# The Darkling Thrush

**by** [Depthcharge2030](https://archiveofourown.org/users/Depthcharge2030)

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**Summary**

Russel Thrush is no Knight in Shining Armor. He's an unapologetic delinquent in a world where the only thing keeping the monsters out is a positive atmosphere. This is the story of a guy who knows exactly who he is. And he's not sorry about it.
Hello RWBY Community. This is my first attempt at a RWBY tale. One that follows a not so beloved secondary character, who had about only one piece of dialogue and is a total ass.

So what fun would it be to take creative license with a secondary character who probably won't be appearing anytime soon (Volume 3 Ending casts some doubt on seeing anything familiar for a while).

Russel's character design is pretty much the reason I've decided to write this. Compare to Cardin and the others, he's the one who stands out. They all wear armor while he doesn't. As armor is worn by the more wealthy knights, I would assume Russel comes from a more rural background. So that's something I wanted to run with.

Anyways, I think I've taken enough of your time. Please, I hope you enjoy my take on this character.

**Story Theme Song: Every Bastille Song. Yes.**

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**I**

**Russel: Part 1**

The plump bird with its green tinted wings glided through the forest. Lunch caught its eye on the ground below so it swooped downward landing on a patch of soaked grass. Out of the clouds, the sun shined through, drowning the land the bird stood on. A twinkle in its eyes, the bird claimed its prize. A struggling worm was snatched up into its beak and devoured without a second thought.

Slithering through the grass, keeping a low profile, stalked a snake. The snake's eyes widened with intent as it drew closer. The Thrush, caught up in its afternoon meal, was unaware of the sinister snake sneaking up from behind. Down the mouth of snake it went. The lump descended downward the long body. And then the snake slithered away.

"Cool." A young adolescent muttered from above.

Russel Thrush, age nine, sat high up off the ground on the limb of a tree. His facial expression was one of pure awe as he watched nature preform for him.

The only son of a farmer, Russel rarely was given the free time to notice the joys life could provide. Always made to help his Father till the land and use his small hands to maintain the machinery they stored in the barn.

Russel would wake early in the morning, before the sun could kiss the earth and help his Father. With most of his duties taken care of earlier, the young boy had stolen away his time, spending it on one of the few joys he could attain out here in his piss poor home.
Oakwood was the ass back end of Vale. A popular retirement location for those old Hunters who'd lived too old to die young, but otherwise one of the Kingdom's central sources of food production. The farms that were based here were primarily small, run by families. Real community people.

They all knew about Russel and the burden he carried. His mother died during childbirth. His Father never really got over it. And he had a strange sense of humor no one could really figure out. Or, at least, the thought it was a sense of humor.

Climbing trees was something he did. It was something he enjoyed. Scaling the bark and hauling himself up a branch, telling the birds that flew past him he was just as good as them. He laughed and he sang songs. Sometimes he'd eat his lunch and be treated to a show just like today.

From where the boy was perched, high up above the ground, he was offered perspective of the way the world worked. There were the prey, the hunter and the hunter who made prey out of the other hunter.

The show over, Russel brought his legs to lay on the branch, turning his back to the trunk. He dug into his dirt covered overalls right pants pocket. Out of the pocket he withdrew a pocketknife. Shifting his body into another more comfortable position on the branch, Russel got to work.

The pocket knife itself was old, without a doubt older than Russel. He'd taken it from one of the drawers in his Father's nightstand. He'd seen his Father pull it out for the multipurpose tools it possessed, but he'd never actually seen dear ol' dad whip out the knife.

That aside, Russel cautiously popped the knife out and held it steadily. Now positioning himself in front of the trunk, Russel began to take the knife and carve his name into it. This was his tree. There were many like it but this one was his.

A faint roar caught the young boy's attention. Russel looked into the forest, looking for the cause of the sound. Perhaps it was the altitude playing tricks on him. He'd never heard of a bear roaming this close to his home before.

So Russel returned his attention to his actions. Graffiti was an art form, though frowned upon. No harm in writing his name in the tree. No harm cutting it with a knife and expressing himself. Russel smiled at his handy work. He folded the knife back into its slot and held it up, preparing to slide back into his pocket.

There was another roar. This time Russel shifted his entire body, looking around for the source. Not seeing anything from his current position, Russel crawled further along the branch in hopes of spotting whatever was creating the noise. There was a sudden creak. Russel spun a look over his shoulder to where the branch sprouted out of the trunk, noticing that it had begun to tear due to the shift in weight.

With a yelp, the branch gave way and Russel plummeted to the forest's floor below. Russel smacked against several more branches on the way down, causing him to let go of his pocket knife. The young boy groaned in pain.

Out from behind a nearby tree, a dark beast lurked. Its red soulless eyes caught sight of Russel and began to stalk forward. Russel sat up and held onto his hurt side. He quickly realized he'd lost his Father's pocket knife and began to look around for it.

Catching sight of the survival tool, Russel began to reach out for it. Then came the growl. Russel turned his head to the side and his eyes widened. There not ten feet away stood an Ursa on all fours. Russel fell back on his butt and quickly crawled backwards until slamming his back against
the base of the tree. The Ursa let out a roar and began to approach the young boy.

Russel froze in place. His mouth went dry and the light in his eyes dimmed at his bleak situation. The Ursa charged at the young boy. Like something out of a horror show, the young boy's imagination began playing tricks on him, giving the nightmarish Grimm more power over him than it did in real life.

The once sunny day turned melancholy. It was him and the Grimm's flaring jaw. Just a mere few feet away, Russel could see down the terror's throat. It was a dark abyss where dreams went to die. The Grimm's eyes burned yellow and orange as it was upon him. It brought back its clawed paw and prepared to cut the boy to shreds.

Russel's immediate reaction was to turn his head, breaking away from the freezing fear. He held out his hands defensively, as if that one action somehow could hold the Ursa at bay. It was a move of desperation, a move that fed the Grimm more than Russel ever could.

With one last sharp inhale, Russel called it quits. He was doomed. The sound of the rushing Grimm was staved off and the life ending swipe never came. There were sounds of cold steel clashing against flesh and a body tumbling over.

The boy opened his eyes and looked ahead, finding his Father standing there with his long sword, 'Darkling', in hand. The Ursa lay on the forest floor, amongst the dirt and fallen leaves. Its body, now just a headless mass, began to evaporate.

Russel remained where he sat, his eyes tracing the mist as it joined with the air and then to his savior: His Father.

"Hm. Never been any Ursa round 'ere." Russel's Father spoke aloud thoughtfully. The farmer's facial expression betrayed his worry. Their farm was relatively far removed from the Grimm. Seeing one now, out here within the town's perimeter would surely stir up the townsfolk. The older man stroked his fine beard and debated what to do.

"D-Dad?" Russel's terrified young voice snapped his Father out of his thought. The elder Thrush's face shifted from worry to anger. He sheathed his sword and walked up to Russel, quickly reaching downward and snatching his son up by the arm. "Dad? Wh-What are you doing?" Russel asked alarmed as he was pulled up onto his feet.

"I came out 'ere lookin fer you, Killer." His Father spoke a matter of fact. "Thought you might shed some light on my missin' pocket knife." He nodded his head at the fallen tool resting on the ground. "Then I find you up shits creek about to get your ass handed to you by some demon."

The Thrush patriarch shook his head in disappointment. "You little thief." He shook Russel violently. A stream of tears broke down descended down Russel's cheeks. He stared up at his Father crying, unable to stop.

"C'mon, Killer, we're goin' home." His Father declared before dragging Russel back from where he came. "Pick that up, Killer." The man ordered harshly, pointing at the pocket knife as they walked by.

Russel quickly did as he was told, bending over and snatching up the pocket knife. He raised it up for his Father to take, only for the man to roughly yank it out of the boy's small hand.

"You had the weapon within arm's reach Killer." He shook his head bitterly. "The damn thing was getting' ready to kill you and all ye did was cower behind your tiny arms!" He shouted, causing...
Russel look away.

"What if this happens again?" He shook Russel again. "The hell are you gonna do then Killer? You gonna cry like ya doin' now?" Russel could only look down at the ground, unsure how to respond. "Well?!" Russel didn't answer, he just cried silently and kept his head down. "Monty…" He muttered in disgust.

"I ain't always gonna be there for ya." The elder Thrush growled as he hauled Russel by the arm out of the forest and back onto the farm. "You've got to be able to provide and handle yerself Russel. Thus world ain't gonna give you nothin'. Unless you take it."

"It's decided." His Father declared as they reached their home's front steps. "Yer goin' to Combat School."

---

I have only five chapters planned out for the moment. If I figure out another direction to take with this then I'll gladly continue.

One final shout out to Thomas Hardy!

Great Poet, had read a lot of his work.
And we're back! I hope I wasn't keeping anyone waiting on this. I'm sort of known to do that. Especially with Ben 10. Don't ask.

The halls of Oakwood Academy were not as glamorous as those such as Signal. There was no dress code, leaving the students to run around in whatever state of dress they desired. The school lacked more state of the art technology such as flat screens to monitor aura levels during spars.

The students, when it came time to create their weapons, were forced to use less desirable materials. The school's library desperately needed an updating. They still had a VHS section. Whatever that was.

The faculty were all Hunters, but from another time. Their glory days were all behind them. Out of shape and tired, the educators were more worried about their pension than developing the next era of Hunters.

The students were a story all of their own. Classes ran in periods of six. A break would normally follow every other class for lunch. Except for that third school day, the one in the middle of the week. In that case the classes were shortened and you were forced to attend three in one sitting and then go on break.

As Oakwood was a local campus, there were no dormitories. After the end of the school day they all just went home. As most were the children of farmers, the students would often find themselves helping their families out in the fields or tending to some homework assigned after class.

But alas, the day was still young. Sitting in the center of his class, neither close to the front nor far from the back, by no means anywhere near the door or seated by the window. At the very center of the class with his freshly shaved head, sat Russel Thrush, age fifteen.

Russel leaned back in his seat, trying his best not to take his pencil and ram it into his ears. Would his professor ever quit talking about his own personal issues and political views? Tune in next time on another exciting episode of Professor Milky's third period Geography!

"But what about the Faunus Civil Rights movement?" One of the students asked. Russel knew the girl, Marie-Anne Cherri. "Surely you have something to comment on, Professor." She feigned interest. Anything to get out of talking about Mistral's swamps.

"Well, we should get on with the lesson…" Professor Milky stroked his chin thoughtfully. "But, a couple more minutes wouldn't hurt." He shrugged.

And so he went on, talking about his opinion and why it mattered. Russel rolled his eyes. When he first came to Oakwood, all those years ago, he never imagined that this would be his life. If he had
any hair on his head, Russel would surely be pulling at it. Any alternative to listening to his teacher's bullshit was acceptable.

"The Faunus are entitled to their rights, just like anyone else." Milky declared.

"Definitely." Someone in the front row agreed.

Russel wasn't an idiot. He could see their games, how they worked in tandem to keep the professor going. What the hell was he doing here again? Oh right, he was here trying to be a Hunter.

'Look at me now Dad.' Russel frowned. 'I'm a big bad Hunter just like you always wanted me to be.' He ran a hand over his hairless head. 'I'm sure you're proud.'

The bell rang, signaling the end of class. Taken by surprise after getting caught up in his improvised lecture about rights and the pursuit of happiness, Milky quickly made the effort to remind the students of some homework assignment the students had no possible way to complete.

Russel groaned loudly and then slammed his head on his desk. '…'

After a moment of internalized screaming, Russel picked himself up out of his seat and grabbed his bag. Not caring that he was carrying the pack instead of throwing the strap over his arm, Russel made his way out the door, heading for his next class.

Blood boiling and having a low tolerance for another person's bullshit, Russel put on the deepest scowl he could muster and trudged through the hallway. He pushed past groups of friends taking a brief moment to catch up.

The only silver lining today was his next class: Physical Education. As Oakwood lacked proper facilities to conduct spar matches or a shooting range for practice, they were forced to make do with a large open field and a few workout machines.

Russel arrived to the boy's locker room and got changed into his workout gear. While it was true that there was no dress code here at Oakwood, no one in their right mind would go out there and run around only for them to be stuck in sweaty clothing for the rest of the day.

Arriving a bit later than he would have liked, Russel was forced to make his way through a sea of butt naked guys just to reach his locker.

"You might want to get that looked at, Brick." Russel sad as he made it to his locker.

Russel dialed in his combination and pulled out his gear. He undressed quickly, throwing off his jeans and long hoodie and swapping them for a grey undershirt and green sleeveless hoodie as well as a pair of ripped up jeans. Russel reached in his locker and pulled out his weapon before throwing in his casual clothes and book bag for safe keeping.

Russel took a moment to study his weapon. In his time at Oakwood, he'd used their resources as well as some equipment off the farm to make it. Russel's weapon base was a simple sword, which he'd since tricked out. There were a pair of exposed gears in the hilt. A button on the handle that would cause the gears to turn and switch the weapon into its secondary mode.

Officially the weapon was called 'Darkling'. Those who knew Russel's Father thought the boy was paying tribute to his own weapon. But that couldn't be further from the truth. Russel had named it that because he knew it pissed off his dad. If his Father ever did show his resentment, he could always play that tribute argument. The confusion that the naming caused was most excellent. If his Father asked about 'Darkling', his 'Darkling'. Russel would be a smartass and present his own
'Darkling'.

Leaving the locker room, Russel couldn't help but laugh at his own actions. Sure it had gotten him hit once or twice, but the look on his Father's face whenever he created the confusion was beyond priceless.

"Hey, it's nothing to laugh at." Some guy said as Russel passed by laughing. "I'm average, trust me!" Russel shrugged and left the room.

Now waiting where the designate waiting spot for his class, Russel sat down on the field of dead grass. His 'Darkling' resting in his arms, Russel took the time to look it over, making sure it's gear mechanism was working properly.

One by one his classmates funneled out of the locker rooms and joined him at their spot. A class of thirty sat around, waiting for their teacher. It was easy enough for them to talk amongst themselves. Russel himself started a conversation with some of the regulars. Some people he could tolerate and they could tolerate him. It worked well that way if you asked him. They weren't friends, but they all knew they were stuck there together. Why not just talk, right?

"You guys see the News lately?" A kid by the name Ruddy asked.

"Oh yeah, I seen it." The girl named Burgundy nodded. "White Fang bombed a train. Some wicked stuff."

"What's this world come to?" Ruddy asked aloud.

Russel shrugged. He didn't like to talk about the White Fang. But for the most part, Russel couldn't really give a damn. He'd never met a single Faunus in his life. Oakwood seemed to have none living in the area. I guess that said a lot about their town. Big enough to have a combat school but small enough where there weren't any Faunus. If anything, that would mean he was neutral in such affairs. At least that's how he reasoned it.

"-And so we kept him going, just like that-" Russel glanced over, spotting Marie-Anne talking to another girl.

Russel shared two classes with the brown haired girl. But that wasn't the full extent of their interaction. They'd been getting thrown into classes together ever since he signed up for combat school. They knew each other. They were on first name basis. You would have to be after spending so long in the same vicinity for so long.

But that didn't mean they were friends. Marie-Anne was good with her words. Too good if you asked Russel. Take Milky for example. He's just some lazy teacher a little too disinterested in his work. You throw in Marie-Anne and you most certainly won't be getting anything done.

Marie-Anne looked over her shoulder, spotting Russel looking at her. He was half expecting her to look away disgusted. Be honest. No one wants someone staring at them. It's kind of weird. But she didn't and that surprised Russel.

She spun around fully and called out to him. "Hey Rus! What'd you think about class, huh?" She asked. "C'mon, you got to admit, its bullet proof!"

Russel assumed she referred to her actions in class. Paying no mind to how casually she called him by a nickname. Russel realized he get nothing done by being anti-social long ago, so responded, making sure to match Marie-Anne's casual attitude.
"Oh yeah. It worked like a charm." He rolled his eye. "If you don't count how we got homework anyways."

"You need to relax, Rus." Marie-Anne waved off Russel's comment. "Usually whenever we get Milky talking he just forgets about homework. Today's the only exception. I doubt if we get him rambling early tomorrow he'll even remember about the assignment."

Russel scoffed at her claims. "You're an idiot."

Marie-Anne shot Russel a cross look. She prepared to beret him for his insult, only to be interrupted by the sudden arrival of their Teacher. "Good Morning Class." The teacher greeted the students as she busied herself with taking roll. "After months of training, I think you're all ready for today's activities." The teacher cracked a prideful smile. "Today we're going to activate your Aura."

"Aura, ma'am?" Russel glanced over his shoulder to see Ruddy holding his hand up and a confused look on his face.

"Aura is a representation of our very souls." The teacher spoke very animatedly, using a sophisticated number of hand gestures ranging from hold out her hand and then closing it into a fist and waving it around. "Aura is a Hunters greatest weapon. It is what separates us from those inhuman sons a bitchin' Grimm."

"To accomplish this," The teacher stepped aside and pointed over to the empty field. "We're going to pit each and every one of you against one of the many creatures of Grimm we've managed to capture of the years."

That news received a number of gasps and shocked faces. Russel himself was caught by surprise. It raised quite a number of questions, compelling the young Thrush to raise his hand into the air, waving it for to catch the teacher's attention.

"Yes, Mr. Thrush?" The Teacher pointed to Russel.

"You mean to tell me there's Grimm on campus?" He asked, only to be given a confirming nod from his teacher. "But what if they got out? None of have an aura yet, Teach." Russel gritted his teeth, not hiding his sour mood any longer. "We'd all get slaughtered!"

"Oh pipe down, Thrush." The Teacher waved off Russel's concerns. "The Grimm are docile. We don't feed 'em anythin'. We keep them in the dark almost at all times. These are the kind of conditions old POWs in the Great War had to endure. Nasty stuff."

"In other words we shouldn't have anything to worry about." Marie-Anne chimed in all cheerfully. No doubt that would be scoring her brownie points when it came to quarter grades.

After that, Russel kept his concerns to himself.

The Teacher signaled for them to follow her and they made their way to the center of the field. "I advise everyone take a step back." She said, motioning for everyone to keep away from the center of the field. She then pulled out a scroll and tapped in a contact. "Alright. Set it up."

The very center of the field fell downward, causing some like Russel act surprised. Of all the things that could possibly be state of the art, of course it's the thing where they keep the monsters.

Out of the hole shot out a two legged but otherwise unimpressive Grimm. Russel looked intrigued. He recalled reading about this type of Grimm once before. They called it the 'Creep'. A lizard-like Grimm.
"So how exactly are we going to unlock our auras?" Russel asked loudly, shouting over The Creep's meek growls.

"You're all going to fight Grimm." The Teacher flashed a wicked smile to her class. At first there was an uproar. The students had weapons, sure, but they were years away from being capable fighters. The Teacher pulled out a whistle and blew it, causing the class to silence on the spot.

"Relax. Weren't you guys paying attention?" The Teacher asked annoyed. "Look at it! It can barely walk!"

The students then cast a looksee at The Creep, finding truth in their Teacher's words. If it weren't for the fact it was a Grimm some of them would question the quality of its containment.

"Ms. Cherri, you're first." The Teacher pointed at Marie-Anne.

Marie-Anne stepped up to bat, holding her tricked out pitchfork weapon with such elegance. Despite its time in captivity, The Creep was capable of running circles around Marie-Anne. None of the students were full-fledged hunters, more like a quarter on their way. It was half expected for them all to die if they ever came face to face with a Grimm.

But despite the odds, Marie-Anne stood her ground. Russel stood there watching in disbelief as Marie-Anne held her own. Soon Marie-Anne began to glow. Russel, like all the other students just watched in disbelief. Suddenly, Marie-Anne's reaction time quickened and she struck the Creep, killing it.

"Top marks there Ms. Cherri." The Teacher smirked as she watched the dead Grimm dissolve. "While those new fancy schools would have some teacher unlock your aura, we prefer to do things a little old fashioned here."

Russel cast a dirty look at his teacher. "You mean we don't have to do this?"

"Got a problem with it, Mr. Thrush?" The Teacher looked back at Russel, matching his stare. "No go on. I want to hear what you have to say."

"You can just activate our auras. We're literally throwing ourselves at Grimm and hoping they don't kill us." Russel deadpanned. "That's just fucking stupid."

"Glad to hear your opinion." The Teacher smiled darkly, apparently not taking to kind to Russel's words. "Now step right on up there cause your next."

"Don't die, Russ." Marie-Anne commented in the background.

Russel scoffed. "Friggin' stupid idea this is."

The boy begrudgingly took his place in the field. His sword held outward, ready for whatever popped out of the hole. While the anxiety gnawed at him, it was the wait that was murdering him. There were sounds beneath the ground like a vending machine.

Out of the ground popped a Grimm Russel knew too well. Russel's fighting stance flattered slightly at the sight of the Ursa. The Ursa let out a roar and cast its red soulless eyes on Russel. No doubt the first human it had seen in years as well as the first human it could kill in revenge for the years of imprisonment. So The Ursa charged at Russel.
Memories of that day in the woods began to flood back. There he was again, staring down that terrible Grimm while it prepared to end his life. He could move, there was nothing stopping him. He wasn't bound by chains nor was he encased in ice. He had the full mobility of his lower body and yet, Russel just couldn't bring himself to move.

And so the Ursa swung, Russel managed to find it in himself to close his eyes. He was half expecting to be smacked across the field and through buildings leaving behind comical holes that outlined his body. But the strike never came.

Russel opened his eyes and was greeted by the sight of his Teacher holding the Ursa at bay with her clipboard. "Good Try, Mr. Thrush." She said before decapitating the Ursa with the clip end of the board.

"Next!" She called out.

Russel went home that day feeling down. He watched from the sidelines as one by one his classmates manifested their auras. He was ridiculed by others, though not to his face. He could hear them while he walked back to the locker room. He could see that in his future days attending Oakwood, he'd be known as 'The Boy Who Froze'.

But at the end of it all, what troubled Russel the most wasn't his social standing. Forget that. It was that when he faced the Ursa, he didn't manifest an aura. An aura was a Hunter's best weapon. And he didn't even have one.

So Russel buried himself into his homework which he had no clue how to do, just to take his mind off things. But, unfortunately, in a town like Oakwood, news traveled fast and reached the ears of those whom one would rather not involve.

"I heard about what happened to you, Killer." Russel looked away from his book to the doorway. There he found his Father standing there with a look of disappointment on his face. He was dressed in long blue jeans and dull green duster that could tell tales of the Thrush Patriarchs glory days as a Huntsman. "The hell was that about?"

"I froze up. It happens." Russel said, returning his gaze to his work.

"No, it doesn't just happen." The elder Thrush stepped into the room, glaring at his son. "So what the fuck happened?"

"I just wasn't expecting it was all." Russel shrugged. He did his best to drown out his Father, just like he always did. But as always he failed. His Father pressed the matter once more, forcing Russel to turn and face him. "What more do you want from me?"

His Father punched him knocking Russel against his table. "I want you to get it through your thick skull. Nobody out there is gonna give you squat unless you succeed dammit!" He yelled. He turned to the door and began to walk out. "And where the hell is 'Darkling' at?" He pondered aloud.

"Right here." Russel rose his weapon, his 'Darkling'. The boy cracked a bloodied smile, fully prepared for whatever beating he received for the stupid joke.

But hey, it was worth it.

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We haven't really seen any of the Combat Schools beneath Beacon. Oakwood is supposed to
be the backwater of it all. They got a crappy school district with irresponsible teachers and what not and underfunded facilities.

I also wanted to play with the idea of Russel actually being a smart character. He makes it to Beacon, he got there on his own abilities. That means the guy has something going for him. But more on that later, yes?

'Til next time dear reader. Later Days!
Hello there dear reader! Welcome to the 3rd installment of 'The Darkling Thrush'! I'd like to give a little warning, this is going dark real quick. I'm going to have to switch this to the 'M' category soon. Not now but soon.

Summer was sweeping through Vale, and the back end that was Oakwood was caught in the middle of a heat wave. Beads of sweat ran down unamused faces as the entire graduating class of Oakwood Academy sat in rows at the center of the school's field. It was a sea of heavy gowns and cheaply made, practically see through, caps sandwiched by bleachers filled with applauding family members and the occasional friend from out of town.

Sitting amongst the sea of blue, in the 'T' aisle, was Russel Thrush age 17. Unlike the rest of his silently frowning schoolmates, Russel wasn't sweating because of the heat. In fact, he'd actually planned ahead and shaved his head again, cutting off that haunting mullet he'd been experimenting with. No, Russel was sweating because he had the unfortunate distinction of being the poor sap sitting on the cover of the Grimm launcher at the center of the field.

After the incident with Prom earlier, Russel's chances of getting mauled had increased even more. All it took was someone behind a desk in some monitor room deciding they didn't much like Russel and out would pop a Grimm, ready to murder him. Just like it did back then. That trudged up some bad memories.

It had been two years since that day in gym class. All of the students who'd stood and watched Russel freeze up in the face of an Ursa had all gone on to unlock their auras. In fact, pretty much the entire student body materialized the phenomenon. Everyone but Russel. The fact of the matter is, that if it wasn't for his stellar grades, Russel wouldn't be graduating at all.

Not having an aura almost sunk his chances entirely. Imagine facing the world's largest Grimm with nothing but napkin. If he had an Aura, Russel would probably be able to force feed the monster the napkin and make it suffocate. But without it he was just the afternoon meal.

"And now, here to present her winning speech, Marie-Anne Cherri!" The Academy Headmaster gave up the mic for said student.

That snapped Russel out of his thoughts. He looked up at the stage, slightly leaning out of his seat because of course he was seated behind some six foot hulk.

Marie-Anne Cherri was a crafty one, sure, but she was nowhere near Russel's grades. The reason she was standing up there by the podium was because she'd won the honor to give a speech to her graduating class.
Russel had submitted something for the contest. One final 'up yours' to all those amongst him he didn't like. As well as being able to tell his dad publically he'd made something of himself. Russel Thrush of all people had achieved something and he wanted everyone to know it.

But, of course, Russel wasn't standing up there living the dream. The school counselor had actually pulled him aside and sat him down to discuss his entry. They look at those things you know. To make sure no one does anything profane or says something they just don't like. Everyday censorship at its finest.

So the counselor told Russel he liked the emotion, that it was just very 'Russel'. It was going good, the counselor was telling Russel great things, buttering him up with compliments. And then came the 'but'.

"But, would you mind sending in another draft? One with a little less 'Russel' for the family's sake?"

It went as well as one would expect it to. Some cuss words here, some cuss words there, a dirty comment about the counselor's mother and then Russel found himself disqualified.

'Ah, oh well,' Russel thought to himself while he was being escorted out the main office and handed a pair of detention slips. 'At least it couldn't get any worse.' But then, they announced the 'winner' and that it was Marie-Anne.

Now Russel just had to do something to settle some bad blood once and for all.

Marie-Anne took her place behind the podium on stage. She extracted a sheet of paper from somewhere under her gown and held it to read from. The student body and the faculty, along with all their families gave her their undivided attention.

This was Marie-Anne's moment. Time to give the people a speech that was uplifting and hopeful for the future. Something that acknowledged that fear of the unknown but would empower those seated in front of her to do better than they would alone.

She took a moment to prepare herself. A deep breath and a quelling of her eyes to block out the hundreds of pairs of eyes that were watching her.

"Good afternoon, esteem faculty and families of my fellow graduates. It's an honor to be standing up here today." Marie-Anne spoke into the microphone. "I know we think we're immortal, we're supposed to feel that way. We're graduating. But like our brief time together, what makes life valuable is that it doesn't last forever."

Funny thing about Marie-Anne. Like most people with an aura, she had a semblance. That special unique ability only you'd get. Her semblance was 'super sight'. It was like she had telescopes for eye balls. They didn't pop out or anything like a how an actual telescope worked, she just had the ability to see farther than anyone else.

A rather lame semblance if you asked literally anyone else. But they had their practical applications in the field. But anyways, any good speaker didn't just read from a note card they had in front of them. Amongst great poise and possessing a great voice, a great speaker makes eye contact with their audience. It was a way to get them invested on a whole other level.

So Marie-Anne surveyed her classmates, looking over their faces and making eye contact with every one of them. And that's exactly what Russel was planning on. So when he felt those eyes of hers fall on him, the Thrush cap forward over his eyes, revealing a small message he'd stitched onto
it beforehand.

'Curious huh? What do the letters mean? Perhaps they form a message of some sort?' Russel thought in a mocking fashion.

Anyone else would've overlooked what Russel had done to his cap. But Marie-Anne couldn't because of her eyes. He'd caught her attention. So she reeled her vision back and read the phrase he'd so eloquently stitched to his cap.

And so, Russel sat back in his seat as he was treated to a show. He didn't have Marie-Anne's eyes, but he could see every moment of doubt on her face. Here she was, this student this aspirations, crumbling down bit by bit within. And he was the only one who could see it.

"But-But nothing lasts forever." Marie-Anne managed to get out. She staggered forward, that doubt in her head plaguing her. All because of two simple words.

All around faces twisted as they were put off by the message. What was supposed to be a last hurrah turned into sudden dread. The thing about being a great speaker? It's also about how you deliver the material. And now Marie-Anne was delivering it poorly.

"W-We, aspiring Huntsmen" She faltered once more, looking off into the crowd once more. "W-We kn-know this well." She stuttered. "But-t that's the price of life. A good death. One that we and we alone live."

"Thank you." Marie-Anne managed to say before quickly pulling away from the on stage podium.

There was a slight delay of applause amongst the crowd. Russel shrugged, guess they were expecting more. And there probably was, but they never would know, Marie-Anne had sipped right to the end to escape embarrassing herself further. So he was the first to start clapping, and soon others joined in. It should've been the entire assembled audience applauding, but it was barely even half.

'Merry firggin' Christmas, Russel.' Russel mentally patted himself on the back over a job well done.

After a speech by their valedictorian, and a noticeably louder applause, The Headmaster took the podium once more. The applause ceased and they began to call the students up row by row to receive their diploma.

When his time came, Russel followed his row up to the stage and reached the stairs. One by one their names were called until finally the Headmaster spoke his. So Russel walked up to the stage. He passed by his counselor and gave him a good look at his pearly whites. The counselor glared at Russel, he knew the boy had a hand in Marie-Anne's misstep. But he'd never be able to prove it.

Russel met the Headmaster who handed him his diploma. And with that, Russel raised it over his head. He'd officially graduated. The display earned a rally of applause from those family members who didn't know Russel. He walked off stage and proceeded through a sea of glares back to his seat.

Russel glanced upward on the way, spotting his Father sitting up in the bleachers to the right. Russel wondered what he was hoping to find, acknowledgement, pride? He found none of that in his father's eyes only that stone cold stare he'd known for seventeen years.

After the ceremony, the pair of Thrush's walked home. Russel had no one to say his goodbyes too.
He'd burned whatever friendships he had at Prom and wasn't looking back. The walk was one of silence. Occasionally, Russel would glance over to his Father, trying to read him and peer into his head.

But the older Thrush was just a stone faced man with a greying beard. He gave no indication to what sort of thoughts brewed within his head. The man didn't congratulate Russel or shower him with kind words. He just walked with his hands in his pockets.

They reached the walkway heading up to their home. Russel reached out for their gate, only for a voice to catch his attention. "Hey there you birds!" An older, milder voice called out to the Thrushes.

"I'll be in the house." The Thrush Patriarch muttered before taking off up the pathway to their house, abandoning Russel to deal with the old man making his way towards him.

Russel turned around, facing an old man way past his prime. Hegemony Marlowe was his name. And he was probably the closest thing to family Russel had. "How you doing Marlowe?" Russel waved to the man.

Marlowe was always that old farmer who lived next door. He was silver haired, not white, he had a little way to go before becoming useless. He walked with a cane and limp and often was hunched over.

Marlowe was a huntsman from another time just like the Thrush Patriarch, but more progressive in his farming. Marlowe actually owned several other farms around Oakwood. He'd always wave hello whenever he'd see Russel walking home and Russel would return the gesture. Sometimes they'd talk, other times they wouldn't. Guess this was one of those times where they talked.

"I heard you graduated. Congratulations." Marlowe spoke with an honest almost paternal tone. Russel would always find it was odd to hear positive reinforcement in that tone.

"Eh, it was nuthin'." Russel shrugged. It was a half-truth. While graduating itself was difficult in its own rite, what Russel really took away from the experience was him finally getting one over on Marie-Anne. But, it was better not to mention that to such a nice old man like Marlowe. He might just start thinking of him differently. "Whatcha up to old man?"

"Managing the business of course." Marlowe chuckled lightly as he eyed Russel's comment skeptically, not really buying Russel's comment. "Your Father must be proud."

Russel frowned slightly. "Eh, you know him." He shrugged, playing off the comment.

"With your days at Oakwood over, are you ready to take the next big step to becoming a Huntsman?" Marlowe inquired in a persuading tone.

Russel knew what the old man was implying. Beacon Academy was still accepting applications. His grades were solid, but his lack of an aura would be a deal breaker if he wished to attend. But the truth was, Russel didn't want to go. He'd just completed his course at Oakwood and was now on top of the world.

He didn't even need to go to Beacon. That was for those guys who wanted to make careers out of being Huntsmen. But truth is, Russel is a farmer. He'll always be a farmer just like anyone else in Oakwood.

"Farm until I die." Russel replied coolly. He removed his cap from his head and gently set it on one of his fence's posts.
"That's a shame." Marlowe frowned. "Barely anyone in Oakwood goes on."

"Well, what do you expect Marlowe?" Russel ran a hand through his recently shaved head. He could feel the mohawk sprouting down the center already. "This is it right? This is where retired hunters come to spend the rest of their days. I just skipped to the end."

"Shame." Marlowe sighed. The old man began to turn and walk away. "You'd have made a decent Huntsman."

They exchanged farewells and went their separate ways. Russel pushed open the gate, and walked up the path to his house. He entered whistling and found his dad hanging out around the kitchen. Feeling a tad bit puckish, Russel entered the kitchen, grabbing a candy bar out of a cabinet.

"So what're you gonna do now?" The elder Thrush asked aloud.

Russel looked over to his Father as he shed the blue gown. Beneath it, Russel wore his green sleeveless hoodie and white under shirt along with a pair of brown pants. It was an odd question to hear coming from his Father. The elder Thrush rarely ever took any interest in his son's affairs, his showing up for his graduation was just one of those few exceptions. It appeared the day was still young and there were more surprises to be had.

"Help around the farm as usual." Russel shrugged.

"Hmph." The elder Thrush scoffed.

"What?" Russel's eyes narrowed at his father.

"No one's gonna give you anything." His Father spoke lowly. "I keep telling you that. But you seem to never, and I mean never ever listen!" He shouted.

Russel stared at this Father as he continued to beret him. "Look at you, killer. You just graduated from Oakwood and now you're gonna be another shit shoveling farmer just like you've always been. You're hopeless dammit."

"Well what you want from me?!" Russel shouted angrily. "You sent me to Combat School and I graduated! It's over, finished! I did everything you asked of me and yet your, what, you're disappointed in me?"

"Were you expecting a gold star, Killer?" The Thrush Patriarch asked coldly. "For all those 'A's you kept getting', you still dumb as shit, killer."

"Quit calling me that?!" Russel shouted, his eyes slightly watering. "I'm not a killer!"

"Tell that to your Ma." That comment stopped Russel in his tracks. "That's right. You are a Killer. And you always will be."

After that it went as well as any of their other arguments went. Russel always said something his dad never liked. The Thrush patriarch would throw the first punch and then they'd fight, just like always.

It died down like it would. The older Thrush would find himself sitting in the kitchen, nursing a cold beer and Russel would end up back in his room. There were no attempts to seek forgiveness just like always. And that angered Russel.

Sitting by his desk, looking out his window longingly, the younger Thrush thought of all he'd
endured in the past 17 years of his life. What the actual hell was his malfunction? This wasn't how a normal father and son handled problems. No, but this was how they did it.

'This is your life, Russel ol' boy.' He internally mused. Russel glanced over to the contents of his desk. There was a handwritten copy of his graduation speech just sitting there. He reached out and snatched it up, quickly crumpling it and throwing it over to his trash can in the corner.

'Congratulations, you graduated.'

There was a light off in the distance. Russel opened the window and stuck his head out for a better look. Here was smoke rising up into the night air. A blaze was running through the neighboring farms.

Russel squinted and could make out figures in white standing around the blaze with torches. It didn't take Russel long to sum up what was going on.

"Dad!" Russel span around and raced out his room into the main hall of their house. "Dad!"

"What the hell you callin' me for?" Russel found the older Thrush firmly seated at the kitchen table, a cold beer in his right hand. "I ain't talkin' to you."

"Fire." Russel stated. There was a code amongst farmers. When another Farm was in trouble it was all hands on deck. Not even the Thrush Patriarchs foul mood would prevent him from his neighborly duty. "Someone's setting farms on fire."

The older Thrush looked up to his son, a serious look on his face. "Get me my sword." Russel nodded and exited the kitchen. The older Thrush stood up and took one last swig of his drink, emptying it and crushing the can.

"Here." The older Thrush felt a sudden shift in the air and could feel something being offered up to him. The Thrush Patriarch was expecting his son to be pulling that stupid gag where he presented his sword instead of his, only to find that it was the opposite.

Russel presented his Father the sword he crafted years ago, his 'Darkling'. "No time for jokes." Russel said, motioning for his father to take the sword.

There was a shimmer in his Father's eyes, one he'd never seen before. He'd seen hate, he'd seen drunken rage, and pitiful depression. But this was something else. If Russel didn't know the man any better, he could have sworn that was pride in his eyes.

"Right." The elder Thrush took his sword from his son's hands. "No time for jokes."

With that, the Thrushes gathered their gear and set out into the night.

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So, next chapter we're going to meet the White Fang! How about that?

I'm trying my best to add that layer of psychology to Russel. For the most part, I think I'm succeeding. I'm also trying my best with these OCs. Marlowe actually was inspired from reading 'Heart of Darkness'. But more on the dear old farmer later.

'Til next time dear reader. Later days!
Hello dear reader! Welcome back to the 4th chapter of 'The Darkling Thrush'!

It was beyond Oakwood where The White Fang were anything other than a combination of words. The same could be said of The Iron Nail. There were whispers of The Iron Nail and his deeds across Vale, usually passed on through a dying man's last breathe. Adam Taurus' Fist, as he was called.

The Iron Nail stood tall, bulky, and dressed in a white tunic with a hood along dark cargo pants. Standard issue White Fang garb. The White Fang hood was off and his snow white hair reflected the dancing flames and their light.

The Iron Nail wore his past on his arms. There were echoes of physical abuse on the scars running down his forearms. Untold battles were raged with his hands as not even the healing properties of one's aura could heal the damage to his crusted palms.

The Iron Nail crossed his arms over his chest and looked to those who followed him. His three associates were named as so: Troia, a faunus with antlers and wielded a mighty sword. Gregory, a faunus who had fangs and facial hair that resembled a wolf. He carried with him Mace with electricity buzzing around its pointy tips. And then there was Maulla, a faunus with a pig snout who carried with her an axe with fire dripping out of its sharp blade.

To The Iron Nails' back was once fruitful crops. Now all that remained was fire.

"It all burns." The Iron Nail spoke, his voice sounding like brick scraping against gravel. "All of it." With that, the White Fang set off with the rest of Oakwood and its many farms on their sights.

When Russel and his dad arrived, many of their neighbors were already hard at work attempting to squash the blaze. Their neighbors were rushing to douse the flames and prevent it from spreading.

The Thrushes caught sight of Marlowe, who owned this specific farm and rushed over. "Marlowe, what's going on?!" The Thrush Patriarch questioned.

Marlowe turned away from a pair of farmhands to meet with the Thrushes. "They came out of nowhere." Marlowe spoke in dismay. "They just started burning everything!"

"Who?" The Thrush elder inquired.

"It was The White Fang!" Marlowe cried. "Four of them just strolled in. Now their setting fire to our homes!"

"The White Fang. No…" The Thrush elder grimaced. "Where are they now?"
"Some of our neighbors ran on ahead to the Bluebottoms." Marlowe spun around with the help of his cane. He pointed to a house an acre away. "The White Fang headed that way."

"Russel let's go!" The Thrush Patriarch called out before sprinting in the direction of the Bluebottoms. The elder Thrush's movements were aura infused. No man could run that fast.

"But what about Marlowe's land?" Russel called out to his Father. But the distance between Father and Son was already too great. Russel's question fell on deaf ears.

"Go on boy, help your Father!" Marlow urged. "My farmhands and I can handle this. The White Fang need to be stopped before they do anymore damage!" As if on cue, the Bluebottom house hold burst into flames off in the distance. "Go!"

Russel nodded and took off after his Father.

"Why are you doing this?!!" Mrs. Bluebottom cried while she held her unconscious daughter in her arms. The Iron Nail turned away from the burning Bluebottom household to answer her question.

"We do this because you deserve it. All of you." He spoke soundly, carrying a commanding tone that froze Mrs. Bluebottom where she stood. "Not a single faunus farm hand around. Oakwood is a symbol of oppression that's plagued my kind for years. It needs to be torn down and rise a new!"

The Iron Nail stalked towards Mrs. Bluebottom. His massive shadow completely swallowing the farmer's wife. He rose his dagger and then brought it down, aiming to murder the woman where she stood.

But the fatal blow was intercepted. The Iron Nail rose his eyes as Mr. Bluebottom had appeared. It seemed The Iron Nail had forgotten, these just weren't farmers, these were Huntsman who also happened to be farmers.

The moment passed and The Iron Nail made sure not to let that small action be interpreted as a moral victory. The Iron Nail could not allow the people to believe they could win. So he powered on through and struck Mrs. Bluebottom with the butt of his dagger, knocking her over.

Mr. Bluebottom cried out for his wife and child. The Iron Nail then seized the opportunity to grab the farmer and smash him into the ground. With the Bluebottoms incapacitated, The Iron Nail set off. There was more work to be done.

The rest of The White Fang had already begun to set fire to the neighboring farmlands. The huntsman dwelling there began to pick up arms and take the fight against The White Fang. But they were too out of shape and too disorganized to muster a proper defensive. The White Fang just bowled right over them and continued to set fire to the land.

When Russel arrived at the Bluebottoms, he'd caught sight of the unconscious family and dragged them away from their burning farm. He left them in a barren wet field, lessening the chances of them being burned alive in their less than pleasant slumber.

Russel looked to his Father and stared in wonder. The man he'd known his entire life, the one with the disappointed expressions and unapologetic remarks was replaced by a man reveling in the fury of combat. A fire burned in the man's eyes. Seemingly with every strike and every clash, a piece of his cold exterior was chipped away.

This was what he was, Russel thought. This was what his Father was before him, before being a Father. Before all of this, the Thrush Patriarch was a Huntsman. It was something they never talked about. Those days when the man had faced countless dangers.
Never had Russel thought his Father missed the life. He'd retired and that was the end of it. But it seemed he'd been mistaken. He'd guessed wrong as every action his Father made disproved his assumptions.

The Thrush Patriarch had the White Fang member on the defensive. Troia just held the old Huntsman at bay, but he could feel his resolve weakening. One look at into the man's eyes told a story about a man who'd lost the world but he was still there. The soul of a soldier still lived in that greying body and it was clawing its way out.

Russel followed his Father's example and charged one of The White Fang. At least he was hoping it was a member of The White Fang, they all dressed the same right?

So Russel charged at The Iron Nail with his back turned and swung. Russel's actions did not go unnoticed. The Iron Nail activated his semblance, coating his body with a metal layer. Russel's blade simply broke to pieces against The Iron Nail's metallic flesh.

"Hmph. Human." The Iron Nail muttered before backhanding Russel away, knocking him several feet away from where he stood. Russel rolled passed fire and was forced to raise his hands to protect himself from the full onslaught of the blaze. Eventually Russel came to a halt, landing on a piece of shattered wood, which tore at his side, causing him to yell in pain.

The Thrush Patriarch, in all the excitement turned away, spotting his son on the ground clutching his side. But the elder Thrush couldn't worry about that, not just yet. He had the White Fang right where he wanted him. So the elder Thrush swung at Troia and smacked his sword against his clothed arm.

Troia's aura took the brunt of the blow, but the force knocked Troia off his feet and to the ground. The elder Thrush prepared to deliver a killing blow. But then everything stopped. His left arm grew numb and his chest began to pain.

The Thrush Patriarch fell to the ground, his sword falling to his side. The man came to lay on his back, his eyes wide open and staring up at the night sky while he clutched his chest. Beads of sweat ran down his forehead while his vision played tricks on him. That pounding in his chest was erratic and the thumping burned through his ears.

Troia took the opportunity to get back onto his feet and run away, leaving the man who'd bested him to his sudden heart attack. "Where've you been?" Maulla inquired somewhat playfully.

"Oh don't start with me." Troia said angrily.

"Enough." The Iron Nail spoke loudly. The four White Fang members gathered together. The Iron Nail pointed out into the distance to an untouched farm. The Thrush farm. "The night is young. We have work to do."

"Dad?!" Russel shouted. The younger Thrush picked himself up off the ground and took off to be by his Father's side.

"I see her." The elder Thrush spoke meekly. Russel just held the man while he cried. His greying beard was now dripping sweat and tears. "I see her." The Thrush Patriarch pulled his right arm away from his chest and reached out into the sky, as if attempting to grab ahold of something that wasn't there.

"Someone help!" Russel shouted. But help would not be coming for the Thrushes. Farmers ran by, still attempting to douse the flames. Not too far out, those few farmers who still thought themselves
Huntsmen were falling to the White Fang. It was just them, as it always was, Father and Son.

"No one's going to give you anything." The Thrush Patriarch spoke weakly. "But you know this already…"

"Dad…"

"You have your Mother's eyes…" The elder Thrush said. With one final breath, the life in the man's eyes died. The flow of tears ceased and his arm fell limp, collapsing to the ground.

Russel looked down into his Father's lifeless eyes. His brain was a mixed bag of emotions and incomplete thoughts. Maybe it was just shock, Russel had never really watched anyone die before. Maybe it was the realization that the flame the shone bright this evening was gone, leaving behind those vacant eyes that looked after him since birth. His father had been a walking corpse his entire life and he'd never known it.

In these instances the loved one would weep endlessly, but Russel just couldn't find it in him to act in such a manner. That was something Russel was good at now wasn't he? No one would give you anything, that's what his Father had told him. Not even tears.

The world came crashing down around Russel. A thousand thoughts, voices and noises cluttered his head. The people, his neighbors were crying out for help as the fires raged. Those who stood in the White Fang's path were quickly trampled over and lay in the dirt, not just yet a part of it, however.

Russel could hear the fires flapping in the wind. He could feel the heat radiating against his exposed skin, cooking him alive. The farmers were watching their hard work go up in flames. The land that nourished their crops was burning. The lifeblood of Oakwood was dying.

And that made Russel angry.

Against the raging heat, Russel's entire body began to glow. An outward extension of his soul, his body was enveloped by aura. Russel pulled his arms away from holding his Father to get a good look at the physical changes his aura was making to his body.

He'd been lectured time and time again back in the academy that an aura had the power to heal minor wounds. He stared down at his burned hands and the bloodied gash on his side. He cleared his mind of any ill thoughts and just concentrated. His aura did as it was commanded and got to work.

Before Russel's eyes, his burns were gone and his gash was no more. He felt slightly dizzy. Aura was still a new thing to him after all. It would take a bit longer for him to master this new skill of his. But for the time being, he had to put that aside. The young Thrush, now the last, looked back down to his Father's body. Russel reached out and shut his eyes. After all those years, now finally he'd know peace.

But was it his Father knowing peace or himself? That would be a debate of itself for another day. So Russel stood up. Taking in the horror of what he saw through new eyes. He'd never heard from anyone in his class about dizzy spells or clouded vision after unlocking their auras. Maybe this was his semblance? Whatever that turned out to be.

Russel set his eyes far off into the distance. He could see white outfits reflecting off light in the distance back by his own home, his own farm. No doubt these White Fang aimed to set fire to his home next. And Russel just couldn't allow that.
So Russel reached down and picked up his Father's sword, the original 'Darkling', and set off with newfound speed to meet the enemy.

The White Fang quickly got to work. The Thrush barn was the first to be engulfed by flames. Maulla's fire spewing axe did all the heavy lifting while the others just stood and admired her handy work.

"Good work, Maulla." The Iron Nail congratulated his subordinate. "Now to the fields."

"Hey assholes!" All but The Iron Nail spun around, causing the senior member to sigh at how easily they trio accepted being referred to by the term. The Iron Nail followed their gazes, finding Russel sprinting towards them with is Father's sword in hand.

"Get away from my property!" Russel shouted angrily. To be honest, he'd never run this fast before. If it wasn't for the fact he had to fight four heavily armed terrorists, he'd just run right by them and see how far he could go before growing tired.

But alas, maybe later. So Russel leapt into the air and swung at Troia. But even with his new found speed, Troia was faster than him. The White Fang blocked his attack with relative ease and then kicked Russel while he was still he was still in the air, sending him flying through the wheat field.

Russel didn't have the chance to gather his bearings as The White Fang were already upon him.

"Tryin' to be a hero little man?" Troia laughed mockingly. He and the rest of the White Fang, aside from The Iron Nail, began to encircle Russel. They each rose their respective weapons and prepared to trade blows with the young man.

Russel took another swing at them, only to be intercepted by The Iron Nail. The larger man grabbed Russel with one hand and started charging into the woods that surrounded the Thrush farm. The Iron Nail then promptly began to charge Russel through trees like a battering ram. After using Russel for deforestation, The Iron Nail, with all his might, spun the younger Thrush and flung him into the woods.

Russel was sent flying through a tree. If he hadn't just unlocked his aura, without a doubt he'd never walk again. But with the aura, it felt more like the first time he'd ever been punched by his dad. Both unexpected and painful. Russel kept on flying, eventually soaring into darkness.

It was all downhill from there, quite literally actually. Russel went tumbling downward into a cave, eventually coming to a full stop. The Thrush groaned. Aura was finite and the beatings he'd endured through the night would surely have depleted it by now. So now Russel laid in the darkness of the cave. Staring upward, not sure how to proceed.

He'd tried and he'd tried, but nothing he did was good enough. The White Fang were stronger than him. Their weapons were beyond anything he could imagine and their skills were lightyears ahead of his. Oakwood and its people were doomed. And there was nothing Russel could do. Russel just closed his eyes in shame.

He was no Huntsman. He was Farmer who couldn't protect his home. He couldn't help his neighbors. What use was he?

Roar.

Russel opened his eyes at the sound. It was all too familiar to him by now. There was no room for speculation or doubt. He sat up, fighting against the pain and found himself face to face with a creature of Grimm. The Ursa.
The white head of the Ursa clashed with the darkness of the cave while its glowing red eyes stared into Russel's. It was trying to pierce into his soul, trying to gleam fear from the darkest pits of his soul. It wanted its meal afraid before it killed him. Lost in the Ursas red eyes, Russel couldn't help what he saw. He was staring back at himself.

Russel didn't have to blink. He just realized he was back there in the forest. He was nine again. His back up against a figurative wall and a literal tree. He was staring back into the eyes of death. The Ursas was just as large as the one he'd encountered back then. His senses blocked out that scent of burning dreams and replaced it in his mind with the smell of fall leaves.

Everything was as it was in his head. It was night no longer but day. The Ursas was staring back at him, getting ready to strike. But unlike before, Russel's Father would not be coming to save him.

Was there fear in his eyes the? Back way then when he was a kid. Was there fear in his eyes now? Did it matter that he was afraid? Did the Grimm understand such concepts such as fear? Or maybe it didn't need to understand, it just recognized fear as something tangible and a worthwhile delicacy.

These Grimm, they were these soulless creatures, not animals. At least that's how Russel reasoned it. Animals possessed an understanding of emotions. Grimm could never understand such things nor could they exhibit such qualities. Grimm were said to be apparitions, dark spirits that possessed animals.

But you couldn't kill a spirit, could you? But you could kill the body. Wasn't that why the Grimm disintegrated after they were cut down? Those animals, subjected to unimaginable horrors. Their bodies mangled and mutated, turned inside out until it was no longer its own, a vessel for a wicked spirit. The body would die and the spirit would go on, no doubt to find another link to the physical world.

"It's you isn't it?" Russel cracked a bloody smirk. Crimson rivers flowed out of his mouth and onto his chin before dripping down onto his clothes. "It's you from all those years ago?" He laughed.

"Well what are you waiting for?" He questioned. The last they'd seen of each other, this spirit had aimed to kill him as a young boy, but now he just stared at him, unmoving. "Go on, isn't this what you wanted?" Russel glared into its eyes.

There was something off about the Ursas eyes. Something Russel couldn't pin down. So he peered deeper into the glowing red void. And then he saw it. "You're scared." Russel's smirk evolved into a full blown shit eating grin, revealing his blood stained pearly whites. "You're scared!"

Russel shot up onto his feet, startling the Ursa. "You recognize me don't you?!" Russel broke out laughing. "Oh woe is you, the poor Ursas. You terrible thing of darkness, you're afraid of me?! Ha!" Russel shouted.

And he was right. He could see it, the Ursa was backing up, and it was quivering. "Ha!" Russel devolved into a manic cackle.

"I think I heard laughter in there!" A voice shouted.

The White Fang would be coming soon. They couldn't let him live. There was that primal urge deep down that everyone felt. Russel had offended them and they couldn't just let that go.

He could hear them. Four pairs of feet stomping their way into the darkened cave. With no aura and no weapon, Russel would surely perish in this next confrontation. But despite the rather grim
outlook, Russel still had his brain.

He looked to the Ursa once more. It had been staring at him the entire time, debating what to do. But it wouldn't have to debate any longer. Russel had decided for it. Primal instincts, if a creature felt threatened it was given two choices, fight or flight.

So Russel reeled back his right arm and with all his might swung at the Ursa, bashing his fist against its head. At first, it looked like it didn't know what to think. Russel had just decked an Ursa, no aura no weapon. Just him and his fist.

"Come on you bastard." Russel spoke smugly. "Fight me."

And then, those glowing red eyes began to shine brighter. The Ursa was seeing red.

The White Fang stomped through the cave, their weapons in hand. They walked with Troia at the front, Maulla and Gregory covering each of his sides and The Iron Nail covering the rear with his unsheathed twin dust daggers.

"He should be in here." Troia muttered.

"Maybe you aren't as good at tracking as you thought." Maulla remarked.

"You saw that tree, you saw the impact crater in the dirt." Troia said defensively. "He smashed through and hit the ground. He had to have bounced and rolled in here. I didn't see any tracks. He couldn't have walked away. And I sure as hell didn't see anything indicating he'd dragged himself away either."

"Both of you, cease your prattle." The Iron Nail barked. "Be on your guard. A living enemy is a dangerous enemy."

"Who knows," Troia spared a glance over his shoulder. "Maybe he died on impact. He bounced right?"

"Now that wouldn't be any fun." Gregory murmured.

The four White Fang members snapped to attention. They could hear a pair of feet running at them. "Scuse me! Pardon me!" Russel shouted as he ran by the White Fang, dodging their attempts to cut him down with their various weapons. The Iron Nail simply let him run past. He liked to play with his quarry before he gutted it of course.

"After him!" Troia shouted, spinning around and shoving his sword into the air.

The rest of them began to spin around in order to give chase after Russel. But then came the roar. There was the distinct noise of claw cutting through flesh followed by the sickening sound of a head flying off shoulders and rolling aside.

The remaining three White Fang spun around to discover an Ursa standing over Troia's body. Blood was pooling at its feet. Its eyes were glowing intensely, more so than it should. The Iron Nail quickly put two and two together. Russel had pissed it off and now it was just killing everything in a blind fury.

Maulla attempted to activate her axe's secondary weapon feature, only for the Ursa to strike at her, slashing through her throat with ease. Before Maulla could even fall over, the Ursa was already atop Gregory, beating the man down with its claws, impaling him severely.
The Iron Nail raised his daggers to fight, only to realize how futile the situation was. He spun around and prepared to flee. The best his comrades could do now was provide the man the opportunity to escape. So that's what he did. The Iron Nail took off running, his fellow faunus' cries falling on deaf ears.

The cave drew silent. All that could be heard were the echoes of footsteps. The Iron Nail ran out the exit. But the man was caught unaware by Russel, who'd perched himself above the cave entrance. Russel leapt down into a kick, connecting against The Iron Nail's jaw.

"Muth-r-fauckr!" The Iron nail managed to say. Russel had dislocated the man's jaw with that kick. But it was nothing his aura couldn't fix. He just needed some time. But, until then, he was gonna gut the farm boy standing in front of him. "Ahmm gunne kuet thagt mug luk ov yur face." The Iron Nail activated his semblance, coating his skin in metal. He rose his twin daggers and prepared to make good on his threat.

Russel cracked a smile and pointed forward. "Don't none of you know not to turn your back on an enemy?"

The Iron Nail spared a look over his shoulder. His eyes widened as he found the Ursa standing behind him.

"Let me tell you, scary White Fang dude, I know Ursa." Russel spoke aloud as The Iron Nail was tackled by the Ursa. "The damn things are typically slow. But that sorry Yogi isn't like all the others now is he? They usually travel in pairs of two, but he's all by his lonesome. He's faster, stronger. He's a hunter. You're its prey."

The Iron Nail was trounced by the Ursa, knocking his daggers out of his hands and sending them flying. The daggers found themselves imbedded into the soil by Russel's feet. Russel paid no attention to The Iron Nail's cries as he attempted to fight the Ursa off bare handed. Russel was too busy plucking the daggers out of the ground.

Russel took each blade into each hand and weighed them. He tested them with a swing and couldn't help but admire how they each cut through the air. Russel looked back to The Iron nail and The Ursa. The Ursa, with all it's might bit down into The Iron Nail's arm, bursting through the metal covering his arm and lifted him into the air. With little to no effort, the Ursa flung The Iron Nail back into the darkness of the cave.

The Ursa spared a look back over to Russel and glared, its eyes still glowing intensely. But Russel stood his ground. He wasn't afraid of the Ursa. At least not that Ursa. There was no way the Ursa, or rather the dark spirit that possessed it could recognize Russel. He was just a kid on that fateful day.

But he'd grown up since then. Russel may have his mother's eyes but he was his Father's son. The man who killed the Ursa in its previous body. So the Ursa snorted, almost like an insult directed at Russel. Yeah, it could kill him, but it wouldn't. It couldn't. Because it was afraid. Even if it couldn't admit it.

"Stupid animal." Russel scoffed. "Couldn't even tell the difference." Russel remarked as he turned around and began to walk away, carrying with him on his shoulders two brand new daggers he was all too happy to have.

As he walked out of the forest, one of the trees he'd been rammed through this evening caught his eye. Russel approached the fallen oak tree. On its side, Russel could make out the carving he'd left in it all those years ago.
'Russel Thrush Was Here' it read.

"Damn right." He muttered before sauntering off.

So this story arc is drawing to a close. I honestly hope this met everyone's expectations.

The fight scenes are meant to portray Russel as a pretty crappy fighter, as up until now he's never had an Aura. I might have taken a leap with the Ursa at the end. But I just found it intriguing, the whole idea around the Grimm being animals possessed by spirits. I just attributed that with Until Dawn and the wendigos.

I took some liberties with the OC The Iron Nail. I just thought that would be an interesting idea for where Russel got his weapons from. It also opens up all sorts of story potential when we get to Beacon. And The Iron Nail character might show up again, I'm not sure. I lie to go by the rule of, unless you see a body then he isn't dead. So, it all depends on where the story is headed.

I hope you liked this chapter. Next we'll be doing some clean up to set up Russel heading off to Beacon. After that I might do an interlude revolving around either Sky or Cardin. I'm not sure yet. I'm playing with the idea myself right now.

Well, until next time, dearest reader. Later Days!
So they all ended up in Marlowe's barn.

A good amount of neighbors and shop keeps were there in attendance. All had gathered to pay their respect for the man who'd died. It had been a week since that night and Oakwood was still reeling from the events that transpired. Whole farms were barren and ash.

The people who lived there were displaced, rooming with kind and gentle souls who were willing to come to their aid. The Bluebottoms were one of the many who'd sold their land. They didn't want to raise a child in Oakwood, not after what happened.

One by one the men and women who knew Russel's Father got up to the podium to speak. They all shared stories, recanting those moments where the man most affect their lives. Mr. Bluebottom spoke of a time when the Thrush Patriarch had aided him in wrangling up his escaped lived stock.

Mr. Cherri told a story of how they'd all gone down to drink at the local watering hole. How some drifter in a drunken frenzy started harassing the regulars. Russel's old man had walked right up to the drifter and tossed him through a window.

It was difficult for Russel. His relationship with his Father was complicated and he didn't know whether or not he was going to miss him. Was it bad of him to think such a thing? Was he supposed to be crying or was he supposed to be smiling? The lone Thrush felt a myriad of emotions. He felt sad. He felt angry.

The Marlowe took the stage. The old man was someone they all knew. Even after the damage his property had endured, he opened his home and held the service. Not because he was asked to, but because he wanted to.

And then Marlowe spoke about Russel's Father. They'd been neighbors for years. It was only Marlowe's sentiment that seemed genuine to the young Thrush. It was like a walk down memory lane, narrated by his kind voice.

"...was a Huntsman and a Farmer." Marlowe said. "He was my neighbor. He was my friend. He will be missed."

Then Marlowe called for Russel to take the podium and say a few words. It was like his body was on auto pilot. Then next thing Russel knew he was standing behind the podium, overlooking the gathered.

The hell was he supposed to say? He never knew the man they all described in their stories. They
all spoke of Russel's Father as some righteous individual who made the right move when the moment called for it. He'd only seen that man once, only once. And that was on the night he died.

"I don't know what to say" Russel spoke wearily.

"Just say what you feel, Russel." Marlowe said with that elderly tone of his, the one that just made you want to live up to whatever example he would set. Marlowe stepped off the stage with the help of his cane and took a seat at the front row.

Russel looked to the crowd. There were those who were crying, there were those trying their best to look sympathetic.

It was up there Russel realized there was nothing wrong with him. Just another look at the assembled audience was enough to make him sick. He looked to Marlowe, sitting there in the front row, looking to him like a caring grandpa.

"Just speak from your heart, Russel." Marlowe said.

So Russel turned to look at these 'mourners'. He could see Marie-Anne in the back row, along with many other farmers' children. She probably was studying every one of his features with that damn semblance of hers, just to figure out what he was going to next.

"I...I'm not good at communicating." Russel spoke softly, looking around and making eye contact with those in attendance like a good speaker would. "Those of you who know me, actually know me, not heard of me would know that."

"But that's just it isn't it? None of you really know me. You didn't really know my old man either." Russel spoke resentfully. "I mean, I are we talking about the same man? He helped you catch live stock? He beat up a drifter for causing problems?"

Russel was laughing. The audience's sympathetic looks were replaced with ones of offense. "My dad was a drunk. The most lively I'd seen him in all my years living was whenever he got to hit something."

"I don't believe for a second you actually cared about him. I don't believe any of you miss him." Russel threw his arms up slightly, only to let them fall. "He did stuff for you, sure. But that doesn't mean you actually liked him. You probably even hated him. Enough is enough. Leave. Just leave."

Russel pointed at the door.

Entire aisles were soon vacant. One by one those in attendance began to file out of the barn. Russel just watched as they all left. He could hear them murmuring, talking amongst themselves. They were trying to vindicate themselves of that guilt they felt for not missing the dead man.

When it was all over, it was just Russel and Marlowe. Russel looked over to Marlowe, half expecting to find disappointment in those eyes of his. He wasn't exactly wrong. Marlowe sat there with a look of disappointment, but there was something else there. In his Marlowe's eyes was understanding.

"When I said speak from your heart, I didn't expect to get the uncensored version." Marlowe said jokingly.

Russel just stared down at the podium where his arms now rested. "I'm not sorry." Russel muttered.

"You don't have to be, I guess." Marlowe shrugged.
After that, Russel and a few of Marlowe's farm hands marched up a hill in Oakwood's cemetery. They trudged up hill and eventually stopped by a recently dug up hole. The grave stone was already in place.

Russel didn't know why he'd gotten a plot on a hill. Maybe it was to discourage him from visiting. Or maybe it was to give the old man a nice view. They set the casket down into the freshly dug hole. With that, the farmhands left, their job was done. The groundskeepers stood ready with shovels to fill in the hole.

"Can I have a minute?" Russel asked. The pair of ground keeps nodded. This wasn't the first time they'd buried a body. There was always that one guy who needed that last moment to speak. It was nothing new to them.

Russel peered down into the open hole, down at the casket. "Hey dad." Russel muttered. "I doubt you would've approved of how I handled that earlier. But I also think you wouldn't have given a shit."

Russel just stared down the hole. His eyes narrowed and he frowned. It was like he could hear his father's voice. 'Ain't nobody gonna give you anything, Killer.' Was Russel seriously expecting to find solace?

"Catch you later Dad." Russel said before turning away. He looked to the groundskeepers and gave them the thumbs up. "We're done here."

Russel made the walk down the steep hill. He could hear the sounds of shovels stabbing into dirt and the fluid motion of tossing said dirt into a six foot deep hole.

It was later in the afternoon. Russel was sitting in the living room, going over a list of things to do. Russel was now the youngest farm owner in Oakwood. He was on his own now. On the list was a number of chores he and his dad divided amongst themselves.

Russel was soon lost in thought, anxiety creeping up at him as the new responsibility of managing the farm full time weighed down on him. Thankfully, he was shaken out of his thoughts by a knock at the door.

The young man sat up off the recliner chair and approached the wooden front door. He unlocked the door and pulled it open only slightly. For all Russel knew it could be one of those so called 'mourners' drunk off their ass and looking to get even with him.

"Mind if I come in?" Russel found not a drunk but Marlowe, standing there on the doormat with a gentle smile. Russel opened the door fully, admitting the man entry. Marlowe kicked off his boots and stepped through the doorway. This action earn an odd look from Russel. "Showing my respect to the household."

"What's up?" Russel asked, closing the door.

"Just wanted to check up on you. After today, you're probably not feeling right as rain." Marlowe said as they walked into the living room.

"Something to drink?" Russel pointed a thumb at the kitchen.

"Oh no thank you, I don't think I'll be long." Marlowe declined. Marlowe took a seat on the living room couch. The old man's eyes wandered to the coffee table and the stack of papers that rested on
"I see you're getting your affairs in order."

"I have to." Russel sighed. He took a seat opposite from Marlowe on the recliner. "The farms still capable of producing. I just need to meet with demand and keep up with our contracts."

"All by your lonesome?" Marlowe spoke in a humorous tone.

"What are you really here for Marlowe?" Russel asked, not really in the mood for games.

"I want to buy your farm." Marlowe answered simply. "I bought out the Bluebottom's and I want to buy yours."

"What?" Russel recoiled in surprise. "Why?"

"Because you're a young man in way over your head." Marlowe sighed. "You've got your whole life ahead of you Russel. You shouldn't be bogged down in a dead end farm job."

"I'm just making you an offer." Marlowe said, setting the matter straight. "You can even set the price. I've got enough banked from all my years of managing farms and days as a Huntsman."

"Marlowe…I don't know what to say." Russel found himself staring at the floor.

"You don't have to give me an answer. I just hope you'll think about the offer. Would you do that for me?" The old man stood up from where he was seated. "Now would you mind escorting a shriveled up old bag like me out the door?"

After seeing Marlowe out, Russel made his way to the kitchen. He hadn't been eating regularly. And for that he was kicking himself in the ass. So he wandered into the kitchen and dug into the fridge.

He made himself a simple sandwich. He hadn't purchased any groceries in the past week. He lacked the means to prepare a proper meal. So Russel sat down at the kitchen table and ate his sandwich.

There was a stack of papers on the table. His Father's things. He actually hadn't gone through all of his stuff yet. It seemed unnatural to Russel, to disturb his Father's things. But he began to sift through the stack of papers. He might as well start out small before moving onto the stuff in his dad's room.

Amongst the stack was an entrance application for Beacon Academy. Russel leaned back in his seat and studied the application. He thought back to when his Father and he last spoke, right after Graduation. He'd asked him about his plans. Russel had told him he wanted to be a farmer.

His Father had one of his outbursts, it was the usual routine. But that time was different. It soon dawned on Russel that his Father was hoping for him to want to continue on and become a full-fledged Huntsman. The form was proof enough.

'No one's going to give you anything.' Russel heard his Father's voice.

"Take the initiative you jackass." Russel said aloud as a means to talk himself into it. "Just go."

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*From the Desk of Russel Thrush*
Graduation Speech Entry

Dear, family and friends. My fellow students and 'good enough' faculty. This is the part where I'm supposed to tell you that the future's bright and we're all going to be fine. That's what you'd like to hear, but it's not what I'm going to say.

Russel made his way to the bus station. He bought his ticket and sat at a bench, waiting for bus to Vale. Seeing as he had time on his hands, Russel got to work double checking his duffel bag. He'd only taken the essentials the rest were sold.

On hand, Russel had only four pairs of pants, ten shirts, twelve pairs of boxers, nine pairs of socks, a spare green hoodie, his laptop, cash, the twin daggers and his Beacon acceptance paper.

Time flies as the next thing Russel knew he was on the bus, outbound to his destination. He peered out the window, watching Oakwood fly past him. This was i

The biggest misconception in life is that we believe we're owed a happily ever after. The truth is we aren’t owed anything.

Nobody is going to give you anything.

Hegemony Marlowe arrived home that afternoon. He'd just given Russel a lift to the

"I see you've gotten rid of the boy." A gravelly brickish voice called out to Marlowe.

Marlowe turned and glanced to a darkened corner of his living room. There, in the recliner he'd purchased from Russel, sat The Iron Nail. "I did a better job than your lot did." The Iron Nail just glared at Marlowe. The tension in the room could be cut with a butter knife. "Tell your superior thank you for his cooperation."

"Just keep your end of the deal." The Iron Nail said threateningly.

Marlowe chuckled. "I will."

Fight as you may. Rail against society and its constructs. Dems the breaks.

Don't consider these words to be the only exception. Because there aren't any. Call it pity, call it some lonely prick's vain attempt to reach out and interact with the outside world.

When Russel arrived in Vale, he'd found the city lights mesmerizing. He got off the bus and found himself a hotel. For the time being, the cheap Inn he'd be staying at was home. He took the opportunity to get acquainted with the new town.

Vale was a melting pot. Here he was the guy from the small town, seeing humans and faunus interact in more peaceful instances. Russel took in the sights. He managed to get into a night club with a fake ID he purchased from some guy named 'Kevin' in an alley.

Of course he had to clear out. Some blonde bombshell had decided to pick a fight with the club owner.

These are just words I wish someone would tell me.

We don't get happy endings. We make them.
The day finally arrived. Class was finally in session.

Russel boarded an airship to Beacon and stood at the back by a window. He just had to take it in. There was this sense of wonder. He'd never been this high up in the sky before.

'Suck it gravity'. Russel mused.

There would be trials ahead of him. Russel was no longer in that small pond, he was here with the heavy hitters, those who would be Huntsmen someday. And excited him.

"Blugh!" The sound of a man throwing up filled the room. Russel turned away from the window and attempted to peer through the mob of people.

"Oh Yang, gross! You have puke on your shoe!"

"Gross, gross, gross, gross, gross, gross…!"

"Get away, get away, get away from me!"

You aren't here for a reason. You're here because you just are. What you do with that is up to you. It's all you can ask for.

Now go make something of yourself.

And so ends the first arc of 'The Darkling Thrush'. I'm not sure this chapter is up to par with the last one.

When I originally began writing this, I only planned for 5 chapters. It book ends nicely I think. I tie up all the little storylines I've been seeding up until this point.

But since then my plans have evolved. And I hope to you'll all stick around for those plans in the future.

The next update will be an 'Interlude'. There'll be an interlude after each arc as a sort of buffer.

Well, until next time. And the time after that. Later Days Dear Reader.
Good Evening Dear Reader! Welcome to the first Interlude chapter of 'The Darkling Thrush'.

The Russel Speech was something short but also supposed to be a slap on the face sort of thing. But a Romance for Russel? I've considered it, but if there was going to be one, it would be with a minor character.

Well enough of me talking. On with the show.

Winchester

One of the final battles the Valean Guard took part in was The Stand Still of Cape Groad. Surrounded by bodies of water on each side, Cape Groad connected the city of Tungsten to the sandy nation of Vaccuo. What amazed the Valean Guard was that the attack had not come sooner. It was all quiet on the Western Front.

Whole battalions of Huntsmen turned soldiers marched along the killing road. The city of Tungsten was under siege. The City Defenders were stomped over and blood flew across the sky taking form into a red bird.

Thus birth the Cardinal.

Roman Winchester, a mere Sergeant at the time, with no notable acts to his name, rallied his broken men. If Tungsten would fall, Vaccuo and its people would sweep through Vale and the war would be lost.

For months, the Winchester and his men braved volley upon volley of cannon fire. A wall of lead swept through the air, cutting down those too stupid or too slow to duck. With precious dust running low and their numbers dwindling, Roman and his men raised their weapons for the final push.

The blood bath would not come however. As Roman and his men waited for death, so did the enemy. Those from Vaccuo sat in their trenches surrounding Tungsten, or rather what was left of it. They too had run out dust. So they all just waited for someone to make the next move.

But it never came. In those final days, those final hours, the countries of Remnant gathered on the Island of Vytal and hashed out treaty.

When news reached Tungsten's defenders, Roman marched out the ruined city, past the decimated homes and the streets of ash. He met those he'd fought at Cape Groad alone. In an act that shocked the Vaccuans, it had appeared that Roman had held them off all on his own.

The superior officer, a man named Cesare Violette met Roman and shook his hand. In the name of peace, there would be no more bloodshed. So Violette took his men and marched on home, leaving behind those who had fallen in the trenches.

And Roman returned back where he'd come, amongst the corpse of a city. Where there had once
been children laughing in the streets and the smell of freshly baked bread in the air, all that remained was the smell of burnt dreams and echoing sounds of screams.

Roman Winchester walked away a war hero. A man who'd taken a stand against unbeatable odds and held back defeat. Roman retired after serving two years on retainer. He'd gone where no man dared to and walked away with scrapes and bruises.

Ozpin set up Beacon during those days of peace. The world had gotten too mixed up with politics that they'd forgotten the true enemy of humanity. The Grimm. As a favor to his old mentor, Roman took up teaching.

The looks on those aspiring faces, those young men and women who wanted to be Huntsmen just like him. But Roman couldn't look them in the eyes most days. Roman had good days when he could stand up straight and educate his pupils. Other days weren't so good.

Roman quit teaching after a year or two. It just wasn't working out.

He dug into the money he'd saved up and invested in Vale's future. Rebuilding infrastructure of the country was a top priority that had gone unattended after the ruling government was reformed.

During a drunken night out in the city tavern, the old veterans and Roman got to thinking of what to call the new capitol. They could never remember who coined the name. But so was birthed Vale. The city within Vale.

Roman would marry eventually. A nice innkeeper who wasn't too set in her ways. They had a pair of kids Richfield and Margery Winchester. Having invested in Vale, the city he'd been kind to return the favor and returned his money tenfold.

When Roman died, twenty years after peace, he left the Winchesters off with more than he had.

And so is story of the Hero of The Stand Still of Cape Groad. His Great Grandson would hear tales of Roman's exploits and aspire to be something great just like him.

And so, now, Cardin Winchester awaits to join Beacon Academy. The place where his Great Grandfather once taught.

This one went through several revisions. I knew I wanted to write an interlude about Cardin, but then I considered the role he'll be playing throughout the story. He's the second protagonist, we'll be spending a lot of time with him. So that left me with trying to figure out how do I tell a small Cardin story that won't make it repetitive further down the line.

I went through talking about Northern Cardinals to maybe writing Cardin in what is considered to be juvie in RWBY. Cardin designed to be a bully character, but his character design tells a different story. He's well off, he's covered head to toe in armor with gold trim. That's pricey material. So he's got a background and I bet his family would have ties to the country of Vale as a whole. So this just made sense.

Anyways, I hope you liked this. Not all Interlude stories will be following this format. I'll update this story in a bit hopefully. 'Til then. Later days!
VI: Welcome to Beacon: Part 1

Oi! How you lot doing? Welcome to the sixth chapter of 'The Darkling Thrush'! The last one doesn't count. That's an interlude silly.

So this chapter begins the second arc. The Welcome to Beacon arc. Relax, grab a drink and let the fun begin dear reader.

VI

Welcome to Beacon: Part 1

If one were to look Russel dead in the eye upon arriving at Beacon, you could've seen the child-like wonder twinkling in his irises. It was like one of those dreams where the airship rose amongst the clouds. It was tempting to stick a hand out a window and see if he could scoop up a cloud and see if he could eat it like cotton candy.

The airship touched down and out the students walked. There were those, namely a blonde haired fellow in jeans and partial armor running to a trash can to deposit this morning's breakfast and then there were others who shared in Russel's amazement.

Down Main Avenue Russel walked. Occasionally he'd glance over his shoulder to the cliff side. He debated running back over for a better look. Not every day one finds such a great view. But Russel wasn't some tourist or a family member visiting. He was there to stay at Beacon. He could always just take a look some other day.

Russel toted his duffel bag over his shoulder and made his way to the statue at the front of the campus. With any luck there would be a directory off to the side somewhere. To be honest, Russel was half expecting pamphlets of some kind to be handed out on the airship, the kind with maps and other need to know information.

With a casual look around, Russel found he wasn't the only one now suddenly realizing how ill prepared they were. A group of students were congregating at the statue, as it was the foremost notable landmark. Some were asking questions, others were just standing around, hiding the anxiety that was slowly building inside.

"Anyone know where we're supposed to be heading now?" Some tall burnt orange haired schmuck in silver armor with gold trim asked to no one specific. He looked to those around him, only finding murmured answers to inaudible to make out and shrugs of indifference.

The orange haired fellow frowned at what he saw as incompetence. "You're all hopeless." He muttered before walking away. Maybe if he walked around and took in the surroundings and actually saw the campus, he might just find an official he could ask.

"Speak for yourself Annoying Orange." The tall orange haired young man glanced to side, finding Russel approaching him with an unimpressed look on his face. "You're just as lost as the rest of us.
"Take that stick out of your ass and relax."

"What did you say to me?" The tall young man turned his body fully to face Russel, revealing his family crest that shone proudly on his chest plate.

"Do I need to repeat myself?" Russel rolled his eyes. "Welcome to Beacon mate. Enjoy your stay." Russel waved bye and continue to walk off. Just from the sight of things he knew he wouldn't be finding any answers among the rest of the non-useful bodies.

The tall young man with burnt orange hair, a boy named Cardin, just watched as that physically unimposing twig walked off. He didn't know it, but Russel had just made an enemy that day.

And then Main Avenue rocked at a loud thunderous 'bang'. Cardin and many others looked over to see a crater in the floor with two girls, one dressed in red and black and another in white lay in a crater with smoke rising in the air.

"...Did that girl just explode?" Cardin couldn't help but ask.

Russel walked off from there, not looking over to see what happened. If it was anything major there would be a siren going off and someone on the PA system, if there was a PA system, shouting for everyone to abandon all hope. If it was something minor, Russel was sure he'd hear about it tomorrow or something. That's how it always worked after all.

"You just couldn't stop acting like a prick even for a day could you, Russel?" A voice called out, catching Russel's attention. The voice belonged to a young woman. And it was one he knew. He just wasn't expecting to hear it here.

"Marie-Anne Cherri." Russel turned around to see Marie-Anne walking up from behind. "What a very unpleasant surprise."

"You got a lot of balls Thrush." Marie-Anne glared at Russel. "After what you did to me at graduation. You're lucky I don't chop 'em off right not."

"Don't tell me you came all this way out of Oakwood for lil ol' me now." Russel smirked. If anything, it was quite flattering.

"Sorry to burst whatever fantasy you got going in that skull of yours." Marie-Anne flicked Russel the bird. "But nothing revolves around you. No one wants anything to do with you. And if they do, they soon won't."

"Still begs the question why you're here." Russel said, unfazed by Marie-Anne's harsh words.

"You think I was just going to stick around in Oakwood? Farming? Forget that noise." Marie-Anne waved him off and walked right on past Russel. "You're gonna get yours you know that? Your kind always gets yours."

"My kind?" Russel raised a brow, actually taking offense at the comment.

"The dregs of society." Marie-Anne flicked him off once more before the distance grew between the two.

When Russel had first set off to Beacon, he never once thought he'd be seeing anyone he knew. It was supposed to be a fresh start of sorts. What people thought of him didn't really bother Russel. It usually just made things a bit more difficult. One could call him the biggest jerk in the world, but Remnant would keep spinning and he'd still be breathing. But if too many people thought he was
an ass, if he ever needed to get pulled out of rubble, none would put it past the other if they all just left him behind.

Marie-Anne's presence didn't exactly make that any easier for Russel. On his own he could do enough damage. With her around, he most certainly would be digging his own grave. But then again, he is Russel. Their opinions and thoughts be damned. He'll act however he pleased.

But back to figuring out where he was supposed to be heading to!

So Russel kept on walking, passing by several buildings. One of which looked like dormitories. Another appeared to be the library. 'Appeared' was the operative word, unless he dipped inside for a look, the building could've been a church.

Now the thought of that got a laugh out of Russel.

But as luck would have it, in the corner of Russel's eye, the young man caught sight of a portly individual with the most astounding moustache he'd ever seen walking out of a neighboring building. He was old, he was greying, he had books under his arms and there was an air of self-importance in how he walked. In other words, the man was a…

"Authority figure!" Russel called out to the man.

"Hm?" The portly gentleman looked around, snapping out of whatever daydream caught his fancy and looked to see a young mind ready to be molded fast approaching him. "Ah, why hello there young man!" He spoke jollily. "What can I help you with?"

"Just trying to find out where us new bloods are supposed to be headed." Russel shrugged. "Mind helping a guy out?"

"Oh, I remember when I was a 'new blood' as you say." The portly man let out a hearty laugh. "There's supposed to be an announcement in the hour. But it wouldn't hurt for you to know ahead of time. All first year students are to report at the amphitheater for information. 'Til then, get acquainted with the campus. It'll be your home for quite some time."

"Thanks for the help Mister…?"

"Professor Peter Port." The admittedly portly man extended a hand. "You?"

"Russel Thrush." Russel shook the man's hand.

"I look forward to seeing you in my classroom, Mr. Thrush." Professor Port said his goodbye before walking off.

"Looking forward to it Professor."

An hour passed and just like every other student, Russel found his way into the school's amphitheater. It was an enormous building, but it could've done with a few chairs.

The eager audience turned their attention to the stage. There stood a silver haired man this glasses and a cane. He also had a coffee mug in hand. That was interesting. Not everyday a man shows those beneath him his addictions.

'Maybe there's alcohol in the mug?' Russel joked. 'A drunken Headmaster would be quite the sight.'

"I'll... keep this brief." Headmaster Ozpin pressed his spectacles closer to his face. "You have
traveled here today in search of knowledge, to hone your craft and acquire new skills, and when you have finished, you plan to dedicate your life to the protection of the people."

"But I look amongst you, and all I see is wasted energy, in need of purpose, direction."

"You assume knowledge will free you of this, but your time at this school will prove that knowledge can only carry you so far. It is up to you to take the first step." With that, Ozpin turned and walked off the stage, leaving the audience confused and unsure how to interpret his words.

"You will gather in the ballroom tonight; tomorrow, your initiation begins. Be ready. You are dismissed." The blonde woman said before vacating the stage.

The gravity of Headmaster Ozpin's words slowly set in. Some of the students brushed it off. Yep, there was definitely alcohol in that mug. But Russel, among slowly started to take offense to his comments.

"He seemed kind of…off." Russel heard a blonde bombshell say from not too far away.

"It's almost like he wasn't even there."

"I'm a natural blonde you know."

Later that night, in the ballroom, the students were given a shock. "You're all sleeping here tonight." Said the teacher assigned to looking over them.

"Us in a room full of muscular guys? Loving this already."

"Girls in night gowns? Hallelujah."

Russel found himself a corner in the ball room. He'd dressed earlier into his sleep wear, a white shirt and green pajama pants. Many people were taking the opportunity to get acquainted with all the new faces that would surely be popping up in their day to day lives. Others were keeping to themselves, reading books they'd brought with them or just quietly contemplating life.

Sleeping on almost paper thin mats was going to be killer though. On the bright side, they had pillows. With nothing in his bag to keep him occupied, and the fact he really couldn't care to interact with any of his soon to be official fellow classmates. Russel decided to try his luck and catch some Z's. He laid down on the mat, oblivious to the fidgeting of one of his 'neighbors'.

"Name's Dove Bronzewing, you?" The fidgeting victim of modern day social anxiety looked over to Russel.

"Wasn't asking." Russel sneered, not enjoying the forced company.

"Well 'Wasn't asking', how do you do?" Dove laughed at his own joke.

"Buzz off. I'm trying to sleep here."

"Oh." Dove frowned. ".Just trying to make conversation is all. Got initiation tomorrow and I hear we're getting paired up with partners tomorrow and stuff. I'm just trying to sort through the field and see who I might work well with."

"...Are you hitting on me?" Russel raised a brow.

"No, no, no, no, no!" Dove waved his hands defensively. His face was turning a bright shade of pink out of sheer embarrassment. "You just seemed like the quiet guy in the back. A loner with no
Russel sat up on the mat and turned fully to face Dove. His eyes narrowed, seemingly analyzing Dove to see if he was actually for real. "Dove right?" Dove nodded. "See those nice pretty girls off to the side?" Russel jotted a thumb over to a trio of girls nearby. One of them was the blonde bombshell from earlier. The one standing beside her had black hair with red tinting and as far as Russel could tell, was too young to be at Beacon. And lastly a black haired girl with bow who was calmly laying down reading 'Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde'.

"You think?" Dove asked, rather surprised at the idea.

"With your social skills? There's no way any of them would turn you down." Russel spoke neutrally.

"...You're messing with me, aren't you?" Dove frowned once more.

"Yup." Russel answered before falling back on the mat. And as if on command, sleep overtook him, right just before lights out.

The following morning, Russel and the others made their way to the Dining Hall. It was buffet style, serve yourself. Russel grabbed himself a plate of pancakes with a side of bacon and chowed down. An announcement over the PA system decreed they'd all have to report to the Cliffside overlooking the Emerald Forest within two hours.

So Russel finished his breakfast and headed to the locker room where they all had stashed their belongings the day prior.

Walking through the doorway, Russel couldn't help but ogle the enchanting redhead walking out with some white haired chick. Russel wound up walking face first into an open locker door, causing the sole living Thrush to fall on his butt.

"Oh crap, you okay?" The locker's current resident, a guy with blue shoulder length hair looked down at Russel with concern.

"Dandy how 'bout yourself?" Russel picked himself up off the floor.

He walked off to his own locker after that. It hadn't been too long since the announcement. For the most part everyone was still in the Dining Hall, the only ones present were the early birds. That gave Russel room to figure everything out.

He pulled out the pair of daggers he'd taken from The Iron Nail. They were dust based, but besides that they were still a mystery to him. He had no knowledge what secrets the blades possessed. The daggers had cylinders filled with dust, but why? He hadn't seen The Iron Nail use them in combat and his practicing with them had shown him nothing.

Was it wise of him to walk into battle with weapons he'd barely understood? The answer was that it was very unwise. And Russel recognized that. But after the destruction of his own sword and his Father's, the daggers were the only option at the time.

Call Russel an optimist, but maybe the daggers and whatever clever little secrets they have within might just come in handy one day. Until then, they would be a source of worry and overbearing ominous. As well as his only weapons.

With that, Russel closed his locker, taking the daggers with him. He then headed out of the locker room, just as the crowds began to pour in. He might as well just head out to the meeting spot. He
was early, sure, but Russel certainly wouldn't be late.

"For years, you have trained to become warriors, and today, your abilities will be evaluated in the Emerald Forest." Ozpin said as he stood before the first year students.

The blonde woman from earlier step forward, a scroll in hand. "Now, I'm sure many of you have heard rumors about the assignment of "teams." Well, allow us to put an end to your confusion. Each of you will be given teammates...today."

"These teammates will be with you for the rest of your time here at Beacon. So it is in your best interest to be paired with someone with whom you can work well." Ozpin chimed back in. "That being said, the first person you make eye contact with after landing will be your partner for the next four years."

Russel could've sworn he'd heard glass breaking. Terrified expressions popped up on the faces of less socially inclined individuals. To them, it must've been the worst thing ever. Forced social interaction, no one should have to endure that.

But there were some pros to the idea of teams. Enough to possibly outweigh the cons. Russel glanced around once more, spotting numerous beautiful women any man would be lucky to be paired up with.

"After you've partnered up, make your way to the northern end of the forest. You will meet opposition along the way. Do not hesitate to destroy everything in your path... or you will die." Ozpin said a little over dramatic.

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

Some poor sap further down the row raised his hand, only to get brushed off by Ozpin. Russel recognized him as the guy who'd gone and barfed up his breakfast on a couple of girl's shoes the other day. Russel then glanced down at the metal platforms they all were standing on. He could tell that guy was not going to like what happened next.

One by one the students were launched into the air into the Emerald Forest. Russel could still hear 'Vomit Boy' running his mouth. Russel took a stance, ready to take flight. And then his platform shot him up and over.

It was when he was soaring through the air when Russel could hear feint whispers against his ears. Call him crazy, you'd probably be right, but there was something comforting about it. Putting aside the fear of breaking his legs or dying in the forest. The fear of dying during initiation was calmed.

Welcome to Beacon. The wind said as it slammed against Russel's face. Welcome to the rest of your life. Where you'll grow old and die in the service of mankind against the forces of evil.

Welcome to the life of a Huntsman, Russel Thrush.

And I think that's a good enough place to leave it. We got to see some proto-CRDL interaction, so that'll develop next chapter. We also got to see hints of other stuff with Marie-
Anne and Ozpin. Stuff I think will define this story. I'm trying my best with banter and jokes. Specifically with trying to make them organic and not feel forced.

Anyways, I hope you enjoyed this latest installment. 'til next time.
Russel landed into a roll. Having managed to avoid the plentiful obstacles on his way down, trees however still were unkind to falling objects, Russel quickly gathered his bearings. Squatting down, close to the ground, he took into account his surroundings.

From what Ozpin indicated, their destination was right in front of them. Several hundred feet away through Grimm infested forest, sure, but still dead ahead. So Russel started walking. He would make no progress if he fumbled about.

Drawing his daggers, the sole remaining Thrush in Remnant wasn't going to let some random Grimm get the drop on him. He might as well keep his eyes out for some other wandering hunter. The first one he makes eye contact with, they'll be stuck together for the rest of their days. Kind of like some forced marriage, but whatever.

But to much surprise, Russel found acquiring a partner to be much more difficult. He approached that rather gorgeous red head from the locker room, but found she'd already become partners with Vomit Boy. It was an interesting sight for sure though. How exactly he got pinned to that tree was a mystery. Weapons malfunction maybe? Oh well, better move on while the sun was still out.

The next person Russel approached, was a stout individual, the kind with enough weight on his bones to give dear Professor Port a run for his money. His hair was spiky, but slicked back. He wore a simple t-shirt and cargo pants. Rather odd choice for a huntsman gear. But he also had a tail.

"Oi, faunus mate?!" Russel called out.

The stout boy turned around, sending a glare down Russel's way. Taking offense, the boy gave Russel a good look at his beaver teeth. "Piss off human."

"Hey, is that how you greet your new partner?" Russel laughed.

"He's already got a partner." A newcomer said, walking out from behind some bushes. "Sorry for the confusion. I was busy taking care of some business." The newcomer gestured to the bushes.

"Gross dude. Too much."
"I apologize." The newcomer turned his baggy eyes to his partner. "We'd better get going."

"Yes. I agree." The beaver faunus nodded. The pair walked off, leaving Russel behind. The stout boy gave one last look over his shoulder, making it clear to Russel he'd just made an enemy that day.

Russel kept on walking. Eventually he'd have to run into someone right? They had an even amount of students right? Imagine if they didn't, that would suck. You came all this way Russel and you washed out of Beacon just because they hadn't bothered to accept one more guy. That just blows. Russel made his way over a stream, only to run into someone he honestly wasn't expecting to see today.

"You." Cardin muttered lowly.

"Oh. It's you." Russel frowned. "How you doing there, tall, tan and terrible?" The Winchester boy raised his mace and charged forward. He didn't put up a fight when Cardin charged into him, knocking him down and scrapping him through the forest floor until finally holding Russel up against a tree.

"What the hell is your problem, man?" Cardin tightened his grip around Russel's neck. "Why are you such an asshole?"

"-Cough-Is this-ugh-where we-cough-establish ground rules-?" Russel managed to say.

"What?" Cardin glared into Russel's eyes.

"…Names Russel Thrush." Russel rose and hand between them. "…What's yours partner?"

Cardin's eyes winded upon the realization, that at this very moment, the boy he was practically strangling would be stuck to him for the rest of his time here at Beacon Academy. "Oh shit."

"Yea…walked ran into this didn't you?" Russel chuckled.

Unamused, Cardin loosened his grip, allowing Russel to fall through and land on the ground. "Oh shut up." Cardin groaned.

"I don't like this any more than you do." Russel rubbed his throat. He picked himself off the ground and stood his ground, matching Cardin's stance. "I was hoping my teammate would be smarter. Or a girl. That would've been interesting."

Cardin reached out to grab Russel once more. He snaked his hand around Russel's throat and prepared to beat some respect into the young man. But Cardin froze. There was now a dagger held up against his neck.

There in the Emerald Forest stood Cardin and Russel, each at each other's necks, prepared to deliver a fatal blow to the other. They stared at each other for a brief moment. These partners having a silent conversation with themselves, debating whether they were ready to draw blood from the other.

But there was no bloodshed. Quietly and calmly, Cardin removed his hand from Russel's neck, and Russel removed his blade from Cardin's.

"No sense in us killing each other." Cardin reasoned.

"Yes, let's put a pin in that and get back around to it later." Russel agreed. He took to rubbing his
neck once more in order to soothe the pain. "You got monster hands there, what did you say your
name was?"

"Winchester, Cardin Winchester." Cardin raise a hand. "Not apologizing."

"Wasn't expecting one." Russel reached out and shook Cardin's hand. "Alright partner, shall we go
finish this dreaded initiation?"

"Mind taking the lead?" Cardin gestured to a clearing up ahead.

Russel shrugged, seeing why not. So he stepped forward and began to walk. But as he and Cardin
walked in a straight line towards their destination, Russel couldn't help but feel a bit egged on
Anyone else would have let the subject alone. "Why don't we just walk side by side?"

"If we're attacked by Grimm, we'll be better able to muster a counter attack. No sense in us both
getting cut down by the same blow."

"In other words you'd like the heads up the moment you hear me wailing bloody murder."

"I know we've only just met, Russel was it?" Cardin asked, trying his best to remember Russel's
name. "I know we've just met, but is that the sort of vibe you got from me?"

"You choke slammed me into a tree." Russel deadpanned. "I'd say you're the type with anger
issues. I wouldn't be shocked if you left me to die."

"Sorry to disprove your psycho analysis." The burnt orange haired boy shrugged. "But if it helps, if
you get mauled I'll bash whatever's attacking you in the face." Cardin pointed to the mace he
shouldered.

"So you say you've got a hero complex?" Russel shot a smirk over his shoulder at Cardin as he
once more played therapist. Which was something he'd done before.

As it was, Russel could see Cardin was visibly displeased by his prodding. The two had holstered
their arms but they were still sizing each other up. Testing each other's boundaries, seeing if they
were going to be having problems with each other in the long run.

"I say you should've watched your step." Russel looked at Cardin, confused at the use of past
tense. But then, as he continued walking, not watching where he was going, he felt one of his boots
get snagged by a tree root. Russel then promptly fell over flat on his face.

Cardin briskly walked past Russel, taking the lead. "Try to keep up. Wouldn't want to show back
up at Beacon all by my lonesome."

It was better in these sorts of situations to know what exactly one would be getting into. They were
stuck together, and it seemed like Russel had finally met his match.

Russel and Cardin made their way to a clearing up ahead. They heard sounds of gunfire and
audible roars from the forest around. Their fellow students had without a doubt engaged themselves
in combat with creatures of Grimm. But Russel and Cardin had come across none. The duo
eventually made it to their destination. It was a wide open plain, with ruins at the base of a
mountain. When they arrived, Russel found they were not alone.

"Sup Dove." Russel said coolly as he and Cardin strolled up to the ruins.

"Oh, hey you, guy." Dove said awkwardly. "I never caught your name."
"Russel. Russel Thrush." Said Thrush said while doing a little dance. Russel then turned his eyes to who he assumed was Dove's partner, the boy in the locker room with blue hair. "Oh, hey. Didn't walk into your locker?"

"I was about to comment about that." The blue haired halberd sporting boy greeted Russel.

"So, we're just supposed to take one of these right?" Cardin asked as he walked around the ruins, examining these so called 'relics'. "Chess pieces? Odd."

"We thought so too." The blue haired boy commented. "The name's Sky, by the way. Sky Lark."

"Winchester. Cardin Winchester." Cardin shot a smile at Sky. He then returned his attention back to the pieces and debated which one to take. "Why chess pieces? This has to be some sort of test."

"It probably is." Russel said as he began to round the ruins. The ruins themselves were old, made ages ago, before The Great War and perhaps even older than the wars that preceded that one. But the pieces themselves were pristine, polished. They were cherished.

"If I were some crazy Headmaster, the kind that shoots kids into forests full of crazed monsters, why would I choose chess pieces?" Russel wondered aloud. He looked to the pieces that remained. They weren't the first groups to arrive, but they weren't the last.

"Maybe it's ranked in importance?" Dove suggested. The boy had been counting the pieces that were present just like the others, but over was also counting the ones that were missing. "Thirty two pieces on a chess board. Sixteen on each side. But there's doubles, look." Dove pointed to a pair of black queens.

"Then it's a mind game." Cardin said firmly. He then turned his eyes back to a pair of black bishops, right as Russel did.

"The bishops are ordinary." Russel reached out and grabbed one. "They're supposed to have a double."

"We only need one." Cardin stated as he reached out and grabbed the second black bishop piece.

"Right." Russel nodded, fully understanding what Cardin meant. Russel then turned and handed Dove his black bishop piece. "Cheers."

"Cheers." Dove spoke cheerfully as he accepted the piece.

After that, the four boys walked made the long trek back to Beacon. On the way they would hear loud explosions out in the distance. Whatever was going on, they were missing it. It almost sounded like a Nevermore was getting decapitated by a fifteen year old.

Later on in the evening, in the amphitheater, the students found themselves once more. But it wasn't as it was yesterday. Russel and all the other first year students hadn't noticed it. But it was only today when they realized the students from years prior had shown up. No doubt since already going through initiation they were given an extra day to their civilian lives to do as they pleased. Now the second, third and fourth year students were treated to watching the new blood get crowned, just like they were once upon a time ago.

On stage once more, this time with a large screen at his back, Ozpin stood reading from a list. The
old man had his ways of settling things. As was the case. The first year students soon realized those who acquired similar pieces were thrown together and mashed into one team.

They were all told ahead of course. Each team seated together and would be called up for official purposes. This was all for show, they all could've done without this. The only thing the students weren't informed about was who would be leading their team. And that nagged at Russel.

"Lance Grimsby. Iliad Marble. Lambert Blind. Willa Rosa." Ozpin read aloud as the screen behind him presented profile images of the four students. "You four retrieved the black knight pieces. From this moment forward you are Team WILL, led by Willa Rosa."

There was an applause from all around. The students were smiling, they'd successfully survived initiation and were moving on to better things.

Russel watched from where he sat as the newly formed Team WILL stepped out of the spotlight and walked back to their seats. The blonde Goodwitch woman called up another group to take the stage. And what would you know? There was Marie-Anne walking with them, along with the stout boy and the baggy eyed kid.

"Marie-Anne Cherri. Nero White. Danny Matchstick. Ezekiel Jupiter." Ozpin read aloud, somehow not making this ceremony sound repetitive. "You four retrieved the white bishop pieces. Now together, you will be known as…” Ozpin paused briefly, stifling what appeared to be a laugh. "Team DNCE, led by Danny Matchstick."

There was another round of applause. And down out of the spotlight the newly formed Team DNCE walked away.

"We're Team Dance?" Marie-Anne asked disbelievingly.

Russel succeeded in hiding his laughter, just as Ozpin did. Now while DNCE could be pronounced as 'Dance'. It could also be pronounced as 'Dunce'. Bad luck there Marie-Anne, bad luck.

As the newly formed Team 'Dunce' took their seats, the Goodwitch woman signaled to Russel and his team. It was their turn in the spotlight. And so one by one they stood from where they were seated and marched into the view of their fellow students.

"Russel Thrush. Cardin Winchester. Dove Bronzewing. Sky Lark." Ozpin recited their names. The four boys stepped up into the spotlight, arms behind their backs standing shoulder to shoulder. They looked up to that silver haired man and the screen behind him as if they were being judged by Monty himself.

"The four of you retrieved the black bishop pieces." An image of said chess piece appeared on the screen behind Ozpin. "From this day forward, you will work together as Team CRDL, led by..."

And then time stopped. Russel stood there, eyes widening. No one mentioned anything about team leaders. He knew Huntsmen functioned in teams, but it never crossed his mind that they all listened to one of their own. And that worried Russel. Because either he'd be the one giving the orders or the one taking them.

That wasn't an ideal situation for Russel, neither outcome was favorable. For one instance he'd have to look after the three sods standing beside him. He could give orders, sure, but he didn't want anyone's life depending on him. And then there was the flip version of it where he himself was depending on another's competence.

He didn't know anyone of them well enough to trust his life to. Maybe he would one day, but that
was too optimistic and fool hardy of an idea. Dove was too socially awkward, not good with his words. Sky seemed decent, but just by his combat style, he seemed to hang back and prod from far away. That's not exactly a reassuring trait when looking for a leader.

And then there was-

"Cardin Winchester!" Ozpin declared.

Time started again and Russel was back in the moment of things. He stood there soaking up applause from his fellow classmates, stunned with the news his partner was now officially his leader.

The taller than the rest of his team Cardin just smiled. It wasn't a cocky smile, or a slick 'I got away with murder' smile. It was genuine, honest and grateful. That was something Russel noticed when he looked up to Cardin.

"Huh." Russel muttered.

"What?" Cardin raised a brow, glancing down at his partner.

"Just, huh." Russel shrugged.

"Yeah." Cardin muttered. "Huh."

With their moment in the spotlight over, the newly formed Team CRDL walked off stage. They took their seats once more and returned to watching. There they witnessed the birth of team JNPR, consisting of the redhead, whom Russel now knew as Pyrrha Nikos, some orange haired girl in a skirt named Nora Valkyrie, what appeared to be a ninja named Lie Ren and Vomit Boy himself, crowned as team leader.

After Team RWBY was formed, the ceremony ended. The first year students were given their room assignments and then they were relieved to do as they wished for the rest of the night. Team CRDL walked through the halls of their dormitory. Each were given a key to their room, at the very top of the building.

"At least we get a window." Dove said, looking on the brighter side of things. The room was exactly four walls, four beds, four cabinets and precisely six feet of walking room between each bed. The view though was something else. Just as Dove said, at least they got the window. One by one they each took turns peering their heads out the open window, just taking in the experience.

"Could be a bit less compact." Sky commented as they all started to figure out who'd be sleeping where.

"Guess you're getting a bottom bunk after all." Russel said to Dove.


"I'm going to go and hit the showers." Sky said before pulling out a towel and change of clothes from his luggage. "I smell like crap."

"Yeah, we'll get everything else situated in the morning." Cardin said as he began to head to the door. "For now, let's just take care of our odds and ends. I'm grabbing some food from the Dining Hall. You guys want anything?"
"Oh don't trouble yourself Cardin." Sky said gently, declining Cardin's offer. "I'll meet you there after I get finished with my thing. It'll be a team building exercise."

"Oh yes, how can we live together if the way we eat annoys the crap out of each other." Cardin said half serious. "But no, seriously, can we all agree that eating with our mouths open is something none of us will do?"

"Yea I don't like that 'Sea Food' funny business." Dove chimed in from where he lay in bed.

"Then let I be the first rule passed within Team CRDL!" Sky raised a fist into the air.

"Alright Cardin." Russel pointed to his partner. "You're the leader. You have to make it official."

Cardin chuckled. "No eating with your mouth open. Because none of want to see what's going on in there."

And just like that, Team CRDL was truly formed.

Agreeing to meet Sky and Cardin in the Dining Hall later, Russel couldn't help but spare one more look out the window. Dove had pulled himself out of bed as nature called, leaving the room all to Russel. With places to be, Russel could only afford a few minutes before having to run off.

So he opened the window fully and popped his head outside. The cold night air carried with it the scent of the sea from not too far away. Back home in Oakwood, Russel could see the stars every night. He could point out constellations by memory and appreciate the beauty of a world beyond this one.

But when he came to Vale, Russel found the city lights to be too distracting. The stars were hidden from him by the night life. And it was only then when Russel knew to cherish something as important as that.

But here in Beacon, Russel and the student body were far removed from the city, with open forest to left and open ocean to the right. The city and its overbearing lights were at his back. And the night sky and its stars were once more in front of him for his eyes to see.

My approach for the Russel and Cardin interactions was that they'd be antagonistic before realizing they're equals. And I like that idea a lot. I don't very much enjoy the bully dynamic in the show. But I can forgive them because it was Volume 1.

I introduced 2 OC Teams. Team [Dunce] and Team WILL. I decided that this is probably going to be my only RWBY fic, so I might as well go all out with everything. Team WILL is just there until further notice, until I need more Beacon students or when Volume 4 comes out so I can figure out where Russel is going. And Team DNCE will sort of be Russel's past come to haunt him in the form of Marie-Anne.

I imagine Dove to be socially awkward like Jaune, but goes along with the rest of Team CRDL. His a momma's boy at heart. And for Sky he's going to be the RWBY equivalent of Dr. Strange.

Welp, those were my thoughts while writing this. I won't update again this week. I'm currently in the middle of something else right now. And I need to focus on that. 'Til next
time dear reader! Later Days!
Hey there faithful readers, welcome back to the 8th chapter of 'The Darkling Thrush'!

For this chapter I actually sat down and debated making this a straight up AU. I don't like how in the show Team CRDL is just a gang of bullies. I don't enjoy it. While we're not in AU territory, wait til we get to Volume 3 territory, oh god.

"To save Pyrrha or not to save Pyrrha? That is the question."

Well, anyways, onto the main event!

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It had been weeks since initiation, and adjusting to life at Beacon was difficult for Russel. The farm boy would always wake up before dawn back in Oakwood. Here, his classes started at 10 Monday through Thursday and usually ended around 6. But if that was the least of his worries, then Russel nothing to worry about at all.

The first class of the day was with Professor Port, that big gentleman he'd met on his first day. He'd go on and on about his exploits as a huntsman, and that was really much up to Russel's speed. Russel was here at Beacon for a reason, to become a Huntsman and he wanted to succeed at that.

So every time Professor Port veered off the reservation, Russel would skillfully bring back round to the subject matter. This wasn't Oakwood Academy, every moment was precious. He wouldn't take a passive role in the classroom anymore.

"Ursa are large Grimm. Would anyone like to state a few of their potential weak spots?" Professor Port asked. Russel hand went up and the portly man pointed at him to answer.

"Their backs are too well protected. Getting them to attack you is the only sure fire way to combat an Ursa. While standing on two legs, an Ursa's stomach is the most exposed part of their body as well as their neck." Russel answered simply.

"Very good Mr. Thrush." Professor Port smiled. "Fighting an Ursa is very hands on. One time I was surrounded by five of the beasts and they all wanted a piece of me…"

Russel, along with the rest of Team CRDL had combat training with Professor Goodwitch. Aside from usually beating the ever loving crap out of one another in Oakwood, which wasn't fun for someone like Russel who only recently unlocked his aura, Beacon took safety precautions to the extreme. It was a whole other experience to Russel. Everyone was outfitted with an aura monitor and their Professor could literally separate two combatants too caught up in the moment with the wave of a finger.

Training with his daggers was a top priority. With each swing, Russel hoped to break physics over
his knee. Perhaps the daggers turned wind into a weapon? Or maybe they could enable Russel to fly. But it didn't matter. All of Russel's efforts appeared fruitless. Perhaps they were just simply daggers.

"The hell are you doing Russel?" Cardin inquired from a ways behind the Thrush.

Russel glanced over his shoulder, recognizing Cardin and then turned to face his dully appointed team leader. "What's it look like? I'm practicing."

"Yeah, I can tell." Cardin pointed a finger at the daggers in Russel's hands. "But you seem so unfamiliar with your own weapons. So what gives?"

"They're new." Russel answered simply. He wasn't lying. They were new to him. "Anyways this is combat training Cardin. Relax, I'm getting the hang of them." Russel just waved off his leader's concerns.

"Well, take however you like, Russel. But I can't exactly trust some guy who swings his crap around like an idiot." Cardin said, not really caring how Russel felt on the matter. "If you need help better using them, we could always ask Professor Goodwitch to put in the next sparring match."

"And watch me get creamed by the likes of say, Pyrrha Nikos?" Russel deadpanned.

Cardin shrugged. "At least we'd be able to better gage your abilities." Cardin then pointed to the training dummy Russel had been mercilessly cutting into for the last past hour. "That poor dummy's just about had it."

Not too far away, one Jaune Arc, the leader of Team JNPR, was approaching one Weiss Schnee from behind. Ever since arriving to Beacon, that Jaune fellow had been hitting on the Schnee heiress to comical failure. Today, he was hoping his sword skills might just be able to catch her attention.

While Cardin and Russel were busy discussing the latter's skills as a liability to the team, Jaune whipped out his sword Corcea Mors. "Hey Snow Angel." He said, catching Weiss by surprise. What Jaune didn't know was that Weiss was at the moment concentrating on her glyphs, focusing them into one tiny area for combat applications. Being caught unawares had the unlikely effect of releasing the energy held within the glyph outward, causing Corcea Mors to fly out of Jaune's hand and fly backwards at Cardin.

Mid bickering, Russel caught sight of the speeding object. Quickly, Russel grabbed ahold of Cardin and tackled him to the floor, taking him out of the sword's path. Corcea Mors then promptly exploded the training dummy's head and found itself lodged in a wall.

Cardin and Russel sat up from where they lay on the floor. They both looked over to the sword stabbed into the wall and then traced it back to the other side of the room. Both members of Team CRDL found Jaune standing there in dismay as Weiss scolded him about proper weapon conduct.

"That guy just took a shot at us." Cardin glared. His expression then softened as he found Russel standing over him with a hand extended downward.

"You going to lay there all day fearless leader?" Russel commented. Cardin graciously accepted Russel's hand. Together, Cardin found himself standing again.

"Thanks for the save there Russel." Cardin said as he busied dusting himself off.
"Don't mention it." Russel shrugged before walking off to return his equipment to his locker. Wouldn't you know it? Class ended two minutes ago.

After that day in combat class, there was bad blood between Jaune and Cardin. There wasn't telling how long the CRDL leader would keep this up. He was tripping Jaune in the halls, stuffing him into his rocket locker and blasting him out into the yard. The operative word is 'into'. The rocket locker literally imbeds itself into the surface and bores downward. Professor Goodwitch had to step in and pull Jaune out last time.

The whole Jaune thing was an uncomfortable topic within the CRDL dorm room. Though none of them would say it, Russel could tell Sky and Dove had been in the blonde's shoes before. Russel picked up on it early on. Dove would always call his mom, at least once a day to check in with her. And that must've been nice, being able to hear your mother's voice every so often.

And Sky's sexual preference, given where he grew up at, opened him up to all manner of harassment. How exactly do you tell the three guys you're bunking with your gay? On the second day, Sky made a point to clear the air, to let them all know in order to face whatever argument there would be head on. But none of them could actually give a shit if the other was man, woman, transgender, faunus, straight or queer.

At the end of the day all that mattered was they all had each other's back. They were a Team after all. And that was Team CRDL's only rule.

So they all turned a blind eye to Cardin's actions. Russel argued that the guy had it coming. Being as reckless as he was almost could've sent Cardin packing.

Now in the present, Russel just sat on the bleachers in combat class. The current sparing match, that Cardin absolutely volunteered for was under way. Jaune vs. Cardin. The knight in jeans vs. the mountain. It was the reasonably stoppable object vs. the tank-like force. And Cardin was winning.

"This is the part where you lose." Cardin said cockily.

Jaune brought himself to face his adversary. This was his chance to stomp out any further altercations with Cardin. If he managed to defeat Cardin, in front of everyone, any hold the Team CRDL leader had over him would dissipate.

"Over my dea-" Jaune began to say defiantly, only to be cut short by Cardin and smacked with his mace. Jaune was sent flying, landing on his rear.

Cardin moved in for the kill, Russel along with the rest of the class unsure of whether this was just a figure of speech or fact, only to be stopped short by Professor Goodwitch. After that Goodwitch went on about the aura tracker, indicating Jaune's aura had fallen into the red. Cardin walked off the combat floor and took his seat on the bleachers beside Russel.

"Hey you alright man?" Russel asked.

Cardin shrugged dismissively. Russel took a good look at his team leader, there was something off about him. The way he was acting, he was most certainly was an aggressive person, but this was pushing it.

Professor Goodwitch called the class over and then they hit the lockers. They stashed their weapons and then set off to the dining hall.

"Gosh I'm starving." Dove said as he pressed his hands against his growling stomach.
"That's what you get for skipping breakfast." Sky said in a scolding manner. "How is it you sleep in when all four of us live in the same room with the same alarm?"

Dove just shrugged then resumed clenching his gut in anguish. Team CRDL passed through the dining hall doorway and quickly got themselves a spot in line.

"You guys go ahead, I'll grab us a table." Cardin said before losing himself into the sea of students.

Cardin found a secluded table and sat down. He just sat there staring out into nothing. His jaw fell open slightly and then he doubled over forward, his elbows on the table and his head arched downward as if he was trying to hide himself from the world.

Not too far away, some girl with long brown hair and bunny ears came strolling down the aisle with a plate of food in hand. Her name was Velvet Scarlatina, she was a second year student at Beacon. She's a kind gentle soul with a secret perverse side, but above all, she was one to lend a helping hand.

Spotting Cardin sitting there, seemingly in pain, Velvet couldn't help but come to the larger boy's aid. "Oi! Mate, you alright?" Velvet asked, quickly taking a seat beside Cardin. She then placed a comforting hand on his armored shoulder. She could hear a faint sobbing.

Cardin shot up, his face red, tears swelling in his eyes and a pissed off look on his face. "Leave me alone you bunny eared freak!" Cardin lashed out.

That got the attention of students seated nearby. With The White Fang running around and anti-faunus sentiment at an all time high, this altercation was the last thing anyone wanted. Velvet recoiled away, shocked.

Down the aisle, Russel and the others came, along with their plates of food and one for Cardin. They took their seats across and beside Cardin at the table. What ensued next was a combination of mob mentality and backing up their leader.

"Those even real?" Cardin asked pointing at Velvet's ears. He then reached out as Velvet shot out of her seat to get away, quickly snatching one of her ears and yanking on it. "Oh, it is real."

"Stop it that hurts!" Velvet cried out, only for Cardin to release his hold.

Maybe it was the pent up anger he felt from watching his neighbor's homes get burned down. Or maybe it was the fact they'd tried to kill him. But Russel's first encounter with a faunus was not a pleasant one. When Russel joined in on harassing the bunny eared girl, it was really coming from a dark place.

"What a freak." Russel sneered.

And then Velvet ran away crying, ashamed that she'd been treated in such a disrespectful manner. All because she'd just wanted to do something nice.

Team CRDL then dug into their lunch, but Russel couldn't help but overhear the conversation occurring at one of the neighboring tables. There across from them sat Teams RWBY and JNPR, they all sat there condemning their actions.

"Well if you didn't like what we were doing. Then why didn't you step in?" Russel muttered to himself.

Team CRDL then finished their meals and were off to complete the rest of their scheduled courses.
for the day. But call him curious, Russel pulled Cardin aside just to figure out what exactly he and
the others had gotten involved with.

"You alright?" Russel asked in a sterner manner than before. Dove and Sky had already gone their
separate ways. So it was Russel walking beside Cardin and the much taller boy was on the
defensive.

"I told you, I'm fine." Cardin muttered, not feeling up to talking. "Shouldn't you be heading to
class? Professor Peach might freak if you don't."

Russel could see what Cardin was doing, hoping to throw him off whatever trail he'd stumbled
onto his reason and logic. Well tough beans Cardin, Russel could afford to skip a day of class, he
was a good enough learner and put in more than enough time into the work. "Peach's too nice of a
person. So why did we go all ham on some second year? I thought we didn't care about none of
that race business?"

Cardin stopped in his tracks and just glared at his partner. "Watch it Russel."

"Cardin." Russel met his partner's stare. "We're a team. If there's something going on with you, just
say it. I'm not going to tug at your ears and call you a freak." He said, casting shade on today's
events. "Just food for thought I guess." Russel shrugged.

"Maybe there's nothing wrong with me Russel. And it's all in your head." Cardin waved him off.
They reached Dr. Oobleck's class and they said their goodbyes. "Catch you later."

Russel just watched as Cardin slinked off into the class, taking a seat upfront. The sole remaining
Thrush just shook his head and began to head back to the dorms. He should be heading to class,
there was still time to make it before roll. But Russel just couldn't find it in himself to backtrack.
Back to the dorm building Russel went. Up the elevator he went, reaching the top floor. Out the
elevator and down the hall, Russel's destination was almost insight.

"I saw what you did in the dining hall." Russel stopped in his tracks, recognizing that voice. He
slowly turned around, finding Marie-Anne standing there in the hallway, looking at him with
judging eyes. "You're a terrible person."

Russel just stood there silently, watching as Marie-Anne approached him. "You come here to
Beacon, poised to be a Huntsman. And yet you keep acting like that pain back in Oakwood. What
the hell is wrong with you?" She asked coldly, bitterly, angrily.

He didn't answer. Russel just stared back at her, neither submitting to her judgement nor admitting
his guilt. Because he didn't feel any. "What the hell is wrong with you?" She asked once more, this
time lower, coarser, with a cold air engulfing the space between them.

Still, Russel didn't flinch. So Marie-Anne brought her hand back and struck forward. There was an
audible 'smack' in the hallway. Russel's cheek burned red from the contact. It was late in the day,
he was tired and his aura was too low. But he had grown accustomed to the pain. Aura was for the
fortunate. He was never fortunate.

"Say something." Marie-Anne's eyes narrowed. Her features twisted, betraying the anger she felt.
"Say something, you coward." She demanded. She reeled her hand back once more and hit him
again.

This time, Russel rolled with the slap, spinning fully around. Russel then walked away. "Get back
here!" Marie-Anne shouted, losing whatever cold calculating composure she had.
But Russel didn't stop, he just kept walking. He didn't owe Marie-Anne anything and she felt entitled to being his handler, the one who chewed him out for whatever mistakes he made. But she wasn't, she was just some girl he knew from Oakwood.

Russel got to his dorm and opened the door. The first thing he did was kick of his usual outfit and throw on his night wear. Then the young man climbed into bed. He stared up at the ceiling, deep in thought about today. You know it didn't really bother him. What they did to that faunus girl, it didn't really affect Russel. What made him uncomfortable was how Cardin reacted. It was almost like an involuntary reaction or something.

From noon to night, Russel remained in the dorm, completing previously assigned work for Goodwitch and Port. Peach had taken the liberty of just putting everything on the syllabus. As long as Russel had the textbook he was in good shape and would never be behind.

Night fell and the rest of Team CRDL trickled back into the room. Dove went on about something called 'Red vs. Blue', how they released a new episode or something online. And Sky was getting ready to head to the washrooms. Cardin on the other hand was busy standing by the room's window, almost as if he could hear something out there.

"Hey, no. Don't jump, you got too much to live for." Russel deadpanned as he eyed Cardin's actions.

"Shh." Cardin held an index finger against his lips and then resumed sticking his head out the window.

Russel got up from where he was seated and walked up to the window and so did Dove. The three boys stood there listening to familiar voices.

"We can train up here after class where no one can bother us!" A feminine voice belonging to one Pyrrha Nikos exclaimed.

"You think I need help?" They could hear the distinct crack in Jaune Arc's voice.

"N-no! No, that's not what I meant." Pyrrha back peddled.

"But you just said it."

"Does it suddenly feel like 'Days of our Lives' to anyone? Huh?" Dove asked, earning confused looks from Cardin and Russel. "'Days of our Lives'? The soap opera? My mom and I used to watch it all the time." Russel and Cardin exchanged another glance and proceeded to roll their eyes before they returned to eavesdropping.

"Jaune, everybody needs a little push from time to time. It doesn't make you any different from the rest of us. You made it to Beacon! That speaks volumes of what you're capable of!"

"You're wrong. I-I don't belong here."

"That's a terrible thing to say! Of course you do!"

"No, I don't! I wasn't really accepted into Beacon..."

"Wh-what do you mean?"

"I mean I didn't go to combat school, I didn't pass any tests. I didn't earn my spot at this Academy! I lied! I got my hands on some fake transcripts, and I lied!"
"…Holy crap." Dove muttered as he and the others continued to listen in. "This is so a soap opera"
"Dude shut up its getting good." Cardin punched Dove in the arm.

"What? But... why?" Pyrrha asked, confused.

"'Cause this is always what I've wanted to be! My father, my grandfather, and his father before him were all warriors! They were all heroes! I wanted to be one, too. I was just never good enough." Jaune said, almost breaking into tears as he admitted his darkest secret to his partner.

"Then let me help you!" Pyrrha exclaimed.

"I don't want help! I don't want to be the damsel in distress! I want to be the hero!" Jaune shouted.

"Jaune, I-"

"I'm tired of being the lovable idiot, stuck in the tree while his friends fight for their lives! Don't you understand? If I can't do this on my own... then what good am I?" Jaune sobbed. "Just... leave me alone. Okay?"

"If that's what you think is best..."

"And here I thought they were gonna fuck." The three CRDL boys turned to find Sky standing behind them, having stealthily returned to the room. "What? We all were thinking it."

"Hold on." Cardin smirked to himself. "I got a great Idea." He said before climbing out the window.

"Cardin what the hell are you doing?" Russel asked, trying his best to keep his voice down.

"Oh, Jaune..."


"I couldn't help but overhear you two from my dorm room. So, you snuck into Beacon, huh? I gotta say, Jaune, I never expected you to be such a rebel!" Cardin said, sounding almost impressed.

"Please, Cardin, please, don't tell anyone!" Jaune begged.

"Jaune, come on! I'd never rat on a friend like that!" Cardin exclaimed as he approached him.

"A... a friend?" Jaune stammered.

"Of course!" Cardin exclaimed before snaking an arm around Jaune, trapping him in a headlock. "We're friends now, Jauney boy! And the way I see it, as long as you're there for me when I need you, we'll be friends for a long time."

"That being said, I really don't have time to do those extra readings Dr. Oobleck gave us today. Think you could take care of that for me, buddy?" Cardin released Jaune from his hold, letting the blonde knight fall to his knees. "That's what I thought."

Cardin then walked back to the ledge, leaving the way he came. "Don't worry, Jaune; your secret's safe with me."

And in the aftermath of it all, Jaune remained there on the roof, unsure how to feel. And within the CRDL dorm, a similar look now found itself on Russel's face.
Well, that’s that.

I actually really enjoy writing this type of character for Russel. It's fun. The only way I could rationalize Cardin's anti-faunus behavior without making him an unremorseful scumbag was to just say 'there's something going on with him', and I hope you all will accept that explanation for the time being. I promise its worth putting up with awkward 'Cardin Smash Hopes and Dreams'.I knew ahead of time that doing this arc was going to be time consuming, because I'm not straying from continuity as much as I'd prefer. For the time being Team RWBY is benched. The next arc after this, we'll see a lot more of them, specifically Blake. Spoiler, but an entire chapter is just Russel and Blake talking in a room. It's going to be great.

Anyways, I hope you all enjoyed this. Good night.
Welcome back everyone for the ninth chapter of 'The Darkling Thrush'! Word of warning, I wrote most of this while under the influence of headaches. This chapter had to go through a lot of edits before I could give it the go ahead for publishing.

Anyways, off with the chapter.

After confronting Jaune about his fake transcripts, Cardin turned the poor blonde buffoon into his own personal servant. It went as well as you'd expect. Jaune was getting pushed to near exhaustion every day, fulfilling all of Cardin's requests in fear of the truth going public.

The more and more Jaune attended to Cardin's whims, the less and less time he spent with his actual team. Russel noticed this whenever he was anywhere near Team JNPR and even Team RWBY. There was something missing. They weren't gelling properly, he guessed.

"Why are we doing this again?" Russel asked.

Team CRDL was currently sitting in their dorm room, getting ready for their outing with Professor Goodwitch. They were supposed to be heading to the Forever Fall forest with Professor Peach, but there was a last minute matter the favored Professor had to attend to.

Cardin looked up from the sandwich he was currently chowing down on and gave Russel a confused look. "Because we all want a passing grade?" The Team CRDL leader said, trying his best not to sound rude.

"I meant why haven't we gone to Ozpin about Janue's transcripts?" Russel, causing everyone stop what they were doing. "Like I get it, you like having a slave and what not, but if he isn't supposed to be here, why not skip to the inevitable conclusion then?"

Russel just looked around, finding unsure looks in his teammate's faces. It soon became apparent to Russel that none of them, including Cardin actually were intending to reveal Jaune's secret. Not once had it even crossed their minds. Cardin just wanted another way to humiliate Jaune. Dove and Sky were just getting the benefits of a personal slave.

"Look, Russel." Cardin said, setting his sandwich aside. "It's my call, alright? We all know Jaune's going to blow his own cover anyways. Do you think we're the only ones to hear him that night? We might as well just milk this while we can." Cardin reached over, patting the box of Rapier Wasps he had Jaune acquire.

One of the effects of Jaune acting as Cardin's personal slave, depriving Team JNPR of their leader left a power vacuum. They needed someone to step up and Pyrrha was just the girl to do it. If Russel had noticed it then so had everyone else. Especially when Cardin made a comment about
Jaune's own lack of knowledge regarding The Great War. Pyrrha stepped up for her leader. She cleverly turned the table on Cardin, dredging up his own family history in a way that unsettled the Winchester boy.

Now, with a score to settle, Cardin planned to deal with Pyrrha the only way he could. He wanted it to be just as personal an attack as she attacked him that day in class. Where she used his Great Grandfather Roman Winchester, a great leader in The Great War, Cardin now aimed to use her leader in this school brawl.

"Anyways, what do you care Mr. Cynic?" Cardin asked, raising a brow at Russel uncharacteristic involvement with his affairs.

"It just doesn't sit right with me." Russel shrugged. "I put in the effort, we all put in the effort. We earned the right to be here. He didn't. Simple, no?"

Cardin pressed his fist to his chin, as if contemplating Russel's words. It was a reasonable argument right? The work you put into anything should be the same you get out. You work hard, you make the right choices and then you get accepted on your own terms. But what Jaune did was go around the rules and Trojan hosed his way into Beacon.

The CRDL leader could understand his partner's stance, but at the end of the day it was his call. "You need to relax Russel." Cardin said finally.

"We'd better get going soon guys." Sky interrupted, referring to the time on his scroll. In less than half an hour they were expected to head out with the rest of their class. They wouldn't want to be late now wouldn't they?

"We'll talk about this later." Cardin as he gathered his gear and the box of wasps.

Team CRDL exited their room one by one. They all knew where they were heading. Down to combat class they went, meeting up with the rest of the teams waiting for instruction. When Professor Peach had originally come to them all about this little excursion, none was exactly thrilled. Gathering sap just didn't sound as exciting as getting launched into the Emerald Forest without a parachute.

So when they got there, Professor Goodwitch had to work extra to get them all motivated. "The dangers out in the Forever Fall Forest are equal to those you faced in the Emerald Forest." Goodwitch said, stressing that this wasn't the milk run assignment they all though it to be. "Stick close, remain cautious. And we'll all make it back okay."

"One part of this exercise is to help better stimulate team bonding. Team leader's this is your time to shine. I will be acting in a supervising role, but the rest is up to you." Goodwitch said before taking a step back and pointing to the various boxes of glass jars in the corner. "Your equipment is over there. Go ahead and claim it."

"Is this a part of the exercise Ms. Goodwitch?" Ruby Rose, the leader of Team RWBY asked after raising her hand and being called upon.

"As a matter of fact, it is." Goodwitch said with a nod.

"Alright, as leader I say we take it into a vote, whether one of us fetches our equipment or we all do." Ruby said excitedly.

"How about I just grab our stuff?" Blake asked in her usual neutral tone. There's was no reason to make a big deal out of just picking up her teams equipment.
"Or...you could do that yeah." Ruby's excited expression faltered slightly.

"I'll just go get our stuff, okay?" Juane said to the rest of Team JNPR. Pyrrha, Ren and Nora just watched as their leader walked off. For the longest time there had been something off with him and none could figure out just why. Pyrrha had a basic idea since Jaune revealed her secret to her, but had nothing concrete to go on.

"You heard the lady, time to dance." Cardin said loudly, quickly taking command of his team. "Russel, as Team Leader I need you to fetch our jars. Sweet and simple."

Russel just shrugged and walked off to gather his team's box of jars. Passing by Team DNCE's elected official to acquire the same amount of jars, Russel couldn't help but antagonize the stout beaver faunus.

"Sup tubby." Russel waved to him as they walked past each other. Ezekiel just sneered over his shoulder in retaliation and hurried on his way.

Blake collected her team's gear quickly and was off. She couldn't resist giving Russel a dirty look, especially after seeing the brief interaction between him and Ezekiel. What that was about was anyone's guess. All Russel cared about was getting his team's crap and moving on.

But while the team's busied took the time to better plan the outing amongst themselves, Russel saw a rare opportunity present itself. Alone in the corner was only Jaune and himself. The other teams had already retrieved their items, leaving only them.

"Out of curiosity, Jaune, just how bad were your original transcripts?" Russel asked quietly.

Jaune looked up at Russel in surprise. He only knew Cardin had been eavesdropping that night. To the young Arc this was just confirmation that his secret was spreading and sooner or later it would be getting out.

"Just curiosity, Russel?" He asked tiredly.

"Yep." Russel nodded.

Jaune let out a quiet sigh. "My grades were crap. Nothing I did, no matter how much effort I put into the work, nothing could pull me out of whatever rut I was in."

"You get caught up in your own world or something?" Russel inquired. "Maybe you're just a bad test taker. They have those you know. People who're terrible at taking tests. It's a real thing."

"Well, my grades were terrible. And I knew Beacon would never take me." Jaune shook his head in dismay. "I didn't even have an aura when I got here."

If Jaune wasn't busy feeling ashamed of himself and looked up, he might've caught the brief look of sympathy that had crossed Russel's face. There was a time when Russel couldn't produce an aura. The only thing separating the Grimm for the people. Imagine what that must do to a person. Being compared to the very thing the terrorized humanity. Russel had been there and he could tell Jaune was there as well.

But that feeling passed and Russel quickly grabbed one of the two remaining boxes and made himself scarce. He made it back his team, but couldn't help but notice Pyrrha had been watching them. While he doubted she had super hearing; that was something Russel had to be careful of. Next time he ever had to take someone aside to discuss private matters, he'd do so in a more discreet fashion.
Alright class, time to head out." Professor Goodwitch announced to the class brightly.

And so Vale's future Huntsmen set off on an hour long trek through the woods beyond Beacon. The walked through cascades of falling leaves and through waves of shimmering light that pierced through the veil of trees around them. All were in awe of what nature had to offer.

"Beautiful isn't it?" Sky asked aloud, earning several nods in agreement from not only Team CRDL but also members of Teams RWBY, JNPR, WILL, STAG and even Team DNCE.

Goodwitch could only smile at the comment. The world of Remnant, despite its many faults, was one of beauty. There was more to fight for than just humanity, but the land where they walked.

"This is a good enough spot." Goodwitch declared. "Stay within close proximity of this spot, no wandering off. We have four hours until night fall. That gives us three to work with." She said before allowing the teams to run off and collect sap.

Jaune, who Cardin made carry both his team's box of jars and his own, heaved as he set them aside, taking the moment to rest. "Heavier than they look." He said to Pyrrha, causing the Mystral Champion to laugh.

Team JNPR then separated, deciding it would be best if they all spread out. It was then, when Jaune was most separated from his team when he was grabbed by Cardin and the rest of Team CRDL. Out of view from Goodwitch, Cardin got to work.

"Just need one jar filled up." He said to his team. Russel, Dove and Sky went along with it. Each one filling a jar a third of the way. Then they all handed their jars off to Cardin, whom poured the contents into one jar.

"Cardin, wh-what's going on?"

Cardin stared out into the forest, past the trees and at Pyrrha, who's back was turned to them. "Payback."

The Arc followed Cardin's stare. Jaune's eyes widened. "Pyrrha...?" He then turned to Cardin in search of an explanation. "Wh-what are you-?"

"That's the girl. Red-haired know-it-all, thinks she's so smart. Alright, boys..." Cardin pulled out a buzzing cardboard box with a large 'W' written on its sides. "Last night, old Jaune here managed to round up an entire box of Rapier Wasps, and now, we're gonna put him to work."

Russel looked over to Jaune and patted him on the shoulder. The Team JNPR leader laughed nervously.

"Now, according to one of the essays you wrote for me last week, these nasty things loooove sweets." Cardin jotted a thumb over his shoulder at Pyrrha as she gathered sap. "I'm thinking it's time we teach her a thing or two."

The members of Team CRDL got up from where they sat. Cardin reached over and yanked Jaune to his feet. Without looking, Cardin could tell Jaune wasn't willing to perform the task he was about to give him. But nonetheless, he would do it. One way or another.

"And you're gonna do it." Cardin said to Jaune.

"Do what?"
"Hit her with the sap." Cadin leaned forward. "Either that, or I'll have a chat with Goodwitch, and you'll be on the first airship out of Beacon."

Jaune looked down at the jar of sap in his hands and then up at the members of Team CRDL. Jaune turned towards the group, aiming his throw at Pyrrha, who was too oblivious to notice. Jaune tried to steel his nerves and his now shaking hand to do the deed. What happened next didn't surprise anyone in the slightest.

"No," Jaune murmured.

"What did you say?" Cardin's eyes narrowed down on the Arc.

"I said... NO!" Jaune declared before throwing the jar at Cardin. The jar collided with Cardin's breastplate, breaking on impact and covering it with sap. Jaune recoiled as the other team leader laughed darkly.

"Oh, you've done it now..." Cardin said threateningly. "You know that wasn't very smart, Jauney boy."

Russel and the others stood by, just watching as Cardin picked Jaune up off the ground, seemingly his signature move. "I'm gonna make sure they send you back to mommy in teeny tiny pieces."

"I don't care what you do to me..." Jaune said once more in a defiant fashion. "... but you are not messing with my team."

"What?" Cardin raised a brow. "You think talk like that makes you tough? You think you're a big strong man now?"

Jaune smiled, enraging Cardin. The Team CRDL Leader let out a roar and raised his fist. He threw a punch, but just before the hit connected, a bright light burst from Jaune, causing him to let go of the boy and get flung backwards. As the blinding light faded, the rest of Team CRDL stood in shock as they found Cardin on the ground, holding his hands and crying out in pain.

Jaune, now back on the ground but completely healed, looks confusedly at his hands as they faintly glow white. Fumbling over the number of questions running through his head, Jaune was caught unaware by Sky, who swept over to deliver a kick from behind. Despite being thrown onto the ground once more and on his stomach, Jaune hadn't lost his fighting spirit. He just looked up and glared at Cardin.

After focusing his aura on his hands, Cardin was good as new. Now it was time to deal with Jaune. He turned and began to approach the fallen knight. "Let's see how much of a man you really are..."

Russel glanced around, checking to make sure that they hadn't caught the attention of any of their peers or their professor. Thankfully, they hadn't. But that didn't mean they hadn't gone unnoticed. Just before anymore punches could be thrown.

A familiar roar caught Russel's attention.

Russel, along with the rest of his team a Jaune slowly turned, finding an Ursa Major standing to too far from them. With dozens of jagged spikes sticking out from its wide back, the Ursa Major was a monster with impressive killing capabilities. It leaped forward, landing in front of the students and causing the ground to shake beneath its feet.

Now standing over the students, the Ursa Major lifted its head. Its nose flared as it caught a whiff of the sap on Cardin's breastplate in the air. The Ursa Major let out a hungered roar, sending a
searing chill down the student's backs.

The world tuned out for a moment. Everything slowed as Russel took in each breath. This wasn't the same Ursa that haunted him as much as he haunted it. And it wasn't the starved Ursa he'd been forced to fight in Oakwood. This was something he was unfamiliar with. This Ursa Major knew not fear. It didn't know years of endless starvation alone in the dark.

This Ursa Major sent shockwaves of fear through Russel. Its murderous eyes stared into his very soul. Russel paled, and then it was a game of survival once more. Fight or flight, his instincts took over. Childhood trauma was ruling his body, his mind taking a backseat. Russel turned and ran.

It didn't matter if he had the weapons to fight the Ursa Major, or even if he had the friends to back him up. This went further than anyone would understand. And Russel didn't care if they ever would. That Ursa in the woods near his farm would forever rule his life.

Dove and Sky followed Russel's example, taking flight.

"That's a big Ursa!" Dove shouted as he ran.

But Russel couldn't hear him, he was too busy scared out of his mind. Next thing he knows he's shouting bloody murder, hoping to alert the rest of the class. "Ursa!" Russel shouts as he dashed through the forest.

Out of seemingly nowhere, Yang appeared in front of him. Russel, unable to stop, found himself running into the blonde bombshell. Unmoved, Yang simply grabbed ahold of Russel and lifted him into the air. The rest of Team RWBY and Pyrrha crowded around him as Dove and Sky continued to run.

"Ursa, where?" Yang demanded while shaking Russel.


He landed on his back and the sole remaining Thrush found himself staring up at the sky. Team RWBY and Pyrrha ran off, ready to fight whatever enemy dare lend a finger on their friend. It was just a painful reminder that he just ran and left his partner behind.

Crap. He had to go back.

"Bloody Ursas." Russel grumbled. As he found his way back onto his feet. Still reeling from the adrenaline fueled fear and being manhandled, Russel dizzily walked back the way he came. He pulled out one of his daggers, the least he could do was throw it at the blasted Grimm.

When Russel returned to the clearing where he last left Jaune and Cardin, where he was half expecting to find their chewed remains, he found Jaune standing victorious over the Ursa's decapitated body.

"Holy crap Juane!" Cardin exclaimed as Jaune helped the Team CRDL leader off the ground.

"Don't ever mess with my team - my friends - ever again." Jaune stared Cardin dead in the eye. "Got it?"

Cardin nodded apologetically as Jaune turned to leave and join his friends. They all walked past Russel, with Jaune giving the Thrush boy a mile long stare, the same he just gave to Cardin. His message went beyond Cardin, it went to the whole team. You could mess with Jaune, but never go
near his friends.

So as they walked away, Russel approached his leader and folded his arms over his chest. Cardin stood there with a look Russel had trouble discerning. "Hey, fearless leader." Russel waved at Cardin. "We still got to collect sap. You in or what?"

"Yeah." Cardin said quietly.

After collecting one jar of sap each, the teams were off on another hour trek through the woods. They made it back to Beacon at sunset. Once delivering the sap they collected, Goodwitch dismissed the class. Cardin walked off to the wash rooms after mentioning he had much to think about.

So that left Russel, Sky and Dove with the fact that they had abandoned their leader when he needed them most. And that Jaune of all people had been the one to save him when they couldn't. They sat in the dining hall, munching away on chicken legs and mashed potatoes.

They were having the usual discussion or same old dinner talks. There was no mention of Dove's mom and her home style cooking, or Sky's topics of alchemy and magic. Not even any of Russel's usual antagonistic comments. They sat there and hashed out the one issue that was anything worth talking about.

What were they going to do about Jaune?

After it was all said and done, Russel volunteered to head off after Cardin to talk while the others went off to finish up assignments at the library and talk with professors. Russel entered the CRDL dorm room, finding Cardin sitting on his bed, lost in thought.

"So Vomit Boy saved your life." Russel said as he walked into the room.

"Yep." Cardin muttered simply.

"You must feel like an ass." Russel commented.

"Yep." Cardin's head fell slightly, his chin drawing close to his collar bone.

"So what happens now?" Russel questioned. "With Jaune I mean."

"Why does it depend on me, Russel?" Cardin stood up, anger swelling deep inside. It felt like he was being talked down to. And that didn't sit well with the young Winchester. "You, or Dove or Sky can all go rat Jaune out to Ozpin all by yourselves for all I care!"

"They honestly couldn't give a shit if he stayed or not." Russel shrugged. It was a true statement, earlier the trio had met to discuss how they felt on the situation. Sky was impressed by the fact someone like Jaune was able to kill an Ursa single handedly. Dove shared Sky's opinion and the two decided that Jaune had just as much a right to attend Beacon as anyone. But it wasn't any skin off their back if he got kicked out.


Russel shrugged, not too long ago he wanted to wash his hands of Jaune. Tell Ozpin and have the boy ejected. But then he and Jaune shared a few words and he saw a little of himself in him. It just made the whole ordeal more complicated than it needed to be. His fault, won't happen again.

"There's a lot to take into account." Russel spoke thoughtfully. Cardin leaned against a wall,
silently quelling his anger. "You got a code Cardin. I know that for a fact." Russel said, pointing a finger at his leader. "The only reason we've been getting along is because I saved you. Don't deny it, I'm not an idiot, I take notice of these things."

Cardin sighed once more, not denying anything. "So now that Jaune saved your butt, you feel like you owe him too." Cardin nodded at Russel's statement. "So, you're not going to rat him out are you?"

"No I'm not." Cardin resolved firmly. "I owe that doofus that much."

"And if I tried to, what would happen?" Russel asked curiously. "Would stop me?"

Cardin didn't have to say a word. He just stared at his partner. CRDL's only rule was broken today, when the team ran out on him. For the sake of the team, this was a matter that needed to be unanimous, everyone had to be on the same page. Or else this was going to be the end of Tea CRDL.

"Then I guess Jaune stays at Beacon." Russel said, easing the tension in the room. "Hey, the dining room's still open. Let's go get yourself something to eat."

Cardin shrugged, seeing why not. Just as they prepared to head out, they couldn't help but over hear a pair of familiar voices up above. Cardin and Russel opened their room's window and stuck their heads out. Now hearing the voices clearly, it wasn't a surprise that they belonged to Pyrrha and Jaune.

"Pyrrha... I'm sorry. I was a jerk! You were only trying to be nice, and... I had all this stupid macho stuff in my head."

"Jaune! It's okay!" Pyrrha said with a smile. "Your team really misses their leader, you know. You should come down! Ren made pancakes! No syrup, though - you can thank Nora for that!"

"Wait!" Jaune called out, causing Pyrrha to stop in place. "I know I don't deserve it after all that happened, but... would you still be willing to help me... to help me become a better fighter?"

"Hey!" Jaune cried out as he was shoved to the floor by Pyrrha.

"Your stance is all wrong. You need to be wider and lower to the ground." She then offered her leader her hand, which he graciously accepted. "Let's try that again."

Cardin and Russel exchanged looks, each having the same one the other wore on their face. It was that all knowing look that only an outside observer could possess. Cardin then raised his hand and extended three fingers. Russel nodded in complete understanding and readied himself as Cardin counted down.

One after the other, each digit folded inward, joining Cardin's fist. Now, after the count of three, both Cardin and Russel raised their hands over their mouths in order to amplify their voices.

"Just Fuck Already!" They shouted in unison.

The pair of teammates had a laugh, they could only picture the looks on Pyrrha and Jaune's faces. No doubt the spartan's face was as red as her hair and Jaune as clueless as ever. And without anything left on their plate. The pair of friends walked out of the room, hitting the lights on the way out.
At the end of the day, I guess 'The Darkling Thrush' is also about the friendship between Russel and Cardin. Especially during this Arc. Next chapter especially as we finally find out just what the hell is up with Cardin. Why are you being such a dick Cardin? Reasons.

For all of the Forever Fall forest dialogue, I ripped a good chunk out of transcripts from the episode. So that's all preserved, I did not edit any of that, that is all depicted from the show. This and the previous chapter were the hardest to write because of it.

Other than that, I just introduced Team STAG right there. And here I thought I was being crafty. Team STAG is an all Faunus team. I hope you guys will find them to be neat in regards to what little interaction we have with them. I've also planned out the next 2 arcs fully.

'Til next time, ladies and gentlemen. Later Days!
Welcome back, dearest reader, to the 10th chapter of 'The Darkling Thrush'!

