had a long fox tail, and the other a pair of large pointed ears.

"Master Ghira," the taller man greeted. "Professor Lionheart wishes to speak with you."

"He'll be here momentarily," said the shorter. "It's rather important."

"Thank you Corsac, Fennec," Ghira replied. "I'll be with you in a moment, I just need to clean up in here."

The two men nodded and left the room, closing the door behind them.

Ghira proceeded to put books away on the shelves, quietly feeling thankful for the private office he had been supplied for his studies. Left to his own devices, he'd probably not be any closer to finding out what happened than he was before leaving Atlas. Before his friends were scattered.

Perhaps I should hire a team and go search for them now, Ghira thought. James and Qrow might be better at interpreting these notes than I am.

"That's a great idea. You should leave now."

Ghira froze, looking around for the source of the voice. It wasn't nearly as high pitched or raspy like Ruby, but it wasn't low enough to be James. And there was a slight accent, most likely from the more eastern parts of the continent.

"You need to leave," the voice said again.

"Who are you?" Ghira asked quietly. "Are you the holder of the Yellow stone?"

"No, I am not."

"Who are you?"


"Master Ghira?" Fennec called. "Is everything alright?"

"Everything's fine," Ghira assured.

"Good. Then you won't mind us coming in."

The doors opened and Ghira felt a burning in his left hand as six people entered the room. Fennec and Corsac stood close behind two young magicians; a man with long, platinum blond hair and dark brown eyes; and a woman with a sunny golden stare and long ginger hair tipped with white. If he didn't know better, Ghira would have assumed she was related to the Albains.

A man stood at the front of the group, tall and lanky in his black suit, a smirk buried beneath his
facial hair. And Leo slouched low behind him, twirling his tail between his fingers in an attempt to stop the shivering.

"Leo," Ghira said slowly. "You are going to introduce me to your friends. Aren't you?"

"Dr. Arthur Watts," said the man in the suit. "My employer sent me to invite you to her home, Chief Belladonna."

"Leo?"

"I'm sorry Ghira," Leo whimpered. "I...they..."

"You sneaky sneak you," giggled the girl mockingly, her hand drawing a sword. "Giving up your best friend to save yourself? How cruel."

Leo bit his lower lip, saying nothing.

"Is it safe to assume you want me tom come with you, Dr. Watts?" Ghira asked, giving Leo a gentle smile and pushing aside the heartbreak as he lifted his hands in assumed surrender.

"Yes," Watts said. "Is it safe to assume you're surrendering?"

"Not in the slightest."

"Good," said the young man. "We like a challenge."

Ghira let out a soft huff and turned around, running toward the window, crossing his arms to protect his face as he broke through the glass. The magicians ran after him, the girl giggling manically as she lifted her sword.

Ghira began to fall, spinning around so he could see the magicians coming his way. The blond clapped his hands together and began to glow a gentle silver, and suddenly the decent fell to a screeching halt. Glancing over his shoulder, Ghira saw that there was a pale platform against his back. He quickly scrambled to stand, the two that had followed him standing upright in front of him.

"Impressive spell," he complimented. "Mind if I ask your name?"

"Lloyd Eledyr," the man introduced. "And this is my sister, Käse Morana."

"Charmed, I'm sure," Käse said, giving Ghira a curtsy. "Now, why don't you come with us quietly, and I won't have to chop off that arm of yours. I'm sure that rock would look beautiful in our Queen's crown."

"Wait," Lloyd said. "Are you saying that-?"

"Yep," she snickered. "I can't believe it. I heard so many things about this Ozpin person, but to leave something that important with a half-baked kitten? How stupid can they be?"

"Well then," Lloyd sighed. "It looks like She'll be extra happy with father when we're done here."

"I'm afraid I won't be joining you," Ghira hummed, closing his eyes. "And since I'm a "half-baked kitten, mind giving me a hand?"

"What?" Käse asked.
The burning sensation in his hand grew, and ten spiked gears appeared in front of Ghira. Holding his hand out, two of them flew into his grasp while the remainder spun forward, separating the two and chasing after Lloyd. Käse flew forward toward Ghira, her blade glowing as it made contact with the left gear. Without opening his eyes, Ghira spun around quickly, the spike of the right gear scraping against the armored dress of his opponent.

"Not bad," Käse grunted. "For an old guy."

"This 'old guy' has years of experience," Ghira chuckled. "And doesn't take too kindly to children who hold his friends hostage."

"Hostage my ass. Lionheart gave you up!"

"And I'm sure he only did it because you threatened his school."

Käse jumped back, dodging another swing from the gears. "So what if we did?"

"Then I forgive him for attempting to give me over to you."

Ghira threw both gears in her direction, holding back a smirk as there was the sound of fizzling from his opponent.

"You forgive him?!" she screamed, cursing as the sword was knocked out of her hand. "Don't you hate him for giving you over?!"

"I could never hate Leo," he shrugged. "He's protecting the children in his care by doing so. I admire him for that."

"But he could be sending you to your death!"

"I'm not saying it doesn't hurt. I understand and refuse to be angry, but that doesn't mean it doesn't hurt." He slowly opened his eyes, a look of pity glinting from them. "Just like how those gears will hurt your brother if that shield doesn't hold."

Käse looked back to see Lloyd, a shield up and slowly cracking against the gears. Her sunny eyes looked to Ghira one last time as she snarled, "You're a fool." She dropped low in an attempt to knock his legs out from under him.

"A fool, am I?"

Ghira lifted the gears in his hands and threw them down on the platform, holding back a chuckle as it shattered.

"We need to leave now," the little voice insisted as they fell.

"Where to?" Ghira asked. "Kind of falling fast here."

"Allow me."

There was a warm sensation, a sharp tingle, and as Ghira's feet made contact with the ground, Haven vanished. In its place was a town, abandoned and decrepit, with a single tree in the center of the cobbled walkways. He settled himself at the base of its roots, taking a deep breath as the burning began to subside.

"So," he panted. "That was a thing..."

"Indeed," the voice agreed. "Are you alright?"
"I'll be fine. I'm more worried about Leo than I am about myself." He reached into his pocket and pulled the journal out, smiling fondly. "At least they didn't get this..."

"But don't let your guard down," reminded the voice. "We got out of there by the skin of our teeth, but now they know about both the journal and the stone. You'll need to hide, and fast."

Ghira nodded, feeling the exhaustion overtaking his body. "Any suggestions?"

"There's a house near the edge of town with a lotus on its front door. You can hide there."

"Thank you...what is your name?"

The voice remained quiet, as if hesitant to reveal such information. Ghira simply shrugged it off. If his new friend wasn't ready to talk, he wouldn't press them to.

Ghira pulled his overcoat closer to his body as he waddled through the town, taking in all the details of the area. There were claw marks and hoof prints across the ground. The buildings were barely standing, covered in mold and moss. There were an empty waterway, and several bridges on the verge of collapse.

"What is this place?" Ghira wondered.

"Kuroyuri," said the voice. "This...was once the home of my wife and child."

"You have a family?"

"I did...My wife passed away...though my son...I am certain is still alive."

"You really love them. I can tell."

"Yes I do...they're the world to me..."

"I know how you feel," Ghira sighed. "I have my own family. A wife and daughter. She should be turning eighteen soon."

"My son is almost eighteen."

The sun began to set as they continued their chat, exchanging stories of their children that they remember fondly. It didn't take very long for Ghira to arrive at the house. Half of the roof was missing, but it was still stable enough of a shelter for him to rest in. With any luck, he'd be able to move onward. But as to where, he had no idea.

Going back to Menagerie wasn't an option right now. His people would be put in danger if he were to do so, and with Kali and Tukson still taking care of Klein, Ghira couldn't risk it.

"Any suggestions on where I should go?" Ghira asked his friend.

"I hear that Saboten is lovely this time of year," said the voice. "It's not too far, if I remember correctly. Three weeks by foot?"

"It'll have to do. Thank you, friend."

"Li."
"Pardon?"

"My name is Li Ren."

The sound of heels clicked across the hardwood floor as Cinder traced her fingers along the counter tops. It was very faint, even more so than back in Vale, but there was still a small trace of them.

"Not here!" Emerald called from the living room.

"Not here either!" Mercury bellowed from upstairs.

"No, they aren't," Cinder mused as they rejoined her. "But they were. For a good few days it appears."

"How can you tell?" Emerald asked.

"Hard to explain. It's as if there's...fragments..."

Her amber eyes flashed a fiery red momentarily as her hand rested on the window. Glancing outside, she could make out the vain attempt of filling in a rather large hole not too far from view. Without another word she left the house and made her way to the loose earth.

They landed here, she thought. Landed in the middle of this crater...If what I think happened did happen, then their Aura never locked...just a strong fragmentation...how interesting.

"Chances are they're heading to Mistral," she purred. "Mercury, call our friends at Haven. Chances are the brothers services will be needed."

"Sure thing," he huffed. "I'll get right on it."

"Good." She turned her attention back toward the house."Emerald?"

"Yes, Cinder?" Emerald responded.

"Keep watch for anyone about to come our way. I've got to take care of our own trail."

A small flame began to flicker in her hands as she walked back toward the house.

I will find you, Ozpin. And when I do, you'll wish you died that night in Atlas.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, so I cut this chapter in half because I'm running on a tight schedule. Next chapter should be out no later than May 1st.

Also, a quick announcement. From May 2nd to May 15th, These Broken Wings will be going on a brief hiatus. I'm not giving up on the story entirely, but I need to get
caught up on some one shots. So May 16th should be chapter 19.

Hope you enjoyed the chapter!
Blake's eyes darted upward as she began to drift awake. Weiss was standing beside her bed, hair fluffed up in a way that complimented the flower crown upon her head. Instead of the leather jacket and dress she had taken to wearing, she was wearing a frilly maid uniform, navy blue with a soft lavender apron.

Blake thought it was adorable.

But kept quiet on it.

"What's up?" she asked groggily.

"Velvet wants to do some two on two training," Weiss explained. "You and me against her and Fox. If you're up for it."

Blake sat up slowly, biting her lower lip in thought. They were supposed to be laying low until Coco and Sage got a hold of someone who could get them a ship. A training session would require finding someplace where they wouldn't be seen. It was risky, and they couldn't afford to be risky.

Then again, Weiss needed practice with her Glyphs. This might be the only chance they get for a while. Blake stood up, looking Weiss over. The heiress, while very dainty looking, was still a decent combatant. A decent combatant that could benefit from some extra training.

"Okay," Blake said. "After lunch we'll head into the woods and practice. For now, I'm going into town to get some supplies."

"Should I come with?"

"No, you wait here. Maybe talk to the others. Get to know them." She smiled fondly, gently patting her head. "They're good people, and I think they'd make good allies for you."

"You're sure?"

"Of course. They've liked having you around so far, haven't they?"
"True..."
"Something wrong?"

"How exactly do you know them all? You seem like really close friends."

Blake felt her ears flatten in shame, letting out a gentle huff as she walked to their bags. "I joined up with their group when I was about fourteen, maybe fifteen. I wanted to make a better world, and The Gold Blade seemed like a good option."

"Was it?" Weiss asked softly.

Blake rummaged through her sack, pulling out her wallet as she smiled, trying hard to keep the heartache down.

"Yes," she whispered. "The best choice I ever made." She stretched forward to work the tightness from her back. "I'm gonna head out. Try to stay out of trouble if you choose to hang with Sun and Reese. They like to cause mischief."


"You stay safe too."

And without another word, Blake left the room.

Blake left the inn, slowly wandering through the town toward the shopping district. The sound of loud music came from several of the alleyways, with people walking in the direction of the sound. She pulled the collar of her purple coat closer in an attempt to come off as unapproachable. Since they were having to wait to find if a ship would be coming, she had to make sure they had a backup plan.

"I wonder if Merrow's is still around," she mumbled. "If it is, I can ask if they have a cart and horses for rental. If not, I'll need a plan C-"

**Thump. Thump. Thump.**

She stopped, turning around quickly in an attempt to spot what was tailing her. She didn't know what it was, but she knew, somewhere, there was someone or something watching her. She continued on her way, keeping her ears moving so as to take in the sounds of everything around her.

And then she heard it again.

**Thump. Thump. Thump.**

Heavy footsteps of someone taller than her, almost as heavy as her father's footsteps. Blake hurried down an empty alley and drew her sword, holding tightly to the ribbon as she threw the blade upward.

It stuck tightly into the roof, allowing her to quickly climb upwards before she was spotted.
From her new perch, Blake could see the entirety of Saboten. Unlike the other villages outside of Mistral, this one had a more western appearance, resembling parts of downtown Vale far more than anything. With the large trees surrounding the area, it allowed Saboten to be hidden in shade almost year round, giving the place a permanent nocturnal atmosphere. The neon lights flickered on and off in an attempt to draw people's attention to the businesses bearing them.

Shady businesses.

Blake despised this place greatly for this.

But everyone had allies here, and because of this, the town remained.

Scanning the ground, she saw who it was that was following her. Tall, dark hair, tanned skin, and a very familiar olive green coat.

*The man from Hinagiku!*

Holding back a snarl, Blake prepared to jump, intending to land on the man's shoulder's when he was in the perfect spot. From her current position, he couldn't see her and, hopefully, couldn't sense her either.

"My lady," the man whispered. "I've tracked them to Saboten."

Blake stopped, leaning as close as possible to try and hear as much as she could without magic. Her eyes scanned the alley, unable to find any sign of another person anywhere.

*He's calling someone somehow, she realized. But how? Magic channeling or scroll?*

"They're not going anywhere," he continued to say. Blake could barely make out the confusion on his face. "Should I abandon the Blade to track him instead?"

*Track who? Blake wondered.*

"Understood," the man sighed. "I'll follow the Blade as planned. If I see the Chief, I'll take him personally."

*The Chief?!*

"Farewell, My Queen. I'll keep you updated."

With fire in her eyes, Blake leapt on top of him in anger, knocking the man to the ground before he could begin to leave. She held the blade to his throat as she pulled his head up by his hair. The man remained still, only glancing up to look at her from the corner of his eyes.

"Why are you following me?" she hissed. "Why are you after The Chief?"

"You were listening," the man grumbled.

"Who are you?" she demanded. "Who are you working for and what do they want with The Gold Blade and the Chief?!" When he remained quiet, she pressed the blade closer to the man's neck. "Answer me!"

"Who I am doesn't matter," he stated. "Nor does my reason for following you. If you're going to kill me, now would be the time. Otherwise, I'll have to kill you."

Blake couldn't help but let out a slight snicker. "You can't kill me. I died a long time ago."
Pulling out her scroll, Blake sent a quick message to Velvet, hoping the reception in the city was strong enough to send it. But the man beneath her grabbed her blade with his bare hand, ripping it from her grasp as he spun around and threw her against the wall. Before Blake had a chance to recover, the blade of Gambol Shroud pierced her abdomen, sending pain through her bones as she was pinned to the stone.

"I warned you," the man said, holding his fist up. "You should have listened."

Blake simply smirked, feeling the familiar burning sensation on her back.

"And I told you," she coughed. "You can't kill me. Not really."

The fist came flying forward, and everything went black.

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"Adam, please. We really shouldn't-"

"Quit screwing around, Blake. Now come on."

Letting out a sigh of frustration, Blake followed her mentor into the building. She didn't want to be there. She wasn't supposed to be there. She had made a promise not to go there.

But as she secured the scarf around her face, she let out a silent prayer that she'd be forgiven for breaking this promise.

Following close to the red-haired commander, Blake's ears curled under the black hair bow, twitching softly as she attempted to pinpoint any guards while Adam muttered incantations. If luck was on their side, no one would notice them sneaking around in the hallowed halls of the school. Her footsteps were silent against the tiled floors as they moved swiftly around corners.

"Which way?" he asked her.

Blake pulled out the map she had drawn, checking the surrounding area to look for the identifying markers. According to the map, there should have been a portrait of a woman with blonde hair nearby.

She looked around, and nearly fell back when she saw the harsh green eyes staring back at her from behind thin oval frames. Beneath the image was a plaque with a single phrase.

"Knowing your heart, mind, and courage leads to knowing yourself. Knowing yourself allows you to find home anywhere."

"Well?" Adam urged. "Where is it?"

"Take a left," Blake whispered. "It'll be near the end of the hall."

"Good. Let's grab this then get back to Khan."

"Okay."

The two of them hurried down the hall, carefully avoiding the guards and managing to make it to their location undetected. At the end of the hall was the door to The Vault, engraved with various
runes to keep unwanted visitors out.

"Do you have the key?" Adam asked.

"Here," Blake mumbled, handing him the small coin.

"Perfect. You know what we're looking for?"

"Yes."

"Good. We need to make it fast."

Without another word, the two of them hurried to the door. Adam put the coin into a hold near the handle, and the runes began to glow softly. The doors slowly swung inward, and they hurried inside.

The two of them split up, with Adam heading right while Blake took the left.

The Vault was massive, filled with various artifacts and tomes protected by enchanted glass cases.

The item they were looking for had to be here.

But where?

And just as she thought that, a soft red glow appeared in the corner of her eye. She turned and followed it, moving around large bookshelves until she came upon a part of The Vault blocked off by metal bars and chains. Behind the barricade was a single blue flower, with red thorns that shone brighter than the sun.

"I found it," she whispered.

"Hey!!"

Blake's eyes widened in fear as she slowly turned around, shaking as she saw the familiar bobbing ponytail running toward her, lavender eyes narrowed in frustration as she crouched into fighting stance.

"What are you doing here?!" the girl screamed. "This place is off limits!"

"I-I just-"

"Yang!" came a voice. "What's going on?! Where are you!"

"Over here, Nini!" the girl called. "I found an intruder!"

"Yang," Blake whimpered.

The girl faltered, her hands lowering slightly as her blonde hair fell in time with the tilt of her head. "Blake?"

"Please, you need to-"

But Blake never had the chance to finish her warning.

There was a flash of reds and golds. A spark of green. And before she knew it, she was sent flying through the bars and into the wall behind. She staggered to stand, hurrying to try and stop the
attack.

She saw a flash of violet, and knew she couldn't last long against any of the opponents.

But I have to try, she thought.

She manages to catch up to everyone, and flew forward to crash into the legs of a magician wielding a cane. The green light they had been emitting vanished just as Adam lunged forward, blade glowing.

"NO!"

Yang ran forward just as the blade was about to come down on the magician, right arm forward in an attempt to punch. Adam turned toward her, and swung.

There was a scream, and flash of light, and Blake's vision faded to black.

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"Blake? Blake. BLAKE!"

Blake's eyes darted upward as she felt the warmth in her back fade away. Weiss was standing beside her bed once again, hair fluffed up in a way that complimented the flower crown upon her head. Like before, instead of the leather jacket and dress she had taken to wearing, she was wearing a frilly maid uniform, navy blue with a soft lavender apron.

Blake still thought it was adorable.

But kept quiet on it.

"What's up?" she asked again.

"Velvet wants to do some two on two training," Weiss explained. "You and me against her and Fox. If you're up for it."

"Actually," Blake said, sitting up. "We need everyone to get together. It's an emergency."

"What? Why?"

"We're being followed. Look out the window."

Blake watched as Weiss went over to peek behind the curtain. She didn't know for sure if the man would be there, but it was better to be safe than sorry.

"Isn't that," Weiss muttered. "Isn't that the man that attacked us before?"

So he is outside the inn, Blake thought. "That's him."

"How did you-"

"Lucky guess." She quickly jumped out of bed, grabbing her weapon and placing it on her back like always. "Go wake up Sun and Neptune, and tell Velvet not to let Coco and Sage leave yet. I'll get Arslan and the others."
"Alright. I'll go do that."

Blake nodded and the two of them split up. Grabbing a sheet of paper from the desk, Blake wrote a quick note and hurried to slip it under the door to Team ABRN's bedroom as she knocked. Afterwards, she went around the inn to find anyone else. Once she'd gotten anyone else's attention, she returned to her room, just in time to see Bolin casting a cloaking spell.

It wasn't long before Weiss returned with everyone else in toe, locking the door behind them. Neptune was pink from the face down, a very telling purple mark on his still exposed neck. Weiss was also redder than a tomato.

Sun really knew how to leave a lasting impression it seemed.

"So what's up?" Reese yawned. "You wanted to talk?"

"We're being followed," Blake put bluntly.

There was a harsh silence over the group. Fox tilt his head in confusion. Arslan began to pace back and forth, running her fingers through her hair. Scarlet went over to the wall and gave it a decent punch.

"By who?" Scarlet asked.

"The guy from Hinagiku," Blake explained. "He's outside right now, waiting for us to leave the inn."

"Dammit," Sage groaned. "What the hell are we supposed to do?"

"We can't just leave," Coco grumbled, flopping onto the bed. "Not without drawing his attention."

"Why is he following us?" Arslan pondered.

"If I had to guess," Blake shrugged. "He's probably after you all. And the rest of The Blade."

"So he is from the capital!" Bolin growled. "That's just great."

"What should we do then?" Fox asked. "Do we leave and head for Sagisō? Or do we stay here and wait for him to leave us be?"

"I don't know," Neptune muttered. "This isn't good."

Everyone began to chatter amongst themselves, debating ideas and plans on how to avoid the man who was after them.

*He's after everyone here, Blake thought. If he follows them to the base, then it's game over. If that man catches dad, it's over. We can't just leave, but we can't stay here either.*

"Dammit," she hissed. "What the hell are we supposed to do?"

"Why not call a Shepherd?"

Everyone stopped and turned toward Weiss, who stood quietly in the corner near the window, holding Myrtenaster close. The looks on their faces were of shock, confusion, and in some cases, a state of being impressed. Even Blake had to admit, it seemed like a solid suggestion.

"What?" Weiss asked. "Was that a bad idea?"
"Actually," Fox hummed, "that's not such a bad idea...And if I remember right, there's a place nearby we can find one for hire."

"But can we find one strong enough?" Nadir inquired. "It took several of us working together to even bring that guy down for five seconds, and Velvet still had to use her ace in the hole just to get us out of there when he lost control of the monster."

"Ended up shorting out the camera too," Velvet muttered.

"We'll need someone who could possible hold their own against him," Sun wagered. "And don't forget, we're all kinda broke at this point, so it'll need to be cheap."

"Cheap, strong mercenary for hire," Arslan chuckled. "One that'd be willing to work for a bunch of kids. Do they have anything like that here in Saboten?"

"At the Amnesia," Fox said. "If I remember right, there's someone who goes by the title Amaryllis. Takes jobs only from Hunters in training." He turned his head up toward the ceiling, letting out a soft sigh. "If we send someone with a still valid trainee badge, we can probably get them to take the job no questions asked."

"Anyone have a valid badge?" Blake asked.

Everyone reached into their pockets, checking their IDs.

Only one person had a valid ID.

"Weiss?" Blake gasped.

Weiss held up her small ID, made out to make it seem as if she were a student at Atlas Academy. "Father had it made when I started learning fencing. The school doesn't technically exist anymore, and I never attended classes when it did. But it's still valid for the next month."

"That settles it," Fox said. "We'll send Schnee to hire Amaryllis. Lay on the charm Snow Angel."

"I don't know about this," Blake said. "Can you even 'lay on the charm', Weiss?"

Weiss' blue eyes watered slightly as she brought her slightly curled fingers to her face in surprise and hurt. "You don't think I can do this, Blake?"

Blake felt both sets of ears burning from embarrassment. "W-Weiss, don't cry. I didn't-"

"Gotcha," Weiss cackled, reverting back to her smiling state.

"Oh she got you good!" Sun laughed, though from his tone and the tears on his face, it was clear he was fooled as well.

"You're crying, Sun," Neptune chuckled.

"A-am not!"

Blake rolled her eyes and let out a sigh. "Alright. So Weiss gets the Shepherd and then what? We can't risk staying so close when that happens."

"Well," Yatsu mumbled. "We could go with Operation Roots. Myself, the team, and whoever else will head to Mistral in hopes of getting a boat to Vacuo."
"Roots isn't supposed to be for until after the tourney," Scarlet seethed.

"True," Sage agreed. "But given the situation, I'm sure Donny and Douggie wouldn't mind us sending Team CFVY on ahead."

"It'd also work out for Blake," Sun chimed in. "Get her home to Menagerie faster."

Everyone talked, piping in with the pros and cons of this plan. Blake simply sat back and listened to all arguments. On the one hand, it'd be good to split up and confuse their pursuer, but on the other, there was a high likelihood he'd still be able to track one group if the Shepherd didn't take care of him.

In the end, there was no clear consensus.

"Alright," Nadir spoke up. "Let's have a vote. I'll sit out so there's no need for a tie. Raise your hand if you want to go with Plan A: Keep going as is and deal with Olive Coat ourselves."

Six hands went up.

"Okay," Nadir said. "Now all in favor of Plan B: Hire a merc and start Operation Roots."

Seven hands flew into the air.

"Alright. Plan B wins. Weiss, get ready to head to the club."

"I'll go with you-" Blake started.

"No, it's best to send Fox and Velvet," Arslan said. "They know the area and aren't nearly as likely to draw attention."

"Besides," Fox chuckled. "No one suspects me."

Blake nodded, agreeing to let them go ahead this way. She didn't like the idea of Weiss going into such a dangerous situation so soon, but it was a necessity.

Everyone began to split up once more. This time around, Coco wouldn't be going with Sage. Instead, it'd be Bolin. Velvet and Fox were going with Weiss, and everyone else would be packing and preparing to go their separate ways. Before she was to leave though, Blake pulled Weiss aside, ears flat in worry.

"I uh," she stammered. "I just...uh...good luck, okay? And be safe?"

Weiss gave her a gentle smile and a light punch on the arm. "Don't worry. I'll handle this easy."

Without another word, Weiss hurried after Velvet, smiling proudly as the mission began.

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_The moon was high in the sky as James made his way to the rooftop of the dormitories. Nights like this were peaceful, and he enjoyed having a moment to enjoy gazing at the scattered rocks in the sky. It made him less anxious about upcoming battles he'd have to march his team through. Being a commanding officer was hard enough when it was strangers you were in charge of._
It was another thing entirely when it was someone you knew.

And that was what brought Captain James Ironwood out to the rooftops every clear evening.

Tonight, however, he wasn't alone.

There in the moonlight was his medic, kneeling in silent prayer as James watched from the shadows. It was inconsiderate to interrupt someone when they were in practice. So he waited until Lucien was finished before making himself known.

"Good evening, Adair," James greeted kindly.

"Evening Ironwood," Lucien sighed. "Did you get the paperwork sorted?"

"Yeah," James mumbled. "The entire team has been approved for a week of leave after the next mission."

"Which is when?"

"Three days from now."

"So I have a week to prepare." Lucien ran his fingers through his deep blue hair, the bags under his eyes making his face look skeletal in the moonlight. "Luckily, I have a sermon ready."

"Sermon?"

Lucien nodded, taking a seat on the edge of the rooftop as he pulled out a small book from his pocket. "The Twins asked me to prepare something. They aren't religious, but their parents and I are of the same faith, so..." He lightly shrugged, pulling a pen from behind his ear. "It's customary for someone of the same faith to say some words to help the departed move on...I've been working on something for them but something feels missing..."

"Really?" James asked. "Mind reading a bit for me?"

"You want to hear a sermon from a Shepherd?" Lucien chuckled. "That's a first. Most people hate hearing me preach."

"Maybe," James snickered, sitting beside him. "But then again I'm not most people. And who knows? Maybe having a friend hear it might help with anything you're stuck on."

Lucien's soft pink eyes sparkled in the light as he turned up toward the moon. "I've already got it done and memorized, but...maybe having a beta-listener might help."

James' blue eyes leveled on him, and he focused on listening as Lucien took a deep breath.

"Dear Heavenly Mother," he began. "Please grant the souls I send your way final peace and rest at last. Grant them safe passage into your loving arms as the shackles of mortality are stripped from their hearts, and watch over them as they lovingly watch and protect their sons from your Kingdom. May Selene and Angus Frasier find happiness within thy Sun, as they had in life, and allow them eternal happiness within Paradise. In the name of the Brothers, the Mother, and Spirit of Time, may they finally be laid to rest. Amen."

James looked up toward the moon, letting the words sink in as he listened to them over again in his mind. "I think it's perfect...It doesn't feel like it's missing anything."

"Perhaps," Lucien sighed. "But then again, you aren't a Shepherd. We tend to be perfectionists."
"I've noticed."

The two of them laughed and talked for about another hour, enjoying each other's company as they watched the moon cross the sky. All the while though, James had a question lingering on his mind.

"Lucien?" he asked. "Why did you decide to join the Atlesian Military?"

Lucien pulled his scarf close to his face, hiding the quiver of his lips as he spoke.

"I used to live on Anima," he explained. "A little town named Saboten. At the time there was nothing there for us, so we moved to a place called Pandora for a better life. My mother was training to be a Shepherd at the time, and my father was a doctor. I wanted to follow in their footsteps." He let out a heartbroken sigh. "But of course, life was never that kind to me. A tribe of bandits ransacked the town."

James stared at the man in shock, worried he had pushed too far. In his years of knowing him, Lucien never told anyone anything about his life other than he grew up in Mantle. But this? This was personal. This was secret.

This was something James felt he shouldn't have attempted to pry at.

"I'm so sorry," James whispered. "I didn't mean-"

"It's alright," Lucien said. "Nothing for you to apologize for. It was a long time ago."

"How...how did you survive the attack?"

"I was lucky," Lucien sighed. "One of the bandits was around my age at the time, and he took pity on me. I think I was...Maybe ten years old when he spared me? I can't really remember. All I do remember was him glaring at me and telling me he'd 'be whipped like a race horse for this' if I got caught."

"Do you remember what happened after that?"

"I ran away," Lucien shrugged. "I snuck onto a boat at a nearby port town, and next thing I knew I was in Mantle. The local convent took me in and I lived there until I signed up for the army. Despite being a kind, my parents weren't spared pain in death...So I joined in hopes of becoming a medic."

James tilted his head in confusion. "I don't understand...Why a medic? Why not a Doctor? Or a bounty hunter like other Shepherds?"

Lucien's voice became distant, sending chills down James' spine as he asked, "Do you know the difference between a Doctor and a Medic, Ironwood?"

"N-no," he stammered.

"A Doctor cures people, James," he said gravely, turning his gaze to the young Captain. "A Medic simply makes them comfortable while they die. It's a privilege my parents didn't have. I want to make sure others do not suffer as they have."

"Lucien, I-"

"James." The blue haired man gently wrapped his arms around him, giving him a tight squeeze. "Thank you...for everything."
Before James could say another word, Lucien let him go, stood up, and began to make his way back to the door.

Qrow refused to talk to James.

No matter what he tried, the most he could get out of the butler was a few yes and no answers and the occasional play of The Game of Letters. Once again, they were walking at a distance, with Qrow taking the lead and James wandering a few meters back. It was all James could do not to scream at the man for acting so distant and standoffish.

But deep down, James understood why.

Ruby was right there. She was within their grasp, and Qrow was unable to get to her in time. And to make matters worse, the people who had her now were the same people James had been helping not long before that, who in turn were working with ghosts of his past.

If the roles were reversed, James probably would have been acting distant as well.

But that didn't mean it didn't hurt any less.

"Hey James," Qrow squawked. "We're coming up on a town. We'll need to find a place to sleep for the night."

"An Inn?" James asked.

"No, it's an abandoned town," Qrow sighed. "There's no Inn here. We'll need to find someplace."

James nodded, keeping his head low as he tried to think of a way to get Qrow to talk to him. They had to talk eventually. This cold shoulder treatment wasn't going to do them any favors when the Grimm came calling.

"How about a church?" James suggested. "There one of those?"

"Yeah," Qrow said. "We can stay there I guess."

He doesn't seem to want to go to the town, James pondered. I wonder why.

Once they arrived, James kind of began to understand.

On the sign as they entered the town, there was light pink lettering on the surface of white that read "Welcome to Pandora".

James didn't want to be here either.

"We can keep moving to the next town," James said. "We don't have to stay here."

"We kind of do," Qrow groaned. "The weather's turning nasty. We need to wait out the rain."

James' blue gaze turned upwards, and he let out a sigh of defeat. The clouds were smoky grey, looming over them like despair incarnate.
"Pandora it is then," he groaned.

"You don't want to be here?" Qrow asked.

He's talking. That's a start.

"One of my old friends used to live here as a kid," James explained. "He ran off to Mantle not long after losing his parents."

"Sorry to hear that," Qrow muttered.

"You don't want to be here either?"

"Nope," Qrow said with a pop. "Didn't exactly have fun the last time I was here."

James nodded, deciding not to push the subject further.

The two of them began to make their way toward the town square, with Qrow taking lead since he knew the place better than James did. The buildings around them were bright, colorful, and inviting, despite being slightly decrepit. The cracks in the ground seemed to create intricate patterns that were pleasing to the eyes. Even the claw marks on the walls and the rooftops seemed very decorative as opposed to malicious.

*It's rather soothing,* he admitted silently.

At least, that's what he thought until they got to the town square.

In the center of the cobblestone ground was a large stage, moldy and weak from years of neglect. On one end of it were stockades, at another end, a hangman's noose. In the center was a tall pole with chains dangling from the top.

Before James knew what was happening, Qrow drew Huginn and swung three times, sending a harsh shockwave through the fixture and causing it to splinter and fall to the ground.

"Qrow-"

"Come on. The church is this way."

With a light sigh, James followed the man to the church just as the rain began to fall.

---

The lights were harsh on her eyes as Weiss walked into the club with Fox and Velvet. The plan was simple enough. They'd head to the dance floor and pretend to be there for the music. Weiss would head over to the far corner of the bar and have a seat at the counter. If what Fox had told them was true, Amaryllis would make themself known to her.

All she had to do was act timid and demure.

And act she had perfected back home to avoid her father's wrath.

She let out a gentle hum as she took a seat at the bar, trying to remain calm. The timid part seemed to come a bit more naturally here. However, that didn't mean she was entirely okay with sitting
It was awkward and terrifying acting as bait.

*Please be real,* she thought. *Please appear.*

"What'll it be?"

Weiss looked up, her blue eyes meeting with the bartender's soft pink. "Um...g-ginger ale..."

"Sure. Just need ID," they said, pouring her a glass. "You from around here?"

"No," she mumbled, handing them her Hunter's badge. "My friends and I are travelling but...well..."

"Something wrong?"

Weiss nodded slightly. "I'm looking for a Shepherd. A Mercenary by the name Amaryllis."

The bartender handed her back the badge, along with the glass of ale, eyebrow raised. "Yeah? Why is that?"

"We're being followed by someone...someone not too nice..."

The bartender looked around, eyes narrowing as they whispered, "Dark hair, hazel eyes, olive green coat?"

"That's him," Weiss whimpered. "He destroyed my friend's home, and is following us." She took a sip, eyes tearing up as she played up the fear. "I'm scared."

The bartender nodded. "The drink is on the house. Take your friends and head to the restrooms. I'll see if the Shepherd is here."

"Thank you," Weiss sighed in relief.

"No worries, kid."

Hazel had followed Schnee in hopes of getting close to the other girl. So far, he wasn't able to get anywhere near the long rabbit ears without people staring. So he stood there, leaning against the wall as he tried to drown out the music. It was far too loud for his liking.

How anyone could enjoy it was beyond him.

*This is ridiculous,* he thought. *Why would the magician come to a club with a blind man and a Schnee in the middle of the day?*

He shrugged it off, thinking that it was probably for no reason other than being immature children.

Though most children don't have an ability to take over bodies.

No, there had to be a reason for them coming here.

*But what?*
And then it happened.

"Red like roses fills my dreams and brings me to the place you rest..."

The crowd began to file out the door at a speed Hazel had never witnessed before. In the center of the room once it was cleared was a masked figure cloaked in a maroon combat suit with black lining. The mask covered their face, save for the mouth, and carefully decorated in intricate red vines, and on their shoulders was a short black poncho, with a small row of pink flowers trailing along the trim, and held in place with a silver cross pin. On their back was a long metal crook.

"White is cold and always yearning, burdened by a royal test.
Black the beast descends from shadows.
Yellow beauty burns gold."

The masked figure drew the crook and charged right for Hazel, and in an attempt to avoid contact, he ducked and rolled, throwing himself back upright with his hands as he tried to avoid the sparkling energy appearing within the hook.

But it was hard to concentrate when the music was so damn loud.

"Mirror, tell me something,
Tell me who's the loneliest of all?
Fear of what's inside of me,
Tell me can a heart be turned to stone?"

Hazel kicked the crook out of his opponent's hand and soon the two of them were engaged in hand to hand combat. The masked person was shorter than him by a good foot, and far slimmer and faster. Keeping up was proving difficult.

And it was then that it clicked.

"Born with no life, Into subjugation.
Treated like a worthless animal-"

The targets lured him here.

"Stripped of all rights, Just a lesser being,
Crushed by cruel ruthless Human rule."

This was a distraction!

"When it started, all we wanted was a chance to live our lives.
Now in darkness, taking everything we want and we will rise."

Hazel tried to keep up the fight, but the masked figure was far faster than anyone he'd ever encountered. In a desperate attempt to try and gain the upper hand, he threw off his coat and used it to blind the fighter, using the momentary breath to send the person straight into the wall.

He marched forward, the picking up the crook as he tried to keep his eyes open. The music kept getting louder and louder with every line.

"Above the darkness and the shame.
Above the torture and the pain."
Above the ridicule and hate.
Above the binding of our fate!

With one well aimed throw, Hazel threw the crook into the D.J.'s booth, causing it to short out and the music momentarily stopped.

Only momentarily.

"Nice try. But that's not where the sound is coming from."

Hazel turned around to see the fighter, the mask broken and revealing half their face. A pink iris glared at him as the body of the person before him began to glow red, flecks of Dust flashing as the suit radiated heat.

"Where is it coming from?!" Hazel groaned.

"Where else?" asked the masked figure.

The figure ran forward, snapping a finger as the crook shot back into their hand, shifting shape into that of a tuning fork.

Wait, Hazel realized. It's coming from the weapon?!

"Come at me, and you'll see,
I'm more than meets the eye.
You think that, you'll break me,
You're gonna find in time-

Hazel ducked and dodged, leaned left, right, let again. The heat was excruciating. The music made his brain feel heavy. In such a short amount of time, this person had worn them down.

"You're standing too close to a flame that's burning,
Hotter than the sun in the middle of July.
Sending out your army, but you still can't win;
Listen up, silly boy, 'cuz I'm gonna tell you why..."

Hazel managed to kick his opponent back, only to realize from the burn in his foot that it was the wrong move to play. His opponent came running, jumped into the air, and threw the tuning fork down like a bat. Hazel threw his arms up to defend.

"I burn!"

The vibrations sent him crashing down. Waves of pain shot through his muscles as he staggered to stand.

"Can't hold me now,
You got nothing that can stop me-"

Hazel saw the foot too late, and he was kicked into the wall.

"I burn!
Swing all you want.
Like a fever I will take you down!"
There was a fizzling sound, and everything began to fade to black.

"What are you?" Hazel groaned.

The fighter slowly walked over to him, the heat from the suit slowly fading away as a pair of handcuffs appeared in their hands.

"I'm just a simple Shepherd," they said.

And then everything went dark.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the delay! This took a bit longer than expected.
The hiatus starts now. These Broken Wings will by flying back into the tags on May 16th.

Let me know what you think of the chapter! Hope you enjoyed it!!!!
"That's it! You're doing great!"

Roman stood back and watched as Amber faced off against Glynda in a sparring match. The ladies insisted on going one on one that morning, and he wasn't about to stop them. Amber had been learning very quickly when it came to her magic, but as for how she could apply it in battle? He had yet to see how they could move forward with that.

Luckily, Glynda had been more than eager to help remedy that problem.

In fact, Glynda had been more than eager to be involved in Amber's studies than she really had any need to. Not that Roman was upset. On the contrary, it made him overjoyed that there were some nobles out there with such a strong desire to educate.

It just seemed a little strange that she seemed so heavily involved, despite not even being a magician.

*Rather ironic,* he thought, *seeing as her name is Goodwitch.*

Turning his focus back towards the fight, Roman made note of how different the two women's fighting styles were. Amber relied very heavily on her staff and kicks, while Glynda made use of the area around her to give her telekinesis a slight edge. Glynda throws projectiles, while Amber blasts them away. Amber worked with hard and damaging blows, while Glynda preferred multiple lighter attacks that, when rapidly applied one after another, were devastating.

Both were great combatants.

But it was clear who had more skill the moment Glynda hand Amber pinned down to the floor.

"Alright, that's enough," Roman sighed. "Amber, go wash up. Junior is making dinner and I wanna see clean hands!"

"Shouldn't I be making dinner?" Amber asked.

"Nope. You're on magic lessons and deck cleaning duty for the next three weeks. Now get washed."

"Okay." With a grumble under her breath, Amber made her way below deck to get cleaned up while Roman walked over to talk with the Countess.

"Thanks for getting the Desert-Crawler for us, Lady Goodwitch," Roman said. "You didn't have to-"

"Amber is my charge," she interjected. "I refuse to travel by caravan while there's a risk of bandits"
and ne'er-do-wells coming after her. Procuring a sand-faring boat is the least I can do."

"Fair enough," he shrugged. "Though...I am wondering something."

"Oh? And what might that be?"

"You're awfully insistent on being a part of Amber's training. As a noble and her employer, you don't need to, you know."

Glynda crossed her arms defensively, spring-green eyes glancing at her boots as she mumbled something incomprehensible.

"What was that, My Lady?" Roman asked. "I couldn't hear you."

"Have I ever told you?" Glynda asked after a pause. "How Ozpin and I became friends?"

"Now that you mention it," Roman hummed. "I don't believe you have. You feel up to sharing?"

"May as well," she sighed. "It was about ten years ago, not long after the Civil War on Solitas. We had met before, but this was the first time we actually had a chance to talk to each other as something other than politicians..."

---

The sound of cries had become far too much. Glynda pulled emerald green scarf around her neck tightly to block out the cold as she and the rest of her team continued the so-called rescue operations.

Rescue was putting it far too kindly.

There were no living souls after what the king had declared the "Battle of Peace".

"This is disgusting," she muttered. "A horrible war that shouldn't have happened."

"Lady Goodwitch!" called a supervisor. "Your team and Team O are off duty for the night. Teams Q and T are going to take your place."

"Understood," she replied. Glynda signaled her group to fall back, and they returned to the ship around the same time as Team O. And the entire time, she heard every word from those around her.

"Nobles cleaning up after themselves, huh?"

"Hush! The Countess volunteered because she's a nice person!"

"And that Wizard?"

"Probably a guilt trip. Ignore them and they'll go away."

"They are a highly esteemed member of our society!" Glynda spat at the gossipers. "You would do well to remember that."

The rest of her team, as well as the other gabby gums, hurried away in fright.
“Ingrates,” she hissed.

“Don’t be so hard on them,” came a soft voice. “What we’re doing is prompting a lot of hard emotions. Some younglings don’t know how to cope other than to gossip.”

“Perhaps,” she groaned. “But that doesn’t mean they have to be disrespectful toward you, Mx. Ozpin.” Glynda smiled as she turned to face them, only for shock to overtake her.

Ozpin stood there, eyes hollow and weary. Their hands were uncovered, pink with cold, and they barely had on enough layers to keep themself from getting frostbite. Their skin was far too pale, and they looked as if they hadn’t slept in weeks.

And they were covered in blood.