This chapter pretty much was sparked out of the phrase 'So Team CRDL walks into a bar...' and then this happened. Funny huh?

... Anyways, onto the chapter!

In the aftermath of the blackmailing Jaune incident, Cardin had seemingly fallen into a slump. He wasn't eating regularly, he wasn't paying attention in class and his head just wasn't in the game during sparring sessions in combat class.

So Sky of all people had the great idea of taking Cardin out on a night in Vale. With nothing major on any of Team CRDL's agendas, they set out on the next airship to the city. The city lights were loud and the people were quiet. All eyes were averted looking elsewhere. No authority figures around to tell them what to do.

But the truth is you can't do much when under the age. You couldn't enjoy the city for what it truly was or what it had to offer. So Russel made a detour, meeting up with the hobo Kevin and bought four fake IDs off of him. It took the man only a couple minutes to get them ready, well worth the money the young Thrush spent.

"Where'd you get that kind of cash?" Dove asked curiously.

Russel just shrugged. "Don't worry about it." He said, not showing his cards too early. The night was young, as was the rest of the year. No reason to go around telling his life story, even to those he'll be trusting his life with.

And now after an abysmal romp through the town, the four Beacon students found themselves in The Crowbar.

"I don't believe you guys are old enough to be drinking." The bartender said as he eyed their IDs skeptically.

"Look, Bartender. Don't let the whiskerless chin fool you. I shave regularly." Dove said, quickly speaking for the rest of Team CRDL. "Four beers please."

"Look kid, serving alcohol to minors is a punishable offense. I could lose my license, my business." The bartender folded his arms over his chest.

"We'll pay cash." Cardin placed a twenty lien note on the table.
"Four beers coming right up." The bartender said, his tone shifting on the spot. He reached back behind the counter and retrieved four cold glass bottles out of the cooler. He then popped the caps and handed them to the boys along with four coasters. "Piece of advice, never let that guy talk for yous ever again." The bartender pointed to Dove, who frowned.

Team CRDL took their drinks and sat down at a booth in a secluded part of the bar. It was a quiet night, more people in the club than at the local water hole. But that suited them just fine, no chance of running into anyone they actually knew.

"I could pass for a twenty one year old, right?" Dove looked around to his teammates. The trio just exchanged glances and then, in unison shook their heads. "Aw man I'm going to have a baby face forever."

"To your health gents." Sky raised his drink into the air, ushering in a toast. The rest of CRDL followed in suit, raising their drinks and tapping them against each other. The four huntsmen in training then took mighty swigs out of their drinks, with only Dove having a difficult time with the liquor.

"Ugh why's it taste like that?" Dove asked as he held his drink close to his face so he could properly read the ingredients.

"First time eh?" Russel laughed.

"My dad gave me my first beer." Sky said before taking another sip of his drink. "He gave it to me when I came out."

"I take it you've had a supportive upbringing then?" Cardin commented as he just sat in his seat spinning his drink on the coaster.

"Yeah, something like that." Sky shrugged. "How about you guys, first time drinkers live Dove here?"

Cardin and Russel exchanged a glance, silently discussing who would go first. With a nod, Cardin began to speak. "My first drink was during a party. This guy, Tommy Braverman, his parents were going out for the weekend. Executive meeting I guess. So he threw a party, alcohol all around."

"Seems straightforward enough." Dove said before downing the last of his drink. "I don't so much as get why people drink these. It doesn't taste good and a sure don't feel any better."

"Give it thirty minutes." Russel assured Dove with a smirk. The Thrush then handed his light brown haired teammate a twenty. Dove accepted the lien, then got up from his seat to buy another round.

"No offense Russel, but what's a guy like you doing with all that cash?" Cardin said, referring to eyebrow raising amount of money that Russel had on hand.

"I planned ahead." Russel shrugged. The sole remaining Thrush hadn't quite figured out how to tell his teammates that he used to own a farm.

"So, what's your first time story, Russel?" Cardin asked as Dove returned with four more drinks.

Russel rubbed the back of his neck, unsure how to tackle the question. Back way then when Russel was twelve, while his Father was out, he'd decided to dig into their fridge to try one of those drinks that his dad was always having. His reaction was similar to Dove's he found the taste funny. He was halfway finished by the time his dad came home from selling the harvest.
What happened next was a typical Thursday. The Thrush Patriarch hit Russel on the back of his head, repeatedly. He recalled his Father shouting at him, more angrily than usual. Maybe it was because a twelve year old shouldn't be drinking, then again maybe it was because Russel was drinking his beer. It didn't matter.

"Snuck a taste when my old man wasn't looking." Russel said half truthfully, making sure to leave out

"A troublemaker from a young age, I see." Dove said as he began to work on his second drink.

Russel calmly sipped from his drink for only the second time. He cracked that troublesome grin of his and gave a nod. "Why of course."

"So, you feeling a bit better, got your heads out of the clouds yet?" Sky addressed Cardin.

All eyes fell on the burnt orange haired leader of the team. Cardin shrugged, not knowing what to say. He found Sky's choice of wording to be interesting, however. Cardin wasn't so much in the clouds, it was as if he wasn't there.

"To tell you guys the truth, when you mentioned this idea to me, I didn't exactly think it would be so…one note." Cardin said, referring to their choice of scenery.

"If we went to the local club, I'm pretty sure Yang would've been running around beating up the owner." Russel muttered, causing everyone to look at him in surprise. "What?"

"What do you mean Yang would've been beating up a club owner?" Cardin asked skeptically.

"When I first got here, I hooked up that connection with that hobo Kevin, then I hit the club." Russel recalled. "It was me trying to just soak in Vale for the first time. Next thing I know in walks Yang Xio Long. The blond bombshell just started pounding on everyone. It was a bloody riot."

"Yeesh." Dove slurred. "What a woman."

"Hush." Sky frowned. "What would your Mother think with you using such language?"

"Oh no, don't tell mah mom." Dove said as the alcohol began to take effect. "You can tell your dad but please don't tell mah mom." Dove slurred once more before downing the rest of his second beer and reaching over for a third.

"Jeez what a light weight." Russel murmured.

"So yous mentioned Sky, your dad is real supportive? That's nice. That's nice like ice. Real nice. Nicer than a headful of lice."

"I take back what I said. This is awesome." Cardin whispered to Russel, who nodded in agreement.

"How about you guys?" Dove looked away from his partner to Russel and Cardin. "We never talk about where we're from. I gots a mom. Everyone has moms. I have a dad too. Everyone has those too. I don't gots a sibling."

"Only child myself I'm afraid." Sky contributed to the topic. "We never do talk about home don't we?" He looked to Cardin and Russel. "So how about you guys? What did you both leave behind?"

Cardin and Russel exchanged glances once more, this time with the duo deciding Russel would go first. It was only fair. "Grew up in Oakwood." Russel said simply. "Nothing compared to Beacon
"Oakwood? That's farm country out there." Sky scratched his chin thoughtfully. "You grew up on a farm didn't you?"

"Guilty as charged."

"That's cool." Sky took one final swig of his drink, finishing it. "Anything interesting ever happen there?"

Russel froze for a moment, reflecting on his childhood. It wasn't always gloomy back then or was it? It was getting harder to tell with every passing day. What was interesting about Oakwood? Nothing, which was just it. There was nothing interesting about Oakwood. Only once, Russel though. Only once did something happen and it resulted with homes being burnt down and his dad dying of a heart attack.

"Just miles of farm land to get lost in." Russel put on that smile he always wore. He took another sip of his beer only to notice Dove was now on his fourth. "Dove, mate you need to cool it."

"Sure…sure…" Dove slurred.

"That's it, after that one you're done." Sky said, acting rather fatherly.

"Okay…" Dove moped.

"So, you and your family ever do anything together?" Cardin asked, bringing the discussion back to family rather than setting.

Russel paused for a brief moment, debating what to tell his team. You don't just go around bringing people down with your business. That's just messed up in his opinion. There was a slight falter in Russel's grin as he recalled all the times he'd been called a killer by his dad. A falter that did not go unnoticed by Cardin.

"Every once in a while, my dad and I would go and fish." Russel lied. "I never caught anything. But it's the thought that counts right?" He asked earning a nod from Sky and Dove. "Dad and I would got and catch fish."

"Your dad s-hic-sounds nice." Dove hiccuped.

"Yeah." Russel muttered. "Yeah."

Cardin just looked at Russel, not entirely buying everything he said but went along with it. "How about you fearless leader? How's life back where you come from?" Russel said, shifting the spotlight over to Cardin.

Cardin scratched the back of his neck, not knowing how to begin. There was a familiar pause and falter in Cardin's expression, something that Russel caught. "My family's very prideful. Us being Winchester's and all." Cardin said, referring to his family's roots back in The Great War.

"My parents just want what's best for me and my sister." Cardin paused, thinking of what to say next.

"You have a sister?!" Dove drunkenly exclaimed. "...how are you bad with women?"

Cardin frowned at Dove's comment, prompting Sky to elbow the youngest member of Team
CRDL. "Inappropriate." Sky said, sternly waving a finger in front of Dove's face.

"So you have a sister, must be nice." Russel said, passing one of the drinks over to Cardin as he reached over.

"Yeah, it is." Russel looked to Cardin, spotting those imperfections in his expression. Cardin took a swig out of the fresh beer. "Our families, well, conservative at best." He said as nicely as possible. "My sister's younger than me by two years. She's just an awesome person. I wouldn't know what to do without her."

There was an air of sadness to Cardin's words. Dove was too buzzed to have picked up on it and Sky was too busy acting the parent for Dove, but Russel picked up on it. He glanced at Cardin, catching a twinkle of reflection in his eyes. Russel said nothing about it, he just finished his drink.

"Hehe..." Dove laughed. "This place is called the 'Crow' 'Bar', get it?" He laughed once more, this time spitting up some drool. "Cause it's a bar...hehe..."

"Alright, come on guys. Dove's knocking out. We'd better get him home." Sky said, being the adult of the group.

"I-I c-can stay up as long as I want." Dove folded his arms over his chest and pouted. "I drink milk."

"No you don't." Cardin deadpanned.

"Yea..." Dove sighed before being helped up out of his seat by Russel and Sky.

The quartet caught a ferry back to the school. The usual air ships had closed down for the night. The smaller, pay per passenger ferries were all that Vale had to offer, but that didn't matter. As long as they got back they were all okay with it.

As they touched down on Beacon's grounds, Sky went on ahead with Dove, leaving Cardin and Russel behind to pay the ferryman.

As they began to head on after Sky and Dove, Cardin stopped in his tracks, turning to look at Russel. "So." He spoke quietly. "The truth?"

And so Russel stopped in place and thought of what to say. The entire night they'd been lying, not only to their colleagues but to themselves. They both knew it.

Russel smiled, thinking about what he'd said. He and his dad went fishing? That was a nice fantasy. And then Russel frowned. That cocky expression falling over, making way to the tired one beneath. Russel then looked to Cardin and shrugged. "You first."

Cardin remained silent. His strong posture with his chest shot outward faltered, falling into a slouching position. He placed his hands into his pockets and then turned his attention forward. The pair of partners walked side by side all the way back to Beacon. The shadow of their upbringing to their backs in the face of Beacon. But they can't talk about it yet. Maybe they'll never be able to talk about it.

Give me your tired and your disenfranchised. The wind howls. Those yearning to breathe free.

Welcome to Beacon.
And so ends the 2nd arc. Throughout most of the Cardin related stuff, I wrote him as having something going on with him. Especially when he was in the dining hall two chapters ago. We'll get some more explanation with Cardin as he goes on a sort of redemption storyline.

I've also decided to go back and add chapter names to the actual chapters themselves. Because I feel like me just saying that these are a part of an arc aren't enough.

We'll check back in with Russel and the gang later. Russel, in particular, is going to be going against everyone's favorite catgirl. No, not Neon but she's totes cool too.

I'll get around to working on that probably next week. Until next time, later days dear reader!
Hello there travelers, welcome to the 2nd Interlude of 'The Darkling Thrush'.

Story Time

It was a winter's evening in Vale when the power cut out. The man of the house turned to his darling wife and patted her hand gently, assuring her he'd fix whatever inconvenience had occurred. The man did not trudge through snow to the local power plant, however. He sat up from the dinner table and briskly walked to their fireplace in the living room.

The man reached to his mantle to his mounted mace, one he hadn't touched in years. The magma crystal within his mace still shone bright as it had back way then. He plucked it from where it was kept within his mace and then knelt to the fireplace.

He kissed the logs that rested in the fireplace with the crystal, igniting them. The man, stood tall, placing the crystal back within his old forgotten weapon and beckoned his family to join them.

His children, ranging from various ages, did as their father instructed. His wife, on the other hand, could only speculate whatever devious idea her husband was planning. "Who'd like to hear a story?" The man asked, his graying burnt orange hair shining brightly in the light of the fire, just as it once did in his youth.

In this newfound age of scientific exploration and all the things that came with it, it was so easy to forget the simpler times, when people would gather around the fire and share stories. And the man decided, this was just as good a time as any to reclaim those days. Even just for a moment.

His children smiled, though his youngest at the age of four quivered at the thought of a scary story. But the boy's mother, the man's wife, walked over to pluck her child off the floor to rest on her lap as she sat down in the living room sofa.

The children too their places beside their mother on the couch and all ears were attentive to what story the man had come up with.

And so the man began to think on what story he wanted to recite. What excellent tale should he speak aloud to his boys and girls? Certainly not how he and their mother met, they'd much rather hear how they fell in love. But then the man paused, thinking back to day that seemed like any other, recalling a friend and a dark part of their lives.

But his children were much too young to understand the meanings and moments of those days. But maybe they'd just enjoy the fabled version of his tale.

So then the man talked, giving boisterous examples of the 'Thrush' and how it glided through life. How the 'Thrush' danced in the air, not caring how the wind turned or what it brought with it. The 'Thrush' was born to fly, no matter what was shackled to its legs, the 'Thrush' defied all laws and notions. The 'Thrush' was born to flap its wings and fly into the sky.

Do you believe in destiny?

The man recalled a familiar voice, belonging to an invincible girl, ringing through his head. The
man looked to his wife, seeing a single tears forming in her brown eyes.

And so the 'Thrush' beat on with his wide wings. Whatever would try to weigh him down, the 'Thrush' would keep on. And that was the moral to the story, the man declared to his children.

Be who you are, don't ever let anyone tell you different. You're all meant to fly. The ground is just the starting point, just like when the man had first landed in that Emerald Forest.

And then the power went back on. The children cheered and the father beat the fire down. One of the children, the youngest, who was seated on his mother's lap, looked up and noticed the tears in her eyes.

"Mum?" The young boy asked, looking up at his mother with childish concern. "Why are you crying?"

"I'm not crying sweetie." She smiled brightly down at her son. Her eyes then were drawn to her husband, watching him look fondly at a photo on the mantle.

It was the man in his prime, standing beside not only the 'Thrush' in the story but a 'Dove' and a 'Lark'. Just four birds and their clever little tales, their adventures and so forth.

The man just smiled fondly at his friends. He said his goodbyes once more and turned to his family. The children were laughing, talking about how one day they'll all fly. And then the man smiled brightly and embraced his wife.

There was no other place the man would rather be, in the company of those he loved.

I actually left enough context clues within this so you could identify the man's wife. This was just a nice light hearted story to balance how somber the last chapter was. And I hope you all enjoyed it.

Next Arc: The Tyger and The Lamb

See you guys then.
XI: The Tyger and the Lamb: Part 1

Why hello there dear reader! Welcome back to the 11th chapter of 'The Darkling Thrush'!

From The Desk of Author X

Shining Beacon Contributor Colum

Who knew language could be so powerful? Yesterday I saw a man cry. All because he was called a word. A simple two syllable word. 'Faunus'.

For the sake of this discussion, my colleague's name will remain undisclosed. But I believe this moment, this specific moment within the halls of Beacon is really telling of our state as people.

Language is the way we express ourselves. Its how we skillfully bring discussions back to the main topic in Professor Port's class, how we get out of homework in Professor Peach's. It's how we express our joy and love for our fellow students and how we tell them we're monsters, worse than those that we fight.

While the Grimm are these atrocious dark beasts, the stuff of nightmares, they can never hurt us the way we do ourselves. Beowulfs cleave us with their claws. An Ursa can crush our skulls with its mighty jaw. A Nevermore just has to snatch us up and drop us, catch us again and drop us once more in the air until we die of fright.

Their methods of killing us range from terrifying to body horror. And what do we do to our fellow man and woman? We just talk to them. We don’t need to raise a hand or weapon. Our weapon of choice is far more sophisticated than that. All we have to do is talk to someone and tell them what they desperately wish not to hear.

"You're a Faunus." They said, holding power over that colleague of not only mine but yours.

These words we utter are more dangerous than any killing machine. They have the power to start and end wars. Call out the revelers and run through the town. Chant about your world views in any tone you choose.

They called him a 'Faunus', because that's a word we accepted into our everyday vocabulary. I'm no revisionist, we'll never to step away from the negative connotations associated with the word. But I can offer a solution, because it's a fact.

You're not just a human. You're not just a faunus. You're a person. And there's nothing criminal about that.

So if these words I write possess any weight to them, then I want to tell you not what you want to hear, but what you need to hear.

"You're a person. You matter. You're loved. You're doing fine."
It had suddenly occurred to Russel that it had taken him longer to see the inside of Beacon Tower. The monument of human achievement was a sight to behold, but the view was something else entirely. Of course. If only it was under better circumstances.

High above the clouds, with Ozpin's back to the window, the gray haired Headmaster sipped out of his cup. His eyes were neutral, devoid of any feeling. His face calm and unreadable. That put Russel at quite the disadvantage.

It wasn't exactly news what Russel had done. He'd gotten into scrapes all the time, but this was different. There always has to be a self-appointed hero. Some guy just looking for a reason to start trouble and quench his ego.

Russel should've known his actions would've come back to bite him in the ass. In walks Lance whatever the hell his last name is. Russel had never actually spoken to him, but the more he thought about it, the guy had always been around in the background, just watching and waiting.

A member of Team WILL, Lance stepped in Russel's way, mentioning all he'd witnessed Russel do in his time at Beacon. From his antagonism of Velvet and the tubby beaver Faunus guy from Team DNCE. Even trudging up his abandoning Cardin to the mercy of an Ursa.

So he got up in Russel's face with something to prove. That he was better than him? That Russel just wasn't cut out to be a Huntsmen? Who cares what his point was. Russel had knocked him back down a flight of stairs.

Lance is expected to make a full recovery of course. The privileges of aura. Unless you're some senile old shut in, you could pretty much bounce back from anything. Aside from a missing arm. But Russel's actions had landed him a front row seat in front of Beacon's Headmaster.

And so the gears up above turned, round and round. Time ticked and tocked. Russel sat before Ozpin, feeling slightly intimidated. After all, this guy could just eject him without a second thought. And given Russel's track record, who'd blame him?

"Do you believe in good and bad?" Ozpin asked, ending what must've been a half hour of silence.

Russel eyed Ozpin, slightly disarmed by his way of starting a conversation. "I'd say yeah, I do."

"Then what is your understanding of good and bad." Ozpin inquired, not giving up on his walled expressions. "Some of your peers would say you commit yourself to bad efforts rather than good."

"Everyone's entitled to an opinion." Russel shrugged. Look at him, this runt out of Oakwood and this big scary authority figure were just talking. And Russel found that absolutely mind blowing.

"And what do you think, then, Mr. Thrush?" Ozpin inquired. "Are your actions good or bad?"

It was pretty cut and dry, the way Ozpin made it sound. Russel had to remind himself that this was technically him getting reprimanded. He'd seen them all, those disappointed faces on those Headmasters and teachers. The way they'd be cross and how their noses would flare.

For kicks Russel would point out if they had any gold sticking out of those tunnels. It was how Russel tipped the balance of the matter in his favor. Emotional reactions just informed the other party how you operated and what you ultimately intended.

Ozpin wasn't like the others. Russel doubted he'd be pulling one over the old man anytime soon. A faultless stone wall expression like that proved he'd been around the block. He knew the game as well as Russel did. Best to play along for now.
"I'd say they're mine and mine alone." He answered simply.

"Put yourself in your fellow student's shoes, would you if someone was acting the way you did would you yourself not be inclined to speak out against them?" Ozpin said, playing devils advocate.

Trying to appeal to reason Ozpin? Here Russel had him all figured out. Or was this just another curveball thrown his way. "Except I'm not in their shoes, I'm in mine." Russel spoke indifferently.

"You're lucky Mr. Grimsby isn't seeking legal counsel." Ozpin said, playing the good cop.

"Guess we're both lucky then." Russel said, not taking the bait.

The school was also liable for the students. If Lance wanted, he could choose to go after the School. It was doubtful that he'd win of course. This is a school designed to train the next generations Huntsmen. The last thing Ozpin needed was bad publicity.

"So we are." Ozpin spoke neutrally. "You're hereby on probation. Turn in your weapons to Ms. Goodwich by the end of the day." He said sharply in the cool unemotional tone of his. "Anymore upsets like this and you'll never step foot on Beacon again."

That wasn't much of a shock. Technically this was Russel's first offense of any kind. He was bound to be lenient in some capacity. At least Russel was getting sent home. Or whatever constituted as home after he sold his farm.

"Anything else?" Ozpin asked rhetorically, but would soon regret his choice of wording.

"Well now that I have you seated down in front of me. What did you mean by 'all [you] see is wasted energy'?" Russel said, turning the tables on Ozpin. "As you can tell I took offense to that comment."

"Not many people address me in such a manner, Mr. Thrush." Ozpin spoke sternly, his eyes narrowing slowly. Finally, Russel had cracked that iron wall of his.

"Not every day you get to set the record straight." Russel said, playing the good cop like Ozpin had. "So, do you think I'm wasting my time by being here?"

It was Ozpin's turn to be in the hot seat. "If we're being frank. I don't believe a future protector of the people should be acting in such a manner as you do, yes." Ozpin said, unflinching. So the silver haired man knew the game after all.

"You going to hold this against me?" Russel asked.

"You most certainly aren't helping yourself, Mr. Thrush. I would like to see all my students graduate. But I can afford to see those less favorable few ejected from these premises." Ozpin's neutral emotionless tone couldn't hide the harsh sentiment of his choice of words.

"I guess we're done here then?" Russel asked as the game had reached its end.

Just as Russel was about to sit up from his seat, Ozpin raised a hand. "Humor me, Mr. Thrush." The Headmaster spoke, catching Russel off guard. "Do you believe in fairy tales?"

Now that really threw him off. Russel cocked a brow and just asked what was on his mind. "Is this a test?"
"Yes." Ozpin answered simply.

"No." Russel replied in the same manner.

"Why?" Ozpin asked, sounding oddly interested in the subject.

"Because they're stories fathers and mothers tell their children before tucking them into bed." Russel said, having dug deep for an honest answer. "That's what they are. Just stories. Did I pass?"

"We'll see." Ozpin said, before pointing to the door. The game had ended. And Russel wasn't sure who'd won. "Make good choices Mr. Thrush."

And then Russel left, down the elevator he went and the off to the dining hall for breakfast. What a way to kick off your Sunday. Get into a fight, if you could call it that. Get to play mind games with the most influential man in Beacon. Exciting stuff.

"You're still here?" A familiar voice, which Russel now associated with the sound of glass shattering on concrete, called out to the lone Thrush. Russel just glanced over his shoulder, spotting Marie-Anne catching up with him on the way to the dining hall. "Why am I not surprised?" She said, sounding disgusted.

"Good to see you too Marie-Anne." Russel smirked. "Sorry to disappoint you. I survived your Headmaster. My reign over these lands continues." He laughed to himself, doing his best impression of a supervillain. Truth is, Russel never watched too much television. He just went on basing his laugh on one of those crafty villains he read of in the library of Oakwood Academy.

"You're an asshole." Marie-Anne scoffed.

"That why you keep trying to stick it to me?" Russel's smirk grew wider. "Marie-Anne. I never would've thought you were into that sort of thing."

Marie-Anne's face paled at the mental image Russel had seeded in her mind. The sole remaining Thrush couldn't help but laugh at the disgust faces she was making. Her face had gone through several shades of red and an eye was twitching.

And so Russel laughed his way into the dining hall, leaving Marie-Anne behind to reboot her motor functions. Russel found got himself a spot in line and had his pick. He grabbed a plate and filled it with scrambled corn beef hash and eggs. He grabbed a glass of juice and was off.

Russel crossed through a sea of colorfully dressed students. It was Sunday, not a lot of people had classes. It was a day they all could just lighten up and wear whatever they wanted. Take that Jaune fellow for instance.

Russel looked off to the familiar set up of Team RWBY and JNPR seated together. Jaune Arc sat amongst his friends, dressed in his onesie. It was the sort of day when you could just be yourself. Of course he also looked dead tired and probably didn't realize he was still dressed in his pajamas, but that beside the point.

"Hey Russel!" Russel looked over the sea of lunch tables, spotting Dove standing on one and waving him over. "We're over here! I'm glad you didn't get expelled!"

A number of students turned to look at Russel. The Thrush frowned and muttered a curse. "Dove you idiot."

Now walking through a sea of stares and murmurs. Russel found his way to his team's table, taking
a seat besides Cardin as usual. "Sup guys." Russel said before digging in.

"I see you're not being carted out by campus security." Sky said, looking up from the school's newspaper, the Shining Beacon. "Unless this is you last meal?"


"Dude, you need to watch yourself then. You could get expelled." Dove said before stuffing his face with French toast.

"You guys worry too much." Russel laughed. "So what's good in the paper today Sky?" Russel said, quickly changing the topic away from him and to the Shining Beacon in Sky's hands.

"Nothing major. There's a little mention in here about that stuff down by the docks." Sky said, referring to that mess with the White Fang and Roman Torchwick last week. "Also, another nice article by Author X."

"Sounds like your cup of tea I guess." Russel just looked at his teammate skeptically. He then looked over to Dove who was currently looking off into the distance, eyes squinting and mouthing words. "Okay what's his deal?"

Sky just shrugged. "Dove's trying to learn lip reading. He's hung up on the idea of it being an important skill."

"Well it is!" Dove exclaimed, frightening those seated on the table beside their own. "Imagine. Being able know what others are saying without hearing them." Dove said, not taking his eyes off of whatever he was looking at. "It's a mind blowing idea."

Sky and Russel just shared a look and just nodded slowly. "Sure it is Dove. Sure it is."

"What're you looking at anyways?" Sky asked, setting the newspaper down.

"Looking at that bunny ear girl. She's talkin' with her team." Dove said as if it wasn't a big deal. "She's saying stuff. I'm trying to piece it together." Dove continued to stare. "That? That Fly? That Fly Nose? That Fly Nose Jeeping? That guy's creeping me out?"

All three members of Team CRDL looked to Dove disbelievingly. "Hey guys I got it right!" He exclaimed excitedly.

"Yay, good for you." Cardin said, finally speaking. "Now knock it off." He ordered. "You're creeping her out."

"What do you care?" Russel asked, raising a brow at his partner's uncharacteristic show of concern.

"After that stuff with Jaune I just think I've been going about everything wrong. You know?" Cardin sighed. He reached over and snatched up Russel's glass of juice and took a sip before setting it back down in front of his partner.

"Dude. That was my juice."

"I know." Cardin said with a nod. "I'm going to go and apologize to her."

"Who?" Sky raised a brow in confusion.

"The bunny ear girl. I think her names Velvet." Cardin stood up from his seat and turned to leave. "Thanks for the juice Russel. For my nerves."
So the rest of Team CRDL just watched as their leader marched on over to Team CFVY's table. Just out of earshot, they were forced to just watch as the scene unfolded.

"What're they saying?" Russel asked Dove as Cardin reached the table.

"See. It's a handy skill!" Dove smiled. The youngest of Team CRDL got to work, staring at Cardin as he talked to Velvet, who appeared unsettled by his sudden appearance. "He's apologizing for stuff." Dove simplified.

Over at the CFVY table, the team leader Coco Adel stood up and jabbed a finger in Cardin's chest, causing him to back up slightly. "Oh snap." Dove commented. "She's going ham! She's going ham!"

"Dove, just tell us what she's saying." Sky elbowed his partner.

"Ouch. She's calling him a racist and stuff." Dove said as he rubbed his arm. He then returned his attention back to the commotion over at the CFVY table. "Now she's calling him an entitled pig and stuff."

The giant Yatsushi the stood up from where he was seated. His back was to Dove, but none of them needed to know what the Team CFVY giant had said. Yatsushi pointed one of his arms outward, causing Cardin to walk away with his hands in his pockets.

When Cardin returned to the table, no one said anything. Cardin just reached over and grabbed Russel's glass of juice and downed what remained. He then stood up once more and began to walk away. "I'll catch you guys later."

The trio just watched their leader walk off once more on his lonesome. Russel just stared at the empty glass on the table in front of him. "He drank my juice…"

The rest of breakfast was uneventful. Dove went on testing out his new skill, joking that it was his semblance. Once finished with their meals, Sky offered to take their plates to the washer. After that they just got up and went on their way.

"You guys want to do anything today?" Dove asked as the trio made their way back to their dorm. "I was thinking Webflix binge. Any partakers?"

"I actually gotta head down to the locker room and hand in my weapons." Russel muttered, recalling what Ozpin had said to him earlier. "After that I'm going to head to the library and work on some things."

"But we don't have any assignments for the next two weeks." Dove commented as they reached their room.

"But we will in the next two weeks." Russel pointed out. "I didn't get to where I am today by thinking like that, Dove."

"I'm not particularly in the Webflix mood." Sky shrugged. "I think I might join you Russel. I need to look up a few things in the history department. Some things caught my eye and I just need to figure it out."

"Cool." Russel muttered.

The pair of Russel and Sky said their goodbyes to Dove, leaving the youngest member of their team free reign over their room. They headed down to the locker room, passing by half of Team
JNPR on their way.

Pyrrha was currently attempting to flirt with Jaune, commenting on how he filled in his onesie rather well. But the unassuming doofus just took it as a friendly compliment and ran off to go change into his day clothes.

Russel and Sky didn't know whether to laugh at Pyrrha's overtly comedic misfortune, or give her a pat on the back for effort. They decided on just moving on with their day to be the better course of action.

When they reached the locker room, Sky patiently waited as Russel retrieved his daggers. "Remember when you walked into my locker?" Sky asked casually. Russel nodded as he dialed in his lock combination. "That was funny." Sky laughed.

"It was a real riot." Russel joined in Sky's laughter as he retrieved his weapons. It was just a simple matter of tracking down Professor Goodwitch and turning them over. "Alright. Time for a witch hunt."

"She's probably in her office." Sky suggested.

"Oh I know. But how often am I going to be able to say 'witch hunt' without sounding like a bigoted ass?" Russel shrugged. And with that the pair were on their way out the room.

Out from behind the lockers on the other side of the room stepped Blake Belladonna. Team RWBY’s resident ninja had at first walked into the locker room in order to clean Gambol Shroud. But the young woman had stuck around long enough to observe Russel and Sky. She had a vested interest in Team CRDL, the likes no other could understand.

You see, Blake had always seen Russel's weapons from afar, never up close. But there was something about them that irked her. Ever since that business with the White Fang last week, Blake just had to act on the feeling in her gut.

So she observed them carefully, meticulously analyzing Russel's weapons. And wouldn't you know it. They had a secret sigil engraved in the handles. A sigil only the likes of Blake and members of the White Fang would recognize.

"Russel Thrush." Blake muttered Russel's name bitterly. "You'll rue the day you infiltrated this school. White Fang."

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**And there we go. Blake vs. Russel.**

When I initially started writing The Darkling Thrush, I didn't know how long I'd keep writing it. So when I began to go over its initial 5 chapter outline, I knew immediately I wanted to do a story where Blake and Russel fought.

The speech writing stuff makes a return in the form of Author X. After the first time I did it in chapter 5, I knew I wanted to use that again but for the school newspaper. Which, I thought would be interesting, if Velvet worked for the newspaper. She seems like the journalist type.

There was actually going to be a lot more in the gutter dialogue between Russel and Marie-Anne. I trimmed it down because I'm not ready to make the rating change yet. Just not yet.
I had an OC show back up. Lance Grimsby. He was mentioned a while back as part of Team WILL. Who we may see show back up later down the line. Say Arc 4. I envisioned him to be a parody of OCs I've written before. He's a brooding do gooder self absorbed in his own tragic backstory. Which isn't that tragic. I thought it was funny.

Last but not least. My take on Ozpin, I'm falling in with the idea that he's basically father time. He walks in eternity and he's seen it all. That's something we'll see more of later on in the arc.

Well, anyways. I hope you enjoyed this chapter. Later days!
For some strange reason, the site wouldn't let me publish this around the time I wanted to. I had to convert the document to Word 97-2003 format, and surprisingly it took.

As always I'd like to thank those who left a review, it means a lot you know, knowing someone cares enough to leave a comment on your work.

The idea of Blake fighting Russel. This was one of the first ideas I had after deciding to move forward after the first arc. It just seemed like something that would have to happen if Russel went walking around with a White Fang member's weapons. Blake would just find out and just not have any of it. Especially after Volume 1.

Well enough of me yapping, on with the main event.

Do not fall.

Forget what you've heard about the place. About the city of Vale. It means the bustling courtyards with fantastic monuments are that of amusement parks. It means the parks and ports, filled with tourists and workers. It doesn't mean they'll catch you when you fall.

The old Vale is waiting just beneath the surface, the dead city built over after a period of war. It's in the eyes of the clerk who declines your card. The bank manager who forecloses on your card. The surgeon who tells you your sister died on the operating table.

It's the discomfort and disgust that your misery awakens in them, as they look away, at anything but you. As they lock you out of the club. You're left standing thinking – Hey, I thought I'd made it?

But no one cares about you if you're damned.

Just because the old city and its problems were paved over with streets of silver and gold, doesn't mean they're gone. Don't think this place has changed. Not in its heart. Not what it is.

Do not fall in Vale.

No one's going to catch you when you do.

Libraries are quiet place where those who fancy themselves to be intellectuals prefer to hang out. The master race of serfs and golden kids who fought with their fists rather than their heads would never be caught dead here. Amongst the stacks and bookshelves, you might find a pair of students getting randy with one another. At least, that's how the library back in Oakwood was.
Centuries of accumulated dust and books based in disproven fact become fiction, that wasn't the library in Beacon. The stacks were kept well, the wealth of knowledge that lined the rows was unimaginable. There wasn't an odorous scent that clung to the carpets, nor were there livestock that'd jumped the nearby farm running wild.

The library here in Beacon was unlike Oakwood's in everywhere. It was vast, clean, and orderly. It lacked the many imperfections of his hometown. And that was what Russel liked the most about the library, aside from the working computers anyways.

Typing away on some matter only he was privy too, Russel hummed a tune quietly, as not to alert the librarian of all people. Not too far away, Sky busied himself with gathering research material from the history section. The blue haired young man then waltzed out of the aisle, a stack of books in his arms and then he gently set them down on a nearby table.

Russel turned back to what he had on the computer screen. He dug into one of his pockets and fished out a thumb drive he'd picked up out of a drug store a couple weeks back. The tech back in Oakwood wasn't thumb drive compatible, it was a new experience to him. But he picked it up fine. Stuck it into the port and dragging his assignment to the drive before removing it.

He was done, might as well see what Sky was up to.

"So what the hell you lookin' up anyways?" Russel asked, taking a seat across from Sky at the table. The young Thrush reached out, grabbing one of the items his teammate eyed it curiously.

'How I Won: Factual Accounts From A Proven Huntsmen' by Peter Port.

Sky laughed awkwardly as he rubbed the back of his neck. "It was a late night venture of mine. Reading an old history book back in my childhood." Sky reached into a binder he'd brought along and pulled out poorly copied pages from a book. "The book had references to some sort of individual known as 'Maiden', always referred to as 'The'."

"The book not give a time period?" Russel raised a brow as he reached out for one of the pages. To Russel's surprise, he found the page to be written in a language completely alien to himself. "This some dead language?"

"Yes, actually." Sky laughed. "My mother was an archeologist. She found the book in an ancient temple, learned the language of the dead king that held. And then she taught me."

"Learning a dead language. That's a useful skill." Russel remarked sarcastically.

Sky looked up from the books he'd gathered, his cheerful smile fading, replaced by the cross look that stared back at Russel. "Quite." Sky deadpanned.

After that, conversation ended between the two. Guess Russel just hit a sore spot. Oh well. So the lone Thrush sat back in his chair, nothing left to busy himself with. He'd completed what he'd set out to do. He glanced up at the ceiling, debating what to do with the rest of his day. Russel could head out to the city, grab some supplies, and run some chores. Speaking of chores he should really head out and take care of his laundry.

He was just about to get up and walk out, until something on the desk caught his eyes. Russel sat up and gave the crusty object a good look. It was a Yearbook. Beacon had a Yearbook? "What do you need this for?"

"I must've picked that up by mistake." Sky shrugged, looking up only to ascertain just what his teammate blabbering about. But then a thought crossed his mind. Something about 'blabbering' and
'teammate' got Sky thinking. Now that he had Russel seated here in front of him, he could finally get some answers regarding the man's partner and his leader. "So what's up with Cardin?"

"What you mean?" Russel asked as he began to unconsciously flip through the old yearbook.

"Since when does he apologize?" Sky said before his eyes soon found themselves aimed at the words on the text currently set out before him. "It's rather out of character, I suppose."

"Nope." Russel said simply as he

"Nope?" Sky raised a brow.

"Yeah. Nope. It's not out of character of him." Russel said as he continued to flip through the yearbook. "Why's Beacon got a Yearbook? Are we going to have a yearbook?"

"Wait what do you mean by, 'Nope'?"

"I mean, do you honestly believe someone could be an unapologetic asshole? That's their defining character trait?" Russel spoke in an eerily serious tone. "Anyways, I finally figured out what's been wrong with our fearless leader."

"What?" Sky asked curiously.

"Oh I can't tell you that." Russel smirked, causing Sky to frown. "It ain't my secret to tell."

"At least give me a hint." Sky leaned forward, placing his elbows wholly on the table.

"Lips are sealed mate." Russel made a zipping motion around his mouth. "You wanna find out what's up with Cardin, just ask him. Or do what I did and go around his back and take a look at his scroll."

"Ugh, you tease." Sky said playfully.

"I'm such a stinker." Russel chuckled. "So, you were talking about this 'Maiden' again?"

The conversation redirected once more, Sky returned to his binder and pulled out his notes. The blue haired young man began to go on, speaking of the few passages he could dig up over the years about something called 'The Maiden'. Such a spectacular and mysterious part of history seemingly forgotten.

Almost as if someone had gone to great lengths to ensure that the world forgot.

Russel continued to flip through the pages in the yearbook, eventually reaching the Team pages. And then Russel froze. The sound of turning pages ceased. Sky looked up from his research once more, stopping mid-sentence, feeling something off about the mohawk sporting boy sitting across from him.

"Something wrong?" Sky asked concerned.

"Nothing." Russel muttered, his eyes narrowing at the contents of the yearbook.

There on the page in the 'Teams' section, there was a photo of four young men and women standing ready to the world. And at the front of the Team was Russel's Father. In the Thrush Patriarch's young age, the resemblance between his son and himself was indisputable. He didn't have Russel's eyes though, they were his mother's after all. That's what he was told anyways when his dad died in his arms.
The then young Thrush Patriarch stood there sporting his sword, the now destroyed 'Darkling'. It looked cleaner in the photo, as if it were brand new. The Thrush Patriarch's team was comprised of two men and two women. It suddenly occurred to Russel that his Father had never mentioned anything about his Team when he was a Huntsman.

They were all smiling, even Russel's Father. There was a joyful quality to the man's features. Creases around the cheeks that hone the constant use the man got out of them. He must've smiled a lot when he was younger. That was something up until now Russel thought impossible. The man he knew never smiled. Never.

But then Russel's eyes began to drift to the team that surrounded his Father. His teammates were an odd bunch. There was a woman in a sleeveless hoodie, armor plating on her wrists and shins. She wore sandals, had an award winning smile and hair bluer than Sky's.

The other man in the photo wore head to toe knight's armor. It was silver and bronze, his helmet tucked under his arm showing his freshly shaved face to the camera. His complexion was pale, seems like one of the few times he ever took off the helmet.

And then finally, Russel glanced at the soul remaining member of the team he had yet to become acquainted with. She was blonde, had a fair complexion. Wore a red leather jacket over a white tunic with armor padding. She had a sash that ran over her shoulder and a pair of guns in each hand. But it was the eyes that caught Russel's attention. Those eyes of hers were the very same he saw when he looked in the morning.

Russel's mother died in childbirth. He never met her. His Father blamed him every day until the day he died for her death. The Thrush Patriarch never mentioned her outside of that context. He never even mentioned her name.

Never before had Russel felt the urge to cry like how he did now. Those eyes staring back at him, his mother's eyes staring back at him with such hopeful kindness. No wonder his Father had hated him. Russel had snuffed out probably the only source of joy the old man had ever felt.

Russel then began to flip through the yearbook, in search of anything related to his Mother. There had to be something else, there had to be so much more. This woman he'd never met but whose memory shaped his past, there just had to be more about her.

And so Sky just watched as Russel desperately ran through the pages of the yearbook. He was reaching the end of the book by the time Russel stopped his rummaging once more. The farmer's boy paled. Sky was about to ask again what was going on, only for Russel to rip a page out of the yearbook.

And then Sky began to speak up in protest of the harsh treatment of the book, despite having no correlation to the subject matter he pursued, it was still a book and should be treated with the most respect. But Russel cut him off. The young Thrush, the last of his kind, held up a hand.

"Hey, I'll catch you later." Russel said as he pocketed the page he'd ripped out. He tossed the yearbook on the table and jumped to his feet. He waved over his shoulder and then made a beeline for the exit.

Sky just sat there with a look of confusion mixed with a look of concern. There walked off his teammate, a part of him saying that he should just run off and catch up to him, find out what's wrong. But then there was the part of him that understood that people needed their space. This was one of those times someone needed their space and Sky intended not to interfere.
And so the Lark went back to his research. It was all he really could do.

On the way out, Russel found himself lost in a maze of his thoughts. The world outside was there, but he just wasn't paying attention. Out of the library now, Russel turned to face Beacon Tower far out in the distance.

A scowl formed on Russel's face as he began to march his way forward, full intent on reaching the top of that stupid tower.

Not too far away, Pyrrha Nikos, the champion herself, the invincible girl, found herself leaning against a wall. After her morning jog, one she'd finally managed to talk her leader and the object of her affection, one Jaune Arc into joining, Pyrrha had tried a more aggressive approach to catching the boy's attention.

The aggressive Pyrrha act was new to her. It would have to be refined and practiced. After all, the invincible girl had struck out. That dense, lovable fool, all her signals, her flirtatious laughs, they had just flew over his head. Maybe what she needed was a couch, maybe Yang could help?

No, not Yang. Pyrrha enjoyed the bombshell's attitude, but she seemed more adapt at simply teaching her to flirt, nothing more. She wanted to lock Jaune down, in more ways than one. And so she thought of Weiss, the one whom Jaune actually pined after. But alas, what would Weiss teach her? Pyrrha like Weiss, but even she had her reservations regarding the heiress. Of course she'd never say anything, Pyrrha was too nice of a person to do that.

But maybe, that's what she needed to fix. Maybe Pyrrha had to stop being so nice of a person. Maybe she needed to be a little mean. Weiss could teach her that. But wouldn't that be somewhat offensive, Pyrrha thought to herself. The last thing she wanted was her love life to harm any of her relationships as they are now.

But maybe, that's what she needed to fix. Maybe Pyrrha had to stop being so nice of a person. Maybe she needed to be a little mean. Weiss could teach her that. But wouldn't that be somewhat offensive, Pyrrha thought to herself. The last thing she wanted was her love life to harm any of her relationships as they are now.

No, what Pyrrha needed was someone who could teach her to be trouble. Someone who could teach her to be unforgiving and mean. Someone like...Russel Thrush? Pyrrha had to do a double take as the mohwak, hoodie wearing member of Team CRDL walked into view. It was worth a shot right?

So Pyrrha kicked off the wall she leaned against and ran to catch up with Russel. She called out to the Thrush, but he just kept on walking, Beacon Tower dead ahead.

"Um, excuse me, Russel?" Pyrrha called out to him as she caught up. But Russel wasn't paying attention, it was full steam ahead, the blinders were on and all he could see was forward. "I don't know how to as you this, Russel, but I'd like you to train me to be, well, pardon this liberally crass use of language, an 'asshole'." Pyrrha said, the use of a curse seemingly foreign to her.

Russel just kept walking and Pyrrha kept on talking. "So, are you willing to help me out?" Pyrrha asked politely.

"Bah Humbug." Russel murmured to himself, causing Pyrrha to stop in her tracks.

The Mystral champion stood there with a quizzical expression on her face. She legitimately knew not what he meant. "I'll take that as a yes?" She called out.

Nearby, Cardin just sat by a tree, communing with nature. A small bird landed on the CRDL Team Leader's outstretched index finger. The taller than average boy sighed as he pulled the bird in close. He gave it a good look as it chirped. Then out of the corner of his eyes he spotted Russel on the warpath. Part of him wanted to see what was up, but he had other plans.
So the bird flapped its wings and flew away. Cardin stood and began to walk in the other direction. But Russel paid no attention to any of them, not to Pyrrha not to Cardin. He just kept walking until he was at the base of Beacon Tower.

Russel looked up, staring upward. His mad expression softened and he took a deep breathe. There was a matter only Ozpin could solve. Now he only hoped that the old man wouldn't mind him showing up in his office twice in one day. Like he thought earlier, the day was still young.

And so Russel reached out for the door. His hand grasped the handle and prepared to pull the door open. But there was a shadowy blur behind the young man. Before he could turn around, Russel was failing to the ground face first.

Blake stood over the unconscious Russel a look of satisfaction on her face. She knew a lot of people who were waiting to do something like that Russel. It felt like stealing candy from a baby.

With no one around, Blake reached down and grabbed Russel, throwing him over her shoulder. With no one around, no one was there to stop Blake from dashing off, speeding poor Russel off to parts unknown.

So when I was first writing this, I had no idea how I was going to fit Pyrrha into the chapter. I've plans for her, this is like my only chance with the world of RWBY, she's got a role in this collection of words. She's too nice of a person to offend someone outright or by accident, so in walks Russel, who else.

Writing for Sky's been difficult, because I had an idea of where to take him, but decided against it. So now I'm slowly building his character back up by involving him with The Maidens. And Honestly I like the idea. Sky's just doing it out of respect for the field, nothing should be forgotten.

The Shining Beacon Colum is going to stick around for the rest of the Arc. Don't worry I got reasons. There's a payoff. I'm not including it for funzies. Even though I'm having a lot of fun writing them.

But oh yeah, Blake totally just kidnapped someone. But more on that next time! Later days.
Welcome back dear reader, to the 13th chapter of 'The Darkling Thrush'!

This chapter starts off on a bit of a somber note. When I initially started writing this particular chapter, a lot of crap happened over the weekend that influence this Author X entry, so I'm sorry if it gets a little topical.

From The Desk of Author X

Shining Beacon Contributor Colum

An Artist died in Vale last night. I didn't know him.

For us Huntsmen, or rather, Huntsmen in training, death is only a natural part of the gig. We kill Grimm, they kill us. It's the circle of life.

Schnee Duct Corporation stocks are at an all-time high. The 40th Vytal Festival, celebrating the end of years of war, is fast approaching. The White Fang are perpetrating violence more than ever.

This is the world we live in. Where the industrial military complex profits, where war is celebrated and grudges are never forgiven. The world of a huntsman is not one of kindness, but filled with buckets asking for donations of blood, our blood. It's a messy world we live in.

But that's our world, not theirs. People exist beyond the endless fighting. Some bake, others farm, and special few, the talented ones seek to make something else of their skills. Entertainers live in a world with heart ache, but they rise above it to make the masses smile.

An Artist died last night, killed by a member of the White Fang.

I didn't know him. These worlds we live in, the ones where Huntsmen dwell with our suicide missions and galvanizing corporations. And the ones where the masses, the crowds and civilians who just want something more than the blood, where they can smile and be fearless.

These are worlds that should never mix.

What time was it? Russel asked himself mentally as he began to stir awake. His vision was murky, the back of the young man's head pounding. The last thing Russel recalled was his marching to Beacon Tower. He had something important to discuss with Headmaster Ozpin. Now if only he could remember what that was.

Russel attempted to move around, only to discover he found himself bound to what felt like the legs of a chair by rope. Russel's vision began to clear slightly, he could see sunlight shining in through a window. A dark figure paced back and forth before him. He hadn't even realized how
muddled his hearing was, he could piece together muted phrases, bits and words from whoever was with him.

Was he in a dorm room? Russel asked himself as he tried to regain his bearings. He shook his head, hoping things would start to make sense. Russel's vision cleared fully and then he really took in his surroundings. He was in a dorm room, but it wasn't his own. The beds were thrown together, very shoddily mind you, to emulate bunk beds. Russel doubted a lot of thought went into the design process. If anyone so much as weighed over two hundred pounds he was sure the ropes holding the beds in the air would give.

Was he in an all girl's room? Russel began to wonder as he caught a whiff of some sort of perfume. What the hell was he doing here? Russel wondered, his thoughts then drew to his marching up to meet with Ozpin. Russel wondered if he made it and asked the graying Headmaster whatever it was he had to question him about. Maybe he'd gotten the worst kind of answer and gone out drinking again.

He got blackout drunk, came back to Beacon, got frisky with some chick. Case closed. That still left several questions, such as how the hell was he going to get out of the chair?

"Good, you're awake," Russel glanced to the window, following a dry feminine voice. His eyes widened in surprise at the sight of Blake Belladonna.

"Oh, Blake." Russel blinked in genuine surprise. "Tell me did we do anything last night?"

"It's still Sunday." Blake deadpanned.

"Oy, I got blackout drunk on the same day?" Russel questioned, eyeing the member of Team RWBY suspiciously. "Did we do anything, me and you…?"

"No." Blake deadpanned once more.

"Dukes." Russel frowned, snapping his fingers. He was at least hoping he could've walked away from his current situation with one hell of a story to tell, but guess not. Still, that left the question of why he was tied to a chair.

"So if we weren't getting kinky, why the hell am I in your room tied to a chair?" Russel motioned to his current situation with his head. Both Russel's arms and legs were tie to the legs of the chairs.

Blake didn't respond. If Russel didn't know any better, he would've thought the ninja of Team RWBY was sizing him up. But he didn't know any better did he? He didn't know the girl standing before him at all.

"What the hell's going on here Blake?" Russel asked harsher, his patience growing thin.

Blake silent reached behind her back. The atmosphere in the room suddenly grew tense when Blake revealed Gambol Shroud and took aim at Russel. "Let's talk 'Russel'." Blake muttered darkly.

Russel's eyes darted at the gun suddenly trained on his forehead. Between getting your brains blown out and chatting with the woman holding the murder weapon, the choice was a no brainer. "Talking's good." He said simply.

Blake lowered her weapon, her silent expression becoming one filled with unnatural hate that was beyond Russel's understanding. "What's Adam planning?" Blake demanded as she began to walk circles around the tied up Russel.
Russel followed every one of Blake's movements. They were rehearsed, whatever the hell was happening, Blake had experience with this sort of thing. And that worried the young man bound to a chair. Blake played with the gun in her hand, but maintained eye contact with Russel. Without a doubt an intimidation tactic.

Was this some sort of game to her? Russel thought as Blake made another pass around him. Well tough luck Blake, Russel played games and was very good at them.

"Adam?" Russel asked, genuinely having no idea what Blake was talking about.

"Don't play dumb Russel. If that even is your real name." Blake glared menacingly at the chair bound boy.

"Questioning the validity of my name?" Russel raised a brow. "I don't that's related to whoever this 'Adam' guy is."

"You like to talk shit don't you, Russel?" Blake asked as she stopped with her pacing. Now standing directly behind Russel, Blake quietly reeled back her leg. Before Russel could muster a witty retort, Blake swiftly kick the chair forward.

Russel let out a yelp in surprise before slamming face first into the carpeted floor. "You really like it rough, don't you Blake?" Russel muttered awkwardly as his cheek was firmly mushed against the floor.

"Why did Adam send you here?" Blake asked darkly before kicking Russel over so he was looking up at the ceiling. "What're you planning?"

Russel just stared at Blake, not giving her the satisfaction of knowing she had any power over him. He didn't know what Blake was running on about, and he didn't care. "The hecks got you so riled up Belladonna?" Russel said with his trademark shit eating grin.

A heeled boot came crashing down against Russel's face, cutting the young man's cheeks against his teeth. Russel coughed and began to gag on the sudden flow of blood.

"Carpets are red enough to hide a little mess." Blake said in her usual deadpan tone, but there was a darkened edge to her words as she leered at Russel. Beneath her heel, Russel spat blood, letting some drip down the sides of his mouth. "Now answer my damn questions."

The Team CRDL member spat up blood once more and stared up meeting Blake's gaze. "I don't have to do anything I don't want to, Belladonna." He laughed.

Again, Blake curb stomped the boy. "I'm not playing games here, Russel. Answer my damn questions."

"Not playing games? Feh." Russel coughed up blood once more. "I am."

"I know about your weapons, Russel." Blake reached down, grabbing ahold of Russel and with all her might, the resident ninja tossed the boy across the room, slamming him against a wall.

If it wasn't for the fact Russel had an aura, he might not have been able to tolerate the punishment Blake was dishing out. Landing in another awkward position, Russel stared sideways as Blake approached once more.

"Adam. Talk. Now. While you still have a jaw." Blake threatened menacingly as she towered over Russel.
"Who the fuck is Adam?" Russel glared at Blake's shoe, the one she'd used to stomp him. The Thrush then spat blood over the tip of her shoe. He then looked up to see whatever expression Blake was making in response to his action. He was hoping for something in between a mix of disgust and anger.

But instead, Russel found only that cold, calculating stare on Blake's face once more. "Oh come on? You aren't going to indulge me?" Russel remarked. "At least call me an asshole or something. I just spat up blood on your shoes. That's more than Arc's ever done to your friends. Vomiting on Yang and what not."

"Do you get off on this?" Blake asked seriously. In her position it wouldn't be too much of a leap to assume such of Russel. He was practically begging for her to hurt him. "All you have to do is answer my questions."

"You knocked me out and tied me to a chair." Russel laughed mockingly. "And then you pulled a gun on me. Answer your questions or Fuck You?" Blake nodded. "Fuck You."

Blake kicked Russel once more, this time getting a pained response from the boy. "You don't owe Adam anything. Quit protecting him."

"Adam? He that guy who got killed last week?" Russel asked. "You know, the one in the Author X article?" Blake just kicked him again in response.

"Enough with the games." Blake spoke coldly, once again reaching down and grabbing Russel. She then dragged the chair back to the center of the room, setting him back upright facing the window.

"You don't read Author X do you?" Russel asked, chuckling slightly as he focused his aura around his wounds. He wasn't as adept at healing as the next guy, but he could keep his ugly mug from puffing like a blowfish. "I don't read them much myself." He just kept on chuckling. "I prefer the illustrations in the back. A cat that hates Mondays? Well shit I can get behind that."

"Hm. I'll indulge you, Russel." Blake scoffed as she reached up to her head and removed her bow. "I hate Mondays." She said as she tossed her bow onto her bunk in one swift fluid motion.

It was the shock of a lifetime. Never once had Russel suspected that Blake Belladonna, that girl who failed at hiding the fact she read smut books in the back of combat class, was truly a master of hiding the fact that she was in reality a Faunus.

"Whoa." Was all Russel could say.

"I pity you, I really do." Blake said, turning to face the window, in turn not noticing how wide Russel's eyes had just become in utter shock. "The White Fang used to be more than terrorists. They used to stand for something, equality, justice, peace." Blake spoke longingly. Russel didn't need to see her face to know what was running through her head. Blake had provided him with enough context clues to make an educated guess.

"You're White Fang?" He said, not in his usual heckling tone, but in one than emulated his irritation.

"I was, once." Blake spoke in a whimsical manner that referred to self-reflection. "Adam doesn't talk about me much does he?" She turned back around to face Russel, now brandishing Gambol Shroud once more. "Why should he, I only walked out on him after all."

It was just Russel's luck. He always got the crazy ones. So the Thrush cracked a smile and shrugged. "Cool story. Sure you don't want to add the bits and pieces about your tortured past?"
You sound like one of those folks who has one."

Blake smacked Russel across the face with her weapon, this time knocking a tooth out. Russel just silently watched as the premolar rolled to a stop beneath one of the beds, an unamused look on his face.

"Whatever your assignment was, it ends today. The White Fang will not terrorize Beacon." Blake declared. "Who else is here? Is your whole Team in on it? Are they White Fang too? I would never have suspected given what you four did to poor Velvet in the Cafeteria."

Russel just stared at lake with a face that spoke a thousand words. He didn't know whether to be insulted or infuriated for being associated with a world renowned terrorist group. "Why would you think I'm White Fang?" It was Russel turn to speak in an utterly dry deadpan fashion. "Do you see antlers sticking out of my ass or something? Cause, this would be the first I've ever heard of."

"I don't need to see any Faunus traits to know you're one of us." Blake retorted a matter of fact like.

"You just didn't want to check my doodle did you?" Russel spoke crassly.

"I had my suspicions from the get go." Blake said, not playing into whatever angle Russel had with that immature comment of his. She would never admit it, but this was by far the most difficult interrogation she had ever been a part of.

Of course back in the White Fang it was Adam who did most of the heavy lifting. She always turned her head whenever things got too much for her. But she'd picked up enough tricks. Though she would never be as effective as Adam, he was too much of a monster, something Blake never wanted to be.

"You and your team, acting like school bullies. I t had to be a cover. Ozpin would never let in anyone so terrible." Blake said, banking on the all-knowing big brother authority figure that Ozpin was. "And then I got a good look at your weapons. I spotted our secret White Fang sigil. The one which we used to communicate with other members, to let us know we were never alone."

Now Blake had him cornered. Try and try as Russel may, Blake was in full control of the situation. He was tied up, bound, devoid of freedom of movement. Blake had tossed him across the room several times over and hurt him in a show of force; that anything that happened within this room happened because of her will. And now she had him trapped, she'd found him out. All was lost. Now all she had to do was sit back and wait for the rat he was to break down and attempt to broker some sort of deal.

Russel just sighed, but not in defeat like Blake expected. "My weapons? Really?" Russel sighed once more. "You'd have found more concrete evidence by checking my damn doodle, Blake."

"I'm not a pervert, I'd never do such a thing." She affirmed.

"Oh knock it off, we all know you read Ninjas in Love in class." Russel accused, causing Blake to actually show a shred of genuine emotion.

"I got those daggers from some dead guy, I don't even know how to work them." Russel practically shouted.

Blake then backhanded Russel with the butt end of Gambol Shroud. "Quiet, do you want the whole floor to hear you?"

"Yes." Russel delivered bluntly.
"So you really expect me to believe you came to Beacon with someone else's weapons, fully expecting to get by with using them, even if you didn't know how to use them?" Blake said aloud, not buying Russel's story.

"Well when you put it like that it sounds preposterous." Russel shrugged. "Would it help if I told you the guy I got them from was White Fang?"

"Depends if I know him." Blake shrugged.

"He was really tall and could coat his body in metal." Russel said, recalling the past owner of his daggers.

"The Iron nail?" Blake raised a brow, not out of surprise but in alarm at the description of one of the White Fang's most brutal members.

"Sure, I guess. We didn't trade names or anything." Russel rolled his eyes.

"I don't believe you. The Iron Nail can't die."

Things were about to escalate even further, with Blake being skeptical over Russel's story and Russel being adamant about how completely factual the events he described were. But then the door to the room began to open. But the door stopped suddenly as Blake had double locked it for privacy.

"Blake! Why's the door locked?" Ruby's voice called from behind the door.

"She's probably indecent." Said Weiss in her ever posh tone.

Blake's eyes widened, she swore she should've had more time. Her Team wasn't supposed to return until around half past six. She wasn't done with interrogating Russel. Risking getting caught in a near unexplainable situation, Blake's thoughts raced in all sorts of directions. How was she going to explain Russel being tied to a chair without having it seem weird?

Seizing his opportunity for freedom, Russel began to call out for help. But Blake's reflexes were faster than his ability to shout, as the closet Faunus quickly snatched up a pair of sock from a nearby drawer and shoved them into Russel's still blood drenched mouth.

She then ran off to grab a roll of tape leftover from Dr. Oobleck's recent group project. Before Russel could spit out the socks that had been violently shoved into his mouth, Blake ran over and ran the roll of tape around his head, taping his mouth shut.

"Make a sound and I'll kill you." Blake whispered threateningly before picking Russel up and walking to Team RWBY's closet. She quickly opened the wardrobe and placed Russel inside, doing her best not to cause too much of a commotion.

And then Blake shut the wardrobe, leaving Russel fuming in darkness. This was not how he had foreseen his Sunday turning out. The soul remaining Thrush could hear Blake undoing the lock outside.

"Sorry about that." Blake apologized in a surprisingly sweet tone Russel couldn't help but raise his eyes at. "Weren't you guys supposed to be at a movie?"

"Turned out to be Rated R. And as a responsible sibling, I deemed it inappropriate for Ruby to watch." Russel could hear Yang say in a surprisingly mature tone, completely unlike what he'd come to expect from such a flirt.
"Oh come on! I kill monsters! I drink milk! Why can't I watch Deadpool?" Ruby whined. Russel couldn't help but attempt to laugh at how childish she sounded.

"What was that?" Weiss said, having seemingly heard Russel's attempt at laughing.

"I didn't hear anything." Blake quickly said. "Hey, if you guys are staying in, why don't I hang up your coats?"

There was a hearty round of thank yous, leaving Russel puzzled at what Blake was planning. The next thing he knew, the wardrobe opened with Blake glaring at him menacingly before throwing Yang, Ruby and Weiss' jackets over him, essentially burying him in layered clothing and closing the door.

Now trapped under several layers of clothing, Russel was now faced with the prospect of dying from heatstroke in a confined space. But that was just another form of torture he would have to endure.

"Is that blood on the ground?" Ruby pointed out.

"Gross, who's on their time of the month?" Yang said half-jokingly.

Russel grumbled. Kill him now.

On a serious note, the Author X article for this chapter was inspired by every crazy incident that happened over the weekend. I want to wish everyone well, and that I'm sorry for the loss of life. There's too much hate in the world and all it does hurt.

I believe I mentioned this chapter back in the 2nd arc, that this was essentially just Blake and Russel spending an entire chapter talking to each other.

I think I justified why Russel doesn't just tell Blake his side of the story immediately well. He's Russel, he's an asshole, he's not going to play along. I set it up with his confrontation with Ozpin at the beginning of the Arc. Russel plays the game, he's good at it too. The body language, the self validation, he knows it he's done it before and its just him doing what he can to get the best possible outcome of the situation.

Blake's reasons are self explanatory. She believes Russel's a member of The White Fang, that brings out the worst in her. And that just means beating the snot out of Russel.

Next update, will be soon, hopefully. I wrote this chapter while I was on vacation in Las Vegas. I don't know if I wrote anything else. 'Til then friends. Later Days. And stay safe.
Welcome dear reader, to the 14th chapter of 'The Darkling Thrush'! Fun fact, I tried uploading this the other day and for some reason the chapter wouldn't show. I've been having a lot of tech issues with FF lately, such as not being able to directly upload my chapters and having to copy them over. I hope this doesn't continue.

This is the first chapter, besides the Interludes to not include Russel. And for the most part, I think it turned out ok. It's a Cardin chapter. He's integral to this story, his name's on it too.

But enough of me rambling, you can skip to the bottom of the page if you wanted to read that. On with the chapter!

From The Desk of Author X

Shining Beacon Contributor Colum

Why doesn't Tuesday have a feeling?

After a lengthy discussion with my editor, we both felt it would be best if I discussed something less political, for a while anyways.

Monday has a feeling, because we acknowledge it. We dread its arrival, because whenever it's Monday it's when we're most comfortable laying in our beds. It's the start of the week, no matter what your calendar says. Monday is the beginning of the work week.

Wednesday has a feeling. It's like the middle child of the week. You know it's there, you feel its presence. As if its hovering over you. It's your best buddy checking on you to let you know there's something great coming around the corner. You're halfway there bud.

Thursday has a feeling. Right after that pep talk Wednesday gave you the other day, in comes Thursday like a swift kick in the balls. You're on the ground unprepared. You've been tricked, you've been had. Thursday goes on laughing at you in a mocking tone.

Friday has a feeling. A universal sigh of relief leaves our lips the moment the clock strikes midnight and Friday arrives. The past four days are behind you now. You've probably got plans with friends, you're giddy with glee. Go out on a night of the town with your partner or friends.

Saturday has a feeling. You feel lethargic, the fiver prior days having exhausted you. But you somehow find it in yourself to keep going. Some other guys got plans, you've been invited to some gathering, or you'd like to check out that.

Sunday definitely has a feeling. You wake up with your head pounding and you decide to go out and get breakfast, but everywhere you go there's a line out the door. Looks like you're going to starve for a while kid.
Over the past semester, Cardin hadn't exactly been at the top of his game. There'd been a massive chip on his shoulder that he could never share with anyone. Any chance to build any meaningful relationships with our Huntsmen were poisoned by his inability to cope. Surprisingly enough, he managed to get along fine with his team, though he believed that to speak volumes about them than himself.

Cardin had made mistakes. From blackmail to heated bigotry, he'd hurt a lot of people. But now he was ready to make amends. For the first time in a while he was seeing clearly. And now Cardin was willing to make things right.

And let him tell you, it was easier said than done. The first part was easy. It was a moment of self-reflection and a realization of how much of a jerk he'd actually been. Like, what kind of person blackmails someone into hurting those he cared about? An asshole that's who. Admitting his mistakes has been the easiest part of his quest to make amends.

Getting everyone to accept his apologies, however, is another story. At first he'd tried to apologize to a certain bunny eared second year student named Velvet. She'd come to him in the dining hall having spotted him in a moment of weakness. He'd faltered, that chip on his shoulder just been too much for him. Velvet had tried to be helpful, but he lashed out, that was then end of that.

He'd tried to apologize earlier this morning, but when he did, Cardin was rebuffed by her teammates. He slinked off to the campus grounds after that, formulating a plan of action. Maybe he had to work up to apologizing to Velvet. Start off with the latest victim of his actions, then Velvet.

So that brought Cardin to the present, where the Team CRDL leader was now standing in front of the Team JNPR dorm. He knocked on the door, hoping someone would answer, more specifically, Jaune Arc, so he could get it over with.

But nobody answered. After spending a half hour waiting by the door for someone to show back up, Cardin was beginning to call it quits. He'd try again some other day. But out of the corner of his eye, Cardin spotted a familiar redhead walking down the hall.

"Cardin?" Pyrrha asked aloud in surprise as she reached her dorm room, finding the leader of Team CRDL slumped against the door. "What're you doing here?" She said in a polite manner. But there was something off with her, Cardin could tell.

"Uh, I'm waiting for Jaune." Cardin answered. "Any chance you know where he is?"

"He went out into the city with Team RWBY." Pyrrha said as she stared down at Cardin. "Would you mind if I asked why you need to see Jaune?"

"Just trying to apologize for being a jerk for the past couple of weeks." He said honestly. It was at that moment that Cardin had another realization, that he owed the young woman standing before him just as much an apology as he did Jaune.

Cardin's machinations had put the Mistral Champion in his crosshairs numerous times. He even pushed things as far as almost covering her in sap and setting a nest of wasps after her. Thank goodness Jaune had developed a backbone, or Pyrrha would probably be in the infirmary at this very moment, getting wasp stingers removed.

"Oh." Pyrrha mouthed, actually surprised at the notion of someone such as Cardin wanting to apologize.
"Shocker right?" Cardin chuckled lightly. "I guess I should also apologize to you too. I've been such a jerk to you and Jaune in particular. I'm really sorry."

Pyrrha couldn't help but smile hearing those words. "It must've taken a lot for you to come to terms with your mistake." She said, her voice clear. "That's rather mature of you, Cardin. Apology accepted."

"If you see Jaune, would you mind passing it along?" Cardin asked as he got back on his feet. "Of course, if you wouldn't mind doing me a favor." Pyrrha smiled.

"Name it."

"I asked your partner Russel if he wouldn't mind coaching me in a sensitive matter." Pyrrha rubbed her arm, hiding how embarrassed she felt. "He seemed a little distracted, I'm not quite sure if he was paying attention to me. Would you mind asking him for me if he'd be able to see me soon?"

"Mind if I ask what for?" Cardin asked, slightly curious about what Pyrrha could need coaching in. She was the Invincible Girl after all, what could she possibly need from Russel that she herself didn't already possess.

"It's a sensitive matter. I hope you understand the secrecy."

"Alright, sure." Cardin shrugged. It was nothing after all, Cardin lived with Russel. Passing along a message was no skin off his back. "Thanks Pyrrha, I mean it."

"I'm just glad we don't have to be enemies." Pyrrha said as she waved goodbye.

So the leader of Team CRDL set off, having scratched one name from his list. For the most part, he couldn't think of anyone else he had to apologize to. Jaune and Pyrrha were the only others besides Velvet really.

That left Carin with the near impossible task of finding a way to get close enough to Velvet to apologize without her team running interference. So Cardin made his way up another floor, making his way to his own dorm room in order to think up a way to accomplish his goal. Maybe if he consulted with his team, they might be able to come up with a bullet proof plan.

But when Cardin returned to his dorm room, instead of finding his teammates engaged in some aimless squabble without his leadership capabilities. Cardin found Dove sitting in nothing but boxers on his bed watching a telenovela.

"Uh…hi." Dove mumbled as he waved at Cardin. There was a spoon in Dove's mouth and a cup of yogurt in his hands.

"Hi yourself." Cardin leered at Dove. "What the hell are you doing?"

"Watching Jane the Virgin." The youngest member of Team CRDL replied meekly.

Cardin just stared at Dove, a judging look on his face. He then looked around the room, finding no sign of Russel or Sky. "Where're the others?"

"They went to the library." Dove said, removing the spoon from his mouth.

"Get dressed, we're going to the library."

"B-But my show!" Dove protested.
"Now Dove." Cardin said with a sense of finality, leaving no further room for discussion.

Cardin waited outside the dorm. As soon as Dove walked out fully dressed, they were off. It was a little bit passed four. On their way down the dorm they passed by Team RWBY, but oddly enough there was no sign of Jaune. Cardin made a mental note of checking in with Pyrrha later to make sure the young Arc got his apology.

So Cardin led Dove across the school, eventually reaching the library. Down into the quiet depths the duo trekked until they happened upon a mountain of stacked history books.

"Sky? Russel?" Cardin called out quietly in search of his teammates.

"Present." A cool quiet voice answered in reply as a hand shot up out of the stacked books. Sky stood tall out from behind his research and waved to his teammates. "Howdy."

"Where's Russel?" Cardin asked as he and Dove hopped over the stacks of books.

"I haven't a clue." Sky shrugged. "What do you guys need him for?"

"Yeah I'm still a little confused about why we're gathering myself." Dove spoke freely.

"I need your guy's help." Cardin said a tad dramatically. I also didn't help that they were being forced to be silent by the all-seeing eyes of the librarian. The trio gave a look see over their shoulders, spotting a woman clearly in her late eighties scowling at Sky and the mess he'd made. It was going to take her forever to put those books back.

"I'm going to try apologizing to Velvet again and I was hoping all of us could come up with a sure fire way for me to do so," Cardin explained, causing both of his teammates to sigh. "What?"

"Dude, why are you so hung up over this?" Dove asked, doing his best not sound so irritated. "I can't believe you pulled me away for this."

"I'm not a bad person, I'm trying to clean the slate." Cardin said simply. "So you guys going to help me or what?"

Dove and Sky exchanged a glance, as if having a conversation amongst themselves. Both sighed and resigned their reservations. "Sure, we'll help Cardin." Dove stated.

"Great." Cardin smiled victoriously.

"I think she works at the school newspaper." Sky said as he rummaged through the stacks of books and pulling out his morning paper. He flipped through The Shining Beacon, eventually coming upon a page with Velvet's name labeled under an editor's position. "If anything she might be there at the newspaper right now working. We could ambush her there, you apologize, then we go back to our business as usual."

"Alright, seems straightforward enough." Cardin nodded in agreement, liking the sound of the plan.

"Any of you know where the newspaper's at?" Dove asked.

And then it was at that moment, both Cardin and Sky realized they didn't know either. Both Team CRDL members cursed. "No, it's okay we'll just ask someone." Sky suggested. The halberd sporting member of Team CRDL turned to the Librarian, about to ask her a question, only for her to flip him the bird and run off.
After that, the trio made their way around the library, asking everyone they could about the whereabouts of the Shining Beacon's base of operations. With no luck, the three young men began their search outwards, they were bound to run into someone who knew eventually.

"Hey, Danny!" Cardin called out to the leader of Team DNCE.

Danny Matchstick was an odd fellow whom Cardin was for the most part on good terms with. While it was another story on its own when it came to his team, there seemed to be some sort of built in animosity between them and Russel. But Danny didn't seem like he was one to hold a grudge.

The Leader of Team DNCE turned to face Cardin, his baggy eyes taking in his appearance. "Hello Cardin. Pleasant day isn't it?" Danny asked in a calm neutral tone. Cardin wouldn't discount the possibility of Danny being an addict, nobody could be that Zen unless they had some help.

"I'm looking for the newspaper's office. Any chance you can point me in the right direction?" Cardin asked as he caught up to Danny.

"Last I checked, the newspaper operates out of one of the offices in the Arcady Building." Danny said, struggling slightly to recall the location of the newspaper. "I think its Room 106. But I could be mistaken."

"But it's in the Arcady Building, though, right?"

"That it is." Danny nodded.

"Thanks Danny." Cardin waved goodbye before running off to the other side of campus where the Arcady Building was located.

"Stay cool, you guys." Danny tucked his hands into his pockets and just watched Cardin and the rest of Team CRDL minus Russel ran off.

When they reached the Arcady Building, the trio of Team CRDL members looked the building bottom to top in search of where the newspaper was operating out of. When their search appeared to be fruitless, the members of Team CRDL set their sights on the last room in the building. And wouldn't you know it, there was a tiny sign with the words 'Shining Beacon' on the door.

The trio of huntsmen in training were about to enter the room, just a mere step through the doorway away. Until they found Yatsushi's hulking frame in the way. The trio backed up away from the door as the members of Team CFVY minus Velvet stepped out of the room, acting like bouncers.

"We knew you'd try to pull something else today." Yatsushi's low voice boomed.

"You're going to stop harassing Velvet if you know what's good for you." Fox directed at Cardin, but those around him found the blind Team CFVY member pointing off to the side in nowhere in particular.

"Fox, forty degrees to the left." Yatsushi whispered to his teammate.

The blind Fox did as he was told, thanking his friend as he readjusted his stance to point directly at Cardin. "Like I said. You're going to stop harassing Velvet or else."

"Look, guys, I just want to apologize." Cardin pleaded his case.
"A jackass like you would never apologize." Coco tilted her sunglasses, looking at Cardin disbelievingly.

"Is it really that difficult for any of you to believe that I'm just trying to do something nice?" Cardin said.

"Yes." The members of Team CFVY and even Sky and Dove said in unison.

Cardin just glared at his teammates. "You guys aren't helping."

"I'm supposed to be doing research." Sky sighed.

"You interrupted my binge watching." Dove remarked, folding his arms over his chest.

"Look, I'm going in there and I'm going to apologize." Cardin said before taking a step forward. In response, Coco whipped out her minigun and shot the floor in front of him, causing Cardin to stop in his tracks.

"No, you're not." Coco insisted as Fox and Yatsushi drew their own weapons.

"You guys got my back?" Cardin asked addressed his teammates as he remained locked in a stare down with Coco.

"We didn't bring our weapons Cardin." An irritated Sky grumbled.

"Do you guys trust me?" Cardin glanced at his teammates out of the corner of his eyes.

Before either Sky or Dove could respond, Cardin reached out and grabbed them by the collar of their shirts. Raising his subordinates in the air, outstretched in front of himself, Cardin began to run forward.

Coco and Yatsushi just watched wide eyed as Cardin came barreling at them, intent on pushing through them. Fox was left wondering at what kind of crazy idea Cardin had pulled to shut up his teammates. Activating his aura seeing semblance, Fox was shocked to discover a large amount of it rushing towards him.

"What the hell is that?" Fox asked aloud before getting trampled by Cardin.

"Take him down!" Coco shouted before laying into Team CRDL with her minigun.

A wave of bullet fire struck Dove and Sky, whom Cardin used as human shields. Their auras were doing a great job a keeping them, well, not dead, but Cardin could see Coco's actions would eventually break them.

So Cardin shifted positions, lifting Sky over his head and having Dove take the brunt of the oncoming hail of bullets.

"What hell man?!" Dove shouted in agony. It felt like falling face first through concrete flooring.

"Sky get ready!" Cardin shouted as he kept charging Coco's position.

"Wait what?!" Sky exclaimed before Cardin lobbed him over the stream of bullets. Sky yelled for help as he found himself flying at Coco.

The Tam CFVY leader's eyes widened behind her sunglasses at the sight of a flailing Sky came flying at her. Sky connected, slamming into Coco, sending her and himself skidding across the
tiled floors of the hallway.

"Coco!" Yatsushi shouted, reaching out for his fallen leader. But Yatsushi had much more pressing matters to deal with than his leader's health. Cardin was rushing him and he was the only thing standing between himself and Velvet. Yatsushi raised his blade, ready for anything.

"Ready Dove?" Cardin shouted as he began to man handle Dove like a sword.

"Ugh…" Dove cried.

As Cardin and Dove ran into striking distance, Yatsushi reeled back his mighty sword and swung. Before making contact, Cardin drew back Dove and took the full brunt of the strike. But despite this, Cardin kept on going and threw Dove at Yatsushi.

"Cling onto him Dove!" Sky shouted from where he lay onto of Coco. His current position giving the CFVY leader a nice shot of his rear and the form fitting fabric the clung to it.

"I don't want you to take this wrong, Sky, but you have a nice ass." Coco smirked deviously as she continued to stare at his butt. "Thank goodness I have a photographic memory."

With Yatsushi distracted by the youngest member of Team CRDL, who now clung to him like a frightened cat, all of Team CFVY was now out of Cardin's hair. So the tallest member of Team CRDL kept on running until he breached the threshold of office.

Velvet looked up from behind her computer in surprise, finding Cardin standing in front of her, fumbling over his words. "Uh, hi Velvet." He waved.

"Uh, hi Cardin." Velvet waved back as she quickly saved the document she was working on before exiting out of it.

"I just wanted to apologize." Cardin said, speaking from the heart. No games, this was him just being as truthful as anyone could be. "I'm sorry for everything I did. I know I don't deserve forgiveness or anything like that. But I'd just like you to know that I'm sorry. What I did was wrong. And I regret it. I do."

"We're also sorry!" Dove shouted from outside the room as Yatsushi did his best to remove the younger boy from his person. The Team CFVY giant was soon successful and slammed Dove onto the floor. "Ouch…"

"I'm not going to accept you apology." Deep down Velvet managed to find it in herself to speak in the harsh manner she did now. "What you said to me was mean. Everything you did was just a representation of everything wrong with the world right now. All the bigotry, all the xenophobia. And I'm sorry Cardin, I am, but I can't accept your apology."

Cardin frowned, he'd truly been seeking redemption and Velvet had slammed the door in his face. "I think it would be best if you left." Velvet murmured sadly. Never before had she been humiliated the way Cardin had done to her. Maybe this was poetic justice and she should be smiling just like he had. But Velvet wasn't smiling, she was frowning.

Cardin's head hanged low in defeat. He then walked out the way he came in, both his bruised teammates and Team CFVY looking on with looks of sympathy. The CRDL leader then approached his fallen comrades, picking them up off the ground one at a time.

"Sorry about using you guys as human shields." Cardin apologized as he helped Sky and Dove up.
"Eh, don't sweat it." Sky playfully hit his leader's arm.

"Yeah, we deserved it anyways." Dove shrugged as the remnants of his aura got to work nursing his bruises. "Leaving you to the Ursa was a dick move."

"Wanna head back to the dorm? I think I've got some yogurt cups left in the mini fridge." Sky suggested as the trio began to leave Arcady Hall.

Dove just averted his head and whistled guiltily. "I wonder what Russel's up to." He said, hoping to change the topic.

"Yeah, where is Russel?" Sky wondered aloud.

And then the trio walked off into the afternoon, completely unaware that their teammate was currently bound to a chair and gagged, buried under several layers of clothing and locked in a confined space.

"I'm sure he'll turn up eventually." Cardin shrugged.

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I hope you all caught the parallels between Cardin and Russel's plights. I've gone to great lengths to make it that way.

The idea of Velvet working for the school newspaper originated after her weapon was revealed in Volume 3. It just seemed like a good fit, and give her a reason to be seen with it walking around, so no one would suspect she's actually taking photos of people's butts. Oh we all know that's what was going on. It may have seemed like she was taking photos of Sun's weapons. But she was taking a photo of his butt. I'm pretty sure she has a scrapbook somewhere.

In this chapter I also tied up that loose end of Cardin getting over Sky and Dove abandoning him. They just carried on like nothing happened, but they're willing to go through hell to make things right. And I hope that speaks volumes of the Team dynamic. Each member has their own thing going on, but they're a team and they'll gladly stick their necks out for the other.

I also just wanted to write a situation where Cardin was forced to use his team as human shields.

Next time, we'll conclude the little adventure Russel has gotten himself into. 'Til then, later days!
Welcome back dear reader to the 15th chapter of 'The Darkling Thrush'!

I’m not sure if everyone liked the Velvet stuff. When I read the reviews I honestly couldn't tell if you hated it or liked it. It was a mixed reception kind of thing.

Well, enough with my yapping on with the chapter!

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From The Desk of Author X

As of yet published contribution to the Shining Beacon

It’s at twilight, or in the early morning, when I remember my home at its best. The times when it was loved. The scent of fine dew on the ground and in the air carried by the wind. I watch the sky preform its ordinary miracle and breathe in.

This is Vale, the country, not the city.

The most progressive of all four nations. With our people waging quiet wars on the streets of our capital city. Where the likes of the superstitious and cowardly lot like Roman Torchwick run wild, breaking into dust shops and stealing the livelihood of hard working people.

Amongst our sky streaking Ferries, down below it's the people at play. Where the White Fang jack containers and kill the innocent for not sharing their ideals. The twilight I loved watching is no longer there to hide the cracks in the pavement. That lovely scent of morning dew is no longer capable of hiding the odorous smell of the scum who plague us.

Can you hear us, those who perpetrate evil? We want nothing to do with you. Attempt to sway our minds with your hurtful tactics, the slaughter of innocents and acts against our property.

By our own words we reject you. We reject your methods and we reject your messages of hate.

And then night falls and I can no longer see the cracks. The faults are hidden away by dazzling lights, far off stars I wish I could cusp. And then we reach twilight once more. The closest star emerging over the horizon. A glimmer of hope of a brand new day arises with a lovely scent I welcome.

This is Vale, the country, not the city. We are the people who inhabit it. The working class, the huntsmen and anyone else in between.

We could do without your hate. We get enough from the Grimm as it is.

---

Dying by torture doesn't seem so bad now that he thought of it. Unbearable, yes, but compared to the alternative, it was the preferred option. Even getting cooked alive he could deal with, even if it did take a long time, Russel would still have gone for it.
Now, buried under several layers of clothes, confined to a tight space bound and gagged, Russel was forced to listen in on Team RWBY's explicitly descriptive conversation about each of their individual menstruation cycles.

Maybe this was just another one of Blake's torture methods? Team RWBY had to be in on the whole thing. There's no way anyone would be able to go on talking about this for so long in the company of others. If it wasn't for the fact that his mouth was taped shut and there was a sock trapped inside, Russel would've gladly thrown up. Drowning in his own puke wasn't exactly the way he wanted to go.

But it was starting to sound tempting.

"So, Blake, what've you been up to?" Yang asked her partner as she sat on her bunk beside Ruby, who was still fuming over not being allowed to see a rated R film.

With the topic finally changing, Russel was able to breathe a sigh of relief. Maye when this is all over he could bleach his brains out, wipe the last couple of weeks out of memories. Once the thought about time popped into his head, Russel once more was left with the question of exactly how long he'd been here.

It was noon last time he'd checked, but that was before he'd been knocked unconscious. Rough estimates placed him about a couple hours in Blake's company. But then after getting tossed into the closet, he'd begun counting the moments as they passed him bye. It was easier now under the grueling heat created by the clothing. It gave him something to focus on, other than what Team RWBY was talking about.

But it didn't matter really how long it had been since he'd been strapped down to the numbing wooden seat he now sat on. What mattered was how long it had been since he last ate. Breakfast was hours ago. And everybody knows what happens when you haven't eaten in quite some time. Your stomach feels the need to voice its opinion.

A low growl caught Team RWBY's attention. The girls looked to each other in wonder. But it was Blake who really knew what was going on. While the rest of her teammates were puzzled by the foreign sound, trying to figure out what it was, Blake was busy making death threats in her head.

A man's got to eat, you know? Russel thought as his gut made yet another audible noise. Who knows, maybe this was exactly what he needed. He tried to smirk, but with the tape firmly planted to his mouth, Russel almost wound up swallowing the sock in his mouth. Mental note, no smiling when kidnapped, it may prove hazardous to your health.

"Did you guys hear that?" Yang asked finally as she looked around.

"Yeah, I heard something too." Weiss muttered, sitting up from where she lay on her bed.

"Sounds like someone's stomach." Ruby said, eyeballing Blake. "Blake, did you spend all day doing White Fang research instead of eating again?"

Russel's stomach, cried out once more.

"Oh yeah, I'm sorry guys." Blake said, attempting to cover up Russel's audible gut. "Where has the time gone, you know? You girls want to get something to eat from the dining hall?" Blake asked, hoping she could use the opportunity to get her teammates out of the room.

"Dinner sounds rather nice about now." Weiss smiled at the suggestion.
Oh no you don't Blake. Russel thought as his stomach made another attempt to be heard. The only reason he wasn't being force fed his teeth was the rest of Team RWBY's presence. If Blake were to manage to send them off, there would be no stopping her from doing who knows to him.

So with all his might, Russel dug deep inside himself. His stomach made another low growl demanding to be heard.

"Jeez, Blake..." Yang shot an accusing look her partner's way.

"Wait I don't think that was Blake." Ruby said as her eyes glanced across the room at their wardrobe.

"No that was me." Blake laughed and patted her exposed gut. "C'mon guys, let's go and get something to eat." Blake stood up from where she was seated and walked over to the door, opening it and gesturing for the rest of her team to follow. "C'mon Ruby, I think they've got cookies for desert tonight."

But even the promise of delicious sweets wasn't enough to dissuade Ruby's curiosity. Russel gave it his all and force another grumble. Ruby jumped up from her seat and cautiously began to approach the wardrobe.

"What's up sis?" Yang asked, raising a brow at Ruby's actions.

"I'm way too hungry for this." Blake said in one last ditch effort to get her team out the room. Internally Blake's mind was racing as with every step Ruby drew closer and closer to closet.

"I think there's something in our closet." Ruby said as she now stood before the wardrobe.

"If there's a snowy forest I blame Weiss." Yang said jokingly.

"Hey!" Weiss folded her arms over her chest, taking offense to her comment. "I will not be compared to another one of those fantasy novels you read as a child, Xio Long."

Ruby pressed her ear against the closet, the mere sight of her actions causing Blake to freeze entirely. Russel's gut let out one more growl, causing Ruby's eyes to widen in surprise. "There's someone in our closet!" She shrieked.

"Wait what?!" Yang exclaimed, her eyes darting at their closet.

Well, if there was ever a time for Blake to panic, it was now. "What? Something's in our closet?!" She exclaimed half convincingly. Blake then drew Gambol Shroud out of the back of her pocket and then repeatedly discharged weapon fire into their closet.

Ruby yelped as she leapt out of the way. One by one the bullets riddled the closet, Blake fully intending to murder Russel. It would be easier to explain the situation to her friends if they all assumed Russel was just creeping on them. After the earlier affair from this morning, it would be easy enough to sweep him under the rug, while Blake went on investigating his White Fang connections.

Blake lowered her weapon, and dropped the clip, digging into her pocket and slamming in another. "I'm sorry." She said, feigning fright. "I was startled."

Her teammates just looked on, bewildered at Blake's actions. Ruby then got back up onto her feet, walking back to the closet. Through the multitude of bullet holes with jagged wooden pieces hanging off, Ruby was able to make out some sort of person inside. Cautiously, Ruby reached out
for the door.

Yang and Weiss, now on their feet approached the closet as well, each of them wishing to get to the bottom of just what was in their closet. So Ruby grabbed one of the doors and pulled it open. The three RWBY girls peered inside, what they found was enough to make Weiss cry.

"No!" Weiss cried out as she reached into the closet. "My jacket! No!" She sobbed as she held the torn fabric.

"Aw." Yang reached inside, pulling her own jacket out. It too had been riddled with Blake's bullets. "A little too trigger happy weren't you?" She shot a disapproving look at her partner. Blake merely shrugged, quietly apologizing.

"Pfft. This is why you guys have to shop at Luna's Weapon Emporium." Ruby reached inside of the closet and pulled out her jacket. She closed her eyes and turned to her teammates to present her clothing to them. The shocked gasps she heard brought made her smile ear to ear. Ruby's jacket was completely spotless. The bullets had simply bounced off the fabric as if it were nothing.

"Combat Jacket. Stylish. Functional. And easy to get blood stains out!" Ruby smirked. She then opened her eyes and still found shocked looks on Weiss and Yang's faces. "Oh come on guys, it's not that shocking." Ruby raised a brow. Yang then raised an arm, pointing to something behind Ruby back in the closet.

Ruby slowly turned around and gasped at the sight of a bloodied and bruised Russel sitting in a chair in their closet. "Oh my Monty!" Ruby exclaimed, dropping her Combat Jacket and placing both of her hands on her cheeks as she took in Russel's beaten form. "Russel are you okay?!"

"Don't ask him if he's okay he's White Fang!" Blake blurted out, quickly raising her gun and leveling it at Russel.

"What?!" The rest of Team RWBY said in unison.

Ruby looked at Russel in shock. The tied up Thrush witness a sudden shift in facial expression on her face as it had gone from a look of concern to anger in an instant. The much younger girl reached out and tugged at the tape covering Russel's mouth. Yanking off the tape, along with some of the skin of his lip, caused Russel to shout in pain. "You! Explanation now!" Ruby demanded.

"Yeah why're you creeping in our room?" Weiss leaned forward, pointing a finger at Russel accusingly.

"And how exactly is he a member of the White Fang, Blake?" Yang asked, cocking a brow at her partner.

Russel spat out the sock and turned to Team RWBY with a contemptuous look. "Why am I creeping?!" He said as he licked at his bloodied lip. "Look at me, I'm tied up!" He gestured to his restraints with his head.

The three girls then glanced at Blake, looking for an explanation. "Blake, did you know Russel was in there?" Weiss demanded.

"You did didn't you?" Ruby folded her arms over her chest and pouted. "If my jacket wasn't covering him he'd be dead."

"That I would." Russel nodded as the flow of blood from his mouth began to slow. He was going to be tasting copper for weeks.
"Shut up." Blake directed at Russel, quickly raising her gun at him. "He's White Fang." She glanced to her team. "Who knows what his intentions are."

"Just because you keep saying I'm White Fang doesn't mean I am." Russel said as he stared past the barrel of the gun pointed at his head and into Blake's eyes.

"I'm still waiting on an explanation." Ruby grumbled, turning her attention to Russel.

"What? Really?" He raised a brow in surprise. "You're asking for me to explain all this?"

"I know Blake. I don't know you." Ruby said, sounding deceptively mature. "If she says you're White Fang, I'll take her word for it. Now talk."

"I'm not White Fang." Russel stated firmly, glaring at all four girls in front of him. "I was just minding my own business, going to see Ozpin and then next thing I know I wake up in some chair getting the snot kicked out of me."

"Blake?" Ruby turned to her gun wielding teammate, looking for her side of the story. "How exactly is Russel a member of the White Fang?"

"Yeah, last time I checked he was just one of Cardin's goons." Weiss said, causing Russel to scoff at the accusation. "Quiet you, you're still in the hot seat."

"No, I'm sitting on the wooden pain in my ass seat." Russel rolled his eyes, gesturing to the chair he was strapped to. "Like c'mon, you could've at least given me a pillow or something to sit on."

"I had my suspicions." Blake said, opening up to her friends. "This is Beacon, where future Huntsmen and groomed. No one here should be acting the role of a bully. And yet Russel and all of his team do. I needed to get close to confirm my suspicions, but I finally did. Every White Fang agent has a secret sigil on their weapons, as to let others know where their loyalties reside."

"You're saying Russel's daggers have the same marking?" Yang asked, glancing at Russel out of the corner of her eyes.

"The very same." Blake held up Gambol Shroud, pointing to the side of her weapon with what appeared to be claw marks. She'd gone and clawed off the White Fang sigil on her weapon. "He's White Fang, and probably so are the rest of Team CRDL."

"We should tell Ozpin." Weiss suggested.

"I was thinking we interrogate him and find out what he knows. But you all showed up." Blake shrugged. "I must confess you're all taking this surprisingly well."

"Russel's a very bad guy? Meh, I was actually hoping he would be." Yang shrugged. "Give us a legitimate reason to hate him."

"For the last time. I'm not a member of the White Fang." Russel droned on. If his hands weren't tied up behind him he'd be pulling on his hair.

"You refused to answer my questions earlier. Now that we've mentioned seeing Ozpin, you're suddenly willing to talk?" Blake glared. "The situation speaks for itself doesn't it?"

"Why didn't you cooperate Russel?" Ruby asked.

"Because I don't owe you anything." Russel sneered.
"Suddenly afraid that you're master plan's fallen apart, Russel?" Blake spoke intensely. She took a step forward with Gambol Shroud trained at Russel's head. "The White Fang was once a peaceful movement. Now look at you. Infiltrating Beacon and for what? Something nefarious I bet."

"You got issues, Blake." Russel muttered as he met her stare.

There was something Russel had learned very early on as a child, especially when living in the environment he did. It was never the weapon that was pressed to your face you looked at, it was what was past it, the person whose hand was on the trigger. A gun was a gun, if it fell and went off it was an accident. But it was the intent of the man or woman holding it who decided when and who was going to get it.

It was foolish of Russel to think of relying on the likes of Blake's teammates. This was still a matter between Blake and himself. After all, while they would gladly go to Ozpin and have him ejected for something he most assuredly was not a part of, it was Blake who was willing to actually kill him.

"It's over Russel." Blake said, her finger still on the trigger. "Tell us everything you know."

"Just skip to the end Blake." Russel said, still looking past the gun aimed at his forehead and into Blake's eyes. "Still won't change the fact I'm not White Fang. Nor will it change the fact you still are."

The rest of the RWBY girls looked to their teammate, unsure of how Russel had come into possession of that kind of knowledge. "Still going with that story are you?" Blake laughed. Not the kind of laugh where you laugh at something funny, but the kind that was made out of sympathy, pity. "The Iron Nail is dead? That's impossible."

"Everything dies Blake." Russel scoffed. "But I'd rather not die today. Got too much to do before that happens."

Weiss, Ruby and Yang just watched on as Blake and Russel were interlocked in a stare down the likes they could sell tickets to. "I'm not White Fang." Russel said once more. "And that's the truth."

"But your weapons…" Ruby spoke up, before trailing off after catching sight of the look Blake was giving her.

"I don't even know how to use them." Russel laughed. "But you know how to use yours, Blake. Go ahead. Shoot me, we all know you have it in you." A familiar shit eating grin found its way back onto Russel's face, causing his wounds to open up once more. "Do it, do the White Fang proud. Show them you still got it in you."

Blake's eyes widened at Russel's comment. "You don't know me Russel."

"What's not to know?" Russel's smile faded, leaving only a tired look on his bloodied face. "You obviously feel guilty for the White Fang. You couldn't stomach it when they were blowing up homes and people huh? That why you left? Isn't that why you've got me tied up like some prisoner of war or something. Because you feel like you're making a difference? Why else would you be doing this?"

The gunshot rang loud. Gambol Shroud fell beside Blake as she just looked on. It was a blink and you'd miss it kind of thing. The rest of Team RWBY was left wondering at what had just happened. Russel was on the floor unharmed and there was now a fresh bullet hole in their wall.

One of the legs of Russel's chair had finally given way, seemingly damaged after Blake's earlier
attempt to kill him. Had it not broken apart, Blake surely would have killed Russel, a fact none of them would forget.

Russel pulled himself off the broken chair. Now that it was in pieces he could slide himself out of his restraints. Standing up, Russel met Blake's stare and wiped the blood off his mouth with his fist. "We done?"

"Yes." Blake muttered, meeting Russel's stare.

"Alright." He said before heading to the door. "Later."

"Wait, what?!" Ruby, Yang and Weiss exclaimed in unison.

"What just happened?" Yang asked.

"We aren't turning him in to Ozpin?" Weiss raised a brow as she watched Russel leave.

"Blake, what's going on?" Ruby asked her teammate, a look of concern on her face.

Blake just let out a heavy sigh and switched on Gambol Shroud's safety before placing in her back pants pocket. "He's not White Fang." She said sounding almost disappointed.

"Are you sure?" Yang said, folding her arms over her chest. "He sounded guilty to me."

"Yes. Positive." Blake said almost frowning. She looked to her friends, unsure of what to say. So Blake dug deep to find the words. "I'm sorry guys. I messed up." She glanced to the chair she'd tied Russel to. She'd gone to extreme lengths to ensure that he couldn't simply break free of his restraints, but had never considered the strength of the chair itself.

Blake wasn't the best shot around. That would be Ruby, her and her sniper rifle. Blake was more likely to spray and pray, but she was smart enough not to shoot wildly, lest she hurt one of her friends. She never shot below Russel's shoulders. It would've been a headshot if it weren't for Ruby's Combat Jacket.

The leg of the chair wasn't damaged by her, but by Russel. It was when he'd wiped his mouth with his fist when Blake realized his innocence. His finger nails were scraped and worn with light amounts of dried blood beneath them. He could have left anytime but stuck around to clear his name.

"Hey, you okay Blake?" Yang asked as they got to work cleaning up their room.

"Yeah." Blake sighed. "It's just been a long day."

Halfway across campus in the Arcady Building, Velvet was still hard at work fine-tuning The Shining Beacon's contributor columns. Just this afternoon she'd received all but one of her contributor's articles. With Coco on fashion, Iliad talking about upcoming school events all that remained was the Author X contribution.

"Knock, knock." Velvet looked up from her desk to the doorway. There stood Russel Thrush, his thumb drive in hand. "Sorry if I'm a bit late. I had a scheduling conflict." He said, making light of today's events.

"You look like crap." Velvet commented on Russel's appearance.

"That I do. Got a blistering headache too." Russel walked up to Velvet and placed the thumb drive
onto her desk. "Alright. I quit." He said before walking to the door to leave.

"Wait, what?" Velvet jumped out of her seat. "You can't quit! People love your Author X articles! I'd never tell Coco this, but no one reads her fashion advice unless it's on the same page as Author X."

"Eh." Russel shrugged as he leaned on the doorway. "I was never going to do this forever, you know."

"So that's it, no more Author X because you don't feel like it?" Velvet asked, sounding somewhat disappointed in his reasoning.

"When I came to you with the idea of Author X, I decided to go with a pen name for a reason." Russel said as he glanced up at the ceiling. "It's like therapy, you know? Anyone can get behind it and write out their feelings without the scrutiny of putting a face to a name. Anyone can be Author X."

"You have anyone in mind?" Velvet asked as she sat back down and inserted the thumb drive into her computer.

"Blake Belladonna." He said without taking his eyes off the ceiling. "She needs the outlet. I'm sure if you asked her she'll think about it. Might have to buy her a drink before"

"I'm not old enough to buy alcohol." Velvet deadpanned.

"Really? I can fix that. I got a guy in Vale who sells great fake IDs." Russel laughed. "Want me to set it up, just ask."

"No thanks. I have a conscience, I might feel bad if I did such a thing." Velvet said jokingly. But then she froze in her seat, her brilliant smile fading from view as she reflected on earlier today. When Cardin had come to apologize she'd gone on to dump so much on him, one step away from claiming he was everything wrong with the way the world worked.

So yes, Velvet's conscience was speaking to her. Telling her to feel bad. She looked up over to Russel, finding he was still standing there. "Hey, Russel?"

"Yeah?" Russel turned his attention away from the ceiling to Velvet.

"Cardin keeps trying to apologize. Last time I said some things that I'm not sure that I meant. Hurtful things." Velvet admitted. "You're his partner, I don't know him very well. Would you say I would be justified in my actions?"

"You're essentially asking me for permission to hate on my partner." Russel frowned. "You really want my opinion, you're going to have to blackmail me."

"What?" Velvet raised a brow, looking away from her computer screen and to the young man over by the door.

"You heard me." Russel crossed his arms over his chest. "Do it."

Velvet just stared at Russel in disbelief. But she bunny girl just shrugged, why not. "If you don't give me your two cents on the matter, I'll tell everyone you're Author X."

"Alright, seems fair." Russel smirked. "Cardin's sister committed suicide after he left for Beacon. He didn't even get to attend the funeral." He said, causing Velvet to gasp. "His parents thought it
would be best if he stick in with his studies. He hasn't been given the chance to mourn, Velvet. That's why he's been acting like an ass. He needed an outlet. You were just one of the many ways he got his feelings across."

"Oh." Velvet mouthed.

"Everyone needs an outlet." He said shaking his head. "Cardin's just working on how he does things. He's got a code you know, that's why he's gone to such extremes to make things right. It's how he can live with himself."

"I now feel really bad for what I said to him." Velvet slumped down in her chair. "I should apologize. That was awful of me."

"Apologize or not. It's a free country." Russel shrugged. "Also, does Beacon have a yearbook?"

"What?" Velvet raised a brow.

"Does Beacon have a yearbook?" He asked once more.

"No, no not for some time." Velvet said as she eyed the boy skeptically. "I answered a question from you, mind answering one of mine?" Russel nodded. "You know, even Dove and Sky apologized. I still haven't got one from you. Why?"

"That's just the thing, Velvet," Russel turned and walked out the door. "I'm never sorry."

With that taken care of, there was only one thing left on Russel's to do list. Just like how he had earlier this morning, Russel now found himself heading to Beacon Tower. Along the way he ran into Cardin, the guys were doing their best to cheer him up about today's events.

"Oh, hey Russel." Cardin waved over to the soul remaining Thrush. "You missed it. I made an ass of myself."

"What else is new?" Russel said, earning a hearty laugh from the rest of the team including Cardin.

The laughter died down. Now that Russel was here, Cardin decided to make good on a promise. "Pyrrha's been asking for you. Says she needs your help."

"Alright. I'll see what she wants in a bit." Russel said before walking off. "I'll see you guys in a bit. Got something to take care of."

Up the elevator of Beacon Tower, Russel ascended into the sky. The elevator stopped, reaching Ozpin's office. There seated behind his desk, with a mug of coffee in hand was the gray haired man, looking over such documents about school funds and something related to a dance.

Ozpin looked up from his work, spotting Russel approaching. "To be frank, Mr. Thrush, you look like shit." Ozpin lowered his mug, setting it on his desk. "I must say, I wasn't expecting you so soon. Last time we spoke I remember we discussed not wanting to see you in here again for quite some time."

"I'm not here to play games Ozpin." Russel muttered as he pulled up a chair and sitting in front of Ozpin's desk.

"You seemed to be playing them earlier." The Beacon Headmaster leaned forward. "What changed?"
"Today a friend of mine dug up a yearbook in the library," Russel said, causing Ozpin to freeze. The soul remaining Thrush dug into his pants pocket and withdrew the sheet he'd torn out of the yearbook from earlier and placed it on the desk for Ozpin to see.

Ozpin's eyes widened. On the page was him as he appeared now, unchanged despite the years that had clearly passed in-between the photo and now. "I don't know what to tell you, Mr. Thrush, but I don't like where this conversation is going." Ozpin said as he discretely reached for his cane behind his desk.

"I'm not here about you, Headmaster Ozpin. Sorry, but you're not what brought me up here tonight." Russel said tiredly as he reach out and pointed to the photo on the page. "Do you know the woman in the photo with you?"

Ozpin looked at the photo once more, recognizing that it wasn't just a photo of him, but of him and a female student he'd known once upon a time. "Yes, I do." Ozpin said, his hand on his cane. "What's it to you?"

"She's my mom." Russel said on the verge of tears.

Ozpin froze, he removed his hand from his cane and placed both arms on his desk. "Come again?"

"She died in childbirth, I never knew her. Not even a name." Russel said, holding back the urge to cry. "I've got her eyes. My dad said I had her eyes. She was on the same Team as my Father. I'm certain she's my mother."

"Why exactly are you here, Russel?" Ozpin asked, leaning forward.

"To ask a favor." Russel answered quietly.

"And if I indulge this favor would you remain silent about this photo?" Ozpin asked as once more one of his arms reached over beneath his desk and for his cane.

"I don't even know what you're talking about, sir." Russel said, pointing to the photo. "It's just a photo of my mom. That's all I know."

Ozpin chuckled. He removed his arm from his cane and placed it back onto the desk. "The favor then, Russel?"

Russel's face brightened. "Would you mind telling me about my mom?" He asked, almost choking on the words.

Ozpin couldn't help but smile. Call him old and sentimental, but he was a man of his word. "Where to begin?" Ozpin wondered aloud. And then they talked for hours. And the smile on Russel's face was not one of disdain or contempt. But it was one of joy. He finally learned his mother's name.

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Oy this was a bit more difficult to write. This was the longest chapter I wrote so far. But I think it came out alright.

I was playing the long game for the Author X reveal, not like it was much of a reveal. I'm sure one of you thought about it.

I always liked thinking of Ozpin as Father Time. He's older than we know, never ages. And I wanted to play with that idea because he would be the only one who would know Russel's
parents. I hope that gave you guys some feels.

The stuff with Cardin might seem a little throwaway line, but I think I built up on that with the previous arc and this one. There was always something up with Cardin, never went into it, but the characters like Russel was aware of it.

I also recently narrowed down the number of Arcs I'm going to do for this story. Hint: It's a double digit.

So, until next time dear readers. I hope you liked this chapter.

Next Arc: The Dance

Later Days!
Interlude: Black

Welcome back everyone! To another interlude!

Anyways, I hope you enjoy this brief interlude, we'll start up the next Arc sometime next week. Enjoy.

Black

In the world of Remnant there were those who fought for causes too noble to ignore and then there were those who fought for riches. Marcus Black was the latter. He killed men for money. It was his life.

Once upon a time, Marcus was a Huntsmen. He'd studied at Haven in Mistral, spent semesters abroad in Vale at Beacon, learning all manners of murder. Eviscerating an enemy's bowels with his bare hands was a neat trick. Some say he'd allegedly picked up stopping a man's heart from Ozpin himself. But there was never any evidence to support this claim. No one ever saw him stop a man's heart. Not when they were in the same room anyhow.

A soldier of fortune, Marcus quit the Huntsmen game and joined up with the private sector. It paid well, better than any other government gig e had with the Mistral council. All over the world Marcus went, from the deserts of Vacuo to the porcelain streets of Atlas.

Anyone with any sense would find it odd, that a Huntsmen, or rather, former Huntsman would be sent to state capitols instead of the outbacks and outskirts where Grimm roamed preying on the fearful. But it was an entirely new hunt to Marcus. The kind that paid better.

If the company matched his price, Marcus would gladly kill whoever they sent him after. He refined it to an art. Politicians, activists, even a Headmaster or two, anyone who got in the company's way. The bigger the pain in the ass, the bigger the payday.

But then as with all things, Marcus got older, he got slower. On one mission, a milk run by his standards, he couldn't pull the trigger fast enough, the target got a shot off and hit him in the leg.

Leaders of the White Fang always carried the most crude of weapons.

It was when he was on the operating table when he thought about his life. What had he truly accomplished? Blood money that could fund small nations were trivial now when faced with his own mortality. A man was defined by his legacy. When he died, Marcus would leave nothing.

So Marcus set out to change that. What he needed was an heir to his knowledge of killer techniques. Someone to inherit the family business. Someone who could carry on the family name.

Traveling to the streets of Mistral, back home in one of the seedier parts of town, the kind where the women of the night hanged out, just trying to make ends meet. Marcus approached one, not too pretty, not too ugly, not too old, and not too young. He gave her an offer she couldn't possibly refuse. Have his child and you'd be set for the rest of your life.

Nine months later, his son was born, Mercury. Marcus never saw the woman again, not that he cared. But when she handed over their son, he caught a glimpse of some foreign sentiment. He saw in her eyes only the kind of love a mother could have for her child.
The rest of his life, Marcus would groom his son in order to create the perfect killing machine. Mercury had a bad streak, however, but a couple of beatings set that right. Day after day, Marcus would teach his son everything he knew.

Eighteen years later, Marcus would finally see the results of his labor. An argument broke out between them, father and son. Their brawl, taking place in their secluded cabin in the woods, lasted for days.

And by the end of it, Marcus was given definitive proof that he'd succeeded in molding a killer in his image.

On his knees with bandages barely holding his legs together, Mercury was left wondering how in the world he was ever going to walk again. His answer came in the form of two lovely ladies.

"What're you looking at?" Mercury spat.

"I'm looking for Marcus Black." Cinder said coolly.

Mercury spat up blood once more and gestured to his now dead Father rotting in the field beside him. "There you go."

And so is the legacy of Marcus Black.

When we were introduced to Marcus Black, it was after he and his son Mercury had gotten into a lethal brawl. There was a story there, he was an assassin, good enough to be wanted by Cinder for her evil machinations, but she showed up and he was dead and took in his son instead.

I promise this wasn't just an excuse to shoe horn in a one shot, despite the interludes being just that.

Well, anyways, I hope you enjoyed this. 'Til next time! Later Days!
It had been weeks since that one Sunday, weeks since finals, and weeks since the end of his first semester at Beacon. Gone were the empty days when this fair Huntsmen training grounds had been silent, renewed with vigor as the students returned.

Russel couldn't lie, he somewhat missed those days, when he had Beacon to himself. Lacking a home to return to left him with the golden opportunity to get to know the academy more intimately. A ghost that roamed the halls, knowing the true inner workings of the facilities, unchaperoned and out of the eyes of authority.

There were the occasional strays he'd run into on campus, such as that Danny fellow from Team DNCE, and not to his surprise, Blake Belladonna. They hadn't talked about the incident, she'd been steering clear of him. But that was okay, if he'd bugged up as good as she did, he wouldn't be too eager to start small talk either.

Every night those strays like Russel would gather in the dining hall, take a projector and watch a film on one of the white walls. Mornings were quiet, nights were filled with cinematic pleasure, a true vacation without worry. But then, those two weeks were over. Returned the students they did, as well as all the drama that came with them.

"Beacon has a dance?" Russel blinked. It's been barely a day, there was already a food fight in the dining hall between Team RWBY and JNPR, breakfast was ruined and now he had to deal with this.

"Oh yeah, there's a dance." Sky remarked. He took the Shining Bacon newspaper in his hands and whipped it around, giving Russel a good look at the advertisement on the page.

"Doesn't it seem a little weird that we'd be having a dance?" Dove asked from where he sat on his bed. He sat up, legs crossed, a yogurt cup in one hand and a spoon in the other. Scooping up a spoonful of yogurt, Dove began to devour his snack. "Just seems odd, no?"

"I could've swore we left that behind at the lesser combat schools." Russel muttered disdainfully.

"Got a thing against dancing?" Sky asked curiously.
"I got thing against having them, yeah." Russel shrugged. "What's the point of having them unless you want to create an anxiety driven environment? Who's going with whom wallflower?"

"Well besides the social implications, the dance is a celebration of unwavering peace across the nations." Sky said, sitting up fully on his bed. "The Vytal festival's fast approaching, remember? This is just one of those many things that precede it."

"For a guy who just found out about the dance on the morning paper, you seem to know a whole lot about it." Russel pointed out. The young Thrush looked at his teammate oddly, slowly putting the pieces together. The sudden interest in the dance, the social settings that came with it, Russel was surprised he hadn't figured it out sooner. "You're going to ask someone to it aren't you?" He asked.

Sky smirked. "You catch on fast, Mr. Thrush."

"That I do, Mr. Lark." Russel chuckled. "So who's the lucky guy?"

"Lie Ren." Sky smiled proudly.

"Good luck with that one." Dove said as he inspected his now empty yogurt cup, wondering where all the contents had gone.

"I know, right? Out of my league. But I'mma give it a shot." Sky leaned back on his pillows. "How about you two? I know you just found out about the dance and it's a lot to get your head around, but who'd you ask?"

"All the women here at Beacon are beautiful and have cool personalities." Dove said, tossing his yogurt cup into the trash and placing the spoon by his bedside table. "I wouldn't know where to begin. I'm in love with all of them."

"Just don't go starting any orgies in the dorm room and we won't be having any problems." Russel cast a judging look in Dove's direction.

"I'd say Yang, I'd ask Yang." Dove said finally after weighing his options.

"The club crasher herself." Russel recalled that time before attending Beacon when he'd snuck into a local club and the brawling blonde had started one hectic hell of a fight.

"And how about you handsome?" Sky looked to Russel. "Who'd you ask?"

"Flattery will get you nowhere Sky." Russel laughed. "I don't know. Dances aren't my thing. I think I'd go stag or something."

"Team STAG or stag?" Dove asked jokingly.

"I ain't the multiple partner type, Dove." Russel folded his arms behind his head and laid back against the back of his bed. "Anyways, given that little incident between us and Velvet, I wouldn't put it past Team STAG to jump me behind an alley someday."

"Speaking of furries, anyone know where Cardin is?" Sky asked as he set his paper aside. The trio of Team CRDL members looked to one another in wonder, where exactly was their leader?

Not too far away, over on campus, the Winchester heir was busy helping out a familiar bunny eared girl move back into her dorm room. After spending the past two weeks back home, Cardin was simply ecstatic to be back in the halls of Beacon. And more importantly, he was happy to be
lending a helping hand to one he'd scorned once before.

"Thanks again for helping, Cardin." Velvet said cheerfully as she and Cardin marched down the hall to the Team CFVY dorm, boxes of her belongings in their arms.

"Please, it's the least I could do after everything." Cardin looked down to the much smaller girl who walked beside him.

"I just don't want you to feel like you owe me anything." Velvet said as they reached her room. She dug into her blazer pocket, fished out her keys and opened the door. "The gesture's nice, helping me with all of these, but I want it to be because we're friends and some strange, manservant thing."

"Trust me when I say I'm doing this out of the goodness of my heart, I swear." Cardin removed a hand from under the box he carried and placed it over his heart, causing Velvet to laugh at the gesture.

"Cardin 'Goody Too-Shoes' Winchester, has a nice ring to it." Velvet said playfully as she led the way inside.

Stepping into the Team CFVY dorm room, Cardin was surprised to find that they were the first to arrive. The beds looked untarnished, the bedside tables and cabinets tidy and empty. Where do you want this?" Cardin asked, looking to Velvet.

"Over by the bed on the far right if you wouldn't mind." Velvet said as she walked over to wardrobe by the door and began to unpack the box she carried. "This time I'm getting a bed by the window." She said deviously.

"Velvet 'The Scheming' Scarlatina, that has a nice ring to it." Cardin smirked as he walked over to the bed by the far right and set the box he carried beside it.

"Can't make anything of it if I got here first." Velvet said innocently.

"Cold world Velvet, cold world." Cardin laughed.

Velvet looked over out of the corner of her eye from where she was crouched before the opened wardrobe. Against the window facing out over the campus, the light shined bright into the room. An in the ray stood Cardin laughing. But it wasn't in the way that she'd known on that day he'd humiliated her. There wasn't any contempt, no anger, just joy.

If one were able to look past his supposed bigotry, the way Velvet now did, you could see Cardin for who he really was. A man in touch with his emotions, learning to vent them correctly. "Thanks again for helping me out, Cardin." Velvet thanked the leader of Team CRDL once more.

"Any time." He said with a wave as he made his way from the other side of the room to the door. "Don't be a stranger now. See you later Velvet."

"Take care Cardin." Velvet waved goodbye, watching Cardin walk out of the room.

Cardin strode out down the hall with a smile on his face. It seemed the second semester was starting out for the better. No crazy altercations, Velvet had forgiven him, it was all up from here. So the burnt orange haired huntsman made his way to the elevator and hit the call button.

He waited patiently, his thoughts drifting back to Velvet. He'd happened upon her by chance, carting several trips worth of boxes. He did what any guilt ridden man would and leant a hand. Jaune was the knight in shining armor, not him. Cardin's intentions were penance, nothing more.
But then his thoughts drifted back to what Velvet had said to him, that he shouldn't be acting in such a way. Be himself, not a slave to what he felt. But having a code of ethics like Winchester's did, Cardin found the two weren't mutually exclusive. Cardin was a slave to himself, his code, his ethics, just like anyone else is. Right is right, wrong is wrong. The sky's blue as are the oceans. All is right with the world once more.

When the elevator arrived, Cardin was prepared to step in, only to be caught off guard at the sight of Russel standing inside. "Sup." His partner waved.

"Oh, hey Russel." Cardin acknowledged his partner with a nod before stepping into the elevator.

"So what are you doing in the second year dorm?" A familiar grin formed on Russel's face. "You wouldn't happen to be hanging out with some bunny eared faunus now wouldn't you?"

"Ugh." Cardin grimaced, regretting every decision up to this point.

Russel hit the first floor button and they were on their way. He glanced back to Cardin and folded his arms over his chest. "You might be expecting me to be teasing you, and other ass-like qualities, but I'm not going to do that." He said, surprising Cardin once more. "I'm happy you've patched up things with Velvet. Now you can move on from your strange funk. Congrats on the win, Cardin."

Cardin stared in shock as his partner reached over and patted him on the back. "Wow, Russel." He said in awe. "That's rather mature of you to do."

"Now, I wouldn't say mature." Russel said as he did his best to stifle a laugh.

Cardin raised a brow, confused in Russel's response to his compliment. The elevator reached the bottom floor and the doors opened. Cardin turned away from Russel and looked outside and frowned deeply. There standing in front of the elevator stood Sky and Dove, both of whom were making kissy faces.

"Cardin likes Velvet. Cardin likes Velvet." They both said in unison.

"God Dammit." Cardin cast a glare in Russel's direction.

"Monty ain't got nothing to do with it." Russel saluted his teammates. "I guess I'll just leave the teasing to them for a little bit. I got places to be."

"Wait what?" Cardin said as he found himself caught between Dove and Sky's aggravating form of teasing. He just looked on as Russel walked off, leaving no explanation whatsoever.

Russel exited the second year's dorm and set off to the campus gym. Gym being a loose term to describe the training course. Beacon was light years ahead of Oakwood, for starters their training drones weren't wooden targets but self-reconstructing automatons. Those were the perks of being friends with Atlas, state of the art technology that put everyone to shame.

So Russel entered the Gym and took a seat on the nearby bleachers. It was still early, the rest of the students were still settling back in, no one was training. Except for one, Pyrrha Nikos. The Invincible Girl danced through the air with stunning acrobatics as she balanced Miló and Akoúo in her arms, both blocking oncoming bean bag projectiles and returning fire on the training drones.

Thinking back to the past three weeks, when he'd spoken with Ozpin, learned his mother's name and was tortured by Blake. After finals all had gone home for a little rest and relaxation. There were few who remained after that. Danny, Blake, and Russel himself. But then there was also one other, a surprise addition to the oddballs and homeless few who inhabited the empty halls. There
was also Pyrrha, who hadn't gone back to her home country of Mistral.

As he recalled, Pyrrha had need of his specific talents, something about him being a total dick. They'd talked about it briefly during finals week, but Oobleck and Port, along with Peach had produced some of the most grueling assignments he'd ever encountered. With their minds elsewhere, nothing could come of whatever Pyrrha required.

During the second week he struck up a conversation with Pyrrha, nothing too major, just scoping out what sort of problem she had that needed someone such as him. To no one's surprise, it was Jaune related.

Russel thought back to the many times he and the rest of his team sat by their window with popcorn just enjoying the show, taking bets when the young Arc would take the hint. To this day, he had no clue of the feelings Pyrrha had for him. Turns out the Invincible Girl had a weakness after all: Blondes.

The soul remaining Thrush just watched as the Mistral champion finished her training exercise. The drones were left on the floor in pieces. Pyrrha stood there, admiring her handiwork and Russel could swear he didn't see a bead of sweat on her. It must've been child's play to her. The way she moved, unlike anything he'd ever seen before. If she was this good in training, who knows what she'd be capable of during the real thing.

Having sense the pair of watchful eyes earlier, like the thousands that had watched her conquer tournaments and claimed victory, Pyrrha had gone the extra mile to hide her semblance. She couldn't take her eyes off the drones to check, maybe it would've been okay. If it was Jaune checking up on her then she could've dazzled him with her expertise. But she couldn't be too sure. She turned around and found Russel sitting by the bleachers. She smiled softly and waved to the Team CRDL member, hiding her disappointment that it wasn't her lovable goof of a leader.

"Marvelous effort." Russel began to clap. Pyrrha smiled at the sentiment. Russel could've thrown in a sarcastic undertone with the comment, but he did not. It was sincere and well meaning. He even had an impressed look on his face.

"Thank you." Pyrrha mock bowed. "I often made the audience roar in applause."

"No doubt." Russel chuckled as Pyrrha closed the distance between them. "Just checking in with you. Wanted to know if you still wanted my help in whatever it is you got going."

Pyrrha grabbed a nearby sack and pulled it over before taking a seat beside Russel. She reached into her sack and pulled out a water bottle and drank from it. The rush of battle always left her mouth dry, something to do with the adrenaline or what not. "I need you to coach me." She said simply in that polite tone of hers that could often be mistaken for innocence.

"I want to be more assertive." She declared. "I'd go to Nora, but she can't keep a secret. I'd go to Weiss, but I'm afraid she'd never understand why I'd go to such lengths to win Jaune's interest."

"She does shut him down a lot." Russel remarked, recalling one such incident from last semester that involved chocolates and flowers, which all wound up stuff into Jaune's mouth by the end of the day.

"Exactly." Pyrrha nodded. "I'd go to Ruby, but she's only fifteen. She lacks experience in this field. I don't want to go to Yang. Though she seems avid in this particular field, I'm afraid she'd only teach me flirtation. I want a meaningful relationship, not a fling." Pyrrha stressed the last part. What she was after was something real, meaningful and everlasting. "I'd got and talk to Blake, but
"Unapproachable." Russel muttered, earning a nod from the girl seated beside him. "But why go to me? Why not ask Ren? Why me?"

"Jaune grew up with only sisters. He sees Ren like a brother. And Ren was an orphan, he knows the value of relationships such as the one he has with Jaune. I'm not sure if he'd be working with me, or against me." Pyrrha sighed. "Why you? You're mean but you're honest. I want you to teach how to apply that to my own situation."

"Other words you want me to teach you how to work up the nerve to admitting to Jaune you like him?" Russel looked Pyrrha and earned another nod. "Cool." He said simply.

"So, will you help me?" Pyrrha looked to her fellow Huntsman for an answer.

"Coaching isn't exactly my forte." Russel shrugged as he leaned back on the bleachers. "I'm more of a Dennis the Menace than Atticus Finch."

"Atticus was a lawyer."

"And Dennis is a four year old." Russel laughed. "I don't exactly fit the bill for either description. But you get the idea."

"Well I think you'd look rather charming in a three piece suit, Russel." Pyrrha remarked. "Like wise dressed up as that pesky neighbor boy."

"Ha!" He laughed once more. "You're alright Pyrrha. I'll help." Russel leapt off the bleachers and began to head for the exit.

"Meet up again tomorrow after class?" Pyrrha called out to Russel as he walked off.

"It's a date!" Russel shouted at the top of his lungs. He didn't have to turn around to know the shade of red on Pyrrha's face now matched the color of her hair.

With his present business concluded, Russel walked off into the day. It was still young out, might as well get catch up to the rest of his team, find out what they're up to.

But back in Team RWBY’s dorm room the girls were busy debating another situation. One revolving around a certain terrorist organization.

"We're not ready!" Shouted the Schnee heiress in irritation.

"And we may never be ready!" Blake shot back fiercely. "Our enemies aren't just going to sit around and wait for graduation day." Team RWBY's resident cat-ninja girl narrowed her eyes and pointed out a nearby door. "They're out there, somewhere, planning their next move, and none of us know what it is, but it's coming! Whether we're ready or not!"

Ruby shot up a hand, moving it back and forth in a manic manner, quickly gaining her team's attention. "Okay, all in favor of becoming the youngest Huntresses to single-handedly taking down a corrupt organization conspiring against the Kingdom of Vale... say aye."

"We're not ready!" Shouted the Schnee heiress in irritation.

"And may never be ready!" Blake shot back fiercely. "Our enemies aren't just going to sit around and wait for graduation day." Team RWBY's resident cat-ninja girl narrowed her eyes and pointed out a nearby door. "They're out there, somewhere, planning their next move, and none of us know what it is, but it's coming! Whether we're ready or not!"

Ruby shot up a hand, moving it back and forth in a manic manner, quickly gaining her team's attention. "Okay, all in favor of becoming the youngest Huntresses to single-handedly taking down a corrupt organization conspiring against the Kingdom of Vale... say aye."

Yang pumped her fist up into the air enthusiastically in support of her sister. "Yes! I love it when you're feisty!"

Considering how Ruby described the situation, Weiss couldn't help but think of the notoriety that
would come with accomplishing such a task. "Well, I suppose it could be fun."

"None of you said aye!" Ruby shouted, sounding rather annoyed that her friends, who just so happened to be her subordinates, were not properly contributing to their totally democratic deliberation.

"Alright then, we're in this together!" Blake declared.

"Let's hatch a plan!" Ruby chimed in excitedly.

"Yeah!" Yang cheered, doing her best rendition of a one man cheerleading squad.

But speaking of planning. Wasn't Ruby forgetting something? "I left my board game at the library!" Ruby panicked. The Team RWBY leader then made a mad dash for their dorm room door, throwing it open and running as fast as she could to the library.

"I'll be right back!" The rest of Team RWBY could hear their leader shout from the hallway. They also too heard the sound of Ruby running into someone and falling on her butt.

"We're doomed." Weiss frowned.

"Sorry. Are you okay?" Ruby looked up at whoever she'd bumped into with an apologetic look. Standing over her Ruby was a dark skinned woman with green hair, accompanied by two other similarly dressed individuals. "I'm fine." The green haired woman said, offering her hand to Ruby to help her off the floor. "Just watch where you're going."

"Oh, right, sorry." Ruby continued as she was helped back onto her feet. "Um, I'm Ruby! Are you new?"

The green haired woman and her male companion stepped aside, revealing their third raven haired companion. "Visiting from Haven, actually." She answered innocently.

Ruby stared at the trio, squinting and taking into account of their different styled uniforms. She'd never met anyone from Haven before, aside from Sun of course. Their uniforms weren't suits or dresses, which Ruby found odd. It was the structure she'd been raised in, she guessed, what she'd become accustomed to.

"Ooh! You're here for the festival!" Ruby deduced. "But exchange students have their own dormitory."

"I guess we just got turned around." The male companion, whose hair was the color of silver and voice cool, shrugged at their mistake.

"Hey, don't worry, it happens all the time." Ruby joked as the trio of transfer students began to walk past her. "Uh, your building is just east of here."

"Thanks." The raven haired woman said as she walked past Ruby, joining her supposed teammates. "Maybe we'll see you around."

"Yeah, maybe! Oh, uh, and welcome to Beacon!" Ruby waved goodbye before running off to the library to reclaim her game.

The trio pressed on, devilish smirks on their faces. And the raven haired woman's eyes began to glow a peculiar color. "Yes. Welcome to Beacon." She uttered darkly.
As with most of the canon moments from preceding chapters, the dialogue at the end with Team RWBY and Cinder is taken right out of Volume 2. I even left the italics to be as cheeky as possible.

During the writing process, I imagined Pyrrha being able to speak a little more carefree in the presence of Russel. He's not like the others she associates herself with. She's still polite, but she's able to get away with being a little crass.

And as one of you guessed, jin0uga, Mercury's going to have a role in this arc, among others. It was too tempting of a storyline to pass up. We'll get some of him, more of Team RWBY and some Cardin dealing with what's going on with him later in this Arc.

'Til next time, dear reader. Later days!
It was a week into the second semester and all the students could talk about was the fact some of their own had fought a giant robot. Headlines cried for Roman Torchwick's head, as did the government of Atlas, how dare such an underhanded dreg of society rob from them and drag their achievements into the public eye. But when all was said and done, all the people wanted to know was, who stopped Torchwick and his rampage through Vale?

Well Team RWBY of course.

Early Monday morning was a familiar setting to all who attended Beacon. Dragging themselves out of bed early in the morning wasn't all they had in common. Everyone not in trouble for pushing a fellow student down some stairs was there. If you wanted to catch someone with a mouthful of food, you've come to the right place. Such as one Velvet Scarlatina, renowned contributor and editor of the Shining Beacon seizing her chance to get the whole story.

"What was it like to fight Roman Torchwick?" Velvet asked eagerly after hitting the record button on her recorder.

On the other side of the table sitting across from Velvet sat a luckless Ruby who pancakes stuffed in her mouth. The leader of Team RWBY attempted to answer her fellow huntsman, but as it would, talking and eating didn't exactly go together.

"I think what Ruby's trying to say is," Yang stepped in, catching Velvet's attention. "We're aren't allowed to talk about it. Hush, hush, talk and suffer the consequences stuff."

"Aw, well that sucks." Velvet frowned as she reached for her recorder and hit the stop button.

"You know how these things are Velvet. Sorry." Blake looked to her editor sympathetically. "Maybe another Author X entry would keep the clamoring public at bay?"

"Nope. Everyone's dying to know what happened on that highway. Me included." Velvet shook her head. "The rest of my team and I are heading out on a mission tomorrow. I just wanted something to get handed in for the rest of the newspaper to send out while I'm gone. That's all."

"Sorry." Ruby finally managed to say before scarfing down on another one of the pancakes seated before her.

"We actually got scheduled for a mission after the upcoming dance. Any pointers you might wanna share?" Yang asked, placing both her elbows on the table and leaning forward.
"Don't die?" Velvet said in a joking manner. "No, but in all seriousness, the first year missions are supposed to be walks in a park. Reconnaissance and stuff like that, milk runs. But still, keep your eyes out. No telling what could happen."

"Thank you, Velvet, for the forewarning." Weiss said in a polite manner, the kind she'd been raised to apply whenever in a formal conversation.

"Anytime." Velvet smiled. "Back to business. I didn't come this way just to get a scoop. Coco volunteered us for the planning committee. Seeing as we're heading off on a mission beforehand, I'd like to ask if you girls wouldn't mind filling in for us if we get held up. These things are devilishly difficult to predict, you know."

"You're asking us to plan the dance if you guys die?"

"I was hoping to leave an air of optimism. But yeah, if we die you mind taking care of the dance? That'd be great." Velvet laughed cheekily. "But that aside, what've you guys got today?"

"Combat Class in an hour." Jaune spoke up after a long silence. For the most part, the Team JNPR crew had remained silent, respecting their fellow Huntsmen's business as Velvet had arrived for them and not the likes of JNPR. But with that over with, it sounded like a good enough time to contribute to the conversation.

"Last week Ms. Goodwitch said she'd start us off on pure sparring. No more practicing on dummies and robots that rebuild themselves. Just some good ol' fashion beating the snot out of each other!" Nora booped into the conversation ecstatically, adding extra emphasis on the 'beating the snot out of each other' bit by flexing her arms. "Gonna break Cardin's legs is what I'm going to do!"

"Oh." Nora froze. The bombastic and usually bubbly member of Team JNPR slowly turned her head around to come face to face with a familiar silver armor with gold trim. Towering over the seated Nora, stood Cardin and beside him Russel, with food trays in hand and on their way to find somewhere to sit in the jam packed Dinning Hall.

"Hey there Cardin…" Nora laughed awkwardly while the silent ninja of JNPR seated beside her shook his head in dismay. "Funny meeting you here…"

"Yeah. Funny." Cardin muttered dryly. The Team CRDL leader then looked away from the flustered Nora over to the other side of the table where Velvet sat. Cardin simply waved at the second year student and smiled. Velvet returned the gesture and looked on as he and Russel walked away to carry on with their breakfast.

As Russel passed by, Blake couldn't help but turn away. The action didn't go unnoticed by Russel who scoffed. "At least own up to it." He said over his shoulder before moving on.

Blake just buried her head in her arms. Everyone not a part of Team RWBY just looked to the resident cat faunus in confusion. The events that occurred the week before finals had since remained a secret. Surprisingly enough, Russel hadn't gone to any higher authority. They hadn't talked to him about it, leaving them completely in the dark.

Seeing her partner wallowing in regret, Yang reached over to her right and patted Blake on the back. "Cheer up, everyone makes mistakes."

"Ugh." Blake groaned. "Stupid White Fang…"

"I'm not gonna even ask." Jaune shook his head and threw his arms up in the air. But unbeknownst
to any of his friends, Jaune was using the overly dramatic action to get away with staring at Weiss, the object of his affection. In order to cover up his actions, the Arc descended back into his chair and glanced away for deniability purposes. By now he was sure Weiss had developed some sort of secondary semblance to detect whenever his eyes had fallen onto her form.

But in doing so, Jaune had turned away to face his partner Pyrrha, and he couldn't notice a folded up sheet of paper set down right beside her elbow almost seemingly out of thin air. "Hey, Pyrrha where'd that come from?" Jaune asked, pointing to the paper beside her elbow. "Did Oobleck say anything about a test? Do I have to panic study? Oh Monty, last semester was insane! I can't afford another slip up!" Jaune flailed in his seat.

"What?" Pyrrha raised a brow at Jaune's dramatic actions, not catching him taking the opportunity to get another look at Weiss. Her emerald eyes soon dawned on the sheet of paper Jaune referred to, causing Pyrrha to raise another brow in confusion.

She reached out and claimed the paper and unfolded it and carefully read its contents. "It's nothing test related, I assure you Jaune." Pyrrha shot an affectionate smile at her leader.

"So what is it?" Jaune flailed once more.

"Jaune are you having a seizure?" Ruby asked in concern, taking a moment away from devouring what remained on her plate.

"No." The blonde said simply as if nothing was wrong while internally clenching. He'd gotten too cocky with that last one.

"It's just a sheet of paper, probably left behind by whoever else sat here before us." Pyrrha said in a reassuring tone as she reached over and patted Jaune on the back with one hand, and crumpled the paper in the other. She then tossed the ball of paper onto the floor, the matter settled.

Thankfully no one questioned Pyrrha about her littering or asked to take a look at the seemingly unimportant sheet of paper. It was a good thing too that everyone was preoccupied with the tense exchange between Nora and Cardin, they all would've caught Russel placing it there in the first place.

The two teams, plus Velvet, then continued with their breakfast. Before class, they each bid farewell to the upperclassman and set off to class, but not after depositing their trays of food for proper disposal.

The two teams reached their class around the same time as Professor Goodwitch. The older woman had just finished unlocking the doors to class and gestured for them to enter. They took their seats on the overlooking bleachers around the pit where those chosen to spar would do battle and watched as others began to funnel in.

Team WILL and then Team DNCE, and soon followed Team CRDL and behind them Team STAG. After that, an unfamiliar face entered the class. He had silver hair and was dressed in complimenting colors. He had an impressed look on his face when he'd entered the room, taking a moment to soak it all in.

"Who's the new guy?" Yang asked, pointing out the silver haired young man and getting a nice look at his posterior the moment he climbed up out of the pit and onto the bleachers.

"Oh, oh, I ran into him and his team just last week!" Ruby said excitedly. "Exchange students!"

When class began it went as they expected. Goodwitch called on one student who'd then challenge
another to combat. Yang was summoned up first and then she proceeded to challenge Danny Matchstick of Team DNCE. It was fair to say Danny didn't stand a chance against Yang's boxing techniques.

Willa of Team WILL, in hopes of an easy win, challenged one Jaune Arc. Though his sessions with Pyrrha had improved his skills immensely, Jaune had a long road ahead of him before he could be considered an actual threat. The match ended with him in a familiar place, on his ass.

As the last two combatants cleared the pit, Goodwitch called on Pyrrha. But none were prepared for what happened next. "I challenge all of Team CRDL." Pyrrha declared dramatically.

A sizeable amount of gasps erupted from the class. It was a surprising request, normal sparring matches were conducted one on one. But the driven look on Pyrrha's face was enough for Goodwitch to indulge such a request.

"Alright boys, we've been drafted." Cardin stood up from where he sat amongst his team on the bleachers.

"Is Pyrrha crazy or what? It's going to be four against one." Dove muttered disbelievingly.

"Don't let the numbers go to your head there, Dove." Russel said as he and the rest of Team CRDL descended from the bleachers into the pit. "This is Pyrrha Nikos we're talking about." With that said, Dove quickly shut up and gulped. Never had he once thought he'd be fighting the face on a cereal box other than for the prize inside.

The five combatants quickly ran to the locker room and gathered their gear. To locker number '2030' Russel went, reclaiming his daggers for the first time since they'd been confiscated. He tested the weight in his hands, making sure hadn't gotten too rusty since parting with them. Satisfied, he and the rest of CRDL returned to the pit and were greeted by Pyrrha, who was now standing on the other end of the matt.

Goodwitch then synced their scrolls to the large monitor above. Soon their aura levels pooped up on screen for careful monitoring.

"You may begin." Goodwitch took a step out of the arena.

"You heard the lady, time to dance." Cardin raised his mace into the air and pumped it even higher.

That young man with silver hair, Mercury, watched attentively from where he sat. He couldn't help but crack a smile. The way Pyrrha moved was captivating. She dodged, blocked and attacked all at once.

Whenever Sky would swing his mighty halberd, she'd leap, knock back Dove with the butt of her weapon and retaliate. When Cardin came at her with his explosive mace, she'd jump back and switch to ranged attacks. She'd have knocked the CRDL leader off his feet if not for the timely intervention of Russel and his daggers.

But not even an eye popping triple somersault could deter Pyrrha. Any and all attacks they threw, she countered. Every defense they mustered she shattered. She'd even begun playing mind games with Cardin, playing on his temper and causing him to knock Dove out of the match. And then, for lack of a better word, she devastated Cardin single handedly by dropping him in the air and throwing him back into the ground.

"You think she broke his legs?" Mercury glanced away from the match to catch Nora whispering to
Ren, who shrugged in response. The pain of others got a quiet laugh out of the man.

"Lucky shot." Cardin managed to say before collapsing.

"Well done, Miss Nikos. You should have no problem qualifying for the Vytal Tournament."
Goodwitch half applauded.

"Thank you Professor." Pyrrha bowed.

Slowly the members of Team CRDL picked themselves off the floor and limped off back to the bleachers. "Hey Dove?" Cardin called out to the youngest member of their team.

"Yes?" Dove asked as he clutched his sides, relying on his aura to fix all of the internal damage.

"No hard feelings right?" Cardin asked, only to receive the bird in response.

"Alright, now I know that's a tough act to follow, but we have time for one more sparring match." Goodwitch looked around, observing her students "Any volunteers? Ms. Belladonna?". There was always something about calling on students that just seemed to osadistic to not enjoy. You picked on the one who least expects it.

"You've been rather docile for the past few classes. Why don't you-"

"I'll do it." Mercury raised his hand.

"Music to my ears." Yang purred.

"Mercury, is it? Well, let's find you an opponent." Goodwitch said, her eyes beaming at Blake once again.

"Actually, I wanna fight her." Mercury pointed at Pyrrha.

Another series of gasps erupted from the crowd. "I'm afraid Miss Nikos has just finished the match. I recommend you choose another partner." Goodwitch said, silently pointing at Blake.

"No, it's fine! I'd be happy to oblige." Pyrrha said in her ever pleasant polite tone.

Once again, Pyrrha found herself in another spar. But unlike the previous one, Pyrrha was starting on a full tank of gas. The theatrics with Cardin at the end had taken a bit of a toll, but as always she soldiered on and met Mercury evenly on the plane of battle.

"Hey, your friend's doing pretty good." Ruby said as she nudged a familiar green haired and dark skinned young woman she'd accidentally ran into last week.

Emerald smiled at the sentiment. But the moment Ruby looked away, turning her attention back on the fight below, Emerald couldn't help but roll her eyes. But her actions didn't go unnoticed. Out of the corner of her eye, should could catch one Russel Thrush smirking.

Unprepared for Mercury's skillful legwork, Pyrrha was forced to use her semblance. Now with the tide of battle shifting in her favor, Pyrrha now had the silver haired young man at her mercy. Attempting to regain his footing, Mercury was left wide open for an attack. So Pyrrha charged at him.

"I forefeit." Mercury said, causing Pyrrha to freeze in place.

"You...don't even want to try?" Pyrrha questioned.
"What's the point? You're a world-renowned fighter. We're obviously leagues apart." Mercury raised his hands in the air and shrugged.

And so with that, Goodwitch called an end to class. They would gather again tomorrow as usual. One by one the students funneled out with Team JNPR congratulating Pyrrha on her efforts while Team CRDL silently wallowed in their embarrassing defeat.

As everyone began to file out of the classroom, Mercury stopped beside Emerald who was busy saying her goodbyes to Team RWBY.

"Making new friends I see." Mercury said casually.

"Shut up." Emerald said through her smile. "You get what we need?"

"Oh yeah." Mercury laughed. "Learning is so much fun."

After the rest of the day's activities, from Port to Peach and then finally the caffeinated lessons of one Doctor Oobleck, Pyrrha finally found some time to herself. In need to decompress and hone her own skills, the four time Mistral Champ found herself back in the gym, fighting against the training drones.

It was during these moments, in the heat of battle, that Pyrrha was truly herself. There was no need for her to meet smile and nod in front of a camera. There was no meeting her parent's expectations. It was just herself, lost in her head, countering, attacking and acting on her instincts. It was Pyrrha at her purest. Without the social anxiety and doubt. This was where she was truly the Invincible Girl.

"You could've held back just a smidge today." Pyrrha glanced over her shoulder and smiled coyly at the sight of Russel.

"What exactly does beating up your entire team have to do with you helping me anyways?" Pyrrha asked as she waved a hand in front of the training drone she sparred with, causing it to freeze in place. "Besides giving me a workout of course."

"You're a winner Pyrrha. You showed that when you faced impossible odds today." Russel placed his hands in his pockets and shrugged. "Four against one's unfair. Five if you count the new guy. Yet you trounced us. Any other guy or gal would've been pissin' themselves at the sight of me triple somersaulting at them. But you won. Aces you won."

"What was that about not being the coaching type again?" Pyrrha said, referencing their last conversation in the gym. "Hello Atticus, it's great to meet you."

Russel laughed. "Cool beans, Scout. But what I'm trying to say is, how come you can take apart a team of guys like a high school science project, but not work up the nerve to say 'Hey Jaune, I'd like to be more than just partners on the battlefield'?"

"You're rough, you're tough. You can multi task life or death situations. Now all you really need to do is apply that to everyday situations. And you're golden."

"Easier said than done."

"Not with that attitude." Russel shrugged. "Look that dance things coming up, I don't know, maybe this should be the test. Can you lockdown Beacon's golden boy before then? Consider it a challenge, get aggressive and accomplish your goal."
"Thank you, Russel, I appreciate it."

"Alright, we'll work on this some other day." He said before turning around and heading back the way he came. "I've gotta get going. Them books ain't gonna hit themselves."

"Take care Dennis." Pyrrha held a hand against her lips to stifle a laugh.

"Bother you some other time Mr. Wilson."

On the way out, Russel couldn't help but notice a familiar face peering into the gym from the glass panel on the exit door. Pushing the door open and stepping outside, Russel found one Marie-Anne Cherri standing coolly outside against a wall. The soul remaining Thrush glanced at his fellow Oakwood native suspiciously but said nothing.

"What?" Marie-Anne looked at him almost attempting to provoke him.

"Don't choke." He said before tipping an imaginary hat on his head. Marie-Anne just glared at Russel who blurted out laughing. She attempted to muster up a comeback only to find the boy was walking away.

Marie-Anne gritted her teeth, she then peered back into the gym and activated her semblance, giving her that much needed boost in her eye sight to see Pyrrha continuing with her workout. There were several things wrong with this picture, first of them being Pyrrha associating herself with Russel Thrush of all people. The second being, Russel associating himself with someone like Pyrrha. That in itself was an omen for trouble.

When Pyrrha had finished testing her mettle against the highest training setting allowed for first year students, she'd decided to call it quits and head back to the dorms. There was still plenty for her to do on her list, chief among them take a shower. It had been a long day and she was in need of one. So out the door of the gym she went, totally unprepared for what happened next.

"Couldn't help but notice how close you and Russel are hanging out." Marie-Anne said, making the Invincible Girl stop in her tracks. Pyrrha glanced over her shoulder, spotting Marie-Anne leaning against the wall of the gym's entrance.

"I don't know what your insinuating." Pyrrha turned to face Marie-Anne fully. "But he's helping me with a personal matter."

"I'm not insinuating anything, Ms. Nikos. In fact I come in peace." Marie kicked off the wall and slowly approached the four time Mistral champ. "Piece of advice? Cut ties with that guy now. He ruins lives Pyrrha, he'll do the same to you like he's done to everyone." Marie-Anne muttered darkly. "I should know. I grew up with that fucker."

Pyrrha winced at Marie-Anne's sailor mouth. "I may not know Russel as well as you do. But I'll have to ask that you refrain from referring to him in that manner."

"I bet you went to him asking for help with that Jaune fellow." Marie-Anne looked out off into the distance, over the horizon where the cliffs dangled over the seas. "You got a minute? I got a story to share with you. Just so you know exactly who you're dealing with."

"Back in Oakwood, amongst the raging hormones and puberty, we all became enamored with the drama of relationships. Who was hooking up with who and that sort of thing." Marie-Anne recalled almost longingly for the days she'd spent in Oakwood. "But there was this one couple who caught the heart of everyone. Their names were Ruddy Grand and Burgundy Blue."
"They were at the heart of everything. Ruddy was kind, athletic, cool. Burgundy was just the same, but smarter, good with her hands, a mechanic. She helped out the local farms whenever something went broke." Pyrrha watched Marie-Anne describe her friends, catching sight of almost a misty quality to her eyes.

But Marie-Anne caught onto that as well. She briefly paused her story to regain her composure. After she'd gathered her bearings she'd gotten right back to it. "Russel was friends with Ruddy. He didn't have many of them, friends I mean. Not a lot of took kind to him and his attitude. But Ruddy put up with him. I guess that was one of the reasons Burgundy loved him. But it wasn't enough."

"The break before graduating from Oakwood, the pair had a falling out. No one knew the specifics, but the entire academy's dynamic changed after that. Burgundy began to slip down into some sort of depression. Ruddy wasn't making any sense. We all could tell they needed each other more than they knew."

"So, when Prom came around, me and the rest of the committee set into motion the perfect plan. Get Ruddy and Burgundy back together."

"It was simple, get them both voted up as Prom King and Queen. They'd be forced to put aside their differences for a dance. And then they'd realize exactly how bad they loved each other." Marie-Anne couldn't help but laugh at how much it sounded like a fairy tale.

"Oakwood is miles behind the technologically superior Beacon, we used paper ballots for voting. Everyone wrote down their names and handed them in. Problem solved right? You would think." Marie-Anne chuckled sadly. "But we made the mistake of attracting Russel's attention. He came to us under the pretense of lending a helping hand, Ruddy was his friend after all. We thought he had a vested interest to see his friend happy again. So we let him do the honors of counting the ballots."

"When the time finally came, Russel handed in the results sealed in an envelope. A teacher, our old coach read them aloud. She read aloud Burgundy's name for Prom Queen. But then, instead of hearing her say Ruddy's name, she called out someone else's."

"We didn't find out until later that Russel had taken just enough of the ballots with Ruddy's name on them and burned them outback in the parking lot." Marie-Anne shook her head, mentally kicking herself for allowing things to go the way they did. There was a part of Pyrrha that wanted to reach out and place a hand on Marie-Anne's shoulder as a show of sympathy, but she didn't. Marie-Anne wasn't exactly the type who'd be coddled. "We confronted him and he laughed. He told us he did it with a smile."

Marie-Anne looked Pyrrha in the eyes, causing the Invincible Girl back up, taken slightly off guard by the eye contact. "That's who you're getting into bed with, Pyrrha." She muttered. "Russel is not a nice guy. Everything he does, he does because he finds it entertaining. You could be his best friend, his only friend, and he'll still screw you over because he simply gets off on it."

I just thought you might know who you were really dealing with." Marie-Anne sighed. "I wish we knew. It would've saved us a lot pain then."

"Thank you, Marie-Anne." Pyrrha glanced down at the floor sadly. "I will take your words into consideration."

"Don't be another life that monster destroys." Marie-Anne said, with her words carrying the full weight of not only her pain but those affected by Russel's actions. "I'll be seeing you Pyrrha. Take care."
"Yeah, thanks…” Pyrrha looked on as Marie-Anne walked away.

The Mistral Champion's thoughts fell back onto the Thrush, her whole world view about him changed. She'd first thought him as jerk who might one day be redeemed under the right circumstances. But now all she recognized was the possibility that she may very well be dealing with the devil.

Not too far away, on the east side of campus. In the transfer student dormitory, there was a trio of so called students who sat around scheming and plotting. Had someone actually taken the time to actually look over the student list of Haven, they would've been able to tell the trio of transfers didn't actually attend Haven.

"And Finally, Pyrrha Nikos." Emerald said as she read off a list she'd compiled on her scroll.

"Ah, the invincible girl." Cinder mused as she busied herself with sewing a black dress.

"She's smart, but I wouldn't say invincible." Mercury muttered from where he lay on the floor, a comic book in hand.

"Do tell." Cinder glanced momentarily away from her work.

"Her semblance is Polarity. But you'd never know just by watching."

"After she made contact with my boots, she was able to move them around however she wanted. But she only made slight adjustments." Mercury said, recalling his brief fight with Pyrrha. The living weapon had felt a strange tug, unnatural even against his feet during the fight. It didn't take him long to put two and two together.

"Just enough to make it look like she's untouchable. She doesn't broadcast her power, so it puts her opponent at a disadvantage." Emerald said

"Hmm... People assume that she's fated for victory, when she's really taking fate into her own hands. Interesting. Add her to the list." Cinder smiled.

"You should be able to take her no problem." Mercury looked up from his comic book and smirked.

"It's not about overpowering an enemy. It's about taking away what power they have. And we will, in time." Cinder said before resuming her sewing.

"I hate waiting." Mercury grumbled.

"Don't worry, Mercury. We have a fun weekend ahead of us…”

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That Prom story Marie-Anne shared was actually referenced all the way back in chapter 3. Which was right around when I started moving ahead with pursuing more chapters. So yeah.

In regards to the somewhat perverted stuff Jaune does in the chapter, I based it off something I used to do back in Elementary. In retrospect if I wasn't seven it wouldn't be cute. It would be exactly how its portrayed in the chapter. Kind of messed up if you think about it.

I initially planned to write in depth fight scenes, but they really don't matter. I'd just be describing what happens in Extracurricular, and I have to do that enough with all the cannon dialogue. So I didn't bother.
The dynamic between Pyrrha and Russel has definitely changed in light of Marie-Anne's interference. Expect something out of that. Fun fact: given the revelation that at RTX that Pyrrha was created to die, and there's definitely no chance of her magically coming back to life because it's an anime, that basically just signed off on moving ahead with insane Pyrrha related material for the story. So yeah expect some of that later.

Next chapter will be out next week, hopefully. 'Til then, thanks for being patient. Later days!
Hey there everyone! We're back for another exciting chapter of 'The Darkling Thrush'!

Also, I know I keep saying this is 'M' territory. Because it is. And the next two chapters are really going there. So, I probably should change the rating...

Apologies in advance to anyone enjoying the bantering dynamic Pyrrha and Russel have. This gonna be a rough chapter.

The halls of Beacon had gotten quiet with anticipation for the upcoming dance on Sunday. There was much discussion in the earlier days, whispers of who was going with whom. Who would be dancing under the spotlight and who’d be a wallflower. But now all there was, was preparation. Take a gander into the Ballroom, there you will find the planning committee setting up shop for the greatest night of their young lives.

After spending days out in the field on their first solo mission without the watchful eyes of their professors, the second year students were beginning to trickle back to Beacon. It seemed as if they all would be making it back for the dance. But then news arrived from the front, Team CFVY would not be making back in time.

Some nasty grimm they'd never seen before, an ape of some kind had wrecked their transportation out in the wilderness. It was a long walk back from where they crashed.

As Team CFVY were the heads of the planning committee, their duties had fallen to Team RWBY. So now Team RWBY, along with everyone they could round up was now currently hard at work in the ballroom, preparing for tomorrow night's festivities.

It was a huge undertaking, given the circumstances. Team CFVY already had weeks of notice and plan for when they'd return. But now Team RWBY had to scramble to get the job done. They were forced to cash in favors accumulated over a semester that they’d hoped to stock pile.

And that's why Team CRDL was now currently at the back of the ballroom, getting the sound equipment set up. Let it be known, never ask to borrow a pencil from one Ruby Rose. She'll hold it over you forever.

"Speaker check in five!" Russel called out loudly for all the students to hear. The last thing they wanted was to be caught off guard by some terrible screeching if Team CRDL hadn't set it up properly.

Over the way, acting as the DJ, stood Cardin with various players. The burnt orange haired Team Leader glanced away from his scroll, and the various messages from Velvet to look over to Russel. His partner gave him the thumbs up and Cardin went to testing.

Cardin adjusted the volume and hit play. Russel covered his ears and stepped away from the speaker as a slow song began to play. The students took a moment to pause and applaud. After
hours of messing around and the awkward dance of finding the right cord in a box of similar power cords, they'd finally gotten it right.

"Nice job fellas." Yang said as she rounded the DJ set up. "Do a couple more tests to be extra sure. Wouldn't want this to be just some fluke now would we?"

"Alright." Cardin said, half paying attention as he busied himself with reading a new message.

The blonde bombshell of Team RWBY merely raised a brow at Cardin's actions. She could see his scroll from where she stood, Cardin was talking to someone and it must be quite the conversation to distract the tall boy. Under normal circumstances she would resort to teasing one about such a subject, but Cardin wasn't some guy you'd joke around with, not the way Yang could anyways.

Hostilities between Team RWBY, Team JNPR and Team CRDL were at an all-time low. But there were issues that needed to be discussed. It was something like a cold war after what Blake had done to Russel. Whatever grievous actions the CRDL boys had done, nothing matched what Blake did. Until they could bring themselves to actually talk about the incident, Team RWBY played nice. And so Yang walked away, leaving the sound tests in the capable hands of Cardin and company.

"Why do they call it a Ballroom?" Dove asked to no one in specific. After lugging around boxes of equipment and helping set up tables and chairs, Dove along with Sky and a couple of other volunteers had decided to take a moments break, eat some lunch graciously provided by the school. 'I'd assume it would have something to do with, well, balls.'

"Hm." Michael Geist, of the all faunus first year Team STAG, nodded in agreement as he chomped away at his sandwich.

"Ballroom. It's where they have 'Balls', as in parties." Sky said casually before taking a sip out of his soda.

"Just some fancy high society wording." Ezekiel Jupiter, the obese beaver faunus of Team DNCE grunted.

"Well why couldn't they just call it a 'Partyroom'?" Willa Rosa, the Leader of Team WILL, groaned as she rubbed her sore shoulders. That was the last time she let someone talk her into carrying a table like that.

"Well why don't we ask our resident high society type?" Sky suggested. And then they all averted their attention to the left. Their eyes fell onto the Schnee heiress herself.

Weiss busied herself with one of the most crucial decisions she'd been face with in her entire life. The fate of the whole dance rested on her shoulders. What color should be the table cloths? After much internal conflict, consulting with her peers and a phone call with the Schnee Dust Corporation's personal architect and home designer, she'd reached two final choices. Ivory or Oldlace.

Lost deep in thought, deliberating the complimenting shades that Ivory offered, but was torn by the tones of Oldlace, Weiss was left shocked back into reality by the sound of five of her peers shouting her name. Wiess had actually jumped in surprise. She turned around, eyes wide, looking for some sort of explanation, perhaps there was a grimm invasion, or a surprise test, Professor Port will forever be one of the banes of her existence.

But no, instead Weiss found only her peers, asking her a stupid question. "Why's it called a
'Ballroom' instead of a 'Partyroom'?" Dove asked in a very serious manner, so much that Weiss
could only look in disgust at how lesser men have no concept of high society.
"A Ball possesses an air of esteem. A party is where simple men wallow." Weiss remarked
contemptuously before returning to her task.
"I think she insulted us. Anyone else think she insulted us?" Sky said, looking around to his fellow
students, who all just nodded in agreement.
"That's it. I'm never borrowing another pencil from Ruby, ever again." Willa muttered, earning
another round of nods from the other students.
"Hey, Cardin. Seeing as were testing these bloody things, would you mind putting something
decent at least?" Russel addressed his team leader informally.
Cardin merely stood in place, tapping up a message on his scroll, as if not hearing Russel. "Oi!
You even paying attention, man?"
"Hm?" Cardin glanced up from his scroll and over to his left, where he found Russel looking rather
cross. "Oh, sorry about that. Play something else? Sure." Cardin said quickly before hurriedly
changing the song to something more upbeat.
"Jeez, Cardin. What's up with you?" Russel raised a brow and pointed at the scroll in his partner's
hands. "There better not be anything inappropriate on that thing. We've got a bad enough reputation
as it is."
"What? No. It's nothing." Cardin waved off Russel's concerns. The CRDL leader then claimed his
scroll once again and checking it.
"Alright, so what are you doing?" Russel pried as he rounded the corner in an attempt to get a
better look at what Cardin was doing on his scroll. "You'd have better luck just telling me what
you're doing than this whole runaround thing. We both know I'll find out eventually."
"Ugh." Cardin groaned. He raised up his free hand and squeezed the bridge of his nose. "I'm just
talking to Velvet. Okay? Now bug off."
Russel raised a brow, his mouth falling slightly open in disbelief. "Oh come on man. Why the hell
are you doing this?"
"What?" Cardin questioned, glancing away from his scroll once more and to his partner.
"I thought you just wanted to apologize to her and what not. Not carry on a correspondence."
Russel shook his head in disapproval. "For Monty's sake Cardin, their ship crashed. And you're just
texting her as if she doesn't have anything better to do? Like worrying about getting back to Beacon
safely."
"You think I don't know that?" Cardin turned fully away from his scroll to face Russel. He puffed
out his chest and stared down at his subordinate. "They're scared out there, you know? At any
moment they can get ambushed by some stupid pack of Beowulfs or whatever that ape thing was.
But at least they know we're waiting for them back at Beacon. That's keeping them going."
"And I'm saying they're better off without us breaking their concentration." Russel scoffed. "Quit
thinking with your dick, Cardin. We both know in this line of work, a distracted huntsman is a dead
huntsman."


"I'm not thinking with my dick!" Cardin shouted angrily. The CRDL leader then froze in place at the sound of Nora bursting into uncontrollable laughter. Cardin slowly turned his head and frowned at the sight of his peers all doing their best not to join the bombastic bubbly girl in her fit. "God dammit."

"Yeah we gotta work on that." Russel chuckled. "The whole anger thing isn't exactly doing us any good."

"Yeah, I know." Cardin's frown deepened. The CRDL Leader then began to sink behind DJ equipment, hiding in shame. "I'll just be here...if anyone needs me."

"Yeah. Okay." Russel reached over the setup and patted Cardin on the back.

Knowing when to leave his partner alone, Russel then set off to see if there was any more work to be done. And by the looks of things, they were pretty much done. The tables were all lined up. Party decorations were hanging from the ceiling. And the DJ equipment didn't seem to be acting up anytime soon.

Maybe no one would notice if Russel left early? The thought caused the young man to smile wickedly. With Dove already preoccupied lounging in the corner, he could whisk himself off back to the dorm and hog the television to himself. No more telenovelas, just good ol' fashion cartoons.

So Russel made his best Solid Snake impression and snuck his way over to the door. There were plenty of cardboard boxes laying around, no one would notice. Not to mention a number of the students were being rounded up by Ren, chief among them being Sky, who seemed to be working up the nerve to ask the JNPR ninja to the dance. By the looks of it, Ren and Nora were teaching them a dance of some sort.

Almost out the door, Russel could practically hear the familiar antics of one hellraising bunny and his duck companion. And he almost made it, if not for the sudden entrance of a familiar pair of transfer students, who's presence had attracted the attention of Team RWBY's leader Ruby.

"Oh! Mercury, Emerald!" Ruby waved to the pair of supposed Haven transfers as she skipped to the door. She then glanced over to Russel, seemingly knowing what the CRDL boy was up to and pointed at him menacingly. 'Get Back to Work', screamed Ruby's eyes in a demonic fashion.

Emerald put on the best warm smile she could muster. Mercury, on the other hand, just smirked and waved. Of the two, Mercury found it easiest to put on a façade. Quite ironic once the pair took into account Emerald's semblance. For all the illusions his green haired compatriot could manifest, Emerald could never lose herself into a role like him.

"I'm glad you guys could make it!" Ruby smiled.

"The promise of seeing festivities early? Getting a lay of the land was too good to pass up." Emerald said cheerfully, despite internally wishing to vomit. "Sorry if it's just me and Mercury. Our dear Cindy is suffering from a little... 'culture shock'."

"Oh, alright then." Ruby laughed awkwardly. "Well, I hope she's able to make it tomorrow."

"Don't worry, I think she'll find it in herself to grace us with her presence." Mercury said with a knowing tone. Ruby just stared at Mercury in confusion. The way he worded it sounded sinister in nature, but she digressed. And with a shrug, the little red riding hood threw a thumb over her shoulder at current state of the ballroom.

"Now while we're almost wrapped up here, feel free to have a look around and get to know
everyone." Ruby's smile grew wider. "What a better chance to make friends?"

"Oh yeah, totally. What a great idea." Emerald said in an agreeing tone. The moment Ruby's back was turned, as if to lead the pair of Haven transfers around, Emerald took the moment to express her discontent. She rolled her eyes and silently cursed. The more and more she'd associate with the likes of Ruby, the more and more she just wanted to violently gouge out her eyes.

But then, out of the corner of her eyes, she caught Russel's stare. Russel cracked an all knowing smirk and chuckled darkly. He gave nod to Ruby, his back was still turned to Emerald and Mercury, and gestured to the green haired girl. It was a silent threat, the kind Emerald understood.

"Play nice now." Russel muttered quietly as he observed Emerald awkwardly follow Ruby around the ballroom.

"You fall in love with my teammate or something?" Russel glanced to his side to find Mercury standing beside him with his hands crossed over his chest. "Mind if you quit staring?"

Not being the type to back down in these types of situations, Russel stood his ground. "Your teammate really needs to quit rolling her eyes. One day she might get caught in the act. Being two faced and what not." The young Thrush said with an underlying tone.

"You saw?" Mercury asked, easing up his stance slightly. He had to mentally remind himself of his mission here at Beacon. The less enemies they made the better. So, as the mohawk sporting boy had said to himself just moments ago, it was indeed time to play nice.

"Yup."

"Ha! Oh man, I can't wait to bring that up at the next team meeting." Mercury exclaimed, relishing in this knowledge. In their constant squabbles, he and Emerald never quite saw eye to eye. Cinder's lapdog would always try to stick it to him whenever she could. Always questioning his skills. Now, he had something he could pull out against her. "Thanks for the ammunition man."

"Got yourself a friendly team dynamic, I see." Russel chuckled lightly, easing up himself. That was a good sign, seeing the green haired Thrush laughing, lowering his guard. Mercury could very well do away with the boy before he could pose any real threat to them. But now it would seem a little odd if a student suddenly went missing. Too many people asking too many questions. Best to squash this fire before it can even start. "Out of curiosity, are you going to be running around mouthing to your friends about Emerald's little quirk? It's tough making friends already, you see."

"Team RWBY's no friends of mine."

"Then why're you helping them set up?" Mercury inquired. But then the silver haired young man realized how impolite that must've sounded, to simply barge into another man's affairs, wanting to know every detail. So the young assassin doubled back. "If you don't mind me asking?"

"Professional courtesy." Russel answered simply. While there were many other factors as to why he was present, namely to square a debt and also because Sky had encouraged them all to attend in his efforts to woo Ren. But there was also another reason why he'd shown up. A certain redhead was avoiding him and he would very much like to know why. But sadly, Pyrrha was nowhere to be found. "You've seen how Ruby operates. Don't ever borrow anything from her."

"Advice noted." Mercury unfolded an arm from his chest and extended it to Russel. "The name's Mercury."
Russel stared at the outstretched hand for a moment before conceding to introductions. He didn't see the harm in it. "Russel."

"Well, nice chatting with you, Russel." Mercury said with a wave goodbye. "I hope to make your acquaintance again."

"Be sure to reign in your friend there. If I noticed, you know very well others did too." Russel said, now seizing his opportunity to escape, now that Ruby was preoccupied with introducing her new best friend Emerald to the present student body. "Take care Mercury."

And with his present business concluded, Russel was off into the day. Next stop, cartoon marathon. And then after that, he might just swing back for an early dinner. Out the Ballroom and onto the campus lawn, the young Thrush walked against the afternoon sun, his shadow casting long and stretching far. And the entire way back he'd felt a searing gaze watching his every move.

He was only a couple feet away from the dorm's entrance when he finally caught those familiar green eyes watching him. He glanced up at the top of the building, and there looking over the edge of the roof was that Invincible Girl.

Without another word, Russel entered the dorm and caught the elevator up, reaching the top floor. He then took the stairs up to the roof, as for some reason the elevator didn't actually go that far. Russel pushed open the door and there she was. Pyrrha Nikos, the Invincible Girl who was quickly adding more titles to her name.

"Maybe you're more suited as, The Elusive Girl, eh?" He said in a particular joking manner. But Pyrrha wasn't laughing or engaging in their usual banter. And that bugged Russel. Something was off about the entire situation, not just how the redhead's acting at this moment in time, but how she's been acting over the entire week.

"Why've you been avoiding me?" Russel asked, quickly getting to the point.

"Why are you helping me?" Pyrrha asked seriously. Her emerald eyes withdrew from the ground and fell upon Russel, giving her a good look at the boy. "I never questioned it before, but it doesn't make too much sense. I asked you to help me with Jaune, you didn't ask for anything in return, you just said alright. What's you're angle Russel?"

"Straight to the point." Russel said a bit playfully, but without nurturing the edge of his words. "Why can't you do this with Jaune?"

"I asked you a question. And as a friend, I'd like to receive an answer." Pyrrha affirmed.

"So how'd this all come about anyway? Where'd all the doubt come from?"

"Answer my question, Russel. Please."

"Marie-Anne right? That girl can't ever let me alone." "You know when I first came here, I wanted it to be a fresh start. But then I turn around and that woman's right behind me. Eyes like daggers, that sort of thing. Fuck my luck."

"She told me about Burgundy and Ruddy." Pyrrha said, causing Russel to freeze. "So it is true."

He stood there for a moment, thinking about the words in his head. His thoughts briefly drifted back to the moment in his past days spent in Oakwood. Now would've been the best time for his vast quick wittedness. He'd pull out a couple of big words out of his vocabulary, talk circles around the girl standing in front of him and maybe get off scot-free.
Except the look in Pyrrha's eyes said differently. As long as he'd been studying her in the brief moments they've spent in each other's company, Russel had made the mistake of lowering his guard, letting her know him a little better. None of his tricks would work on her. So he just skipped right to the inevitable conclusion of things.

"Yeah. And I'd do it again." Russel said without a hint of regret.

"Is that what this was? Another Burgundy and Ruddy? You helping me was just another one of your sick twisted games?" Pyrrha asked sounding bitter about the whole idea. The last thing she wanted was her life to be someone else's game. Especially when seeing where the end goal would eventually lead her.

"Not exactly." Russel said, doing his best not to raise his voice. "My intention always was to help you Pyrrha. I've had to get into your head to figure you out. And I think I finally understand you. Do you believe in destiny Pyrrha?"

"W-What?"

"The Invincible Girl, Pyrrha Nikos. Four time Mistral Champion. You don't bust a sweat. Even against the impossible odds such as you versus my team. It's all child's play to you." Russel raised up his hands into the air, celebrating Pyrrha's achievements in a mocking tone. "And yet you can't just walk up to Jaune and ask him if he'd like to go to the dance together."

"What are you getting at, Russel?" Pyrrha demanded, completely fed up with Russel's tone.

"I'm saying, you can't make decision for yourself." Russel said, unyielding. He probably should've handled that delivery better. But damn it he was angry. "Why do you think Jaune's your team leader? It shit sure ain't because he's the best fighter. You outclass everyone at Beacon in skill and tactics. But at the end of the day, you can't make a call. Because you're too god damn uncertain about everything."

"Tell me, did you come to Beacon because you wanted to? Or because someone told you to?" He asked, looking back to find a particularly hurt expression on Pyrrha's face. She was at a loss for words.

There would be no heated exchange between the two of them. The conversation was already over and Russel hadn't even noticed. "God dammit." He murmured, mentally kicking himself.

"I think you should go, Russel." Pyrrha said, looking away from the young man with green hair.

Russel complied and began to head to the door. But not before leaving with the final word. Something that he believed Pyrrha desperately needed to hear. "We forge our own paths Pyrrha. Destiny's got nothing to fuckin' do with it." Russel said bitterly before walking off back down to his dorm room.

Left alone with only the fresh air to keep her company, Pyrrha's thought's drifted to Russel's words. Perhaps there was some truth to what he had to say. But then again, maybe it was all just another deceit, all apart of whatever game he was playing. And so, it was on that day the Invincible Girl recognized through Russel's words her only true weakness.

Her own uncertainty.

In regards to Pyrrha, I was never satisfied by her own inability to pursue Jaune when she clearly held feelings for him. She's Pyrrha Nikos, gosh darn it. So I thought back to the whole
Destiny thing she had going on. Which got kind of meta when at RTX the RWBY team revealed they’d always planned to kill her.

But Pyrrha always lacked agency. She reacted and never actively pursued anything. And so I thought maybe adding another layer to that whole Destiny theme, straight out of 'Beowulf' there's this idea of predestined fate. And how Beowulf and the King Hrothgar, whenever they’d give a speech, as heroes do, they never championed the idea of succeeding. They just declared that it was in the hands of god now and that they’d just go out and give a hundred percent.

So I thought maybe Pyrrha operated similarly. Even if she didn't know it. I liked the idea enough because it also opens up a lot of unanswered questions about Pyrrha, like her family and her life before Beacon. Does she even want to be a Huntsman?

You can write a paper about that kind of stuff. And I love it. Next update will be at the most next week. I'm finishing up some long running projects of mine elsewhere here on FF. 'Til next time faithful readers! Later days!
Welcome one and all to another installment of 'The Darkling Thrush'!

And before we get started. I'd like to point out the story's rating has officially changed to 'M'. We're going to some dark places, touching on some dark subject matter that I won't directly name because I can't bring myself to actually write it. But its there, it's hinted at. And of course, because I just had to have Russel use every naughty word in the dictionary.

This chapter went through 3 rewrites. Ugh.

Anyways, more on that later. On with the chapter!

XIX
The Dance: Part 4

Music, lights, non-alcoholic beverages and armed Atlesian Guards. So this was how they threw a bash in Vale. Sitting off to the side by his lonesome, with only a plastic cup of punch to keep himself company, sat Russel as he tapped a foot along with the music.

Everybody in the whole school was there. The boys were all decked out suits and the girls in dresses. Of course there was that occasional outlier. A girl walked in wearing a suit and sneakers. A boy danced in a vibrant blouse, the kind that screamed tradition. But that was alright in Russel's eyes.

It wasn't a surprise at all when they were the first to hit the dance floor. But that's how it always went. The dance needed some people willing to break the awkward tension the hung in the air. The carefree and ecstatic are what gets a dance moving. You put someone like Russel on the dance floor and he'll just stare you to death. Russel was more the type who sat to the side and watched, as he was doing now.

He wasn't alone though. To his surprise, Russel could see Weiss, the Schnee heiress herself on the other end of the room sitting quietly. Russel didn't keep his ear out to the goings on of the social side of school, but he'd heard whispers of some blue haired exchange student who'd caught Weiss' eye. If underage gambling was legal, Russel would've put money on the two going together. But then he'd be out twenty lien.

On the other side of the room as well stood the socially awkward duo of Jaune Arc and Ruby Rose. The blonde doofus and the fifteen year old had a toast to themselves as they stood on the sidelines. Russel could only frown at the sight. Seeing Jaune there dateless meant Pyrrha hadn't found the nerve to pursue the boy. Not even in a last ditch effort to prove him wrong.

Blake seemed to be enjoying her time with some guy with a monkey tail. Russel scoffed at the sight. At least she was having a good time. The thought of revenge had crossed Russel's mind once or twice. Seeing Blake enjoy herself was almost enough to get the young Thrush out of his seat and work his magic. An eye for an eye, right? That's how the saying goes. What's one more ruined dance?

But then Russel relented. He would not be running around causing mischief tonight. Well not yet
anyways. Rumor had it some fellows had managed to sneak a keg onto campus. In a little while Russel would head out behind the dorm and join the real party. Then when he had a nice buzz he'd see if he wanted to get into a little trouble.

Russel returned to his looking around, watching the goings on at the dance. He didn't have Marie-Anne's semblance powered eyes, he couldn't make out every little detail, but he could see enough from where he was sitting. He could spot Yang dancing with a large group of friends, Nora and Ren were standing by the punch bowl talking, about what was anyone's guess. Dove may be the oddest of them all, but that lip reading skill seemed most appropriate for this sort of thing.

Speaking of his hapless teammate, in the end of it all, the members of Team CRDL had all arrived alone. While Russel had intended to go stag, the others had other plans. Dove had failed miserably in asking any girl. Now he could be seen dancing by himself in the center of the dance floor. It was a sad sight. Though he was at the center of it all, Dove was as isolated as Russel. He danced alone beside, not with anyone in particular.

A glance back over at the punch bowl, Russel could see Sky attempting to strike up a conversation with Ren. Sky had tried numerous times to lock down that Ren character. Russel hadn't heard all the details, but it seemed Ren was as clueless as Jaune. He'd interpreted Sky's attempts to ask him to the dance as an extended hand of goodwill, a burying of hatchets sort of thing.

Russel searched through the crowd, but couldn't find Cardin amongst the student body. That bothered the young Thrush. Cardin was his partner, his leader within the team dynamic, but between the two they were partners, equals even. Shouldn't they be able to confide in one another? Russel just shrugged off the notion. Confiding and trust was something friends did, maybe they just weren't friends.

Cardin was entitled to his privacy, just as they all were. Russel respected that enough not to pry any more than he already did. It was jarring in a way, they're supposed to trust one another with the other's life when it came down to it. But the truth of the matter was none of them had done anything particular to earn the other's trust. If one were to recall, Russel and the others had abandoned Cardin to face an Ursa all on his own.

So Russel resigned not to worry about Cardin's affairs. Not now anyways. The dance was just a formal party with their teachers supervising. The last thing Russel wanted to be was another authority figure looming over their shoulders. A contradicting statement if taken into account that he'd been doing so all night long. Along the walls he watched like any Atlesain soldier or professor, just without the authority.

Russel's eyes wandered through the crowds of students embracing the merriment of things. It was a joyous time after all, eighty years of peace was a devil to maintain. Take pride in the fact no one's fucked up yet. That's all you can do, really. Amongst those crowds, Russel could swear he'd caught sight of a familiar red headed girl. But then when he'd look back again, having to do a double take, he'd find nothing, just the sea of students.

The music began to pick up and the hour was drawing near for Russel to pick himself up and move and see if there was any truth to those keg rumors, but then out of the blue a familiar face pulled up a chair and took a seat beside him. So Russel glanced to his side and found Mercury taking a seat beside him.

"Hey Russel." Mercury greeted with a wave. Russel returned the gesture, raising his hand slightly. "Couldn't help but notice you aren't out there dancing."

"What can I say? Dances really aren't my thing." Russel muttered as the current song ended and a
dubstep rendition of 'Flaws' by Bastille played in the background. A frown found its way onto Russel's face. He was a farmboy after all. Give him pianos, trumpets and guitars any day. Dubstep to Russel sounded something akin to the tractor engine acting up.

"So, would you mind breaking it down for someone who's never been to a dance in Vale?" Mercury waved a hand at the many Beacon students dancing before them. "Is everything up to standard? Or should I be appalled?"

"The music's decent enough." Russel merely shrugged. "If anything it's a better set up than my old combat school had. Of course we had a live band, we didn't have too much high tech sound equipment to play with. But how about your perspective on things? Does this little dance meet your Haven standards?"

Mercury just laughed at the question. "I never attended a dance a Haven." He said truthfully. "Visiting and all ahead of the tournament, me and my team just missed out. But yeah, the music's not that bad. Can't sat too much about the decorations though."

"Too bland? Or not bland enough?" Russel jotted a thumb over to the pair of Atlesian guards standing guard around an orange haired girl in a simple plain dress who danced by herself. "I personally think the armed soldiers bring the whole room together."

"Ha!" Mercury slapped his knee and let out a genuine laugh. "Yeah. When you put it that way, I do detect a little Atlesian influence, yeah. Too proper."

"I've never been into this synthesized crap." Russel pointed a finger into the air and gestured at the music laying over them. "Just isn't real, you know?"

"I can see your point." Mercury nodded. "But isn't that what makes music so unique? It doesn't have to be the same. All those cords, all those melodies and angelic tones."

"You some sort of musician?" Russel spared a glance away from Mercury, having caught sight of Pyrrha's eye popping red hair whisking itself off away from view once more.

"No. My dad was firm believer in varying talents. He'd drill me every day into accomplishing a new skill." Mercury said once more truthfully. He threw in a fond tone, as if he'd missed those days of his childhood, all for show of course. Russel had proven to be more perceptive than most. It was better in the long run to speak the truth rather than get caught in a lie later on.

"Picking up a bunch of skills doesn't sound too bad. Must come in handy."

"Oh yeah, I'll subdue a Deathstalker with music. Surely that will tame the beast." Mercury said, causing the pair to burst out laughing.

"Mercury, there you are!" Russel and Mercury both looked to the left, finding a familiar green haired gal walking towards their direction. Internally, the green haired woman wanted to grab that silver haired idiot and strangle him. They were on the clock, there was no time to sit around and socialize. Ironic given the current setting. The pair had a job to do, one that would be best done on the dance floor and not on the sidelines.

"I need a dance partner." She said while sparing a glance at Russel. Back in the privacy of their dorm, Mercury could never shut up about how that guy was always catching her when she had to vent her pent up frustration. Russel didn't know it, but he'd made the list on Emerald's to kill list.

"Nice chatting with you, Russel." Mercury said kindly before standing up from his seat and meeting Emerald halfway. "Duty calls."
Russel waved bye and just watched them go. Mercury seemed nice enough, he could carry a conversation well enough, the young Thrush thought to himself. But then there was Emerald, who he presumed was Mercury's partner. Russel hadn't had the pleasure of meeting the rest of their team, but Emerald was enough to paint a good enough picture.

While the likes of Ruby wasted their time buying into Emerald's nice girl act, Russel had been privy to her true nature. She could play nice, sure, but she couldn't do so for long. That leave a vote of confidence for Mercury. Russel didn't know too many people from Mistral. Pyrrha was honest and kind. Emerald was a liar. Somewhere in between those two extremes was Mercury. The mystery was whether he leaned more towards his partner, which seemed more than likely as Russel watched them walk away.

Again, Russel found himself in need of Dove's special abilities. Whatever they were saying to one another was between them and no one else. There needn't be false faces among kindred spirits.

"The hell are you doing spending time with that guy?" Emerald asked as she and Mercury hit the dance floor.

"Damage control." Mercury said simply. "You keep slipping up and eventually that guy might put two and two together that we're not who we say we are."

"I'm going to kill him."

"Later." Mercury reassured his comrade, placing a hand on her shoulder and gestured around. "But now, we dance."

Having been sitting for quite some time, Russel decided to get up and stretch his legs. While he wouldn't partake in dancing, he'd like to see what else there was to be offered. Perhaps he'd snatch up some sort of cake or other goods. There was no harm in an after dinner snack. So Russel circled around the ballroom rather than cut through the middle. It would've taken less time no doubt, but it saved him the trouble of navigating through the numerous students engaging in the celebration.

Russel reached the punch table on a hunch but found only plastic cups and students loitering around. Deciding he'd try his luck somewhere else, Russel decided to move on. But out of the corner of his eye he caught sight of Pyrrha once more.

The young Thrush stood still taking in her visage. She didn't wear one of those school provided dresses most others wore. She wore a matching red dress and heels. If compared to her normal outfit, you'd find that of the two her dress was the more conservative. But it wasn't the Invincible Girl's stunning beauty the caught Russel's eye, but it was the look of sadness on her face.

The Team CRDL boy followed Pyrrha's gaze across the room. Some blue haired boy with honest intent was dragging Jaune across the dance floor over to Weiss' side. The blue haired boy with his flashy smile instantly caught Weiss' attention. And for the first time in the night, Russel didn't ask for Dove's rather odd skill of lip reading. He didn't need to know what they were saying.

The blue haired Mistral native patted Jaune on the back and departed, leaving them alone. Jaune reached a hand out to Weiss for her to take. There was a hesitant look on Weiss' face as she stared at the hand, debating whether or not she would accept Jaune's offer. The party planner who'd sat on the sidelines was finally offered the chance to take center stage amongst the rest of them on the dance floor. It was too good an offer to refuse.

So Russel looked away from the pair of Jaune and Weiss, looking back to Pyrrha. There was a knowing look of devastation in her eyes, one that Russel had seen before. Yesterday when they'd
last spoke, he'd seen it last. And now he saw it again. Normal men and women, whose hearts shatter would break into tears. But not the Invincible Girl. So Pyrrha departed, no longer wishing to watch. There was a part of Russel who wanted to catch up to her. But that was a job for a friend. That was something Russel wasn't, her friend.

Russel departed the ballroom soon after. He'd kept track of the time and his surroundings. As the hour drew closer to midnight, more and more faculty began to arrive. There wasn't any rhyme or reason to it, Russel supposed. Maybe it had something to do with what was going on in Beacon Tower, where a dark haired woman busied herself with implanting a deadly virus for a later day.

But Russel had no knowledge of such things, so he kept on walking out of the ballroom and into the open campus. His destination was clear, back to the dorms, or rather, behind the dorms. He glanced to his sides, catching sight of some other students leaving the dance too. When Russel reached the back of the dorms, he found the real party in full swing.

A keg sat in the corner with a good twenty students huddled around a fire. They all had plastic cups in hand and laughing like maniacs. There was no telling how long they'd all been at it. Their close proximity to the fire concealed any reddish features, hiding them with the glowing glare of the fire that bounced off their skin. Upon closer inspection of the gathered students, Russel couldn't help but act surprised at who was present.

All of Team DNCE was present. Marie-Anne was doing her best not to give him the stink eye, but she must've had a couple of cups already, her movements were sluggish and the impulse appeared to be too great. Beside her sad her Team Leader Danny, apparently inspecting his drink, as if he'd just received it. Nero had a pair of empty cup by his feet and a third in his hand, one that he happily chugged. And the tubby Ezekiel busied himself in conversation with his teammates, talking mostly and not caring if they paid him any attention.

After Team DNCE, there some others students Russel had seen around campus. A couple of Team STAG members, not their leader, just some of the others Russel never bothered to remember their names. They joined in the merriment and bliss provided by drink. There were a couple of second year students.

What was a rather big surprise to Russel was the sight of Pyrrha standing beside the nearby keg, getting a cup for herself. Now Russel didn't blame her, in fact he pitied her. And then, not too far off from everyone sat Cardin, a cup in hand and his scroll in the other. So this was where his partner had been spending his time.

The young Thrush began to close the distance between himself and Cardin, thinking maybe he'd break the guy's concentration on whatever he was doing. But it didn't take a genius to figure out he was bombarding Velvet with a multitude of messages. Whether or not she responded was beyond him, but there was a certain lack of professionalism with the deed. Cardin was essentially interfering with an active mission. Anyone with authority would've deemed the act as treacherous and deliberate sabotage.

"What the hell are you doing here, Russel?" A forcibly gruff voice called out to Russel. The Team CRDL member sighed, recognizing the voice. Slowly Russel turned around, not at all looking forward to another inevitable bout.

Russel had never met more of a tool in his life until he met Lance Grimsby. He was tall, dark, had short hair and a permanent crease along the edges of his mouth. Needless to say he liked smiling. They had most of the same classes together, but overall, they'd never actually talked to one another, except for that one time last semester, but that hardly constituted for a conversation. More like a civil disagreement that turned uncivil.
Lance wasn't too difficult to figure out. Compared to Pyrrha's poor warped head, Lance had his personality written on his forehead in glow in the dark ink so you couldn't ignore it. A hero complex and an ego to boot, it certainly made him the most straightforward of their year. Russel recalled their first interaction, how Lance had marched up to him on the stairwell and demanded he change his ways, something about having witnessed the way Russel and the rest of Team CRDL treating Velvet poorly.

One thing led to another, Lance invaded Russel's personal space. Russel, not liking that, threw a punch and sent Lance tumbling down some stairs. Russel gets called up to Ozpin's office and next thing he knows he's waking up in Team RWBY's dorm strapped to a chair and getting the crap kicked out of him. What terrible day that was.

"I asked you a question, Russel." Lance pointed a finger at Russel in an accusing manner. Russel couldn't help but notice the slight slur in the boy's speech as well as the half empty plastic cup in his free hand.

Give his aggressive tone, it was a safe bet to assume Lance hadn't gotten over that whole pushing him down some stairs ordeal. Now it wouldn't have been much of a problem to get into a shouting match with Lance. Russel had that down in spades. Years and years of dealing with a drunk for a Father had taught him much. But usually all such incidents ended with a fist fight of some sort. That was something Russel had no problem not reliving.

So Russel's only option was to simply defuse the situation. But sadly, Russel wasn't exactly as adept with stopping a fight as he was starting one. "Heard there'd be some refreshments served behind the dorms. Thought I might come around and see if there was any truth to the rumors. And given the fact you reek of alcohol, I guess there is some truth after all." He said with a smile.

"You jackass!" Lance shouted, quickly causing everyone around to stop what they were doing and look on with curiosity. "You threw me down the stairwell! And now you think you can waltz in here and drink from my keg? You can just go straight to hell!"

"You brought the keg?" Russel asked in genuine surprise. Maybe he'd figured Lance all wrong. Bringing a keg on school property wasn't exactly the sort of thing a wishy washy hero type like him to do. "That's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard!" Russel broke out laughing. "You? You, a poor man's Jaune Arc, decided to break school rules by bringing alcohol on campus and serve it to minors even. Monty, I'd expect this from someone like me. But you, I don't believe it."

"Unless you aren't the man I pegged you out to be." Russel smirked as he fell back into old habits. He then glanced around, taking into account of everyone present. It then dawned on Russel as he started counting those present that number of female students outweighed the number of male students. And that was even counting the students who were funneling in.

Russel thought back to their first interaction with each other. Lance had confronted him not because of his overly liberal use of negative comments, but in fact he'd confronted him over Velvet. And then Russel's smile faded. His mocking features shifted into one that conveyed the disgust he felt. "You ain't a good man, Lance. I see it now."

"Turn out your pockets." Russel held his stare, meeting Lance's glare. "Turn 'em out now."

"I don't have to do anything you tell me to do." Lance grunted. All fell silent, waiting to see what happened next.

"Right." Russel nodded. "You're going to be a difficult one. Alright." Without warning, Russel darted forward, reaching a hand out and quickly jamming his hand into Lance's pocket. Caught off
guard by the act, Lance dropped his drink, pouring its contents all over Russel. But Russel just brushed it off, after all such a thing wasn't new to him. He'd throw his get up in the laundry and take a shower later, problem solved. The issue at hand took precedence. When Russel withdrew his hand, he opened his palm to reveal a condom wrapper.

Russel held it up for everyone to see and then tossed it over his shoulder, having it land in Cardin's lap. "You're a scumbag you know that?"

Those in attendance just stared at Lance in alarm. The implication was clear as day. Lance tripped over his words in a vain attempt to defend himself from the oncoming fury of his peers. But before the first student could let out a shout in anger, Marie-Anne spoke up.

"Drop dead Russel!" Marie-Anne shouted drunkenly. "We both know you fucking planted that on Lance! This is just another one of you messed up attempts at satisfying your sick need for drama." Marie-Anne stood up and quickly addressed the rest of the students present. She pointed a finger at Russel and recanted the tale of an Oakwood Academy Prom, where she and many others had tried to get a couple like Burgundy and Ruddy back together. Only for Russel to come along as he did now and ruin everything.

"He planted it on me!" Lance shouted, having used the Marie-Anne's hijacking of the situation to come up with the most plausible explanation his buzzed mind could think of. "Get him!"

"Wait what?" Russel asked in alarm before getting cocked in the back of the head. He fell forward and landed on his hands. He attempted to get back up on his feet, only for a heel to come bashing against his cheek.

"Whoa, guys what're you doing?!" Cardin responded sluggishly. He tossed the condom wrapper into his back pocket and quickly ran to his partner's aid.

"Stay out this you racist pig." One of the Team STAG members shouted before turning and punching Cardin across the jaw, knocking him onto the floor also. "We haven't forgotten what you did to Velvet."

Cardin watched helplessly as the likes of Lance and Marie-Anne, along with every radicalized student picked Russel up and carried him away. "God dammit." Cardin muttered to himself before getting back up onto his feet and going back in search of his cup. If he was going to go and save his partner the last thing he wanted to do was do it sober. The alcohol would dull his pain as he valiantly rescued his teammate.

So then Cardin made his way over to the keg for a refill. One was intended to be one drink soon turned into two, and then three. As time passed he'd forgotten all about Russel and his plight. His vision blurred and everything a haze, Cardin stumbled his way back to his scroll. And then after that, everything went dark. The last thing he heard before losing consciousness was an adorable girlish snort and fumbling for his room key.

The angry mob then marched all the way out to the front of the school, practically crying for Russel's head. The young Thrush began to stir awake and soon found himself reacquainted with the ground. In front of Beacon Tower as well as in front of the ballroom, there stood the fifty foot flagpole the national Vale flag flapped against the wind.

Over the course of their trek there had been much discussion about what to do about Russel. And then they'd all finally settled for their current action. Before Russel knew it, he was hung upside down to the flagpole in nothing but his boxers. He'd been stripped and his clothes repurposed into makeshift bindings.
Russel just glared as he watched the angry mob depart. They were patting themselves on the back, a night's job well done. They'd gotten the bad guy now time to celebrate. That just left Russel with the task of escaping before anyone could actually see him in his indecency. But then again, maybe that was what he needed, a friendly passerby he could reach out to, a righteous soul who could find it in themselves to help him out.

"Oi! A little help here?" Russel shouted, calling out to some dark haired woman, dressed in a dark dress with dust stitched to it. The woman simply brushed off Russel's cries for help and made her way into the ballroom. Russel glared at the woman as she, like so many others left him to hang. Seeing as no one would come to his aid, Russel let out a defeated sigh and quickly set out on the arduous task of cutting himself free with his own finger nails. "Everybody's a fuckin' cunt."

So...yeah. That happened.

I remember saying I was debating turning this story into an AU. Which it technically was but now officially is. In the end Neptune got Jaune and Wiess to dance together, indirectly reaffirming Pyrrha's uncertainty.

The Russel I've spent time developing is a character who's brain is his only true weapon. This is the most overt usage of his analytical skills to date. Especially with the Lance thing which might be a bit of a stretch, but that was always something I intended for that character. Just out of the blue, some jackass to root against. Enough said.

Expect to see more of Mercury when we get to Arc 8-10. For obvious reasons. Vytaal reasons.

Next time we'll get the conclusion to this arc, and there'll be some answers in regards to a certain incident in Oakwood. Anyways, It's late. Good night everyone! See you next time!
The Dance: Conclusion

I'm going to be real honest. I'm actually afraid of what you're all going to think about this chapter. The whole point of this arc was leading up to this chapter. This went through a couple rewrites because I wanted it just right. I think I'm going to piss some of you off right now.

Apologies in advance.

The sun slowly crept up over the sky, bathing the land in its life giving light. Usual Monday mornings at Beacon would see students running around, all making their rounds before winding up at the dining hall for breakfast. But classes have since been cancelled in favor for the missions the students were to partake in. For an entire month, no class, no stress, no worry. All leading up to the Vytal Festival.

So the students who hadn't been assigned a mission this week had partied all through the night not a care in the world. But those students who did have missions, well, it sucked to be them.

Pyrrha Nikos, the Invincible Girl, began to stir from her slumber. Her eyes were dull and her head ached. She'd never before tried alcohol, last night being a first. She'd only heard of hangovers in passing and often in reference to that trilogy of comedies. Never before had she imagined such a pain in her life.

So the Mistral champion jumped out of bed, intending to rummage through her team's communal cabinet as they called it. It was in reality just a drawer where Ren stashed medical supplies and herbs. Pyrrha cautiously began to tip toe through the dorm room as not to suddenly wake her teammates, but with a simple weary glance to the other beds, Pyrrha found them all empty.

Along the way, Pyrrha noticed her state of dress. She was still wearing her dress from last night. Pyrrha began to put the pieces of last night back together. After watching Weiss and Jaune take the dance floor together, she'd decided to follow up on the rumors that some kid had snuck a keg onto campus. She'd been given a drink and then after that it suddenly got a lot hazier. Pyrrha tried to recall other events, there was apparently something that had happened, something involving Russel.

The thought of the young Thrush made Pyrrha frown. She'd actually thought there was something more to the boy. More than the bully he'd been made out to be. But that had proven false.

Pyrrha reached the school provided nightstand and pulled it open, half expecting to find numerous over the counter medications and strange leafy greens Ren claimed to be for colds. But instead, Pyrrha found dozens of neatly folded socks stacked atop one another.

The Mistral native's frown deepened, after all, she'd been seeking a way to stop this god awful pounding in her head. Instead, she'd found Ren's sock collection. But the thing was, Pyrrha slowly began to realize, Ren didn't wear socks. The JNPR ninja's choice of footwear didn't require such things, so he didn't own any.
Pyrrha then assumed they belonged to Nora, who'd often made use of Ren's belongings. But then Pyrrha recalled how Nora's socks complimented her usual attire, the tip of every sock was pink or orange, as were the soles. But these were dull muted gray. And then Pyrrha began to assume they were Jaune's. That lovable goof who just wanted to be stronger person, a trait that she admired greatly. But even then he had his quirks, such as reading his comic books instead of studying, cleaning up in an odd fashion, and more famously unintentionally breaking her heart.

Pyrrha shook her head, cast such harsh thoughts from her mind. As some dark resentful part of herself noted, Jaune hurt her unintentionally. He was clueless to what she felt and innocent in his actions. At least that's what she told herself.

That pounding sensation in her head was taking its toll on the Mistral champ more than she expected. So she began to dig past the leg wear, assuming what she was looking for was somewhere beneath.

And then she finally heard the snoring. Pyrrha slowly turned around, back to the bed she'd climbed off of. She cautiously approached and on the floor on the other side of the bed was Cardin Winchester, as naked as the day he was born. Pyrrha instantly paled.

A horrified expression manifested on her face as if the mere sight of Cardin was the key to unlocking her drunken memories. Never before had Pyrrha wanted to vomit in disgust and shame than she did right now. In fact, she did.

Pyrrha heaved all over the floor of Team CRDL's dorm. She felt like her brain was running on nightmare fuel. Whatever pain she felt was completely overridden by the horror she now felt. She wiped the vomit that clung to the edges of her mouth with a hand and stood back up. There were many more thoughts that run through the Invincible Girl's head, such as her recent action of puking all over the floor. Aside from her general disgust with not only herself and Cardin, there were the other implications as well. Wasn't that morning sickness?

Her face paled even more, resembling that of a ghost. But even in her panic Pyrrha managed to keep a level head. She delved through the scattered images from last night in her head, and in spite of the cringey details of a drunken flirtation, she managed to push on and recall the use of a condom.

She cast another look of disbelief Cardin's way before resolving to leave. She gathered what belongings she could find and quickly made her way for the door. It was still early in the morning and there shouldn't be too much activity on their floor, after all, only a few first year students had missions. That was something Pyrrha had to remind herself that like many others, such as RWBY and CRDL, she and her team had missions today.

And then Pyrrha found herself struck by terror as she crept through the silent hallway back to her dorm room. Her team had a mission, their first, they would most certainly be up. With that realization, Pyrrha then slunk off past her room, heading to the rooftop. Maybe she could wait it all out there. She could look over the roof and wait to see her team leave the building then make her way back inside rather than face them.

Reasoning this to be the best possible choice available between being faced with the odd question of where she was last night and why she was still in her dress, Pyrrha headed up to roof. She pushed open the stairwell door and ascended upward. She opened the door to the roof and took in the morning air.

She thought of just sitting by the door just in case Jaune came looking for her. Barricade the door, that would most certainly work, Pyrrha thought sarcastically. But when she stepped onto the roof,
Pyrrha found she wasn't alone. Standing there against the sun, overlooking the campus stood a figure hidden by sunlight.

"Sorry, am I intruding?" Pyrrha couldn't help but ask. Even with all the mind numbing thoughts that burdened her, she was still Pyrrha. The Invincible Girl who said 'sorry' maybe a little too often.

As her eyes adjusted to the morning light, Pyrrha could identify the boy who stood on the roof with her. She raised a hand, about to ask why he was here of all places. But then he held out a hand, silently asking for her to hold off her questions.

The figure bathed in sunlight then dug into his pants. He then pulled out his scroll and held it up for Pyrrha to see. Without another word, the figure tapped the scroll's screen activating the pre-established prompt. Then far off by beacon tower, nearby the ballroom, a remote control lighter switched on and lit the fuses on three fireworks. The morning air was then filled with obnoxious explosions, which surely would've woken anyone not already awake and cause them to come running.

"What was that for?" Pyrrha questioned. The figure simply turned his back to Pyrrha, looking over the edge of the roof once more. As he expected, the figure could see faculty and students alike all scrambling to find out the cause of the explosion. Right where he wanted them to be.

Back in the CRDL dorm room, the burnt orange haired leader began to wake. The audible sound, a trio of loud booms was enough to shake the windows. Cardin began to gather his bearings, picking himself off the floor. The Winchester boy had to hold his hands against his head, it felt like Nora had finally made good on her threats and taken revenge on his head. Despite the pounding in his head, the leader of Team CRDL found it in himself to jump out of bed.

Cardin thought for a minute. He took into account his state of dress, the lipstick on his pillow and among other things that he fund on the floor, he began to piece together what happened last night. After a night drinking he'd wound up in bed with arguably the hottest woman at Beacon. And while any other guy would probably kill for something like that, it didn't sit well with Cardin.

The Winchester boy let out a pained sigh. He didn't want that at all. He cast a look over at his scroll. One of the last things he remembered was messaging Velvet and getting into a rather livid discussion about the current goings on at the dance. She mentioned how she wished she and her team could've been there. And then he wished she was there too. But then after that the conversation had seemingly ended. He dwelled on that for a while. Got mad then sad, he started questioning if he should've messaged her back. He didn't want to ruin whatever friendship they had going on. But before that, his scroll's battery ran out.

After that Cardin recalled him following up on rumors about a keg. In need of a drink to calm his nerves, Cardin soon found himself beyond only one. And then after that, what happened? And then Russel walked in and handed him a condom while yelling at Lance…

"Oh shit!" Cardin exclaimed after recalling his last clear memory, which was of Russel getting carted off by an angry mob. "Russel!"

He quickly grabbed his pants off the floor, left scattered with the rest of his suit. In doing so, Cardin took notice of how the room was in need of a good cleaning later. A used condom resting beside the trash can, having been lazily chucked over there after use. And there was also an alarming amount of vomit on the floor. Something Cardin could only assume was the work of either himself or his partner from last night.
One of these days both he and Pyrrha were going to have to sit down and talk about last night. But hopefully not today. Maybe, if Cardin was lucky, they would both just pretend like it never happened. But Cardin wasn't lucky at all, especially here at Beacon.

But the CRDL leader was forced to push aside such thoughts. After all, as he knew it to be, the last he'd seen of his partner Russel was him getting carted off by an angry mob or something. So then Cardin set on to get dressed, intending to look for Russel.

"Hey everyone! There's some naked guy tied up to the school's flagpole!" Some voice came roaring down the hallway outside.

With that news spreading, Cardin got dressed quicker. He was out the door before he knew it, barely grabbing his room key on the way out. Down the dormitory hall Cardin ran as best anyone with a hangover could. Was it possible for an aura to remedy such a thing like headaches? Cardin wondered as he reached the dorm's elevator. There was no telling, after all he'd and the rest of the academy's populace were drilled in the ways of killing Grimm, not dealing with the after effects of a night drinking.

But now was as best a time as ever to try. Cardin waited patiently for the elevator to arrive after hitting the call button. As soon as he reached the bottom he'd be running like a maniac to save Russel from an embarrassing fate. In hind sight, he should've brought an extra pair of clothes. As the thought entered Cardin's mind, the elevator doors opened, revealing a large number of students all waiting patiently inside.

"You going to see the poor naked sap tied to the flagpole too?" Willa, the leader of Team WILL asked Cardin before gesturing for him to step inside as she and the others made room.

Cardin silently stepped inside the elevator, not saying a word. Though the other occupants saw no change in the Winchester boy, the confined space forced them all to

"Alright, who got lucky last night?" Serin Quiet, the leader of the all Faunus Team STAG asked playfully.

And just like that, this became the longest elevator ride of Cardin's life. The elevator slowly descended, picking up students along the way until they couldn't fit anymore. Serin continued the witch hunt of sorts, questioning those who occupied the same space as her. Cardin's outward composure began to breakdown as he began to sweat bullets.

"Claustrophobic." Cardin muttered once asked about his state of being. The elevator doors soon opened, allowing Cardin to burst out running.

"Why's he running?" Willa asked as she and the rest of the occupants exited the elevator in a calm and timely manner.

"A bully like him?" Serin laughed in a sardonic fashion. "He probably just wants to get in on the mocking while its good. Too bad he's in for the shock of his life."

"Why's that?" The magenta haired Willa asked, her curiosity piqued by Serin's mysterious choice of words.

"We strung up his partner Russel last night." Serin laughed. "This is it, the fall of Team CRDL's bullshit Willa. It begins now. Nobody will ever take them serious again after this."

"Jeez Serin." Willa said, sounding slightly appalled by the vicious nature of her fellow Team Leader's words. "Dial it down a notch would you? What did they ever do to you?"
"I don't take kind to those who harm my kind." Serin stated firmly, casting an angered glance at Willa before walking on without her.

Cardin ran through campus barefoot. For the most part his body was on auto pilot while his mind dealt with the application of aura around his head. As it turned out, you could use aura to combat a hangover, what fun. The CRDL leader then found himself amongst an amassing mob of fellow students and faculty who'd only just arrived as well.

And at the heart of it all was the flagpole where the flag of Vale flapped freely in the wind. Knowing Russel was at the heart of it all as well, Cardin fought his way to the center to rescue his partner. He might not have been able to save him from the eyes of his peers, but maybe Cardin could get him out before more students arrived, or at the very least before they all whipped out their scrolls.

Thankfully they were still gawking like idiots. Cardin used this to his advantage and pushed on through the crowd. He'd ask politely, but if they didn't move, then he'd get to shoving. He'd activate that tank-like semblance of his, the one that gave him immeasurable strength and pick them off the ground before setting them aside and pressing on. Cardin reached the center, finally breaking through and aimed to rush to Russel's aid.

But instead of Russel, Cardin found Lance Grimsby tied to the flagpole.

"Wait what?" Cardin couldn't help but ask aloud.

"Come on guys you've had your laughs not help me down!" Lance shouted angrily as he continued to struggle. He was tied to the flagpole upside down, his shame on display for the whole world to see. "Get me down!" Lance snarled as he continued to struggle out of his bindings, which seemed to be his own clothes. Lance's struggling, however, had the unfortunate effect of causing his only free appendage to dance around.

The graphicness of it all too appalling for even Cardin, caused the CRDL leader to cover his eyes and throw up a nights worth of drinking onto the lawn surrounding the base of the flagpole. What an awful turn of events.

Back on the roof of the dormitory, Russel stood overlooking it all. There was a pleased look on his face. Everything was seemingly going off without a hitch. He then looked over his shoulder, seeing Pyrrha who had waited long enough for an explanation. "Bear with me now. I've got this obnoxious headache throwin' this all together." He said, gesturing to his forehead.

"Mob mentality took over when the drunks thought they could get at me. The left me in nothing but my boxers, tied upside down to a flagpole." Russel recalled last night's events. "Chief among them, Lance Grimsby, golden boy by day, scumbag by night."

"For the last month he's been desperately been trying to get laid. Maybe if he was some sort of hero he'd get the damsel, like Velvet for example. Standing up to one of her bullies would've no doubt gotten her attention." Russel rolled his eyes at Lance's logic while Pyrrha simply stood in place, listening attentively to Russel's story. "But that wasn't the case. So the guy decided to bring a keg on campus and see if he might get lucky. Get a girl while she was nice a drunk. Not at all in control of her actions."

Pyrrha paled once more at the words that left Russel's mouth, thinking back to last night. Seeing as what happened between herself and Cardin, there was a measure of truth to Russel's words. After all, as she recalled, Russel did pull proof of Lance's scheme out of his pocket in front of the assembled crowd. That just made Pyrrha feel guilty over the fact she stood by like so many others.
when the Thrush had been carried away.

"There was never a doubt I'd get free. Just took a bit longer than I expected." Russel said preemptively. Just one look at Pyrrha told him of the thoughts that were running around in her head. She was cleared of any fault in his eyes maybe that was enough to soothe her conscious over the matter.

"After that I spent the night tracking this guy I know in Vale. He hooks me up with whatever I need, usually fake I.D.s. As long as I'm paying he'll get it. So I had him scrounge me up some fireworks. I came back to Beacon, found Lance passed out in his dorm an hour ago." Russel dug into his pockets, revealing a room key that bore Team WILL's dorm room number on it. "That wrapper of his wasn't the only thing I snagged off him last night."

"So you got your revenge?" Pyrrha asked as she slowly walked over to see the gathering crowd down below. There should've been a scolding tone attached to her words. But after last night and waking up in someone's bed like she did, all she could do was think about how well deserved Lance's humiliation was. "It's grand, no doubt. But someone like him. Someone who'll prey on those not in control of their actions. Is it wrong of me to wish you'd done something worse to him?"

Russel looked away from Pyrrha, turning his eyes back over the roof. Watching the students below scurry around like ants, he couldn't help but admire the view. "You know there's laws about public nudity. Even if he was a victim of hazing, which of course he was. At least that's what the cops will think when they get called in by Ozpin. When they take him in, they'll do that breathe test. It's mandatory you know. And then they'll find him guilty of underage drinking."

"He's seventeen, his parent will get involved if they give a damn." Russel trailed off for a bit. He thought for a moment about what his parents would say if they saw him now. He wondered if his mother would condone his actions or whether his father would care enough to comment. "Then he'll have to explain to them the fact that while he was a Combat School, he got tied to a fuckin' pole in his birthday suit and got slapped with public intoxication to boot. His home life will be dicey, social life will be in ruin."

"He'll get put on probation, preventing him from attending missions. And maybe no girl on campus will give him the time of day again." Pyrrha surmised.

"Like I said, his social life is shot to pieces." Russel muttered.

"Holy crap Russel." Pyrrha said in utter awe of how thorough the boy standing in her presence had thought this through.

"There's no such thing as Destiny Pyrrha." Russel said he continued to gaze down over at the flagpole where students and faculty all gathered to see just what the commotion was all about.

Down below, Russel could see Ozpin waltz down from Beacon Tower. His ever present mug in hand and an unamused look on his face. Sensing a pair of eyes on his person, Ozpin glanced Russel's way. The old headmaster looked at Russel from afar knowingly. Russel raised a pair of fingers, his index and middle and waved. Ozpin just nodded and continued on his way. No words exchanged but an understanding was met.

Pyrrha looked at Russel in confusion. But then she recalled their earlier conversation. She wanted to say something, to defend the way she approached her Jaune situation, or lack thereof, but then she decided against it. She was too polite sometimes, letting Russel run his mouth the way he did. But for once she wanted to listen.
"You asked me about Oakwood, remember?" Russel closed his eyes, soaking in the morning breeze. The sun pricked his skin with its glow while the air saved him from its burning touch. "This is what they did, Marie-Anne and her merry band. They saw something they didn't like, such as a pair of lovers who'd fallen out with each other. They wanted them back together so badly, Ruddy and Burgundy's feelings were cast aside. So they put some fairytale scheme together."

Russel opened his eyes and turned to face Pyrrha fully. He took a seat on the edge of the roof and continued on with what he had to say. "Now you can argue that they were acting on behalf of some cosmic force, that they were meant to be together and all the lovey dovey jazz. But it was still the intent of man that was the driving force. Just as it was when I intervened."

"Ruddy was my friend, whatever that means." Russel muttered. "When I mucked with Marie-Anne's plans I put choice back in their hands. Ruddy standing out on the sidelines while Burgundy danced without him."

"Again, you can say I was acting on behalf of some mysterious string puller. But maybe I wasn't." Russel said thoughtfully. "In the end nothing came about it. But they were reminded on that day what they were missing. If anything will come out of it then it's of their own will, not another's."

"What I'm trying to tell you, Pyrrha, is that Destiny is just a word." Russel looked the Invincible Girl square in the eye. "We're all just a bunch of guys and gals with differing motivations and goals. We all want something, whether it be self-validation from another's life or to save them from a world of embarrassment. We make the choice to act."

"And I'll smile about it any day." Russel flashed Pyrrha a toothy grin. He then cast a look back over the edge, spotting a familiar pair of teams with blondes running out the dormitory. "I just saw your Team running out the dorm. If you hurry you can head back now and get yourself cleaned up. Less questions about your whereabouts the better, you know?"

Noticing how Russel had worded that last sentence. How he said it in a knowing tone. Pyrrha grimaced in dismay as already she could see how knowledge of her one night stand will spread. "You know don't you?"

"The first thing I did was head back to my dorm and get myself situated. A shower to get the smell of alcohol and a fresh change of clothes, that sort of thing. Just so happens, I walk in and see you two passed out in Cardin's bed."

"Will you say anything?" Pyrrha asked, afraid of how Russel would respond.

"That isn't for me to decide. That's your call. It'll always be your call." He said quelling her concerns. "Now get out of here, I think I want the roof alone for a minute."

Pyrrha smiled and silently thanked Russel. She silently thought of a number of excuses of where she'd been this whole time. But on the way back inside, Pyrrha couldn't help but look back over her shoulder one last time. "Hey, Russel?" She said catching his attention once more. "I'm sorry for treating you like the way I did."

"Take care of yourself Pyrrha." He muttered, not looking back. There was a familiar opening of the door and then sound of it shutting. And then Russel was alone.

So Russel stood there for a while longer, watching as campus police arrived and snatched up Lance. The crowds dispersed after being warned that distributing images of Lance was a punishable offense. So one by one all the scrolls were checked and any images of Lance were deleted. Oh well, Russel thought as he smiled to himself. The damage was already done. There'd
be no coming back from it. So then Russel turned to leave, after all he still had business elsewhere. After all, there was still the question of what happened to the rest of his team.

Russel made his way back into the dorms and wouldn't you know it, he found Dove and Sky stumbling out of the some room that wasn't their own. "What the hell happened to you two?" Russel asked, genuinely surprised by their disheveld appearances.

"The most intense game of Risk. Ever." Dove answered smiling ear to ear. "And I won."

"Cool." Russel just nodded. He then threw a thumb over to their room. "You guys should head on back now. By my count we've got some hours before dust off."

"Big day today, how could we forget?!" Sky slapped himself.

With that, Russel just watched as his teammates unwittingly walked into their room, knowing fully well cleaning duties would fall to one of them. There was an audible yelp of disgust at what they'd found, but Russel didn't care. At least he didn't have to sort out that mess.

An hour passed and after an awkward conversation about the state of their room, Cardin came up with some half assed excuse about his drinking the night earlier. Thankfully neither Dove nor Sky had found the rest of the evidence of Cardin's drunken late night activity. Cardin and Russel shared words with one another, mostly the former apologizing about his in action the night earlier. But Russel waved it off like how he'd normally do. He thanked Cardin for at least attempting to get it right the second time.

So after hitting the showers and getting dressed properly, Team CRDL stood at the tarmac ready to go. A nice breakfast courtesy of the dining room in their guts and their weapons in hand, the four boys were ready for whatever lay ahead of them.

The first airship of the day arrived and to their surprise, Team CFVY stepped out. There was a part of Cardin that wanted to go over and talk to Velvet, see how she was fairing after the mission she'd just been on. But then the rest of him wanted to stand right behind the rest of his team and use them as a shield to hide himself from her gaze.

But then Velvet broke away from her team and came bouncing by. "CRDL." She said in a greeting fashion. In general, Velvet looked like absolute crap. She survived a plane crash, a week in the wilderness and a week without a shower. But all in all the bunny eared girl looked alright.

"Hey, Velvet." Russel waved hello.

"Would you three mind stepping aside? I hate to ask but I'd like to have a word with Cardin alone." Velvet said as best she could without sounding mean. It was something of a task, after all she was asking for the rest of CRDL minus Cardin to walk away for a moment. Russel assumed she'd picked up on Cardin's body language. It seemed asking for them to walk away for a minute was easier than asking Cardin directly for a moment to chat.

The rest of Team CRDL obliged and walked off to go airship spotting. That left only Velvet and Cardin alone.

"Hey, Velvet." Cardin waved awkwardly.

"Sorry about not messaging you sooner." Velvet said completely catching Cardin off guard. "While waiting for evac at this clearing, we got jumped by a Death Stalker. The blasted thing smashed my scroll right after I sent that last message."
"Wait really?" Cardin internally breathed a sigh of relief.

"I just wanted to apologize, is all." Velvet chuckled lightly. She then pointed over to her team who were all smiling and waving at Cardin, which surprised the Winchester boy immensely. "Thanks for lifting all our spirits while things were looking 'grim'. Heh, bad joke. But yeah. It meant a lot knowing that everyone was waiting for us and all. Glad to know we weren't written off as a lost cause."

"Glad to have you guys back." Cardin said confidently. "We'll catch up later, alright?"

"Definitely." Velvet smiled brightly before reaching up and lightly punching Cardin on the shoulder. "Good luck out there. Don't die."

"I won't." Cardin smirked before turning to leave and join his team.

"Velvet!" A voice belonging to one Blake Belladonna called out, catching both Velvet and Cardin's attention. While Blake and the rest of Team RWBY began to swarm around the part time journalist, Team JNPR was fast approaching to join in the celebration of her return.

And then Cardin and Pyrrha caught each other's eye. They both looked away and continued on with their business. But their actions did not go unnoticed by Velvet. She'd caught sight of both of their body languages and was left in confusion. It was an awkward familiarity; that was the only way the bunny girl could describe it. She said nothing of it as she walked away to rejoin her team. But it did leave her puzzled. Seeing how things went when they all got back, she might just look into it.

When Cardin returned to his team, he found them waiting beside Professor Port of all people. "Hey, c'mon Cardin we're heading out!" Dove shouted as he waved his team leader over.

"Well come along, students." Professor Port gestured to a waiting airship. "We're due in about an hour. We'd best get going now. We Huntsmen are both deadly and timely now."

With that the Team boarded the waiting airship. They threw the doors closed and then moved to take their seats. "You boys have been assigned to shadow me on this trip of ours. Expect to reconnaissance, lots of time watching grass grow, and eventually we'll get around to killing Grimm. How's that sound?" The four huntsmen in training gave a hearty roar.

"And our destination, Professor?" Russel asked as he and the other members of Team CRDL took their seats.

"Ah, I'm glad you asked Mr. Thrush." Port exclaimed in his ever jolly attitude. "There's been reports of Grimm activity to our north. We're going to Oakwood." And then Russel buckled in his seat. He was going home.

So yeah. That happened. I hope you guys at least enjoyed the WTF factor of it all.

At the very heart of this arc, it was all a discussion about destiny. You can believe in it, but Russel doesn't. I tried my best not to make it cut an dry. Russel plays devil's advocate a little bit. Which I thought was very important to build a discussion about it. It helped validate everything, if that makes sense. It made it mature enough to not just be a crazy asshole beating someone's head in with a hammer of opinion.

When I touched on everything that Lance represented, a total scumbag of a person, I knew I
couldn't leave this chapter without him suffering some sort of consequence. Thankfully, I think I was able to get away with writing what Russel was able to get away with. I've spent enough time building him up, I think that's enough to justify everything.

Also, the Pyrrha/Cardin thing? I have a history of writing late at night and deciding to publish crazy things. I assure you, that was planned. I only decided to use it after I planned out where that storyline went. Which you can kind of see where that's going to wind us all up at, there at the end with Velvet.

A while back someone asked if there was going to be a pairing for Russel. I've toyed with the idea before. But now, I'm proud to announce there is going to be a pairing for Russel. Rest assured, it's not with an OC.

I'll give you all a hint who it is though. She's from Vacuo. :)

Next Arc: Who Dares Wins

'Til then! Later days!
I was expecting you all to threaten my life about last chapter. I'm really glad that didn't happen. In fact, I'd say the only gripe some of you had was that I'm not shipping Pyrrha and Russel. I apparently made one of you really sad over that decision? Sorry about that.

Before we kick off with the next Arc, we have another Interlude. Sorry if these aren't your thing. This one takes some beats from Interlude 2 Story Time. I hope you enjoy this one also.

Reframe

Half past noon on a snowy day. Darkened skies outside and flakes crashing against windows. The schools were closed for the day, let the kids stay home and rest for a bit, maybe they'll take to the streets and have a smashing snowball fight.

But for the powerful men and women in Mistral, as well as for every other cog in the grand machine that made up the governing body, their days were not spent at home curled up by the fire or in the company of loved ones. No, they were busy keeping the world going.

Up in the highest points of the capitol building, sitting behind a desk overlooking official documents sat a woman dressed in the traditional Mistral council uniform. Some may be deceived with her appearance, she looked rather fetching for a woman in her mid-forties. It was as if time moved slower for her, she did look a day past thirty. Her eyes still shone bright with fire, just as they did on that fateful day back in Beacon.

She finished reading the document, a proposal from one of the other council members, some economics proposal that would cut tax breaks to the rich. They'd be voting on the proposal tomorrow, but the woman had already made up her mind on the matter. She set it aside for later use, but she made the mental note to chuck the damn thing the first chance she got.

And then after that, the woman turned to grab whatever official business was next on her list of things to do. Her eyes widened in surprise as she found a vacant in-box. So for the first time in a very long career, she had a moment's free time to herself.

There was much she was grateful for. Those she loved were all doing fine, her job was rewarding and the world wasn't ending. She had much to be thankful for, that was something she would never forget.

And then the woman's emerald eyes drifted over to the many photos that littered her desk. Most of the photos were clean and crisp behind their glass frames. Recently taken and thrown onto the desk as a reminder of what she had. Every once in a while, someone with purpose would walk into her office and notice her pictures. They'd compliment her family and her appearance.

But they all would say nothing about the old photo in the oak wood frame. The woman's eyes fell onto that particular photo. A brief sadness fell onto her features.

There in the photo was the woman in her early twenties in full mute green combat dress. There was that award winning smile that the crowds had always loved, but her eyes were dimmed from the harsh realities she'd witnessed in those days.

The photo itself was a group shot, with several others there standing and posing. The tallest among
them, a familiar face that she knew well, that burnt orange haired fellow with the mace acted all stoic in battle, but he was allowed to sneak in that stupid goofy smile of his.

Beside the woman stood a familiar bonde haired doofus. He wore his familiar hand me down armor over the standard mute green. Coreea Mors rested in place by his feet. And beside him sat little red riding hood herself. She wasn't so little anymore, almost as tall as the rest of them now.

And then the woman's eyes fell onto a familiar figure. The color of his blended in with the uniform. Once, she recalled, the young man had once thought of shaving it. Maybe one day he'd let it grow after everything was over.

When she'd first met the young man, formally met him, they were opposites. But latter, she'd sought him out in need of his help. They didn't become friends then. That happened later, after the last dance at Beacon. It was hard to believe that school was gone now.

"Madame Council Woman?" A short haired aide in her mid-twenties called into the office. "Your two o'clock appointment is here."

"Hm?" The woman looked away from the photo and to the doorway. She brushed a strand of her lovely red hair out of her face and smiled. "Send them in would you?" The aide bowed and then departed, to fetch a rather bombastic orange haired woman who'd been trying her damn best to see her old friend again.

The woman looked back to the photo and smiled kindly at it. She looked to the faces present, and then came back to that green haired mohawk sporting young man she could never thank. If it weren't for him, she wouldn't be the woman she is today.

And then she finally took into account how old and damaged the frame was. Compared to the others, she was doing her friends a disservice. Eventually she'd have to go out and buy a new frame. Maybe after the snow let up. But for now, the woman would have to say good bye once more. She turned away from the photo and greeted her guest. They had so much to say to one another, so much catching up to do. But before that familiar bubbly woman entered through the doorway, the Invincible Woman spared one last glance at the photo.

"There's no such thing as Destiny Pyrrha." She could hear that boy's words even now.

The woman smirked, thankful for the life she had. "Damn right there isn't."

The interludes allow me to play with every aspect of the story, like flash forward and see what the characters are up to in their later years. I don't think I'll be doing anymore flash forward chapters for a while, however.

Also, I don't think anyone's written Russel/Any of the five Vacuo girls before. Huh. That's neat.

The next Arc is going to be taking us back to Oakwood. And that's pretty big all things considered. After I finished writing chapter five, before even considering 'Welcome to Beacon' I set up a lot of stuff involving Marlowe and The Iron Nail. Expect to see them again real soon. Next Arc: Who Dares Wins

'Til then faithful readers! Later days!
Hello there reader! Welcome to the 21st chapter of 'The Darkling Thrush'! Today we're starting a new arc! Woo!

This chapter would've been out sooner, but I wasn't happy with the first couple of drafts. Would you believe these go through several revisions? There was a part I cut out about Russel using 'Cauliflower' as a synonym to a swear word. I liked the joke but I felt it detracted from the flow. But anyways, enough with my yapping on with the chapter!

There were four nations in the world of Remnant. A couple of islands here and there, some of which no doubt remain undiscovered while others were annexed after they all started cutting up territory. But of those four nations, without a doubt the greatest of them all had to be Vale of all places. Or at least it was to Russel.

Now it would seem a little bias of an opinion, seeing as Russel had never even left the country before in his life. But he'd definitely seen what Vale had to offer. He'd read in morning papers about social discord in countries like Vacuo and he'd seen the riots in Mistral on the television back in Beacon. Atlas on the other hand was a completely different story. A military regime that rose up from the ashes of a depression riddled Mantle, home to the Schnee Dust Corporation and a forerunner in military warfare, the country just worried Russel.

Vale's capitol was a captivating display of neon lights from afar. He'd heard whispers of a town called Venezier off by the coast where at nights you could sail through an ocean of stars. And aside from the occasional radicalized White Fang butcher taking to the streets to preach his political views, everyone was pretty much on the same page. And Russel knew this from experience. Nobody likes racists.

But Vale was not all streets paved in gold, it had its hiccups. When Russel had first left Oakwood it was for a better tomorrow. Today on the airship ride over he remained silent while his teammates engaged in conversation. Professor Port spun a tale about his golden years, when he was in his prime like how he always did back in school. Dove wouldn't shut up about that Cindy chick from Mistral, citing she had the most beautiful eyes he'd ever seen. Sky was too interested in Port's tale. And Cardin was barely following along, still reeling from his own personal dilemmas back at Beacon.

Team CRDL's first proper mission as Huntsmen wasn't taking them to Mt. Glenn or under the ruins of a ransacked and forgotten settlement. No, their destination was Oakwood, Russel's hometown. Oakwood was nothing more than over glorified farmland. The local combat school was underfunded and outdated. The only people who could possibly compare such a place to the city of Vale and its captivating neon night life were the retired Huntsmen who lived there.

If there was any point to Russel's musings, from his critiques on foreign powers and the beauty of his home country, the last thing he wanted was to wind back home in Oakwood. He'd been frowning all the way since their departure from Beacon. And he'd continue to frown once the
The metallic marvel of human engineering began to descend into a small clearing some ways outside of town. There were forests to the north and farmland everywhere else. Team CRDL and Professor Port disembarked from the ship with their gear in tow and began the long trek into town. The airship took back into the air, it would return either in the next four days or, in the eventuality that their mission ran short, would come running after a call from Port. It all really depended on how things went.

The field they were dropped off at was mainly covered in small patches of dead grass. It was an odd sight to be sure, after all, Russel was familiar with the clearing. Oakwood was a tight community, all the kids would get together and play ball out here. Sometimes it was kickball, other times it was baseball. It all really depended on whether or not they actually had a ball. More than often they just used an empty tin can.

Farmers don't make as much money as one would think. Only the big company sponsored farms like Marlowe's made any real money. It was awfully kind of the old man to buy the Thrush farm off of Russel when he did. That was something Russel would never forget.

Russel smirked to himself as the five Huntsmen made the five mile long trek into town. Maybe while he was in town, Russel might be afforded the chance to drop in and say hello. The old man had been kind enough to help Russel out before, especially with the death of his Father, the least he could do was check in on him.

"Ugh. How much further?" Dove grumbled as he lugged along a backpack full of his belongings.

"You should've packed light, my boy!" Port exclaimed in response to Dove's complaints. "I remember when I was your age, I'd made the same mistake on my first mission too! Ha! What an exciting day that was!" Port recalled happily. "That day I killed my first Grimm! It was me and the beast, one on one. It swung first, but I swung faster! And off its head came, rolling off its shoulders while its large body fell before my feet! What a day!" Port laughed.

The Professor then went on a long tangent about his years as a Huntsman. Russel liked Port, there were endearing qualities to the man, but his get sidetracked by recollections of the past always caused him to roll his eyes. In the normal school setting Russel would desperately try to get the discussion back on topic and would mostly succeed, but then Port would find a way to talk about arm wrestling an Ursa.

"…And then I tossed off my tatter shirt and engaged in unarmed combat with the beast!" Port declared jollily. Because this wasn't the usual class setting of Beacon, Russel didn't feel the need to attempt to redirect Port's attention back to the task at hand. So the boy just zoned out.

And then just like that time began to pass Russel by. Before he knew it they were taking their first steps into town. For the most part the place hadn't changed in the some five months Russel had spent away. But there was one huge difference Russel noticed immediately. As they began walking through town, Russel realized Oakwood Academy had been closed down.

"Hey, check it out." Sky pointed in the direction of the combat school Russel had attended before Beacon. In front of the school's lawn was a large sign and in red letter is read 'Condemned'.

"Hey Russel, you lived here before right?" Cardin asked, the sight of the school probably reminded him of when the four boys went on their team building adventure to the Crow Bar. "Any chance this the school you transferred out of?"
“Oh yeah.” Russel muttered as he looked at the boarded up school. By the looks of it, Oakwood Academy was closed up only recently. It wasn't a huge loss, Russel thought bitterly. The young Thrush thought of his days attending the combat school, how the students worked together to get out of learning and how they'd rather get involved with the social scene. The facilities were old, out of date and in need of a good remodeling.

Russel thought of the library, how the stacks were covered in dust and how students would sneak kisses among other things inside. The management of the whole thing was so terrible Russel could get away with making off with the few half-way decent books they had. That was Russel's education. He'd fend for himself, steal knowledge from wherever he could and when it came time to take tests and do homework he'd excel at it. Not because of the school and its teachers, but because he chose to.

One of the things they'd tried to teach him, back then, was to manifest an aura. They could've had a trained professional come around and do it for them like sane reasonable folk. But there wasn't a professional amongst them. They through caged Grimm at you to see if you could do it on your own.

That last thought got Russel thinking, about the Grimm that were caged and left to wallow in darkness beneath the school's open field. The young Thrush hoped that they'd gotten around to killing them all on the way out. Because with that faculty, they probably would've left them caged up forever. That presented a problem, leaving Grimm unchecked, wallowing beneath everyone's homes. They five of them were here in response to Grimm sightings. Who knows, maybe the caged up Grimm were the ones running around. Even more reason for Russel to hate Oakwood.

But only time would tell if his assumptions were correct. They were going to be here for a while and they were going to get to the bottom of this. So Russel pushed his concerns to the back of his mind and continued on, following Port's lead just like the rest of his team. They pressed on further into the heart of the town.

The five Huntsmen began to pass by the local Inn, a place where all the drifters and out of towners, always big company guys in suits checking in on their investments would stay there. Port stopped in his tracks. He turned and looked at the Inn. The expression on his face prominently shown the gears in his head turning.

"In normal circumstances, we Huntsmen would be roughing it in the woods." Port said as he continued to eye the vacancy sign out front. "But seeing there's a perfectly good Inn here in town, I don't see why we should take advantage of the situation." Port said in a sly manner. He dug into his back pocket and withdrew his wallet, holding it up for Team CRDL to see. "It'll be my treat."

"Oh sweet!" Dove exclaimed, though slightly tired from the walk over into town, the youngest member of Team CRDL could help but sound excited. At the end of it, such accommodations meant there would be warm water and a bed to sleep on instead of the ground. They'd have four walls instead of being out in the open and easy targets for Grimm. It was the best possible option.

As no one spoke up or complained, Port led the way into the Inn and sent the boys off to the side while he spoke to the young woman managing the front desk. With Port preoccupied, this finally gave Team CRDL the chance to discuss matter amongst themselves without any form of authority listening in on them.

"What do you guys think so far?" Cardin said, quickly taking charge of the conversation. The burnt orange haired boy looked to his teammates, only to find Dove and Sky give rather indifferent responses. For the most part, Dove was just glad to not have to sleep on the ground again. Sky was rather unimpressed by the architecture. He cited the lack of imagination when it came to designing
the homes. For the most part they were all cookie cutter buildings with a simple one floor layout.

Cardin then turned to his partner, looking for Russel to chime in with his two cents. As Russel had lived in Oakwood before, it was only natural to assume he'd have more to say on the matter. "Don't you have family here, Russel?" Cardin asked. "I remember you mentioned your dad back in the Crow Bar. Maybe you might get the chance to pop in and surprise him."

"Don't worry Cardin." Russel muttered. "It's on my list of things to do."

"Come on boys I've got the rooms!" Port shouted from over at the front desk. The rather portly man held a trio of room keys up in the air and waved them around. Team CRDL gathered their things and were off into the Inn.

Port had gotten three rooms, there were five of them. Port himself would have a room to himself while the others divided up into the other rooms. Dove and Sky grabbed the room across the hall while Russel and Cardin took the one with a window. Port had given them two hours to get situated, then they'd head out and check the town perimeter and see if they could find some Grimm.

Neither Russel nor Cardin had brought much along for the mission, only the bare essentials. Between the two of them they had ten ration packs as well as a small water supply. They each brought one change of clothes and most importantly, they had their weapons.

Cardin removed his mace from his duffel bag and placed it on his bed, the one that was closest to the window. The Winchester boy then set his things aside and took a seat on the bed while he performed weapon maintenance. Russel on the other hand left his daggers in his bag and began to head for the door.

"You heading out?" Cardin asked, sounding not at all surprised at the action.

"I'm going to go and see my dad." Russel said simply before grabbing one of the two room keys. "I'll be back in an hour or so."

"Alright." Cardin nodded before returning to cleaning his weapon with one of the towels in the bathroom.

Russel left the room, shutting the door behind him. He walked out of the Inn and couldn't help but notice the Inn Keeper had been scowling at him. The young Thrush gave a look over his shoulder over at the Inn Keeper and studied her features more carefully. He didn't know her, but apparently she knew him. That usually didn't bode well in his experience.

So Russel made himself scarce and left the Inn. Back on the town's main road, Russel began to backtrack down the way they'd came. He passed by Oakwood Academy and soon found himself taking the path he'd normally take on his way home from school.

He passed by the local tavern, the same old drunks were in there loading up when it wasn't even five. There were a couple of new faces amongst the lot, some guys Russel had gone to school with. Not everyone went on to Beacon, some stayed and got rooted into the farming gig like their family. Others probably got rejected and now wasted away at the counter calling for the bartender for another drink. Those boys were all Russel's age, but it didn't surprise him to find them there. After all, Russel knew very well that the bartender didn't even have a license.

Russel kept on walking and passed by the Cherri residence. That reminded Russel, he still owed Marie-Anne for her part in having him tied up to that flagpole the other day. A part of Russel
thought for a moment about claiming his vengeance by messing with her folks. But it was Marie-
Anne who had earned his wrath, not her parents. So Russel kept his pace, never stopping, never
looking back, never again would he let that thought creep back into his head.

He then came upon a fork in the road, one that he knew very well. His muscle memory urged him
to take the right path back home, to the Thrush farm. But that was gone by now, he'd sold it to
Marlowe and in turn he'd probably demolished it to fully integrate the land with his own. There
was nothing down that path for Russel, so he took a left. And waiting for him was a hill in a
graveyard where his Father was buried.

There were no gates at Saint Jack's, just a large patch of grass and a sea of gravestones. Russel
quietly walked through the markers, paying mind to the fact that the layout of the place meant
there was no official walkway, so the young Thrush was forced to step on the ground where men
and women were buried beneath.

Eventually Russel trudged up a hill beside a tree and there it was, his Father's grave. Russel stood
there silently for a moment, carefully watching the gravestone as if it were going to jump at him.
But it did no such thing.

"Hey Dad." Russel greeted the mute gray marker. The young Thrush sighed. Just what the hell was
he expecting? Did he honestly think there'd be a reply? "I'm back." He muttered.

There had been too much left unsaid between them, Russel and his Father. The elder Thrush had
taken to calling his son 'Killer' in memory of his mother, who died in childbirth. Russel had been
called that for longer than he could remember and it was only recently until he understood the
exact measure of pain that the old man truly bore.

Russel's chats with Ozpin had been enlightening, the Beacon Headmaster had informed the boy all
about his mother and her time in Beacon. Russel's mother's name was Alba Stross. The whole bird
thing got a good laugh at out of the boy the first time when he'd heard it. But Russel wasn't
laughing now.

"I think I finally understand you. Rather, I finally understand who you were." The young Thrush
somberly said. "She was your everything and you hated me for her death." A sigh escaped Russel's
lips. If he'd ever done so in his Father's presence before, he'd be smacked for such a sign of
disrespect. Thankfully the man couldn't do that anymore, after all, he was dead. "Is that where your
mantra came from? 'No one's going to give you anything'? That's what you'd drill into my head
every day. Is it because your son killed the woman you loved?"

"Maybe I'm overthinking your reasons. Maybe you were just as much a cruel bastard as you were
to begin with." Russel spoke darkly. "But I know that's not true." Russel's mother hadn't been the
only one he'd asked Ozpin about. The gray haired Headmaster had also told him of his father.

"Ozpin said you used to smile. That was something you never did around me. He also said he was
proud to have known you. He said you were brave, a man with ethics one whom he himself looked
up to." Russel shook his head in disgust. "I had to bite my tongue during our discussions. I didn't
know how to tell the man what kind of monster you'd become."

Nobody's going to give you anything. Russel could hear his Father saying those words to him now.
"I just came by to say hello." Russel sighed before turning his back to his Father's grave. "I guess
I'll be seeing you. Not like you're going anywhere. Bye Dad." And with that, Russel walked off
down the hill and began to head back to the Inn.

Not too far away, hidden by vast tree line of the surrounding forest, stood a tall man with a facial
scar around the side of his bald head resembling Ursa claw marks. He wore a large tan coat that concealed the white and black robes beneath. His dark cargo pants and metal padded boots were coated in dirt and ash, seemingly unwashed in what must've been weeks.

The man whose true name was forgotten stared at Russel, watching him menacingly as the young Thrush departed the cemetery. The man knew Russel, after all, the boy was the reason he now bore the scar left behind by that Ursa. For a long while he'd been wishing to repay Russel for the unpleasantness of that night, however, the boy's absence from Oakwood had robbed him of the chance.

But now it seemed their paths would cross once more. And so, The Iron Nail turned to leave back into the forest. The time to spill blood would rear itself shortly, but for now he had to prepare, there was too much to hide and so little time. The appearance of Huntsmen was a troubling sight as they would no doubt interfere. For the sake of The White Fang, its prosperity and its business ventures with an unnamed woman with burning eyes, The Iron Nail could not lose Oakwood. And so he would not.

For those who remember, The Iron Nail is a member of the White Fang I introduced all the way back in chapter 4. He's the guy Russel got his daggers from in the first place. He got mentioned by Blake sometime in Arc 3, I forget the specific chapter. So he's important. I was debating whether to name Russel's mother, but I decided to eventually. His Father will remain unnamed for the time being, but his mother Alba Stross is just another way to say Albatross. I felt that the name was fitting. After all, sailors who killed an Albatross were made to wear the bird around their neck for the whole voyage. You could make the connections with Russel and the death of his mother at your leisure. I thought it was clever.

Well, next chapter will be out sometime soon, I don't have an exact date. Who knows, it might be Sunday could be Tuesday.

'Til then dear Reader! Later days!
XXII: Who Dares Wins: Part 2

Good evening everyone, welcome to another chapter of 'The Darkling Thrush'!

As always before we begin, I'd like to thank those who left a review! Thank you jin0uga, noon297, Baoh joestar, Guest, SanShine and Bagration! I appreciate the words, I mean it.

Although I must say, I am a little surprised by all the Russel/Pyrrha love. I never said you wouldn't see anything along those lines in the story, particularly I have something planned in Arc 13. It's called 'Eidolon'. I hope that will satisfy you all.

Also, I think I just confirmed there's 13 arcs. Hm. I'm going to go one step further and confirm there's 20. Exciting right?

Well enough with that now! On with the story!

XXII

Who Dares Wins: Part 2

There should've been four dead bodies where Russel stood. Deep within a dark and damp cave, with his only source of light being what shone out of the screen of his scroll, the young Thrush found himself faced with a rather disappointing and somewhat worrying sight. Only half an hour earlier did Team CRDL and their Huntsman chaperone set out to do their job, locate any Grimm and eliminate them. They'd set out into the neighboring woods that surrounded the town and so far hadn't seen neither a red eyed beast nor evidence of such Grimm being in close proximity of Oakwood.

Playing on a hunch, Russel had snuck away from the group, recalling the Ursa that he'd stumbled upon that one night after graduation. Thinking it might've been the beast that had caught the eyes of the townsfolk, Russel came into the cave well prepared to finish it off. Though he doubted such an act would deal with the Ursa for long, after all, this was the second time the damn thing roamed free.

So that was the story of how Russel came to be in this dark, isolating and mildew ridden environment. But as luck had it there was no sign of the Ursa. That didn't rule out the possibility of the Ursa's presence nearby, however, but what puzzled the young Thrush was the lag of floor decorations. Last he'd been here, Russel left four White Fang members to their deaths. Without a doubt three were slain, but with the last one there may have been a chance of his survival.

Of course, the Ursa could've gobbled their bodies up whole, Grimm were known to devour their victims. But if Russel recalled correctly, some of them got chopped to bits. The Ursa could've been thorough in its work, leaving no trace but the blood that stained the cave floor, which was the possibility Russel secretly wished for. After all, the alternative meant something different entirely.

The alternative being that someone came back to collect the bodies. Now that possibility was one that Russel feared. He hadn't told anyone about what happened that night, everyone busied themselves with dousing the searing flames that night, and there was the matter of his Father's death. With his immediate attention elsewhere Russel couldn't be bothered with it.
Russel recalled that day when Blake had gone off the deep end and kidnapped him. The whole thing was started after she'd realized his daggers belonged to a member of the White Fang, which they technically did. They belonged to that one guy who could coat his skin in metal, who just so happened to be the one whom Russel was uncertain had died. In Blake's own words, she said the guy couldn't die. So maybe he didn't and had the self-respect to come back for his friends. And that meant one of them was still running around.

And then there was the other more disturbing alternative that popped its way into Russel's head. Now if it wasn't some seemingly immortal crazed zealot with a hard on for arson, and if the Ursa didn't very well eat them, then that would mean someone came looking and found the bodies and before taking them and doing god knows what. And that was a scary thought. The last thing anyone needed was some guy wearing a burlap sack running around collecting dead bodies. No one wants that. No one needs that.

Of those three possibilities, Russel couldn't decide which one sounded worse. Maybe if he had time he'd look into the matter, but for now he'd keep quiet. You'd have to be mental if telling your team the dead terrorists you left in a cave were missing sounded like a good idea. So now that his present business was concluded, Russel turned back and walked out of the cave.

Russel blinked repeatedly, his eyes adjusting to the sunlight once more. He hadn't noticed the passage of time, too lost in his thoughts. Deciding he'd better get going and track down his team rather than let them worry and come looking for him, Russel set out deeper into the woods.

As a kid after chores he'd come out here and eat lunch. He'd climb trees and get into all sorts of trouble. But it was after he'd gotten attacked by the Ursa the first time when he'd start venturing out into the wilderness less and less. There was a cabin that had since fallen into disrepair after the owner had passed out in the woods. Time to time the kids would dare each other into going inside, claiming his spirit haunted in or some other nonsense. The young Thrush passed by the old cabin and was surprised to find it laying in ruin. Mother Nature had uprooted the foundation, vines covered its fallen walls while the wet wood rotted away to a swarm of insects that had decided to call it home.

There was a lot of history to the cabin, some of it fond the rest not so much. It was the birth of Russel and Ruddy's so called friendship, if you could even call it that. It was always a mystery to everyone else back in Oakwood Academy how the all-around decent guy like Ruddy could put up with an asshole like Russel.

When they were kids, Russel and Ruddy were both dared by the other kids to go into the cabin. They did, but Russel wasn't planning on staying too long. So the young Thrush left, abandoning Ruddy to the place. Later that day, while they were playing kick ball with a can back in that clearing outside of Oakwood, Ruddy showed up looking bruised and beaten. As it was, the floor of the cabin had corroded and he fell through. He blamed Russel the most out of everyone because he'd left him.

Ruddy then pulled out his dad's revolver. All the other kids went running, leaving Russel to his fate. The young Thrush didn't recall anyone getting help that day, they just ran and left him to his fate. Even at a young age, Russel was conscious of the concept of death, his Father did a good job of reminding him of that.

Scared out of his mind but too naive to succumb to fear, Russel stared beyond the barrel of the gun. Turned out Ruddy was just as scared as Russel, he was trembling even. He just stared into Russel's eyes and broke down crying. He tossed the gun aside and fell into Russel's arms and the young Thrush just held him.
You point a gun at most guys and it paralyzes them. It's like they're hypnotized into staring down the barrel, thinking about what'll happen next, what it'll do to them. But it's never the gun that's going to tell them that. But rather it's the guy holding it and his eyes. And that was the beginning of their 'friendship'.

"Hey Russel! Where've you been?!" Dove's shouting snapped Russel out of his thoughts. The green haired Huntsman in training looked to his left, finding Dove along with the rest of his team and Port gathered atop a small hill.

When faced with the question of his whereabouts prior, Russel thought about lying but then he doubted they'd buy him getting lost in the woods. So the young Thrush opted to tell the truth. "There was a cave a coupe ways back, I decided to check it out." Russel said casually.

Russel watched as Dove raised a brow skeptically but he accepted the answer. With that bullet dodged, Russel joined his team and found them all gathered around in a circle looking down at the ground. Russel was about to question just why they were standing around doing nothing, but then he followed their gazes downward and found themselves standing around tracks in the dirt.

"What do you boys think?" Port turned to Team CRDL and gestured to the tracks. "You've taken my class. What kind of Grim mare we dealing with here?"

Russel stared at the tracks left behind by the Grimm. Most of the nightmarish creatures took after animals, like the Ursa or a Beowulf, their tracks often resembled those of a bear or a wolf however distorted. But these tracks were misshapen and grossly inhuman. They appeared be overgrown bird feet, but then there was the deep punctures in the ground left behind by claws, as well as the impression left behind by the grooved feet.

"Creeps." Cardin answered. "We're dealing with a pack of Creeps."

"A pack?" Sky asked, confused at Cardin's seemingly firm stance on the matter. "Where'd you get that from?"

Cardin raised two fingers and pointed down the other side of the hill. Everyone followed Cardin's instruction, with most eyes going wide at the sight of a plethora of Creep tracks going in several direction. "Oh."

"Ah! Splendid!" Port let out a hearty laugh. The senior Huntsman raised his ax-gun weapon and held it ready before descending from the hill in order to inspect the rest of the tracks. Team CRDL exchanged glances but said nothing of Port's overzealousness. They just all calmly walked down the hill and joined the stout professor.

"Now, here's the real test. You can tell a lot about your prey just from their tracks." Port said as he crouched beside a series of Creep tracks. He gestured for the boys to come closer and get a better look. "Some egg head scientist might make the argument for the more abstract, that Grimm are just mindless killing machines. But they're animal killing machines. They each have their own independent thoughts, they answer to their own hierarchies of alphas and betas. You could tell a lot about Grimm just because of their tracks."

"So what can you boys tell me about this one?" Port pointed at the series of tracks beside him. They all took a look at the tracks that went off into the forest. You had to really study the drag in the right tracks to get a sense of the Creep's state of mind. Every third step and impression in the ground was sluggish, as if the Creep had to stop and gather itself before continuing on.

"Looks to me like this poor bastard's starving." Russel said aloud crassly. "Its movements are too
erratic, it's trying to keep up with the others but the damn thing probably hasn't eaten in weeks."

"Correct." Port nodded before standing back up and shouldering his gun. "You said it wasn't keeping up with the others, Mr. Thrush, why would that be?"

"Because it's the beta." Russel answered clearly. "It eats last."

"Take a look at the other tracks boys, see if you can pick anything else out." Port said before giving them free reign to play detective.

Team CRDL quickly broke off to inspect various other tracks. Russel himself took on searching for the leader of the pack. If there was a beta, there would most certainly be an alpha. Creeps could theoretically grow as big as they were allowed to be, but most sightings of an Alpha Creep have attribute their peak height to at least two meters. So Russel just went looking for the biggest pair of feet around.

Russel found a sizeable pair of tracks off further ahead, which was easier to identify once he'd gotten away from that crazy soup of tracks back a ways. Russel quickly took to identifying the Grimm's movements, he was half expecting the Alpha Creep to be in better condition than the beta, but found quite the opposite. In fact, their movements were eerily similar. And that didn't bode well at all.

"Hey guys! You better come take a look at this!" Russel shouted over his shoulder. Soon enough they all came running, wondering just what had deserved their attention. "We got ourselves a situation."

"How so?" Cardin asked, quickly raising his mace.

"Check it." Russel pointed at the Alpha Creep's tracks. "The Alpha's in just as bad a shape as our beta friend back there."

"That would mean the entire pack is as well." Cardin groaned, catching onto Russel's train of thought. "Hey Professor, packs of Creeps aren't as big as Beowulfs right?"

"They usually travel in bands of eight, no more than ten." Port answered. "Creeps aren't too agile, nor do they possess the frame to pose as serious a threat as say a Deathstalker. Because of this, they don't venture often into human settlements. They're essentially overrated scavengers doing hit and runs."

"So we gots ourselves a bunch of hungry scavengers. What's that mean?" Dove scratched the back of his head, still unaware of the gravity of the situation.

"It means the damn things are more than likely to do something stupid." Cardin shook his head. "If they're hungry enough, what's to say they stop playing by the rules? No more hit and runs. Full frontal assault."

"Who wants to bet where these tracks lead?" Russel muttered darkly. "Ten lien says they're heading to town."

"We'd best be off then." Port said before quickly running after the tracks. "If we hurry we might be able to cut them off!"

"You heard the man." Cardin looked to his team and raised his mace. "Let's move!" He shouted before rushing into action.
To that the rest of CRDL resigned themselves to joining both their leader and Port in the act of running through the woods. There must've been something funny about the situation, as Dove burst out laughing. Russel spared a glance at his teammate, part of him wanting to ask what the youngest member of Team CRDL found so amusing. But then it clicked with Russel and he too joined in the laughter. It was funny actually, form an outsiders perspective it just looked like a bunch of heavily armed men running without reason.

The mad dash back into town was shorter than the hike into the woods. Before they'd all been careful not to alert any nearby Grimm of their presence, after all, they were the hunters and they were the prey. But now what they desired was the attention of the Grimm, just as a means to distract them from the town.

As they drew closer to town, they could hear a number of wails and high pitched screams. Adrenaline pumping, they all ran as fast as they could hoping they weren't too late. When they finally reached the town, they found The Creeps ransacking everything and giving chase to the townsfolk.

The misshapen bipedal monstrosities tore through buildings and snapped at the town people. By the looks of it the attack had only just begun and there appeared to have been not fatalities, at least not yet.

"Alright students." Port flashed Team CRDL a smile. "Put these Grimm down, quickly, before the panic attracts something worse!"

"Understood!" Cardin shouted before raising his mace into the air, as if rallying his team behind him. "Let's get in there!"

Russel drew his daggers and set his sights on the nearest Creep. The whole situation was less than ideal, they were reacting to conflict, doing their best to keep destruction and death to a minimal. The Huntsmen weren't in control, it was the Grimm. As established earlier, they could be dealing with the bare minimum eight Creeps, or they could be dealing with more, and from what Russel could see with his own two eyes, there were only three present. That left most of them unaccounted for.

No doubt the rest of the Creeps had gone deeper into town, these were just the stragglers. Russel ran forward at the closest Creep, a bruised angry looking fellow, no doubt this was the beta of them pack. The thing saw Russel and turned its attention on the boy. It came running at him acting like it had something to prove. Or maybe it just wanted to kill for shits and giggles, after all that's what all Grimm did.

The thing about Creeps though, was that they had a very basic means of attack. If they couldn't gnaw your leg off then they'd just head-butt you, and if that didn't work they just throw themselves at you until something happened. So as long as they all avoided its mouth, then they'd be alright.

The Creep closed the distance between Russel and itself. I lunged forward, aiming to wrap its enormous jaws around one of Russel's limbs. Russel dodged and spun around and struck it with the edge of one of his daggers. The Creep let out a pained screech and landed on its feet. It spun around and came running in for another attempt. Russel ran it with both daggers outstretched, he aimed to run it through. They rammed into each other, with Russel impaling the Creep with his daggers and being forced to set the dying beta onto the ground due to its weight.

As soon as it quit kicking, Russel removed his daggers out of the beta's body. It began to disintegrate before Russel's eyes, becoming dust to the wind. With the Creep dead, Russel turned his attention elsewhere, looking for another of the monsters to slay. Russel then looked off to the
left to see if his team was faring better than he had.

Cardin was currently removing his mace from the base of a Creep's skull. Because it wasn't disintegrating, Russel could only assume it was somehow still alive. As soon as Cardin dislodged his weapon from the creature, it began to stir some fight still in it. Cardin then promptly brought his foot down, quite literally actually. There was a sickening crack and the awful sound of a squishy matter being mashed by the bottom of Cardin's metal boot. The Creep the burned away.

Dove and Sky had tag teamed one of the Creeps. It wasn't as gruesome an affair as what Cardin had done with his. Sky had swept its legs with the sharp end of his halberd, leaving the Creep immobile. Dove then came in for the killing blow, just impaling it with his gun sword.

It went unsaid between the team that there were still more in the area. They quickly joined together and rushed off, following the shouts for help. As they drew closer to the town center, the destruction became more and more apparent. There was a couple of teenagers trying to get a bleeding elderly man out of the area while another man was pinned under some rubble.

"Dove, Sky, lend a hand over there will you?!!" Cardin shouted. Dove and Sky did as they were ordered and split off to aid the injured.

Russel and Cardin kept on going, following the Creeps' path of destruction. It soon became apparent to the duo that Port had seemingly disappeared. Before either could pose such a question to the other, a disintegrating Creep body was flung in front of them. It had completely evaporated into the air before it even hit the ground.

The pair of Russel and Cardin looked to where the Creep had been thrown from and found Professor Port walking out of the local tavern with a smile on his face, his ax gun in one hand and a mug of beer in the other. "Ah! There you boys are!" Port let out a hearty laugh. "I'd caught two of the blasted things behind the counter! You could say I got the drop on them. But it was them that got the drop on you! Ha ha!"

"Yeah, sure Professor." Russel deadpanned.

"I presume the other one was dealt with?" Cardin questioned.

"I'd have skinned the damn thing then and there, but sadly they turn to dust." Port frowned. To cheer himself up the stout man took a swig of his drink, downing it in its entirety. He then tossed the glass over his shoulder and set out forward. "Come along boys, there's more prey out and about!"

"You think he's enjoying this?" Cardin asked as soon as Port was out of hearing distance.

"He's having the time of his life." Russel said before the two of them hurried off to join their Professor.

Along the way the trio of huntsmen caught the remaining Creeps with their backs turned. Port obliterated one with a pointblank shot from his gun. Cardin snared one with his mace's claws, plucking it off the Inn Keeper before incinerating it with the magma crystal at the center of his mace.

With that seemingly being the last of the Creeps, Team CRDL and Professor Port regrouped at the center of town. They looked around and found the town in a disoriented state. No doubt the town doctor would be busy this evening, and there would be need of reconstruction to repair damaged buildings.
"So, did we get them all?" Sky asked as he and Dove returned from aiding the civilians.

"By my count, we killed seven." Russel muttered. "I haven't seen an Alpha Creep, have you?"

"Then we've got one still roaming out here." Port twirled his moustache.

And then, as if on cue, the assembled huntsmen heard a loud chewing bone snapping noise. They all looked down a nearby alley and saw garbage cans dancing around. The noise grew louder, resembling the noise of Cardin putting his boot through one of the Creeps. Cautiously, they all began to funnel into the alley with Russel taking point.

Amongst the garbage lay the Alpha Creep, in its mouth was a dead cat. "That's unnerving." Sky muttered as he raised his halberd. The Alpha Creep got back onto its feet and swallowed what was left of the feline. Its nostrils flared angrily, its eyes turned another shade of red.

Without a word, Dove preemptively struck the Creep with his sword's secondary function. And thus began the slaughter of the lone Creep. Team CRDL ganged up on the beast before it could catch its bearings. It had gorged itself and was now unable to defend itself. The last of the pack died there amongst the trash.

One by one they all funneled out of the alley and once more took in the sight of the ransacked town. It wasn't the first time something major like this happened to it. Russel could attest to that. He recalled the actions his neighbors made, rushing into danger to combat the fires that threatened their crops. He could see that sentiment now as the town buzzed alive to aid their own.

"So…" Dove droned one awkwardly. "I think we did good."

"I would say you did marvelously!" They all turned to see an elder man in blue overalls and a white dress shirt approaching them with his cane.

Russel cracked a smile, recognizing the man. He stepped out from behind his team and revealed his presence and greeted the man. "Oi! Marlowe!"

"Oh? Russel!" The old man's eyes went wide in surprise. A wide smile grew on his face as he quickly rushed to meet the young Thrush. "What're you doing back in Oakwood?!"

"Oh, it's my first mission." Russel answered simply. He then looked around, seeing the torn up buildings and the ash covered spots where the Grimm had died. "Yeah, It's going well."

"You couldn't have minimalized the destruction just a little bit there could you?"

"Eh." Russel shrugged.

"Uh, Russel, who's this?" Dove asked pointing at Marlowe.

"Oh, where have my manners gone?" Russel mentally kicked himself.

"Marlowe, these are my teammates and one from my Professors from Beacon." Russel gave a wave over to his team. "That's Professor Peter Port. He's a real nice guy, one of the best minds Beacon has to offer. The tall guy's my partner Cardin Winchester. Beside him is Sky Lark, he's great. And beside him is Dove Bronzewing. Everyone, this is Hegemony Marlowe, the largest land owner in Oakwood and a close personal friend of mine."
"Hello everyone." Marlowe waved. "I see you've been taking care of Russel here. I hope he hasn't been causing you any trouble. He's know not do that."

"Oh you've still got that sense of humor of yours old man."

"One of us has to." Marlowe smiled kindly. "I came down to see what all the shouting was about, I heard from Mr. Cherri there was a pack of Grimm running loose. I see you lot handled it."

"Just doing our job, sir." Cardin spoke up.

"Sir? Oh I like him." Marlowe pointed at Cardin. "Reminds me of when I was running around as a Huntsman. Oh dear that was a long time ago." Marlowe chuckled somewhat nervously. "Seeing as you all had very much just save the town from the Grimm, why don't you all come over for dinner tonight?"

"Marlowe, you don't have to. It was no big deal."

"Whoa, we're getting offered dinner and you're rejecting it? Where's the hospitality Russel?" Sky snickered.

"I like that one too." Marlowe pointed at Sky. "How about you, Professor Port? Would dinner at a friend's house be okay within mission parameters?" Marlowe asked the stout Professor.

"Who are we to refuse such great hospitality!" Port laughed cheerily. He'd just killed a number of Grimm and was now getting offered a free meal. He was absolutely ecstatic.

"Then it's settled! Dinner at seven o'clock." Marlowe declared. He then turned to Russel and patted the boy on the shoulder. "You remember the way don't you?" Russel nodded. "Splendid! See you all there!"

With that said, Marlowe walked off, vanishing in the mob of townsfolk who'd quickly gotten around to repairing the damage to the town. Not too far away, the Inn Keeper stood watching Russel and the others talk amongst themselves. There was some conversation between them, where Russel explained to them his relationship with Marlowe, which actually surprised many to find out Russel actually had a legitimate friend.

The Inn Keeper brushed her disheveled hair with a free hand. Gently she patted the trimmed antlers hidden beneath her bob of hair. The sacrifices she'd made for the White Fang were many, but in the end they would all be worth it. With her other hand she withdrew a scroll out of her pants pocket and pulled up her contact list. She quickly sent a message to an individual labeled under 'Nail'. Everything was going as planned, she typed.

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There was some debate on how I was going to start this chapter. And for some reason the most appealing way to do it involved four dead bodies. It certainly beats opening with whatever else I had drafted up. The Cave scene was something I enjoyed writing as a whole. There's a lot more meaning to the words if you think of the cave as a character. He's standing in there alone with his only source of light being his scroll, which isn't native to Oakwood. There's a lot more there.

I hinted at the whole Ruddy thing back in Arc 3. When Russel stared beyond Gambol Shroud and into Blake's eyes, there was a bit where it mentioned how he'd learned once before that it was the person behind the gun that mattered, not the gun itself.
During writing, it became apparent I had to show Marlowe as pretty much the only person Russel has maintained a healthy relationship with. And I hope it comes across as that.

The next chapter should be out sometime this week. 'Til then, Later Days!
Hello there faithful reader! Welcome to another chapter of 'The Darkling Thrush'!

This chapter is a very interesting one. I keep talking about how these go through drafts, this one is no exception. This one took two drafts, the least so far. Fun fact, the character of Hegemony Marlowe was inspired by 'Heart of Darkness' by Joseph Conrad. So you can sort of see some of those themes influencing this entire arc, especially the stuff about truth and lies.

Well, I'll save the rest of my notes for the end as always.

Dinner at Marlowe's wasn't uncommon to Russel. They were neighbors for years, and though he'd never say it, the old man was the closest thing to a father figure he had growing up. He was a father figure to everyone in fact. A respectable member of the town who looked after his own. Hegemony Marlowe was one of a kind and Russel was grateful to have him in his life.

Russel led the way up to Marlowe's homestead, his team and Port following closely behind. "So how do you know this guy anyways?" Dove would ask in his usual insensitive manner. Russel knew the guy didn't mean it, but the way he usually came across would always be his biggest detractor.

"Neighbors," Russel answered simply. As they continued to make their way to Marlowe's home, Russel's thoughts drifted to when he'd actually met the old man. He'd always just been the 'Old Man' to him, he'd always had white hair and bad posture. It was a summer's day when they'd actually struck up a conversation. Marlowe and his Father had a business relationship, he'd outsource a good deal of work to them. That was the sort of man Marlowe was, always looking after his neighbors, his extended family.

Then one day while Russel's Father was still in bed passed out from a night drinking, Marlowe showed up at their doorstep checking in on the man, he'd received word from one of the big suit types they'd been behind last month. With Russel's Father indisposed, the young boy was forced to entertain Marlowe. They'd never shared a single word before and in a young boy's eyes Marlowe was just another big business guy.

Russel was four, he didn't have the vast vocabulary he had now nor the people skills. So the young Thrush just started blabbing about primary school. Russel forgot the exact topic, but it probably had something to do with the structure of courses. Marlowe kept calm, not bothered by the child's actions and just played along. And then the rest was history, as the saying goes.

They reached the Homestead a tad bit early. Dove couldn't help but be surprised at all the farmland that surrounded the place. Russel didn't mention how a part of the land used to belong to him, how he'd sold it to run away to the big city and become a Huntsman. There were many things Russel wasn't good at, talking about himself was one of them.

So they marched up the porch and knocked. The door opened revealing Marlowe. "Please come in,
come in!" He said happily as he urged them all inside.

Closing the door behind them, Marlowe led them all down through the living room and into the dining room. There, the five huntsmen were greeted by a number of other individuals, some whom Russel recognized, and others he didn't. No doubt they were all farmhands enjoying a meal with the boss. On the table, which could seat up to twenty, was a platter of steak, trays of mashed potatoes and gravy, a dish with corn and sweet bread that seemed to have been recently removed from the oven.

By the looks of things, everyone had been waiting for the huntsmen to arrive, not a single plate was touched, the silverware left alone. If Russel had known this was how it would've been they all probably should've left earlier. But Russel pushed that thought aside and quickly found a seat, as did the others.

Port was absolutely delighted, practically drooling all over himself. "You'll love this Professor Port. Grown here in Oakwood!" Marlowe said before taking his seat at the head of the table. He gestured at the food in front of everyone and with a thankful smile they all dug in.

"You really must phone ahead next time." Marlowe directed at Russel. He had said it in a joking manner but there was an underlying serious tone to his words.

"Never had a phone before. It's a new concept to me." Russel smirked.

The old man just laughed while everyone busied themselves with devouring the food in front of them. But beyond them, this wasn't about rewarding noble huntsmen for their good deeds but two friends catching up. "So how's everything been at Beacon? It's been ages since I've last been in Vale." Marlowe said as his mind slowly wandered to his Huntsman days. "I hope you haven't been causing trouble for your fellow students."

Russel chuckled as he busied himself with cutting the steak on his plate. "You know me Marlowe. I've been on my best behavior."

"I was afraid you'd say that." The elder of the two just shook his head.

"The city's gorgeous." Russel leaned back in his seat and just stared up at the ceiling, recalling the city of Vale. "I look at it from my dorm and it's just this marble of lights. And then I can just look out towards the ocean and see the stars. It's perfect."

"I remember my first time in Vale. I felt the same way." Marlowe muttered as he grabbed himself a spoon full of potatoes for his plate. "The city life isn't like how it is in Oakwood is it? It's grand, bombastic and not at all deep rooted like these blasted trees. You can be whatever you want out there, like a huntsman."

"We just had a dance at Beacon." Russel said as Marlowe passed the bowl of potatoes his way. The young Thrush to grabbed himself a spoonful and passed it along over to Cardin, who was all too happy to receive it.

"Oh dear no." Marlowe feigned a heart attack, placing a hand over his heart. "You and dances aren't exactly a good combination."

"I told you, I was on my best behavior, old man." Russel reassured, raising his right hand and mocking a scout troop salute.

Not believing a word Russel said, Marlowe looked to his teammates and caught their attention with the wave of a hand. "Hey you kids, did anything odd happen during this dance of yours? No drama
or people shouting how ruined everything was?" He asked.

"Now that you mentioned it," Dove tapped his chin as he thought aloud. "Some guy was stripped naked and tied to the flagpole right outside the ballroom."

Marlowe then slowly turned his head and shot Russel an accusing look. "You can't stay out of trouble can you?" He laughed.

"Trouble finds me." Russel remarked. "Who am I to resist a challenge?"

"Ha!" "One of these days you're gonna run right into something more stubborn than you are."

"Then I'll just watch where I step." Russel replied. Noticing how long they'd been talking about himself, the young Thrush thought it impolite and decided to change the topic of their discussion. "But enough about me, how've you been?"

"Oh I've had my hands full." Marlowe let out a stressed sigh. "But these fine ladies and gentlemen have been helping me meet demands." Marlowe raised a glass to his farmhands.

"I've only been back in town for a day, but I couldn't help but notice what's changed. The school's closed down."

"Oh, that." Marlowe grunted, not hiding what disgust he felt on the matter. "You've gone there, Russel. The place was falling apart right in front of everyone. Facilities were garbage, text books were out of date, not to mention the attitudes of the teachers." He spared a glance over at Port who was busy scarfing down whatever was on his plate. "Just by being here that gentleman's got more credentials than any other who taught at the local Academy."

"Which reminds me, I'd like to apologize on behalf of the Cherri's." The retired huntsman turned farmer rubbed the back of his neck awkwardly. "I'd be surprised if you haven't found out by now, but Marie-Anne is attending Beacon as well."

Russel frowned at the mention of her name. He though back to just last night, when in her drunken anger she'd gathered together an angry mob of many others Russel had scorned directly or indirectly and tied him to the very same flag pole he'd later tie Lance to. "I've already had enough run-ins with her."

"Ah, poor lad." Marlowe said sounding sympathetic to Russel's case. "After that business with prom, I doubt she'll ever let up."

"Speaking of Ruddy and Burgundy," Russel said being all too quick to change the topic. "Again, only been here a day. Any chance you know what's happened to them?"

There was a delay in Marlowe's response, as if he had to think for a moment and choose his words. "Would you believe they've eloped?" Marlowe said doing his best not to crack up laughing.

"No shit?" Russel's eyes raised slightly in surprise.

"No shit." Marlowe snickered. "I mean, what a heart attack on their parents, god I can't even imagine what would happen what it must feel like. But just when we all had them figured out, that it was over and done with, they just up and vanished. They left a note sayin' 'Welp we're getting hitched. Good-bye.' What a crazy turn of events."

"Well I'm glad they're happy." Russel found himself saying honestly.
"Aye." Marlowe nodded in agreement. The old man then looked across the table following the noise of chair scraping against wood. One of his farmhands had finished his meal and was heading to the kitchen to clean his plate. Time had seemingly flown over their shoulder, too caught up in catching up. "Here we've been blabbin' and the foods been gettin' cold."

"How silly of us." Russel shook his head.

They remained silent for the rest of the evening, Team CRL and Port had gorged themselves on their fill of food, as did the farmhands and Marlowe. The portions were so grand, there were bound to be left overs. So Marlowe obliged Port's request for a box to go. They all said their thanks for the meal and Russel and Marlowe said their good-byes.

Down the road they found themselves yet again, the light that led their way through the darkness was not the city lights of Vale but the stars above. There were nights in Vale where Russel would find himself missing the stars that shone bright above Oakwood, but then he'd turn to sea and find them hiding just outside of Vale's shine.

When they all reached the Inn, the all decided to turn in for the night. Port went off to his room, that box of food still in hand. Dove and Sky said their good byes for the night, they'd resume searching for Grimm in the morning, probably. Maybe they wouldn't, it all depended on Port really. Maybe they'd cleared the Grimm for the time being and they could call it in early. Go back to Beacon and veg out for the remainder of time until the Vytal Festival.

Russel and Cardin entered their room and each began to their nightly routine before bed. Cardin busied himself with looking at his scroll, no doubt he'd gotten messages from Velvet. But the Winchester boy didn't seem all too eager to message back, after all he was still reeling from the other day's activities and the awkwardness that came with it.

So Russel just kicked his boots off and sat on his bed. He glanced at the old hand clock that was mounted on the wall. They'd shown up at Marlowe's a little before seven and now it was ten. Their room didn't have the comfort of a television, you could list that as one of the negatives of Oakwood. So that left Russel with nothing to busy himself with.

But then Cardin started talking. "It's kind of funny." The burnt orange haired boy said as he set his scroll aside. Out of the corner of Russel's eye he could see that Cardin hadn't read any of his messages. The app was bursting with a number in the double digits, referring to the number of unread messages he'd received.

"What is?" Russel asked lazily.

"You actually having a positive relationship with someone." Cardin said, causing Russel to raise a brow in surprise. "I mean that from an observer's point of view. I'm just calling it as I see it. Just nice to see you actually enjoying yourself."

Russel just eyed Cadin curiously, unsure how to take the compliment. So he just smiled and nodded before the gears in his head started moving again. "Don't go getting sweet on me now Cardin." He snickered.

"But what a day, eh? Saved the town from a pack of Creeps. Got a free meal out of it." Cardin mused. "Things wrapped up rather nicely didn't they?"

"Yeah." Russel agreed before falling back on his bed. He thought back to the Grimm, how they were so disoriented from the need to satisfy their hunger that they were barely able to put up a fight. They didn't save the day, it was a slaughter. "A little too nicely."
"What do you mean?" Cardin looked to his partner in confusion.

"They were all in the same condition as the other. The Creeps." Russel muttered as he stared up at the ceiling. "The Alpha would've taken priority over its own wellbeing, right? Then why was it and the Beta on the same level?"

"Dry season. Maybe they couldn't find any food out there? I don't know." Cardin offered his thoughts with a shrug. "But I can see what you're getting at. They were all worse for wear. Too hungry to organize, like it was every man for itself."

"We passed through a lot of farm land on the way to the woods. Creeps are scavengers, they'd have hit a chicken coup if they were hungry."

"But they didn't. They charged straight into town." Cardin scratched his hairless chin in thought. He just shook his head, the more they thought about it, and the more the entire ordeal displeased Cardin.

"That doesn't make any sense." Russel bit his lip. As he thought about it, the concept of starved Grimm lashing out at anything became more and more familiar. Such as one hot day in Gym class, when he and the rest of his class were taken to the field to unlock their auras, the coach released Grimm that all displayed the same traits. The realization caused Russel to shudder. "Maybe we weren't dealing with the garden variety Grimm? Maybe they were home grown?"

"I don't follow."

"Oakwood Academy's closed down. Their facilities had capture Grimm. We kept them in the dark, never fed them anything. Theoretically, all the Grimm would be in the safe state as those Creeps we fought." Russel shared his thoughts before sitting back up.

"You'd think the faculty would kill the damn things before closing shop, would you?" Cardin said hopefully.

"This isn't Vale, Cardin." Russel said disdainfully. "This is Oakwood. Standards here went out the window the same time Mantle decides Atlas sounded better."

"Alright, up for a field trip?" Cardin jumped off his bed and began to get his equipment in order.

"I gotta work off this steak somehow." Russel patted his gut before reaching out for his discarded boots. He and Cardin claimed their weapons and were out the door.

They debated for a moment about involving the others. But they ultimately decided not to just in case they were wrong. So the duo set out, leaving the Inn through the front. Once again, Russel couldn't help but feel the Inn Keeper's eyes following him. He was just about to say something to the lass, but he opted not too. Best keep things quiet, no need to go getting into trouble. Maybe it was Marlowe's words to him earlier, maybe she'd be more stubborn than he.

They calmly made their way over to the boarded up school. Not many people were out on the streets, from the sounds of all the laughter, it seemed everyone was busy own at the tavern having themselves a blazing row with themselves. Cardin and Russel reached the school and circled around to the other side where the field was.

Over the fence they went, which was something Russel couldn't help but laugh at. Years he'd been breaking out of the damn place and now he was breaking in, funny how things turn out. Once they were on the other side, Cardin defaulted the navigational duties over to Russel. Russel took point, whipping out his scroll for light.
Oakwood Academy's layout was odd. Buildings encircled the field where the Grimm were held beneath. They took some safety precautions, last thing they needed was them making a run through a single exit, now all they had to do was rampage through classrooms full of students. Along the way, Russel caught sight of the old library. It looked the same as it always had, dark, gloomy and foreboding.

Back in the day Russel would spend his free time there. When he didn't have class or when he wasn't needed at home, his time was spent in between the library's stacks, getting the best education he could. Aside from the dusty set up, the out of date texts, and the otherwise inattentive staff, it was the perfect base of operations for a kid like himself.

He had a lot of history in that building, some good and some bad. He first met Burgundy in there, in fact. Ruddy was all jazzed up about some girl he'd been talking to and eventually brought her into Russel's world.

They didn't have a negative relationship, but like so many other people in Russel's life the boy could say they were friends. She was always that girl Ruddy was dating, nothing more. He played nice, or as nice as he could. He'd catch Burgundy rolling her eyes at his comments, but she never said anything.

There had been several theories about why Ruddy and Burgundy had broken up. Some assumed it was just a regular falling out, but some would always come back around and think Russel was responsible. Maybe he was, maybe all his shenanigans had pushed Burgundy to her breaking point. Maybe because Ruddy would never oppose Russel, that's why she left him.

Russel was one of three people to know the truth. He'd never say it, however, because he wasn't supposed to be there that day. He'd been in the library when he overheard the shouting. Late in the evening, everyone had gone home. He peeked outside and saw them arguing and couldn't help but overhear. He kept quiet about the whole affair, after all it wasn't for him to tell.

"So this is where you went to school?" Cardin asked, not sounding too impressed by what the school had to offer. "Got any funny stories about this place?"

"I lost my virginity over there." Russel said casually as he pointed a thumb to a nearby bungalow. "Me and Rocio Bluejeans had been at each other's throats for years. It all culminated in the most awkward afternoon detention I'd ever had."

"Oh gross, Russel." Cardin said in disgust, causing Russel to burst out laughing.

"So, you and Pyrrha?" Russel said, causing Cardin to freeze. "Don't deny it."

"Alcohol makes you do stupid things." Cardin held the bridge of his nose and sighed. "I guess on some level, I wanted it. But I don't know, that's not how I wanted that to go."

"She was messed up over it too." Russel said as they made their way onto the grassy field. "I guess she was expecting her first time to be with someone she trusted, like Jaune or something like that. I couldn't tell what disappointed her the most, Jaune not being the guy she woke up beside or herself."

"That's going to be one awkward conversation when we get back to Beacon." Cardin groaned. "You aren't going to say anything, right? I don't exactly have the best reputation, you know. We both know exactly how it'll all go down if word gets out."

"I won't, that's private, for you two to discuss on your own. I only brought it up because I wanted to
clear the air." Russel said thoughtfully.

"Why?" Cardin just eyed Russel unsure of his intentions.

"Because we're about to go where all the Grimm live. If they're in there, I want us being straight with each other. You're my partner, I'm yours. We get each other's backs." Russel muttered. They continued to walk through the field before stopping dead in the center. Russel knelt down and peeled away a piece of the lawn, revealing a control panel beneath. He opened it up and hit a switch, causing a section of the field to open up, revealing a staircase.

"They say that the most trustworthy thing two men can do is sit in a room together with a gun in between them. It's to show that each has the power to kill the other, but neither do it, because they mean the other no harm." Cardin said as he and Russel began to descend down the staircase. "Try that scenario but a room full of Grimm."

Down into the dark depths of the underground facility they went. Their only source of light was their scrolls and the magma crystal attached to Cardin's mace. They kept on going until reaching the bottom. Along a nearby wall, Russel fumble to find a light switch of some sort. And as luck would have it, he found one.

The lights switched on, revealing the entirety of the underground facility. To both boy's surprise, they found the complex empty, just a room gathering dust.

"Alright, scratch that. An empty room." Cardin folded his arms over his chest. "Guess they got rid of them after all. Good job crappy faculty."

"No they didn't." Russel grunted as he searched the area. He found a series of scratch marks that seemed to go on forever deeper into the complex. "What kind of Grim makes these marks?" He asked over his shoulder.

"Not Grimm, no. Looks like something was hauled through and scraped the floor." Cardin said as he eyed the markings. "How did they hold the Grimm in here anyway?"

"Cages." Russel uttered darkly. They both looked around, as it would, they found no sign of cages. "Someone took the Grimm."

"They had to get the cages out somehow, right?" Cardin figured. He then pointed down at the scratch marks and began to follow them. As the duo followed the scratch marks, it became apparent that they were just one big line, no doubt left behind by a cage that was hauled away.

Further into the complex they went, through vast open white rooms with steel walls. There were carvings in the walls made by Grimm that spoke tales of the beasts that were held captive beneath the school.

They'd walked for what felt like miles, but eventually they reached the end. A giant door that could open and allow trucks to drive on in, probably to deliver the Grimm for use. They found a smaller side door for personal use off to the side and pulled it open, allowing them to leave the building.

That's when the pair found themselves outside once more, miles away from the town and in the forest that surrounded it. There were sounds and lights up ahead, voices belonging to numerous individuals that neither huntsman in training was too keen on meeting immediately. They snuck off into the woods to get a better angle on things.

There were trucks in an open field, at least ten men and women were operating forklifts, moving cages with Grimm onto awaiting trucks. From behind some trees, Russel and Cardin lay prone with
the later using a pair of binoculars to scope out the situation.

"Oh shit." Cardin muttered quietly as he watched the masked men and women in white robes busied themselves with loading all sorts of Grimm into trucks. "It's the White Fang. They're loading the last of the Grimm onto trucks."

"God dammit." Russel gritted his teeth angrily. "There's no telling what those jackasses can do with them. Before they were hitting dust shops, robbing trains and causing minimalized terror. Imagine how much damage they can do with Grimm at their disposal?" He shook his head. "This is bad."

"And then it goes from bad," Cardin and Russel froze where they lay at the foreign voice. They slowly turned their heads around and found the Inn Keeper of all people standing behind them with a gun aimed at them. She moved her hair out the way, revealing for their benefit where her antlers had once been. "To much, much worse."

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If it was apparent before, this Arc is very much just Russel's homecoming. It's very much about him coming to terms with his past one step at a time. Marlowe is the only positive influence in his life he acknowledges. The Marlowe/Dinner stuff I tried to write like an almost familial bond.

When it comes to Ruddy and Burgundy, Russel's very uncertain about his relationship with them. You all remember them from Arc 4 right? I hope. You can see some interesting parallels with their situation and Cardin and Pyrrha. I can't say its entirely the same, there are differences, but at the heart of it there are those similarities that can't go unnoticed.

But also, the Cardin and Russel buddy cop feature. Their friendship is one of the main driving points of this story. So, this arc and especially the next one are going to see them become closer, actually become friends. That's not a spoiler right? Interlude 2 was about Cardin reflecting on their friendship.

But anyways, next chapter is Russel and Cardin vs. The White Fang. Oh boy.

'Til next time! Later days!
Hello there! Welcome back for another chapter of 'The Darkling Thrush'!

This was by far the most I've written in one sitting and so far the most action heavy of any chapter. I've been working on my fight scenes over the years and I hope to nail them down before we reach the Vytal Festival. Because, well, that's self explanatory really.

Well that's enough yapping for now, on with the show!

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XXIV

Who Dares Wins: Part 4

Gunshots rang loudly throughout the Oakwood forest. The White Fang members halted their work, startled by how close it sounded. They gathered their weapons and stowed away the Grimm before setting out to follow the noises that had suddenly ceased. A silent hush fell across the land, everyone waiting for the next shots to kick off.

"Okay, we can't ever let anyone know what we did." Cardin said firmly as both he and Russel sat around the unconscious body of the Inn Keeper. "If word got out back at Beacon that the first person we beat up was a woman, everyone would start thinking we're a bunch of sexists."

"Everyone already thinks we're a bunch of sexists." Russel scoffed as he inspected the handgun they'd wrestled away from the Inn Keeper. He held it up against one of his daggers and spotted similar sigils on both weapons, thus confirming the Inn Keeper's allegiance to the White Fang. "We're also apparently racists. This incident doesn't help either case. So fuck it, whatever."

"They'll be coming." Cardin said as Russel handed him the handgun. "Sure you don't need it?" He asked his partner as he accepted the weapon.

"You'll need it more than me." Russel said before standing up. He extended his hand to Cardin, who gratefully accepted the assist back onto his feet.

"I serve as a distraction, get their attention and then you sneak in and gut the Grimm in their cages." Cardin said as they began to head out. "Whatever it is they want with the Grimm, we can't allow the White Fang to get away with them."

"Agreed." Russel nodded.

Understanding their parts in their half-baked plan, the two huntsmen set off in different directions. Cardin ran as fast as he could, his mace in one hand and the Inn Keeper's hand gun in the other. The Winchester boy sped off like a bullet thorough the lights of White Fang search parties.

"There!" One of the white robed fanatics shouted as he caught sight of Cardin.

As they'd planned, the White Fang members set off after Cardin, leaving their operation relatively unprotected. That left Russel with the menial task of sneaking past the one or two sentries they'd left guarding the caged Grimm.

The young Thrush could hear gunfire out in the distance. A part of him worried of Cardin's
wellbeing, but he pushed those thoughts aside, recalling with semblance of increased strength and durability. The Winchester boy was a walking tank, an armed and dangerous tank to boot.

Russel crawled into one of the truck containers and drew his daggers. The next part was tricky, after all, the Grimm would surely be startled by his presence and alert the sentries outside. So Russel got to work and approached the nearest caged creature, a Beowulf of all things. It growled quietly as it stared at Russel as he approached. Russel knelt beside the cage in order to taunt the beast into coming closer. It let out a loud growl and lunged at the bars. Russel then thrust his daggers through the bars, causing the Beowulf to impale itself on them.

He withdrew his daggers and set to work on the next captured Grimm. Beyond the container, he could hear the two sentries wondering aloud at what the commotion was. They'd be right on top of him soon. So Russel decided to speed run it and set to cutting the locks on all the cages off.

Back in the forest, Cardin busied himself with leading the White Fang members as far away from their work site as possible. He needed to buy Russel enough time to accomplish his task and thankfully the White Fang weren't exactly in the chance taking mood, they'd practically sent their entire force after him.

Cardin just kept running, their shouts for him to stop falling on deaf ears. But then the gunfire started, causing Cardin to switch his running in a straight line tactic to more of a zig zag through the trees sort of effort. The White Fang were armed with rifles, Atlas tech that had been stolen on one of their raids.

Cardin's armor was tough and his semblance was tougher. The bullets would bounce of the young man, feeling like a light tap or a simple flick. But the Winchester boy would eventually have to stand his ground, there was no conceivable way that he could run all night. His aura meter had indicated he was half full last time he checked, that was after he and his team had taken care of the pack of Creeps.

Growing tired and getting closer to town, Cardin realized that final stand of his would be happening sooner than he expected. He needed to buy Russel time sure, but the last thing he wanted was to put civilians in harm's way. Maybe if they were close enough to town, the gunfire would catch everyone's attention and Port and the rest of his team would come running to investigate. Hopefully Cardin would still be around for them to help.

Pushing those grim thoughts aside, Cardin pressed on, avoiding another hail of bullets that streaked around him. Dead ahead, Cardin decided upon spotting an old rundown Cabin in the woods, that would be his final stand, his Cape Groad.

"He's heading for the cabin!" One of the White Fang members shouted.

Cardin made it to the cabin, bullets striking everything around him and bouncing off his back. He took up a position behind the cabin's only standing roof and aimed the Inn Keeper's handgun out the window at the crazed zealots that chased him.

He'd never used a gun before, Cardin realized as he felt the weight of the weapon in his palm. He'd always been more of a melee type of guy. That was his strength as a large hulking figure, he'd intimidate his opponent with his size and bash them into the pavement with his equally hulking mace. Cardin let out a warning shot, as a means to halt the White Fang's advance. The kickback from the handgun was unexpected, however. The gun slammed itself against Cardin's face, causing him to grunt in pain. If this was an indicator of how things were going to go, then he was surely doomed.
But the Winchester boy's resolve was not crushed. He steadied the gun in his hand and took aim as the hail of bullets tore through what was left of the old cabin. This was the life of a Huntsman, they looked death in the face every day and laughed at impossible odds. What were a handful of crazed masked types to a pack of ravenous Grimm? That Ursa back in Forever Fall forest scared him more than these jokers.

There positions were sloppy, the White Fang were completely unaware of their surroundings. And that was why Cardin would come out on top, that's why Winchesters always came out on top. He stuck his feet to the ground and braced himself for the kickback of the gun and opened fire once more. Out of the barrel shot out a blink and you'll miss it bullet that struck the side of a tree that one of the White Fang was using for cover. The splinters that ripped out of the tree bathed the zealot, causing him to jump back and run for more suitable cover.

They could sweep the land with a hail of bullets, but Cardin would stand firm. He could take whatever they could dish out. They could try organizing but even then there would be no other result. So he took his time with aiming, which was something those whom he fought could benefit from learning. He let out another shot, his efforts had rewarded him by striking and damaging one of the White Fang's weapons. Cardin just smirked to himself, his dire situation didn't seem all too bleak after all.

Back with Russel, the green haired boy had just done something beyond stupid. He let the Grimm out of their cages. There weren't too many of them, less than ten, no doubt the last Grimm the old school had locked up. The carnivorous creatures were mainly Beowulfs and Creeps, there was a Boarbatusk in the bunch, but beside that not a single apex predator amongst them.

The creatures had been caged up for so long, sat alone in darkness and on the brink of starvation, Russel knew they wouldn't only attack him. The two White Fang members left behind didn't know what to do at the sight of the Grimm bum rushing them. But that worked out in Russel's favor. He just needed the Grimm dead, the White Fang could serve as a distraction or aid in his endeavors, he didn't really care.

One of the White Fang members regained his senses and started shooting into the mob of Grimm. The Beowulfs were his main priority as they posed the real danger. They had a farther reach than any of the others, therefore taking them out was a priority. With that handled, Russel took to the task of curb stomping the Boarbatusk as it attempted to escape. Getting it while it was still disoriented was key, after all he'd seen firsthand what those things could do back at Beacon when Weiss fought one.

Stunned by Russel's initial attack, the Boarbatusk was helpless to the young man's next actions. He flipped it over onto its back, exposing its less armored belly and stabbed downward with a dagger. The Grimm let out a pain wail. Still not dead, Russel took to repeatedly stabbing the thing until its cries ceased and its body dissolved. A messy kill if there ever was one, but Russel didn't care, he had other Grimm to attend to.

Russel disembarked from the container and found the White Fang members about to be overrun. The duo had done a good enough job of thinning the herd, all that remained were a couple of Creeps and a Beowulf. But one of them was unconscious and the other masked faunus was cradling his brother in arms in vein attempts to hold back the Grimm.

The young Thrush rushed up behind the Beowulf just as it was about to land the final blow. He leapt up and ran one of his blades through the beast from behind. The Beowulf let out a loud howl while Russel ran his other dagger through it. The Beowulf fell over and Russel removed his blades from its body. He turned to find the creeps attempting to eat one of the still conscious White Fang
The masked faunus let out several shouts and cries for help while the Creeps sank their teeth into his arms and legs. To end the god awful screaming, Russel threw his daggers at the Creeps, each one pierced through their bodies, killing them instantly. The White Fang member who'd almost been eaten found his arms and legs completely thrashed by the ordeal. He couldn't lift a finger to harm Russel even if he wanted to.

"Sup." Russel greeted the White Fang. " Couldn't help but notice you guys were trying to transport Grimm. Now I don't know every law word for word, but that just sounds very much illegal."

"Drop dead Human!" The crippled faunus shouted defiantly.

Russel laughed mockingly in response. "Way I see it, I'm the only option you have for receiving help. Either you tell me just what the hell you guys were planning on doing with those things or you can kiss that airship ride to a hospital goodbye."

Part of Russel didn't honestly expect that the wounded faunus would take him up on his offer. But his response was still brow raising. The wounded man just laughed in a similar mocking tone as Russel had just moments ago.

"You aren't my only option." He said knowingly.

Russel followed the man's eyes, turning around to see just what he was talking about. And then he froze in place, as if he'd seen a ghost. Walking out from behind the truck was a familiar tall, bald man.

"I would have gladly waited a lifetime for this bout." The Iron Nail said as he addressed the stunned Russel. "This operation was too important to be sacrificed for some personal vendetta, but it seems fate has had other plans for the likes of you and I; Russel."

"I didn't know we were on a first name basis." Russel muttered, quickly snapping out of his stunned state. He quickly spun around and recovered his daggers out of the still dissolving Creep bodies and held them ready.

"Since our last meeting, I've taken the time to study up on the man responsible for the deaths of three of my brothers and sisters." The Iron Nail sneered as he began to circle around Russel. In doing so, the above average man removed a hammer from his coat. "You have quite the reputation in this town."

"Last I checked Oakwood residents never took to outsiders too well." Russel said as he followed The Iron Nail's movements closely. "That beauty mark of yours would've definitely scared off the ladies."

"There's the famous wit." The Iron Nail laughed. He reached up with his free hand and lightly tap the scar on the side of his head with two fingers and laughed once more. The scar was a result of their last meeting, when Russel had left the man to the mercy of the Ursa. "I would have you know I bested the beast, one of our first shipments out of Oakwood. But there is a measure of truth to your words. No one would take too kindly to us. But of course that wasn't how I received my intelligence. We had many sources, mainly firsthand accounts."