“Ozpin, what happened to you?” Glynda gasped.

“Work,” they shrugged. “I’ll be fine—”

“Come here,” she insisted, taking her scarf and wrapping it around them before giving them her coat. “You’ll catch your death of cold if you don’t warm up.”

“I’m fi—”

“Don’t you fucking try to lie to The Countess,” she spat. “Now come on. We’re going back to my room. You’re going to get in the shower and you’re going to warm up. I’ve got plenty of clothes you can change into, and don’t—” she held up a hand as they were about to protest “—you dare try to say you’re fine. I can tell you’re not. Now come. On.”

With a soft grumble, Ozpin allowed Glynda to drag them to her room on board the ship.

Glynda sat at her desk while Ozpin got changed in the bathroom. She wrote down the reports of the day’s findings, keeping her busy so as to not break from the stress of helping bring home the bodies of lost soldiers. Seeing the carnage so soon in the aftermath was rather taxing on the mind.

She hoped they’d never have to experience another war like it.

“Thank you for lending me your facilities,” Ozpin stammered as they come out. “That was very kind of you.”

“No need to thank me,” she assured them. “If things were reversed, you’d have done the same.”

“You’re quite right,” they chuckled. “I’m a bit surprised you had my size of clothes though.”

“I prefer my casual attire to be loose.”

“That’s fair.”

The two of them let out a soft laugh as Glynda finished her reports. “So, how’re you feeling?”

“I’m—”
"And don't say you're alright, Oz. It's clear you're not."

Glynda turned to look at them, eyes soft with understanding as Ozpin sat on the edge of her bed. Their golden eyes, so vibrant, yet so pained, were cast on the floor as their shoulders slumped forward in defeat.

"I'm...not alright," they admitted. "I found a survivor...and...he might not forgive me for helping to save him..."

Glynda slowly made her way over to the bed, placing a comforting arm around their shoulders, letting them lean against her.

"It wasn't just him," he murmured. "There was a woman, holding him...she had teal hair...and such a kind smile...she truly cared about the general...she held him, using her aura to keep him stable until I got there...and...she was singing..."

"Singing?" Glynda asked.

"Yes," they whimpered, shaking as they fought to hold back the tears. "She sang to him, holding his left arm so desperately...She used what little life she had left to keep him alive until I could take over...I didn't get to them in time, and she died keeping him alive."

"You did your best, Oz. That's all any of us can do."

"But it's not good enough!" they croaked. "When he wakes up someone will have to tell him how he survived losing half his body...I'll have to...t-to..."

Instinctively, Glynda pulled them into a protective embrace, allowing Ozpin to bury their face in her shoulder and let out the tears. Harsh, broken sobs filled the room. Glynda held them close, lightly rocking them back and forth, rubbing soothing circles on their back, and running her fingers through their hair.

"Would you like to stay with me for the night?" she asked calmly.

"Y-yes," they stammered. "I...I don't want to be alone right now..."

"Alright. Come on, let's get some sleep. I'll be right by your side."

Glynda took no time in preparing for bed, making sure to tuck Ozpin in before pulling them into her arms, letting them press an ear to her chest to hear her heartbeat. She quietly hummed to them, letting them fade into a gentle slumber to the sound of her voice.

She didn't realize that would be the first, and last, time she'd ever dry their tears.

"From that moment on," Glynda concluded, "I swore to be by their side, and watch over them as much as I could. I aided them in training wait-staff, trying to help educate young Hunters in training by being a major benefactor for Beacon when it was still in service, and swearing to watch over Amber for them."

Roman bit his lower lip, feeling the weight of this revelation strike him right to his core. A lot of things started to make sense that he had been wondering about for so long. The closeness with
James and Glynda, the constant insistence of being okay, the separation they had put between everyone.

Ozpin was carrying more weight than they should have been carrying.

*Because they cared far too much about us to let us be crushed by it.*

"That's why you wanted to travel with us," he whispered.

"I have to be there for her," Glynda muttered. "For all the times I never could be there for Ozpin...for all the times Ozpin can't be there for Amber...For all the times I wish I could have been there for both of them...I'm going to be there for her."

"We're both going to be there," Roman corrected. "For the times were weren't, and for the times we will be...and I'll be there for you too, Glynda. We all need someone to lean on."

Glynda looked up at him with a gentle smile, letting herself relax long enough to punch him in the shoulder. "That's Professor to you, Torchy."

"Torchy?" Roman gasped dramatically. "That's Mr. Torchy to you!"

"Roman!" came a call from below deck. "Dinner!"

"Coming Baby-Bear!" He held a hand out to Glynda, grinning playfully. "Shall we?"

"Let's," Glynda chuckled as she took his hand."And Roman?"

"Yellow?"

"If you need to talk to anyone about...that," she mumbled awkwardly, gesturing to his right eye, "you can talk to me. You're part of my family too."

Family. Oh how Roman loved that word. Family meant forever.

And forever was what he wanted.

*Family, Roman thought, are the ones there for you when you can't be there for yourself.*

"A family that talks together, stays together," Roman cheered. "Now let's all go talk over dinner."

Together, the two of them went below deck, a stronger bond having been forged.

And Roman couldn't help but feel happy about that.

*Maybe I'll talk to her about my eye later.*

---

The lights were dimmed throughout the entire mansion when Ozpin finally came back. *They had left Qrow with James for only a month, and from the sound of it the two of them weren't getting along very well.*

*Qrow was doing his best, but James kept pushing him away.*
James tried to let Qrow do his job, but the panic attacks had become so frequent he more often than not had Qrow run errands outside the house so he wouldn’t see him.

Oz knew it would be a challenge.

But it was one they knew all three of them could handle in time.

So that night, Ozpin came to check on them.

James wasn't that hard to find. There was the sound of a gunshot coming from his direction. Nearly tripping, they picked up the pace and were soon joined by Qrow at the door of the master bedroom.

Without even stopping to ask why they were there, Qrow opened the door, ducking low just in time to avoid the last Dust bullet from James’ gun.

"Fuckity fuck on a fuck!” Qrow hissed. "That almost killed me."

Ozpin knelt beside him, placing a hand on Qrow's shoulder and pulling him away from the door as James began to pace back and forth, searching the room for more ammunition. "Did you remove all the bullets earlier?"

"Most of them," Qrow grumbled. "Don't know where he hid those ones."

"Okay. I'm so sorry, Qrow-"

Qrow shook his head, giving Ozpin a gentle pat on the back. "Don't apologize Oz. You can't be here all the time, and the guy doesn't exactly have a good therapist."

"About that," Oz sighed. "I convinced Dr. Polendina to come back to Atlas. He's the one who did James' prosthetics. I think talking to him would be better than that stranger he'd been going to."

"Sounds good," said Qrow. "Now to get Jimbo to calm down."

"I could knock him out-"

"No offense Oz, but that guy had at least a hundred pounds on you. It's too risky."

"Well it would help if I knew what caused this."

"Wish I knew." Qrow peaked around the corner of the door, eyes narrowed as he watched the Earl tear apart the room. "Sounds like he’s mumbling something about needing ammo-doggies."

"Ammo what?" Ozpin leaned close, watching James as the man walked over to the closet to get dressed. His blue eyes were glazed over, and glowing very faintly in the dim light.

"Douggie, where's the ammo?" James murmured. "You were in charge of that, remember?"

Not doggies. Douggie.

They'd heard that name once. James talked about him not long ago. Him, and several other people.

"I think he's hallucinating," Oz whispered. "About his time in the war."

"Hallucinating doesn't cause someone to shoot their butler," Qrow said drily. "At least not like this."
"This isn't a normal hallucination...Follow my lead, okay?"

"Okay."

Slowly, Ozpin stood up and entered the room, back straight and eyes forward. As attentive as possible, they saluted, clicking their heels together. Though confused, Qrow followed in suit.

"General Ironwood, Sir," Ozpin stated. "We've returned from our perimeter check, Sir!"

James turned around, the glow in his eyes flickering slightly as he stood up, hands folded behind his back. "Anything to report?"

"No Grimm sightings," Oz reported. "The enemy seems to have retreated. The guards are finishing rotation, and the Captain is prepared to take over so you may rest, Sir."

"I'll sleep when I'm dead," James said gravely. "I have a unit to run."

"Permission to speak sir?" Qrow stammered.

"Granted."

"Sir, with all due respect, you can't very well run a unit to its full potential if you yourself aren't well rested. Say we end up in battle come morning. If you're not rested, you might end up accidentally calling a wrong order. It's best if you rest sir. Not for you, but for your soldiers."

James narrowed his eyes at Qrow, and Ozpin felt their heart rate skyrocket. As well said as Qrow's proposal was, they weren't sure that was the best thing to say at that moment.

Finally, James let his shoulders slump as he sighed, "I suppose you're right. Tell Captain Appleby I'll be in my cot if she needs anything."

"Will do, Sir," Ozpin responded.

With a salute to them, James wandered over to the bed, setting his gun on the nightstand before laying down and closing his eyes. Ozpin and Qrow marched out of the room, leaving the door open so as not to startle the tired General.

"So," Qrow huffed, straightening his tailcoat. "Care to explain?"

"You remember the Battle of Peace?" Oz asked.

"I heard about it. James was the only survivor, right?"

"Well...You know how he survived?"

Qrow shook his head, eyebrow raised questioningly. "I take it you do?"

"Mh...I was there when the rescue and cleanup happened...one of his fellow soldiers used her magic to keep him alive...Used up all her Aura doing so..."

"Oh..." Qrow pulled lightly at his hair, the pieces falling into place in his head. "Too much magic, too long of exposure. Still, that was one hell of an event to relive."

"Yes, well...hallucinations like this aren't uncommon to those exposed to heavy doses of magic...I'm sorry, Qrow."
"Hey, don't apologize." Qrow gently wrapped an arm around Ozpin's shoulders, placing a soft kiss on their cheek. "It wasn't your fault."

"But-"

"If I thought I couldn't handle this job, I'd have turned it down. You asked me to do this job because you can't be here for him all the time." He gently tilted their chin up, smiling fondly. "You were there for my family. Now I'm here for yours."

Ozpin gave him a tired grin and kissed him on the cheek. "Thank you, Qrow."

"No need to thank me," Qrow chuckled. "Oz, you're an amazing person. But you're a person all the same. You can't be expected to work miracles alone. We all have limits. Even you."

"Those are awfully wise words," Oz muttered. "Who are you and what did you do with My Qrow?"

"Hey! I can be a Wiz-Kid too, Oz!"

"Smartass more like."

"Buzzkill," Qrow chuckled. "Come on. The guest room is already set. You should rest here for the night."

"You know what? I think I shall."

With a spring in their step, Oz followed Qrow to the guest room.

The rain pelted heavily against the rooftop of the old church as James sat against the wall by the fire, holding one leg close as he proceeded to poke at the stone in his hand. Qrow sat on the railing of one of the windows, keeping guard over the former-general. They didn't talk to each other. They didn't look at each other.

And Qrow didn't want to admit it, but it kind of hurt pushing him away.

He wanted to talk to him again. He wanted those tender moments like they had back at the springs. Back at Ironwood Manor.

But indulging those desires led to him being far too soft for his liking. And that softness made him miss his chance at finding Ruby.

Qrow knew James probably blamed himself for that.

But it wasn't James' fault. It's my fault for not being vigilant.

"Qrow?" James piped up after a while.

"Yes, My Lord?"

"I'm sorry."

There was a pause, and Qrow let out a sigh as he narrowed his tired gaze on his companion. "What
"are you sorry for?"

"For everything," James mumbled. "For dragging you away from your family. Keeping you here with me as we travel south. And for..."

"What? 'And for' what, Jim?" Qrow groaned.

"And for not saving them...Ruby...Oz...everyone...I...I'm sorry."

Qrow winced when the thunder clapped through the sky, nearly falling from his perch. His heart was breaking looking at James. Hearing that apology.

"You don't have to apologize," Qrow said. "What happened wasn't your fault."

"But-"

"We lost Ruby because I was too soft," he interrupted. "We lost her because I wasn't fast enough. You did what you thought was right helping those kids. You have no reason to apologize there." He slipped down from the ledge and raised his arms to stretch. "You also don't need to apologize for pulling me away from the family. I came to work for you of my own volition. That's also on me."

James' brows furrowed, and Qrow knew by that look that the Earl didn't entirely believe him. "And as for Ozpin...That wasn't on you. Ozpin...they made their choice." He felt his lip quiver slightly. "They chose to sacrifice themself for us...There was nothing either of us could do."

It truly hit home right then.

There was nothing they could have done.

Nothing he could have done.

"None of this was your fault James."

It wasn't their fault. There was only so much anyone could do.

"I...I know," James muttered. "It's just....I should have done something."

"I get it," Qrow sighed. "You wish you could have done more. You're "The Iron General", the Man of Miracles. The only official survivor of the last battle of the Civil War...Jim...You're an amazing man...but you're still a man all the same. We all have limits. You can't work miracles all the time." "But I-"

"Just stop, okay?" Qrow grit his teeth, trying to remain calm. "James, there's only so much you can do. You're only human, after all...Just...stop blaming yourself for the hopeless things that happened and...start making your way forward. If not for yourself now, then for all the times you never could in the past." With a quick turn, Qrow headed toward the entryway.

"Where are you going?" James asked.

"Forward," Qrow shrugged. "Get some rest, Jimbo. We have a long way to go. I'll wake you when it's your turn for guard duty."

James reluctantly did as he was asked, and Qrow stepped outside the church to take flight. Despite the stormy weather, he had to keep up his perimeter checks.
All the while though, Qrow couldn't help but feel he was being watched.

James prepared one of the pews to act as a bed while Qrow stepped outside. The butler was probably going to have a quick flight. How anyone wanted to risk getting struck by lightning, he'd never understand.

No, he thought. He did understand.

He'd done the same many years ago.

He did it when the other soldiers couldn't.

"Damn," he sighed. "I haven't thought of that mission in years..."

He thought it was rather strange. Normally back home in Atlas, thinking of the time back when he was in the military made him anxious. He'd be shaking, sometimes screaming, but mostly he'd feel shattered. Broken, much like the stained glass of the old church.

But being out and about like this, traveling from town to town, setting up camp. It all reminded him of his time in the specialist's division.

One mission in particular that made him smile.

"I can still hear their voices," he chuckled, falling to sleep.
"Ocean's gone too!" Lucien called.

"They're coming!" James assured.

"Ye ken?"

"You sure?"

"Yep!"

As if on cue, James looked at the windows of the building they jumped from and smirked. There was a violet suited soldier heading toward them with mousy brown hair and bright red eyes. She was running along the glass like it was pavement, a strange weapon perched on her back in place of the usual sniper rifle she favored. The sound of heels clicked rapidly as she ran right past them, tossing a grappling hook over to Douglas.

"Thanks lass!" he called, taking aim at another building and shooting. He reached out and grabbed the medic by his ankle, chucking as the poor Shepherd let out a high pitched wail as they flew toward the rooftop.

"Hey Marie!" James called out. "What's that on your back?!"

"Grimm-Shot!" she laughed, pushing off the window just as James was about to pass her, shoving him further from the building as the glass began to shatter. "Ried thought it'd look good on me, just like the suit!"

"Sure does! Where is she anyway?"

"Calvary is coming, just be patient and call in!"

"Right." James placed a hand to his ear, wincing at the slight static discharge before the connection leveled out. "Squad Alpha to Beta and Gamma! Objective obtained! Head to the fallback point, over!"

"Rodger," someone croaked. "Beta falling back, over."

"Rodger that sugar!" came another voice. "Gamma falling back! See you soon, handsome!"

"Sugar?" Marie chuckled. "Handsome? Didn't realize Gamma team had the hots for you, Colonel!"

"Shut it, Appleby!"

"Yeah," came a giggle. "Shut it!"

James felt a pair of hands grab him by the shoulders and throw him down just as the sound of music filled the air. Teal hair came into his vision when his feet made contact with flooring. "Cutting close, don't you think, Ried?"

"Don't blame me!" Ocean spat. "Donny insisted on getting the damn car!"

"I didnae!" the redhead protested. "Ye said we hae tae leave fast! What's faster than a big cat?!"

"And now we're being followed," Marie sighed drily, pointing to the enemy soldiers tailing them.

"Tatties o’wer the side!" Donald shouted, nodding ahead at the barrier of attack vehicles.
"Dammit," James hissed, hopping to the gun mounted on the back of the car. "Ocean, make a hole! I'll cover the rear!"

"On it!"

Without another word, James watched as she turned into foam and dashed toward the enemy, using the weather to shock and take out the main cars, leaving them an opening to escape as James shot out the wheels of the people following them.

"Be safe everyone," he whispered.

When Qrow finally woke James for guard duty, the storm had passed. Qrow was slightly damp from his flight, but was otherwise okay. The moon was still high in the sky as James stepped outside to check the perimeter.

It was much like this after his team met up at the fallback point.

Only this was more lonely.

"Normally I don't miss being in the military," he sighed. "I wonder what changed."

A soft burning sensation came from his left hand, but not like what he felt in combat. This was kinder. More familiar.

"James."

Turning around, he could have sworn he heard a voice. It was distorted, but...

"James, over there! By the town hall!"

"Who's there?" he asked.

"Just go, Dickbiscuit!"

James looked back to the church, knowing he should probably wake up Qrow.

"James, they're going to die! Help them!"

With a groan, James stormed off in the direction of the town hall, the feeling of something following him plaguing his mind.

\textit{Crash!}

"Ciel! Look out!"

James saw a girl with a golden cloak get thrown into a wall by a woman in a Grimm visor as another girl with a pink bow in her hair knelt beside an older gentleman with a long white beard wearing a lab coat.

A man James knew very well.
"Dr. Polendina!"

The man looked over at him in time with the woman in the mask, eyes wide in confusion. "Ironwood-

The woman with the mask dashed toward James, drawing the giant sword from her back as both the bade and her suit began to glow a violent shade of mauve. James threw his hands upward just in time for several gears to form in front of him, blocking her strike while causing cracks in the ground.

"Get out of here!" James bellowed. "Head to the church! I've got this!"

"But-" the cloaked girl started.

"GO!" James kicked the attacker's legs out from under her just as the others ran off. The blade barely grazed his left shoulder as she hit the ground. He reached for his gun and was about to fire when something flew out and knocked it from his hand.

Something sticky.

Looking at the assailant, James' eyes flew wide as the 'something' flew at his head from her mouth. He leaned left just in time for it to miss.

*It was her tongue!*

"How ribbiting," he huffed.

"Like I haven't heard that one before," the woman grumbled, kicking him backwards, causing him to land by his gun. "What're you doing here? You're supposed to be dead, Ironwood."

James staggered to his feet, holding back a smirk as he picked up his weapon, shooting a few bullets only for the masked woman to deflect them with her sword. "How do you know my name?"

Before the woman could answer, her gaze flew upwards and she jumped back as a sword slammed down in her place, a tattered red cape billowing in the breeze of the aftershock.

"Qrow!" James bellowed.

"You damned idiot!" Qrow huffed. "Do I need to put a bell on you?!"

"I-"

"You tell me when you're going to run off! We are not having a repeat of Kigiku!"

"Huh," the woman scoffed. "Didn't think Jim-Dear had a boyfriend."

Qrow's red stare glowed menacingly in the moonlight as he ran forward. "Not. My. Boyfriend."

"Husband," she teased, dodging his strikes. "Got it."

"Not married!"

"But you like him. I can tell. You got it bad."

"Shut up! Shut up! **SHUT UP!!!**"
James jumped between both of them, arms out to catch their blades as they both attempted to swing at him. Both got caught between gears, causing sparks to fly from Qrow's sword while Dust flickered to the ground from the woman's weapon.

"Stop!" he ordered, looking at the masked woman. "Who are you?! And how do you know my name?!"

The woman smirked and backed away, sheathing her blade as Qrow was released. "You honestly want to know who I am?"

"No," Qrow spat.

"Yes," James stressed. "Who are you?"

The woman shrugged. "I'm a motherfucking ghost."

There was a flash of light, the sound of a gasp, and as James turned around, he saw the woman preparing to jump through a violet portal with something silver dangling from her hand.

"Sorry James, but the next time we meet, you're dead."

The woman vanished into the portal.

And Qrow collapsed to the ground, a clean diagonal slice across his torso and a knife to the shoulder.

"Qrow!"

---

"For all the times couldn't follow orders, for the trouble I got us into, and for causing you all so much grief, I am sorry. I'm so, so sorry."

Everyone stared at her in surprise, James tilting his head in confusion.

Marie never apologized for anything.

Ever.

"Why ye apologizin'?" Douglas asked. "Ye didnae do anythin' wrong, Marie."

"In fact," James added, "you disobeying my orders saved Delta Squad from the explosion. Your intuition on missions is a great asset."

"But look where we are!" she screeched. "We're on border patrol in one of the most deadly areas of downtown Mantle, with guns that have bouncing ammo, in the middle of winter with little food left in the stores, and Ocean lost her right leg! All because I didn't listen to the General when she said to leave Delta behind!"

"This is the worst assignment we've had," Ocean conceded.

"Ever," Lucien groaned. "Of all time."
“However,” James interjected. “I’m pretty sure I can speak for everyone here when I say we’d gladly take this punishment a thousand times over if it means not losing more people.” His blue gaze surveyed the room, leveling on everyone present. “And if anyone disagrees, feel free to say so.”

No one said a word.

“There you have it,” James shrugged. “No need to apologize.”

“You’re not mad at me?” Marie asked.

“If we were,” Donald chuckled, “ye’d know it, Marie.”

“What makes you think we’d be mad at you?” James asked.

“Because I’m me?” she stressed. “I’m The Troublemaker? The Queen Bitch of Atlas? The Ghost of Pain?”

“So?” Ocean asked. “Those are just uncreative nicknames from assholes who are jealous of your fighting prowess.”

“I’m the Flying Disaster!”

“Aye,” Douglas teased. “And tha’s Donny, me Flyin’ Brother.” His wolf ears twitched fondly from beneath his hat. “Marie, dinnae pay the other soldiers hied. If they cannae see how wonderful ye are, their bums out tae windae.”

“Marie,” James groaned. “There’s more to being a soldier than following orders. You’re the prime example of that.”

“Look at all the great things you’ve done,” Ocean praised. “I’d be dead if you hadn’t grabbed those weapons back in the bomb-extraction mission, Donny might have been killed if you didn’t take over the wheel on that supply run, and James would have lost his entire left side if you didn’t bat that grenade back to the enemy’s side with your rifle like a freakin’ champ.”

“But your leg-” Marie started.

“I have a badass metal one now!” she laughed. “I mean, yeah, it hurt at first. And, sure, I still wake up sometimes and panic until I remember what happened. But I’m still alive, I’m still with my family, and that’s all I care about. Sure, I’m getting used to it, but that’s my new normal.”

“You’re a great soldier, Marie.” James stood up and took off his scarf, wrapping it around her. “You’re our most trusted friend and comrade because of that intuition of yours. Don’t ever apologize for that.”

“Now get over to the fire,” Lucien huffed, reaching for his guitar. “We don’t want you getting hypothermia.”

“You going to sing for us, Doc?” Ocean teased.

“No,” he spat. “Doug is.”

“Why me?” Douglas gasped.

“Because Donny and I can’t carry a tune, Ocean’s still learning this song, and the day James and Marie sing for us is the day we’re dead.”
“Fine.”

James smiled as he lead his friend back to her seat, ruffling her hair as she attempted to swat his hand away.

"We've been here so long
Still I remember
The rainy September
Contact."

"Qrow, hold on! I've got you!"

James was shaking, removing his shirt and using it to apply pressure to the wound as Qrow gasped. He couldn't think straight. This wasn't right. Qrow's Aura was full! How did she manage to wound him like this?

And why isn't he healing?!

"Sir, over here!"

James looked up and saw three people running toward them. One was his doctor, carrying a case James hoped had medical supplies. The other two were girls, a little older than Ruby. One had bright green eyes like the doctor, soft ginger hair that was tied back with a vibrant pink bow that, while adorable, seemed out of place with her green and black dress. The other girl had brilliant blue eyes and navy hair, a small sun tattoo in the center of her forehead, and a long golden cloak wrapped tightly around her shoulders.

"Dr. Polendina," James stammered. "Wh-what's going on? Why are-"

"Hush," the doctor commanded. "Ciel, I need you to help me with this. Penny, go find the others and get the cart. We need to hurry to Ayame."

"Yes father," the ginger haired girl said.

"James, go with her," Polendina ordered. "She'll lead the way, you keep her safe."

"But-" James started.

"Go!"

Hesitantly, James nodded and followed the ginger haired girl towards the edge of town.

"Salutations friend," the girl said. "My name is Penny. What's yours?"

"James," he panted, the panic in his gut sinking in.

"Hello James," said Penny calmly. "I'm sure you have many questions, but they'll have to wait until your friend is safe in bed. Will that be alright?"

"Yes. More than alright."
"Alright then."

James didn't really register what happened after that. Everything became noise. Noise and pain. The burning in his hand stopped, replaced by a dull ache, and the feeling of ice and wind.

Raven was about to head to guard duty when the portal appeared beside her. She turned, hand to her sword, and scowled from behind her mask as the bob of mousy brown hair appeared in her vision.

"You're late," she spat. "What took you so long?"

"Nice to see you too boss," greeted the woman. "My day was great, thanks for asking."

Raven shook her head in annoyance. "For fuck's sake-"

"No one there," the woman shrugged. "Pandora is completely abandoned now. White fang are gone, and any stragglers have been scared off. I can move the rest of the tribe there by the end of the week, repairs should take a month. Two at the most. It'll be perfect for wintertime."

"Thank you." Raven removed her mask, wincing at the pain it caused. The dent in the left side made it quite the task. "Maybe next time we raid a town for shelter, you won't burn it down?"

"Got it boss. No more flame-thrower. I'll stick to sword and Grimm-Shot."

"Good."

"Want me to repair that?" the woman offered, nodding to Raven's mask. "Wouldn't take me but an hour."

Raven looked between her and the mask for a second before reluctantly tossing it to her. "Knock your socks off. I'm going to check the perimeter."

"Got it." Slowly, the woman made her way back to the camp.

"And Marie?" Raven added, causing the woman to freeze in place.

"Yes Raven?" the woman asked.

"It's nice having you around. I'm glad you're part of the tribe."

The woman said nothing and returned to the camp. Raven let out a breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding and continued on her patrol. She hadn't felt this level of comfort around a person since...

*Stop thinking about them,* Raven, she told herself. *That was then, this is now.*

Tomorrow, the tribe would split in two. Raven and a few others would continue the search for her family and collecting supplies. The rest would head to Pandora.

"I'll make that place a home for all of us," she vowed. "For all the times I never could."
Curling up in her tent, she pulled off her visor so she could better inspect the damage done to the mask. It wasn't much, but it was enough to cause the wearer pain when taking it off.

"Looks like her niece did a number on this," she chuckled, pulling out her tools and setting to work on repairs, humming softly to herself.

"Two, four, one, ten
Two, four, one, ten
Am I still willing
To foot all this billing?"

Contact"

Chapter End Notes

Well, that was a thing!
Next chapter we'll meet back up with Oz, Blake, and of course Qrow. I'm not going to make you all wait to find out if he'll live or not. *whispers* No one's gonna die yet.

Thanks for reading.
Rose Tattoo

Chapter Summary

I ain't winning no one over
I wear it just for you
I've got your name written here
In a rose tattoo

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the wait!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Weiss slowly left the restroom with Velvet and Fox, the entire club was empty. The DJ booth had been destroyed, and the man that had been following them was cuffed to the counter of the bar.

The Shepherd was looking through the man's pockets.

"Um...Thank you, Amaryllis" Weiss called to them.

"No problem," said the Shepherd. "Now...if you don't mind me asking...What's a Schnee doing so far south after the Fall of Atlas?"

Weiss' hand flew instinctively to Myrtenaster as Fox and Velvet ran in front of her, preparing to strike.

"Relax," Amaryllis sighed. "I'm not gonna hurt the girl. I'm just curious as to how she got here so fast."

"How did you know about the Fall?" Weiss demanded. "And what do you mean 'so fast'?"

Amaryllis shrugged before walking over to Fox, handing the young hunter a small stack of papers from inside their poncho. "Take these. The lightish-red envelopes must get to the leaders of the Gold Blade. The blue ones must get to Chief Belladonna as soon as possible. And the gold envelope has to get to the Chief's daughter."

"You want us to be mail carriers?" Velvet asked.

"Consider it payment for wrangling your stalker. Remember, blue is Belladonna. Lightish-red is the Blade. Gold is Belladonna's daughter."

"Right," Fox chuckled. "I'll be sure to tell someone who knows what those colors look like."

"I know you will." The Shepherd wandered over to the man that had been following them, letting out a soft yawn. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I gotta make like lightening and bolt out of here."
"Wait!" Weiss called, only to see Amaryllis vanish in a cloud of smoke.

The man in the olive coat was gone as well.

"Well," Velvet sighed. "That was a thing."

"So they need us to take some letters to places," Fox grumbled. "Looks like Operation Roots will have to wait."

"But what about Amaryllis?" Weiss asked. "How did they know about the Fall of Atlas? What did they mean by 'so fast'? I don't understand."

"Neither do I," Velvet muttered. "It doesn't make any sense."

"I suggest getting back to the others," Fox said. "We can talk it over with them."

"Right," Weiss said. "Um...do you want me to sort the letters first?"

"Knock your socks off."

Weiss took the letters over to the counter, sorting them into three piles. The pink, or lightish-red as Amaryllis had insisted, had a total of twenty envelopes. The blue had five. And there was only one gold one.

"Any idea where all these people are?" Weiss asked. "I mean, I know you know where the leaders of the Gold Blade are but...Chief Belladonna and his daughter?"

"We know where they are," Velvet giggled. "Ghira's been an ally of ours for a while, and his activism is what inspired the Blade's creation. He's not that hard to find once you've got his Aura on your radar."

"And what about his daughter?" Weiss asked. "I didn't even know he had a daughter."

Velvet and Fox turned to each other before bursting into a fit of laughter, causing Weiss a mild sense of discomfort and irritation.

"What's so funny?!" she demanded.

"You already met his daughter!" Velvet wheezed.

"I have?"

"God, you're really dense!" Fox cackled. "It's Blake, Weiss. Ghira Belladonna's daughter is the girl you've been travelling with."

"She never told you her full name?" Velvet asked.

"No," Weiss mumbled. "But...this does explain why she's so desperate to get to Menagerie..."

Fox gave a gentle nod before heading towards the door. "Come on. We better regroup."

"Right."

When I see Blake again, Weiss thought, she has some questions to answer.
Blake sat quietly in her room at the inn, holding her knees up to her chest as she wondered how everyone was getting on. Bolin and Sage should be back soon. It doesn't seem to take them long to get some kind of transportation.

*How do they get in contact with each other so fast?*

Her mind flickered back to the last jump.

*Perhaps the same way that guy talked to his boss.*

**Knock, Knock!**

"Blake?" came a voice. "May I come in?"

Scarlet? "Uh, sure. Come on in."

Scarlet came in and locked the door behind them, their green eyes downcast and partially hidden behind their bangs. Without saying anything they went over to the window and made sure that the curtains were closed before tossing their cloak and red jacket on the back of the chair.

"So," Scarlet sighed. "Had another jump?"

*Of course.* "That obvious?"

"You know better than that, Blake. I've seen enough outcomes to know when someone has messed with the timeline." They looked her over, waiting for her to give the okay to join her on the bed. When Blake pat the spot beside her, they skipped over and landed on the bed with a soft *thwump.* "So, just how many save points were there this time?"

"Six total," she sighed. "Most recent was this morning when I woke up. The bastard that tore up Hinagiku punched my face in."

"Damn."

"Yeah. Before that it was when I was thrown into the main chapel in Hinagiku. Prior to that was me in the mountain right before finding Weiss. The last three were at each camp on the way to Sagisō for the last time."

"I see."

They stretched their arms over their head, and Blake found herself relaxing a bit. "I'm guessing you aren't just here to warn me about more broken train tracks?"

"Nah," they chuckled. "That was a onetime thing. And since you didn't go back far enough to use that info, it's pretty much useless."

"Noted," she tittered.

"So...how many are left?"

Blake's smile faded away, and she looked to her lap, the hair on the back of her ears standing on end. "I don't know. Haven't checked yet."

"Want me to check for you? Only if you want me to."
Blake hesitated, biting her lower lip before standing up. "Sure. Just...don't freak out okay?"

"Hey," Scarlet chuckled. "You didn't freak out we met, I won't freak out over this."

"Okay."

Blake took a deep breath and took over her jacket, settling her nerves as Scarlet stood. She lifted up her shirt, pulling her hair out of the way so that Scarlet could see her back. The room was bathed in a soft sapphire glow, and the cool air felt nice against her skin.

"Mind if I touch it?" Scarlet asked.

"Go ahead," Blake shrugged.

Scarlet stepped close and lightly traced their fingers over the glowing blue rose mark on her back. She closed her eyes and focused on the movements. The left hand was tracing over the thorns and the petals at the base of her spine, while the right counted the petals on the bloom.

"Looks like there's ten petals left," they assessed. "How many jumps a petal?"

"It varies," she answered softly. "Roughly three to ten on average."

"Let's keep it at three," Scarlet said. "Just to be on the safe side for planning. That'll mean you've got thirty left."

"Thirty jumps...that's not a lot left."

"No it isn't...You'll need to be careful."

They stepped back and Blake put her shirt back on, shaking slightly as the blue glow vanished. She never did like people seeing her back, let alone touching it.

But it was Scarlet doing the touching. She trusted them.

A truth made stronger when they wrapped her coat around her shoulders.

"You okay?" they asked worriedly.

"I'm fine," Blake said. "Don't worry about me."

"If didn't worry you'd be running off to Menagerie with no arms or a weapon," they chided. "You need to slow down, otherwise all the bad outcomes will be the permanent ones."

"I don't have the luxury of slowing down, Scarlet."

"No, but it's a necessity. They fell back onto the bed, arms covering their eyes. "Especially since you have a novice travelling with you."

That was a fair point, she mused. Weiss needs more attention, and attention typically means slowing down. She'd have to try and balance her mission with Weiss' training.

This would be so much easier if Weiss already knew how to fight.

But...Team CVFY would be coming with her as well. And Velvet...

"I think we can move at a moderate pace," Blake said.
"If you're sure," Scarlet sighed.

"I'm sure..."

"You don't sound so sure."

Blake rubbed the back of her neck as she looked at the window, brows furrowed in worry. "Has my dad's outcome changed yet?"

She knew it wasn't her place to ask that question. It was Illegal, bad luck, taboo.

But she had to know.

Scarlet ran their fingers through their bright red bangs. There was a bright red glow taking over their eyes for a brief second.

"Looks like it's a little different," they hummed. "Can't really see any sort of end at the moment."

"Wh-what do you mean?"

"It looks like he lives in this timeline, Blake. Though his health is still up in the air."

Blake's amber gaze leveled on them as she jumped onto the bed, hugging them so tightly they have to pat her shoulder to get her to ease her grip. "Thank you."

"No problem," they coughed, catching a breath. "Just...be careful okay? Now that you know, Karma has its eye on you."

"Karma can kiss my ass."

The two of them shared another laugh, and once Blake had her fill of snuggles Scarlet left the room. Alone with her thoughts, Blake began to plan.

Her father was going to live.

She'd make sure of it.

James sat quietly in his room as he waited for Dr. Polendina and his charge, Ciel, work on treating Qrow. The ginger haired girl, Penny, sat with him and held his hand soothingly as their compatriots went to bring them something to eat. James had recognized them from when Atlas had fallen. They were on the ship when it...

James pushes that memory aside. He has more important things to worry about. Qrow was injured, and the town of Ayame didn't have a doctor.

Come to think of it, he realized, a lot of places we come across haven't had a decent medical facility at all.

Neon, the girl with ginger pigtails, came rolling up to him in her roller blades, handing him a bottle of water and, if he had to guess, a ham and cheese sandwich. It wasn't much, but it would be enough to hold him over.
"Thank you," he muttered.

"No problem," Neon replied, albeit a bit too cheery for his liking.

"I'm sure you have a lot of questions," said Penny. "If there is anything you want to know, feel free to ask."

"You can start by telling me where your friends are." The two girls looked at each other and then back to him, clearly confused looks on their face. He expected as much. "We ran into your friends in the golden cloaks in Kigiku a few days ago. They took Qrow's niece, and we're on our way to find her. Now, where are they?"

Neon's tail twitched rapidly, intimidated by the General's harsh tone. "I wish I could tell you, but we're not allowed to bring people unless authorized. Flynt and I aren't authorized."

"Then why are you with them?" James asked Penny.

"Father and I are heading to Mistral," she explained. "We ran into the Gold Blade after our ship crashed. They've been helping us get back on track."

"I see..."

"Flynt's trying to get in contact with HQ," Neon assured. "With some luck, he should be able to get the okay to bring you both there. Chances are that's where the others took the girl."

"We'll get the okay."

"You don't know that."

"I do," James stated, standing up and folding his arms behind him. "Your commanding officers were once part of my unit. If your friend mentions my name, we'll be allowed at your headquarters."

"Right," Neon giggled nervously. "That makes sense. Um...what was your name again?"

"James Ironwood."

"I'll go check on Flynt. Make sure he knows."

Neon took off fast, a rainbow trailing behind her as she skidded along the walls out the door and down the hall.

"Mr. Ironwood?" Penny chimed in. "Why did you give her your real name?"

James looked at her, not dropping the General facade. "Because that's my name, and the leaders of this renegade troupe know me."

"But earlier, you told the lady at the check in counter your name was Rheneas Low. Was that a lie?"

James couldn't place it, but something about this child's mannerisms threw him off. They seemed strange, but familiar. Welcoming even.

"It was a lie," he admitted. "But it's only because there some bad people after me. It's to keep Qrow and I safe."
"Why are they after you?" Penny asked.

"I thought I was supposed to be asking questions." He relaxed his stance, but didn't sit back down. "Like, are you really Polendina's daughter?"

"I am," Penny said. "I just don't get out much."

*Obviously.* "And why are you and your father traveling Anima?"

"That I don't know. Father said a friend asked him to go to Vacuo, but he opted to go through Anima first. Help people we come across while I get some combat training in."

*That does sound like something the Doctor would do. And a good thing too, otherwise Qrow..."

"Who was that person who attacked you?"

Penny looked down to the floor, pulling her legs to her chest and resting her chin on top. "I don't know. Father thinks she was part of the White Fang but...her combat skills are more akin to that of an Atlesian Hunter. Especially the sudden disappearing and reappearing technique."

James knew that trick well. It was one preferred by Specialists.

*Wait...it can't be-

"*Penny. General.*"

James looked over to the door, smiling when he saw the bright blue eyes of Ciel staring at them from the doorway. She'd forgone the cloak, allowing him to see her white button up and blue skirt with matching beret. The dress code for new recruits in Atlas.

He hadn't seen a Cadet uniform in decades.

"How's Qrow?" he asked.

"He's resting," she explained. "We managed to heal all the worst of the cuts, but we had to revert to basic first aid. He'll be in an out of consciousness for a while by the look of it." She motioned for Penny to follow her. "I have to head into town to get some anti-venom, antidotes, and some healing poultices. I'll need you to come with."

"Yes Ma'am," Penny sighed.


"The knife was poisoned," Ciel sighed. "Dr. Polendina ran out of the stores he has taking care of your friend."

*Poison?!

"You can go see him if you want," she said. "Just don't do anything to rile him up when he comes to."

"Thank you."

Penny and Ciel hurried away while James went to the room next to his. Quietly, he went inside, taking a deep breath as he saw Qrow.
The poor man was groaning in his sleep, mumbling something incoherently through shallow breaths. Sweat coated his brow, pale grey vein marks crawled across his neck, and every so often a slight cough filled the air. His shirts and cape lay draped across the chairs and tables by the window. The Doctor was asleep in the bed on the opposite side of the room.

"T-Tai," Qrow muttered. "S-Sum...mer..."

James sat in the empty chair beside the bed, gently taking Qrow's hand in his.

"It's going to be okay, Qrow," he whispered. "I promise."

---

**Graduation. The day every Hunter at Beacon looks forward to. Making it to this day meant you were the best of the best. You were to protect all of Remnant.**

And as he sat by the window, watching the student body prepare for the dance ahead, Qrow can't help but feel that there was a mistake. He wasn't meant to be here.

*How did I last so long?*

"Hey Bird-brain!"

Qrow turned to look at the doorway, smiling tiredly as the silver-eyed beauty hop, skip, and jumped over to him. Standing on her tip-toes barely made her the same height as him sitting.

"Sup, Scatter-brain?" he asked.

"I got you something!" she said cheerfully, handing him a box wrapped in black and silver paper.

"What is it?"

Summer bounced up and down excitedly. "It's a graduation present. Open it!"

Qrow looked at the present, hesitantly reaching out to take it. "You...didn't have to, you know..."

"I know, silly," Summer said. "But we all worked so hard for this! And I want you to wear them tonight at the party."

With an air of confusion, Qrow unwrapped the tiny box, red eyes gleaming in wonder at the gift inside.

Inside was a pair of rings, one bearing Summer and Taiyang's emblems in the black band, while the other was engraved with Raven's and his own. To go with the rings was a silver necklace with a cross on its side.

"I know crosses aren't really your style," she said nervously. "But I know how much you love silver, and I thought this would go great with your cape and...Qrow, are you crying?"

He was. He didn't expect this. Birthdays he kind of had to get used to because Taiyang and Summer loved to try and bake, but he always avoided having them get him an actual present. Dinner and a nice, quiet evening was enough for him.
But this? Qrow couldn't help but cry.

For the first time, he started to feel like part of a family.

"D-do you not like it?" Summer stammered. "I-I'm sorry, I shouldn't have assumed-"

"I love it," Qrow whispered, standing up and pulling her into one of his flying hugs. "Thank you, Summer. Thank you so, so much."

Summer smiled as he tried not to break into a fit of tears, wrapping her arms around him. "You're very welcome, Qrow. Now how about we go prepare for the dance? I hear there's a really cute girl from Mistral who wants to dance with you."

"I'd rather dance with you all," Qrow chuckled. "Starting with Tai."

"I know. Now, let's go get your outfit."

Qrow woke up with a slight jolt, the images of the night before flashing before his eyes as he tried to sit up. The pain in his body forced him back to the pillows.

"Dammit," he hissed. He glanced around, trying to figure out where he was.

There was a ceiling, floor, walls. He was laying in a bed, a rather comfy one at that. He was topless, save for a large amount of bandages all across his upper torso. His neck felt bare.

Wait...this isn't right.

His cross was missing.

He never took it off.

And that's when he remembered.

That woman had portals like Raven, he thought. She had fighting skills kind of like James'. She was fast. She was deadly. She...

She took it.

She took it and tried to kill me!

There was the feeling of something cold on his right hand, and Qrow looked to see the General, slumped forward and asleep, holding Qrow's hand like Tai would when the girls were ill. His clothes were slightly disheveled, and his bangs weren't brushed back like they normally were.

Qrow swiped his hand away and tried to sit up, letting out a sharp groan as the pain shot through his body.

That bitch fights like a Specialist...she took my good luck charm...

"Sorry James, but the next time we meet, you're dead."

She knew James.
And it made his blood boil.