"Firsthand accounts?" Russel questioned, not liking the sound of The Iron Nail's words.

"You were not the first individual to stumble onto our operations, Russel." The Iron Nail smirked. "Do the names Ruddy and Burgundy ring a bell?"
Back with Cardin, the CRDL Team leader was doing his best to keep the White Fang at bay. If anyone in town had heard the commotion, then they'd be running to investigate by now. Scratch that, whatever help he'd received should've been there by now. That lowered the morale a bit.

Ammunition was running low. They'd only pulled two spare magazines off the Inn Keeper. Their struggle with the woman had left the handgun's already in use magazine depleted, which left Cardin to use the spares. He was now down to half of the last magazine if he was counting his bullets correctly.

The wall he hid behind was practically in pieces. All of the White Fang members were still standing and it didn't seem like they were running out of ammunition themselves anytime soon. That left Cardin in a rather bad spot.

The last thing Cardin needed was more bad news, such as the cabin's rotted out wooden floor giving way. Following a loud creek, Cardin fell through the floor with a loud yelp. The White Fang just kept shooting, Cardin's cries falling deaf over the gunfire. The Winchester boy hadn't fallen far, thankfully the cellar of the cabin had some padding to break his fall.

As he got back up and started to think about his terrible predicament, it suddenly dawned on Cardin how odd it sounded that there was padding inside of a condemned cabin. So he turned back around to see what he'd landed on and jumped back in horror at the sight of two dead bodies. They were a boy and a girl around Cardin's age by the looks of things. They didn't seem to be there long, hadn't been dead no more than a month.

Cardin had to hold back the urge to vomit. He couldn't afford to worry about that, not while the White Fang weren't letting up with their onslaught. But still, Cardin couldn't look away from the bodies. He looked them over a bit in order to identify a cause of death. There were several laceration around there arms, as if they'd been bound by rope, poor bastards were interrogated before they died. And the cause of death appeared to be blunt force to the cranium, almost like they were hit with a hammer.

What a terrible way to go, Cardin thought to himself.

"They came wandering into the woods one day. I had no idea if they knew anything about our operation here." The Iron Nail said honestly. "But we couldn't let them leave. They'd seen too much. And so, out of curiosity, I asked them about you, they appeared to be as young as you, maybe they knew you, maybe they didn't."

"They eloped."

"So I hear. But I beg to differ." The Iron Nail scoffed. "We hid the bodies in that old rundown cabin back in the forest. I also hear no one goes there."

"You killed them? All for what? Just to know shit about me?" Russel exclaimed in disgust.

"All they did was tell me things I already knew. It was just an exercise, a gamble, I didn't expect them to know you." The Iron Nail shrugged. "If it makes you feel any better, I was going to kill them regardless."

"Oh you sick bastard." Russel sneered.

"I could say the same about you." The large faunus chuckled darkly. "After all, what kind of man kills his mother?"

Russel lunged forward, striking at The Iron Nail with one of his daggers. But the faunus was faster.
and blocked the attack with his hammer. He reeled back his fist and activated his semblance, coating his body in metal and threw a punch at Russel. He sent the young Thrush flying through the sky, gasping as the air left his body.

The huntsman crashed through trees like a cannonball, completely cutting them in two. He eventually came to a stop, rolling onto the ground. Russel staggered back onto his feet as The Iron Nail calmly walked through the makeshift path through the forest.

"I've dreamed about this day for a while now." The Iron Nail said smugly as he drew closer. "But I must say, I mildly disappointed."

Russel let out a sharp yell as he once more attempted to strike The Iron Nail. "There's the fire!" The faunus shouted as he moved to block the young Thrush's attacks. He moved in to halt one of Russel's strikes with his hammer as he'd done once before, only for Russel to stop mid swipe and spin back around for a reverses strike. Once again, The Iron Nail moved to intercept Russel's blow, this ultimately left his side unguarded allowing for Russel to stop mid swing once again and thrust his left dagger against the man's ribs.

But The Iron Nail's metal coating left him otherwise unaffected as Russel's dagger just bounced off. The tall faunus just laughed at Russel's failed attempts to land a killing blow and raised his hammer and struck Russel across the face. Russel rolled with the hit and pushed on despite the pain. He spun around, a tad bit disoriented but kept on.

Russel's attacks were seemingly having no effect on The Iron Nail, with his semblance in full effect, this left the man impervious to most physical attacks. This left Russel in an otherwise risky situation. So the boy decided to turn and run after feigning another attack. The best he could do was psych out the larger man and keep him guessing.

The young Thrush didn't get too far, after all he'd just been thrown through several trees. Not to mention The Iron Nail was well rested and not burdened by other activities throughout the day. So The Iron Nail caught up to Russel and forced him to fight once more lest he be struck from behind.

"All this time you've had my weapons and you haven't even mastered them!" The Iron Nail taunted as struck Russel with his hammer yet again. This time Russel raised his daggers like an 'x' and blocked the strike, but the force behind the weapon sent Russel flying backwards. He rolled onto his back and eventually rolled onto his feet, allowing him to kick off back up and standing ready for the next attack.

But Russel was beginning to doubt if he could even withstand another attack. The Iron Nail wasn't some Ursa who could be intimidated, nor was he a Huntsman he could play mind games with, he wasn't a Creep that could be bullied or an exhausted Boarbatusk that could be caught off guard. The Iron Nail was a well-rested fighter with years of experience and up until now the man had been toying with him. And Russel was sincerely doubting he would ever best the man.

The hail of bullets outside the rundown cabin had completely stopped. Cardin pulled himself out of the hole he'd fallen down in order to assess the situation. Thankfully there was a big enough piece of wall to hide behind. So Cardin peeked around a corner and found that the White Fang members were talking amongst themselves. They were whispering, Cardin had to really try to hear them. By the sounds of things they were running low on ammo too, how unfortunate.

So that put Cardin on equal footing with them all; that was good news. If there was any bad news it was the fact he hadn't received any help from any of the townsfolk nor had Russel returned to lend a hand. Now that didn't bode well for either of them. It was a simple job for Russel, run in and gut the Grimm. His partner's absence meant he'd run into as much trouble as he was in now.
If help wasn't going to arrive, then that meant Cardin was going to have to go on the offensive. He could last any longer even if he tried. His saving grace was the White Fang’s lack of strong leadership. He'd be dead right now if they were following a tactician of some sort. No doubt about it, Cardin got stuck with the grunts of all people. An operation this size needed someone to head it, someone smart. Now that didn't bode well for Russel.

So Cardin raised his handgun. He emptied out the magazine and counted the remaining rounds. Five left overall, Cardin returned the magazine into the gun and readied himself as he was about to try something stupid. He leapt out of cover and began to charge at the White Fang. Now that must've startled them. The entire time they had grown comfortable in shooting at a stationary target, but now Cardin was on the offensive and he'd caught them with their pants down.

So he shot at them, not really aiming for anyone specific, rather their weapons. He'd never held a gun before in his life, but he had to say, he was a quick learner. With pinpoint accuracy he landed all five shots, damaging five more weapons. That still left two however. So Cardin flung the handgun at one of the two White Fang members, striking him in the throat, causing him to drop his gun and grab his neck. The other guy wasn't much of a problem for Cardin, he'd done the math in his head.

Cardin raised his mace and kicked off the child locks. He slammed the end onto the ground, causing the magma crystal to burst the ground in a straight line. The ground beneath the last gun wielding White Fang member erupted, sending him flying. With their weapons disabled, Cardin fully turned to face them.

Tired, exhausted from physical exertion, Cardin could've just blacked out then and there. But he endured, he endured intent on living to see tomorrow. He shouldered his mace and smirked proudly. "Well come on. I don't have all night."

And before and of the White Fang could take the initiative to fight Cardin, they all got on their knees and put their hands behind their heads. Cardin just raised a brow in confusion. "Ahem." A familiar voice caught Cardin's attention. The Winchester boy spun around and to his joy, he found Professor Port, along with Dove, Sky and many townsfolk armed with pitchforks and torches standing behind him. "Sorry to interrupt such a rousing brawl, Mr. Winchester, but we thought you could use a hand."

Cardin smiled dumbly, thankful for their presence. He reached out to hug Port, but only found himself in freefall and would've hit the ground if not for Dove and Sky's interference. The two boys caught their leader and threw the larger boy's arms over their shoulders.

"White Fang have been robbing Oakwood Academy of the Grimm they'd use for training." Cardin said, giving a nod over to the eight White Fang who were on their knees.

"Where's Russel?" Sky asked, noting the absence of their team's fourth member.

"We divided in order to conquer. I left him to the task of eliminating the captured Grimm. If anything happened to us we couldn't allow them to take the Grimm. God knows what they'd do with them." Cardin answered. "But I think something happened to him, he should've been here helping me by now."

"Oh jeez." One of the townsfolk exclaimed as they investigated the old cabin.

"That's Ruddy and Burgundy!" One shouted in horror.

"I thought they eloped…dear god." Another said somberly. The four huntsmen just exchange
glances. They unanimously decided to go looking for Russel, lest he end up like one of those kids in the cellar. The town's folk then rounded up the White Fang and marched them off while others set off with the huntsmen.

Russel's body was flung out of the forest and followed closely behind by The Iron Nail. He bounced and landed in the local cemetery. He struggled to get back up, he'd taken more punishment than he thought he could. His face was puffy and bruised, he'd landed on a rather pointy piece of bar earlier and whatever aura he still had was diverted to patching that up. Or at the very least halting the blood flow.

The Iron Nail just laughed mockingly as he approached Russel once more. The young Thrush leapt up intent on stabbing the man, but his semblance had prevented Russel from doing any real damage. The faunus just laughed at Russel's attempts to harm him and backhanded the younger man, sending him flying through the cemetery.

Russel crashed through several tombstones along the way before coming to a halt. He dropped a dagger and used his free hand to clutch his wound as he crawled up a familiar hill in an attempt to get away from The Iron Nail. Even if he were to meet his demise tonight, he was going to make the bald bastard work for it.

So The Iron Nail just followed Russel up the hill. He eventually caught up with the young Thrush and grabbed a hold of his leg and yanked him off the ground. Russel flailed aimlessly, too tired from the pain and blood loss. He aimed low and bashed the handle of his dagger against what he hoped was The Iron Nail's dick.

The Iron Nail heaved but did not release his hold over Russel. The young Thrush couldn't help but laugh, of all his attempts to harm the guy why didn't he just start off with kick the dude in the balls? It would've saved him a lot of trouble. So he was just a man in a metal suit, interesting.

The Iron Nail then flung Russel at the gravestone on the hill, knocking it over. Russel remained unmoving, his remaining dagger had since fallen out of his grasp and rolled down hill. The Iron nail just stalked forward until he towered over Russel.

"Hm." The Iron Nail muttered in an amused tone. Russel followed the White Fang lieutenant's gaze which led to the tombstone he'd thrown him through. It was his Father's grave marker. "Your Father's, no Russel?" The Iron Nail chuckled in a taunting manner.

Russel scowled upward at The Iron Nail. He tried to move but found it almost impossible. He felt bruised all over and he'd just gotten his aura to fix up that wound of his. He was almost completely spent.

"I spoke with the Old Man, he filled me in on all the noteworthy bits about you. Like your relationship with your Father." The Iron nail muttered. "Your father descended into alcoholism after you killed your mother. He subjected you to various forms of abuse. I somewhat pity you."

"But it is because of your upbringing why I despise you even more." The Iron Nail declared as he rose his hammer into the night sky. "You recall the other three who were with me on that day don't you? Their names were Gregory, Maulla and Troia."

"Does it look like I give a fuck?" Russel managed to sneer.

"No, no and I don't expect you to. How could you ever understand what it's like to lose those you love. You were brought up in hate. The Old Man also spoke of how you'd fight back, how your verbal disagreements would turn physical. You hated your father. And despite the favor we did
"They had dreams you know? The three of them. When the revolution was over and done with, Gregory wanted to open a bakery. Mauilla wanted to be a teacher. And Troia just wanted to a better life for his family. And then in an instant, you took that all away from them!" The Iron Nail shouted venomously, releasing all manner of pent up rage against Russel. "As I've been told, you're Father called you a killer for a majority of your life. How right he was."

"I didn't take nothing from them." Russel muttered as he managed to raise an arm to wipe the blood off his face with his arm warmer. "You all walked into the cave seeking an easy kill. You turned your backs for a second and then comes along the big bad Ursa who's got no problems hacking your pals to bits."

"You didn't even kill my dad. He died of a heart attack." Russel slurred as his arm fell against his Father's tombstone.

"You acted not to avenge your Father, of course you didn't. You don't know what it is to love, boy. There's no fire that burns bright in your heart, you're just something that walks the world that deserves to be put out." The Iron Nail shook his head in disgust. "Know that with your death, my fallen brothers and sisters will know peace."

Without another word, The Iron Nail raised his hammer over his body and brought it down, intending to finish Russel once and for all. But Russel couldn't help but smirk as The Iron Nail unknowingly walked right into his defeat.

"Soup Can." Russel muttered under his breath before quickly reaching over and grabbing his father's tombstone with both hands. And with all his might he and smashed it against The Iron Nail's face as he leaned in for the final blow. The Iron Nail fell over onto his side beside Russel. The White Fang lieutenant's semblance deactivated before he even hit the ground.

Russel struggled back onto his feet and stood looking down at The Iron Nail. His actions against the White Fang lieutenant had the unfortunate effect of knocking one of his eyes out of his head. The evidence of such action being on the lawn beside the unconscious man.

"Soup Cans." Russel muttered to himself. "We played with soup cans when we were kids. Metal shells with all manner of sensitives inside. You reminded me of one." He said before turning to walk down the hill.

He could hear people shouting his name. Russel looked ahead and could see lights and people following the devastation left behind by his and The Iron Nails fight. Russel attempted to shout out, but he just couldn't. He was too busy falling face first into the ground.

The next time Russel opened his eyes, he was afraid of what he'd see. The young Thrush awoke in the local clinic, he looked around to a nearby window, only to find it was morning. He blinked, unsure how to process everything. So he just kept staring put the window, afraid to move. It felt like he'd been thrown through solid stone, which he actually had.

Outside he could hear a rustling, a familiar jet engine whistle. Out the window he could see a number of airships begin to land in the town square. But they weren't the usual airship, not like the ones that had dropped them off the other day, but they were military grade dropships. Altesian military dropships.

So Russel then forced himself up off the cot he'd been laying in. He noticed his state of dress, or
rather the fact he wasn't wearing much. But thankfully whoever had brought him to the clinic had
also dropped off his duffel bag. So Russel stiffly changed into a fresh pair of clothes, which was
just a copy of his usual garb. He threw on his boots and then he set off to hobble his way outside in
order to find out just what the heck was going on.

Russel made his way out the clinic and onto the streets of Oakwood. In town square he could see
his team meeting with a dark haired man dressed in a white suit who was flanked by Atlas troops.
By the looks of that brass bar pinned to his suit, the man held a high position in their strange
authoritarian government.

"Good work halting this operation." General Ironwood of the Atlesian military said in a grateful
tone. "We have news of more White Fang activity up in Mt. Glenn. We'll be heading out shortly."

"Yes, I'd very much like to get in on the butt kicking. After all, I missed last night's activities." Port
twirled his moustache.

Seeing his team busy discussing things in broad daylight, Russel decided now was the best time if
ever there was one to slip away. One look over to the number of Atlesian troops marching White
Fang members into their many ships was enough to inform Russel that they'd succeeded last night
before he'd lost consciousness.

But there was a disturbing lack of a certain bald headed and currently one eyed White Fang
lieutenant amongst the bunch. Sure the state he'd left him in was nothing he could just walk off,
then again maybe it was. Russel had left the man for dead once before and he'd come back from
that.

So the bruised and battered Russel made his way up the road to a familiar homestead, one just as
familiar as his own home. The Iron Nail had said some things last night, about first-hand accounts,
even before he'd gotten a hold of Ruddy and Burgundy, he'd been talking to someone else, an Old
Man.

Russel rang the doorbell and waited patiently for and answer. The door opened and there stood
Marlowe looking a tad somber. But the man's expression turned to one of concern after noticing

"Save it Marlowe." Russel said neutrally. "I know everything. Invite me in."

Marlowe just stared at Russel. His expression morphed to one Russel had been familiar with his
entire life, but it was new to Marlowe. The old man looked at Russel with contempt and stood
aside, opening the door the whole way and allowing Russel to enter. Once the young Thrush had
entered, Marlowe made sure he wasn't followed by checking the surrounding area. Satisfied with
his search, Marlowe turned back to his home and closed to door behind him. There was much to be
discussed.

I was going to originally the chapter with Russel falling unconscious, but I just had to leave it
at a cliffhanger. I know you guys love those.

But oh yeah, the Ruddy and Burgundy thing...oh boy. They weren't always supposed to be
dead. In my original plot outline for this Arc I had planned for Russel to run into them in
Oakwood, that they would've been grateful for everything Russel did for them during the
dance. But when I started planning the later chapters of the arc, I couldn't reconcile that idea
with what kind of person Russel will be at the end of this arc. So Ruddy and Burgundy, two
prominent figures of his past were killed off.

I enjoyed writing the Cardin stuff. I envision him to be a very capable fighter and soldier. He's definitely the most militaristic of all the characters. And this is the first taste of Cardin using guns.

Also, while writing this I forgot Port was involved with the Breach in Volume 2, so that whole discussion between him and Ironwood sets this entire arc very much before the Volume 2 finale. Chronologically its only been a day since they left Beacon.

Well, I don't have too much else to say. I might be able to update in the next two days. I'm not really too sure. But I'll try my best. This next chapter shouldn't be too long. 'Til next time dear reader! Later days!
Welcome one and all to another chapter of 'The Darkling Thrush'!

I recall saying this would've been out a few days ago, but this chapter in particular has been in the works since a little before and after I finished the first arc. I always knew moving forward there would be a confrontation with Marlowe and I wrote this basic draft that showed off the conflict. But I spent the last couple days just trying to get this chapter right. It went from varying degrees of 'WTF' to 'OMG'. I don't know what it is now because I've worked on it for so long. So I'll just leave that to you the reader to decide...

Well enough with my yapping. On with the chapter.

"So when did you become the White Fang's bitch?" Russel asked crass as ever.

Almost on the entire other side of town, the green haired member of Team CRDL found himself in the company of man he once upon a time would've called family. Hell, he might've even called him dad, seeing as they were that close. But now they found themselves sitting in a quaint little living room, seated directly across from one another with a glass coffee table separating them.

Hegemony Marlowe, the largest land owner and well respected figure in Oakwood sat in his seat with his legs crossed, a displeased look on his face. He'd known Russel for most of the young boy's life, but even the years spent around him could never prepare Marlowe for the young Thrush's pottymouth.

"It was more of a mutual relationship." Marlowe said with a wave of his hand, not at all denying his involvement with the White Fang. After all, there was nothing to be gained from disputing such a fact. Russel came to him, there would be no pulling a fast one over that boy's head. No last minute take backs, no denying guilt, no pleas of innocence.

"Elaborate." Russel demanded lowly, doing his best not to raise his voice.

Marlowe could see the anger boiling inside the young Thrush. Last night he'd heard the gunshots ringing loudly in the nearby forest, he'd heard of the White Fang being discovered and their operation completely shut down by a pair of in-training Huntsmen. And by the looks of Russel's injuries, the poor kid had been put through the gauntlet last night. He probably ran into The Iron Nail even. If that was the case, then good lord he was pissed.

"You help the White Fang make off with all of Oakwood Academy's Grimm and you get a couple acres of land out of it all? That doesn't sound too much like a mutual relationship. There were hundreds of Grimm under that school, you know. You got scammed, Marlowe." Russel spoke in an attacking manner. Marlowe had seen the boy do it before, so he wasn't fazed by such a tactic.

"Land wasn't the only reason I helped them." Marlowe said a matter of fact, shooting a cold glare at the young Thrush sitting opposite of him. He shifted in his chair uncomfortably, an action that didn't go unnoticed by Russel. Marlowe uncrossed his legs and leaned forward in his chair. "They
offered me more than that, Russel. They offered me a chance to be part of something bigger."

"I don't give a shit about what they offered you, Marlowe. All I care about is what you did because of it." Russel sneered. The boy just shook his head and leaned back in his seat. He cracked a smile and laughed hollowly. "You were working with them on the night of the fires, weren't you?" Russel couldn't help but laugh as the notion dawned on him. And so the Thrush just continued to laugh, as if he'd been told the world's greatest joke. Once more, Marlowe shifted in his seat, obviously unnerved by the sight.

But Russel was aware that Marlowe was familiar with his playbook of tricks. How he could talk circles around a teacher, a public official or peer. It was always a combination of words, tone and actions that genuinely unsettled people. The fact Russel had gotten such a response from Marlowe told the young Thrush all he needed to know. Beneath the cushion of Marlowe's set, there was some sort of object. A weapon, Russel deduced.

"I could've just as easily done it differently, you know." Marlowe said, well aware that Russel had picked up on the angle he was currently working. "They set fire to crops and only a few homes. If not for my intervention, The Iron Nail and his men would've killed everyone. The whole ordeal would've been written off as a tragedy."

There was an obvious double meaning to Marlowe's words. The old man very much could've done things differently, and he could've very well do things differently now. He could've gone for the gun the moment they'd sat down. The whole ordeal would've been written off as a tragedy as Marlowe would pass along some false story of seeing the young Thrush run off in some bloodlust craze, never to be seen again.

"Oh it would've been a tragedy wouldn't it? So bad the rest of the town would never let you buy the land, not without a fight at least." Russel sneered angrily. "Everyone in this town's a boonie goat fucker, but they at least got the decency to feel, to mourn."

"I'm not your enemy, Russel. Everything I've done, I did to protect Oakwood, to protect our neighbors and by extension their neighbors and so on." Marlowe said hopefully. Russel picked up on the tone and couldn't resist raising an eyebrow in confusion. Marlowe was breaking out his grandfather voice, as he liked to call it, trying to appeal to Russel the only way he knew worked. "If only you knew what was coming, Russel."

"Rather ominous thing of you to say." Russel quipped.

"Oakwood's farmland, Russel. Farmland for miles and miles as far as they can see. It's the ass end of Vale, secluded enough as no one would possibly come barking by unless someone alerted the authorities." Marlowe muttered. "After all, every army needs to eat."

Russel's eyes shot open immediately at the mention of 'army'. "You really are the White Fang's bitch." He said harshly. "And they'll just keep you alive, eh? Keep you as some sort of figure head to keep the locals all doped up on merriment, oblivious at how hard they'd fallen. The damn academy's closed for goodness sake and not one of them batted an eye."

The young Thrush just shook his head in disbelief, realizing fully well that Marlowe and the White Fang's plans would've succeeded and still very much could. The White Fang had the town wrapped completely around their finger and they didn't even know it, they still wouldn't have known if not for his and the rest of their team's intervention. Hell, they wouldn't have found out about Ruddy and Burgundy's deaths unless they hadn't shown up.

And then Russel froze in place. Marlowe rose a curious brow, wondering just what was going on in
the boy's head. "Did you know about Ruddy and Burgundy?" Russel finally managed to ask.

Marlowe remained still under Russel's ever watching gaze. He pondered how to approach the question, but then the old man realized any and all attempts to deceive Russel would prove futile. He wasn't asking for confirmation, he didn't need that. Russel was smart enough to piece it all together. How could Marlowe not know fellow townsfolk were getting killed off in the forest?

"Yes." Marlowe admitted quietly. "But that's not how I wanted it to go down."

"You wanted everyone to live in your little bubble, didn't you?" Russel laughed tauntingly. "How exactly did you want it to go down then, eh?"

"I wanted to buy them off." Marlowe answered quietly. But there was a tinge of anger to his words, something boiling beneath it all. After all, here he'd been just talking about wishing to protect his fellow townsfolk and then two were murdered under his watch. He must've sounded like the biggest hypocrite in the world. And one glance at Russel just confirmed Marlowe's feelings. That unforgiving grin of his, how Russel mocked him.

"They said no, of course." Marlowe glanced at the dirty wooden floor, where the dirt from outside had seeped itself into the boards over the years. "They couldn't get over the fact one of their friend's Father died on the night he Iron Nail set fire to the farms."

"And then you had them killed, didn't you?" Russel asked coldly. Marlowe's silence was the only confirmation he needed. "But not before they called in the Grimm sightings, right?" Marlowe looked up away from the dirty old wooden floor a look of surprise on his face, one that asked how Russel could possibly have known. And then there was that judging look on Russel's face again.

A look of disgust, one that evoke shame out of the receiver. It carried more weight that probably another other look of contempt Marlowe had seen in his years, mainly because he knew the boy giving it. Marlowe knew all about those clever little mind games Russel would play on people, such as Marie-Anne during their Oakwood Academy graduation ceremony. It spoke a myriad of words to Marlowe, after all, if an irredeemable delinquent like Russel could be appalled by someone's actions, they really must've done something truly heinous.

"You and The Iron Nail went to a lot of trouble to throw us off the scent with the Creeps." Russel answered the unasked question. "When we showed up, no doubt one of those White Fang sentries like the Inn Keeper called it in. Then the bald bastard who can coat his ass with metal lets loose a pack of Grimm to throw us for a loop. We killed them and then you showed up, putting on quite the show by thanking us, offering us dinner. We would've went back to Beacon none the wiser, too busy off the high of being town heroes."

"And you really should've." Marlowe glared as Russel taunted him once more. For all his effort, Marlowe found it futile to shine off Russel's remarks. Though Marlowe had the gun, it was really Russel who was in control. That boy could make God do a double take. All he had to do was grin.

"Maybe if it went down the way it should have, your Mother and Father would be proud of you." Marlowe said, hoping to turn the tables on Russel. The old man just watched as the young Thrush's expression twisted from that stupid grin of his to one anger. "Well I'd ask." Marlowe muttered darkly. "But it seems you killed them both. As usual, you ruin everything. How am I not surprised?"

Russel remained silent, his only response being the harsh glare he was giving Marlowe. And just like that, Marlowe was in control again. It was the old man's turn to smirk. So he did. He cracked a smile, the kind he'd break out during his public addresses or during town meetings, or that one time
he had to preside over a friend's Father's funeral.

"You killed your Mother at birth. Killed your Father over the years by existing. And then your relation to Ruddy and Burgundy was their undoing." Marlowe spoke harshly. "It's just like your Father always said, what he always called you. 'Killer'. You kill everything Russel, everyone's hopes such as your Father's, you kill their dreams such as your Mother's."

"You ruin lives Russel. No doubt you've gone on to ruin more at Beacon like you did here with Marie-Anne and all the other brats." It was Marlowe's turn to shake his head in disgust. "So I ask you this, quit ruining lives, quit killing, quit interfering. Allow me to see this through. Allow me to save lives for once."

But Russel remained silent. The young Thrush shifted in his seat, a less than pleased expression on his face. Marlowe knew the boy for years, his mouth had always been his most dangerous weapon. Those mind games he'd play with the boys and girls in school yards and especially with his Father. But it was when he was silent, like how he was now, that worried Marlowe.

This entire time Russel had been more or less predictable. He'd managed to get under Marlowe's skin, like how he did with everyone, so that wasn't a cause for concern. But now, even with his angry expression which spoke volumes on its own, any insight into Russel's mind was shut out. So then Marlowe joined Russel in silence, waiting to see what the boy would do next.

Perhaps this was another one of his games? Marlowe thought to himself as he felt every moment that passed. There wasn't much to do other than accept time itself when the guy sitting across from you had daggers for eyes. "Come on now, Russel, you aren't seriously going to ignore everything I just said?" Marlowe asked, breaking his silence in an attempt to get a response out of the boy.

Russel remained silent and stared angrily into Marlowe's eyes. The young Thrush's hands formed fists on the chair's armrests, something that Marlowe took note of with a quick glance out of Russel's gaze. But Marlowe found himself staring back at Russel once again, quickly deciding that this must've been one of the boy's mind games. Just by looking away even for a moment, Marlowe had given Russel back control over the situation.

So then it devolved into a staring match. No doubt the boy sitting across from him was absolutely livid about the whole affair. And in his pursuit of dominance, Marlowe continued in his attempts to pick Russel apart, all in an effort to break the boy's stare.

"I told The Iron Nail about you, but you already knew that no doubt." Marlowe said, not noticing Russel's slight but firm thumb movements in his left hand. "He asked a lot of questions, about your home life and what kind of boy could leave three men and women to die at the hands of an Ursa. That's another three names you can add to your ever growing list of people you've killed Russel."

"The Iron Nail became convinced that you couldn't love. I never agreed with him, how could I? I was like the Father you wish you had." Marlowe said, unable to resist laughing at the entire situation.

"I don't know what you were thinking, marching up here the way you did." Marlowe commented. "What did you have to accomplish, what were you trying to prove? There's no way you've been stalling this entire time. The Atlesian military outside would've just barged in long before now." He said as he attempted to gain a better understanding of Russel's thought process.

After all, what was there to achieve? Russel had clearly put the pieces together himself, maybe his silence so far was just a formality, a sign of respect and appreciation for the years they'd known each other. Maybe Russel was gearing up to appeal to Marlowe's humanity, to see the error of his
"Hmph. Given me a big ass headache over this mess." Russel scoffed, breaking his long silence. And then Marlowe mentally claimed victory, he'd broken Russel back down, just like he'd intended. Now it was the old man's turn to take control of the situation. Maybe he could avoid a full on fight after all. All he had to do now was appeal to Russel, about that familial bond they'd established over the years and ask him to join him in his endeavors.

"I didn't think about what would happen if I came here." The young Thrush said honestly, snapping Marlowe out of his train of thought. Soon enough that damn smile of Russel's crept back onto his battered and bruised face. "But now I got a really good idea." He made a mock gun out of his right hand and pointed it at Marlowe while his left remained folded in a fist. "Draw." He nodded knowingly at the seat cushion Marlowe sat on.

So that was what it would come down to. The inevitable conclusion of things. And then Marlowe reached beneath his seat cushion and pulled out the gun he'd stashed there some time ago. He mentally patted himself on the back, it always paid to be prepared. As soon as he'd drawn the handgun he'd started firing blindly, more as a reactionary motion than a planned one. With Russel firmly seated in front of him the old man couldn't waste the chance to get the boy while he was easy to kill. Marlowe was old and a fist fight was beyond him now.

But as Marlowe slammed his index finger against the trigger for a second time, the old man then found his right eye shutting reflexively as something had suddenly become lodged against it. With half his vision clouded, Marlowe couldn't easily see Russel. In order to compensate for his lack of vision, Marlowe turned his head fully to the right in order to get Russel back in view. Only for it to be too late.

Before Marlowe knew it Russel was right beside him, having quickly jumped out his seat, completely dodging the first and second shots. And now he was wrestling with Marlowe for the gun. Marlowe was quickly overwhelmed by the youth and thrown out of his seat and onto the floor. Russel had taken the gun from him and now stood victoriously with it in hand.

Marlowe attempted to open his eye only to feel something odd slapped against it. So the old man busied himself with attempting to pluck whatever was in his eye out while Russel checked the handgun. To Russel's surprise, the handgun had dust slugs. He removed one from the clip to hold it and inspect before then throwing the magazine back into the handgun and aiming it at the fallen Marlowe, the dust slug he'd removed remaining in his hands.

The old man then finally removed what had lodged itself in his eye and held it up to the light for a better look. Marlowe blinked, recognizing the object to be a fingernail. He then turned to Russel for an explanation. The young Thrush held up his left hand, revealing he'd ripped out his index fingernail during their staring contest.

"You bastard." Marlowe choked on the words as Russel began to walk around him. With his back now facing the front door, Russel then aimed the handgun at Marlowe and firmly on the trigger. With unforgiving and judging eyes, Russel stared down at the old man and prepared to render verdict.

"You wouldn't dare." Marlowe growled lowly. "I know you. I know you, Russel. You wouldn't dare do this." He said, staring beyond the barrel of the gun and stared into Russel's eyes. But Russel remained unmoving. His finger wrapped around the trigger was firm, never quivering. "Not to me. You wouldn't do this to me! I'm the one man, the one person alive you love! You wouldn't do this to me!"
But Russel remained silent. His expression softened slightly, but his resolve wasn't swayed, not in the slightest. And Marlowe knew it, he saw it in the boy's eyes. And then he choked, as if he were about to cry. But the old man didn't. He just shook his head in vain.

"This is what it comes to then, eh?" The old man said as shakily. "You're just going to shoot me like a cold blooded killer then? That's what your Father called all them years, Russel? Huh? Killer?!" He shouted as the fear of death welled up in his soul. "Maybe if you didn't kill the ones you loved, then it wouldn't be so bad then, right? But that's your claim to fame now, isn't it 'Killer'? You can't stop killing those you love can you?" And for a moment, as Marlowe stared into Russel's unforgiving eyes, he could've swore this was the end of it. He was going to pull the trigger and he'd be dead.

But then Russel lowered the gun and let out an exhausted sigh. His head hung low and he turned around, completely obstructing Marlowe's view of the gun. Russel then took the dust slug in his other hand, but a small sliver that shimmered magnificently in the light, and then he shoved it down the barrel until it was fully inside.

"Everyone I loved is dead." Russel said quietly before tossing the gun over his shoulder. The weapon landed with a loud thud on the wooden floor in front of Marlowe.

Marlowe's eyes went from Russel to the gun. He quickly weighed his options as Russel made his way to the front door. There was no way to guarantee Russel wouldn't rat him out to the authorities, even though he wished that the display of tossing the gun was Russel washing his hands from this business. Marlowe would forever be looking over his back. So he reached out and claimed the gun. He raised his gun and took aim at Russel's back. He'd failed the first time to shoot Russel today, he would not fail again, that he swore.

Russel didn't flinch as the whole house rocked. The explosion was loud and would surely garner the attention of the town. So he quickly pushed open the door and made his way down the path to the main gate. He didn't spare a look over his shoulder, because he never looked back.

The walk back into town proper was quite the sight. The neighbors all around along with some of the military stooges were rushing at the sight of the explosion. There were cries for water to douse the flames. The Horror, The Horror, one passerby shouted as the Marlowe homestead burned to the ground in the distance behind Russel.

Eventually Russel made it back to the clinic. He saw the custodians of the town physician running off on his way back in order to lend their services. That meant the entire one floor building was empty, allowing Russel to slip back inside and grab his belongings. He was out the door without a word.

Tracking down his team wasn't difficult, he found them waiting by an airship, courtesy of the Atlas Military. There was no sign of Port, which Russel found odd. But as soon as he stepped into their line of view, his team came rushing to meet him. They'd shout his name happily, apparently they hadn't checked on him since dropping him off at the local clinic.

Russel just nodded away when Dove openly assumed he'd just woken up, given his disheveled appearance. In a cold sweat he'd woken, so Russel said. Upon questioning Port's absence, Sky merely offered the explanation that the old warhorse had gone on to fight another battle, one currently being waged just outside of Vale.

"We're not going." Sky said, sounding a bit disappointed.

"We've apparently done more than was asked of us." Dove muttered, sounding equally as
disappointed as Sky. "Man I didn't even fight any White Fang."

"We were just about to go and fetch you." Cardin said in an oddly comforting tone. "We're about to head on out." The team leader gently patted the airship they stood beside. "Off to Beacon we go."

Russel just gave a shrug before Team CRDL boarded the ship. It was a military vehicle, it didn't have the comforts of some of the airship that had dropped them off just the other day. For starters, it was smaller, more cramped, and the cockpit was open to the passengers to look up over into.

Behind the wheel of sorts was an eccentric looking pilot who fiddle around with local radio stations. He then stopped his actions to then fire up the airship once Cardin gave him the signal. Team CRDL found their seats and the ship took off.

For the most part the team just talked, recappping the events of their mission. It was uneventful for Dove and Sky, which they couldn't help but dwell on. Dove couldn't help but wonder how things would have gone if he were there backing up Cardin when the White Fang came chasing after him. And Sky couldn't help but feel cheated out of not one, but two missions as Team CRDL was benched from participating in whatever it was Port had gotten himself involved in.

"Hey, Russel." Cardin glanced over at his partner as Sky and Dove began to theorize just what was going on at Mountain Glenn.

"What is it Cardin?" Russel let out a tired sigh as the pilot resumed his playing around with the radio. Eventually the pilot settled for a station that then began playing 'Move on Up' by Curtis Mayfield.

"You forgot these." Cardin dug into his duffel bag and removed Russel's daggers. He reached over and held them up for his teammate to take. Russel accepted the weapons with a thankful nod.

"While we went looking for the guy you fought, I stumble on those bad boys. They need a little maintenance though. Whatever you were slicing out there was a lot tougher by the looks of it."

Russel just nodded along as he inspected his weapons. He glanced upwards at Cardin, it appeared the Winchester boy had something else to say. So Russel gave him his attention. "Those weren't the only things I found while we were up at the cemetery," Cardin said awkwardly. "We marched up that hill you were walking down for any sign of the guy you were fighting. Long story short, we didn't find him, but we found a busted up tombstone."

"I got curious." Cardin said honestly. "There was some blood on it, an eye on the ground nearby helped me piece together what happened. But it was what was written on it that really got my attention." The Winchester boy just gave his partner the most sincere and sympathetic look he could make. "I'm sorry about your dad, Russel."

Russel turned to look at his partner, studying the sincere look on his face. He turned away and processed Cardin's words. "Thanks Cardin," Russel finally said after spending much time dwelling on his words.

The airship flew off into the afternoon sky, when the sun was at its brightest and the land below at its fullest. The nearby seas were vast bodies of sapphires, the mountain crusts and molded flesh. Beacon tower stood tall and welcoming as always. If it had arms they would always be open, offering condolences and a foreign form of intimate contact known simply as a hug.

Team CRDL would never forget their time in Oakwood. Dove would bounce of the walls telling others tales about he'd helped injured civilians when the Creeps attacked. Sky mentioned his disdain for the backwater of such a wounderful country, but would recollect finer moments about
the agriculture. The stoic Cardin wouldn't outright mention the time he fought the White Fang, he was too modest of a person to revel in such an achievement. But it was Russel who would be silent. It was on the ride back to Beacon when he silently decreed that he would never speak of this day again.

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This chapter went through several rewrites. I just wanted to get it right. I'm very much happy with this version.

The original draft for this chapter I wrote back just as I finished up chapter 4. I knew exactly where I wanted this to go, but as I finally reached it in the story, I realized it wasn't where I wanted to take Russel nor was it where the story should be going. In the original draft, I had Russel and Marlowe end up struggling and falling down a flight of stairs into the cellar of Marlowe's home. Marlowe would've broken his back and try to get Russel to help him, but Russel would then viciously berate Marlowe and set off to make the entire scene appear as if Marlowe had fallen down the stairs himself and leave him to die. I realized that wasn't the character I've been developing. It takes out the choice factor and strange planning that Russel's known to do. So in this final draft Russel simply leaves the gun for Marlowe not caring what he did with it and decides to leave.

Russel is still an asshole in his own rite. He lies. He doesn't tell people about things like leaving four people to die in a cave with an Ursa.

We also see at the end one of the finer moments that was always planned, with Cardin and Russel. And this is really where their friendship begins. So expect more bromance between the two from this point onward.

Dove and Sky got sidelined for the most part, but expect to see Dove more in action during Arc 10. And Sky's got a story line seeded that will pick up, sometime after Arc 10, but he's still relevant.

Next Chapter: Interlude 5!

Next Arc: Downtime

'Til then! Later days!
**Interlude: Beginnings**

Welcome back everyone! As always after every arc we have an interlude!

Some of you might be disappointed with this interlude. If you were expecting a flash forward like with Cardin and Pyrrha, I'm sorry to tell you, this is a flashback.

Welp, on with the show, eh?

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**Beginnings**

It was a warm summer's day in Oakwood then.

The town and its people weren't blessed with the salvation provided by gusts of wind nor the enlightening feeling of the end of the work week. The day was Tuesday, the day after Monday, the day with no feeling.

A man worn down by years of fighting, years of intense labor and emotional exhaustion stood at the feet of a wire gate. The man was old, but clean shaven. He was a retired huntsman, but he didn't make the mistake of falling into disorder. After all, now in his golden years, Hegemony Marlowe had turned to big business.

Marlowe was known throughout town for a multitude of things. His charity and caring nature for his fellow man for example. But even a charitable man such as he had his limits. And that is what has brought him to the Thrush's door. Marlowe was a nice man, he was fairly reasonable. He'd outsourced several contracts to the Thrush patriarch, a man who only a few years earlier had settled out of the huntsmen business with his darling wife.

But the man's wife was long dead and that bright hopeful look in his eyes had faded. Marlowe had taken pity in the man and overlooked his downward spiral for some time. But now was not the time for coddling. Marlowe's own personal reputation was at stake, as he had introduced the Thrush to the suits from out of town. They had been complaining recently, noting less and less product being shipped from the Thrush farm.

The threat was clear, the Thrush's continued failures would forever be assigned to Marlowe unless the man turned it all around. And so that's why Marlowe was now pushing open the wire gate and marching up to the Thrush home. He'd stuck out his neck for one man far too long and without compensation, it seemed the best course of action would be to cut his losses if no solution could be found.

So the old and graying man walked up to the front door, balled his hand into a fist and like the thunderous will of god brought his fist against door three times. He had words to share with the man, words of fire and brimstone. He would grovel like any other dead beat had before, the likes whom had drained the well of sympathy from a man such as he. No more chances, just get in line or get tossed. That were the words Marlowe had for the Thrush.

So then the front door opened with a slow creek. Marlowe glared forward, hoping to meet the eyes of the Thrush dead on, to show him the kind of anger he'd brought forth from such a fine man such as he. But the door opened inward and there was no one there at eye level to meet him.

Confused, Marlowe glanced around to the sides, but still he found no one. That was, until he
looked down. There standing in the open doorway stood a child with green hair wearing a messy white shirt two sizes too big and some tattered pants. The kid stood around three feet tall and was staring up at Marlowe with his big wide brown eyes.

"Hello?" The kid asked, sounding slightly afraid as he raised his arm against his face to wipe his nose.

"Um, yes. Hello." Marlowe said in surprise at the sight of the child. He silently quelled his anger as he studied the child. He appeared to have

"Are you here to see my dad?" The kid asked, still looking up at Marlowe.

"...Yes. I am." Marlowe nodded slowly.

"He's passed out in his room." The kid casually glanced over his shoulder down into the house.

"It's half past three." Marlowe deadpanned. For goodness sake, he expected more out of the Thrush.

"I know." The kid said before wiping his nose on his arm once more.

Marlowe just stared downward at the child in front of him. He had half a mind to march into the Thrush household and wake the man in his bed, but there was the matter of the child. Marlowe took a closer look at the boy, at his pale complexion and the drying tears on his cheek.

So this was their child, Marlowe thought to himself as he continued to stare at the boy. He recalled seeing Alba's baby bump, but he was nowhere present when the child was born. He'd heard of that unfortunate day, how she'd died delivering the kid now standing in front of him.

"You're welcome to wait outside until he wakes up." The kid said gently as he peered out the door and pointed to the bench on the porch.

"...Sure..." Marlowe muttered awkwardly. The old man then walked over and took a seat by the bench, content to wait things out rather than make a fuss in front of the kid.

"You're old." The kid commented as he took a seat beside Marlowe.

The old man just watched, stifling a laugh as the boy struggled to pull himself onto the bench. He found it humorous enough to not take offense to the boy's words. As soon as the boy was seated on the bench beside Marlowe, the kid turned to him with his wide eyes and pointed at Marlowe's face.

"But it's not the hair that makes you old." The kid said. "It's the lines on your face. It's the wars."

Marlowe just raised a brow at the boy's words. "I don't deny your claims, child. I am a man of many years. But pray tell, what do you mean by that?" He asked curiously.

"My dad has the same lines." The kid said as turned back to look at his farm's fields. "My teachers don't though. But that's because he's a teacher. Not a huntsman." Marlowe just stared at the boy, surprised by his observational skills. So the old man just remained silent, as the boy began to ramble on.

"Schools weird." The kid said, completely out of nowhere. "Teachers talk and talk and talk and talk. They write stuff on the board and think you follow along and stuff. And then they grade you for how well you remember how they say things. It's weird. They're weird."

"I take it you don't get too many good grades then, kid." Marlowe commented, feeling some pity for the boy.
"I get 'A's." The kid muttered.

"Then why are you complaining?" Marlowe asked curiously.

"Because they didn't teach me." The kid said, looking down at his feet as he kicked up and back aimlessly. "You ever read outside of class before?"

"Well, it's been some time since I've been in primary school." Marlowe said thoughtfully, answering the boys' question. "But yes, I have.”

"The pages make more sense than the teacher." The kid said as he continued kicking his legs against the air. "The teacher just talks. But it's the book that does the teaching. School's weird."

"Yes, well, I guess it is weird isn't it." He chuckled. "You're well-spoken for a child your age." Marlowe pointed out. "How'd you get so good with your words?"

"From a book." The kid answered as if there were nothing to it.

Marlowe cracked a smile, impressed by the boy. "I'm Hegemony Marlowe." Marlowe said, introducing himself.

"Heg-heg-mon-ey." The kid frowned as he attempted to recite Marlowe's name. "Mar-Low. Marlowe." He turned and smiled having sounded Marlowe's name out loud, revealing that most of his teeth hadn't even grown in yet. "I'm Russel."

"Pleased to meet you Russel."

Russel as a child I always imagined to be having a hard time dealing with his dad. At the age of 4 he's not the guy who's running around talking back to the man, he's just a kid who can't really defend himself. Keeping in line with some of the traits he's been established to have, as a child Russel is an outlier, not really taking comfort in the way others teach. I might explore more of Russel as a child in the future, but for the time being I feel like this is the final word on his time in Oakwood. From here on out, Russel will be moving on with his life, which is something I've been wanting to explore.

To EternalKing, I've done my best to imply and portray Oakwood as some rural town. Russel's mom died in childbirth, which has since been a thing that's followed Russel around his entire life as it was the reason why his dad fell into his downward spiral. So naturally people like throwing that in his face.

And to Baoh joestar. You're in luck.

Next Arc: Downtime

It's all about three long running plot threads. One of them being: Russel v Blake: Dawn of Injustice. Coming soon!
XXVI: Downtime: Part 1

Welcome back everyone to another chapter of 'The Darkling Thrush'!

XXVI

Downtime: Part 1

It had been four days since Team CRDL returned home to Beacon. In that time the likes of Tam RWBY had foiled a most sinister plot involving criminal mastermind Roman Torchwick and his White Fang affiliates at Mountain Glenn. The twenty four seven news cycle was just bursting with positivity about the matter. Analysts predict a decline in recent gangland activity here in Vale. No more organized acts of violence. Just the occasional mugger or looter, but nothing sinister to be named.

Because of the coverage regarding the Glenn, there was less eyes looking the way Team CRDL had come. No one's talking about the foiled White Fang-Grimm acquisition. And why would they? Because it wasn't foiled. In reality Team CRDL's efforts had proven how inattentive the Huntsmen have been. No doubt several hundred Grimm had been swiped right under their noses by the radical White Fang to do god knows what.

In a world where doubt and negativity attracts beasts and demons, why would anyone want to report on such a disaster? Sure there could be the free agent or independent paper who deals in ideals, believing everything must be known, the public has a right. And then that's when the Atlesian military comes to kick down your doors, point a gun at your head and ask politely to look the other way.

But that was alright, no harm no foul. Let the knights in silver, mass produced armor walk among the people and police, that was fine by Russel. No one was talking about the homestead that burnt down that very Tuesday. No one was asking how or why, only a small town left in the dark stuck around to mourn the lost. Three people were buried this very week.

And that brings Russel to the present, waiting outside another team's dorm room. Team DNCE, as the young Thrush had been informed, had shipped out on a mission that very Tuesday. As the only other Oakwood local attending Beacon, Russel carried with him the burden of knowledge, which would be passed to another, a sister in arms you could say. But Marie-Anne was anything but sisterly.

Boots off the airship just an hour earlier, no doubt from a crummy first mission, Russel could see the discontent in Marie-Anne's green eyes as she stepped out the elevator down the hall. He could see that very irritation growing at the sight of him. It was well deserved, Russel acknowledged, he'd done some terrible things to her, ruined possibly one of the greatest moments of her life a little ways back. But he wasn't sorry about it.

She'd dyed her hair, since last he'd seen her. Now out of the bottle red, a poor choice in Russel's opinion. The dirt and grime from the forest floor stuck to it like a glow light. Her cross expression was an all too familiar one as she stopped just outside her dorm. She'd have entered the room without saying a word to Russel, that's how it would've gone. But Russel was mindful of such an
outcome. So that's why he was leaning on the door.

"You mind moving?" Marie-Anne asked lowly, doing her best not to cause a scene. It was understandable, she just got back from a mission and it obviously didn't go well. The last person she wanted to see was Russel.

"You and I gotta talk." Russel uttered, meeting her angered gaze with a neutral one of his own. He wasn't there to kick up another storm. This wasn't business nor was it pleasure. Russel's presence here today was about human decency, nothing more, nothing less.

There was that familiar fierceness in her eyes. She may have gotten back at Russel on the night of the dance, but that would never make up for the years she'd known him. She could've kicked him in the balls right then and there, force him out the way. She toyed with that idea for a little bit, Russel could tell. He could practically hear the gears turning in that head of hers.

"I'm not here to fight." Russel said, quickly raising his hands in defense. Aside from not wanting to fight, there was no real way for him to prevent Marie-Anne from causing harm on his person, so an olive branch of sorts was his only way of walking away without swollen balls. "Just to talk."

"When is it ever that simple with you?" Marie-Anne spoke bitterly.

"Ruddy, Burgundy and Marlowe are dead." Russel broke the news to her calmly.

Marie-Anne just stared at Russel, looking offended that he could stoop so low, thinking that the young Thrush was making this all up just to mess with her. But the longer she stared at Russel, the more she looked into his eyes, the more she studied his features. There wasn't a curl of the lips, no shit eating grin, no enjoyment was had when he delivered the news. And then the gravity behind Russel's words was fully realized. She was at a loss of words.

Seeing as she wasn't going to be interrupting him anytime soon, Russel continued with the rest of his piece. "Your family misses you, you know?" Russel said as he kicked off the door and side stepped passed Marie-Anne. "You should call more. Right now might just be the best time for that."

"Yeah, yeah." Marie-Anne muttered as her gaze fell downward at the floor. The pride of Oakwood was dead. People she knew just as well as Russel, people whom she'd loved possibly even more were gone.

Russel lingered for a moment. He'd said what he'd come to say, now he should be going, let Marie-Anne mourn, let her do something he couldn't. But there was a part of Russel that felt like he should stay. He glanced over his shoulder and saw her still standing there, lost in her mind. It was a prick of empathy, nothing more. So he shrugged it off and then carried on his way. He had other things to do before tonight.

Up ahead stepping out of the elevator, Russel could see another familiar face stepping off and onto the floor. He raised a hand and called out to the approaching peer. "Oi, Danny." Russel called out lazily, flagging down the approaching Team DNCE leader.

"Ho, Russel." The leader of Team DNCE, Danny Matchstick raised a hand in acknowledgment.

"It's Saturday, you gonna make it tonight?" Russel said as he and Danny stopped in the middle of the hall. "Sky's setting up for it as we speak."

"Need to get the room in order for the festivities." Danny chuckled to himself, finding such a thing so amusing. Danny looked as worse for wear as Marie-Anne if not even more. But there was
always something about the guy, maybe his personality, which made him so approachable. His reply was thought out, not spontaneous. "But yes, I'll make it tonight. Wouldn't miss it for the world." He said, almost confirming that of all the crap he and his team had been rooted in this past week, the Matchstick boy had something to look forward to.

"Alright, see you there." Russel said his goodbyes with a wave of the hand. Danny did the same and then they went off in their separate ways.

Russel continued on his way, not sparing look back. He hopped into the elevator and caught a ride down to the bottom floor. Before he knew it the doors were opening and he was stepping out, allowing a number of other students to jump inside and head on up.

It was a quiet Saturday afternoon. With all the missions going on and the upcoming Vtyal Festival just a month away, class had been suspended in favor of preparing the students for the obstacles they would surely face. To those students who'd already participated in missions like CRDL, RWBY and JNPR, they were left to vegetate out here in Beacon.

That gave them all chances to catch up on the more mundane things life had to offer. As soon as they arrived back at Beacon, Dove had locked himself in the dorm room for a three day tv show binge. Aside from preparing for the tonight's main event, Sky had lost himself in his more personal studies. He last time he and Russel had spoken, Sky had mentioned something about needing to talk to Headmaster Ozpin, something about irregularities in world history and all that jazz. It sounded interesting but Sky had lost the young Thrush in all that technical jargon.

But when it came to their leader and Russel's partner Cardin, it appeared the man was always switched on. Aside from the awkwardness of another event that occurred last Sunday, the Winchester boy hadn't had the time to sit down for a breather. Russel had picked up on Cardin making several trips into Vale, making several private phone calls back home and was always seeming to be dodging inquiries. For the most part it all seemed family oriented, so Russel let it be.

Caught up in all his thoughts, the young Thrush hadn't paid attention to where he'd been walking all this time. He must've zoned out on himself, which wasn't something new to the young man, but usually only happened when he'd been bored to death by something. But maybe that's what was going on, maybe he was being bored to death. After all there wasn't anything really going on here at Beacon.

A casual glance to his side, Russel could see the likes of Team RWBY and JNPR leaving the dining room. He could see Ruby was a ball of energy, totally ecstatic over their victory over the White Fang. Yang was looking on after her sister, not ashamed for her public behavior, but rather prideful in their actions. But their appeared to be something going on beneath the surface. Russel couldn't put his finger on it, but it seemed like there the bombshell had something on her mind, as if she'd seen something recently that utterly haunted her.

Weiss, the heiress was droning on about proper behavior and handling of one's person. Unlike Yang, Weiss was ashamed by her partner's actions. Blake remained silent, just walking beside her teammates. The cat girl caught Russel's eye for a moment and met his watchful eyes with a silent gaze. She looked away soon enough, after realizing her mistake of making eye contact. They still hadn't set the record straight last semester, and that was a long overdue conversation.

Jaune and Pyrrha were conversing with one another more privately. Russel couldn't help but overhear Jaune wishing to continue with their practice sessions for this evening. Pyrrha just looked on to her crush and leader with wide green eyes and nodded along, she'd help him sure and maybe something else might come out of it, the invincible girl could only hope. And all the while Nora was talking Ren's ear off. Poor guy.
And so then Russel kept walking, it was impolite to stare after all. The heroes of Vale went off in one direction and Russel in the other. The young Thrush soon found himself in the local blacksmith shop, where students and teacher alike would come to work on their weapons. The other day Russel had left his weapons on a work bench, letting it sit there for him to return and continue his work.

He arrived at the workbench, found everything just as he'd left it and then got back to work. And that would be where Russel would spend the rest of his day, working on his weapons until later tonight when everyone got together as usual, just like they did every Saturday night.

Somewhere in the city of Vale, behind some back alley on the side of a busy street, a familiar burnt orange haired young man stood with his back against a brick wall. Of all the places to be on a Saturday, this by far had to be the foulest of them all, Cardin thought to himself. But the Winchester boy was here now on business, not pleasure, so he put up with it and kept watch out for his contact.

Out of the shadows of the alley sauntered out a man who could only be described as raggedy. His pants were hanging loose around his ankles, his hoodie looked unwashed for what must've been months judging by that pizza stain, if that even was a pizza stain. The man's name was Kevin, he deals in all things illegal.

Cardin had only met the man once before, the night he and the rest of his team had gone out on a bonding exercise. Course, none of them ha the proper identification to get themselves into a bar. So Russel of all people turned them down this very alley and Kevin here hooked them up with everything they needed. It was safe to say Kevin unsettled Cardin. The man enjoyed his job far too much, and least of all he could shower a bit more regularly. After all, before this meeting, Cardin had done some digging into the man's past, turns out he owns a two floor home just outside of Vale. He just dressed and acted like this for kicks.

"Mr. Winchester, a pleasure to have you coming to my alley." Kevin said as he joined Cardin against the brick wall.

"You get what I asked for?" Cardin said, quickly getting to the chase.

"Depends if you brought the negotiated fee." Kevin smiled ear to ear. And his smile grew even more as Cardin dug into his pocket and pulled out a wad of cash. "I like you Huntsmen types. I never have to fuss around and threaten to break your knees with my pig iron." Levin said happily as he pulled up his shirt ever so slightly, giving Cardin a good look at the handgun stuffed in his drawers. "You all are men and women of your word. Always honoring contracts. I love you people."

"Only if you honor the contract yourself." Cardin narrowed his eyes, not liking the display of force.

"its cool man, it's alright to doubt a dreg such as myself." Kevin said before digging into his hoodie and removing an envelope. "It just means the customer leaves happier when I deliver."

The exchange went smoothly, with Cardin and Kevin handing over the sum of money and folder quietly and without a hitch. They then took several paces away from one another. Cardin opened the folder and glanced inside. He skimmed the material and gave a satisfied nod as Kevin finished counting his money.

"Happy hunting, Mr. Winchester." Kevin waved before the man slinked back into the shadows of the alley.
Their business concluded, Cardin tossed the folder into a bag he'd brought and then departed the alley, walking out into the busy streets in an attempt to hail down a cab to take him back to Beacon.

Later that night, when the sun had fallen and the air was nice and cool, Pyrrha Nikos, the Invincible Girl left her room in the company of that lovable goofball leader of hers. They'd take to the roof of the dorm and take up arms in an effort to enhance Jaune's lackluster skills. Maybe one day she'd make a warrior out of him, maybe one day he'd outclass her and he'd be he'd one teaching her. A girl could dream.

But down below in Team CRDL's room more than a dozen students found themselves all gathered around a television screen. At the feet of the screen rested a hat with money flooding out of it and on the screen showed from a hidden camera on the roof Pyrrha and Jaune practicing.

Every Saturday night, whenever Jaune and Pyrrha would take to the roof and practice, these men and women would gather, each one placing a five lien note in the hat, each one betting on when Pyrrha would confess her feelings for that blonde idiot.

"Pass me the popcorn?" Coco asked Sky from where she sat in the small room. The blue haired halberd using member of CRDL obliged the CFVY Team Leader's request and passed along a bowl to the fashionista. "Thanks."

When news of their sessions had spread, more and more students especially on the current floor had started taking bets on when something would happen between the Knight and Spartan. It got to a point when they all just decided to make a night of it, every week they all would meet at the CRDL dorm room. The sessions attracted the likes of Coco who enjoyed a good soap opera and Yang who just who couldn't get enough of seeing Pyrrha fail miserably at attracting the blonde Knight.

"So this is what you all do on your Saturdays?" Emerald looked over to Yang for an explanation. When she'd been invited to the gathering, Emerald had assumed it would be a great opportunity to further Cinder's goals, but now that she was here, the thief couldn't help but feel underwhelmed by the experience. "What's the point of it all?"

And then just before Yang could offer a reply, up above Jaune let out a girlish scream. All eyes were on the screen, some of them grinning wide at the sight of Jaune now laying on top of Pyrrha. The Arc had seemingly tripped and fallen, taking the Invincible Girl along with him. The risqué position the two JNPR members had earned a number of 'ooos' from the assembled students.

Everyone went dead silent the moment Pyrrha attempted to lean upward and steal a kiss from the boy sitting on top of her. As they all recalled, if she confessed today, then the money pile would be going Yang's way. "Come on, Pyyr. Momma needs a brand new bike." Yang said eagerly.

But nothing came of the whole affair as Jaune quickly jumped off the Spartan. He tried to play it off coolly, like it didn't even happen. This ultimately led to not only Pyrrha's but also the room full of people's disappointment.

"I take it back." Emerald said aloud, having found the amusement out of the whole display. "This is awesome."

The dorm room door then opened, causing all to turn away from the screen to see who'd just entered. Russel practically jumped through hoops just to find himself a place to sit. He'd lost track of time down at the blacksmith, usually he was here when things began, because, well, it was his dorm.
"Hey, what I miss?" Russel asked as he took a seat beside Mercury, who'd decided to tag along with Emerald to this little shindig.

"That Jaune guy practically mounted Pyrrha." Mercury muttered as he nibbled on a chocolate malt ball. He then held up the box of the sweets he had in hand to Russel, offering the boy one.

"Oh thanks." Russel said before grabbing one out the box. "Cheers." He said before tossing it in his mouth.

The crowd fell silent as they continued to watch the screen. The audio was provided from the open window. The pair of Jaune and Pyrrha continued to spar. Time passed with their session looking to be winding down. All hope of their betting ending tonight seemed to have been dashed. There would always be tomorrow they supposed. So they all began to help with tidying up the room before they all inevitable have to one by one leave the room as to not catch the attention of Jaune and Pyrrha as they made their way down from the roof.

But just then, the conversation above began to become more intimate. It was an honest heart to heart between a trusted confidant and friend. So all the students in room were dead silent as Jaune expressed his gratitude for having Pyrrha as his partner.

"You're always there for me, I'm lucky to have you." Jaune spoke from the heart. "We tell each other everything, that's what I like about you Pyrrha. You're honest with me and I couldn't be more thankful to have you."

And then Yang bean dancing in her seat. "This is her moment!" The blonde squealed. Thankfully as they'd found out on the day when Blake kidnapped Russel and tortured him, they'd all found out the rooms were soundproof, so Yang was absolutely ecstatic.

After a long awkward silence, Pyrrha began to shift uncomfortably and turned to face Jaune. "You've put your faith in me and that means the world. I can't tell you what it means to have someone like you in my life. Jaune, I have something to tell you."

"Oh my Monty." Coco said in awe.

"This is it..." Danny murmured in anticipation.

"God dammit! Tomorrow was going to be my day!" Dove shouted angrily.

"I got drunk on the night of The Dance and slept with Cardin." She blurted out.

And then then everyone in the room fell silent. They all just looked to one another as if they had misheard the Invincible Girl. Maybe the close space shared between them all was causing their blood to boil and they all needed some air. Or perhaps they'd eaten some bad snacks and were hallucinating. Because there was no way in hell that she said what they think she said.

On the television screen, Jaune just stared in surprise, in a creepy unmoving manner. He too was experiencing the same sort of interference that everyone was feeling. There was no conceivable way that his partner Pyrrha had bumped uglies with his arch nemesis.

And then the door opened once again and all those present turned to look at the doorway. There stood Cardin with a look of disinterest on his face. He was never one for these sorts of get togethers. Usually they were long gone by the time he returned. But then the Winchester boy noticed that all eyes were fixed on him. He raised a brow at all the silent expressions that screamed 'How could you'.
And so he just shrugged. "What?"

And then they rioted. Ha ha!

So, for this arc, we're finally getting round to dealing with the fallout of Cardin and Pyrrha's one night stand, the Blake-Russel incident, and something going on with Cardin that has been mentioned before but only in passing.

I always liked the idea that everyone on that floor of the dorm would have like a betting pool going around to see how long until Pyrrha and Jaune finally become an item, or at least how long until Pyrrha does something about it. They'd all just show up and camp out in someone's dorm to find out if something would happen. The beginning of the chapter also sort of further closes the door on any Oakwood interaction for the foreseeable future. The only remaining tie to that place was Marie-Anne, and I'm not just going to senselessly kill a character, at least not until we get to like...later. Fun fact. I spent an hour coming up with fifty OCs the other day who I could violently murder at any point in this story. That'll come in handy eventually.

Next chapter will be out sometime next week. 'Til then! Later days!
Hey everyone! Welcome back for another chapter of 'The Darkling Thrush'!

Warning: Just to clarify, I don't condone everything Russel says and does. Sure I wrote it, but that doesn't mean I support it 100%. It does fit in line with the character I've been building over the 100,000+ words, but it doesn't represent me.

Other Warning: I like both Marvel and DC, its just fun for me to poke fun at everything.

Sunday afternoon at Beacon was different than usual. There was an eerie silence outside rooms and in hallways. Off in the distance you could hear the sharpening of weapons and catch a whiff of gasoline soaked rags ready to be set ablaze. There were whispers here and there in the dorms. A shrill chill down everyone's spine as they all waited in anticipation for something to happen.

Be it an angry mob that sweeps through campus or the Holy Ghost itself, everyone knew something was coming. Even a woman who'd been planning the worst day in Vale history fell a cold touch against her shoulder. There would be no diabolical machinations this evening, just a day spent in doors curled up in bed waiting for the end to pass over her.

And so, with all the dread and foreboding in the air, you would expect to find the likes of the doomed nailing down boards and stockpiling foods and drink. Faced with death by unholy slaughter, are now faced with the toughest questions of all.

"Who's your favorite comic book superhero?" Dove asked aloud.

Seated in the empty dining hall at a circular table, nine students found themselves playing a harmless game of blackjack. Instead of money they played for treats, bags of chips and candy bars that they'd all had on hand. By the end of the game someone would be walking off and eventually checking into a hospital. Prognosis: type two diabetes.

"...Eh, Captain America." Willa Rosa, the leader of Team WILL, answered after weighing the options in her head.

"It's the Chris' right?" Nero Goldlock of Team DNCE snickered as he checked the cards he was dealt. In hand he had a pair of twos. He signaled the dealer to pass him another card. The dealer acknowledged and passed him another card, a Jack. Not liking the odds of getting anything under a seven, Nero decided not to stay his hand rather than bust. "You love them biceps right?"

"Hey, did you even see Civil War? Chris Evans is the full package." Willa protested. The Team WILL leader checked her cards, an ace and a three. Deciding for the time being to count the ace as a one, Willa flagged down the dealer and was handed another card. Now possessing a five, that left her with cards that mounted to a total of nine. She asked for another card, which turned out to be an eight. Testing her luck, Willa asked for another card, only for it to be a nine. "Shit." She cursed as she tossed her cards on the table. "Twenty-six. I busted."
"Batman. Always choose Batman." Dove quickly quipped as he added up his cards. "He's a billionaire, has the coolest villains and gets all the ladies." He smirked to himself, pleased with the fact he'd been handed a queen and an ace. A perfect twenty one. "I'll stay."

"He's an overrated cosplayer living in his parent's basement." Willa muttered, clearly dissatisfied with her life choices. She'd put up two bags of barbecue chips, and now she'd be parting ways with them for sure.

"Oh I'm sorry, I thought this was about our favorites, not a comic book fight." Dove stuck out his tongue. "If this was, then sorry Willa, but Cap ain't that cool. He's spent more time as a werewolf and losing his powers than fighting for truth, justice and freedom."

"Was he at least a sexy werewolf?" Willa swooned over the mental image of Chris Evans crossed between one of those twilight films. "I could get behind that."

"My favorite would have to be…Wolverine." Ezekiel Jupiter, the sole faunus member of Team DNCE and the only faunus present at the table said as scratched his chin. He debated his next move, whether to pursue another card and add it to his trio of fives. Maybe if he did he'd get another five and make it a solid twenty. His luck ran out the moment he called for another card. And with a frown, Ezekiel tossed his cards onto the table. "I busted."

"It's the claws right? He's the best at what he does. Isn't afraid of nothin'." Nero joked as he looked at his cards. "Give me another card, dealer." The dealer nodded and handed the boy a card from the deck. A frown found its way across the Team DNCE boy, causing him the fall back in his seat. "Bust."

"The whole can't really die thing is the main selling point for me, actually." Ezekiel muttered as he opened a bag of sour cream and onion flavored chips he'd won from an earlier game.

"What are you talking about? Wolverine dies all the time. There are literally two 'The Death of Wolverine' storylines. All within a decade of the other." Dove said as he glanced over to Sky. The Lark boy had been staring at the hand he'd been dealt the entire time. "You gonna make a move there, Sky?"

"I'll stay." Sky declared before placing his cards back on the table. "I like The Flash. He run's real fast, saves the day and has a Museum. That's cool."

"The Flash? He fights a Gorilla right?" Danny asked as he placed his cards down on the table, having busted with a hand of twenty two.

"Oh yeah. A Psychic Gorilla." Dove laughed. "It's so silly, yet so amazing."

"Green Arrow." Danny declared. "I like Green Arrow."

"Oh right, the poor man's Batman." Willa muttered as Mercury and Cardin busted.

"I like his politics." Danny muttered simply. "How about you? You got a favorite superhero?"

They all turned to the dealer.

Russel just shifted in his seat uncomfortably. "I don't really read comics." He said before Dove claimed victory and the mountain of snacks at the center of the table.

"Oh come on, you've got to at least have heard of one of them." Nero exclaimed as he began the next betting pool by tossing in a cookies and cream candy bar.
"Alright, fine." Russel shrugged, not enjoying being put on the spot like how he was now. "Superman. I like Superman."

"Dude Superman sucks." Dove muttered as he tossed in a pair of skittle packets to the growing pool. "He's too overpowered and his weakness is a green rock."

"He's too overpowered? Gee I guess that's why he's super." Russel rolled his eyes. "Don't ever insult another man's hero, Dove."

"Man of Steel. The scene where Henry Cavill walked through fire. You could grind cheese on that thing." Willa gushed.

"Oi, keep it in your pants sister." Russel pointed at Willa before proceeding to gather the cards back into the deck and shuffling them. "How about you Merc? You got a favorite superhero?"

"Not really a superhero." Mercury shrugged as he checked the new hand he'd been dealt. "I'd say The Punisher. You got to admire a man with a mission, am I right?"

"Eh, depends who's writing him, honestly." Nero shrugged.

"What's The Punisher do again?" Russel asked as he revealed his hand which added to twenty. Dove did the same, revealing his to be a perfect twenty one. Dove collected the assembled snacks up for grabs and added them to his pile and smiled like an idiot.

"The Punisher kills bad guys." Sky muttered as he and the others passed in their cards to be reshuffled in the deck. "That's literally all he does."

"Superman doesn't kill criminals." Russel muttered.

"He killed Zod in Man of Steel." Willa commented before getting up from her seat and fetching a soda from a nearby cooler one of the Dunces had brought along.

"I don't know what the fuck that is." Russel said as he handed a card to Sky. The Lark boy just frowned once more as he busted.

"It was a movie." Nero aid before placing his cards on the table. "Twenty-One."

"I didn't have any movie theaters where I grew up. And Superman doesn't kill people. Because he's Superman." Russel retorted as everyone passed back their cards for another game.

"Sheesh. For a guy who doesn't read comic books, you seem really hung up on Superman." Mercury said jokingly. But there was something to his words that made Russel's ears twitch. And underlying tone beneath the words that generally unsettled the young Thrush.

"I got one comic book when I was growing up. It was a Superman comic." Russel explained. "You know what he did? He saved the day without killing anyone. He was always smiling in the damn thing.

"You only ever got one comic?"

"Found it in the fiction section of my school library." Russel shrugged."Unless you hadn't picked it up when we were there, Dove. Oakwood is a pretty shitty place."

"Amen to that." Cardin muttered as he reached down to rub one of his knees. The Winchester boy had been nursing a bad wound from the fall he'd taken in the cabin. He hadn't said anything about
it at the time, given the circumstances he was preoccupied with fending off White Fang forces. Just talking about Oakwood made the damn thing act up.

"So the conquering hero speaks!" Nero exclaimed happily.

"Don't call me that." Cardin shot a glare across the table at Nero.

"But you are!" The Dunce shouted excitedly. "You bumped uglies with the hottest girl in school man! The most unattainable too! Anyone else would literally kill to be you Cardin. You're like a real life superhero man!"

"I find it disturbing how blurred the definition of a superhero is amongst you guys." Russel said as he shoved the pile of goodies over to Nero. Everyone else had busted, meaning the dunce had claimed victory. Russel attention then fell from collecting the cards to his pocket. Feeling the familiar vibration of his scroll, the green haired lad dug into his pocket and retrieved his scroll, discovering a notification indicating he'd received a new message.

"So how was it?" Willa asked, glancing over at Cardin.

"I don't feel like talking about it." Cardin spoke lowly, doing his best to quell his temper. "I just want to forget it all happened."

"I'm still kind of miffed you didn't tell us Cardin." Dove said as he opened a bag of corn chips and tossed a handful of them into his mouth. "You not only got to fight the White Fang, but you also got laid. Like c'mon man I got trouble taking to girls as it is! It's unfair I tell you!"

"Drop it Dove." Cardin sighed heavily. "Are we going to start another round or what?" Cardin turned to look at Russel. But the young Thrush wasn't paying attention, too busy responding to a message on his scroll. "Russel?"

"I've gotta go." Russel said before throwing his scroll in his pocket and grabbing what few sweets he still had in his possession.

"What's up?" Mercury inquired.

Russel sent an odd look Mercury's way. He'd learned very well not to take things at face value these past few days. There was more to Mercury than there seemed. And given recent events, that greatly unsettled the young Thrush. So he just shrugged, hiding his thoughts behing that god awful smirk of his. "Wouldn't you like to know?" He said before pushing in his chair and turning to leave.

"Yeah." Cardin nodded, almost in agreement with some unasked question. "Seeing as the questions into my personal life won't be stopping anytime soon. I'm gonna go." The Winchester said before following Russel's example and collecting his winnings before leaving the table and heading out for the exit.

"No come on man!" Dove shouted pleadingly after his leader. "I need tips! I need strategies! Is there a guide book? How do I get women to notice me?!"

"Forgive him. He's had too many sweets." Sky apologized.

After leaving the dining hall, Russel took off to the local cab station, right by the tarmac just outside of campus. He could've legged it to his destination, but it was too convenient and less of a hassle to use transport by air.

"Into town, if you would." Russel said to the cabbie after he'd flagged him down. The cabbie
nodded and off they went into Vale. After a five minute ride from the coast, the cabbie set the Gondola down outside a quaint coffee shop. Russel handed the cabbie his fare and stepped out.

The young Thrush spotted his contact sated by the window. The message he'd received said it was urgent, and by the looks of things, it could've been anything but. Pyrrha Nikos, the Invincible Girl was seated a booth, dressed in the most conservative outfit he'd ever seen her in, sipping a cup of tea.

So Russel stepped into the coffee house, bypassed the hostess and took a seat across from Pyrrha at the booth. It was then when he was within close proximity of the four time Mistral champ that Russel realized his earlier analysis was incorrect. Pyrrha was by far the greatest performer he'd ever known. It takes one to put on a smile like the way she did now to hide the problems beneath. Upon closer inspection, Russel noticed a slight tremor of her fingers as they were wrapped around the two dollar mug.

"The hell are you wearing?" Russel pointed at her outfit, which consisted of a brown turtle neck, broad rim nonprescription glasses and matching plaid beret.

"It's my incognito outfit." Pyrrha answered simply. "Whenever I go out in public, I usually run into fans. Sometimes they're nice. And other times…not so much." Pyrrha shivered at the thought of the numerous times she'd been approached by ravenous fans citing her fame from cereal boxes and demanding a number of photos with her. "I'm glad you could make it." Pyrrha said quietly but didn't downplay the gratitude she had for the boy's presence.

"Yeah I'm actually sorta curious how you got my number." Russel muttered as he scratched the back of his head. "I don't remember giving you that, or you even asking for it. Which opens a lot of questions, you see."

"I asked around, and surprisingly enough Blake had it." Pyrrha shrugged as if it were nothing.

Russel's eyes widened slightly, all manner of alarms ringing in his head. He knew without a doubt he'd never given such information out to the cat girl, but he knew with definite certainty there was a point in time when Blake would have had access to such things. Say when she had him unconscious and tied to a chair. And what would you know, that also happened on a Sunday.

"Feel free to order anything, it's my treat." Pyrrha offered as the waitress arrived with her meal. The waitress, an average looking fifty year old, or a down on her luck twenty something year old, it really depend on the lighting, turned to Russel with a pen and paper.

"Just a coffee. I won't be staying long." Russel sighed as he dealt with the more disturbing thoughts about what else Blake might have done while he'd been unconscious. Maybe she was tech savvy and put a bug in his scroll, she had access to it and could possibly be monitoring his every move. And given what went down in Oakwood, such a possibility would prove to be quite troubling. Already Russel could see their paths crossing once again, something he'd been dreading for some time as it seemed almost inevitable.

"Meeting that fellow who sold you the fireworks?" Pyrrha laughed lightly.

"As a matter of fact, yeah." Russel said before thanking the waitress as she returned with a mug of coffee. He reached over for the bowl of prepackaged creamer and plucked two packets, along with two plain packets of sweetener. "So, what did you want to talk about?" Russel asked as he looked around for a utensil to stir his drink.

Pyrrha hung her head low and let out a heavy sigh. "Last night, I told Jaune about the night of the
dance." She said regretfully.

Already privy to such information from the night before, Russel just nodded along as he reached over to the booth behind him and grabbed a knife. Of all the people Russel knew at Beacon, Pyrrha was one of the few he actually respected. He didn't feign surprise like many others would have in this scenario, he wouldn't dare patronize Pyrrha with something shrewd like that.

But that didn't mean he wouldn't question her logic. "And why would you do that? I could've sworn that was the last thing you wanted to do." Russel said before taking a sip of his coffee.

Pyrrha sighed once more. "It was. But ever since that day, since Mountain Glenn, we've all been put in dangerous situations and I just needed a friend to talk to." She said as she poked her salad with a fork. "Nora means well, Ren's Ren. But Jaune's my partner, confiding in him was a no brainer."

"He took it well enough. But I didn't get the moral support I wanted." Pyrrha frowned, disappointed with the turn of events. "I guess the feud between him and Cardin is still present as ever. For a minute I thought he would vomit on himself."

"You know we did blackmail him, right?" Russel deadpanned. "The dudes not going to get over that. Like never."

"And then this morning at breakfast, Yang brought up my sleeping with Cardin." The four time Mistral champ recalled sounding dower. She then looked up at Russel, looking afraid to ask the question that was no doubt the reason why she'd had him meet her here. "It was the way she'd said it too, like it'd become common knowledge almost instantly. So I'm going to ask you bluntly, I'm sorry for what I'm implying. But did you tell anyone?"

"I can safely say I'm not the one who let the cat out the bag." Russel muttered as he debated how to break the news to Pyrrha.

"Alright. Then did Cardin tell anyone?" She asked sounding oddly hopeful. But she wasn't hoping, she was begging. Because if it wasn't Cardin then it could've only been one other person in Pyrrha's eyes.

"Cardin's been too busy trying to forget the whole thing happened anyways." Russel said before reaching over and grabbing another creamer packet from the bowl. "The coffee tastes like boot." He murmured.

"If it wasn't you or Cardin, then it could only be one other person." Pyrrha dreaded.

"Oh yeah, it was you." Russel said casually as he mixed in another creamer packet into his coffee.

"Wait what?" Pyrrha raised a brow in confusion.

"You do realize we can all hear you during your practice sessions on the rooftop, right?" The young Thrush said before taking a sip out of the mug and then recoiling almost immediately. "And now it tastes even worse…"

"Oh dear no…" Pyrrha's eyes widened at the realization. "But I thought we could only be heard from your room?"

"Every Saturday, the night of your little rooftop excursions, a number of fellas gather together for a little wager. When will you confess your attraction for everyone's favorite knight?" Russel said, not exactly enjoying the fact he was the one who had to break the news to Pyrrha.
A look of shock and disbelief crossed Pyrrha's face. Her features shifted from hurt to shame in an instant. "What the hell?" Pyrrha muttered as she buried her face in her arm. "How long?" She managed to ask.

With Pyrrha's face hidden from view, Russel couldn't tell if she was crying or not. He wouldn't put it past her to do so, after all, people were betting on her social life, it was a violation of her privacy. But the way she sounded, it took a level of strength to keep calm, to keep from having such a thing affect her speech.

"A little after the Forever Fall incident." Russel answered. Pyrrha looked up from her arm and stared at Russel with a hurt eyes. "You look like a sad puppy." He commented. "God dammit I just kicked a sad puppy. Not again."

"You kicked a puppy?" Pyrrha said sounding just as shocked as she had earlier.

"I don't know, how old is Zwei?" Russel shrugged. "He peed on my leg. I responded appropriately."

"That's horrible." The Mistral native muttered, her feelings about her current situation subsiding slightly due to her dividing her attention on a distraction such as this. "You don't kick dogs Russel."

"What's horrible is forcing a dog to live in the cramped conditions like how it lives now." Russel said a matter of fact as he took a 'Free Zwei' platform. "Do you really think a stuffy ol' dorm room is the best place for a dog? Let me answer that question for you. It isn't. Zwei's an animal, he needs room to roam and piss on everything without interruption. It's just downright cruelty what Ruby's doing I tell you."

"You still kicked a dog." Pyrrha frowned.

"I'm not arguing." He shrugged indifferently.

"People meet at your guy's room every Saturday and bet on my love life." Pyrrha said aloud more so to help her realize such a thing was actually happening to her. She sat up in her seat and frowned, feeling slightly betrayed given by how quickly news had seemed to spread. "You knew and didn't stop it?"

"Do I look like a shining example of a strong morals and ethics to you?" Russel asked rhetorically. "I kick dogs." He said before pushing the coffee to the side of the table. But I never bet, I never contributed to the profit."

"But you still let it happen." Pyrrha pointed out.

"And Atlas is military state where the only freedom of speech is the note card the government hands you. Vacuo is the most segregated country in the world. And Mistral politicians are up to their necks in payoffs, drugs and women." Russel mocked. "Well look at that, Ms. Nikos. By your definition, my knowledge of such things would therefore deputize my body and soul into becoming an agent of your black and white moral system. Shall my crusade to purge the wicked begin in Vacuo or in Atlas?"

Pyrrha remained silent, not knowing how to answer Russel's question. She wished to contend his claims, say it was different. But Pyrrha was too nice an individual to do so. She just sank in her chair, not sure how to proceed. "Does everyone know I like Jaune?"

"Not everyone, no. Just everyone on our floor. And the one below ours. And below theirs. And then theres the second year students now that I think about it and they live in a whole other
"Was I really that obvious?" Pyrrha groaned.

"You weren't Jaune obvious, no." Russel said in the best reassuring tone he could make in light of events. "The guy parades through class following Weiss' every move. You on the other hand, it comes more from everyone watching you." He said, causing Pyrrha to raise a brow in confusion and prompting Russel to elaborate. "You're the great Pyrrha Nikos, you're a celebrity. Everyone wants to know whatever they can about you."

"Hey not so loud." Pyrrha reached over the table and lightly tapped Russel's arm. "I'm incognito, remember?"

"Oh please." Russel waved off Pyrrha's concerns and stood up from his seat. "Hey everyone mind if I borrow your attention for a moment?" He said as he addressed the patrons. "Who here is well aware that Pyrrha Nikos is sitting in this very coffee shop?" A number of hands all around raised instantly, with some patrons even shooting up in an attempt to run up and get Pyrrha's attention.

"Sit your asses back down. That was not an invitation." Russel spoke harshly as he shooed those more excited patrons away.

"Ugh." Pyrrha groaned at the display. "I'm going to have to go to Coco for another 'incognito' outfit." She grumbled as Russel sat back down. "At least Jaune doesn't know, right?" She said, looking on the bright side. "Sure, things might be a little odd between us for the time being. But at least he'll judge me like the caring friend I know him to be."

Pyrrha looked over to Russel, hoping the boy would at least nod in agreement, a sign that today couldn't get any worse. But Russel sat in his seat with a somber expression on his face. "Is there something I'm missing?"

Russel just looked at Pyrrha and sighed. "I think I've shattered enough illusions for one lifetime." He stated clearly.

"What aren't you telling me, Russel?" Pyrrha questioned.

Russel sighed. "Pyrrha, Jaune's not an idiot." He said, contrary to popular belief as it were. "It takes a level of cunning and intellect to successfully break into Beacon the way he did. So ask yourself, of all the people in our year, on our floor and in Beacon in general, why hasn't he of all people clued in on your feelings?"

Pyrrha sat in her seat and didn't dare attempt to draw any conclusions. "Don't you have somewhere else to be?" She said wishing to be left alone.

"Yeah, I guess I do." Russel said before digging in his wallet and grabbing a twenty lien note and tossing it onto the table. "That should just about cover it."

"I told you I was buying, it was my treat." Pyrrha protested Russel's actions.

"I recently came into a little money, don't worry about it."

"You came into a little money?" Pyrrha looked at the Thrush skeptically.

"Inherited it actually." Russel frowned before getting up from his seat and heading for the door.

"Aren't you at least going to say sorry kid?" The waitress said in a scolding fashion as Russel
walked past.

"I don't do that." Russel muttered before leaving the coffee house. And in doing so cemented a precedent for being the first house Russel left to not fall in ruin.

Back at Beacon, Cardin found himself alone in the elevator heading back up to his dorm room. He stepped out the moment the doors opened and made a beeline for his room. The last thing he wanted was someone to flag him down over his one night stand. The Winchester boy genuinely wanted to forget the whole thing ever happened.

But it appeared that more and more people were learning about that night every moment. Along the way to his room he could hear knowing snickers from open doors made by fellow students who'd waited just to watch him pass by. Cardin didn't blame Pyrrha for what happened, how was she supposed to know the entire floor was listening in on her? He couldn't imagine what she must be going through.

"Hey Cardin hold up a sec." A familiar voice belonging to one Jaune Arc called out, demanding his attention.

This was exactly the attention Cardin dreaded. So the CRDL leader just kept on going. "Hey Cardin we want to talk to you!" The voice of one Nora Valkyrie shouted angrily.

Fearing for his life now, Cardin began to speed up before making a full on sprint for his room, lest allow Nora to make good on all her threats to harm his body in a laundry list of imaginative ways.

"We need to talk." Lie Ren said as he appeared literally out of nowhere in front of Cardin, causing the Winchester boy to come to halt just less than a few feet away from his room.

"I told you, don't ever mess with my friends." 'What kind of sick game are you and your cronies playing? Somehow you managed to get an audience of people to hear Pyrrha admit to-to-"

"To booping your twisted face!" Nora exclaimed angrily.

"I literally have no time for this." Cardin said as he checked the time on his scroll.

"Make time!" Jaune shouted angrily as he smacked Cardin's scroll out of his hand. "For a moment I thought we could be decent men, you and I. We'd put aside our differences long enough to coexist. But you hurt one of the people I care about. I don't care what happens to me, I don't care if I get kicked out, Cardin. You're not getting away with this."

"Holy shit." Some bystander muttered in awe as they all watched from the safety of their doorways.

"Jaune's standing up to Cardin."

"Put that racist in his place!" One of the Team STAG members shouted from their room.

"Damn right Jaune you assert your dominance!" Another cried.

Not exactly in the mood for a fight and with his presence needed elsewhere, Cardin knew he had to pull out all the stops in order to make a slick escape. "Weiss' hotter older sister who's totally into you is standing over there!" Cardin pointed past Jaune's shoulder, causing the blonde Knight to spin around. Surprisingly enough so did Nora of all people, probably confused at the idea of someone other than Pyrrha being into Jaune. Ren just sighed, not surprised in the slightest that his teammates had been fooled so easily.

Not one to look a gift horse in the mouth, Cardin high tailed it back to his room before they
remainder of JNPR could give chase. Cardin quickly opened his door and locked it behind him. The members of Team JNPR followed close behind and began knocking at his door.

"Open up Cardin, we don't want to break down the door!" Jaune shouted.

"But it doesn't mean we won't!" Nora exclaimed before breaking out her hammer and bashing the door down.

The trio of JNPR members stepped inside the CRDL dorm room and prepared to deliver a much deserved beat down on the infamous bully. But just as soon as they stepped inside, they found the room empty. Believing Cardin to be hiding somewhere in the room, the trio split up to toss over every possible hiding spot before turning their eyes to the open window.

"You don't think he…?" Nora glanced at her teammates.

"That's an eight story drop." Ren said firmly.

The trio then approached the window and stuck their heads out. Their eyes all widened at the sight of a very large crater at the feet of the dormitory. Not too far away, Cardin marched off. Plummetsing downwards from floors wasn't a new concept to him, he thought as he patted his leg. But this time he was prepared and focused his aura at the soles of his feet. So Cardin walked off, intent to hail a cab at the tarmac, the folder he'd acquired from Kevin in hand and a handgun in his back pocket.

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Well now that was unexpected right?

One of the things I wanted to do for this arc was have a bunch of people sitting around a table and talk about super heroes. It just sounded like a neat character building moment, as the name of the arc would suggest, its their downtime and they're just shooting the breeze talking.

You all might argue against the Russel liking Superman, and that's fine. But for the intents of this story, he likes Superman. I've gone to extreme lengths to make such a thing feasible over the course of the last 26 chapters and 5 interludes. He grew up in a rural town burden with the guilt of his mom dying in childbirth. And the one superhero he knows is Superman. I chose Superman because he's the end all be all superhero.

But yeah, idk, Chris Evans man.

Cardin not having a good time. Check.

And the Pyrrha and Russel coffee house scene, that was actually supposed to be shorter. But then I just kept writing it and the scenarios in my head and the Russel/Pyrrha dynamic just made me write more. Pyrrha's turned to arguably the only person she can trust, who just so happens to be the worst person she could trust in this situation. And then Jaune just going full on alpha was not planned either. But the way he sees things, it just seemed natural, because that's kind of how everything happened from a certain angle. And I also played with the idea that Jaune's not an idiot. He's a goof but not an idiot. At some point he probably figured out Pyrrha liked him, maybe, maybe not. I think I left it ambiguous enough to be either or.
Next chapter will be out sometime this week. Might be tomorrow. Idk. 'TIL NEXT TIME!
LATER DAYYS!
Hey everyone! Welcome back to another chapter of 'The Darkling Thrush'!

Like I said last chapter, divisive right? In regards to all the comic book stuff, it's actually important thematically to this arc and the story overall. Superman is an icon of hope, and one of the main themes of Thomas' Hardy's poem, which this story was inspired by and shares the same name, is about hope. So that's a little insight into not only the origins and direction of this story going forward.

This was a difficult chapter to get out. I got sick while writing this. I tried to soldier on, but I just couldn't do it. I'm feeling a bit better, but even as I write this author's note I have tissues jammed up my nose keeping the gunk from leaking out. So I apologize in advance if things might seem a little incoherent, I honestly couldn't edit this chapter even if I wanted to. I wrote a couple thousand words the first try, I was forced to scrap everything and start again. Also, Nordlending brought up a point about the story needing line breaks. So I'm experimenting and seeing if that works. Anyways, on with the story.

Warning: This is a story about Russel, right? He's our protagonist, but he's an antagonist like Cardin in the eyes of Teams RWBY and JNPR.

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When Velvet woke up this morning the last thing she expected when she sat down behind her editor's desk with the Shining Beacon was a poorly written slander piece about one of the school's finest. She'd wanted a normal Sunday, where she and the rest of the volunteer staff assembled Monday's newspaper. She just wanted to sit back, relax, see what Blake had in store for the Author X column this time around, maybe Team RWBY would've shown up for that interview they promised her about the Mountain Glenn situation.

So you could imagine her displeasure when one Lance Grimsby walked through the door and threw such a character assassinating piece onto her desk. For months Velvet had been dodging the Grimsby boy, he'd been this strange tick that'd been following her almost everywhere she'd gone. At first Velvet had thought he was some first year student looking to an older more experience one for guidance.

A few days before the incident with Team CRDL in the dining hall, Yatsushi had caught the Grimsby boy lurking outside their room. He'd played it off as him getting lost, still trying to find his way around campus. And then after that Velvet couldn't help but feel like something had been following her to and from class.

And then after the incident with CRDL, Lance had gone out of his way to act the role of hero, standing up to bullies such as Russel. It didn't go well for Lance, he wound up with a concussion, bad tumble down the stairs. Then he found out about her working as an editor for the paper. Which brings them to the present.

"What'd you think, Velvet? Worthy of print no doubt, eh?" Lance smirked to himself as he stood
When Velvet had returned from her mission with the rest of her team, she'd found it a refreshing change of pace to not have one such as Lance stalking her every move. As she'd heard from a number of reliable sources, he'd been tied to a pole butt naked and then dragged off by the authorities. There were murmurs about suspension, but given Lance's presence it appeared those rumors were false. Drat.

"It's certainly reads like something you'd write." Velvet said as she held back the urge to vomit. Lance was not a world class author, neither was she, but at least she knew when journalism needed to be restrained. "You have five curse words in the first paragraph alone."

"So? Did you at least get to the part in paragraph four about the firsthand accounts I scrounged together? Pyrrha unknowingly confessed to a number of students who she slept with." Lance said as he placed a finger on the paper, tapping said paragraph.

"No and I don't need to." Velvet said without skipping a beat. "I can't print this. I won't print this."

"Wait what? What about freedom of speech?!!" Lance exclaimed in protest. "Come on Velvet, what could be so bad about it?"

"The second paragraph is a detailed dramatization about Pyrrha mid orgasm." Velvet retorted with a deadpan expression. "This is slander and smut."

"It's tasteful." Lance countered.

"It's appalling." Velvet said sounding disgusted.

"Look, maybe if you continue reading you'll see how this story benefits you." Lance said, imploring Velvet to continue looking over the paper.

"Nothing you say will get me to reconsider, Lance." Velvet held firmly.

"It's Cardin. He's the guy who slept with Pyrrha." Lance blurted out in one last ditch effort to get Velvet to see things his way.

"Cardin?!" Velvet exclaimed in surprise. Her eyes then fell back onto the paper and quickly she read the fourth paragraph. All accounts, mostly from people she knew, confirmed what Lance was saying. "But that-on the night of-What?!" Immediately, Velvet's eyes returned to the sheet in front of her. It was just as Lance had said. He'd acquired three statements from three individuals she herself knew that confirmed Lance's story.

But the biggest take away from everything had to be the way Lance had worded the piece. The Winchester boy was portrayed under a rather negative light. The way everything was described seemed to insinuate Cardin may have taken advantage of Pyrrha in her drunken state. But that wasn't the young man Velvet knew. She looked up to Lance to explain.

"I'm just saying, given what they did to you, this is your golden opportunity to get revenge." Lance said eagerly. "You should be thanking me Velvet. We do this right, Pyrrha saves face under the guise as a victim, Cardin gets what's been coming to and more, and you get to be the one who does it. This it Velvet, by some miracle everything's aligned itself for you. You just have to give the word and send it to print."

Velvet sighed. "Lance?"
"Yes?" Lance asked with an enamored look on his face.

"That's fucked up." Velvet said before taking the paper and crumpling it into a ball and tossing it over at a nearby trash can. "Now if you excuse me, I've gotta do some real journalism." And without another word, Velvet sat up from her desk, grabbed her bag and made a run for the exit.

"W-wait what? This is your chance for revenge! Isn't this what you want?!" Lance questioned, confused by the turn of events.

"Nooope!" Velvet shouted over her shoulder before exiting the room.

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After departing from Pyrrha's company, Russel set off through the busy streets of Vale. Through crowded sidewalks and jaywalking through traffic, that green haired mohawk sporting boy went, eventually winding up in the local law firm district in town. Given the circumstances and reasoning for his arrival in such a place, the young man couldn't help laugh at irony.

Now walking down a busy sidewalk where both human and faunus roamed as one, Russel made a sharp left turn down a familiar alley. He walked up against the side of one of the buildings and leaned against a brick wall. Kevin had a way of doing business that could only be described as obsessive.

Russel had done this dance a multitude of times. He'd stand just like how he was standing now against the same brick wall, just as how Kevin preferred. The saggy pants wearing man himself would slink out of the shadows with his whole ambiance setting routine and then they'd begin business as usual. And so, after waiting five minutes, just like how he always did, then would Kevin walk over.

It was after the second time they'd done business when Russel figured out Kevin's actions were all just a front. You could tell a lot about a man by the clothes he wore, or rather the clothes he refused to remove. Day after day Kevin would stand down that alley in darkness provided by god knows what and would step out cleaner than the clothes he wore. As Russel saw it, he was either an undercover cop or the guy loved theatre. And seeing as Russel was currently being handcuffed and thrown into the backseat of a cruiser, it was probably the later.

"Ah, Mr. Thrush, my favorite customer!" Kevin greeted boisterously as he joined Russel against the wall, which was something he'd always do. The way he leaned unsettled Russel, as if Kevin was trying to hide himself from those bystanders who walked by. It was always as if Kevin was always prepared for the likelihood of an aggressive force would be running down his alleys and he would use his customer as a human shield.

"I bet you say that to all the junkies you supply, Kev." Russel returned the pleasantries with his own charismatic spin.

"So, what brings you back in my neck of the woods?" Kevin laughed at his attempt to make a joke. Russel remained unfazed by his joke, not finding it funny in the slightest. Seeing that his quality material had flown over Russel, Kevin stifled his laughter and composed himself in order to do business. "It was funny because-you know-we're in the city and I said woods."

"Yeah I got that. I need another I.D." He said as he dug into his pocket and hand the old one over to Kevin.

"Planning on drowning your sorrows in some bar tonight only to find it's expired, eh? Mhm." Kevin nodded as he looked over the faux I.D. "Alright, I can whip you up another in jiffy. But it'll cost
you twice as much."

"Twice? That's ridiculous." Russel protested. Kevin's work was good, but not enough to warrant such a sharp increase in cost.

"No, it's business." Kevin shrugged. "Tell you what, I'll sweeten the deal. Free of charge I'll throw in a copy of the shit your buddy had me scrape up for him?"

"My buddy?" Russel questioned, not sure what Kevin meant.

"Buddy, friend, partner, I don't give a shit. The guy, the tall guy that came in with you that one time a couple months back, Cardin." Kevin said catching Russel's interest. "He had me pull together some stuff for him. As it happened I made two copies, one to sell to him and one to sell to you, if you're interested."

"Why would I buy that?" Russel asked, wishing for more incentive for him to go along with the deal. There wasn't a doubt he would go for it, he need the I.D., but he might as well make Kevin work for that sale.

"So you're telling me you don't want to know what kind of secret terrible thing he had me dig up for him?" Kevin implored. Thinking it over a little more, Russel eventually caved and dug into his pocket and handing the man twice the usual payment. "Thought so." Kevin smiled as he counted the lien. Satisfied, he turned back to the shadows of the alley where no doubt he had some elaborate setup. "Alright give me a sec."

"Alright, one new I.D. and one folder of unmentionables." "Now get lost you're drawing too much attention to me."

With their business concluded, Russel walked out of the alley and Kevin returning to his 'office'. Along the way to catching a cab back to Beacon, Russel checked out the folder he'd bought and read the contents. Wat he found wasn't much of a surprise but still enough of a headache to cause Russel to sigh in frustration. "God dammit Cardin."

"And then he jumped out the window?" Yang questioned doubtfully at Nora's tale. Standing inside Team CRDL's dorm room the members of Team JNPR, minus Pyrrha busied themselves with sacking CRDL's belongings in search of any clue as to where Cardin might possibly go. All the while Team RWBY stood watching, unsure how to process the events that led up to now.

"Have a look for yourself, there's a crater and everything!" Nora shouted over her shoulder as she opened a worn duffel bag. She quickly rummaged through the contents before pausing to examine an old but still in good condition pocket knife. "Cool." She smirked to herself before folding the knife into the handle and taking it. "They wouldn't mind if we took souvenirs right? Course not. They're bad guys."

"We don't doubt that, Nora." Ruby said as she stuck her head the CRDL dorm window for a look at said crater. "But given all the commotion from earlier, you could hardly blame us for thinking you threw him out the window."

"Me? A defenestrator? Preposterous!" Nora said dramatically. "I will not stand here and have my good name besmirched!"

"Defene-what?" Yang raised a confused brow at Nora's choice of wording.

"Defenestration. The act of throwing one out a window." Ren informed as he dug into the CRDL
closet. Out poured a mountain of dirty laundry, causing the JNPR ninja to recoil at the sight. "Would it kill them to clean up after themselves?"

"Why don't you guys just chase down one of Cardin's teammates? Maybe then you wouldn't be guilty of barging and entering." Weiss remarked.

"We would but Dove was last seen getting carted off in an ambulance." Jaune said as he dug through the nightstand beside what he presumed to be Cardin's bed.

"Oh my gosh, is he alright?" Ruby gasped.

"He and some of the other students were playing blackjack for candy. Turns out one of those candy bars he ate expired a decade ago." Ren recalled. "So, worst case he's getting his stomach pumped."

"And what about Sky?" Blake questioned as Jaune violently rippled out the nightstand drawer and flipped it over allowing the contents to spill out on the floor.

"I talked to Willa-you know-Team WILL Willa? The one who writes the slash fanfiction?"

"Yes we know all about her nightly escapades around a computer." Weiss rolled her eyes.

"I still don't, actually." Ruby raised a hand as if she were sitting in a classroom and waiting to be called on by the teacher. "What's slash fanfiction?"

"You'll find out when you're older." Yang stated firmly, quickly casting death glances at Weiss and Nora as a warning not to ruin her impressionable sister's innocence.

"…So we asked Willa and Sky got up to leave before Dove fell out. She said while they were in the middle of a game he had an 'epiphany', claimed everything was 'right under our noses'– whatever that means–and then apparently he ran out the room to Beacon Tower." Nora said, recalling her earlier conversation with Willa.

"We went to Beacon Tower, no sign of him." Ren said a matter of fact. "We asked around, people saw him enter, but no one saw him leave. It was really odd."

With the only other two members of CRDL incapacitated or MIA, that only left one other for them all to turn to. Team RWBY shared uncomfortable glances amongst each other, as it was their history with said last remaining member of CRDL was by far the rockiest. "And Russel?" Blake spoke up.

"Oddly enough, no one knows where he is." Jaune said as he finished sorting through the miscellaneous objects he'd dumped onto the ground.

"I've got his number if you want it." Blake said as she pulled her scroll out of her pocket.

"Wait, how? Why?" Jaune asked in surprise.

"The circumstances aren't important." Blake stressed, hoping to put that one Sunday behind her. "I just have his number. You want it or not?"

"Oh yeah hand it here." Jaune reached his hand out for Blake to place her scroll on his palm.

"Knock, knock." All eyes darted at the open doorway. There stood Velvet outside the room staring inside. "Is it cool if I enter?"

"Oh no it's cool. We don't live here." Nora said welcomingly before resuming ruminating through
Team CRDL's belongings.

"So, hi, Velvet." Blake waved at her editor awkwardly. "What are you doing here?"

Raking a step into the ransacked room, Velvet was careful not to step on anything and contribute to the growing mess. "Lance tried to get a story about Pyrrha and Cardin published." Velvet informed, causing everyone in the room to pale. "'Tried', don't worry, I ran interference. But that doesn't mean word won't get out."

"Ugh." Jaune groaned. "Pyrrha's life is going to fall apart."

"Cardin's too." Velvet said as she recalled Lance's rather negative portrayal of events. "Lance was going to portray it as if Cardin used the night drinking at the dance to have his way with Pyrrha."

"That's because that actually happened." Jaune said bitterly, causing everyone to react in shock. "What? You're all surprised? This is Cardin everyone! He blackmailed me and tried to get me to hurt Pyrrha. Did we all forget that? This is all just one of his sick twisted games at hurting us."

"No. That's not the Cardin I know." Velvet firmly declared.

"That's not the Cardin you know?" Yang raised a brow at the implication. "Velvet, did you stop by our rooms first before coming here?" Velvet remained silent. "You came seeking Cardin out first? Why?"

"He's a bad guy, Velvet." Jaune spoke bitterly as he began to dial Russel's number into his scroll. "Cardin is an irredeemable racist, an opportunistic bully and overall a chauvinistic asshole. You of all people should know that."

Velvet frowned, not liking being talked down to. "Why're you all even here anyways?"

"Cardin needs to pay." Jaune said seriously, exuding his intent. "I'm going to call Russel, maybe we can get him to help us." Jaune said before hitting the call button on his scroll.

And then they heard the familiar ringing of a scroll receiving a call. Once again all looked to the doorway and there stood Russel, a folder under his arm and a hand digging into his pocket. "Hold on a sec guys, phone call." He said casually before taking his scroll and answering the call. "Hello?" Russel spoke into the receiver.

"Uh…" Jaune looked to his friends for advice, unsure how to handle the situation. Everyone in unison simply shrugged, causing Jaune to move ahead and respond over the scroll. "Um…hi?"

"Cunt!" Russel shouted sharply into his scroll, causing Jaune to yank his head away from his. Russel then hit the 'end' button on his scroll and placed it back in his pocket. "Alright, why the fuck are you all in my room?" He asked. "Better question. Why is it a lot messier than when I left it this morning?"

"That there's a funny story, Russel! Too bad we don't have time to talk about it!" Nora laughed awkwardly as she attempted to divert the conversation onto something more productive. "Hey by any chance do you know where Cardin is?"

"That's mine." Russel pointed at the pocket knife in Nora's hand.

Nora eyed the pocket knife and smirked as an idea popped in her head. "I'll hand it back if you help us find Cardin." She said as she raised it up in the air for Russel to see. But then the bottom of the handle caught her eye, written in small print was an inscription. Silently Nora read it and then
turned to Russel with a confused look on her face. "Who's Alba?"

Russel frowned at the mention of his mother's name. "Look, you guys are in my dorm uninvited. You've got my property. Just hand it over and leave." He sighed.

"Not until, you help us find Cardin." Jaune stepped forward with a confidence he'd never had before. It was an odd sight for sure, everyone was used to the spineless blonde bloke who'd let people walk over him. But given the circumstances it was no surprise that of all people present in the room it was Jaune who'd manned up to take charge. "Pyrrha, my friend, my partner. Cardin's put her in a compromising situation, Russel. And the only way I can fix this is with Cardin."

"Well look whose balls dropped." Russel whistled. "Look, I get that you just want to help your partner, but there's no way I'm going to help you lynch my teammate. So get the fuck out." Russel threw a thumb over his shoulder at the open doorway.

"We said nothing about-" Jaune began to protest before getting cut off.

"I heard you all shouting from down the hall." Russel threw his thumb over his shoulder and t the open doorway once more. "If you're trying to keep things quiet about Pyrrha and Cardin, for goodness sake learn to shut up."

"Ugh…" Jaune groaned as he recognized both the truth and irony in Russel's words. After all, it was because he couldn't keep his mouth shut that led to his indentured servitude beneath Cardin's heal. "Give him back the knife, Nora." Jaune glanced over at his bombastic teammate.

"Aw!" Nora pouted. But the walking lightning rod of energy did as she was told and tossed it over to Russel who caught the knife with his free hand and proceeded to inspect it, ensuring it hadn't been damaged.

"You don't have to do anything you don't want to, Russel. No one's forcing you to help, but it would be appreciated." Jaune spoke honestly. "But I want you to know that this is going to be resolved regardless. This is your one chance to be a part of the solution."

"My one chance?" Russel couldn't laugh at how stupid it sounded. "You mean well, Jaune, I admire that. I don't know where Cardin is, but I wouldn't tell you anyways. After all, he's my partner, just as Pyrrha's yours. I'm going to support him regardless, now get lost."

"So what's in the folder?" After a moments silence Jaune pointed to the folder in Russel's hands.

"Photos of your mom." Russel quipped sarcastically. He took a step to the side and then gestured to the door. "Now, seriously, get out."

And so they did, one by one the members of Team JNPR and Team RWBY along with Velvet began to funnel out of the ransacked room. Jaune marched out, resolute to find Cardin and preserve Pyrrha's honor. He was flanked by Nora and Ren who both felt the same way. Again, Russel couldn't blame them, but he still found it annoying that they'd tried to ransom the pocket knife for his help.

The Velvet walked past. "You could've handled that differently." She whispered to Russel as she left the room. Russel nodded, accepting that he could've and probably should've. But he just wasn't in the mindset, his patience was taxed enough as it was.

And then Team RWBY left, with Ruby right behind Velvet. Weiss followed suit and then did Yang. And then all that remained in the room amongst the garbage and scattered clothes, the flipped beds and tossed drawers, stood Russel and Blake.
"Got something to say Belladonna?" Russel sneered, having noticed the one time closet faunus hadn't budged an inch unlike the others.

Blake remained silent, meeting Russel's stare with one as equally cold and calculating. The events of last semester weighed heavily on their minds. After all how could it not? It happened on a Sunday just like this one, when a crusading warrior proclaiming to serve a greater good had kidnapped and tortured some unsuspecting CRDL boy while he was busy taking care of personal business.

"This is going to blow up in everyone's faces, you know that right?" Russel said as he flipped the pocket knife open and pointed it at the young woman standing there at the other side of the room. He could understand the paranoia she feels in regards to the White Fang, he could even pity her descent into that world of fear. But that was as far as he was willing to go in order to empathize with her.

"Maybe, maybe not." Blake said before taking a step forward. She'd wasted enough time dealing with Russel, if she didn't hurry the others would surely leave without her. "We'll see." She said before walking past Russel and making her way for the door.

Russel lowered the knife, collapsing the blade back into the handle and tossing it over onto his bed. He glanced over his shoulder and watched Blake leave. "I wasn't talking about Cardin."

"Neither was I." She said before she walked through the doorway. Now in the hallway outside, Blake quickly dashed to catch up to her friends. Discreetly reintegrating into the group, Blake spoke up, wondering about their next move. "So now what?"

"Nuclear option." Jaune said as he pulled a Cardin's scroll lout of his back pocket, having retrieved it earlier. "Anyone know how to hack a scroll?"

Russel looked around the tossed room. He debated whether or not to begin clean up duty, but ultimately he decided against it. Rather, he decidedly to pretend he never saw it and hopefully Dove or Sky would come along and clean it up. He took to his bed and threw down the folder, pulling it open and quickly read through the contents.

Cardin wasn't the man everyone made him out to be, Russel knew that from firsthand experience. There would be no reasoning with Jaune or anyone else, they'd made their intent clear enough for the young Thrush to see. They intended to have Cardin expelled. They could do so just by going to Ozpin himself, but no, they wanted to bring Cardin in, to drag him in chains, make him stand before the headmaster. In order to save Cardin, Russel was going to have to get to him first.

Russel didn't exactly lie when he said he didn't know where Cardin was. The contents of the folder gave him an approximate location of his partner. So Russel stuck his head out his room, making sure the likes of Team RWBY and JNPR had gone. And then he looked out the window and found them and Velvet walking off to the Transfer Student Dorms. No doubt they intended to enlist assistance. And so the angry mob grew.

His window of opportunity to depart from the dorm without watching eyes presented itself. Russel grabbed a bag and made his way down to the locker rooms where he claimed both his daggers and Cardin's mace. Once upon a time he'd offered to take his teammate's weapons to their lockers, but in order to do so they had to entrust him with their locker combos. Nice to see things pay off.

Russel made his way to the tarmac, hailed a cab and threw his bag of weapons into the back. "Where to?" The cabbie asked as Russel sat down in the passenger seat.
"Intersection of York and Paddock." He answered.

"Merchant District. That's a half hour fare." The Cabbie said, wondering if Russel was sure if he wanted to go to such a place.

"Just get me there and we'll be alright." Russel said, not really minding the cost. And then the gondola took off, its destination halfway across Vale. The city, not the country.

This is a funny arc, because while I was writing it, I realized how intricate it actually had to be. It was intended to be a simple Russel-Cardin bromance arc, but then I realized how involved the student populace of Beacon was.

Before anyone starts throwing rocks at my house, everyone is acting against the image that we've all given Cardin. Cardin in cannon might be the type to take advantage of someone under the influence, I don't know, but that isn't the Cardin I'm writing. So everyone is railing against that other version of Cardin because that's the only 'Cardin' they know. I dragged my ass out of a fever dream to explain Jaune's side of things, as well as everyone else's.

We also saw the return of Lance in this chapter, who is by far the most disturbing character I've had to write. He's very much responsible for everything going on in the arc, even he himself along with everyone else is unaware of this fact.

I cut out at least two plot points in all the rewriting and what not I did. One of which involved Russel visiting a law office to retrieve one last thing he'd inherited from Marlowe's death. I also cut out a Sky sub plot involving Ozpin and a certain Maiden under Beacon Tower.

The whole York and Paddock thing is a little easter egg for anyone who reads my KND fics. I sprinkle those in every once n a while.
Welcome back everyone to another chapter of 'The Darkling Thrush'!

Something worth mentioning! If you look at the character tags for this story, you'll notice I've added Team NDGO. That is important moving forward because one of those four girls is getting paired with Russel. But I won't reveal that until...next interlude.

WARNING: Um...so you know how this story is rated 'M'?

"Of the years of my tenure presiding over Beacon, you are by far the last one I expected to find down here." Beneath Beacon Tower, in a secret dimly lit vault, Ozpin stood beside a vast life support machine, flanked by Ms. Goodwitch and the Atlesian General Ironwood. Ozpin glanced at his signature coffee mug in hand and took a sip before turning his attention back to a young first year student whom they'd bound to a chair.

Sky Lark found himself smiling proudly as he faced the three authority figures. "I'll take that as a compliment, sir."

"Just how did you figure it out?" General Ironwood inquired as he crossed his arms over his chest.

"It wasn't an easy task, you've gone to great lengths to hide such a secret from the world of man," Sky laughed as he monologued. "But I am not an ordinary man. I grew up on archeological expeditions with my mother and father. I've seen ancient societies and learned dead languages. I've transcribed the mythological Scrolls of Evermore and stolen away secrets of dead kings. It was only a matter of time before I pieced the truth together. The Maidens are real."

"Quite." Ozpin took another sip out of his mug. "Alright, huddle up team meeting." He said before turning his back to Sky. Goodwitch and Ironwood followed Ozpin's example and formed a small circle. With his person bound to the chair, all Sky really could do was

"Thoughts?" Ozpin asked quietly.

"We can't just let him go. He could divulge his findings to everyone. You know how things are these days. Especially with the invention of the internet, information can be attained with a simple click of a mouse."

"Careful, James, your age is showing." Ms. Goodwitch quipped.

"...I can hear you guys. All you did was turn around." Sky said aloud as he watched the trio of authority figures conduct their 'secret' meeting.

"I don't like it, and I hate what I'm about to suggest, but maybe it'd just be easier if no one saw him again." Ironwood sighed.

"You aren't talking about killing him, are you? That's terrible, James." Goodwitch frowned at her companions willingness to send the young man seated before them to an early grave.
"...I'm still in the room..." Sky chuckled worriedly.

"Well what choice do we have? He's a liability."

"There's always a choice." Ozpin said seriously. "Relax James, I'll handle this." The Beacon Headmaster said before turning around to face the absolutely scared shitless Sky. "I'm forced to make a difficult decision, Mr. Lark. One I haven't made in quite a long time. You're an obvious risk, and letting you continue to socialize with the outside world will cause the risk you represent to double by the day. It might not be today, it might not be tomorrow, but one day you may talk to someone, and then they'll talk and so on."

"You're one of my students, Mr. Lark. I allowed you to attend Beacon because I saw something in you, a potential to be a great huntsman like all the other students." Ozpin spoke quietly, but the weight of his words hit Sky like a wave washing over him. It was the way Ozpin looked down at him that betrayed the years and wars he'd fought. "I very much want you to realize that potential, but you can't do that from a cell or in a grave. Which leaves only one solution."

"Can I trust you, Mr. Lark? Can I trust you to meet my demanding expectations and remain silent? That you work for me instead of against me?"

Sky remained silent. The way Ozpin had said it, he wasn't asking him to stay quiet about what he'd found out, but he was asking him to actively prove his loyalty, to prove he could be trusted with such information. Sky looked up and smiled lightly. "I hope to make you proud, sir."

"Splendid." Ozpin smiled before tapping his cane on the floor and causing Sky's restraints to fall off. "Welcome to the team."

"Qrow's not going to like this."

"Really?" Ironwood couldn't help but smile. "Well in that case I change my mind. I'm full support of this decision now." The Atleasian General took a step forward and extended his prosthetic hand to Sky. "Welcome to the cabal, Mr. Lark. We expect good things from you."

"It's an honor for you to take me into your confidence." Sky said as he shook Ironwood's robotic hand. Sky took a step back, taking a moment to soak in the fact he was now one of few to be a part of something more. But then his scroll began to ring. "Is it alright if I answer that?" Sky asked, visibly embarrassed with his scroll.

"Oh no, please. I don't mind." Ozpin shrugged.


"Angry mob?" General Ironwood raised a brow.

"Uh-huh. Yeah, you're actually in luck, I got him right here." Sky said before taking his scroll and presenting it to Ozpin. "It's for you."

"Ms. Goodwitch, would you kindly hold my mug?" Ozpin asked before handing his mug off to Goodwitch. Ozpin then reached over and claimed Sky's scroll and held it up against his face. "Good evening Mr. Thrush, how may I help you?"

"And Bingo!" The blue haired, goggle wearing Mistral native Neptune Vasilias exclaimed. Seated behind a desk in his transfer student accommodation dorm room, Neptune spun around in his seat
presenting Cardin's recently hacked Scroll to the nine people standing behind him.

"Impressive work, Neptune." Weiss complimented the young man as he handed the scroll off to a waiting Jaune. "Where'd you pick up such a skill?"

"I've always been good at electronics." Neptune made a passing gesture to his electricity based weapon resting on the desk. "I'm like a Science Wizard. But cooler."

"I know you guys came here for help finding this Cardin guy, but how's his scroll supposed to, well, help with that?" The blonde faunus and partner of Neptune, Sun Wukong, asked as he peered over Jaune's shoulder and at the scroll in his hand. Sun couldn't help but raise a brow at the scroll's chosen screen saver, a picture of who he assumed to be Cardin and a young woman no older than fifteen standing beside him, both of whom were smiling as they posed for the photo.

"Cardin's the guy, right?" Neptune aske as he approached the group.

"Yes." Jaune rolled his eyes. Sure, he knew the two of them, Sun and Neptune, had never met Cardin before, but what kind of question was that? "Cardin's the guy."

"Cool, at least it's the most physically imposing of the two." Neptune said coolly.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Jaune questioned before he opened Cardin's messages.

"I'd never let you live down being bullied by a little girl." Neptune deadpanned. Off to the side, Ruby couldn't help but chuckle lightly. Maybe she'd start teasing Jaune more often.

"The girl's his sister." Velvet spoke up.

"Cardin has a sister?" Yang said in an amused tone. "Yeesh and I thought one was bad enough. Imagine what having two of them around must be like."

"'Had', he had a sister. She committed suicide." Velvet said sadly. And just like that everyone in the room stopped what they were doing and looked to Velvet with slack jaws and mortified expressions.

"Well you could've said that before I made the insensitive comment, Velvet!" Yang shouted, feeling horrible for what she'd said just moments earlier. "Ugh…"

"I don't feel comfortable going through Cardin's messages. This is a violation of his privacy." Velvet said, not hiding her disdain for their actions. In fact, she disapproved of their actions so much, that if one were to actually look behind the second year student's back, they'd see her messaging a certain green haired Thrush about their whereabouts.

"Yeah, we already did that. Remember?" Nora shrugged as if it were no big deal. "Whoa boy, I would not wish cleaning that up even on my worst enemy."

"You don't have a worst enemy." Ren said neutrally as he crossed his arms.

"Shhh! They don't need to know that!" Nora 'whispered' rather loudly.

"...Well that aside, I think we've got something." Jaune said aloud as he opened the most recent correspondence. "It's with a man named Kevin. He's talking about how he's got what Cardin 'asked for'."

"That sounds rather ominous." Weiss muttered.
"Is it by messenger by chance or is there a number we can call?" Yang spoke up, her interested piqued at the mention of the name 'Kevin'. "I think I know the guy Cardin's been talking to."

"What?!" Ruby shouted in alarm. "Yang, don't you tell me this is that guy you see for your fake I.D.s!"

"You got a guy that sells you fake I.D.s?" Sun asked in surprise.

"That's so cool! You've gotta hook us up, Yang!" Neptune said, excited at the prospects of the possibility of sneaking into one of the many clubs in Vale.

"Hey, relax, I don't even know if it's the same guy." Yang said as she pulled out her scroll to compare the numbers. After doing so, she frowned. "Ok, it's the same guy."

"Yang, what would Dad say if he knew you were in cahoots with some drug dealer!" Ruby shouted in a scolding tone.

"Chill Rubes. I don't even think the guys a dealer. Although I don't doubt the possibility that he's a user. He dresses like he might." Yang shrugged.

"That's not helping your case!"

"Is there a chance this Kevin guy would know where Cardin went?" Jaune looked to Yang for an answer.

"Maybe. He's actually a really knowledgeable guy." Yang said as she recalled the many times she'd visited Kevin and he'd astounded her with his knowledge of the goings on at Vale. "Alright then, let's go ask him."

And so then the ten huntsmen in training set off to the tarmac outside campus and caught a ride to Vale. It didn't take too long to reach their destination, but with the setting sun, there was no telling how long they'd be at this. Until they found Cardin at least.

These past few weeks hadn't exactly been going well for the Invincible Girl. To say the least it was an understatement of the facts. Pyrrha remained in the booth at the coffee shop where, sitting in her seat for what must've been hours. She was mindful of the fact it was getting late and that her friends were probably worried about her, but the last thing she wanted to do was go back to Beacon. So she remained in her seat sipping tea and waiting for the world to send her message about what to do with her life.

Just last week she'd tried to woo the object of her affection, one goofy young man, not a boy, but a man who'd yet to realize her potential. But she hadn't the courage to make a move. And then, in her despair at seeing him with the object of his affection, she turned to an outside source to remedy the pain she felt. But then that ultimately led to her sharing a night in bed with Cardin.

And then, after seeking refuge from that loveable leader of hers, she'd unintentionally revealed that secret to a room full of people. And then she learned that those people were there only to bet on her love life. But when she'd thought it couldn't get any worse, Russel had implied that maybe her leader, her partner wasn't so blind to her feelings as she'd thought. The whole idea of it was so stressful and troubling.

It was odd now, being called The Invincible Girl. Because it seemed as if she was anything but. Pyrrha shook her head at the thought. She could fight the whole world but at the end of the day it was her heart that was her Achilles heel of sorts. Damn life sucked.
"You alright hon?" The elder waitress addressed Pyrrha as she passed by to deliver a platter to the table across from her. "You've been here a rather long time."

"Oh, yes, thank you for asking." Pyrrha gave the waitress a friendly smile, well, the best she could at the moment.

"Do us both a favor. Quit lying to yourself." The waitress said harshly. "You look devastated. Especially after that guy you were with walked out. Ugh. You could do better than that, kid."

"W-What?" Pyrrha's eyes widened behind her nonprescription glasses at the implication. "No, no he was just my…friend? I don't know. He's a colleague from combat school."

To be honest, Pyrrha didn't actually know what to call Russel. It wouldn't be much trouble to just call him a friend, lob him in with the rest of her so called friends. But she just couldn't for some reason, she just couldn't say the words. They weren't just simply colleagues, he was too involved with her personal life to be something as simple as that. Were they enemies? The whole question just confused Pyrrha the more she thought about it.

"Riiight." The waitress said in a disbelieving tone. "You want more tea?"

"No, no I'm fine ma'am. I'd best be going, I guess. It's late." Pyrrha said before grabbing the check and making her way up to the cash register and paid with the twenty lien note Russel had left her.

"Hello?" Pyrrha answered. But upon recognizing the voice on the other end, the Invincible Girl's brilliant smile turned to a sour frown. "I don't want to talk to you right now. I'm mad at you, Russel."

But Russel pressed on at the other end of the call, causing Pyrrha to raise a brow in confusion. "What do you mean Jaune's on the warpath?" Pyrrha's look of confusion turned to one of shock as Russel began to describe in great detail what had occurred earlier at his dorm. "No, that doesn't sound like him. Jaune wouldn't do that unless…you hurt his friends."

Pyrrha froze at the realization. But then, oddly enough, Pyrrha broke out laughing. "Cardin hurt me? That's hilarious!" She continued to laugh before settling down. "Alright, where's Jaune now?"

"Really?" Pyrrha raised a surprised brow. "That close? I just have to make a walk down? Alright. Thanks for the heads up Russel, I'll straighten him out." Before they said their proper goodbyes, it dawned on Pyrrha that this was her chance to answer her earlier conundrum.

'Hey, Russel, are we friends?' That was all she had to say. But before Pyrrha could ask the boy, he hung up. And then the four time Mistral champ found herself frowning once more. She let out a defeated sigh before resigning herself to the task of tracking down her partner and the rest of her friends at the law district.

There lived over five billion people in the world of Remnant, given in the latest census, and you could find a billion of them living here in the country of Vale. Distributed diversely across the land, the majority of humans and faunus living in those lands, however, dwelled in the capitol. The city of Vale was young, born out of blood and on the backs of great men like Roman Winchester. A shining beacon in the dark, a symbol of hope and peace, the city of Vale is truly the greatest achievement of mankind.

To Cardin, the city of Vale was his home. Growing up in the nearby suburbs was a treat. He saw the city from afar and up close every day. Ever since he was a little tike he'd look far off, past the high rise buildings of brick, stone and glass over to Beacon Tower as it shine bright by the coast.
He grew up being told tales of the heroics of the elder Winchester and of their importance to the city. Cardin was meant to be a Huntsman, it was in his blood.

So was his sister, he thought somberly. Cardin stopped in place and looked around to the surrounding city. Night had fallen over Vale and it was only now that he'd realized it. Funny how things worked, you know. You look away for a second, just a second, and then everything changes. Day turns to night and night to dawn. But if it was so funny, why wasn't Cardin laughing?"

Pushing aside his dark thoughts, Cardin continued on his way. He still had an errand or two before he could set out to achieve his goal. The Merchant district was a melting pot, Cardin knew this from firsthand experience; he and his mother would come down to the local market often when he was a child. He'd see people of different shapes, sizes and color.

But there was always something off about it, something he could never put his finger on until recently. Roman Torchwick wasn't the only gangster in town, he was the biggest without a doubt, but there were the small fish, the ones who ran everything he was too busy to see to himself.

Rex Memoria was a well-respected member of the community. Cardin had met him once or twice back in the day through his father's construction projects. Rex was known to walk the streets of the merchant district, touch base with those of the community. Cardin remembered one such day when he and his mother were out getting groceries when he'd seen Rex from afar, flanked by two broad shouldered gentlemen. The shop keeps Rex spoke with seemed happy enough to entertain such a fine member of the community, at east on the surface.

Cardin was too young then to understand, too young to understand what kind of man Rex Memoria and his dirty world was. The merchant district was just the Memoria crime family's playground. They owned all of it through intimidation or force. The documents Cardin had bought from Kevin was proof of that fact.

But it wasn't Rex who brought Cardin back to this particular part of Vale, but rather, his seventeen year old son Carlo Memoria. Cardin had never known the guy personally, just that he was the son of a well-respected community member. They never crossed paths before, but they will tonight.

The documents he'd bought from Kevin were highly detailed, listing Carlo's schedule. Mondays he spends time at the club his family owns right at the heart of the merchant district. Tuesdays he's at the club. Wednesdays he's at the club. Thursdays he's at the club and so on and so on. This Sunday he's at the club. So that's where Cardin will be going. But not before making a quick stop at a local clothes shop.

Cardin had left his dorm quite some time before he could properly prepare for the occasion. Well, he'd been chased out, but still, he had to look the part of a club goer, not a student of Beacon. So Cardin walked into a suit shop. He wasn't in a rush, he still had some time to kill. The Memoria club won't be jumping at this hour.

So Cardin picked himself a three piece black suit, white dress shirt, black and orange tie. He grabbed himself a pair of loafers, something easy to slip on and he a pair of black leather gloves. The cost didn't bother him, he just put it on his card. It was about time his family's money was put towards something productive.

The next thing Cardin did was find a secluded back alley to change into his newly purchased outfit. He didn't have a mirror to aid in his endeavors to look his best, but after enough formal gatherings such as Beacon and a number of other school gatherings beforehand, Cardin had picked up enough to know how to actually wear a suit without looking like an idiot. And he had to say, he made it look good.
Stepping out of the alleyway, Cardin made his way to the Memoria club. Along the way he spared himself the time to take the scenic route to see all the notable landmarks. He passed by the famous ten meter wide wall with a colorful mural of faunus and humans putting aside their petty differences. It had been painted by a man whose name escaped Cardin at the moment. All the Winchester really recalled was that he'd died fairly recently, killed a few weeks before their first semester ended. He was killed in the streets of Vale by White Fang.

Along the way to the club Cardin walked passed the old playground where he used to play at. His mother would take him there usually before they'd go shopping. She just watched as he climbed up the slide and declared himself king of the playground. Cardin smiled at the memory, it was just an innocent day out in the town with his mother, nothing sketchy about it.

But then Cardin rounded a corner and he spotted a familiar sight. Resting by a telephone pole were a set of candles and a pair of roses. Cardin knew the reason of their placement well, after all, he was the one who put them there. Back some time before attending Beacon, he and his sister were walking home from picking up some odds and ends. Mostly it was because his sister had wanted to try her hand at the culinary arts and needed supplies. He humored her, as he always did and so they’d rounded this very corner on their way back home.

And out of the corner of his sister’s eye, she caught sight of one of her friends. Cardin had met the girl once or twice before. Her name was Delilah. Sadly, Cardin hadn't picked up her last name. But his sister was calling out to her, it was something you did, you call out to your friend and say 'hi'. But something was off with her. Upon closer inspection, they saw she was sobbing. And the next thing they knew, Delilah had thrown herself into traffic.

That stuck with Cardin for a while. Mainly because he'd been looking into her eyes when she'd taken the step off the sidewalk. It was as if there were nothing there, just an emptiness. He shuddered at the thought and wondered what could have driven such a young individual with such a promising future ahead of her to do such a thing. Then word about the autopsy got out. So his sister left the candles and Cardin left a pair of roses, one for Delilah and the other for the kid.

Cardin reached the Memoria club right on time. It wasn't too jam packed to prevent him from ever getting in, but there were enough people to make a big enough crowd for him to get lost in when the time called for it.

But that wasn't the best part, Kevin's documents had been exceptionally precise. Right on cue, up beside the club a limo pulled out, no doubt with Carlo inside. But to Cardin's surprise, Carlo wasn't the only one to step out that limo, but also his father Rex himself. Cardin hadn't expected this, no doubt security would be twice as heavy on the inside. Maybe if he doubled back now he could try again another day. But no, he'd come too far and given how things were going down at Beacon, this would probably be his one chance. So Cardin strengthened his resolve and soldiered on.

The fake I.D. Cardin had purchased from Kevin was worth every cent. The bouncer couldn't tell the difference between it and the one he'd check just a second earlier. He waved Cardin forward and so on. The Memoria Club wasn't like Junior's. At least Junior had the charismatic DJ.

While the music raged and the clubbers took to the dance floor, Cardin sat back and watched from afar as Carlo and Rex made their way up the stairs to the second floor. Thankfully one of the many documents Kevin had provided Cardin was the plans for the building. Again, worth every cent.

As he planned, Cardin made his way to the restroom and barricaded it behind him. He then set out to enact the next phase of his plan, climbing up an air vent to the second floor. But before he could, he caught sight of a familiar green mohawk.
"Russel?!” Cardin jumped at the sight of his partner. At the back of the men's room stood Russel who'd apparently been waiting for some time. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"Mind keeping it down? I got a fucking headache." In response to Cardin's question, Russel pulled out a familiar folder out of his duffel bag. And for show, he flipped through it and pointed out Kevin's detailed schedule of Carlo Memoria's whereabouts. "Would you believe that the most difficult part about piecing together your little revenge scheme was sneaking this duffel bag into the club?" Russel patted the bag.

Cardin rolled his eyes. "You can't stop me, Russel." He said firmly. He'd come too far to stop now.

"Stop you?" Russel just laughed. "You misunderstand Cardin, I'm here to help you." He said before reaching into the bag once more and pulling out Cardin's mace. "You forgot that."

"Thanks." Cardin accepted the weapon. "You sure about this, Russel? What I'm what we're about to do, it could get us into a lot of trouble."

"What's the one rule about Team CRDL, partner?" Russel smiled. "No matter what, we've got each other's backs." Cardin returned the smile and thanked his partner once more. "So, when do we begin?"

"Right now."

So...that happened...

I think I mentioned the Sky subplot earlier in my last author's note. If you look back to Arc 3, you'd recall Sky was on the trail of unravelling the mysteries of The Maidens. And so from that point on, in the background of the story, he's been piecing everything together before winding up where he is now. So, if anyone of the characters was going to find out about the Maidens, it was going to be him.

Back in Arc 3, Russel name dropped Cardin's Sister's death to Velvet in the finale of that arc. But this is by far the most layers I've pulled away from this version of Cardin I've been developing. He's a good guy at heart but he's jus as misunderstood as The Hulk. And he's sort of turned into The Punisher at the moment. But he and Russel are going to reenact one of the better Red vs Blue Season 14 episodes next chapter, that'll be fun.

Next update should be soon. I really want to finish this arc soon so I could move on to the next one. I've got something fun in store.

'Til next time dear readers! Later Days!
Welcome back dear Reader for what is without a doubt the longest chapter in 'The Darkling Thrush'!

I'm not going to waste too much time with notes up here, rather save that for down below. So let's just skipped on down to the story, eh?

Warning: Cardin's life sucks. Someone give him a hug.

"He's down this way." Yang announced before walking down a familiar alley. This wasn't the first time Yang had walked down this very alley. But it was the first time she'd had company. Under the light of the shattered moon above, ten Huntsmen in training took a left down an alley right beside one of the more well-known law firms in the district. The irony wasn't lost to Yang. She'd had that very same thought every time she walked through these alleys.

"So where is this guy?" Neptune asked aloud. If he hadn't spoken up, someone else surely would've. Before the group of ten students was an empty alleyway with litter and trashcans to keep them company. There was no sign of this 'Kevin' individual.

"We have to lean against that wall." Yang casually gestured to a nearby brick wall.

"We have to lean against a wall?" Blake asked skeptically. "And then what? He'll just show up?"

"Yeah, pretty much." Yang nodded. Already familiar with Kevin's routine, the bombshell no longer found it brotherism, nor did she find it an inconvenience. Any attempts to rationalize Kevin's obsessive behavior had fallen to the wayside, especially after the goods he'd delivered had proved time and again worth the effort.

So Yang led by example and took up leaning against the brick wall. The others shared odd looks and expressions, silently conversing with another on whether Yang was serious or not. But as time passed each and every one of them joined Yang against the wall. And then as they began to settle in at staring at the wall opposite of them, out of a nearby shadow walked the hooded form of Kevin.

"Yang Xiao Long? Haven't seen you by here in a while." Kevin greeted the blonde bombshell before taking a spot beside her on the wall. "What's up with the posse? I thought you rolled solo?"

"Looking for some information. By any chance do you know where Cardin Winchester is?" Yang said as Jaune handed her Cardin's scroll. Yang raised the scroll and showed Kevin the background photo and pointed to Cardin.

"Hm. My memories a little fuzzy." Kevin scratched his chin as he feigned amnesia. "It's gonna cost you."

"How much we talkin', Kev?" yang inquired coolly.
"Two Hundred lien." Kevin said before being followed by the sound of glass shattering on floor. And then every looked down the line with confused looks on their faces. There at the end of the line of huntsmen leaning against a wall stood Ruby with an apologetic look on her face."

"Sorry." Ruby smiled sheepishly as she gestured to trash can right beside her. Apparently hearing the amount to pay Kevin for his knowledge had cause Ruby to jump and bump up against the trash can, knocking a glass cup out of it and falling to the ground.

Ruby's response was an adequate one. Aside from probably Weiss, none of them had that sort of cash on them. So then all eyes fell to the Schnee heiress, hoping that she might pick up the tab. Hearing her friends' quiet plea, Weiss let out a long tired sigh. Was that all she was to her team, to her friends? Oh, well, she thought to herself before pulling her credit card out of seemingly nowhere.

"Sorry, I don't take plastic." Kevin muttered.

"That's literally I have." The Schnee Heiress said as she pulled her wallet out of thin air and showing its contents off, revealing the number of credit cards inside.

"Well I don't like leaving a paper trail." Kevin shrugged. "Cash only."

"Alright, how much do we all have?" Jaune turned to the group. One by one the assembled group of huntsmen began to empty their wallets and pass up their cash to the front of their little line against the wall.

Yang collected the lien and began to count. "Maybe next time it wouldn't hurt to bring cash, Weiss." Yang glanced at her snow white haired teammate. "Take this as life lesson if anything."

"Yes, because a proper young woman such as myself will be spending a lot of time in back allies with shady men. That's how I want my life to be." Weiss rolled her eyes.

"Damn it." Yang frowned as she finished counting. "We're ten short." She looked to Kevin and smiled. "You don't think you could knock that price down for little ol' me, would you?"

"Not even if you were my own mother." Kevin deadpanned. "Two hundred lien. That's my offer. Get me that or kiss Cardin's whereabouts goodbye."

"Well can we at least get some fake I.D.s?" Sun asked before getting elbowed by Blake. "I was kidding, I was kidding!"

"Ugh." Ruby groaned. "Where are we going to get ten lien?"

"I'd suggest visiting an ATM." A familiar voice said, causing all to turn to the alley entrance. There stood Pyrrha looking disappointed in her friends. "But just as it so happens, I have ten lien to spare."

"Pyrrha!" Nora cried happily.

"What are you wearing?" Ren questioned as he pointed at Pyrrha's outfit.

"It's my 'incognito' outfit." Pyrrha's cheeks darkened as for the second time today she was forced to explain this particular combination of clothing. And given how easily her friends had recognized her, this just reaffirmed her decision to look into a more discrete 'incognito' outfit.

"Wait, what are you doing here?" Jaune quickly asked before Yang or anyone else could begin a long drawn out dialogue about clothing.

"A little bird told me you guys were trying to 'lynch' Cardin." Pyrrha frowned before taking a ten lien note, he change from her meal at the coffee house, and passing it down the line.

"And you've come to join us? Sweat!" Nora exclaimed.

"No." Pyrrha shook her head. "I'm helping you find him so we all could sit down and discuss what happened like civilized adults."

"But, Pyrrha, he took advantage of you." Ruby spoke up.

"No, he didn't." Pyrrha sighed. "That's not what I said Jaune. I told you about what happened, at no point did I say he took advantage of. In fact, Cardin had more drinks than I did. When I woke up he was still past out. We were both under the influence, that's it."

"Pyrrha. Who told you where we were?" Jaune asked firmly.

"Russel." Pyrrha begrudgingly answered.

"Oh hey, you guys know Russel? That's cool." Kevin couldn't help but chuckle.

"Wait, how do you know Russel?" Yang turned to her supplier.

"Haven't any of you been paying attention? I sell high quality fake I.D.s. A good chunk of my customers are in fact from Beacon." Kevin laughed. "That reminds me! May I interest any of you in my private detective business? Between Cardin and those spouses who think their significant others are cheating on them, I'm making a killing."

"…How much for you to find out what the Headmaster of Beacon does on his off hours?" Weiss asked, taking a interest in the offer.

"Oh, Ozpin?" Kevin's eyes widened, but not from shock or surprise, but in utter fear. "No fuck that. That's above any pay grade. Shit."

"Pyrrha, you of all people know what they did to me." Jaune said angrily. To those in his confidence, who knew about Jaune's faked transcripts and the blackmailing incident could only sympathize for the blonde Arc. "They held my actions over my head and forced me to be their indentured servant. They made me almost hurt you for goodness sake! Even if you both weren't in the right state of mind, do you honestly thing any of this wasn't planned? Team CRDL is filled with scrupulous manipulators. They even had a party over at their room to witness your confession."

"Don't mention the fact they hooked up a camera!" Yang chimed in for a split second.

"Yeah they-wait a minute they had a camera watching us the whole time?" Jaune spun around, having caught how overly informed Yang's comment was.

"Yes…" Yang slowly nodded. It didn't take too long for her to realize her mistake.

"Go on, Yang. Tell them how you know." Pyrrha cast a knowing look Yang's way.

"…Yeah so I sort of, maybe, kind of, go to those little gatherings." Yang admitted while she grabbed her arm.

"Bad Yang! Bad!" Ruby quickly ran over from where she leaned against the wall and smacked her
sister's arm. "This is delinquent behavior! Think about what Dad would say!"

"He'd say 'Yang, that's not how I raised you'." Yang rolled her eyes.

"Hey, you get back against the wall! I need plausible deniability!" Kevin shouted as he pointed at the empty space between Blake and Weiss against the wall.

A number of eyes fell onto Yang for an explanation regarding Kevin's outburst. Yang could only shrug and offer what wisdom she could. "He's very obsessive. Just go with it."

"And then how did you find out about that, Pyrrha? Russel told you didn't he? Just like how he told you to come here." Jaune muttered, not liking how the more and more this discussion continued it all appeared to be a CRDL ploy.

"So he did. What of it?" Pyrrha crossed her arms over her chest.

"Pyrrha, you can't seriously think there isn't something off about this, right?" Jaune exclaimed, flailing his arms into the air. "Just take a step back and see what's in front of you. You're getting information from Russel of all people. How does that not sound suspicious?"

"Russel was the last guy we saw at Beacon before turning to Neptune and Sun." Blake spoke up. "He also knew enough to point Pyrrha to Kevin's way, seemingly as if he knew we'd show up here."

"Actually, I told Russel what we've been up to." Velvet informed before removing her scroll from behind her back and showing a number of messages she'd sent to Russel.

"Okay, who is this Russel guy? I just go into Vale I don't know everyone." Neptune asked before Sun reached over and placed a hand on his shoulder. Of every one present, they alone shared the burden of being outsiders to whatever argument was occurring. Now if only they'd brought popcorn.

"You all think Team CRDL's a bunch of bad apples. Sure, they all messed up just one time. But since then they've all gone to lengths to make amends. Cardin especially. But they aren't inherently bad people. And I've worked with Russel long enough that, despite his really colored view of the world, he's not that big of an asshole."

"You've worked with him?" Ren questioned.

"Does anyone else have something to reveal about Team CRDL right now?" Jaune threw his arms up in the air in frustration. "Anyone?"

"Ren was getting hit on hardcore by Sky before the dance." Nor blurted out.

"Nora! You swore you'd never speak of that!" Ren shouted before throwing his hands over Nora's mouth.

"I'm the chief editor for the Shining Beacon. You come to me if you want something published." Velvet said a matter of fact. "You just don't write what Russel sent in. You need to on some level believe in what you're writing."

"What'd he write?" Blake asked cautiously, not liking the sound of Russel being involved with the Shining Beacon. The place where she now operated as Author X.

"That's need to know information. And you don't need to know." Velvet said simply. "But he's got
my vote of confidence. He's not a monster."

"But he is an asshole?" Neptune raise a brow.

"Sadly, he is." Velvet frowned. "He kicks dogs and refuses to say sorry. He's an asshole."

"And yet you're sure he isn't a monster?" Sun couldn't help but ask.

"Can we get back on topic?!" Jaune shouted, causing any murmuring and discussion amongst the group to cease. He then took a deep breathe, quickly calming down and then turned to Pyrrha. "Pyrrha, with all that evidence, cameras watching us as we sparred, Russel orchestrating events for us to be here, do you honestly still believe there isn't something off?"

"Yes." Pyrrha declared without hesitation.

"How could you say that?" Jaune practically shouted.

Pyrrha sighed. "Because he's the only one who hasn't been lying to me."

"What?"

"How long have you known I liked you?" Pyrrha asked quietly.

"Whoa." Everyone besides Janue and Pyrrha said as they stared in utter awe.

"Wait, does that count as you confessing?" Yang curiously asked, recalling the amount of money in the betting pool.

"Yes, yes it does. And I am very well aware of your betting on my love life. Those proceeds better go to a nice children's hospital or there will be hell to pay." Pyrrha said in a threatening manner before quickly apologizing. "I'm sorry if that sounded a little too mean."

"I've known since a little after"

"Then why haven't you said anything?"

"Because you're my partner. Because I respect you too much." "I'm a goofball who lied his way into Beacon. You're The Invincible Girl. You can do better than me. You should do better than me."

"But I don't want better, I want you." Pyrrha proclaimed, taking a step closer and closing the distance between herself and Jaune.

"I think I'm tearing up man." Sun whispered quietly

"Dude shut up. We're men we can't cry." Neptune said before breaking out into tears.

A hush fell across the alley as all stared in awe at what they were witnessing. Both Jaune and Pyrrha were simply staring into the other's eyes, as if in a trance. Though none spoke, the body language was doing all the talking. Jaune slowly leaned in, as did Pyrrha.

"Ahem." Someone coughed, causing Jaune and Pyrrha to yank themselves back and recompose themselves. Al eyes then turned to the source of the interruption. "So you guys want that Cardin info or not?" Kevin asked, interrupting the silence.

"Oh, right. Here you go." Yang said casually before handing the two hundred lien off to Kevin.
"I'll be right back." Kevin smiled before walking off back from whence he came.

"...So is there like a back room I'm not seeing or what?" Nora looked to her friends, who all shrugged in unison. Apparently all were confused as to just where Kevin had went.

"Aaaand I'm back." Kevin announced merrily as he stepped out of the darkness. "Here you guys go. Pleasure doing business." Kevin winked before slinking back into the shadows once more.

"Alright, let's take a look." Yang said before opening the folder.

"He's at the Memoria Nightclub!" Kevin's voice shouted from the darkness of the alley. "You'd better hurry!"

"What?!" They all shouted in unison.

"Why couldn't you just say so?" Weiss questioned.

"I love money." Kevin said in a deadpanned tone. "Now get the hell out of my alley you're bringing too much attention to yourselves!"

Any chance to further protest was dashed by Kevin's departure. So then one by one they departed the alley and began their trek to the Merchant District. Once more Yang took the lead and led the group of eleven students through the city of Vale. It didn't surprise anyone that Yang would have such knowledge. Only Ruby threw a fit, but that was to be expected. This entire day she'd been learning all sort of new things about her sister. Enough to give their father a heart attack.

But aside from that the trek was mostly quiet. There was still the lingering tension amongst Jaune and Pyrrha, but it was clear to them and everyone else that finding Cardin now took priority. In order to put the last week behind them, they needed to sit down with Cardin a properly hash things out.

As they drew closer and closer to the Memoria nightclub, they suddenly found police cruisers dashing down the street. It was an odd sight, sure, maybe even exiting to see for a few of the group such as Sun and Neptune, after all they were junior detectives. But they paid no real attention to it. Vale was a busy city, certainly there could all sorts of crime occurring within its borders.

But then the sound of fire trucks caught their ears. After making a left and crossing the street, the fire engines crossed as well and made a turn down the next street, the very same Yang was about to lead them down. They all exchanged odd looks, thinking the same thing, something was going on at the Memoria club. So they quickened their pace.

It was then at the sound of airships flying overhead that the eleven huntsmen fell into full on sprints. The sight of General Ironwood's flagship warranted their attention. Wherever that man went something bad was bound to occur. After running through the streets of Vale, they found themselves right outside of the Memoria nightclub. And to their horror, they found the building set on fire.

"What happened here?" Ruby couldn't help but ask aloud.

"I'm not the one you should be arresting! You're making a huge mistake!" Everyone turned to see a pair of Atleasian soldiers a young man around their age.

From a nearby dropship, out stepped General Ironwood who was surprisingly accompanied by Sky. The two soldiers, seeing their commanding officer, began to march the young man Ironwood's way.
"Carlo Memoria. The only son of Rex Memoria, the alleged kingpin of crime in these parts of Vale." Ironwood said coldly as he sized up the young man brought before him.

"What the hell are you doing man? The guys you want are inside! They just showed up out of nowhere and tried to kill my ass!"

"I am unfamiliar with such individuals. But I am familiar with your Father's dealings."

"Get away from my son!" Everyone turned to see a badly burned old man carrying a rocket launcher/battle axe hybrid marching out of the fires than consumed the nightclub.

"Rex Memoria I presume?" Ironwood addressed the man. "Lay down your arms. You're under arrest for racketeering and intimidation."

"Arrest me? Feh. Atlas Dog. You think you can come to my country and tell me what to do? Take that metal hand of yours and shove it up your ass." Rex Memoria gestured to Ironwood's prosthetic. He then quickly shifted his weapon out from the battle axe into its rocket form and took aim at the General. "Now let go of my son."

But before Rex Memoria could harm anyone, Ruby and Weiss sprang into action, disarming him with a combination of the former's speed and the latter's glyphs. Before Rex Memoria knew it, his weapon was on the floor as Atlesaian troops began to surround him.

"Ah, yes, Team RWBY. Good work as always." "I'll be sure to inform Headmaster Ozpin of your efforts." "There's a nice cell on my ship right beside Roman Torchwick with your name on it."

"You can't do this, you have no authority here Atlas dog!" Rex shouted as he was brought before Ironwood.

"I am the authority." Ironwood said lowly in a threatening manner. "Take him away." With that said, the troopers marched Rex to the drop ship and seated him right beside a number of his bouncers and his son.

"General Ironwood, sir." Pyrrha shouted, quickly gaining the ear of the Atlas military officer and headmaster. "We're looking for our fellow student, have you seen them anywhere."

Ironwood spared a glance Sky's way before returning his attention to Weiss. The general let out a tired sigh. "We've evacuated everyone we could. But from what we gather, your friends are still inside." Ironwood then glanced at the Memoria Nightclub lay and frowned, doubtful of their survival.

Inside the burning nightclub, underneath a pocket of debris on the dance floor, lay both Cardin and Russel. Cardin was perfectly still on the floor, unmoving, his head resting right beside a still functioning air vent. His suit jacket and dress shirt were in ruin, having taken a rocket point to the chest. Though his semblance had taken the brunt of the blast, Cardin was barely capable of moving.

Russel on the other hand had most of his motor functions intact. Aside from the steel beam pinning his leg, the young Thrush was alright. Every attempt to move the beam off of himself had failed. Russel neither had the leverage nor the strength to move it.

"Why didn't you take the damn shot, Cardin?" Russel asked, doing his best not to raise his voice. He didn't fault Cardin for the events that led to their current situation, rather, he was more concerned about Cardin's own wellbeing. The Winchester boy had come a long way to kill a man.
But in the end he just couldn't pull the trigger.

"Because he shot a rocket at you." Cardin answered simply. He glanced over to the empty space between the pair of trapped huntsmen where his weapons lay. But it wasn't the mace Cardin was focused on, but rather the handgun he'd brought, the one he'd taken from the Inn Keeper back in Oakwood. The very same gun he'd pointed at Carlo Memoria's head and failed to fire.

"We're going to die in here unless we can figure something out." Russel muttered. "Any chance you can move? Maybe kick your mace my way so I can free myself?" Russel glanced over to Cardin's weapon which remained beside its owner, quite a distance away from the young Thrush. "I'd really like to not cut my leg off man."

"You'd bleed out before you could even reach my mace." Cardin muttered darkly, shooting down Russel's ideas of self-mutilation.

"Cardin, why didn't you take the shot?" Russel asked once more in an effort to understand his partner. "You had Carlo at gun point. You had him there at all if you couldn't shoot him?"

'I've been thinking about this night for a while, Russel." Cardin answered quietly as the fires raged and outside firetrucks wailed. "When it came to it I fucking froze." He shook his head as he began to get all misty eyed.

"Here I am trying to kill this little shit and I couldn't even do it. I couldn't even do it." Cardin shook his head angrily, disappointed in his own inability to go through with killing Carlo.

Russel sighed. "I know this involves your sister, Cardin. But just why the hell do you want him dead anyways?"

"Do you really want to know?" Cardin question as he turned to face a nearby air vent in an attempt to breathe in fresh air and not the smoke that surrounded them.

"Does it look like I got somewhere else to be?" Russel deadpanned, once more he gestured to the steel beam that'd trapped him.

"There was this girl. Her name was Delilah." Cardin struggled to say. "She was a friend of my sister. Close friend they'd always stay up talking on the scroll, you know, talking about boys and shit. Stupid stuff. One night word got out that Delilah was caught with a boy in her bed. Carlo Memoria, that's the first time I hear his pansy ass name."

"We're in the suburbs. Word travels, next thing you know we're hearing conversation about her family arguing with her and what not. And then there's rumour that Delilah didn't want to have a relationship with that boy. But he's fuckin' Rex Memoria's son so who the fuck is gonna fuck with him. So then she goes and throws herself in front of a car. She was four weeks pregnant."

"Holy shit." Russel managed to say. A horrified expression on his face.

"And then the same shit happened to my sister." Cardin shook his head, a pained look on his face. "Except instead of a car she took a knife and cut open her arms from the elbow down."

"She was my sister, I grew up with her. I watched her grow up, I saw her take her first steps, I used to beat up the guys who made fun of her on the bus. She was my sister, Russel. I turn my back for a month, one month. I go to Beacon for one month and then the world just devours her."

"I didn't find out until the day before, you know? I found out cause a buddy of mine, he found out and reached out to me. He sent his condolences. I go and ask my Mom and Dad, I'm this absolute
wreck, I ask them why they didn't tell me. They say they didn't want to worry me. I'm a Winchester, I've gotta be a Huntsman. I gotta be the soldier like my great grandad."

"I didn't get to go to her funeral." Cardin said as he struggled to keep himself together. But Russel could see it in his eyes, holding back the tears was an impossible task. And so soon enough the flood gates opened. Months of hidden emotion began to spill out. "I didn't get to go to my own sister's funeral, Russel. I don't think I would've too, and that's the truth, cause I don't want to say goodbye. I don't want to say goodbye. That's selfish of me isn't it? Right? Holy shit my sister died and I'm too busy thinking about my own feelings. Fuck me."

"Last time I saw her was when I got on the airship. She was standing on the dock smiling wide knowing her big brother was gonna be go kill Grimm, gonna be a goddamn hero. She's smiling wide knowing I'm not just gonna be protecting her anymore, I'm gonna be protecting everyone." Cardin shook his head angrily.

"Keep the fucking Grimm out, beat them back. Stomp the shit out of the White Fang be a goddamn hero. I could do it too, we've both done it, you and me. But I wasn't there when she needed me, I wasn't there when she needed me most."

"I go home on semester break, the first thing I do is demand why my Dad and Mom couldn't be the heroes she needed. I don't know why I did it. The fuck am I talking about? I know why I did it. Cause I wanted someone to blame. I'm so goddamn angry I lash out at them. I'm so goddamn fuckin' angry I lashed out at Velvet, I'm so fucking angry all the time cause I couldn't be there!"

"And I guess they're angry too, you know? My Mom and Dad, I never thought how it was for them. They found her, they've been grieving and they're still grieving cause their daughter's gone. And here I am being the big stupid jerk everyone hates, I'm yelling at my parents because I am just that. I'm a big fuckin' stupid asshole."

"You're not a stupid asshole, Cardin. You're probably the nicest guy I know." Russel asserted.

"Don't you patronize me, Russel." Cardin glared. "We're about to die and the last thing I want is to be patronized."

"I'm not mocking you. I'm commenting on what I observed." Russel looked across the cramped room into Cardin's eyes. "You couldn't kill Carlo because that just isn't you. You're not a...you're not a killer." Russel struggled to say that word. 'Killer'. "And asshole would've pulled the trigger without a second thought, without hesitation."

"We're going to die down here."

"Yep." Russel nodded.

And then just like that the pair of partners burst out laughing.

"I have to say, getting killed by an Ursa seemed more likely than burning to death." Russel muttered as the flames around them began to draw closer.

"I imagined myself dying in battle." Cardin shook his head. "Look at me. I wanted a hero's death. That's just typical of me isn't it?"

"Quit being so hard on yourself. Who doesn't want a memorable death Front page news on tomorrows Shining Beacon. Fellow students die in tragic club fire. I'm sure they'll name a garden after us." Russel couldn't help but laugh.
"There better be a statue. That's what I want in our garden." Cardin muttered.

"Yeah, with us on a motorcycle or something. Motorcycles are cool right? I've read about them in books. They always sounded cool."

"Flaming motorcycles. Like Ghost Rider." Cardin laughed.

"Who's Ghost Rider?" Russel raised a brow.

"A superhero." Cardin said simply.

"He your favorite?" Russel questioned, harkening back to their earlier conversation topic while they all played blackjack. As he recalled, Cardin hadn't mentioned who his favorite hero was.

"No. Superman is." Cardin smiled wide.

Russel shook his head and began to cry. "I'm going to miss you Cardin."

"Yeah. I'm going to miss you too." Cardin frowned. "Not a lot of people join up on a revenge mission, Russel. Thanks for being there with me. I'm sorry I got you killed. Thanks for being my friend."

Russel just stared at Cardin, freezing at the mention of the word 'friend'. "Yeah, yeah I guess we are friends."

Just then the ceiling above began to break apart as the fires between them began to flare even wilder. "This is it!" Cardin shouted before shutting his eyes, unable to watch.

Russel glanced upward and cocked his head to the side. His eyes widened at the sight of Corcea Mors stabbing through the above wreckage and cutting a hole large enough for its owner to peer inside.

"They're over here!" Jaune shouted to a number of out of view individuals.

"Jaune?!" Cardin shouted in surprise before Jaune and Sun jumped through the opening and landed before the wounded Winchester. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"Saving your ass." Jaune said a matter of fact. "You ran into a mobster club? Really?" He said in a scolding manner before he and Sun managed to pry Cardin off the floor and began to carry him over to the opening.

"How'd you guys find us?" Cardin managed to ask.

"Ventilation shaft." Sun jotted a thumb over his shoulder at the nearby vent. "We just followed the echo to the source."

"Hey, Cardin, I think I can speak for everyone when I say this. I'm sorry about your Sister." "I have seven of them. I wouldn't know what to do if I were in your shoes."

"Thanks Jaune." Cardin managed to smile.

"Hold on tight, Pyrrha's going to pull us through.

"Wait, how?" Cardin began to question. The next thing the Winchester boy knew, he along with Sun and Jaune as they held onto him.
"I'm pinned beneath a steel beam I'm not going anywhere! Just get Cardin out of here!" And then, before Russel could protest any further, the steel beam began to move as if by magic off of him. Russel glanced upward and found Pyrrha peering down below, seemingly moving it on her own.

"Hold onto your daggers, Russel!" Pyrrha shouted before magnetizing Russel's weapons. Russel did as he was told and held on tightly to the handles before being pulled into the air. On the way out, however, Russel made sure to reach back down and reclaim Cardin's mace.

The next thing Russel knew, medical crews stormed their position and whisked both Cardin and himself onto stretchers. The young Thrush just stared upward as the building around him burnt down and he and everyone else made their way outside.

He could hear people shouting all around, he could hear his fellow students asking about both his and Cardin's wellbeing. But then before Russel could do anything, both he and Cardin were tossed into a nearby ambulance and jetted to a nearby hospital. Behind them, the nightclub burnt down. Russel sort of wished he could've stayed to see it all through.

After an hour in surgery, Russel and Cardin were tossed into the only available rooms for observation. Russel glanced down at his leg and the cast around it. He frowned at the sight, even with an aura the damage that had been dealt would take time to heal. The same story went for Cardin, who was in the room next door in a full body cast.

The Winchester boy was rolled into his room and welcomed by joyous Dove. Cardin could barely move his head, but he managed and noticed Dove lying in the other bed with a tub of ice cream in his lap.

"Hey Cardin!" Dove waved with his spoon. "What happened to you?"

Before Cardin could speak, another voice filled the room. A gruff and weary tone that commanded authority belonging to one General Ironwood. "This young man was injured while assisting in the apprehension of the head of the Memoria Crime family."

Cardin glanced to the doorway where Ironwood stood. Around the edges of the doorframe the CRDL leader could see the rest of his peers looking into the room. As soon as Ironwood took a step inside they began to pour in.

"Let's not crowd the young man." Ironwood said over his shoulder as the students funneled into the room. "He's had a difficult day."

"How you feeling, Cardin?" Ruby asked in a quiet tone as she winced at the sight of his casted form.

"I feel like a building landed on me." Cardin said in a joking tone, in effect, breaking whatever tension his peers had brought into the room with them. Some of them couldn't help but laugh, most notably the two Haven boys Cardin had yet to officially meet. "So, how's Russel?"

"Sky's with him now." Velvet spoke up from the assembled group. "He's a bit banged up. Won't be walking anywhere for a while."

"We're not in trouble, are we?" Cardin directed his question at Ironwood.

The General nodded, it was a reasonable question. "We're the good guys, Mr. Winchester. We only arrest the bad guys. You just worry about getting better." With having said his piece, Ironwood turned to leave. The General made his way past the students and exited the room, knowing fully
well they were sure to bombard the poor boy with questions of their own.

"So you guys heard everything?" Cardin asked as he stared up at the ceiling. "That's how you found us right?"

"Yeah, we heard everything." Jaune said as he found himself at Cardin's bedside. "We're all sorry Cardin. We mean that."

"You shouldn't have to be." Cardin muttered as he found himself tearing up once again. "If anything, I should be the one apologizing. To all of you."

"Aw." Dove couldn't help but gush from where he sat in bed. "How sweet."

"I haven't been at my best for a while. And I took it out on you guys. I shouldn't have done it. It's easy to say, you know? To say you're sorry. But I want guys to know, especially you Jaune. I am so sorry for what I've done." And then he was crying again.

"Hey, it's okay." Jaune offered a smile as he placed a hand on Cardin's shoulder. "New chapter. Just get some rest man."

With that said, Jaune stepped away from Cardin's side and joined his friends. "That was so beautiful." Yang couldn't help but say.

"I have no words." Weiss said as she shed a tear. "No words."

After the bully and former bully victim made their peace, Jaune, Nora and Ren, along with Weiss, Yang and Ruby, as well as Neptune and Sun departed the room. There was much more any of them could have said, but they weren't the ones who really needed to speak with Cardin. There would be more time for that in the coming months and years.

With their friends' departure, this left only Pyrrha and Velvet in the room. The second year student walked up to Cardin's side and folded her arms over her chest. "You're a little dumb, you know that?"

"I've been told. Usually behind my back though. Thanks for being honest." Cardin couldn't help but smile.

Noting Cardin's injured form and his inability to move, Velvet reached over and grabbed a nearby cloth and dried the Winchester boy's eyes. "If you ever want to talk about it, I'll be there."

"I'll do that." Cardin said a little flushed.

Velvet just smiled as she waved goodbye. "You'd better." She said before leaving the room.

With Velvet's departure, that left only three of them in the room. "Hey…Pyrrha." Cardin glanced at the Mistral native as she approached him.

"Hey." Pyrrha said quietly.

"Dove?" Cardin called out to his teammate.

"Yes?" Came Dove's reply.

"Shut your ears." Cardin ordered.

"What?"
"Shut your ears."

"Why?"

"Because I said so. This is a private conversation."

"Oh, right. I'll do that." Dove said before sticking his index fingers in his ears.

"You really think that'll stop him from listening?" Pyrrha spared a glance Dove's way, not totally buying the idea that his actions would

"Close enough." Cardin murmured before moving his head Pyrrha's way. "So...about last Sunday."

"That was a mistake." She said immediately.

"I couldn't agree anymore. I'm sorry, that it even happened."

"I should be the one apologizing, Cardin. Everyone was just about to lynch you over the idea you took advantage of me."

"That's nothing you should be sorry for. I haven't been the most likeable nor the nicest guy at Beacon. Heck, I'd hate me too." Cardin sighed. For minute or two the pair remained silent. Cardin glanced over at Pyrrha and then back to the ceiling, holding back the urge to ask The Invincible Girl a question.

Noticing this, Pyrrha implored the boy to spit it out, she would not judge him, not after today. "Was I at least any good?" He asked awkwardly.

"Uh..." Pyrrha blushed at the question. "Alcohol, you know." She said in a flustered manner, looking away off to the side away from Cardin. "Can't remember any of it." She laughed nervously as she rubbed her arm.

"Oh, yeah. Can't remember a moment of it either." Cardin said as he caught on. "Almost like it never happened."

"Yeah." Pyrrha nodded in agreement. "Like Jaune said, new chapter."

"You know that's not going to end well, right?" Cardin said, causing Pyrrha to raise a brow in confusion. "You've been pining after the guy for a while and thrown him all sorts of hints. I'm not saying he's not a decent guy, quite the opposite in fact. But this isn't going to end well for you Pyrrha."

"We'll see." She muttered. "Goodnight, Cardin." Pyrrha said before leaving the room, closing the door behind her.

"Hey Cardin?" Dove called out.

"Yes Dove?"

"Is it alright if I take my fingers out of my ears?"

"Yeah, sure Dove."

"Cool."
"Thanks for passing my message along, Sky. I mean that. We very much would be dead unless you hadn't brought the cavalry." Russel said from where he lay in bed.

"We weren't the ones who ran in and got you, but I'm certain you'd planned on Team RWBY and JNPR's interventions." Sky shrugged, not really feeling like he'd contributed at all. "But we caught the bad guy, so we did that."

"Good. I hope Ironwood throws the book at them. Hell, I hope he just throws them both, father and son, out the ship and they go splat." Russel said, meaning every word. "Cardin's okay though, right?"

"I checked in with him, he's alright. His parents are in there with him right now." Sky nodded to the room over. "Not to mention everyone else is in there. Jaune, Pyrrha, Ruby, those two other guys? The monkey boy with those fabulous abs and his dashing companion."

"I'm just going to forget you said 'fabulous', alright?"

"Eh, no offense taken." Sky shrugged. "Want me to fluff your pillow or something? You look uncomfortable." Sky said after noticing Russel struggling to get on the right side of his pillow.

"Why do they only give you one pillow?" Russel questioned. "Mind grabbing me one from the other bed?"

"Sure." Sky jumped up out of his seat and crossed the distance between himself and the other bed in the room. "Huh, this one has two. Weird. So, Pyrrha confessed to Jaune earlier."

"And? Don't leave me in suspense, Sky. What happened?" Russel said before having a pillow tossed his way. The young Thrush then took the pillow and tossed it behind his head and on top of the one he already had.

"Well, they aren't a couple or anything. From the sounds of it they're both aware of the attraction but none of them are willing to make a move."

"Yeah that sounds like them." Russel sighed. "So, who won the bet?"

Sky dug into his pocket and withdrew a list of names. He quickly skimmed the list and found who had today's date. "Huh, it was Dove."

"Where is Dove?" Russel questioned having not seen the youngest member of Team CRDL since their game of blackjack earlier that day.

"Oh, he ate some bad candy. Would you believe he's Cardin's roommate? They're keeping him for observation too." Sky informed.

"Well then, I pity you Sky."

"Why's that?" Sky raised a brow.

"With all three of us in the hospital, that means you got to clean our room." Russel couldn't help but laugh. "Jaune and the others tossed it. Last I saw it was in terrible condition."

"Oh goddammit." Sky groaned.

"Yeah, good luck there buddy."

"You planned this, didn't you?" The Lark accused the Thrush. "You asshole." Sky laughed.
"Alright, it's late, I gotta go clean our room now, I guess. I'll visit you guys every once in a while."
And with that they said their goodbyes and Sky departed. In doing so, Sky shut the lights off,
allowing Russel to get some rest. It was already hours into the next day.

Russel closed his eyes, hoping that maybe sleep would overtake him. But there was something at
the back of his mind, something primal, something nagged at him. He dwelled on that for a
moment and wondered, why was it his bed had only one pillow while the other had two? Russel
opened his eyes. He didn't act surprised when he found Blake standing over him, the missing
fourth pillow in her hands.

"You just couldn't resist, could you? How long have you been here?"

"Not too long. I'm surprised you hadn't figure it out earlier." Blake answered simply. "Not as smart
as you think you are?"

"Well a building fell on me. Cut me some slack." Russel simply shrugged. "Or you could skip to
killing me. Whichever, I'm not too picky."

"I don't want to kill you, Russel." Blake spoke honestly and from the heart.

"The pillow in your hand says otherwise."

"Like I was saying, I don't want to kill you. But with each passing day, you're becoming more and
more a liability." Blake sighed. "I can't have too many people running around knowing I'm ex-
White Fang. Especially with Ironwood and his little crackdown. The less people who know the
better. You're not White Fang, though, Russel, you don't deserve my wrath. It was wrong of me to
jump the gun the way I did. But you can't honestly have me believe you'll stay quiet about
everything, do you?"

"You ever actually kill anyone before, Blake?" Russel asked in a serious tone. "Cardin tried to do
that tonight, but he couldn't go through with it. Because he's too nice of a guy. You honestly want
to be known as the girl who was worse than Cardin?"

"No one would know."

"But you would." "You're the one who couldn't stomach being in the White Fang. You're
absolutely haunted enough by your experience to kidnap and torture the first supposed White Fang
agent you've met. You're a guilty woman, Ms. Belladonna. How long before the weight of my
death causes you to snap just like that?"

"You're betting on moral character." Blake glared.

"No, I'm, betting on the girl who knows right from wrong. The one who left behind a life of killing
people in order to save them. That's who I'm betting on." Russel stated clearly as he met Blake's
stare with his own. "I can't fight you, look at me, I'm in no condition to do so. You can get away
with murder, Blake. That is if your conscience will allow it."

"Now if you aren't going to kill me? Can you leave? I kind of want to sleep. It's been a long day." Russel said before reclining back in bed. Casually he placed his hand under his pillows in order to
get more comfortable.

"Then may this be the end of our feud. Goodnight, Russel." And then, without another word, Blake
tossed the pillow onto Russel and headed for the door.

"Goodnight to you to, Blake." Russel said as he watched from the corner of his eye as Blake left.
The moment his room's door closed, Russel reached under his pillow and removed the Innkeeper's Handgun, which had been the source of his earlier discomfort until Sky had retrieved him a second pillow.

Russel inspected the weapon, double checking the ammo in the magazine, as well as ensuring it hadn't been damaged in the blaze. What a terrible way to figure out if the damn thing still worked.

The path to recovery would be a strenuous one. In less than a month, there would be the Vytal Festival where he and his team would compete. Russel doubted that they'd win, given the current wellbeing of his teammates and himself, but who knew, maybe they'd pull it off after all. Until then, he was stuck sleeping with one eye open. Blake could always change her mind and come back. That was scary thought. But until then, the young Thrush resigned himself to a hearty smile.

Time for some real downtime. Let the healing begin.

---

I actually cried a little when I was writing Cardin's dialogue. Since the third chapter of Arc 2 we've seen Cardin dealing with something, it caused him to lash out at Velvet. You can see the similarities between what people think Cardin's done, such as taking advantage of Pyrrha and then you see that he strongly opposes that. It was very important that we stress how f*cked up that is, especially for Cardin. And that was always the endgame for this part of Cardin's life.

For the Kevin Alley scenes, I pretty much just wrote dialogue. It's fun to just have characters sit in a room and talk. It's just fun. I also kept everything in line with continuity in regards to Jaune and Pyrrha, surprisingly. I just added more layers and what not.

I sorry if I disappointed any of you with that great set up from last chapter. But while I was writing this, I realized it didn't need a fight scene in the club, all you needed to see was the aftermath and let Cardin and Russel just talk. And that's the emotional core of the chapter and the story overall. Russel is important to Cardin and Cardin is important to Russel. They're partners, they lean on each other because there's literally no one else in their lives. So Bromance.

The ending went through several renditions, but Russel always had the gun. Here comes along Blake, as if we all forgot about her. And I honestly believe given all these experiences, she sees Russel isn't a total piece of shit like she earlier believed, like they all believed. So she doesn't want to fight him or to kill him. Her actions are more about survival, which is an idea I hope to pursue in later arcs.

Next chapter is an interlude, so, we got that to look forward to. And then I'll announce what's going on with the next arc. 'Til then, see you guys later! Thanks again for reading!
Interlude: Violette

For some reason there were some issues with the chapter when I published it initially. So I'm hoping it works this time around.

Hey there everyone, welcome back for another interlude! Yup. As always after we finish up an arc, we take a moment, have breather and hopefully these little one-shots prove to be entertaining enough or manage to excite you all for what's to come.

Also, uh, so...some people actually messaged me about that supposed 'Arkos' thing last chapter. So, we're at chapter 36 now. There will be a total of 120 chapters in 'The Darkling Thrush'. There's a lot more going to happen.

Well, that aside, on with the interlude.

Violette

In every war there are winners and then there are losers. Despite ending with the unanimous decision for world peace, The Great War was no exception. To the east, Roman Winchester was hailed as a hero due to his efforts during the Standoff at Cape Groad. He was hailed as the man who succeeded where any other man, woman or faunus would surely have failed. The sun did not set on Vale under the Winchester's stewardship.

Because the Winchester had persevered to the point of stalemate, Vacuo did not storm the capitol as they had initially intended. The war could have ended with then and there, Vacuo would have prevailed. With no victory in sight, the ruling council of Vacuo agreed to the terms of the Vytal Peace Accord.

The inability to crush the enemy's defenses made the Vacuan commanding officer the most hated man in the nation. Orion Violette was a loser in the eyes of his peers, in the eyes of the men and women who he'd given arm and leg for. Orion was cursed for his failures as was his entire bloodline.

Andros Violette, son of Orion, aspired to be so much more than his father whose failure clung to him like the stench of a dead cat. Born in war time, Andros knew only the art of waging war. He dedicated his life to strengthening Vacuo, pulling it out of the rank desert shit pile it had become.

He didn't care for the people, Andros believed they served only to fuel the grand war machine that was Vacuo. He rose above his father's failings and soon he stood on his own, no longer shamed by the actions of another.

It soon became apparent that Vacuo was revving up the engines of war once again. However, days before Andros and the ruling class of Vacuo could commence what would have been the second Great War, out in the very courtyard of the capitol building, a group of faunus equal rights protesters were gunned down for being bothersome.

It was this action that acted as a call to arms, that every faunus in Vacuo would take to the streets and riot. Andros' leadership abilities were tested when the government instilled martial law. After the fateful night, the faunus would become organized under a banner of anger and begin The Faunus Rights Revolution.
Andros proved to be an incapable leader when it came to urban warfare. His stratagems were foolhardy and destroyed infrastructure rather than the revolting faunus. Andros had also failed to win over the hearts of those who served beneath him, leading to an alarming number of mutinies.

The defeat of the Faunus at the island nation Menagerie would not be done by Andros hands, but rather by a colleague and a united coalition of other nations, who all had been suffering from his personal failures. Andros fell farther than even his own father. While Vale would consider Orion to be a worthy adversary, all would come to think of Andros as nothing more than a fool.

Messier Violette was born during the twilight hours of Andros' career. He witnessed his father's decline into despair and eventual suicide. Messier was unlike his father or his grandfather, he chose to step away from the public stage. Messier was the Violette who couldn't even bother to try as he was too fearful of ending up like his predecessors.

He chose a simple life over a life of a Huntsman or the life of a government official. Messier took a job with the Schnee Dust Corporation. He never ascended up the ladder nor did he fall beneath it, rather he remained stagnant at his job. It was for the best, that's what he'd say to himself. It was better to be away from it all, to not take part in the shaping of the world. He'd never be a winner, but at least he'd never be a loser.

But then Messier met a nice woman. They talked, they hit it off, he fell in love. They'd wed and then they'd have a child. So then Messier welcomed into this world his daughter whom he would name Nebula. Maybe things would be different for her, he'd pray. Maybe she'd manage to turn things around for the Violette.

Maybe she might just succeed where they all failed. Perhaps she'd be a winner.

So there we have it, our girl from Vacuo is Nebula Violette.

I actually hinted at this decision all the way back in the first interlude where I'd purposely named the Vacuo General as a Violette. So I hop that tells you the level of planning that's gone into all this.

The main reason I chose her was because before I published the first chapter of 'TDT', I'd been kicking around ideas of writing an NDGO centric story, as well as a May Zedong story (which I'd actually gotten around to coin a title called 'Winnebago'). The Darkling Thrush is the only story I'm writing for RWBY, so I'm just tossing all those elements for those ideas into these characters. So, next arc is going to be a little different.

Next Arc: Nebula
XXXI: Nebula: Part 1

Hey there everyone, welcome back to another chapter of 'The Darkling Thrush'!

So this arc is a little different. Like I previously established in the previous authors note, this arc is not following Russel, but rather, we're following Nebula. Who, I've been sort of jumping at the chance to write. Because she isn't like any other character I've written before.

Alright, enough with my yapping. On with the story!

XXXI

Nebula: Part 1

The lean Thrush with its brown tinted wings glided the sandy desert that was Vacuo. Lunch caught its eye on the ground below so it swooped downward landing beside a decorative cattle skull. The sun shined bright, bathing the land the bird stood on. A twinkle in its eyes, the bird claimed its prize. A struggling lizard of all things, which had taken shelter beneath the skull in an attempt to scavenge anything worth eating for itself, was caught unaware by the Thrush.

The bird yanked it out by the tail with its beak. The lizard struggled, it squealed as it thrashed about in an attempt to find its way back onto its fours. But the Thrush was a veteran in his craft, it'd done this before. It kept the lizard pinned with its claws and then it set to work with killing it with its beak. Gouged with blood pouring out of it, the lizard remained lifeless while the Thrush helped itself to its meal.

Slithering through the dirt, keeping a low profile, stalked a rattle snake. The snake's eyes widened with intent as it drew closer to its prey. The Thrush, caught up in its meal, was unaware of the sinister snake sneaking up from behind. The Thrush was taken by surprise as the rattler's fangs sang into its back. And soon, down the mouth of snake it went. The lump descended down the long body. And then the rattler slithered away.

"Cool." A young adolescent muttered to herself.

Nebula Violette, age nine, sat cross-legged high up off the ground on the peak of a large boulder she'd climbed. Her facial expression was one of pure awe as she watched nature preform for her.

It was a stunning sight to the olive color eyed young girl, she was never allowed to wander out and about on her own for too long, not allowed to see what the world had to offer her. The only daughter of a Schnee Dust Corporation pencil pusher and an overbearing stay at home mom, Nebula wasn't usually allowed to leave their sight. But it was these instances, when she was away from an ever watching eye, when she'd pick up more knowledge than in a primary school classroom.

It was the way the snake prowled, how it snuck up and caught the Thrush unaware that intrigued her the most. The Thrush should've seen its approach, it should've heard it, but it was too caught up in its meal to pay attention. That was its downfall. And that was something no textbook could teach you.

Nebula lived in a town called Acre, just north of the capitol of Vacuo, which was a renowned upper
middle class suburb. Her home was right across from the primary school she attended and less than a mile away from the combat school she wished to be attending. The buildings were all level, almost cookie cutter in a way. Because of that, the schools acted as mighty landmarks that could be seen from great distances.

Watching as the snake departed through an opening in the gate of the primary school, Nebula was caught by surprise as a familiar womanly voice called out for her. "Nebula? Nebula! Where are you dear?!"

Recognizing her mother's voice, Nebula frowned having realized her expedition into the supposed 'wilds' of the world would soon be ending. She spun around on the rock, turning to see her home across the street and her mother standing on their rock lawn.

"Nebula, what have I told you about wandering off!" Her mother shouted in a scolding manner as she began to cross the street. "Get down from there."

"You found me, didn't you?" Nebula played off her mother's concerns. She then leapt off the boulder in an extravagant fashion, much to her mother's dismay. "Relax Mom, no harm done." She smiled.

"You could've given me a heart attack." Her mother retorted. "Not to mention you could've hurt yourself."

"That was like two feet." Nebula muttered before her mother reached out and took her hand.

"Come along its getting dark." Her mother said as she gestured to the setting sun and the rising smoke far off in the distance. Nebula looked up to her mother and caught a glimpse of something familiar. She thought back to the Thrush and the fear on its face as the snake attacked it. That's what she found on her mother's face.

But Nebula was still too young to understand why her mother was so afraid of smoke. So she shrugged it off as some adult concern and complied with her mother's wishes. Nebula had learned not to argue with her mother, she'd been sure to put down any rebellious nature or fits she'd throw when she was four or seven. So the indigo haired girl did as she was told and just followed her mother closely as they made their way across the street back to their home.

Stepping into their home, Nebula was greeted with the aroma of freshly cooked pork and the sweet smell of baked bread. Her mother ushered her off into the kitchen, no doubt to hand her a plate of food. But Nebula couldn't help but turn her attention to the living room where her father now rested after a long day at work.

Nebula was half expecting some sort of footage from one of those action cop thrillers her father enjoyed, but instead she found there to be one of those boing reporters in the firm pressed suits talking about things that otherwise disinterested the young girl. But then on the right beside the man, flashed a video with a red dot in the corner claiming it to be a live feed.

This was only in passing, but Nebula caught sight of cars being set on fire by masked individual with horns and animal ears poking out of them. After being brought into the kitchen, Nebula was no longer able to see what was being depicted on the television, instead all she had to go on was what she heard. She shut her eyes as if the loss of one sense amplified another. It appeared to work as she soon managed to sort out from the noise of her mother's over rehearsed speech about staying home and what was coming out of the television.

"-Just moments ago Councilman Vermillion delivered an address acknowledging the escalation of
the Belfry Riots. Although he didn't call for martial law, the increase of military forces would certainly confirm—"

"Here you go." Nebula's mother snapped her out of her concentration by handing her a plate full of food. Nebula quietly thanked her mother before scurrying off, snatching a pair of utensils on the way out of the kitchen and into the living room in order to find out just what was up with the news.

Her father must've sensed her arrival, because as soon as she stepped into the living room he quickly changed the channel. "Hey kiddo." Messier Violette, looked to his only child with adoring eyes.

"What was that on the news, pops?" Nebula said before setting herself down on the floor, her back against the couch and already stuffing her face with the food on her plate.

"Something you wouldn't understand, not now anyways." Messier said in an attempt to quell his daughter's interest as e continued to channel surf.

"I bet you I could understand it." Nebula quipped before her father settled on a live feed of a low tier tournament in Mistral. Nebula then found herself turning to the screen in front of her, almost as if it beckoned to her.

"I don't have a doubt that you could, dear." Messier couldn't help but chuckled nervously. Nebula was his daughter, after all. She was the granddaughter of his father Andros and the great-granddaughter of Orion. It wasn't just the pride of being a father that allowed such word to leave his lips, but rather the knowledge that it was their blood that coursed through her veins. "You could do whatever you want if you set your mind to it."

On the television, a young girl with red hair who appeared to be Nebula's age, a newcomer into the world and life of a huntsman in training, stood amongst a cheering crowd applauded her opponent. Nebula wasn't as savvy in following these tournaments as she'd like to be. But she recognized the setting of the tournament, one of Mistral's annual lower division championship matches. And she recognized the red haired girl's opponent, the defending champion a teenager named Daedalus. Given by the cheers surrounding his arrival to ring, it appeared he was the favored contender.

The way he moved on the screen with his boastful taunts and rousing the crowd with flamboyant hand gestures did not cause the girl with red hair to lose her resolve. And then it was announced by one of the commentators that this was the final fight of the tournament, the championship match. Nebula couldn't help but watch in awe for the second time that day as someone her age stood poised to take home the championship title.

As Nebula watched the fight on the screen with great interest, her father Messier was busy looking away from the screen and at her. The indigo haired girl had quit eating, too captivated with fight before her. And Messier couldn't help but feel a surge of fatherly pride. He himself had failed as a Violette, taken a desk job instead of rising towards something more. And here he sat seeing the same look on his daughter's face that no doubt was worn by those before them.

As the fight raged and began to come to a close, Messier leaned forward and whispered against his daughter's ear, "You can do that too."

A smile encroached its way onto Nebula's face. There were stars in the young girl's eyes. Before her on the television, the redhead girl, whose name was Pyrrha, stood victorious and smiled at the crowd. After shrugging off the surprise of the usurping of the champion Daedalus, they all cheered and applauded the hard earned victory. That girl standing there down below before the crowd, Nebula thought, she wanted to stand there just like her one day.
"I'd like that." Nebula smiled to herself.

A month later, Nebula was enrolled into combat school.

So, I hope you all caught the parallels to the very first chapter. The entire setup of watching a Thrush get eaten by a snake is pulled right from the beginning of the story. And from there you can pick apart, compare and contrast Russel and Nebula's upbringings. Russel grew up motherless and in an abusive household while Nebula has the love and support of both her parents. And I think that speaks volumes about Nebula, because she isn't messed up in any way. She's got everything together and I think that's important to her character, or rather the small bits we can gleam about out her from her brief appearances in Volume 3.

I'm also taking the time to build up Vacuo. I imagine the kingdom to be heavily segregated and in the midst of social unrest. And I find that interesting and something that'll be fun to explore with Nebula and company.

Next chapter will be out sometime this week, but expect updates to be less frequent. I've got things going behind the scenes right now. 'Til next time dear reader! Later days!
Welcome back everyone to another exciting chapter of The Darkling Thrush!

This one is a bit late, I've been in a transitioning period. Summer's over back to business as usual, you know? So, hopefully I'm now in a place where I can write more. We'll find out.

So, anyways, moving on. Once again, we're back for another Nebula chapter. I wrote this over the course of a week, but only having an hour a day to work on it. So, yeah. I hope it flows well enough.

Well, on with the show!

---

The acceptance letter from Shade Academy arrived in late spring. There was never a doubt Nebula, now age seventeen, would get in. Spending eight years of her life at the local Acre Combat School, she'd studied and trained. Graduating with high honors, Nebula was her class' valedictorian. The speech she delivered drew tears from both her parents, the faculty, her peers and esteemed guests.

"The future is ours." Nebula muttered to herself, recalling the final four words of her passionate speech. Staring out the window of the airship, Nebula couldn't help but admire her destination. A combat school surrounded by desert, built upon a plateau with high spires which demanded recognition for the brilliant ingenuity that resulted in their being built. Shade Academy was a futuristic marvel that could make even Atlesian engineers and Mistralian architects green with envy.

Nebula could feel a mix of fear and excitement welling in her chest. For the past eight years she'd worked tirelessly, from unlocking her aura, to honing her skills with a crossbow to even academia. Everything had been leading up to these moments when she'd take the first step forward into the rest of her life.

The airship landed and its doors opened. Nebula grabbed her suitcase and joined the other passengers as they swarmed for the exit and disembarked their transport. Her first steps taken forward, Nebula met the all too familiar blistering heat of Vacuo with a confident grin. The students were motioned forward by loadmasters, appointed faculty who ensured the incoming and outgoing airships ran smoothly and in a timely fashion.

It was when she was heading down Main Avenue of the school when Nebula realized she hadn't taken in all of her surroundings. The entire trip over to the school and she'd spent it all gawking at the plateau and the buildings built atop it. Never once did she pay any mind to the kingdom's capitol right next door.

The indigo haired girl wanted to run back over and take in the sights. Maybe she'd catch sight of the council chamber or the Schnee Dust Corporation building her father worked at. Maybe she could even take a photo and send it to him, maybe he'd find it reassuring that his baby girl was alright and having the time of her life. But one look over her shoulder back at the busy tarmac quickly snuffed such thoughts. Sure, she could go around and get another angle, but it wouldn't be
the same. Maybe later she'd do it, just not now. After all, Nebula, just like the rest of her fellow first years were left with the puzzling question, where exactly were they supposed to go now?

Down the maroon brick road the mob of students went before congregating right beside a statue out front in the center of a fountain. The statue in question was of a cloaked figure standing triumphantly in the process of removing a spear from a dead Ursa. Some students took seats at the edge of the fountain, others stood and silently kept watch, as if waiting for someone else to take lead and answer the unspoken question of their destination.

"Anyone know where we're supposed to be headed?" A young man with his light pink eyes with short dark red messy hair asked allowed to no one in specific.

Like most others present, Nebula's eyes fell onto the young man. The Violette could help but look the boy over, taking note of his casual dress consisting of a deep sky blue jacket with a black hood and rolled up black sleeves. Beneath that he wore a white shirt with long, rolled up sleeves. A pair of sunglasses with lenses that matched his eye color hung from his collar. His burgundy colored pants were ripped but stitched accordingly. Must've been the style.

The young man was looking to his peers for answers, turning slowly and meeting their eyes. Some looked away from the foreign eye contact, others just let it was over them. But none answered his question.

She could tell by the look on his face he wasn't exactly enjoying the lack of feedback from his peers. Soon, the scarf wearing young man's eyes fell onto Nebula. She met his gaze and gave a shrug, deciding any response was better than none. "Not a clue." Nebula said before following up with a thoughtful laugh.

The young man stared at Nebula coldly, as if he'd preferred she hadn't said anything at all. He let out a hearty scoff before shaking his head and walking off, sneering something under his breath too inaudible to make out. But from the young man's body language it couldn't be anything nice. Nebula watched as the boy walked away, a frown forming on her face. For goodness sake, all she did was contribute, no need to be all fussy about it.

"Bit of a jerk, that one is." A foreign feminine voice interrupted Nebula's thoughts. The Violette turned to her right, following the voice to its source. There standing a foot away stood a girl, slightly shorter than herself with curly black hair pulled into ringlets. She wore a black corset dress with a dark gray front, purple hem and purple laces on the back with a high gray collar and elbow length sleeved with black cuffs. Her belt was a long purple ribbon edged in gray, with a bow in the back and tied in the front. The girl had the appearance of a ballet dancer and could very easily be mistaken for one if not for the pair of armor tassets that appeared to act as storage for her weapon connected to her belt.

"Am I right?" The girl directed her question towards Nebula.

Nebula didn't know him, so Nebula couldn't agree with the curly haired girl's assessment. But Violette shrugged, not exactly able to argue for the boy either. "Eh, maybe. He certainly isn't the type for long winded conversation though, is he?" Nebula said jokingly before turning to face the curly haired girl fully. If she didn't know where they were supposed to be heading, the least Nebula could do was entertain a conversation and possibly make a friend.

"Name's Gwen. Gwen Darcy." Gwen said in a welcoming tone before taking a step forward and extending her hand.

"Nebula. Nebula Violette." Nebula returned the gesture. She grabbed Gwen's hand and shook it
"Violette? That wouldn't be 'The' Violette, would it?" Gwen asked.

"Fraid so." Nebula reluctantly admitted.

"Yikes." Gwen could help but say. "Not that there's anything wrong with that, I mean."

"No, no it's fine." Nebula waved it off, seemingly unoffended. The past eight years spent attending the Acre Academy, Nebula had been faced with similar responses from her peers. It was in the history books when she'd learned of her great grandfather and grandfather's failures. Everyone expected her to choke, to fail at some point or another. But she never did. Nor does she intend to anytime soon. "I will overcome great adversity."

"Are you quoting?" Gwen raised a brow as she tried to make sense of Nebula's comment. "Sounds like quoting. I just can't point my finger on it."

"Pyrrha Nikos. Right after she took home the Mistral Cup for the third time." Nebula said a matter of fact.

"Oh, right, the Mistral prodigy. Isn't she on that cereal? The one that isn't good for you?" Gwen inquired innocently.

"Oh yeah. That's the best part." Nebula couldn't help but laugh. Of all the cereal boxes on the market, her idol couldn't have chosen something healthier. Oh well, Nebula ate it anyways. "The prizes inside aren't that bad though. Got myself a kickass decoder ring once."

The pair shared a quick laugh, but then things seemed to die down. In an effort to keep the conversation going, Nebula changed topics to something bound to get a response out of Gwen. "Can you believe they let us off the airship without telling us where we had to go?"

"Yeah, that did strike me as a bit odd." Gwen nodded in agreement. "I tried asking those guys manning the tarmac, but they wouldn't budge. To busy making sure everyone got off. You think they'll make an announcement or something?"

"Attention. Will All First Year Students Report To The Northern Edge Of Campus." A voice spoke loudly over the intercom.

"Guess that answers that question." Nebula remarked before both she and Gwen, along with the rest of the hangers on doing nothing by the fountain gathered their things and followed the voice over the intercom's instructions.

There must have been over a hundred first year students, Nebula thought to herself as she got lost in a sea of her peers as she made her way to the designated rallying point. It got so bad the Violette lost sight of Gwen. Before she knew it she'd been pushed and shoved all the way to the edge of campus and now found herself looking down what would be a rather steep fall.

"You'd be best to step away from there child." A womanly voice called out to Nebula in a warning tone. The Violette snapped at attention and laid her eyes on the speaker. The elder woman had appeared almost out of nowhere and now stood flanked by a silver haired man beside Nebula. "Please, join the others." She gestured to the mob of students.

Nebula stared at the woman for a moment, noting her dark green work suit and purple hair. She had a cold calculating face, one devoid of emotion. She must've noticed Nebula's staring, because the woman's eyes quickly darted at the Violette and sent a chill down her spine. "I won't ask
again.” She said coldly. Nebula then did as she was told and joined the rest of the students beside a long row of metal platforms imbedded into the rocky surface of the plateau.

"I am Headmistress Wytcherly. I'll do my best to keep this as brief as possible, today is not only your first day but may possibly be your last." The Headmistress stressed darkly, causing a number of the students present to become a tad rowdy and demand an explanation. The purple haired woman raised a hand and an icy silence descended on the students. Nebula couldn't tell if it was of their own volition or somehow the Headmistress had coerced them in some manner to do so.

"You all may have skirted by with high grades at your respective prior academies, but Shade isn't a place for the weak. We train Vacuo's next great defenders and no one else. Those who return before dawn will have earned their place at Shade. Those who don't, well, you're better off not just coming back at all."

"Now, if you would all please turn your attention to Professor Kashmir, he will explain the rest of this test and any other little bits of information you'd best know." The Headmistress turned the student's attention to the silver haired man standing beside her. "Professor." The man identified as Professor Kashmir stepped forward. His hair was silver not from age but apparently from stress. He didn't look a day over forty. He wore a three piece beige suit and wore a pair of circular spectacles. He practically danced at the chance to speak as the Headmistress turned everything over to him.

"Yes, thank you ma'am." Professor Kashmir smiled before turning addressing the assembled students. "You have three objectives in this year's initiation. Objective one, make your way to the Sinbad Mountains just over yonder." The Professor pointed outward over the edge and at the far off distant mountains. "There you will find an artifact. You will choose one and only one. Objective two, you will return to Shade with said artifact before dawn."

"Objective three-this is a fun one. I'm sure many of you have heard rumors about the assignment of "teams." Well, those rumors were correct. The first person you make eye contact with is now your designated teammate for the rest of your presumed stay here at Shade. Your third objective is to arrive back here at Shade together. If not, then you're both washed. Any questions?"

"Yeah, you make it sound cut and dry, but I want to know, will there be any staff standing by in case one of us gets hurt? That's a mighty long walk to and from. All sorts of nasty stuff can happen along the way." One of the students, a dark skinned boy with dreads, spoke up as he jotted a thumb at the considerable distance between the mountain and their current position.

"There will be no supervision. If you're as good as you should be, then you won't have any issues dealing with Grimm or any other surprises out there." The Professor said simply. "Any other questions? No? Good. Take your places on the launch pads and we'll begin."

"Launch pads?!" A fair number of students, including Nebula, exclaimed in unison.

"Did I forget to mention? Oh dear I do that every year." Professor Kashmir couldn't help but lightly slap the side of his head. "Consider this an act of kindness. Like that one boy mentioned earlier. It's a rather long walk. Consider this a small boost."

The students glanced to each other cautiously before they all began taking their places on the nearby launch pads that appeared to be built into the rock. Soon, one by one all one hundred and forty four first year students including Nebula were launched into the air. It was unexpected, neither the Professor nor the Headmistress gave them notice of when they'd begin. The first few students were taken by surprise, but Nebula was further down the line, by the time her turn had come, she'd already prepared herself and thought up a suitable landing strategy to accommodate the firm hard Vacuo surface.
Nebula landed into a roll. Quickly gathered her bearings as she now faced the desert flats of Vacuo. Squatting down, close to the ground, she took into account his surroundings. There were shrubs far and wide and numerous boulders. Dead ahead were the Sinbad Mountains, named after Sinbad Queen and old wizard who'd been said to have harnessed the elements through dust and made the mountains his home where he acted as the Sentinel of Vacuo.

From what the Headmistress had indicated, their destination would no doubt take them into the mountain. Several hundred feet away through Grimm infested land and the hazardous heat of the desert itself, there were relics that needed to be reclaimed. After assessing and understanding what was required of her, the Violette detached her crossbow from her back and armed herself before setting off for the long trek up the mountains.

But the distance between herself and her destination was vast, she wouldn't be getting there anytime soon. In the meantime, Nebula decided to keep her eyes out for some other wandering hunter. After all, the first one she makes eye contact with, will be her partner for the rest of her days at Shade. If she acted fast and cautiously, maybe she'd snag a partner that didn't weigh her down.

But to much surprise, Nebula found acquiring a partner to be much more difficult than expected. For a good hour, Nebula walked under the merciless sun alone with no sign of a fellow huntsman either behind or in front of her. Another hour passed and Nebula found herself about to give up on finding a partner of any sort. That was until she fancied taking a right by phallic rock formation for some rest in the shade.

Sitting atop the rock was a girl wearing a red and white hoodie with blue tracksuit pants and a distinctive black beanie that covers her left eye. The first thought that crossed Nebula's mind was just how someone dressed like her could stand the heat. The second thought was one of pure desperation as Nebula recalled she was in need of a companion. And at this point anything was better than nothing.

"Hey, over here!" Nebula called out. The beanie wearing girl turned glanced downward, spotting Nebula waving to her. "You got a partner already?" Nebula asked the girl. But the beanie wearing individual remained silent, staring at Nebula with her wide uncovered eye. Nebula found the girl's actions a little unsettling. She neither made a noise nor appeared to be sweating up there. "Uh…"

"She's already got a partner." A familiar gruff voice said from behind a nearby boulder. Walking out from behind the massive stones stepped out the messy redheaded boy with pink eyes from earlier, his hands gripping onto his pants as he struggled to pull them up. "Oh, it's you." He said in the most offensive tone he could muster while he finished cleaning up after himself.

"I think you forgot to flush." Nebula smirked as she pinched her nose and waved a hand in front of her face. The boy glared in response causing Nebula's smirk to widen into a full blown smile.

"Piss off." He sneered. The boy then glanced up to the beanie wearing girl and nodded at the road ahead. "Let's hit it May."

The girl, May, nodded simply before leaping down from where she'd been perched. Nebula then watched as the duo walked off, a frown forming on her face. So far she'd only met one half way decent person and unless she had the fortune of running into Gwen again, the odds of getting paired with some other piss poor mannered individual appeared to be more likely.

Nebula took some time out of walking and rested beneath the shade the rather odd looking rock formation offered her. Next time she ever had to walk through the desert, she'd be sure to wear something other than her light blue coat. Being bullet proof in the back was nice, but that god
awful sun above didn't give two shits about bullet proof.

The Violette spared a glance upward, taking into account how the sun had moved and determined it would be setting in a couple hours. The nights in Vacuo were arguably harsher than the day. And just like that, Nebula was glad she'd brought her coat. It never got to freezing temperatures, but the last thing you wanted was to be stuck out here in a dress.

But even if Nebula waited for the sun to set, the distance between her current position and the Sinbad Mountain was still too numerous to count. Not to mention she'd have to walk all the way back too. Given what time remained before dawn tomorrow, Nebula resigned herself to her fate and stepped out of the shade and begun walking towards the mountain once more.

Another hour of walking in the desert and Nebula had pretty much given up hope of finding a partner. For a large open landscape, you'd think you could just turn one way, look another, and then you'd find some other guy or gal in the same desert and wave at them. But for some reason that wasn't the case. The desert had numerous hills and dips, no doubt there were caves some poor fools were getting lost in. Maybe if she just waited it out by the artifacts in the mountain, maybe then Nebula would find a partner.

But even with that optimistic outlook, Nebula couldn't help but feel doubt and uncertainty creeping up her spine. Without a partner, she couldn't complete initiation. Then her dreams of becoming a huntress would end before they even began. Then she really would be a Violette after all.

Lost in her worrisome thoughts, Nebula was caught off-guard by the Deathstalker flying overhead. After noticing the brief relief from the sun the Grimm's shadow provided, Nebula whipped her head upward to see the giant scorpion soaring over her and landing nearby. Nebula then whipped her crossbow around and took aim at the Grimm. If anything were to come of her experience at Shade, she would be leaving with the knowledge she'd slayed a god damn ugly looking scorpion.

But before Nebula could bring herself to pull the trigger, she stopped herself. Instead she lowered her weapon and stared in amazement. There, practically riding the Grimm was a girl her age with long blonde hair wearing a green sleeveless dress with what appeared to be gold scale armor beneath it. She was holding onto the Deathstalker with one hand and using the other to repeatedly stab the Grimm with the staff weapon.

The Deathstalker desperately attempted to remove the girl from its back, but its claws were too short to reach her. So the Grimm resorted to using its tail and stabbed downward. But it appeared the girl was planning on this and cracked a smile. She dodged the Deathstalker's attack, allowing it to stab itself. It let out an ear piercing screech in pain before dying on the desert floor.

"Um, hi." Nebula waved.

"Hey." The girl shrugged before dislodging her weapon from the disintegrating body of the Deathstalker. "You got a partner?"

"Nope. You?"

"Guess we're partners then." She shrugged before stepping off the carcass. "The name's Dew Gayl. You?"

"Nebula Violette." Nebula returned the pleasantries as she helped Dew down.

"Violette? That's rough." Dew muttered.

"So people keep telling me." Nebula shrugged it off. "You seemed to have handled yourself pretty
"I would've handled the situation better if they'd given us some warning ahead of time."
Dew said spitefully. She then pointed at her staff-like weapon and gestured to the large diamond shaped hole near the point of the head. "With all this flinging us into the desert nonsense, I didn't have the time to properly prepare."

"If anything I'd say that's a testament to your own abilities."
Nebula complimented.

"Thank you, you're so kind." She said in an almost sarcastic tone, causing Nebula to raise a brow. Dew then turned to face the mountain and then began to walk on ahead. "Come on, there's still a lot of ground to cover."

Nebula just watched as her partner departed without her. For a moment, she thought she'd been stuck with a relatively nice person to be her partner. Now it seemed her earlier fears have been realized. The indigo haired girl let out a sigh before hurrying on to catch up to Dew, resigning to the reality that this very much was how her days at Shade would be for the next four years.

Hours passed and there was barely any water to be had. Their trek through the desert was a perilous one. Along the way to their destination, Nebula and Dew stumbled upon what appeared to be fully clothed skeletons, no doubt belonging to students who'd perished during their initiation. It was a foreboding sight, but it was a reality Nebula found herself easily accepting.

"Not everyone makes it." Nebula couldn't help but say aloud.

Dew remained silent, but she nodded, agreeing with Nebula's sentiment. This was their test, to see if they had what it took to study at Shade and protect the people of Vacuo. They continued on their way, neither spoke of the sight again. They had more pressing matter to deal with, like climbing the mountain.

Hours passed and by the time they'd reached the mountain night had already fallen. Nebula glanced to her opposite, her partner Dew and was well prepared to offer her coat to the girl, having taken into account of her state of dress. But Dew declined her offers and soldiered on, despite her audible teeth chattering.

They climbed the mountain, passing a few pairs of students on the up. They didn't stop to ask questions like where exactly in the mountain the artifacts were located. It was a combination of pride and respect for their fellow peers. Nebula was not the type to turn to others for help. She'd gotten this far on her own abilities and she wasn't about to stop yet. Not to mention, by the looks on their peers' faces, they were worn down by the march through the desert and she didn't want to trouble them.

Eventually, the further they climbed, they happened upon a dip into the mountain and found the ruins of what must have been the Sentinel of Vacuo's lair. Amongst the ruins were a series of weapons stabbed into the ground around it. Nebula continued onward, passing by Dew and quickly made her way towards the ruins, only to stop in place after spotting a familiar face. "Gwen!"

Nebula called out to the girl she'd met earlier. The ballerina looking girl spun around and shot Nebula a tired smile.

"Hey Nebula." Gwen managed to wave. "Tough day, am I right?"

"Oh yeah. Like crap, there better be beds when we get back."
"I could do with a shower." Dew muttered as she walked up from behind Nebula. "Hello there, I'm Dew, Nebula's partner."

"Pleased to meet you, I'm Gwen." Gwen greeted before shaking hands with Dew. But then the dancer heard a coughing in the background from a girl with red hair. "Oh, and this is Octavia. She's my partner!" Gwen said quickly introducing the pair of Nebula and Dew to Octavia.

"So, we're just supposed to take one of these right?" Dew asked as she walked around the ruins, examining these so called 'artifacts'. "They're just painted swords."

"A little strange right?" The Octavia commented. "This has to be some sort of test."

"It probably is." Nebula agreed as she began to round the ruins that protruded from the mountain. The ruins themselves were old, made ages ago, before The Great War and perhaps even older than the wars that preceded that one. The swords themselves matched the sentiment. Despite the heavy coatings of paint, Nebula could make out signs of damage along their blades and hilts. The weapons had seen battle and they'd been rusted by the air.

"We're supposed to take one. Now the question is, which one should we take?" Gwen mused.

"Who cares?" Dew deadpanned. "Just grab one and let's go."

"How about this one?" Nebula said before reaching out and plucking one of two painted black spathas out of the ground. "You guys want one?" She asked, turning to Gwen and Octavia. The pair of partners shared a glance and shrugged, there was no reason for them to decline Nebula's offer. So the Violette plucked the second spathe out of the ground and tossed it to Gwen who caught it before passing it on to Octavia to hold.

After that, the four girls made the long trek back to Shade. They made their way down the mountain and once more they crossed the desert. Hours passed by them like fingernails scraping a chalkboard. The burning sun had been replaced by the chill of night. Any Grimm lurking out in the darkness remained silent and still, but the paranoia of their presence had the girls on high alert throughout the night.

Occasionally, they would hear sounds of Beowulf snarling in the distance. There was audible gunfire echoing behind them, then what followed was the dying whimper of creatures of Grimm. The shattered moon above passed over the sky just as easily as the sun had. Dawn would be arriving soon.

The four girls arrived at the base of the plateau. Despite their tired states, the four of them managed to let out a round of cheers. They patted themselves on the back before stopping shortly as they realized they would have to scale the rock formation in order to gain entrance into Shade. They let out a series of groans and exhausted sighs, but the four girls shrugged it off and got down to business.

By the time they arrived at the top, all four girls were just about ready to give up. It had been a grueling day and night, what they really wanted was something to drink, somewhere to sleep and something to eat. They didn't care in which order they received said accommodations, they just really wanted it to be over.

"Oh, goodie, more of you made it. How exciting!" The quartet of girls looked to their left and found Professor Kashmir standing there looking absolutely ecstatic. "Do you have your artifacts?" He inquired. Both Nebula and Octavia raised the black spathas, causing the professor to jump up happily. "Congratulations girls, you've passed! Head on down to the campus amphitheater. Feel
free to catch some shut eye, we won't begin the ceremony until after dawn."

"Ceremony?" Nebula couldn't help but ask.

"We're going to formally introduce you all into teams in front of the whole student body. Now, chop-chop. You wouldn't want to wast your time sleeping on some rocky ground when there's some nice chairs in doors." Kashmir said before motioning to what appeared to be the only illuminated building on campus.

"Well he's not wrong." Dew muttered as she tapped the rocky surface with her foot. So together, the four girls fought tiredness once more as they trudged through campus to the amphitheater.

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Hours later, well into the morning. Nebula found herself seated amongst the rest of the first years, the ones who'd passed initiation. There was quite a considerable difference in numbers compared to earlier. It was almost unsettling, but Nebula pushed past it and allowed herself to enjoy the ceremony as Headmistress Wytcherly formed another Team.

"Kafka Dominos, Panini Delso, Sibrand Chow and Yasmin Tea. You four retrieved the green paramerion. You will be hence known as Team PSYK, led by Panini Delso. Congratulations." Headmistress Wytcherly said with a smile. Nebula couldn't make heads or tail if it were a genuine one. That sort of scared the Violette.

There was an applause from all around. The students were smiling, they'd successfully survived initiation and were moving on to better things. Nebula watched from where she sat as the newly formed Team PSYK stepped out of the spotlight and walked back to their seats. Professor Kashmir called up another group to take the stage. Apart of that group contained that boy with the affinity for pink and his partner, May. There was also a rather toned, punkish looking boy with slicked hair. A little easy on the eyes, Nebula couldn't help but stare a little as he took to the stage as well.

"Nolan Porfirio, May Zedong, Brawnz Ni and Roy Stallion. The four of you retrieved the golden khopesh. From this day forward, you will operate as Team BRNZ. Led by Brawnz Ni." Wytcherly said before the crowd broke out into applause once more.

As the newly formed Team BRNZ took their seats, Professor Kashmir signaled to Nebula and her team. It was their turn in the spotlight. And so one by one they stood from where they were seated and marched into the view of their fellow students.

"Octavia Ember, Gwen Darcy, Dew Gayl and Nebula Violette." The Headmistress recited their names. The four girls stepped up into the spotlight, arms behind their backs standing shoulder to shoulder. They looked up to that middle-aged purple haired woman and the screen behind her in anticipation of what came next.

"The four of you retrieved the black spatha." An image of said darkly dyed weapon appeared on the screen behind Wytcherly. "From this day forward, you will work together as Team NDGO, led by…"

And then time stopped. Nebula stood there, eyes widening in anticipation. She'd come this far from the Acre Academy. She'd graduated the top of her class despite the name that she'd been born into. The name Violette, which was now synonymous with failure because of another's actions, clung to Nebula like a dead animal. But she'd pushed herself time and time again to come up short now. More than anything, she wanted to lead.

"Nebula Violette!" Wytcherly declared. Time started again and Nebula was back in the moment of
things. She stood there soaking up applause from her fellow classmates unable to help herself from grinning with the outcome. "I knew your Grandfather, Ms. Violette." The Headmistress singled out Nebula. "You've come this far. Don't burn out like the rest of your family. I expect great things from you."

"I aim to please!" Nebula smiled. Another round of applause erupted from the student body, causing Nebula's grin to widen.

With their moment in the spotlight over, the newly formed Team NDGO walked off stage. They took their seats once more and returned to watching their fellow students be christened into teams. A hush fell over the assembled student body and faculty as the next group of students marched up onto stage. And it was then, when they were under the light and presented to their peers when Nebula noticed one of their number had a pair of antlers sticking out of his forehead.

It was a pleasant surprise to Nebula. She'd known a number of faunus while attending the Acre Academy, but none had wished to enroll at Shade. Some of them went to Mistral, others to Vacuo's longtime rival Vale.

"Revy Linnaeus, Talal Cuvier, Echelon Lyell and Ketch Buffon." "You four retrieved the bronze scabbard. From this point onward you will be known as Team TREK." Headmistress Wytcherly announced.

"Led by, Talal Cuvier." The Headmistress announced. On the screen beside her, an image of the antler headed boy appeared. "Congratulations Mr. Cuvier. You're both the first faunus to attend Shade as well as the first ever faunus team leader. I expect great things from you."

Nebula began clapping, as was the customary thing to do. But then she halted her actions after the realization that she alone was the only one clapping. The Violette looked around hurriedly as her cheeks turned reddish. For a moment she wondered if she'd begun clapping early and cut off the Headmistress. But upon further inspection, Nebula realized that wasn't the case. It was just nobody was clapping.

Nebula raised a brow in confusion and leant over to Dew. "Why isn't anyone clapping?" She whispered.

"Because he's a faunus." Dew rolled her eyes. "Poor bastard. They're going to eat him alive."

Once more, Nebula raised a brow in confusion. She looked from Dew to the boy Talal as he and his team stepped out of the spotlight and walked back down the stairs as the next team got up to be announced. But one of the boys while walking past Talal, stuck his foot out and hooked it around the antler headed boy's leg, causing him to fall forward. Immediately, a number of Nebula's peers erupted in laughter. But there was something off about it, something Nebula couldn't quite put her finger on. It was almost as if they were laughing not because they found it funny, like a three stooges slapstick episode, but rather they laughed to hurt the fallen Talal.

But the antler headed boy said nothing. He picked himself up and soldiered on. The ceremony resumed but Nebula was left staring, appalled by her peer's actions.

When it comes to Vacuo, what really sparked this whole anti-faunus idea was really Nolan Porfirio. The guy literally has a cattle prod as a weapon. I asked myself, what good will that do against Grimm? So, then my mind wandered and thought, maybe its not for Grimm. And that was the birth of this version of Vacuo, a kingdom in need of a civil rights movement.
Nebula, is really the perfect character to deal with that. She's not Russel, she grew up in a home with loving and supportive family. She's rounded enough to know when something's off and driven enough to want to make a difference. So, expect to see some social topics brought up in this arc and later down the line.

I also played around with the aftermath of The Great War. Vacuo is the sort of country to still harbor ill will over the whole affair. After all, they didn't lose but they didn't win either. So, there's a lot of nationalistic ideology flung around. And, as evidence by their so called artifacts, they like reminding everyone there was a war and there could be another.

Headmistress Wytcherly spun out of a Wicked Witch of the West sort of thing. I took into account of Ozpin and Ironwood, who are Oz and the Tin Man. She could've been Dorothy, but, as you'll see later on, Shade Academy doesn't need a Dorothy, it needs a witch. So, that's a little fun fact.

Next chapter, I hope to have out soon. If you couldn't tell, each chapter sort of mirrors a specific previous arc. The last chapter mirrored 'Russel', this one mirrored 'Welcome to Beacon'. So, next one might mirror 'The Tyger and the Lamb' or 'The Dance'. We'll see.

'Til then later days!
Hey there everyone, welcome back to another chapter of The Darkling Thrush!

This one's coming in a bit later than I wanted. For the most part I want to be able to get a chapter in at least once a week. Given my new schedule, I'm doing my best to make that work. Again, I'm doing my best.

With that said, I hope this chapter is entertaining at least. We get into some dark subject matter ahead. So Warning ahead.

XXXIII

Nebula: Part 3

It had suddenly occurred to Nebula that it had taken him longer to see the inside of Shade Tower, the pinnacle center where the Headmistress of the very academy she attended dwelled. The monument of human achievement was a sight to behold, but the view was something else entirely. Of course, she'd expected to grace Headmistress Wytcherly's office under more pleasant circumstances.

High above looking over the rest of campus and the far off capitol of Vacuo, with her back facing her desk, the gray haired Headmistress sat with contemplative look on her face. From where Nebula sat, the Violette could see the Headmistress' reflection in the glass. There was a tug of fear around her heart, causing it to skip a beat at the sight of Wytcherly smirking to herself. She'd attended Shade for over a semester and never once had she nor any of her peers seen the woman so much as smile.

The exact reason behind Nebula's appearance in Wythcerly's office wasn't much of a surprise. Since attending Shade she'd sort of built up a reputation for her actions. They called her a comet these days, a satellite that passed by trouble and would find herself in the middle of it.

Just this morning, that boy Talal Cuvier, the first faunus in history to attend Shade, found himself in the middle of another altercation. It didn't surprise anyone in the slightest how often such things occurred. His very presence caused even the mildest mannered Councilman Vermillion supporter to throw a hissy fit.

Some guys from Team PSYK jumped Talal outside the dormitories when he was alone. It just so happened Nebula was coming back from her morning jog around campus. Despite the cuts and bruises Nebula sustained, it was the other guys who needed to visit the infirmary. They must've been sore losers, because not an hour later after Nebula had showered and prepared to go to breakfast, campus security arrived to escort her to where she sat now.

And so the grandfather clock in the corner ticked and tocked as the hands turned, round and round. Nebula couldn't help but fidget in her seat, feeling slightly intimidated. After all, Wythcerly could just eject her without a second thought. Finally, after minutes of sitting with her back facing Nebula, Wythcerly's chair spun around.

"Ms. Violette, just what am I going to do with you?" The Headmistress asked aloud in a rhetorical manner. "Assaulting your fellow students? Is this some sort of game to you, are you trying to get
"expelled?"

"They were attacking a fellow student. I acted as I saw fit."

"You aided a faunus in his time of need?"

"I don't like thinking about a person like that, ma'am."

"Your Grandfather would say differently." Headmistress Wytcherly remarked.

"I'm not my Grandfather, Headmistress." Nebula stated firmly.

"Yes, you lack his repulsive ego." Wytcherly quipped. It was on Nebula's second day at Shade when the woman had revealed she'd known her grandfather. The specifics of their association had since remained clouded in mystery, but Nebula had pieced a few things together giving her a general idea. One that she immediately began to repress. "You're a good student, Ms. Violette. I've read your transcripts, viewed recordings of your sparring sessions in Professor Kashmir's combat class. You have a promising career as a Huntress ahead of you. That is, if you keep your head down and quit getting into these pointless squabbles."

"But they're victimizing Talal." The Violette protested.

But the Headmistress of Shade held up a hand, silencing Nebula. "Your concerns are warranted, but I see I must remind you why you're all here. Talal, like the rest of your peers, is just as capable a huntsman as yourself. He can handle himself."

"You're letting this happen, aren't you?" Nebula's eyes narrowed. "You're encouraging it."

"Vacuo isn't as great a country as we claim it to be." Wytcherly leaned back in her seat and sighed. "As you've no doubt noticed, there's a sense of division amongst its people. Shade Academy is no different. It's time for a shake up in the status quo. Change is in the air. But sadly, a mountain is not carved out in a day, Ms. Violette. We're moving forward one step at a time."

"You're talking about a person, Headmistress."

"I'm talking about the future. Both Vacuo's and your own." "Like I said earlier, you're a good student, one of my better ones in fact. I won't have you put your future here on the line over something stupid. No more of these ridiculous fights, am I understood?"

Nebula reluctantly nodded. "Crystal clear, Headmistress. Are we finished?"

"I've said my piece. You're free to go." Wytchery said before gesturing to the open doorway.

And then Nebula left, down the elevator she went and the off to the dining hall for some long overdue breakfast. What a way to kick off your Sunday. Get into a fight, if you can even call it that. She got to sit down inside of Shade Tower and really got to know the Headmistress of the school. Real exciting stuff, Nebula thought to herself sarcastically.

"You're still here?" A voice called out to her in a condescending tone. Nebula just glanced over her shoulder, spotting the source of such mind-numbing blabber.

Panini Delso the leader of Team PSYK. She had long brown hair tied into a braid, a tan complexion and amber eyes. She was dressed in a form fitting white top, it showed off her curves leaving nothing to imagination. She also wore khaki cargo pants with extra padding, especially around the knees.
Nebula wasn't surprised to find Panini already gunning for her. She did after all put two of her teammates in the infirmary. To think there would be no repercussions for her actions was foolish, this was a combat school, they all practically lived for conflict, even if they wouldn't admit it.

"Was there any doubt?" Nebula questioned haughtily, turning to face the approaching Panini fully. She crossed her arms over her chest and smirked in a victorious manner. "But enough about me, how're you Panini? Still getting down on your hands and knees?" Nebula said before giving a nod at Panini’s knee pads. "Scrubbing those floors all the time must be tiresome." Her smirk grew.

"At least I have a sex life." Panini retorted in a dry contentious manner. "Then again, maybe you do too. You seem to be quite fond of that faunus boy, Nebula." She countered.

Nebula shrugged off the PSYK Leader's attempt at belittling her. "If that's how you want to play it, Panini. I must say, the near twenty four seven attention the whole merry lot of you, Team DORK and even Team FECH, must be the most sexually frustrated lot on campus then." She said, hold her smirk even and meeting Panini's chilling glare.

"You think the issue is that we're bullying that goat fucker? Victimizing him? You're so narrow minded Nebula. As were your grandfather and his father before him." Panini shook her head, noticeably becoming angrier as her attempts to pick Nebula apart fell flat against the Violette. "Shade Academy has been human only since its creation nearly a century ago. And then all of a sudden we're letting the mongrels have free reign of anything? You give them an inch then the next thing they'll want is to climb out of their ghettos and shit where we eat."

"You romanticize a misconception." Nebula said disapprovingly as their argument evolved from Talal to faunus as a whole. "Don't you even once think that it's wrong? What you're doing is terrible."

"The moment you give them an inch, they take a mile." Panini uttered angrily intense as she arched forward once more. "You need to remind them of their place."

"You say that as if they're less than human."

"But they are." Panini took a step forward until she was now mere inches away from her. Nebula herself remained calm while the amber eyed girl blood boiled beneath her skin. "Get it through your head, Nebula. We let it stand that this guy can run wild, any other mangy mutt can come along."

"Perhaps like the other students who arrived at initiation, but who did not make it back before dawn?" Nebula remarked calculatedly. There was a fault in Panini's angered expression, reminded of the so called 'mangy mutt's accomplishments over so many other capable humans. "Talal earned his place like you and I. The very same, as you and I, in fact. He is the leader of his team, correct?" Nebula couldn't help but laugh. "Doesn't seem less than human to me."

And so Nebula turned her back to the amber eyed girl and laughed her way into the dining hall as Panini looked on, he eyes daggers aimed at the Violette's back. Stepping inside, Nebula found got herself a spot in line and had her pick. She grabbed a plate and filled it with some French toast with a side of bacon and eggs. With that done, Nebula made her way to the nearby coffee and poured herself a mug before setting off to track down her team.

Ever since initiation, it had taken the four girls some time to get used to the other. Before friendship could be established, they quartet had to meet each other at some sort of common ground. It seemed impossible at first, with Octavia's hot headed nature and Dew's passive aggressive comments, but they made it work. It was either make friends or start tearing each other's
It was Gwen who managed to smooth things over. She'd come up with the idea of the four of them taking the day off and heading into town. The day out had been spent at the local air conditioned mall, just hanging out, window shopping and grabbing a bite to eat. It was simple yet effective as whatever tension was there between them was gone when they came back.

Nebula crossed through a sea of colorfully dressed students. It was Sunday, not a lot of people had classes. No one wore uniforms, it was a day they all could just lighten up, and you could wear whatever you wanted. Eventually, the NDGO leader caught sight of her team seated at their usual spot at the very heart of the dining hall.

The Violette was welcomed with a round of ‘good mornings’ and sighs of reliefs. It was only natural, after she’d been hauled away by campus security, her team was left in the dark about her fate. Seeing her casually walk up to she did had the questions piling up before Nebula could even sit down.

"What happened? What happened?" Gwen blurted out like an excited child. "One moment you're getting back from your jog next the feds are kicking down the door and dragging you away!"

"I never took you for a rule breaker, Neb." Octavia smirked wickedly.

"How's the inside of Shade Tower by the way? Does Wytcherly decorate her office with the heads of rowdy students or with animals?" Dew inquired.

"Nothing too serious, just a slap on the wrist, nothing major." Nebula said, in effect, downplaying the seriousness of her conversation with the Headmistress. "Got into another scrape. Wytcherly just doesn't want me wasting my talents is all." She shrugged before getting to work cutting up her plate of French toast. "We got any syrup?" Nebula looked to her teammates, having forgotten to grab a packet while she was up getting food.

The trio looked around to their own half-finished plates thinking maybe one of them would've brought an extra packet along with them. But sadly, their search proved fruitless. With a sigh, Nebula resigned herself to the long walk back through the sea of students back to the counter for a measly packet of syrup. But before she could, Dew raised a hand and gently placed it on Nebula's shoulder and silently told her partner she'd handle it.

Nebula sat in silence as she waited for Dew to get up and retrieve her the final ingredient to her breakfast, but her partner remained in her seat beside her, making no attempt to get up. The Violette raised a brow and was about to simply walk up on her own, not in the mood for one of Dew's games, but then her partner shot to her feet, having caught the eye of a passerby.

The NDGO leader frowned at Dew's actions, as did Octavia and so did Gwen. To say the least, Dew was a people person. Call it her semblance, call it magic, but there was a siren quality to her voice whenever she wanted. Often she'd use this ability of hers to catch the attention of the occasional peer and somehow she'd talk them into doing

"Hey Roy, you got any syrup on you?" Dew asked as she flagged down Roy Stallion of Team BRNZ.

"Uh…no?" Roy glanced at his plate and then back to Dew. "Would you like me to get you one, Dew?" He asked a little anxiously.

"If you could, please." Dew said sweetly before Roy ran off to fulfil her request. Nebula found Roy
to be a nice enough boy, he never caused trouble, seemed a little too into his programs, but overall
she found had nothing against the man. So least to say, Nebula had some issue with Dew's usage of
him. But it had only been recent since they'd actually gotten along, so Nebula made nothing of it,
nor did she intend to.

Nebula remained silent as Roy returned from the front of the dining hall and handed Dew the syrup
as if to earn her favor. Dew simply patted the boy on the top of his head before shooing him away.
The siren girl with an affinity for wind styled dust turned to her partner and gingerly placed
the packet beside her. Nebula accepted it, knowing the great deal of effort that had gone towards
acquiring it and thanked Dew, and in part also thanked Roy. She then sprinkled the contents of the
packet over her plate and dug in.

Over the course of their breakfast, Team NDGO engaged in conversation relating to current events.
They discussed the upcoming school dance in honor of the eighty years spent in relative peace with
the rest of the other kingdoms. There was talk of companionship to said dances, with Dew
mentioning the number of suitors she herself was fending off. Octavia scoffed at the idea and
rebelled at the idea of conforming to such interpretations of social courting. If she were going to be
going with anyone, she'd be the one asking, not a boy.

Gwen was a different story. More or less the kid of the team, in terms of how she acted and her
naïve view of the world, all the dancer could do was gush and stare whenever a halfway decent
looking guy walked by. So, unless some guy had the balls to ask her, everyone knew she'd be going
alone. Then the conversation drifted towards Nebula, but the Violette shrugged, not really finding
anything or anyone to get excited over.

A little after, their discussion turned to more adventurous horizons. They'd be going out on their
first official mission as Huntresses in training. It was no secret that first year students got the
equivalent of a milk run, shadowing a more experienced Huntsman. But still, it was their first step
towards the real deal, being huntresses. What there not to be excited for?

There was talk about them fighting Grimm while patrolling the border between Vacuo and Vale.
All sorts of nasties were prone to wander out of their forests and into Vacuo's dunes. It would be
their pleasure, showing Vale how to properly handle the enemy of humanity. But then again,
maybe they'd get something cozier, near the highlands or possibly something in an urban setting.
All Nebula and the others could really do was speculate, there would be no official notice until the
day of. All they really could do was dream.

After their first mission, they'd be put on notice, given a month to prepare for the main event of the
year. Nebula couldn't help but smile to herself as they began to talk about the upcoming Vytal
Festival. It was only a week ago when Nebula had submitted her team's entry form. In less than
two months they'd be in Vale, showing the world what Team NDGO and Vacuo as a whole was
capable of.

And most importantly, Nebula would be showing the world what she was made of. It went unsaid
at this point, as it had become too repetitive of a topic, about Nebula's name and the burden that
came with it. How it was her great grandfather who essentially let the Great War end in stalemate.
Taking home a victory for Vacuo wasn't her only goal for this year's Vytal Tournament, but also to
remove the stain on her family's name.

So Nebula turned to her teammates, fires in her eyes. She looked to them as they'd lost themselves
to conversation about all the new faces they'd see, the people they'd fight and the welcome change
of scenery. They'd be traveling to Vale of all places, the country that had halted a Vacuo victory.
And it would be in their very own capitol where Nebula intended to reclaim her family's honor.
Just adding more reason for her to want to win.

After breakfast, Nebula and her team went their separate ways. They all had private matters to attend to. Dew was heading down to the science lab, working on a new dust crystal isotope. Octavia was heading into town, something to do with some guy named 'Kevin' specializing in fake I.D.s. And Gwen had run off to the gym.

Nebula herself had nothing really major to do. It was Sunday, classes were pretty much cancelled for first years due to preparations for the upcoming dance and missions, and she had nothing better to do. So, Nebula resigned herself to what she always did on her off hours and headed down to the shooting range.

She headed down to the locker room and fetched her crossbow and made her way down to the range. It was quieter than you'd expect down there. Not from the lack of students practicing and tuning their aim, but it was quiet in the sense of the weapons they all used. Nebula used a crossbow, not a lot of bang. The other regulars whom Nebula waved at as she entered the range also didn't have the loudest of weapons. May Zedong of Team BRNZ was really the only one who made any real noise. And with reason too. She went through forty of those self-rebuilding dummies a day. Because they could never rebuild themselves fast enough so she had to go down range and physically replace them.

May herself was quiet. Nebula had rarely heard the beanie wearing girl utter any long winded sentences, just the occasional comment about her sights and the once in a while acknowledgement when Nebula would take the time to aid her in replacing those heavy dummies.

Nebula stood in silence, tuning her aim and sending a plethora of arrows down range. She liked the crossbow, not because of the aesthetic, but because she could always reuse ammunition. Dust shells were nice, they had the right amount of kick to them as did dust coated knives and blades, but the darn things always blew up and you couldn't recycle.

You shoot an arrow into a guy and the damn things sticking out of them. You kill a Grimm it fades away, leaving the arrows sitting there to be reclaimed for later use. It all worked out in Nebula's opinion, she thought as she took the head off a dummy with a well-aimed shot. She could help but smirk to herself. If her aim was always that good, then winning the Vytal Tournament seemed that much more plausible.

Hours of honing her skills passed before Nebula decided to call it quits. She was honestly surprised to find the hour was half past four. Time flies when you're giving it your all, she mused as she departed the firing range. Nebula shouldered her crossbow as well as the arrows she'd been too lazy to place back into their respective magazines. She made her way back to the locker room and dropped them off before heading back to the dormitory.

By then Nebula was making lists in her head, deciding what else she'd do. If she found any of her team lounging around in their dorm she'd be sure to drag them off in search of dinner or at least a late lunch. If not, she could always go by herself.

But on the way back to the dormitory, something caught Nebula's eye. There number of uniformed men standing guard outside, keeping a number of students from entering the building. They weren't campus security, but in fact honest to god police, no doubt from the capitol.

Finding the sight strange, Nebula joined the crowd, eventually pushing her way to the front. Seeking answers, Nebula caught a policeman's attention and questioned him about his presence here on campus.
The policeman, who wasn't old but not young either, frowned at Nebula's queries. "Incident, ma'am. It'll be handled shortly." He said in a tired tone. The guy probably answered the very same questions earlier once or twice, probably more.

"Yeah, but what's the incident?" Nebula asked, not really wanting to bother the policeman, but just to get some answers.

"It's a rather complicated matter, miss." The policeman said before glancing over to the dormitory opening. As if to answer Nebula's question, a pair of EMTs came walking out of the building with a stretcher and a covered body on it. The policeman turned back around to face Nebula and met her eyes. "Some poor faunus killed himself."

Nebula's eyes opened wide at the policeman's words. Her first instinct was to blurt out something obnoxious like exclaim the word 'what' loudly and in the policeman's ear. But she didn't, rather, Nebula quickly ran off to follow up on the policeman's claims. There was no way Talal had killed himself, she'd just seen him earlier and he was fine. Just a couple of bruises, but nothing major.

It seems that Nebula was not the only one to have such thoughts, as Nolan found himself drawn out of the crowd seeking answers as well. The pink eyed boy quickly ran up to the EMTs and before they could react, Nolan pulled off the sheet covering the body, revealing the antler headed face of Talal.

"Holy shit." Nebula gasped at the sight. Talal's eyes were still open and staring up at Nolan, who stood stunned unable to stop himself from staring back.

"God damn. The fucker offed himself." Nolan muttered wide eyed before some officer ran up and grabbed him by the arm before pulling him away. The EMTs then quickly threw the cover back over Talal and then made continued on their way.

Shade Academy was built on a plateau, you were not getting a car let alone an ambulance up onto campus. The only way to transport anything in or out was via airship. And it was a long walk from the dormitory to the tarmac. So essentially, the EMTs, even if they weren't aware of it, were parading Talal's body all across the school for everyone to see.

And Nebula could only look on in horror. She could hear Panini's contentious hate filled laughter in the background. She could hear them all talking about the faunus boy and how he just couldn't handle the pressure, not like them humans could.

Slowly, Nebula regained some of her senses and she spared a glance towards Shade Tower. She wasn't at all surprised to find Headmistress Wytcherly standing by the window looking down at the display, a deep mourningful frown on her face.

All Nebula wanted to do was grab Panini or Nolan or any of Talal's attackers and she wanted to throttle them for what their actions had led to. But the Violette just stood there in silence, turning her attention back to the EMTs, watching as they carted his body away.

Yeah, so...that happened.

I actually had three different drafts for the ending. I think, in a way, this is the darkest of the four. Not because its overt but because of how quiet it is. Fun fact, Talal Cuvier, his last name alongside those of his team are based on Pre-Evolutionists, such as Georges Cuvier who came up with Catastrophism.
You know, I find it a little odd, writing a character named Nolan who's an absolute fucker of a person. I've written a character named that for just about five years. And it's just weird.

Next chapter should be out in the next seven days. I'm hoping to get it out quicker this time around. 'Til then, later days!
Welcome back everyone, to another chapter of 'The Darkling Thrush'! I hope I didn't keep anyone waiting. We are also now 1/3 of the way done with the story woo!

Well enough with me talking, on with the story.

It was an ordinary day in Dayspring, a little town on the outskirts of the kingdom capitol. The overbearing sun was present as ever, nurturing backyard gardens. The children were out of the home and at school, the parents were out earning just enough to keep the lights on and put food on the table.

No one was present when an unmarked van made its way into town. No one was there when four men exited and paid a visit to the local shut in, a man who'd become an urban legend of sorts. Boo Pan was his name. A man too old to die young and still too young to die. Every day he'd receive groceries from one of those online apps, they were the only visitors he expected.

Pan was so set in his routine that the moment the doorbell rung he didn't bother to check. He just opened the door, allowing the men to jump him. Pan fought as best he could, but he was neither the huntsman he used to be. Retirement had sapped his strength, routine had soften his edge and that killer instinct, like a muscle, had receded from disuse. Not to mention, he'd never fought with only one arm before.

His attackers did not share his woes. They were at their physical peak. There was a man, tall, built like an action figure, who wore green goggles for the hell of it. He blindsided Pan and rammed the old huntsman up against a wall. He then doubled back, allowing his companion, a burly fellow with a thick beard, to run up get in a good punch and more some.

Defeated, Pan was helpless as the duo dragged him into his private study. The irony was lost to Pan, after all, he was a shut in. Everything in his home was private. They dragged him by his arm and tossed him onto the floor of his study right beside his lounging sofa. It occurred to Pan that if this was a typical burglary, then they wouldn't have gone through the effort. They had made it apparent they could've killed him by now, instead, they just stood there keeping watch, waiting for him to make a move.

"Boss, you can come in now." The man with the thick beard called out into the hallway.

Pan looked up through swelling eyes as a thin man in a beige day suit walked into his study. He had a handlebar moustache and a scruffy piece of fur growing on his chin. If he wasn't suffering the way he was now, Pan would've most certainly made fun of his appearance.

"Apologies for the intrusion." The man said before crouching down beside Pan. "I am Doctor Kruger. Maybe you've heard of me?"

"No." Pan deadpanned.
"Ah. Well, I am the leading scientist of my field." Dr. Kruger said a matter of fact.

"Congratulations, now get the fuck out of my home."

"In due time. But first, we have business, you and I." Dr. Kruger said before standing up and circling around Pan and taking a walk through his study. There were pictures of Pan in his prime. Photos of him with two arms instead of one. And there was even a newspaper article of his team and himself up at Sinbad Mountain. It was this photo that caught the so called doctor's attention, causing him to stop beside it and comb it for any outstanding details. "I am a simple ecologist in search of answers. Nothing too grand, nothing anyone should die for. So answer my questions and no harm will come to you."

Having taken notice of Kruger's actions, Pan deduced the man's intentions. So the once former huntsman held a firm scowl. "Go to hell."

"Break his legs." Dr. Kruger said over his shoulder.

"With pleasure." The man with green goggles growled before stomping at Pan's knees, kicking them both inward. There was a sickening pair of snapping noises followed closely by Pan's pained wails. The goggle wearing man and the burly bearded man then tossed the faunus onto the nearby by sofa where then the trio circled around Pan with Dr. Kruger taking point.

"My reasonability is wearing thin. Your compliance would help speed up this process." Dr. Kruger said, sounding rather taxed.

"I know what you seek. And I will never tell." Pan met Kruger's stare with his own.

"As I'd hoped." Dr. Kruger smirked. "One last time, I ask you, please reconsider. Simply divulging what you know will save you and I the pain of what happens next."

"Do you're worst." Pan laughed hollowly.

"It is not I who you should fear, Mr. Pan." Dr. Kruger gave a look at the door. "Coyote, will come in here? I'm in need of your services."

The door leading into the hallway opened and in stepped a lean tall figure dressed in a dark brown duster, a white undershirt and light blue cowboy pants. He wore a red tattered scarf around his neck which hung loosely against his chest as if it were a noose. But the most striking detail about the man was his headwear.

It appeared he wore an old fashioned Atlesian trooper helmet, the one used by their soldiers during the Great War when the kingdom was known as Mantle. But it had since 'evolved'. On the left side of his helmet, there appeared to be a cracked horn belonging to a bull seemingly bolted into it. The pitch black visor still gleamed like the day it was made, but now it was slanted into a permanent glare. Patches of the helmet had been removed and seeming replaced with almost bone-like material. The lower chin guard and mouth plate were missing entirely, along with the rest of the lower section of the helmet. It had been replaced with a jaw bone.

"Mr. Pan, Coyote. Coyote, Mr. Pan." Dr. Kruger spoke lividly as he introduced the pair to each other. "Mr. Pan has been very uncooperative. Mind persuading him?"

Coyote's helmeted head turned slowly, as if suddenly noticing Mr. Pan's presence. It was the way that dark mirror like visor of his stared at Pan that creeped the faunus out the most. Whatever lay behind the man's helmet, whether it be two eye or more, whatever it was caused a chill to run down Pan's spine.
The bearded man raised a hand in the air as if he were waiting to be called on by a teacher at school. "Hey, Boss, is it cool if we just hang outside or something?"

"Yeah, we're not big fans on what happens next." The man with goggles said from where he now stood right beside the door. Pan just looked at the men standing around, noticing how the two men who'd just broken his legs now seemed uneasy with the helmeted man's presence.

"Yes and I think I'll join you." Dr. Kruger said, giving his pair of bruisers the okay to leave the room. The ecologist then turned back around to face the injured faunus once more.

"I'll be honest with you, Mr. Pan, this man disturbs me. So I'll be in the next room, waiting." He said quietly as if not to let the leering Coyote behind hear. "Just call out when you're ready to talk. And you will want to talk." Dr. Kruger said with sure smile before turning and leaving the room.

And then there were only two left in Pan's private study. There were no words exchanged between them at first, just the sounds of pained panting belonging to Pan. The helmeted Coyote just stared at Pan, that god awful helmet of his piercing into the faunus' soul.

"You will get nothing out of me." Pan spat defiantly.

"Frying or Flute?" A low distorted voice emitted from Coyote's helmet.

Pan raised a brow at the man's question. It wasn't difficult for the man to figure out what Coyote referred to. He referred to the kitchen utensil and the musical instrument. Pan shot the man a dirty look and kept silent.

"Frying it is." Coyote muttered forebodingly before proceeding to stalk towards Pan on the sofa. The man then drew what appeared to be a baton like weapon from his back and pressed a button, causing it to extend and reveal its cattle prod nature.

It was a good thing the neighborhood was empty. Everyone would have heard the screaming.

The sun slowly crept up over the sky, bathing the land in its life giving light. Usual Monday mornings at Shade would see students running around, all making their rounds before winding up at the dining hall for breakfast. But classes have since been cancelled in favor for the missions the students were to partake in. For an entire month, no class, no stress, no worry. All leading up to the Vytal Festival.

So the students who hadn't been assigned a mission this week had partied all through the night not a care in the world. But those students who did have missions, well, it sucked to be them. But for all of them, it was the day after. The day after the dance.

It had been an absolutely fine affair. Team NDGO hadn't been stuck on the planning committee, so that did fine by Nebula. The music didn't tank and one of the chefs whipped up one of the most fabulous finger sandwiches she'd ever had. But it was the after bash that Nebula had spent most of her time. As it was, one of the fourth year students had managed to sneak a keg onto campus.

Nebula had never been one for alcohol, but she tried it. She didn't abuse it like Octavia did. For the most part, the NDGO leader had spent her time supervising her hot headed teammate, making sure she didn't get into any trouble. She also made sure to take lots of incriminating videos of Octavia's actions for later use.

Overall, it had been a little over two weeks since Talal had passed. Shade didn't waste a breath, it kept trudging forward. As did Nebula. Standing in her dorm room alone, dressed and waiting on
her teammates, the Violette was prepared more than anything for what the day offered her. Team NDGO was first on the list and set to meet at the tarmac in less than an hour.

"Hurry up and get dressed, we'll be heading out soon." Nebula cast a glance over to Octavia, who still remained in bed.

"Not so loud, Neb. My brains ringing." Octavia muttered woozily.

The NDGO leader frowned at her teammate. The night before she'd tried to temper Octavia's consumption of drink, but the girl kept at it with no intent of stopping. "That's what you get. Should've quit at five like I told you to." Nebula remarked sharply.

"Five? I don't remember having five." Octavia said as she attempted to climb out of bed, resulting in her falling face first onto the floor. "…Ow."

"Light weight." Gwen quipped as she finished with her hair.

"Ugh…rooms spinning. I'm gonna hurl." Octavia warned the duo of girls before puking on her side of the room.

"Gwen, would you be a dear and help Octavia?" nebula looked over her shoulder and to the team's resident knife thrower.

Gwen nodded and went to aid her partner and picked Octavia off the ground. As Gwen helped Octavia to the restroom to clean herself up, Nebula herself got to work cleaning up the mess. She grabbed some paper towels and wiped up Octavia's upchuck.

With that taken care of, the NDGO leader double checked her mental list. Finding her partner Dew. Though sleep came easy to Nebula last night, the alcohol had helped with that, the Violette couldn't help but worry about her teammate's wellbeing, especially since she forgot her scroll at the dorm. With no means to directly contact her, Nebula set off down the hall in search of her partner.

As Nebula recalled, Dew was the only one of their team who'd gotten a date to the dance. Brawnz Ni, the leader of Team BRNZ. He wasn't as big a condescending prick as Nolan, nor was he sweet like Roy, or soft spoken like May. Brawnz had an alpha male persona that he'd go to great lengths to showcase. But there was something about the boy Nebula couldn't help but admit as fetching. Maybe it was the hair, how it was slicked back or maybe it was his toned forearms.

Whatever it was that Brawnz had going for him, it was enough to get Dew to agree to going with him. So that's where Nebula's search began. Three doors down the hall on the left, Nebula found herself at Team BRNZ's dorm room. Nebula knocked loudly, not caring who she would wake up. Their team was heading out in an hour, she didn't have the time to go about this quietly.

There was some rumbling noises within the room. A slight thudding sound behind the door followed by a pained groan. Nebula strained to hear what was going on within the room, but she could hear some cussing. Less than a minute later, the handle turned and the door flew up. In the doorway stood Nolan dressed in a pair of pajama pants with an angered expression on his face.

"What do you want?" Nolan asked angrily through tired eyes. It went unsaid through the months they'd known each other, but there was always something there in between Nolan's words that egged Nebula. Never once had they traded anything other than unpleasant comments.

Sometimes Nebula wanted to just reach out and ask the boy what exactly it was he had against her. She'd always attributed it to her name and the burden of being related to failed generals, but there was much more to it. Even before they'd learned each other's names, Nolan had been spiteful and
resentful.

"Looking for my partner. Any chance you know where she might be?" Nebula asked, unfazed by Nolan's crass attitude.

"And you thought she'd be here?" The messy haired red head raised a brow.

"Last I checked, she and Brawnz were getting cozy. Didn't hurt to check." Nebula said, meeting Nolan's angered expression. "So is Dew in there or not?"

"Oh let me check that for you." Nolan rolled his eyes before closing the door, intent on slamming it on Nebula's face.

But Nebula was conscious of the fact Nolan would be unwilling to assist her. So she'd already stuck her foot in the door way, preventing it from closing. "Let's try that again. This time with a little less attitude." She folded her arms over her chest. "Do you or do you not know where Dew is?"

"Ugh." Nolan groaned as he once more attempted to shut his door by pulling it back and slamming it against Nebula's foot in hopes maybe she'd be hurt and pull it back in recoil. It probably would've worked if it had been Dew at the door who wore sandals, or Gwen and her ballet flats. But Nebula wore padded boots. Try as Nolan may, she would not be removing her foot any time soon. Once realizing this, Nolan's scowl deepened as he once more face Nebula.

"Just point me in the direction of my partner, I'll be out of your hair and you can go back to sleeping." The NDGO leader said, in a way handing Nolan an ultimatum.

Nolan let out an irritated sigh. He gave a look over his shoulder, no doubt to his bed which he longed to reunite with. Resolving this to be the quickest way of returning to his slumber, Nolan nodded and face Nebula once more. "Last night, your pal Dew, the rest of us and PSYK ran off into town. Took the party to go, hit up a club, around two. We came back a little after that. If anything your girl is probably passed out in the PSYK dorm."

As it appeared Nolan had given her a definite location, Nebula removed her foot from the doorway. "Thanks." She said before turning her back to the boy and heading off on her way. She heard the feint sound of a door closing behind her, no doubt Nolan returning to bed.

So Nebula walked off further down the hall and soon enough she was face to face with the PSYK dorm room. Like how she'd done earlier with the BRNZ room, Nebula knocked and hoped for the best. Unlike with the Team BRNZ, she was on the outs with all of Team PSYK. She hadn't forgotten their part in what became of the first Faunus to attend Shade Academy. It had only been weeks and yet the world moved on, uncaring of what happened in these very dorms. No one was held responsible.

With no answer, Nebula knocked once again, this time a tad bit louder. She heard some rummaging within the room. Some voices conversing with the other. It was a squabble to see who would answer the door. Nebula waited patiently, though she found her mind wandering slightly to the clock on her scroll. Mindful of the time, she knocked once more, letting the inhabitants of the room know their problem wouldn't simply go away.

The door opened almost immediately after the third thunderous knock. It flew open, revealing a half dressed Panini in the door way. "Oh fuck off." The Team PSYK leader cursed as she recognized Nebula. She then went to slam the door, only for Nebula to put her door in the way, preventing it from closing.
Nebula was just about to comment on the fact that this was the second time someone had tried to slam a door in her face this morning when she found Panini's fist connecting with her face. The force behind the punch knocked the Violette off her feet and sending her backwards into the hallway. The strike had taken her off guard, she was genuinely unprepared for that. Stupid mistake, she muttered to herself as she found her way back to her feet.

Once more Nebula turned to the Team PSYK dorm room and once more she found it closed. The NDGO leader sighed. She'd wanted to handle this as civilly as possible, but it appeared that would not be the case. So Nebula walked up to the door once more and place her right leg against it.

Panini was just about to climb back into bed when her door came flying off the hinges into the center of the room. The Team PSYK leader whipped her head around and glared at Nebula as she stepped inside, rubbing the side of her face where she'd been hit.

"What the hell is wrong with you?!" Panini shouted angrily.

But the Team PSYK's cries fell on uncaring ears as Nebula scanned the room. In one of the beds, Nebula spotted a familiar head of blonde hair belonging to Dew beside a passed out Brawnz. Having found her partner, Nebula allowed herself to let out a sigh of relief. Her search had come at an end.

So the NDGO leader marched into the room, brushing off Panini and the rest of her team's comments. Kneeling beside Dew, Nebula tapped her shoulder until the slumbering siren began to wake.

Once awaking, Dew sat up in bed and reached up to clear her blurred vision. To her right she found Nebula waving at her and to her left she found "Ugh." Dew spat in disgust at the sight of Brawnz.

"Not the night you expected, huh?" Nebula asked cheekily.

"He wouldn't shut up about what he did back in his old combat school. As if that matters. What a waste of time he was." Dew said before slapping Brawnz's shoulder. But the BRNZ leader slept like a rock, he'd wake when he felt like it. "So, what's up?"

"We got our first mission in less than an hour. I was hoping you'd be joining us." Nebula said casually. "No sense in going without you watching my back."

"Well, I ain't got nothing better to do." Dew shrugged before jumping out of bed.

Once gathering Dew's things, the duo began to head for the doorway. "Hey, what about our door?!" Panini shouted in protest.

Nebula and Dew exchanged a glance and shrugged. "I'm quoting here, so bear with me." Nebula cracked a smile. "Oh Fuck off."

With that, the duo left the room.

Up top beyond the laughter of youth within Shade Tower, the Headmistress of the academy, Wytcherly, sat in her chair, back to the window as she entertained her pair of guests. But 'entertain' is a rather strong word, more like, put up with. Looking cross, up earlier than she would've liked for the benefit of another, Headmistress Wycherly was absolutely livid.

Sitting across from the purple haired woman sat a face all of Vacuo knew. Stagnant Vermillion, one of the hundred elected officials governing the country as a whole, as well as The Speaker of
Chambers. With jet black hair, a winning smile and twenty years of public office under his belt, he was still the youngest man serving in office at forty-five.

And to the councilman's right sat his aide, a woman who'd since gone unnamed, but Wytcherly had picked up the formality between the two of them since they'd walked in. A conversation or two, picked up via listening device in the elevator. Gabriella was her name, though Wytcherly was unsure whether it was her first or last name. She had long dirty blonde hair tied into a bun, a perkish nose elevated slightly to a point, and she was quiet on an unsettling level.

"When you'd messaged me about meeting, I hadn't imagined you'd show up at my doors this early in the day." Wytcherly mock yawned. "But, then again, given your busy schedule, I'm not surprised in the slightest. You must be dead tired."

"The re-election campaign runs itself. I have good people working for me. The finest movers and shakers for campaign managers. Not to mention inspired interns all too willing to lend a hand." Vermillion smiled.

"I bet not a one of them is a Faunus."

"Progress takes time. But you know that already, don't you, Wytcherly?" Vermillion said in a knowing tone.

"Talal's suicide was unfortunate and a setback, yes." The headmistress sighed. "I really thought he could've made the difference."

"Which is why we're here today." The councilman said before he shifted the conversation. "Human-Faunus relationships are at an all-time low." Vermillion informed as he extended a hand to his aide. Gabriella dug into the brief case she'd brought with her and handed the councilman a sheet of paper, which Vermillion then placed onto the desk in front of him and slid to Wytcherly.

"I don't need polls to know that." Wytcherly muttered before sliding the paper back. "All I need to do is switch on the telly or look to my computer. Faunus getting shot by cops. Riots in the streets. How long before we have another civil war in our streets?"

"That is something I hope to avoid." Vermillion sighed as he reclaimed the sheet of paper and handed it back to his aide. "I've gotten a think tank together. We've brain stormed some options, and I think we've come up with a solution."

"You and the rest of your cabal of politicians are finally going to let them vote?"

"Fuck no. You kidding? Then they'd get the idea of voting one of their own into public office." The Speaker of the Chamber said in disgust. "We want to attract more Faunus to the Huntsmen work field. Get them out of slums, let them see beyond their ghettos and learn to love Vacuo and the rest of its people."

"Which is what I've already been working on."

"Yes, except we don't want them to kill themselves this time. That's counterproductive, Wytcherly." Vermillion snapped. "To amend this, I hope you'll consider sending this year's first year students on missions near Faunus border towns. They'll patrol and maybe they can do some community outreach while they're there. It might inspire a few Faunus and definitely it'll remind them that there's more important things we must divide our attention to, such as possible Grimm invasions."

"Well as it so happens, I've already to deploy teams to the border." Wytcherly muttered as she reclined back in her chair.
"Ah, great minds think alike."

"Don't flatter yourself, Vermillion. If anything I thought of it first." The Headmistress smirked.

After Dew had finished dressing, Team NDGO was now mission ready. And with ten minutes to spare too. The quartet of young women made their way out of the dormitory and down to the tarmac where they had been notified days earlier to meet for assignment.

Nebula looked to her team and studied them for a moment. They were mobile, but last night's dance and after activities had taken a toll on a few of their number. Octavia had taken the worst of it by suffering from a hangover. And Dew just looked tired in general. That had her worried.

She debated voicing her concerns for a little bit as they engaged in conversation about the last night's events. In between the laughter at Octavia's expense and the fiery girl's response in angered shouting, Nebula decided against killing the mood. Should her team falter in anyway, Nebula would be sure to shoulder it like the leader she was.

This was her team after all. They were the only people she could rely on and vice versa. She would be damned if she couldn't fulfil her duties.

"Hey, Nebula, you listening?" Dew snapped her finger in front of Nebula's face, snapping the team leader out of her thoughts.

"Huh? Oh, sorry, zoned out. What did you say?" She sheepishly asked.

"I said we're about to head out." Dew jotted a thumb over her shoulder at Professor Kashmir of all people who waited beside a Bullhead.

"Well come along, students." Professor Kashmir gestured to the waiting Bullhead, the first of the day. "We're due in about an hour. We'd best get going now. We Huntsmen are both deadly and timely now."

With that the Team boarded the waiting Bullhead. They threw the doors closed and then moved to take their seats. "You girls have been assigned to shadow me on this trip of ours. Expect to reconnaissance, getting to know our neighbors, and eventually we'll get around to killing Grimm. How's that sound?" The four huntresses in training gave a hearty roar.

"And our destination, Professor?" Nebula asked as she and the other members of Team NDGO took their seats.

"I'm glad you asked, Ms. Violette. This came down from the Headmistress herself. We're off to the border. We'll patrol the area and stop by a local predominately Faunus town." Professor Kashmir answered in his usual upbeat attitude. "Shows the little guy we're out there protecting them."

"I'd like that." Nebula quietly said to herself.

With that said, Professor Kashmir gave the thumbs up to the pilot to take off. The Bullhead shot up off the tarmac and sped off to the east, to the border and what would no doubt be a memorable first adventure for Team NDGO.

"Mr. Freeman, or would you prefer to be addressed by your birth given name, Balkin?" Dr. Kruger asked aloud as he addressed a dark skinned man who was on his knees glaring up at him. It had been three days since paying Pan a visit, but the former huntsman had died before he could give
them anything valuable. So then they tracked down one of his teammates.

Their journey took them into the heart of a Faunus ghetto near the border Vacuo shared with Vale. The men in Kruger's employ had stormed this particular home belonging to the Mr. Freeman, the man on his knees before Kruger. It was in the day, his family was home, giving Kruger and his men the proper leverage to no doubt finally get the answers he sought.

"That was another life, one I've turned my back on." Freeman said, quickly glancing past Kruger and to his family, his darling wife and his two children who were all huddled beside each other with an absolutely haunting individual wearing a helmet stood pointing a gun at them.

Normally Kruger would have assigned the rest of his muscle to watch over and keep the family in line. But after storming the house and taking them by surprise, it became all too apparent that allowing Coyote stand outside alone unsupervised would do no one good. So the rest of the men waited outside, keeping watch, while the helmeted Coyote stood there menacingly brandishing a gun in the family's direction.

"Yes, well, I'm sorry, but we have much to discuss on that matter." Kruger said, sounding a tad regretful. "We've spoken to your surviving associates. None of them were exactly willing to share what you four found up on the mountain."

"As it should be." Freeman sneered.

"Young, foolhardy huntsmen gone treasure hunting. Ends in tragedy." Kruger said aloud, reciting the old newspaper clipping he'd found in Pan's study. "Three of you lived through your experience, but none shared the truth of your experience. But unlike your friends Demeter or Pan, you went off the grid entirely. You even married a Faunus."

"No! Please stop!" Freeman begged. "Pease, I'll give you what you want. Just don't hurt my family."

"Splendid." Kruger happily danced. "The Sentinel and his knowledge, where is it?"

"In Vale, we tracked it to a town called Venezier." Freeman lowered his head in shame, as he relinquished a secret his former teammates had died to keep. "That's where our journey took us. That's where it ended. Now please, just leave my family alone."

Kruger was prepared to fulfil his end of the bargain. He turned to face Coyote and gestured to the man to cease his actions, to turn the gun he held in his hands away from Freeman's family. But the helmeted man remained still, as if not seeing Kruger and his vision fixated on the trio of Faunus kneeling before him.

"Oh no." Kruger muttered under his breath. Coyote let out a low growl then proceeded to execute Freeman's family. A series of loud gunshot rang out through the neighborhood and caused a startled Kruger to jump backwards. "Goddammit, Coyote!" The doctor shouted.

"No!" Freeman screamed.

"I apologize, I do not condone my associate's behavior. He's only like this around Faunus. I'm very sorry." Kruger said, waving his hands defensively as if such an action could calm Freeman. "Please, let's not get violent. We can still sort things out."

"I'll kill you!" Freeman shouted before leaping at Dr. Kruger. Another pair of gunshots rang loudly. Before he'd even gotten off the ground, the Freeman was dead. His body hit the floor with a silent thud.
The doctor sighed. He looked to Coyote who was still staring downward at the dead Faunus. "I guess I should have expected as much."

"People would've heard that, Boss. We'd better get going." The goggle wearing bruise in Kruger's employ said as he entered the room.

Kruger nodded in acknowledgement, understanding his subordinate's concerns. But the man waved them off, he still had much to do here in the Freeman household. "I don't believe Balkin was telling the truth. He was hiding something." Kruger muttered. "Brussels, you and I are sacking this place. Maybe he left something behind."

"But, what if cops show up?"

"In a faunus ghetto? Unlikely." Kruger practically laughed at the idea. "What we should be worried about are Huntsmen. This close to the border and Grimm, no doubt a patrol team would have heard Coyote's commotion."

"So what do we do?" Brussels, the goggle wearing bruise, asked.

Kruger spared a glance Coyote's way. "Take Pepper and do what you do best. Divert attention away from us."

The helmeted Coyote gave a nod and then turned to the front door. He then let out a haunting laugh that sent a shiver down his associate's spines. He then set out on his task still brandishing his gun.

Monty help them all.

This chapter was originally going to be longer, by that I mean, I was going to wrap up NDGO's first mission in this one chapter. But I decided to move all of that to the next chapter and then do what I originally planned.

I'm also happy to introduce you all a number of OC characters who will be serving as antagonists. Season 3 is where the canon material ends and Season 4 is pretty much picking up with RNJR going to Mistral. So, I'm forced to create antagonists to challenge the characters and so forth. But what's really important is that they aren't just one note characters. I don't want to write characters who are evil for the sake of evil. So, I hope the characterizations I provided for Dr. Kruger and Coyote sort of suffice for now, next chapter we'll get more into their motivations and unravel just what the heck they're doing.

Also, we saw some political intrigue with Wytcherly and Vermillion. That's kind of important moving forward. Because, eventually, Russel will be coming to Vacuo. And I can't wait for that.

I hope to update sooner, but I will within the next seven days. 'Til then, later days!
XXXV: Nebula: Conclusion

Welcome back everyone to a long overdue installment of The Darkling Thrush!

Before we get started, I'd like to thank everyone for your patience. These past two weeks I've been swamped and struggling to write this piece. Anyways, I think you all have waited long enough. Here's the next chapter. Further notes below.

XXXV

Nebula: Conclusion

"What the hell are those?" Dew asked aloud, pointing out into the buffer lands between Vacuo and Vale.

"They're called Goliaths." Professor Kashmir answered as he viewed the herd of Grimm from afar through the use of binoculars. "The oldest living Grimm in the world."

"Huh." Nebula raised a brow at the Goliaths, watching as they slowly walked across the land.

"They're Elephants?"

"Yes." Kashmir pulled his binoculars away from his face and passed them off to Gwen who'd been waiting patiently to use them.

"They're Elephants?" Nebula asked in a bemused tone.

"Your point, Ms. Violette?" Kashmir questioned.

"Elephant doesn't exactly scream godless murder beast." The indigo haired team leader shrugged. "I don't know. I expected more from 'oldest living Grimm'."

It was a three hour flight from Shade to the border. The girls and their Professor spent their time between liftoff to touchdown discussing the objectives of their mission. Initially it seemed to be a standard operation as prefaced by the months spent attending Combat School. Patrol the border and eliminate any Grimm they should come across.

The Bullhead came to a stop, hovering over sandy dunes and they jumped out minding the sand that got kicked up into the air. Then it was another three hours spent walking under the harsh sun along the border. In that time they hadn't seen a single creature of Grimm. No Creep, no Deathstalker, just them and the unkind sun.

But then they cast a glance over to the no man's land boundary between Vacuo and Vale's borders. Out of the death coated buffer lands stepped out the herd of Goliaths they now watched.

"So, what's our plan of attack?" Nebula addressed their Professor.

"There is no plan of attack." Kashmir muttered as he continued to survey the border. "Goliaths are never a concern. It's the other ones we need to worry about."

"We can take them." Nebula said, raising her crossbow in the air to further prove the statement.
"It's not a question of whether you can in deed fight them, Ms. Violette. Goliaths are some of the oldest living Grimm on Remnant." Kashmir informed. "They've learned that when they attack our borders, they're likely to die, and what we lack in strength, we make up for in will, and that killing one human will only bring more."

"So what do we do then, Professor?" Octavia questioned.

"Nothing." Kashmir muttered before retrieving his binoculars from Gwen. "Goliaths are pose no immediate threat. There's nothing out of the ordinary here. We should continue on." He said that last part bitterly.

"Something up Professor?" Nebula inquired, noting Kashmir's tone.

"I had this mission planned out for weeks." Kashmir said gesturing for the team to continue their patrol. "But then orders from high up dictated that instead of expending our effort in productive sweeps in the northwest forests of upper Vacuo, we'd instead be out here along the no man's land. For community outreach purposes."

"From Headmistress Wytcherly?" Dew asked as they turned their attention away from the Goliaths and in the direction of a nearby town just a mile away.

"Higher." The Professor muttered in a way that made his true thoughts on the matter known. He shook his head and did not hide his scowl. "I don't particularly like it when the politicians think they can meddle in our affairs. We're huntsmen is all, we're out in the field while they sit behind their desks in air conditioned offices. They don't know the first thing about this sort of thing and I believe it's best to leave it to us, the professionals."

"Community outreach? What's so bad about that?" Nebula questioned, once more finding her Professor's reasoning and tonal change odd.

"It's a waste of our talents." Kashmir said in a disdainful manner. "Well come along children. We'd best get this over with." He said before he led motioning to the town in the distance.

Without a word, the girls fell in line and followed the senior Huntsman's lead. But Nebula couldn't help but linger a little longer. The violet haired girl spared a glance over her shoulder to the herd of Goliaths off in the distance. Where they had spent their time leisurely vegetating out in the distance before, now the herd stood now staring back at Nebula and the rest of her team.

A cold shiver ran down Nebula's spine as those glowing red eyes shined like rubies out in the distance, staring into her soul from afar. It was the call of her partner Dew that snapped Nebula from her trance and the NDGO leader found herself playing catch up. She turned her attention back in front of her and quickly ran to close the distance between herself and her team, but in the back of her mind she knew they were still standing there, watching, waiting. And that unsettled Nebula greatly.

It took them another hour to reach the town of Grendel. And the moment the step within its perimeter, all eyes fell on them. Walking through open sandy streets out in the open for all the town's inhabitants to see put the team under their scrutiny.

There was a natural tension between them and the Huntsmen and the townsfolk, one that Nebula was familiar with. But this was the first time she'd ever been on the receiving end. These people were all Faunus, living in clay buildings and wearing rags. The mere sight of Nebula and her team brought glares and silent sneers, the same that she'd seen on her fellow students back at Beacon when Talal ever graced them with his presence.
"Savages." Nebula caught Professor Kashmir saying under his breath. Where there would normally be a happy excited smile was replaced with a contentious expression.

For all that Nebula had seen, her experiences at Shade had opened her eyes to a world she was unaware of. She'd seen the people at their worst and the consequences of their actions. The first immediate response that crossed her mind when hearing Kashmir's words were to violently berate the man, his position as Professor and her place as pupil would not save him from her scolding remarks.

But that wouldn't do her or anyone else for that matter any good. Nebula's argument was not with her Professor, but with a commonly held mindset. That was whom she had words for. So she stayed her tongue and held a kind smile. This was them reaching out to a community, to these townspeople. If Kashmir wouldn't be the bridge between them, then she certainly would.

Out of a growing crowd of onlookers emerged an old man, thinly built and his back arched slightly. He wore a pale sun bleached tunic and brown pants worn by years of labor. The old faunus must've held some sort of authority amongst the community, as the crowd he emerged from began to watch him, as if waiting for an order.

So the five Huntsmen met with the old faunus at the center of the growing crowd at the center of town.

"What is it you want, Huntsman?" The old faunus asked, addressing Professor Kashmir directly.

The Professor just eyed the man, not liking his tone. "Patrolling the borders and visiting our neighbors." Kashmir answered simply as he locked eyes with the old faunus, meeting his senior's tone with a contentious glare. "Would you perhaps have need of any assistance? By the good graces of the Speaker of Chambers we are required to lend our help, should you need it."

Nebula and the rest of her team sneaked glances towards the other, making sure they weren't the only ones noticing Kashmir's underlying tone. They then looked to the old faunus for his response, catching sight of and equally contentious expression that matched Kashmir. But the old faunus, instead of trading blows with The Professor, he laughed.

"What's so funny?" Kashmir asked angrily.

"You mask your spite poorly." The old faunus smiled. "Aside from that, we have no love for The Speaker of Chamber's lapdogs."

Taking a step forward past Kashmir, Nebula spoke up. "Sir, all due respect, but our intentions are pure. We just want to lend a hand." Nebula pleaded her case, paying no mind to her Professor's heated glare.

"Forgive me, child. But I find that hard to believe." The old faunus said in a scolding tone. "

"Did you guys hear that?" Dew asked aloud as she stood and faced the direction of banging noise. "That sounded like gunshots."

"It seems you have need of our aid after all." Kashmir mused as he, along with the rest of the crowd of folks looked on after the sounds of gunshots and screams. "Well wat are you four waiting for?" The Professor addressed the Huntresses in training. "Let's move!"

Following the senior Huntsman's command, Team NDGO rushed off in the direction of gunfire. Aside from a curious few who'd run off alongside the Huntsmen, the majority of the crowd that had welcomed them remained behind. Nebula afforded herself to look back for a just a brief moment,
seeing the looks on their faces. They wore a myriad of expressions, ranging from concern, fear and contempt, especially so on the old faunus.

Down streets littered with trash and old tossed out sofas as well as past other town folk running in fear, the Huntresses and their Professor ran. The noises grew louder but the screams died down to an eerie silence. Down a corner they ran, but Octavia, the most earnest of the group who'd run off ahead of the group, came to stop and let out a sharp gasp.

The group caught up with Octavia and shared the brash girl's horror. Littered throughout the street were the bodies of dead faunus. Some appeared to have been shot. Others appeared to have been hacked apart by some bladed weapon, given all the bits and pieces. The sight was enough to make anyone lose their lunch, so no one was surprised when Dew did just that, vomiting on the ground.

"Who could have done this?" Gwen asked aloud, a repulsed look on her face. "What kind of monster would do this?"

As if to answer Gwen's question, out in a nearby clay hut, a wolf faunus was shot outward from his home and onto the street. Out of the hut stepped a helmeted man armed with an old Great War era Lancer in its sword form. The wolf faunus attempted to crawl away, but the helmeted man quickly ran over and placed his boot atop his back to hold him in place before getting to work, hacking away at the man.

The Huntresses looked on, frozen in place by the sheer horror and brutality of it all. Professor Kashmir, on the other hand, let out a tired sigh and mumbled a number of swears under his breath.

After finishing his brutal murder of the wolf faunus, the helmeted man then turned his attention to what was without a doubt Huntsmen standing there in the street watching him. After acknowledging their presence, the helmeted man with one cracked horn at the top glanced back to the clay hut and let out and whistled. Out of the hut stepped a burly man, who appeared to have a number of silver objects in his hands, probably the only things of value the wolf faunus had ever owned.

"Finished are we?" The burly man questioned his partner. The helmet man simply pointed to the five Hunters standing in the street, causing the burly man to frown. "Sheet, I thought we'd have more time."

Snapping out of whatever stunned trance the brutal scene had placed the Huntresses in, Nebula stepped forward, drawing her crossbow and taking aim at the duo. "Stay the fuck where you are!" Nebula shouted angrily.

"Sheet, we gotta go!" The helmeted man's burly companion shouted before taking off down the street with the silverware. "We gotta keep moving! They'll be here soon!"

The helmeted man gave an agreeing nod. He grabbed ahold of the handle of his weapon still lodged in the body of the wolf faunus and withdrew it. After wiping the blood off on his sleeve, the helmeted man took off after his burly associate.

Making good on her threats, Nebula pulled the trigger of her crossbow, and launching an arrow the pair. The arrow darted past the helmeted man and found its way into the burly man's shoulder. The burly man let out a pained yelp and wound up dropping the loot he'd taken from the hut.

Nebula fired again, this time however her arrow failed to even come close to hitting either man. It became apparent that the murderous pair had run out of her range. "Come on, let's get them!" Nebula shouted before rushing after the pair.
Her still stunned teammates remained still a few moments longer, their brains still processing the barbaric event they'd witnessed. They'd been training for years, studying at lower academies for the day when they'd eventually face the devilish creatures of Grimm. Never before did they believe they'd encounter such acts that they could only describe as evil. But after snapping out of their daze, the trio ran after their leader.

Professor Kashmir remained where he stood and folded his arms on his chest, quietly debating how to proceed. By now it had become abundantly clear he the man had no love for faunus. It was only the shouting of his students that caused the senior Huntsman to act. He sighed as he removed his rapier from its sheath by is hip and then he darted off after his students.

Nebula kept on after the two men, chasing after them as they vanished from her line of sight behind a corner. Rounding the same corner, Nebula found herself facing a fork in the road. The NDGO leader looked to each of the dirt roads in order to narrow down her odds at hunting down the two men.

She looked down the right road and then the left. It was down the left where a small patch of blood caught her eye. There were no dead bodies down this side of the street, nothing around to bleed, except for the man she'd shot with an arrow. So without a second thought, Nebula went running down the left road.

The rest of her team arrived moments later. They looked down both roads, seeing as they curved down around poorly constructed buildings, they were left guessing on which road to take. So then they defaulted to their Professor, expecting some sort of wisdom or lesson in tracking prey. But Kashmir offered them no such teachings and merely ran forward, down the right road. Trusting their Professor and his reputation, the trio ran off following their Professor without question.

The right road took them all the way to the edge of town, past a multitude of dead faunus and equally scared number of living taking shelter in their homes. The team excluding Nebula continued on after their Professor, sure of themselves they'd gone the right way.

Now where the town faces the nearby border, the Huntresses and their Professor found the helmeted man alone without his burly companion standing to meet them.

"Where's your pal?" Gwen questioned as she produced a pair of throwing knives.

"Better question is, where's Nebula?" Octavia asked, glancing around as she attempted to find any sign of their leader.

All eyes fell to the helmeted man for some sort of explanation. But he stood there and eyed them before offering a question. "An unexpected slaughter brings out the worst in people, no?" The helmeted man said in a rhetoric in a rhetoric manner.

"What the actual fuck is he talking about?" Dew raised a brow.

As if to answer Dew's question, a low growl caught their ear. The trio of DGO looked off to the side, spotting a pack of Beowulfs running from out of the nearby desert and into town. Creatures of Grimm were attracted to negative feelings, one of which being fear. The trio of girls didn't have to exchange any dialogue between them. On their own they put the pieces together. With the rampaging gunmen running loose, the townsfolk were without a doubt cowering in fear and attracting the Grimm to this very settlement.

"Deal with the Grimm." Kashmir ordered the trio as he raised his weapon at the helmeted man. "I'll deal with him."
"We can take them." Octavia said as she amassed whatever courage she could to face the Grimm. And so then, without another word, the trio leapt into action, planning to cut off the Grimm somewhere in town.

With the trio of DGO now gone, all that remained were Kashmir and the helmeted man. "I don't like faunus." Kashmir admitted as he held his rapier. "I couldn't care less about what you've done to these people. But you're careless actions have set loose Grimm onto Vacuo's borders. You've not only endangered the lives of my students but Vacuo as a whole. I simply cannot let that pass." The helmeted man gave an understanding nod, before ultimately drawing his lancer and raising it to meet The Professor's weapon. "But before we begin, I would like to know the name of the man I intend to kill."

"Coyote." The helmeted man answered simply.

"Well then, Mr. Coyote, shall we?"

Following the trail of blood, Nebula tracked the burly man back to home deeper in town. She watched as the burly man made his way into the building, cradling his shoulder wound. Nebula saw no sign of his helmet wearing companion and was left to assume they'd split up at the fork in the road in order to decrease the chances of both of them being caught.

"Dr. Kruger, we've got Huntsmen." The burly man shouted announced as he entered the house, sidestepping the bodies of the Freeman family in the process. "And given the shouting of all those faunus, I reckon we'll but up to ore knees in Grimm about now."

"Very well, then we'll depart. After all, I believe we have everything we need." The thin Dr. Kruger nodded in agreement before producing a journal with the image of a snake devouring its own tail on the cover from one of Freeman's desk drawers. "Pepper." Kruger pointed to the wounded burly man. "Go fetch the van. We'll remain here. Can't be too careful, there's Grimm out there."

"You got it boss." The burly man, Pepper, nodded before running for the exit to retrieve their mode of transportation. With Pepper's departure to claim their van, that left only Kruger and his goggle wearing henchman alone in the house once more.

"So, just like that and we're done?" The goggle wearing man questioned, sounding a bit disappointed. "I didn't even get to kill anyone, boss."

"To be perfectly frank, Brussels, you didn't even notice that kid sneak in here. I doubt you would have been effective even at that." Kruger said, pointing past Brussels.

"What kid?" The goggle wearing man known as Brussels questioned before the end of Nebula's crossbow was bashed against the back of his head.

"You look familiar." Dr. Kruger pressed a finger on his chin as he eyed Nebula. In particular the man was drawn to the girl's distinct indigo colored hair. "Have you ever attended one of my lectures on the origin of species?"

"Can't say I have." Nebula said as she turned her crossbow on Kruger. "No sudden movements pal."

The thin man did as he was told and remained still, his eyes staring at Nebula's weapon. "You'll have to forgive me, I'm not much of a fighter. I pay people for things like that." Kruger said, making a slight hand gesture to the unconscious Brussels on the floor. "Guess I'll have to
reconsider the way I vet applicant—"

"Stow it." Nebula uttered sharply. "You're going to jail."

"For what?" The thin man couldn't help but laugh.

Kruger's laughs caused Nebula's features to shift to unprofessional. "Look around you daft man. Look at all the dead!" She shouted with anger, gesturing to the dead family lying on the floor.

"So what? They're only faunus." Kruger said with a smile, causing Nebula's angry scowl to twist and betray the disgust she felt for the man.

"It doesn't matter if they're Faunus or not, it never did. They were people who had lives and they're dead because you." Nebula retorted, holding back the urge to pull the trigger on her crossbow.

"Ha! Sure, they lived lives that didn't belong to them. They're a lesser species my dear. You can prattle along with those speeches about human-faunus equality all you like, I'm on the verge of making the discussion redundant." Kruger couldn't help but crack a smile.

Nebula raised a brow, which did not go unnoticed by the doctor. Kruger's smile widened. If anything, the man was a teacher. So Kruger began educating the huntress standing before him.

"There was once a great cataclysm. All you need is but to look up into the night sky and see the shattered moon. Once upon a time this was not so. Once before, there were societies like our own. Archeologists like the Larks from Vale have uncovered such truths in jungle ruins and ancient structures of steel and stone. But what does this have to do with anything you might ask. Well, it means that at one point there was recorded history and then there wasn't."

"I'm an ecologist. I'm interested in the process of how life became what we know today."

"But what about faunus? What does any of your prattle have to do with them?" Nebula questioned.

"My 'prattle', is how I ease individuals into the lecture, Huntress. For you see, it was not too long ago when a pair of archeologists and their son, the Larks, made a discovery. They led an expedition and found the oldest known human civilization." Kruger said in a way that exposed his experience in this art of public speaking. "There, they discovered bodies, an ancient king and found myth itself. The Scrolls of Evermore. The oldest piece of recorded history. Dated some hundred thousand years ago."

"And you want to know what the scrolls said about Faunus?" He asked rhetorically. "Nothing. Oldest recorded history of man and there's absolutely nothing about Faunus. So from somewhere between the cataclysm and now, they emerged." With that said, Kruger raised the journal he'd pulled from Freeman's private study and held it up in the air for Nebula to see. "And I'm very well on my way to solving mystery."

"So who gives a damn? They're still people."

"Are they?" "We can trace back humanity's origins but not Faunus. Perhaps, they're man made organisms, built in a lab who broke free of their bonds and scurried off into the woods. Or maybe they're the result of some shit farmer and his goat. We can't say for certain, not yet anyways. The Sentinel of Vacuo, you know of him, correct?"

"Everyone does, he's a folk hero and everyone's learned of him in primary school. Sinbad Queen, he was Vacuo's greatest hero a protector." Nebula glared.

"As well as an adventurer, a scientist and hoarder of knowledge." Kruger said excitedly as he
continued to 'educate' Nebula. If she didn't know any better she'd guess the man had been hoping for some Huntsmen to happen along, just so he could hear the sound of his own voice. "He had a library built, which is said to be vast and includes texts long forgotten. He never shared any of his findings. And then died and became a factual myth we romanticize for children and whatever other nationalistic nonsense the politicians gamble at."

"I'm not the first to theorize that The Sentinel found the missing link, the origin of Faunus and hid it away in his library like all the other treasures. But I will be the last. Especially since the last piece of the puzzle has been provided by one of thanks to this gentleman." Kruger nodded his head at Freeman's body.

"Now I understand." Nebula muttered lowly.

"As I hoped you would." Kruger smiled victoriously. "Now, if you would please stand aside. I must retrieve my men and be off."

"No, you misunderstand. I do not agree with you. I can't ever agree with anyone who'd try to validate this idea of a master race. That something that does not meet their standards is in effect beneath them." Nebula said before gently moving her crossbow a little to the right. She pulled the trigger and shot an arrow at Kruger, piercing through his wrist and causing him to drop Freeman's journal.

"You brat!" Kruger shouted in a pained tone as he cradled his arm. He reached out and touched "…Violette?" Kruger wondered aloud as he eyed Nebula once more. "Your related to Andros Violette, aren't you?" The thin man questioned.

Nebula remained silent, only watching as Kruger continued with his pained ramblings. "That bastard must be dead these days. And you're much too young to be his daughter." Kruger glared at the Huntress standing before him. "But you're related to him. I can see it. You're a Violette."

"So what if I am?" Nebula gritted.

She was expecting the man to continue with his tirades but Kruger broke out laughing, as if she'd made the world's funniest joke. The way he howled, the way Kruger held his sides, he would surely hurt himself if he continued this fit. In between his laughs he glanced at Nebula and continued with each obnoxious sound that left his mouth turning more venomous than the last.

"I knew him. I knew Andros Violette." Kruger continued to laugh. "He knew the importance of human supremacy. He also knew the dangers of enabling faunus. That should any of them come to believe that they matter, they will fight to establish themselves, to claim they actually matter."

"And you find that funny?" Nebula raised a brow.

"I find it tragic." Kruger corrected her as his taunting laughs turned hollow. "Andros would be ashamed of you. But he wouldn't be surprised. No, you Violette are always on the losing side of history."

"That may be true for any other Violette, that they have been destined to lose. But not this Violette." Nebula declared. "For my time attending Shade, I've seen the world in a new light. I've seen people acting horribly towards another just for being different. And It's appalling, immoral. And I know in my heart that it's wrong. Just as everything that you preach."

"Do you honestly believe you can sway me to your side of this argument?" Kruger laughed. "My minds already made up. What then, child? What happens then?"
"No, I don't believe I could change your mind or anyone else's." She admitted to both Kruger and herself. "It could take a decade or another hundred years before we all start regarding Human and Faunus as just people. But I'll never give up." Nebula proclaimed.

"Well, it's good to know where you stand then." Kruger said tauntingly, looking past Nebula to Brussels, who was now finding himself back to his feet having regained consciousness moments ago. "Deal with her if you would?" He said, catching Nebula off guard.

Realizing that last bit of dialogue wasn't directed towards her, Nebula spun around, recalling the man she'd knocked out earlier. Brussels had reached out his hands as if to grab Nebula, but the girl was quicker than he and turned her weapon on him and shot an arrow at him, imbedding it in his shoulder.

With Nebula's attention preoccupied with dealing with Brussels, Kruger took the opportunity to reclaim Freeman's journal and make a run at Nebula. With her attention elsewhere, Nebula was blindsided by Kruger and knocked to the floor. The two men then made a run for the door. Nebula found her way back to her feet and reclaimed her crossbow. Resolving not to let Kruger and his men escape, she set off, intending to stop them no matter the cost.

From the outskirts of town back to its heart, the duel between Professor Kashmir and Coyote had initially appeared to be a one-sided bout. Kashmir was an expert swordsman and a capable Huntsman, he had the skills to effectively kill Griffons and Nevermores. But this man standing before him, armed with an old outdated weapon from the Great War was matching him blow for blow.

In the heat of battle as they exchanged attacks, the senior Huntsman attempted to use his semblance of increased agility to gain the upper hand and end the battle quickly and prevent the spread of fear. But Coyote persevered and now, after an extensive sword fight, towered over the fallen Kashmir and prepared to deliver a killing blow.

But Coyote's actions had sacrificed his footing, allowing the downed Kashmir to kick the helmeted man and knock him over with ease. The Professor leapt back to his feet and ran at the downed man, reeling back his leg for an aura charged kick to the face. The momentarily stunned Coyote was incapable of preventing Kashmir's attack and watched helplessly as the man struck him. The horned helmet flew off, bouncing off a nearby brick wall and damaging the single horn further.

Then Kashmir's eyes fell over the unmasked face of Coyote with a victorious smirk. Now would have been the time for him to say something memorable like a catchphrase, to publicly declare victory and rub salt into his opponent's wounds. But Kashmir couldn't act on these impulses, he was too busy looking in shock at what he'd found beneath Coyote's helmet.

Coyote found his bearings while the Shade Professor doubled over, vomiting on the desert street. He gave an understanding nod and waited patiently for Kashmir to finish recomposing himself. "You're no man." Kashmir muttered in awe as Coyote went over to reclaim his helmet.

After lightly tapping the helmet's forehead and examining the damages made to the horn, Coyote placed it once more over his face. He then turned his attention back to the senior Huntsman and indulged the man.

So then Coyote stalked towards Kashmir, producing a jagged knife worn from years of use from his duster pocket. The helmeted man's intent was clear. So with a gruff sigh, Kashmir shifted his weapon from its rapier from to its hand gun and took aim at the man. A small part of Kashmir regretted what was about to happen, but he quelled that voice by the time he pulled the trigger.
Kashmir shot at Coyote twice, clearly hitting the man in his chest and throat. But still the helmeted man powered forward. Another round of gunshots rang through the air, two more bullets ran through Coyote but still he pushed on.

"What are you?!" Kashmir exclaimed before taking a step backwards out of fear as Coyote continued his approach. Kashmir kept taking steps backwards into the open street, but then he came to a stop, bumping into something behind him.

It must've been a trick on the eyes. Coyote was no longer standing in front of him. A familiar sleeved arm snaked around Kashmir's neck and pulled him back. The Professor struggled, attempted to revert his gun back to its rapier form, but it was already too late. The jagged knife was already being jammed into his ribs. Repeatedly.

"I am Coyote." The helmeted man declared before tossing Kashmir's body to the side. With that settled, Coyote turned his attention elsewhere, back to the faunus running scared from his rampage.

After retrieving his Mantle era lancer from the ground, he aimed to return to his slaughter. But from around a street corner came the trio of Dew, Gwen and Octavia. Seeing the approaching Huntresses was a cause for concern. So the helmeted man prepared for another bout.

"Coyote!" A familiar voice belonging to Kruger called out from nearby. So the helmeted Coyote spared a glance Kruger's way, spotting the good doctor cradling his wound while Brussels and Pepper brought the van around. "We're finished here. It's time to go!" With a nod, Coyote headed Kruger's words and closed the distance between them.

But fast on the heels of Kruger and his men was Nebula, running as quickly as she could. Rounding a corner, Nebula took aim with her crossbow. Seeing Kruger and his men, she let loose a barrage of arrows.

Seeing the oncoming hail of arrows, Kruger dived into the van and was closely followed by Coyote. She could hear Kruger shouting from within the van, demanding the driver gun it. With her quarry attempting to escape, Nebula decided to pull out all the stops and began to aim at for the tires. With any luck she might be able to prolong their escape.

But the Violette knew that there was no such thing. Out of a nearby alley crawled out a Deathstalker with some poor civilian impaled on its stinger. The creature of Grimm charged at Nebula and flung the dead faunus off its stinger like a projectile. But Nebula's reflexes were quicker. She rolled out of the way and then turned her weapon on the Grimm.

A Deathstalker had ten eyes. That meant it had ten targets a well-trained shot could exploit. Thankfully, Nebula was just that good a shot. Ten arrows, ten well placed arrows, had the beast crying out in pain.

The Deathstalker charged out into the open blindly, its claws and tail lashing out in whichever direction. Nebula collapsed her crossbow and produced a blade from the front. It would not be arrows that would slay this beast, but rather steel. So the Huntress charged at it and leapt forward, completely bypassing its outstretched claws and struck at its stinger.

The blood stained stinger flew off with one swing and was long forgotten by the time Nebula got to work on the rest of the Deathstalker. Nebula channeled her partner in these next few moments, recalling how she'd first met Dew out in the desert during initiation. How Dew had literally dropped into her life while combating this very same type of Grimm. Nebula had been taking notes then, on how to successfully murder a Deathstalker.
After brutally stabbing the creature of Grimm to death, Nebula walked away from the evaporating corpse. She turned her attention back to her original goal, to capture Kruger and his men, but they were nowhere to be seen. Instead, Nebula found this Faunus community being overrun by Grimm.

There were Deathstalkers running around and Beowulfs chasing the people who all ran away screaming. So now Nebula was faced with a hard choice, to further pursue Kruger or drop everything and throw herself into the fray and save as many lives as she could.

"Nebula!" A familiar voiced snapped the Violette from her thoughts. Nebula turned around and spotted her team running towards her with relieved expressions on their faces. Dew actually ran up to Nebula and hugged her.

"You idiot, we were worried about you!" Octavia shouted as Team NDGO was reunited.

"Don't ever run off without us again!" Gwen shouted in a scolding tone.

"Hey, relax, I was chasing the bad guy." Nebula said before looking around, having noticed the lack of Professor Kashmir's presence. "Where's the Professor?"

"Professor Kashmir's dead, Neb." Dew informed somberly. "Killed by some that creepy helmet guy."

"Where is he?" Nebula asked as she reloaded her crossbow.

"I saw their van leaving town. Which is something we should be doing as well." Octavia said as the screams of terrified townspeople and roars of bloodthirsty Grimm echoed all around them.

"Negative on that." Nebula said darkly. "We're staying put."

"What?!" Her three teammates exclaimed in unison.

"Even if we call now, evac is three hours out and so is any backup Shade can pull together." Nebula gave a look over to the darkening sky, noting how the radiant setting sun had turned the sky orange and now matched the sandy surface. "It's going to get dark soon and more and more people are going to be afraid. That means more Grimm will be coming out to play."

"Which is why we should leave!" Octavia shouted in hopes of snapping Nebula to her senses.

"Which is why we need to show them there isn't anything to be afraid of." Nebula stated firmly. The NDGO leader looked to her friends, seeing their weary faces and taking into account their days' worth of walking and exertion at fighting Coyote. To say the least, none of them were at their top form.

"I'm not going to argue with any of you. I'm staying." Nebula said, in effect quickly shooting down anymore protests for them to flee while they still could.

Nebula wasn't stupid. Standing their ground here and now would most likely result in certain doom. She was a Violette after all, this endeavor of hers was practically fated to end in failure. The very least she could do was spare her team this fate. She wouldn't judge them and hopefully they wouldn't judge themselves.

The trio of girls exchanged concerned glances, carrying on a silent conversation, before returning their attention to their leader. "Alright, looks like we're staying." Gwen announced. "What's our plan?"
Knowing that despite giving them an excuse to leave that her team decided to remain at her side brought a smile to Nebula's face. But that brief moment of joy was quickly killed by the dower situation "We hold the line."

And so then Team NDGO walked out into the streets once more. They walked past fleeing town folk and even the old faunus from earlier. The old man just watched as the quartet of Huntresses walked towards danger. Nebula didn't spare any glances like before, neither did anyone of her team. Their attention was firmly directed ahead of them to the packs of Beowulfs and the Deathstalkers as well as a Goliath that now approached the town.

The massive Goliath peered downward over them all. As Team NDGO engaged the enemy, the larger than life Grimm found itself locking eyes with Nebula. The Violette felt a small tinge of fear grace her countenance, but only for a moment. She readied her weapon once more that day, drawing her blade from the throat of a Beowulf and took aim after converting it into its crossbow form.

This creature of Grimm that has lived for centuries, that's spread fear through its mere existence, Nebula would kill it. This symbol of an outdated regime that has since long overstayed its welcome, she would defeat it. And so then Nebula leapt at the giant Grimm.

Word reached the capitol of a Grimm breach somewhere far out in the desert sometime in the night, when some frightful faunus living out in Grendel had managed to make the call. The immediate response by the men and women of the ruling council was not swift action, but rather debating on how they would tackle such a matter.

After hours spent discussing the matter, it was then decided they would default their response to the Headmistress of Shade. That early morning a number of Bullheads carrying Wytcherly, The Speaker of Chambers himself and a number of experienced Huntsmen made the three hour long trip from the capitol to the border town of Grendel.

The Bullheads landed just outside of the town, with their payload of battle ready Huntsmen deploying onto the desert floor. Led by the Headmistress herself they made their way into the town, ready to do battle with the multitude of Grimm that no doubt infested Grendel.

But they found no Grimm. The Huntsmen were greeted with the sight of four exhausted Huntresses and what remained of the town's faunus inhabitants.