Struggling through the pain, he threw off the blanket and tried to stand up. He had to go. He had people to find. If he hurried, he could find them before James woke up. He could do it. He was a strong Hunter. He could do this on his own. He-

He barely got three feet from the bed before his legs gave out, still weak from the injuries.

"Qrow!"

Shit. I woke the Earl. Fucking hell.

Qrow felt two pairs of hand gently lift him off the floor and carry him back into bed. He shot a glare at them, finally getting a good look at the other guy.

That damn doctor.

"Are you alright?" James asked.

"No, I'm not," Qrow growled. "That bitch almost killed me, and took my necklace."

"You're not wrong there," sighed the doctor. "Luckily we got to Ayame in time."

"Luck. Humph." Qrow turned his gaze away, fists clenched tightly around the hem of the blanket. "Luck's got shit to do with it."

James sat on the edge of the bed, brow furrowed in confusion. "Qrow."

"How long was I out?"

"Three days," the doctor said. "The poison in that knife did a number on you."

Three days?! he thought. That's too long! We'll never find Ruby at this rate. "Have you heard anything from Ruby, James?"

"No," James admitted. "Not yet. I have been trying."

"Right..." Of course James has been trying. That's all anyone can do in this situation.

That didn't make him any less angry. Qrow wanted to snap. He wanted to just up and fly away right then and there. He just wanted to find his family and go home.

I've had enough.

"Leave, please."

James was taken aback, a look of hurt on his face that Qrow didn't want to deal with right now. "Qrow-"

"Just go away," Qrow whispered. "I don't want to see anyone right now."

"Qrow, if this is about the necklace-"

"James. Go."

Qrow felt his heart rate increasing. All the thoughts and emotions he'd been brushing aside feeling like they were going to spill over at any second. The pain of losing his friends, the lingering sense that his family might already be dead, the fear of being left alone again. Everything
he'd been burying since the Fall. Since Arriving on Anima. Since losing Klein, and the Schnees, Tai, Ruby, and Yang. Since losing Ozpin.

He was furious. He was scared. He was in intense pain.

He just wanted to go back home.

"Please go."

"Qrow-" James started.

"Take a fucking hint!" Qrow spat. His head snapped upwards, eyes glowing violently as he snarled. "Get the fuck out of here! I don't want to see you! I don't want to see anyone! Get the fuck out of here!"

James' eyes went wide, his mouth slack jawed. "I-"

"Ever since I started working for you, everything in my life has gone to shit! And not just normal shit I usually go through either! Some really fucked up shit!"

"I didn't mean to-"

"I've been shot at, stabbed, poisoned, had everyone I've ever even dared to consider a loved one scattered across Remnant, be forced to make a deal with my sister and risk going back to a hellhole life I want nothing to do with, watched the person I'd die for die first, and I've lost one of the few things left of my best friend from youth!"

"Wait-"

"And now I wake up three days later to find we're no closer to finding Ruby?! I've had enough! I've had it with you and your ghosts! I've had it with Ozpin's secrets! I've had it with everything! I WANT TO GO HOME!"

Qrow's breathing went shallow as he tried not to burst into a fit of coughs. His muscles ached, his head hurt, and his throat was killing him. James just stared at him while Dr. Polendina pulled out medications.

"I didn't mean," James stammered, "I mean... I didn't mean for any of this to happen..."

I know, Qrow thought. And that's what hurts the most...

"The moment I find my family and we get to Mistral, we're done. I'm putting you on a boat to Menagerie and then taking my family and going home to Patch." He curled up under the blanket, pulling it over his head so he didn't have to look anyone. "Now leave me alone."

"Qrow, I'm sorry. If there's anything I can-"

"If you want to make up for it, why not do the shopping for the next week? We're going to be stuck here since I'm laid up in the makeshift hospital. There's a list of shit we need in the briefcase. Now get lost."

Qrow didn't look out from under the blankets. He just listened as the doctor coaxed James out of the room. There was something in the conversation about the doc looking after him as he recovered, but Qrow didn't really pay attention. He just lay there, hugging himself as the tears finally began to fall.
The Doctor came over and sat on the edge of the bed, placing a hand where Qrow's good shoulder was. "I know you're upset, Qrow...But taking your anger out on James was going too far. He's just as much a victim in all of this as you."

"Don't care," Qrow whimpered.

"Liar, liar, flask on fire," Polendina chuckled. "You do care...."

_I do_, Qrow thought. _And it fucking sucks._

"I'll talk to James for you," the doctor offered, handing Qrow some of the medicine for the poison. "And if you're okay with it, we can talk later about how you're feeling...Sounds to me you've been bottling things up for a while."

"...Maybe later...I just want to sleep now..."

"That's fine. I'll be checking up on you and making sure you're recovering. Ozpin wouldn't want you to be out for the count, right?"

"Right..."

"I'll be back to change your bandages in a bit. Then we can talk about whatever you want to talk about, okay?"

"Okay..."

Qrow felt him getting up to leave, and he fought the urge to ask him to stay.

_I've pushed enough people away today._

---

_Out of all the places they had to fall ill, it had to be at the Schnee Manor._

_Jacques was relentless in his attempts to be a gracious host. Constantly coming in and bringing doctors and dinners and, for the love of the Gods please go away._

_If James wasn't away for a week, they'd ask to stay with him._

_They'd much rather be there right now._

_Why did I have to fall sick now?_

_It was the middle of the night. They knew by the sound of the clock in the hallway. They were too tired to open their eyes, sweating heavily. There was a gentle hand running through their hair. It wasn't one they were familiar with. It was calloused, and there were a few rings on the fingers._

"Just rest," came a voice. "You'll get through this, Oz."

_They didn't recognize this voice, but it felt soothing. They wanted to hear it a little longer._

"Sing for me?" they croaked.

_There was a slight pause, but soon the person by their beside began to sing. The voice was low, a_
Oscar woke when the train came to a sudden halt. The entire car felt stuffy and hot, and there was the sound of footsteps coming from the rooftop.

"Nini," he whispered, giving Ozpin a light shake. "Nini, we need to-"

Oscar figured out where the heat was coming from. Ozpin was sweating heavily, and his breathing had a soft crackle to it.

"Oh god," he breathed. "What do I-"

"Search the car, Ilia!" called a gruff voice.

"Yes sir," replied a softer one.

Oscar pulled Ozpin close, reaching into his bag and pulling out the old scarf he had packed, wrapping it around their head so that their hair was hidden. He let Ozpin rest their head on his shoulder, and took a deep breath as he waited for the rummaging to stop.

Please don't see us, he prayed. Don't see us. Don't hurt us. Don't kill us.

"Ilia, hurry up!" called the gruff voice. "Adam wants the people on this train dead and gone before we change route!"

"I'm looking!" spat the other.

Oscar felt his heart racing. He couldn't help but shake in fear.

"Oscar," Ozpin muttered softly. "What's-"

"Not now," Oscar hushed. "Stay quiet."

The sound of footsteps approached their hiding place, pulling Ozpin closer so their face wouldn't be seen. Who was in the car with them? Mistral Police? White Fang? The Gold Blade? No, not the Blade. From what Oscar heard, they didn't kill innocent people.

If he had to pick who it was, he hoped it was the Fang.

"A-ha. Found you."
Oscar looked up, eyes wide in fear as his hazel and gold eyes met with a pair of light periwinkle from behind a Grimm visor. The girl in the visor fell to the floor, landing perfectly on her feet as she drew her rapier. Or was it a whip? Oscar couldn't quite tell. Maybe it was both.

"Please don't kill us," he begged quietly, moving to keep the girl away from Ozpin. "Please, we mean no harm."

Ozpin let out a soft cough, and the girl froze in place, her dark brown ponytail swinging back and forth from the sudden halt in movement. Her skin turned a soft blue and her hair a pale green.

"What are you doing on this train?" she asked softly.

Oscar felt the urge to run, and a burning sensation deep in his chest. But he remained where he was and said as calmly as possible, "We're heading to Mistral. Nini is sick, and needs medicine from the doctors there."

Her eyes narrowed in suspicion. "And you're in the caboose because?"

"B-because we couldn't afford tickets. It was either sneak and get medicine, or buy tickets and watch Nini die...I can't lose Nini...they're all I have left. Please don't take them from me, Miss. Please..."

The girl looked between Oscar and Ozpin, wincing when Oz let out another harsh cough. Oscar was shaking, but refused to back down. He wasn't sure why, but the way the girl looked at him made him think she might be reasoned with.

"Please," Oscar asked. "We won't say anything about what's going on with the train. Let us leave, and we'll never see each other again, I swear."

After a moment of silence, she put her weapon away.

"Wait for the train whistle," she ordered, "and sneak off. Lamia is three miles south. The doctor is an old friend of mine. He'll help you for free if you tell him Amitola sent you."

"R-really?"

"Don't make me change my mind. Whistle, sneak, leave. And don't ever come back to Mistral. Got it?"

Oscar nodded rapidly, smiling in relief. "Thank you."

"Just don't come back. Ever."

She changed back to her default coloring and then hurried out of the car.

Oscar gathered their bags and prepared for them to leave, sneaking some of the Dust crystals from a few of the crates just in case. "Nini? You okay?"

"That was," they muttered, "very quick thinking, Oscar. Well done."

"That was the most terrifying thing I've ever done," Oscar chuckled.

"The most terrifying thing you've done so far," Ozpin teased. "We've got a long road ahead."

"Yeah. Come on, let's get ready to go."
Oscar helped Ozpin to their feet, letting them lean on him for support. The whistle sounded, and Oscar helped limp Ozpin over to the door. The train began to move.

"We're jumping," Oscar said. "Ready?"

"As ready as I'll ever be," Oz wheezed.

With a gentle nod, Oscar threw the door open and on the count of three, they jumped. Ozpin manages to land on their feet, stumbling slightly. Oscar feel forward and ended up with a cut on his cheek. His Aura healed most of it.

"Hold still," Ozpin said, kneeling beside him. "I'll heal it-"

"No, you're sick," Oscar stressed. "Just tell me what to do. I can do it."

"You sure?"

"Might as well make healing my first lesson."

Ozpin let out a soft hum in agreement, and began instructing Oscar in how to cast a small healing spell. Oscar listened carefully and focused.

"Pool your Aura to one part of your body, like the hand. Focus on what you want it to do."

Oscar placed his left hand, now glowing a soft goldenrod, up to the cut and closed his eyes. There was a slight tingling sensation, and he could feel the flesh melt back into place. Once he was sure he'd finished healing it, he removed his hand and opened his eyes.

Ozpin was grinning.

"Well done!" they praised. "Not bad for a first try. I think we've got a real prodigy here."

"Thanks," Oscar chuckled, ears burning from embarrassment at the word 'prodigy'. "Want me to help you with you? You're still feverish, I could-"

"I'm fine," Ozpin assured through a cough. "I'm afraid a normal healing spell isn't going to be enough for this cough. It'll take something a bit stronger, and you're not quite ready for that."

"You sure?"

"I'm sure. I can hold out until we get to Lamia."

"Okay."

The two of them stood and continued on their way.

_Hopefully Lamia isn't too far._

"Come on, Oz! Come look!"

_Qrow pulled Ozpin through to the living room, smiling brightly as they laughed in gay abandon._
"Qrow, what is going on?" they asked cheerfully. "You haven't been this excited since Yang threw the cake on us."

"Tai's got something to show you," Qrow chuckled. "You know how I have my tattoo on my chest?"

"Yes, I do. Why?"

"Well, Tai's got a ton of them, and you need to see the changes he made to one of them."

"Oh, how exciting," they said drily. "Nothing more exciting than Taiyang's tattoos."

"That's the spirit!" Qrow knew Ozpin was just humoring him, but he couldn't wait to see the look on their face when they saw what Tai did.

"You ready?" Taiyang inquired. "Because I've been working out just for this occasion."

Ozpin raised their eyebrow quizzically and Qrow bounced on the tips of his toes. This was a rare treat. Only those closest to Tai got this honor, and knowing that Ozpin was worthy of this little family tradition? It made his heart swell with joy.

"Okay," Qrow said. "On three. One-"

"Two," Ozpin chuckled.

"Three!" Taiyang roared, throwing off his shirt and flexing his arms so that his chest was exposed.

Qrow watched as Ozpin stepped forward to observe the artwork more closely. Their golden stare flickered across the giant white rose over Taiyang's heart, reading all the names intricately written in golden calligraphy. It took a while, seeing as there were almost twenty or so names across all the petals.

Then they went slack jawed.

"You added my name," they whispered.

"Yep," Taiyang cackled. "Only family makes the flower, Oz. Finally got the chance to add your name."

"Welcome to the flower, Oz," Qrow chuckled. "Hope you don't mind a bunch of blooming idiots like us for family." Qrow chuckled at his own pun, only for his laughter to die down.

Ozpin was tearing up.

"Oz-"

"This is one of the nicest things anyone has ever done for me," they sniffled, pulling them both into a tight embrace. "Thank you."

Qrow hugged them tightly, smiling as Tai followed suit.

They were a family, through and through. And Qrow didn't want it any other way.
James walked through the streets of town, hood up over his brow like before. He didn't want to go back to the inn just yet. Qrow's words still echoed in his ears. It'd been almost a week since his breakdown, and while James did try to understand, it didn't stop what Qrow said from hurting.

"He's been suppressing a lot of emotions," Dr. Polendina had told him. "I can't go into full detail, but it seems that losing that cross was the straw that broke the Beringel's back. I'm working through it with him. He seems to have opened up to me about it, much like you when we first started. Just give him time and he'll be ready for visitors. He just...needs someone he can talk to about certain things."

"Does...does he hate me?"

"No, Jim-"

"James."

"No, he doesn't hate you James. He just hates the hand he's been dealt."

James wished he knew what hand that was.

"Why didn't I ask him how he was feeling?" he muttered. "Why didn't I check up on him like he does with me? We're supposed to be..."

James didn't know what they were. More than friends, yes, but beyond that?

*This was so much easier when it was just employer and employee.*

But at the moment, even that was out of reach. Qrow was recovering, and James was preparing for the trip to Sagisō. Flynt was able to get a hold of their HQ, and a ship would be on the way soon.

"Turns out mentioning "Jimmae!" granted you and your pal the VIP treatment," Neon had explained. "Expect a big party!"

James was never one for parties.

*But...Qrow seemed to enjoy them. He did enjoy the Schnee banquet once he was relieved of duty. And then there was the photo of him and Oz...* 

"Dammit," he hissed. "I'm thinking too hard on this...Just...be his friend, James. Be a friend. That's what he needs you to be right now."

So James continued preparing for their trip. He stopped by the weapons shop for ammo and cleaning supplies. He managed to order Qrow a new outfit, black jeans and a grey button-up, as well as a leather jacket with thick padding for defending against knives, and a new pair of boots. Hopefully he'd be okay with this. As he passed by some of the stalls, James' eyes lingered on the jeweler's stand when he saw a silver locket in the shape of a circle with a rose pattern engraved on it.

It wasn't a cross, but it looked like something Qrow might purchase. If not for himself, for his nieces.

He ended up getting it.


"You bastards! We had a deal!"
James came to a halt as he was about to head back. Glancing into the alleyway, he noticed a group of men surrounding someone, pinning them up against the wall. From what he could make out, there was blond hair on the person being cornered.

"You said," the victim groaned, "that if I acted as your guard to Ayame, you'd tear up that stupid contract and give me back my Aura!"

"I'm afraid we have to change that," one of the thugs chuckled. "Turns out there's some people who are in need of a bodyguard like you. We got a bidder at the ready to buy your papers."

"Get the fuck off me!"

James quietly started sneaking forward, being careful not to be spotted as he drew his gun. He tilted his head, trying to get a better look at the person being attacked.

*Feels like my Specialists days.*

He saw that the person had darker skin and bright blue eyes. They were missing their shirt, and their cargo shorts were torn pretty badly. They were also missing a shoe. Being topless, James was able to sneak a glimpse of their torso. They were pretty well toned, and there were a few scars peppering their body.

And while it was hard to see in detail, James managed to catch sight of two rose tattoos. One on their neck as red as blood. The other over their heart, white as the first snow with flecks of gold.

*It can't be him! Oh praise the Gods!*

James held his gun to the back of the head of one of the goons, lowering his voice and putting on the General's voice.

"Back the fuck off," he warned. "You had a deal, let the poor soul go."

The person who had been laughing slowly turned, pale green eyes bulging from their head as they were taken off guard. "Wh-who the hell are you?!!"


"We have a contract! He's gotta work for us!"

"How much?"

"Wh-what?"

"I said. How. Much?" James used his free hand to pull the Lien from his pocket. "I've got six-thousand right here. I'll buy his contract and you'll restore his Aura. Will that suffice?"

The group looked between each other, all shaking. He had to hold back a laugh. They were nothing but a bunch of schoolyard bullies.

"That's good," they all stammered. The one with the gun to their head placed a hand to the victim's shoulder and began to unlock his Aura. Another one of the creeps pulled out the paperwork and James signed it, using the fake name.

"Here's your Lien," he spat. "Now get lost before I decide to shoot anyway." He waited until the group scrambled away before putting his gun back in the holster, turning to look at his new friend. "You okay, Taiyang? They didn't hurt you too bad, did-"
James felt a hand grab his throat and the wall of bricks hit his back. Taiyang's blue eyes burned brightly with paranoia.

"Taiyang-"

"How do you know my name?" Taiyang growled. "You have to the count of five to-"

"The tattoos," James choked. "You got the first ones after graduating Beacon."

Taiyang's eyes narrowed and he loosened his grip slightly. "How many and what did I get?"

"Five. Gold dragon on your back, crow on the right leg, emblem on right arm. Raven left arm, white rose over your heart with the names of your family and friends on the petals." James smiled when Taiyang let go. "The red rose is for Ruby, right? And you have another dragon on the other leg for Yang?"

"How the fuck do you know all that?" Taiyang demanded. "Who the fuck told you all that? Who are you and how do you know me?!"

"It was the rose on your chest that confirmed my suspicions." James lowered his hood, letting out a soft chuckle as Taiyang's suspicious glare melted into a look of relief. "Hello, Tai."

"No way," Tai gasped. "You're-"

"I'm the Earl of Ironwood, and I think you know my butler."

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the wait. I was supposed to finish edits on this earlier, but I ended up sick. Better late than never, right?
So yeah, Qrow finally broke. I've been planning this scene since the beginning. His path to healing starts now.
Blake and Weiss are going to have to talk, huh?
And good job Oscar! I'm so proud of little Compost King.

Next chapters will be Hazel, Ghira, Tyrian, and Watts, as well as some Taiyang and James bonding. Ooooooooh fun!

Hope you liked the chapter friends!!!
The winds blew softly through the window as Salem paced back and forth in the meeting hall. The candlelight flickered dimly in her crimson red eyes as she tried to get in touch with her Generals. It had been a while since she had heard from two of them, and it was starting to cause her worry.

Cinder had finally caught wind of where Ozpin had been hiding and was on the move. By the looks of things, they ended up on the train out of the farming district. Capturing them would be short work it seems. Salem had no fear she would be successful in her mission. And with her cohorts by her side, it should be simple work disposing anyone who was near the Wizard at any point.

Watts was still in Mistral at Haven. Belladonna had escaped from his grasp with the aid of Destruction. The new recruits almost had him, but somehow Belladonna managed to make contact with a fragment. With no training, managed to summon defensive measures.

And they escaped.

Now Watts was in the process of extorting Lionheart. Having a someone of his political status could be beneficial to them, he reasoned. If they can keep one of Ozpin's former allies on a tight leash, taking over Mistral would be made easy when the time came.

So Salem decided she'd give Watts permission to act as he saw fit, but not to return without the targets.

Tyrian was still unreachable. His Aura was off radar, much like how all of Vale vanished. This was troubling. No, troubling is an understatement. Tyrian was one of her best. She personally oversaw his training, much like with Cinder. He was loyal to a fault. He wouldn't just ignore her.

But he was still unreachable.

And now so was Hazel.

Hazel, arguably her strongest General, was off her radar. Untraceable.

"Where have they gone?" she whispered.

The soft cooing of the Seer drew Salem's attention from her thoughts, and she beckoned for the creature to approach. There was no news to report, but the creature often came to her in times of confusion. It seemed to help soothe both her and the Grimm as a whole.

"I'll need to get in contact with young Adam Taurus," Salem mused. "If Tyrian and Hazel's conditions have been compromised, I'll need to make more use of the Adept...I'll send him after Siena Khan."
"Tyri! Get the water buckets!"

"Tyri, I need help with my make up!"

"Hey Tyri! Can you please hold this?"

"Tyri this, Tyri that. That's not my name, dammit!"

Tyrian paced back and forth behind one of the tents, kicking the pebbles that lay haphazardly across the ground. They had been on the road for a week. A week. And in that entire time, he'd been made to help around the camps in ways that were beyond what was expected of one of Salem's most trusted warriors.

And the stupid nickname.

Why are they all calling me "Tyri"? he wondered. He'd been doing everything he could to avoid talking to anyone. He had been keeping his name, his trait, his goal, everything a secret!

But that nickname!

Ignoring the call of the ringmaster, Tyrian stopped in front of one of the mirrors for the magic show. His pale yellow eyes looked weak in the fading sunlight. His hair, no longer a braid, was still loosely tied by the velvet band. The black and purple clothes he'd been given clung to him from the heat.

He was a shell of who he once was.

And it pissed him off.

"Where's that little brat?" he spat. She had to have something to do with this. All these chores and interactions. She wasn't even anywhere near him during all of them.

Where is she?!

Deciding it would be best to find her, Tyrian wandered around the camp, listening for her as he scanned the area, checking nearby bushes and the shoreline of the oasis. Knowing Briar, she'd be playing that stupid little flute of hers in some hidden corner of the food vendor's hall.

Why does she use it to talk? he thought. And why does she want to get to Nagisa?

"Hey Tyri!" called one of the musicians as he passed. "Do you have a minute?"

Tyrian turned around, nostrils flaring as he bellowed at them. "For the last time, my name isn't Tyri! It's Tyrian!"
"Chill," the musician groaned. "I just wanted to ask if you'd seen your sister around anywhere."

"My what?"

"Sister? The little girl who followed you everywhere?"

Briar. "Oh. Right. No, actually. I'm looking for her now. You seen her?"

"Nope," the musician grumbled. "We were kinda hoping she'd play with us for the late night show. Find her, will you? We'll pay double."

"Sure," he sighed. "I'll have her play in your band tonight if she's up for it."

"Thanks. I'll keep an eye out for her too."

Tyrian watched as the musician left, and he couldn't help the gnawing feeling of anxiety in the pit of his stomach.

_I bet the others are currently bringing Remnant to their knees right about now._

Tyrian continued his search across the camp, circling around through the stalls and the colorful streamers. People in vibrant costumes were making their way to the center tent. These was no sign of the little girl.

Until he saw an old rusted pot floating toward the far end of camp.

"Gotcha." Tyrian ran forward and chased after the bucket, holding back a cackle as he saw it vanish into a nearby bush. The closer he came, the louder the flute sound became. He was going to find her. And once he did, he-

He skidded to a halt, eyes wide in shock as he came face to face with a creature with eight legs. There were several spikes protruding from each one, and its eyes glowed a vibrant green in the fading light of day. Hisses and clicks from its pincers filled the air as Briar began to run away from the camp, smacking a branch against the old bucket and playing her little flute as loud as she could to draw its attention. Her movements were sporadic as she tried to draw it away, giving off a sense of panic that enticed the spindly creature.

_I know this one_, Tyrian realized. It was one his Goddess was quite proud of. The Cavatica, made especially for the oases of Sanus. The detailing on the abdomen made it quite clear this was a Grimm of his Queen's design. But there were many things off about it. Cavaticas dug into the sand or nested in caves, hiding and waiting. They never came above to attack.

_And that coloring. That green hue._

It was unnatural.

It was unholy.

_It needed to die._

Without hesitation, Tyrian leapt upward and landed directly on the creature's back, flicking his wrists to allow his gauntlets to fire. The Cavatica reared as the bullets grazed its eyes, nearly knocking him off balance. Out of the corner of his eye, Tyrian noticed Briar throwing the bucket directly at the face of the beast. It lodged between the pincers, giving Tyrian and opening to kill.

Using the front left leg as a post, Tyrian swung around, using his tail to keep from falling off his
perch. He aimed, holding back a grimace as he fired into the mouth of the beast.

After three rounds, it fell.

Tyrian hopped off the dissipating body and began to walk over to Briar, smirking as he returned his weapon to its resting state. "Not bad, kid. Most grown ass men wouldn't try to even snipe this thing-WOAH!"

Tyrian barely dodged the tip of a stinger. Briar had dropped the flute, and her eyes were no longer the dark hazel hue that he had seen when they first met. They were a deep violet color, like amethysts in moonlight. She was shaking, whimpering, and there was a dried streak of blood over her right eye from, if Tyrian had to guess, a whip gash.

"Briar, stop!" he bellowed as he dodged her tail. "It's me! It's Tyrian!"

But Briar didn't listen. She just kept striking, attempting to hit him with the end of her cracked tail.

"Briar!" he growled. "Listen to Tyri, you little brat!"

Tyrian's own tail uncoiled and moved forward, just in time to curl around the little girl's and stop the stinger from hitting him right in the chest. Briar tried to tug away, but winced at the pain it caused. Tyrian took a closer look at the cracks and let out a sympathetic sigh. The cracks had grown incredibly long. She was close to losing the armor.

_I knew this was going to happen. She's about that age._

"You want the pain to stop?" he asked her. Briar nodded, lips quivering as her eyes began to change back. "Who hurt you?"

Briar looked away, leaning down to pick up her flute and dust it off, taking a deep breath before beginning to play. Tyrian looked and saw the branch float upward, swirling the tip in the sand as it wrote out the words.

"It was the ringmaster," Briar wrote. "He said I had to keep the perimeter clear while they were performing, and when I said no..."

"I get it," he groaned. "He took out the whip." Tyrian released her tail, licking his lips in anticipation. "I think I know how to help you. We'll need to prepare though." Briar was erasing the words on the ground as she tilted her head. He took it as a way of asking why.

"We're going to run," he explained. "And taking everything we can with us."

---

_Hey, buddy. You ever wonder why we're here?_

Hazel let out a soft groan as his eyes slowly became adjusted to the light. There was a heavy weight on his wrists, and what felt like bark against his back. Chances are, he wagered, that he was chained to it by the arms. It was dark out, sans the campfire in front of him. All knives and pistols he had stored on him were laying on the ground in front of him, just out of reach. His shoes were near the fire.
His coat was missing.

"Up here, buddy."

Hazel's eyes looked upward, narrowing as he saw the bartender from Amnesia smiling at him from a branch. Though they were dressed like...

"You're the Shepherd," he groaned.

"Amaryllis," they introduced, shaking the crook in their hand. "What's your name, friendo?"

"None of your business."

"That's where you're wrong." Amaryllis hooked themself onto the branch and slid down, pulling a small wanted flyer out of their pocket and holding it up for Hazel to see. "This is you, right?"

He looked over the paper, letting out a small grunt of annoyance when he saw his face staring back at him. "What of it?"

"Hazel Rainart," Amaryllis chuckled. "Wanted for arson, murder, raiding, and destruction to private property. You know, turning you into the Capital right now would set me up for life. I could retire and open my own parish if I wanted. Never have to work another day."

Hazel scowled at them. He knew it was a risk, coming to Anima. There were always chances he'd be recognized. But it had been so long, he had hoped no one would even remember there had been a bounty on him.

It seems Tyrian's recklessness is rubbing off on us, he thought.

"Relax," the Shepherd sighed. "I'm not turning you in. Yet." Hazel tried to pull the chains keeping him bound, only for Amaryllis to cackle. "I'm not stupid, Rainart. I locked you up both in the physical and spiritual sense of the word. Those chains aren't coming loose and you're not going to be able to enhance your strength to get out unless I let you."

"Then why not kill me?" he asked. "Why not kill me and take me in?"

"Because I want to make a deal."

"A deal?"

"Yes." Amaryllis leaned against the tree, pulling a few more wanted posters from the pockets of his poncho, holding them up so Hazel could get a good look at the people on them. "These people are wanted more than you are. If I can catch them, I'd be set and then some. We can split the cash too."

Hazel resisted the urge to laugh. "You want me to help you catch other criminals?"

"Yep."

"And if I refuse?"

"Well, here's how I see it." Amaryllis walked over to a backpack that had been by the fire. "If you refuse, I'll have to knock you out again and take you in. And you know I can do it too. But if you agree, you'll be able to retire and we can part ways as unlikely allies. And, I'll owe you a favor since you're helping me."

Hazel remained quiet, closing his eyes in an attempt to contact Salem. He had to let her know his
mission was compromised. If he didn't, everything would begin to fall to pieces.

But there was nothing.

His Aura was locked up tight.

"I don't suppose I have a choice in the matter," he groaned. "I'll do what you need me to do."

"Great!" Amaryllis cheered. "We'll start tomorrow. Get some rest."

"Aren't you going to unchain me?" Hazel asked.

"Nope," they cackled. "I'm not stupid. You'll kill me the minute I fall asleep if I let you go, right?"

"That depends. Did you use a temporary lock on me?"

"No. Perma-lock or bust."

"Then you're safe. I can't kill you if I'm going to get my Aura back." The two of them stared at each other for a long while, and Hazel let out a sigh of defeat. "You're still not going to unchain me."

"Nope," Amaryllis said with a pop. "Just can't risk it. Goodnight Rainart."

Hazel watched as Amaryllis lay on their side, using the backpack as a pillow. "Since we seem to be on last name basis, mind if I ask yours?"

Amaryllis looked over at the fire, their happy expression softening into a look that sent a chill down Hazel's spine.

*The look of someone who has nothing left to lose.*

"Never mind," he grumbled. "You don't-"

"Adaire."

"Adaire."

"Excuse me?"

"My last name" Amaryllis muttered solemnly, pink eyes glowing scarlet in the firelight. "It's Adaire. And if you ever tell anyone-" Their eyes turned to a harsh black, and their voice distorted itself- *"I'll cut out your tongue with a scalpel and use it to feed the Nevermores.*"

Without another word, Amaryllis turned over and went to sleep, leaving Hazel alone with his thoughts.

*I just made a deal that'll cost me my life if I'm not careful, he realized. I need to help this loon fast if I'm going to get out of this alive.*

---

Ghira awoke with a throbbing headache and a burning sensation in his left hand. Taking a moment to get his bearings, he glanced around the room. He wasn't in Mistral anymore. His little escape had resulted in him in an abandoned town.
"Good morning," came a voice.

Ghira's sight snapped in the direction of the voice, brows furrowed in confusion as he saw a man stand before him, holding what appeared to be a wild bird he didn't recognize. The man had black and grey hair, pale eyes, and wore a suit of green. He had a quiver on his back, and a bow folded down against his hip.

"Good morning," Ghira groaned. "Who are you?"

"We met yesterday," the man chuckled. "My name is Li Ren."

"What?"

"I'm afraid I can't talk now. I must rest. Fix yourself this and start heading out. The search party will be coming soon enough and we don't want to be here when they arrive."

Before Ghira could ask further, the man who called himself Li vanished, leaving the bird on the ground along with a small satchel. The headache and burning feeling subsided.

"Search party," he sighed. "I get the feeling it's not going to be a warm welcome."

Ghira walked over to the doorframe and picked up the bag, admiring the fine leather before looking at the contents. Inside was a knife, some flint, a few matches, bandages, a small bottle of water, and a few healing potions. There was also a change of clothes.

With no time to spare, he changed from his great coat into the sleeveless black sweater. It was a tad snug, but it'd have to do. The pants in the bag were far too small, so Ghira left them in, folding his coat into a nice little roll and sliding it in.

"Let's get out of here before breakfast," he mumbled. "Get some firewood, set up a camp. Hopefully find some more water."

Ghira hurried out of the abandoned house, heading in the opposite direction of Mistral. If he remembered right, there were a few paths that headed west that were relatively covered. He should be able to make it to Saboten fast if he hurried.

But Li...

"Hey Li," he mumbled. "Mind if I ask you something?"

"Of course," Li's voice replied tiredly.

"How were you able to walk around? And why did you vanish?"

"It's...a long story."

"We have time."

"Not now. It would take too long, and I must rest. I'll explain everything later, I promise."

Ghira nodded and didn't press the issue further. As much as he wanted answers, stability was the main goal right now.

He could wait for answers.
"I can't wait for answers!"

Watts paced back and forth in the hall, sparks flying from his steps as he moved. The Albain brothers stood at the side whispering to themselves as they watched him. Watts knew what they were mumbling about. They were wondering if he was stable. If he was worth the time and effort to follow. He was used to people wondering such things.

But he was growing just as tired of that as he was of Lionheart. The moment Belladonna vanished, he refused to aid them any further. He was shutting them out. It was now even harder to manipulate him. Harder to get information, power, resources.

The coward is probably laughing at us from his binds, Watts thought.

"I'm trying my best!" Käse insisted, pulling the pins from her hair. "He's just not letting me in anymore. He's completely blocked his mind."

"Then we need to unblock it," Watts spat. "It shouldn't be that hard. Especially for you."

"You're right, Papa," she said drily. "Super easy. Getting past mind mazes, risking insanity and disassociation, all in the hope that you'll find one little piece of information to what you seek. Telepathy and mind reading, super easy."

"Don't you dare-"

"Might I make a suggestion?" Lloyd chimed in, taking the pins from his sister. "I think I know a few ways to get Lionheart to talk."

Watts leveled his green gaze on his student, brow raised in intrigue. "You do?"

"Yes," Lloyd hummed, smirking as the hairpins melted in his grasp, coating his fingers like a silk glove. "I'll just need ten minutes."

Watts pondered this for a moment, looking between his subordinates to try and garner a second opinion. Käse was in a fit of giggles as she combed her fingers through her hair, Corsac had his tail between his legs, and Fennec's ears lay flat.

It seemed as though everyone knew what Lloyd had planned.

"Very well," Watts sighed. "You have ten minutes. But I want him alive afterwards. Do we understand each other?"

"Yes Father."

Watts nodded to the brothers and watched as they opened the doors to Lionheart's study. The Professor sat in his chair, bound by chains that kept him in place. Even if he stood, he wouldn't get three feet away. His eyes were sunken from insomnia, filled with terror as Lloyd glided across the floor toward him.

"Might not want to watch," he warned them. "This might get a little messy." The doors closed behind him, the oak turned to grey, and they were left in waiting.
"Doctor Watts."

Watts glanced at Käse, who simply nodded her acknowledgement before gesturing for the brothers to follow her out of the hallway. Once he was alone, he turned his attention to the voice of his Queen.

"Yes, My Lady?"

"Tyrian and Hazel have vanished," she explained. "Their missions have been compromised. I'll need you to take over for Hazel."

"What of Tyrian and the Mage?"

"That will have to wait until after you retrieve the targets on Anima. We know who is wielding Destruction, and I know your subordinates can't stand a chance against him if the conditions aren't right. I want you to send them after The Blade and the rabbit Magician, and you'll be searching for the Chieftain. With Lionheart's resources, it should be simple."

"Of course, Your Grace."

"I'll also be contacting Adam Taurus. From here on out, the White Fang will be ours to use as we deem fit. Be sure to use everything to your advantage."

"Of course."

"And Watts?"

"Yes, My Lady?"

"I want Belladonna dead or alive. Do I make myself clear?"

Watts' eyes took on the electric yellow glow as he let those words echo in his ears. "Crystal clear, My Queen."

"Report to me your progress. And do not return until the task is completed."

Without another word, Salem's voice vanished. Watts was once again left alone with his thoughts.

It looks as if I'm the only one left, he mused. Provided Cinder hasn't up and died on her way to capture Ozpin. How pathetic.

The doors opened, pulling him from his mind and turning his attention to Lloyd. He smirked, bowing politely as he stepped aside to reveal a disheveled Lionheart. Grey vein marks crossed the Headmaster's face as sweat coated his brow. His breathing was shallow.

He's broken.

"He's agreed to give us everything," Lloyd hummed. "Provided I left the students alone. Käse should be able to get everything from him now."

"Impressive, Lloyd," Watts chuckled. "Have Lionheart arrange for you two to be given a ship each. You're to go after The Gold Blade."

"Without you?"

"I'm to track down Belladonna. We are to bring the targets back alive. Understood?"
"Yes, Father."

"Good. Now go get your sister and prepare to depart. And send Fennec and Corsac to me." The two parted ways, and Watts began planning.

*I'm not going to fail like they did.*

---

Tyrian hid low in the bushes near the ringmaster's tent as Briar waited out front. People were clearing out for the night, and the next day everyone would be packing up to leave. This would be their one chance.

He watched as Briar slowly uncurled her tail from her waist. She knelt down just as he had shown her. It was rather impressive how fast she was learning. The ringmaster was stumbling in her direction, his face red from the ale he'd likely been consuming. The whip was gripped tightly in his hand.

*Go for it,* he thought. *Kill him!*

Briar's tail pulled back, prepared to strike as the man started to notice she was there.

*Kill him! Come on! Kill him!*

Briar's hands flew to her ears, and she curled up on herself.

*Dammit.*

Deciding not to let this opportunity pass by, Tyrian lunged out of the bush and ran his tail through the man's back before he had a chance to lift the whip. When he pulled his tail out, the man collapsed to the ground, dead as a doornail.

"What were you doing?" Tyrian hissed. "You had him!" Briar looked up at him, tears welling in her eyes as she relaxed. "You could have killed him! You could have stopped the pain in your tail! Why did you stop?!" Briar poked at the ground, lips quivering as she wrote a sing word.

*Scared.*

She was scared to kill.

"I should have known," he groaned. "Come on. We have to go before someone finds the body." He held out his hand to her and helped her up off the ground. They hurried through the bushes and over to a horse and cart they had prepared. Briar sat in the back as Tyrian took the reins.

They didn't look back. They kept looking ahead as the camp became but a light in the distance. A light that was attracting Nevermores by the dozens.

*If I don't teach her how to kill, Tyrian thought, both of us are going to die before we make it halfway.*
James was laying flat on his back in the grove, panting heavily as he tried to focus. Taiyang insisted on sparring before getting new clothes, saying it was a great way to get to know each other. And he wasn't entirely wrong in that.

In their few rounds, James learned that he can't hold his own against Tai.

**Team bonding!**

"Not bad," Tai chuckled. "But you're really off balance."

"Having a half metal body does that to you," James said drily.

"Not what I meant." Taiyang reached out a hand to help him up. "Your mind is in ten different places. Your spirit isn't in it. You're off balance."

"I don't get it." James reached out and took Tai's hand, holding back a grumble from the pain in his back.

Tia ran his fingers through his hair, letting out a sigh as he thought about how to explain it. "Think of it like-" His eyes fell to James' pistol- "like target practice."

"Target practice."

"Right. You're constantly aiming at moving targets, but you having trouble focusing on them because of their speed. The targets are what you're focusing on, but the speed is your spirit. Because you're unable to keep up with the targets, your shots keep missing."

James pondered this for a moment, putting his hands on his lower back to stretch out the stiffness. "So...me being off balance is like a soldier with too many fast targets. I can't focus because there's too much going on."

"Right," Tai says. "You got it!"

"I think I got. It's...strange to think about."

"It is. Not just for adults, but students too. But you'll get there."

James raised a brow at that comment. "You're a teacher?"

"Used to be at Signal Academy before it cut back." Taiyang turned back toward Ayame, stretching his arms over his head that made the dragon on his back take flight. "Come on. It's getting late, and I want to get clothes before I see my brother in law."

"Right," James agreed. "But mind if I ask a few questions on the way?"

"Sure thing, Jimmy-"

"Please don't call me that."

Taiyang side-eyed him but said nothing about it. "Alright James. What do you want to know?"

There was a lot that James wanted to know. So many questions about Tai and how he got there.
About Ruby and Qrow. The conditions in Vale. Everything. He had to have some answers.

The biggest question was, what answers was James ready for.

"There's a lot," James said. "But I suppose the best place to start would be how you got so far so fast."

And just like that, James wondered if he asked the wrong question. Taiyang's arms crossed, covering the rose on his chest, and his bangs covered his deep blue eyes.

"We were a few days behind Ruby," Tai mumbled. "We had come up on the ruins of a town just off the coast of Anima called Wormwood. Yang and I were ambushed by some bandits."

"Raven's tribe?" James asked.

"No," Tai scoffed. "If it were Rae, she'd have taken us to camp. No, this was a different group. We got ambushed and..."

"And?"

"I don't really remember. We were fighting and I felt something hit the back of my head and...the next thing I knew I was a few towns south of here with no money, no supplies, and Yang was gone. My Sunny Little Dragon..."

Without thinking, James wrapped an arm around Taiyang's shoulders, letting him lean against him as they walked. "We'll find her, Taiyang. I promise we will. Yang, Ruby, we'll find them."

"Yeah...Hopefully..."

"We will," he promised. "How about we save more questions for later? Let's get you dressed and then see how Qrow reacts to seeing you."

A smile graced his face, and Taiyang nodded in excitement. "You're right. One thing at a time."

"Speaking of one thing, don't be surprised if Qrow starts swearing at me."

"Why? You break his flask?"

"No," James sighed. "Long story short, I'm the reason he's laid up right now. I've kind of been his bad luck charm, not the other way around."

"Woah, hold up," Tai gasped. "He told you?!!"

"Told me?"

"About...about his Semblance....he told you."

"Is...that weird?"

"Well, I mean," Tai stammered, running his hand over his face. "He never even told Oz, and those two were tight at the hip. We all learned the hard way what he can do."

That shook James to his core. He was told. Qrow divulged personal information to him that not even his own family knew until it was too late. And Qrow trusted Ozpin to the point where...where...
"...watched the person I'd die for die first..."

Just what were they? More than friends? If so then...

What was that kiss?

"I wonder what makes me so special," James mumbled.

"I don't know," Tai huffed. "But whatever it is, don't lose it. He needs friends like you."

"Yeah. He does."

The two returned to town and headed toward the nearby tailors. If Tai was going to be presented to Qrow, he had to be wearing more than a pair of shorts.

"Tai?! Ruby, where are you?! Yang!"


They had to be somewhere. Anywhere.

Maybe in Vale.

Qrow quickly changed form, wings flapping rapidly as he moved in the direction of the city. There was smoke everywhere.

"Qrow!"

"Uncle Qrow!"

"Qrow, help!"

There they were, right below him sinking into the ground as Grimm surrounded them. He flew down fast in an attempt to get to them, only to be frozen in place by flashes of green and white. Hues of reds and golds blocked his path as he changed back, standing alone in the middle of a cage.

Wait...A cage...?

No. Not this again. Not again.

"So you're really going to just leave him there to die?"

Qrow turned around, shaking in fear as several pairs of eyes floated around him.

"It's what's best for the Tribe."

"Someone will come for him."

"Who would want such a curse?"
I'm not bad. I'm not a bad omen. I'm a person. I'm not cursed. I'm not-

"I'll call you Prosper."

Qrow felt his body relax. Ozpin was here. They'll help them. They're always there for each other-

"Keep each other safe."

The cage was gone. The eyes and the voices had vanished.

"Qrow."

No. I don't want to be alone.

"Qrow, hey."

Don't leave me alone-

"Qrow, wake up."

Qrow opened his eyes, slowly sitting up and looking around to find himself back in bed. Everything was stable. Nothing changing form, no strange colors, and only one other person in the room with him.

Someone he didn't want to see right now.

James stood there by the closet door, smiling fondly as he adjusted his right glove on his hand. "How're you feeling?"

"Like shit," Qrow spat. "What're you doing here?"

"I wanted to show you something."

Show me something? What the hell does he want to show me? "What is it?"

"While I was out," James began, "I found something that I thought you might like, so I picked it up for you."

"You bought me a present?" Qrow growled.

"Yes."

"What is it?"

"It's a rose tattoo. Got it for about six thousand Lien. Pretty big steal if you ask me."

"You...you what?!" Qrow threw off the blanket, ignoring the screams of pain from his still healing wounds as he stormed over to the Earl. "You spent six thousand on a stupid tattoo?!"

"I wouldn't say it was stupid," James chuckled. "It's in the closet. Take a look."

"No," Qrow bellowed. "Don't you fucking start with me! We are on a mission! You do not waste money on shit we don't need."

"You need this tattoo."

"I don't need any fucking tattoo! I need to find my family!" He glared at the closet door and
reached for the handle. "If I open this door and find a tattoo artist, I'm going to stab you with my sword!"

"It's not an artist," James assured. "Though I think you'll see this as a work of art."

*Oh, how I want to kill you right now,* he thought. *If Oz hadn't told me to keep you safe, I'd do it.*

"You going to open the door?" James asked.

"I-"

*I don't know where we should go
Feeling farther from our goal -*

Qrow froze in place, his glare melting to terror as he slowly began to open the door.

*I don't know, what path we will be shown-*

His eyes widened as the singer stepped out of the closet, wearing an open brown leather vest and armor plates on his shoulders. His arms were covered with leather braces, and he had an orange bandana tied around his left knee over a pair of cargo pants.

*But I know that when I'm with you, I'm at home.*

Blond hair, blue eyes, a white rose over his heart and a red one on his neck.

*Yes, I know that when I'm with you, I'm at home.*

*It couldn't be.*

"Tai?" Qrow whimpered. "Is that...is that really you?"

"That depends," Tai chuckled. "Are you going to hit me if I'm not?"

Hesitantly, Qrow held out a hand and gently pressed his palm to Taiyang's cheek, the feeling of stubble against his calluses soothing his soul. His red eyes darted about to see the other tattoos if they were present. The emblem on the right arm was plain as day, and the tip of the raven's wing poked out from the left brace.

*It really was him.*

"Tai..."

Qrow threw his arms around him tightly, burying his face in the crook of Tai's neck as he felt the pain in his eyes warn him of the tears to come. There was an arm around his waist, a hand running through his hair, and the floor making contact with his knees.

"I got you, Qrow," Taiyang whispered. "I'm here. It's okay."

"I was so scared," Qrow whispered. "I thought you...I thought..."

"I know, Bird-brain. I know. But I'm here now. It's going to be okay."

Qrow nodded and tried to choke back the tears. He didn't see the nod between James and Tai, nor the Earl take leave. He didn't hear footsteps. All there was in his senses was salt. Salt and heartbeats he never thought he'd hear again. The arms didn't pull away, and he was grateful for it.
He wanted this to last, even just for a little while.

The moon was high in the sky when Ghira came up to a little town a few miles away from the train tracks. He had a little bit of Lien, but not necessarily enough for a room in the local inn. If he asked, maybe he could trade for it. Trade kitchen duty for a bed and breakfast. That should be fair.

Li wasn't very talkative their entire way there. The poor soul must have worn himself out getting Ghira breakfast, since he'd been asleep most of the day. He'd have to thank him for it later. With luck, Li would be wide awake come morning.

As he entered the town, he saw there were cherry trees lining every street, glowing softly in the lamplight on every building. There was one with a sign planted in front of it that read "Welcome to Lamia" in bright pink lettering.

"The blossoms are lovely," Ghira hummed. "I've never seen such a lovely shade of pink before."

"Did you know some myths say they're pink because of the fallen warriors?"

Ghira stopped in his tracks, turning his amber stare to the young boy who had snuck up beside him. He had dark brown hair, freckles, and one gold eye. The other was a soft hazel. And he was dressed rather nicely too for someone who had just gone grocery shopping.

"I'm sorry?" Ghira asked.

"Oh, it's uh," the boy stuttered. "It's this old story my aunt told me. There's a lot of versions, but I like hers the best. She said that cherry blossoms are pink because hunters who were mortally wounded in battle would lay under the branches and pass away. Their blood turned the blossoms pink as a reminder to the world not to forget the fallen. I think she called it "Iron Poison." But I don't remember most of it."

"That's a rather grim story."

"I suppose. Though Nini seems to like it." The boy held out his hand to Ghira, smiling brightly. "My name is Oscar, by the way."

"Nice to meet you," Ghira said, shaking his hand. "My name is Ghira."

"Wait...as in...Ghira Belladonna?"

"Yes-"

"Come on!"

Before Ghira could argue, he was being dragged along by the boy. Despite his size, he was incredibly strong. And very fast. Oscar dragged him to the inn, up the stairs, and into one of the rooms.

"Nini!" Oscar called. "Look who I found!"

Ghira looked over at the desk, slack jawed at the sight. There sat someone with silvery hair, with one gold eye and one brown. Their face unforgettable.
"Ozpin."

Chapter End Notes

This was meant to go up, like, 12 hours ago. But it wasn't posting. Now I got it to work.

I hope you all liked it!
Fighting First Impressions

Chapter Summary

Sometimes first impressions of people aren't what you expect.

Chapter Notes

I'm baaaaaaaaaack!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Ozpin stood near the back of the pack as everyone filed out of the meeting room. They were a little shaken, but mostly confused.

It hasn't been a good week, they remembered. Jacques wasn't helping matters any. I'm sure everyone was just on edge.

But for that to happen? There'd be hell to pay if he found out who it really was that punched him.

Why are things going wrong lately? What's happening to the world?

Or...is it just me?

"Excuse me, Your Grace?"

Ozpin looked up, eyes wide in shock as they saw Ghira and James standing behind them. The two of them were nearly the same height. If one didn't know any better, you'd have sworn the two were cousins.

"Lord Ironwood, Chief Belladonna," Ozpin greeted.

"Just James and Ghira is fine," James muttered.

"Then you may call me Ozpin. Or Oz if you prefer."

"Okay."

"Are you alright, Oz?" Ghira inquired. "I know Jacques isn't the most...accepting individual at times-"

"He's an asshole," James groaned. "Don't sugar coat it Ghira. You and I both know he's an asshole and a bigot and I'm mad you beat me to the punch. Literally."

Ozpin held back a chuckle. They'd never seen these two behave like this before. It was rather heartwarming.

"Point being," Ghira sighed. "We wanted to make sure you were alright. Jacques behavior toward
you was unacceptable. As was my outburst."

"If there is anything we can do for you," James added, "please let us know."

Ozpin smiled softly as they held out a hand to each of them. "I'll be alright. I do appreciate you coming and checking up on me. Not many people have the time nor patience these days to do so."

"You're a valued member of the community," Ghira assured, shaking Ozpin's hand. "And I consider you a dear friend."

"So do I," James said, shaking Ozpin's other hand. "Even though we haven't spoken for very long outside of these meetings."

"Then why don't we change that?" Ozpin offered. "Would you both like to join me for tea?"

"That would be lovely."

Ozpin smiled and escorted them to the study after asking Klein if he'd bring them tea. A delightful bird flew over and landed gently on their shoulder, nuzzling them and letting out a soft garble.

"By the way," James added fondly. "That's a very nice outfit. It's a lovely color on you."

"Thank you," Ozpin stammered, their cheeks pink from the compliment. "I think we're going to get along greatly, the three of us."

"Four," Ghira corrected. "Can't forget your friend on your shoulder."

"You're right. Can't forget Prosper, now can we?"

Prosper let out a pleased caw.

Looks like I have some new friends, Oz thought. How wonderful!

They waited until they were sure Oscar was asleep before leaving the room to talk. Ozpin managed to book a separate room for Ghira, and the two decided it'd be best to talk in there.

Oscar would hear all this eventually.

Ghira placed a hand to the wall, muttering the silencing spell under his breath as Ozpin sat on the bed. Ozpin knew there was a lot to explain. A lot that couldn't be risked being overheard.


"I am," Ozpin acknowledged. "I'm a little surprised myself."

"What happened, Oz? When I left, you were so scared about people getting the Black Stone-"

"Where is it? Is it safe?"

Ozpin watched as Ghira removed the fingerless glove from his left hand and held it up for them to see. They felt their heart sink.
Ghira wasn't meant to have it.

"I'm so sorry, Ghira."

"You don't have to apologize." Ghira slipped the glove back on. "Things happen. There's nothing we can do to change that."

"I know..."

"I have a lot of questions, Oz," he said. "And I need as many answered as possible."

"Of course," Ozpin sighed. "Ask away. You have the floor now."

Ghira walked over and took the chair from beside the desk, moving it so he sat right in front of them within arms' reach. He held out a hand, smiling as Ozpin took it in their's.

"How did you survive the crash?" Ghira asked. "When Klein showed up at our home-"

Ozpin's eyes went wide. "Klein's okay?! He survived?!"

"He was hurt pretty badly, but he's alive. Kali and Tukson are working round the clock to get him back to health."

"Thank the Gods," Oz whimpered. "I thought I killed him..."

"What happened, Oz? I need you to tell me everything you remember about what happened."

With a deep breath and gently tightening their grip on Ghira's hand, Ozpin thought back to that night.

It was mostly a blur. They remembered the ship exploding, the pain in their back as the world faded to something void of life. They recounted the limp bodies of everyone floating around them as they healed.

They remembered Qrow and James waking up.

They could hear Qrow's screams.

"It doesn't have to be this way! You can come with us!"

They remembered saying goodbye.

"OZPIN DON'T!"

They could see him fighting to reach. James holding him back.

"Let me go! James let me go! Fucking listen to me! LET ME GO!"

They turned and then...then...

Pain.

Something is killing them.

Their soul is splitting.

It hurts.
"Oz?"

Stop it.

"Hey, Oz?"

The pain.

"Oz, look at me."

Make it stop!

"OZPIN!"

Ozpin's eyes flew open, (When did I close my eyes? they wondered), and they saw that Ghira had his hands on their shoulders, his warm amber eyes looking at them with concern.

"Oz, talk to me," Ghira said as calmly as possible. "You spaced out. What happened? Are you okay?"

"I can't remember," Oz stammered, pulling at their hair. "I can't remember how we got out of there. I just...I can't...I'm sorry."

"Deep breaths, Oz. It's okay. You don't have apologize. You don't have to talk about it. It's okay. You're okay. Breathe."

Ozpin took a few breaths, trying to steady themself as Ghira moved to sit beside them, gently pulling them close so they had someone to cling to if need be.

They couldn't remember.

It was too painful to remember.

But he'll remember it.

"Oscar is going to remember it," they muttered.

"What?"

"Oscar...he'll see what happened that night..."

Ghira looked at them, brows furrowed. "The kid?"

"Yes," Ozpin answered, trying to bite back the panic. "He's my successor. He'll inherit everything from me. My magic. My memories. My cane, if we ever find it. I have to train him."

"Oz...do you really think that Oscar can handle this?"

Ozpin resisted the urge to bite their lower lip. As much as they wanted to say yes, there was some worry. There were things that they couldn't teach him. Things he'd need to know. And Oz knew they couldn't leave Lamia quite yet. The town's doctor told them to rest for at least another day while the medicine finished running its course.

But time was running out. Her forces were growing stronger.

"It doesn't matter what I think," Ozpin stated. "What matters is that Oscar believes he can do it."
And if believes in himself, then I believe in him."

"Ozpin, this is more than a simple case of belief."

"What else am I supposed to do?" Ozpin spat, getting up to pace the room. "I've been searching for years, Ghira. I've met dozens of talented Magicians who came close, but none who were the right caliber. Roman was the closest and even then he was missing that certain spark that showed he could handle this kind of power! Oscar has that spark." They stopped dead center of the room, eyes glowing in the moonlight from the window. "What I think about this doesn't matter. What matters is that Oscar shows promise, so I have to at least let him try."

Ghira let out a sigh, nodding as he took in every word before smiling. "Then I guess Li and I better help with the training."

Ozpin looked him over, confused. "Li?"

Ghira held up his left hand, letting out a chuckle. "I think he's pretty handy with a bow and arrow. Helped me out of a tight scrape back at Haven."

_Haven? _"What happened at Haven?"

"Have a seat," Ghira said, pulling the diary from his coat pocket. "And we'll set up Oscar's lesson plan while I get you up to speed. I think between the two of us, we can get Oscar ready for the worst of it."

Ozpin felt a wave of relief wash through their shoulders as they reached over and grabbed the notepad from the nightstand.

_We have work to do._

_It was late in the afternoon when James was walking down to the training halls. He didn't know what to expect when he got down there. Being the only soldier without a team of any sort was hard enough, but a cadet who was three weeks into his training and still has nobody to watch his back? It was a hell on earth._

So when he arrived at the training hall, he was surprised to see a woman with golden feathers in her hairline smiling at him from the doorway. He stood up straight, his grey uniform clean pressed and presentable.

_"Officer ID: SDR-73114," he saluted. "James Ironwood, reporting for duty ma'am."

_"Hello there, Ironwood," she greeted fondly. "Name's Gilda Stadtfeld. I'm your new team leader and drill instructor."_

_Team leader? Am I finally being given a team? _"Pleased to meet you, ma'am."

_"Cut the ma'am thing, please. Makes me feel old." Gilda motioned for him to follow and they continued on their way. _"You can call me Cappy. That's what everyone else calls me."

_"Right. Cappy. Got it."_
"At ease, Jimbo," she giggled. "You'll fit in great here with Grey Team. I've had the honor of training all the cadets that get assigned here these past few years, and all of them end up in the Specialists division."

"Really?"

"You bet! No Grey Team has failed that goal, and I bet you all will be the best yet." Without looking up from her clipboard, she let out a content sigh. "I think you and the twins will get along great. They're so strong and intelligent. Oh, and the medic is just a precious angel. The girls will probably love spending time with you too! I know Marie needs a new sparring partner, and Ocean will just love reading with you!"

"You make it sound like a camp out," James chuckled nervously. "I'm looking forward to meeting everyone."

"I'm glad you are," Gilda chirped, "because this is the first time everyone is meeting everyone."

"Wait, what?"

Before he could ask further, Gilda opened the door to the control room. Inside were several cadets arguing with each other. There were two men who looked exactly the same, save for the wolf ears and ram horns that allowed everyone to tell them apart. A woman with ruby red eyes holding a man with bubblegum blue hair in a headlock. In the corner was another woman with a teal bun, her nose buried deep in the pages of a book.

And the shouting was unbearable.

"Everyone!" Gilda called. "Attention please! I want you to meet Jimmy! He's going to join the team!"

"It's James," he corrected. "James Ironwood. It's nice to meet you all." James watched as the group's bickering just increased, and the twins tried pulling the bubblegum man from the grip of the red-eyed woman, only to get their ginger curls tugged on by him.

"I didn't want to have to do this," Gilda sighed, lifting a giant red whistle to her lips and giving it a hard toot. The wolf ears on one of the twins flattened and he backed away in pain, while the one with horns glared at Gilda and the red-eyed woman let go of her captive to cover her ears.

"Everyone! Attention!"

Everyone hurried to line up, with the woman reading not even looking up from the book as she moved. James stood at the end of the line on Gilda's left, arms folded back at attention like he'd always been taught. Everyone else stood at various forms of attention, their uniforms covered in wrinkles along the green stripes of their sleeves.

"Right," Gilda sighed. "Sorry about that everyone. I'm Cappy, and this is our new team! We're the Grey Team, and by the end of your training years here at Atlas Academy, I intend for all of you to make it to the Specialists. Now, let's go around in a circle and introduce ourselves." Her brown eyes met with one of the twins, eyebrows raised hopefully. "Douglas, care to start us off?"

"Ye want me tae go first?" asked the wolf twin. "What did ye wan' tae talk about?"

"Just name and talent," Gilda said. "What's your special little trick that makes you one of a kind? If we know what we all can do, that'll make operations really easy to plan."

"Righto," Douglas chuckled. "Name's Douglas Frasier, an' ye dinnae wantae be near me when I'm
sneezing. I can blow up to fifty stone with one breath!"

"How interesting!" Gilda cheered.

"Oh, an' this here's me brother," Douglas chuckled. "Donald here can make earthquakes."

"Aye," Donald chuckled, scratching at one of his ram horns. "Makes it a wee bit tricky to dance."

"Ye still have better footwork than me."

"I didnae!"

"Do too!"

"I didnae!"

James smiled as he listened to the brothers' banter. He couldn't help but feel warm and fuzzy listening to them.

"I'm Lucien Adaire," the bubblegum haired man introduced. "I'm a magician, but my main power is cleansing." Everyone stared at him in confusion, only for him to turn away, head lowered in shame. "Don't ask, okay? It isn't useful in battle."

"I'm Ocean Ried," the bookworm mumbled. "I turn into sea foam. Lets me fly short distances in the air."

"Marie Appleby," the red-eyed woman groaned. "I don't know what my Semblance is. I don't want to know. I don't want to be here." She shrugged, letting her mess of hair fall into her eyes. "Also, I can kick your asses faster than you can say 'battlestations', got it?"

"Gotcha," Donald chuckled, turning to look at James. "What's yer story, laddie?"

"Oh. I'm James Ironwood," James greeted. "And I..." James took a deep breath, biting his lower lip as he hoped no one would laugh. "I don't know what my Semblance is either."

Everyone stared at him and Marie. Even Ocean peaked up from her book to raise an eyebrow. It wasn't unusual for one person in a group not to know their ability. But two? That was strange. He was strange. He knew it.

"Well, I know how we can fix that," Gilda chuckled lowly. "And since Marie seems so confident in her fighting prowess, we'll be heading to training room 810! We'll be splitting into teams of-"

"I said I can kick all their asses," Marie spat. "I can take them all out on my own."

"Alright then. We'll see if that's true. Marie VS Everyone Else it is!"

James side-eyed her, a slight tingle of fear going through his spine.

This is going to be a long day.

Ruby's eyes were wide as she looked at the paintings on the walls as Winter and team JNPR
escorted her to the main meeting room. There were images of fierce warriors from all different time periods of Remnant's history, each with their own weapons and skills. She tried to hold herself back from the excitement.

"That's a high impact sniper rifle!" she squealed at one of the more recent eras. "Connected to a broad sword and paired with a shield that works as a storage for ammo?! Oh my gosh, this is so amazing!"

"Ruby!" Winter called. "Focus, please. You're supposed to be meeting with the leaders, and they aren't known for their patience."

"Right, sorry!" Ruby giggled, hurrying to catch up. "I'm just amazed at all these paintings. There's so many weapons I've only heard of in stories!"

"Well, if you make a good impression, maybe you'll be allowed to browse the armory."

"You have an armory?! Are there really rare weapons in there?!"

"Of course," Winter stated. "But not everyone is allowed in. You'd have to earn that privilege."

"Of course," Ruby agreed. "I'll make a good impression, I swear!"

"Winter," Pyrrha giggled. "I do think you've got the wrong idea of Donald and Douglas. They're not the serious war heroes you're making them out to be."

"Pyrrha," Winter sighed. "I do think you've got the wrong idea. They're two of the most respected, powerful, intelligent, and extremely capable leaders on Anima. We need to present ourselves in a way that represents the kind of organization of this caliber."

"We do," Ren hummed. "But I agree with Pyrrha. You're kind of taking them a little too seriously."

"They're a bunch of goofballs," Nora giggled. "Like us."

"The Sergeant and the Corporal are high ranking military officials that survived one of the greatest wars Remnant has ever seen," Winter spat as she opened the door to the office. "They're not the kind of people who would be classified as goofballs."

"Oh, help me!"

Ruby looked inside, hands flying to her face to try and stop the laughter from erupting from her throat.

In the meeting room standing on the table was a little girl with silver hair and bright green eyes wearing a crown and cloak, her curled pig's tail bouncing in time with her movements. A man in a frilly pink dress lay on the floor, his ginger curls decorated with bright blue flowers and his tongue stuck out in a cartoonish manner. A similar looking man stood on the table, dressed in bright yellow fur and wings.

"RAWR!" the winged man screeched. "I'll eat yer gizzards with a side o' hash!"

"Vile beast!" the girl bellowed. "Thou shalt pay for murdering Princess Rammy-Rams!"

"You think you can defeat me, Lord Moni?!"

"I don't think. I know!" The little girl ran forward, placing the wooden sword between the man's
arm and torso.

"GAH!" the man screamed. "Ye got me! I cannae believe ye bested me!" With a loud roar of defeat, the man fell from the table, landing with a hard thump.

The little girl walked over and retrieved her sword, kneeling as she held it in place, forehead to hilt as she delivered the final monologue.

"Despite her brave efforts," she recited solemnly, "the great Lord Moni failed to protect the Princess. Now, to reclaim her honor, she must journey to parts unknown to seek out the great Wizard Bart-a-bell to reverse this tragedy."

Team JNPR clapped their hands in joyous applause, with Jaune pulling a flower from Nora's crown to bestow upon the brave knight.


"Thankie," the child giggled, looking over at the man in pink. "Daddy, ye can get up now."

"Oh thank god," the man in pink sighed. "If I had tae listen to Douggie's bletherin' for another minute, I'd have tae wash out my ears with whiskey."

"Ock, shut ye geggie," the man in the fur growled. "At least I got more lines than ye did, Donny."

"Lines dinnae matter! What matters is the emotion!"

"Ahem."

The two men looked over to the door, hazel eyes wide in shock when they saw Ruby standing beside Winter. The young Schnee appeared paler than before, likely from embarrassment. Nora was being held up by Pyrrha, both red heads pink from holding in laughter.

"Sergeant Frasier," Winter stammered. "We, uh, we have a, um-

"Guests daddy," the little girl hissed. "Ye have guests."

"Right," Donald chuckled, picking the girl up and giving her a kiss on the cheek. "Ye want to go play with your brothers while daddy's working, Moni?"

"Okay daddy," the girl giggled. "We still gonna share berries later?"

"O' course darlin'. As soon as daddy's done."

"Okay!"

"Winter, can ye take her back to her mum?" Donald set the little girl down and watched as she scurried out of the room, taking Winter's hand and pulling her along as Team JNPR closed the door behind them. "Such an angel."

"You've raised her well," Ren complimented.

"We do our best," Donald chuckled. "Not easy raising five kids and running a resistance."

"Well, I think you all are doing splendidly," Pyrrha sighed as she sat at the table.

"Well thank ye," Douglas hummed. "Now, let's hear those mission reports."
"Um, sir?" Jaune stammered. "You're not, uh-"

"No what?" asked the brothers.

"Are you going to wear those for the meeting?" Ruby snickered. "I don't think pink is your color."

Donald and Douglas looked at each other, bursting into laughter at the ridiculous outfits they were wearing.


"Green and grey all the way," Donald spat playfully. "Ye five wait here while we get changed." He started to make his way to a door on the other side of the room before turning around and looking at Nora. "Did everyone get their post mission hugs? The kids are gonna be askin'."

"Team BRNZ didn't," Nora giggled. "They wanted to wait until they got home."

"Fair enough," Douglas hummed. "Wait here, and we'll be out faster than you can say 'battle stations', alright?"

"Gotcha," Jaune said.

Ruby watched as the brothers left the room before looking at the cases on the walls. There were photographs hanging beside various weapons, with names written on plaques with various dates on them. There was a harpoon, a pair of chains with blades on each end, some bows and arrows, and a giant metal glove with several inserts for bullets.

But the one that drew her eye was the one near the head of the meeting room table.

It was a rifle that could attached to a Hunter's arm, with a large curled knife blade and a hook on the end. If someone ran out of ammo, they could turn their arm into a great sword, or with some modifications, a scythe.

"I see you like the Grimm-shot," Pyrrha tittered. "You know they-"

"They only made twelve of them!" Ruby gushed. "The A.W. Mark Four Grimm-shot was one of the most coveted pieces of equipment during the Atlesian Civil War. They used to have one at the Beacon Archives for historical purposes, but I never knew there were any outside of Vale!"

"Sounds like we got ourselves a weapons expert."

Donald came out of the room, flowers free from his hair and now dressed in armor plating and a forest green kilt. Douglas was right behind him, wearing a navy kilt instead.

Ruby scratched the back of her head in embarrassment as she pulled Crescent Rose from its holster.

"I've got a bit of a knack for them. I enjoy my high impact sniper scythe, but seeing new weapons is always a treat! A weapon is-"

"An extension of ourselves!" the brothers cackled.

"Exactly!" Ruby cheered. "Finally, people who understand! None of my classmates back home get it! This is exciting!"

"So what do you think?" Pyrrha asked. "Think she'll fit in well here?"

"Hold on," Ren interrupted. "Mission debriefing first. Then we talk about our new friend."
"Lie's right," Donald sighed. "So, I want mission details from all four of you. Then we'll call team NDGO together and get their side of what happened, and then BRNZ. Winter last."

"You wantae sit over here, Ruby?" Douglas offered. "We've got cookies on the way."

"Okay!"

Ruby sat near the end of the table holding her weapon in her lap, listening as everyone shuffled around so that JNPR sat across from the brothers. Douglas pulled out a marble from his sporran, setting it on the table and allowing it to roll across the table on its own. The crystal blue ball rolled with a purpose between every member of the team as they told their side of the story.

"Winter had been placed in charge for the mission."

"Our goal was to weed out several camps belonging to the White Fang."

"As well as acquire their manifests for train robberies."

"Then we were to meet up in Kigiku and head back to HQ with the patients in need of our care."

Ruby listened closely as they told the story. How they acquired the airship, finding her in the woods, being captured by bounty hunters. Pyrrha told the brothers about how they got a hold of Phil, while Ren and Nora explained how they were captured.

"And then I ran into town looking for help!" Nora bragged. "I ran all over the place until I saw some guy with a cloak on. He kind of stood out in that weird sort of way, you know? I ran up to him and asked if he had any military experience, and he turned out to be a General! He was super amazing! You should have seen him use my hammer! I think he's better than you, Donny!"

"Yer a chancer, Nora," Donald teased. "So what happened next?"

"Well," Nora continued, "after I got him to agree to help rescue everyone, we snuck up on the camp and the General came up with a really risky plan. I played decoy and drew as many people away from the camp as possible."

"That was when the General came up to us," Ren added. "He knocked out the remaining guards and told us he was there to help."

"We didn't believe him at first," Jaune admitted. "Until he gave the signal."

"What next?" Douglas asked.

"He ripped the door off the cage," Ren said. "And we started getting our weapons back."

"That was when I came back," Nora mumbled. "The bounty hunters had caught me and shocked me with a taser. My Aura was closed off, so I couldn't absorb the electricity and passed out for a bit. When I came to, I was back at the camp and they were preparing to put us all back in the cage."

"I did a dumb," Jaune sighed. "Ran right for Nora and got blasted back by a force field, spell, thingy. The General caught me by my ankle though."

"And then the General took Magnhild and BLAM! Knocked the field to smithereens! I bit one of the guys holding me, took my hammer back and chased them away!"

"But then the guards woke up and one of them grabbed a rocket launcher-"
"And the General blocked it with these giant gears," Ren finished. "The remaining hunters ran away and then we all hurried back into Kigiku. And that was when the Grimm were attacking."

"I ended up getting cornered in town," Pyrrha sighed. "There was another hunter running about fighting off Grimm, and he almost got sliced in half by an Alpha. I pulled him out of the way with my Polarity, and we had each other's back until the General and the other teams returned. The Hunter and the General held off the White Fang and the Grimm while I released everyone's Aura."

"But doing so nearly made her pass out," Nora said solemnly. "Luckily Winter showed up in time with Phil, and we got all the patients out of that hospital in time, including Ruby here."

"We didn't have time to go back for the General though," Jaune muttered. "But hopefully he and the Hunter are okay."

"Keep yer hied," Douglas soothed. "If we know the General, he's halfway here by now."

"What happened to the patients?" Donald asked.

"All of them made it to the hospital here," Ren assured. "They're receiving treatment for injuries, and soon they'll be ready to go home."

"Drop dead brilliant," Douglas chuckled. "Righto, I think we have what we need here. You four go get washed up."

"Well go make sure your quarters are ready," Ren said. "We'll be back for you later to give you a tour. Okay?"

"Okay."

"See you later Ruby!" Nora called.

Ruby waved goodbye and watched the team walk out of the meeting room before looking at the brothers. They were whispering between themselves, nodding in her direction with looks of concern on their faces.

They seem nice, she thought. And they have kids here. I shouldn't be worried about being here...

The warm sensation in her hand began to tingle again, and Ruby smiled, feeling the trepidation in her mind begin to fade. If she didn't know any better, she thought she could hear a voice whispering to her.

You can trust them.

"So," Ruby hummed. "What did you want to talk to me about?"

Douglas looked her over with a smile, giving his brother a tap on the shoulder signaling for him to leave. "Mostly me, dear. Donny isnae well versed in the magic of Remnant like I am."

Ruby nodded, watching as the ram horns bobbed out of the room just as a food cart began to roll itself over to her. On top were various sweets, a bowl of fruit, and three different pots with steam coming from the spouts.

"Help yerself," Douglas hummed. "I recommend the cookies. Nessie has quite the talent fer bakin'."
"Who's Nessie?" Ruby asked, taking a bite of one of the larger chocolate chip treats. "Mh, this is great!"

"I'm glad you like it. Nessie is Moni's mum. My sister in law makes the best cookies this side o' the waters." Douglas reached into his sporran, pulling out a pair of fingerless leather gloves. "Here Ruby. These are fer ye."

"For me?"

"To cover tha' little rock ye have embedded in yer left hand."

Ruby felt the color drain from her face as she attempted to hide her left hand. "Why would I need to cover it?"

Douglas' ears twitched softly as he began to pace the room, his soft hazel eyes resting upon the large portrait hanging near the Grimm-shot. In the portrait stood Donald and Douglas as younger soldiers in their dress uniforms posing as if they were going to fall over any second. Beside them with their arms hooked in joy stood a woman with brown hair, a shorter woman with a teal bun, a man with blue hair that reminded Ruby of cotton candy, and just off to the side was a man with a strong jaw with his arms folded behind him. Despite being the only one being somewhat professional, he looked as if he was trying not to burst into laughter at his comrades antics.

"Back in the day," Douglas explained, "I knew someone who...had one of those relics. And I was asked not tae tell anyone about it. I helped hide the secret, givin' that person gloves much like those you have now. I'm planning on taking that secret to the grave."

"Then why tell me?" Ruby asked. "If it's meant to be a secret, why tell me about it?"

"Because I saw that friend give up everything tae tha' damn rock, and I wantae make sure ye dinnae follow the same path. Yer fifteen, Ruby. Ye have a long life ahead of ye." His ears went flat, giving the broad shouldered warrior a rather puppy like vulnerability as his voice seemed to become muffled. "I've knowledge I'm willing tae give ye. About how tae use yer little rock. And I can get ye anythin' else ye'd be needin'. I just...need ye tae promise me somethin'."

"A promise?" Ruby wondered. "What is it you need me to promise?"

"I need ye tae promise tha' yer not gonna use what ye learn here to for selfish reasons" He let out a shaky breath, folding his arms behind his back much like the man in the portrait. "From what I've seen, those stones can turn even the most generous angels into demons. I need ye tae promise yer not gonna use what you learn about it to hurt others."

Ruby felt a chill run up her spine as she listened to the withered warrior speak. "You really want to help me..."

"I wantae help everyone I can. I promised them I would..."

With a turn on his heal, he looked her right in the eyes, and Ruby could see every emotion buried beneath his gaze. Pain, yearning, sorrow. Pride, joy, hope. She could feel her hand burning as she came to the realization of the situation.

He's tired, she thought. But he's still fighting. Like a true Hunter. Like dad, and Nini, and...

"If I decided not to promise," Ruby asked cautiously, "would you still be willing to help me?"

"Of course," Douglas replied. "It's our custom here, regardless of who walks into our home. We'll
offer ye home brew, we'll see ye mended, and we'll offer all our services to ensure yer prepared for the harsh wilds."

Ruby pondered over this while looking over the treats on the cart, choosing to nibble on a strawberry. She didn't really know these people, but they seemed nice enough. And one of their commanding officers was offering her information just because she knew a friend. Part of her was wary this could be a trap, and her run in with her Aunt in Asphodel didn't help soothe her mind on the matter.

Then again, there were still many things she didn't understand about this new part of her. No matter how many times she asked, Taiyang would only give vague answers about it. She wasn't even supposed to have it, let alone be half-way across the world with it.

A small part of her was telling her to run.

But another was telling her otherwise.

This is my only lead to find Uncle Qrow.

"So you'd help me find my Uncle?" Ruby asked. "And teach me some of your group's fighting methods and stuff if I asked?"

"Aye," Douglas agreed with a smile. "The Gold Blade is here to help. You'll 'ave full access to everythin' here. And by the time yer done here in Sagisō, you'll be ready for anythin'."

They'll help me find Uncle Qrow... "I have one more thing I'd like to ask."

"Fire away."

"What exactly is The Gold Blade?" Ruby inquired. "And what exactly is your goal?"

Douglas glanced over his shoulder and Ruby followed his gaze. A man with a bow slung over his back smiled down at them from the portrait on the wall, standing next to a woman with beautiful magenta eyes. Between them stood a little boy with a familiar pink streak in his hair.

Is that...Ren?

"I'm afraid," Douglas sighed, "that explanation isnae for me to tell ye. But ye can ask around. I'm sure someone will tell ye."

Ruby simply nodded, glancing at her hand as she contemplated her options. As much as she just wanted to up and go, she still didn't know the area too well. And she didn't know just how much control she had over her new abilities. She took a deep breath, thinking back to her training. Thinking back to all the stories she'd heard back on Patch.

What would dad do?

Would Nini take the deal?

Would Yang stick around?

What would Uncle Qrow say in a moment like this?

"It's okay."

Ruby felt her hand burning again. There was that voice from before.
Why do they sound so familiar?

"You can trust him Ruby. I promise, you'll be safe here."

Ruby looked over at Douglas, who had his attention back to the portrait by the Grimm-shot. The voice wasn't wrong so far. She could trust the voice.

"I'll do it."

Douglas snapped back to attention, eyes wide in surprise. "Huh?"

"I promise not to use the stone to hurt others," Ruby vowed confidently. "And I'll work really hard in my studies here, and I'll help in any way I can until we find Uncle Qrow." She walked over to him, holding out her now gloved left hand in solidarity. "I look forward to working with you and the others. Let's make Remnant a better place, together."

Douglas smiled, taking her hand in his and giving it a firm shake.

"Welcome to the team, lass."

Chapter End Notes

Miss me?

So sorry for the long wait everyone. Things have been hell these last two months, but I promise I'm getting back into the swing of things.

Thank you for your patience. You're all wonderful people.

Hope you all enjoyed the chapter!
Forward

Chapter Summary

Heart to Hearts are had, and plans to move forward are made.

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the wait!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Wake up. Learn how to dance. Learn the violin. Practice your table etiquette.
Wake up. Present yourself to father. Remain quiet. Do not interfere.
No time for rest.
No time for relaxation.
Every day the lesson plans changed. Every day the skills changed. Some days he'd be learning about the history of the Great War, or the Solitas Civilian War, while other days he'd be learning the differences between Atlas and Mistral's Nobility and how trade between Vale and Vacuo depended entirely on the connections to the Schnee Dust Company. There were so many things he had to learn. And balancing it with his attempts to have a childhood were very difficult.

But that was the life of an Heir for the Schnee name.

"You are representing the family," Jacques told them. "You are the future of this company. You are to behave as such."

Every time they were presentable, every time they made a good impression, they'd be rewarded with praise.

If they ever messed up, if they ever failed to meet expectations, they were reprimanded.

And one night, it was just too much for him.

"I hate him!" Whitley screamed from beneath the blankets. "I hate him! I hate him! I hate him!"

"I know," Klein sighed patiently, sitting on the edge of the bed. "Master Whitley, please, let me heal the injury."

Hesitantly, Whitley crawled out from his hiding spot, a bright purple hand print swollen across his face. "I hate him."
"I know," Klein muttered. "I do too." His eyes flashed to pink as a hand gently came to rest on the swollen cheek, glowing in the same flowery hue. "If I could take the injuries for you, I would."

"I hate him," Whitley whimpered. "I wish you were my father. You're nice. I like you."

Klein gave him a gentle smile. "I wish I could be your father too. And if I could, I'd take you away from here."

"Why can't you?" Whitley begged. "Can't you take me someplace else? I don't want to be a Schnee anymore! I want to be anything else!"

"If it were in my power, I'd take you and your siblings away in a heartbeat. But I'm bound by contract to do as your father requests. And my kind of contracts are unbreakable."

"It's not fair..."

"I agree wholeheartedly. But...given time, things should change."


It was a simple fact. Things in Atlas never changed. They remained stagnant. The people of Mantel were still oppressed even after the end of the war. The Nobility remained in power, despite having many of their past allowances stripped away legally. And the help were still bound to a gag order hidden deep within the rabbit hole that was the Atlesian Legal System.

He despised Atlas.

He hated Schnee Manor.

He loathed being the son of Jacques Schnee.

He wanted out.

He needed out.

"Klein," Whitley muttered. "Please...the moment it's safe to do so...get me out of here?"

Klein finished healing his injury before pulling him into a hug. "I promise, I'll get you, your mother, and your sisters out of here if it's the last thing I do. And until then, I swear, I'll protect you."

Whitley hugged him, burying his face in the stout man's shoulder as he cried. "Thank you."

Klein held him close, whispering soothing words to him as Whitley let his sobs lull him to slumber. The last words he heard echoing in his mind coming from his father figure.

"Take your time, Whitley. You'll get there. Don't give up. Don't let him win."

I won't ever let him win.

Wake up. Morning Yoga. Sword fighting. Rest.


Every day the lesson plans changed. Every day the skills changed. Some days he'd be learning how to cast a line, while other days he'd be learning the difference between a parry and Parle. There were far more things he had to learn now. And learning to balance it with the searches from the last few ports have been very difficult. Far more challenging than back home in Atlas.

And Whitley never felt more free.

There was something liberating about being out on the open sea. Something unusually genuine.

Every day he grew a little stronger.

Every day, a little wiser.

Matte took him under their wing, treating them like a little brother and being very patient. The passengers enjoyed dancing to his violin. Captain even let him steer the ship from time to time.

Life started to feel perfect.

But that night, as he gazed up at the shattered moon, he couldn't help but feel empty.

*How long has it been now? I'm training and working hard and I still can't use my Semblance.*

*Why?*

"*Hey Whitley!*"

Whitley looked down from his seat on the roof, smiling as Matte waved him down. He smiled and jumped onto the deck, landing with a soft tap on his feet. "What's up, Matte?"

"Come on. We need to talk."

"Okay?"

Whitley followed a few steps behind Matte, wondering what it was that they needed to talk about. Was there something Whitley wasn't doing right? Was there something he messed up on?

*What if they're going to kick me off at the next port?*

*What if they don't want me around anymore?*

Matte ushered him into their room, and motioned for them to sit on the bed. "Captain asked me to check up on you. He said you've been spacing out."

*I have?* "I'm feeling alright."

*"You sure?" Matte asked. "Because if there's something troubling you, you can tell me."

Whitley looked at his feet, trying to find the right words. It wasn't exactly something he was used to doing back home. Talking about his feelings was, at its core, a major taboo back at Schnee Manor.

*But this isn't Schnee Manor, he had to remind himself. I'm not an heir to the company anymore. I'm*
"Is it about your family?" Matte asked, worriedly. "I'm sure we'll find them soon-

"It's not that," Whitley grumbled. "Not entirely at least."

"Then what's the matter?"

Whitley twiddled his fingers, trying to remain calm. Would they think it's weird?

"It's my Semblance, Matte...I still can't use it without fainting...."

Matte nodded, smiling as they ruffled his hair. "That's alright. It's going to take some time. No need to stress yourself over it."

"But I-"

"Look," they sighed. "Not everyone in Remnant can unlock and master their Semblance. It's rare, but it isn't unusual. You know yours, but you might not be able to use it. That's fine. What you need to focus on is how to use what you can. Like your Aura."

Matte seemed a little...too sure about this.

"Matte?"

"Yeah?"

"Do you...know what your Semblance is?"

Matte let out a hearty chuckle. "Yeah, but it isn't anything overly applicable outside of the sea. Nothing too exciting."

"Sounds better than what I have," Whitley sighed. "How did you manage to figure it out? And how to use it?"

Matte wandered over to the bookshelf, picking up a photograph of them with a pair of women hugging their arms. "Growing up, I always had this fascination with the ocean. I loved being on the open sea fishing with my moms. I remember when my Aura unlocked for the first time and I tried to figure out my Semblance. And I was really frustrated and a little distant for a while, kind of like you."

Whitley looked over the picture as Matte handed it over. In the photo, they were about his age, wearing a sailor school uniform common in some of the port towns. He thought it looked rather cute.

"That photo," Matte continued, "was taken the day I got accepted into Shade Academy's Seafaring Course. I still hadn't figured out what my power was or what I'd end up doing. But then mama, oh mama. She gave me the best piece of advice in the world." Matte had a softness to their eye as they thought back to that day. "You know what mama told me?"

"What did she say?"

"She said 'Matte, honey. There'll come days where you doubt yourself. You'll slip up, and bad things will happen. You'll wonder if you're cut out for whatever you choose to do. But you need to look into the mirror and tell yourself 'I can do this. I'll keep moving forward!' And never stop moving forward.' And you know what I did?"

Whitley was on the edge of his seat, eyes wide in excitement and a smile on his face. "What did
Matte clapped their hands together and spun on their toes. "I did it! I kept moving forward. Every time I didn't succeed, I kept going. Every time I messed up, I kept moving. And eventually, I got to where I needed to go. I succeeded in what I wanted to do."

"And...what was it you wanted to do?"

"Find freedom."

Whitley's smile faded for but a moment. "Freedom?"

"Yeah," Matte sighed. "True freedom. The kind that you can only truly get when you find your calling. What you were meant to do in life. I found my calling being on the open sea as part of this crew." They took the picture and returned it to its rightful place on the bookshelf.

"And once I found that, everything else fell into place. I found my Semblance, I found my freedom." They looked over their shoulder, smiling brightly. "You'll find that freedom someday, Whitley. And when you do, everything will be okay. Just give it time."

Whitley looked at his feet, processing what Matte had told him. He didn't quite understand it. And yet, it made perfect sense.

"So," he said softly. "If I just give it time, and go with the flow...I'll get there?"

"That's right," Matte affirmed. "Just don't push yourself too hard. And don't ever stop moving forward, okay?"

Whitley gave them a gentle smile, their eyes straining with tears they were holding in. "Thanks Matte..."

"No problem...hey, you sure you're okay?"

Whitley felt his cheeks begin to dampen, and his lips tasted of salt. "I'm fine, I just..."

Matte sat beside him, gently wrapping an arm around his shoulders. "Hey, what's the matter? You okay?"

"I just," he stammered. "I've only had one person talk to me like this...telling me it's okay not to get it right away...You're the first since him who has been this patient with me and I..."

He didn't have to say anything more. He let himself fall against Matte's shoulder as his breathes stuttered in his attempts not to scream.

What's the matter with me? Why am I turning into such a mess?