"Ms. Violette?" Wytcherly singled out Nebula as she approached the tired Team NDGO. The elder woman studied the weary team of Huntresses, noting their battle worn attire and the devastated homes behind them. "I see you've had quite the night." She gestured to the ruined town.

"Yeah, you could say that." Nebula offered weakly from where she sat against the only remaining wall of the town's local bar.

"Professor Kashmir?" Wytherly asked aloud as she looked around the nearby wreckage.

"Dead." Came a somber reply from the NDGO leader. Though they had conflicting views of faunus, Nebula mourned her Professor.

"Bravo Huntresses, you've saved these people." Vermillion said as he and his aide arrived at the scene. "I can see the headlines now: 'Young Huntresses avert Grimm Disaster!' 'Huntresses Rescue Faunus Town From Danger!' 'Huntsman Killed In Action Protecting Faunus.'"

"Yes, most excellent sir." Vermillion's aide agreed in a monotone fashion as she busied typing up a
memo to media outlets all over Vacuo on a portable laptop.

"Not just Grimm, sir." Nebula spoke up from where she sat, gaining the councilman's ear. "This is the work of a number of humans under the order of some ecologist. They initiated a slaughter that brought the Grimm into town."

"You fail to grasp the gravity of such an accusation, miss." Vermillion spoke sharply in a scolding manner. "These are troubling times and what we need most is cooperation between faunus and humans. Grimm attacked faunus. Huntsmen saved faunus. End of story. As you were, Huntress." Vermillion said before turning back to the airship he arrived on. "We're done here."

Nebula looked on after Vermillion as he and his aide retreated back to their ship, a firm glare on her face. Seeing her angered expression, Wytcherly couldn't help but sympathize for the girl. "Does this ecologist have a name?" Wytcherly looked to Nebula.

Nebula thought back earlier to when she'd snuck into the Freeman household. She'd overheard Pepper and Brussels talking with the doctor, even using his name. "Kruger." She answered. "He wants to scientifically prove Faunus to be an inferior race."

"I'll keep my ear out for anything regarding this Kruger character." Wytcherly said before signaling to medical crews to come and aid Team NDGO. "These are indeed troubling times, Ms. Violette. But you and your team kept a cool head and handled the situation. Excellent job, to all of you."

With that said, Team NDGO was helped to their feet by medical personnel and began their trek to the waiting airships.

"Oh, one last thing Ms. Violette." Wytcherly called out one last time, causing Nebula to look back. "The Vytal Festival is fast approaching. You've signed up to participate, haven't you?"

"We have, ma'am." Nebula answered quietly.

"Just brainstorming here." The Headmistress said. "Given what you've done here, saving all these faunus." She gestured to the number of townsfolk who'd survived the night. "Should you win the tournament, perhaps you might be able to steal a moment of air time and hypothetically call for peace between both faunus and human."

"Might just be what we need." Wytcherly winked. The Headmistress then watched as the Team of Huntresses were escorted to the waiting airships a feeling of pride swelling within. She then turned her attention east, beyond the nearby border to Vale, where in less than thirty day the next Vytal Festival would be held.

The Headmistress of Shade afforded herself a pleasant smile. There was a saying about the Violettes, that they were ultimately destined to lose. All they had to do was point to the likes of Orion Violette during The Great War and Andros Violette during the Faunus Rights Revolution. But having met Nebula, perhaps there was an exception to the rule.

So the Headmistress looked forward to the coming month, already sure of the winner.

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Is it a cop out to not show a fight scene? Yes, yes it is. Which is something I'm famous for these days. But I don't feel like the fighting was actually important, especially between the Grimm. You notice how I just glossed over that, because that wasn't what Nebula's story was about. It's like The Walking Dead, its the people you need to worry about, not just the zombies.
In regards to a character like Kruger, I thought it would be interesting to take a look at these aspects of society we haven't seen in the show. Kruger is a Human Supremacist, trying to scientifically prove his ideology, which was a thing people tried to do in real life. So, its this discussion that fits perfectly in the Vacuo setting, where we get to see Humans being villains, not just for criminal empires like Roman, but for their own fucked up beliefs. And you especially see that in Coyote. We will see Kruger and his merry band of misfits again, it just won't be with Nebula.

Also, I think I should address the SSSN vs NDGO fight now. Will it be an AU scenario? We'll just have to find out won't we?

Next time and Interlude, expect that relatively soon, those aren't too difficult to write up. 'Til then, Later Days!
Interlude: Hey, Dad

Hello there everyone, welcome back for another Interlude!

I'm also pleased to see that chapter went well with you, especially glad to see you guys liked Kruger's angle and reason for villainy. As well as that whole 'Cataclysm' thing. I'm sort of waiting for the show to delve into why the moon is the way it is. If anything I can say I beat them to the punch. So that's neat.

So, anyways, without further ado, on with the interlude!

Hey, Dad

It was after that mess down in Grendel some years back, when Messier Violette received the phone call. It was all over the news back then. The media was hailing the actions of some brave Huntresses who'd met with death and denied his passage as well as the mourning of a teacher who was not as lucky as his students. That team that day in Grendel, who'd repelled a Grimm attack on a poor Faunus community, weren't even proper Huntsmen.

It wouldn't be until years later when they all found out the whole affair was kicked off by some radicals, seeking to justify human supremacy or some such other nonsense.

But, while sitting by the television that day, Messier felt a tinge of fear. A sharp prick in his heart and his gut plunging into an abyss. The Violette that hadn't amounted to anything in his life, knew in those moments, while watching the reporters with their fake optimism about strengthen bonds between humans and Faunus, in that moment Messier knew that his daughter Nebula was somehow involved.

There was no word of any other fatalities beside the Professor from Shade, but still, the horrors of being a parent were there. The ever constant worry plagued Messier as he was left wondering if his shooting star was alright. Was his daughter okay?

And then the home phone rang. The foreboding echo of the ring haunted Messier as if it were the voice of Death himself, come to personally deliver the bad news.

Messier hauled himself up out of his seat and dragged himself to the phone. There was a brief hesitation as Messier reached out to claim the phone. He brought his hand back, afraid to even touch it. He stood by the phone and would have allowed to ring on forever rather than answer it. And then the ringing ended so Messier allowed himself a bittersweet sigh.

What a cowardly man he was, he thought to himself. His Grandfather Orion must be screaming in his grave, just as his father Andros. Both would be disappointed to see what kind of man he'd turned out to be. For goodness sake, he couldn't even pick up a bloody phone.

He hated himself, hated that he'd lived in fear of becoming a failure. But more than anything he hated that he was so powerless and how such a scared little man he'd become.

Messier hung his head low and resolved to return to his sofa, or to his room or his study. Somewhere where he could hide his shame. And he was well on his way when the phone rang again.
He stared at the ringing phone on its stand once more with weary eyes as it taunted him. Be it Monty or his mortal opposite, someone demanded that Messier answer that phone. But this time he was not afraid, just tired and expecting the worse. So he reached out and claimed the phone before pressing it to his ear.

"Hello?" He asked cautiously.

"Hey, Dad." The speaker replied.

And then Messier wept tears of joy, happy to know his little girl was alright.

A simple enough interlude, right?

I initially planned for something like this to be in last chapter, but I couldn't find anywhere to put it in the chapter.

Anyways, I think this is the first present day interlude. Every other one has been a flash forward or a flashback. So, something new. Certainly acts as the perfect epilogue to the Nebula arc.

So Next Arc: The Vytal Festival! 'Til next time dear readers!
XXXVI: The Vytal Festival: Part 1

Welcome back everyone to a...wait would this be considered early or late? Another update to The Darkling Thrush!

This time around, we're kicking off a new arc! Holy shit we're making progress.

Anyways, let's get to it eh?

It was following the end of The Great War that a contest to commemorate the peace that was ushered upon the world of Remnant. Created to serve as a celebration of peace between the Kingdoms. Every two years, a Kingdom would be chosen to open its doors to the world, allowing citizens from every corner of Remnant to meet and indulge in one another's cultures. These events are called The Vytal Festival, in honor of the land where the peace between kingdoms was brokered.

Now, eighty years of peace later, it is the kingdom of Vale who hosts this year's festival. It is considered to be an honor to compete in the tournament, where the best fighters the four noble academies have to offer test their might for the glory of their kingdom.

A privilege reserved only for first and second year students, while third and fourth years participated in active field work. Truly, only for those future Huntsmen who exemplify the best their nation has to offer.

"Oh fuck! I'm late!" Russel Thrush shouted, before promptly kicking down his dorm room door and dashing down the hall, past bewildered onlookers.

As it was, Team CRDL had some time ago signed on to participate in this year's Vytal Festival. They would not be the first fighters to take the world stage, but they would not be the last. Last Russel checked, their match was scheduled for noon. So the young Thrush afforded himself the opportunity to sleep in for a change.

Surely this experience would make him a wiser man should he grow old. But Russel was a young man, all he could see was right in front of him. Such as if he didn't catch the airbus in the next ten minutes, his entire team would forfeit their match due to his tardiness.

So Russel ran down the hall in a full sprint, not giving a damn who he had to push his way through to make it to the elevator. Reaching the elevator, Russel quickly tapped the call button, repeatedly until the doors opened.

The doors slid open and Russel leapt inside. Just as he did the call button, the young Thrush repeatedly tapped the close door button, as if that could speed up the process. He then hit the bottom floor button and was well on his way.

Now alone, waiting patiently in the silence of the elevator, Russel was finally capable of hearing a low familiar ring from his pants pocket. Retrieving his scroll, Russel found a number of missed
calls from his teammates. So the young Thrush dialed back the most recent one.

"Russel, where are you? The next airbus takes off in ten minutes." Sky's voice shouted frantically over the scroll.

"Goddammit, I overslept!" Russel shouted defensively.

"What the hell man? You said you'd be up in five!"

"Clearly I was lying, Sky!" He replied, sounding quite irritated. "I'm not going to make it in ten minutes man."

"Alright, alright. Where are you now?" Russel could hear Sky's disappointed sigh.

"Leaving the dormitory now." Russel announced as the elevator reached the bottom floor. The doors slid open and the CRDL boy came running out passed a pair of students who'd been waiting patiently for the elevator. "I'm going to try cutting through the fairgrounds that might shave off a good minute or two."

"The Airbus stop is on an elevated platform, on the other side of campus, cutting through the fairgrounds won't shave jack." Sky replied in a disbelieving tone.

"Don't worry, I got a plan." Russel smirked as the gears in his head began to turn. Before Sky could question his teammate further, Russel ended the call.

Racing down Main Avenue, under the ever watching eye of Beacon Tower, Russel's master plan began to unfold. As he would need to retrieve his daggers from the locker room, Russel decided to cut out the middle man and signal the rocket locker, causing it to shoot out of the nearby gym and land right in the center of the brick walkway.

A number of onlookers raised their brows at Russel's actions, some even turned to murmur to their companion or two, wondering just what the hell the Thrush was thinking. Russel quickly claimed his daggers and shot off on his way towards the fairgrounds. But he halted for a moment, feeling a pair of familiar eyes accosting him from afar.

Russel glanced upward at Beacon Tower, and there stood Headmaster Ozpin by the window, his coffee mug in one hand and cane in the other. Russel, raised a hand and waved to the watchful man and cracked a smirk. There wasn't a doubt that he'd be hearing something akin to scolding about unauthorized use of the rocket locker and damaging school property, but that was later and this was now. And Russel had somewhere to be.

So then Russel took off once again, running as fast as his legs could take him while Ozpin watched on, looking after the boy as he sped on. The gray haired man mumbled something under his breath, something about Russel becoming more like his old man every day. With Russel disappearing out of view, Ozpin returned his attention back to his open file on his computer, deciding to amend a certain private article about the young Thrush.

The fairgrounds themselves were buzzing with activity. Visitors from the other three kingdoms and even locals were out and about, enjoying the best Vale had to offer in the way of food and activities. Vendors called out to passerby, goading them to partake in ring toss carnival games and to test their strength by slamming a mallet on a lever to see if they can ring a bell with a propelled weight.

Lethargy had taken hold of Russel since spending his time cooped up in a hospital room. But now that he was out and about, taking in the fresh air and aroma of nearby delicacies, the young man
was alive again. But his mind distracted, wandering around the fairgrounds instead of focusing at
the task at hand, Russel was completely oblivious to the crowd of people he was just about to run
into.

Standing in a large group in the center of a busy intersection between vendors and booths, were a
quartet of students from Shade Academy. Among them was an indigo haired young woman
wearing a high-necked, tight-fitting gray shirt, along with a long, light blue coat with a leather
bandolier and a shoulder pad on the right.

"So, what do you guys think about Vale so far?" She asked, addressing her many companions.

"A bit of a cooler climate than used to." A girl with blonde hair and scale armor said with an
indifferent shrug.

"I like it." A girl who looked like a ballerina declared. "The trees are lively, as are the people. A
nice change of pace given our usual surroundings."

"Beats the shit out of Grendel." A fiery redhead in their company murmured. "What about you,
Neb? You asked, see anything you like about Vale?"

"Undecided." Nebula Violette said simply. The indigo haired girl cast a glance upward, off to the
distant Amity Collesseum hovering above the city of Vale. "When's our match again?"

"Sometime at three." The redhead replied after checking her scroll.

"I can't wait." Nebula smiled herself as her thoughts drifted to fantasies of victory. But Nebula's
thoughts came to a crashing halt at the distracting noise of a large number of bodies hitting the
ground.

Nebula whipped her head around, joining her team in staring at the aftermath of what looked to be
a painful head on collision, the kind you'd only see on highways but in the form of ordinary people.

The sounds of groans echoed loudly in the now quiet fairgrounds. All eyes drifted towards the
pileup, waiting in anticipation at what happened next. Out of the mass, one Russel Thrush pulled
himself free and back to his feet. He retrieved his daggers from where they lay on the floor and
firmly hooked them to rim of his pants.

The young Thrush, now out of the fog of his mind, was now conscious of the passage of time. By
his count, he still had minutes to make it to the Airbus stop. So he turned his heel, ready to carry
on running with purpose.

But from behind Russel, a familiar quartet of bodies freed themselves from the pile up as well.
Their dagger-like eyes turning their attention to the young Thrush. "The least you could do was say
sorry, jackass!" Serin Quiet, the leader of the all faunus Team STAG shouted with anger in a
challenging tone.

That sort of comment got a dark laugh out of the Thrush. Aside from one exception, Russel never
said sorry. Given his tenure at Beacon, he'd have thought that was apparent by now. But it seemed
the masses had yet to learn.

"I don't say sorry, wolf breath." Russel replied, earning angered glares from the STAGs.

That sort of comment would have flown over anyone else's head, left them wondering just what the
hell Russel was talking about. But the comment was directed at Serin. And she was a wolf faunus.
The scene was observed by all sorts of bystanders, ranging from a food vendor to a patron and even Team NDGO who watched from afar.

"You thinks somethings about to jump off?" Dew Gayle, the scale armored blonde, asked her team.

"I sure hope so." The redhead Octavia smirked.

The Leader of Team STAG let out an angered howl and rallied her team behind her. "For too long we've been letting you get away with your shit, Russel!" She declared, taking a step forward. "Tormenting Velvet, humiliating Jaune, worming your way out of just punishment like the flagpole and messing with Lance's social life. Enough's enough! Get him!"

Before he knew it, Russel was besieged by Team STAG. Faced with overwhelming forces and pressed with time to be catch the Airbus. Russel took off running like a rock propelled through the air by a slingshot. Not remotely fast enough to outrun his pursuers, who were in questionable better shape than he, but careful planning ahead of time had afforded Russel at least one trick up his sleeve.

"Oh shit." Dew muttered.

"Everyone move!" Nebula shouted before pushing her teammates out the path of Russel and the anger fueled Team STAG, who'd gone running their way.

"Ugh." Dew groaned. "I take it back. I don't like Vale."

"Those guys are going to get someone killed." Octavia said as she dusted herself off, having jumped to the side to avoid getting rundown. "Can we go watch?"

"Octavia's right, someone's going to get hurt." Nebula said before turning and taking off after the angry mob. "We need to put a stop to it."

"Whoa, not our fight girl, not our fight!" Dew protested, attempting to reach out and prevent Nebula from running off again, just like she did back in the town of Grendel.

But Nebula couldn't hear her partner. She had already taken off.

"Oh dammit." Dew frowned.

"Well, looks like we gotta go help her." Gwen sighed.

"Looks like it." Dew nodded, a disappointed look on her face.

"Alright! Fight, Fight!" Octavia shouted eagerly before the trio ran off after their friend.

Running through crowds, Russel kept a foot's distance ahead of his pursuer's reach. It wasn't an easy task, making his way through the crowds proved difficult, the way people stood like obstacles, forcing Russel to usually shove past them. This ultimately had the unfortunate effect of causing the angry mob to grow in size.

Privately, Russel made a not to shove less people along the way, lest his pursuers triple in size once again. But as luck would have it, up ahead another obstacle appeared, in the form of two men moving a long wooden table, no doubt for use in constructing another vending booth.

Just a few feet away from the duo moving the table, he could see the look in their eyes, deer in headlights. They wouldn't be moving anytime soon. So Russel cursed to himself before getting low
and sliding under the table.

The likes of Serin and her merry band on the other hand attempted to mimic Russel's actions or simply jump over the obstacle. But as it was, the obstruction acted as a funnel, and the men and women of the angry mob weren't as graceful as water. Some poor bastard ran against one of the men holding the table upward, knocking him as well as himself over.

The table collapsed on one side, falling on a number of people trying to go under and tripping others who'd tried to jump over it. And thus the second pile up of the Vtyal Festival was created in that moment.

Seeing the pile up ahead, Nebula took a detour down around a vendor and popped up back on the main stretch, not at all losing sight of Team STAG and that unruly boy who'd caused this mess. But it seemed the chase would be soon reaching its end, one way or another. As Nebula could see up ahead, the road led to a giant stone wall, crafted to make way for the Airbus that would land up above on the elevated platform.

With nowhere else to run, Nebula could see this chase turning more violent in a heartbeat. As soon as the boy would be cornered, the mob would turn to blows with him. In hopes of avoiding this, Nebula quickened her pace, believing that perhaps she may be able to prevent such an escalation.

Russel could feel the knowing smiles at his back as he ran at the wall. He could practically hear their jeers again, just like on the night of The Dance, when STAG and the rest of the drunks had thought him beat and left him strung up. They were always so certain that'd they'd bested him. And this time was no different.

"But they never really learn, do they?" Russel murmured aloud as he found himself face to face with the natural wall. It was just as he'd planned.

Having been momentarily delayed by the pile up, Serin and the rest of her team had given Russel a bit of a lead. But that didn't matter, not anymore. Not while he stood cornered ahead of them.

"You think yourself a predator, but that's just a lie you tell yourself, Russel." Serin announced darkly as she and her team began to close in on the Thrush. "We're the Predators. You're the Prey."

"But can you climb?" Was Russel's retort.

Without another word, Russel drew his daggers and leapt upward, stabbing one into the side of the rock. The likes of Serin and her team ran at Russel, hoping to at least grab at his legs and pull him down. But they weren't quick enough, Russel was already out of reach.

Using his daggers, Russel stabbed his way up the side of the wall. He'd sink one dagger into the rock, then remove the other. He'd pull himself up and begin again. "Bet you weren't expecting that?" Russel smirked to himself as he taunted Team STAG down below.

"After him!" Serin ordered her team. The trio of TAG did as they were told and attempted to climb after Russel. But they struggled to do so and it soon became apparent that Russel had successfully escaped their grasp.

Standing from at the front of a growing crowd, consisting of both the angry mob and curious onlookers, was Nebula. Staring upward at the Thrush as he made his escape, Nebula was left with mixed feelings about the whole ordeal. On one hand, no more harm would come to anybody with the boy's escape. On the other hand, he'd escaped any just punishment for his actions.

But Nebula could find no solution to her plight. Just as it was back in Grendel, the quarry had
gotten away yet again. But she pushed those thoughts aside, she’d done her best then and she’d done her best now. So she brought her eyes upward and just kept watching with all the rest of them, watching to see what happened next.

By then Russel had almost reached the top. It had taken him less than two minutes and he was just one stab away, which was all that remained. All Russel needed to do was jump one last time and stab the damn rock and pull himself up, then he'd be through.

So Russel reeled back, just like all the other times and prepared to leap upward and stab the rock once more. So he did, he leapt and stabbed forward with success. Russel removed his other dagger where it was embedded in the rock and began to pull himself up with the other. But then suddenly, it all began to give way.

It took a moment for Russel to register what had happened. But then he realized his fault and never before did he wish to bang his head on something. Of all the rookie mistakes he could have made, he'd gone and stabbed into dirt, dry loose dirt.

Russel didn't need to be a genius to know what would happen next. He'd fall back down to the waiting masses. Then like jackals they'd be upon him. Then back to another month in a hospital bed. That is, if the fall didn't kill him.

But to Russel's surprise, he wasn't falling. He looked up in wonder at what had happened, at what he hadn't anticipated. And the young Thrush couldn't help but laugh at his fortune. "Sup, Cardin."

"Scale a cliff? Really? That was your plan?" Cardin asked, sounding mildly disappointed in his partner's solution to reaching the Airbus in time. "You couldn't take the stairs like normal people?"

"Worked out in the long run now, didn't it?" Russel cocked his head back down to the angry mob waiting below. "Mind pulling me up now?"

With little effort, the Winchester boy pulled his partner up from over the edge. "I see you've got quite the crowd stirred up." Cardin mused as he peered over the railing to the angry mob Russel had attracted with his antics.

"We've been in recovery for almost a month, Cardin. What better way to get back into the swing of things." Russel smirked, having found a measure of pride in his work. "Not to mention, it certainly will make the tournament a little more interesting." He jotted a thumb downward, pointing out a number of youths around their age wearing armor and uniforms from other schools.

"That kind of attitude's going to get you into trouble one of these days." Cardin remarked before the duo began to walk towards a nearby Airbus waiting for passengers to embark for the flight over to the Amity Colesseum hovering above Vale.

"Maybe so." The Thrush shrugged. "Or maybe not. Who knows?"

Cardin scoffed. "Sure. Well, come on. The others are waiting for us."

"Look out everyone." Russel said aloud as he and Cardin joined Sky and Dove at their spot in line. "Here comes CRDL."

In the locker room of Amity Colesseum, the many participating fighters were busy situating themselves for their coming matches, or catching their breath from fierce battle experienced in their own tournament match.
One such returning team, consisting of a nefarious and beautiful woman with raven hair, her jewel of a thief, well-tempered assassin and a deadly mute. After leading their opponents on for the begging moments of the match, Cinder's team quickly turned things around and mopped the floor with Team WILL. The Valean team hadn't known what hit them.

But this one small victory was but a means to an end. So Cinder Fall quietly sat down in a secluded portion of the locker room as her 'team' stood around acting nonchalant over the whole ordeal, but in reality they were standing guard, protecting Cinder from those who remained in the locker room.

"Hm." Cinder muttered to herself as she acknowledged a notification on her scroll. Removing the device from her gray pants pocket.

"What is it?" Emerald looked to her leader.

"The Black Queen Virus." Cinder announced quietly. "It's pinged something."

"Wait, has it been discovered?" Emerald asked alarmed at the prospect of their computer virus being discovered. Though it would surely take them time, there was no doubt that Ozpin or even General Ironwood's Atlesian forces could somehow track it back to them and possibly foil their schemes.

"No, no, these fools are still blissfully ignorant of our plans." Cinder couldn't help but smirk devilishly. "It's simply highlighted Ozpin's recent activity."

"Anything we should be concerned with?" Mercury asked as he kept lookout, making sure no one was within earshot.

"He's accessing his personal student files, making amendments." Cinder announced with a hint of interest.

"He hasn't done that for a while." Emerald commented.

After reviewing the information the Black Queen Virus provided, Cinder frowned with disappointment. "It's nothing."

"What was it? What'd he do?" Emerald implored.

"He didn't add anything significant. Nothing about Ms. Rose, Ms. Nikos or even Mr. Arc." Cinder said, dissatisfied. "Just some such nonsense about…I don't even know his name. That's how little he matters." She looked down back to her scroll and read what appeared on it. "Russel Thrush?"

Hearing that name got Emerald's brain buzzing with quiet promises surging back to the surface. "With your permission, can I see?" She quickly asked.

"Where's this coming from, Emerald?" Cinder asked, eyeing her minion skeptically. "This isn't like you."

"Russel Thrush? Fuck that guy." Emerald laughed as she cautiously looked to the rest of the locker room, watching the last of teams depart to either their own matches or to claim their front row seats reserved only for competitors.

"He's caught Emerald break character a couple of times." Mercury chimed in, causing Emerald to direct her deathly glare in his direction.

"Oh? That's quite interesting." Cinder spoke quietly, but with a threatening undertone that sent a
shiver down Emerald's spine. "Emerald, could it be I was wrong about you? Are you really that inept?"


"And yet this so called 'nothing' may have gleamed our true intentions through your misstep."

"He's just a thug. A bully. I just want to take him down a notch is all. A pet project before we burn this place to the ground."

"You've served me loyally. I will grant you this." Cinder raised her scroll, offering it for Emerald to take. Emerald smirked to herself as she reached out to take the scroll. She claimed it and tugged to pull it back to her, but found Cinder still holding the device with a cold stare. "I'm going to need that back."

"Y-Yes, of course." Emerald nodded fearfully.

With that said, Cinder released her scroll into Emerald's possession.

"Anything interesting?"

"Oh yeah." Emerald smirked to herself. "How many dead mom jokes do you think will take to beak this guy?"

"His mom's dead?" Mercury raised a brow.

"Apparently she died in childbirth. I think I'll start with calling him fat, then somehow I'll tie that to pregnancy. And then I'll hit him with a dead mom joke." Emerald couldn't resist laughing. Her eyes returned to the screen and her smile grew wider as she continued to read. "Then I guess I'll make dead dad jokes too."

"His dad's…dead?" Mercury asked hesitantly.

"Yeah." Emerald nodded. "What's it to you?"

"Does it say how he died?" Mercury asked quietly.

Emerald shot a questioning look Mercury's way. There was something about the way he'd said it that just seemed off, unlike the sadistic assassin she'd come to know. But, she indulged the silver haired boy and read aloud what Ozpin had written about the Thrush.

"Ozpin wrote that he died of a heart attack. But he's suspected there's more to it. Apparently, Russel and his dad didn't have the best relationship. They fought a lot." Emerald said before awkwardly rubbing the back of her neck. "Man, how am I going to tie child abuse to patricide, and then to dead mom jokes?"

"What's your sudden interest in this Russel character, Mercury?" Cinder asked, having been watching her two henchmen for some time.

"My dad and I fought too." Was all Mercury said.

"I got it! I'll call him fat and pregnant, taunt him with child abuse and then hit him with the 'your parents are dead' gag!" Emerald declared. "Fucking full proof."

"Oh give me that." Mercury muttered before snatching the scroll out of Emerald's hands. The thief began to protest, but her cries fell silent as she soon found herself being slammed onto the floor.
Mercury stood over Emerald, one boot pressed firmly against her gut, holding her in place. The thief attempted to struggle in vain, but they both knew that no matter what Emerald did, there would be no moving Mercury's leg.

"Now, now, children. Behave." Cinder said coolly. "You can be as rough as you want anywhere else. But not when you're handling my scroll."

"Of course, ma'am. How stupid of me." Mercury said before removing his foot from Emerald's gut and turning to go and sit at a nearby bench, as to read the contents of Ozpin's file undisturbed.

"What the hell got into him?" Emerald asked aloud.

"I'm not quite sure. But it seems you've hit a nerve." Cinder mused as both she, Emerald and the murderous mute in the corner turned their attention to Mercury. The silver haired young man paid no mind to them. He simply continued to read in peace. "One hell of a nerve."

Down below, the quartet of Team CRDL stepped out onto the field, meeting their opponents at the center shoulder to shoulder.

"Impressive, huh?" Sky smirked as he waved to the crowd.

"You know, it's nice to have people cheering for us for a change." Dove mused as he joined Sky in waving to the cheering crowd.

"This afternoon we've got ourselves another exciting matchup." Professor Port announced from where he sat in the commentator box overlooking the arena.

Beside Port sat Dr. Oobleck, who fiddle with his spectacles before contributing to the commentary and introducing the two teams that now took to the field. "Yes, with us today we have Team PSYK, led by Panini Delso, of Vacuo. And their opponents Team CRDL, led by Cardin Winchester, representing Vale."

"Cardin Winchester, eh?" Panini Delso, the leader of Team PSYK questioned, "That wouldn't happen to be as in Roman Winchester, would it? The hero of The Great War?"

"Looks like you've got yourself a fan, Cardin!" Dove shouted giggily, before elbowing the CRDL leader in the arm.

"As a matter of fact, yes." Cardin answered, not seeing any harm.

Panini exchanged a glance with her team and shared with them the sinister smile she now wore on her face. "Oh, this is too good." She muttered to herself before raising her cannon weapon, ready for battle. "You've had this one coming for a long time Winchester."

And so, both Team CRDL and PSYK readied themselves as the biomes were selected behind them. Out behind Team PSYK emerged what appeared to be unfertile land with trenches and large boulders scattered around. While behind Team CRDL, a ruined urban setting emerged with a shattered church at the center of it all.

"Alright, here we go." Russel smirked to himself as he raised his daggers.

The crowd increased their vigor, demanding for the match to begin. And so, up in the commentator's box, Professor Port bowed to their whims and bean to countdown.
"Three!"

"Two!"

"One! Begin!"

Anyways, the initial opening was crafted to properly reintroduce Russel back into the story. It just seemed like something that would happen, seeing as he's been out of it for a month in and out.

Aside from that, I haven't too many notes for this chapter. I've been playing with Emerald and Mercury being foils to Russel and vice versa for a while. He's been pissing Emerald off since meeting her and become acquainted with Mercury to the point where he'd show up at their game nights. So, expect more Mercury and Emerald for this arc and the next.

Next chapter, Team CRDL vs Team PSYK.

'Til next time dear readers, later days!
Welcome back everyone to another exciting chapter of The Darkling Thrush! This is the chapter that almost killed me! That was a joke.

This is however the most action heavy chapter I've written, beating out the penultimate chapter of Who Dares Wins which was more tension and personal drama heavy compared to this full one battle tournament type setting.

This is officially the longest chapter yet. Anyways, best get on with the chapter then, eh? Further notes down below and so it goes.

Under the watchful eyes of cheering crowds, televised all across the world, the teams of CRDL and PSYK engaging in combat. As soon as Port called for them to begin, they were off, charging at the other team.

From the harsh deserts of Vacuo, Team PSYK came armed with blunt weapons stylized with exposed gears showcasing the inner workings and giving the audience as well as their opponents a good idea of what their secondary modes could be.

Panini Delso, the leader of Team PSYK led the charge, meeting CRDL at the center of the arena. She raised her broadsword weapon and swung at Cardin. Being up close and personal like the way she was, Panini made her intent clear to Cardin with a fiery glare. She didn't just want to beat Cardin and his team, she wanted to crush them, she wanted to humiliate them like no other.

Though a significant percentage of the Beacon student body would protest, Cardin was in fact no idiot. He registered the clear as day threat with indifference as he blocked Panini's attack with his mace. To Cardin, such things were just another day, another drop in the bucket of his life. And he will endure.

So the Winchester boy continued to block Panini's strikes, waiting for just the right opening to retaliate. Panini drew back her broadsword, intending to reel back and deliver a powerful blow capable of breaking through Cardin's weapon, a smirk on her face. But Cardin seized the opportunity immediately, catching her off guard with his surprising speed. The flanges of his mace opened like a blooming flower and snared around Panini's midsection like a venus flytrap.

Panini attempted to fend off Cardin by smacking him with her broadsword, but whatever momentum she would normally carry with her swings were substantially decreed by her current predicament. Cardin brushed off her attacks, owing it to his semblance and readied to send the Team PSYK leader flying. He lifted Panini into the air with his strength and began spinning in place.

As soon as he had enough momentum behind him, Cardin opened his mace's flanges once more, sending Panini flying to her team's side of the arena. Panini bounced off the barren infertile land before eventually stopping. After picking herself off the ground, Panini shot a glance upward at a large screen beside the commentator's box. There she saw both her teams and Team CRDL's aura.
levels projected to the crowd. And hers currently registered at eighty-five percent.

Panini let out a low angry growl before fixating her attention back to Cardin, who ran off to assist his team members. She switched her broadsword into its secondary weapon mode, a projectile launcher. She scooped up a nearby rock and loaded it, then she began to steady her aim.

As Cardin moved to regroup with his team, Russel found himself in the thick of things as he and Dove dueled with one of Team PSYK. Sibrand Chow, like Russel, carried two weapons. A long sword and a short blade, which he used to great effect as he fended off both Dove and Russel’s attacks.

Sky appeared to be having less of an issue as he used his halberd to keep his opponent at a manageable length. Yasmin Tea's electric charge club was best used up close and personal, but due to Sky's range, getting close just wasn't an option. So Yasmin was forced on to the defensive and backed away, hoping to regroup with one of her teammates.

To say the least, Russel felt an odd sense of déjà vu. In the heat of battle, the Thrush found himself thinking back to the day when Pyrrha challenged all of Team CRDL to spar. It was both he and Dove who'd fought in sync against the Invincible Girl, just as they did now against Sibrand.

But there was one major difference from then and now, Russel thought to himself as he lowered his daggers ever so slightly in order to bait Sibrand into attacking him. Sibrand wasn't Pyrrha Nikos. So the dual wielding Team PSYK member took the bait and eased off of Dove in order to swing back around and strike what he perceived to be an exposed weakness. Pyrrha wouldn't have made that mistake, Russel thought to himself as Sibrand thrusted his short blade at him.

Russel whipped his arms upward, locking them with Sibrand and held on tight. Realizing his error, Sibrand attempted to pull away, but Russel wouldn't give. The next thing he knew, Dove was upon him once more, striking at him with his gun sword.

Except the blow never came. It was a blink and you'll miss it moment. After all, there were four members of Team PSYK. Panini just landed on the far side of their biome, while Yasmin was fighting Sky. Team PSYK's fourth member had been waiting for an opportunity to strike, and now he'd just found it.

Dove was taken by surprise as metal chain found itself wrapped around his arm, pulling him back. The youngest member of Team CRDL looked back to the source of the chain and found the fourth member of Team PSYK, Kafka Dominos, standing on their side of the arena in one of the demolished buildings of the urban setting.

"Get over here." Kafka snarled.

"Aaah!" Dove screamed as he hauled into the air by his arm, dragged off elsewhere by Kafka, leaving Russel to deal with Sibrand. The Thrush couldn't help but sigh as the audience's cheers turned to laughter at Dove's misfortune.

"Enough!" Sibrand shouted as seized the moment to kick Russel away.

Russel fell onto his back, but the Thrush threw the momentum behind him into a roll. And just like that, he was back on his feet. He raised his daggers, ready to start anew.

"Dust Daggers?" Sibrand asked, pointing to the Russel's cylinders, as if noticing for the first time. "Dust swords." He said comparatively as he raised his weapons to show Russel.

"Huh." Russel muttered. "Too bad I don't know how to use mine." He shrugged before leaping at
Sibrand.

The dual welding Team PSYK member let out a shout and charged at Russel. The two were poised to clash halfway, to see who could best the other. But before they could meet, Cardin's mace came crashing against Sibrand, sending him skidding off to the side.

"I had him." Russel said as he turned his attention to his partner. Cardin hefted his mace against his shoulder and shot Russel a disbelieving look. The Thrush was about to protest with the boy, but out of the corner of his eye caught sight of an incoming projectile. Both he and Cardin took a step back, allowing the speeding rock to pass between them.

The pair then turned their attention to Panini all the way at the end of her biome, reloading her weapon with rocks she found on the ground.

"What an odd weapon." Cardin thought aloud, earning an agreeing nod from his partner.

"I'll show you odd!" Sibrand shouted after picking himself off the ground and gathering his bearings. The dual wielder raised his weapons and then began to run directly at them, while at the same time letting loose a battle cry.

"Oh, believe me, you are." Russel's signature shit eating smirk found its way on his face at the sight of the PSYK boy screaming his head off.

Before Sibrand could even get close to the pair, Cardin slammed his mace onto the ground. The magma dust crystal at the center of his mace radiated as it shot bursting energy through the arena floor. The searing shockwave cracked the tile floor as it surged Sibrand's way, exploding beneath his feet like a landmine and sending him flying once more.

"Oh, enough of this!" Yasmin shouted as she dodged Sky's ranged halberd attack. She leapt backward, getting some distance from the Lark, then activated her club's secondary weapon mode. The front of the club opened up, revealing a dust crystal within. Electricity danced through air, causing both Yasmin and Sky's hair to stand up on their heads.

"Get slagged." Yasmin spat before a pure ball of electricity shot out of her club. The dancing energy mass grew in size the moment it left the club, gathering whatever electricity was in the air. In order to avoid the energy ball, Sky stabbed his halberd into the floor and used it vault over it.

But the energy ball continued, not at all stopping. While Russel and Cardin dealt with another one of Sibrand's attempts to attack them, as well as Panini's awkward attempts at sniping them, the Thrush was caught unaware and struck by the ball, electrocuting him.

"Oooh, that's gotta hurt." Port winced at the sight of Russel flailing on the ground as electricity surged through his body. Up above on the monitor, Russel's aura dramatically dropped from eighty nine to thirty one.

Laying there on the floor, his body still involuntarily convulsing, Russel reflected on his unimpressive amount of aura. His outer representation of his soul, was unlocked not by a trained professional, nor in the heat of battle. It was unlocked when he was at his lowest. To say the least, Russel didn't have the same amount of aura reserves as the next guy.

If one were to hold him up in comparison to Jaune of all people, you'd see a significant difference in aura. Not to mention, Russel's earlier exploits this morning had diminished a percentage of his aura before the match had even started. Given by how much pain he was in, he was absolutely astounded he hadn't been eliminated from the match even.
"Russel, back to your feet!" The Thrush could hear Cardin shouting, urging for him to get back into the thick of things as Sibrand kicked in his semblance of heightened speed. The Team PSYK was now running laps around Cardin, while from afar Panini pelted the young man with random objects that littered the field.

But Russel just had the shock of a lifetime. Team PSYK was too busy with his teammates to care about an incapacitated fighter. No one would be bothering him anytime soon. And that was okay with him. He needed the time to think anyways.

If one were to glance to the aura monitors, once more you'd find Russel's aura slowly declining once more.

Fighting one on one was a completely new experience for Dove. The boy had never once been called on for sparring sessions in Goodwitch's combat class, aside from that one time Pyrrha challenged all of CRDL. Every time Dove had been in a fight, which wasn't too often mind you, he'd had someone at his back helping him along. To say the least, being violently dragged into a one on one fight with Kafka was a less than ideal situation for Dove.

Kafka was armed with a metal chain and a sub machine gun that doubled as a nightstick. The Vacuo native was stood a head taller than Dove and held an intimidating glare. And at times, when Dove found himself striking at the young man as they fought through the ruins of house in the urban biome, Kafka would not once wince. The Team PSYK boy would simply meet Dove's strikes head on. He'd take the bullet from Dove's weapon and he'd keep moving not at all deterred.

Dove made one last ditch effort to strike down his opponent, swinging his sword. But Kafka threw up his chain, wrapping it around the blade. And with seemingly little effort, he ripped Dove's sword out of his hands.

The CRDL boy looked on in terror as Kafka reeled back, switching his machine gun into its nightstick form. With no weapon to protect himself, Dove raised up his hands and silently prayed. Kafka's attack and the force that came with it slammed Dove through the rotted roof of the building and into the air.

There was a thing called gravity that Dove was aware. Where whatever went up would come down. And Dove should have plummeted long ago. The boy opened his eyes, found himself drifting through the air, the aura around his body glowing slightly. "What?" he asked aloud, not so much to begin a dialogue or turn to another for answers, but to externalize his surprise.

But just as he began to properly gather his bearings, that slight glow of his aura faded and he began to fall. Dove landed on his back, at the end of his team's biome and rolled off in pain into the out of bounds area. A buzzer blew, announcing Dove's elimination from the match.

"And just like that folks, Team PSYK gains the advantage!" Oobleck announced.

"Damn it," Cardin cursed as he found himself being forced by Sibrand and Panini. The Team PSYK leader had since moved on from her position, deeming long range ill-fitting and closed the distance to medium. This move had in fact doubled her combat effectiveness, her projectiles though humorously avoidable at first now flew faster with the distance from its target shortened.

"We're getting pushed back!" Sky shouted over to Cardin as he avoided another one of Yasmin's electricity balls.

The Lark flipped backwards, his halberd in hand, and landed with his back to Cardin's. With Team CRDL now confined to one area, the PSYKs began to close in for the kill. Kafka emerged from the
building in CRDL’s biome and switched his weapon to its gun form. Panini approached from the front, her weapon trained directly at Cardin. And Sibrand and Yasmin approached the duo from opposite sides, essentially boxing them in.

"Any ideas, Cardin?" Sky asked as he spun his halberd with one hand, readying it for inevitable melee. He spared a glance the Winchester's way, but found Cardin's attention firmly elsewhere. "Cardin?" Sky asked before following his gaze.

Team PSYK had forgotten all about Russel, too caught up in the heat of battle or, in Panini's case, too busy trying to make Cardin bleed to notice the Thrush had picked himself up off the ground. Russel now set on the task of laying a line of dust, taken from one of his dagger's cylinder containers.

"The hell is he doing?" Sky asked quietly as not to draw Team PSYK's attention to Russel's actions. The Thrush now stood, waving to his two teammates, silently urging them to break lines and join him.

With each step Team PSYK encroached into their space. At any moment the ones with guns would start firing. Cardin's semblance offered him some protection. It wouldn't be the first time someone's shot him. But the real question was for how long could he endure such punishment. They still had the numbers advantage.

"Count of three. Run." Cardin muttered quietly to Sky. Seeing the futility in a drawn out engagement, the CRDL leader resigned to follow his partners lead. "One."

"Two." Sky said as he pointed his halberd to Yasmin and then Sibrand. "Three!" They shouted in unison before running forward between Sibrand and Panini.

Team PSYK, who'd been closing in for the kill, was not at all surprised by their actions. It was either fight or flight. Naturally, they'd flee like cowards rather than fight. So Panini and Sibrand raised took up their weapons, hoping to deter their escape while Yasmin and Kafka opened fire on the from afar.

Seeing their opponent's ahead acting as obstacles, Carding ran ahead of Sky. Using his bulky frame like a battering ram, Cardin slammed past the two. Both he and Sky, with bullets and energy balls whizzing by, ran off to the PSYK side of the arena where they were met by Russel behind a boulder offering minimal protection.

So Cardin and Sky joined their teammate, hiding behind a slightly bigger rock as Team PSYK picked themselves up and set after them once more. Bullets struck the boulder, chipping away sections and bouncing off, flying elsewhere. All the while the remaining trio of CRDL got to work figuring out their next move.

"Think you could strike the ground? Throw them off balance or something?" Sky turned to Cardin.

"We've got no ranged capabilities. Even if I did manage to throw them off, we'd have no way to capitalize on the situation." Cardin muttered bitterly.

"Fuckin' headaches." Russel cursed under his breath as he massaged his temples, as if that could remedy the pounding in his head.

"So how was getting electrocuted?"

"About as fun as you'd think, Sky." He rolled his eyes. "Anyways, my head ain't pounding over getting shocked. If anything it's the shakes in my hands." The Thrush held up both of his hands,
how they trembled. "I'm gonna be pissed off forever if I got nerve damage."

The Thrush then peered around over their cover, watching as Team PSYK approached from the front, right where he wanted them. "Hey, Cardin? You trust me?" He asked, catching his partner's attention.

"What?" Cardin raised a confused brow, not exactly sure of the questions relevance to their situation.

"Do you trust me?" Russel reiterated, withdrawing from his position by the edge of their cover.

Cardin let the question settle in his mind. He thought back to their first ever mission as huntsmen, in Oakwood when they fought White Fang. And then he thought back to a month ago, when Russel had tagged along for his revenge quest against the Memoria. "You even have to ask?"

"I need your mace." And without objection, Cardin handed off his weapon to Russel. The Thrush hit the switch on the side of the handle, opening the flanges. He reached inside and removed the magma dust crystal.

The Thrush looked at it for a moment. Watching the red crystal flare brightly against the sun light in his shaking hands. He then turned his head and peered out from behind the boulder they hid behind.

"So, what happens now?" Sky asked, before being slapped on the shoulder by Cardin. The Lark winced slightly and turned to his leader for an explanation. But all he found was Cardin pointing over to where Russel kneeled. "What?" Sky questioned before following Cardin's gaze. Right beside Russel's foot was a trail of dust, leading out into the open where Team PSYK now stood. "Oh shit."

"An' good fuckin' night." He said before pressing the magma crystal to the line of dust.

The resulting flare shot off, following the trail the Thrush had laid to the larger scattered pile that Team PSYK now stood over. The crackling tiny explosions along the way did not go unnoticed, however, as the opposing team lowered their weapons and eyed it with curiosity. The dust blended with the biome, but upon further inspection of the trail the fire followed, four pairs of eyes shot wide open with fear.

"Move!" Panini shouted, urging her team to scatter. But it was already too late.

The spectators were treated to a fiery explosion with pitch black smoke erupting into the air. The crowds cheered at the brutal display, as horns signaling Team PSYK's elimination blew loudly into the air.

"What a surprising turn of events!" Port shouted. "Is that even legal?" He turned to his co-commentator. "Hm. Lets have a replay, shall we?"

On one of the overhead monitors, a video minutes earlier appeared. It showed Russel picking himself up off the ground, looking around while his team battled Team PSYK. Russel then set off and laid down dust from his daggers which would then be used to create the resulting explosion.

"Though in this tournament, the only attribute being tested are fighters skills, we are willing to let Mr. Thrush's actions slide, seeing as the dust he used came from his weapons." Oobleck said.

"Finally found a use for the dust, huh?" Sky joked, pointing to Russel's daggers as the trio stepped out from behind cover.
“Do I know why these daggers use dust? No. Do I know how to blow shit up? Yes, yes I do.” Russel smirked before glancing upward at the aura monitor. Along with Dove's monitor, there were a total of four eliminations registered.

“Look alive, we got one more.” Russel called out, before a familiar metal chain came shooting out of the smoke and wrapping around the Thrush’s leg. Russel let out a surprised yelp before he was yanked off his feet and pulled into the smoke.

“Grab him!” Cardin shouted reactively. Both he and Sky leapt to their teammate's aid, aiming to grab ahold of Russel's arms and act as an anchor, preventing him from being dragged off. But they were too slow, Russel was rapidly dragged into the smoke, where a furious Kafka awaited him.

“Um…hi?” Russel waved at the visibly pissed Team PSYK member.

Without a word, Kafka leant downward and proceeded to beat Russel into the ground. The smoke cleared, giving the spectators and the cameras a good look at the situation now found himself. No doubt a good number of individuals were laughing all across Vale. Russel could practically hear their laughs amongst the crowd.

Cardin and Sky winced at violent display, turning away as Kafka continued his assault. The on looking audience's cheers silenced as Kafka's punches grew more violent. Soon the entire arena was filled with the sounds of Kafka's rustling chain, slapping the tile ground every time he brought his knuckles down on Russel's face.

The moment Kafka began to draw blood, however, a horn signaling Russel's elimination blew. The Vacuan native glanced up to the aura monitor, seeing Russel's aura had finally fallen below the minimum amount of fifteen percent. With an accepting nod, Kafka pulled himself out of the crater he'd created from punching Russel into the ground and turned his attention to Cardin and Sky.

Silently, Kafka wrapped his chain around his left arm and presented his machine gun in his right. The young man fired wildly at the duo, forcing Cardin and Sky to dodge lest they be struck. Cardin rolled forward, drawing his mace and slammed it onto the ground, intending to strike Kafka with his magma attack. But nothing happened. Cardin mentally kicked himself, Russel still had his magma crystal.

Now out in the open like an idiot, having bet everything on that move, Cardin was struck full on by a hail of dust shells. Kafka poured it on while Panini watched from where she lay with a smile. Cardin felt himself succumbing to the pain as a hundred rounds struck his body simultaneously. High up above the crowd, Cardin's aura level could be seen dropping dramatically. Even with his semblance, he was no match for this amount of abuse.

“Hey asshole!” Sky shouted, catching Kafka's ear. The Vacuan turned to find Sky charging at him from the side, his halberd extended forward like a spear.

Turning his gun from Cardin to Sky, Kafka began his onslaught once more. Sky kept running against the storm of dust infused lead, letting it slam against him. Sky wasn't like Cardin, he didn't have the semblance to cope with the pain, and yet the young man pressed on.

A bullet struck his shoulder, another his side, and still Sky persevered. His aura was in the thirties, a few yards from his opponent and from the face of the gun barrel. There was no more room to dodge, so he'd just have to suck it up, Kafka was now within reach, obviously weakened from the dust explosion. If there was any hope for a Team CRDL victory, it now solely resided with Sky.

So Sky pulled an earlier move from his book of tricks. He impaled the end of the halberd into the
Sky landed behind Kafka, who was now in the process of spinning around to riddle him. But Sky let the momentum from his efforts flow through him, and he then proceeded to slam blade of his halberd against Kafka's side. The young man's aura soaked up the would-be fatal blow, but still it wasn't enough to keep him on his feet. Kafka fell to the side, his aura dropping below the necessary fifteen percent. And the final horn was blown.

"And with that, Team CRDL moves on to the doubles round!" Port announced over the microphone.

"…Yay we won…" Russel raised his arm weakly from where he lay in the crater, producing a thumbs up.

"Need any help?" Cardin asked as both he and Sky walked over to the crater and peered down at their teammate. Russel's already extended hand opened up, signaling to Cardin, who grabbed his partner's hand and hauled him to his feet.

With the match now officially over, Dove pulled himself back onto the field and ran to his team, still a tad bit shaken from his experience in the air. "So…what now?" Dove asked as medical crews arrived to gather up Team PSYK and treat them for injuries. The members of Team CRDL exchanged glances, wondering what to do now to celebrate their victory.

"Anyone hungry?"

Elsewhere in the city of Vale, down a familiar alleyway, a pair of darkly dressed men. One wore a black suit with a red tie and shades with a black fedora with red trim. The other man in his company wore a black hoodie and black jeans. They both stood leaning against a brick wall, not at all attracting the attention of pedestrians who passed by.

"That'll be two hundy, my good sir." The hooded man smirked as he held out his palm.

The shades wearing man didn't protest at the obscene price, his wasn't the first time he'd done business with Kevin. He simply fished into his pocket and handed the hooded man the lien. And in turn, Kevin dug into his own pocket and handed the man a passport of his own making. The man studied the identification, gently brushing his fingertips against the lettering and his picture.

"Congrats mate, you're now a citizen of the fine kingdom of Mistral." Kevin said, slowly clapping his hands.

"Thanks Kev, you're a life saver." The red tie wearing man said before turning and hugging Kevin.

"Oi, let go! I don't know you like that!" Kevin protested the action, slapping the man on the shoulder until he let go.

"Sorry, sorry." The man apologized, taking a step back.

"The hell do you need a passport anyways Mick?" Kevin asked as he patted himself off, not at all enjoying the foreign contact. "Your boss Junior call a hit out on you or somethin'?"

"Junior? No, no, Junior's gone Kev." The red tie wearing man, Mick, said getting a surprised
reaction out of Kevin. "He closed his club down last night, picked up his shit and ran. Told the rest of us if we were smart we'd do the same."

"Huh." Kevin scratched his chin. "I didn't think the Memoria crack down freaked him out that bad. Guess he decided to get out while the getting was good, eh?"

"It wasn't the Atlas dogs that got Junior spooked." Mick shook his head. "It's something else man."

"Well what the hell scares the shit out of Junior? Besides a blonde, I mean." Kevin said, unable to prevent himself from laughing at that last part.

"I don't know man. But I ain't sticking around to find out." Mick said before kicking off the wall and heading for the end of the alley. "Take care of yourself Kev."

"Yeah, you too Mick." Kevin waved as he watched his customer depart.

He stood there for a moment longer, even after Mick had departed, thinking about what Junior's former henchman had said. One of the city's crime bosses had taken off without an explanation. Something about it didn't sit well with Kevin. So he thought about it a moment longer before deciding to call it in.

Kevin kicked off the wall and walked further down the alley. He took a left, walking into a wall, essentially stepping into his 'office'. He found himself in a simple room with all manner of machinery he'd use to craft his faux IDs along with a list of individuals who'd purchased them. He sat down at a desk, reclined in his seat and pulled out his scroll.

He dialed up a number and ran it to on a nearby machine to ensure the line was secure. "Kevin Twelve reporting in, I got something here you might want to know, sir." He spoke into the receiver.

"Go ahead Kevin Twelve, I'm listening." A monotone reply from the other end.

"Just heard from one of Junior's goons that the guy just sipped town. Something's going on boss. I don't like it." 'Kevin' informed.


Seated behind his desk, staring at his scroll and a live feed of Team CRDL's victory on the computer was none other than Ozpin. There was a contemplative frown on his face. Lost to his thoughts, the old man was left with a number of questions, all of which offered up unsavory answers.

For a long time, Ozpin had prided himself with knowing all that occurred in his city. Though he was only a Headmaster with no official say in governing, that didn't stop Ozpin from assembling his own underground spy network which he'd used to great effect to subdue crime. For so long he'd become comfortable knowing the city of Vale was under his watchful eye, that nothing could threaten it.

But as of recent, with the attack on Amber, Roman Torchwick's crime wave and The Breach, everything was so uncertain. There was a force pushing against him, vying for control, undermining everything he'd worked so hard to achieve. And all he could do was watch and wait.

"I just came to tell you that Qrow is inbound, as is General Ironwood." Ms. Goodwitch said as she stepped into the office. The pair had worked together for years, she'd seen Ozpin during his highs and his lows. And by the look on his face, this was one of his lows. "Is something wrong?"
"Possibly." The Beacon Headmaster muttered. "Something is going to happen, Glynda. And it's more important now more than ever that we choose Amber's replacement."

"Have you reached a decision?"

"Yes, yes I have."

"I'll fetch her right away."

"No, don't bother yourself. We have some time before James or Qrow arrive. And besides, we've just recruited an eager young huntsman willing to handle such tasks." Ozpin glanced to his scroll, eyeing Sky's contact info he'd procured since they'd taken the young man into their confidence.

With that said, Ozpin spun his seat around and faced the sun. "It's a beautiful day Glynda. The students are out and about enjoying themselves. You should too."

"I should be on hand in case Qrow starts trouble, shouldn't I?" She deadpanned.

"Now, I didn't say that. But it doesn't mean you're wrong. Thank you Glynda."

"Of course, sir."

After their victory, Team CRDL jumped onto the next Airship and headed down to the fairgrounds in search of something to eat. They had much to choose from, such as the local cuisine or the vendor who'd traveled from their kingdom serving their home specials.

They chose a quiet burger vendor from Vacuo who had a television set up so both he and his patrons could watch the rest of the tournament matches. There, while eating, the quartet witnessed Team RWBY take to the field and fight Team ABRN from Mistral. It was an exciting match up that showcased how well both teams worked together, something Team CRDL quietly acknowledged as something they themselves should work on for the future.

The fight lasted shorter than theirs. And not a single one of Team RWBY was eliminated from battle. Together the quartet of young women defeated their opponents with relative effort and claimed victory.

"Huh. Not a bad match." Sky mused as he watched Team RWBY wave to their adoring audience at the center of the arena. "Not bad at all."

"I liked the part where Yang punched everyone." Dove commented before stuffing his mouth full of food. The rest of CRDL nodded in agreement. It was quite the impressive feet, punching three opponents out the way Yang did.

"I for one think it needed more explosions." Cardin smirked, shooting a glance Russel's way. The team broke out in laughter, earning the occasional odd look from their server and the passerby. But they didn't care, it was a joke for them and only them.

"Hey fellas." A feminine voice called out, catching CRDL's ear. The team looked to their left, finding a familiar faunus girl with rabbit ears and her mountain of a partner at her side.

"Velvet, Yatsuhashi." Cardin greeted the pair of second year students with a friendly smile, which they returned in kind. "Caught your guys' match earlier. Job well done there Yatsuhashi, you certainly know how to use that sword."
"It was a team effort. But regardless, thank you." Yatsuhashi said, slightly nodding his head. He then glanced over to his shorter partner and then back to Cardin, as if suddenly feeling like a third wheel by the look Velvet was giving him. "I must be off. I need to...prepare for tomorrow." He said before waving goodbye to Velvet and to Team CRDL.

"Catch you later, Yatsuhashi." Cardin waved as he and the others watched as the larger than life Team CFVY strong man departed elsewhere. Over the past couple weeks, tensions between Cardin and the rest of the student body had declined. Instead of enemies, he was making friends for a change. And it was something he very much enjoyed.

"So, what's up Velvet?" Russel asked curiously. Velvet was the editor of The Shining Beacon, not to mention a participant in this year's Vytal Festival, if anything she should have her hands busy with sorting through some amateur journalist's contribution to the paper or running off with Yatsuhashi to prep for tomorrow or at the least help. But no, Velvet was here, with them.

To answer Russel's question, Velvet motioned to her box-like purse. Opening it, she pulled out a camera. "I need photos for the paper." She smiled, eagerly raising her camera at the assembled team as they sat on their respective stools. "Mind if I snap one of you guys?"

The assembled quartet exchange glances and ultimately shrugged, seeing no reason not to, they all stood from their seats and gathered for a group photo. Team CRDL stood shoulder to shoulder, putting on their best faces. "Thanks guys!" Velvet exclaimed before snapping a couple of photos. "Wanna see?" She asked, holding up her camera.

Cardin nodded and reached for the camera, accepting it from Velvet and holding so he and the others could sort through the photos.

"This is the part where you and the others leave." Velvet whispered discretely to Russel as Dove and Sky returned to their seats to finish their meals.

"Ah. So the truth comes out." Russel muttered, biting back the urge to laugh as Cardin turned his attention back to them and handing Velvet back her camera. Complying with Velvet's wishes, Russel quickly walked over to his teammates, and patted them on their backs. "Well fellas, we'd better get going."

"Huh? Wot for?" Dove managed to ask with his mouth still stuffed with food.

"Hey remember what we said about talking with food in our mouths." Russel pointed at Dove accusingly. "No sea food."

"Oh." Dove swallowed. "Right, sorry."

"Anyways," Russel nodded at Cardin and Velvet as he maintained eye contact wth Sky and Dove. "We'd best be getting on now, got other things to do."

"Oh, right. How could I forget." Sky tapped the side of his head, finally understanding Russel's efforts to leave the pair of Velvet and Cardin alone. "Yes, we'd best be on our way Dove."

"Fine." Dove muttered before grabbing what was left on his plate to go. And so they all left, leaving Cardin and Velvet alone, as if they noticed.

"The check, sir." The vendor said, quickly catching Cardin's ear. To his dismay, Cardin found himself stuck with the bill, a silent curse under his breath accompanied by the disbelieving look on his face was enough to make Velvet laugh at his misfortune.
"Well they sure seem to have gotten close all of a sudden." Sky commented as he, Russel and Dove walked around the fairgrounds.

"Yep. But not just her, everybody's taken a bit kinder to our boy." Russel said as they rounded a corner in search of something to kill their time. "You were his roommate in the Hospital Dove. You saw how many people visited him." Dove nodded still scarfing down his food. "Honestly? I'm happy for the guy. About time shit went his way."

"So now what?" Sky inquired.

"You guys wanna just go loiter around and stand in public walkways?" Russel asked loudly as the trio struggled to walk past a quartet of students wearing Haven Academy attire, who were blocking the walkway. The students merely accosted Russel with glares. But the Thrush flipped them the bird and kept on walking. "Up Yours." He said over his shoulder.

"I'd appreciate it if you didn't cause trouble for one day." Sky sighed.

"Too late. Got chased by an angry mob this morning." Russel snickered.

"Of course you did." The Lark shook his head, as if he'd expected any less from his teammate.

Before the trio could once again debate how to spend their free time, the familiar ring of a scroll caught their ears. Sky reached into his pants pocket, removing his scroll. He caught sight of the name of the called and instantly froze. He glanced at his teammates, who appeared to be standing there waiting for him to inform them who it was.

"Uh…I gotta go take this call guys." Sky awkwardly pointed at his scroll without revealing the identity of the caller to his companions. That appeared to be enough for Russel and Dove as they simply nodded and continued carrying a one sided conversation as Dove had yet to finish his meal.

Sky stepped aside and answer his scroll, holding it to ear. "Headmaster, sir?" He answered Ozpin's call.

"Mr. Lark, I have a job for you."

"So I'm thinking we could go check out one of the activity booths. Throw bean bags at stacked bottles and shit like that." Russel suggested.

Dove thought about it for a moment as he chewed the last of his fries. "But what do we do with the stuffed animals we win?" He asked, swallowing. "We haven't the room back in the dorm. Not after Sky bought all that rock junk off the internet."

"Well, you could always give them to your girlfriend as a present." Russel laughed while Dove fumed over the comment.

"Oh, hey, what's up?"

"Sorry, very sorry, I've gotta head out. Got a project thing I need to do back at the school."

"…But we don't have any projects." Dove said, confused by Sky's excuse to depart their company.

"We haven't had projects for a month." Russel said, reflecting the amount of time that had passed since classes were suspended for their year to attend missions and prepare for the tournament. "Unless it's like one of those personal projects of yours in the library?"
"Uh…yeah. Personal project? Yeah, yeah personal project." Sky stammered, deciding that it was best to go with whatever his teammates though he was doing instead of producing his own half-baked explanation. "I'll see you guys later, bye!" Sky shouted before running off back to the academy.

After a moment spent watching their teammate scurry away, the remaining CRDL boys looked to the other with Russel commenting first on Sky's behavior. "So do you think he's got like a boyfriend now or somethin'?"

"Nah, I'd know. I'm his partner, he's contractually obligated to tell me stuff like that." Dove shook his head, not at all believing for even a second that Sky would hide anything from him.

"I don't think that's how this partner business works."

"Well I tell him all about the girls I like."

"That's what you call voluntarily divulging information. There's no fine print to that, Dove. It's just you spouting whatever's crossed your mind."

"I still think Sky would've told me if he's seeing someone."

"…So you wanna go and see if they've got some games around here or not?"

"I don't see why not." Dove shrugged.

With that said, the two teammates walked off in search of carnival games. They walked by a number of vendors and games, but most seemed busy with lines extending down the pathway. For a minute, it seemed as if they were just going to call it quits and default to loitering about in a walkway like good ordinary folk. But then they happened upon a not so busy part of the grounds where there was a nearby noodle shop with a particular game of shooting balls into hoops.

"Oh sweet!" Dove shouted excitedly as he ran up to the booth, all too eager to start throwing balls into hoops. But before he could, the vendor held out a hand to Dove and pointed at a nearby sign saying it was three lien for ten balls.

Dove then dug into his pockets, fishing for money but found only lint. He then turned to Russel hoping the young man would be sympathetic to his cause. "Hey, you mind spotting me some lien?"

"The hell happened to your winnings?" Russel said, recalling the substantial amount of money Dove had earned from their nights betting on when Pyrrha would confess her feelings to Jaune.

"Pyrrha made me donate it all to the school." Dove rolled his eyes.

"Huh. And how does that make you feel?" The Thrush asked.

"Dirt poor is what it makes me feel." Dove frowned. "You going to spot me or not?"

"Eh, what do I 'ave to lose by loaning money to someone I know has zero chances of paying me back?" Russel snickered, causing Dove's frown to deepen. "Hey, knock it off, it was a joke!" He said before digging into his pockets and pulling out a twenty lien note and handing it to Dove. "Just make it last, alright?"

Dove nodded before gleefully accepting the money. He then turned to the vendor and paid for a round and began playing. Russel stood there for a moment, watching Dove play. The vendor asked him if he wanted a round himself, but Russel declined. He was never one for those sorts of games.
So, while Dove busied himself, Russel's eyes wandered elsewhere. And it was up ahead, nearby, where Russel could see Emerald and Mercury approaching Team RWBY, who stood around talking amongst themselves, discussing where to eat. While Mercury stopped by a shoe vendor to smell their wears of all things, it was Emerald's actions that piqued Russel's interest.

Emerald operated undetected, just out of Team RWBY's view. While they all turned to walk off, settling to eat at the nearby noodle house, she discreetly 'liberated' Ruby's wallet from her possession. Russel raised a curious brow at the action, never having pegged Emerald for a thief. But it was her next action that left Russel completely perplexed.

Instead of running off with Ruby's wallet, Emerald caught Team RWBY's attention. She held up Ruby's wallet for them to see, claiming it had fallen. Ruby and the others played into her schemes, thankful to have her possession returned. Then Russel just watched as Emerald struck up a conversation with the team.

"Hey, Dove, is it alright if I leave you alone here for a little bit?" Russel turned to his teammate. "Somethin' I want to check out."

"Of course it is. I'm not a child." Dove laughed before gleefully throwing a ball and watching it successfully enter the hoop. "Yes! Nothing but net!"

Emerald and Mercury waved goodbye to Team RWBY, with the former happily exclaiming they'd see each other later. But, as to be expected, as soon as Emerald's back was turned to them she dropped her façade, her face betraying her disgust.

"So, how are the new friends?" Mercury slyly asked his partner.

"I hate them." The mint green haired woman scowled.

"Orders are orders." Mercury shrugged indifferently.

But still, Emerald couldn't let it go. "I just... how can they be so happy all the time!?!" She said, reiterating her disdain for Team RWBY as she violently pressed her hands together as if to satiate her rage for them.

"Did you at least get what we want?"

"It's the heiress and the bimbo." She deadpanned.

"Hmm, alright. At least we know who we're working with." Mercury mused, rubbing his chin.

"Mercury, Emerald." Russel greeted the pair of conspirators, before walking past them.

As to keep up with appearances as good natured decent folk from Mistral, they did the same, greeting the Thrush with a smile lacking any true

"Oh, hey, Emerald. You dropped something."

Emerald spun around, ready to have another go at the Thrush. But any intent to belittle Russel was squashed as she was caught off guard by a familiar object being tossed her way. Emerald's eyes widened in surprise, recognizing the pouch that she now held in her hands. It was her wallet.

But that was impossible. Emerald took precautions when it came to her money, such as wearing buttoned pockets as to ensure nothing would fall out or be easily taken from another thief. And yet, there it was, being handed back to her, in the same manner as she did with Ruby. "How-?"
"You ain't the only one who can pick a pocket or two, Fagin." Russel said, quickly dropping all pretense, letting them know he'd seen her earlier actions.

"What?" Was all Emerald could say.

"Read a fuckin' book." Russel muttered before walking off back to where he left Dove.

"He really showed you, Em." Mercury commented after a moment of silence.

"Shut it Mercury." Emerald said in a threatening tone as she pocket her wallet once more.

"I mean I feel sorry for you. If Cinder saw how easily he pulled one over on you, I bet she'd start seriously questioning why she keeps you around." Mercury smirked.

"I said shut up. And you and I both know how important I am to this operation." Emerald said, now visibly seething from anger.

"I'm talking about afterwards. After you've served your purpose." Mercury's smirk widened.

"Shut the fuck up Mercury."

"What are you going to do? Make a joke about my dead or something?" He laughed before continuing on his way. He spared one last glance over his shoulder at Emerald who remained where she stood glaring at him. "Come on, we've got to report back to Cinder."

Still visibly angered, but seeing the necessity of fulfilling their mission, Emerald set aside her contempt for her partner and joined him. After all, she wasn't doing this for him nor herself, but for Cinder. "Not a word about this." She threatened Mercury as they made their way back to their designated dorm room.

"So anything new?" Russel asked Dove the moment he returned.

"I won a toy." Dove smiled as he held up a colorful plush toy marginally resembling a bear. "Also, I think I flew."

I liked writing the fighting for this chapter and the little moments in between with Cardin and Russel. If anything its shown how close the two have become as partners, a long way from their first meeting. Team PSYK showed up in Nebula's Arc, Panini being a prominent Human Supremacist and certainly not Nebula's biggest fan, especially holding a mild grudge for her family too for losing the war.

Also, we saw a little bit of the goings on with Ozpin and revealed something I hinted at in Nebula's Arc as well. Kevin is just a handle, he's one of many agents working for Ozpin keeping tabs on the underworld. It was a concept I kicked around for a while, Ozpin's this grand chess master, he should be having all this pull in the city and his own spy network.

And a little closer to the end, we saw Velvet pop in and take a photo of Team CRDL. Now, I want you all to go back and read the Interlude Story time.

In terms of Emerald's characterization. My interpretation of her really stems from moments like her appearance in the first episode of Volume 3. She's a master thief and conjurer of illusions, yet she can't hide her thoughts and feelings. Enter Russel, who sort of pokes fun at that with his mere presence of being the one who witnesses her break character. Emerald's
animosity for Russel comes from the fact that he's a nobody, there's nothing special about him yet he's always the one who throws her off and threatens her place by Cinder's side. So, that's the direction I've been going with her character. I hope that's cool with all of you.

And so that's about it. Next chapter we'll get a long awaited meeting between two characters.

:)  
'Til then, later days!
Hell there everyone! Welcome back to another chapter of The Darkling Thrush!

This chapter is long over due. Everything that could've gone wrong in my corner of the world went wrong, the school work piled up and I just kicked off another story in the Kids Next Door corner of FF. So, I'm sorry I've been keeping you guys ready, but trust me, this chapter was worth the wait.

Not because of word count, mind you, but because of content. You'll see in a little bit.

Well, I think I've kept you all waiting enough as it is. More notes down below! On with the story!

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XXXVIII

The Vytal Festival: Part 3

It was later in the day when Team JNPR defeated Team BRNZ in combat. It wasn't the upset anyone expected. Team BRNZ was a favored team from Vacuo, known primarily for their efforts in the Rocky Region a month prior where they'd ran a herd of Bull Mongers off a cliff. But Team JNPR had Mistral's champion Pyrrha Nikos.

But, defeat at the hands of Ms. Nikos was not the case. For it was just Nora Valkyrie who bested Team BRNZ, who hit them all with her hammer and sent them on their way. Even uber charged with electricity, Beacon students were left wondering if such an incredible feat was capable not from her semblance, but from pent up rage left over from never being able to make good on her threats of breaking Cardin's legs.

So as soon as the victors left the field and the losers were hauled off on stretchers, the stadium began to prepare for the next match.

"Ah, well, Vacuo fans are sure to be hurting after that one, but this next one will have them on the edge of their seats!" Oobleck said as the next pair of teams took to the field.

"Team NDGO of Shade is certainly a crowd favorite." Port said as an image of Team NDGO appeared on the monitor. "News of their recent exploits defending a town in Vacuo from Grimm invasion has reached far and wide. But the real question is, do they have what it takes to best some of the toughest, testosterone-filled teammates we've seen so far! I'm of course talking about... Team SSSN!"

"I don't know, do we?" Nebula asked her team, a confident smile on her face as they took to the field. The indigo haired looked to her team, expecting some manner of reply, but instead she found them soaking up the applause.

It didn't surprise Nebula in the slightest to see Gwen waving to their audience with such vigor. She'd mentioned in passing of her history in the arts of ballet and the stage. She was a natural, the way she smiled and waved, the crowd couldn't get enough of Gwen. Dew was a different matter, often reserved and passive, as well as prone to snide remarks. But there she was, gracefully addressing their adoring public without a hint of stage fright.
And when it came to Octavia, Nebula was almost certain the firecracker would've whipped her hands into the air and given them all the bird just to get a reaction. But, instead, Octavia waved to the audience with just as much, if not more, vigor as her teammates.

Team NDGO reached the center of the arena and were soon graced with their opponent’s lively entrance. While running off cocksure with her crossbow was more her speed, Nebula was one to prepare for predetermined fights such as this one. The moment she and the rest of her team were notified who their opponents would be Nebula made sure to brief herself on their history and scour any media site for archival footage of Team SSSN in action. Of which she found an amateur video taken of two their members participating in a highway brawl with Vale's up and coming star Team RWBY what appeared to be a rampaging robot.

From her findings it appeared Team SSSN to be a rather nice group of young men. Their leader was Sun Wukong, a native from Vacuo. It brought a smile to Nebula's face to see a faunus do so well for himself outside of their kingdom but saddened her at the same time as it was only when he left Vacuo that Sun could have reached this standing amongst his peers. For a moment, Talal popped into her head, the young aspiring huntsman, the first Faunus to attend Shade and Nebula briefly entertained the fantasy of the boy having shipped off to Mistral instead.

Neptune Vasilias was Sun's partner, and from what that video on the internet showed her, a master with technology. That was concerning, for Nebula nor her team had fought an opponent with the possibility of being technologically superior to they themselves. SO instantly in Nebula's mind, she marked Neptune as posing the greatest threat.

There wasn't too much she could gather on the rest of Team SSSN. Scarlet David and Sage Ayana didn't participate in the highway brawl and odds were they weren't in the kingdom at all. But Scarlet appeared to fancy himself a pirate, given by his choice of attire as he and his team stood across from them. And there absolutely nothing to go on about Sage, aside from his impressive physique and the giant sword on his back. If anything, of the team, these two were the second stringers.

"Ladies." Neptune flashed the team a flirtatious grin. "Alright, girls, try and remember: hands above the waist."

"Ignore him, for he... Yeah, he's dumb." Tem SSSN's leader Sun Wukong said, playfully slapping his teammate's shoulder.

While the rest of her team responded typically to Neptune's flirtations, Nebula smiled amusingly. For the most part, they seemed nice enough, quirky even. While Octavia and Dew balked at such implications of them ever going anywhere near his nether regions and Gwen looking to her side flustered over a decent looking guy hitting on her, Nebula played it off as her mind drifted to her goal: Winning.

Yeah, Team SSSN seemed alright enough, too bad they were nothing more than a stepping stone for Nebula to propel herself forward through the tournament.

With both teams at the center of the arena the match was now officially beginning as the biome randomizer activated. Nebula, like the rest of her teammates spared a look over her shoulder, as to know just what they had to work with.

Flickering through the selection holograms were silhouette images of biomes already seen throughout the tournament where other fighters did battle. Knowing what you had to your back was just as important as what was at your front. The last thing Team NDGO needed was something like the geyser biome and its unpredictable nature or the forest biome that Team BRNZ fought with...
last round. Fighting behind trees wasn't something NDGO was used to they grew up in a desert after all.

But call it a stroke of luck or proof that Oum existed and he was smiling down on Nebula this day as the randomizer came to a halt on a desert silhouette. Out of the ground popped large pillars of rock making suitable cover as they protruded out of the sand. Nebula's smile amused smile widened, evolving into a toothy grin at the sight of familiar sandy dunes.

"Alright!" Nebula celebrated. "Home field advantage!"

"Hey, don't forget, that's my turf too." Sun said cockily, reminding NDGO of his origins in Vacuo.

"Look, the ocean!" Dew called out as Team SSSN's biome raised out of the floor behind them. And to Dew's word, there was an ocean, or what counted for an ocean in this contained simulation of a battlefield. And, for fun, there appeared to be a pirate ship floating in the water. Seeing the ship and its cross bone sails made Nebula cast an amused look Scarlet's way.

"Three!" Port's voice boomed over the speakers as he counted down. Both opposing teams readied themselves for the melee. "Two!" His voice carried as Nebula waited with anticipation. "One!"

And then just as Nebula and the rest of NDGO were about to rush off forward, to take the battle to the enemy, Neptune burst forward, kicking up sand as he quickly dashed over to the other side of the arena.

Nebula stood shocked, her eyes following the blue haired boy as he sped up the side of a rocky formation on their side of the biome. Feeling a sharp prick of fear in her chest, Nebula spun around to watch the young man scurry his way up the formation and taking up what she assumed to be a sniper's post.

Seeing this, Nebula couldn't help let out a breathe of relief. Neptune very well could have run up and struck first blood, but instead he'd chosen to take the time to get into a suitable position.

"Neptune, what are you doing?!" Sage yelled sounding agitated with his teammate's actions.

"Oh, you know…just gaining the higher ground…!" Neptune bellowed from where he stood atop the rock formation, his weapon on his shoulder in a casual fashion. The action showcased the weapon for all to see, including Nebula, who quickly noted the pulsating blue energy within its dust cylinder. From the size of the weapon, she gleamed that it wasn't a sniper rifle as she'd first assumed, but rather more along the lines of a semi-automatic rifle.

"On the enemy's side?!" Sun questioned, sounding equally furious with his partner's actions.

"They would never expect it!" Neptune waved off their concerns, hiding the nervous glances over to the ocean biome behind his team.

The NDGO girls exchange looks. "Well he's not wrong." Dew shrugged.

Nodding, Nebula whipped up her cross bow and raised it into the air and cried out, "Open fire!"

And then that was the last thing she recalled before waking up in a makeshift bed in the infirmary…

"I'm telling you, I flew!" Dove shouted at the top of his lungs.
High up on top of the cliff overlooking the fairgrounds stood Dove staring down below, a cross expression on his face. Meeting the young CRDL member's stare was Russel who wore an equally unamused look on his face.

While everyone busied themselves with watching the ongoing fight between FNKY and DORK, or fancied themselves the brawl between the Atlas Officer and the drunken Huntsman down over at Main Avenue, Dove had ran off in a stupor, suddenly reminded of earlier events within Amity Colesseum. Russel had followed, more indifferent than annoyed, but now the young Thrush was stark pissed at his teammate's suicidal display.

"Did someone spike that burger you ate?" Russel responded loudly, aiming not to feed Dove's delusions. "Better yet, were there any drugs in that teddy bear you won?"

"In our match I flew! I flew! I can fly, Russel!" Dove claimed wildly as medical crews ran disembarked a landing Airbus, bringing with them on gurneys several fighters from the ongoing competition taking place over Vale.

"Look, Dove, I'm not saying I don't believe you. I'm saying…this seems a little dangerous. What do you think?" Russel said, hoping Dove would realize how dangerous his actions were.

But Dove played off Russel's concerns, brushing them aside with a sneer. "Oh come on, Blake literally can create clones of herself! And then Sun has that weird astral projection clone thing. Not to mention Weiss does that weird glyph thing and Nora literally is a god of thunder!" He argued, citing the many different semblances their peers possessed.

"Actually, thunder is the noise."

"What difference does it make?!" Dove shouted, spit flying from his mouth. "They all can do things fantastic things! How hard is it to believe that a man can fly?!"

"You mean like Superman?"

"No! No, not Superman!" Dove shook a fist in air against the sound of Russel's snickering down below.

"You sure? Superman can fly. That's like his thing." Russel said as he struggled to squash the urge to laugh.

"No! No! I refuse to be compared to that one note hero!" Came Dove's thunderous reply from high up there.

Whatever amusement Russel found in this dialogue shared was immediately dashed at the sound of Dove's comment. The smirk was gone, replaced by a frown. The elate eyes of his turned sharpened steel, similar to the pair of daggers he used. "I hear you shit talk Supes one more time you're gonna wish you can fly!" He shouted angrily.

"But I can!" Dove whined. "Just watch!"

Watching Dove take a step back to leap from the cliff Russel himself had feared falling from earlier that day, the young Thrush felt inclined to further voice his objections in the matter. But he held back his tongue, folding his arms over his chest. Russel resigned himself to simply observe what would no doubt be a learning experience for not only Dove, but also for himself. The youngest member of CRDL didn't know it, but he was educating Russel in the laws of gravity.

And so Dove leaped off the side of the cliff, unrestrained by passerby trying to catch the next airbus or by Russel who waited down below. The result was just as one would expect, who was Dove to think himself a man of power, who could defy all notions and take off into the night. And so the moment he jumped, he'd begun falling.

At first he didn't make a noise. Dove was too overcome with shock to let out the appropriate outburst. But then as he drew closer to the ground, the hamster wheel that was his mind began turning and he let out a low yell. He slammed against the grass covered ground, bouncing slightly before coming to a rest.

"...ow." Dove muttered as pain coursed through the front of his body.

"Guess not." Russel chuckled as he watched Dove roll onto his back. "So I hear you can fly, eh?"

"I don't understand." He groaned as he held his pained chest. "In the arena, I flew."

Russel shook his head. "You were tossed by a one man army who used the back of my head to make a pot hole. If anything he just threw you really far." He deadpanned.

"But everyone else has cool semblances." Dove protested the unfairness of his situation. "Cardin is immune to physical harm, Sky has some weird sensory lie detector shit, Yang goes super saiyan, and who knows what bullshit Jaune is going to pull out of his ass!" Tears began to swell in the corner of his eyes. "...This was supposed to be mine."

"You make a compelling argument." Russel deadpanned. "Are you sure there weren't any drugs in that teddy bear?"

"Russel! I'm being serious!" Dove snapped, whipping his head up and glaring at his teammate, only to wince in pain once more.

"You're being melodramatic." Russel quipped.

"You were there! You saw how useless I was against Team PSYK! If I had a kickass semblance I could've done more!" Dove shot back at Russel. But the Thrush noted his tone and choice of words. Dove held no ill will for he, but rather himself.

Russel sighed, now realizing the reason behind Dove's bizarre recklessness. No one on the team held anything against the boy, they all recognized he was giving it his all, trying his best to contribute. But now Russel recognized that deep inside Dove felt as if he hadn't been carrying his own weight, and his quick elimination during the tournament served to reinforce his insecurities.

"You an I both." The Thrush muttered, sticking his hands into his pockets. "Could have gone either way really." He shrugged before deciding it best to change the subject to something more urgent, like Dove's health. "Now do you want me to help you to the medical tent or not? You just jump from a sixty foot drop. You're probably all banged up inside."

Dove sighed, realizing there would be no argument between himself and his teammate. "No, my aura soaked up most of the impact. At least the darn got something right."

"Don't get too down in the dumps man, it takes a while for some of us to figure out what our semblances are."

"...The hell is your semblance anyways, Russel?" Dove asked in a manner that made Russel raise a cautious brow. Given by the expression on his face, Dove was utterly devasted. The manner in which he'd asked his question betrayed the undercurrent in hopefulness, or rather, melancholy. The
fact of the matter was, Dove wasn't asking what Russel's semblance was, what kind of impossible ability his aura gifted him, but rather, Dove was trying to find commonality with Russel. He wanted to know if he even had one to see if someone could share in his pain.

Seeing the guy like that made it increasingly difficult for Russel to make light of the situation. Just what exactly was one supposed to say in this situation? Probably lie, and make Dove feel better, tell him he didn't have a semblance like him and was just a common man in the world of impossible men and women.

But there was nothing to be gained from lying to Dove. Nor would there be anything to be gained from a truthful answer, he'd only be reinforcing his insecurities. So seeing no real solution, Russel stuck to his gut with that shit eating smirk of his appearing prominently on his face as he uttered a laugh. "Painful-ass headaches." He snickered.

"Ugh. I'm being serious." Dove groaned once more, unsatisfied with the answer he'd received.

"You're lying on the ground after leaping off a cliff. You're anything but serious, Dove." Russel scoffed before turning on his heel and walking away. "I'mma go an see what else the fair has to offer. You comin' or not?"

"I think I'm just going to lay here for a while if that's alright with you." Dove spoke quietly as he longingly stared up at the orange sky, where the airships danced and birds balked at man.

Russel frowned at the sight of Dove. He felt pang in his head, almost as if it were a signal for him to say to console the boy. But that wasn't what Dove wanted to hear, not what he needed.

All Dove needed to know was that he had people who depended on him "Don't stay out too long now. Got ourselves a big day tomorrow."

The youngest of Team CRDL raised a hand and gave Russel a thumbs up. Satisfied, Russel went on about his business, giving Dove the time he needed to himself. So then Russel headed off back through the fairgrounds earing the sound of jollity and laughter of strangers with foreign accents belonging to Atlas and Mistral as well as Vacuo.

…After waking up on the cot, Nebula found herself feeling sore all over. It felt as if she'd sat out bare in the sun out in the deserts of Vacuo for weeks. Her mouth was parched and dry, her lips cracked and blistered and her hair was standing up on her head.

"What happened?" Nebula asked aloud.

"You were electrocuted, deary." A friendly voiced chimed in from the side. Nebula turned to gleam a look at the source of the voice, finding an elderly woman dressed in scrubs standing by some empty beds with a clipboard in hand. "You took quite the nasty hit during your match."

"My match?" Nebula questioned as she drew a blank at what the woman was saying. But the more she thought about it, the more she recalled. Yes, she was in the middle of a match. "Oh crap my fight!" Nebula exclaimed before wildly leaping off the cot. But sadly, Nebula had yet to evaluate her physical wellbeing and fell flat on her face on grass. "Ow." She groaned.

"Aye, yes, I shoulda warned ya about that, yea." The elderly woman bit her lip. "The disorientation and all that, yea."

"Ugh." Nebula groaned into the dirt. The elderly woman in scrubs then hobble along and helped Nebula back onto the cot. "Where am I?" She asked as she sat down.
"Y'er at the fairgrounds lass. No room for an infirmary at the big floatin' colesseum. They needed all the space for the hot dog vendors. The Vale economy isn't what it used ta be y'know." The woman answered with her thick accent. "Me boss gone and tol' me 'Tilly, ah need you to take these three youngens and get them some help.' And that there was what I did when we carried you and y'er friends 'ere lass."

"Uh…right." Nebula feigned understanding with a slow nod.

The thickly accented older woman in scrubs then walked over to some other patients of hers resting in cots, some of whom Nebula recognized, such as Panini Delso and the rest of Team PSYK. They were all competitors from the competition. And that was where she was supposed to be right now. Out there in front of the world fighting for her way to the finals. Right?

Nebula thought of the woman's words and pondered over her own memories. She was electrocuted, Nebula thought to herself. She was electrocuted in battle. She closed her eyes and concentrated and then everything began to unfold in front of her.

After running in after Neptune and leading the rest of Team SSSN to their side of the field, Nebula had signaled her team to turn around and engage the enemy. While Nebula Gwen and Octavia triple teamed Sun and Scarlet, Dew had eliminated Sage with a powerful tornado she'd conjured up with that dust crystal imbued spear of hers. Things looked bright for Team NDGO as they secured an early advantage, Nebula recalled a swelling adrenaline and excitement at the time. But then Sun had evened the floor by soloing Octavia and knocking the firey redhead on her ass.

In an effort to regain their lead, Dew had thrown Scarlet across the field as she'd previously done to Sage But unlike his broadsword wielding teammate, Scarlet was thrown towards the pirate ship resting on Team SSSN's side of the field and recovered by grabbing onto the mast. Nebula sprang into action with Gwen, and with the dancer's help propel led herself up the mast to battle Scarlet one on one.

Their sword fight was brief as Nebula had sacrificed her footing for a quick strike. Scarlet had capitalized on that fact and sent her falling to the ground. Nebula mentally berated herself over her mistake while Scarlet hung up Gwen by her feet. But in the end it was Dew who defeated Scarlet, or rather, it was a pair of coconuts.

With the odds in their favor once again, Nebula took action by rescuing Gwen from her predicament, then the trio regrouped in the water to deal with the remaining duo of Sun and Neptune. Everything seemed to be going their way. And just then, Neptune's gun switched into its secondary form, a trident, and then he stuck it in the water. Then that was when Nebula had been electrocuted...and lost.

She'd lost, Nebula thought to herself. She'd lost.

"I lost." She said quietly, as if she needed to hear them said in order to let reality sink in. "I lost."

Having such high hopes for the competition and heart set on victory, Nebula should have been feeling defeated, completely crushed by the shocking turn of events. But instead, she sat there on her cot, in complete denial over that it, in fact she was hard pressed into believing the battle hadn't transpired at all.

After spending some time seated in silence, with no interaction between the woman in scrubs Tilly or any of the other competitors, Nebula found herself lost in her own thoughts. She told herself that it was only a dream, that the battle had yet to even occur. She'd probably hit her head or fallen asleep while doing research on the enemy team. Heck, she probably electrocuted herself because
she'd drooled all over the computer keyboard in Beacon's library.

But then, the longer her thoughts dwelled over her dilemma, the more real it felt. The memories that ad once felt blurred like dreams were no longer fantasies conjured by her mind. Instead, they felt as real as any other sort of experience she brought to mind. No longer was the feeling of standing in ankle high water a dream, now it was a reality, a past experience.

"I lost." Nebula uttered louder than before, catching Tilly's ear.

"Ah, yea, ye did lass. Sorry." Tilly said over her shoulder as she tended to a bruised Panini Delso.

"Fucking asshole blew us up." Panini cursed while Tilly tended to her wounds.

"I lost." Nebula said once more, her eyes widening slightly then narrowing. "I lost."

"Yeah, yeah, no surprise there Violette." Panini sneered as Tilly finished up bandaging her arm. "The blue haired hottie absolutely destroyed you girls. What a fucking riot."

Hearing Panini's venomous tongue, Nebula averted her gaze away from the grass. Seemingly snapping out of whatever trance had fixed her to reciting her defeat, Nebula took to viewing the wounded PSYK leader with a fixed glare.

"Ooh, so scary." Panini taunted, not at all fazed by the threatening look Nebula was giving her.

With a harsh grunt, Nebula leapt up to her feet, this time putting in the effort to land without falling over. She then began to stalk towards Panini, intent on sharing a few long overdue words with the girl. There was a flare in her eyes and a menacing unapologetic attitude that she carried with every step. For lack of a better way of phrasing, Nebula was pissed the fuck off and just found the perfect way to deal with her frustrations.

Panini raised her brow at the sight as Nebula's actions caught the attention of more battered tournament competitors. If the rest of Team PSYK could pull themselves out of their cots they would, because it appeared as though Nebula was about to beat the hell out of their leader.

Nebula had always imagined her and Panini coming to blows, over something such as the politics of Faunus Rights and overall equality. No doubt in the fray of some urban dispute, with both on opposite sides of the argument. Never once did she assume the upsetting trigger of their cataclysmic battle would be in part caused by simple name calling.

The distance closed between the girls and suddenly it became clear to them both, that Panini hadn't any fight left in her. The Team PSYK girl couldn't even stand, not after what happened in her match when she and two of her team were literally exploded after standing on a figurative powder keg.

One could practically see Nebula relishing in the fact. She didn't see some wounded warrior, but rather an unsympathetic monster who'd not too long ago contributed to a Faunus boy's suicide. If anything, Nebula was avenging Talal's memory. So once she stood towering over Panini, her face practically blackened out by her vengeful intent, she raised a fist and reeled in back.

It was in that moment Nebula saw in Panini's eyes fear. She was so helpless in her current state, powerless against the Team NDGO leader's fury. No one was rushing in to prevent her actions either, all standing idly to the wayside or resting in their cots unable to physically move. This was what a peer of their endured for months before taking his own life, Nebula thought to herself. This was what Talal faced everyday with some imposing force towering over him ready to strike while all the world watched.
But Nebula was never a bystander, she took action and hoped to make amends for all the cruelty the world offered that young man. And now here she was, the aggressor tormenting a wounded foe. This was not the battle she had imagined at all, there was no war over ideas, no weight behind her actions. That was the whole point of why she wanted to win the Vytal Tournament in the first place, to use it as a platform to spread a message of goodwill. Her actions as of now were any but goodwill.

Panini had to turned away unable to face Nebula's attack. But the strike she dreaded never came. Panini looked to see what had stalled the Violette, as if she had been waiting for her to beg or some other such nonsense. But instead, Nebula was simply gone.

"Hey, do you know what happened to my friends? My team?" Nebula asked Tilly on the way out. The woman in scrubs had been oblivious to the near confrontation, too busy aiding other wounded tournament competitor. She simply looked over her shoulder, too ignorant of the tension still floating in the air. "The rest of yer team awoke some time ago, said that when ye woke they'd be about in the fairgrounds." She said jotting a thumb to the makeshift infirmary's exit.

Nebula thanked Tilly before carrying on. Many eyes followed the Violette as she left the long white tent that had been set up on the outskirts of the fairgrounds, but Nebula didn't care. She simply walked on in search of her team while loss of today and the victory that almost was haunted her.

All around Russel, people were celebrating the festival and what it represented.

Eighty years of peace wasn't an easy thing to achieve. Like every good relationship, it took a substantial amount of effort to make things work. There had been bumps in the road from then to now such as the Fauns Rights Revolution and the myriad of international incidents that had occurred along the way, but they were all still here not killing each other but instead sharing in the good times. And that was all anyone really could ask for.

Sure, there was still a lot of work to be done, that was something Russel acknowledged as an irrefutable truth. After all, if everything were perfect then, well, they wouldn't need Huntsmen or this tournament. There was still the threat of Grimm and the ever present danger that came with their existence, as well as deep underlying political tensions between nations.

'You'd have to be a fucking moron not to see it.' Russel bitterly thought as he passed by trio of Northern Atlesian's uttering a derogatory curse in their native tongue about Vale's racially diverse teams representing them in the tournament.

Now of course, Russel could be mistaken. Maybe everything was just peachy and it was his inner pessimist that made him see the world through muddy shades. But if there was one thing a socially stunted bastard such as himself could pick up from his days spent in the library back at Oakwood, it was every how to curse in twelve languages.

"Pitcantua." Russel murmured under his breath the Northern Atlesian word for Goat-Fucker as he passed the trio. They perked up in their seats at the word and their eyes quickly darted to Russel, not angry, more so shocked. Sensing their eyes now aimed at the back of his head, Russel looked over his shoulder and smirked at the visitors before holding up a fist and flicking them the bird.

They just sat in their seats, unsure how to act. And that was alright with Russel, all they did was give him something genuinely funny to laugh about.
Traveling through the fairgrounds was a different sort of affair than traveling with company. For starters, there was no one present for conversation, no one to lean over to and converse with or share in jollity of small pointless victories over hapless fools. It was just Russel alone with all the thoughts in his head, surrounded by the oddities of the fair as well as the men and women capitalizing on all tourists naive of the Kingdom of Vale.

"Last call for tours around Beacon Academy! Last call!" A voice caught Russel's ear.

To his far left, the Thrush found Willa holding up a poorly made sign labeled 'Beacon Tours'. It was public knowledge to the students that campus was open for visitors, just as the fairgrounds were, it appeared the word didn't spread to the tourists. There was a decent sized group of people hanging around, their wallets open and handing twenty lien to get led around campus by someone Russel had never pegged as the hustling type.

Willa was an oddity to Russel. As long as he'd known the WILL leader, which wasn't too long, Willa had always struck him as more of a civilian than a Huntress. In Goodwitch's combat class she usually tried to hide in the back of class and rarely took part in spars unless called upon. She played blackjack well enough, usually sitting in on Team CRDL's game nights. Then there were her extracurricular activities which included writing erotic fantasies about her fellow students.

"What's all this about?" Russel asked as he bypassed the line of tourists, making his way to the front to meet Willa.

"Making a quick buck." Willa shrugged. "Not everyone at Beacon has the luxury of being a Schnee."

"I hear that." Russel nodded understandingly, after all, he used to work on a farm. For a moment, the Thrush stood there overlooking the line and quickly noticed the presence of Willa's other two teammates Iliad Marble and Lambert White, both of whom were collecting the tourist's lien.

But it wasn't their presence that caused a few alarms to go off in Russel's head, but rather, it was the absence. "No Lance?"

There were only a few people Russel could say he hated, that he truly despised. Chief among them was a Faunus who could coat himself in organic metal, but also on that very small list you'd find Lance Grimsby. At the end of the day you had to do completely fuck up to be on the same shit list as a known terrorist. And Lance Grimsby fucked up the moment he crossed paths with Russel during The Dance.

"Oh yeah, I don't want to be anywhere near him." Willa said, lowering her sign, a disgusted look on her face. "Ever since what happened during The Dance, he's been weird."

"How so?" Russel asked, curiosity snapping him out of his venomous thoughts.

"I don't know how to describe it, he's just been weird." "It all started after The Dance, we tried to console him over the incident with the flagpole, but he just started screaming at us. We tried to be understanding, but then when things calmed down we asked about the keg and he just starts off again. And that's not even the worst of it."

"No, really? How bad can he be?" Willa shot Russel a dirty look for his sarcasm.

"Well, when we first met him he seemed like an alright guy. Like how Jaune tries to present himself with that cheesy line of his but actually succeeds. But after The Dance we start noticing things that weren't there before, something up with his eyes maybe, I don't know. Like there was
something about them whenever me or Iliad walked into the room, whenever we mentioned Velvet or something."

"You wouldn't know where he is, would you?" Russel asked causing Willa shoot him a questioning look. "Just gonna check in on the guy, that's all."

"Last I saw of him was an hour ago over at one of the food vendors." Willa answered. "Said he wanted to meet some out of towners or something stupid like that."

"Thanks Willa." Russel thanked his fellow student and then turned to leave. But almost as soon as he'd departed, Willa caught his attention once more with quite the audible shout. The Thrush looked over his shoulder and found the Team WILL leader holding out a hand.

"That'll be ten lien." She said.

Russel just stared at the Team WILL girl, his mouth slightly open and a myriad of responses flooding his brain. But for the life of him, the best retort he could come up with was to burst out laughing and carry on his way to the food district of the fairgrounds while Willa's threatening curses fell on uncaring ears.

Though Velvet and even Jaune had become accepting of Cardin's company, the unsure glances the Winchester boy was receiving were less than friendly.

After the rest of his team had departed to allow Velvet and himself some time to catch up after a month locked up recuperating in a hospital wing, Team RWBY, JNPR, SSSN and a number of other unfamiliar students Cardin assumed to hail outside of Vale swarmed the burger shack.

While they all engaged in conversation, Cardin found himself isolated by their dialogue. Though a number of them made broad general statements and jokes, the general discussion held wasn't directed for Cardin's benefit but rather to exclude him.

Yes, some people still found it odd to be sitting across a man they'd come to negatively view. The transition between hated bully and friendly acquaintance was still ongoing, the new status quo unsolidified, this was the expected response.

Even though Velvet tried her best to include Cardin in the general discussion, most topics became inside jokes that further isolated Cardin who lacked the necessary information to contribute. And yet teams like ABRN and BRNZ could chime in uninitiated.

"So, you were saying you guys fought The White Fang?" Reese Chloris of Team ABRN asked.

"Oh yeah, we fought them at Mt. Glenn." Ruby said cheerfully. "We stopped their evil plans and stuff."

"That's hella rad." The skater girl, Reese, bobbed her head up and down, totally digging Ruby's story.

"And we helped too." Neptune interjected, more so directing his comment towards the other female peers present.

"So you keep mentioning, Neptune." Bolin Hori of Team ABRN said, sounding quite irritated by Neptune's attempt to capitalize on his part during The Breach to gain the attention of their female companions.
"Well it's true, me and Sun here even fought with Roman Torchwick on the highway a month ago." Neptune said, patting his partner on the back and causing him to almost choke on the bite of burger he was in the process of chewing. "Oh, crap, sorry man!"

"Not cool man! Not cool!" Sun shouted as he coughed up his meal. "Ugh."

"Ah, you guys got to do all the cool stuff." Nadir Shiko of Team ABRN said, slightly pouting. "All we did for our first mission was watch the grass grow."

"It was an excellent learning experience about patience of the hunt, Nadir." Arslan Altan, the leader of Team ABRN said, as she lightly slapped her teammate's back. "Maybe if you weren't too busy playing games on your scroll you would've gotten something out of it."

"Our last training mission, my team and I got stranded out in No Man's Land." Velvet spoke up, contributing to the discussion. "We ran so late, Team RWBY here had to take over as planning committee for our recent dance." She said, not at all noticing both Cardin and Pyrrha stiffing at the mention.

"In our mission we wound up at the Rocky Region of Vacuo." Brawnz Ni, the leader of Team BRNZ chimed in as he sat off to the side shoulder to shoulder with his team.

"It couldn't have been that bad." Cardin said, taking the initiative to partake.

But Brawnz didn't appear to take kind to Cardin's inquiry, finding it condescending in a way. "We ran against a herd of Bull Mongers. The only way to kill them all was to trick them into running off a cliff. I myself had to lead them over the edge. Trust me, it was bad."

"Uh, okay." Cardin said, not sure how to respond to that information.

"Whoa." Yang's mouth hang open slightly. "That's cool."

"Sometimes you how dangerous the job can be." Roy Stallion of Team BRNZ flashed the blonde bombshell a toothy grin. "But it's all worth it in the end."

"So, how about you Cardin? You never exactly told us how things went on your mission." Velvet spoke up, once more attempting to include Cardin.

At this, Cardin snapped to attention and thought back to a little over a month ago right after The Dance. Though most of the morning was a haze with Cardin almost running outside butt naked to rescue Russel, whom he assumed was in danger, the Winchester recalled what had happened next with them heading off to the backwater town of Oakwood and the covert White Fang operation.

"Fought some White Fang too." Cardin stated with a shrug.

"That's it?" Nora asked, raising a brow. "You just fought White Fang? C'mon Cardin give us details."

"Yeah, Team RWBY fought on a train rigged with explosives, Brawnz over there led a herd off a cliff. Where's the action and excitement?" Neptune asked, demanding more out of Cardin's story telling abilities.

"Uh, well…" Cardin trailed off as he thought back to when he and Russel stumbled onto the operation out in Oakwood Forest "The White Fang were pillaging the local academy's Grimm reserves after it closed down. We stumbled upon their operation and put it down."
"You stumbled upon it?" Yang questioned, essentially asking for Cardin to elaborate.

"We were called in to deal with Grimm, but it was just a pack of Creeps. But it was the condition of The Creeps that got me and my team thinking, that there was something else happening in the town." Cardin recalled the famished pack of Creeps he, Port and the rest of CRDL tracked back into Oakwood. "They were unleashed by The White Fang after they found out Huntsmen were called into town about Grimm."

"Wait a minute, Cardin" Ruby raised her hand in the air waving it to be called on as if she were in class. "If The White Fang released The Creeps in response to your arrival, then why were you guys called to Oakwood in the first place?"

Cardin paused for a moment, debating whether or not to share this part of his experience in Oakwood. But, seeing that everyone else shared their tales so far, Cardin couldn't argue against continuing his tale.

"There was a local couple in Oakwood, they called in for Huntsmen after discovering The White Fang in their town." Cardin sighed. "The White Fang killed them before we arrived and hid their bodies in an old cabin."

A hush fell over the assembled group while the proprietor busied himself with collecting empty plates and refilling equally empty drinks. It was at that moment that the tone of the conversation took a somber turn. The gathered Huntsmen and Huntresses looked amongst themselves as if they were silently contemplating not only Cardin's tale but the repercussions of it.

The truth of the matter was, they had faced the possibility of death in the field but none of them had ever been faced with it. Ruby and Yang's expressions saddened, Jaune started to look scared and fearful for not only himself but for his friends seated beside him. Velvet looked hurt by the tale. And Blake looked horrified since the mention of The White Fang killing the couple.

Cardin looked all around him and took in what he'd done without even realizing mood had turned sour and it was all Cardin's fault. But he didn't want to ruin their levity, that wasn't why Cardin had shared his tale. He wanted to feel comradery with his peers, but that wasn't the case. He'd only saddened their spirits. And there was only one way he recognized to rectify his actions.

"I forgot, I have to go do something." Cardin said, standing from his seat. His action snapped the majority of the group out of their depressing trances, save for Blake who was stuck thinking about the atrocities committed by The White Fang.

Cardin quickly hailed down the vendor and paid for not only his meal but for the rest of Team CRDL who departed prior and as well as Velvet's. "I'll talk to you guys later, okay?" He said before taking off into the fair.

"Wait, Cardin!" Velvet shouted, causing the Winchester to stop in his tracks. With his attention hers, Velvet gestured to the bill he'd just paid. "You bought my dinner."

"Yeah." He shrugged as if there wasn't anything to it.

"I owe you one." Velvet smiled appreciatively. "Say tomorrow, breakfast? How's that sound? It'll be my treat." She said, causing a number of eyes to shoot wide open.

Cardin stared dumbly at Velvet, drawing a complete mental blank. A part of him wanted to rationalize the gesture as one of friendship, but a part of his mind began wandering to someplace else, a thought of the gesture meaning something more. And then finally, Cardin decided to take a
leap of faith. "It's a date." He smirked before turning his back to the Velvet and the dumbfounded Team RWBY and JNPR.

"What just happened?!" Nora exclaimed, pulling on her own hair.

"I have no idea." Ren shook his head, equally confused as the rest of them.

It had been around noon when Nebula had graced Amity Colesseum's arena. The sun was high up there overhead in the center of the sky. But that was some hours ago which the Violette had spent slumbering in an infirmary cot. Now the sun was far off setting over the nearby sea and the once blue sky was now dark red with a familiar nighttime darkness trailing it from behind.

Nebula couldn't help but stop and stare at the sight of the sun against the ocean. Growing up in a desert, she'd never had the fortune of seeing such a sight. There was something about the way the light shimmered through the water that was appealing and mesmerizing. There was no wonder why Beacon was built so close to Cliffside, this was the kind of sight one could look at for the rest of their lives.

But eventually Nebula removed her eyes from the distance, returning her attention to the task of locating her team. It should have been an easy task to locate the trio, given how often Dew checked her scroll, or how attentive Gwen could be to social media. But sadly, the trio of NDGO members weren't the only things electrocuted out there by Neptune, but also Nebula's scroll which she always carried in her back pants pocket.

With no means to contact her team, she was forced to walk through the fairgrounds in search of them, a task that was by no means easy. The crowds that seemed dull in the morning had grown lively at the entertainment provided by street performers, as well as by the activities vendors provided.

Walking past a ring toss booth, Nebula thought about what the fair offered her teammates would find attractive. She could imagine Octavia trying to win a stuffed animal at a carnival game, or at the very least enjoying the act of throwing a ball and obliterating stacked up pins through aura infused force. And then there was Gwen and her fascination for the arts, she'd probably seen a pair of performers dancing in the walkway intersection and stopped to watch or join in.

But it was probably what Dew wanted to do that seemed to be the most likely of possibilities. Whenever Nebula wasn't around, leadership of the team fell to Dew. And she very well could be doing literally anything. Dew wasn't just a jack of all trades in battle but she was also one personality wise. Though she had the habit of saying every negative thought on her mind and had that siren's song semblance of hers, Dew really was a nice person, though you had to try hard to find that part of her. Dew liked games, she probably liked carnival games. She liked performances, she also liked street performers. She could literally be anywhere.

Plagued with trying to ascertain just where her team might be, Nebula found it more and more difficult to think clearly. She paused a brief moment, shuffling herself off to the side of the walkway to let others pass by. There she tried to concentrate, but found herself wandering off, enticed by a nearby scent of grilled onions.

It had been some time since Nebula had last ate, the aroma of onions was driving her so crazy that her gut seemingly grew a mind of its own and demanded to be fed. It was absolutely tempting to break off her search for her tem for a moment and grab something to eat. But before she could make up her mind on the matter, a light went off in Nebula's head.
Her teammates were electrocuted just as much as she was. They weren't unconscious for as long, but still, time passed by all of them. They had to have gone for food. And it was with that realization that Nebula took off running through the fair, recalling that most of the food vendors were relegated to one part of the grounds.

Nebula's search took her past a quaint noodle shop to a mouthwatering venison stand as well as past a crepe vendor. Mentally noting the stands for later visitation, the NDGO leader continued her search before ultimately arriving at a secluded tent on the outskirts of grounds, right near a Cliffside overlooking what she assumed to be the Emerald Forest.

Taking a quick peak inside tent, Nebula found her search at an end. Inside the tent sitting at the counter was her team as they had their drink orders filled. But Nebula found they weren't alone, there was a young man around their age with them. And from the looks on Dew and Octavia's faces, they weren't exactly pleased by his presence. Gwen, on the other hand, was engrossed by the attention the young man was giving her as he chatted her up.

With a sigh of relief at finally finding her team, Nebula rejoined them by taking up a vacant seat beside Dew.

"Hey girls." Nebula said as she took her seat, quickly earning their attention.

"Nebula! You woke up!" Gwen exclaimed from the other side of the counter while the boy seated beside her cracked an off putting smile, taking the opportunity to reach out for Gwen's drink unnoticed.

"Yep." Nebula sighed as she hailed down a server and ordered a meal and drink. "Whiskey." She said, pulling out a fake I.D. Octavia had gotten her a while back before the incident at Grendel.

The server took the I.D. and looked at then back to Nebula, a skeptic brow raised. "You don't look twenty one." The serve said, handing back the card.

"And you got the worst plot of real-estate in the fair." Nebula said, raising a hand and gesturing around the tent. As it was, Nebula, her team and that boy seated with them were the server's only customers. No doubt this was in part due to the tent being so far out of the way. "I could use a pick me up, and so could you." She said as she reached into her wallet and revealed lien notes.

The server stared at Nebula for a moment tempted to argue with her, but later conceded, acknowledging the lack of business that funneled their way. So, looking past the Vacuan's age, the server went and fetched Nebula her drink.

"Holy shit Neb. I got you that as a joke, I never thought you'd use it." Octavia said, sounding quite impressed by her leader's actions. "I never figured you for a rebel."

"Ugh." Nebula groaned. "I can't believe we lost."

The trio of NDGO members exchanged concerned glances. "Well, we gave it our all. What more could we have done?" Dew said as the server came back with Nebula's meal.

"We could have won." The NDGO leader frowned as she thanked the server for her plate of dumplings.

The trio shared another glance and then to their male companion who looked seemingly perplexed by Nebula's arrival. "Uh, Lance, this is our leader Nebula. Nebula, this is Lance." Gwen said, introducing the young man.
"Uh, hi." Lance waved. "So, Gwen here tells me you killed a Goliath, that's pretty cool." The resident NDGO dancer nodded before reaching out and sipping her drink.

"Ugh." Nebula spat.

"Forgive her, she had her heart set on winning today." Gwen said, quickly turning her attention back to Lance, hearts for eyes.

"Least you guys competed, right? Must've been cool." Lance said, reaching out and claiming his drink and taking a sip.

"I'm a bit of a stage performer back home, but I've never had that big an audience before."

"Really? Sounds intriguing." He said, causing Gwen to giggle. Seeing this display, Octavia turned to her teammates and emulated gagging.

"We could have won out there today." Nebula said, catching Dew and Octavia's ears while Gwen was blissfully unaware, too busy talking with Lance. "It was three against two. We had Sun on the ropes and we made that stupid mistake. Ugh." She said bitterly before throwing a dumpling in her mouth.

"Neb, I get it, you really wanted to win. But moping about it isn't going to change anything." Dew said as she stirred the contents of her drink. "We just gotta move on."

"Dew, you don't get it." Nebula sighed. "I didn't want to win for 'me', but rather so I could address the world, call for an end to all this crappy tension between humans and faunus. You were there at Grendel, you saw how we were received by its people and what those madmen did. This needs to stop." She declared, reaching out and taking a sip of her alcoholic beverage.

Setting her drink back onto the counter, practically slamming it, Nebula began to laugh, concerning her teammates. She shook her head and sighed once more. "I was a fool to believe I could do it." She continued to shake her head, further sinking into depression. "I'm a Violette. We're destined to lose."

"You're being too hard on yourself, Neb." Gwen spoke up from the other side of the counter. "You led us out of Grendel didn't you? When the professor died, you took charge! You le dus to victory that day!"

"Gwen's right." Dew declared, reaching over and patting her partner on the back. "You aren't doing anything wrong, Neb. We just had crummy luck is all."

"Exactly!" Gwen shouted before reaching out for her neglected drink to take a sip, all the while Lance watched with anticipation. But before she could, a hand reached out and smacked her soda out of her hand. The dancer let out a surprised yelp, quickly gaining her teammate's attention. Gwen turned to the stranger who'd knocked her drink from her hand to protest his actions and demand compensation.

But her words fell on deaf ears as he busied himself with manhandling Lance. The stranger reached out and grabbed Lance by his shirt collar and hoisted him up off the ground.

"R-Russel." Lance gasped.

"The one an only." Russel smirked. Before any of the NDGO girls could ascertain just what was going on, Russel reeled his head back and slammed it forward against Lance's. 
Lance let out a pained cry, his hands instantly shooting up to apply pressure to where he'd been struck. "What the fuck man!" He shouted before Russel loosened his grip, allowing Lance to fall flat on his ass.

"How the hell is it I keep catchin' you up to no good?" Russel questioned as he glared down at the fallen Lance.

"Hey, you can't just go around hitting people!" Gwen shouted, quickly shooting to her feet in defense of Lance. "What's wrong with you?!"

Russel turned his gaze away from the downed Lance to Gwen and eyed the dancer with a raised brow. "You're not from around here are you?"

With Russel momentarily distracted, Lance seized his chance to fight back. The Team WILL boy shot to his feet in an attempt to strike back at Russel. He reeled back his right arm and formed a fist. He then thrust it forward, socking Russel across the jaw.

Russel staggered backward, slightly stunned by the attack. He uttered a quiet curse beneath his breath and spat blood. He'd been in the middle of forming a sentence when Lance hit him, he'd bit his tongue. The Thrush just eyed Lance, a low burning anger in the center of his brain. He was now counting the ways he could hurt his so called 'peer'.

Nebula looked away from her meal to watch the nearby altercation. While Gwen understood his retaliation, she couldn't help but questioned Lance for his actions. The NDGO leader could see something off about the guy. It wasn't the blood running down his nose that had the gears in Nebula's head turning, but rather it was his eyes. There was just something off, something about them that informed hunger.

The NDGO leader momentarily glanced away from the pair to Lance's attacker. Her eyes shot wide, recognizing the young man with the mohawk from earlier. She recalled how the guy insulted a Team of Faunus huntsmen and then created an angry mob with his careless actions, indirectly harming numerous people. Though she didn't know Lance and there was something about him that didn't sit right with Nebula, she had some familiarity with the sleeveless delinquent, knowing him as a troublemaker and appalling racist.

"Seriously, what is your deal?" Gwen questioned Russel, quickly snapping him out of his violent thoughts. The NDGO ballerina stuck up a finger poked him on the chest in order to get him to answer her question.

"Hey, she asked you a question!" Octavia shouted from where she sat by the counter.

Russel glanced at Gwen's poking his person and smacked her hand away. Gwen jumped back in order to get out of Russel's way as he shot forward, quickly grabbing a hold of Lance and tripping him by kicking his feet out from under him. Lance attempted to struggle, but without the support of his legs, he was unable to prevent Russel from slamming his head against the counter.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?!" Dew exclaimed, shocked by the violent act.

Nebula had spared Panini earlier her wrath, due to the fact that she was a wounded combatant as well as the nature of their current argument being anything less than worth the effort. But in this instance, intervening seemed more likely than inaction. This was a fight, an unsanctioned brawl. The boy with the mohawk had struck his opponent while they were looking away. Not to mention, he'd laid a hand on Gwen. She would not be sparing him.
So, Nebula sat up and knocked over her stool. Without a word, she then kicked it at Russel effectively sweeping his legs and causing him to fall onto the stool and crush it under his weight.

Lance picked himself off the ground as the rest of NDGO shot to their feet. The server shouted obscenities, demanding that one of them pay for the stool they'd broken all the while Russel staggered back onto his feet. With him, Russel raised up two of the legs of the stool and held them up like daggers. Russel pointed one in Team NDGO's direction, the other in Lances.

"Stay out of this." Russel uttered lowly as he waved one of the legs threateningly at NDGO.

"We're Huntresses, a little twig isn't going to scare us." Nebula took a step forward, not at all impressed by Russel's show of force. "Now drop it. Or we drop you."

"Never been in a five-way. Could be fun." Russel shrugged off Nebula's threat, earning appalled expressions out of the rest of NDGO.

"Gross." Dew muttered.

"Anyways." Russel turned back to Lance, who stood ready to defend himself. "You really didn't your lesson last time you pulled this shit."

"Not like you can prove anything. You destroyed the evidence." Lance laughed cockily, gesturing to Gwen's drink resting on the ground. Its contents emptied over the grass.

"Do I look like a cop to you? I'm just gonna beat the shit out of you." Russel said before quickly raising one of the broken off pieces of stool, intent on striking Lance.

But before Russel could even attempt to hit Lance, a foreign hand belonging to Nebula reached out and snatched the end of the reeled back piece of the wooden stool. Russel looked at Nebula in surprise, not even seeing her move. And without any effort, the Violette lifted her leg and pressed it against Russel's side and kicked him out of the tent while at the same time loosening his grasp on the leg she held and claiming it as her own.

Russel rolled out of the tent onto the fairgrounds on his back, skidding for the last few feet of the way. He a grunt, the Thrush picked himself up once more and raised the remaining leg in his hand and directed it toward Nebula who was just merging from the tent, the rest of Team NDGO behind her.

"We got your back, Neb." Octavia cracked her knuckles.

"No, I've got this." Nebula raised the piece of the stool as if it were her very own crossbow weapon.

"You've got this? How utterly dehumanizing of you." Russel chuckled as began to step forward, his makeshift weapon still raised ready to counter whatever his opponent could dish out. "I'm not an object ladies."


"Quick with words, but how are you with the swordplay? Or, in this instance, woodplay?" Russel said before lunging forward and striking at Nebula. Nebula blocked the attack, meeting the Thrush with and equal amount of force

"It's impolite to hit a lady, you know." She said as she wiped the blood from the corner of her mouth.
Russel afforded himself a laugh before raising his weapon and using it to point at Nebula's indigo colored hair. "Could've fooled me with that haircut."

"You're one to talk. Nice fern." Nebula smirked at her retort.

"Scathing."

"Kick his ass Neb!" Octavia shouted supportively like a very hyper active punk rock cheerleader. "Beat the fuck out of him!"

As Nebula and Russel did battle with their wooden sticks, Octavia's loud obscenities quickly garnered the attention of nearby patrons at other booths. Once they took notice of the fight between Nebula and the Thrush, a crowd began to grow.

But even as the crowds grew and the fight raged on, Russel made an effort to keep an eye of Lance. The WILL boy stood there amongst Team NDGO looking hot under the collar. He spared glances to Gwen and back to the fight before him. It was an easy enough task for Russel, to divide his attention like the way he was doing, but Nebula was proving to be more capable of an opponent than he anticipated. Every strike he made she countered and every time he was forced onto the defensive she was utterly relenting.

So for the time being Russel was forced to give Nebula his full undivided attention and focus on the fight. But the moment that one eye of his he had watching Lance was averted, the WILL boy took off back to the nearby tent and claimed Gwen's drinking cup before fleeing into the night.

"C'mon Nebula!" Dew shouted, joining her teammate in support of their leader.

"Yeah go, Neb-whoa...!" Gwen exclaimed, hoping to join her teammates in cheering on their leader. But suddenly everything began to cloud around Nebula and the girl lost balance in her legs and fell to the side. Thankfully, Dew and Octavia were attentive enough and caught her.

"Gwen? What's wrong?" Octavia asked, concerned over her partner's unexplained action.

For a moment, Nebula looked away from her fight with Russel and to her teammates just to see what had happened. All she could hear was little snippets of conversation, but from the sounds of things something had happened to Gwen. With Nebula momentarily distracted, Russel struck her across the face with his weapon. The Violette staggered back, completely caught off guard by the attack.

"Huntress, huh? I doubt it. Even a rookie knows not to take their eye off the enemy even for a second."

"Yeah, I know." Nebula gritted before bawling her right hand into a fist. She knelt down and began to channel her aura into her hand, causing it to glow slightly. The next thing Russel knew, Nebula was punching him in the crotch.

The amassed crowd of onlookers all in unison let out pained looks as if they themselves had been struck by the same blow with some male members of the assembled audiences went as far as to cover their own private regions.

"What. The. Fuck." Russel struggled to say as he fell to his knees, an utterly devastated look on his face. He tossed aside his wooden plank and tended to his crushed balls.

"Even a rookie knows not to take their eye off the enemy." Nebula echoed Russel's words as she rose to her feet. "Idiot." She spat before turning to join her teammates in helping Gwen. "Is she
"Alright?"

"I-I'm a-alright-alright." Gwen said unconvincingly as her teammates were forced to hold her up.
"W-Where's Lance? Lance where'd you go?"

"Who cares about him, Gwen what's happening to you?"

"It hasn't even been a day and you're already getting into another scrape." Russel turned his head to
sound of a familiar voice. There, he found Cardin emerging from a nearby crowd of bystanders, his
arms crossed over his chest and a disappointed look on his face. "I could have sworn I left you in
the hands of one and a half capable chaperones."

"Sky's…off with his…boyfriend," Russel did his best to answer his partner's questions. But the
pain was something fierce and almost overwhelming. "Also, Dove jumped off a cliff."

"Sky has a boyfriend? Since when?" Cardin asked sounding surprised.

"I don't know…He's always running off and stuff," Russel grunted. "it's the only plausible
explanation."

"Well I'm happy for him." Cardin nodded approvingly.

"Yeah…at least one of us is getting laid."

"And Dove? He jumped off a cliff?"

"Oh, please. He has an aura. He'll be fine." Russel waved off Cardin's concerns.

"So, what's this all about?" Cardin pointed to Team NDGO as they surrounded their fallen member.

"Ugh, it's fuckin' Lance." Russel sneered as he fought the pain. "He spiked that girl over there's
drink."

"Any evidence to back up that claim?" Cardin asked, not to discredit his partner but rather to help
him. Without any proof of the act then all they said about Lance was speculation. The Grimsby
boy could just as well point blame to the vendor Gwen ate at or to Gwen herself.

"Not a chance, he scrammed with the cup." Russel muttered as he picked himself up off the ground
once more.

"Damn. I've been meaning to pay him back for the way he's been pressuring Velvet." Cardin said,
recalling all the times Velvet had confided in him about Lance's creepiness around her. "This
would've been the thing to finally kick his ass out of Beacon."

"Whelp, least we know where he sleeps at night. We can always hang him upside down nude on
the flagpole again."

"Someone, please call an ambulance! My friend needs help!" Nebula addressed the crowd
sounding uneasy and fearful for Gwen's health.

"That's your cue." Russel directed at Cardin as he continued to kneel on the grass, holding his
swelling junk.

"Right, of course, I have to be the responsible adult." Cardin lamented his current status while he
dug into his pocket and withdrew his scroll to dial emergency services. "You do recall me being
the one charging into a mob club three weeks ago, right?"
"Yeah? Well I was the idiot who volunteered to help you." Russel shot back with a laugh.

Some time passed and the crowd that formed to witness Nebula and Russel fight had grown at the sight of an ambulance arriving onto the fairgrounds. The red and blue lights clashed against the yellow emitted from torches illuminating the grounds.

A man and a woman dressed in red and white disembarked their vehicle, bringing with them a gurney which they placed Gwen on. They rushed the dancer off back to the ambulance with the nominated Octavia accompanying her partner on the ride to the hospital.

With the ambulance taking off, the scene had last its flare and the crowd began to disperse returning to the rest of the fair. When all was said and done Russel, Cardin, Nebula and Dew found themselves sitting down back at the tent where the entire incident began.

"Can I get a bag of ice?" Russel asked the server as he offered him a two lien note. The server, who'd long given up on attempting to acquire compensation for the broken stool, sighed and fetched the Thrush a plastic bag which the server then filled with ice.

Russel gratefully thanked the server for the bag and then limped back to where Cardin was seated. Sitting opposite of his partner at a table, Russel now took the opportunity to apply the bag of ice to his crotch and winced at the touch of cold.

"I tell you, Cardin, I've been thrown through gravestones, run through trees and even punched into the ground with such force that it created a crater, but out of all of those no pain measures up to what I feel now." Russel said as he reclined back in his seat.

"Uh, hey." Russel turned to see Nebula standing beside their table.

"Hi."

"Sorry about punching you in the dick there." She gestured to the back of ice. "I should have known that guy was a creep. There was just something off about him."

"Yeah, well we'll deal with him in due time." Cardin reassured. "What's the paramedics say about your friend there?"

"Well, we don't have the means to properly communicate between my team at the moment, so I can't call our friends for updates, but while the paramedics were here they said they were confidant it was a case of roofies." Nebula answered Cardin's query. "Me and my teammate are going to file a report with the local police, mind spreading the word about this guy?"

"It'll be our pleasure." Cardin smiled, indulging in the concept of ruining Lance.

Nebula then once again addressed Russel, guilt on her face. "Again, I'm sorry about beating the crap out of you. I know now you were just trying to help." She said, a small thankful smile appearing on her face.

"What're you talking about?" Russel simply shrugged. "I just wanted to beat him up."

Nebula just stared at the Thrush for a moment, not sure whether his response was some form of dry wit or just deadpan serious. She just simply nodded in acknowledgement of his help, regardless of his intent and simply turned to depart.

"Hey." The Thrush called out, causing Nebula to stop and spin around on her heel. "You got one hell of a right hook, girl."
"Hmph. It's Nebula, not 'girl'."

"Take care of yourself 'Not Girl'." Russel smirked to himself as he watched Nebula close the distance between herself and Dew.

"Ready to go?" Nebula jotted a thumb at the exit.

"Yeah." Dew shrugged, seeing no point in delaying their departure to the hospital. "You know, I know that guy helped and all, but I still think he's an asshole."

"Oh without a doubt." Nebula laughed.

"She seemed nice." Cardin said, referring to how Nebula carried herself when she apologized.

"Yeah." Russel nodded in agreement as he watched Nebula and Dew depart. "I guess she did."

"By the way. Good luck tomorrow." Cardin said as he waved down the server and ordered a drink.

"What are you talking about?" Russel asked, confused.

"Tomorrows the doubles round. Good luck." The Winchester said as the server handed him his drink.

It took a moment for Russel to fully register Cardin's words, to understand just what he was implying. "What? No, no, no way." The Thrush shook his head.

"Yeah. Both you and Sky." Cardin said as he dug into his pocket and paid the server.

"Oh what the hell Cardin, you saw me out there. They knocked the shit out of me today." The Thrush exclaimed, reminding Cardin of their fight with Team PSYK earlier.

"You also eliminated three of the enemy team. That's not bad."

"Yeah, because you and Sky distracted them long enough for me to set the damn trap!"

"There's no point arguing with me on this, Russel. I already sent in our selection. You're going to do fine."

"...Holy shit you actually believe in me."

"I wasn't lying earlier, Russel. I trust you."

Russel was at a complete loss of words. But then he quickly regained them as he realized it was too good to be true. "You and Velvet are doing something tomorrow aren't you?"

"Maybe."

"You sly dog." The Thrush laughed as he reached over the table and grabbed Cardin's drink.

"...That's my drink." Cardin protested as Russel downed the whole bottle.

"I know."

It was later in the night when Sky arrived at Ozpin's office. Earlier he'd been contacted by the Beacon Headmaster and told to fetch him some documents from town. To say the least, the Lark was surprised to find he'd been sent down a familiar alley near the merchant district.
There, Sky acted out the routine of leaning against a brick wall which somehow summoned Kevin out of the shadows of the alley. It was a confusing experience that left Sky with more questions than answers as Kevin handed him a stack of papers and sent him on his way. What exactly was his connection with Ozpin and for how long had they been working together?

But that was a matter for another day. Sky then spent some time trying to catch a cab back to Beacon, which wasn't an easy task. With the influx of tourists from the other three kingdoms, there wasn't enough to spare, this ultimately forced Sky to make the journey from the city to Beacon, a double digit mile walk.

So when he arrived at Beacon Tower, Sky was a sweating mess. Up the elevator he went, still clutching onto the documents Kevin had given him. He arrived, at Ozpin's door and knocked. He stepped in and found the Headmaster as well as the other members of his inner circle and one other, a greying man that smelt of booze who had a familiar fire in his eyes, the kind that reminded him oddly of Yang Xiao Long.

"What's with the kid, Ozpin?" The greying old crow of a man turned to the Headmaster for an explanation for Sky's presence.

"Sky Lark, allow me to introduce you to Qrow Branwen. Qrow, meet Sky." Ozpin gestured to the pair, sidestepping the veteran Huntsman's question.

"Lark? As in The Larks?" Qrow raised abrow.

"Yes, the archeologists." Goodwitch answered with a nod.

"Alright, now I'm starting to understand." Qrow spun around to his left, turning to face General Ironwood who stood secluded from the rest. "He fucking figured it all out. Jimmy, what fuck?"

"Oh don't look at me." Ironwood glared at his contemporary. "He made it past the death traps in the basement you designed."

"Even the Doom Scythes?"

"Especially the Doom Scythes."

"Anyways, uh, I brought what you wanted, sir." Sky cautiously spoke up, raising the documents he'd carried all the way from the city to Beacon.

"Ah, yes, good work." Ozpin extended a hand and gestured for Sky to deliver the documents to him. The Lark closed the distance between himself and the Headmaster of Beacon seated behind his desk and delivered the parcel of paper. "Kevin Twelve's physical reports are always so detailed. I do enjoy his penmanship."

"His last name's Twelve?" Sky questioned, not really expecting the man in the alleyway to have such an unassuming name.

"Oh, no, that's his designation." Ozpin chuckled. He then straightened himself, once more assuming his serious demeanor and addressed "I have another assignment, Mr. Lark. We've reached a consensus. Tomorrow, after the doubles rounds we need you to bring Pyrrha Nikos to us."

"If I may sir? For what purpose?" Sky asked, not following.

"You know why, Mr. Lark. It's about time we brought Ms. Nikos into the fold…"
"You arrogant bastard." Cinder bit her lip as she watched the live feed. Seated on her assigned dorm room bed, the evil mastermind that was Cinder Fall watched as Ozpin and his inner circle plotted, unaware of her prying eye. "Soon." She told herself. "Soon all you've built will crumble."

"How did your reconnaissance go?" Cinder questioned her two lackeys as they entered their dorm room.

"As well as it could go, Boss." Mercury answered casually while his mint green haired partner broodily made her way to her assigned bed.

"Is there something troubling you, Emerald?" Cinder asked, noticing her underling's mood.

"Russel messed with her again." Mercury said, instantly earning a menacing glare from his partner. "You missed it, he out thiefed her."

"He did not!" Emerald she practically screamed in Mercury's face. But the silver haired young man was unfazed by the display, in fact, he was smiling. Her eyes widened, realizing Cinder had witness the break in her cool collected attitude. She turned her head slowly and saw her leader staring with a cross expression.

"I expect more from you, Emerald. You showed great promise back in Mistral so I will forget this emotional outburst of your." Cinder spoke coldly.

"Thank you, Mistress." Emerald said, practically falling to her and kissing Cinder's feet.

"Now, who do we have to work with?"

"Yang Xiao Long and Weiss Schnee are participating in the doubles round." Mercury said as Emerald provided visuals via the use of her scroll which currently, through the use of the Black Queen virus, was jacked into the Amity Colosseum's computer systems.

"Ah, yes, the local heroes." Cinder smiled at the pieces she had at her disposal. Without a doubt, Team RWBY's members would advance through the tournament, and either one of their chosen representatives would serve well in her plans. "Yes, they'll do nicely."

"If I may, Mistress?" Emerald spoke up, a devilish idea coming to mind as she further scrolled through the list of doubles round participants.

"Speak, Emerald."

"We've acquired knowledge of the Atlesain robot, why not tip the scales of the fight to truly see if its death would gain the reaction we need?"

"You're proposing we change the match ups in tomorrow's fights, but to what end Emerald?"

"To give the people of Remnant a hero." "Imagine that Atlas' robot defeats the villains of this tournament? It'll gain the favor of the world and it'll that much more emotional once they realize the false idol they'd put their faith in."

"You sound as if you have a particular match up in mind?"

Emerald smirked as her browsing came to a halt. On the scroll in her hands, were images of Team CRDL's representatives Russel Thrush and Sky Lark. "As a matter of fact, I do."
I write up outlines for every chapter in every arc. On my outline this chapter had three paragraphs. And somehow that translated to over ten thousand words of story. Because that makes sense.

Whenever I write anything related to Lance, I get uncomfortable. He's a very dark character in what he represents and does. So, I try my best not to have that utter shit person who getting hated on is their entire reason for existing in this story. That's sort of why narratively I've dodged writing the final word on Lance or Panini, because there's more story with those characters further down the line. In this chapter we also witnessed the first meeting of Russel and Nebula. If someone could figure out a ship name for them, that would be great. Part of why this chapter took so long to write was also due in part to rewrites. I just couldn't settle on how their first meeting should go. But then, I realized, Nebula wouldn't like Russel too much during an initial meeting.

And then I feel the circumstances of their meeting is also important to Russel's character. He's not a traditional hero with altruistic views. He's the hero because he's our protagonist. He's very much a liberal individual who I imagine in great support of Freedom of Speech. But, the whole reason he runs into Nebula is because of how he went about it. He didn't show up to save Gwen from getting drugged by Lance, he showed up just to settle a score with the guy. He's not a knight in shining armor.

And we also saw Cardin and how he's dealing with fitting in with everyone now that he's not that guy they all hate. I think I may have confirmed a ship for this story, I don't know. So, next chapter, I hope will be out by the end of next week. It'll focus heavily on Pyrrha as we near the end of this arc.

Also, I'd like to make an announcement. I've decided to extend the story by 5 arcs. This decision was made because, well, I don't want to rush the narrative. That brings our total of arcs to 25 and our overall chapter total to 150 chapters.

'Til next time dear reader! Later days!
XXXIX: The Vytal Festival: Part 4

Welcome back everybody! To another installment of The Darkling Thrush!

As always, I’d like to thank everyone for their words from last chapter and also to wish you all a late Merry Christmas!

Writing for Lance is something I don't enjoy. And I'm sorry for keeping you all waiting, this last chapter had a few things that needed to be worked out. And, I'd just like to thank you all for your support for this story. I can't say it enough, or rather, write it enough because really without you I wouldn't be doing this to the capacity I am now. So, thank you. Thank you all.

Without further ado, here's with the chapter! I promise the next one won't take as long. Other notes down below!

XXXIX
The Vytal Festival: Part 4

It was half past breakfast when Cardin and Velvet arrived at the quaint little diner in Vale. They both would have arrived earlier had it not been for the festival, the booming tourism made the local cabs in high demand to and from the city and fairgrounds. Not to mention there was the awkward sending off of their respective teams to the tournament.

But the pair didn't let that bother them too much. So they couldn't make it to breakfast, big whoop. Brunch sounded much ideal anyways. So then Cardin and Velvet stepped into the diner, catching the place in between shifts with the breakfast crew punching out and the lunch crew checking in.

The wait for a table wasn't too bad. They were seated at a booth near a window, giving them a nice view of the sidewalk and all the civilians walk on by.

"My mother used to take me out into the city all the time." Velvet said, looking out the window to a nearby shopping center. "I always enjoyed the daily routine of it all, walking around and seeing all the city had to offer. All the fresh faces and wonderful colors, it just seemed so lively. Makes you just want to get a snapshot of it all."

"Is that how you got into photography?" Cardin inquired as a waitress finally came around to take their drink order.

"A cup of Earl Grey Tea, please." Velvet said to the waitress before turning her gaze back to Cardin. "Something like that."

"Coffee, please." Cardin said with a thankful smile. The waitress nodded and walked off to fill their order, leaving the pair alone once again. "Well, my mother used to take me and my sister into town too, all the time actually."

"If that's the case, I'm surprised we never ran into each other before Beacon." She said as a small smile formed on her face. "Ships in the night, I guess."

"Yeah, I guess so too." Cardin said quietly as he thoughtfully pondered over the suggestion. By all
reason, both he and Velvet should have met before then, Vale wasn't the largest of the four kingdoms, nor did it possess as many academies as Atlas and Mistral. Cardin had to stop himself from thinking things of wish fulfillment, that the past year and all the hole he'd dug himself into through one action, that it all could have been prevented under the right circumstances.

So Cardin quelled his racing thoughts, of days where he hadn't become Beacon's most recognizable bully and had instead been something else, someone else, lest he start to think of the tiny details of this dream. One minute he'd be thinking of how he could have prevented his antagonistic actions, the next he'd be thinking of how he could have prevented his Sister's death. And that was something he didn't want to be hung up on, not while he was in the company of a friend like Velvet. Well meaning, forgiving and kind, the last thing he wanted was to offend her in any way. So he recomposed his thoughts and turned to the window, hoping to change the topic of conversation to something more pleasant.

"It's a nice day out." He said.

"I like it here in Vale, always sunny and pleasant. When there aren't terrorists running wild." Velvet laughed as she mentally recalled all the crazy events the city of Vale had endured over the past year. Between the White Fang and Roman Torchwick's criminal activities, Velvet couldn't help but feel that the city and its people deserved the breather that came with the Vytal Festival. Where they all could just stop for a moment and enjoy themselves, it'd been one hell of a year.

"How do you suppose the doubles rounds are going for our friends?" Velvet asked.

Cardin couldn't help but smile at the question. "I'm sure everything's alright on their end." He said, sounding totally confident in his teammate's abilities.

"Not at all worried about your team?" Velvet eyed the broad young man sitting across from her.

"You kidding?" He laughed. "Nothing they can't handle."

"Holy Fuck!" Russel exclaimed as spinning blades of death came hurdling towards him.

"Get down!" Sky shouted before he tackled his teammate to the floor, saving him from being struck by the oncoming attack. "How in the hell is she doing that?" His eyes darted towards their opponent, an unassuming curly orange haired girl dressed in an old fashioned blouse and overalls.

Up above overlooking the events fight below, seated firmly behind a desk, microphone in hand, Port commentated with vigor. "Penny Polendina of Atlas Academy has wasted no time on putting the CRDL boys on the defensive."

"In all my years, I have never seen anything so striking." Oobleck said awe struck as he and all the world watched Penny's blades fly through the air, strung around by wire and her own will. "I can only imagine the years she must've put into training, perfecting this fighting style of hers."

"This is bullshit." Russel muttered as he observed the blades turning to fly back at them, obeying the girl's hand gesture.

"Run!" Sky exclaimed before he and Russel shot up from the ground and began to run from the spinning blades of death.

With the blades to their backs, the boys were faced with little option in choice of direction to run to. While initially forced back by the blades, they now found themselves being herded forward, meeting the pair of opponents who remained standing the center of the ring. Sudden feelings of
dread and anxiety fell upon the pair of Russel and Sky as they drew closer with every step. Both Russel and Sky acknowledged the truth, they weren't in control, the enemy team was.

"Russel Thrush and Sky Lark." Penny addressed the two boys drawing near as her partner Ciel Soleil stood idle by, her attention fixated on her wristwatch. "My friend Ruby has told me much about you."

"Nothing bad I hope." Russel muttered as kept his eyes on the blades. Penny was no fool, she kept her weapons elevated, just out of reach, minimizing the possibility of either CRDL boy's chances of severing the connection to the user.

"You are bullies, who harasses faunus and blackmail upstanding friends of hers." Penny said, a smirk forming on her porcelain face as she drew another set of blades from her backpack. The second set of blades soon found themselves airborne, spinning in parallel to the other set.

With the flick of her hands, Penny circled the pair with her weapons, forcing them back to back. Russel and Sky kept their weapons raised, thought their predicament seemed dire, they were sure they could muster up some sort of counter attack.

"Any ideas?" Sky asked over his shoulder as he kept his halberd extended in an effort to keep the blades at bay.

Russel watched as the blades made another pass around, watching as they each moved dynamically in an independent yet unified fashion. The Thrush couldn't help but admire the skill it took to control the weapons, they were wire based and in the hands of a lesser individual would surely have tangled. But instead, Penny had boxed the pair into a trap of her own design.

If either boy were to break, they'd find one of the sets of blades converging on them. Penny has made it apparent with her skill and the weapon's elevation that she could strike at any angle, and that each blade on its own could independently move and be made to attack in coordinated efforts.

"It appears Penny has them cornered." Port commented, earning an agreeing nod from his co-host.

"Goddammit Cardin." Russel muttered under his breath as he recalled his partner's earlier revelation that he'd volunteered the Thrush to participate in the tournament's double's rounds. "This is complete bull."

"I do not claim to understand why people act horrifically as you do. Do you somehow find it empowering, to be able to deem another inhuman? To subjugate another to your will? Is that what makes the life of a bully so attractive and enticing. Do you not feel any regret for your actions?" Penny probed before unleashing the full might of her weapons onto the pair.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. We're terrible people." Russel rolled his eyes, visibly irritated at being accosted by someone he didn't know.

"Moving on." Sky chimed in.

Containing Russel and Sky had been a simple enough task, but actually attacking them proved to be a far more difficult. As it turned out, the CRDL boys were much lighter on their feet, performing impossible leaps and somersaults to avoid the oncoming attacks.

"CRDL isn't out of the fight just yet." Oobleck said as he fiddled with his glasses.

"On your left!" Russel shouted to Sky as he continued to dodge the oncoming blades.
Heading Russel's warning, Sky sidestepped Penny's unseen attack and continued to press forward alongside his teammate. Dodging the blades was a strenuous affair, the pair of CRDL boys were forced to be mindful of their surroundings, for their enemy could attack from any direction. Speed was key, the longer they were in the air or their feet were touching the ground, the easier it was for their opponent to strike.

But these actions only delayed the inevitable. While Sky and Russel pushed their bodies and taxed their minds with the myriad of variables to take into consideration, Penny and her teammate had yet to exert themselves. Penny herself showed no visible signs of weakness, in fact, she hadn't even broken a sweat.

"This is getting us nowhere!" Sky shouted as he slid on the ground, just barely dodging a trio of blades that found themselves impaled onto the floor in his wake. "We need to push!"

"Easier said than done!" Russel retorted as he attempted to sever one of the blades from its wire. The Thrush had allowed one of Penny's to strike him all in an effort to get close enough disconnect the orange haired girl from one of her weapons. But before he could even so much as scuff the blade with his dagger, it retracted backwards.

"What the actual fuck." He spared a glance Penny's way. The girl was simply standing there, waving her hands through the air, puppeteering her weapons. The orange haired girl met the Thrush's gaze and winked. Before Russel even knew what had happened, he found himself being thrown through the air.

Penny had capitalized on Russel's worn resolve and proceeded to unleash a flurry of strikes, sending him flying by the sheer force behind her attacks. The Thrush let out a pained wail as he skidded along the arena's floor, eventually coming to a stop once he'd smacked into a large boulder in one of the biomes that represented CRDL's side of the field.

"Russel?!" Sky shouted in concern for his teammate. But Penny seized the opportunity to get the Lark with his back turned and flung him over to the other side of the field. Sky bounced and rolled before coming to a halt.

The CRDL boys, worn down and with nothing to show for their efforts, were barely hanging on. All they had to do was glance upward to the giant monitor that showed that displayed their aura levels. Sky was at thirty two, but Russel was dangerously close to elimination with a measly nineteen.

This was a sharp contrast to their opponents, who both possessed full bars. The odds were against them entirely, neither of them possessed any ranged weaponry, nor did they have the luxury of pulling off an stunning upset like their last match. Penny and Ciel stood unmoved, because they didn't have to. Penny could just get them from across the field, a fact she continued to exploit.

Penny raised her hands into the air, reeled them back and then threw them forward. Her blades came flying at the tired duo. Russel and Sky both ran for cover behind a pair of large boulders, successfully avoiding the attack. They both took a moment's breather, banking on their cover to deter any other attacks. If she couldn't see them, she couldn't hit them.

"Think we'll get penalized for hiding out in the back?" Russel asked aloud as he crouched behind his boulder. Sky let out a tired breath, he looked over to Russel and shrugged. "Yeah, I wish they sent us a rule book or something."

"They're going to have to come to us." Sky said as he cautiously looked over the boulder to catch sight of their opponents. "Any chance you can rig up another one of those dust explosions?"
"You see, that would imply I would have dust." Russel raised one of his daggers. He reached up with a free hand and unlocked the cylinder casing, revealing it to be empty. "I do not."

Before Sky or Russel could come up with some other half-baked plan to best the pair of Ciel and Penny, a low thudding sound caught their attention. Both CRDL boys peeked over their rocks, and much to their surprise, the found Penny's blades stabbed into them. They exchanged confused looks and wondered just what the Altesian duo were planning.

Then, without warning, the boulders which they used for cover began to rise out of the floor. On the other side of the arena, Penny was holding her arms in the air, using her blades to weaponize the CRDL boys cover.

"This is un-fucking-believable," Russel muttered as he shot a spiteful glare up at the boulder that was now hovering over him and Sky.

And then, without warning, Penny slammed her hands down, with them the boulders. A pair of buzzers rang loudly, signaling both Russel and Sky's elimination from the tournament. Placing a fist in her palm and mockingly bowing, Penny's smile widened. "Thank you for a wonderful time."

As the crowd went wild as the two victors turned to leave the stadium. Russel feebly reached out from under the shattered remains of what was once the boulder, only to get hit in the head by an errant stone. He fell flat on his face and grumbled a curse while medical crews ran to check on the pair.

"That was the most satisfying thing I've ever seen," Emerald laughed.

Seated on a bench in the locker room, killing time while they waited for their own respective match, Emerald and Mercury found themselves watching the aftermath of CRDL's defeat. The medical crews hurriedly attempted to dig the two young men out of the rubble in order to move along with following matches.