"It'll be okay," Matte assured. "You're safe. It's okay. Let it out."

Whitley nodded, letting the tears fall until he couldn't cry anymore. He wiped the tears away with the edge of his scarf.

It doesn't matter why. I'm at least someplace I can let myself be a mess.

"Feel better?" Matte asked worriedly.

"No problem." They helped him stand, ruffling their hair affectionately. "Come on. Let's get you some water, and a snack. Okay?"

"Sounds good."

The two of them headed out of the room toward the kitchens. Whitley's legs felt heavy, but he didn't care. The weight on his chest was lighter. And the emptiness was a filled just a little.

That was all that mattered.

"Come on! Winter's room is this way!"

"Weiss, let's go back! We're not supposed to be in here!"

"Come on, Whitley!"

It was her birthday. Winter had been grounded to the confines of her bedroom, and Weiss wanted to spend the day with her brother and sister sharing cake. A little thing like grounding wasn't going to stop her. She dragged Whitley by the hand, the bag with the cake box bouncing slightly as they hurried down the hall.

If they weren't careful, they'd be caught.

If they got caught, they'd be in trouble.

"Weiss," Whitley whimpered. "I really don't think we should be in here."

"We have to share cake with Winter," Weiss insisted. "I'm the birthday girl. It's what I want."

"But-"

"And you need to tell her your Aura unlocked! She'll be super impressed."

Whitley's face slowly returned to color, a very tiny smile on his face. "You really think she'll be impressed?"

"Really! Hey, maybe we can train with her! I wanna know what my Semblance is already!"

The two ducked behind a curtain as a guard walked past, easily hiding from their sight. Once the coast was clear, they moved on. Their blue gradient clothes made it easy for them to blend into the background.

"We're kind of like ninjas," Whitley giggled.

"Yeah!"

The two of them reached the end of the hall and approached the door with the elegant snowdrop engraved on the door.

"Over here," Weiss whispered. "Here's Winter's room-"
"I am NOT going to marry some bastard just so you can have a new trade partner!"

Weiss felt her skin crawl as the shouting only got louder.

"This isn't about the trade! This is about what's good for the family!"

"You haven't cared about this family since the day you married into it!"

"What's going on?" Whitley asked. "Weiss?"

Weiss heard the sound of footsteps and backed away from the door with her brother just in time. Winter stormed out wearing a long bathrobe, stomping her heels on the hard tile floor hard enough to leave cracks. Jacques came after, followed by Klein. Both looking rather frazzled.

"Winter, listen to me!" Jacques spat. "This family holds a prominent standing in Mistral! They are Magicians of the highest degree!"

"Magician or not, I refuse!" Winter snapped. "I'm sick and tired of being a pawn in your games!"

Weiss scurried up behind Klein, tugging on his sleeve to get his attention. "Klein, what's going-"

"You will do as you are told! As your father, I-"


Winter spun around, throwing off the robe just as a large snowflake appeared behind her. She was wearing a black combat suit with a high collar that Weiss had never seen before. Her hair was up in a tight bun, and her eyes glowed an icy blue. There was a three pointed brooch with a snow white Dust crystal in the center of it.

Klein ushered Weiss and Whitley behind him, preparing to block anything that might come their way. Whitley was crying, and the cake box Weiss was holding crashed to the ground.

"Winter-" Jacques started, trying not to panic.

"Shut up!" Winter bellowed. "I have put up with your cruelty for too long father! I refuse to play a part in your games!"

"You will stop this at once," Jacques ordered. "You are not a Huntress! You are the daughter of a Baron, and you will uphold your duties!"

"No!"

The snowflake behind Winter grew brighter as ice began to slide from the seams of her suit to the floor, crawling and wrapping around Jacques' legs.

"Winter," Whitley stammered. "Stop, please. You're scaring me."

Jacques tried to break free of the ice, his voice low and threatening. "I order you to release me at once!"

"No!" Winter cried. "I am not your pet! I'm not your property! I am not a martyr for your crimes!"

She waved her hand, using the snowflake behind her to create what appeared to be projectiles of icicles. "I am Winter Schnee, and you will not keep me trapped here anymore!"

Winter sent the projectiles to the wall, smirking as they froze the surface and allowed her to break
"Klein!" Jacques screeched. "Stop her!"

Klein went to take a step forward, only to look and see he was also frozen to the floor.

Winter leapt through the hole and vanished in a puff of snow.

"Winter!" Weiss screamed. "Winter, come back!"

But she never came back.

Jacques turned his glare toward Klein, a snarl coating his words. "I want the children's Aura closed off. And I want this day to never have happened. Do you understand?"

Weiss' eyes went wide as she looked between the two men. Surely Klein wouldn't obey that order. There was no way it was possible. He couldn't-

"Yes, Master Jacques," Klein sighed.

Whitley panicked and turned to run away, only to slip on some of the ice that remained. Weiss, reached out for him, only for Klein to put a hand to her shoulder, shaking his head in warning. He scooped up the children in his arms and carried them back toward the library.

"Klein," Weiss whimpered. "You're not going to-"

"I'm sorry, Miss Schnee..."

"But-" Whitley started.

But before the children could protest any further, Klein's eyes glossed over in black.

It was quiet throughout the house as Klein slowly limped out of his temporary quarters. He wasn't in any condition to be moving about quite yet. He knew this too well. It happened to him before back when he traveled the farthest reaches of Vale, and even further back when he was chipping his life away in the Dust mines. Such injuries were going to hinder him for a good month more at best.

But he had to move. He had to get back to Atlas. The children, Willow, everyone needed him. He had to get back.

So that night, once he was certain everyone was off to bed, Klein slipped out of his room and began to sneak away. The clothing Tukson left for him fit like a glove, well tailored to allow for fluid movement. While black jeans and a grey sweater weren't his style, they were comfortable enough and were perfect for fairing the salty seas.

He'd have to come back and thank them someday for their hospitality.

"Going somewhere?"

Klein nearly tripped over his own feet as he turned, fists raised in defense as Kali smiled at him
from the shadows. She was wearing a violet robe over her black silk nightgown, and appeared to be holding two cups of, if he guessed correctly, fresh Atlesian roast.

"Mrs. Belladonna," Klein stammered, "I hope I didn't wake you."

"Not at all," she giggled, handing him one of the mugs. "I figured you'd be coming out of bed sooner or later. I thought I'd bring you some coffee. You still like it with a hint of crème?"

"You know me too well," he chuckled. "Thank you."

"Of course."

Kali gestured to the bench and the two of them took a seat. As he sipped slowly from his cup, Klein couldn't help but look upwards toward the sky to admire the stars. It was so rare to see so many at once back on Solitas, and even when you were able to, it was far too brief.

Klein couldn't help but feel a smidge of envy toward the Belladonna household.

"I've always admired the skies here," he muttered. "Far more enchanting than anything back home."

"You could stay you know," Kali hummed absentmindedly.

Klein nearly spat out his coffee in shock. "Pardon?"

"You said Atlas has fallen," she elaborated. "If you'd like, you can stay here. You're more than welcome, Klein. Tukson certainly wouldn't mind the company, and I do enjoy having you around."

Her ears twitched softly as the breeze lightly picked up. "And besides, you're not quite fit for travel yet anyway. And without your weapon, you can't really defend yourself."

"I know," he sighed. "I know that. But-"

"But?"

"But I need to go. I have to find the others. Willow, Weiss, and Whitley. I swore to them I wouldn't abandon them, and I refuse to break that promise."

Kali nodded slowly, gazing into her cup with a distant expression in her eyes.

"What if," she began softly, "I could help you?"

Klein looked over at her, brows furrowed as he tried to understand. "You can help?"

"Well, yes and no," she sighed. "Let's just say I have the...tools, that you might need to help you find them."

"I don't understand."

Kali set her cup on the railing and beckoned him to follow her. Hesitantly, he did so, and the two of them made their way down to the basement. The steps felt as if they went on forever.

"Tell me, Klein," Kali said. "How much do you know about Atlas' Military, Pre-Civil War?"

Where was this coming from? he wondered. "I don't know much. Just that they used to be trained at Atlas Academy before the war, and then the Academy shut down about a year before the war ended."
"And what about the Schnee Dust Company?"

"Nothing besides the basic trade history...Why do you ask?"

As they reached the bottom floor, Kali walked over to a bookshelf and pulled a book marked with the royal crest for the Kingdom of Atlas.

The shelf moved aside, revealing a hidden room lit with a soft green light. The walls were lined with shelves covered in folders, and there were old computers in the far corner. In the center of the room was a case that held two brooches with three points; one with a green and one with a dark brown Dust Crystal.

"What is this?" Klein asked, eyes wide in wonder.

"ENFYS," Kali answered. "It was...a project by the Atlesian military in an attempt to improve the chances of soldiers coming home unharmed from battle. The Schnee Dust Company was a prime benefactor."

Klein approached the case, looking closely at the brooches. "I've seen something like this...Winter was wearing one like this the day she ran away from home, only...I think it was White."

"White Dust?" Kali hurried over to one of the folders, opening it up an flipping through a few pages. "Ah, here...It was the Ice Suit. Rather fitting."

"Ice Suit?"

"Basically, it's a combat suit that comes from the brooch. They're enhanced with Dust, and are supposed to adapt to certain users." Kali looked over at Klein, her smile completely vanished even from her eyes. "Those brooches before you are the Wind and Ground Suits. There were six total, but only two were ever recovered."

"How do you know all this?"

Kali put the folder back on the shelf, her ears flattening in worry. "I used to have a friend who...worked on the project. They left these with me for safe keeping after the war."

Klein felt shocked. He never knew Kali would have something like this beneath the Belladonna home. "Does Ghira know?"

"No," Kali said. "And he won't ever know, if things go right." She gently placed a hand on his shoulder, the kind motherly shine returning to her eyes once more. "If you truly need to leave, I won't stop you. You can go now if you want but...If you stay for a few more weeks.

Complete your recovery and train with Tukson, I'll send you both with these, and provide you with anything else you'll need for your journey. You and Tukson can both look for the remaining members of the Schnee family."

Klein raised an eyebrow, his mustache twitching in suspicion. "Why are you offering this to me?"

"Do you want the long answer, or the short answer?"

"Short for now."

"Because if we don't do something, Klein, we're all going to die."

The world seemed to freeze.
Those were words that should never come from Kali.

"Alright," he agreed. "I'll stay and train, but I want you to tell us everything. Myself and Tukson. He deserves to know."

"Of course." Kali smiled, her eyes filling with tears. "We'll start in the morning. For now, you should go back to bed. I'll prepare everything for tomorrow."

"Alright."

Without another word, Klein made his way back upstairs to his quarters and went back to sleep, his dreams bogged down by questions he'd finally have answered.

It was late when Emerald walked away from the camp to check the perimeter. The sky was overcast, masking the stars from view. There was a strange chill in the air she couldn't quite place. A cold sense of dread.

Emerald stopped and let herself rest beside a tree, arms crossed as she let her eyes close.

The voice wouldn't stop speaking to her.

They had to do it. They didn't have a choice. It was her order.

But she could still see her smile.

"What are you doing all the way out here? You're supposed to be back at the house with Oz."

"Hey, Em."

Emerald looked over her shoulder as the steel grey stud sauntered over to her. "Wuzzup, Merc?"

"You okay?" he asked. "You're spacing out."

"I'm..." she trailed off. She knew what she wanted to say. She wanted to tell him what was bugging her.

But she couldn't.

"Just thinking," she settled. "This mission is just taking longer than I thought it would."

"Yeah..." The two of them leaned against the tree, their fingers laced together as they tried to make out the moon from behind the cloud cover. "I don't think it's just the mission bothering you though." Mercury gently pulled her closer, letting her minty head rest against his shoulder. "Thinking about that woman back there?"

"Come on, Oscar. If you help me with the groceries, I'll make your favorite dessert."

"She was just," Emerald mumbled. "She seemed so nice...And you saw the photos back at the farmhouse....she someone else to look after..." She turned her ruby eyes up toward him, tears blurring her vision. "Mercury, I don't think we did the right thing. It was one thing when it was..."
Atlas. Most of those bastards had it coming. But that woman had nothing to do with it...

"I know." Mercury glanced back at the campsite, taking note of the fire and Cinder laying on the ground asleep. "Want to make right by it?"

Emerald felt a jolt of fear shoot up her spine. "You're not suggesting-"

"If we don't leave now, we'll be doing worse things when we run into the Wizard and you know it." Mercury wrapped his arms around her, his hands shaking from the terror of these thoughts. "Let's leave, Em. Now, while we have the chance."

She thought it over. He had a point. When they come across Ozpin again, there was no telling what might happen. They might have to incapacitate them. Or even try to kill them.

But this was Ozpin. There'd be no killing them. Cinder couldn't even catch up with them back during the Fall. How were they going to be able stop someone who was more powerful than all the world's Hunters combined?

They weren't going to come out of the confrontation unscathed.

But if they tried to run...

"...What will you do if I don't?"

Cinder might come after them.

Mercury held tighter, biting his lower lip. "As much as I don't want to stay...I'm not leaving without you."

Emerald managed a soft smile and wrapped her arms around him, resting her head against his chest. "Mercury...I want to leave...but..."

"But?"

"I need to do something first. Can you stay with me until I do it?"

Mercury smiled, giving her a kiss on the cheek. "Of course."

Emerald watched as Mercury made his way back toward the camp before continuing on her rounds.

*I'm probably going to go to hell for my deeds anyway, she thought. Might as well try and do the right thing once.*

Chapter End Notes

Had to move a few story parts to the next chapter due to pacing. Hope this chapter was okay!

Comments are love!
Blake stood in place on the edge of the cliff, ears perked in an attempt to hear anything that might be coming. There was something in the distance she couldn't place. Something new. Something of immense power.

But what could it be?

"Blake?"

Blake let out a sigh and turned her attention to Weiss. "What was it? I wasn't listening."

"I was asking when you were going to tell me you're the Chief’s daughter." Weiss stood beside her, looking out over the horizon. "Kind of a big thing to hide."

Blake pulled her hair back, pulling a hair tie from her pocket. "It's a long story, and I don't want to talk about it."

Weiss had her eyes narrowed and eyebrow raised in curiosity. "I didn't even know that the Chief had a daughter."

"Well there's a reason for that. And I'm not going over it right now." She walked past her, heading back in the direction of the others. "We should be coming up on the next town soon, and it's getting late."

Weiss let out a sigh and followed in suit. As much as Blake hated keeping her distant, it was a necessity at the moment. They were going to be arriving at Tsubaki village soon, and they needed to be ready to head out as soon as they get there.

When they returned to the others, Velvet was tinkering with her camera, her tongue stuck out in concentration. Yatsu was finishing packing the food, while Coco was counting their ammo.

"Coco said that there'd be a carriage waiting for us in town," Fox said as the girls approached. "Team AZRE prepped it before leaving. Hopefully it'll get us to Lamia, then we can walk to Mistral."

"You sure it's a good idea to just leave a carriage?" Weiss asked. "Not that I doubt your groups
methods. It just seems a little reckless."

Fox simply shrugged. "Sometimes that happens. We gotta take a chance."

Blake nodded in agreement. As much as she preferred careful planning, this was a matter where they had to act on faith and hope that luck was on their side.

"Coco and I will go on ahead with Weiss," Yatsu said. "We'll head into town and retrieve our transportation. Then we'll be back for you."

"Why aren't they coming with us?" Weiss asked.

Velvet looked up from her work, her face twisted with a deep sadness Blake understood too well.

"We're not...welcome there," she said, her voice heavy with heartbreak.

"Why not?" Weiss asked.

Blake let out a sigh before looking Weiss in the eye. "This town isn't very...friendly toward Faunus. There's a few places in town we can stay, but we just prefer to avoid trouble and stay out of town." By the look on her face, Weiss still seemed a bit confused. Blake figured as much. "Not every town on Anima is as open to everyone as they were back in Mantle or as they are in Vacuo, so it's better sometimes to just avoid certain areas. There's people who still see us as monsters, even after the war."

"But you're not!" Coco hissed. "You're just like everyone else. You just have a few extra traits is all. There's nothing wrong with-"

"Coco," Velvet said. "It's fine. Just...focus on the objective. Okay?"

Coco bit her lip, nodding in agreement. "Fine."

Blake went over and knelt beside Coco, gently placing a hand on her shoulder. "We'll be fine here. I promise."

Coco gave her a nod before grabbing her pack. "I'll send up a flare if we end up in trouble. You do the same if you're cornered, got it?"

"Of course."

Blake watched as Coco rose to her feet, motioning for Weiss and Yatsu to follow. Soon the three were off, and Blake made herself comfortable in one of the nearby trees.

"So Blake," Fox sighed. "Why aren't you telling Weiss anything about yourself? Keeping her distant isn't going to work in our favor in the long run. You know that."

"I know," Blake mumbled. "I just need space is all. I'll sit her down and talk later."

"You better," Velvet groaned. "I keep having to turn her down during training. Eventually, she'll just start eavesdropping. That's the last thing you want."

"I'll talk to her, okay? Just...after we get to Lamia."

"Promise?" Fox urged.

Blake hesitated, letting out an exasperated breath as she pulled her coat closer.
Weiss doesn't need to know anything, she thought. She doesn't need to know about my father, or myself, or...anything. She just needs to act as my partner for a little while.

But hearing herself think that way only sent a chill down her spine. It sounded too familiar. Too much like someone else.

Too much like him.

"I promise," she said firmly. "And if I don't, you're free to tell her everything you know."

Fox and Velvet exchanged looks of shock and confusion before nodding in agreement.

"Once we're in Lamia," Velvet said. "You're going to tell her everything. Or we will."

"Alright," Blake sighed. "Now, I'm going to get some rest. Keep an ear out for them?"

"Will do," said Fox.

With the end of that conversation, Blake closed her eyes and tried to rest.

The carriage was there as promised.

The rest of the town was not.

Weiss' eyes were wide in shock as they looked around, examining the damage done to the town. The buildings were completely burned down. There were toys, weapons, and various tools strewn about the pathways. Blood stained areas were faded from the weather.

"What happened here?" Weiss muttered.

"I don't know," Coco said. "But whatever it was, it had to have been long after Team AZRE dropped off the carriage." She reached into her pack, pulling out a long red stick and tossing it to Yatsuhashi. "Alert the others. Weiss and I will look for survivors."

Weiss nodded, though her mind was elsewhere. She followed Coco, wincing as Yatsu lit the flare and the flash of light zoomed upwards with a harsh whistle. The two of them scurried around, looking for anyone that could still be alive. It was all Weiss could do not to throw up.

Is this what happened during the Civil War? Weiss began to wonder. Is this what Atlas and Vale are like now? Is this what Hinagiku would have been if we weren't there?

"I can't find anyone," Coco said through clenched teeth. "Dammit. What happened here?"

Weiss was about to answer, but the sound of crying tore her attention away. She quietly turned and headed down an alleyway. There was a snarl, and the glowing eyes of a small Grimm in the form of a lion. Without thinking, Weiss felt herself fly forward on a row of glyphs, her rapier impaling the beast as it leapt to attack her. With a hard grunt, she tossed it behind her, feeling herself relax as the sound of hissing filled the air.

"Are you alright?" Weiss panted, looking at the person who had been crying.
Her heart began to sink.

Curled up there was a woman with long silver hair, her arms wrapped tightly around the body of a little boy. Both of them had feathery wings, though the woman's left wing seemed bent in an odd angle.

"Are you a Hunter?" she whimpered, not taking her eyes off the child in her arms.

"In training," Weiss admitted. "We were passing by."

The woman staggered to her feet as she turned to look at Weiss. Her gentle green eyes were sunken, as if she hadn't slept in days. The child in her arms still didn't move. Didn't make a sound.

"Are you injured?" Weiss managed to stammer. "We have a friend who can do healing magic for your wing if-

"My wing was always like this," the woman sighed. "I don't have any injuries."

"Then your child-"

The woman bit her lip, shaking her head. "It's...too late..."

Weiss felt the world begin to crumble from beneath her as the realization cemented itself in her heart.

"Weiss!" came a call. "Weiss, where are you?!"

Weiss tightened her grip on Myrtenaster as she placed it in its scabbard, biting back tears. "What's your name?"

"My name?" the woman asked.

"Yes. Your name. And your child."

The woman looked down at her feet, the tears growing heavier. "I'm Lily, and...my son's name was Zephyr..."

Weiss heard footsteps and turned to see Blake, eyes wide with fear as she saw them.

"Weiss?" Blake started. "What happened-

"Not right now," Weiss interrupted, turning back to Lily. "Do you have any family near here?" Lily shook her head. "Okay...is there anything we can do for you?"

Lily's shoulders shook as she tried to calm down. "I just...want to lay my son to rest please..."

Weiss nodded to Blake, who hurried to gather the others. She slipped off her jacket, wrapping it around Lily's shoulders. "We'll help you prepare, if you want. Just tell us what to do."

Lily nodded, and the two of them wandered out of the alley.
Night had fallen by the time the coffin and headstone was ready. Yatsu had worked hard to find a stone that would be sturdy enough to last a long time. Fox and Coco helped prepare the site, a small grove where the mother and child would have picnics during the summertime. Velvet did her best to make it seem as if young Zephyr were asleep. Blake held back tears as she watched Lily say her final goodbyes. Weiss stepped forward, placing a small white rose in Zephyr's hands.

"He always loved coming here for picnics," Lily whispered. "He'd try to climb trees, and he'd roll around in the grass and try to fly. He'd sing too. He had the most beautiful voice." She wiped the tears from her eyes. "I can't sing worth a damn...I would if I could..."

"Would you like me to sing for him?" Weiss offered. "Any songs in he liked in particular?"

"I think he'd like that." Lily managed a smile, gently pulling her hair to the side. "He always enjoyed 'Forever' and 'Home' for some reason. He said they reminded him of his father."

"I don't know the second one...But I remember writing the first one...I'll sing 'Forever' for him, if that's okay..."

Weiss waited for Lily to nod approval before standing up to sing. This wasn't the first time she sang for someone's passing. She'd done plenty of events like that for the Memorial, and some of her most well known songs were commissioned just for that reason. But this was the first time she'd actively partaken in a funeral beyond performing. This time the song was more personal to the person who was lost, rather than those who were grieving.

She had to make sure she sang it strongly.

She had to sing it clearly.

She had to be earnest.

"*You and I were in a dream*
*You'd follow close wherever I'd lead*
*My steps you'd echo one and all*
*You'd catch me safe if ever I'd fall...*

Weiss tried not to cry herself. She tried to focus on who she was singing for. For the mother who lost her home, her son, her happiness.

But she could feel her own emotions mixing with the tune, as images of her own mother, of her sister and brother, and of Klein flashed behind her closed eyes.

What if the same thing has happened to them?

She opened her eyes, noticing the tears forming on her companions faces. Yatsu had his arm around Velvet, who had her face buried in his chest. Fox had his head turned to the sky while Coco faced the ground, her glasses and cap hiding her sorrow. Blake's ears were flat against her head as she tried not to let herself break down.

Lily isn't the only one grieving, she realized.

Everyone was. For both Zephyr and others she never met.

This song meant a lot to all of them.

"*Farewell my angel*
You're with me always
Just close your eyes now
Next time we meet it's forever."

Everything was a blur now. Weiss could hear everyone else talking to Lily after the grave had been covered, but she wasn't focused on the conversation. Just the nagging sensation in the back of her mind.

There's a high chance I'll have to sing again, she thought. But...for them...

"Weiss?"

Weiss snapped back to reality, her tired gaze meeting with Blake, whose own eyes were red.

"Blake?"

"We're settling for the night," Blake said gently. "Do you...wanna come back to camp and talk over coffee?"

Weiss managed a smile. "How about tea instead?"

Blake smiled and wrapped an arm around her. "I think I owe you some answers."


Blake nodded in agreement, and the two returned to town.

It was time to rest.

Amber couldn't sleep.

Over and over again the night Vale fell replayed in her dreams. The frantic escape from the club, the falling buildings, the incoming hordes. She could still hear the screams of people as the Grimm tore everything apart. It was all she could do to keep from collapsing in fear.

She saw it on endless repeat. The Ursa backing the twins into a corner and the Nevermore perched in the car. She remembered Glynda jumping into action, managing to slay the beasts effortlessly as they helped clear the bar of patrons as best they could. How her Aura was pushed beyond its limits.

She remembered Glynda turning around and leaping between her and a Beowolf.

The claw ripping across the Countess' back just as her violet glow sparked out.

Why did she jump between us? Amber wondered. She could have died. She's not supposed to be throwing herself at death to protect me. I'm supposed to protect her, not the other way around.

Deciding that trying to go back to sleep was a fruitless endeavor, Amber got out of bed and slipped on her bathrobe. If she couldn't return to the land of dreams, perhaps the sight of the land of Vacuo would be refreshing.

She left her room and proceeded to walk the halls of the Desert-Crawler, admiring the soft blue glow from the candles on the wall. The moonlight bathed the walls in its silver glow, giving the
inside of the ship a heavenly glow. Amber found it soothing, reminiscent of the nights in Atlas when the night sky wasn't hindered by the light of the city. She pretended that the ship had been painted with the lights of the North, giggling softly at the idea of people magically collecting the colors from the sky.

*Perhaps I should write a book about that,* Amber thought. *That might make a good story.* She turned the corner, expecting to have a clear shot to the deck only to be surprised by the sight before her.

There stood Neo in her long pink nightgown and her hair in twintails, hands folded behind her back as she leaned against the wall. Her eyes were focused on the open door that lead to Roman's room. She seemed completely unaware of Amber's presence.

"Hey Neo-" Amber started, only to get a "hush" sign from the tri-colored youth. "Sorry. What're you doing up so late?"

"Watching," Neo signed. *"Stay quiet. They think the door is closed."*

Curiosity getting the better of her, Amber joined her against the wall to watch, switching over to using her hands to talk. *"What are we watching?"

"Junior's going to sketch dad," Neo explained. *"He hasn't drawn in a long time. This is going to be good."*

Amber looked over at the open door, brow raised in confusion. *"Can't they see us?"

"No. I made it so it looks like they're alone. I just...really wanna see what Dad does."

Without another word, the two of them watched.

Junior pulled a chair out so he had his back to the girls, facing the king sized bed with a large sketchbook in hand. Roman sat on the edge, wearing only his slacks, his shirt, coat, and scarf lying on the back of the other chair in the room. His hat sat on the nightstand beside the lamp.

"Okay," Roman chuckled. "How do you want me?"

"Whatever you're comfortable with," Junior replied.

"Come on, Baby Bear! You gotta give me more direction than that. Whatever you want, I'll do."

"Well...are you comfortable with me seeing...you know?"

Roman's visible eye blinked a few times in surprise, but he managed a smile. "Sure. For you, anything."

"Okay," Junior said, walking over to him. "And maybe have your hands like this?"

Junior walked over to him, blocking Roman from the girls' sight for a moment. There was the sound of a light kiss being shared, soft hums and chuckles, and soon Junior was back in his seat preparing to draw. Roman's hands were up toward his jaw, fingers curled to caress his cheeks as he managed a saddened smile. His head was tilted so his long bangs weren't covering the golden bloom in his right eye.

"You remember the word?" Junior asked, concerned.

Junior picked up a pencil and began to sketch, losing himself in deep concentration as the graphite glided over the paper. Roman sat very still, his only movement being slow breaths and the occasional blink of the eye.

Amber felt completely frozen in place watching, observing carefully as Junior traced over the outline of his body. Her amber eyes traced over his lithe form, taking in every scar that crisscrossed his torso. There were dark lines across his body that looked similar to that of roots, beginning at the base of his neck that was carefully covered daily by his scarf. The roots trailed down his arms until they reached his fingertips, and swirled around his torso until they reached just above his navel.

"Is this why he's always covered?" Amber signed to Neo. "To hide the roots?"

Neo gave a small nod, not turning her eyes away from the room. "Yes. It's part of the curse."

"You mean his eye?"

"Hey Baby Bear," Roman chirped. "Want something to spice up your drawing?"

Junior looked up, having just completed the main body's outline. "What did you have in mind?"

"Something to make it more...heavenly?"

"Oh," Junior gasped. "You mean-"

"Yep."

"I um...sure...if you're up for it."

"What's he going to do?" Amber asked.

"Just watch," Neo replied.

Amber watched, her eyes widening in amazement as she saw what Roman had planned.

The vibrant orange glow of his Aura covered him, slowly moving and pooling toward his back as Junior took pencil in hand once more. The roots along his body took on a similar shade as the light of his soul began to pull away from his body, morphing into thin curves and tails.

Soon the movement became still, and the moonlight pouring through the window made contact with the bright butterfly wings on Roman's back and covering the room in a soft golden shine.

Junior stopped sketching for a moment, taking a deep breath to steady himself. "God, you're beautiful."

"No I'm not," Roman chuckled. "Now stop staring and finish the picture. My arms are tired."

"Right. Sorry Ro."

"It's alright, Hei."

Amber looked over at Neo, who had begun to tear up when the wings appeared. "What is this? Some kind of spell?"

"I don't know," Neo admitted, lips trembling as she smiled. "I'm not quite at the level to learn what
it is. But it sure is beautiful, isn't it?"

Amber looked back to the room, smiling fondly as she watched them. "Yeah, it is. Do you think he'll teach me that?"

"Only if you can master all the other things you need to learn, I'm sure he'll teach you. You'll need to learn everything I know, and what I don't know." She gave her a playful smirk. "But I don't think you'll be able to catch up to me at your current rate."

Amber was going to argue, but Neo had a point. So far, she wasn't learning much past the basics. She could heal minor wounds, and deflect most bullets, but there were so many other spells and techniques she still needed to learn.

There was no way she'd catch up in time.

Unless...

"Can you tutor me?" Amber asked.

Neo raised an eyebrow, confused. "You want me to tutor you?"

"Yes. If I'm going to catch up, I can't just rely on Roman and Glynda. Will you teach me what you know?"

Neo looked at the floor, stroking her chin in thought as her eyes alternated between brown, white, and pink as she pondered this. Amber waited patiently for an answer.

"I can teach you," Neo finally said. "But you have to listen to me and do exactly as I say, okay?"

"Okay," Amber agreed. "I promise, I'll follow every word."

"Good. We'll start tomorrow evening with some meditation."

Roman's glow started to fade as Junior motioned for him to stop posing, prompting Neo to tiptoe away from the door. "We'd better head to bed before they catch us. Come on."

Amber nodded and followed her, glancing back once more to see Junior and Roman pull each other into a tender embrace.

I promise, brother, she vowed. I'll become a grand Mage and undo whatever that curse is. With a gentle sigh, she quietly left the hall to return to her room.

I won't lose them like I lost Nini.

The shattered moon glowed softly over the roof as James stood near the edge. Day twenty-three of training on Grey Team was much harder than he expected it to be. He was supposed to disarm a man armed only with a pair of knives for that simulation, and he failed miserably. He couldn't keep up with the trainer, much less his opponent.

"Hey Jimboree. Thinking about jumping?"
"Not her, he thought. Slowly he turned, blue eyes meeting with brilliant crimson. "Evening Appleby. Strange seeing you out this late."

"Call me Marie," she groaned. "That's what everyone else calls me. When they're not calling me other things."

James watched as she sat down on the edge of the roof, trying to resist the urge to kick her off. In all his life, he'd never met anyone so arrogant. So intimidating. So crude, selfish, lazy, and-

"Let me guess. You're still mad I whooped your ass at training today, right?"

So horrible.

"Did you have to humiliate me in front of Cappy?" he spat.

"You're seriously calling her that?" Marie chuckled. "Word of advice, don't call her that. And don't act like she's a Season's Maiden descending from the heavens to restore the Oasis of Sanus. She's bad news."

"And how would you know?"

"Instinct, Ironwood. Something you Atlesian punks wouldn't know if it bit you in the dick."

"And you do?"

"Kind of have to if you're going to live longer than a day in Vacuo."

James went to make a remark, but he found the words wouldn't form. Being from the outskirts of Mantle's poorer district, he had heard tales from the retired Hunters there about the vast deserts on Sanus. He couldn't imagine people living there peacefully. Not with the heat. Not with the crime.

Not with the Grimm.

"How'd you end up here?" he asked.

"Hopped a boat," Marie croaked. "Mum didn't want me to spend my life in the middle of the desert praying for morning to come, so she made me move here through some...interesting friends. Got drafted the moment I set foot on the snow."

"Drafted?"

"It was either this or prison," she shrugged. "Figured I could learn a thing or two as a cadet, then sneak home after being issued a weapon." She turned her eyes to the ground, her usually smug grin fading into a pitiful scowl as her voice sent soft. "Though...I don't particularly like the way things are back home so I might just stick around...If anyone wants me to, I mean."

James noticed her biting her lower lip, and he felt a pang of guilt rising in his chest.

Maybe I'm being too harsh.

"Well," he sighed, taking a seat beside her. "If you wouldn't mind teaching me how to fight with knives...I'd like to have you around."

Marie glanced at him brow raised in intrigue. "What's in it for me?"
"Uh, me not using what you teach me in front of Cappy?"

"Not enough. Need something better than that."

"I know where the twins hide the chocolate granola bars. I could tell you."

"The ones with the orange flavor to them?"

"Yep."

"That's evil, James," Marie chuckled, pulling her hair over her shoulder to braid.

James' eyes flew open wide as his mouth hung open. "Did...you just call me James?"

"That is you name, right?"

"No. I mean, yes it is, but it's just...you never call anyone their name."

Marie gave him a hard smack on the head, her lips curling into a playful smirk. "Don't get used to it, Jimmy."

James managed a smile and gave her a gentle punch on the arm. "So we got a deal or what?"

"Yeah. We got a deal."

"Good. Now how about we head inside before-"

Marie held up a finger to silence him, pointing toward the ledge. "I heard something."

The two of them slowly made their way over to the edge, looking down to see the rooftop of the dorms below them. Standing there in the moonlight was a girl with long teal hair trailing halfway down her back. She was spinning, eyes closed and singing as she moved in time to an unheard beat.

"The nights are long, the winds unending
Our bones are broken, and hearts not mending
We try our best to do what's right
Despite the reasons not to fight
Soon the only light will be far in the shores of the shallow sea.
And as I sing, my soul ignites, to love you always, my treasured night."

"Isn't that Ried?" James asked quietly.

"Sure is," Marie agreed. "Bit of a loony. Doesn't talk at all."

"Maybe she has a reason?"

Marie scoffed, rolling her eyes. "Like what? She's secretly a Grimm in disguise?" Marie turned to head inside, stretching her arms. "We'll start practice tomorrow night. Show up by midnight, okay?"

"Right. Gotcha."

Marie went back inside, leaving James to watch their teammate alone on the rooftops. He didn't know why, but he had the feeling he had been wrong about them both.
"A couple of angels lost in hell," he hummed. "Looks like there's a lot left for me to learn about my team."

*With one last glance, over his shoulder, he headed back inside.*

The moon was high in the sky as James sat by the window of his room. Qrow was resting, having finally managed to calm down enough to relax and let the doctor do his job with little to no complaint. Taiyang took over as the butler for a while, making sure that James was comfortable. He tried to protest, but it had been on Qrow's request. So James let Taiyang do his work, and prayed that it would help make Qrow feel better, even if just a little.

The plan was to leave tomorrow afternoon when someone came for them. They'd be waiting at the outskirts of town with an airship. James still didn't know how the young hunters managed to get in touch with their comrades. Tower communications were down, so it should have been impossible.

Then again, there were always ways to get a hold of someone if you really tried.

Deciding it was useless to put it off any longer, James curled up in bed and tried to get some sleep. The nagging sense of panic in his mind made it difficult, but he could manage. He always somehow managed.

However the pain made it harder than usual. His head ached with every blink, and his entire body burned. He felt as if he were being watched. That someone was taking aim with a gun.

The bedroom started to vanish, replaced by the cold wasteland yet again as he drifted between the worlds of slumber and reality. The screams filled his ears. Pain shot through every nerve from head to toe.

He was sinking, too far deep into the nightmare.

But this time he didn't have Qrow to pull him back.

"Help me," he whimpered. " Someone make it stop."

"*I can make it stop.*"

There was the sound of a soft click and James looked up, eyes wide and pistol aimed, but there was the feeling of a barrel being pressed against his head. His hands shook as he tried to remain calm. Someone stood over them, their mask covering the lower half of their face as a bright gold bloom protruded from their left eye.

"Drop the gun," the intruder ordered softly. "Or I go next door and kill your friends."

James lowered his gun, too frightened by the flashing images before him. The screams in his ears wouldn't let him go. He gripped tightly to his hair, curling up on himself as the intruder tossed the pistol aside.

"What do you want from me?" James managed.

"That rock," the intruder hissed. "Give it to me?"
How did he know about it? James wondered. Why is this damned rock so important?

"Well? You gonna hand it over?"

"Can't," James managed. It was all he could do to get the room to focus. "I can't get it out of my hand."

The intruder reached behind him. "That can be fixed." He pulled an ax from the holster on their belt, and raised it over their head. "Just. Stay. Still."

This has to be a dream, he thought. I'm just dreaming. The snow. The flower. It's all an illusion. Something my mind is making up. James closed his eyes and waited for the sharp contact of the ax blade. If it was a dream, he'd wake up in a cold sweat like before.

If not, at least the pain would finally end.

He waited for the sharp blade to make contact with his skull.

But the blade never came in contact with him.

Noticing the silence, James opened his eyes and looked up, expecting to see Taiyang or one of the younger hunters. He wanted it to be Qrow.

But it wasn't any of them.

Standing there, holding a bloodied ax, was a person in a blue combat suit with a helmet masking their face. They weren't very tall, and gave off an eerie familiarity. The moonlight gave them a ghostly shine as their aura pooled to their back to resemble sea green wings reminiscent of a dragonfly.

"What the hell?" James stammered.

"Relax, Dickbiscuit," the mystery blue soldier said, their voice distorted by the helmet. "Don't go giving up on yourself so easily, got it? People are counting on you, General."

"Who...are you?"

The soldier shrugged leaning down to pick up the body of the intruder. "I'll clean things up here. You get dressed, meet me at the edge of town, okay?"

Before he could protest the soldier vanished in a soft flash of light. The room returned to normal in his sight, and the soft hum of a breeze helped soothe his soul. James got up, quickly throwing on some jeans and his jacket before grabbing his pistol. While something in his heart told him he could trust the soldier, he wanted to be careful.

Once he was dressed and ready, James hurried out of the inn, being extra careful so as not to wake Qrow and Taiyang.

"You damned idiot! Do I need to put a bell on you?!!"

James stopped right by the bedroom door, glancing at the doorknob as the look of fear and anger on Qrow's face back in Pandora briefly appeared before him.

"You tell me when you're going to run off! We are not having a repeat of Kigiku!"

Letting out a sigh of defeat, James quietly entered the room.
Qrow was curled up comfortably in bed, one hand under his head and the blanket pulled up close, giving him the appearance of a sleeping bird. Taiyang sat in the chair, having fallen asleep as he watched over Qrow. His eyes were puffy, and his cheeks slightly pink.

*He must have let it out when no one was looking,* James mused. He took his jacket and gently wrapped it around Taiyang's shoulder before going over to the notepad by the bedstead. He quickly wrote that he was going for a walk and would be back by morning. Propping the note so it could be seen, James turned toward the sleeping butler, eyes soft with worry.

*He's getting better,* he thought. *I just hope he can make the journey to wherever we're going.*

Careful not to wake him, James placed a tender kiss to Qrow's forehead before silently leaving the room, glancing back one last time before closing the door.

Chapter End Notes

This is a chapter I have been both waiting to finish and dreading finishing simply because it's a hard one to get through emotionally. This is a major moment in Weiss and Blake's storyline and Amber is slowly coming upon answers to questions she doesn't have yet. And James is about to make a big leap in order to protect Qrow and the others.

Things only get more intense from here on out everyone. I hope you're all ready for it. I sure ain't ready for it!

Also, I wanna give a huge shoutout to NanoTwentyFaces (xhikarixyamix on tumblr) and their awesome RWBY OC team, Team AZRE (azure)! You should totally check out their art. They're super talented!

Hope you enjoyed the chapter!!!
Chapter Summary

Ghosts and devils come a-calling
Calling my name, lost in the fire

Chapter Notes

Boop!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Why does nothing ever go according to plan? she wondered. They were supposed to make their way through the cave and establish a viewpoint. But instead, a wrong move resulted in them going down the wrong path and now they were waiting for the rescue team. With any luck, Roy and Octavia would be back before they ran out of food and water. With a bit of planning, they could easily last a month and still have enough for tea.

These Gold Blade kids sure do come prepared. Were they trained by the Atlesian Military or something?

"Hey Blake!"

Blake let out a soft groan as she watched the group of teens walk over to join her by the fire. She didn't want to talk to anyone right now. She wanted to be alone.

But being trapped in a cave made it very hard to find alone time.

"What is it Sun?" she grumbled.

"We wrote a song for you!" Sun said excitedly as he sat beside her. "Reese made a killer tune and Sage and Ren helped me and Arslan write from your perspective and-"

Blake raised an eyebrow, her curiosity peaked. Sun continued his ramble as the others joined around the circle. Pyrrha sat beside her, handing her a cup of tea while Gwen started preparing the bedding. There was the sound of a pair of guitars being tuned, while Nora was practicing her drum.

"You wanna hear it?" Sun asked.

Blake looked around at the expectant eyes of her peers, letting her ears twitch pleasantly in response. If she said no, they'd give her the constant chorus of pleases and pretties. And while she didn't want to admit it, she was curious what Sun meant by "your perspective".

"Sweet!" Sun cackled. "Alright, so this song is called 'Like Morning Follows Night'. We hope you like it!"
Blake smiled and took a sip of her tea, letting out a soft giggle as Pyrrha and Nolan leaned against her shoulders. May leaned against Sun, starting off the song as Jaune and Nebula strummed chords in perfect harmony.

"You don't know what it's like to live in shadows
Always regretting what you've done
Spending time counting every little mistake
Knowing it's always easier to run -"

Blake set her cup down as she listened to Sun and May sing back and forth, her mind wandering slightly as visions of gold fire and green sparks danced in her vision.

"We have a chance to make it better if we try-"

"Oh, but I will not endanger one more friend-"

Blake felt a slight twinge in her heart as she listened to the lyrics. They hit very close to home, in every way. They hurt so much.

But still...

"You're free to do the things you want
But listen, so am I-"

"I've made my choice-"

"And now I'm making mine -"

"Stop..."

Everyone went silent, and Blake noticed her voice had started to crack. Everyone looked at her with worry.

"Is everything okay?" Jaune asked.

"Is it the song?" May asked softly. "Is it bad?"

"No," Blake assured. "It's really good, I love it. It's just..."

Blake couldn't bring herself to say it. She couldn't handle the questions right now. She couldn't face the questions from them. So she stared blankly over the group, wondering if the lilac eyes staring at her from the shadows were truly there.

It was Sage who managed to speak up first and break the silence. "I have a game I want to teach you all." Everyone stared at him in confusion as Sage pulled out a small Grimm Ursa plush with button eyes. "It's a good game, trust me. My dad taught it to me. It's how we got things off our chest back home."

"Is this the Hidden Secrets game?" Ren asked.

"That's the one." Sage's eyes leveled on Blake, his tender smile helping her to relax. "You want to give it a try?"