"I see you're enjoying yourself." Mercury commented dryly, having spent the past ten minutes watching his partner in crime having the time of her life as she watched Penny pick apart her opponents.

"I was never going to fight him, there's just too much riding on Cinder's plan to screw up on my own vendetta." Emerald said, not once taking her eyes off the monitor in the locker room. "So, I chose simply to claim my vengeance through proxy."

"Easy to say now that the deed is done, I guess." Mercury said, earning a cold stare in response.

"What's your deal, Merc?" She questioned. "This entire time you've been working to undermine me, questioning my place by Cinder's side. Have I offended you in some way?"

"Not more than usual, no." He shrugged.

"Then what is it?" She demanded, eyes narrowing as she awaited a response.

Mercury met Emerald's stare, he thought over the words in his head and moved to speak in defense of his actions. But he didn't, he paused and decided against it, opting to leave his partner in the dark. "Don't we have a match in a little bit?" He asked, turning away.

Emerald continued to stare angrily at her partner. "When me and Cinder found you, you were on the verge of death. You owe us."
"Is that not why I'm here?" Mercury fixed his attention toward the monitor. While the crews worked to remove Russel and Sky, the feed cut to highlights of the battle, which included a close up of Russel shouting in pain as the boulder came crashing down on top of him.

"That's you paying off your life debt to Cinder." Emerald poked the silver haired young man. "The very least you could do for me is quit being an ass." Mercury didn't respond, he simply continued to stare at the monitor. Interpreting Mercury's silence as an admission of defeat, Emerald carried on about with her business, mostly spending her time prepping her weapons.

And Mercury would go on to remain silent, until he and Emerald graced the arena with their presence. There he met his opponents Coco and Yatsuhashi and shared with them some choice words his father taught him, the kind that he used to kill the bastard.

"Ugh." Sky groaned as he pulled himself out of the cot the fairground's infirmary had provided him. "I feel like crap." He said aloud to no one specific.

The Lark looked around to his surroundings and found the infirmary to be vacant, aside for his and Russel's presence. Being one of the first matches of the day had its up sides, he supposed. At least they got first dibs on treatment instead of having to wait with their aches and pains before seeing someone.

The heavily accented woman who'd helped them was off to the left, watching the latest tournament match between the pair of Coco and Yatsuhashi against Emerald and Mercury. And by the looks of things, the battle appeared to be going to the later.

"I feel like some chick in a skirt threw a boulder at me." Sky turned to see Russel lying in his cot staring up at the roof of the tent.

"Yeah, definitely not one of our higher moments." The Lark nodded in agreement.

"We have higher moments?" Russel shot his teammate a questioning look.

"Funny." Sky couldn't help but laugh. He then turned his attention to the woman in scrubs who'd bandaged up their wounds and waved, quickly gaining her attention. "Is it cool if I leave?"

The woman in scrubs gave just shrugged indifferently before returning her attention to the small portable television set. "Guess that's a yes." Sky shrugged at the response before hopping off the cot.

"Any other man who's just been crushed by a giant fuckin' rock would lay up in bed, but not you, Sky." Russel said as he observed his teammate collect his things and prepare to leave. "Got a hot date or something?"

"Or something." Sky said jokingly. He wasn't lying to the Thrush, he was telling the truth. He had something else to attend to. "You're selling yourself a little short. I bet you can walk about now."

"Yeah, give me a minute or two." The Thrush muttered. "Well, don't let me keep you. Go do what you gotta do."

"I'll see you and the others at the thing tonight, right?" Sky asked on the way out the tent.

"Just might." Russel answered as Sky departed.

The day prior, Sky had been assigned the task of bringing Pyrrha to meet with Headmaster Ozpin.
After being inducted into their little 'secret society', The Lark wasn't about to let the old man down. So for the next hour Sky spent his time searching for The Invincible Girl. Conscious of the fact her match was the first of the day, Sky spent most of his time searching between the fairgrounds and Amity Collesseum, thinking she'd either be in the company of friends enjoying what vendors had to offer or supporting her friends in tournament. But Sky found the four-time Mistral champion at neither location, instead, he found her in the halls of Beacon having just returned from dropping her weapons off at the local locker room.

"Hey, Pyrrha!" Sky shouted, quickly catching the girl's attention. Pyrrha turned to greet Sky with a pearly white grin. Of all the people who held some sort of animosity against Team CRDL, Pyrrha had proved to be by far the most forgiving of the boy's actions. This was a fact that Sky couldn't help but appreciate yet question. Though it made talking to her a lot easier, it certainly made him wonder about the girl, seeing as she was without a doubt the most affected by their, rather, Cardin's actions.

"Good afternoon, Sky." She waved politely. "What can I help you with?"

"Just acting on orders, Pyrrha." Sky spoke sincerely, earning a curious look from the girl standing in front of him. "Headmaster Ozpin asked me to go and, well, 'fetch' you."

"Ozpin want's to speak to me?" She asked, sounding surprised.

"Not over anything bad, I assure you." Sky waved his hands defensively. "He just wants to talk with you about something."

Pyrrha eyed the Lark skeptically, though she was one of the more forgiving, she couldn't help but find it a little odd that of all the people sent to send for her, Ozpin would have chosen him. But she pushed those thoughts aside, giving the boy the benefit of the doubt.

"What do you think he wants to speak with me about?" She questioned before the pair began to walk off towards Beacon Tower.

"Not a clue." Sky lied.

The rest of the walk was spent in silence as they made they crossed main avenue, passing by one of Team WILL's not at all sanctioned tours of the campus. They entered the building and caught the elevator and ascended upwards.

Stepping out of the elevator, the pair walked to Headmaster Ozpin's office and knocked before entering.

"You wanted to see me, sir?" Pyrrha asked as Sky walked off to the side of the office. Ozpin chuckled as he gestured to the Invincible Girl, his cane resting at his side. "Well, it comes as no surprise that they've chosen you to move on to the final round of the tournament. Your performance was exemplary."

Humbly, Pyrrha accepted the Headmaster's acknowledgements with a kind smile. "Thank you, Professor Ozpin, but I would have never made it this far without my teammates."

"Personaly, I think it's the other way around." Qrow remarked from where he stood leaning against a column at the back of the room.
"I'm sorry, but I don't believe we've been introduced." She said, attempting to be formal.

"Name's Qrow." He said, sounding rather hostile.

"Qrow is a trusted colleague of mine." Ozpin said, hoping to quell whatever argument was bound to erupt.

Pyrrha looked to Qrow for another moment, eyeing him cautiously before addressing The Headmaster again, "If you don't mind me asking, why have you called me here?"

"Please, take a seat." Ozpin said, casually as he leaned back in his seat. "What is your favorite fairy tale?"

"I'm... sorry?" Pyrrha said visibly confused.

"Fairy tales, stories from your childhood. Surely you must remember some of them." He elaborated.

Pyrrha thought over the question,"Well, there's The Tale of The Two Brothers, The Shallow Sea, The Girl in the Tower..."

"What about The Story of the Seasons?" Ozpin interrupted, leaning forward.

"Well, of course!" Pyrrha exclaimed brightly before reciting the tale. "A callous old man, who refuses to leave his home, is visited by four traveling sisters. The first understands his reclusive nature and urges him to use his time in solitude to reflect and meditate. The second brings him fruits and flowers, tending to his crops and revitalizing his garden. The third warms the man's heart, convincing him to step outside and embrace the world around him. And the fourth and final sister begs him to look at all that he has, and be thankful."

"In return for their kindness, the man grants the maidens incredible powers, so that they may continue to help others all over the world. They graciously accept, and promise to share their gifts with the people of Remnant 'til the end of days. Winter, Spring, Summer, and Fall; the four maidens. My mother loves that story."

"Would you believe me if I told you that one's been around since I was a boy?" Said the old Headmaster.

"You're not that old, Professor." Pyrrha laughed at the suggestion.

But there was no break in the headmaster's demeanor. "Well, would you believe me if I told you it was true?"

The invincible girl watched the old man for a moment, letting the silence settle in the room as she finally felt the pairs of eyes watching her, unsettling her. "I beg your pardon?"

The old Headmaster leaned forward in his seat, pressing his elbows onto the table and placing his hands together. "What if I told you that there were four maidens existing in this world, that could wield such tremendous power, without Dust?"

"You mean... like a Semblance?" Pyrrha said, attempting to make sense of this development.

"Like magic." Ozpin delivered with a smile.

Pyrrha paused for a moment, letting the Headmaster's words sink in. "I..."
"Yeah." Qrow spoke, quickly catching Pyrrha's attention. "First time hearing this, it's pretty crazy."

"You're serious?" Pyrrha questioned, sounding amazed by the implication.

"Do I look like I'm joking?" The Headmaster replied with a straight-face.

"... No." She said quietly, struggling to find the right words. "Why... why are you telling me this?"

Ozpin glanced over to Qrow, who nodded in approval, before looking into Pyrrha's eyes. "We are telling you this, Pyrrha Nikos, because we believe you are next in line to receive the Fall Maiden's powers." He said, causing Pyrrha's eyes grow wide.

"We"? At that moment, the elevator doors open, and she sees Professor Goodwitch and General Ironwood step out.

Straightening his tie, General Ironwood addressed all those present. "Sorry we're late."

The sight of the Atlesian General startled Pyrrha, causing her to look back and forth between all those present. "Wait, what is this?" She questioned, feeling overwhelmed. "Who are you?"

Stepping forward with Ironwood and Qrow, Goodwitch spread her hands and trying to sound reassuring. "You know who we are. We're still the same teachers and Headmasters you met when you arrived at Beacon."

"But we've got a little part-time job." Qrow chimed in.

"We are the protectors of the world." Ironwood said, folding his arms behind his back.

"And we need your help." Ozpin said, almost pleadingly.

A shocked look found its way onto Pyrrha's face. The room fell silent as everyone in looked to her. She gulped, unsure what to say. "What do you need me to do?" She asked.

Ozpin stood from his seat and gestured to the door. "That you follow us."

One by one the assembled group of 'protectors' exited the room with Pyrrha in tow. They called the elevator and descended downward.

"Where are we going?" Pyrrha asked as she nervously rubbed her left arm.

"The vault. Under the school." Sky answered her question, earning a snort from Qrow who held a contentious glare for the boy.

The elevator continued downward through the vertical tunnel of dark green lights. Eventually the elevator came to a stop with its doors opening, allowing the passengers step out. Pyrrha was the last to leave, taking cautious steps into this secret world she'd been inducted into.

Before her was the sight of a large sparsely-lit hallway with the group walking down it. Goodwitch halted for a moment, waits up for her behind the others. Seeing this, Pyrrha quickened her pace, not wanting to keep them waiting.

"I'm sure you must have questions." Goodwitch said as Pyrrha caught up.

"Maybe one, or two..." She said, still taking it in. "I still don't understand. You said I was next in line to receive the Maiden's power. What do you mean by that?"
"The Maidens have existed for thousands of years. But much like in nature, the seasons change. No two summers are alike." Goodwitch said, doing her best to answer Pyrrha's query. "When a Maiden dies, her power leaves her body and seeks out a new host, ensuring that the seasons are never lost, and that no individual can hold on to that power forever."

"So, how does the power choose?" The Mistral Champion questioned.

"Through a series of stupid and convoluted rules." Qrow spoke over his shoulder.

"Qrow." Goodwitch shot the veteran Huntsman a scolding look.

"Hey, don't get mad 'cause I'm right." He said defensively.

Turning her attention back to Pyrrha, Goodwitch began to explain further. "At first, the only thing that was certain was that the powers were specifically passed on to young women. But as time went on, it was discovered that the selection process was much more... intimate."

A look of concern appeared on Pyrrha's face "... Intimate?" She repeated the word, imploring an explanation.

"As we understand it now, when a Maiden dies, the one who is in her final thoughts is the first candidate to inherit her power."

"Unless it's a dude or some old hag." Qrow spoke up, crass as ever. "Then the power goes to someone random, and our job gets a lot harder."

"Why tell me all of this now? Why not wait until I've graduated?"

"Because we've run out of time." Ozpin spoke in a dark serious manner, the kind that sent a shiver down Pyrrha's spine. "I don't know if you've not noticed, but things are getting a lot scarier out in the world. Tensions are high. Grimm are growing stronger, more prevalent. And it's not going to be long before the peace we've been enjoying for so long goes out the window."

"You're not... talking about a war?"

"Not a war between nations." General Ironwood said in order to ease Pyrrha. "The last thing anyone wants is another war."

"We can fill you on the details once we know that you're with us." Qrow aid, once more shooting a hostile look Pyrrha's way. "For now, all you need to know is that one of the Maidens has been attacked. And for the first time in history, part of her power was stolen."

A humming of electricity is caught Pyrrha's ear as the group closed in on their destination at the end of the hallway: a large machine with lit screens hooked up to two rectangular pods, one of which is upright to show through the glass window a young girl dressed in minimal clothing with a burn scar over her left eye and across her face.

Pyrrha stepped forward hesitantly and stared at the girl in the machine. "Is that..."

The old Headmaster heavily sighed. "The current Fall Maiden, Amber."

"She's... still alive." Pyrrha said aloud as she continued to stare wide-eyed at the girl, Amber.

"For now." Ironwood said sounding regretful. "We're using state of the art Atlas technology to keep her stable. But there is a lot about this situation that is... unprecedented."
"What do you mean?" Pyrrha questioned. Having done her best to follow along with the information these 'protectors' had dumped on her, some of the General's wording just didn't match up. "Won't... her power... just transfer to the next host?"

"Look who's been listening!" Qrow exclaimed before turning to Ozpin and whispering, "She is smart."

"Under normal circumstances, yes. But this is a delicate situation. It's not uncommon for the last thoughts of the slain to be of their attacker." Ironwood glanced at Amber. "And to make matters worse, no one's seen the power split like this before. For all we know, it will seek out its other half."

"...Her assailant." Pyrrha murmured, having connected the pieces.

"And that would not bode well for any of us."

Pyrrha lowered her head in thought, before suddenly walking forward and placing a hand on the glass of Amber's pod, staring at the girl inside. "If all of this is true, why keep it secret!? If this girl is so important... if we're truly on the brink of war, why not tell everyone?"

"From what we understand, it used to be common knowledge." Goodwitch said causing Pyrrha look at the woman with a questionable star.

"Excuse me?"

"How do you think legends and fairy tales get started?" Qrow said before reaching into his pants pocket and producing a flask. The Huntsman unscrewed the cap and took a swig of the contents. "Even the craziest ones come from somewhere."

"Our group was founded in order to protect both mankind and the Maidens. Those hungry for power hunted them with the hope of inheriting their strength." Goodwitch said.

"And as you can imagine," Qrow finished his drink. "the ones that succeeded weren't exactly the ones you'd want to have unimaginable power."

"And so our brotherhood chose to remove the Maidens from the public eye. "Ironwood paced around the machine, eyeing the comatose Amber. "Allowing their existence to fade away into legend."

"The things we're telling you go against hundreds of years of human history and religion." Sky said earning another disapproving look from Qrow. "No one would want to believe us. It would cause an uproar."

"It would cause panic." Ozpin muttered. "And we all know what that would bring to clawing at our Kingdom's walls. Which is why we would like to..."

"I'll do it." Pyrrha said as she stares at the ground. "If you believe that this will help humanity...then I will become your Fall Maiden." Silently the 'protectors' turned to each other with wary faces. "That's what you wanted, isn't it?"

"It is, but I'm afraid it's not that simple." Ozpin stepped forward. "Given Amber's condition, you won't be able to inherit her power naturally. However, General Ironwood believes he has a solution."

"For the past few years, Atlas has been studying Aura from a more scientific standpoint; how it
works, what's it made of, how it can be used." "We've made... significant strides. And we believe we've found a way to capture it."

"Capture it and cram it into something else." Qrow gestured to Pyrrha, who took a moment to realize the meaning of his words. "Or in your case…"

Pyrrha turned to face Ironwood, a mortified look on her face. "That's..."

"Classified."

"Wrong!" She exclaimed.

Ms. Goodwitch shot a glare Ironwood's way. "The feeling is mutual. But desperate times call for desperate measures."

"And these are indeed desperate times." Ironwood folded his arms over his chest as he defended his actions. "We can't transfer Amber's power to you, but we can give you what those powers are bound to."

"...Her Aura." Pyrrha muttered.

Ozpin turned to the Invincible Girl, who now appeared to be anything but invincible given the shaken look on her face. "Her life would become intertwined with yours. The question is..."

"What's that going to do to you?" Sky said, finishing the Headmaster's sentence and earning another scornful look from Qrow.

"You have an important decision before you, Miss Nikos." Ozpin spoke as he and the others observed Pyrrha approach the machine. "There's no guarantee this transfer will work. And there's no telling if you will be the same person if it does. I advise you to take time on this matter. But understand that before the Vytal Festival is over, we will need your answer."

Pyrrha didn't respond, instead she simply placed her hand on the glass separating the maiden from her, the potential replacement. Seeing Pyrrha's scared expression reflected on the scarred face of the dying girl, Ozpin gave one final warning.

"The assailant that attacked the Fall Maiden has made their first move. And there's no telling when their next move will be."

Before the doubles rounds had begun, it was made aware to numerous of the tournament's participants that there was to be a gathering of sorts. Held as a private ceremony at Beacon Academy's ballroom later into the day, after the final doubles match had concluded, the future defenders of humanity hailing from opposite ends of the world met, finding themselves welcomed to a feast in honor of them.

So there stood Russel in the doorway, getting patted down by one of those Atlesian war robots. Security was to be expected, seeing as all the tournaments competitors were expected to attend the gathering. Word on the street was that the Vytal Festival inspired a billion lien gambling empire. Not to mention there were all those old grudges held between kingdoms. If anyone wanted kick a hornets nest worth of international incidents, this was the place.

After being cleared by the mechanized soldier, Russel entered the room. It was The Dance all over again in terms of the spread, food was stacked on top of each other on tables in one side of the room and drinks set up in a far off corner.
By all accounts, Russel was one of the late arrivals. His aura wasn't as strong as the next guy's, which meant triple the time it would take for recovery. That also meant he'd spent quite the amount of time laying in that cot in the infirmary. To say the least, he had worked up quite the appetite.

Making his way to the buffet table, Russel was careful not to run in, conscious not to start some sort of argument and grabbed himself a plate. He passed by groups congregating around the more tantalizing of the present delicacies, settling for some chicken legs left alone of to the side.

Filling his plate, Russel took a moment to savor the smell, bringing to mind days back on the farm in Oakwood. Taking his plate, Russel walked off to the side in search of either his team or somewhere to sit. But in his search for a nice quite place where he could enjoy his meal uninterrupted, a voice called out to the Thrush, quickly gaining his attention.

"Russel." He turned, finding Mercury of all people approaching him with a wave.

"Mercury." Russel waved back before reaching onto his plate. Seeing as he wouldn't be finding place to sit anytime soon, eating while standing seemed to be the best way to go.

"I saw you had one hell of a match today, you good?" Mercury asked, a surprising hint of concern in his tone.

"A little banged up, but I'll live." Russel said before taking a bite out of the chicken leg. "Yatsuhashi’s an upperclassman, couldn't help but notice he gave you a run for your money."

"Eh, he wasn't tough." Mercury smirked.

"I don't suppose you're here for small talk." Russel said, attempting to skip past the formalities and get to whatever it was that brought Mercury to meet him.

"Just checking up on a friend, that's all." He said as if there were nothing to it.

"Friend?" Russel raised a brow at the word. "I wasn't under the impression we were friends."

"Kindred spirit then." Mercury smirked as he placed a hand on Russel's shoulder.

Russel stared at Mercury, a half-eaten chicken leg in hand. "You hitting on me?" He questioned, arching a brow.

"What? No!" Mercury exclaimed, quickly recoiling his hand and catching the attention of several onlookers.

"Cause, it sounds like you're hitting on me."

"Well, I'm not." Mercury assured as more eyes were aimed their direction.

"I mean, it's flattering, but I don't swing that way."

"I'm not hitting on you..."

"Had me fooled."

"Alright, enough, forget it. I was just trying to be nice is all." Mercury threw his hands up into the air before turning and walking away.

"Uh huh, yeah, sure, 'nice'." Russel muttered before taking another bite out of the chicken leg.
"Hey Mercury, what's up?" Ruby called out to Mercury as he walked on by, completely oblivious to her presence. "Talk later then? Cool? Cool."

With that business resolved, the Thrush returned his attention to finding a secluded spot in the ballroom to set down and dig into the contents of his plate. "Can't go a day without messing with someone, can you?" Out of the corner of his eye, Russel spotted a familiar out of the bottle redhead approaching him. He turned and found Marie-Anne of all people standing by the wayside.

"I thought this was a tournament participant only thing." Russel said, calling into question Marie-Anne's presence.

"It is and I was." Marie-Anne shrugged as her gaze lazily fell to the cup of juice in hand. "My team got eliminated in the opening rounds."

"How bad was it?"

"Enemy took me, Nero and Ezekiel out in the first couple of minutes. The only one of us who put up a fight was Danny." Marie-Anne sighed. "All in all it was a complete embarrassment."

"Sure you aren't talking about the hair dye?" "Aren't you a little concerned people might confuse you for Pyrrha, or is that what you were going for?"

"Fuck off, Russel. I'm just trying to have a friendly conversation with you." Marie-Anne rolled her eyes.

Russel simply eyed the fellow Oakwood native with a skeptical look. "Did someone spike the punch?"

"I wish. I could go for a drink." Marie-Anne grumbled before taking a sip out of her cup of juice.

"Last time you had a drink, you sent an angry mob after my ass." Russel muttered, recalling the incident back during the dance.

"How did Lance sneak a keg on campus anyway?"

"What was that? Speak louder, I can't hear that apology."

"Well you sure as shit aren't getting one."

"Hmph, typical." Marie-Anne scoffed. "If you want to know how he did it, why don't you just go and ask him?"

"Because he's not here. Team WILL didn't participate in the tournament."

"He roofied a girl last night."

"Who?"

"Lance. He roofied some girl visiting from out of town."

"I find that really difficult to believe coming from you. You're not exactly the most trustworthy of people Russel."

"You don't have to take my word for it, you could just ask the girl he drugged. She's sitting right over there." Russel pointed off to the side with the chicken bone. Seated at a table on the far side of the ballroom, sat Gwen Darcy amongst the rest of her team and other Vacuo participants.
"Speaking of which, if you'll excuse me."

Waving goodbye to Marie-Anne, Russel set off in the direction of Team NDGO. His approach was practically noticed a mile away by several other Vacuo participants, most notably those of Team PSYK, who'd he and his team had bested in combat the previous day.

It felt like Russel had stepped into a wolf’s den as he found all eyes on him. A confrontation wouldn’t have been unexpected, but with the Atlesian Knights standing watch, Russel doubted they’d even reach him let alone attempt. That’s the thing with authority figures, they did a great job of suppressing criminal intent standing in front of them, but it never got to the heart of the issue. If Russel were to walk outside the tent, he had a suspicious feeling that he’d be followed by one of the PSYK kids, who’d share with him their thoughts about him blowing them up.

But Russel pushed that thought aside, he'd deal with it should it occur. For now, however, he busied himself with moving through the assembled Vacuan participants to reach Team NDGO. And he was noticed quickly by the quartet of girls and their friends. It was the familiar indigo haired young woman from yesterday who broke apart from the group to meet Russel.

"Nebula." Russel greeted the leader of Team NDGO.

"Fern." Nebula returned with a grin.

"That's cute." Russel chuckled. "Any chance for a word in private?" He asked, mindful of those others present.

Nebula nodded, obliging his request. The pair stepped aside from the others just fare enough to carry a conversation out of earshot. "Can I help you with anything?" She asked.

"Just checking in to see how your friend is doing." He shot a glance Gwen's way, noticing how the girl sat conspicuously a seat away from any guy at the table.

"She's doing alright, thanks." Nebula said, lacking any double meaning in her words.

Russel looked back to Gwen, watching as she fidgeted in her seat. He observed as Brawnz Ni of Team BRNZ spoke to the remaining trio of NDGO as a whole, yet Gwen was unable to meet the boy's eye. "She doesn't look alright."

"It's going to take a little bit for her to readjust." Nebula sighed. "That was the first time a boy took an interest in Gwen like that. It was a traumatizing experience."

Russel frowned. "Well, hopefully she can move on from this one day."

"Yeah." She nodded in agreement. "Any luck with finding the guy?"

"Lance is a worm. He'll turn up sooner or later, they all do when it rains."

"Am I supposed to believe you're the rain in that analogy?"

"I was hoping the rain would symbolize the good folks at VPD, given that you provided a statement with them, of course."

"We did, but I doubt they'll get him before the end of the festival."

"That's unfortunate."

"Yeah." Nebula muttered before turning to leave and rejoin her friends. "Well, thanks again for
checking in, Fern."

"Russel." He said, causing Nebula to stop in her tracks.

Nebula spun back around to face Russel. "Hm?" She questioned.

"It's Russel. Not 'Fern'."

Nebula glanced up at the top of Russel's head, gesturing to his green colored mohawk. "I think I'm going to stick to calling you Fern."

"Pfft, whatever." He muttered before walking away, once more in search of either a place to sit or the rest of his team.

Nebula returned to her table, taking her seat left vacant beside her Partner Dew. The blonde turned to her leader and asked of why Russel had stopped by to speak with her. Though his actions the previous night were intent of aiding their friend, Dew was opposed to how he handled the situation, thinking him more of a thug than a knight in shining armor.

And Nebula couldn't help but agree with the sentiment. A more capable individual motivated by genuine altruism would not only have saved Gwen from Lance but also ensured he wouldn't have escaped either, that he would face the justice he deserved. But that wasn't what happened then. There's was no knight to come to Gwen's aid, but rather it was Russel.

"He just wanted to know if Gwen was alright." Nebula said, finally, ending the conversation topic as a whole. With that done, the group resumed their previous discussion, with Nebula glancing to Gwen, thankful that at least someone came to her aid.

Russel walked about for minute or two, before being flagged by Sky. As it happened, all of Team RWBY, CFVY, JNPR and the remaining CRDL trio had sectioned of an entire corner from the rest of the tournament participants.

Everything was sunshine and rainbows by the looks of things. Though Coco and Yatsushi appeared to be glum over their elimination from the tournament, not even that could prevent them from being happy for their friends, Yang and Pyrrha who had won their matches against Team FNKY and the unfortunately named Team DONG.

And that was fine with Russel. Like the others, he congratulated the two victors and wished them both luck in tomorrow's one-on-one matches. The Thrush shouldered the odd joke about his 'crushing defeat' from Yang and did little to disrupt the group. He just sat and observed, too busy eating a leg of chicken.

"Yang, Pyrrha, it's all up to you now." Cardin said, raising his cup to the duo. Soon, all the others joined in, save for Russel, who didn't possess a drink of his own, so he simply raised a half-eaten chicken leg. "Make Beacon proud."

Yang accepted the sentiment, as did Pyrrha. But The Invincible Girl couldn't do so, not without thinking back to today's events. She snuck a glance towards Sky while the others weren't looking. They were all too engrossed in discussing tomorrow's struggles, while she herself dwelled on a decision that would change her life forever.

There's a big underlying theme with this arc and will also be prominent in the next, which will become greatly elaborated with next chapter. I'm over thirty chapters in now, and its
about time Russel received some validation. That's been a long running issue with him since attending Beacon which harkens back to his decision to even go in the first place. Cause Russel is something of a contradiction, he says racial slurs, blackmails people and has even killed others but at the same time he was Author X. He wrote a number of works about goodwill for others. And so, we're getting close to making sense of it.

Cardin/Velvet.

For the Pyrrha scene I primarily adapted the dialogue from a transcript of the episode and gave some lines to Sky, seeing as he's now apart of the group he'd have some things to say as well. There's also actually a reason for why Sky's involved with Ozpin's secret society, other than to help with his own character arc. You see, I write this conscious of the show and I don't know what the writers have planned further down the line. Sky's sort of like, the easy fix, he'll just know everything that the show reveals. It's perfect.

That's pretty much it. I don't have much else to say, other than I think the Geist doesn't work within RWBY. I've been thinking about this for a while. Like, it possesses fucking rocks, and becomes a rock monster, as opposed to every other Grimm we've seen that's just a ravenous beast, the Geist is a ghost. Like, I can accept a Dragon Grimm, and Not-The Serpant from Avatar, because that's at least they're animals. But The Geist is a fucking ghost.

Well, anyways, hopefully I will have the next chapter finish soon, as well as the interlude and I might just be able to kick off the next arc before school starts up again. 'Til next time, dear reader! Later Days!
Welcome one and all to another chapter of The Darkling Thrush!

This chapter was supposed to be submitted on New Years eve. But, I didn't get to finish it before then. Sorry.

Anyways, on with the chapter!

XL

The Vytal Festival: Conclusion

It was the final day of The Vytal Festival and it began with tragedy. Of the hundred teams from the four kingdoms and their four Huntsmen Academies, only eight participants remained. Of those eight were Yang Xiao Long and Mercury Black, the first match up of the day. And it was Yang who prevailed.

But then the world witnessed Yang lash out and strike at her defeated opponent unprovoked. For her actions, Yang was disqualified from the competition, essentially under house arrest in her room, while Mercury was whisked away by a pair of paramedics.

There's outrage, a rising tension amongst the people. Unsportsmanlike conduct is ill befitting of a Huntress in the making, shouts the media who scramble to ruin a once famed rising star for ratings. All the while those close to Yang worried over her insistence that her actions were self-defense.

In the afternoon of the day, Pyrrha sat alone outside the dining hall, head bowed low, her chin an inch away from her collar bone. There's a breeze in the air, carrying with it the scent of pine from the surrounding forests. And with the air a single orange leaf comes fluttering by, before collapsing onto the cobblestones by Pyrrha's feet.

Yang and her eventual battle in the competition are not the only things weighing heavily on the four time Mistral champion's mind. A lazy, barely attentive glance to the fallen leaf, and those fall colors brought upon the memory of Amber in her comatose state laying in that machine.

"Hey." Jaune's voice called out, snapping her out of her thoughts. Pyrrha turned to see her smiling friend with a large cone of cotton candy. "I-It's no green goop, but I think it still might do some good."

"Um, right. Thank you, Jaune." She said, staring at the offered treat.

Jaune's beam fades as he sees her still-tormented face, and looks to the far end of the building as Nora and Ren come around, the latter of which carrying a cotton candy, a tub of popcorn, and a drink to sip on. Of the two, it was Nora who was conscious of the private moment. With only a stare shared between them, Nora quickly grabbed Ren by the arm and directed him elsewhere, giving the pair their privacy.

So then Jaune took a seat beside his partner on the floor and held up the sugary treat in the air and stared at it. There was a lot left unsaid between the pair, especially after what happened on the night the Memoria Crime Family fell. It was them in an alleyway with their friends. She confessed
to him how she felt, how she truly felt. A fact he and several others had been aware.

But simply knowing and experiencing were two different things. For the first time, someone actually showed genuine interest in him and Jaune had finally realized he'd been taking his partner for granted.

"You were the first person to ever believe in me, you know that?" He said, causing Pyrrha look up at him. The knight laughed to himself as he'd stumbled over the words. "Even when I told my parents I was going to Beacon, they told me not to worry if I ended up having to move back home. How depressing is that?"

"I'm sure they didn't mean-" She suddenly paused at the feeling of Jaune's hand being placed upon hers.

"I guess... I'm just trying to say that... you've always been there for me... even when I didn't deserve it." He said, smiling slightly. "And I can tell there's something on your mind, so... I don't know. How can I help?"

"You're already doing it." She said as her astonishment gave way to contentment. And then she leaned over, nestling her head against the boy's shoulder. A smile found its way onto Pyrrha's face and for a long moment as they sat there in each other's company her plight was all but forgotten. But then an additional autumn leaf came floating by, joining the first, causing Pyrrha's expression darken once more.

"Jaune?"

"Hm?"

"I don't know what to do." She said, pulling away from the JNPR leader.

"W-What do you mean?" He raised a brow in confusion.

She thought for a moment, thinking about how to confide in Jaune without revealing the truth of what plagued her. "Do you believe in destiny?" She turned to her friend with pleading emerald eyes.

"Um... I-I don't know. I guess that depends on how you view it." Jaune said, taken aback by the question.

Pyrrha paused for a moment. She thought of all the people she'd met, whom she'd learned from, those who'd shaped her world view. From her parents, to her teachers, to even a lone Thrush standing on rooftop and his defiant views of the world. It was these moments, these experiences that had made Pyrrha the young woman she was now. "When I think of destiny, I don't think of a predetermined fate you can't escape. But rather... some sort of final goal, something you work towards your entire life."

"Okay. Uh, yeah. I can see that, sure." Jaune nodded, doing his best to follow along.

"Well..." She paused struggling to find the words. "What would you do if something came along that you... never expected? Something that had the potential to stand between you and your destiny?"

"Like what?"

"Or what if you could suddenly fulfill your destiny in an instant, but at the cost of who you were?"
She continued, the stressed look on her face causing Jaune to look upon her with worry.

"Pyrrha, you're not making any sense." Jaune Said, leaning over and placing a hand on her shoulder.

"None of it makes sense!" She shouted, quickly standing up as if to run from his touch. This was supposed to be a moment she'd dreamed of, a moment that could have led to more between herself and this young man whom she'd come to adore. But given all that had been revealed to her, Pyrrha was spinning wildly out of control. "This isn't how things were supposed to happen!" She shouted on the verge of tears.

"I'm sorry! Please, I-I'm just trying to understand what's wrong." Jaune said, finding his way to his feet as well.

"I've always felt as though I was destined to become a Huntress - to protect the world." She sighed. "And it's become increasingly clear to me that my feelings were right." A sad smile crept formed on her face. "But...I don't know if I can do it."

"Of course you can." Jaune took a step forward. "The Pyrrha Nikos I know would never back down from a challenge. And if you really believe it's your destiny to save the world...you can't let anything stand in your way." He said confidently. But instead of the relief the blonde knight had intended with his words, Pyrrha appeared absolutely devastated. She placed a hand over her mouth and began to cry.

"Pyrrha?" He said, sounding confused. The Invincible Girl wasn't so Invincible after all.

"Stop..." She turned away.

"Did I say something wrong?" Jaune continued to approach.

"STOP!" She shouted before holding out her hand. A black energy encircled it, signifying the use of her semblance. Before Jaune could even comprehend what was occurring, the knight was pulled back by his armor, pinning him up in the air against one of the dining room's columns.

"Jaune!" Pyrrha gasped before lowering her hand, causing the blonde knight to fall to the ground. "I'm... I'm sorry..." She said as tears began to streak down her cheeks. Without another word, Pyrrha turned on her heel, and ran. She ran as fast as she could, unable to face the boy she adored so much.

"Pyrrha, wait!" Jaune shouted, outstretching an arm as if he could reach out and stop her. But she was so far away now, and there was nothing he could do to stop her. Jaune just faced the ground, unable to determine what it was he did to cause her to lash out at him, to run away.

"I don't trust him." Qrow muttered as he leaned against one of the columns in Ozpin's office. "There's just too many coincidences. Between all the crazy shit this past year, our enemy is lying in wait and this kid joins our ranks? There's got to be something more."

"You're concerns are understandable," Ozpin admitted from where he sat behind his desk. He glanced to his computer, reading messages as he continued his conversation with the veteran huntsman. "But rest assured, Mr. Lark checks out. You needn't worry, his intentions are genuine."

"I don't care if his parents are archeologists. It's still extremely concerning to know this guy just pieced everything together right under our noses." Qrow scoffed. "And how did he even think you were involved? How'd he know to come to us? From some old dusty books in the library?"
"A yearbook, actually." The headmaster said smugly.

"Monty above." The dusty old crow sighed. "This isn't going to end well, Oz. If some first-year student could figure any of this out, you can only imagine what our enemy has been doing behind our backs. For crying out loud, we're supposed to be the 'protectors' of the world. We can't even protect ourselves at this point."

"That's why we must remain ever vigilant." Ozpin said, not once removing his gaze from his computer. On the screen before the headmaster was a message from one of his numerous informants across Remnant.

Qrow remained silent, having taken notice of Ozpin's silent reading. The senior huntsman simply watched as the playful smugness on the old man's face disappeared, replaced by a quiet dread.

"What's wrong?" Qrow asked.

"Kevin Twenty-Two's latest report." Ozpin muttered lowly. "There's something going on in Venezier."

"Venezier?" Qrow raised a brow in confusion. "We talking about the same Venezier?"

"Our agent won't elaborate about the specifics, but he's requesting assistance." Ozpin leaned back in his chair and glanced to Qrow while he stroked his hairless chin. "Thoughts?"

"Our forces are spread thin as it is." Qrow said grimly. "Not to mention, with The Vtyal Festival proving to be the most opportune time for our enemy to strike, we haven't the man power to spare."

"True." The Headmaster nodded in agreement. "But we need to act."

"I can always go." Qrow suggested, placing a hand on his holstered scythe. "I'll set out now, be there by dawn and settle whatever business before noon tomorrow."

"No, you're needed here. There's too much at stake. And besides, I know just who to send." Ozpin smirked before logging off his computer. The Headmaster grabbed his cane and stood from his seat and began to head to his office's door. "I believe it's time we put an end to the question of Mr. Lark's loyalty, wouldn't you say, Qrow?"

"Then just call him." Qrow groaned, not seeing the necessity in meeting with Sky in person outside the office walls.

"I have some other matters to attend to, involving a rather frank discussion with one of my students." Ozpin said over his shoulder.

"You can't be serious, Oz? Yang's been through enough today." But before the Huntsman could protest further, the Headmaster was already a foot out the door.

"I wasn't talking about Ms. Xiao Long."

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It was later in the day when things begin to slow down at the fairgrounds. After the morning incident with Yang and Mercury, the matches were momentarily postponed, relegating those in attendance to move down from the floating colosseum in the sky back down to the ground. But now the tournament would continue, with Sun Wukong fighting against one of that Atlas fellow in the power armor.
But while all the people returned the stadium, which left the fairgrounds relatively peaceful to those such as Russel. The Thrush found himself leaning against a nearby pole used to prop up one of the vendor's tents, waiting patiently for Sky to conclude his purchase of some souvenir.

"Thirty lien for a shirt?" Russel could hear Sky say, sounding quite agitated. "That's highway robbery!"

"Hey, you want the shirt or not buddy?" Replied the unamused vendor, who sounded like he'd spent half a life smoking six packs of cigarettes a day.

"Ugh. Fine." Sky said, before being followed by the sound of a cash register ringing to a sale.

Russel eyed his teammate with an arched brow as Sky exited the tent, a white t-shirt in hand. 
"What was that all about?" The Thrush questioned, jotting a thumb to the tent as he kicked off the pole.

"I got robbed." Sky fumed.

"You didn't have to buy the shirt, you know?" Russel pointed to the article of clothing in Sky's hands.

"Oh, but I did." Sky said, raising the shirt for Russel to see. On I was an image of four silhouetted figures, of which resembled that of Team CRDL. "Turns out they were selling team shirts all along, I just had to get one."

"They're selling shirts of us?" Russel said, genuinely surprised.

"Not just us, but of everyone who's competed in the festival." Sky said, a matter of fact. "But it's so incredibly expensive. Team RWBY's shirts are going for fifty."

"I'd assume it'd be the opposite after what just happened with Mercury." Russel shrugged.

"Actually, it's quite the opposite. Given that any memorabilia of Yang would more likely be discontinued due to her controversial actions, all merchandise featuring her would essentially be double its initial value."

"Economics is bullshit." Russel scoffed.

"Quite." A older voice, one familiar to both boys, caught their attention. Both CRDL boys turned on their heels, finding Ozpin approaching.

"Uh, Headmaster Ozpin?" Sky asked, still confused over the Headmaster's presence. As long as Sky had known the old Headmaster, which was admittedly shorter than he'd have liked, the Lark had come to know the man to be secretive who rarely made such public appearances. And that worried Sky greatly.

"Headmaster." Russel addressed Ozpin wearily, watching as the old man approached with his cane lightly sinking into the soil with each step.

"Mr. Lark, Mr. Thrush." The Headmaster nodded. "Just the two young men I wanted to see."

"Uh huh." Russel muttered, eyeing the man carefully.

"Since when do you go on strolls?" Sky asked, still confused over the Headmaster's presence.

"Like I said, I wanted to speak with you both." He said simply before fixating his attention on Russel. "When last we spoke, I asked a question. Do you recall what it was?"
Russel frowned, recalling the time he'd been hauled to meet with Ozpin after kicking Lance down a flight of stairs. "Somethin' about a very black and white view of the world."

"My exact question was, whether or not you saw your actions, then, as being good or evil. A simple question. But then you said that they were 'yours and yours alone' and left it at that." Ozpin said with a scolding undertone to his words.

"Where is this going, Ozpin?" Russel's eyes narrowed.

"I'm getting to that." Ozpin said as he met Russel's stare. "Since then I've sat back and watched, deciding what to make of you. I witnessed firsthand your actions during the dance, and then I heard from Professor Port all about you and Mr. Winchester's outing without supervision against the White Fang. And then after that, the incident with the Memoria crime family."

"My greatest hits, eh?"

"Then I saw that little fiasco of yours two days ago. You created an angry mob. "And then the incident with the NDGO girl and Lance-"

"You know about Lance?" Russel said, surprised. "Then why haven't you done anything? Why haven't you called the law down on his ass? We both know you can."

"No, the real question is, why haven't you?" He leaned forward, "Russel, we're Huntsmen, defenders of humanity. You were the first response and you failed, miserably."

"You can't be serious." He uttered lowly.

"My speech to your class on the first day, do you recall it? I said I saw wasted effort. That's what your actions were, wasted effort. "We're Huntsmen, Russel, we protect people, no matter the cost. You failed."

"I stopped Lance." Russel affirmed, doing his best not to raise his voice. After all, this was Headmaster Ozpin he was speaking to, one wrong move on his part and he could very well find himself ejected from Beacon. "And yet he got away, free to run off and attempt again on some other poor unsuspecting girl." He countered.

Russel's mouth fell open slightly as he stared at Ozpin, a disbelieving look on his face. "You could call on the whole Atlesain army to gaff up a bunch of mobsters, but you can't round up one Huntsman in-training?"

"The Memoria was a different matter." The Headmaster retorted. "There was proof of their criminal activities. You allowed Lance to flee with the evidence to convict him."

"We have NDGO's testimonies." Russel muttered.

"Which could easily be thrown out. Without the physical evidence, a good lawyer could merely attribute her symptoms to that of post-battle injuries sustained from fighting in the festival. And they wouldn't stop there, they'd discredit you as nothing more than a thug, because all you ran in fists first."

"I'm only a Huntsman in-training."

"You don't get to make that excuse." The Headmaster snapped. "Your actions in Oakwood, running
off alone without your senior Huntsman and then running off to the Memoria nightclub, it's all the same, Russel. You have all the potential in the world, just like the rest of your peers, but if you continue to act in this manner, I can't say for certain what your future will be."

"A Huntsman can't have baggage, Russel," Ozpin said finally as he stared down Russel. "his own weight, there's just no room for it. He's already got the weight of humanity on his back. No more mistakes, are we clear?"

There was a long pause of Russel's part. It was to be expected, he just got chewed out in public by his own Headmaster. And what made him mad as hell was the fact he understood Ozpin's point of view. If he'd handled the Lance situation differently, then no one would have to worry about that guy ever again. So The Thrush caved with a heavy sigh. "Sure, yeah, whatever."

"Glad to hear it." Ozpin said with a genuine smile, as if the past couple minutes of heated lecture had never happened. "You're dismissed." He said giving a nod for Russel to leave.

The Thrush just eyed the Headmaster with another confused look on his face. He'd allowed Sky to sit in on his little chat, but wouldn't allow he himself to be present for his and Sky's conversation. And the truth of the matter was, Ozpin didn't need Sky present for Russel's scolding, he could have sent him away just as he was doing to Russel now. He didn't only want to lecture Russel, but he also wanted to humiliate him in front of a peer.

And it was upon that realization that Russel broke out laughing. The smile that had graced Ozpin's face disappeared instantly as he watched Russel depart with that mocking laugh of his. Russel had allowed him the final word in their dialogue, but he refused to leave Ozpin with a true sense of accomplishment.

Ozpin waited for a minute longer than he should have, waiting for Russel's voice to leave his ears. He then turned to Sky, an apologetic look on his face. "I'm sorry you had to see that."

"Uh, yeah, I feel real awkward about that." The Lark nodded along. "So…what's up?"

"I'll tell you, back at Beacon Tower, of course." Ozpin said, before turning to head back the way from where he came. "There, I'll tell you the details of your mission."

"Whoa, wait, what? My mission?" Sky exclaimed as he hurried along to catch up with the Headmaster.

"Yes, Mr. Lark." The old man glanced at Sky, a smile on his face. "You're going to Venezier."

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When Nebula and the rest of Team NDGO had left Vacuo to participate in the Vytal Tournament, they arrived on the high of claiming a bitter sweet victory against an army of Grimm. And once faced with a life or death, fight for survival situation and emerging victorious, they felt as if they could take on all the world had to offer. And in Nebula's case, she believed she could win the tournament, that she could overcome the stigmas associated with her family and affect change all by herself.

But then NDGO had been eliminated, all because of a simple, avoidable, misstep. Defeat was something every Violette was bound to know, that was a truth Nebula had refused to accept, but given the events of this year's festival and the soul crushing feeling in her gut, it was one she found herself unable to avoid.

And if that wasn't bad enough, some guy had tried to hurt Gwen, right in front of them and they hadn't even known. Gwen didn't want to talk about it, even though her friends could see how much
she was hurting over it. She was a dancer, a performer, one who wished to be in the spotlight, but now all she did was recede into herself, and that had them all worrying.

So, faced with the realization that their trip to Vale was anything but the victory lap they'd thought it to be, Team NDGO was now simply trying to make the best of the last day of the festival. The quartet of girls took to the fairgrounds, in search of fun and excitement, something to drown out the memories the past two days.

Down by the northern east part of the fairgrounds, NDGO found themselves, with Octavia doing her best to get Gwen to participate in a carnival game, while Nebula and Dew supervised from a relative safe distance.

In private Nebula and Dew had speculated the nature of Octavia's semblance, often sidestepping the notion of directly asking the girl, associating the act as questioning someone the color of underwear they were wearing or their religious views. They were teammates, sure, but they were polite enough to respect each other's personal space and privacy. The thing about Octavia that the two young women have noted, was her ability to bring out the fieriness in people, as if she were able to amplify emotions. And if that just so happened to be her semblance, well, there was no way the two of them wanted to be standing close by. Gwen was a powder keg, and Octavia a match.

"Now, remember Gwen, the goal of this is to knock down the pins." Octavia instructed as she paid the games operator for three balls to throw at a stack of milk bottles. The fiery member of NDGO then reached over, grabbed one of the balls and placed it in Gwen's hands. "Give it a throw."

"Ugh." Gwen groaned before lazily throwing the ball, missing the stack entirely.

It had taken the trio quite the effort to talk the knife thrower into joining them. For the most part, all Gwen wanted to do was wall herself off inside their accommodations provided by Beacon Academy. At one point, they almost had to drag her out.

Seeing that Gwen needed some convincing, Octavia went to work. "I think you need to work on your form." She said, smirking, as the air around her began to warm against her activated semblance.

"Meh." Gwen grunted angrily before having another ball shoved into her hands. The girl glared at her partner, who purposely aimed to provoke her. And Gwen could feel her anger rising. She then turned her attention back at the stack of milk bottles and threw the ball, crashing it through the center and knocking half of them over.

"Not a bad shot, Gwen." Nebula said, doing her best to encourage her teammate.

"One more ball." Octavia said before handing the last ball to Gwen. "Imagine that guy Lance's face." She said, earning another glare from her partner. "Alright, good, but imagine his face is the bottles." She jotted a thumb in the direction of the stack of bottles.

Gwen followed her partner's direction and set her sights on another stack of bottles. "Now," Octavia said with a smirk. "How bad do you want to throw that ball at that guy's face?" She asked as Gwen's blood boiled.

"Very much." Gwen utter lowly before reeling her arm back and throwing the ball. The ball connected, this time the ball struck the foundation of the bottles, causing them to topple over entirely.

"Woo! Go Gwen!" Octavia pumped her fist in the air while her partner beside her let out a heated
"Nice shot." Dew applauded from the sidelines.

"That imagination worked like a charm, huh?" Octavia said smugly as the games operator handed Gwen her prize, a stuffed elephant. "It always works when you think you're aiming at someone's face!"

"I wasn't aiming for his face. I was aiming for his crotch." Gwen said, causing the games operator to wince.

"Well…that's therapeutic." Dew muttered.

"So, you want another round?" Octavia asked as she raised a ten lien note up in the air for them all to see.

"No, no, I'm fine." Gwen said as she eyed the stuffed elephant. She squeezed the plush toy with her hands before throwing it under her arm and turning to walk away from the games booth. "I don't think I'm in the mood for any more games."

"Alright, taking suggestions. What next?" Nebula asked as the quartet stepped away from the booth, allowing others to pay to throw balls at bottles.

"Well, the tournament will be kicking off in an hour or so." Dew said as they began to walk away. "We could catch a ride on the next Airbus."

"Sounds good to me." Gwen said as she wormed her way between her teammates. "I've had my fill of the fairgrounds."

"Then it's settled!" Nebula declared before suddenly stopping in her tracks. Her teammates looked to their leader with puzzled looks, as the Violette stood frozen in place, looking off into the distance. The followed her gaze and found the source of her peculiar actions.

"That's Pyrrha Nikos." Nebula said, her mouth gaping at the sight of the Invincible Girl sitting alone at a noodle hut. The rest of NDGO exchanged amused looks, as they all recalled the fact Nebula owned a poster of Pyrrha which she hung in their dorm room back in Vacuo.

"You wanna go get her autograph or something?" Dew suggested. "Now's your chance."

"Yes, I-I mean, no. No." She said, tripping over her words. "She seems busy, I wouldn't want to disturb her."

"She's sitting alone." Octavia laughed.

"Still, it would be impolite, you know?" Nebula said, once more attempting to dissuade herself.

"Well, all things considered, we're going to go and get our seats before the tournament starts up," Octavia jotted a thumb at the Airbus stop. "When you've finally worked up the nerve to go and talk to her, just meet us there."

"No, I should go with you guys." Nebula protested, before being cut short by her partner.

"We've got reserved front row seating, remember?" Dew said as the trio of DGO began to head out.

With that said, Nebula just watched as her team walked off, leaving her alone to work up there nerve to approach the one who inspired her all those years ago to become a Huntress. Any minute
now she would saunter up there and introduce herself to Pyrrha, tell her how much of an influence she'd been. Any minute now she'd thank her for being such an inspirational figure for her peers.

Any minute now….

"I still can't believe what Yang did."

"Bloody hell, she went and bust the man's leg, that's wot she did."

"Crazy woman, doesn't know when to stop fighting."

"She could have killed that poor boy."

"…Cardin?" Cardin snapped to attention and looked to find Velvet staring at him with a perplexed look. "You okay?"

Seated in a booth at the back of a Dinner located in the Merchant District of Vale, the city, sat Cardin Winchester, and opposite of him sat Velvet.

"Sorry." The Winchester apologized. "Just spaced out for a moment, won't happen again." He smiled.

"Alright then, I'll be sure to hold you to that." Velvet smirked playfully before holding up her camera to the young man's eyes. "Do you prefer this one? Or this one?" She asked as she flipped between pictures of Yang punching Mercury in the leg. Both photos were graphic, showing the precise angle in which the blonde bombshell had snapped the Mistralian's leg. To say the least, Cardin wouldn't be ordering any solid food anytime soon.

"The second one." Cardin decided.

"It's just so surreal, you know."

"Yeah, we knew them both." Velvet frowned. "I think it's awful what they're saying about Yang." She nodded to the other patrons in the dinner, all of whom shared their thoughts on the matter with their own company. "Now she's under public scrutiny. All the while Mercury might not be walking again."

"Still, can't believe what happened, after the hell of a time Mercury gave Yatsuhashi, no offense, I mean." He said, quickly catching himself.

"Oh, no, nothing to be offended about." Velvet waved off the comment, seeing no harm in it. "He sure did give them a run, both Yatsuhashi and Coco didn't know what to think afterwards. They got so worn down, that for a moment, Coco thought Yatsu was backing her up against Emerald, but he never made it out of the gyeser field."

"Like a stress-induced hallucination?" Cardin raised a brow. "Reckon that's what Yang had?"

"It's the finals of the Vytal Tournament. Can you think of anything more stressful?" She laughed.

"Hmph." Cardin murmured to himself as the waitress came by to refill his coffee mug. "But what are the odds of that happening twice?"

But before Velvet could engage in more exchanges with the Winchester, the time caught her eye. "The next match will start soon." She said, shooting out of her seat. "Damn, I've got to go."
And before Cardin could respond to that information, he found Velvet quickly walking over and pecking him on the cheek. She then turned to leave, but stopped in mid motion, a shocked expression equal only to the surprised face Cardin himself was making. "Oh, Monty, I can't believe I just did that." She said as she turned a shade of red. "I'm so, so sorry."

"Oh, no, it's fine." Cardin said, doing his best to simply wave off the action while at the same time feeling hot under the collar. "It's fine Velvet. See you later?"

"Yeah, I'll, uh, see you later. Bye Cardin." She said before quickly running out the door, leaving Cardin alone to question exactly what had just happened.

Russel wandered around the fairgrounds, lost in thought. He wasn't a stranger to a lecture, having been given a number over the years from numerous other authority figures. But none of them were able to get under his skin the way Ozpin had. To say the least, Russel was pissed.

But he could also acknowledge the validity to the old Headmaster's words. He'd gone as far as to dig up a number of the Thrush's exploits, to compare and contrast, dissect his actions and use them as fact to further support his argument and he could follow that logic. Ozpin wasn't like any of the other authority figure's Russel had known, he was actually smart, he had to be, seeing as he was the Headmaster of Beacon.

And yet, that didn't necessarily make Ozpin right, not to Russel anyways. The Thrush could understand the Headmaster's perspective, he was a first year student in over his head in his eyes. But Russel resolved each and every conflict as he saw fit, like any Huntsman would if they were pressed into the situation. Or rather, that was what Russel told himself.

He spent a while walking aimlessly, coasting through crowds, lost in his mind. He thought of Ozpin's final words to him and attempted to make sense of them and how his fortune cookie wisdom had any relevance at all. That was until, he stumbled upon a curious sight.

Over on one side of the walkway stood Nebula, whom he recognized by her indigo colored hair. But what stuck out about her was the young woman's immobility, or rather, her lack of agency. She stood in place, but the by the look on her face, that was the only part of her that wasn't active. She looked to be debating a serious question, the life or death kind.

But then Russel took a moment to fully assess the situation. He picked up on her constant glances off to the other side of the pathway and followed them over to a quaint little noodle vendor run by an old man Russel could have sworn owned a dust shop back in the city. But he found Nebula's gaze wasn't fixed on the old man, but rather, to a familiar redhead. There, alone as the stand, sat Pyrrha, sneaking in a last minute meal before she would grace the world one last time for the competition.

Maybe it was the noodles she was eating, maybe the old man got the order wrong and Pyrrha was too polite not to speak up. But Russel could see a look of sadness on the four time Mistral champ's face. Russel found friendship to be a puzzling concept, and there were very few in the world qualified to be more than an acquaintance or co-worker to the Thrush. As far as Russel knew, Cardin was the only person he could really consider a friend, someone he knew he could trust in the heat of things.

But then he thought about Pyrrha, The Invincible Girl, and how he respected her abilities as a Huntress. Not many people in the world can take a team alone, after all. Then he thought about the times she went to him for help. They had a falling out once, almost twice, but here they were, sitting beside each other no ill intent held for the other. All in all, Pyrrha was as decent a human
being could be, so seeing her sitting there wallowing in her sadness, got The Thrush's brain spinning.

One mild headache later, and Russel was weaving through the crowd and pulling up a vacant seat beside Pyrrha. With a tired sigh, he sat down beside The Invincible Girl and waved off the old man.

"How you doin', Pyrrha?" Russel asked as he stared off forward, not once glancing at the four time Mistral champ.

"Did Jaune send you?" Pyrrha said, glancing away from her bowl of noodles.

"Nope." He almost laughed at the suggestion. "Just got chewed out by Ozpin over some bullshit. Saw you were moping around all by your lonesome, thought I might join you."

"I'm not moping." She asserted, making an effort to recompose herself. "I'm just thinking. I've got a lot on my mind."

"I bet." Russel muttered, nodding in agreement. "This how you always get during one of these tournaments?"

Pyrrha stared at the Thrush for a moment, thinking of how to respond. "No, not always." She said as the memory of Amber popped into her head. "I just…I didn't think things would turn out the way they are now."

"Yeah, who'd of guessed Yang could be that cold." Russel said, pointing a thumb over to a nearby television set the old man had on hand. There on screen, the local news outlets were having a field day with rerunning the footage of Yang and Mercury's fight while so called experts gave their two cents about the matter.

"I wasn't referring to Yang." Pyrrha said quietly as she looked down to her half eaten meal. She grabbed her chopsticks and circled them in the broth, forcing whatever noodles that remained to submerge, and allowing Pyrrha to view her own murky reflection.

"You mentioned Jaune. Did you guys finally talk it out?" Russel asked, turning to Pyrrha and sideways glancing to Nebula on the other side the pathway, checking to see if the NDGO leader was still there. And, as he suspected, Russel found Nebula on the edge of deciding whether to approach the Invincible Girl.

"This…it's not about Jaune." She sadly said.

"Is that a yes or a no?"

"We haven't talked about it."

"So what's got you so troubled then?"

"Destiny, I guess." She said, trying her best to answer Russel's question, without revealing the nature of her dilemma.

"If it ain't blondes, it's abstract concepts of finality." "You know my stance on the matter."

"By the end of the night, I'm supposed to make a decision." She said, earning an odd glance from Russel. "Nothing bad, I assure you." She quickly said, easing off the look of concern. "But, I just don't know what to think anymore. I-I just…becoming a Huntress was just so natural. And now I'm
finding myself becoming…something else."

"Look, Pyrrha, I'm not going to pretend that I know the magic words that'll help you with whatever it is you're going through." He said, casting shade on Pyrrha's inability to confide her situation with the Thrush, let alone go into detail of her dilemma. "But you're talking about decision making and Destiny. Those don't exactly go hand in hand."

"I believe they do." Pyrrha quietly said as she watched her once steamy bowl of noodles cool.

"My Dad wanted me to become a Huntsman." Russel said, earning a surprised look from Pyrrha.

"I had no idea." She said, more surprised to hear of Russel's younger years. In the time she'd attended Beacon, Pyrrha had learned much about her friends and their pasts. Ranging from the knowledge of Jaune's uncommonly large family, Ren and Nora being orphans, to Ruby's mother having been killed when the red reaper was much younger. But she'd known nothing of Russel's past, or even his reasoning for attending Beacon. To say the least, she was mildly interested in the subject.

"I didn't have a say in attending the local academy. Predetermination at its finest." He mused. "He even wanted me to go to Beacon, got a pamphlet and form all ready to go." A frown began to form on the Thrush's face. "But then he died."

"Russel…I'm sorry to hear."

"Don't be." He scoffed. "So, my Dad goes and dies and I end up inheriting the farm. I'm completely in no position to move out to Vale. And why would I? It was my Dad who wanted me to go, right?" "Now ask yourself, Pyrrha, if that's true, then why the hell am I here at Beacon?"

"Why are you here?"

"Because, as it turns out, I actually liked the idea of being a Huntsman, so much so that I actually wanted to be one." "So, I sold the farm to a guy named Marlowe and caught the next bus to Vale."

"Now, Ms. Nikos, what's the moral to the story?"

"Is it 'Destiny is bullshit'?" She said, paraphrasing The Thrush's words after the incident during The Dance.

"No." He shook his head. "You always get a choice. Good or bad, it's on you. You just gotta want it." He said, before looking over his shoulder once more to where Nebula was standing. But he found the NDGO had departed, having not worked up the nerve to speak to the Invincible Girl. "Well, that's a shame." He muttered.

"What is?" Pyrrha raised a brow at Russel's comment.

"Nothing." "Now don't you have a tournament to win?" He said, jotting a thumb at the old man's television, where it showed Amity Coliseum gearing up for the next match.

With that said, Pyrrha flagged down the old man manning the noodle booth and paid for her meal. Both she and Russel then hopped off their stools and fought their way through crowds, all in an effort to catch the next airbus to the arena.

When they landed, Pyrrha and Russel said their goodbyes, with The Invincible Girl thanking him for his company and Russel wishing her luck in her fight. And so then, Russel watched Pyrrha depart, to no doubt collect her weaponry in the locker room before taking to the stage to fight in a contest of skill before the entire world.
"The least you should have done was ask her for her signature, Nebula." Russel said glanced to his left.

"She seemed like she wanted her privacy. Last thing celebrities want is to be bothered by their fans." Nebula said as she emerged from one of the mobs of people offloading from the very same airbus Russel and Pyrrha had arrived on.

"Well, your loss I guess." Russel shrugged as Port took to the loudspeaker.

"The next match of the Vytal Tournament is about to begin!" The portly professor announced, catching the pair's ears.

"We'd better find our seats." Nebula said as all the other arrivals began to take off into the colosseum. "You got a seat already saved?" She asked, glancing over her shoulder. "If not, you can join me and my team."

"Oh, thanks," Russel said, before catching eye of Team STAG offloading out of one of the airbuses. The Thrush paused, watching as the all faunus team splintered off from the main mob of people and heading the opposite way. Typically this wouldn't have been outstanding behavior, but Russel couldn't help but notice the way Team STAG carried themselves, as they walked oddly with self-imposed limps. "But I'm going to have to refuse your offer."

"Yeah, uh, no problem." Nebula said, not noticing Russel discreetly monitoring Team STAG. And with that said, Nebula departed, leaving with the last of the tournament attendees. But not after stopping in place one more. "Hey, Fern." She called out to Russel, gaining his ear once more. "I don't think I can say this enough, but, thanks again for what you did for Gwen."

"Enjoy the fight, Nebula." He muttered before waving her off. Russel then allowed himself a brief moment to watch Nebula vanish with the rest of the civilians into the stadium, before ultimately turning his attention back to Team STAG, who'd gone and walked off to the far end of the landing area. After witnessing Team STAG's peculiar movements and odd actions, Russel felt an unsettling thumping in his brain, like an alarm. So the Thrush began to follow the team.

He did his best to be silent, but Russel wasn't much of a ninja. He could do discrete, however. He kept his distance, taking cover behind nearby pillars and glancing around corners. Russel also had the benefit of Amity Colosseum floating in the air. This high up, he winds were raging and most of his movements were muted by the sounds of nearby flying unmarked Bullheads and Airbuses.

Russel didn't pay it no mind, however, as he assumed the aircraft were privately owned and not public transports like the airbuses that he and the others used to travel to and from the stadium. He didn't even notice the peculiar flight movements, how they all primarily kept close but refused to land.

"Alright, it's now time to begin the randomization process for our next fight!" Oobleck's voice boomed over the speaker system.

"It looks like our first contender is... Penny Polendina, from Atlas! And her opponent will be... Pyrrha Nikos, from Beacon!" Port exclaimed.

All around Russel could hear the encouraging chants of the audience, all waiting in anticipation of the next fight. But Russel tuned them out, turning his attention back to Team STAG. Up ahead, Russel could see the four man team approaching a squad of Atlesain Knights. The robotic squad leader raised an arm, halting its patrol as they were greeted by Team STAG.
While one of the STAG members distracted the Knights, the rest of the team began to spread out around them, encircling the robotic Knights. And then, as soon as they were in position, Team STAG unsheathed weapons hidden in their clothing and proceeded to massacre the squad of robots.

Russel had to take a step back, alarmed by the sheer brutality of the scene as Team STAG completely destroyed the Atlesain Knights. "What the fuck?" He muttered to himself behind the cover of a nearby pillar.

Once the last Knight quit kicking, Team STAG turned their attention to the nearby hovering Bullheads and Airbuses. Serin Quiet, the leader of Team STAG stepped forward from the others, producing a torch. She raised it up to the night sky and repeatedly tapped the 'on' switch, signaling the awaiting aircraft.

Russel then watched as one by one as the aircraft began to land with an unmarked Bullhead landing before Team STAG. The engines kicked off and the door opened. Out of the Bullhead stepped a bald man with a claw mark scar at the base of his skull. He was brandished with the traditional White Fang robes and wore a eye patch to cover a most recent scar. The man was one whom Russel recognized, after all, he knew him well.

"Landing pad is secure, sir." Serin Quiet saluted.

"Good work." The Iron Nail said as he glanced to the fallen robots. "Take your squad and get into position."

"Belay that order." A voice called out from within the Bullhead. The Iron Nail released a disgruntled sigh, before turning to watch a thin man in grey White Fang fatigues adorned with patch of green scale armor covering his left arm.

"Captain Pangolin, is there a problem?" The Iron Nail asked, doing his best not to sound irritated.

"I believe you and I, Nail, have differing definitions of the word." The White Fang Captain muttered, as he glanced towards Russel's hiding spot. "You missed one." He pointed at the pillar.

"Fighters are you ready?!" Oobleck's voice carried throughout the stadium. "Three! Two! One! Begin!"

"Fuck." Russel cursed before turning to run in hopes of getting help. But before the Thrush could make a break for it, he turned to find more ships landing to his back, with more White Fang members disembarking.

"Russel?" The Thrush turned around, finding The Iron Nail approaching. "What luck."

"Nice eye patch, Nail." Russel smirked.

"You know this human, Iron Nail?" Captain Pangolin asked mockingly. "I expected more, seeing as he bested you so many times." The Iron Nail spared a glare his superior's way.

"Permission to engage the interloper?" Serin asked The White Fang officers. "Please? We all hare him."

"No." Captain Pangolin rebuked the STAG leader. "You have your assignment. Now go." With that said, Team STAG walked off, further into the stadium. Captain Pangolin turned his attention back to The Iron Nail and taunted the man. "Be sure not to fail this time." He laughed before walking off to rally the rest of the White Fang members. The Iron Nail snorted, before turning his eyes to Russel, who noticed stood unarmed.
"So, was that your Boss? He seemed nice." Russel laughed.

"I won't even dignify that with a response." The Iron Nail glared.

"But you just did." The Thrush smugly smirked.

"You shouldn't look so smug, Russel. It's bad for your health." The Iron Nail said threateningly.

"I could say the same for you." Russel retorted. "This is your plan? Attack a Huntsman Tournament? In the next ten minutes, you and the rest of your White Fang pals are gonna feel like a bunch of assholes when we're runnin' your asses out of here."

"Is that so?" The Iron Nail smirked as he turned back to the Bullhead. "Do you recall our first meeting, Russel?" He asked as he stopped onto the ship. The Iron Nail then walked to the back of the Bullhead and unlocked a cage. "You left me for dead at the mercy of an Ursa."

And in an instant, Russel's smug smile vanished, replaced by a look of dread. Against the wind, Russel could hear the rustling of chains and a low, yet familiar growl. Out of the Bullhead stepped The Iron Nail, a chain leash in his hands and a knowing smile.

"I emerged victorious over the beast and he became the first of the Grimm we harvested from your hometown." The Iron Nail said as he tugged on the chain leash.

Out of the darkness of the Bullhead, stepped out The Ursa. The very same unkillable Ursa that had attacked Russel all those years ago in the forests of Oakwood. The Ursa let out a fiendish roar as it set its blood red sights on Russel.

"Consider this a farewell present." The Iron Nail said as he let the chain leash fall from his hands. "Goodbye Russel." He said before turning and walking away, leaving Russel and The Ursa alone.

The Ursa let out another roar. The months in captivity had hardened it, no longer did it fear Russel's visage. And while all the cheers throughout the stadium turned to screams, all Russel could do was stand, frozen in fear as The Ursa approached.

"This is not a tragedy." A woman's voice suddenly appeared over the loudspeaker. "This was not an accident."

And so that brings this Arc to a close! Yeah, it was always going to end in a cliffhanger.

Oh boy, this chapter. It went through a lot of rewrites. Especially the stuff with Russel and Pyrrha.

The Cardin/Velvet.

So, I'm positioning Sky's story arc to be intertwined with this place called Venezier. If you all can look back to Nebula's arc, Venezier was mentioned greatly by people Dr. Kruger had interrogated. So, uh, expect stuff with those people.

At the very end of the chapter, we saw the return of The Ursa. The last time we physically saw The Ursa, was in chapter 4. I play the long game.

Next Arc: The Fall of Vale I hope you all enjoyed this chapter. I'm incredibly tired. 'Til next time! Later days!
Hey there everybody, welcome back for an Interlude! Apologies to those who were expecting the next story chapter, but I do this thing after every arc.

I spent most of last chapter positioning our cast, knowing that the concluding chapter would lead into the next arc. So, expect next chapter to pick up immediately after where we left off.

Alright, on with the interlude!

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The Night

It's late at night and sleep continues to elude The Man with burnt orange hair and graying temples. The children have all gone to bed and the woman he loved was now slumbering peacefully by his side, her light snore like a melody to his ears. And yet, The Man still cannot sleep.

So, then The Man pulls himself out of bed, careful not to disturb his wife. He tiptoes out the room, past the children's room. He stops momentarily, popping his head in through the open doorway, finding them all sprawled out, but nonetheless, tuckered out after a day spent running wild throughout the home.

After checking on the children, The Man walks through the house. With all the inhabitants asleep, The Man couldn't help but feel a cold empty chill as he roamed about. He entered the living room and took a seat on the couch and stared blankly at the inert television mounted on the wall.

This hasn't been the first time The Man had roamed aimlessly through his home, he doubts this will be the last. This is his routine, he thinks to himself, as he resigns himself to another lonely night.

In search of solace, he reaches out for the coffee table, claiming the remote. With the push of a button, he switches on the television and with another, he reduces the volume as not to disturb his family.

The twenty four hour news cycle is The Man's only company, his only distraction from his wandering mind. The anchormen and women on the screen debate amongst themselves about some scandal, something about one of Vale's councilmen and his taking bribes. The Man watches, trying his best not to think. He just wishes to sit, to zone out and never wander. To endure another lonely night without those invading thoughts of his.

But, even great kingdoms fall and every show must cut to commercial break. So then, The Man was alone once more, without another voice to tether himself to. And like a dark bleakness, the memories of days past begin to creep upon him.

He's there again, there in Vale. Amongst the Huntsmen and Huntresses, alongside the men, women and children who'd never seen violence before in their lives. The Grimm are nipping at their heels and The Man feels powerless. To his left, the Atlesian Knights turn with sinister glowing red visors, and to his right, the civilians they cut down.

It's endless, this gory routine that The Man must relive. That night in Vale, that god awful night. The very same night they teach to his kids in school, the one they know their Father lived through
and ask questions of. The Man wants to forget that day and the horrors he witnessed, as well as the horrors he’d seen since then.

He's back in the city streets, fending off The Grimm while a mighty Dragon soars overhead, raining down destruction and toppling high rise buildings. Its dust clouds and brimstone, hellfire at his heels.

The Man's high up atop a building, his best mat by his side as they fought against two whom they'd believed to be friends. And then he's in the air, high up above clouds and the Airbuses, higher than the Griffons and the Nevermores. And then he's crashing back into the ground, poised to relive it all again.

But the station returns, snapping The Man from his thoughts. He resumes his spectation, watching the so called experts trade their comments, all the while the night continues.

If this interlude has done anything, it's showcased at least how ark the next story arc is going to be, as well as showcased a certain individual's home life. So, yeah.

Next chapter wont come out until sometime next week. I'm sort of busy right now.

Until next time dear reader! Later days!
Welcome back everyone to another installment of TDT! We're kicking off another story arc! Yay!

This should have been out sooner, but I took ill. So, sorry about that.

To answer one question, in regards to the Interludes. When its a flash forward its technically a spoiler, because I'm confirming a character makes it to the end of the story. And trust me, there's an end goal to this story. So far I've confirmed Cardin and Pyrrha make it to the end with their interludes, so I have to be picky with who pops up in those. As the story unfolds, we'll see other characters in the future, but only when its appropriate. Because, well, there needs to be some degree of suspense.

Anyways, uh...so The Fall of Vale...

WARNING: This Rated M.

"This is what happens when you hand over your trust, your safety, your children, to men who claim to be our guardians, but are, in reality, nothing more than men." Cinder's voice carried throughout the stadium, reaching the ears of horrified audience members, and the students hailing from the four kingdom's premier Huntsmen academies. "Our Academies' Headmasters wield more power than most armies, and one was audacious enough to control both."

Any attempts to cut the world wide video feed proved futile. Up above in the commentator's box, Oobleck and Port shared sullen looks while they were taunted by their failure to prevent tragedy. The great General Ironwood himself stood horrified in the booth, having barged in moments ago to lend his assistance in any way he could, only to find he was completely powerless.

"They cling to this power in the name of peace," Cinder continued her speech, from a lone rooftop in Vale. She sat crosslegged on an AC unit, staring up at Amity Colesseum floating up in the sky, a prideful smirk on her face. "and yet, what do we have here? One nation's attempt at a synthetic army, mercilessly torn apart by another's star pupil. What need would Atlas have for a soldier disguised as an innocent little girl? I don't think the Grimm can tell the difference."

Down below in the arena, stood a devastated Pyrrha, her eyes glued to the body of the robot girl she'd just murdered. She raised her hands to cover her mouth, to halt any scream. But the flow of tears raining down her cheeks were left unattended all while Cinder's voice danced around her. "And what, I ask you, is Ozpin teaching his students? First a dismemberment, now this? Huntsmen and Huntresses should carry themselves with honor and mercy, yet I have witnessed neither."

"Perhaps Ozpin felt as though defeating Atlas in the Tournament would help people forget his colossal failure to protect Vale when the Grimm invaded its streets." The spectators reeled back as the fresh memories of the recent Breach were forced to the forefront of their minds.
"Or perhaps this was his message to the tyrannical dictator that has occupied an unsuspecting kingdom with armed forces." Cinder said as the recently freed Roman Torchwick commandeered the Atslian fleet's Flagship. Aided by his mute assassin, Torchwick turned the ships guns on the rest of fleet and proceeded to blast them out of the air. "Honestly, I haven't the slightest clue as to who is right and who is wrong. But I know the existence of peace is fragile, and the leaders of our kingdoms conduct their business with iron gloves."

"As someone who hails from Mistral, I can assure you the situation there is... equally undesirable. Our Kingdoms are on the brink of war, yet we, the citizens, are left in the dark. So I ask you: When the first shots are fired... who do you think you can trust?" Cinder said, before ending the transmission. She'd said all she needed to say. Now all she really had to do was wait for the dominos to fall. Her subordinates would return to her in time, she told herself. The White Fang and their Grimm will cause panic and that will attract a larger Grimm force. And no doubt these so called 'protectors' such as Ozpin will go running to swiftly secure the true prize, the maiden.

And then the maiden would be hers.

The cold and alluring voice of a mad woman fell on deaf ears to one lone Thrush. Too caught up in the horror he faced, Russel stared into a blood red abyss. Just as he did nine years ago back in the forests of Oakwood. And The Ursa who'd plagued him then, who plagued him now, stared back with deathly intent.

The beastly creature let out another one of its bone chilling roars. It charged forward, the metal chain surgically grafted to its neck during its imprisonment clattered against the metal flooring. And the pair were back there again, Russel and The Ursa, back in Oakwood. A young child with his back against a tree, a monster running full speed to devour him.

And there would be no timely rescue like before, his Father was long dead, buried beneath a shattered pale marker at Saint Jack's cemetery. All those who could step in to save Russel stood or sat idly by while Cinder carried on with her monologue. Those he trusted were too far away and unaware of dire situation.

Russel had frozen up entirely and was snared by the charging Ursa's powerful jaws. He let out a pained howl as the Grimm lifted him into the air by his side, its teeth puncturing through his aura and breaking his skin. The Ursa flailed about, tearing at Russel like a ragdoll before releasing him, flinging him across the landing pad.

The Thrush came to a screeching halt, his spiked shoulder pad scraping against the floor like fingernails to a chalkboard. A lazy hand fell to rest itself upon his damp wound, the shock of pain, stirring Russel alive. He winced as he applied pressure to the fresh wound. He rose his hand, inspecting the blood.

A little aura could go a long way, Russel had recovered from enough scrapes and burning clubs to know this to be true. But that involved unadulterated concentration, something he couldn't spare at the moment. Snapping to attention, Russel found The Ursa charging towards him once more. His mind was racing, adrenaline pumping, blood flowing. He was a dead man if he continued to lie on the floor, so Russel pulled himself off the ground, biting his lip against the pain in his left side.

He applied his hand to cover wound and readied himself for The Ursa, its thunderous footsteps like earthquakes shook the very metal floor Russel stood on. Thoughts and realizations occurred to the CRDL boy as his brain reached its final conclusions. All of Russel's victories against Grimm had been claimed due to an advantage. The starved and erratic pack of Creeps he'd encountered in Oakwood, he'd killed with the help of his team. And the Grimm The White Fang were plundering
Russel had never once truly bested a Grimm by his own merit. And he knew he wouldn't be doing so today, not against this Ursa. The tables had been turned and he was at a disadvantage. But that was alright with him, The Thrush smirked as he reached up from his wound to the clasp of his shoulder pad strap, unhooking it and removing it from his person.

"Come on you bastard." Russel taunted the Grimm as it charged at him with those blood red eyes. He raised the spiked shoulder pad and aimed it liked a gun. "Come on." He squinted, staring back at The Ursa. "Come on." He muttered, starring past The Ursa and catching sight of its chain leash.

The Ursa roared, it was right on top of him now. Russel could practically see his blood dripping from its teeth. The Ursa reeled back a limb, aiming to swipe the CRDL boy's head clean from his shoulders. It struck, but Russel's head was not removed. The Thrush ducked, avoiding the fatal blow and turned the shoulder pad vertical, aiming the jagged mental spikes at the Grimm's exposed belly.

With all his might, Russel rammed the spikes upward, gutting the Grimm. He then ran it along The Ursa, tearing into it with three ragged streaks. If Grimm could bleed, The Ursa would be pooling at the feet. It let out a pained roar and lashed outward, striking Russel and sending him flying once more.

Russel collided with one of The White Fang's parked bullheads, bouncing off the metal hull with a hard smack. He fell forward, landing face down on the cold metal surface of the landing platform. The Ursa's pained wails and natural fight or flight instinct forced the Thrush back to his feet, fighting against the pain. He reclaimed his shoulder pad, his only means of defense. Russel eyed The Ursa, sizing it up, noting the wounds he'd inflicted.

He was halfway tempted to pat himself on the back when suddenly, the wounds on The Ursa began to dissipate, rapidly healing. Russel watched, eyes wide as the beast recovered, looking as if he'd never struck it. The Ursa let out a pained roar and readied itself to pursue Russel once more.

The reality of Russel's situation began to set in, his bout with The Ursa would only end in his death. The Grimm had the edge where it counted, it healed while all he could do was bleed on himself. So faced with this, the Thrush turned on his heal and began to run, determined to prolong the inevitable. Seeing the Thrush take off further down the rim of the colosseum landing zone, The Ursa took off after him, willing to pursue Russel to end of the world if it came to it.

At Beacon Tower, Ozpin stood facing his glass window, watching as the kingdom of Vale fell all around him. From where he stood, Ozpin could see the Grimm practically marching to his doorstep, slaughtering every innocent in sight. But the Grimm weren't the only danger to the kingdom, as by Main Avenue, the old Headmaster could spot the familiar Grimm masks worn by the radical White Fang.

"I can't raise any of our border teams." Goodwitch announced as she entered the office.

"We'll have to assume the worst." Ozpin muttered somberly. "Those poor fourth years…" It was a well-known fact between the pair of Beacon faculty, that students in their fourth year attending their fair academy would be assigned active field work to better prepare them for their future as Huntsmen. Such tasks they'd be handed would consist of technical support here at Beacon as well as border patrol to discourage the curious Grimm from entering their Kingdom.

Hearing Goodwitch's foreboding tone, Ozpin couldn't help but assume the worst. One look outside
and his worst fears were all but confirmed. An entire generation of Remnant's protectors, wiped out in an instant. And all the Headmaster could do was stand and stare. Never before in all his years had he felt so powerless.

"Orders, Oz?" Qrow asked from where his stood in the shadow of a support column off to the side.

"Go, get down there." Ozpin said, turning to face his colleagues. "Save everyone you can." He said, finding the resolve within himself. Both Qrow and Goodwitch exchanged a knowing nod and set off for the door, followed by the fourth individual present in the office, one Sky Lark, the most recent addition to their inner circle.

But before Sky could step out the door, the young man found himself being called out to by the Ozpin. "Not you, Sky."

"But, Headmaster, I can help." Sky said, removing his scroll from his pocket and showing Ozpin he'd already pulled up the weapon requisition prompt. With the press of his thumb, Sky could have his halberd in hand in an instant via rocket locker.

"Believe me when I say any one Huntsman can turn the tide of any battle, of any war." Ozpin said as reached down, claiming his cane. "But your mission is too important."

"Vale is under siege!" Sky protested.

"And we will deal with it." Ozpin said, reassuring the CRDL boy. "But as you can see, time is of the essence." The Headmaster gestured to the chaos ensuing outside. "You need to go, now. Get out of the city by any means necessary and get to Venezier."

"But, Headmaster-" He attempted to protest further.

"No 'buts', Mr. Lark." Ozpin said in a scolding manner. "Go." He pointed to the door. Sky nodded, conceding and turned to the door and ran, leaving Ozpin alone.

The Beacon Headmaster reached out to his desk, claiming his mug. He eyed the contents and stirred. With a final sigh, he downed what remained and slammed the mug onto his desk. The Headmaster then took off for the door, intent to join the fray. He reached out and hit the lights of his office before shutting the door behind him.

"Come on everyone, this way!" Nero White of Team DNCE shouted to a group of spectators as he gestured to the nearest exit. "It isn't safe here people, we need to go!"

Dove looked out over the sea of civilians and students, watching as they all attempted to run for the exit. He shot a glance over his shoulder, up at the giant Nevermore attempting to break into the arena. He watched as the cracks in the barrier dramatically became more prevalent. It wouldn't take much longer for it the Grimm to break in. And with so many innocents present and the lack of equipped Huntsmen, the CRDL boy could practically see the potential slaughter.

"Dove!" A familiar voice called out to Dove, snapping him out of his train thoughts. He glanced up, catching sight of Nero. Beside the DNCE member stood two of Team WILL, Iliad Marble and Lambert Blind.

"Come on man, we gotta get the hell out of here!" Lambert shouted, beckoning for Dove to join them in fleeing.

Dove glanced back to the sea of civilians, all making their way for the exits and then to the
Nevermore overhead. "What about the Nevermore?!" Dove shouted over the frightened screams of the masses.

"Does it look like we're armed?" Iliad barked anxiously. "Evacuation's the priority, not fighting to the death with that!" She pointed to the Nevermore as it continued to bash its beak against the barrier.

"Now come on Dove!" Nero motioned for the boy to join them.

Conceding to his fellow students, Dove pulled himself out of his row and ran to join them. The four Beacon students then made a beeline for one of the farther, less crowded exits. The quartet pushed themselves through civilians, even jumping over those poor few who'd tripped. Dove looked back momentarily, debating whether to run back and help the fallen, but he kept his pace, not wanting to be separated from his fellow students, not like how he was separated from his team.

Dove silently cursed to himself, unable to stop those fearful thoughts from creeping into his head. If the colosseum was under attack, who knows what else was happening around Vale. Anyone of his teammates could be in trouble and he was none the wiser. They could be dead or dying and he was nowhere near to help them.

As the quartet ventured down the hallway, they were welcomed by an eerie silence. They'd seen others take this very exit, but they saw no one other than themselves. There were no footsteps signaling the company of others, only an empty hallway shared between them. But they paid it no real mind, chalk ing it up to way the masses poured for one lone exit while they, believing themselves to be smarter for taking the less traveled path, continued to run for the airships and buses parked on the landing pads.

And then they heard the yelling. The four Beacon students paled at the sounds of pained wails and that of inhuman growls. They continued cautiously, with Nero at the lead and Dove at the back. Turning a corner, they were greeted with the sight of a Beowulf tearing into a young man their age wearing Haven attire.

The Haven student continued to yell as the Beowulf continued its onslaught, using its sharp claws to slice through the man's aura and tear into his guts. Blood pooled around the young man as his screams began to fall silent.

"Oh shit." Lambert muttered.

"Run!" Iliad screamed. The quartet of Huntsmen then took off running down an opposite corridor. The Beowulf remained where it squatted. It wasn't in any rush.

Down the hall they went, fueled by the fear of meeting a grizzly death like that poor Haven student. But up ahead, something caught their eye, the sight of more bodies. The students slowed their pace as they cautiously investigated. Amongst the dead were students hailing from Haven and also from Vale.

Dove took a moment to inspect the dead, as if to satisfy some morbid curiosity. The others on the other hand continued on. Dove moved to rejoin, but his thoughts couldn't help but linger to the dead. If he didn't know any better, he could have sworn it looked like they'd been shot to death. They hurried along, not liking the stench of death.

But Nero stopped, catching sight of something up ahead. "Yo Serin!" Nero called out up ahead to the approaching Team STAG. "You're going the wrong way! We have Grimm back there." He jotted a thumb over his shoulder down the path they'd come.
"We know." Serin muttered coldly. The STAG leader then reached around to the back of her pants, drawing a concealed hand gun. She raised the weapon, letting the sigil on the side gleam against the overhead lights. The rest of Team STAG

"Oh, cool, you guys brought your weapons!" Nero gave the quartet a jolly thumbs up.

Before the DNCE member even knew it, the sound of a gunshot rang out throughout the hallway. A red mist exploded backward, covering Dove and the two WILL members. Iliad let out a horrified scream while all Lambert could do was watch as their fellow huntsman in training toppled over, a large hole in his head.

Without a word, Serin and the rest of her team began to engage the trio. Angela Revear ran forward with her katana weapon, running Iliad through the abdomen. Iliad's horrified scream turned to a shrill high pitch cry. The sound of which snapped Dove to attention. The CRDL boy turned to see the rest of Team STAG converge, murderously intent in their eyes.

Angela withdrew her weapon the moment Iliad's screams turned silent. The WILL girl just fell over, joining Nero on the ground. Both Dove and Lambert turned to run, quickly establishing a substantial amount of distance between themselves and their attackers. But Serin wouldn't have it. She raised her gun and took aim. Pulling the trigger of her handgun, a number of gunshots rang out.

Dove winced, feeling a sharp pain in his shoulder. But he kept running, unable to allow himself to stop. He just kept running, moving as fast as he could and as far as his legs could take him. Dove made it around a bend and then the gunshots grew silent. He kept going, his mind a blank. The adrenaline was pumping and the world beyond was blocked out. All that mattered right now was getting away and getting help. He didn't even notice he'd been running alone.

Lambert lay on the floor, never even making it around the bend. The WILL boy crawled, dragging himself along the floor, a trio of fresh bullet wounds in his back. Serin and the rest of her team closed in on Lambert, taking their time. She walked up to the wounded boy and pressed her foot on his back, causing him to shout in pain while at the same time, holding him in place. She then aimed downward and steadied herself. Another pair of gunshots rang loudly.

"This is where we split up." Serin announced to her team, her eyes trailing the path Dove had taken. "Michael, Angela, hunt him down. Finish the kill." She signaled down the hall. The STAG members then nodded, heading their leader's orders they set off after Dove.

Serin then turned to her one remaining subordinate, Tobias Stillwater and cocked her head towards the direction of the landing pad. "They'll be mobbing up outside." She said as she loaded a fresh magazine into her weapon. Tobias acknowledged with a nod. With that said, the pair walked off, intent on joining their fellow students.

"Pyrrha! Pyrrha!" Jaune shouted from where he stood beside the Ren and Nora in the front row of the bleachers.

Down below in the center of the ring was Pyrrha. On her knees and staring in disbelief of her actions. Scattered on the floor in front of her was what remained of Penny Polendina. Entire chunks of her with exposed cybernetics and sparking wires.

"Warning: Safety Barriers Failing." A monotone computerized voice announced over the loud speakers. Up above the Nevermore continued its assault, all in hopes of breaking in.

"Pyrrha! That things going to bust in!" Jaune shouted at the top of his lungs, hoping to call his
partner to her sense. "Please, snap out of it!" He exclaimed.

But Pyrrha didn't respond, she was too lost in her head. She'd just murdered a peer, unintentional or not, she'd just killed someone. It didn't even matter if Penny was a robot, she was a Huntress like herself. For goodness sake, it went deeper than that. Penny wasn't just some other peer, she was a colleague, a friend of a friend even. And Pyrrha had allowed herself to take her life.

Tears ran down the sides of her cheeks as Pyrrha replayed the moment in her head. She'd seen a thousand swords appear out of thin air, all of which came crashing down on her. The stress of her monumental decision looming over her, she reacted in a panic. She used her semblance to push back Penny's onslaught. And then the next thing she knew, Penny's lifeless body was there on the ground. There were no thousand swords by her side, only ten. Ten flimsy sheets of metal that she could have simply bended and rendered useless. Instead, she'd forced them back, ripping Penny apart in the process.

Jaune leapt down from the bleachers, much to his team's reservation. All of those in attendance had already fled, leaving an empty arena and themselves alone with the giant Grimm up above. Nora anxiously jumped, glancing over her shoulder to the exit while Ren stood calm by her side, watching their friends with concern.

"Pyrrha, you need to get up!" Jaune shouted as he climbed up onto the arena and raced to Pyrrha's side. The blonde knight reached out and grabbed onto her shoulder and shook the young woman in an attempt to snap her out of her daze. "We need to go, now!" He shouted.

But it was too late. As soon as the words escaped Jaune's lips, the barrier up above gave way. Sirens blared loudly as the Nevermore came swooping in. With the flap of its wings, the massive Grimm sent a huge gust of wind smacking into the pair of partners and sending them flying.

For a moment, Pyrrha thought that this was it, this was what she deserved. She'd killed an innocent and the universe had sent some indomitable Grimm to set things right, to clean the slate by killing her. And she'd be lying if she said she wouldn't stand for it. On the contrary, Pyrrha would have laid herself out to die that very moment. Because she felt in her heart that she deserved it.

She thought back to a few days ago, right after Team RWBY's match with some of her peers from Mistral. She'd mentioned her thankfulness for the rules and regulations of the tournament in contrast to the lawless fights they'd rage against kingpins of crime and terrorists. The irony was not lost to her, she'd broken every rule in the book.

The Nevermore let out a glass shattering screech. It turned its gaze towards Pyrrha, blocking out the rest of JNPR and honed in on the girl. It let out another screech and then lunged forward, intent on devouring her whole.

Jaune's cries fell on deaf ears as Pyrrha prepared herself. She'd never felt so small in her life. She'd never felt so guilty and ashamed of herself before. She just wanted it to be over, this feeling of the weight of the world Ozpin and the others had thrust onto her shoulders. She just wanted everything to just stop for a moment, to let her think if only for a moment. And maybe it finally would, now that the Nevermore was here.

But suddenly, The Nevermore was knocked back with a thunderous crack. It let out a pained screech as it staggered backwards, rose petals raining onto the ground. Pyrrha looked up, snapped out of her thoughts to see Ruby standing there armed with one of Penny's swords.

"…Ruby?" Pyrrha asked quietly.
"Leave her alone!" Ruby shouted, sweat running down her forehead from the exertion from an earlier confrontation.

The Nevermore let out another high pitched screech and poised itself to engage Ruby in combat. But then out of the sky, numerous rocket lockers rained down, crashing into the Nevermore's body. With a loud 'thud', the Nevmore collapsed dead. And Pyrrha looked on in confusion.

Out from the bleachers, students from the four kingdoms emerged. There were some Pyrrha recognized, like Team SSSN and Team CFVY. There were Team FNKY and Team DORK from Atlas. There was Team ABRN, the team from Mistral that fought Team RWBY on the opening day of the tournament. And then there was Team BRNZ, the team Pyrrha had fought. They were standing beside an all-female team that she recalled, Team NDGO. And there were many more, others from Vale like Danny Matchstick and Marie-Anne Cherri as well as several other faces she didn't recognize.

One by one they all dropped down from the bleachers and walked to center of the arena to claim their weapons off the now dead Grimm. Its body dissipated, evaporating into darkness and then into nothingness. Pyrrha just watched as more rocket lockers landing, those of Jaune's and Ruby's and also that of hers. The locker door opened, revealing Miló and Akoúo, both ready for use.

She looked to see Ruby claim her weapons, taking them and then turning to hand them to Pyrrha. But she just stared, tears still running down her rosy cheeks. "Ruby…" Pyrrha gasped. "I am so, so sorry."

"Me too." Ruby shared Pyrrha's saddened expression. "But it wasn't your fault." The fifteen year old said as she presented her weapons to her. Pyrrha then reached out and claimed them.

"She's right you know." Jaune chimed in. "Whoever was on that microphone... they're the ones that did this. And we have to make sure they don't take anyone else." He said, earning a several voices of agreement from those present.

Pyrrha wiped away her tears. She turned to find no looks of judgement from those else present, but rather looks of determination. Everyone present was dead set on turning the night around and saving Vale. And Pyrrha couldn't help but share in their resolve. A slight smile formed on her face. "Alright." She said. "What next?"

"Griffons!" Ren shouted as he pointed upward. All the students looked up and found several of the Grimm flying in through the opening the Nevermore made.

"Game on!" Brawnz shouted, eagerly raising his claw weapons. The Huntsmen all then drew their weapons, ready for the fight. "Let's do this!"

But before any of the Huntsmen in-training could engage the Griffons, the voice of one of their teachers caught their ear. "Students!" The students all just stared in awe as Professor Port and Doctor Oobleck too to the field, armed with their own weapons. "I think it would be best for you to leave."

Pyrrha and Ruby exchanged the odd glance. "But we can help." Pyrrha said.

"This day will surely go down in Remnant's history." Port said as he took aim with his axe-rifle at the nearest Griffon. "I'd prefer it if my students could live to tell about it."

"Uh…cool." Reese Chloris shrugged, seeing no reason to object.

"Okay everybody, let's go!" Jaune shouted to the force of gathered students. Together the mass of
Huntsmen in-training ran off for the nearest exit, with Pyrrha trailing at the end.

Pyrrha spared one last look over her shoulder to the pair of teachers, uncertain if she'd ever see them again. And then to the fallen body of Penny that had been scattered by the Nevermore. She fought the dark self-loathing thoughts that crept into her head, turning her gaze back to the rest of her fellow Huntsmen. With any luck they might just be able to save the day.

In the city of Vale, Cinder's speech had given rise to anarchy. The citizens of the fare kingdom ran amok while The White Fang airdropped Grimm onto the streets. Looters smashed into markets, hoping to make off with provisions while the world burned around them, all the while local police scrambled to respond.

Atlesian war robots marched through the streets while their battle ships floating in the air were gunned down by a rogue flagship, taken over by a crime kingpin and his mute assistant. Nevermores and Griffons poured out of the sky, raining down hell and snatching unsuspecting, taking them high up into the air, only to release them and send them plummeting to their deaths.

Cardin found himself racing through the merchant district. He'd been waiting to catch a cab back to Beacon when Cinder's voice filled the airwaves. On nearby television sets in store windows, the Winchester could see the horrific climax of the Vytal Festival played on a loop by some outside force. And civilians not partaking in the end of the world were cowering in fear in nearby homes, in stores and in alleyways, all waiting for the Huntsmen to come and save the day just as they were always told.

But all anyone had to do was look over yonder to the far off Beacon academy, up to the skies over head. Nevermore and many other flight capable Grimm tore through the air while Atlesian vessels, or rather what was left of them, rained down, crashing into the city, exploding on impact and shooting debris into the surrounding area. Explosions rocked the surface and the deafening sound of collapsing architecture soon followed.

Cardin's heart skipped a beat as he could see the dust clouds sweeping through the streets, consuming all those in its path while the shockwave tossed parked cars and tossed whole sides of collapsed building into the air. People ran, that was all they could do in the face of a danger they could not comprehend.

Through the blinding dust cloud Cardin ran doing all he could to keep the world together just seconds longer. Vale wasn't just a kingdom, it was his home. He grew up here in the Merchant district, he'd ran around and often stared up in awe at those buildings that now shattered against the ground like glass. The city of Vale was his home, and these people who'd only wished to live the life they best could, he'd sworn to protect them the moment he got on that airship to Beacon. So in the face of danger, with the world crashing down all around him, Cardin raced into the unknown.

The sounds of gatling guns and dispensed bullet casings clashing against pavement echoed off in the distance as Atlesian Knights met their Grimm opposites. The deathly screeches of overhead birds of prey and inhuman monsters cut through the night. Far off death machines built in porcelain factories on a far off continent whizzed by, propelled by their screaming engines. And yet none of these sounds caught Cardin's ears, he was too focused on the cries of the innocent.

Through the desolation Cardin raced, leaping over toppled over debris and racing through glass covered road. He passed by people running the opposite way and allowed himself a moment to glance over his shoulder, just to ensure they were alright, that they could carry on without his aid.

Cardin followed the shouts and cries, finding a pair of civilians in their late twenties desperately
attempting to free a plethora of others trapped behind the remains of a supermarket. The pair of civilians, average working class fellows, turned to see Cardin, a look of relief finding its way to their downtrodden faces.

"It's a Huntsman!" Cardin could hear a child's voice shout from somewhere behind the debris. "We're gonna be alright!"

"Can you help them?" One of the pair of civilians asked, a younger looking fellow with black hair wearing a supermarket employee's uniform.

"One moment." Cardin said as he reached into his back pocket for his scroll. Quickly, he dialed up the prompt to call in his weapon and hit the confirm button. In less than a minute, a rocket locker found its way crashing nearby. Cardin then ran to the locker and pried it open, retrieving his mace.

"Get clear!" Cardin shouted, gesturing for everyone trapped behind the rubble to take a step back. The CRDL leader then raised his mace, the magma dust crystal centerpiece flaring to life. He then slammed it down on the ground, sending a streak of explosive energy to detonate at the face of the rubble, blowing it clear and freeing the trapped civilians.

The pair of average looking civilians then got to work helping those trapped safely exit the collapsed building. Cardin then raced over, joining them. "Is that everyone?" He asked as he peered into the darkness, finding no signs of anyone else.

"That's it, we're good!" One of the civilians shouted.

"Now what?" Another asked, a woman in her late thirties. She then looked around, gesturing to the ruined dust covered street and over yonder to the battle raging near Beacon. "Where do we go now?"

And just like that, all the people looked to Cardin for answers. But the truth of the matter was, Cardin didn't have a plan, all he did was run into danger without thinking. There was no step two, there was no superior he could raise, not with the communication blackout anyways. But this wasn't the time for him clamor up, this was the time to get his shit in order. Because now there were people who depended on him.

He was three years away from being a full blown Huntsman. But it seemed graduation came early. So Cardin turned his head northern east coast, right on the outskirts of town. From what he could tell, it seemed to be the only part of the city not on fire. If anything it most certainly would be their best option to set up a safe zone, not to mention it gave them water access to evacuate people to Peach if need be.

But before Cardin could relay his direction to the civilians, a nearby growl caught his ear. Emerging out of a ruined building, Cardin caught sight of a pack of blood soaked Creeps. Their appearance was startling to say the least. The Winchester watched for a moment, waiting to see what the Creeps would do while the civilians he'd rescued cowered behind him.

There was something off about the Grimm, something odd yet familiar. Cardin watched as they sauntered out into the open, watching each individual member of the pack. It was their movements, he pinpointed, something about the way they moved, it was too sluggish. If Cardin didn't know any better, he'd probably say these were the same pack from…

"…Oakwood." Cardin gritted his teeth, realizing the origin of The White Fang's supply of ravenous Grimm.
"Oakwood?" One of the civilians asked disbelievingly. "That's pretty far away, Mr. Huntsman."

"Shoreline, move, now!" Cardin barked, pointing off to the distance as the pack of blood covered Creeps turned their attention their way.

Seeing the approaching Grimm, the civilians eagerly nodded and followed Cardin's command. The numerous civilians took off, leaving Cardin to deal with the Grimm. But that was alright with him, it was his job.

One of The Creeps attempted to break off from the pack and lunge after one of the civilians, but Cardin smashed his mace down onto the ground, causing a magma blast to streak through the pavement and explode under the Creep's feet, sending it flying. The pack turned their attention to Cardin and flared their teeth and charged in unison.

Cardin roared, deciding to meet the Grimm halfway and charged.

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Going into this arc, I really wanted to portray the attack on Vale for what it is. Its an act of Terror. You can pick up shades of 9/11 imagery during Cardin's section, especially. In the show, Cardin was depicted as being in the city and fighting. I really wanted to maintain that. While everyone was busy at Beacon, he was down fighting in the streets. He's our first responder.

I'm sidelining Sky, he's got shit to do.

And Dove, oh poor Dove, he's having a bad day.

This chapter is mainly set up. Sorry if its not as long as some of the latest chapters.

So, I've got nothing else to say about the chapter. I'd like to thank you all for reading, it means a lot! Seriously, thank you.

Next chapter will take some time, but it shouldn't be too long. 'Til next time! Later days!
Welcome back everyone to another chapter of Everything Going Horribly Wrong! lol

I actually got a chapter done in less than a week this time. Nice.

Whenever I write anything that's sort of topical like terrorism or anything Lance related I sort of get a little hesitant, not too sure how you all will react to me killing characters or depicting situations like the one Cardin dealt with.

As always, I hope you enjoy this chapter, thanks.

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It must've taken years of planning to ensure this moment in history. But in reality, it took less than that. The Iron Nail would know, he was there for every meeting. He and the rest of the high ranking White Fang members had sat down with a trio of foreigners with deep pockets and high aspirations and hashed out this little invasion of theirs in a matter of months. Entire days were spent in a cramped tent, coordinating White Fang troops and laying the foundation of Vale's fall from grace. Everything detail meticulously thought, hinging on the success of each other.

The Iron Nail had overseen most of their day to day operations. Acquiring land and food supplies out by the country side. Not to mention he'd also acquired the very Grimm that they dropped into the city below. And he'd done so without question, using the barest minimum of resources to accomplish their grander goals. Brothers and Sisters had died for this day to come. All the while The Iron Nail lived on, enduring scars that could never heal.

But it was never enough. The loss of even one of their number had deemed the operation a failure, no matter the degree of success. And as punishment, The Iron Nail was stripped of his status as Adam's elite enforcer and assigned to a lesser member of the organization. So now the once feared Iron Nail found himself in the present, chaperoning some young upstart, as they made their way down into the engine room of the grand Amity Colosseum.

"Keep up!" Captain Pangolin shouted over his shoulder to the men that followed him. "We're on a time table!"

There five of them all together, The Iron Nail, Pangolin and three others whom the veteran hadn't the chance to know. If it wasn't for the fact Pangolin seemed more interested in pursuing a promotion up the relatively small chain of command, The Iron Nail dared to liken this moment to days long gone. With his team standing right beside him.

"Troia, Maulla, Gregory." The Iron Nail uttered his fallen comrade's names under his breath. They'd all died in a cave, slaughtered by an Ursa one lowly farm boy had disturbed. And their deaths had haunted the once revered White Fang Lieutenant since then.

But they hadn't died for nothing, The Iron Nail thought to himself as the party jogged through a dimly lit hallway at the bottom of the Colosseum. Their being here now was in-part because of their sacrifice. They'd plundered Oakwood of what they needed and their part in the invasion
completed. And because of them, the dream lives on. A dream of a world where Faunus live not under the boot of persecution, but towering over those who'd ostracized them for centuries. That was what they died for, a world where a life time of suffering was nonexistent. And now, that dream was coming true, The Iron Nail thought. All the world will look to Vale and watch in horror, as the prideful Amity Colosseum crashes down from the Heavens. And they will know then, truly then, that The White Fang, that Faunus, are not to be trifled with.

And with those final thoughts, The Iron Nail's mind grew silent and clear. No longer was he lingering on dreams of possibilities spoken to him by elders long ago, or fixated on some vendetta for a lone Thrush. He was at peace in the here and now, focused and willing to do whatever was necessary to accomplish their objective.

The party made a turn down another hallway, following Pangolin's lead. And then down the hall they could see it, their objective defined by black bar on door. 'Engineering Room', it read. Pangolin smiled, as did the others, it was almost over for them.

"Let's go!" Pangolin barked to his men before rushing down the hall.

"Not a step further!" A voice called out, causing the White Fang to stop in their tracks. They turned to find the source of the voice, finding a peculiar group of Huntsmen down the hall. It wasn't their presence that surprised the White Fang members, they'd expected some form of resistance, but rather, it was the members of that comprised this group of Huntsmen that caught them off-guard.

"I told you there'd be bad guys down here." Revy Linnaeus of the Vacuan Team formerly called 'TREK' said over shoulder to the others.

"No one argued with you." Nindo Bloom, the katana wielding member of the Mistralian Team GRNN, remarked.

"Quite." Ezekiel Jupiter of the sole Faunus member of Team DNCE muttered, crossing his arms in a judging manner.

"Let me guess," Darnell Blacktop, the leader of the Atlesian Team DORK said taking an aggressive step forward. "You were going to sabotage the engines and crash the colosseum into the city."

"Hmpf." Pangolin scoffed as he stepped apart from his strike team. "Aren't you the clever Homo sapien?" The White Fang Captain then turned to his men and pointed to their opposition. "Deal with them."

The assembled Huntsmen darted forward, weapons in hand as they aimed to push past the White Fang line and prevent Pangolin from accomplishing their goal. The White Fang soldiers picked their targets, aiming to fight them one on one in order to slow them down. They all ran forward, meeting the Huntsmen in the center of the hall.

Revy leapt forward with her pole weapon and attempted to use it to vault over their line. But one of
their number possessed the hind legs of a frog and jumped to tackle her in the air, blocking her advance. Nindo broke out his katana and aimed to assist Revy, only for his sword strike to be blocked by a fiery scimitar. The blade wielding White Fang forced Nindo away and pressed on, opting to take their battle elsewhere.

Darnell stepped forward, sidestepping the ensuing sword duel and producing a silver handgun. He took aim at The Iron Nail, intending to take out the most imposing figure in the room. He pulled the trigger, sending a high caliber dust round traveling towards the Lieutenant. But The Iron Nail activated his semblance, coating his entire body in organic metal. The round his forehead, exploding on impact, but dealing no real damage. The Iron Nail balked at the attack, half tempted to laugh it off.

The Atlesian Huntsman then attempted to fire off another shot, only for his weapon to explode in his hand. Darnell recoiled in pain, falling to the floor. What was once a hand was now a bloody stub. The Huntsman looked up at his wound, a mortified expression on his face, all while the third member of The White Fang strike team towered over him, a smoking sawed off shotgun in his hand.

The shotgun wielding revolutionary pressed her foot on Darnell's chest and aimed downward, intent on finishing him off. But before she could get off the shot, Ezekiel ran up with his spiked brass knuckles and socked her across the jaw with all his might. The woman's weapon discharged, striking the ground Darnell instead of his face, all the while the force of Ezekiel's punch sent her flying backward with several of her teeth scattering onto the floor.

Glancing over his shoulder, The Iron Nail watched as his compatriot skidded across the floor. He fought against the urge to run and aid her, opting rather to turn his attention to her attacker. There, kneeling beside Darnell was Ezekiel, doing his best to keep the Atlesian from bleeding to death. The Iron Nail studied the young man for moment, his hands reaching from his holstered hammer and sickle. But he stopped suddenly, noticing Ezekiel's beaver tail.

"You are Faunus." The Iron Nail addressed the young plus size Huntsman. After ripping off part of his own shirt to bandage Darnell's wound, Ezekiel stood, turning to face The Iron Nail fully. "Our argument is not with you." The Lieutenant said, removing his hands from the hilts of his weapons.

"So you claim." Ezekiel said in a distrustful tone. "And yet you've brought war to Vale."

"The hallmarks of this fractured society must burn before we can raise utopia." The Iron Nail, taking a step forward and deactivating his semblance. The coat of metal faded away into his skin and he opened his arms wide willing to embrace his fellow faunus. "An end to discrimination, an end to prejudice, an end to human run world."

"I am from Vacuo." Ezekiel declared as the battle raged at his side between the rest of the White Fang and the rag tag group of Huntsmen. "I know what it is like to be discriminated against. I have felt the same pain and the same shame as any other of our kind." He shook his head.

"Then join us, Brother." The Iron Nail implored as he continued to step forward, hoping that he could sway Ezekiel to the With Fang cause.

"You are not my brother. You're a terrorist." Ezekiel scoffed, raising his arms high up, giving the eye-patch wearing Lieutenant a good look at his bloodied brass knuckles. "Vale isn't perfect, there is still prejudice. But it is not Vacuo. It is not my race for which I am judged most," The DNCE boy said, gesturing to his rather portly frame. "But rather my weight."

"And that is a privilege I will gladly lay my life down for." Ezekiel glared.
The Iron Nail paused in his advance. While the rest of the strike team fended off the other Huntsmen to limited success, here he was attempting to convert one man to their cause. But Ezekiel would not see reason. And that pained his heart.

"I am sorry to hear that." The Iron Nail spoke, meaning every word. He reached for his hammer and his sickle and raised both weapons and charged at Ezekiel.

"White Fang!" General Ironwood shouted. "Everyone take cover!"

On the southern landing pad of Amity Colosseum, the few remaining Atlesian security forces made their stand, fending off attacking Grimm while buying time for the civilians to be evacuated via Airship. It was a task easier said than done, the night had presented numerous surprises for the good General and his men, both flesh and mechanical. He'd seen Grimm rare only to forests on the country side of Vale and their condition was anything other than typical.

And the White Fang were a different matter entirely. The radicalized Faunus attacked in teams of four, approaching from opposite sides. The Atlesian Knights were caught in the crossfire, as were the civilians. Cover was in high demand, as Ironwood and his few forces were forced to use pillars and the bodies of downed robotic companions to fend off attack parties.

Evacuating the civilians was becoming an exceedingly difficult task by the minute. The moment they'd find reprieve, another wave of Grimm or another team of White Fang would swoop in to take their place. And Ironwood's attention wasn't firmly here in the firefight. It was up there in the clouds, where some vagabond had taken one of his ships and now proceeded to lay waste to the city and his fleet.

"Transport away!" An Atlesian lieutenant shouted over the roars of stampeding Boarbatusks. Ironwood afforded himself a brief moment to look back and watch an Airbus take flight, half expecting it to fly clear of the city entirely. But instead, the Airbus descended, flying off to the northern east coastline.

"Lieutenant, where's that ship headed?" Ironwood shouted, confused by the ships flight direction.

"Huntsmen are directing all civilians towards a designated safe zone, sir!" The lieutenant replied as he returned fire on a pair of White Fang.

Hearing that bit news, Ironwood couldn't help but breathe a sigh of relief. He had to remind himself, that even though they were caught off guard, there still capable professionals out there keeping the city from falling. And for that, Ironwood was thankful. It meant he could divide his time as he saw fit, and take back his ship. But before he could do so, the General must make it off the colosseum. Which was becoming more and more unlikely.

"Where are they coming from?" A Private shouted as another pack of malnourished Creeps came running at them.

The few remaining Atlesian Knights turned their attention on the Grimm, blasting them in a coordinated strike. But with their attention deviated from the attacking White Fang, the radicals struck, annihilating the last of the robotic defenders with concentrated weapons fire. The shrapnel from the robots found themselves imbedded in the ceiling, against pillars and in some occasions in the sides of nearby cowering civilians.

"They're breaking through!" Another Private shouted as he attempted to drag a wounded civilian behind a pillar. But before he could, a Teflon arrow courtesy of a White Fang crossbow struck the
side of his helmet, piercing it. The Private let out a surprised cry before collapsing against the impact and dying on the floor.

Ironwood turned his attention to the opposite side of the landing strip. The White Fang were aggressively pushing their way through the Atlesian defenders, cutting them down with relative ease. The few remaining Atlesian soldiers divided their already thinly stretched force to accommodate the assault, but Ironwood could already see the inevitable conclusion drawing near. All he had to do was turn his gaze to the Airbus attempting to take off.

The Airbus engines burst to life, propelling it into the air. The pilot spun the ship towards the sea and attempted to jet off. But seeing the transport attempting to flee, the numerous White Fang soldiers turned their guns and took aim. A volley of high velocity dust rounds and explosive arrows among rocket propelled grenades struck the Airbus. The left tail rotor exploded, the main cabin caught fire. General Ironwood's eyes went wide as the ship crashed into the landing platform before skidding off, still propelled by the remaining engine, until it fell over the side.

Over forty souls were lost in that instant. The General somberly thought. Ironwood was a man charged with the protection of his Kingdom. He'd spent a lifetime climbing through the ranks of the Atlesian military to earn that honor. But here in this moment, he doubted he could save these few frightened civilians. The enemy was closing in from all sides, closing in for the kill. And all the General could do was stand, officer's pistol in hand and do his best to delay death. He took aim at the closest White Fang soldier, his finger on the trigger.

But he never pulled it. He was too caught off guard by the appearance of forty fresh heavily armed Huntsmen running to the rescue. "Students!" Ironwood shouted, surprised by their intervention.

"We've got this General!" Jaune cried out as he stabbed his sword into the air. The Huntsmen let out a unified battle cry and leapt into the fray.

"Gunners on our left!" Sun called out machine gun toting White Fang soldiers over the sound of his shotgun weapons discharging into the face of an attacking Beowulf.

"I see 'em!" Coco whipped out her machine gun and tore through the nearby columns used by the White Fang for cover while Neptune and Nadir provided suppressing fire, discouraging the radical group from attempting to shots on the CFVY leader.

"Rocket guy to the right!" Nora exclaimed as she tackled a civilian to the floor, saving him from being struck by enemy ordinance.

"I got him!" Roy shouted. The BRNZ boy reeled back an arm and then flung one of his saw blades forward, ricocheting it off the nearby walls to strike the Rocket wielding White Fang.

"Beowulf! Beowulf!" Gwen shouted as an Alpha Beowulf bashed its way past a pair of Atlesian soldiers and charged through their lines.

"Hey you!" Ren called out, momentarily distracting the Alpha Grimm. The Beowulf looked over its shoulder to see the JNPR ninja running towards it at full speed. Meeting the challenge, the Beowulf charged to face him.

"Argh! Fuck!" Fox cursed as a high velocity dust round pierced through his shoulder, blasting out the other side and striking the Alpha Beowulf Ren fought, momentarily stunning it. "Sniper!" The blind CFVY member exclaimed.

"Ruby, May, deal with that guy, please!" Ren angrily cried out to the pair of snipers as he slid on
the metal floor, stopping until he was beneath the stunned Beowulf. Ren turned StormFlower upward, aimed at the Grimm's exposed underbelly. He pulled the triggers of his dual auto pistols and riddled the beast until it was nothing.

"On it!" Ruby said, speaking for not only herself but the Vacuan sniper. Both Ruby and May took up positions behind a column and quickly got to work. "He's by the far pillar." Ruby called out the enemy sniper, catching the glare from his scope. The Huntress took aim and fired. The dust round streaked through the air, leaving a trail in its wake and struck the column the White Fang sniper hid behind.

Ruby grunted in dismay. She then looked to check Crescent Rose's sights, wondering if the rocket locker's landing hand in some way thrown them off. The Vacuan sniper watched the younger girl for a moment, slightly puzzled at her actions. But then, she shrugged and without a word, May turned her gun on the White Fang marksman and put a round through his barely exposed head.

"Nice shooting May!" Ruby turned to her sharpshooter in arms with a gleeful expression and a thumbs up.

"Eh." The Vacuan sniper shrugged, as if it were nothing.

"Keep up the pressure!" Pyrrha shouted as she, Brawnz and Nolan met a pair of sword wielding White Fang soldiers head on.

"Protect the Civilians!" Scarlet shouted to Sage, pointing to a number of civilians who'd been forced into the open by the attacking Alpha Beowulf. The broadsword wielding member of SSSN acknowledged his leader's and ran to their aid, using his mighty weapon as a shield to protect them from harm.

"We've got Creeps inbound!" Marie-Anne bellowed from her vantage point atop a parked Airship. Danny Matchstick turned to face the oncoming horde of Creeps, walking through the crossfire of White Fang and Huntsmen attacks. He reached for his gun holsters, removing a pair of similarly designed pistols and readied himself.

"Bet you I can kill more." Danny turned to find Reese standing by his side with a sly grin, her hoverboard weapon deconstructed and in its dual bayoneted revolver form.

"You're on." Danny shot Reese a kind smile. The two Huntsmen then turned their dual guns on the Grimm horde.

"I could use a hand here!" Octavia cried out as she dueled a sword wielding White Fang soldier. The Faunus lunged forward, preparing to deliver a killing blow. But a dust tipped arrow struck his blade, exploding on impact and shattering the metal. The Soldier turned to find Nebula standing there, her crossbow trained on him.

"He's all yours." Nebula smirked before turning to rejoin the larger battle. The White Fang soldier stared in confusion, puzzled by the NDGO leader's words. But he soon realized she wasn't speaking to him and turned to find a malicious grin firmly planted on Octavia's face. The fiery Vacuan raised her blade and slashed him across the chest.

"Suppressing fire!" A White Fang soldier screamed as he ran directly into the heart of the defending Huntsmen guns blazing.

"Pfft." Arslan scoffed, clearly unimpressed by the White Fang soldier's assault. "You call that fire?" She said mockingly as she took a step forward. She reeled back and arm and charged her
aura into her fist. "This is fire." She muttered before throwing a punch into the air. A ball of flame shot forth from her knuckles, striking the White Fang soldier and engulfing him in flame.

A Beringel thrashed about, smashing the ground and swatting several Huntsmen and civilians with the backs of its hands. "Concentrate your attacks on the Beringel!" Bolin barked as he and Yatsuhashi and Neon raced to meet the rampaging Gorilla styled Grimm head on.

The eccentrically dressed faunus girl on roller blades ran circles around the Beringel, earning an angered roar in response from the towering beast as she dodged its attacks. With the Grimm distracted, Bolin ran in from behind alongside Yatsuhashi and together they struck at the back of its legs. The Beringel toppled over at the loss of support and fell flat on its face. And before it could get up, Yatsuhashi brought his mighty sword down on its neck.

"They're sizing up for a final push!" Flynt shouted as he dragged a wounded Atlas soldier out of the line of fire.

The assembled Huntsmen turned their attention to their right, finding The Grimm and White Fang rushing together. Some stood in awe at such a display, never before had any of them thought it possible for Grimm to willing work in tandem with faunus. But it wasn't that at all, rather, two warring parties setting aside their differences to vanquish a common foe that was all. All the Huntsmen had to do was look into those murderous red eyes for confirmation.

Their enemies drew closer, amassed like a mighty wall charging forward. Not even their combined firepower could fell their indomitable presence. So the Huntsmen readied themselves, collecting their thoughts for the inevitable melee.

But they never came blows. As it was, a gust wind picked up at the heart of the amassed forces. A gust of wind that quickly spun and spun before picking up the power to suck all the Grimm and White fang into a tornado. The Huntsmen and civilians watched in awe as they were carried off over the side. They cried as the wind dissipated and they all fell over off the platform, left to plummet to the city below.

Slowly, the Huntsmen turned to see Dew standing off to the side, her wind elemental spear casually extended forward and an unimpressed expression on her face.

"That all of them?" Pyrrha inquired, cautiously checking the surrounding area.

"For the moment anyway." General Ironwood said, quickly earning the assembled Huntsmen's attention. "I owe you my thanks, students. Without you, we all would have surely perished." He said, gesturing to the hundreds of Civilians and unarmed academy students, all of whom smiled with gratitude for the Huntsmen's intervention.

"Thanks aren't necessary, General." Flynt said coolly as he brandished his trumpet over his shoulder.

"We're Huntsmen." Arslan firmly said as she crossed her arms over her chest.

"It's our job." Jaune said

"What's going on up there?" Ruby pointed out into the open sky. Up in the moonli night Grimm waged war on Atlesian warships while the fleet's flagship rained hell down upon the city and its sister ships.

"Some vagabond has seized control of my ship." Ironwood cast a glare upward. He had a sinking suspicion of just who the dastardly villain manning the ship's weapons could be. "I need to get up
there and take back control."

"We'll back you up," Coco said, taking a step forward and raising her gatling gun.

"That'll be unnecessary." Ironwood said as he signaled to the remainder of his troops silently telling them to continue with the evacuation effort in his absence with a simple hand gesture. "Besides, the city appears to be in dire need of help. Help only you can provide." He said, turning his eyes to the city below, under siege by an army of Grimm.

With that said, General Ironwood turned and marched his way up to a parked Atlesian Dropship, leaving the assembled Huntsmen to the task of getting down to the city.

"Well, you all heard the man!" Jaune shouted from where she stood at the front of the mob of Huntsmen. "Let's get down there!" He said, earning a chorus of eager cries in response. The assembled group of Huntsmen then raced off down the platform, where a vacant Airbus awaited them for use.

"You've really come into your own, Jaune." Pyrrha commented as she jogged beside Jaune.

"Thanks," He said, smiling slightly. "I learned it from watching you."

"Mind if we tag along?" A voice called out, causing Jaune and Pyrrha to slow their pace. The odd half of JNPR looked to their left, finding a pair of their fellow Beacon students approaching.

"Any help is appreciated." Jaune said before nodding to the awaiting Airbus. "The more the merrier." He said before he and Pyrrha set off to rejoin the others.

Serin lingered momentarily, as did her companion Tobias. They'd arrived late, unable to turn the tide of the battle. But the deaths of the White Fang would be avenged, so she silently swore. So they brandished their weapons, holding in their inner rage and moved to join the Huntsmen in their voyage to the city below, fully intending to strike back in the name of Faunus everywhere.

On the complete other side of the colosseum, Russel found himself a moment's reprieve. By some miracle he'd given The Ursa the slip and now held his back against a steel support column, his right hand covering his wound and his eyes glancing out to the chaos ensuing out in the city below. What would have otherwise been a lovely view of Vale was muddled with burning buildings and the cries of panic.

Russel watched with dread, knowing he could do little to help. Without any doubt the stadium was being evacuated, but here he was nowhere near the extraction point. Escape from this death trap of a colosseum seemed more and more unlikely with every passing moment. And The Ursa was still out there, along with whatever White Fang soldiers and Grimm remained. But for the moment, he was alone. There was no death beast nipping at his heels, no walking soup can monologing about inequality between races, nor was there any friend he could turn to for aid. It was just Russel standing with the night and all that came with it, such as the chilling winds and chilling sounds of distant cannon fire.

But he wasn't alone. Russel turned, to the sound of a nearby door being shoved open, followed by the tired sounds of panting. Glancing over the side of the column, Russel looked to see the source of the noise. And much to the Thrush's surprise, he found his teammate Dove, taking a moment to catch his breath.

"Dove?" Russel called out to the youngest member of CRDL. Dove froze where he stood and slowly turned to face Russel. Where was once a look of desperation was now replaced by one of
relief.

"You scared the crap out of me man!" Dove exclaimed before hobbling over to the column Russel stood behind. "Oh, Russel, you don't know how good it is to see a friendly face." Dove said, unable to help himself but let out a shaky laugh. "What happened to you?" He asked, noticing Russel's blood stained clothing.

"Ursa." Russel said simply. The Thrush then glanced at Dove's bloodied shoulder. "You?"

"Team STAG." Dove said bitterly. "They killed Nero. Iliad, Lambert and Oum knows how many more."

Russel couldn't help but bite his lip at the news. The all faunus Huntsman team had always seemed particularly militant, but he'd never truly paid them any mind. After all, how could he? They were Huntsmen like himself, or at least they claimed to be. How could anyone fathom White Fang members infiltrating Beacon. But as the thought registered in Russel's mind, memories of that one Sunday afternoon with Blake was brought to the forefront of his mind.

"Fuck." Russel murmured, realizing that if Blake could have attended Beacon without alerting the school of her ties to the faunus terrorist organization, then any other White Fang operative could have done the same.

"Hm?" Dove raised a brow at his teammate's swearing.

"Nothing, nothing. Just feeling stupid." He muttered. "Well I'm glad you got away Dove." Russel spoke honestly as he reached over to further inspect his comrade's wound. By the looks of it, Dove had been overreacting. The youngest of CRDL hadn't been shot after all, rather, the bullet nicked his shoulder.

"There he is." A foreign voice said, earning the pair of CRDL member's attention. Russel and Dove turned their attention back to the door Dove had kicked open. There, stepping out of the doorway was Angela Revear and Michael Geist of Team STAG.

"There they both are." Angela corrected her teammate as she aimed her blood stained katana at Russel standing behind the column. "Oh, I wish the others could be here for this."

"I see you didn't quite lose them." Russel remarked, not at all fazed by the turn of events. "I'm counting only two mutts, where's the Head Bitch?" He questioned the pair of White Fang infiltrators tauntingly.

"I'm gonna cut out your fucking tongue and give it to her for a present." Michael threatened as he produced a pair of stiletto blades from his jacket.

"So you admit she's a bitch?" Russel smirked.

"Now would be to time to call in our weapons." Dove said as he discretely removed his scroll from his pocket.

Russel nodded and drew his scroll from his pants pocket and began to dial up the prompt. Seeing Russel attempting to call in his rocket locker, Michael reeled back one of his arms and threw his stiletto, piercing through the device's screen. Russel just stared at the thin weapon as it protruded from his scroll, a disbelieving look on his face. "You cheeky fuck." He swore before removing the blade from his scroll and pocketing the device once more.

Michael scoffed before reaching into his jacket and removing another blade. "Drop dead you
"You first you sick demented assholes." Dove shot back in defense of his teammate. A rocket locker then suddenly crashed through the roof, landing behind the CRDL boys. Dove pocketed his scroll and turned to reach into the locker and retrieve his sword. Turning back to face the mass murderers, Dove raised his gun sword and took aim.

And then without a word, the pair of Angela and Michael raced forward, weapons ready. Dove pulled the trigger of his underslung pistol and rocketed a dust round at their adversaries. Angela leapt forward with her katana, cutting the bullet in two and causing the halves to shoot off in different directions and explode in the free open space behind the pair of STAG members.

Russel darted forward, holding the stiletto in his hand like an icepick and met the pair head on. Michael leapt ahead of Angela, marking Russel as his opponent and slashed at the Thrush with his blades. Russel blocked with his own and kicked Michael back. Before anything could be made of the STAG member's loss of footing, Angela came to Michael's rescue and forced Russel back.

In comparison to Russel's knife, Angela had the capacity to launch long range attacks and fended him away. Michael then picked himself off the ground and flung one of his knives at the approaching Dove. The youngest of CRDL swatted the stiletto out of the air with his sword and charged ahead. Michael then threw off his jacket, revealing his wearing a vest carrying some ten knife pouches. He took his jacket and flung it at Dove as a distraction to replenish his knife supply.

Angela struck at Russel, but he leapt forward into a roll, completely dodging it and closing the distance between them. He quickly shot upward, cutting Angela across the chest with his knife. With Angela momentarily stunned by his attack, Russel afforded himself the chance to glance over to Dove's current situation, where he found the younger man fighting a simple jacket while Michael prepared to release a flurry of knives upon him.

With a grunt, Russel quickly flung his knife at Michael, impaling it through his left hand. The STAG boy let out a pained wail as he dropped his blades, too busy attending to his wound. But with Russel distracted, he was unable to protect himself from Angela. The sword wielder cried out sharply, she reeled back a fist and socked Russel across the jaw, completely spinning the Thrush around and knocking him down onto the floor.

"Gonna kill you, Russel!" She shouted before thrusting her blade forward at Russel's back.

But before Angela could make contact with the Russel, Dove came swooping in to save his teammate, striking Angela's blade with his own. The duo then engaged in sword play, trading blows which were then blocked by the other. They clashed, forcing their swords against the other and leaned forward until their faces were but mere inches apart.

"You killed innocent people!" Dove screamed in Angela's face.

"Innocent?" Angela laughed mockingly. She then reeled her head back and then threw it forward through the clashing blades and struck her forehead against the bridge of Dove's nose, causing the CRDL boy to shout in pain and stumble back. "Nobody's innocent." Angela muttered coldly before taking the opportunity to strike at Dove. He quickly raised his blade to deflect Angela's attack. But the force behind her blow, coupled with his disoriented stance, was enough to force Dove onto the defensive.

"Vale and its people are just as much guilty for the atrocities committed against Faunus as any other Kingdom!" Angela shouted as she delivered another powerful blow against Dove's sword, forcing the young man closer to the edge of the platform. "You are all children of a fucked system!
Everyone I've murdered today has more blood on their hands than I do!"

"Argh!" Dove shouted in pain as sparks skittered off the latest clash between their blades and
struck his cheek, burning him. The young Huntsman winced as he once again blocked another of
Angela's strikes. "You sure about that?" He snapped back. "Iliad never killed anybody." He said,
momentarily glancing at Angela's blade and seeing Iliad's blood. "The only one guilty of atrocities
here is you."

"Ugh." Russel groaned as picked himself off the floor. He turned his attention back to Michael,
who stood there taunting him.

"You winded already? From one punch? Pathetic." Michael said as his aura quickly healed his
hand wound.

"You'd be winded too if an Ursa used you like a chew toy." Russel shot back as he turned his
attention to Michael's knife pouches. As it currently was, The Thrush was unarmed. But he planned
to remedy that.

"Hmpf. Excuses." Michael scoffed as he drew another pair of knives from his pouches. The STAG
boy then ran forward, intent on finishing Russel off. He jumped into the air and then slammed his
blades downward full force onto The Thrush.

But Russel upwards, grabbing Michael by his forearms and wrestled with him for dominance.
Russel gave it a moment of struggling before seizing up his legs, planning to fall backwards and
bring the STAG boy with him. And so he caved, bringing the unsuspecting White Fang infiltrator
with him. Before Michael even knew what had happened, Russel pressed a boot to the guy's gut
and flipped him over his head.

Michael landed hard onto the cold steel floor. But that wasn't enough to keep him down. He soon
picked himself up and turned to meet a waiting Russel. He prepared to have another go at it, rush
Russel from the side and exploit his injury sustained from The Ursa, but before he could, Russel
held out his hand revealed six knives in-between the fingers of both hands.

Seeing the display of knives, Michael quickly looked to his vest of pouches, finding that one had
been opened and emptied. "How did y-?"

"Didn't you ever hear of sleight of hand?" Russel said as he raised the blades to throw. "And for
my next trick!" He shouted before flinging the blades at Michael.

Angela lashed out against Dove, taking exception to his words. And despite his opponent's ruthless
assault, Dove held on as best he could. But that didn't mean anything to Angela, not while she
forced him closer to the edge of the platform with every sword strike. Eventually Dove would be
forced to die by her blade or fall. Either way, she was content with her victory.

Dove soon found himself taking another step back, but he found nothing to support himself. He
quickly reeled his leg back and stabilized his balance. He didn't need to look back to know he'd run
out of walking room. So he kept his attention firmly on Angela, who now cracked a wicked smile
as he was right where she wanted him.

"This doesn't change anything." Dove met Angela's stare.

"This doesn't change anything? But it does." Angela affirmed, closing the distance between them
and clashing her blade with Dove's. "With every one of yours dead, truly then can a peaceful world
be achieved." She said before swinging her sword back and striking at Dove with all her might.
"This is how you change the world."

The force of the attack had knocked Dove back, and just like that he was falling over the edge. And there stood Angela peering over the side in victory, wanting to watch Dove plummet to his doom. But even in the face of death, Dove didn't surrender. He reached out in one last ditch effort and grabbed onto Angela's arm. The infiltrator was taken by surprise at the action and with all his weight pulling against her, both Dove and Angela went over the edge.

"Dove!" Russel shouted out for his teammate. He quickly spun around and flung a knife he'd taken from Michael into the STAG boy's knee, felling him, then ran over to the edge of the platform. Russel peered over the edge, looking for any glimpse of hope that Dove may have grabbed onto something off the side that the boy had survived. But he couldn't see Dove, nor Angela. From this far up everything thing was indistinguishable with the surface, it all just meshed together.

Out of Russel's view, Dove and Angela plummeted to their deaths. The STAG member let out a bone chilling scream as she flailed about. Dove, on the other hand, was silent. The youngest of CRDL was too busy thinking of his family and his friends to scream in terror.

"Damn you Dove! Damn you!" Angela cried out as she spiraled out of control in midair.

Dove thought of his supportive Mother and Father, thinking that maybe he should have called a bit more regularly. He thought about the life he led up until this point and the decisions he made. And then he thought of Beacon and the few friends he made in the form of his team. He'd never seen much action up until The Vytal Festival. And then he thought back that moment in the competition. That moment when he was thrown through the air by Kafka. He felt weightless then, almost as if he were flying…

…Just like he did now. And then Dove stopped falling.

"For every one of us, a hundred of yours will die." Michael sneered as he pried the blade from his knee. The White Fang infiltrator picked himself off the floor and walked to the edge of the platform where Russel currently stood peering over.

Russel shot a glare over his shoulder and tightened his grip on the knife in his right hand. He had no response to Michael's words. He'd just watched a teammate, arguably a friend of his fall of the side and plummet to his death. That wasn't a way to go, he thought to himself. Dove didn't deserve that.

But while Michael went into full blown monologue about the ruination of Vale and ascendance of all Faunus kind, the boy was left unaware to the sound of heavy clawed feet thudding against the floor. Russel looked past Michael, loosened from his thoughts from the all too familiar sound. And there standing off to the side was The Ursa.

The Grimm looked to Russel, shooting the Thrush a glare before turning his eyes to Michael. The Faunus stopped with his speech and turned to see The Ursa standing there. He let out a laugh and shot a smile at Russel. He didn't have to say a word to get his message across, Russel could already tell he was outnumbered, that he didn't have the firepower nor the skills to take on both Michael and The Ursa.

"Guess this really isn't your night, huh?" Michael cockily said before lunging forward at Russel.

The Ursa did the same, racing forward to clash with the pair. Russel welcomed them, raising his blade in icepick fashion. He took a step forward and clashed his blade against Michael's. But with Russel busy deflecting Michael's attack, he was unable to counter The Ursa, who swiped him with
its claw and sent him flying back over skidding closer to the wall.

Michael then turned on his heel, turning his back to the night sky and readied to run off after Russel. But then a looming shadow cast down over the boy, causing him to freeze. Slowly, Michael turned his head to look over is shoulder in wonder of the source. And there stood The Ursa on its hind legs towering over him.

"Argh!" Michael cried out as The Ursa pounced him from behind. The faunus struggled, attempting to break away from the Grimm. But The Ursa was relentless, it held him in place and brought its free claw down on the young man, proceeding to tear into him.

Russel watched in horror from afar as The Ursa mauled Michael, just as it had done to those White Fang soldiers in the cave at Oakwood. The Ursa momentarily halted its assault on the faunus boy and looked up, meeting Russel's stare with its own, as if to tell Russel that it'd be gunning for him next. Which has always been the case, hasn't it? Ever since that day in Oakwood.

But Russel wasn't in the forests of Oakwood anymore. He was in the city of Vale, a city he loved. He wasn't that little boy anymore, the one who'd fallen from the tree and landed into the sights of a godless beast. He'd grown up since that fateful day. He was a Huntsman now. The Ursa wasn't some devil emerging from his nightmares, it was his prey.

So he pulled himself off the ground, producing two of Michael's knives in each hand and stalked forward. The Ursa had just about finished ripping the STAG boy apart. Russel could hear a few incomprehensible words leave Michael's mouth, surprising him to find the guy hadn't died yet. But Russel was thankful for his perseverance. The Ursa was so distracted with killing Michael it didn't even notice Russel approaching from the front.

Russel leapt forward, his quick movements catching the Grimm off-guard. It quickly whipped its head up from Michael's body to register Russel's attack, but before it could even comprehend what was happening, Russel shoved the blade's into The Ursa's eyes. The Ursa let out a pained screech, all the while Russel produced another pair of stilettos he'd taken from Mchael.

The Thrush leaned in, completely dodging The Ursa's desperate lashing out with its claws and got in close. He stabbed forward, piercing the Grimm in the gut. The Ursa let out another pained wail and attempted to strike at Russel. But with its vision impaired, The Ursa hadn't even been close.

Russel removed the blade then side stepped another attack. The Ursa got onto its hind legs, deciding to use both of its clawed hands in its desperate struggle. But Russel was already too close, its attacks completely missed the CRDL boy. Russel took both knives and then fiercely stabbed The Ursa, shouting bloody murder and all manner of curses, fully exercising his vast vocabulary of swear words.

But with every wound he inflicted on the beast, two would heal. The reality was that The Ursa could take whatever damage Russel could dish out, but the knives he'd stabbed into the Grimm's eyes remained in place, unable to properly heal with the blades piercing into the sockets. And that gave Russel some advantage.

If The Ursa had a heart, Russel would have stabbed it by now. He kept on cutting away at the damn monster, punching it and even kicking it. He slashed upward at its throat, downward in its nether regions and he kept on going. The Ursa flailed about, despite its apparent regenerative abilities, it still felt the pain of every one of Russel's attacks, and that was something the Thrush decided to use to his advantage.

There was no possible way he could kill The Ursa with the tools he had at his disposal. Maiming it
was a short term solution, such as him stabbing it in the eyes. But there was one thing he hadn't had at his disposal before this day: Gravity. So Russel kept on the pressure, stabbing The Ursa in its fat gut and forcing it back by slamming his spiked shoulder against it, all in an effort to toss it over the edge.

But in his desperation to rid himself of The Ursa, Russel had forgotten just who it was he was dealing with. The Ursa wasn't some run of the mill Grimm, it was beast unto its own. For instant, it was a fast learner. Without its eyes the Grimm was forced to endure copious amounts of pain just to estimate Russel's relative location. And now, with it so close to the edge, it had found him, standing right within striking distance.

So The Ursa reached out, blocking Russel's attack with its protected claw, breaking the knife in two. It then quickly backhanded Russel, sending the young man flying across the platform and striking Dove's rocket locker, tipping it over completely. With Russel momentarily indisposed, The Ursa took to the task of remediying its vision by raising its claws to its face and scraping the knives out.

"Oh will you just fucking die!!" Russel shouted angrily before slamming his fist down onto the toppled over rocket locker's launch button.

The rocket locker then shot forward, skidding against the metal floor. The blinded Ursa was then struck by the locker, knocking it off its hind legs and causing it to fall forward onto the locker. The rocket powered box then shot off over the side of the platform, carrying with it The Ursa. The Grimm flailed its limbs wildly in freefall and let out a petrified roar that rang like music to Russel's ears.

Russel fell backward, landing on his back. He panted, exhausted from the effort.

"Russel!" A voice sounding a lot like Dove's called out to The Thrush. Russel opened his eyes and sat, he looked over the edge of the platform, afraid that somehow The Ursa had clung to the side and tormented him with the voice of his teammate. But much to his surprise, Russel didn't find The Ursa, but rather, he found Dove. And he wasn't hanging off over the side, he was ascending upward on nothingness.

"…Dove?" Russel said, near speechless at the sight of Dove rising up through the air.

"I can fly!" Dove shouted to the heavens. "I can fly!" Russel's jaw dropped as he watched Dove fly up, passing by and hover above him. "I told you! I told you!" Dove exclaimed gleefully. "Cool though, right?"

But Russel didn't respond. He just stared up at the CRDL boy in disbelief. "So uh…I saw an Ursa skydiving…" Dove said awkwardly as he noticed Michael's mauled corpse. "Is that why he looks like that?

"…You can fly?" Russel asked, completely disregarding Dove's question.

"Yeah, cool right?" Dove said excitedly.

"You can fly." Russel muttered.

"Yeah." Dove nodded.

"You can fly!" Russel shouted, a wide grin on his face. "Like Superman!"

"No, no, no!" Dove shouted, pensive look on his face. "Not like Superman! Superman sucks! I
swear you're doing this just to spite me!"

"Well that's what you get you jackass!" Russel shouted as he snapped his last stiletto's blade of and flung the broken knife at Dove, which harmlessly struck his chest and fell back down to the floor. "Anyways, I'm glad you're not dead."

Out in the distance, a flaring explosion caught the boy's attention. Dove and Russel looked to the night and witnessed The Atlas Flagship tear apart the last corvette hovering in the sky. A series of smaller explosions ran through the corvette as its engines caught fire. It then began to nose dive and plummet to the residential district of Vale.

"Holy shit." Dove cursed in horror. "Those poor people…"

"You've gotta get down there." Russel said as he stared out at the flaming fireball, watching it crash down into the surface of the world.

"Me?" Dove questioned. "What about you?"

"You just got your semblance, Dove. There's no way I'm gonna let you carry me down there." Russel smirked. "Don't worry, I'll catch a ride on a ship or something. Now get going, they can use a man who could fly."

"Heh." Dove scoffed before taking flight down to city below. Russel turned his back to the night and marched in search of some way off Amity Colosseum.

Up above a rooftop in Vale, Cinder watched as the cried out. The symphony of terror brought a please smile to the woman's face. Everything was going according to plan. All she needed now was her servants to return to her so that they made proceed with the next phase of her plan.

And just as the thought of Mercury and Emerald crossed her mind, the duo appeared, climbing a ladder off the side of the building onto the roof. Cinder couldn't help but find it amusing, the world really did have a sense of humor.

"Mistress." Emerald bowed as she and Mercury made their presence known.

"You're just in time, my dear." Cinder said as she glanced over to the flaming corvette crashing into the residential district of Vale in the distance. "Contact Roman, it's time." She ordered Emerald before turning to Mercury. "Patch into the video feed."

"Already done ma'am." Mercury said, earning a jealous look from Emerald as the thief sent off a message to Roman's mute assistant onboard The Flagship. Mercury raised his scroll, hitting the record button on its video function. He then turned it on a group of civilians down below being escorted by Atlesian Knights to the designated safe zone.

"Good." Cinder smirked to herself. Up above on the Atlas Flagship, the recently freed kingpin of crime himself Roman Torchwick acted on her orders. And with the flip of a switch, all the robotic soldiers suddenly froze in place, their visors turning into a particular shade of red as their new orders were beamed into their heads.

"The show is about to begin." Cinder said as the robotic soldiers turned their guns on the men and women they'd been tasked to protect.

The whole 'Dove can fly' thing actually comes from Peter Pan. I always wrote Dove in mind
as being the Kid of CRDL, often acting childish and being the least mature of the bunch. And I think I did a fine enough job laying the foundation in earlier chapter for the reveal of his semblance.

This is also the first time we get into The Iron Nail's head, which is important. Because he's a man who truly believes in The White Fang's cause. Even so much as back when he first appeared, I didn't want to write him as some sort of mustache twirling villain. He's a revolutionary with a dream he'd be willing to die for. But he also has rules, as seen with him attempting to talk with Ezekiel, the only faunus member of my OC Team DNCE.

My favorite part of this chapter, though, would be the fight with all the Huntsmen showing up. Because realistically, I'm never going to get the chance of writing all of them again. So it was just full on highlight reel moments with everyone. And that's just fun. Everyone gets a heroic moment whether it be pulling a wounded civilian out of the way of killing a Grimm. It was just fun to write.

Next chapter will be out sometime next week, hopefully. 'Til then, later days!
Hello everyone! Sorry about the wait, I've been a tad busy as of late. Again, sorry. But hey we're back! So that counts right?

Anyways, welcome to the 43rd chapter of The Darkling Thrush! WOOO! We'll hit 50 someday folks.

Before we get started, I saw there was some concern with all the killing in last chapter, especially those committed by our heroes. Trust me when I say that was by design. Under any other circumstances they would be handling the situation differently, but this is The White Fang and an army of Grimm, they're going lethal. And its not out of character, specifically for those students from Vacuo...well, save for Nebula. Who didn't shoot that one White Fang soldier when she could have...

Well, enough of that, more notes down below!

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With the exploding corvette to his back, Russel walked deeper into the stadium. Reasoning that circling around the entire colosseum would take longer, Russel settled on cutting through the arena. Given his injured state at the jaws of The Ursa, Russel settled on the least amount of effort and stress, he had a wound to think about and not enough aura to spare. So through the stadium's hallways Russel ventured through, all in an effort to make it to the other side.

The further he wandered away from the edge of the colosseum and closer to the interior, the quieter the world seemed. Out there in city of Vale where battles for survival were raged, Russel found a relative calm her within the halls of Amity, up amongst the clouds. The cold whistling of the wind his only company.

But that was fine with Russel, it gave him the time to think, something he'd found himself doing quite often as of late. He lifted a hand and lightly applied his fingertips to massage his forehead. Sometimes when Russel thought a lot, he'd get these killer migraines. He'd complain about them to others before, but he'd always played it off with that snarky wit of his, so nobody ever took him seriously.