Blake took a deep breath and nodded, smiling as everyone made themselves comfortable. "Let's try it."
"Alright. Sun, start the chorus."

It had been a week since they left the town of Tsubaki. They helped to rebuild what they could, and scavenged for whatever they needed. Despite offering to let her come with, Lily wanted to remain. She intended to rebuild her home, making it a more open and friendly place.

Having to keep on the move, the group made their way east in silence, the heavy atmosphere unrelenting in their hearts. They stopped only when they absolutely had to, and said nothing to each other.

Weiss couldn't stand the silence.

Which was what made that night so important to her. The silence was replaced with something more earnest, and helped ease the pain everyone had been holding in.

"Go where you need to
Know I won't leave you
I'll follow you like morning follows night-"

The fire burned softly as Velvet and Yatsuhashi sang. Coco and Fox provided a beat through clapping, snaps, and slaps. Blake helped teach Weiss the words to the song. It was a soft melody that accompanied a much grander number, but only the chorus was in use tonight for the game.

From Weiss' understanding, it was relatively simple. They'd go around, and if anyone had something to get off their chest, now would be the time to put it out in the open. No questions, no pressing for details, no judgment. And anything said during the game wasn't allowed to be talked about outside of the game without the consent of the person who poured their heart out to the group.

But they weren't allowed to proceed with the game until everyone knew the song.

"You can run 'till your pain's through
One thing I won't do is to let you go
Alone to face the fight!"

It didn't take long for Weiss to learn.

"Nice!" Velvet giggled. "Alright, so now that Weiss knows the tune, who wants to go first?"

Weiss remained quiet while the others talked, trying to prepare for when it would be her turn. There was a lot that she needed to say, but she wasn't sure how she was going to say it. And she wanted to hold it off as long as possible.

"I'll go first," Fox said, standing up and taking a deep breath while everyone hummed softly. "I'm terrified about what'll happen when we get to Mistral. We're probably going to be running and hiding and I don't know if I'm ready to go back there. I don't care that it's been years. Knowing things have just gotten worse since we left Haven, I'm not ready." He closed his eyes, turning his head toward the fire. "But I know we're gonna be okay. Because we're stronger than whoever they
Fox took his seat and the chorus played again. Everyone clapped softly, and Coco brought herself to her feet, removing her beret in respect.

"I don't think we should have left Lily back in Tsubaki," she said when the chorus finished. "But I respect her decision to rebuild the village on her own. Reminds me a lot of Ren when I first met him. I admire that determination. I wish I had that much." She wiped the tears from her eyes, smiling proudly at the sky. "And I'm terrified...I don't want to lose you all to whatever comes next. I can't lose anymore family."

Yatsuhashi wrapped an arm around her as Coco sat back down, letting her bury her face in his chest to regain her composure.

"Go where you need to
Know I won't leave you-"

Blake slowly stood, pulling her coat tightly around herself as her turn came up.

"I'm sorry," she muttered. "For dragging you all out here with me. I know you all have other things you should be doing. People you should be helping. But instead, you're all here with me. You're helping me train a new friend, and to find a way back to Menagerie...Even after abandoning you all, you're still my friends...And I'm so grateful to have you all...But I wish things weren't so dire. I don't have much time, but I'm glad I'm not spending it alone..."

Weiss kept her gaze focused on Blake, wondering what she mean by that. Everything tuned out for a while as Yatsu and Velvet continued the game. It was all a blur until her turn, and even then she couldn't think straight. Her eyes wandered over to the fire as she stood, hazy images dancing in the flame.

What do I say? she wondered. What do I do?

"Take your time," Blake said softly. "You don't have to share if you're not ready."

Weiss took a few breaths, clenching her fists as she tried to find her courage. There were a lot of things she had been bottling up for years. Things she wanted to say.

She knew what she was willing to share.

"I hate being a Schnee," she hissed. "I hate myself, my family name, and everything my father turned it into. Being a Schnee means secrets. Being a Schnee means people hiding things from you if you're not at the top of the food chain, and even then you're only told what you need to know when others want you to know. That way of thinking only resulted in me leaving my home, and losing everything."

The humming slowly started to grow silent and the clapping began to halt. All eyes were on her. But Weiss didn't stop.

"I'm surrounded by even more secrets now than I ever was back in Atlas. But I don't care. I'm not near the top of the chain anymore. I'm at the bottom and I'm learning and growing. I'm finally free of my chains of royalty." She felt the sting of tears, but they were drowned out by the sound of her laughter. "So however long it takes me to find answers, I'm ready. In the short time I've known all of you, I've been possessed, nearly killed, and gained a few scars, and I've never been happier. You're all traveling with me, teaching me what you know, and trusting me more than most people
ever would. You're all amazing...

Everyone started to smile, and the humming began to rise once more.

"Landing in Erika was the best thing to ever happen," Weiss said. "If I hadn't landed there, I don't think I'd be alive right now. So I want to say thank you...for everything."

Everyone let out a soft cheer, and the song continued once more. Everyone took turns going around again and again until all the tears had been shed and all the laughter had gone. Weiss and Blake took the first watch, and the others curled up beside each other, falling into a peaceful sleep.

"That felt good," Weiss muttered. "I haven't felt that cathartic since yelling at my father."

"You yelled at Jacques Schnee?" Blake tittered. "That must have been hilarious."

"It was hilarious. The look on his face when Whitley smashed the plate was priceless!"

The two shared a gentle laugh, and started circling the perimeter of the camp, weapons at the ready. There were no Grimm nearby, but one couldn't be too careful. Blake stayed close by, but seemed to space out a fair bit.

"Everything okay?" Weiss asked.

"Mh," Blake replied softly. "Just...thinking about something..."

Weiss gave a slight shrug of acceptance. "Okay."

"Okay?" Blake hurried in front of her, stopping Weiss from moving. "You're...not going to ask about it?"

"You not ready to tell me." Weiss gently put a hand on Blake's shoulder, feeling her relax to the touch. "I know you're not ready to tell me. I'm just a novice you're travelling with. And...while I do want to know what's going on with you, I know it's not my place to pry. So when you're ready to tell me, you can tell me."

Blake's eyes shined softly in the moonlight, and Weiss couldn't help but feel her ears burning. She didn't realize before how lovely Blake really was.

Blake scurried over to one of the nearby trees, pulling the two of them up onto one of the branches before reaching into her coat pocket, pulling out a small journal with a black emblem vaguely resembling a flower on the cover. "Weiss?"

"Yes, Blake?"

"I have a story to tell you...About a little girl who was cursed by the passage of time..."

"Why are we wasting time here?"

Hazel glanced around as they walked through the ruins of a little town in the far north. When he woke up, they were further away from Mistral than he had wanted. He didn't even remember being unchained from the tree.
"Sorry," Amaryllis sighed. "This is part of my job. I was asked to cleanse this little mountain town. It's my duty to do it quickly and efficiently. Then I can inform the Headmaster of Haven that the task is complete."

The Headmaster? "Why does he need to know you did the job?"

"Because it was a student who requested I do it. I only take jobs from Hunter's in training. The innocent. The naive."

"The cheap?"

Amaryllis let out a soft chuckle as they adjusted their mask. "The honest, simple souls." With a flick of the wrist, they took their crook and planted it firmly into the ground, pulling themself up to balance on top. "Now you keep the Grimm off me while I set to work. Once we're done here, I'll order us dinner."

"Why should I help you?" Hazel asked. "You seem more than capable helping yourself."

"I was never meant to be a fighter. So if I die, it's because of my lack of skill. And if I die-" they turned to glance at him, their pink eye glowing softly "-I can't reopen your Aura."

Hazel wanted to argue. He wanted to say he didn't need Amaryllis to be able to regain his power. But that wasn't possible. He needed the Shepherd.

So Hazel groaned in defeat, grabbing hold of the knife he'd been provided so that he could fight off anyone that came close. "Alright. So what exactly is this 'cleansing' you're going to do?"

Amaryllis traced their fingers over their sleeves sparks gently flying off them and falling into perfect rings around them. "You ever see a sponge soak up water?"

"Yeah?"

"Same concept."

Without another word, they threw their poncho to into the air, pulled the guitar from their back, and began to play an eerie tune. From where he was standing, Hazel could see a three pointed brooch in the middle of their back with a bright red stone in the center, along with names seemingly sewn into the fabric that began to glow in the darkness. Hazel was just starting to make them out when the Beowolves began to crawl out of the decimated buildings.

"It's time," Amaryllis whispered. They hopped off the top of the crook just as it began to shift to its tuning fork form. "You ready, Rainart?"

"As ready as I'll ever be," he grumbled. "I take it you are, Adaire?"

"You know it."

With a well placed kick, Amaryllis made the fork erupt with a clean and concise sound. The monsters winced, backing away slightly as Hazel ran forward. Amaryllis continued their song, dancing around flames as sparks flew from their suit. Any Grimm strong enough to still move despite the sound lunged at them, only for the fires around them to swallow them whole.
Hazel moved quickly, stabbing the Beowolves right through the facial plate and watching as they slumped forward and began to dissolve. The smoke rose into the air, swirling into small clusters before seemingly being pulled away. As he continued his assault, he watched as the entire ruins of the town began to cover itself in shadows.

*What the hell is this?!*

"How're you holding up, Rainart?" Amaryllis called, the song still playing.

"Just fine!" Hazel spat just as his coat was torn by a stray claw. More and more, the Grimm were beginning to ignore him and head straight for the Shepherd, who was now glowing a soft shade of maroon. "What the hell are you doing?!

"Cleaning up the town." They took notice of Hazel's coat, rolling their eyes. "I'll pay for that later."

"You'd better."

"Just focus on killing those Beowolves."

With a frustrated shout, Hazel continued slaying the beasts. Watching Her creations fall by his hand used to be so common, so natural, that he never thought twice about it. But with every slash, the feeling that he was betraying their cause ate away at him.

*I have a mission. I'm not supposed to be here.*

As he turned to find another target, there was a flash of green, and Hazel felt himself being lifted into the air by a giant claw of an Alpha. In place of the lovely crimson was a toxic hue, and there were large spiked crystals across its back. Hazel stabbed the knife into the paw, causing the beast to release him.

"What is this freak?!" he bellowed.

The beast raised its claw, preparing to strike as a ring of fire surrounded it, blocking it off from Hazel as another clear tone echoed through the town.

"Are you alright?"

Hazel looked to his right, expecting to see Amaryllis standing all high and mighty with a smug look on their half-exposed face.

But instead he saw the Shepherd, their body covered entirely by shadow, with a single pink eye glowing from the depths.

"I'm fine," Hazel managed after a moment. "Why is this one green?"

Amaryllis shrugged, the shadow swirling slightly in time with their movements. "Green ones have been popping up all over the place this past year. Became more prevalent after Atlas fell though."

With a wave of their hand, the flames around the toxic Alpha increased, and soon traces of green mixed in with the rest of the smoke. "You ready to head out? We're done here."

Hazel nodded, feeling a shiver run down his spine as Amaryllis walked back toward their crook. The remains of the town were more prevalent now, having seemingly regained some color as the last of the smoke and shadows made its way to them.

"Is this what you meant by cleansing?" Hazel asked. "Just absorbing all the darkness like that?"
Amaryllis set the guitar on the ground, the music finally having faded from its strings. "Who said I just absorb it?"

Before Hazel could inquire as to what they meant, Amaryllis clapped their hands together, and soon their entire body was covered in a barrage of violet flames.

"Holy shit!" Hazel couldn't believe it. This couldn't be real.

"Behold," Amaryllis cackled. "I am a walking candlestick!" They spun on their heel, and the flames vanished, revealing them as completely unharmed. "The world's most useless Semblance. Pathetic, huh?"

"That was your Semblance?" Hazel scrambled to his feet, grabbing the knife once the fires had disappeared. "What exactly did you do?"

Amaryllis reached their hand out just in time to catch their poncho as it floated down from the sky, pulling it around them so their shoulders were covered. "I absorb negative energy, like you said. Only my Semblance allows me to discard it by setting it afame. Kind of like old superstitions about burning bones or cursed objects to get rid of ghosts. It's not very practical in combat, but I make it work."

"It seems pretty useful to me," Hazel said. "When you said discard, where exactly are you discarding it to?"

"It just means I discard it," they groaned. "Look, I don't know where it goes, okay? It just goes. It's a stupid power." They grabbed their crook and placed it upon their back. "Not useful in combat at all."

"It's not a stupid power," Hazel muttered, unable to mask the impressed tone in his voice. "It's a good one, and you seem to fight well with it."

"That's what you thought I was doing? Fighting with my Semblance?"

"You weren't?"

Amaryllis burst into laughter as they began to walk away. "I can't discard when I'm moving. I gotta be standing still. Makes me a sitting duck. And if I absorb too much without dumping it, it makes me sick. Now come on, let's get you a new coat."

Hesitantly, Hazel followed, feeling more confused than ever. "How exactly do you intend to get me a new coat? The nearest town is pretty far away."

"Simple. We're going back to Saboten."

Taking the knife from Hazel's hand, Amaryllis made a quick slash, leaving a light pink line in the middle of the air. It slowly started to swell, and soon there were flecks of blue swirling about in the vortex that had appeared before them.

So this is how we got here so fast, he realized. "You'll need to teach me this trick."

"Sorry," Amaryllis sighed. "I don't teach. I take odd jobs and make people comfy while they die. Now let's get moving."

The two of them entered the vortex, the ruins vanishing behind them as they reappeared in a little apartment lit up by the sole lamp in the corner of the room. Hazel looked around as the portal
closed, taking in the sight of a toppled table and a few pieces of broken chairs stacked beside an empty fireplace. There were a few photos on the wall, along with several paintings. Besides those, the table, and a loveseat, there wasn't much to this room.

"Make yourself comfortable," Amaryllis sighed. "If you leave your coat on the sofa, I'll take it along to get a new one made." They hung up their poncho and set the table upright so they had a place to put the mask. "I need to get a new mask made anyway, so if you want anything in particular made for the coat, let me know."

Hazel said nothing as he took off the torn garment. His attention was drawn to the photo by the door. There were several people in combat suits similar to the Shepherd, only in different colors and with heavier plating. The two the men on the left looked identical, save for the horns and ears that told them apart. The one with horns wore a brown suit, while his twin wore green. There were two women, the shorter in blue and while the other wore violet, and the man in the center of the group wore black. Amaryllis stood beside him, his suit a more crimson shade then.

"I see you found my team," Amaryllis said softly. "Good eggs, the lot of them. I think you would have liked them."

"That's the Iron General," Hazel muttered, pointing to the man in black. "You were friends?"

"Oh, more than that love," they chuckled. "Way more than that. But I'll spare you the details." They skipped through the door to their left, humming pleasantly. "Hungry? I think we still got some cheese and apples still. We can snack on that while I order food from downstairs."

"Downstairs?"

"Yeah, my apartment is over this little restaurant across from the club I kicked your ass in."

Hazel took a seat, the exhaustion slowly settling into his bones as the bruises slowly became prominent on his arms. He hadn't realized how badly he'd been hit. He didn't even notice being hit. Amaryllis came out of the kitchen with a plate of cheese and apple slices, their combat suit replaced with a loose tank top and sweatpants. In the dim light their bubblegum blue hair took on a more mellow shade. "Eat up while I fix those bruises for you."

Hazel looked them over, the desire to sleep prevalent on his face. "I don't get you..."

The Shepherd shrugged, sitting beside him as their hands turned a soft maroon. "There's nothing to 'get'. Now have a snack and relax. I'll get a fire going in a bit so it's not too cold in here." They smiled, a distant look in their eyes as they watched the bruises fade away. "You did good, Hazel. You earned some rest."

Hazel said nothing, and focused his eyes on the empty fireplace as he helped himself to the apples. Normally silence and the mention of rest put him on edge. But that wasn't the case here. For now, there were too many questions he needed to find answers to. About his captor, the town they had returned to, and so much more.

For now, the silence was welcomed.
When James made it to the outskirts of town, the soldier from before stood under one of the nearby trees, hands raised and hidden behind their head as they leaned against trunk. Their Aura had subsided completely, giving them a normal appearance.

Or at least, as normal of an appearance as possible, given their apparel.

"You made it," they said. "Didn't think you'd show up."

"Least I could do," James replied. "You did save me after all."

"Us."

"What?"

"I saved us." The soldier turned to look at him, their supposed gaze focused on James' left hand. "Haven't you noticed the burning feeling?"

James looked down, surprised to see that the stone was glowing in his hand. "I didn't." He looked and saw them heading deeper into the woods, prompting him to hurry. "Wait, how do you know about this? Do you have one too?"

"Had one," the soldier explained. "I am the previous bearer of that relic. But I'm dead now...Well, mostly. Death and I aren't exactly in a committed relationship right now."

James felt the blood drain from his face. "You mean you're a ghost?"

"In layman's terms, I suppose you could call me that. I prefer the term Fragment personally. Like the old book series about the man whose essence was split and shit? Penderyn and Clive, I think it was called? It's basically similar to that."

James couldn't believe what he was hearing. "So you're a fragment of a soul?"

"Yep, right on the nose Dickbiscuit."

"Stop calling me that," James hissed. "My name is-"

"General James Ironwood, Earl to the more recently instated House of Ironwood in Atlas."

James grabbed the soldier's arm, his body seething with rage. "I don't like information being kept from me. So I suggest you tell me who you are and what the fuck you want. Otherwise I'm going back."

The soldier looked at him, their eyes hidden beneath the visor preventing James from getting a clear read on them. They made no attempt to run, and despite the anger and confusion, remained completely calm.

Why does this feel so familiar?

"Who are you?" he asked. "You know me...but I don't know you..."

The soldier gently removed his hand from their arm, shaking their head as their shoulders slumped forward. "I don't have time. I need you to just trust me, okay? Otherwise, your friend back there isn't going to live to see another day."
James bit back the urge to pull his gun. He didn't like hearing those words one bit.

"Alright," he grumbled. "What do you want to talk about?"

"Less talking, more showing."

Without another argument, the two continued into the woods, getting further from Ayame with every passing minute. The darkness of the night made things hard to see, but somehow James felt as if he'd known this place all his life. The fireflies glided about, flickering in and out of sight until they reached the edge of the woods. Just in front of them was a cliffside, illuminated by firelight near the bottom of the gorge.

"What's going on?" James asked cautiously.

"See for yourself," said the soldier.

With a few cautious steps, James walked toward the edge, kneeling down to peer over while remaining unseen.

Below was an encampment of White Fang soldiers, split evenly into two sides as they faced the man standing on a large boulder. From what he could make out about the man, he seemed to be dressed in red and black, and had a pair of horns protruding from his head.

"Brothers and Sisters of the White Fang," the man bellowed. "Tomorrow at dawn, we strike the town of Ayame. Gather as much of their Dust, Lien, and weapons as possible. Anyone you feel can be an asset to our ranks are to be captured and brought to me. We have only three towns left to strike. Let's do this as efficiently as possible. Understood?"

"Yes sir!" the crowd proclaimed.

"And remember the faces of those we fought in Kigiku. They are to be struck down without mercy for what they did to our comrades." He gestured to the rock wall behind him, where several wanted posters were pinned, pointing to two in particular. "Except for them. You are to bring them to me alive."

James felt as if a weight had crashed down on him.

It's Kigiku all over again!

"I have to go back and warn the others," he muttered.

"And then what?" the soldier asked. "Donald and Douglas are sending people to come and fetch you. They'll be here when the White Fang invade." They let out a sigh, kneeling down to the ground and poking the loose dirt with their finger. "You need to warn them that they're running into an ambush."

"And how do I do that?" James inquired. "Because Flynt, Neon, and Ciel won't tell me how they managed to get a hold of anyone."

"You're The Man of Miracles, James. You always know how to contact someone."

James looked over at them, his eyes drawn to the ground as he watched them etch various flowers into the dirt. He could just make out the soft humming under their breath.

"2-4-1-10"
"Am I transmitting?  
Is anyone listening-"

That's it!

"I think I have an idea," James huffed, quietly moving away from the cliff and back toward town. "Can you help me?"

The soldier scurried after him, patting him on the back as they passed by. "What's the plan, Jimmy?"

When Qrow awoke that morning, everything was burning. He could barely breathe without the crackling in his voice. There were grey vein marks even further down his arms now. His fever bit down on his flesh, coating him with sweat. The poison wasn't completely out of his system.

He was relapsing.

But he didn't care.

All he cared about was that he was all alone in the room. James' coat was on the back of Tai's chair. There was a button up shirt, a leather vest, and jeans on the table, with a pair of boots beside the chair that matched the vest. A silver locket with a rose engraved on it lay on top of the shirt beside a note.

"Hey Qrow," read the note. "I went out for a walk. I'll be back in the morning, I promise. Get some rest. Your friend, James"

"That damned bastard will be the death of me," he hissed, trying to lift his sword to use as a crutch. He'd done it before, in far worse conditions. He could do it again.

With heavy breaths, Qrow slipped on the clothes that were laid out for him, hesitating before putting on the locket that had been left there. He didn't know where it came from, but he didn't care. He hated having nothing around his neck more.

After checking that James' room was empty, Qrow slowly but surely he made his way downstairs, careful not to trip over the loose laces. The tip of Huginn bore into the hardwood floor, leaving cracks and splinters to mark his trail. The closer he got to the outside the more he could hear chattering.

"I'll carry him down. Just be ready to head toward Pandora."

"James, are you sure it's a good idea?"

"Not in the slightest, but it's the best chance we got."

James and Tai, Qrow thought. What are they talking about? Before he could process what was being said, a sharp pain in his nerves sent him falling down the last ten steps, only to be caught by
someone's metal arm.

"Qrow!" James gasped. "Are you okay?"

"Fuckin' fine," Qrow hissed.

"You're burning up. Come on. Let's get you laying down."

"I'm not going back to that bed—"

"You won't be."

Despite the squawk of protest, James scooped Qrow up in his arms, leaving Taiyang to grab the sword as the two nodded for the teens to head outside. The two ginger haired lasses were carrying pillows and blankets, while the trumpet carrier had stacks of flares in his arms. The one that had been assisting the doctor was running in and out with all their luggage.

*Why are we preparing to leave?*

"What the fuck is going on?" Qrow asked. "You remember your pain meds, My Lord? And have you all eaten yet? I can cook—"

"Qrow, hush," James said softly. "Just relax. Everything is going to be okay."

Qrow glanced up at him, surprised at how calm James was. This wasn't the same man he'd known for the last three years. There was something different. Something new. He couldn't quite place it, but there was something about James that seemed, for lack of better terms, stronger.

Letting out a sigh of defeat, Qrow rested his head against James' shoulder and watched as the young Hunters packed the luggage into a cart, arranging the pillows and blankets on top to make a comfortable bed. The doctor was at the reigns, watching with a look of concern as they worked.

"How're you feeling?" Tai asked.

"Like shit," Qrow mumbled. "Why are we packing up to leave? It isn't even sunrise yet."

"You're going to see Ruby," James explained as he softly lowered him onto . "These kids will take you and Taiyang there. I'll catch up when I can."

Qrow's eyes shot wide open as he grabbed as tightly as he could to James' arm, trying to sit upright. "No, fuck that. You're not running off again you son of a—"

James gently lowered him back down as Qrow began a coughing fit, giving his right hand a reassuring squeeze. "Qrow, you're very sick. Don't push yourself."

"I'm fine—"

"*That's enough, Qrow.*"

Qrow winced at the harsh tone in the Earl's voice, and said no more.

"Listen," James sighed. "This is for your own safety. I need you to trust me on this, okay? You're going to be okay."

Qrow lightly shook his head. He couldn't believe what he was hearing. The way James was speaking was actually starting to scare him.
"Why does he sound like he's not coming back?"

"We need to hurry," Polendina urged. "If we don't we'll all be in trouble."

"Alright," James said. "Everyone have enough ammo?"

"Yep," Flynt said. "You?"

"I should have enough. And if need be, I'll have my backup plan." He looked to Taiyang, who handed him Qrow's sword. "I'm counting on all of you to look after each other. Keep each other safe."

Qrow felt something begin to snap. Those words echoed over and over, piercing his very being.

"Keep each other safe."

When James went to set the sword beside him, Qrow grabbed him by the collar and pulled him close, crashing their foreheads together hard enough to bruise. He knew he was going to regret that later, but he didn't care. His mind was running a thousand miles a second. The panic was settling into his bones.

"Qrow," James groaned. "That hurt-"

"You better fucking come back."

James' blue eyes met with his own, and Qrow could feel James' brow furrow in confusion. "What are you-"

"Don't you fucking die," Qrow whispered. "Whatever you're planning, you better come back or I swear to the Gods I will drag your ass from the afterlife and beat you to death with your own corpse. Do you hear me? Don't. Fucking. Die on me, James."

James' gaze began to soften and he carefully removed the clenched fist from his collar, lacing their fingers together as he smiled. "I promise, Qrow. I'll come back to you. You have my word."

Reluctantly, Qrow let James go and watched him slowly back away from the cart. The pain from where they knocked heads started to mix with the fever, but he did his best to keep his eyes open as the kids piled into the cart around him.

"Let's head out," Polendina said softly.

There was the sound of reigns clicking, a soft whinny, and soon the cart was in movement. James stood still, watching from in front of the inn with as brave of a smile as he could manage. The fever slowly started to lull him back to sleep in time with the shaking of the wheels on the cobblestone. James became smaller and blurrier with every second.

And Qrow's heart began to feel heavier as they left Ayame.

You better come back alive James.
James stood near the center of town square, taking in the surroundings. The mayor was kind enough to evacuate everyone to the nearest safe houses, and with the help of the soldier, James had managed to paint a message on the roofs of town. He had a thorough understanding of the area, and was more than prepared to face Grimm and White Fang alike.

But he still couldn't stop shaking.

This was going to be a tough battle.

*I'm not ready.*

*I think you're going to need my help.*

James looked behind him, eyes wide when he saw Taiyang standing there. "Tai, what're you doing?! You're supposed to be with the others!"

"They'll be fine," Tai assured. "You on the other hand? No offence, but you can't even hold your own against me when sparring. If you're going to keep that promise to Qrow, you're going to need help."

James' shoulders slumped forward in defeat. "I hate that you're right."

Taiyang gave him a pat on the back. "Relax. The Dragon of the West has your back."

The sound of footsteps pulled their attention from each other toward the entrance of town. James stood tall, arms folded back as the man in black slowly approached. Now that they were closer, James could make out the red and white pattern on his left shoulder. Behind him followed five Grimm that resembled lions.

"Adam Taurus," Taiyang hissed.

"You know him?" James asked.

"Yeah, I know him. And I'm going to kill him."

Taiyang walked forward, throwing off his shirt as the tattoos began to glow. James hurried after him, drawing his pistol. Adam halted, raising a hand that prompted the beasts to do the same.

"Remember me, you bastard?!" Taiyang shouted. "Been what, three, almost four years now since we last saw each other?"

*Three years?* James thought. That's around the time Qrow-

"Sorry," Adam scoffed. "You don't look familiar. Now stand aside." He turned his gaze toward James, scowling. "He's the one I'm after."

Taiyang smirked as a ball of fire appeared in his hands. "Maybe this will jog your memory."

"Taiyang, what are you doing?" James hissed.

*Do not fear the tempest of despair,* Taiyang chanted. *Rise up and fight. For the embers of your existence can weather any storm."

The tattoos of the creatures upon his body began to fade slightly, and the flames in Taiyang's hands grew brighter as the Grimm backed up a few steps. James found himself frozen in place watching as Taiyang tossed the fire on the ground, creating a wall of flames around him before the fire began
to take the form of two dragons of slightly differing sizes.

"What the hell?" James gasped.

Adam drew his blade, preparing to strike. "Now I remember you. Damned historians."

Taiyang's eyes burned brightly as the golden hue of his Aura lit him up like a beacon in the night.

"Bow down to the dragon."

Chapter End Notes

So this chapter was hell to edit. There was meant to be a Ruby and an Oscar section but those will have to wait. This chapter was getting too long.

The scene with team CFVY, Weiss, and Blake was loosely inspired by a scene from one of my favorite movies. I just like the idea of people surrounding the campfire and pouring their hearts out.

Taiyang...oh boy Taiyang is livid. This will be fun.

Hope you enjoyed the chapter!
Chapter Summary

Some truths live on, far after they've faded into mythos.

Chapter Notes

I'm back! Sorry for the wait!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Everything was a blur. Sparks were flying everywhere. Blake staggered to her feet yet again. She lost track of how many times she'd done so. But she had to do it. She had to run for it. She had to stop him. She had to save them.

How many times have I seen this play out?

She hurried out of the bars, the burning in her back continuing to linger as she watched the bouncing flames that emitted from Yang's hair. She was doing her best to dodge Adam's attempted strikes, but he was just too fast. She couldn't get a good hit in. The wizard in green used their cane in place of a sword, constantly hitting the blade when it came too close.

That's not good! They're just feeding the blade!

Adam smirked and jumped away, sheathing Wilt and preparing for a final strike. She'd seen it before. She knew what was going to happen. She'd seen just about every variation of this moment she could possibly imagine. The blade will slice right through the neck. There will be a surge of emerald light, Yang will disappear, and then she'll be flung back.

Again.

And again.

Until it wouldn't let her go back anymore.

"NO!"

Blake ran forward, catching the wizard by their legs and knocking them to the ground. She grabbed the cane from their hand and swung around, hitting Yang in the back with the metal handle and causing her to fall to the ground before standing up. She dropped the can and ran toward the Adept.

"That's enough!" she screamed. "Adam, leave them alone and let's just go!"

"Are you siding with humans?" he spat. "They're the ones responsible for-"

"That's not what's important right now!" Blake insisted. "Adam, the Rose is gone! We don't need to
stay anymore. If we linger, the guards are going to capture us and -"

Adam growled, kicking her in the abdomen hard enough to knock the wind out of her. "What do you mean it's gone?! We were supposed to take it back to camp!"

"GET AWAY FROM HER!"

Blake tried to blink away the tears as she looked up and saw a screaming ball of fire flying toward them. Adam spun around and drew his blade, sprinting forward at a speed Blake had never seen before. The ball of fire fizzled out and slowly returned to the form of the young Yang Xiao Long. She landed on the ground, out cold and covered in bruises and gauges.

Her right arm was missing.

"BASTARD!!!"

Adam spun around just in time for a foot to make contact with his chin. His flew off, and he staggered back as he tried to regain his barring. Blake stood up, watching as the tall, brooding blond that had come running in began to glow, the tattoos on his arms and legs glowing in the dim light of the achieves. The wizard had managed to make it over to Yang, using whatever power they had to keep her from bleeding out.

This isn't how it was meant to end. That man wasn't there before. And Yang never lost only her arm.

I...I did it! I changed it!

"You're both gonna pay for this you fucking thieves!"

The blond was soon joined by a beast made of fire. Instinctively, Blake turned and began to make her way out of the archives, keeping to the shadows as she hurried out of Beacon.

The burning in her back slowly began to fade.

"I ran away after that. I found someplace well hidden and called home. I didn't want to stop fighting for my people, but I couldn't be in the White Fang anymore. I couldn't face her again. My parents told me I could come home, and that's what I planned at first but...then I met everyone. Made friends with Velvet and Sun and the others and we fought together against the tyranny here on Anima. And for a while, things were going well. But then Atlas fell, and I started being sent back to Erika every time I died, regardless how far ahead in the future I got."

Weiss listened carefully, taking in everything Blake was saying. She couldn't believe it. It just wasn't possible. This kind of magic, this ability to go back, was just a myth. But given everything up until that point, she didn't have any reason to doubt the validity of young Belladonna's claims. If anything, the way Blake always seemed to be one step ahead in everything seemed to make more sense if she did believe it.

So Weiss chose to believe her.

"No matter how many times I was sent back," Blake stammered. "I couldn't seem to change
anything. Every time, my father would die at the hands of the Lieutenant, The Gold Blade and all my friends died, and I'd be sent back to the point in time I spent alone in that abandoned little town. But...now things have been happening differently. This is the first time I've seen the path diverge this much."

"Why would it be so different?" Weiss inquired.

"I don't know. But I think it might have something to do with you showing up here."

"How so?"

Blake shrugged, trying to find the right way to put it. "You just...weren't there before. Whatever is changing things here, it has something to do with you showing up that night in Erika."

Weiss wanted to know more. She needed to know. This was something huge. It could be a clue toward finding her family. But she knew better than to press the matter. Blake wascurling up on herself, pulling her coat tighter around her in an attempt to seem smaller.

That was enough sharing for now.

"I appreciate you telling me, Blake," Weiss said gently. "I know it must have been hard, especially after everything you've been through."

"Yeah," Blake mumbled, holding back a yawn. "It's not something I like talking about. Team CFVY and Scarlet are the only other people who know about it. No one else can know."

"I promise, I won't tell."

"Thank you."

"Come on. Let's head back to camp. You need to sleep."

Not even bothering to argue, Blake allowed herself to be escorted back to camp and tucked into her sleeping bag. Velvet and Fox were curled up beside each other asleep, the camera they'd been attempting to fix finally put back in one piece. Coco was asleep in her own little corner, hugging her purse like her life depended on it. Yatsu remained by the fire, keeping it going while watching the skies. Once she was sure Blake was asleep, Weiss took a seat across from him.

_"Should I try to talk to him?" she wondered. He rarely spoke, and was rather intimidating. She didn't know if he'd be interested in speaking with her while they were the only ones still awake._

_"They're good people, and I think they'd make good allies for you."_

She decided it was worth a shot. Blake thought it'd be good for her to get to know them, so why not start with the person who scared her the most?

"So," she muttered. "You know about Blake's...backwards thing?"

"I think there are better terms for it," Yatsu chuckled. "I personally call it a Slingshot, but "Backwards Thing" works too."

"Right...How long-"

"How long have I known? Since about a year ago. Blake told my team after a mission."

"I see."
Yatsuhashi glanced at her, brow raised with curiosity. "Is there something on your mind?"

"A lot of things," Weiss admitted. "Mostly I just don't know what to do. I don't even have a plan for when we reach Mistral."

Yatsu hummed, turning his attention back to the sky. "Mistral is a very big place. You might fall into something while you're there. Or run into someone. Or perhaps something. Like a ghost of the past, or a giant tank driven by a corgi."

Weiss rolled her eyes, snorting softly at his jest. "Maybe..."

Yatsu motioned for her to join him on his side, keeping his eyes trained on the sky as she did so. "Tell me, Weiss. Do they have many myths in Atlas?"

"Not really. Mostly just war stories about General Ironwood and the civil war. We don't even have many songs outside of instrumental pieces and what I write... Why?"

"See there?" He pointed to a particular cluster of stars. "That is the Dragon of the East. It's a constellation that is only visible during the full moon, when the moon is believed to be the strongest influence on Remnant. It has related constellation that can usually only be seen during the new moon, when the sun is the strongest influence."

Weiss looked closely at the stars, squinting slightly as she started to make out the familiar shape of long horns, two front legs, and a long serpentine body. "It kind of does look like a dragon... Any reason why it's only visible during these times?"

"Nope," Yatsu hummed. "But it's something interesting to think about. Dragons, real ones, haven't been seen on Remnant in over a century. Many people think they're no longer around. But... If we're still here, that means they are too. That's what I think at least."

Weiss smiled fondly, leaning against his side. "That's a nice way of thinking about it..."

Yatsuhashi smiled and began to tell more about the Dragons myths. Weiss took in every word, occasionally glancing around to make sure no one was stirring. He told her of a story of the dragons forcing back Grimm, protecting people from the malevolent forces. Yatsu was so enthusiastic about these tales, Weiss couldn't help but feel relaxed. It was as though she were back home, curled up in the library while Klein told her and her brother stories.

*I guess he's not so scary after all.*

---

Ozpin watched quietly as Taiyang paced back and forth in the hall. Both were still in their former attire, having come straight from the gala when the White Fang spies fled. Qrow would be coming soon to take over guard duty, but until then, they had to watch over Yang while the doctors tended to her. There was nothing much either of them could do.

*For all their powers, regrowing limbs was something still far beyond their ability.*

"How could this have happened?" Tai growled. "How could the White Fang have gotten in? How did they escape?!"
"I have a theory," Ozpin sighed. "But you’re not going to like it."

"Whatever it is, I don’t want to hear it right now."

"Understood. I’ll wait until Yang is out of surgery." Ozpin gently placed a hand to Tai's shoulder, stopping him from pacing. "Tai, please. You need to sit down."

Taiyang wanted to protest, but just grumbled as he allowed Oz to lead him to a nearby chair. They understood his frustration. Seeing your child hurt is something no parent ever wants to see. Especially when said child is barely fourteen. Taiyang did his best to raise his daughters right, but there were always moments where he couldn’t be there for them.

And now he was probably cursing himself for not being there this time.

"I shouldn’t have let her take the internship," Tai whispered. "I should have tried to convince her to wait. I should have offered to be on guard duty. I-"

"Enough," Oz soothed. "Tai, there was nothing you could have done. No one could have predicted this."

"But she’s my daughter, Oz!" he spat. "I shouldn't have let her enroll in the history course! I should have kept her in the basic training!"

"Now you and I both know that wouldn't have helped. Yang would have enrolled in the history course even if you didn't want her to." Ozpin unwrapped their scarf from their neck, curling it around Taiyang so that he felt a little comfortable. "Tai, you've raised her well enough to make informed decisions. She knew the dangers of being a historian like you and Bart. This. Was. Not. Your. Fault. So stop blaming yourself."

Taiyang bit his lip, nodding as he tried not to cry. "I know...I know, but-"

"I know, Tai."

Ozpin waited until Tai regained composure before heading down to the waiting room to meet up with Qrow. Their mind was going a mile a minute trying to piece together what happened. They were certain that was the young Belladonna in the archives. The way they panicked as the other person began to draw the blade made them think that she knew what was going to happen. That kick to their shoulder and knocking them to the ground was too well timed.

And with the missing artifact...

"Hey, Oz."

Ozpin looked up, their golden eyes soft as they saw their Prosper wander over to them from the doorway. Qrow threw his arms around them, hugging them tightly as though they would vanish. He was soaked from the rainfall, but they didn't care. Ozpin returned the embrace, feeling a wave of relief that they had someone to be their support.

"How's she doin'?" Qrow asked softly. "Are you okay? How’s Tai? Were any of you seriously hurt?"

"I'm fine," Ozpin assured. "Just tired from the fight. Tai had a few scrapes, but is more or less unharmed..."

Qrow pulled back a bit, gently tilting their chin so they were looking eye to eye. "Oz?"
With a deep breath, Ozpin rested their forehead to his, trying to find the right words. There were never any good ones in these situations. They'd had to do this so often, but never to their own family. It hurt so deeply to even consider having to do it.

But Qrow needs to know.

"Yang got hurt...pretty badly," they croaked. "She's in surgery now. I did what I could. Healed some broken bones, kept her stable, managed to bring her Aura back a little. But I'm afraid I couldn't save her arm."

Ozpin felt Qrow's hands tighten slightly on their shoulders, and the shakiness in his breathing as he took in the news. They couldn't imagine how much it hurt him to hear it. Just like Tai, Qrow would probably blame himself for not being there to save her, or for not being further away because of his Semblance. There were days where it was just too hard to tell which it would be.

"Did they catch who did it?" Qrow managed to ask after a painful minute of silence.

"No," Ozpin sighed. "We know who one of them was though. A young Adept by the name of Adam Taurus. The other I think was someone Yang's age."

"Did they take anything?"

"I'm not sure take is the right word-"

"Oz."

"The Rose. They took The Rose."

Qrow cursed under his breath and pulled away, pacing much like Tai just moments earlier. Ozpin wondered if it was a Team STRQ thing.

"Ruby still with Junior?" Qrow asked.

"Yes," Ozpin said. "Back at the house. She's still asleep. Bart knows about what happened and is making all the needed adjustments to security. By the time he's done, I don't think even a Grimm infestation will be able to get into the archives."

"Good. That's good." Qrow stuck out his tongue, his mind racing a mile a minute to organize. "We're going to need to find a way to pay the bills until the security updates are done. Between the two of us, there's no way Tai'll be able to keep the house if we can't find work. And one of us has to be home to help Yang with her recovery."

"I can take care of finances," Oz insisted. "I have just enough to keep you above water."

Qrow smiled fondly, finally standing still. "I appreciate the offer Oz, but between your work expenses and Roman's care packages, I don't think that'll be enough. Especially with the rising taxes as of late."

That was a fair point. While their current salary was plentiful, it did tend to vanish rather quickly. Roman relied on them to help care for Neo and the orphanage in Sakaba, as well as help Junior with providing the twins a chance to attend Signal. And the Kingdoms of Vale and Atlas didn't provide transportation for their diplomatic endeavors, despite the other two kingdoms doing so for their officials. And then of course there was all the wasteful expenses to keep the Baron off James' back. The poor soul was struggling enough these days as it was, he didn't need Jacques harassing him for political alliances.
But to hell with all that, they thought. Ozpin didn't care if they went broke. If it meant their family
didn't become homeless, they'd give everything they had and more. They didn't care how thin they
were spread. They were determined to help.

If only there was something I could do to...wait...

That's it!

"We'll figure something out," Qrow assured. "If need be, I'll go back to taking the bad jobs. Man-
hunts and such. Those pay quite a lot."

"No," Ozpin said sternly. "You're not going to that route."

"How else am I going to put bread on the table then?"

"I have a friend," they explained. "He's nouveau riche, and I think he could do with having some
new staff on hand. How good are you at housework?"

"Uh, pretty damn good?" Qrow answered nervously. "Are...you seriously suggesting I become a
butler?"

"Butler, bodyguard, probably help out in more ways than that, depending on if he fired everyone
again."

"Again? What the hell, Oz?"

"He's..." Ozpin tugged on their scarf, trying to find the best way to explain it. "You've heard of the
Iron General, yes?"

"You're kidding," Qrow gasped. "You want me to work for the war hero?"

"Being a butler in Atlas pays far better than taking the dirty work," they explained. "And the King
put me in charge of making sure he has what he needs...and I think he could benefit from having
you around when I can't be there."

Qrow looked them over, the quizzical look on his face providing Oz with enough insight into his
mind to know what the answer would be.

This will help everyone. I'm certain of it.

"Taiyang, stop! This isn't helping anyone!"

"SURE IT IS! IT'S HELPING ME FEEL BETTER!"

James did his best to keep up with Tai, summoning gears to keep the incoming Grimm away. He
didn't have a whole lot of bullets left, and this fight was going on for far longer than expected. The
White Fang sentries completely ignored him, focusing on going into the houses and retrieving
anything of value. James left them to it. He'd already managed to get the village to evacuate. They
made sure to take anything that was of use to the intruders.

Taiyang continued flying full force at Taurus. Every swing of the blade was dodged, and every
time Adam went to sheath it, Tai would take the chance to land a few punches. The flame dragons tended to the Rampants, seemingly growing stronger every time they consumed the balls of fire on the end of their tails.

James couldn't help but be impressed.

Taiyang spun around, kicking Adam right in the head as he screamed. "This is for what you did to Yang back at Beacon, you fucking son of a bitch!"

Adam jumped back, hand to his mask to keep it from falling off. A glint of metal from above drew James' attention, and he saw the whirling blade of a chainsaw coming down toward Tai as the blond prepared to lunge at Adam once more.

"LOOK OUT!"

James turned and ran toward Tai, eyes wide in fright. There was no way he was going to make it. There was too much space between them. So James did the next best thing he could think of, and threw a gear at the man holding the chainsaw, sending him flying into an empty house nearby. Taiyang turned around, clearly startled at how close the gear had come to hitting him.

"What the hell?!" Tai bellowed.

"You were almost mince meat!" James spat, taking aim with his gun at Adam.

"I have it under control!" Taiyang turned around, only to see bullets hitting the spot where Adam once was. "Dammit, he's getting away!"

"Taiyang! Focus on the plan!"

"I am!"

"I mean my plan!"

"Yeah, well your plan sucks!"

James let out a groan as he and Tai both ducked for cover as the sentries began to fire at them. This was all too familiar. He'd had this conversation before with someone. He knew he did, and it was causing him to feel anxious. But he couldn't focus on that right now. He had to keep the White Fang focused on him. He was someone they wanted.

As long as Tai is so hell-bent on his revenge I can't do what I have to do.

"That might be a good thing."

James looked around, trying to find out where the voice was coming from. It was the Soldier from the night before.

Where did they go?

"I'm in your head right now, Dickbiscuit," they grumbled. "I'm too tired to actually come out and play. You ran me ragged with that paint job."

"Sorry," James mumbled.

"Why are you apologizing?" Tai groaned.
"Not to you! To...uh..." James nodded to his left, unsure how to explain.

Taiyang looked and let out a soft "oh" as he began to grasp the situation. "Got it. Do they have a plan?"

"I don't know," James admitted. "Do you?"

"I have an idea," they said. "I can't come out to play...but The Iron General can. Just have Taiyang knock you out. One good uppercut to that glass jaw of yours should do it."

"What?! I'm not going to have him knock me out!"

"Trust me James, this is the only way to help!"

"I-"

Before James had a chance to argue, there was a sudden pain to his face, and the world faded to black.

"Lucien! Focus on the plan!"

"I am!"

"I mean my plan!"

"Yeah, well your plan sucks!"

James let out an exaggerated groan as they trudged through the snow. There were tracks leading in four different directions, all of which eventually circled back to the same place in downtown Mantle. They were meant to go and "clean up the bad vibes" according to command, but only Lucien seemed to really understand what it was they were talking about. So the plan was to have James and Lucien scout ahead and see what they needed to do and then continue as protocol dictated.

But that didn't seem to be what Adaire planned.

"Alright," Lucien huffed. "I need to get to the top of the clock tower. Grimm will probably be coming in, so try to keep them off my back, okay?"

"Lucien-"

"Just trust me on this, okay Jim?" Lucien turned his bright pink eyes to him, smiling fondly. "I need my partner to have my back just this once, okay?"

James smiled, sighing in defeat as they began to head to the clock tower. "Not once, Luci. Any time you need me there, I'll be there."

Lucien chuckled, turning away and hurrying so he was a few steps ahead. "You're too soft, IronDick."

"Say that to my face, Adaire you."
Lucien froze in the doorway, giving him a stern pout. "Did you seriously make my name a pun?"

"I don't know," James hummed. "Did I?"

"You're an idiot."

"But I'm your idiot."

"...No comment."

James tried not to burst into laughter as they made their way up the stairs of the tower. "You ready to try the new upgrade?"

"No," Lucien admitted. "It'd rather try not to rely too much on Atlesian creations of destruction. I'm using the upgrade only as a way to keep warm and claws off my back."

"Wouldn't that be a waste?"

"It may be for some, but just because you have something doesn't mean you should use it. Not all tools are meant to be used all the time, James. And some shouldn't be used at all."

James nodded and said no more as they reached the top of the tower. He knew when Lucien wanted to drop a subject.

Once at the top, the two of them began to open the shutters and Lucien began to make his way to the roof of the tower. He was surprised at how flat it was compared to some of the other buildings. If he had to guess, it was probably a newer building.

"I'm going to have to be sitting very still for this," Lucien explained. "I mean, I can still talk, but I won't be able to get up and fight. Keep everything off my back, okay? I'm counting on you."

"Okay."

James watched as Lucien sat on the ground, legs crossed and hands folded delicately over his collarbone, before turning to the sky and watching. It was currently too cold for ground dwelling Grimm to appear, so that left the Nevermores to contend with should they appear. And enemy soldiers of course.

Minutes slowly ticked by, and with every passing moment, James couldn't help but feel things were too quiet.

"I don't like this," he muttered, turning to his partner. "Something just isn't- **HOLY SHIT!**"

Lucien smiled. Or at least, James hoped that was him smiling. He was covered in shadow, making it hard to see his face. The only thing that gave him away was the bubblegum pink of his eyes.

"Is this what command meant by "clean up"?" James asked nervously.

"Yes," Lucien sighed. "Remember day one together, how Captain Stadtfeld had us explain our Semblances? This is mine."

"But...you said it was Cleansing."

"It is. I'm cleaning up all the negative energy that lingers here. I sit here, focus, and it comes to me."
“You mean like a sponge and water?”

Lucien chuckled, trying not to fall over. "That's probably the best analogy I've ever heard."

James had a seat across from him, watching as the shadows grew darker. "Where does it go once you've soaked it all up?"

"I don't know. I just kind of get rid of it in fire."

Before James could ask any further, the sound of a screams drew his attention. He hurried to the edge, looking down just in time to see what was going on.

Several Mantle soldiers were running, shooting blindly at a long serpentine creature that was long enough to wrap entirely around the tower at least twice. There were long teeth, two legs, and flashes of lightning coming from its mouth.

"Lucien, we gotta go!"

"I can't leave yet. Not until I'm done-"

"We have to! Someone smuggled in a-"

The light around them vanished, and James turned to see the great red wings of the Sea Dragon.

"SHIT!"

Lucien's eyes went wide as James ran toward him and picked him up, jumping from the tower just as the dragon went to blast them. James landed and ran in the opposite direction of the other fighters.

"Not good, Ironwood!"

"Are you alright, Luci?" James asked worriedly.

"No!" Lucien screamed. "I'm not able to run right now, probably attracting that beast, and you're carrying me like some damsel in Donny's dumb rom-com novellas!"

James sighed and hurried to another building, setting Lucien in a nearby closet. "Wait here. I'll take care of everything."

"Jimmy, don't you dare-"

James closed the door and hurried back outside. He'd have to rely on the suit upgrades. There was no time to locate his guns from the demolished tower.

The beast was waiting for him.

In hindsight, punching James might have been the worst idea ever. Of all time.

Taiyang did his best to aim, his hands shaking as he tried to shoot down incoming Nevermore. He was starting to feel tired. The dragons were growing weak as the Grimm began to wear them down.
He couldn't go running in to knock them about.

And the only person capable of having his back was out cold.

"Dammit," he hissed. "This is-"

"SHIT!"

Taiyang felt someone scoop him up just as several feathers pierced the ground where he had just been standing. Looking up, he saw James, eyes glowing a familiar blue shade. "Ironwood?"

"Are you alright, Luci?" James asked, voice slightly distorted.

"No, I'm not, I-Wait. Luci?"

James sighed and entered a nearby building, setting Taiyang in a closet. "Wait here. I'll take care of everything."

"Wait-"

James shut the door and hurried out of the building. Tai left his hiding spot and made it to the window, kneeling on the sledge and taking aim at the monsters as he watched James ran toward the larger Grimm. With a proper support, he was able to kill a few creeps with no problem.

He's hallucinating! He's going to get himself killed!

James brushed his hands over his sleeves before turning and snapping his fingers at a Silverback leaping from a rooftop. The creature froze in place as a stalagmite the color of snow flew from James' hand and pierced it's body, cutting all the way through its armored back. With a quick spin he dodged out of the way, sending several more at oncoming Creeps. When White Fang Sentries started to approach, he lifted his right hand in an elegant wave, lifting them into the air on what appeared to be an ice wall, causing them to fall backwards. Taiyang's eyes widened in shock as he hurried out to observe the creation

"When did you learn to do that?!" he bellowed, leaning in close to observe the wall. He placed a hand over it, smiling as he felt the warm metallic feeling of tiny gears pulsing against his skin.

"Luci, get out of here!" James screamed, pulling Tai from the dissipating fixture and taking back his gun. "Go get the others! Call Marie and Ocean. We need them!"

"Wait, who-"

"GO!"

Before he could argue, Taiyang was lifted off the ground and thrown toward the outskirts of the village in the direction of Pandora. His heart was pounding right out of his chest as he tried to remember a landing strategy.

He couldn't remember one in time.

There was the feeling of a trunk hitting his back, a soft fizzle, and the world faded to black.

The last thing he saw was a pair of black and red boots.
James watched as Lucien flew out of sight. He knew he’d get scolded for tossing their medic like that, but he couldn't afford to let him get in the middle of the fight. Not when he was still covered in shadows.

Focusing on the task at hand, he lowered his stance and clenched his fists, letting the cold overtake his senses. He was told that under no circumstances was he to attempt anything he wasn't taught. This maneuver wasn't something anyone really knew. It was just a theoretical idea that they'd discussed.

He had to try it though.

Placing his hands to his neck, covering the three pointed broach, he closed his eyes and focused on the Dust on his body. Slowly the ice began to cover him, surrounding him in a case of icicles. The Sea Dragon flew around him in circles, snarling as more lesser Grimm appeared from the dark corners of the alleyways.

I don’t have much Aura left. I only have one shot at this. If this works, that dragon is dead. If it doesn’t...well, at least Luci’s out of the fight.

With a deep breath, James threw his arms out, shattering the ice and sending the shards flying into the Grimm on all sides. He raised his hands, clapping them together and pulling them apart as a larger icicle formed in their grasp. With a stomp to the ground, he summoned a grand pillar of ice, using it to lift himself into the air as the dragon made a dive for him.

Now or never!

"I think you need to chill!"

He leapt into the air just as the creature crashed into his pillar. With one hardy throw, he pierced the dragon’s throat, pinning it to the ground before reaching into his pocket to pull out his trusty revolver, silently thanking the gods for allowing him to still have it on his holster. He took aim and pulled the trigger.

With one shot, he hit the Sea Dragon right in the eye with a Gravity bullet. Its head began to collapse on itself before exploding, the shock wave causing all the ice to shatter into a fine powder.

"Alright!" he cheered. "I can't believe I just kill a-

He hit the ground before he could finish speaking, landing flat on his back hard enough to knock the wind out of him. There was a slight flash of blue, and he knew his Aura had finally broken. He struggled to regain air as he stood, watching as Mantle soldiers began to surround him.

The flame dragons disappeared just as Adam was about to charge at them. His troops began to gather around the target. The Lieutenant had returned from being knocked away. Ilia was by his side. The General stood in the center, breathing shallow as he looked around like cornered prey.

"He has one of them," Adam hissed. "We need to take him to Mistral, alive."
"What?" Ilia gasped. "You're wanting him alive?"

"He has one of the things we seek. Something we can't just take from him dead. Subdue him."

The Sentries began to fly forward, surrounding The General. He was panting, spinning in circles to dodge them as he called out names. His eyes were flickering with light as his voice began to crackle.

"Ocean!" he screamed. "Luci, are you alright?! Marie, I'm being surrounded here! Could use some help!"


The Sentries kept trying to pin him, but none could seem to get in close.

"This is getting ridiculous," Ilia groaned. She sprinted forward, pulling out her rapier and pressing the button, allowing it to come to life with a large spark of lightening. With a quick whip, she caught The General's right arm. James let out a blood curdling scream and collapsed to the ground. The Sentries managed to grab his arms and cuff him before dragging his unconscious body away.

"Good," Adam sighed. "Now it's time we returned to Mistral. Everyone, back to camp." He watched as their comrades began to leave town, scanning the area as he followed. He had to make sure there would be no sneak attacks. Even if he was hallucinating, it was better to be safe and keep an eye one just in case.

When he returned to Mistral, he had to meet with Sienna Khan. Salem wanted them out of the way, and with Haven now in her grasps and him on her side, there really wasn't any need for Khan. They could take out the kingdom at any time.

But that will have to wait until after we remove the stone from the General.

Ilia walked up to him, keeping up with his long strides. "The train is almost full, Adam. There weren't many valuables here. A few weapons and some ore, but that that was about it. It looks as if the entire town cleared out before we arrived."

"I'm guessing it has something to do with Ironwood," Adam muttered. "We'll need to circle back around then, after we hit the next three locations." He gripped Wilt's handle tightly, gritting his teeth. "I want a scour team searching the woods for that magician and bring me his head. Send anyone we have available. And if they come across anyone else, kill them on sight."

"Yes, Adam," Ilia replied softly.

"And make it fast. We need to be out of here in an hour. I don't want to be here when the Tribes start sniffing out scraps."

There was a harsh gust of wind, and Adam nearly fell forward from the momentum. His eyes began to water, and his nose stung from the intense scent of mint that filled the air. He slowly turned around, coming face to face with two golden cloaked figures, their faces obscured from view. Their voices echoed as they spoke in unison.

"We dinnae think yer leavin' just yet."
Sorry for the wait! Between personal matters and my One-Shot spew, I didn't have time to edit!

Hope you enjoyed the chapter!
Lesson, Plans

Chapter Summary

Oscar and Ghira have a heart to heart.
Ruby and her friends go on a mission.

Chapter Notes

So there's a lot I'll need to talk about with this fic near the end. Please be wary of spoilers.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The sun beat down on the back of their neck as they stabbed at the hay stacks. Their muscles ached with every movement. They wanted to stop. They wanted to rest. They'd been working too long, and they felt they would collapse at any moment. But they didn't falter. If they attempted to stop, they'd be reprimanded.

And so they continued their work, moving hay from one part of the field to the other with the other farmhands. There was no other way to spend the day on the little farm in Gale Town. Not for little orphans in need of money for school.

But they weren't like the other orphans. They had parents. They were the ones who brought them to the farm in the first place. It'd been so long, they couldn't really remember their faces. The only think they could remember was that they promised to come back soon.

And then they left, never to be seen or heard from again.

But why? they wondered. Why did they leave me here? Why am I being worked to death here instead sitting at home reading with my parents? Do I even have a home anymore?

Do I even have a family?

"Oi! Silver, get over here!"

They winced as the harsh tones of the supervisor called after them. Setting down their pitchfork, they slowly made their way over to the main farmhouse, wringing their hands as they kept their head low. They hated the name. It wasn't because it was a bad one, but because it wasn't theirs. It was the one given to them by the people in charge because of their hair, and for some reason those bastards thought it was easier to remember.

As they arrived at the porch, the supervisor looked down on them, his dull yellow eyes staring at them with distaste. The heavy scent of moonshine caked his Aura, making them sick to their stomach.

"Silver," the supervisor grumbled. "You still having those freaky dreams?"
How...how does he know about those? I thought I was being careful. "Why are you--"

"Answer me!"

They stepped back a bit, shuffling on their toes to remain calm. "I-I uh-"

"Stop yelling at the poor child."

They looked up, earth brown eyes warm and timid as they saw someone approach in a long black cloak. They couldn't make out a face, but they could see the familiar golden stare they'd been seeing in their nightmares. But they seemed different. Kinder, brighter, and more caring.

They didn't know why, but they were happy to see them.

"Silver is just an abandoned farmhand," the supervisor grumbled. " Barely able to hold a pitchfork. Don't see why you're interested in 'em."

The cloaked figure looked them over, slowly walking around them. Their lithe frame hunched over in fear as they tried to remain calm. Grimm were the last thing they wanted to attract.

"Tell me," the cloaked figure said softly. "How long have you been having these dreams?"

"About, uh, maybe three months?" they mumbled. "Why?"

"What's the most recurring one?"

They thought about it, the faint flashes of light dancing before their eyes. "It was night time. There was an old cottage covered in snow. I'd...no...not me but, someone else I think? They'd sit under the tree and stare at the old house for a bit before closing their eyes."

The person in the cloak lowered their hood, revealing long, snow white hair in two braids that trailed down their back. Their skin was almost the same shade as their locks, with a few golden tendrils covering a portion of their face near their left eye.

"I've been looking for you for a very long time, young one," the figure said. They turned to the supervisor, smiling fondly in a way that made him blush. "Tell me, do you have the adoption paperwork ready?"

"In the house," the supervisor grumbled. "I'll get it for you."

"Thank you." The figure removed their cloak, lightly wrapping it around their shoulders. "Tell me child, what is your name?"

"My name?" Why did they want to know their name?"

"Yes. You have a name, I'm sure. Unless it actually is Silver."

"No," they said hastily. "It's not my name."

"Then what is your name?"

"What's yours?"

The figure stood up tall, their golden hues shining in the sunlight. "You may call me Aurelia. What should I call you?"
Aurelia. Such a beautiful name. And they want to call me by my name. My real name. Is it still a good name? Is it something they'd really be okay with?

"You promise not to hate it?" they asked.

"I promise," Aurelia vowed. "Whatever name you wish to give, that name is what I'll call you. It's your choice."

"Um...my name...it's-"

"Ozpin, for crying out loud, eat your vegetables'."

Oscar was working on a spreadsheet while nibbling on his brussels sprouts. There were different basic questions every Hunter had to be able to answer. Can someone survive without a Semblance? Who would win in a fight; a Magician or a normal Hunter? What are the most common forms of Dust? All of these were basic things. They were relatively easy, unlike the knife fighting lessons that Ghira had been giving him in the late evenings. There were too many different rules for how to hold them and how to strike. It was hard to keep up with all of the information.

But they managed somehow. After a few explanations, it made a bit of sense. And they finally got used to being able to draw the knife from the holster and embed it in some objects.

Something Oscar kind of wanted to attempt to try on the table when his current protectors and mentors were bickering over dinner.

"I don't want to," Ozpin grumbled. "They taste horrid."

"We don't exactly have the funds to complain," Ghira sighed. "The inn keeper agreed room and food in exchange for helping around the kitchens. That means we eat what she cooks, and she cooks what she can afford to spare for us. Meaning you eat the damned sprouts."

"Surely there's something else-"

"We have sprouts, bread, and one slice of corned beef each, along with one cupcake to share between the three of us. Now eat."

Grumbling, Ozpin poked at one of the sprouts and sighed. "If I must."

"Done," Oscar mumbled, handing Ghira the worksheet. "I'll finish dinner and then go practice upstairs. There are a few spells I wanna practice on my own."

"Sounds good," Ghira hummed, looking over the paper. "I must say, Oscar. You're an outstanding student. All of these are correct."

"Thank you."

Ozpin raised a brow, their gaze gentle and caring. "Everything okay, Oscar?"

"Hm? Oh. Yeah, everything's fine. Just...thinking about last night's dream."
"Really?" Ozpin's eyes sparkled with curiosity. "What was it about?"

Oscar shrugged as he poked the last of the corned beef on his plate onto his fork. "It wasn't much. It was just a farm."

"A farm?"

"Yeah, and some woman named Aurelia."

The sound of a fork falling to the ground startled Oscar, and everyone turned their attention to Oz. Their eyes were wide, and their hand shook slightly at the name. He watched as they gently grabbed their own wrist to steady themself. Their soft brown eye filling with tears as they slowly stood up.

"Please excuse me," Ozpin muttered. "I'll eat later, I just...I need a moment."

Before they could ask what was the matter, Oscar and Ghira watched as Ozpin zoomed out of the dining room and up the stairs to their rooms. Oscar bit his lip, trying to process what just happened.

"Did I do something wrong?" he asked.

"No," Ghira sighed. "I've seen them do that once before. That name just...has a lot of weight. About as much as the name Prosper does to them."

"They do like the name Prosper."

Ghira placed a gentle hand on his shoulder, smiling fondly. "Finish your food, then let's go for a walk."

"But what about Oz?"

"They'll be fine. Trust me."

As much as Oscar didn't like the idea, they nodded in agreement. "Alright. But let me grab my coat. It's still chilly out at night."

"Fair enough."

The two of them finished their food and Oscar ran upstairs to fetch his coat, stopping just short of the top to look at himself in the mirror. He didn't quite recognize the person on the other side. The golden right eye looked so out of place, and yet it felt right at home. He seemed to have grown slightly, and his hair was a smidge longer than it was before. He hadn't been away from home for too long, he thought. Maybe a month at the most? It'd been a while since he bothered to check a calendar, that was for sure. But he couldn't have changed that much in such a short amount of time.

But that didn't really matter. He was still young, and this new magic took a lot of getting used to. He'd be just fine as long as he didn't push himself.

Quietly, Oscar swiped his coat from the room, glancing at Oz as he passed them. They sat at the desk, gazing at the moon with a nostalgic look of comfort. Whatever it was they were thinking about, it must have been rather pleasant.

Should I tell them we're leaving? he thought. They seem a little spacey. I don't want to startle them...Wait!

Remembering the notepad on the nightstand, Oscar wrote down the same message on five sheets
of paper. He placed one on the bed, one on the door, and one in front of Oz on the desk. He placed another one on the door to Ghira's room and left the last one with the innkeeper as he and Ghira headed out.

"What was all that about?" Ghira asked.

"Leaving Oz a note," he explained. "They seemed really deep in thought and I didn't want to spook them, so I left a few notes to let them know where we're going."

"Smart," Ghira chuckled. "What did the note say?"

"The same thing. 'Went for a walk with Ghira. Be back soon, Nini. -Oscar.' There's five of them, so they should be able to catch it."

"Way to go."

The two of them remained quiet as they passed the cherry blossoms lining the streets, the bustle of everyone preparing for night providing a light ambience. There were magician's flicking their wrists at the lamp posts, setting the candles alight so that the night wouldn't be too dark.

"So where exactly are we going?" Oscar asked.

"Just for a walk," Ghira said. "Not leaving the town anytime soon, but we need to keep our strength up. No lazing about outside of practices."

"Right..."

Ghira gave him a gentle pat on the back, his voice laced with a gentle wisdom Oscar never knew before. "Keeping your feelings bottled up makes things worse. Anything that troubles you can cause irreparable damage. Whatever is on your mind, you're safe to talk about with either of us."

Oscar nodded, trying to get his thoughts in order. There was a lot that troubled him. The lack of action, remaining in one place, more physical over magical training. The memories he saw every night. The private conversations Ghira and Ozpin shared.

*The secrets.*

"I feel like," Oscar grumbled. "I feel like there's things Ozpin isn't telling me. Things they're hesitating to teach me. And if things are really going to be as bad as they said they are, then I need to know what it is that I'm supposed to do."

"I know," Ghira said. "Taking things this slow is frustrating. Especially given the circumstances. But there's a lot of training that goes into learning how to use magic. You need to be able to physically handle it. And that means combat training, and learning one spell at a time. You can't expect answers right away." He rubbed his hand over his face, letting out a sigh as they took a left to one of the quieter streets. "As for what Ozpin might be hiding, you'll need to talk to them about it. If I try, they'll probably be a little more defensive. You could probably get them to open up a little bit."

Oscar shrugged. He didn't know how much of that was true. There was too much he was being kept in the dark about and he could tell Ghira knew more than he was letting on. Ever since leaving home, there had been a lot of secrets. He didn't want to pry, but there was a lot he had the right to know.

*But there's no way poking and prodding is going to get Nini to open up to me. I have to take it*
"Can you teach me a few combative spells?" Oscar asked.

Ghira stopped, putting his hands on his waist to give himself a stretch. "There's quite a few. Anything in particular you're wanting to learn?"

"Something more damage inducing? Or something to deflect damage? Just something more that what I'm being taught now."

"I'm not sure-"

"Ghira, please! My lessons are moving too slow! I can keep up! Give me something harder already!"

Ghira's eyes narrowed, and Oscar could have sworn there was a low heat radiating off him. He began to wonder if he asked the wrong question.

"Are you sure you're ready for that?" Ghira asked softly.

No, Oscar thought. But he nodded, standing up straight and keeping an air of determination. "I'm ready."

"Then let's go over here. I know a place we can practice."

Ghira walked down an alleyway and Oscar followed in suit, fists clenched tightly as he tried not to freak out. He honestly thought Ghira would have put up more of a fight on the matter. Though the look he gave him was rather off-putting. Was there something on his mind?

The two of them made it out to a small grove a fair bit away from the town. No one would disturb them there by the looks of it. Oscar glanced around, trying to get a proper feel for his surroundings.

"Do you remember the Shield spell?" Ghira asked.

"Yes," Oscar answered. "Why?"

"Can you summon a shield without speaking?"

Nonverbal spell casting. That's the worst.

"Not quite."

"You'd better learn how to then."

Without even waiting, Ghira's hands flexed, and a pair of giant spiked gears appeared in his hands. He swung one in the direction of Oscar, and it took the young farmhand everything he had to jump out of the way.

"What the hell?!" Oscar screeched. "Where did you learn this?!!"

"You wanted to learn something harder!" Ghira growled. "I've also been studying my new gifts, young Oscar. Summon a shield or get hit! Your choice!"

Oscar turned and began to run away, only for a wall of gears to appear in his way. He turned and saw Ghira catching up to him with a wild look to his eye.

"May dust be brought to dust-" Oscar began, only to be interrupted by a gear flying only an inch from his nose.
"No talking!" Ghira chided. "Focus!"

What the hell is wrong with him?!

Oscar ducked and rolled, avoiding another assault. Every time he stopped to cast, another two, three, even four more spiked weapons would fly in his direction. He couldn't keep up forever, but he had to. He didn't know when Ghira would let up.

If he'll ever let up.

If I can keep him from hitting me until he's exhausted I-

A spike ripped the left sleeve, just barely missing the skin of his arm.

"What's the matter?" Ghira taunted. "I thought you said you could handle it! I thought you wanted this!"

I do want this, he thought. I want to be able to handle this magic. I want to be able to fight!

Ghira managed to get in close and with a sharp kick, sent Oscar flying back a few feet.

But I can't fight if I can't defend.

Three gears came from above as two more rolled toward him on either side. Oscar's blood ran cold as the panic began to overtake him. Time seemed to slow as drops of rain began to fall from the night sky. There was a sharp pain in his right eye as Oscar fell to his knees, hands clutched together and pressed to his lips as the spell ran itself through his mind.

"May dust be brought to dust but not bring despair, for there is no futility even in death."

The gears froze in place, and as Oscar looked up, he saw a small golden dome covering him. The projectiles scratched against the surface as he realized what he had done.

"Impressive!" Ghira chuckled. "You seem to be more of a natural than I thought. Though this was more raw instinct than actual quick thinking. We'll need to work on that before you learn any offensive abilities."

The gears disappeared and Oscar stood up, the dome slowly fizzling out as he wobbled over to Ghira. His every inhale was sharp and painful. His heart beat a mile a minute. He never experienced anything like that. The feeling of having absolutely no control and yet managing something like this. It was exhilarating.

And terrifying.

"Is...there a difference between the two?" Oscar asked timidly.

"A lot of differences," Ghira said. "But to put it simply, one is something you do on the fly with a quick thought, while the other is something that just happens out of fear, and it can cause a person to go off the rails in a panic."

"Well I certainly felt a little scared. I wasn't expecting you to full on attack me like that."

"Believe me, if I were really going to attack you, you'd be dead."

"How comforting."
The two of them snickered and collapsed on the grass, staring up at the sky. With a few minutes to rest, Oscar managed to calm down. Things started to move at the normal pace they always had. He glanced at his arm, gingerly touching where the gear almost touched him.

That was a lot scarier than I expected.

"Ghira?" Oscar asked. "Are all offensive spells like that?"

Ghira sat up, running his hand through his hair. "Not all. Some are more deadly than others. It depends on the magician. How much Aura they have. The more you have, the more powerful the spell, though sometimes it also means they run out of stamina faster. Though that's not entirely true for Ozpin and Amber."

Oscar sat up, confused. "Wait, who's Amber?"

Ghira glanced at his left hand, the stone out in plain sight and glowing slightly from the sparring match. "Ozpin explained what their role is to you, right? And who you're going to become?"

"Yes. Back on the train before we got kicked off."

"Well, do you remember the other role is?"

Oscar thought back to the story, trying to recall every detail. *The four relics, the Grimm witch, the Wizard and..."

"Is Amber the Mage?"

"That's right. And I suppose by technicality, that'd make her your older sister of sorts." Ghira looked around, making sure there wasn't a soul within earshot. "When we first met her, she was an orphan, constantly on the run. We don't know if Amber was her real name, but that was what she gave us. Ozpin and Qrow rescued her from people who were after her. Ozpin adopted her, took her in, and found her work and education with our friend Glynda."

"Where is she now?"

"If I had to guess? Probably somewhere on Sanus, running again. Maybe travelling with Glynda if we're lucky. Unlike you though, she's a bit more combat savvy. Though she doesn't really have a whole lot of training with her magic."

Oscar stood upright, eyes glowing softly with a newfound determination. "Then shouldn't we be going and looking for her then? Why waste time here in Lamia when she could be in danger?"

"Things aren't that simple, Oscar," Ghira soothed. "Believe me, if it were, Ozpin would have taken you and gone to find her. But right now, we're all needed here on Anima. We need to train you, rescue Leo, find Oz's cane. Not to mention the fact that a lot of their family are scattered somewhere on this continent." He gave him a light pat on the back. "I know things are frustrating right now. There's too many things you need to know, and too many things we have to do. But we need to be cautious. If we just jump head first into things, it could cause more than harm to us. It could bring destruction to all of Remnant."

"But-"

"You're on the right path, Oscar. But don't try to run ahead of those who have walked it before you. Their footprints are vital markers of where you need to go next."
Oscar let out a groan. As much as he just wanted to keep moving already, he knew Ghira was right. This wasn't just about him and his desire for answers.

"I get it," he mumbled. "I'm sorry."

"No need to apologize," Ghira said. "I understand, it's frustrating. But things will come in time. You just have to be patient." He reached down and lifted Oscar up onto his shoulders, chuckling as he let out a soft squeak. "You remind me a lot of my daughter, you know. She was a lot like you growing up."

Oscar raised an eyebrow at him. "Did you also scare the shit out of her with magic gears to prove a point?"

"Is that what this was?" Ghira teased. "I thought we were training."

"We were...but...you were trying to prove a point to me, right?"

Ghira hummed sagely as the two of them wandered back into town. "Whether or not I did is completely up to you, Oscar. If you feel you took something away from this, then I hope whatever it is helps play a part in where you go next."

Oscar smiled and ruffled Ghira's hair. "Yeah, I took something from it. I learned I have a crazy Uncle along with a Nini."

"Oh, is that what I am to you? Then I better start telling you about your cousin Blake and your Aunt Kali. If you think my fighting was harsh here, you should spar with her. She's barely 5'5" and I still can't keep her from knocking me flat on my ass."

"Really? Now that's something I want to see."

The two of them laughed all the way back to the inn. Oscar felt a little better after all that. Ozpin reprimanded them for the shirt though. But Oscar didn't mind. Things would come in time.

_Hopefully in fast time though._

---

It'd been a few weeks since she came to Sagisō.

Every morning consisted of a quick jog around the school, followed by stretches, sit ups, pushups, and then breakfast. Afterwards, class begins. Basic law was a must, along with weapon design and maintenance. After that, there'd be hand to hand combat training, and then a satisfying lunch. Lunch was followed by history, then language arts, and the day wrapped up with mathematics. There were more things that would happen during the week. Some days Language Arts was replaced with first aide courses, and the mathematics exchanged for balance training in the gyms.

Ruby loved all of it.

All of it, besides hand to hand and balance.

Every time they had to go for balance practice, she'd always fall off the pole before she could even
steady herself. She’d try to perch perfectly on her toes, arms out to her sides. But no matter how much she tried, she’d fall to the floor.

Just like today.

*This is just like back at Signal,* she thought, lying flat on her back. *How come I can't master this here? I'm supposed to be improving!*

"**Everything okay Ruby?**"

Ruby looked up, her silver gaze meeting with the soft pair of sunny gold of her instructor. "I'm fine Sage. Just having trouble balancing is all."

Sage reached out a hand, smiling as he pulled her back on her feet. Ruby had only just recently met him, along with the other members of team SSSN and ABRN when they returned from their travels. They were all skilled fighters, and very kind instructors too. She enjoyed getting to know them, and learning all about their fighting styles.

Though hearing Winter chew them out for letting her sister go was something she wasn't expecting. Winter got so angry it took Sage, Neptune, and Arslan combined to keep the summons away. If that was how Winter got learning her sister was traveling with other members of their organization, Ruby didn't want to know how Winter would react if someone she cared about got hurt.

"Do you need a hand learning how to balance?" Sage asked.

"Sure," Ruby said. "I'd appreciate-"

The sound of an alarm resonated in the gym, and everyone present began to hurry out.

"Let's go," Sage said calmly.

"What's going on?" Ruby cried, following him.

"It's an SOS mission alert. We need to head to the main hall now!"

"A mission?" Ruby's eye widened as she saw everyone rushing past her. "But I thought I wasn't meant to go on missions, being underage and all."

"Everyone is present for these," Sage explained. "It's not like other missions. These ones are more on the fly, and you never know what the situation might be." He smiled, taking her hand in his and pulling her along. "Consider this a learning experience."

"Well, if it's an emergency," she said. "Then we need to get there before everyone else."

Without even waiting for a response, Ruby grabbed Sage by the waist, and with a harsh push began to run fast, leaving a trail of red and green petals in their wake. There were gasps from the others as they passed, and Sage let out a yelp of surprise, but he was smiling. Ruby felt a little light headed, but not to the point of passing out.

If anything, she felt a rush of adrenaline that made her crave more.

As the alarms began to fade, Ruby tried to skid to a halt when the doors came into view. There was no way she was going to be able to stop them from crashing.

"I can't stop!" she called.
"I got it!" Sage laughed, drawing his sword from his back. "Lift your legs and hold on!"

Ruby nodded and did as she was told. Sage held his sword out in front of him, left palm against the flat side of the blade as they glided through the air. The metal met with the wooden door, and it splintered on contact. The force of contact was just enough to slow them down, and Sage embedded the blade into the floor. The momentum caused them to skid to a halt, and they collapsed to the floor, panting between laughter.

"Well," Ruby giggled. "That was a thing."

"Impressive speed," Sage praised. "Now if only we could get you to channel that energy into balancing on a damn pole."

"Did you have to destroy the door and tear up the floor?"

The two of them looked up, embarrassed grins on their faces as Ren stared at them from the stage. He seemed a little more than irked, but was smiling nonetheless. Ruby didn't know why, but she could never read him. There was something about Ren that was more closed than the others.

"We're sorry," she said, standing upright. "Sage said it was an emergency alarm so I kinda...you know...ran?"

Ren nodded, rolling his eyes as Sage stuck his tongue out at him. The tenseness in his shoulders lessened, and he managed a genuine smile. "Well, it's a good thing you're here then Ruby. You're needed this mission."

"Wait...I am?"

"Yes. I'll explain once everyone is present."

Ruby gave a soft "okay" and adjusted her hood, watching as the rest of the Hunters, both young and old, came filing in. Some made comments about the mess, while others chuckled and began whispering about how they used to be the same way when they were young. Sage's team came over to join them, while the rest of team JNPR and Winter scurried onto stage. The chatter was rather loud, and Ruby had to resist the urge to squeal at all the various weapons just within reach.

They all look so cool.

The crowd began to hush as the last of them trailed in. There was the sound of heavy footsteps as Ren was joined at the podium by Donald and Douglas, who had forgone their kilts in exchange for trousers. The joyful air about them seemed to have been replaced by something cold and stern. Ruby couldn't quite tell what it was, but they seemed more serious. The twins shared a quick whisper with Ren, and then stepped back.

I wonder what's going on.

"Members of the Gold Blade," Ren began, his voice slightly shaking. "We've just received word from team AZRE of an airship crash in the forests several miles north of Tsubaki village, as well as a request of evacuation of some of the members of Team FNKI in the town of Ayame. Confirmed wounded on both sides, as well as suspected White Fang activity near Ayame. Those who have been confirmed for Operation Bad Apple will be heading to Ayame, while the following teams will be assigned to what we're calling Operation Airlift."

He sounds so confident, yet a little nervous, Ruby thought. I wonder if he's scared about presenting this information.
"Also," Ren continued, "Miss Ruby Rose will be accompanying those heading to Ayame to help identify the people in need of rescue."

Confused, Ruby raised her hand. "What do you mean by that?"

Ren looked at her, his face calm and soothing. "The reported injured party is a man by the name of Qrow Branwen, last reported travelling with two people by the names of James Ironwood and Taiyang Xiao Long. We need you to come with us to confirm it."

_Dad?! What's he doing this far away from Signal?! And Uncle Qrow is hurt?!_

The rest of the meeting flew by. Ruby felt as if her knees were going to give out. Sage must have sensed this and put his arm around her at some point, gently leading her in the direction of the airship when the meeting wrapped up. The gentle warmth of her relic seemed to burn in an attempt to assure her things would be okay, but she couldn't quite seem to believe it.

"Ruby?" Sage asked softly. "Are you alright?"

"I'm okay," she muttered. "I'm just worried. It takes a lot for Uncle Qrow to be knocked about and get injured. And my dad isn't even supposed to be here. He's meant to be back home on Patch."

"I'm sure they'll be okay. Just stick with us, and we'll find them."

"Okay."

The two of them remained silent as the last of the Hunters boarded Phil. Nora was praising Ren for his speech, while Pyrrha was discussing battle strategies with Jaune, Arslan, and Roy. Sun was bouncing about, trying to be a part of every conversation. Ruby took a quick look around, trying to memorize the route they were taking.

She was rather taken aback when she saw the ship was flying away from an island.

"So," Ruby sighed. "How exactly are we going to get there fast enough? Uncle Qrow could be in need in a doctor or...or..."

"Just stay calm, Ruby," Sage assured, smiling brightly. "Hey, do you want to take a look at Sun's weapons? I think you'd enjoy looking at Ruyi Bang and Jingu Bang."

Ruby smiled and nodded, watching as Sage called Sun over to them. He brought out his weapon and started explaining all the parts, from the guns to how the chain rig worked to how he alternated between all the different forms. There were a lot of small intricacies that went into the design that she'd never seen before. Soon the worry began to lessen, replaced by curiosity and joy as Sun asked about Crescent Rose.

Just as she was about to explain how it worked, there was a harsh breeze and a flash of greens and pinks. Ruby looked up from the weapons, only to find they were still in the sky, but instead of being over a large lake, they were far above a cliffside.

And everything was monotoned.

"What is this?" Ruby asked.

"Ren's cloaking the ship with his Semblance," Sun sighed. "He's going to be exhausted after this."

"You would too," Sage teased, "if you had to teleport and cloak a giant ship."
"Wait," Ruby said. "What do you mean-"

"We got a problem!"

Everyone looked over toward Winter, who was standing near the open doors of the ship, pointing to the ground below. Ruby was among the first to rush over to see what was going on.

In the town below, there were several masked people rushing in and out of houses as Grimm invaded the town. There was flashing golden lights and giant white gears crashing about, causing damage to some of the nearby buildings. The rooftops were covered in painted numbers and arrows pointing northeast of the town.

"2-4-1-10?" Ruby read. "What does that mean?"

"Location's been compromised," Arslan called. "Follow the arrows! We're landing in the Pandora ruins!"

"I don't think Ren can hold it that long!" Nora called out. "He's getting exhausted!"

"We'll need to hurry then," Winter said. "All hands to battlestations! We need to be prepared to defend the ship!"

Before Ruby could ask what the plan was, the form of a man with short blond hair flew past the ship, kicking and twisting around as he tried to figure out a landing strategy.

"DAD!"

Ruby jumped from the ship, drawing her scythe and using it to slow her decent and direct herself toward her flailing father. She managed to land just before he did, putting away her weapon and taking off fast in the direction of his landing site.

She made it just in time to see his back strike the trunk of a tree, and the golden fizzle of his Aura breaking before hitting the ground.

"DAD!" she screamed, running over to him to check for external injuries. "Dad, answer me! What are you doing here?! Dad?!"

Taiyang said nothing, but his steady breathing assured her that he was still alive.

_Pandora, she remembered. Everyone's heading there!_

Mustering all her strength, Ruby tried to lift Taiyang off the ground, remaining as calm as possible. There wasn't much time. If she didn't hurry, the Grimm would catch wind of her. Or the White Fang. She didn't know which was worse.

And she hoped she didn't have to find out.

"Ruby!"

Ruby looked behind her, smiling as she saw team SSSN rushing toward her. "Can I get some help?"

Neptune and Sun took an arm each while Scarlet grabbed the legs and they took off in the direction of the others. Sage and Ruby brought up the rear, weapons poised to shoot down any Grimm that might come their way.
"That was reckless," Sage chided. "Please don't do that again."

"I will make no such promises," Ruby replied, jumping ahead and slicing down a Beowolf that had been charging in from the right. "How much further?"

"About another few minutes," Neptune groaned. "Give or take a lung."

"You know," Sun teased, "this wouldn't be as big a problem if you'd just-"

"Not now guys!" Scarlet spat. "This guy is heavy!"

"Well, he is mostly muscle," Ruby giggled. "And his legs have Gravity Dust tattoos."

"Impressive," Sage hummed, slicing down a moderately sized Nevermore as it dived toward them.

The trees began to thin out as the ship came into view above them. There were tracks along the ground, freshly made if Ruby had to guess. There were shouts and the sound of gunfire, and soon smoke took over the air. The five of them skidded to a halt just in time to see two people with long rabbit ears rush over with a stretcher. They all lay Taiyang on it and watched as they hurried him toward the ship.

"He's going to be okay, right?" Ruby asked. "He'll be fine, right?"

"He will be," Sage promised.

"Who's that in the cart?" Scarlet asked, sword aimed in the direction of the old schoolhouse.

Ruby looked over, eyes wide and filling with tears as she zoomed over. She ignored the voices of the people around her saying "stay back", and reached out to grabbed the ringed fingers of the feverish man being transferred to another stretcher.

"Uncle Qrow," she croaked. "Uncle Qrow, it's me. It's Ruby. Are you awake?"

He didn't say anything. His eyes were shut tight as he tried to hold back a cough. His hands were cold, and there appeared to be bandages poking out from below his shirt. Ruby had to do a double take when she noticed the familiar cross was replaced with a locket, embellished with a rose.

"He'll be okay," a kind voice said. "Father has been tending to him since his injuries."

Ruby turned to the person speaking, wiping away the tears as she steadied herself. "Thank you, uh-"

"My name is Penny," the person introduced. "Penny Polendina. My father is a doctor. I'm sure you have a lot of questions, but I'm afraid they will have to wait."

"Of course," Ruby said. "Um...wait for what?"

"Wait for the train."

Nadir came rushing over, gun at the ready as he directed everyone to group up. "The main crew will be taking Dr. Polendina, your dad, and your uncle back to base for treatment. We have a job to do though."

"Right," Ruby muttered. "I'll head back then-"

"Actually," Nadir said. "Donny and Douggie said you're to join us. You, and this nice young lady
Ruby was shocked. She didn't think she'd be helping on this. "What am I going to be helping with?"

"We're going to be taking a train."

The two of them stood quietly in the shadows, watching as the White Fang sentries began to make their way toward the place they made camp. Donald and Douglas whispered softly, so as not to be heard.

"Ye sure about this?" Douglas asked.

"Not one bit," Donald admitted. "But this is the only way to get Jimbo out o' here without riskin' harm to 'im."

"But do we have tae be so humiliated? Wha' about our dignity."

"Dignity went away the moment Edgar was born. Now take yer mints and get his attention."

"Fine."

Douglas reached into his pocket and pulled out a small pack of mints, popping a few into his mouth and giving them a thorough chew before they stepped out of their hiding place. The man with the horns on his head was talking to a young lady with a long, curled ponytail.

"I want a scour team searching the woods for that magician and bring me his head. Send anyone we have available. And if they come across anyone else, kill them on sight."

"Yes, Adam."

"And make it fast. We need to be out of here in an hour. I don't want to be here when the Tribes start sniffing out scraps."

Douglas took a deep breath, filling his lungs to the brim, before letting out a decent puff. The people in front of them, who the twins assumed were the ringleaders in this attack, nearly fell forward from the force. It was all the two of them could do not to chuckle as they turned to look at them.

Just like the old days, just like when they were growing up, the Frasiers spoke in unison to send a shiver down their opponents' spines.

"We dinnae think yer leavin' just yet."
Okay, so quick heads up about this fic.
I started this story with a set plan. When choosing the relics and their associations, my setup was about 75% off the mark compared to canon.
THAT BEING SAID: I am not planning to change anything in this fic to match with canon except for one character's storyline, but the change is minor and won't change the overall course of the story that much.
This fic isn't diverging from the main path I set for it now that Volume 5 is coming out.

Thank you for reading and I hope you all have a lovely day!
"How did you do it?"

Leo stared at the young magician, eyes narrowed in worry. He didn't trust him one bit. He knew that any information now was precious. He couldn't afford to let anything slip. Ozpin needed him. Ghira needed him. His students needed him. He couldn't let anyone know what was going on in his mind. That information was too precious.

The magician, (Lloyd? he wondered. Is that his name?) slowly walked over to him, his fingers coated in a silver liquid. His dull brown gaze seemed to have taken on a new shine. As much as Leo didn't want to say anything, the young man was making it quite difficult to want to keep things secret.

"I said," Lloyd muttered. "How did you do it?"

"Do what?" Leo spat.

"How were you able to lock my sister out of your thoughts? She's always been able to get the information she needs, yet you finally put your foot down once your friend is out of harm's way and manage to keep her from telling us what we need to know." He leaned in close, a playful smirk on his face. "I've been wanting to do that for years. So tell me, how did you do it?"

Leo raised an eyebrow, perplexed. "You're not wanting information from me?"

"Oh no, I do want information. But I know how to get it without needing to ask my sister for help." He waved his fingers around elegantly. "And I know you don't want to help my family out at all. Which is fair. I mean, if I were in your shoes, I'd want to die for my friends too."

"What's your game?" Leo asked. "Why are you taunting me? What do you get out of this?"

Lloyd let out a harsh snicker that made his blood run cold.

"Listen, Lionheart" Lloyd chuckled. "I like you. You're not like the other adults I've come across. So here's what I'm gonna do. I'm gonna make sure your precious students don't get hurt, and you're going to give me the bare minimum. Tell me how to find The Gold Blade, and how to block out my sister's mind reading ability. You do that, and I'll make sure your students don't get harmed."

"And why should I trust you?"

"Because right now, I'm the only one standing between your school and complete, total annihilation. Well, it's my sister, my father, and myself if we're getting technical. And if you give me the information I desire, I'll be in your debt." Lloyd's eyes flashed a soft, crimson light for a split second. "So tell me, Leonardo...do we have a deal?"
Lionheart sat at his desk, looking over his paperwork as best he could with shaking hands. He was still recovering from the poisoning he'd been given, but he didn't care. He had to hurry and get this work done. If he didn't, things were only going to get worse.

*Let's see, I have a meeting with Marigold's representative in an hour. Then I have to speak with the king, check in with the nobles. Then I have lesson plans to complete.*

"*Your Grace?*"

Lionheart looked up from his papers, a weary smile on his face when he saw Fennec standing in the doorway. "Hello Fennec."

"You wished to speak with me?" he asked, closing the door.

"Yes, I do. Please, muffle the door. This is important."

"Of course."

Fennec cast the incantation and made his way over to the empty seat. Leo reached into his desk, pulling out an envelope addressed to Kuo Kuana. There wasn't much time left. If they were going to do this, it had to be fast.

"Fennec?" Leo asked. "Was there any news about the Hunters our...guests took with them?"

"Yes," Fennec said, ears flat. "They crashed several miles from Tsubaki. Most likely perished."

"I had hoped not," Leo whispered. "Hopefully someone is able to get to them."

"Shall I send some-"

"No. I need you to do something else for me." Leo handed him the envelope, trying to remain calm. "I need you to take this letter to Kali immediately. Use my personal airship. You know where I keep it."

Fennec's eyes went wide in fear. "Sir?"

"This is vital to the safety of the students," he stressed. "I'm entrusting you with this task because I know you can handle it. And because I know you know how to get things done without your brother knowing. I need you to leave now, if you can. Tomorrow morning at the latest."

Fennec nodded, slipping the envelope into his robe pocket. "I'll do what I can, but...we're meant to be meeting with High Leader Khan soon. If I am to go to Menagerie, that might raise suspicion."

Leo smiled, standing up to look out the window. "Not if you make it seem as though you were meeting with someone else. I have a friend in the west who keeps tabs on the bandits for me. You can tell your brother you're meeting with them."

"A noble?"
"Not exactly," Leo chuckled, glancing at him. "Just tell him they're an official of sorts and you're to meet with them. Start heading west, and when you're far enough away, turn south and head to Menagerie."

Fennec stood slowly, hands folded in front of him in that usual manner. "All these lies, sir...are they for the good of our people?"

Leo managed a shrug, his tail waving back and forth anxiously. "I don't know, honestly. If you make it to Menagerie and back before the festival, then I'd say yes....Can I count on you to take that message to Kali?"

Fennec looked down at the floor, lost in thought. Leo knew this was a lot to ask, but he didn't know who else to turn to. Anyone else that could help were scattered to the winds. He was alone.

"Very well," Fennec said. "I'll leave right away. Just please...keep my brother from harm's way."

Leo nodded, a feeling of relief washing over him. "I promise, I will."

"Thank you, sir." Fennec turned to leave the room, and soon Leo was left alone to ponder.

_I hope I've made the right decision._

The snow fell slowly as the troop made their way back toward the trains. Dozens of soldiers were huddled together in an attempt to get some semblance of warmth. Some had children on their laps wrapped in their coats, while others had blankets draped over their shoulders. Everyone tried to fit as comfortably into the cars as possible. Getting the remaining people out of the toppled neighborhood and to proper shelter took longer than anticipated, but after nearly a week of evacuation, they managed to get the last group out of Mantle and headed toward Atlas.

_Thank the gods, James thought. I can't believe we managed to get them out. He watched silently as the last train out of the capital made its way from the station, leaving their small regiment behind to guard the newly acquired territory._

Everyone began splitting into teams to set up watch posts, around the nearby buildings that remained. There was a gentle calm wafting through the air as he headed over to the other members of Grey Team. Donald and Douglas were talking in joyous tones while Marie rolled her eyes at whatever antics they'd gotten into this time. Ocean remained off to the side, lightly kicking at a pebble near the edge of the platform while Lucien looked over the supply lists.

"Alright, alright," Marie groaned. "How about this? The ability to find missing items. But only items that are missing by someone."

"Sounds rather useful," Douglas mused. "Imagine all the useful trinkets you can gain. So much cash from wallets-"

"And a giant bag o' dirty gym socks!" Donald spat. "I dinnae wanna wake up and find someone's ol' briefs near me."

James raised an eyebrow, confused. "What's going on here?"
"The twins started a new game," Ocean said. "Lame Semblances. Basically you have to come up with the most useless or most damaging Semblances in order to win a round. So far Douggie's winning with reflective sight, where you can only see if you look into a reflection, and to being able to get wet in a storm."

"And only a storm!" Douglas stressed. "You cannae get wet then. Every other time's fair game."

"Really?" James looked at the three of them. "What were the other powers?"

"Let's see," Lucien mumbled. "There was flying only north, levitating only an inch off the ground, bad luck to everyone, being able to tell what someone will say just before they say it, endless mindreading, and the ability to sense texture without touching. The ability to find other people's lost items is the only useful one in the bunch."

"Those are really strange," James said. "Though...I suppose they all could have some use, if you knew how to apply them."

"Doubt it," Donald said. "Who'd wantae be able to only fly north? Ye'd have tae get a ride somewhere else every time you make it as far north as possible."

"Levitation only an inch is only useful in a minefield," Marie sighed. "The bad luck one doesn't sound too bad. Perfect for one on one."

"I think that would be a cruel power to have," Ocean muttered.

Everyone was taken aback by Ocean's statement. Rarely did she ever say something was cruel, and when she did, it was always followed by something positive to lighten the mood. But this time, she said nothing.

"Why would it be cruel?" Lucien finally asked.

"Can't you imagine it?" she asked. "You never stated whether it could be turned on or off like our Semblances. If it can, then sure, it'd be a great ability. But imagine if it were more passive. You never know when it'd strike." Her sea foam gaze leveled on all of them. "Imagine if you couldn't turn it off. How horrible that'd be if it effect more than just an enemy."

Everyone went silent, looking between each other and shifting on their toes.

"Same old Ocean, James thought. She always knows just what to say to get people to think things through.

"Fair point," Douglas said. "Um...maybe we should wait to play until after we get settled at our posts."

"That sounds like a good plan," Marie said. "Come on. Let's get moving."

Everyone grabbed their gear, pulling scarves closer around themselves as they continued onward. Marie lead the way, followed by the twins with Lucien between them. James brought up the rear with Ocean.

"Ocean?" James asked softly. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," she muttered. "I just...you never know what power someone has. You might see it as a blessing from where you stand, but to the person having it, they could feel cursed." She held her hands close to her chest, fists clenched tightly. "You know the old saying. The fields are always
greener on the other side of the meadow until you arrive.' It's kinda like that."

James mulled it over in his mind for a moment. He had to admit, she had a point. "It's probably a lot pricklier than we realize."

"Exactly!"

He reached up and lightly put his hand on her head, smiling fondly as she looked up at him. "Ocean, you're a lot smarter than you give yourself credit for. Not everyone would take that into account when playing these kind of thought games."

Ocean smiled, lightly leaning against him. "I've just had a lot of time to think about these kind of things, you know?"

"I know that feeling."

"Trust me, you don't. And you don't want to know that feeling."

Before James could ask what she meant, Ocean ran up ahead to go talk with Marie, leaving him to ponder her words once again.

She's never straight forward with anyone. Why?

"Jimmy?"

James looked over at Lucien, who had fallen back to walk with him. "Yeah?"

"You okay?"

"I'm alright, Lu," he assured.

"You sure?"

"Yeah. I'm sure."

The team made their way to the city hall, preparing to set up camp. The snow began to fall faster.

"Come on," said James. "Let's get things going before we freeze to death."

Pain.

Nothing but pain.

Slowly, James came to. He could feel his entire body aching, the slight burning of ropes into his left wrist. The floor was cold and smelt heavily of iron, and there was a steady clicking and clacking of train tracks as he lightly rocked back and forth. He couldn't feel his right side at all. The calibrations were off. Something had been shut down. He took a deep breath, trying not to panic. There wasn't much he could do right now.

Alright, Jim, think. Where are you? What's the last thing you remember?
He focused, the images flashing back and forth in his mind.

_I was in Ayame, fighting off White Fang in an attempt to keep them away from Qrow and the others. Tai was there. He was fighting Adam. They knew each other. There's bad blood. My little...friend? Fragment? Whoever had my stone last, told Taiyang to punch me. It was all a blur after that. What else? Oh, I painted a warning on the rooftops the night before to warn Donny and Dougie that they were walking into a trap-

"Alright, alright. How about this?"

Wait. What?

"The ability tae never get lost, but only when ye crawl. No walkin'."

"That's a shitty Semblance! Only a wee bab could make use of it!"

"Or a sniper. A sniper could."

"Fair point. Then how about this?"

Oh god.

"The ability tae teleport only one foot at a time."

"Ocean used tae be able to do that, right?"

"No, she was a flying batch o' bubbles."

Oh god.

James looked up, eyes wide in shock as he saw two pairs of hazel eyes staring at him from beneath long ginger curls. They were wearing only black turtlenecks and jeans, most likely having had been stripped of their weapons the moment they had been caught. They smiled at him, rosy cheeks a glow.

Oh god.

"Jimmae!" they cheered in unison. "We're here to rescue you!"

"Oh god," James groaned, lightly hitting his head against the floor. "Why me?"

"Yer special, that's why," Douglas chuckled. "Long time no see, Jimbo! We thought ye were dead."

"Me?" James tried to sit up, silently cursing whoever it was that ruined his prosthetics. "You two have been dead for almost ten years!"

The twins looked at each other before bursting into laughter. Donald managed to wiggle forward and hold out his hands, both still bound, and help him sit up. As the rest of the world began to come into focus, James could make out the few boxes of Dust surrounding them. James own hands were in front of him, but unlike the twins, his legs weren't bound.

Instead, the right leg was completely missing.

"We ne'er died," Donald snickered. "We woke up in a wee village near Mistral. Still dinnae learn how we got there."
"Ye look grand," Douglas said. "Life after the war seems tae treat you well."

"Fuck no," James grumbled. "Nightmares, pain, having to put up with pompous Atlesian royalty, and now all this? I'd rather be the Iron General again."

"Aye," Donald sighed. "We get it. Things were a lot easier back then. But I wouldn't trade the present fer the world."

"Aye," Douglas agreed. "The lads and lasses wouldn't be here if we went back then."

"Lads?" James asked. "Lasses?"

"Oh!" Donald chuckled. "I have a few kids. They're a right joy, they are. You'll love 'em."

"Once we get outta here," Douglas said. "Just gotta wait on the backup."

"Backup?" James couldn't believe what he was hearing. Donald and Douglas were the backup. They always were.

"Anyway," Donald said. "How about this for a lame Semblance? The ability tae summon hunters in training to steal a train from the White Fang?"

"I think that's a grand power," Douglas laughed. "Bonus if some o' those kids can transport an entire train someplace far, far away from Mistral."

"Aye! That's just amazing!"

"You two are mental," James stammered. "Completely and utterly mental."

"What else is new?" they asked in unison.

James looked between them, trying to figure out their game. They weren't the same Frasier twins he knew back then. Back then they were more reckless. They'd have torn the entire train apart by now. Derailed it, smashed it, sent it flying.

That wasn't how they did things. Sure, they're still laughing and goofing off a bit, but...What is this? Are they really the same twins I grew to know back then?

"By the way," Douglas added. "That was smart thinkin' on yer part Jimmae. Ne'er woulda gone tae Pandora had ye not pointed us in the right direction."

"Wait, you went there?" James felt his entire body begin to shake with worry. "Please tell me you got to them in time! Tell me Qrow and the others are okay!"

"They'll be fine," Donald assured. "Calm yer hied, lad."

"But-"

The sound of a horn echoed around them as the train shook slightly, nearly sending them all falling forward. The twins let out a cheer and began to prop themselves up as best they could. A large blade pierced the roof, while what appeared to be a fiery red knife began to make a circle around it.

"They went 'Incense'," Donald mused. "Not what I'd have picked but, eh, to each their own."

Douglas rolled his eyes playfully. "Oh, and what would ye have picked?"
"I'd have gone with 'Burning Pyre'. Less messy."

The circle of metal was flung from the roof, and a team of four in golden cloaks fell through. James recognized the familiar red hair of Nora skipping over to him to untie his hands while Ren and Jaune helped the twins. The last person he remembered fighting by Qrow's side. He couldn't quite remember her name, but that didn't matter. She was holding a pair of hammers, an ax, and his gun in her arms.

"Much better," Donald said, taking the hammers. "Mind liftin' me out, Pyrrha?"

"No problem," Pyrrha said.

James watched as a soft black glow covered the hammers, pulling Donald through the hole with Douglas and the ax not long after.

"We got a problem," Nora snickered. "The General doesn't have a leg to stand on!"

*Oh god. These kids really are with the twins.*

"All the supplies seems to be in this one," Jaune said, checking the crates. "Pyrrha, can you lift the others out? I'll meet you near the main engine."

"Got it!"

James felt a light buzzing around his body, and slowly he was lifted up and out of the train car. Several pairs of arms grabbed hold of him, pulling him over to the next car. There were flashes of light flying through the air, the smell of dust filling his senses. It felt familiar. Like the battlefields on Mantle. Only...

"*We're all born with a dream*  
*We wanna make come true*  
*The best will climb to the top like me*  
*The rest will end up like you!*"

*Music?*

"What's going on?!" James bellowed.

"We're hijacking the train!" Nora cackled.

James looked around, seeing a group of White Fang sentries running toward them from the caboose. There were several kids with guns aimed in their direction, kids he didn't recognize. One had a monkey tail and was running head first into the fray, while another was balancing on a staff, reciting incantations under his breath while his companions fought off the enemy.

"Can I get a Rainbow Arkos over here?!" Donald called.

"Coming up!" Pyrrha called. She raised her hand, pulling Jaune out of the train by his shield and laying him down just as Neon appeared in front of him. Jaune laid his shield down so that Neon could use it as a launch ramp. She flew upwards over them, spinning her nunchaku as it began to glow blue.

"Sage!" Douglas cried. "Take Nadir an' get Jim to the front! Have Ciel and Penny get to fixin' him!"
"Got it!"

Sage, James thought. *Pyrrha. Ciel, Penny, and Nadir. I need to remember all these names. They're just kids. They shouldn't be fighting on a goddamn train!*

Sage lifted James over his shoulder and began to walk him toward the front of the train, carefully passing him off to Nadir any time they had to jump the gap. James had been handed his gun back, but there was only one bullet in the chamber. He'd have to save them until he knew he'd have a shot. He could hear the cries of different battle cries ringing through the air. He glimpsed back as often as he could to see what was going on.

"**Space Pirates!**" One with a crossbow and the other with a cutlass block the shot from a nearby sentry.

"**Shockwave!**" The lad with a cattle prod and someone with a trident use Lightning Dust shocks on Nora, who proceeded to swing her hammer and throw a few of the goons flying away.

"**Ballet Beat!**" Flynt used his trumpet to send the daggers one of the girls had been throwing flying farther.

*This is impressive. They're barely older than I was when I started training, and yet they've managed to work as a cohesive unit. This is far better than anything the Special Operatives could accomplish back then.*

"**Welcome back, General!**"

James looked back toward the train, eyes wide as he saw Winter kneeling before him with her blades cemented into the roof of the train. There were three girls standing beside her on top of snowflake glyphs. Penny and Ciel grabbed hold of him and began to work on putting him back together while the third girl used her weapon, a scythe with a rifle attachment, to fire at any of the enemy while Sage and Nadir ran back toward the others. All were clad in golden cloaks, save for the girl with the scythe.

"This may hurt a bit," Ciel warned. "Please don't be too upset with us."

"I won't be," James said. He turned his attention to the girl with the scythe, smiling fondly. "Let me guess. You're Ruby?"

"Yep!" the girl said cheerfully. "Nice to finally meet you, James!"

"Likewise."

"We're going to be taking the whole train straight to HQ." Winter explained. "Once we get it cleared of White Fang soldiers."

"And how-Ow!" James felt a sharp bolt of pain running up his spine as they began to reconnect the leg.

"Sorry," Penny muttered.

"How do you intend to take a whole train?" James continued. "We're on the way to Mistral, right? Is your HQ near there?"

All of the kids began to snicker and Winter simply rolled her eyes. Realizing he wouldn't be getting an answer, he focused his attention on the fight playing out along the rest of the train cars. Phrases
such as "Seamonkey", "Starless", and "Downpour" flew through the air, followed by various attacks that sent the enemy flying several meters away from the rails while the children made their way closer to the main engine. Donald and Douglas constantly threw themselves between blades and unwatched backs, keeping the younger fighters safe.

*I guess they haven't changed all that much. Still as caring on the battlefield.*

The brothers called for everyone to get to the front, and soon all of the kids were clamoring onto the main engine. Donald and Douglas did a quick headcount, muttering names softly as they made sure everyone was present. Neon kept drifting back and forth, and that was when James realized the excess music had been coming from speakers dangling from her belt.

"*Listen, girlfriend. Can't you see? I'm all of the things that you'll never be. I'm cool like the rain and I'm hot like the sun. I'm a neon rainbow and you're no fun.*"

"Alright," Ciel said. "Almost done repairing the circuits. You should be able to stand soon, General."

"Great," James sighed. "That'll be nice." He continued to keep his eyes on the fighting going on around him, trying to take note of what everyone was doing. Winter was supplying everyone with a glyph so they didn't fall off the train, while Ren constantly jumped back and forth in an attempt to hold off incoming fire so everyone could get onto the main engine. Jaune and Pyrrha found themselves going against the Lieutenant from earlier, with Pyrrha holding the chainsaw's blade in place while Jaune came up from behind to kick his legs out from under him. A group of girls were alternating Dust attacks. Soon all the White Fang sentries were knocked off the train.

*This is truly impressive. I need to ask them how they managed to organize all of this.*

"Taurus!" Winter called.

Everyone gathered to the front while those with guns continued to shoot at Adam. He drew his blade, blocking every shot that came his way. Every hit to the sword caused every inch of red to flash for but a second. Again, and again, absorbing the force.

"Stop shooting!" Douglas called. "Everyone get behind me and duck! Ruby, I need you to put up a shield."

"What?!" She looked at him, terrified. "I-I can't do that yet! I can barely use the Know-All thing, how am I supposed to do that?"

*Shield? They need a shield?* James' gaze darted around, taking in their surroundings. Adam was slowly walking toward them, glowing dangerously. He could begin to feel his right side again. It was almost fixed. Douglas was trying to explain to Ruby how to do something, but he wasn't focused on that.

James focused his attention to his body, preparing to go. He would only get one chance at this.

"Done," Ciel said. "Now we can get you-"

Without waiting for more information, James picked himself up and ran forward just as Adam sheathed his sword. He clenched his fists, the burning in his right hand beginning to grow. The voice in the back of his mind screamed at him to stop.
"You're still recovering, Dickbiscuit! What the hell are you-"

"Shut up!" James spat.

Adam knelt low, preparing to dart forward with a quick slice. James threw his left hand down, a wall of snow white gears surrounding himself and the front half of the train just as Adam drew his sword again. The sound of metal on metal rang through his ears, and a slight tremble worked its way up his left arm. There was a flash of light, and James closed his eyes as he braced himself, waiting for the inevitable attack that would surely strike him down.

But it never came.

There was a bright, blinding light as Adam let out a shriek of pain. The gears fell away, revealing the young Adept had lost his weapon and was clutching his face as he curled upon himself in agony. Blood fell onto the roof where he stood as the shattered remains of his Grimm mask bounced and slipped away. Leaves surrounded them as the train rushed onward, the echoes of trees falling adding to the unsteady air as Adam shook his head.

"You bastard!" Adam screamed. "I'll fucking kill you!"

He rose to lunge, barely able to keep balance as the tracks began to bend and turn. James looked at him in horror, shocked at what he had done. There were several clean cuts over his face, and his tears were stained with blood.

Adam Taurus was blinded.

"Where are you?!" Adam cried. "I'm going to kill you! You're going to pay for what you did you monster!"

Before James could say anything, ice slowly began to surround Adam's body, encasing him and preventing him from moving. Winter zoomed past him and kicked Adam off the train, sending him flying further away with the aid of her glyphs.

"Nice job," Winter praised. "I can see why you were the hero of the Civil War."

"I wasn't-"

"We need to get back to the main engine, now. Come on!"

Winter grabbed his hands and dragged him back toward the front. James's eyes darted about in a panic, trying to get a hold of the situation. Something felt off about all this. Something was horribly wrong.

*What is it? Where is it? What's going wrong? Where's the problem?!!*

He located it up ahead.

The train was heading toward a junction, and it hadn't been switched. There was a fence closing off the path to the left where the tracks had been pulled up, while the bridge up ahead was down for repairs that was to pass over the ravine.

"Bridge is safer," he sighed.

"Wait-" Winter started.

James took aim at the lever managing to focus just enough to hit it. The switch was made, and the
train began to hurry toward the ravine as they made it to the front.

"What did you do?!" Winter screamed. "That bridge has been down for weeks! We can't go that way!"

"Better than crashing on a dead end!" James spat. "Tell everyone to prepare to jump-
Donald stepped between them, patting them both on the shoulder to shut them up. "No need! We have Ren with us!" He looked over to him, smiling fondly. "You up fer it?"

"Yes," Ren said, pulling out a small knife. "Let's to it.

Everyone looked ahead, jaws slacked as Donald lifted Ren over his head and threw him like a javelin as they approached the bridge. Ren spun around held the blade out as he began to fall forward. Bright flashes of pinks and greens began to swirl in front of them. James felt his stomach drop. He'd seen a portal like that twice now. Once with Raven, and once with-

"Get ready tae pull the break!" Douglas called. "Everyone, hold on tight!"

"What about Ren?" James asked.

"He's already home!"

"Home?!"

"Jim, pull the break!"

Reluctantly, James grabbed hold of the lever and pulled tightly. The wheels began to shriek as the train started to skid to a halt. They were passing through the vortex, blinding hues flying about as they went from the bridge to a station. There were people cheering loudly from the platforms as they came to a halt. Ren waved at them from the side, looking pale and sweating heavily as Pyrrha ran over to catch him with Nora and Jaune in tow. Ruby slowly came over and stood beside James and the twins, curled up on herself.

"Did we make it?" she asked timidly.

"Aye," Donald sighed. "We made it."

"I'm sorry-"

"Don't be." Donald lightly ruffled her hair, giving her a nod of approval. "I shouldn't 'ave asked ye tae perform a high level move so soon. My apologies."

"It's alright, Mr. Frasier..."

Sage walked over to her, putting a hand on her shoulder. "You did a great job providing cover fire. You've improved a lot since we started training. Well done, Ruby."

Ruby managed a smile, relaxing slightly. "Thanks."

"Sage, tell JNPR to take Ren to get checked out," Douglas said. "The unloading crew will take the supplies we've recovered and get it sorted." He turned to look at the rest of the group, smiling brightly. "Everyone else, write up those mission reports and then go get cleaned up. Got get food, drink, and snuggle up by the fire. Ye did grand today."

"Yes, sir!" they all cheered.
"And as for you," Donald chuckled, pulling James close for a noogie. "Yer comin' with me back tae my house and yer gonna meet the missus. Then we'll give you the grand tour."

James pushed him off, the adrenaline starting to wear off as he fought to regain his breath. "Grand tour of where?! Some little bandit camp?!"

The twins looked at each other, smiles replaced with stern looks of concern before reaching and taking an arm each. They carried James off the train, with Ruby tailing along behind them. James kicked and screamed, clinging as many creative curses as he could at them.

"James," Ruby said. "Please calm down. You're safe here!"

"And where exactly is here?!” he demanded. "And where's Qrow and Tai-"

"Calm yer hied," Douglas warned, "or we'll string ye up the flag pole in nothin' but yer birthday suit."

The four of them left the platform, walking down a long hallway toward the exit. James tried his best to get loose, ignoring Ruby's insistence that this was a safe place. To him, no place was safe. Not when those vortexes were involved.

"Was he always this wiggly?" Douglas asked.

"Only when Adaire was nearby," Donald teased.

"If I had any ammo left, I'd shoot you both!" James growled.

"There's the Jimmae we know and love."

Ruby darted ahead and opened the door for them. The brothers threw James forward, cackling as he landed on the grass outside. James scrambled to his feet, eyes wide as he saw rows of houses lining the streets. Decorations hung from every corner. Pillars and walls ornately surrounding the streets, with hundreds of people laughing and singing as they went about their day. There was a large mountain, embedded with buildings and platforms that were just as lively as the rest of the town. There were several, slow moving islands floating around the mountain by dark violet Dust crystals.

He didn't know why, but something about this place seemed to give off an aura of peace. Slowly he turned to the twins, who were looking at him fondly while Ruby rocked back and forth on her toes in excitement.

"Where are we?" James asked.

The twins smiled, pulling him in for a hug as Douglas waved his arm grandly toward the mountain.

"James Ironwood," they said in unison. "Welcome to Sagisō!"

Chapter End Notes

Hope you enjoyed the chapter! I've been wanting to get to this one for a while. And then I had to rewrite it because something something I have bad luck.
Thanks for reading!
I'm baaaaaack.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Roman awoke in the middle of the night coated in sweat. He felt his entire body constricting and burning with pain. Once again, he was suffering. He bit his thumb in an attempt to ignore the pain, trying not to gag as the taste of iron fell upon his lips. Nights like this were always the worst for him. He tried so hard to ignore it all. He tried to push it all down. There wasn't anything he could do to get rid of it. He had to just lay there and wait until he's able to move freely once more.

Please stop, he said. Please make it stop. Make it stop. It hurts.

The pain slowly began to fade, and soon he was able to move again. Immediately he flew out of bed, hoping he didn't accidentally wake Junior as he made his way to the bathroom. He didn't need to turn on the lights. The moment he closed the door, the entire room lit up from the root marks on his skin. He was glowing a deeper shade of gold than the last time. Looking in the mirror, he saw the roots had made their way up to his neck, and trailed all the way down his fingers and began to curl into his palms. He turned and glanced over his shoulder, looking to see that the roots had taken hold of his back now.


"Alright, let's try it again."

Roman looked around, taken aback by the noise. "Who-"

"Neo, come on. I can do it!"

"Amber?"

Roman reached over and grabbed his bathrobe, slipping it on as he tiptoed out of the room. With every step, his glow began to fade away. The darkness seemed quite welcoming now. Perhaps he'd gotten used to it. There wasn't much he could get used to these days. They were growing shorter after all.

He made his way to the top of the deck, hiding behind some of the nearby crates near the doorway. He could see Neo standing on her toes near the bow, keeping perfectly balanced on the tip of her parasol while Amber struggled to mimic her. The stars seemed to dance across their eyes as they made themselves comfortable.

"Like this?" Amber asked, finally managing to balance.

"That's it." Neo signed. "Now, hold your hands close to your chest like you're praying and close your eyes. Repeat in your mind the feelings you wish to express. Say the line three times and open your eyes. Hold your hands out and flames should appear."

Roman watched as Amber followed instructions, smiling when he realized what was happening.
The girls had been tired the last two weeks. And now he knew why.

Magic lessons will definitely make you tired, he thought.

"Let the fire of your heart burn," Amber said. "Rise up. Shine. And set the darkness ablaze."

Amber slowly opened her eyes as her eyes began to glow. She pulled her hands away from her and held them out to the side, balls of fire burning brightly in her palms. Amber stared at them in awe. She gently raised her hands above her head, to the side, watching as they slowly grew bigger. They glittered like gold, sparkling like a polished ring.

"Amazing," she whispered. "I've never seen flames like these."

Neo nodded. "Learned this from Uncle Tai before leaving Vale some time ago. A simple spell that with practice can become silent. Once you get a tattoo, I can teach you the summoning spell he created."

Roman hummed contently and quietly snuck back to the bedroom. He'd have to talk to the girls about their change in plans. He couldn't train Amber when she wasn't at full rest. But he wasn't going to get in the way of Neo's teaching. Glynda would have to be notified. As would the twins and Junior. Their original workout plans needed to be adjusted.

For now, he was going back to bed.

They'd talk about it in the morning.

When Oscar had gone into town that day, he hadn't been expecting to see Nini upset. The look on their face. It was terrifying. They'd never seen such an aura of fear and anguish. It was unsettling.

No, he realized. Unsettling was putting it far too lightly.

They'd gone into town to see about getting some spell books from the local shop. Not usually a hard task. It was honestly probably the most mundane errand they could have done. Grab book. Pay. Leave. Simple, right? That's what he thought.

But when they saw the shopkeep working there, Ozpin nearly collapsed to their knees. The old man was covered in vines. There were dark, root-like marks covering his skin. A gold flower for an eye. His movements were slow. Wooden even. Despite the smile he kept, it was very clear.

He was on the verge of death.

"We're," Oz managed. "We're looking for some spell books. For a beginner."

"Ah," the shopkeep hummed, pointing to the shelves to the left. "Right there. Name your price, my friends. I know you're probably not carrying much. If need be, you can take them for free."

"We can't possibly do that."

The old man smiled, his teeth resembling amber. "I don't have much time, you know. I'd prefer
they'd go to someone than wait here to rot."

Ozpin shook their head. "How can you be so-"

Oscar stepped forward slowly, putting a hand out to stop them. "We... We can help clean up. At the very least. Would that be a fair trade?"

The shopkeep pondered the offer. There wasn't much that they could offer. Their funds were already running low. Ozpin and Ghira had mentioned either moving on or picking up a few more hunting jobs just to make ends meet. This was the least he could do help them.

"Well," the shopkeep sighed. "I do need to go talk to the town's designated guard about that lawyer they promised me. I'll let you both tidy up while I go talk to them." He got up, hobbling off toward the closet and pulling out a cane. "In the closet is all you'll need. Try not to go overboard with all your spells while you clean, alright? And I'll close up shop until you're done."

Oscar smiled. "Thank you, sir. I promise, we'll make sure to make it look spotless."

"I'm holding you to it."

The shopkeep left, leaving them to clean.

"I'll start dusting," Ozpin said. "Can you get the books off the shelf."

"Sure thing."

Oscar pulled a cart out of the closet, pushing it over to one of the shelves and getting started, setting aside the books they'd need later. Books on basic spells, advanced incantations, potions, and creating weapons. A book about how to become an official Hunter. Basic survival skills. History books.

As they continued on with their chores, sweeping together the dust and leaves, Oscar tried to remember all the books he'd come across. The covers, often embellished with gold or silver thread, were rather beautiful. And every single one of them held stories. Tales to be told of what was. What is. What will be.

If he could, Oscar would have stayed there forever to read them all.

"Someday," he muttered, "I'm going to have a giant library." He reached up to the top shelf. "A library with every book known to Remnant."

Ozpin chuckled fondly. "That's a wonderful goal to have, Oscar. Keep hold of that dream."

Oscar looked over at them, expecting a grin. Instead, he saw only pain on Ozpin's face. Loneliness. Something else he couldn't quite place.

"Oz?" Oscar asked. "Are you okay?"

"Mh? Oh. Yes, I... I'm fine."

Oscar stepped off his ladder and walked over to them, placing a gentle hand on their shoulder. "Oz? What's troubling you?"

"It's nothing," they assured. "The shop owner just reminds me of... of a friend."

"You mean Roman?"
Oz looked at him, perplexed. "I guess you know more than I realize."

Oscar nodded. "You...told me a bit about him but not...not that." He crossed his arms, his hand lingering up toward his right eye. "What...is this exactly? That they have?"

Ozpin sighed and glanced at the shelves. Oscar followed their gaze to it, feeling a slight chill in the room. Their eyes rested momentarily on a black leather book near the top of another set, only just poking out from under an old snow globe. From its pages, a single mark dangled. The book was bleeding.

Whatever question Oscar just asked, he knew it was an important one.

But it was a heavy one as well.

"If you really want to know," Oz stated solemnly, "you'll need that book there."

"The leather one there?" Oscar asked. "With...with the blood red ribbon there?"

"Yes."

"Okay."

Oscar grabbed his ladder and slowly walked over to grab the book. He could feel the malice echoing off it. It was suffocating.

A book carrying such a power. What kind of book is this?

Oscar gingerly took it down and began to read.

Tyrian held the Creep down, grumbling as he watched Briar shifting on her toes. He hated having to do this. It sickened him. But he'd been where this child had been. And right now, she needed this. It would help with the pain in her tail quickly.

He just hoped his Queen would be alright with this.

"Alright," he spat. "Ram your tail into its head."

Briar shook her head, holding her flute close. Tyrian expected as much. The girl couldn't hurt a fly. But if they were going to get to Nagisa safely, she had to learn to fight. She had to learn to defend herself while using her powers.

She had to get the old shell off.

"Briar," he warned. "You better kill this thing right now or I swear to my Goddess-"

Briar jumped back, raising her flute and playing a quick scale. The moment she stopped the notes, the neck of the Creep snapped. Seconds later it dissipated. Tyrian sank onto the ground.

And he was angry.
"What the hell?" He glared at her. "I'm trying to help you! Do you know how hard it is to capture a Grimm?!" He got to his feet and stomped toward her, eyes glowing violet. "You need to stop relying on that stupid little flute! Use your actual voice!"

As he reached out to grab it, Briar's tail came rushing forward. He jumped back, using his own tail to easily block hers. Another bit of shell chipped off of her. He got hold of the flute and threw it behind him. Briar gasped in horror. She made a dart for his left, only to be pushed back by Tyrian's stinger.

"Oh no you don't!" he yelled. "You're not going to use your Semblance. You're going to use your tail." Briar shook her head. "No! No, you're going to listen! That shell is going to get infected if you don't-"

Briar ducked and slid to the ground, flying between his legs in a home run. She reached out, grabbing the flute before it sank into the sand forever. She clutched it close to her chest, tears filling her hazel eyes.

Tyrian reached out and grabbed her by the collar. "Don't you-"

"CLICK CLICK GROWL CLICK! HISS CLACK!!!"

Tyrian's eyes reverted to their sickly yellow and he dropped her. Jumping back, he stared at her in shock. All the anger had frozen inside him, replaced by the cold sense of death and lament.

On Briar's neck, glowing brighter than a silent dawn, was a Death Stalker's brand.

"You've," he muttered. "You've been-"

Briar glared at him, standing up slowly as she yelled at him. In place of words were the calls of the giant Grimm that resembled them both. He couldn't quite read what her lips were saying. But he didn't need to. It was clearly written across her face.

"Enough," he said. "Just go back to the cart. We'll talk later."

Briar stopped trying to talk. Her glare softened to a grimace as she wobbled past him and back to their cart. The mark on her neck stopped glowing. She crawled into the back and cried. In place of sobs were little hisses. The flute was held close to her chest.

With a defeated grunt, Tyrian took his seat back at the reigns and continued onward.

The Grimm wouldn't be following them anytime soon.

---

"Curses? That...that's a curse?"

Ozpin nodded. "A powerful one at that." They set their rag down and gingerly took the book. "The Death Bloom has two outcomes. One for each eye. For the left, it takes life force from others. It makes the cursed one stronger. But the right eye, the host is the one who is drained. Slowly makes them weaker, until the roots completely take over."
Oscar shook his head in disbelief. "Who would be so cruel-"

"Many people, Oscar." Ozpin saw him wince. They hated being so stern. But this topic serious. And an incredibly touchy one at that. One that hit close to home. They had to make sure he understood.

"Curses," Ozpin explained, "are not something to be taken lightly. They are incredibly difficult to cast. And once cast, can only be undone by the caster. You can't just go to any magician and asked them to remove it. Like a Semblance, a curse has a unique identity. It varies from one person to another. Some are similar, but not ever the exact same. One person who casts the Death Bloom may cause someone to sprout a rose. Others-"

"A marigold?" Oscar interjected.

"Precisely."

Oscar clenched his fists. "The person who cursed Roman and the shopkeep...it was Marigold, wasn't it?"

Of course Oscar knew. Ozpin's memories were seeping in faster now. Oscar was starting to pick out details. It was only a matter of time before he knew everything. They had to admit, this was moving much faster than what they had expected. Oscar was a bright one.

"Yes, Oscar." Ozpin slowly turned the pages. "Specifically, Henry. His father taught him everything he knows. We have a bit of a history."

"Mind telling me?"

"Not now, Oscar. Not where ears can overhear."

Oscar nodded, but it was clear he didn't like this. Ozpin didn't either.

"There are many kinds of curses, Oscar. There's plant based. Aura tampering. Even Grimm Incantations. And they're all incredibly dangerous."

"Wait...Grimm?" Oscar was starting to shake, his eyes filling with tears. "Grimm curses?"

"More common in older times, but you'll come across them now and again." They held out the book, pointing to the various brands. "These ones are simple. Brand someone, and they'll take on a trait relating to the Grimm in question, as well as mask one's presence from it. I once met a Hunter with a Beowolf's tongue."

"That's horrible." He pushed the book away. "Why would such a book even exist?"

"For the same reason there are bad guys who win in your comic books, Oscar. For the same reason you learn about your own body. It's important information." Ozpin closed the book, adjusting their glasses. "A friend of mine once told me that he became a Hunter because he wanted to preserve Remnant's history. And while he has the tools and weapons to protect the people, he feels that knowledge is a far greater weapon he can use."

Oscar twiddled his thumbs, trying to remain calm. "So then...the reason a book like this exists is to help people?"

Ozpin nodded. "That's my hope at least. While someone could use it to cast them, this has ways to undo them as well."
"Then we're going to have to keep it, aren't we?"

"Yes." Ozpin slipped it into their vest. "I'll be holding onto it."

"Okay."

The bell chimed, alerting them to the shopkeep's return. The two Wizards completed their chores and began to pack their books into a satchel. Ozpin could see the shift in Oscar's stance. He was curled up on himself. Pensive. Defeated. They'd expected as much.

A side effect of coming into contact with dark magic after all.

"You two did a spiffy job," the shopkeep sighed. "I haven't seen my shop look this good in years. Thank you both."

"Anytime," Ozpin said. "Thank you for the books."

"You two heading home?"

"We still need to pick up a few things first-"

"May we come back tomorrow?"

Ozpin looked at Oscar, taken aback by how forward the request was. The shopkeep was equally surprised, but seemed rather amused as well.

"You want more chores to do?" he teased.

"Absolutely," Oscar said. "Anything I can do to help out around here."

The shopkeep smiled, reaching into his desk and pulling out a key. "Here. Come by tomorrow morning and sweep out front. I'll make you cocoa. And I'll find more for you to do, if you really want to."

Oscar smiled, carefully putting the key into his back pocket. "Sounds perfect."

"Good. Now get lost."

The three of them laughed and Ozpin and Oscar left the bookshop. The world still felt heavier. But Ozpin was hopeful.

Oscar's already on the right path. I'm proud of him.

The sound of the cicadas buzzing in the air calmed her nerves as Raven sharpened her blades. They rarely had a moment to rest these days, so it was a welcomed change of pace. The momentary silence of screams kept her from feeling too strongly about the last few weeks.

She had a network slowly growing in her tribe. Members had been placed across the entire continent, in every town. There were smaller camps located within miles of each other. She'd be
able to cover more ground with everyone keeping their eyes out and wits sharp. Soon. It'd be soon. It had to be. At this rate, she'd be able to find Yang, Ruby, and Taiyang.

She hoped that was the case at least.

"Raven?"

Raven looked up, sighing warily. "What is it Marie?"

"Just got a message from Vernal near Ayame," she explained. "From the sound of it, Taiyang was spotted there...along with Ruby and the Iron General."

Raven felt her blood begin to boil. "You know, normally one brings good news along with the bad."

Marie smirked, lightly patting the Grimm Shot on her arm. "Good news is, they were with the Blade. Based on the reports, they keep to the railways and with a little detective work, I know exactly where they are now."

"Do you, now?" Her nerves began to ease. "Good. We'll make arrangements for an attack at once. We'll get them back as soon as we find Yang."

"Actually, Raven, I have a better plan."

Raven slowly turned around, narrowing her gaze. She hated when Marie had a plan. they all ended in fire. Or blood. Usually both. But she couldn't exactly rule it out.

"What is it?"

"I can arrange for the two of us to retrieve your family from the Blade easily."

"How?"

Marie reached up, letting her hair out of its ponytail, giving it a flip for dramatic effect.

"Because I have a spy planted in their midst. Those fools have been cursed. And I'll be sure it's well known."

Chapter End Notes

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