Russel sighed as he lowered his hand and applying it to his wound. Cuts and bruises, scrapes and burns, those were easy enough, even for someone with as small a supply of aura as he possessed, but these were puncture wounds. Much more difficult that the average paper cut. You really had to know your anatomy to apply your aura correctly, because it wasn't just a flesh wound, there was something penetrating the outer layer and stabbing into you, cutting god knows what on the way. And the last thing anyone needs is some jackass near immortal Grimm running you through with a set of thirty two pearly whites.

So Russel had to really think, recollecting images in textbooks he'd seen back in the day in Oakwood. But that was a long time ago, and those days were a little fuzzy on the memory. So he paused for a moment and closed his eyes, concentrating and thinking, rummaging through the
whole of his life for a moment when he'd lazily looked through some odd book in a dusty old run down library.

"Hm." He muttered to himself as he thinned his search. "Ttch, intestines." He smirked as he felt another one of those migraines coming on. With his mental recollections complete, the Thrush focused his attention fully on his gastrointestinal tract. And with the surgical expertise of a man doped up on pain he applied his aura to his ripped organ and focused all his efforts and healing the damn thing.

When this was all over, Russel would have to go and see a proper physician, there was no doubt in that fact. Sealing up the wound is only a temporary fix. He'd been bleeding internally for a bit now, and he was a hundred percent positive there were no diagrams or pictured examples in library textbook he could refer too.

But while he Russel was on the topic of blood, he realized he'd been wandering for quite some time, not so much walking in the direct path he'd set off on. All he'd really done was just go inside, got away from any craziness he could avoid on the outer rim of the landing platforms. And now, Russel walked a curved path through an ocean of red.

The CRDL boy had blinked at the sight he hadn't even noticed. He'd been too busy focusing on himself that he'd completely blocked out the world around him to notice what was right in front of him. And all Russel could do was stop in his tracks and stare in awe at the ocean of blood before him. It seemed to go on forever, completely consuming the floor of the curved hall.

It hadn't been even an hour, and these the results of The White Fang's attack. The release of their Grimm onto these people, and all Russel could do was stare like a gawking idiot. Laying in the sea of crimson were the sources of the copious amounts of blood, the bodies of men, women and even children, all of whom had attended this evening to enjoy themselves and observe the best humanity had to offer as defenders of Remnant.

And all Russel could do was hang his head low and continue on.

When the Altesian Corvette fell, all across Vale the people stared in wonder. A smoking, fractured warship crashed into the homes of thousands, enveloping the surrounding area in a fiery cloud. Civilian airships and Atlas military craft began to pour in from all over the city, racing against time to save any poor innocent caught in the disaster. Cardin raced through mobs of attacking Grimm, swatting the smaller beasts aside with his mace and dashing past the larger blood thirsty monsters, all in an effort to make it there to the crash site and lend his hand in the rescue effort.

But Cardin wasn't racing into the heart of darkness alone. The piercing wails of patrol car sirens zipped by as the local police made use of their equipment to the best of their ability. They weren't Huntsmen, they were simple ordinary folk who'd been deputized to keep the peace, they didn't have auras, but they had what really counted, and that was the courage to see the night through and fight back the monsters the sieged this fair city. Patrol cruisers were now battering rams, being driven into the mobs of Grimm, sending the soulless creatures flying or smearing them on the hood of the car.

The CRDL Leader couldn't help but let out heartfelt cheer at the sight of honest men doing their part to keep the city from plunging into the depravity. And they weren't alone, both Cardin and the policemen found themselves but few of the many running to their burning homes. Cardin could see one Glynda Goodwitch running across rooftops beside a grizzled peer. The thunderous footsteps of marching Atlesain Knights rang like comforting chimes against the volleying thunderous cannon blasts the streak the skies.
The people of Vale, the common folk who were neither capable of running up the sides of entire mountains nor capable of inhuman feats, the ones who made the kingdom of Vale a kingdom at all, they could hear the men and women, and the mechanized soldiers, running to their aid. The deathly cries of the boogiemen that stalked the frontier, they all fell silent in those moments. The burning fires that raged through the crashed corvette and through the homes of many whimpered, receding into nothingness. Their heroes were coming. Like forces of nature, undeterred by masses, their protectors were coming.

Now approaching the homes, having joined his efforts with the others soldiers and police, the Huntsmen and other ordinary folk who could not stand idly by as their world came crashing down around them, Cardin tore his way through an onslaught of Grimm. He was back to back, shoulder to shoulder with his fellow man. He smashed a Beowulf's with his mace with such force that it imploded into its neck. With the wave of her wand, the fires were dragged from the burning homes and washed through attacking Grimm. Deputized men in uniforms of blue plowed into the biggest of Grimm, toppling them and continuing on.

Fighting through the Grimm was only a means to an end. As soon as Cardin and the others broke through the black mass of blood lusting monsters, they set on the task of running door to door and evacuating the people. The Atlesian Knights moved in small squads of four akin to the normal Huntsman team establishing a perimeter while Goodwitch got to work putting out the spreading the fire. Police officers offered their battered cars, ferrying fleeing families from their homes to the designated safe zone.

But Cardin couldn't find any joy nor pride as he lifted a fallen doorway, allowing a family to escape their burning home. One look in that families' eyes made his heart sink. This was all they had, this was their home and they were being forced to run away from it all. And that saddened Cardin, who knew exactly what they were giving up for the possibility of surviving through the night.

Far off somewhere Cardin knew his family home was no doubt under siege, just like the rest of the city. And all the Winchester boy could do was pray that his family had gotten out in time, that they were well on their way to the safe zone and sitting tight until the he and the rest of Vale's defenders could save their kingdom. But he couldn't linger on those thoughts for long, Cardin needed all his faculties to see himself through the uphill challenge.

"Soldier, escort these people to the safe zone." Cardin ordered as he directed the family to the awaiting Atlas Knight that stood guard nearby. The soldier nodded before turning to lead the way for the people to follow.

Cardin then turned his attention back to the flaming wreck in the distance. Too busy lost in his thoughts over the crashed corvette landing near his family home, Cardin didn't notice the sudden shift of color in the Altas Knight's visor. Turning to an intimidating shade of red, the Knight received its newest orders from the commandeered Flagship flying overhead. It then halted in its step, much to the family's confusion. It the quickly spun around and fired on the family.

The gunshots caught Cardin's attention, snapping him from his worrisome thoughts of the fate of his family. He turned around, half expecting some sort of Grimm attacking the civilians he'd recently freed, but much to Cardin's horror that wasn't the case. There stood the mechanized foot soldier, standing in the blood of the family it'd just murdered.

At a loss for words, Cardin just stared as the robot turned its gun on him. The bullets bashed against Cardin, striking his outer armor and scraping against his forehead. The corrupted robotic soldier continued to fire upon the CRDL leader and would have killed him had it not been for the
Winchester semblance of invulnerability. The bullets bounced off, leaving Cardin relatively unharmed. Quickly regaining his faculties, Cardin let out an angered shout before charging at the robot. He struck down with his mace, ripping it apart at the waist.

Despite its otherwise perceived destruction, the top half of the Atlesian Knight remained active. It raised its assault rifle upward and aimed at Cardin once more. Bit before it could get off another shot, Cardin smacked its rifle out of its mechanized hands. The Winchester then raised his boot over its faceplate and proceeded to curb stomp the Knight's head until it stopped moving.

Satisfied with the Knight's destruction, Cardin turned his attention back to the people it had gunned down. He frowned, disheartened at the sight. Cardin had many questions, such as what had brought the Atlesian Knight to shed the blood of the innocents it had been charged to protect. But Cardin couldn't bring himself to ponder his query, he was needed elsewhere.

Turning to find more Atlesian Knights going haywire, firing on civilians, Cardin knew this wasn't a time for him to slack off, this was a time for action. So he ran off, feeling a weight of guilt bearing down on his shoulders as he ran past the fresh corpses of a family he never knew. But he couldn't bring himself to mourn, not now when there were others who needed him.

Cardin ran at the Atlesian Knights screaming, quickly turning their attention from the civilians onto himself. He ran into a hail of oncoming dust rounds, not giving damn if they hit him or not. Cardin pushed on in spite of the explosive rounds, he had the incentive not to falter, not give in to pain. He pushed it aside and kept going, swinging the Knights aside with his mace and then bashing their heads in.

With the pair of Altesian Knights in pieces, Cardin turned his gaze to the sound of nearby gunfire. Not too far from where he stood, The CRDL leader could see a pair of officers under fire from another rogue Knight. Behind their cruiser they hid while the robot relentlessly attempted to cut through the car to get to them. Cardin let out an anger shout before raising his mace and striking the ground, sending another explosive streak of magma shooting through the pavement and detonating under the robot's feet.

Cardin turned to those few remaining men, women and children and urged them to step out from hiding. They cautiously peered from their makeshift cover of wrecked cars and fallen chunks of the corvette that had landed in the streets and looked to Cardin.

"It isn't safe here." The Winchester boy rose his mace and pointed to the pair of officers he'd just saved. "Those men will take you to somewhere that is. Go." The people nodded and ran from cover, quickly rushing to the pair of officers who stood by, ready to herd them to the safe zone.

But one man lingered for a moment, even when he felt his child tug on his arm to join the others in their exodus. The man stared at Cardin, who stood in the street, taking a moment to catch his breath and gather himself. "Huntsman." The man called out, catching Cardin's ear. "Thank you." The man said.

Cardin just stood there and stared unsure how to respond. For a moment he felt like smiling, show the man and his child a toothy reassuring grin just like any there courageous Huntsman would. But Cardin couldn't find it in himself to smile. Not when he stood in the presence of the dead and dying. So he just nodded and saw the man and his child off. That was all he really could do.

He watched silently over his shoulder as the officers ran off with the people, thinking that he's should go with them, for their protection. He had to remind himself that they were better off than most, that nearby others cried out for help. And with the Atlesian Knights turning on the people of Vale, they needed Huntsmen like Cardin more and more.
So Cardin shouldered his mace and walked off down the street, following the sounds of violence. Ready to do what was required of himself.

Within Amity Colosseum's interior, the battle between the White Fang's five man strike team and the rag tag group of Huntsmen raged on. Bone breaking blows were traded and blood was spilled, gun shots streaked hallways while sparks shot off colliding blades. And all the while The White Fang Captain Pangolin accomplished his mission's objective while his brethren engaged the academy students in mortal combat.

Pangolin reached into a sack he'd burden himself the entre trek below and for the umpteenth time today he'd retrieved a small compact explosive device. He pressed a button on the side of the device, priming the explosive and attached it to the side of the colosseum's propulsion engine. With that done, Pangolin tossed the empty sack aside and took a moment to admire his handiwork. All over the engine room there were several similar devices attached to equipment and the base of architecture, all beeping and flashing the color red.

The Captain smirked at a job well done. He reached into his jacket pocket and produced another device. At the push of a button, Pangolin sent out a signal to the bombs, activating the countdown that would inevitably end with sending the Colosseum plummeting down to the city below. But before he could, he and the rest of his team would have to get clear. So now with their mission complete, it was time for the White Fang to evacuate. Pangolin then calmly walked out the engine room exit and into the ongoing battle.

Far off down the hall, the more seasoned White Fang scimitar wielder made use of his endurance and simply bided his time while his opponent wore himself out. But the Mistralian Huntsman, Nindo, refused to give into the habits of a sloth, he would not give in so easily. Sweat dripped down both blade user's brow as they locked eyes, a silent glare was exchanged. And with fevered blows, the heat of combat escalated once more as their blades collided.

Revy gave it all she had, using her pole weapon to combat the frog faunus. But the man had an uncanny flexibility and agility to dodge her attacks. Not to mention he had the reach to strike at her. Seeing no other course, the Vacuan Huntsman let out a cry then charged at her opponent, aiming to close the distance. But the White Fang member was seasoned beyond Revy's years and welcomed the attempt on his life with open arms, knowing fully well she posed little a threat.

Just as Revy closed in, the frog legged faunus fell backwards, landing on his hands and stuck out his feet. He kicked out, smacking his boots against Revy's gut and then with all his might, he launched her back, throwing her further down the hallway and knocking Nindo over. The frog faunus smirked at his efforts and leapt to his feet, giving his scimitar wielding comrade a thumbs up. The fire blade wielding White Fang soldier acknowledged his teammate's aid and regarded the pair of unconscious huntsmen with a simple nod, before turning to rejoin his companions.

The Iron Nail's bout with Ezekiel had rocked the very floor they stood upon. The faunus Huntsman carried with him a pair of spiked brass knuckles, which protected his fists every time he collided with The Iron Nail's coated body. He didn't hold back at all, putting in every ounce of aura he could muster into his punches, into his form to maximize the damage. And for a moment, for a brief moment, as he landed another blow against the left side of The Iron Nail's face, Ezekiel felt as if he might actually have a chance of besting the larger man.

It had been almost a month since The Iron Nail had lost his left eye. It had been bashed out of his head atop a hill in a cemetery in Oakwood. And in that time, The White Fang Lieutenant had strived to compensate the dip in his depth perception. But one month wasn't enough. This was proved by Ezekiel's punch. The Iron Nail hadn't even seen it coming. But The Iron Nail rolled with
the punch. It may have been unexpected, but he knew how to take a punch.

Any hope of defeating The White Fang Lieutenant was dashed by his imposing stature. And The Iron Nail could see the look of defeat in Ezekiel's eyes as he stood tall, not all showing any signs of weakness.

"You claim it's a privilege to be judged by your weight? Rather than your race?" The Iron Nail boomed, his voice filling the hallway. His colleagues all tuned their eyes to The Iron Nail and stared in awe as he rose his weapons as if he were about to strike down the faunus student. But he didn't, simply relinquished his grasp of his hammer and sickle, letting them drop hard onto the floor. "The truth is, boy, you've deluded yourself into believing there's a difference!" He shouted.

"You think trading a greater evil for a lesser makes for the years we've all lived under their boots!" The Iron Nail said in a scolding manner before ramming a fist into Ezekiel's gut, knocking the wind out of the boy. "You believe we can coexist, that we've reached a compromise with this façade!" He gestured to the whole of the Colosseum.

Ezekiel coughed roughly as he brought his arms to shield himself from another one of The Iron Nail's blows. But The Iron Nail simply slapped his arms apart before backhanding the young man. "Look around, boy! This symbol of unity glorifies the four kingdoms and their horrors!"

"It's a symbol of peace!" Ezekiel spat. But before the DNCE boy could get another word in, The Iron Nail delivered another blow, causing him to stumble backwards.

"It's a symbol of united oppression." The Iron Nail corrected. "If Vale truly were the utopia you claimed it to be, then this wouldn't exist." The Iron Nail then ran forward and socked Ezekiel across his jaw, sending the boy flying. And before the faunus Huntsman even hit the ground, The Iron Nail came sprinting forward, delivering a series of punches while Ezekiel was in midair.

"You hold onto dreams and fantasies, believing them to be ideals." The Iron Nail said as he reached out to Ezekiel, plucking the portly boy from the air and lifted him up by the collar of his shirt. "Vale isn't an ideal. It's a flaw." He spoke lowly, almost growling as he looked up into Ezekiel's disheartened eyes.

"You are young, you think you've been hurt in a way no other could comprehend." The Iron Nail said before releasing his hold of Ezekiel, letting the boy fall flat on his back. "You've been shown an act of kindness. And now you feel as if you owe Vale." The Iron Nail stared down at Ezekiel with judging eyes. "But this is just another form of oppression." He said, leaning down over the DNCE boy. "They've deceived you, brother."

"Argh!" Ezekiel shouted as he seized the chance to strike at The Iron Nail. But the White Fang Lieutenant caught his fist and squeezed around it, shattering his brass knuckle. The pieces of his weapon fell to the floor and all Ezekiel could do was stare at The Iron Nail in disbelief.

"I do not blame you." The Iron Nail sighed. "This world is wicked and unjust. And I forgive you."

"Bombs are counting down." Pangolin confirmed as he removed a handgun from his back pocket. "But before we go, some maters to attend to." He said before turning his weapon on the unconscious Darnell and pulling the trigger. None of the White Fang even flinched at the gunshot. They all just stared approvingly as the Captain walked from unconscious student to unconscious
student, putting a bullet through their heads.

"Seeing as we're finished." The Iron Nail as he gestured to the unconscious Ezekiel laying on the
floor. "Would one of you kindly lend me a hand with him? Sadly, he is a job for two." The other
members soon rushed to aid The Iron Nail, seeing the point to his efforts. Ezekiel wasn't a
Huntsman, he was a faunus and he deserved to be saved. But before any of the other trio of White
Fang soldiers could make it to The Iron Nail's side, Pangolin step forward and offered his services.

"Ah, thank you, Captain." The Iron Nail smiled at the Pangolin. It had seemed the veteran member
of the White Fang had misjudged his younger counterpart after all. "I'll grab his legs and you his
arms?" He said before bending over to reach down for the young beaver faunus.

"Fuck no." Pangolin cursed before leveling his gun at Ezekiel and pulling down on the trigger
twice.

The Iron Nail stared wide eyed as Ezekiel's body kicked, the gunshot ringing through his ears. He
looked up to Pangolin shooting the man a furious glare. "What have you done?!" The Iron Nail's
voice boomed loudly through the halls.

"You're getting soft in your old age, Lieutenant." Pangolin scoffed as he holstered his hand gun.
The Captain then turned to address the remainder of the team to give the order to evacuate the
arena. But before he could, one of The Iron Nail's cold metal hands reached out and snared
Pangolin's arm and yanked him off his feet.

"He was Faunus!" The Iron Nail shouted angrily, spewing spittle over the Captain.

"He was a Huntsman." Pangolin shot back coldly, unfazed by The Iron Nail's heated actions.
"Now, unhand me."

"Let him go, sir." The Iron Nail turned to find the rest of the strike team at his back, their weapons
drawn, ready to engage him should it come to that.

The Iron Nail met their stares, as if challenging them. But as the moments passed by, he realized
any confrontation between them, whether just or not, would only end in further faunus bloodshed.
That was a cost The Iron Nail would never accept. So with a contentious grunt, he relented,
deactivated his semblance and released Pangolin and letting him drop onto his feet.

"You're years are finally catching up to you, clouding your judgement." Pangolin said as he
straightened himself. "If we were Huntsmen, I'd be charged with the duty of arresting you for
treason. But we aren't Huntsmen, we're better than that. We're a brotherhood, a community of
likeminded." He said before strut ting off down the hall. "And because of that, I'm going to forget
your indiscretion."

"Not to mention, we're on the clock." The White Fang captain jotted a thumb to the engine room.
"Now, without further ado, shall?" Pangolin gestured to the way they'd initially arrived from.

Without another word, the rest of the strike team began to head out, following their leader, leaving
The Iron Nail behind. The larger gorilla handed faunus lingered, staring down at Ezekiel's fresh
corpse with a frown. With a regretful sigh, The Iron Nail turned on his heel to follow his comrade's
example in fleeing from the impending explosion. But The Iron Nail would spare one final glance
over his shoulder, to the soul he could never save.

All over Vale, Atlesian Knights were suddenly running rampant. The dramatic turn of events had
captured all off guard, including one General Iron wood who was shot attack by a squad of knights
he’d kept deactivated at the back of his dropship

"General Ironwood!" Ruby's voice filled the Airbus' man cabin as she and the rest of her fellow Huntsmen in training watched in horror as Ironwood's dropship spiraled downward, unable to fathom the loss of such a revered and respected military mind.

Pyrrha closed the distance between herself and a nearby viewport, joining other students who crowded around staring out to the night sky at the fireball. She was at a loss of words, enough good men and women had died already, and now another seemingly joined the mass of dead. And the young woman couldn't help but feel responsible.

Even with the stirring words from Jaune she'd received earlier, claiming that she was not at fault, but another woman whose voice still haunted her mind with its alluring yet menacing tone, Pyrrha recognized the part she played in the madness that now assaulted Vale. They'd put Pyrrha in a position to weaken the people of Remnant's resolve, and now they all paid the price for her misstep.

With a heavy sigh, Pyrrha ripped her gaze away from the view port and turned her attention elsewhere. The fact of the matter was that Vale and its people were in danger, the school was under attack by the combined efforts of Grimm and White Fang, and her self-loathing thoughts would help no one other than the Grimm she had sworn to defend against. So Pyrrha looked to the front of the Airbus, where she found a number of her fellow students arguing.

"Ironwood just bought the farm! What the hell are we gonna do now?" Arslan of Team ABRN shouted as she and other Team leaders stood around the Airbus' pilot seat.

"We stick to the plan!" Jaune exclaimed before pointing out the front port and down to Beacon Academy below. "We get down below and we lend a hand!"

"You kidding?!” Sun exclaimed before pointed out the same viewport up to the Altas Flagship hovering in the sky, raining hell down upon the city. "It won't matter if we get to the school or not. That ship's got guns shredding everything it can aim at!"

"And we'll get creamed if we attempt to fly at that thing.,” Coco shot back, gesturing to the Airbus they currently occupied. "Look at this thing, they wouldn't even have to aim to shit this plus size whale out of the sky."

"It's suicide." Arslan nodded in agreement.

"Not with me at the wheel it's not!" Brawnz shot back as he jabbed one of his thumbs against his chest. "I'll have you know I'm an excellent driver."

"But this isn't a car Brawnz!” Nebula shouted, gesturing to the pilot's seat and the ship's controls, of which consisted of several levers, numerous screens with colorful readouts displayed and six pedals.

"Pfft, girl, I'm versatile as hell." Brawnz said before winking at Arslan.

Nebula rolled her eyes. "I'm sure Dew would say otherwise." She said, earning a number of 'oh's from the other students.

"Excuse me, sorry, guys?" Pyrrha spoke up, quickly gaining her fellow Huntsmen's ears. "Perhaps we could reach a compromise?" She suggested.

But before they could reach a consensus, Ruby's semblance enhanced speed kicked up a gust of
wind that knocked the majority of the students off their feet as well as nearly tipping the ship onto its side. They looked after the crimson reaper, watching as she sped off without a word back into the arena.

"Ruby!" Sun shouted after the RWBY leader. "What heck is she doing?!"

"Taking things into her own hands." Jaune said with a knowing tone. The blonde knight then turned to his fellow students and caught their eyes. Pausing for a moment, he looked amongst them, finding all too familiar looks of fear that he once upon a time bore. These troubling times, the whole world felt like it was closing in on them, they had every right to be afraid.

But then Jaune looked to Pyrrha. Though the guilt she felt bludgeoned her every passing second, The Invincible Girl managed reciprocate his stare with a loving, reassuring smile. This was his chance, to be the hero he'd always dreamt of being, and they both knew it. Everyone was looking to him now, and more than ever they needed to follow.

"What would you have us do, Jaune?" Pyrrha said, cutting into the silence.

"We're heading to Beacon." Jaune declared.

"But what about the ship with the big ass guns?" Bolin shouted from the back of the airbus.

"If I know Ruby, she's already taking care of it." Jaune said before looking through the crowd of students and signaling out a familiar head of blue hair. "Neptune, we need a pilot. You game?"

"This thing? Yeah, I can do that." Neptune shrugged. The SSSN member then cut his way through the group, pushing past the leaders and took the pilot's seat. "Everyone buckle up! I don't have a licensee!" He called out to the others before tracking down the ignition switch on the console in front of him.

Quickly, the gathered students all ran for their seats. Pyrrha took her seat beside Jaune and placed a hand on his shoulder. He turned to face the Mistral champion and smiled. "Thanks Pyrrha." He said, raising a hand and gently placing it over Pyrrha's.

"Mind if I have a seat?" A foreign female voice asked. Both Pyrrha and Jaune looked up to find none other than Serin standing in the aisle, gesturing to the vacant seat beside the pair. Seeing no reason to rebuke the Team STAG leader, they welcomed Serin.

"Crazy night, right?" Serin said, doing her best to sound friendly, while she also toyed with the gun in her hand.

"Uh, yeah, you could say that." Jaune coughed awkwardly as the Airbus jerked forward.

"Sorry about that!" Neptune shouted from the pilot's seat up front.

The Airbus jerked once more before taking off into the air. A chorus of cheers and applause erupted from the gathered students. The Airbus slowly ascended into the air, with Neptune steering the ship towards the direction of the school. If one were to inspect the Mistral student's features closely, they'd be able to see a stream of sweat flowing down his forehead. But Neptune kept calm, he stayed cool and quietly made his peace with whatever deity existed. Then without another word, he pulled on the throttle and the Airbus took off.

"Woo!" Neptune shouted smiling ear to ear.

"Good going Neptune." Sage gave a thumbs up to his teammate from where he sat in the airbus'
"Yeah, just don't crash, okay?" Scarlet said, earning a number of glares from several students sitting adjacent from himself. "Wot? Wot I say?"

"So, I noticed you've got your entire team here." Serin said, continuing a halfhearted conversation with both Pyrrha and Jaune.

"Yes, we were lucky enough not to be separated." Pyrrha said, shifting in her seat uncomfortably. "I notice Tobias is here. Where's Angela and Michael?"

"We got separated." Serin said simply. She glanced upward, taking her eyes off the weapon she fiddled with in her hands and looked forward. There sitting close to the pilot's seat was Tobias, waiting for her signal. "But they should be fine, just dealing with a pest control issue."

"Pest control?" Jaune raised a brow.

"One of CRDL, Dove." Serin couldn't help but smirk. "Don't worry though, they're fine. Probably having the time of their lives."

Hearing this, Pyrrha blinked. "I'm sorry, but I don't understand what you mean. Pest control on Dove?"

"What do you think it means, Pyrrha?" Serin turned to face Pyrrha, flashing a sinister smile. "Now let me tell you a story, I'm sure you'd like to hear it. I mean, we aren't going anywhere anytime soon."

Without warning, Tobias shot out of his seat. The STAG boy whipped out an underslung shotgun from his coat and turned the weapon on the student sitting directly across from himself, Gree Granite, the leader of Team GRNN. He pulled the trigger and blew the Haven student away. A series of fearful shouts filled the cabin as Tobias used the chaos to make his way to the front of the ship.

Neptune then glanced over his shoulder, seeking to find out what the commotion was all about. But the blue haired boy found only the barrel of Tobias' shotgun aimed right at his face. "Keep the bird steady." Tobias growled threateningly, giving Neptune a good look at his wolverine fangs. "Or I blow your goddamn brains out."

"Uh, okay." Neptune replied, knowing all too well he wasn't in the position to refuse. "I can do that."

"Serin?" Pyrrha looked to the STAG leader for an explanation.

"That's my name, don't wear it out." She laughed as she stood from her seat. Serin brandished her gun and raised it into the air, firing it once at the ceiling to quiet down the restless bunch of Huntsmen in-training. "Now, if none of you have figured it out, in the name of The White Fang, I'm taking over this ship." She said smiling bright.

"Yeah, hell no." Nadir said, quickly shooting up from his seat and taking aim with his rifle. But before Nadir could even snake his finger around the trigger, Serin spun around and blasted a round through the barrel of his weapon, exiting through the stock and rendering it useless.

"Back in your seat." Serin motioned to Nadir with her gun in a threatening manner. Slowly, Nadir complied and sat back down beside Reese and Bolin who patted their teammate for his efforts.

"Anyone else gets up? I put a fucking bullet in your head." She said before stepping out of the aisle.
to move about freely. "Now how about that story I was talking about?"

"It's a simple story, really, about a little girl who watched her family die." Serin said as she walked around the main cabin, her gun at her side, ready to crack down on any other would-be heroes who'd try to step up and take back control. "I grew up here in a village on the borderlands of Vale with my Mom, Father and little brother. But it isn't easy being Faunus amongst a town of humans. You catch angry stares from people who don't even know you, who think they have the right to label you, to decide your value."

"But then one night, they couldn't just settle with the awful stares and their silent glares." Serin's eyes as she overlooked the assembled students. "The villagers rallied behind a drifter, who wore an Atlesian Helmet. I remember looking at him from where I hid in my room, staring into that featureless faceplate of his, as they dragged out my family and burned them."

"In other words, 'Fuck Vale' and 'Fuck Atlas'?" Nolan rolled his eyes as Serin passed by. Hearing the BRNZ boy's words, Serin responded appropriately, smacking his head with the butt of her gun. "Argh! Fucking Faunus bitch!" He shouted, quickly earning angry stares from Velvet and Neon who sat nearby.

"Hmph. Yeah, I guess I am." Serin shrugged.

"I'm Faunus too." Velvet said, as she stood from her seat. Serin then quickly spun around and turned her gun on Velvet, but the second year student stood unfazed at the threat. "I've felt the very same prejudice you have. And I'm sorry about your family, Serin. But what you're doing here isn't right. Look outside, innocent people who had no part in your family's murder are dying!" She pointed to a nearby viewport, where down below the people of Vale struggled in a fight for survival.

But Serin didn't care to hear Velvet's protests, she'd already made up her mind. There would be no dialogue, no treaties, no more faunus abused in the pursuit of a human defined 'peaceful' world. "You're just another sellout, Velvet. All too willing to lie in bed with our people's enemies. Take, for example, your newfound friendship with Cardin. Didn't he bully you not too long ago?"

"And he showed remorse." Velvet glared. "He made amends, and now we're friends. Possibly more than that now, hopefully." She said, blushing slightly.

"Well, don't you feel proud of yourself?" Serin sneered before turning her head towards the front and nodding at Tobias.

Tobias took his shotgun and jammed it right against the back of Neptune's head. "Aim us at the school." He said lowly. "Full throttle."

"Are you out of your goddamn mind?" Neptune asked, only to have Tobias to press the barrel of his weapon against his head harder. "Oh, oh you are."

"Less lip, a little more ship crashing into the school." Tobias threatened with another forceful shove of his weapon. The Airbus slowly tilted and began a fast downward descent aimed at Beacon Academy. The students all exchanged frightful looks.

"And what do you hope to achieve by that, Serin?!" Velvet shouted, calling into question the motivations of the pair of White Fang infiltrators. "You'd be dead too!"

"You fail to understand the lengths we will go to accomplish our goals." Serin said, unmoving. "For every one of us who dies, another hundred of you goes down as well."
As The Airbus began to make its deadly approach with the school, it became apparent to prevent their demises, the assembled students would have to act, fast. A tense air fell over them as everyone's grasp tightened around their individual weapons. And Serin could see it, even if she was locked in a heated glaring contest with Velvet.

Even with all the theatricalities, Serin wasn't the real threat. Pyrrha had recognized this early on. The STAG leader's theatrics and speeches were a distraction, keeping the students on their seats while she ran interference, keeping their eyes off Tobias. Even if they managed to disarm Serin, Tobias could still get a shot off on Neptune, and then there'd go their pilot, the only one who had any chance of safely landing the Airbus. And still, with the ship already on its course trained at the school, Neptune really was the only loose end.

But even from where she sat, far away from Tobias, Pyrrha was a lethal and effective Huntress. With Serin distracted with holding the others at a standstill, The Invincible Girl raised a hand and aimed it at the shotgun in Tobias' hands. The next few moments were crucial, Pyrrha had to be quick, or else Tobias would get a shot off. So she activated her semblance polarity, and in a 'blink and you'll miss it' instant, completely disassembled the weapon in his hands.

The clang of metal smacking against the floor of the Airbus cut through the tense silence. Those students closest to Tobias and Neptune sprang to action. Sage rushed forward, ramming his shoulder against the White Fang infiltrator while also clearing Neptune. With thankful sigh, Neptune eased up on the Airbus, slowing its descent and began to pilot the ship towards a clearing by Main Avenue.

A brawl broke out in the front of the ship as well as in the back. While the likes of Team SSSN minus Neptune fought Tobias, the others rushed Serin. A series of well-placed shots quickly incapacitated Yatsuhashi, who fell forward to cradle his knees. Another shot struck Flynt's shoulder, causing the musician to let out pained cry as he ducked for cover. Bolin closed the distance between himself and Serin, as did Brawnz. The two charged at the STAG leader, but she leaped over them, causing them to crash into one another.

"Grab her!" Nora shouted as she, Danny and Reese came charging at Serin.

The only advantage Serin possessed over the mass of Huntsmen in training was the closeness. They were unable to go all out lest they attack themselves. Serin on the other hand, did not share the restriction. She shot at whoever got close and let the others trip over themselves as she played keep away. Nora and Danny charged at her from behind, but Serin managed to dodge the pair of Beacon students by jumping through a row of seats. She then quickly rammed her knee into Roy's face, knocking him back into his seat as he leapt to tackle her.

But despite the challenge she posed, Serin couldn't help it as they closed in around her. These students were some of the better trained out of the four schools. They knew how to control their auras, they knew how to heal and how to take a bullet, substantially decreasing the chances of a successful escape. And over towards the front of the ship, Tobias fared poorly against the combined efforts of Sun, Scarlet and Sage. And like a cornered animal, Serin got desperate. She weighed her options and decided to do something crazy.

Jaune led the charge, followed closely behind by Pyrrha, Ren and Octavia as he leapt over seats. The blonde knight half expected Serin to attempt to make a break for the Airbus' door, to try and test her luck with gravity. But instead, he found the STAG leader running forward over seats to meet him head on. Whipping out Corcea Mors from its sheath, Jaune intended to strike at the woman and end it all. He reeled back his blade and swung forward, but blow didn't connect.

Serin jumped upward, somersaulting over the JNPR leader and landed in the aisle behind him. Ren
raised one of his automatic pistols, only to have it knocked out of his hand and kicked into Pyrrha, sending the pair falling onto the floor. Octavia then ran to tackle Serin from behind, but the woman spun around and smacked the fiery NDGO girl with the butt of her gun, sending her onto the floor. Jaune then spun back around to bring down his blade on Serin, only for the wolf faunus to side step his attack. Corcea Mors then slashed its way into one of the bus seats, burying itself in the fluffy white cotton contents. And before Jaune could remove his sword, Serin head-butted the knight, disorienting him and causing him to release his weapon. The next thing Jaune knew, Serin was snaking an arm around his neck and jamming her gun against his head.

"Nobody move." Serin growled, causing everyone to pause at the sight of her taking Jaune hostage. Jaune struggled to get free, but Serin's grip was tight and the gun she continued to force against the side of his head further dissuaded him.

"Drop the gun." Serin glanced out of the corner of her eye, finding Nebula standing off to the side, her crossbow raised and trained on the STAG leader.

"Shoot her Nebula!" Nolan shouted from the rear of the ship. "Just fucking shoot her!"

"Oh just shoot the bitch already." An annoyed Dew rolled her eyes.

"You're in no position to make demands." Serin smirked as she eyed Nebula's finger on the trigger of her weapon, noting how it shook slightly. "You don't even have the guts to pull the trigger."

"Hey!" Sun called out from the front of the ship, catching everyone's attention. There stood Sun, with Sage and Scarlet at his sides while he held Tobias in similar hold, one of his own guns aimed at his head. "We've got your pal, you've got ours, why don't we do a little trade, eh?"

"Or you could just surrender!" Scarlet chimed in. "We'll accept that too!"

But even caught the way he was, Tobias would not go quietly. "I refuse!" He shouted at the top of his lungs. "I refuse to be used as a tool for the humans!"

"Dude, I'm Faunus too." Sun deadpanned as Tobias attempted to struggle free.

"Never!" Tobias shouted. He then reached up for the gun aimed at his head, much to Sun's surprise, and pulled the trigger himself. A red mist spray to Sun's left, completely covering Sage as the trio of SSSN boys stared in awe.

"Bloody hell!" Scarlet exclaimed in shock.

"Why would he do that?! What was the point?!" Sun shouted in utter disbelief as Tobias' body fell to the floor beside Gree's. "Why are they so suicidal?!"

"Oh, Oum..." Sage cringed as he stuck out his tongue to wipe it on the inside of his jacket. "My mouth was open..."

With everyone distracted, Serin turned her gun on Nebula. But not everyone was distracted by Team SSSN's outburst, Pyrrha remained vigilant. She raised her hand and activated her semblance once more, the proceeded to rip apart Serin's handgun. The metal pieces hit the floor, alerting the Huntsmen. With Serin weaponless, Jaune bashed the back of his head against her face. Momentarily dazed by jaune's attack, Roy sprang to his feet and tackled her from behind, sending the trio of them hurling onto the floor.

"Grab her! Grab her!" Arslan shouted as she and other students began to dogpile on top of Serin as
"Anyone got some rope we could tie her up with?" Marie-Anne asked to no one specific. But before anyone could answer the DNCE girl, what was once Serin's gun began to levitate off the ground. Those who piled on top of the STAG leader watched in awe as the metal morphed, becoming thin lines which then wrapped around Serin's arms, binding them to her back. "Whoa." Marie-Anne muttered as her mouth hung open.

"What do we do with her?" Ren asked as Roy and Arslan hauled Serin to her feet.

"This place got a restroom?" Jaune asked aloud, earning a number of affirming nods from those students hanging by the back of the ship. "Good. Lock her in."

A series of claps filled the main cabin as Roy and Arslan marched Serin past the students to the back of the ship, to be confined to the restroom. With that mess sorted, the gathered Huntsmen turned their attention to Jaune, who once more held the stage.

"We're going to be landing soon guys," Jaune said, pointing out to the forward viewport where they could see the front of Beacon Academy. "We're down a guy and some of us are hurt. But they need us out there. What do you all say we go out and lend them a hand, huh?" He said, earning a couple of nods from his peers.

Pyrrha just watched as the boy, no, the young man, she admired most took charge, a proud smile on her face. With a quiet lull falling over the assembled students, they all attended to their belongings. Pyrrha herself claimed her weapons then marched to the door, waiting for them to land so she may exit and join the fray outside.

"It's gonna be a little hot, guys! Get ready!" Neptune shouted from the front of the ship.

"You heard the man, lock and load!" Coco exclaimed as she eagerly raised her giant machine gun.

"You ready?" Jaune asked as he joined Pyrrha by the door.

Pyrrha nodded. "As ready as I'll ever be." She smiled.

The Airbus landed in the center of Main Avenue, behind a group of armed students who rallied against the combined forces of Atlesian Knights and Grimm. With a slow hiss, the door of the ship opened. And out came running all the Huntsmen inside, all ready to do their part.

Back up above the city of Vale, aboard Amity Coliseum, The White Fang strike team finished off the last of the Atlas troopers guarding the platform. The team knew escaping the colosseum death trap would be a long shot, seeing as the Black Queen virus had seized control of all forms of communication. A wave of relief washed over them as there remained one dropship, no doubt to be used by the very same troopers they'd slaughtered after the evacuation of the civilians had been completed.

Perhaps it was the afterglow of battle, or fatigue, or the sense of pride that caused the team of five to stall. Everything was going off without a hitch. Looking over the side, they could see the city of Vale dealing with a plethora of issues, ranging from the Grimm, to the White Fang, to fires that spread from the corvette's crash, to the commandeered Atlesian Knights. They caught their breath and savored the taste of victory. But with the team entranced by the sight of the screaming city, none were aware of another figure emerging from the arena's entrance.

Russel Thrush emerged from the arena, a somber expression on his face, earned by the horror he'd
witnessed. But Russel did not walk in a fog, he had control of his faculties and was conscious of the many dead who lay scattered around the platform, just as much as he was aware of the White Fang soldiers who stood off to the side, basking in the wake of the destruction they brought to the city below.

But it was not any of the other four who earned Russel's hateful glare. The Iron Nail stood oblivious to his dagger eyes, staring blankly out to the night sky. And suited Russel just fine. Tracking blood off his boots through the platform, Russel quietly approached. He lacked the means to properly engage his enemies, so he took the time to scavenge from the dead. From a wide-eyed corpse, Russel plucked the assault rifle it clutched to.

Russel then cocked the rifle and took aim. Only now did the Thrush realize he'd never held a gun before, well, never properly held a gun before. There was the time in Oakwood with Marlowe, but he never had the intention of firing it. But this was an entirely different affair, there was a heft to the Atlas weapon, a measure of weight that bore down on it. He found it surprising, citing how he'd seen so many run off into battle in historical footage showcased in Oobleck's class.

It was humbling in a way, Russel found himself a new appreciation to the Atlesian military and the youths they molded soldiers out of, they'd made it look so easy. But there were some things the Atlas military industrial complex could never get right, Russel mused as he leveled the rifle at the oblivious White Fang. After all, if the Atlas military were the kind of force they boasted to be, then why were they all dead?

Then without another thought, Russel snaked his hand around the trigger of the gun and pulled it. An onslaught of lead shot forth, streaking the very floor the Iron Nail stood on. It would have been a kill shot for sure, but as Russel had previously noted, he'd never held a gun before in a day of his life. The kickback was intense, the stock of the gun bashed against his shoulder, causing him to fire wildly. It was stupid really, he'd trained in knives and swords all his life and yet suddenly he thought himself a master of guns that he could just pick one up. But that wasn't how it worked. So Russel just blew his one advantage and alerted the White Fang of his presence. They turned on their heels, weapons raised, ready to engage any remaining Atlas soldiers who dared to stand in their way. But they didn't find a soldier, they found Russel. The Iron Nail was the only one who held caution, raising his sickle and hammer, locking eyes with Russel. But the others relaxed, some even chuckling at the sight of Russel barely able to properly hold the rifle in his hands.

"Oh, how pitiful." Pangolin laughed. The captain then dug into his jacket pocket, pulling out a timer he'd synced to the bombs below. Seeing the countdown drawing close to zero, Pangolin smiled. Without another word, the captain reached for his gun and drew it. With one shot he blasted Russel off his feet. "Alright, times up. Let's get the hell out of here."

"You underestimate our opponent, Pangolin." The Iron Nail said, not once taking his eyes off Russel. The Thrush stabbed the rifle he held onto the floor and used it to pull himself back up.

"Feel free to stay and fight then, but we're leaving." Pangolin scoffed as he and the others began to board the Dropship.

"So be it then. I will delay him."

"Delay?" The frog faunus shot The Iron Nail and odd look before turning to see Russel struggling to get back on his feet. "You give him too much credit, he can barely stand."

"You don't understand, do you?" The Iron Nail turned his gaze away from Russel, meeting the frog faunus' bizarre stare. He then began to berate his fellow faunus and tell a tale of his adventures in
Oakwood, operating in the name of The White Fang. He spoke of a boy who'd cost him his team and nearly foiled their schemes in the backwater town. And that boy was in their presence.

But The Iron Nail made one mistake too many. He'd taken his eyes off of Russel. The White Fang busied themselves with kicking on the Dropship engines and squabbling about the threat he posed, that none of them considered what Russel was capable of doing then and there. Though he couldn't wield the gun he held, Russel was still dangerous. He didn't the gun, he never once needed a gun. He stuck knives and swords, and other pointy objects he could throw. Like the bullets in the gun's magazine.

Discretely, Russel ripped out the gun's clip and emptied out the remaining bullets, a total of three. Without another word, he stood up and started running. The Iron Nail turned his attention back to Russel, hearing the sounds of his rapid footsteps. He quickly raised his sickle and ran to meet his enemy head on.

As they closed the distance between each other, The Iron Nail let out a sharp yell and reeled back his arm before swinging his sickle forward. But the attack didn't connect, Russel slid between The Iron Nail's legs and kept on going. The gorilla armed faunus spun around, raising a brow at the Thrush's tactics. He watched for a moment before realizing Russel did not intend to fight, but rather, he aimed to rob them of their ship. So The Iron Nail gave chase.

Russel dashed past the frog faunus, pushed the scimitar wielder aside and shouldered Pangolin, causing the Captain to fall flat on his face on the boarding plank. His abrupt entry into the Dropship did not go unnoticed as the shotgun toting faunus woman spun around in the pilot's seat and took aim with her weapon. But Russel whipped out one of the bullets he'd taken and chucked it at the barrel of the shotgun and clogged it.

The gun exploded in the faunus woman's hands, sending her backwards and bumping against the Dropship's ignition. The ship's engines then roared to life and began to shoot forward, scraping against the platform. Seeing the ship about to take off, the remainder of the White Fang strike team raced to climb aboard lest they be left behind.

"Russel!" The Iron Nail shouted after the CRDL boy.

Russel wrestled for control of the ship with the injured woman. But the arrival of The Iron Nail and his comrades quickly changed the battle for supremacy. He drew another of the remaining two bullets and jumped. He spun in midair, giving his throw the extra momentum to be effective. And then he threw the bullet at The Iron Nail's eye patch. The bullet pierced through the black fabric and cut into the eyelid behind it. The Iron Nail, however, didn't even flinch and stormed forward and socked Russel across his jaw, knocking him against the ship's control panel.

The thrusters kicked on and the ship shot forward off the side of the colosseum and began to spiral downward towards the ground below. Pangolin's surprised cries fell deaf to The Iron Nail's ears. The veteran White Fang member battled Russel, grabbing ahold of the Thrush and choke slamming him against the console once more. But The Iron Nail's actions weren't of pure brutality, but also a precise strike. He bashed Russel's head against the autopilot, switching it on and causing the Dropship to level out and putting it safely out of harm's way.

Pangolin and the others smacked against the Dropship floor, no longer in freefall, while Russel took the last of his bullets and drove it into The Iron Nail's hand. The Iron Nail released his grasp, recoiling in pain. Then he promptly removed the bullet and tossed it aside. But once again, The Iron Nail made the mistake of taking his eyes off Russel, even if only for a moment.

Russel fished his scroll out of his pants pocket. Originally, he'd intended to throw it at The Iron
Nail, but much to his the Thrush's surprise, the device buzzed to life. Though the sparks that emitted from it was slightly concerning, Russel wasn't the type to look a gift horse in the mouth. So minding the knife hole in the center of the screen, Russel pulled up the locker requisition prompt and signaled for his daggers.

"Drop dead." He sneered. Russel then turned to The Iron Nail and chucked his scroll at him. Whereas Ezekiel blindly struck at the White Fang Lieutenant and was lucky enough to capitalize on his near blindness, Russel had a level of familiarity of The Iron Nail's missing eye. He never even saw it coming, the scroll that bashed against the bullet in his eye patch, causing it to seep further into his head.

But The Iron Nail paid it no mind and charged ahead at Russel. He activated his semblance, coating his body in metal once more and threw a punch at his most hated foe. "Will you just fucking die?!" The Iron Nail shouted as he delivered a punch to Russel's gut. With the air knocked out of him, Russel could only stagger forward, unable to block or dodge the next barrage of metal coated fists that struck.

Before The Iron Nail could finish off Russel, however, a rocket locker pierced through the side of the Dropship. It streaked through one of the engines, causing the entire left side of the ship to catch on fire. The locker then struck The Iron Nail from behind, knocking him forward and then finally crashing through the Dropship's controls. The entire front of the ship exploded, shooting electrically charge wires about and a number of shrapnel that cut the rest of the strike team.

With the Dropship's controls destroyed and the left engine nonfunctional, the ship began to dive down towards the city below. Russel then ran for the rocket locker, bashing a fist against it and causing the door to pop off. He reached inside and drew his daggers, then he turned to face The Iron Nail and cracked one of his taunting smiles.

The Iron Nail spat onto ground before raising his sickle and hammer. "You don't even know how to work those." He glared.

"I don't have to." Russel smirked. "All I need to know is that you hate that I have them."

"Let's rectify that, shall we?" The Iron Nail leapt forward, intending to strike at Russel. But the CRDL boy rolled out of the way, causing The Iron Nail to bash the rocket locker instead, causing it to crumble beneath his hammer and expose its fuel tank. He then turned to face Russel once more, but instead of finding the Thrush standing there and taunting him with that mocking grin of his, he found the boy running towards the Dropship off ramp. He raised a brow at the Thrush's actions, unsure of his play. Because, by the looks of things, Russel had no intents of stopping.

During the whole fight, Russel made an effort to be mindful of the state of the ship he stood in. With the engines totaled and the controls scrapped, there was no conceivable way the Dropship would be landing safely. There was only one way off, and that was gravity. So he raced forward, shoved aside those White Fang members he couldn't give a damn about and ran for the exit.

"Russel!" The Iron Nail, still coated in metal, shouted after the Thrush. But before the Lieutenant could give chase, the wild electric wires struck the rocket locker's exposed fuel tank, detonating it. The resulting blast rocked the ship and knocked The Iron Nail off his feet. Heading the explosion, Russel leapt out of the ship, leaving it and its White Fang occupants to the mercy of their own abilities.

Russel should have probably been afraid to jump, but he wasn't. The ship wasn't so high up, having spent a good amount of time itself plummeting to the ground before leveling out. But Russel also had one ace up his sleeve. The first thing he ever learnt at Beacon was how to land. So he echoed
his landing strategy from initiation, hit the ground into roll. But not everything went as planned, Russel hadn't accounted for the increased momentum. So the Thrush kept on rolling down the empty street of the residential district of Vale.

After coming to a halt, Russel picked himself up and looked to his surroundings. There he was, standing in the middle of a long evacuated street, smiling like a mad idiot high off of adrenaline. He couldn't stop himself from laughing, he felt as if he'd cheated death. He then turned his gaze back to Amity Coliseum floating over the city in the distance and smiled.

But that soon faded, however, as Russel witnessed a small explosion on the colosseum's underbelly. The Thrush then watched in horror as Amity dropped out of the sky and crashed into the city below.

"Beautiful." Cinder said as she admired the view afforded to her and her pair of henchmen. Out over Vale, the once prided Amity Coliseum plunged into very ground. Entire city blocks were crushed under its weight.

"It's almost sad." Emerald said, feigning a sorrowful expression.

"It's horrendous." Cinder smirked as the sounds of civilian's cries of terror caught her ears. "Focus on the Atlesian Knights."

"Oh, I'm getting all of it." Mercury said as he held the scroll in his hand aimed down below at a squad of robotic soldiers gunning down innocent citizens of Vale.

"Good. Continue the broadcast until the end." The puppeteer Vale's downfall instructed, only for she and her cohorts to be rocked by a sizeable tremor. "And do not miss what happens next." Cinder said before turning to make her leave, walking off towards Beacon Academy.

The tremors surged through Vale, causing all to pause. A mountain south of the city shook violently, rattling off whole chunks of rock. Those watching just stared as an inhuman claw shot out of the mountain, followed by a terrible scream. The mountain hatched apart, giving birth to another monstrous Grimm, the kind of legend. The Dragon Grimm spread its wings as the tossed the mountain apart before taking flight.

Over the remnants of Mt. Glenn it flew, a mysterious black liquid dripping from its underbelly. With every flap of its wings The Dragon drew closer to Vale, screaming a deathly cry and striking fear into the hearts of everyone who watched it soar. The Grimm in the city, and those beasts that poured in from the nearby forests, rallied as if heeding The Dragon's call to action with renewed vigor. The skirmishes between Vale's Defenders and the invading Grimm intensified as the Dragon's looming shadow fell over the city.

And all the while Ozpin could only watch from the doorway at the base of Beacon Tower. Standing idly by while the best and brightest of Beacon ran to the aid of others, Ozpin waited. He'd been at this time and time before, he'd been an excellent judge of character, he his choice for Amber's successor.

Not too far from where he stood, Ozpin could see the young generation of Huntsmen banding together. They fought against rogue mechanized soldiers and fended off attacking monsters from the civilians they herded out of the Fairgrounds. Airbuses landed in a small makeshift landing zone and began to ferry people out of the school to the designated safe zone.

It was then, in the heat of battle, that Pyrrha caught sight of Ozpin. As Team JNPR tag teamed a
Deathstalker, The Invincible Girl quickly finished off the Grimm before running off after the Headmaster.

"Where's she going?" Nora exclaimed in confusion.

"Keep fighting! I'll go find out!" Jaune announced not only to his team but to those other students within earshot before he took off after his partner.

"Headmaster Ozpin!" Pyrrha called out, catching the grey haired man's attention. And just like that, any doubts were finally put to rest.

"Ms. Nikos." He greeted her with the kindest smile he could muster. "I'm sorry, I thought you would have had more time to consider, but now I need your decision."

Pyrrha paused for what must've felt like a lifetime, but in reality was only for a moment and not a second longer. But in that moment she thought of her life and all the events that had led her on the path of a Huntress. She recalled the first time she'd ever stepped into an arena. She thought of her first championship victory against the then reigning champion Daedalus. She thought of the airship journey to Vale and how she'd met Jaune, Ruby, Nora, Ren and even Russel. She thought about the last time she'd talked to her parents.

But in truth, none of that mattered. Pyrrha's decision had already been made for her. All around her the city was crumbling, choking on dust clouds and sieged by invading forces led by their unknown enemy. To refuse the burden of becoming The Fall Maiden, was to forfeit humanity. So Pyrrha turned to Ozpin and nodded. No matter what happened next, she would live with her decisions.

"Good. "Ozpin said before gesturing to the doorway, motioning for Pyrrha to enter Beacon Tower. "Shall we?"

Then without another word, Ozpin and Pyrrha, followed closely behind by Jaune, stepped inside. But their actions did not go unnoticed. Not too far away, atop a nearby building stood Cinder, a sinister smile on her face. "Finally."

From the get go, I always had an idea of Russel's semblance and over the course of the story I've teased it through his headaches. But this is the first time its been displayed so prominently.

I've gone out of my way to portray Cardin as a hero, or rather, to make him heroic. So, that's cool right?

Whenever I write The Iron Nail, I like to think he sounds like Bane from The Dark Knight Rises. He's just this hulking foe who monologues while he beats you up. And, originally, when I planned this arc out last year, this entire Iron Nail vs Ezekiel thing was going to be between Adam and Ezekiel. But I changed it, seeing the way the show was going it totally sank any Blake centric storyline I had planned moving forward. But I think it works better with The Iron Nail, it builds more to his character and adds dimension to him, so it all worked out.

The Airbus section was difficult to write, I didn't know how to properly portray Serin and Pyrrha in the equivalent of a hijacking. But I think I nailed it.

The final bit with Russel and The White Fang was probably one of the crazier ideas for an
action scene that I've had in a long time. Where they destroy the ship they're fighting in. But, believe me when I say, it is nowhere near as crazy as this one fight sequence I've got coming up. And It'll be very, very soon.

So, yeah, that's about it. Thanks again for reading! Next chapter may be out next week, or later this one, we'll see. I'm kind of busy at the moment. Until then, later days!
Hello there people of the internet, welcome back for the 44th chapter of The Darkling Thrush! I'm sorry that this chapter is coming in a bit late, there's been some major shake ups in my schedule, which has made writing for fun increasingly more difficult.

But, that's alright now, new chapter!

Things to discuss? I see my take of Emerald has been controversial. I don't have any plans for an Emerald and Mercury redemption arc. As soon as this arc is finished, this story will focus primarily on plot points established in previous arcs and resolve those. So, sorry.

And, In regards to the fates of The Iron Nail and Pangolin, I'm one of those believers in 'they're alive until you show me a body'. So, good chance he's still kicking for that rematch.

Further notes down below! Now on with the show!

XLIV
The Fall of Vale: Part 4

With howling winds and exploding cannons, puffs of dissipating black smoke and screeching creatures of nightmare, Dove streaked through the sky. Even in the face of tragedy, nothing could suppress the childish grin on his face. Up here amongst the clouds Dove's laughter was uncontained. Where winged demons thought themselves unmatched and conquered instruments of widespread devastation were peerless, there was Dove. Armed only with his sword, a fresh semblance, and the determination to see the night through to the end.

Dove shouted at the top of his lungs, crying out a taunt to any nearby Grimm that dared to strike down upon the people Vale. Here was there in the skies, amongst beasts who for too long had moved unchecked, unchallenged. And yet there he was, right beside them, meeting them in a place where no man or woman had gone before.

Tilting his weight to his left, Dove made a wide turn, flying over a murder of Griffons. By their flight path, the young man suspected they aimed to bombard Beacon and the valiant students that made their stand at Main Avenue. So he took a deep breath and flew down. Extending his sword forward, Dove rammed it through the Griffon at the front. The Grimm let out a sharp shriek in response, spinning its body in an effort to throw loose whatever had pierced through its skin. Giving way to the force of momentum, Dove kicked himself free of the Griffon, withdrawing his sword in the processes, and flew at the closest adjacent Grimm. He then proceeded to slow himself, letting the Griffon fly past him before finally thrusting his blade downward and impaling it in the Grimm's back. Another shrill shriek pierced the air around them, but Dove preserved and reached for the trigger of his weapons secondary function. Before the Griffon could attempt to shake Dove off, a pair of dust rounds shot out of the underslung revolver attached to Dove's sword, completely ripping through the beast.

With a dying cry, the Griffon began to plummet downward. Dove removed his sword and launched into the air once more, throwing himself at another Griffon. But now the reaming Grimm had
caught wind to his presence and averted their attention away from the school and to Dove. The wounded Alpha Griffon spun around in the air, letting out a blood curdling screech in an effort to instill a measure of fear in Dove's heart.

But Dove scoffed, not all impressed. Up here amongst the clouds he and the Griffons were on an even playing field. Where they could swoop down and tear at a stationary target, Dove could weave through the air alongside them and outmaneuver them with his slim body. So Dove shot forward, his sword extended forth and trained on the lead Griffon. The Alpha then met Dove's challenge, flapping its wings and flew forward.

The inevitable head on collision ended with Dove thrusting his blade forward, impaling it through its armored forehead and then driving it through the rest of its body as he kept flying on. The Alpha then fell, its body splitting, coming undone, before finally bursting into black dust and scattering to the wind. With the Alpha dealt with, Dove then spun around, heading the threat of Griffon screams. What remained of the murder converged on Dove, but he remained undeterred.

So Dove shot forward once more aiming his sword at the heart of the encroaching Griffons. He slammed down hard on the trigger of his revolver, shooting out a trio of dust rounds that ripped through a pair of Grimm. The pair of Griffons fell, but the others continued forward, not at all dissuaded. But still Dove remained resolute and cried out bloody murder before engaging the Griffons head on.

Slamming his blade into a screaming Griffon, Dove ripped the blade through its wide open beak, cutting through its cheek. Another Griffon aimed to swipe him from the left, but Dove saw it coming. He reached out and grabbed the maimed Griffon by the back of its head and flung himself over it while at the same time throwing it in the path of its attacking compatriot. The two Griffons violently crashed into each other. Dove spun his sword in his hands and struck at the neck of another Griffon, cutting its head clean off.

The bodies of Griffons rained from the sky as Dove embraced a new form of acrobatics. Free from the restrictions of gravity, he spun pas the Grimm, cutting them with his sword and shooting them with his gun and all they could do was lift up their stubby little claws to defend themselves. The apex predators of the sky now became the prey as Dove established his supremacy, gliding through the sky once more and thrusting his sword into the back of another Griffon. It wailed and cried out in pain, but it fell on deaf ears as Dove slammed down the trigger of his weapon, blasting into its back until it exploded into black dust.

Though out of breath, Dove cracked a proud smile as the last of the murder of Griffons fell. He floated, drifting for a moment, as her regained his faculties and comprehension of his state of being. He broke out into a fit of laughter, having not even realized he'd been upside down. But then something odd caught Dove's eye. Unable to make heads or tails of some far off object from his current vantage point, the CRDL boy reoriented himself. With the blood no longer crashing down on his head, his vision cleared and Dove could fully see the object that caught his eye: a woman with half pink and half brown hair, wearing a similarly colored jacket and bottom, slowly descending to the ground below through the use of a parasol.

"Huh." Dove muttered as he stared in confusion, watching the woman's slow descent. "What a strange day." He mused.

Before Dove could speed off to the woman's aid, a sniper round whizzed by, nearly blasting through his head. Glancing upward, Dove stared in disbelief as Ruby Rose rode her sniper-scythe Crescent Rose like a pogo stick while the Atlasian Flagship nosedived behind her. "Oh crap." He murmured as he watched the crashing ship gain on Ruby. At its current speed and Ruby's attempts
to delay her descent the warship would no doubt crash into her like a car hitting a fly on a highway.

So Dove blasted upward, racing to catch Ruby and push out of harm's way. His approach went unnoticed, easily overlooked by Ruby who was too busy preoccupied with masterminding her great escape from the Atlesian Flagship's path. But before the ship could collide with Ruby, Dove swooped by, catching the crimson reaper and flying off.

"Dove?" Ruby exclaimed in surprise.

"Hey Ruby." He greeted the RWBY leader as he flew them out of the ill-fated ship's path. "Don't worry, I've got you."

"You've got me?" Ruby questioned in confusion. She then looked around Dove, finding no means of propulsion or anything to explain his flying. "Who's got you?!"

"Turns out I could fly." Dove shrugged as shifted his weight, veering to the left and heading north. "Crazy, huh?"

"Wait, where are we going?" Ruby asked, looking over Dove's shoulder and seeing Beacon miniaturize as the distance between themselves and the school increase.

"I'm getting you out of here." Dove simply said. "We've got a safe zone established on the edge of the city."

"No, no!" She began to protest. "We need to get to Beacon! Everyone needs our help!"

"I'd argue with you, but the whole city needs our help Ruby." Dove nodded to buildings below, where men, women and children all huddled on rooftops holding out flares and with flags, shining the lights from torches all in an effort to get the attention of some Airship for rescue. "Our fellow students can handle everything on the ground, I'm more worried about what's up here with us in the skies." He said, casting a glance at some dark winged figure gliding through a far off fog bank over Mt. Glenn.

"Then at least drop me off at Beacon!" Ruby pleaded. "I can do more good there than sitting around at some safe zone."

"Ugh." Dove groaned. He acknowledged Ruby's case, they were Huntsmen and she was perhaps the greatest sharpshooter he knew. To Ruby at the safe zone was to deprive the people of Vale a considerable asset, one that could save more lives. So Dove conceded to Ruby and shifted his weight, making a wide turn through the air and heading back to Beacon Academy.

In the wake of Amity's collision with the surface of Vale, Russel was throw down the empty street by the resulting shockwave. Skidding across the pavement, Russel finally came to halt by slamming against the back of a parked minivan. He then fell back onto the concrete, the rear windshield gave way and rained glass down upon the Thrush.

Silently cursing, Russel combed his right hand through his hair, brushing pieces of windshield out of his mohawk. Next, he took flicking shards off his person and the tri-horned damaged shoulder pad. Russel took to inspecting the piece of protective gear, noting the metal spikes were all but gone. Two of them were messily stumps, showing obvious signs of breakage, probably lost when he'd rammed into the Ursa prior, or perhaps bashed off by one of The Iron Nail's mighty blows. And then there was the shoulder pad itself that Russel had to asses.

Upon closer inspection, Russel discovered a bullet lodged in the armor with tiny cracks
surrounding it. Russel had to think for a moment, recalling when exactly it was he'd been shot, eventually recalling the moment he'd been flung off his feet by a White Fang soldier after messing up his surprise ambush. He honestly didn't know what had happened at that moment, he didn't even see the gun get fired. Russel was too fixated on The Iron Nail to consider his allies. But, if there was any consolation, it was that his one flimsy piece of protective gear had taken the brunt of the attack.

He reached for one of his daggers, clasped to the belt around his waist and unhooked it. He raised the weapon's blade and wedged its edge against the shoulder pad, before driving it in and using it to pry the bullet out. With an audible 'pop', the bullet jumped out, skittering onto the pavement, and along with it, an entire section of the shoulder pad.

Russel sighed at the sight of half his single piece of protective armor laying in the street beside him, in the gutter atop of glass. He tapped the back of his head against the minivan's bumper and glanced up at the sky, up at the smoke clouds and Grimm, and up at the faraway stars. He breathed an exhausted sigh and closed his eyes. He drifted back to the first time he'd ever really seen the sky of Vale, when he'd first bothered to look up away from the city lights. When he'd waited by his dorm room window and just stared up at the peaceful sky that looked down over this wonderful city he adored.

It seemed to as if it were so long ago, but it hadn't been. It hasn't even been a year since he'd left Oakwood. And it hasn't even been two hours since all this madness kicked off. And all the while, Russel lay while others gave their lives for the city they loved more than he and people they didn't know. So, with a scoff, he opened his eyes and with his left hand, unclasped his shoulder pad's strap for the last time. What remained of his armor fell to the floor while Russel rose.

Hearing the sounds of nearby violence, Russel set off to do all that he could do for the city he loved and for the people who resided in it. Such as any other Huntsman, Russel walked forth to lend his aid wherever it was needed. And so through the empty streets of the residential district he found himself, following desperate grunts and Grimm wails.

Turning a corner, the Thrush found a horde of Grimm and the remnants of the residential evacuation effort fighting for their lives. Amongst fallen Huntsmen, Police officers and civilians alike, Russel found Cardin at the heart of the mess. So without further delay, Russel threw himself into the fray.

"Russel!" Cardin shouted in surprise, catching sight of his mohawk sporting partner rushing into the conflict from the corner of his eye. "Where the hell did you come from?" He questioned before bashing his mace against a Beowulf's, raining the Grimm's jagged fangs across the street. "You look like crap."

"Eh, I feel like crap too." Russel shrugged.

"You two kids can catch up later! Focus on the battle!" A greying dark haired man wearing a red tattered cloak shouted angrily at the pair of CRDL boys while he copped a nearby Grimm's head off with his sword.

Seeing no point in arguing with the man, Russel ran past Cardin and charged an attacking Beowulf, tackling it to the ground. As the pair began to struggle for dominance, Cardin suddenly spun around, bringing his mace down on the Beowulf's head, splitting it in two. The Beowulf then exploded into dust all around Russel, leaving the Thrush in a coughing fit.

Before he could tend to Russel, Cardin caught a miniature Ursa flanking him from the side. He then spun around and bashed it with his mace, activating the magma dust crystal within and
completely obliterating the Grimm. The CRDL leader couldn't help but smirk, feeling some sort of satisfaction from the kill. As he recalled, he'd almost been killed by an Ursa back in the Emerald Forest. In a way, Cardin had finally found retribution for the attempt on his life.

Cardin then turned to extend his hand to Russel, who greatly accepted his aid. With little effort, Cardin pulled Russel back onto his feet. "I hate it when they explode too." Cardin laughed before patting the still coughing Russel on the back.

"Yeah, what a bunch of assholes." Russel coughed. Cardin and Russel then turned to aid the senior Huntsman, only to halt at the sounds of metallic footsteps colliding with concrete. "Why're the robots aiming at us?" He asked, pointing to a pair of Atlesian Knights emerging from a nearby alley, their guns leveled at the CRDL boys.

Already familiar with the mechanized soldier's rogue actions, Cardin took up arms and prepared to strike at the robots before they could get a shot before Cardin could act, a pair of gunshots rang out loudly, causing the Winchester to freeze up. Before him, the pair of Knights lay on the ground, smoke emanating from their face plates. Both Cardin and Russel then turned around, and to their surprise, they found a shirtless General Ironwood standing there in all his half cyborg glory, holding a smoking gun.

"Mr. Winchester." Ironwood nodded at Cardin. "The area's secure." He spoke aloud as he surveyed the area, spotting Goodwitch finishing the last of the Grimm. "Our next order of business should be-" He paused, catching sight of the graying huntsmen glaring daggers at him. Recognizing the deathly expression the man wore on his face, General Ironwood threw his hands up in defense. "Qrow! This isn't my doing!" He shouted.

But it appeared as if Qrow didn't care, reaching for his weapon and changing it into its second configuration, a scythe. He then dashed past Russel and Cardin, reeling back to swing. Ironwood then reached back for his revolver in order to defend himself. But instead of lunging at the General as Ironwood expected, Qrow leapt upward past him, swinging his weapon at an incoming Griffon, carving the blade through the Grimm's neck, beheading it.

"You idiot." Qrow scoffed in a teasing manner. "I know you didn't do this."

"So what now?" Cardin asked, gesturing to the empty street. "Like you said, General, the area's secure. Where should we head next?"

As if to answer Cardin's question, a nearby storefront with televisions buzzed to life, catching the assembled group's attention. And much to their horror, the televisions began to depict live footage of Atlesian Knights gunning down defenseless civilians.

"No..." Ironwood gasped. "It's just like earlier, in Amity, they've commandeered the broadcasts."

"Except this time, instead of some harpy ranting about her political views, she's forcing the world to watch Atlas' finest slaughter the good people of Vale." Qrow growled lowly, barely able to contain his anger.

"We need to commandeer that broadcast." Ironwood declared, earning a number of confused looks. The good General then turned to answer their unasked questions. "There's a communication blackout in effect. That broadcast is live, we can use it to get word out to the other kingdoms of what's actually happening here in Vale."

"In other words, you want to tell the world Atlas isn't at fault for all the dead. I'm right, aren't I Jimmy?" Qrow snidely remarked.
"Atlas isn't at fault, Qrow. It's whoever took over my ship."

"Hey Cardin." Russel pointed at a charred building in the corner of the screen. "Does that look familiar to you?"

Cardin stepped forward, getting a closer look at the building. He had to squint to discern location. "The Memoria Night Club." He glared. "They're right across the damn street. Videotaping atop an office building." Realizing the location of the broadcast, he then turned to face the good General and his Professor. "General Ironwood, Professor Goodwitch, I would like to volunteer my services."

"For what, Mr. Winchester?" Ironwood raised a brow.

"Like you said, we need to commandeer that broadcast, and I know where they're at." Cardin jotted a thumb over his shoulder at the television screen.

"Mr. Winchester, what you're volunteering for is dangerous." Professor Goodwitch spoke in concern, viewing Cardin not as an equal, but as one of her students. "There's no telling what or who's behind the camera. You're still a first year student, you're too ill prepared for this."

"Don't worry, Professor, he won't be going alone." Russel said stepping forward.

"That's a nice sentiment, kid. But like Goodwitch said, you guys don't know squat." Qrow remarked as he reached into his coat and pulled out a flask. "There's too much uncertainty." He said before opening the container and taking a sip of its contents.

"This isn't up for debate, old guy." Russel sneered. "The whole cities under siege and you three got better things to do. Cardin and I can handle getting in front of a camera." He said before turning to walk off.

"We'll get it done." Cardin assured the trio before running off to join Russel.

"Good luck boys." Goodwitch said as she, Ironwood and Qrow watched Cardin and Russel race off for the merchant district.

"Did that punk just call me old?" Qrow questioned, a look of disbelief on his face.

"Heh." Ironwood couldn't help but chuckle.

"What's so funny, Jimmy?" He glared at the Atlesian General.

"Nothing, no, it's just Mr. Thrush reminds me a little of you, old guy." Ironwood smirked. "On too other business, I need to get to my ship." But out in the distance, an eerie whistling noise caught the trio's ear. They all turned to look up in the sky, and to Ironwood's dismay, they found the Atlesian Flagship hurdling towards the ground.

"Well, at least you won't have to walk far." Qrow laughed.

Beneath Beacon Tower, Pyrrha found herself in the familiar confines of an elevator, descending downward to the vault below. Just like before, the ride to the bottom was filled with an unsettling silence. But unlike before, there were three less bodies to occupy the claustrophobic space. So Pyrrha stood far away from Ozpin, and stood as far away as she could from Jaune, practically taking a corner for herself.
Though she had accepted her fate, to become something that others needed her to be, Pyrrha still felt uneasy. She couldn't look Ozpin in the eye. A man she'd revered due to his occupation as the Headmaster of Beacon, she now felt something akin to disgust. And Jaune, simply stood by, too focused on the elevator key pad, watching as the digital display rapidly flew by, showing the number of floors they passed before they reached their final destination. And Pyrrha herself couldn't help it as her eyes lingered to that mute display, as if she were watching a clock count down in reverse.

The elevator soon began to slow, the trio had reached their destination. The elevator doors opened and out stepped Ozpin with his cane. Jaune was the next to depart, leaving Pyrrha alone in the elevator for a moment longer. She glanced at the control panel, at those holographic floor buttons. The temptation to hit one and depart was great, but Pyrrha was too overwhelmed by this duty, this responsibility that had been entrusted to her, she couldn't turn back now. So, reluctantly, she stepped out of the elevator, the doors closing behind her.

"What is this place?" Jaune asked, staring wide eyed at the enormous room filled with diverging pathways.

"It's... a type of vault." Pyrrha answered,

"You've... been here before?" The blond knight asked cautiously. But Pyrrha didn't answer his query, she merely turned away, unable to face him. "What would this school need to... hide?"

Jaune sared wide eyed at the comatose Amber, a flurry of questions running through his head, all vying for a way to be expressed. But all the knight could do was stumble over his words. "What? Who?" He frantically gestured to the dying Fall Maiden.

"Jaune..." But there was no time for Pyrrha to explain. "Pyrrha! Get to the pods!" Ozpin shouted from where he stood by the machine's control panel. Heading the Headmaster's call, Pyrrha quickly did as she was instructed and jogged to the machine. She reached out for the vacant pod beside Amber's and pulled down on a latch, prying it open. And Pyrrha lingered for a moment, staring into the metal tube, knowing fully well that should she get in, she would never be the same.

Catching sight of Pyrrha's hesitant eyes, Ozpin looked to Jaune. "Mister Arc, if you'd like to help, you can stand guard here." He said, doing his best not to raise his voice.

The JNPR leader looked to the Headmaster and then back to Pyrrha, watching as she slowly pulled herself into the machine. He then departed back down the path they'd arrived, glancing over his shoulder once to see Pyrrha climb into the pod and the old Headmaster type away on the machine's hologram keyboard in front of him. Still plagued with a myriad of questions, Jaune couldn't help but stand at his post halfheartedly.

"Are you ready?" Ozpin asked, looking past the control panel to Pyrrha resting inside her pod. "I... I need to hear you say it." He said, sounding remorseful.

Pyrrha stared out of the pod, out to Jaune standing out in the hall. She placed a hand on the pod's view port, as if she were attempting to reach out to the blonde knight.

"Thank you, Miss Nikos." Ozpin spoke quietly. With a regretful sigh, the old Headmaster then reached over and punched in the machine's activation sequence. The pod in which Amber lay raised up into the air and began to glow orange, her eyelids fluttering before finally opening slightly, revealing glowing white irises hidden beneath.

Down a tube connecting both pods, the orange glow traveled, funnelling into the pod Pyrrha resided
in. Pyrrha's pod then raised into the air alongside Amber's, and she too began to glow orange, as if she were being consumed by it. Pyrrha didn't know how to describe the sensations she felt, there were no words to express how she felt. For a moment it felt as if this orange energy wrapped around her like the softest silk blanket the world had ever known. But then, what felt like pleasure turned to pain, as the energy began to dig into her very being, down into her soul. And all Pyrrha could do was scream in agony.

Hearing Pyrrha's screams, Jaune came running. "Pyrrha!" He shouted, quickly leaving his post and arriving back by the machine. He looked back and forth from Pyrrha to Amber before setting his gaze on Ozpin. "What's happening?!" He panicked.

But Ozpin couldn't even face the blonde knight. He just stared, teary eyed at the young woman willing to give up her life for the sake of humanity. "I'm... so sorry."

Before Jaune could question The Headmaster any further, an arrow cut through the air around the pair, piercing through the glass of Amber's pod, striking the Fall Maiden in the chest. The woman in the pod gasped, as if the shock of her fresh wound had awakened her from her coma, all while the machine began beeping an and Jaune turned and were welcomed by the sight of Cinder standing halfway down the corridor from them, an obsidian bow in her hand. Cinder lowered the bow, a tiny smirk creeping across her face.

Amber's struggle to breathe soon filled the room, even over the sounds of the alarm, both Ozpin and Jaune were forced to listen to the woman as she died in her pod until, finally, all breath left her. One quick glance back over their shoulder confirmed this, as they found Amber's eyes drifting closed, and her head leaning to the side, her whole body gone limp.

The green flames that eminated throughout the torches that littered the vault suddenly snuffed out. The alarm died out, replaced by the sound of Pyrrha frantically beating her fists against the glass of her pod filled the room. The orange energy receded, leaving Pyrrha and traveling back through the tubes into energy then burst out of the woman, shattering the glass in its way, and flowing out into the room.

The energy then encircled Cinder before finally entering the woman. Now glowing, Cinder began to float, gain long trails of flame around her eyes with orange energy swirling around her. Beats even harder on the glass, Pyrrha was forced to watch as Jaune rose his sword and charged toward Cinder.

"No!" Ozpin reached out to stop the boy's charge but failed. With the flick of her wrist, Cinder conjured a fireball. She then flung the blooming fire at Jaune, who rose his shield to block. Though he was successful, the force behind the blast proved too much and threw the JNPR leader back, skidding across the green floor.

"Jaune!" Pyrrha frantically shouted. She then pressed her hands against the pod and activated her semblance of polarity. Pyrrha then ripped the pod's door off its hinges and stepped out. She held the door in midair for a moment, long enough to get Cinder in her sights before throwing it at the woman. But the energy swirling around Cinder began to intensify and she simply reached out and smacked the door aside.

Watching as Cinder descended to the floor, Pyrrha called to her weapon and shield with the power of her semblance and began to charge forward. However, Ozpin puts his arm out, stopping her.

"Take Jaune and get out of here!" Ozpin shouted, a look of fear gracing his face. "Find Glynda! Ironwood! Qrow!Bring them here right away! The tower cannot fall!"
"But I can help." Pyrrha began to protest.

Slowly, the old Headmaster turned his head to stare Pyrrha in the eyes. "You'll only get in the way."

Hesitating for a moment, Pyrrha looked from Ozpin, to Cinder and then to Jaune who struggled to his feet. Biting her lip, Pyrrha conceded to Ozpin's wishes and ran off to pick Jaune off the ground. Now with her two feet firmly planted onto the floor once more, Cinder cocked her head over her shoulder to watch the pair of Jaune and Pyrrha flee, the glow of the swirling orange energy, and the flames around her eyes all disappearing. She then turned her attention back to Ozpin, her eyes still glowing for a moment.

"This whole time... right beneath our feet." She gestured upward, no doubt referring to the building resting over their heads. "She was right about you." She glared as Ozpin turn his cane in his grip, ready for their bout. "Such arrogance."

Sneaking through back alleyways and creeping through shadows, both Russel and Cardin put in a great deal of effort to avoid confrontation with any roaming Grimm on their journey to the merchant district. Over the sounds of ships crashing into buildings and Grim running rampant through the nearby streets, the duo found themselves cautiously crossing the open street and making their way to a familiar alley.

While taking point, Russel ran down the alley, only to stop in his tracks at the sight of a body lying limp in a pile of trash. "Aw shit." He frowned.

"What, what's going on?" Cardin asked as low as a whisper as he checked their backsides in case of a Grimm ambush.

"It's Kevin." Russel sighed as he pointed to the pile of garbage. Amongst the black bags of trash rested the body of the infamous Kevin, whom both Russel and Cardin, as well as many other Beacon students had gone to in search of many items such as fake IDs, fireworks, kegs and even the day to day even schedule of one mob boss' son.

"God damn..." Cardin muttered as he turned to gaze upon Kevin's bludgeoned body. The pair remained still, hanging their heads low out of respect in a moment of silence for their deceased supplier. With the moment passing, Russel turned to continue forward, while Cardin remained. "We can't just leave him here." He said quietly.

Russel stopped in his tracks once more. "We can't bring him with us and we can't bury him." He sighed. "That's the reality of the situation, the city's fucked and we can't do jack shit for anyone. All we can do is save who we can."

"It just doesn't seem right." Cardin said, turning to Russel. "All these people dead. And for what?"

Russel paused for a moment, to think over the question. In truth, he was stumped. How could anyone justify a slaughter of this magnitude? "I don't know, Cardin." He spoke honestly. "We'd better get moving, it's a little ways from here."

"Yeah, okay." Cardin nodded before the pair set off once again. But Cardin couldn't help but spare one last glance, back to Kevin. He sighed, regretful that he couldn't do anything more for the man.

One after the other, Russel and Cardin exited the alley and continued on their trek to their destination. As they drew closer and closer to the remnants of the Memoria nightclub, they discovered what remained of brave officers and off duty huntsmen, attempting to make a final
stand at the center of the street. There was no telling how many Grimm fell by their hands before they were eventually overwhelmed. Due to the Grimm's nature of never leaving bodies, they were treated to the demoralizing image of a crushed resistance. Spent shotgun shells and wrecked guns littered the street, as did the men and women who once held them.

"We'll avenge them." Cardin declared in passing as they continued on. "We'll avenge them all."

Continuing on through ruined streets, they finally reached their destination. Following their estimation from where the footage was taken, Russel and Cardin turned their attention to a seemingly abandoned office building directly adjacent from the burnt down Memoria nightclub. Barging their way into the building by knocking down the door, they quickly took to racing up the stairs.

After climbing twenty flights of stairs, the pair of reached the roof access. Before continuing on, they paused, seeking to catch their breath and prepare themselves for the showdown about to take place.

"Hey, Russel." Cardin looked to Russel, speaking quietly, lest whoever waited beyond those doors become aware of their presence.

"Hm?" Russel turned to face Cardin as he anxiously gripped onto the handles of his daggers.

"We're walking into Oum knows what. We're probably about to face whoever masterminded all of this madness. And, I just wanted you to know, before anything kicks off, I've got your back." He said extending his hand out to Russel. "And I hope you've got mine too."

Russel stared at the gesture for a moment before chuckling quietly. "Well, we aren't hitting up another nightclub and punching out a mob boss this time, so, we'll see what happens." He said, causing both to burst out laughing. "Yeah, but real talk. We sure as shit didn't start off on the right foot back when all this started, but there ain't another person I trust to walk into a fight with other than you." Russel said before extending his own hand and shaking Cardin's.

"Thanks, Russel. I mean that, you're my best friend." Cardin smiled, proud to call the man standing beside him friend. "There really isn't anyone else I'd picture jumping into hell with."

"Alright, now c'mon," He raised his daggers. "Let's go kick some ass." He nodded at the door.

Cardin smirked and raised his mace. "With pleasure." He said before turning and kicking the rooftop access door off its hinges. With the door open, both Russel and Cardin raced onto the rooftop, weapons drawn.

Slowly, Emerald and Mercury glanced over their shoulders, finding Russel and Cardin standing there. "Oh, look who it is." Emerald smirked. "I was wondering if someone would show up. I was starting to feel a little disappointed."

"You?" Cardin gasped, genuinely surprised. "You're behind this?"

"I wouldn't say 'behind', more like, 'taking part'." Mercury shrugged as he continued to film nearby civilians get torn apart by Grimm.

"Mercury." Russel glared. "You look fine for a man who had his leg blown out."

"What can I say? You should've trusted Yang." Mercury scoffed. He then spun around from the edge of the building, bringing with him his scroll. He pointed the camera at the duo and all over the world, television screens were filled with the images of Cardin and Russel glaring at the pair.
"Anything you'd like to say to the world?" He asked tauntingly. But before either CRDL boy could act, Mercury snapped his scroll in half. "Oops, butter fingers." He smirked before tossing what remained of his scroll over the side of the roof. "How clumsy of me."

"You'll never get away with this." Cardin gritted through his teeth as he took a step forward.

"But we already have." Emerald laughed mockingly, gesturing to the city behind her. "And we did it right under your noses too." She turned her gaze to Russel. "You must really hate yourselves about now." She laughed as she discreetly drew her pair of weapons.

"Heh." Russel sneered. "Come on then, the both of you." And then they leapt at each other.

Originally, Dove was going to fight a nevermore in this chapter. But I scrapped that. A neat little reference I threw in, when Dove catches Ruby, the following exchange mirrors that of Superman catching Lois Lane in the 1978 film. It's the little things, you know?

I tried to show more of Pyrrha's reluctance in this chapter, to meet this responsibility that's been thrusted onto her. There's no question that she's willing to do whatever is required of her, she's just not 100% onboard with it. So, I hope I succeeded in that.

One of the biggest things I've strived to achieve is to craft Russel and Cardin's friendship. It's by far one of the most important aspects of the entire story. It wasn't not too long ago when they met at odds and now here, it's really come to a head where they're practically brothers now. And I think that's important going forward.

That's pretty much it. Next chapter: Russel and Cardin v. Emerald and Mercury. I can safely say the next chapter will be the longest yet.

Next update will take a while, no more than two weeks. 'Til next time! Later days!
Hello everyone! Welcome back to the startling conclusion of the current Arc of 'The Darkling Thrush'!

This chapter has been a long time coming. We've finally reached the Volume 3 finale. This will probably be the last time we see anything familiar. This is also the longest chapter to date, and befittingly so! Anyways, onto the chapter.

XLV

The Fall of Vale: Conclusion

In less than two hours the city of Vale was brought to its knees. Pillars of achievement such as Amity Coliseum had fallen. Soldiers made to defend mankind, built in factories and handed gun, turned tier sights on those whom they'd been charged to protect. Marvelous warships of Atlesian origin, swatted like insignificant flies. The streets ran with crimson, the airways crowded with dying screams. And a far off indomitable beats its wings, gliding through the air, awoken by the fear and doubt owned by every soul across the land.

The city of Vale, the crown jewel of the Kingdom which shown throughout the world. Settled by those brave enough to leave their cave dwellings, built by carpenters, and armed by blacksmiths. It was here where Kings made warded off wars, where great generals turned back the tides of defeat, where men and women lived without fear of the monsters beyond their borders. A city that stood the bombing raids of a Great War, that wouldn't budge against the last Vacuan offensive, a city that brokered the controversial peace between man and faunus. It took decades if not centuries to build Vale up, to become the marvel it was today. And yet, it only took two short hours to topple it over.

That was a fact not lost to Russel, not while he ran across a rooftop, dragging daggers like icepicks, about to clash with a mint green haired woman. The city of Vale was dying all around him and Russel and Cardin had failed in their mission to get word out to the world of goings on within its ruined walls. So the very least either CRDL boy could do now, was raise their weapons and charge at their adversaries. There would be no saving Vale tonight, but the very least they could do is walk away with the killer's heads.

Cardin and Russel met Emerald and Mercury at the center of the roof. They clashed their blades, their mace and weaponized footwear, shaking the very foundation of the building they stood on. Russel stood his ground, holding his daggers against Emerald's sickles. The two glared at each other for a moment, but Russel could tell something was off, Emerald was smiling, and that worried him.

"I still can't believe they sent you two to stop us." Emerald said mockingly. "Was JNPR too busy? Did RWBY get caught in traffic?" She taunted, earning a matching dagger like glare from her mohawk sporting opponent.

"Saving the School, I hope." Russel spoke with an air of sincerity to his words. From where Russel stood, looking past Emerald out to the city behind her, he could see Beacon Academy in the distance. The swaths of Grimm were like shrouds, draping the very steps of Main Avenue. But Russel couldn't afford to look on after the school any longer, he needed all one hundred percent of
himself, or at the very least what remained after his earlier bouts with The Ursa, Team STAG and The Iron nail. Here and now in this fight with the ones responsible for Vale's sorry state.

Slowly, Emerald turned one of her interlocked sickles and tried her best to aim it at Russel. The wheels in Russel's head began to turn as he studied the pair of weapons in each of his opponent's hands. There was a solid rule of thumb in the land of Remnant that when it came to Huntsmen or fighters in general, aside for the odd exception, every weapon turned into a gun. Noting the structure of the weapons, Russel's eyes shot open wide as the sickle Emerald aimed at himself as the blade folded in and a gun barrel emerged.

Jerking his head to the side, but at the cost of losing his footing, Russel avoided a point blank headshot. The bullet streaked the air as the gunshot rang out. The Thrush flanked her, hitting the floor rolling into a crouch, getting a little distance away from his opponent. But Emerald was lethal at all distances. She quickly spun around, morphing the second sickle into its revolver configuration and took aim. With the pull of her weapon's triggers, a pair of dust rounds shot out, dead on to make contact with Russel.

But Russel was far from helpless. As one Pyrrha Nikos could attest to, the Thrush had a habit of blocking bullets with his daggers. Spinning the face of one of his blades outward, Russel rose his dagger, protecting himself from the pair of bullets. The resulting dust explosions shook Russel, but he held firm and leapt to his feet, charging forward in order to close the distance with Emerald. But seeing the Thrush's approach, Emerald let loose a barrage of weapons fire.

While Russel and Emerald fought, not too far away, Cardin and Mercury came to blows. Swinging at Mercury with his mace, Cardin let out a rage filled cry. Over the course of the night, Cardin had seen so much, seen good people die and watched as the city he grew up in was ripped apart and set ablaze. When he'd arrived with the intention of battling the mastermind of Vale's current plight, he couldn't have imagined the culprits being anyone he knew. But then he'd found Emerald and Mercury, two people he'd shared the same room with time and time before.

The Winchester boy felt as if his blood was boiling beneath his skin. The way he kept swinging his mace at Mercury was tactless, only wishing to hit the silver haired man, not at all caring how. And Mercury simply dodged his attacks, seemingly without any effort.

"You're getting sloppy, Cardin." Mercury commented as he avoided another one of Cardin's attacks. "I thought you were supposed to be better than this, being a Winchester and all." He smirked before feeling the force behind Cardin's clenched fist striking him across the jaw. Mercury stumbled backwards, almost stunned by the action. He raised a hand where he'd been struck. "Heh. Almost felt that one."

"Shut up and fight." Cardin glared.

"Fine, but you asked for it." Mercury shrugged. He then ran forward and kicked into the air, activating the underslung projectile launcher attached to his boot, shooting a dust slug Cardin's way. But before the projectile to hit the Winchester, Cardin swatted it out of the air with his mace, sending it rocketing off to the side and blowing a hole in the roof.

With an unamused look on his face, Cardin charged forward to meet his opponent head on. Mercury did the same, sprinting forward to meet the CRDL leader head on. He leapt in to the air and kicked once more, sending another projectile Cardin's way. But this time, Cardin didn't even attempt to swat the attack out of the air or even attempt to dodge. He ran forward, letting it strike and explode against his left shoulder armor. But he remained unimpeded by the attack and continued forward.
Now with the distance between them nothing more than a few feet, Cardin raised his mace and struck at Mercury once more. Mercury dodged, spun around, gaining momentum and kicked upward, smacking Cardin against the side of his head. Mercury smirked as it appeared he’d delivered a powerful blow against Cardin, watching as the Winchester budged against the force of the attack. However, Cardin reached outward catching Mercury's leg with his hand.

Shooting a menacing glare Mercury's way, Cardin raised his mace, intent on bashing his opponent's skull in. But before he could capitalize on the advantage, a projectile screamed out of the conspirator's boot, striking Cardin in the head. The blast knocked the CRDL leader off his feet on skidding across the gravelly rooftop. Mercury retracted his outstretched leg and scoffed, he then raised a hand to his opposite shoulder and flicked at it, as if he were dusting it.

"I can't believe you didn't see that coming." He laughed.

Cardin quickly found his way back onto his feet, his semblance having took the brunt of the blast. He raised a hand to his cheek and wiped away the blood and then reached to the ground reclaiming his mace. Without another word, Cardin rose his weapon and then slammed it onto the rooftop. A streak of volcanic fire shot forth, cracking through the very foundation of the roof as it sped towards Mercury.

But the fiery light show did little to worry Mercury. Some time ago, Mercury, as well as Emerald and Cinder had read Ozpin's personal files on each and every one of his prized students. As it happened to be, Ozpin was exceedingly thorough in his examination of his student's fighting capabilities, even including a detailed list of their means of attack. Already familiar with the specifics of Cardin's long range attack, he side stepped the streak and got some distance. He then turned to face Cardin and shoot the young man a taunting smile.

To Mercury's surprise, however, he found the Winchester standing there with a smile of his own. The magma streak continued forward, past Mercury, shooting to where Emerald currently stood as she attempted to gun down Russel. And before Mercury could warn Emerald, the burning magma shot reached her, detonating under her feet. Emerald was forward over the air, sending her flying over Russel and over the side of the building.

As Cardin watched Emerald fly over the side, Mercury opted to attack while he was distracted. With his mace firmly bashed into the roof, Mercury had little to worry about Cardin raising it against him. He ran forward and kicked at Cardin, sending another projectile rocketing towards him. But it never made contact as familiar dagger found its way in the projectile's path. The projectile exploded against the face of the dagger, leaving a cloud of smoke in its wake. And there stood Russel, right by Cardin's side.

"I could've taken the hit." Cardin muttered as he pulled his mace out of the floor.

"Just because you can take a bullet doesn't mean you have to." Russel retorted as he rested the blade of his dagger on his shoulder.

"Argh!" Emerald shouted angrily as she hauled herself back onto the roof through the use of her weapon's third configuration of a kusarigama. She then reached out for the blade she'd anchored to the roof as she went over the side and removed it before retracting it into her weapon. She then jogged to rejoin Mercury where he stood starring down the pair of CRDL boys.

"I couldn't help but notice a lack of concerned cries." Emerald muttered angrily in Mercury's direction.

"I knew you'd pull through." Mercury simply shrugged. He then leapt forward into another kick,
sending another projectile at the pair of Cardin and Russel.

Responding to the attack, Russel rose his daggers once again, forming and ‘x’ and blocked the attack. But with Russel positioned forward, Emerald jumped at the chance to attack form the side. She quickly moved herself into position, reconfiguring her weapons into revolvers and fired on the duo. But Emerald's repositioning did not go unnoticed by Russel, who quickly danced the blades in his hands in order to block her attacks.

Emerald gritted her teeth at the sight, watching as Russel repelled every shot. She then reconfigured her weapons again, switching the revolvers into kusarigama. Swinging her blades on their metal chains, Emerald ran forward. Cardin met the challenge by striking the roof once more, shooting another explosive streak across the surface. But this time, she could see the attack coming, and sidestepped, allowing it to continue onward, detonating against the side of the building. She swung her kusarigama, letting the blade and chain fly at the pair.

The blade at the end of the chain came sweeping by. Russel raised another of his daggers to block, only for the blade to swipe past him and wrap around Cardin's neck. The Winchester quickly reached out for the metal chain that choked him, attempting to pry it off. Seeing this, Emerald dashed forward, leaping over a swipe from Russel's blade and pounced on the Winchester. She reeled in her kusarigama's chain just enough as to better strangle the larger man.

Cardin flailed about, attempting to lash out at Emerald. But the thief kept her distance, poised behind the CRDL leader while the blade of the kusarigama still edged against his neck as the chain links tightened around his throat. Cardin gagged, gasped for air and swung his mace in a desperate attempt to swat the woman behind him. Seeing his partner's plight, Russel turned to aid Cardin, only for Mercury to kick him from behind.

Russel spun back around to face Mercury and leapt at the man. He struck forward at an angle and then across with both of his blades, but Mercury danced through both attacks. The Assassin's son then launched a kick forward, completely bypassing Russel's defenses and connected with the Thrush's gut. All the air in Russel's lungs left him, completely knocked out of his body and causing him to double over slightly.

What little aura remained in the Thrush's body was quickly diverted to the area in which he'd been struck and set on the task of remediing any internal injuries he'd sustained. But Russel could feel himself waning, as if he was losing his edge. He didn't have too much aura to go on as it was, the night and the events that had transpired beforehand had robbed him of his bite. But Russel remained resolute and pushed himself against Mercury's leg. At any moment his opponent could launch a point blank projectile at him, time was of the essence and from the sounds of Cardin's nearby hoarse gagging, he was needed elsewhere. So Russel shot a dagger into the air and brought it down through Mercury's outstretched leg.

"Argh! No, my leg!" Mercury overtly shouted in agony, causing Russel to pause for a moment and stare at the wound. Much to his surprise, he found no blood spewing from the gaping cut, but rather, he saw wires and exposed circuitry. With his attention fixated elsewhere, Russel was left open for an attack and was smacked aside by Mercury, who then reached down for the hilt of the dagger and grasped it. Then he promptly removed the blade from his leg. "Aw, man." Mercury frowned as he inspected his leg. "There's a hole in my jeans." He then broke out laughing and chuckled the dagger back at Russel, striking the Thrush against his left shoulder.

Russel let out a pained wail as he recoiled backwards. What little aura the Thrush still possessed was too busy elsewhere to prevent his own dagger from breaking the skin. Thankfully, however, the manner in which Mercury had thrown the weapon had diminished the possibility of the weapon
impaling itself through Russel, so the dagger simply fell to the floor to be reclaimed by its owner. Inspecting the weapon closer, Russel found that the only blood on its blade was his own.

"You never were hurt during the tournament." Russel muttered as he looked up from the blade. "You couldn't possibly have been hurt, not when your leg isn't even real."

"No shit, Captain Obvious." Emerald spat as she continued to strangle Cardin with the chain of her kusarigama.

Russel cast a glare in the mint green haired woman's direction. He then tossed one of his daggers into the air, testing its weight while he eyed the chain she'd roped around Cardin's neck. Once catching his weapon, Russel quickly threw it across the rooftop, its blade piercing through one of the links of the chain, piercing through it completely. Emerald just stared at both parts of her weapon, the part of the chain with her blade in one hand, and the chain attached to the hilt in the other, all while Cardin caught his breath. The Winchester then spun around and elbowed Emerald, knocking her back.

"Bitch." Cardin spat hoarsely as he rubbed his throat. He then reached down for the thrown dagger and tossed it back over to his partner who caught it by the handle.

"Heh, if you hate that," Emerald smirked as she holstered her weapons. "You're gonna hate what comes next." She said before pressing her hands together and focusing intensely.

Before either Cardin or Russel could fathom just what Emerald was up to, the entire landscape around them began to change. The roof cracked apart and malformed hands burst out, thrusting into the air in an attempt to reach out and grab both CRDL boys. Cardin let out a sharp yelp in surprise as he felt a hand latch against his leg. He quickly raised his mace and swung at the hand, but it retracted into the roof and the Winchester wound up hurting only himself.

Russel leapt backwards, dodging a wave of hands that began to sprout upward. Cardin did the same, fleeing from the nightmarish hands until they were back to back. They raised their weapons to ward off the encroaching hands. Suddenly, the hands receded back and pressed their palms against the floor of the roof. Using the roof as leverage, a hundred fractured Emerald's emerged. Ghoulish in

"This is absolutely fucked." Russel cursed as he raised his weapons for the oncoming assault. All the Emerald's cracked a crooked smile and then began to shamble forward, converging on the pair. Both the original Emerald and Mercury were lost in the sea of abnormal manifestations as Cardin and Russel quickly set on the task of cutting them down.

"If you'd have told me we'd be fighting undead looking roof people today, Cardin, I would have laughed. Now I'm pissing my fucking pants!" Russel shouted as he thrusted one of his daggers forward, impaling it through an Emerald's chest. But the Emerald remained active, unaffected by Russel's attack and screamed in his face.

"Keep fighting, we can't let up!" Cardin shouted as he hit the switch on his mace's handle, causing the jaws to open so he can grab an approaching Emerald. He then raised the malformed manifestation into the air before bashing it into another Emerald. He then raised his brow at the sight of the pair shimmering out into nothingness.

Cardin paused for a moment, while the Emeralds continued to press forward and Russel fought on. The Winchester thought back to his earlier conversation with Velvet at the diner, how they'd spoken about Yang's arrest and Coco's so called 'stress induced hallucinations'. That they'd seen things that weren't even there.
"How are these things even real?!" He shouted before kicking the Emerald off his blade and into a group of them.

"Because they're not." Cardin gritted his teeth as the Emerald's struck at him. He felt nothing, no pain when they raised their blood soaked hands against him. "They aren't real. Like these so called 'stress induced hallucinations' that Coco and Yang have experienced. They're just illusions, created by one woman." He sneered.

"Well don't you think you're so clever." Emerald's voice could be heard from amongst the mob of malformed images of herself. "But just because what you're seeing isn't real, doesn't mean you can't be hurt." She said as the familiar sound of Mercury's projectile launcher rang out. A rocket shot out, cutting path through the faux Emeralds and heading towards Cardin and Russel.

Seeing the projectile, Russel quickly struck out, intent on cutting it down before it could make contact. But the projectile split into five spate pieces and continued onward. Russel could only block two, while the remaining three struck is chest. With his aura nearly depleted, Russel couldn't protect himself from the entire barrage, two exploding against the shield his soul provided. The third of the trio of unblock projectiles found itself imbedded in his left thigh. Russel let out a sharp pained cry and heaved loudly as he removed the sharp segmented projectile from his leg.

"Only seemed fair." Mercury's voice could be heard as he hid amongst the mob. The sound of his launcher rang out again. The projectile cut across the sea of Emeralds from a completely different direction from before. Russel turned to block the oncoming projectile, but Cardin's hand shot out and caught it, before proceeding to crush it in his palm.

"I don't like not seeing my opponent." Cardin muttered as what remained of the projectile fell like dust from his hand. He then lowered the head of mace, placing it between his feet. "Russel, on my back, now!" He shouted as another projectile came screaming through the mob of Emerals.

Russel cut the projectile in two, letting its parts veer off over the side of the roof before exploding in the clear open air. The Thrush then turned to face his partner, wondering just what he had in mind. But then he saw the mace aimed at the ground. So Russel nodded, attached his daggers to his belt and hopped onto Cardin's back.

"What the hell are they doing?" Emerald questioned, as she did her best to keep her concentration, lest she break her illusion.

"Burn." Cardin threatened lowly before stabbing his mace into the roof. The magma dust crystal at the center of his weapon glowed to life. A shockwave of magma fire burst out, washing over the entire roof and knocking both Emerald and Mercury off their feet. With Emerald's concentration broken, the nightmarish manifestations of herself dissipated, revealing only the open and ruined rooftop with their two enemies on the ground.

"How long you been holding back that one?" Russel inquired as he hopped off Cardin's back.

"Never a time when it was appropriate." Cardin shrugged. He the raised his mace to inspect the magma dust crystal within. Where there was once a solid brick of molten powered dust, was now a pebble. The night had raged on and thrown all manner of obstacles in Cardin's way, his dust crystal was now almost depleted. "We've need to finish this."

"Agreed." Russel nodded as he removed his daggers from his belt.

"You got somewhere to be?" Emerald laughed as she and Mercury picked themselves up off the floor. "I find that very unlikely." She said, gesturing out to the city under siege around them.
"Besides, you really believe you can keep going? Look at yourselves, your messes." She pointed to their current states, worn by battle in the case of Cardin and soaked in his own blood in the case of Russel. "How much longer do you honestly think you can keep this up?"

"As long we need to." Russel sneered as he raised his daggers once more. Then without a word shared between them, both Russel and Cardin took off sprinting towards Emerald and Mercury. The pair of thief and assassin then took off running, meeting them down the middle and clashed.

Mercury kicked at Cardin, launching another projectile, only for it to screech past the Winchester boy who bashed him against his chest with his mace. The magma crystal burned to life and blasted him, sending him spinning backwards. But Mercury used the momentum of the attack to get of another kick, sending another projectile at Cardin, which exploded against his chest armor.

Russel slashed at Emerald with his dagger, but the thief blocked with her sickle. She then reconfigured one of her sickles into its kusarigama form and kicked Russel away. With some distance between them, she began to spin the blade in the air before throwing it at the Thrush. Russel in turn raised a dagger to block the attack, only for the blade and chain to wrap around the dagger. With a smile, Emerald then pulled back on her weapon, ripping the dagger out of Russel's hand.

Emerald then whipped the dagger through the air before finally slinging it back at Russel. With his eyes wide, Russel rolled forward to dodge his dagger, which struck the open and free damaged floor behind him. He rushed forward in order to close the distance between himself and Emerald, but the thief switched her weapons into their revolver form and let loose a barrage of weapons fire.

But that didn't stop Russel from closing the distance, from edging closer towards his opponent. His brain rang out and bashed against his skull, the familiar thumping and pain of migraines past coming into memory. He then moved through the oncoming weapons fire with precision, weaving side to side past those that could be avoided and swatting aside the ones he couldn't with his dagger and pushed on. Emerald stared out in alarm, watching as Russel got closer and closer.

"Y-You-" Emerald stuttered angrily. She then changed her weapons back into their sickle forms and moved to strike at Russel. She brought her weapons down on the Thrush, who blocked a sickle with his dagger and grabbed ahold of her other arm with his free hand. They then stood there with interlocked glares fighting for dominance.

Emerald then reeled back her head and struck forward, colliding it against Russel's. She then looked up and stared in surprise as Russel remained unfazed, not once budging despite the flow of blood leaking from his nose and onto his chin. She then reeled her foot back in a desperate attempt to get away from the Thrush and firmly placed her foot against his groin. Russel coughed out in pain, but he pressed on by head-butting Emerald, knocking her back.

The four fighters then took to standing on their opposite sides of the roof, all heaving in pain except for the exception of Mercury, who stood calmly cracking his neck. It became apparent to both Russel and Cardin that Emerald was reaching the end of her rope, just as they were, no doubt that illusion based semblance of hers had taken its own toll on the thief, just as the constant battling had done to themselves.

As much as Russel and Cardin's bodies screamed for them to rest for a moment longer, they knew in their hearts and minds they couldn't let up, not even for a moment. They couldn't let Emerald and Mercury walk away, not after what they'd done. It was all or nothing to the CRDL boys. They just picked up their weapons from where ever they lay and started again, determined to fight on to the bitter end.
But the night was still young, however, and there were surprises around every corner. A nearby gust of wind turned into a furious gale. Both sides stood firm against the imposing howl. And then they heard the roar. All four combatants then slowly turned their heads to their north, and much to their shock, found a massive Dragon Grimm heading towards the merchant district.

"You've got to be kidding me." Cardin muttered as he and the others stared in disbelief as the Dragon Grimm slammed through nearby buildings, heading towards them.

"Run!" Russel shouted, causing all four of them to race towards the exit. The ruins of destroyed buildings flew over their heads as they raced, but it was already too late. The Dragon Grimm was a force of nature they'd never seen before. Powerful winds beat from wings and it speared through buildings at unprecedented speeds.

The Dragon Grimm slammed into the building, cutting through it and sending the four of them flying into the air. Russel and Cardin let out a shared panicked cry, but their fall to the streets below was detoured as they slammed onto the armored back of the Dragon. The massive Grimm let out a haunting shriek before turning its course towards Beacon.

Russel held on as best he could to the Dragon. But he found no grasp around where he'd landed and found himself being flung against the winds further down against the Dragon's back.

"Russel!" Cardin shouted after his partner as he held firm to a crevice between the Dragon's armor plating.

"Argh!" The Thrush panicked. He then whipped out one of his daggers and stabbed it against the Dragon's back, hoping that maybe he'd hit something fleshy. The blade then sank against the Dragon, slowing Russel's descent and causing the massive Grimm to let out another roar into the heavens. Russel allowed himself a moment's reprieve, to let out a sigh of relief as both he and Cardin rode on the back of the Dragon.

But Russel and Cardin weren't alone. A dust round struck the area around Russel's hand, causing the Thrush to jolt to attention. Both Cardin and Russel looked ahead and found Mercury and Emerald up ahead, holding to the back of the Dragon just as they were. Despite the change of location, their argument raged on. And Emerald continued her onslaught of weapons fire.

Cardin activate his semblance once more, leaving him unharmed by the assault. But the Winchester wasn't Emerald's real target, it was Russel, who lacked the semblance and aura to brush off her attacks.

"You fucking bastard!" Emerald shouted against the deafening high speed winds.

"Hrn." Russel muttered in an irritated manner and raised his second dagger to block the weapons fire. "Cardin!" He shouted to his partner. "Light 'em up!"

Cardin looked back to his partner and friend, straining to hear his words. But he heard, he heard and acknowledged. He then raised his mace into the lashing air and struck the Dragon, causing a magma shot to shoot forward across the Grimm's back lengthways. Emerald's eyes shot open wide at the unavoidable sight. The magma detonated right under Emerald, sending her flying into the air.

"Ahhh!" Emerald screamed. And yet, still, the thief did not relent. She switched her weapon back into a kusarigama and flung back onto the Dragon, intent on hooking back on and continuing her fight with the Thrush. But then a projectile struck her blade, causing it to undershoot and hook onto the back of Cardin's armor.
Cardin was then yanked off the back of the Dragon by Emerald's added weight. Russel attached his daggers back to his belt and reached out to his partner to catch his hand. But another projectile struck Russel, blowing his hand back and preventing him from catching Cardin.

"Cardin!" Russel shouted after his partner and friend over the pain he felt in his hand. He then watched in horror as Cardin and Emerald went over the side of the Dragon, falling down to the fairgrounds nearby Beacon Academy below.

Russel then cast a glare up ahead to Mercury, who stared back. The Dragon let out an ear-piercing cry in response to Cardin's earlier attack and began to climb upwards through the sky above Beacon. Russel began to shout incoherently as the force of the climb bashed against him. Mercury himself found their predicament troubling, and felt crushed by the same weight of gravity.

Up in the sky where the air was thin, Russel began to struggle to breathe. Never before had he thought his sleeveless style of clothing was so ill-conceived than now up amongst the chilly night and uncaring wind, his teeth clattered and body shook. And despite his hand numbing to the cold, Russel could feel his grasp slipping. He'd given too much of himself, gone and pushed himself too far. He had barely anything left in himself to keep going and it just wasn't enough.

Without a sound, Russel began to fall to the ground below. He just stared out up to the starry night sky above, watching as those far off stars got further away. But he never hit the ground, rather, he slammed into Beacon Tower, crashing through the roof and smacking against the turning clock gears, he bounced and fell again, bashing into Ozpin's desk before finally rolling off and hitting the floor.

Russel let out a pained groan before slowly attempting to pull himself back onto his feet. But he stumbled and fell face first back onto the marble floor. He lay there for a moment, unable to prevent himself from breaking out in a fit of laughter. Despite all the pain he felt in his body, he'd somehow survived, hitting practically everything to slow his descent. But that was alright with him, he was alive after all. He then began to run in his head the next several course of actions he should take, such as finding Cardin whom he knew could've survived that fall, he had that semblance of invulnerability which was nothing to snub. Then, they should link up with the rest of Beacon's defenders and give the Grimm a fight to remember.

But for the time being, he decided to lay for a moment longer and rest. Russel felt like closing his eyes and falling asleep. It'd been a long time since he'd felt this worked, back to days on the old farm when he and his Father would have to bring in the season's harvest all on their own. He laughed at the memory, a sad smile forming on his face. To think he'd come so far, from Oakwood to Vale, just for everything around him to get burned to the ground. It was disheartening.

There was a sudden clang up above which snapped Russel to attention. The Thrush looked up and frowned. There standing on one of the turning gears above was Mercury. Russel then watched as the assassin leapt down, landing some feet in front of him. With a sigh, he unclasped his remaining dagger from his belt and stabbed it into the floor, using it to leverage himself back to his feet. He breathed heavily, feeling as if he'd run a marathon. Fatigued by action, he could barely even raise his damn blade.

But it didn't matter, Mercury was swift, faster than Russel could ever dream to be. Disarming the Thrush was probably a child's game to the assassin, who simply kicked the dagger out of his hand before kicking Russel over Ozpin's desk. "Have a seat." Mercury said coolly as Russel landed in the vacant armchair. He then stuck out a hand and caught his dagger, before raising it at the Thrush. "Don't get up." He said as a fact, not needing to threaten Russel. It was clear the Beacon student was outclassed.
"Just get it over with." Russel said as some last act of defiance.

"You misunderstand." Mercury said, lowering the dagger. "I don't want to fight, I wanna talk."

Russel raised a cautious brow. "About what?"

The battle around Beacon raged on, with students taking up arms to fight the oncoming Grimm and the few rogue Atlesian machines that still ran amuck. Nebula took aim with her crossbow, launching an arrow through an Ursa's eye. The Grimm let out a dying roar as the arrowhead pierced through its brain before finally dying and dissipating into nothingness.

"Great shot Neb!" Gwen shouted as she tossed a pair of knives at a charging Creep. The dust tipped knives exploded on impact, completely destroying the Grimm's face and causing it to crash into the student's makeshift barricades.

"Not bad yourself there," Velvet commented, shooting a smile Gwen's way.

"We're doing it! We're actually doing it!" Nadir shouted with glee as he shot a pouncing Beowulf off of a Beacon student.

"I'd hold off on the celebrating." Coco muttered grimly as she pointed up to the sky above. Every single Beacon defender looked up in that moment as the long shadow of the Dragon Grimm fell over them against the night sky.

The Dragon Grimm let out a pained roar and up above all could see a pair of individuals in freefall. Cardin hit Main Avenue hard, leaving a massive crater in his wake. The Winchester boy pulled himself out of the rubble, shouldered his mace and stood tall before the watchful defenders.

"Is that who I think it is?" Nora asked aloud, eyeing the crater as she climbed atop the statues at the center of Main Avenue.

"Cardin!" Velvet exclaimed, recognizing the Winchester's broad frame in the smoking crater.

"Holy shit, was he riding that Grimm?" Marie-Anne wondered aloud.

"Damn." Bolin muttered as he watched as Cardin emerged from the crater, his tattered and broken armor falling off around him.

Seeing the student's dug in at the front of the school, Cardin made his way towards them in order to join in the defense of their school. He walked amongst Grimm, batting them from behind and crushing their heads beneath his boots. He reached out and grabbed the back of a Beowulf's head, yanking it backwards off its feet before running it forward straight into the stone pavement. A Creep launched at him from the left, leaping up and clamping its jaws around his forearm.

"Cardin!" Velvet called out to the CRDL leader as she made her way to the front to meet him. "Are you alright?"

"I'm fine, Velvet." Cardin managed a smile as gunfire from Willa's gun emplacement tore apart a Beowulf to his side. "Does anyone know who the officer in charge is?" He asked aloud as he reached the student's position. "How far along evacuation are we?" The students of the four kingdoms all looked to each other and shrugged, not knowing the answers to the questions he asked, causing Cardin to sigh.

"Uh, communications are still down? We've just been holding them off until we can get some
relief." A Mistral student spoke up, quickly earning Cardin's ire.

"Relief? Look around people, we've got a goddamn Dragon flying over our heads!" He jotted a thumb up into the air. "There isn't going to be any 'relief'. We need to get everyone out, now. Before that thing starts making attack runs!"

"You're too late, Cardin." A familiar feminine voice caught Cardin's ear. The CRDL leader, along with Velvet, Team NDGO and a myriad of other students turned to find Emerald limping towards their position. The Thief chuckled lightly as she approached, her deathly glare fixated on the CRDL leader. "It doesn't matter anymore, you're all already doomed."

"She's hurt! Someone help her!" Nora called out from where she was perched atop the fountain statue at the center of Maine Avenue. An Atlesian student wearing silver body armor with a red cross painted onto his chest stepped forward, producing a medical kit from his hip pocket. He then jogged forward to aid Emerald.

"No." Cardin held out a hand, halting the student. "This woman is our enemy." He then rose his mighty and slammed it onto the stone tiles of Main Avenue, intent on sending a magma shot at her. But nothing emerged from the mace, no searing hot explosive, nothing. Cardin cursed under his breath, realizing he'd used the last of his dust crystal.

"Oh? No more fire, eh?" Emerald taunted as she drew her weapons. "Don't worry, I've still got some."

"Emerald…?" Nora muttered in a confused tone. "What's going on?"

"Shut up." Emerald sneered before turning her gun on Nora and pulling the trigger. The 'Queen of the Castle' let out a sharp 'yelp' before ducking behind the head of one of the statues she'd perched herself onto. The dust round struck the head of the stone Huntsman wielding a sword, exploding on contact and raining the ashy remnants all over the area. "By far, you're the most aggravating people I've ever known."

"I could say the same to you." Cardin sneered as he quickly closed the distance between himself and Emerald. He reeled back his mace and swung forward, aiming to swipe the thief off her feet.

But Emerald was quick, she leapt up completely avoiding Cardin's attack and whipped her weapons forward. With her revolvers trained forward, she pulled back the triggers and blasted Cardin point blank in the face. The dust shells exploded and send the Winchester rocketing backwards.

The students overcame their shock and quickly made up their minds over the situation. Nadir and Bolin charged forward at Emerald, but she proved herself more capable for the duo. As Nadir charged with his bayonet, Emerald kicked it out of his hands. Bolin swiped at her with his staff, only for Emerald to duck and causing Bolin to strike Nadir instead. She then lifted a revolver and aimed low, blasting Bolin in the gut. The Bo staff wielder fell over in pain, his hands reaching for his stomach to halt the bleeding.

Before Emerald could finish either of the ABRN boys off, she found the rest of the students gunning for her. Not taking kindly to her teammates being smacked around, Arslan sprinted at Emerald, reeling back a fist and launching a fireball at Emerald. But the thief merely scoffed at the action and stepped aside, letting the fireball pass her by and strike an attacking Grimm, setting ablaze.

Arslan pulled out her dagger and uncoiled its rope. Within seconds the ABRN leader was spinning
the dart at the end of her rope in the air and flinging it at Emerald with expert precision. Emerald met the challenge by uncoiling her kusarigama and using it to block Arslan's attack by severing the dart from the rope with her blade. Next, Emerald whipped her blade and chain around Arslan's leg, once it went taught, with all her might she threw the woman into the air before finally slamming her back into the ground.

"Get her!" Octavia shouted as both she, Gwen and Brawnz launched forward to fight Emerald. But before either of them could get close, Emerald raised her revolvers and opened fire, warding off the trio. A slight smile crossed Emerald's face as she saw the trio back off. But it was quickly disappeared following a surprise punch to the face.

Emerald was sent flying backwards off her feet and skidding across Main Avenue. She wiped the blood off her mouth and found her bearings before shooting a glare at her attacker. There standing unamused was Velvet, a hard light construct of Ember Celica around her forearms. Seeing the constructs around Velvet's arms, however, caused Emerald to laugh. "Oh, you do illusions?" She remarked, causing Velvet to stiffen with uneasiness. "I can do that too."

Emerald then closed her eyes, channeling her semblance and creating a mirage Beowulf. The faux Grimm lurked forward and began approach Velvet. Seeing The Grimm appear out of thin air cause Velvet to jump back. Believing it to be real, the CFVY girl went out of her way to avoid its attacks through magnificent flips through the air. Emerald just watched with a smile as she forced the Huntress to wear herself down on an intangible object. But then then a sharp pain surged through her shoulder, causing Emerald's concentration to falter and the Grimm to dissipate.

The thief glanced at her shoulder and her eyes widened at the sight of an arrow sticking out of it. She looked up and found Nebula staring back at her. Emerald quickly raised one of her revolvers, but before she could get a shot off, Nebula shot an arrow through the barrel, causing the weapon to explode in her hands. Emerald let out a sharp yell, recoiling her hand and holding it to her chest. And then, the next thing she knew, Emerald was being driven into the ground.

Cardin let out an angered shout as he reached out for Emerald. Grabbing her by the wounded shoulder, Cardin then slammed her into the ground, rocking it slightly. With his enemy stunned, Cardin lifted foot and placed it against her chest, pinning her in place. He then rose his mace and held it up high, intent on slamming it down on Emerald.

Emerald closed her eyes in fear and winced in anticipation for the inevitable strike. But it never came. She opened her eyes and looked upward, finding Cardin staring down at her, the mace shaking in his hand. She stared for a moment, but then she cracked a smirk. "You don't have what it takes." She taunted. "For all your bluster, this alpha male bravado of yours, you can't even bring yourself to kill? Pathetic."

Cardin then lowered the mace, letting it fall to his side. He removed his foot from Emerald's chest and took a step back. Cardin was many things, such as a brother. It wasn't too long ago when that fact had brought him to the man responsible for his sister's death's door. And he'd held him at gun point, just as he held Emerald in place for a killing blow. And just like then, he couldn't follow through now. So he let out a shaky breath and backed away from the thief.

"I'm not a killer." He declared. All around him, students from Beacon watched as some first year student refused to take the life of a woman who'd played a role in the destruction of their very city. There were some murmurs of disagreement, some chants jeering for Cardin to put aside morality and just end her. But then there were people like Velvet and Coco, and Fox and Yatsuhashi and Nora, as well as Ren, people who knew Cardin. And all they could do was smile.

"Tough." Emerald sneered as she quickly raised her remaining revolver at Cardin, holding
gunpoint. "There's rule to this world, eat or be eaten. That's how you survive." She said as she picked herself off the ground. "And your self-righteous arrogance is why you and yours will always lose."

And then she moved to pull the trigger. But then, before Emerald could, a light construct dagger struck the ground beneath her. Energy surged through the cement and the soil beneath. Before Emerald could react, the ground beneath her exploded, blasting her into the air. Cardin just turned to his right, to the source of the thrown dagger. And there stood Velvet, wielding a light construct of Russel's dagger.

All eye then shot up to the air, watching as Emerald began to fall back to the ground. "…Cinder…" The thief managed to say. As Emerald collided with the ground, her body broke apart, seemingly incinerating on contact. Bright golden ashes bathed the pavement before scattering to the winds. The students stared for a moment in confusion, Emerald was gone.

"So that's what they do." Velvet remarked in amazement. She then turned to find Cardin approaching her, an unsure look on his face. "Uh, Cardin, she was going to shoot you." She said, raising her hands in defense.

"I know, I know." He nodded in understanding. "…You alright though?" He asked, having finally closing the distance between them.

"Yeah…” Velvet paused, realizing how close Cardin was. "How about you?" She lifted a hand, placing it over one of his.

"Good." He answered as he stared down at her, an affectionate smile crossing his lips.

"That's good." She smiled back.

"Hey, guys!" A voice shouted from above, catching their ears. All the students looked up once more and to their surprise, they found Dove flying towards them with Ruby in his arms. "What'd we miss?" The RWBY year old questioned as the CRDL boy landed on the ground.

"Dove?" Cardin raised a brow in surprise. "You can-?"

"He can fly like Superman!" Nora shouted, a wide grin on her face.

"Urgh…” The youngest member of CRDL groaned before setting Ruby onto the ground. "So, what'd we miss?"

As if to answer Dove's question, The Dragon Grimm let out a ferocious roar up above, signaling another wave of Grimm to charge at the students.

"Admittedly, not much." Cardin said as he raised his mace, bracing for the oncoming horde.

"Okay, I think I have Glynda's number." Jaune spoke aloud as he desperately searched his person for his scroll. "Oh, where is it?" He muttered before looking to Pyrrha, finding the Invincible Girl staring back to Beacon Tower. He watched her for a moment, noting the soft look of regret she held.

Jaune was a simple young man with humble beginnings. He had a family with seven sisters and broke into Beacon to strike out his own heroic journey like the rest of his ancestors. And at the end of the day, despite all the hard work and determination to become better than himself, Jaune was just a man. Everything he'd just seen down below Beacon Tower haunted him in a way, confused
him and left him with burning questions that needed answers. "Pyrrha? What was all of that?" He asked.

Pyrrha snapped to attention, hearing Jaune's voice. She turned to her partner, this young man whom she'd have liked to have been more than just friends with and stared into his bright blue eyes. She thought over the words in her head, tripping over them. What exactly was she to say? That she was supposed to sacrifice her humanity and become something other than herself? And for a cadre of teachers and figures who worked behind closed doors to 'protect' humanity. Pyrrha didn't know where to start.

"I..." She started to speak, only for a loud roaring noise to catch their attention. Both Jaune and Pyrrha spun around to back to Beacon Tower's lobby, there, they could see the woman Cinder blasting through the elevator shaft and ascending up the building.

"But... Ozpin..." Jaune muttered in concern, his eyes dashing back to the direction they'd come from.

There was an unasked question between them, whether they should abandon the task of they'd been assigned by The Headmaster or go back to his aid. But Pyrrha acknowledged how futile their efforts would be. "There's no time." She sighed, turning to face Jaune fully. "Go. Get to Vale and call for help."

"Huh?" The Knight raised a confused brow at Pyrrha's wording and the implications. "What are you gonna do?" He asked, but his partner didn't reply. Pyrrha simply looked back toward Beacon Tower. And He followed her gaze, the wheels in his turning, Jaune realized her intent. "No... no, Pyrrha, you can't. You saw how powerful she is! Pyrrha, I won't let you do-"

But suddenly, Jaune's pleas for reason were silenced, by a pair of lips mashing against his. The Knight froze in his feet, staring forward mind numb as Pyrrha held him close, deepening the kiss. For the first time in what seemed to be forever, Pyrrha was taking control of her life. And after a moment of hesitation, Jaune pulled her in close and reciprocated the kiss.

This was everything the Invincible Girl wanted. To be held by someone she trusted and knew wouldn't judge her. And to think it took such mental anguish on her part to finally work up the nerve to act on her own desires, something no amount. Now if only she had more time, Pyrrha found herself somberly thinking as she pulled away from Jaune.

"I'm so sorry." Pyrrha cried, a tear descending down the side of her cheek. She then pressed her palm against Jaune's chest plate and activated her semblance. Jaune let out a yelp in surprise as he found himself flying across the courtyard, slamming into a nearby locker, which then shut closed from the impact.

"Hey! Wait! Stop, stop!" Jaune pleaded, bashing his fist against the locker door. "Pyrrha, please don't do this!"

But Jaune's cries fell on deaf ears, Pyrrha walked over to the locker and began typing coordinates into it. She paused for a moment, looking to Jaune and staring past the locker and into his bright blue eyes one last time. Jaune cried out one last time, attempting to reason with the Invincible Girl. But with a teary eyes, Pyrrha hit the activation button before stepping back and watching the locker fly away. She hung her head low, unable to watch the locker vanishes into the distance. Pyrrha clenched her fists and a look of determination found its way across her face. Taking up arms, she turned on her heel and began for Beacon Tower.

Stepping through the entrance of Beacon Tower once more, Pyrrha ran to the nearest elevator. She
then raised a hand and activated her semblance of polarity, forcing the metal doors open. Inside, she found a large gaping hole in the roof of the elevator created by Cinder on her way up to the top, as well as the control panel totaled. Realizing she'd need every ounce of strength she could muster for her inevitable showdown with the mastermind behind Vale's fall, Pyrrha took to the nearby stairs. Kicking in the door access, breathing a heavy sigh, she began her long ascent upwards to the top.

"I read your file, front and back. Twice. All the little notes Ozpin left, all the details of your past. And I've committed them to memory." Mercury tapped the side of his head as he stared out to the Thrush seated in The Headmaster's chair. "You never knew your Mother, who died bringing you into this world. Your Father was abusive and beat you, attempted to make a soldier out of you by starting you on the path to becoming a Huntsman."

"There a point to this, Mercury?" Russel questioned between shorten breathes.

"I haven't killed you have I?" Mercury spoke calmly before violently stabbing the dagger he'd confiscated from Russel into The Headmaster's desk. "Then please, allow me to continue uninterrupted." Russel remained silent at the display, his eyes wandering to a nearby cabinet then back toe Mercury.

Recomposing himself, Mercury continued. "You see, Russel. You and I are kindred spirits."

"You better not be fucking proposing to me." Russel shook his head. "For the last time, I don't swing that way."

"What did I just say?!" Mercury shouted before reaching for Ozpin's desktop computer and chucking it at Russel. The Thrush attempted to raise his arms to defend himself, but he barely had the strength and wasn't quick enough. The computer slammed against him, loudly breaking into pieces, creating a dazzling display of glass shards and internal components to scatter around. Russel jerked back in the chaos, screeching the chair legs against the floor, and thus concealing his opening of one of the desks cabinets. "Now shut up and listen."

"My Father was an Assassin, one of the greatest killers the world of Remnant had ever known." Mercury said, pressing the palms of his hands against The Headmaster's desk. "But to me, he was a drunken bastard who beat me every stepped out of line. Sounds familiar, no?" He eyed Russel before pushing off the desk and turning to pace back and forth.

"My life was very much like yours, Russel." Mercury spat bitterly as he sauntered through the office space, regarding the moving clock gears above and the moonlight to his back cascading off of the green marble floor. "I never knew my Mother and my Father was a coldhearted bastard just like yours. "My Father was an Assassin turned drunk. He beat me, day in, day out, verbal and physical abuse, all in an effort to mold me into being something I never had a say in becoming." He said, sparing a knowing glance over his shoulder at Russel.

The Thrush remained silent, watching Mercury pace back and forth, paying as minimal attention to him as he could possibly spare. Russel was no idiot, he knew very well the only thing keeping him alive was his cooperation. Mercury didn't need weapons, he could easily punt Russel through the glass window behind him and he wouldn't be able to stop him. So he remained attentive, listening to what Mercury had to say, while at the same time he peered into the open drawer, searching for anything of use. But he paused for a moment, a slight smile crossing his features.

"What's so funny?" Mercury questioned, turning to face Russel fully, having caught sight of his growing smile.
"Nothing." Russel chuckled lightly.

"Was I not conveying enough emotion?" Mercury questioned, raising a brow as he motioned to himself and then to Russel.

"Just realized it's taken me a couple months to get around to vandalizing Ozpin's office." He laughed, lazily throwing a hand up and gesturing to the wide hole in the ceiling and the trashed desk. "I'm losing my touch."

That actually got a laugh out of Mercury. The young Assassin lowered his head, shaking it slightly. "That is pretty funny." He admitted before glancing back up to the seated Thrush. He followed Russel's gaze, studying his body language, trying to get a grasp of what the young man was thinking. But all he saw was a defeated boy, soaked in his own blood and quietly resigning himself to whatever came next. So, content that he wouldn't be interrupted again, Mercury continued. "I was Homeschooled, the only hazing I ever did were the jokes I'd pull on my old man."

"Heh." Russel couldn't help but lightly laugh. He glanced away from the open drawer, having found nothing of use and turned to look out to the side, off into some distant void and reminisced of days long past back in Oakwood and all the little jokes and he'd make to irk his Father.

"Call it the boldest claim to have ever been uttered, but I wasn't lying, we really are two of a kind. We're the bastards of the world." Mercury said with a knowing tone as he eyed Russel. "My Dad never liked it when I'd whistle, he thought it made me weak. So whenever I whistled he'd bash me over the head with a rusty pipe."

"I'd poke fun at the weapons he'd trained me to use," Mercury gestured to his footwear. "I'd call them 'ballet booties', and he'd just sock me." He said, gently raising a hand and pressing his palm against his jaw, as if the punch and following bruise were still fresh. "All the time, we'd get punished, berated and hurt. But we didn't care, right?" He said before turning away and continuing on with his pacing. "We didn't give a damn because we'd already won. We got a response out of them."

"That was our way of getting even. Our means of making sense of it all." Mercury muttered as he glared off into the empty room space. "How to make up for years of psychological torment, for being molded into their twisted vision? You take what you can get, any chance at showing them how fallible they are. Be out our petty little jokes or intentional quirks, anything was better than nothing."

"My Father molded me to become his 'heir', to be his successor, in the art of killing for money." Mercury spat in a disdainful tone. He then turned back over his shoulder to look onto Russel. "Just as your Father set you on the path to becoming a Huntsman. Even in death, their shadows loom over us." Russel looked up at Mercury, his eyes widening slightly. Now things were starting to make sense, he thought to himself as the young Assassin set off on another tangent.

"You don't understand how happy I am to have met you, Russel, to know there's someone else out there like me." Mercury looked upwards, through the hole in the ceiling Russel ad left behind, out to the open and free night sky. "It gets lonely, having all these words and thoughts in our heads. And there's no one else around who could possibly sympathize with you. And it hurts, it hurts to be like us, to be so alone and forever shackled to those bastards, to know that no matter what we'll always be our Father's sons. Both of us, their little 'Killers'."

Mercury paused for a moment, thinking over the words that had left his lips. He said them again in his head and quietly cursed. He then turned on his heel to face Russel once more, and as expected, found the Thrush glaring daggers at him. "Poor choice of words?" Mercury asked.
"Something like that." Russel glared. Already conscious of Ozpin's supposed 'files', coupled with Mercury's exuberance in having read them, there was no doubt in Russel's mind Mercury's wording was a coincidence. This whole time, Mercury had been trying to draw these similarities between the two, but that wasn't the case, that was how he was presenting it, not what he truly sought. And he'd finally overplayed his hand.

"You said 'their', their shadows'," Russel muttered. "How did your Father die?"

Mercury paused at the question, seemingly stunned by it in fact. He shook it off, however, and eyed Russel with curiosity. "One summer ago, it started like any other night, me and my old man having dinner by the fireplace." He said, a sense nostalgia to his words. "But he'd been drinking as always, just like every other night." He shook his head before beginning to turn away once faced with the memory. But realizing his mistake, he stood his ground and continued to speak against Russel's gaze.

"But it's not like any other night like before, is it?" Russel questioned, what little aura remained circulating through his body quickly diverted from healing his open wounds and funneling into his brain. The cranial muscle began to pound in his head like a heartbeat, bashing against his skull. "You're older, you're Father's had years to train you and now after all those years of taking his abuse, you finally boiled over. You killed your Father that night." He glared.

Mercury met Russel's glare with one of his own. The young Assassin, could've killed the Thrush then and there, kicked up a leg and blasted a projectile through his unprotected head, splattering the window behind him in red. He could have ran and kicked the desk forward with such force it would cut Russel in two. Mercury, with all of his training and speed, he could've ran up to Russel and grabbed him by the collar of his blood stained green sweater and flung him through the window to his death below. And yet, Mercury did neither of those things. Instead, he merely laughed.

Russel stared, an unamused look on his face as he continued to sit in the admittedly comfortable armchair.

"I'm sorry, it's just so goddamn funny!" Mercury sneered as he taunted Russel with his hyena laugh. "You of all people? You're honestly attempting to bring morality into this? Ozpin's files were thorough. He knew all about your black deeds." He continued to mock the Thrush. "You led three White Fang members to their deaths, ruined the lives of two of your so called friends, were party to the blackmail of a fellow student, and then you assaulted a night club with the intent of murdering the owner's son. And those aren't even the worst of your failings, Russel."

"Hegemony Marlowe. That was his name, right? I thought it was a typo or something, I couldn't believe there was someone actually named 'Hegemony'." Mercury scoffed, earning a deathly cold glare in response from Russel. "Ozpin knew the guy, you know? Called him a one of kind and was surprised to find out you'd axed him. Even more surprised to find out you'd killed your own Father too."

Russel stared forward, his mouth gaping in shock from the revelation, that Ozpin had meticulously looked into his life to such an extent was both unnerving and angering. But that wasn't what bothered him so much, the truths never bothered Russel. His brain still rattling around in its boney cage, the Thrush thought back to the days spent in Oakwood.

He thought of Ruddy and Burgundy, as well as the secrets they kept. He reminisced of Marie-Anne and their outright disdain for the other. He recalled the hundred pairs of glares that jammed into his back from his peers, who believed he'd robbed them of their validation in their own beliefs. He thought back to the night The Iron Nail had come to burn their farms and how Russel had put his
subordinates in a position to die.

Russel then thought to his time spent in Beacon, how he along with the rest of CRDL had discovered Jaune's falsified transcripts and the resulting fiasco that followed. He then thought of the time he'd gotten roped up in Cardin's own issues, and the part he played goading his best friend to kill a man. And then he thought of Marlowe.

That caused Russel's features to soften, thinking of the old man who'd been practically family. But perhaps that was all a lie, he'd never know the truth. He thought of the final time they'd been together, how Russel ultimately left the man's fate in his own hands, placing a dust bullet into the barrel of a loaded gun. He'd walked out fully well knowing Marlowe would turn it on him, he couldn't afford letting the Thrush to live, not after he'd figured out his involvement with The White Fang.

"It's funny, kind of," Mercury chuckled knowingly as he watched Russel contemplate his life up to this moment. "People always tend to die around us."

There was a measure of truth to Mercury's words, that neither of them were the saintly type. A moral checkmate of sorts. But there were lines Russel would never cross. And the Thrush looked up and met Mercury's mocking glare with a look conviction, causing the Assassin to pause.

"I won't give you the absolution you seek." Russel declared defiantly. "I didn't kill my Father, Mercury." Mercury's mouth hung open slightly, staring in disbelief. "I didn't kill my Father."

"You're lying," Mercury shook his head, calling Russel's bluff. "Ozpin's files were thorough, he even knew about The White Fang stuff."

"My Father died of a heart attack. Died right in my arms in an open field." The Thrush frowned, recalling the memory of looking down into The Elder Thrush's lifeless eyes. Russel couldn't forgive the man for all he'd done, he couldn't change the past. But in his time here in Beacon, he'd learned more about his Father than he'd done so in the time he'd spent with him alive.

Russel knew the man was once filled with compassion and love for his Mother, and it was with her death that he became the empty shell of his former self. It was through Ozpin that Russel had learned these things, seated in the very arm chair he sat in now, The Headmaster told him stories of his parents whom he'd known to an ambiguous degree. And seated opposite from the old gray haired man, where Mercury now stood, Russel would sit and listen, finally able to understand the man who'd raised him, well, at the very least, he'd come to know who we was before.

And it was then that Russel faced an inescapable truth, that he never hated his Father. After all, how could he? He never went hungry, he always had a roof over his head, and he wouldn't be the man he was today without him. If anything, he felt pity, but he felt remorse. That just the one thing Russel couldn't do, he couldn't feel sorry, he just couldn't. Here seated in The Headmaster's chair, with the city of Vale burning all around him, Russel couldn't look back, he had to look forward, with his brain beating against his skull, the last of his aura being drained by his semblance.

"I loved my Father." Russel said, knowing fully well there was no going back now. His brief reprieve from battle has ended, now began the fight of his life against a man who hadn't broken a sweat once in their long battle from fight dragged through on the back of a Dragon to here, Vale's shining beacon of hope.

"You don't even know what you're talking about." Mercury shook his head, not once attempting to hide the angered expression on his face.
"No, the question is, do you?" Russel shot back, his eyes quickly darting to his dagger stabbed into the table in front of him while he dug his thumb against his ring finger's nail. "You actually regret killing your dad, don't you?"

"I wasn't going to kill you, Russel, honest." Mercury muttered lowly in a cold gravely tone, dropping all civility. "But now I've reconsidered."

It was a 'blink and you'd miss it' moment, with Mercury lunging forward into a kick, he couldn't have expected how Russel would respond and found something jammed into his eye. Mercury winced, his vision blurred by whatever now resided against his eye and launched a projectile from his boot. The projectile whizzed past Russel, who reached out for his dagger, drawing it from the desk. The Thrush then placed his boot on the end of the metal desk and shoved it with all his might forward into the path of Mercury.

The Assassin connected with the desk, accidentally ramming his leg through it. He cursed under his breath and raised a hand to his eye in an attempt to remove whatever Russel had lodged in it. But before he could, Russel was already upon him. The Thrush struck forward, smacking the blade of his dagger against Mercury's forearm. But Mercury's raised arm was protected by his plentiful amounts of aura.

Mercury let out an annoyed sigh and blasted his leg up out of the desk, shooting him up into the air. He then spun in midair, swinging a leg down at Russel. The Thrush attempted to dodge, but he wasn't fast enough, he just didn't have it in him to avoid the attack and found himself being slammed into the floor. He tried to pick himself up off the ground, but he faltered and soon found one of Mercury's hands against his throat.

Russel then found himself lifted off the ground by Mercury and in an attempt to fend off the man, he stabbed forward with his dagger. But Mercury caught the blade with his free hand and wrestled it away from Russel. Without a word, Mercury flung Russel across the room, causing him to crash against one of the nearby stone pillars. With Russel momentarily indisposed, Mercury set on the task of removing whatever it was that resided in his eye and to his surprise, he found a finger nail.

He shot Russel a surprised looked and eyed his hands, finding that he'd removed the nail himself in a bid to counter him. There was a part of Mercury that couldn't help but be impressed by the lengths Russel seemed to be willing to go, but ultimately, it proved futile. He tossed the nail aside and weighted the dagger in his hand. And then, aiming for the nail-less finger, he chucked the dagger at Russel.

"Got to hand it to you, Russel. You keep me guessing." Mercury laughed as he watched Russel squirm in pain.

Russel let out a pained cry as he recoiled his hand, holding it closed to his chest. He glanced at the dagger impaled into the marble floor, staring at its metal blade smeared with his own blood and his left ring finger resting severed beside it. He then looked up and shot a glare at Mercury who smirked in response. Reaching out for his dagger, Russel removed it from the ground and pocketed his finger. The Thrush then charged forward, pushing past against his screaming dehydrated muscles and raised his dagger for another run at Mercury.

"Don't you learn anything?" Mercury questioned before leaping forward and kicking past Russel's defenses and sending the Thrush flying backwards, his dagger skidding beside him. "Best get to rid of any more ideas." He muttered before kicking forward, shooting a projectile at the dagger. The projectile connected with the dagger's dust container, igniting the few grains that remained, exploding the weapon.
Russel went limp in order the ensuing shrapnel and just watched with his face against the floor as smoke rose from the resulting crater of where once his dagger rested. He glanced forward and found Mercury stalking forward. "Look at you. Defeated." He sneered before reeling back his leg and kicking Russel in the stomach, sending him flying once more and crashing into a wall.

The Thrush hit the ground once more in a coughing fit. He'd given it his all and more, the last of his aura spent thinking on his failed final gambit. "What a shitty semblance." He murmured quietly. For all of his thinking, he always seemed to overlook one crucial detail with all his meticulous planning, whether it be Cardin's high standing moral character or not laying down enough dust to the left to blow Team PSYK out of the arena.

"I thought we were the same." Mercury said, staring down at Russel with contempt. "Guess I was wrong." Russel just laughed hearing those words, causing Mercury to glare. The Assassin then dashed forward, punting the Thrush into the air and then with his speed, dashed behind him in midair and kicked him towards the office door. Russel slammed against the door, breaking it off its hinges and collapsed onto the ground. "Brainwashed idiot." Mercury sneered.

Russel laid there for a moment, just wishing to rest to close his eyes. But how could he with Mercury running his mouth off. "You actually think men like our fathers should be loved." He sneered as he gazed upon Russel's battered and wounded form with judging eyes.

"But I can't go back. I can't change what happened. All I can do is move forward." He said as he pushed himself to his feet once again. He then shoved a hand into his pocket and then withdrew it and aimed his hand at Mercury like a gun. The Assassin raised brow at the action as he eyed the drawn hand. Russel had three fingers extended forward, and another two held in place by his thumb. "As if that'll change anything." Mercury scoffed. "You really are an idiot." Mercury muttered in disbelief as he stared at the obliterated prosthetic. "Well the, come on, you bastard," Russel taunted as he reeled his hand back to his chest. "Fight me." Mercury just scoffed in response. He then ran forward into a kick, aimed to launch a projectile at Russel. But before the projectile could even leave the chamber, Mercury's prosthetic leg exploded in a blinding light, sending the man flying backwards and smacking his back against the cold marble flooring. "H-How?" Mercury muttered in disbelief as he stared at the obliterated prosthetic. Russel merely raised his hands in response, giving his fingers a good flex. "Oh, you bastard." He shook his head as he turned his eyes to his discarded boot and the destroyed launcher attached to it. Amongst the wreck, Mercury could make the remains of a charred phalange. "You must feel like a real asshole right now." Russel muttered, taking a step forward. But he couldn't manage that, he lost his footing and fell forward, face first, hitting the floor again. Sighing, Russel threw his arms forward, and proceeded to crawl across the marble floor.

Mercury just stared, watching Russel slowly approach. He didn't know whether to laugh or to cry. It was pathetic, seeing this young man who not too long ago he'd labeled as an equal of sorts, reduced to crawling on his hands. But, at the same time, it was startling, to see Russel with such resolve, to continue on relentlessly. But

Russel heaved as he crawled, dragging himself across the room towards Mercury. And then it began to dawn on the Assassin just what Russel intended to do. The Thrush reached out and grabbed ahold of the remains of the ruined prosthetic and dragged it with him, glaring at Mercury the entire time.
"No." Mercury said, staring wide eyed as Russel got closer. "You don't even…you can't-" Before he could even finish his sentence, Russel was already upon him. Mercury lashed forward in an attempt to fend off Russel, but the Thrush fought through his defenses by bashing his hands with the blunt end of the prosthetic.

Climbing on top of Mercury and straddling his chest, Russel held him in place. He then reeled back and began to wail on the man with his own leg. What remained of the leg broke apart, chipping away piece by piece every time Russel bashed it against Mercury's aura protected face. Soon enough, Russel just started punching with his one good hand until it went numb, and still, he continued on until Mercury looked like a swollen tomato.

"C-C-Cinder!" Mercury called out in agony.

Russel reeled back his fist one last time and ran it forward. But as soon as it connected with Mercury's face, the Assassin's body exploded into bright golden ash. The Thrush just stared wide eyed as it began to swirl around him, dancing over his head. The ashes of Mercury then shot backwards for the door, exiting the room, leaving the Thrush alone.

On his knees, Russel breathed a sigh of relief. It was over, he'd done it, he'd won. By some miracle he'd won. But before he could become comfortable with this new arrangement, the sounds of high heels echoing through the outside hallway caught his ears. Russel slowly turned his head to the door and let out tired sigh.

There, standing in the doorway, with the bright golden ashes dancing around her, stood Cinder with an unamused look on her face. They met each other's gazes, acknowledging the other's presence. The ashes continued to dance around Cinder, before finally running through a tattoo in the back of her neck. She then let out an irritated sigh before addressing Russel fully.

"So, you're Russel?" She said, sounding somewhat disappointed. "You're a nobody."

Russel then glanced to his side, to his surprise, he found another one of Mercury's prosthetics left behind. He reached out and claimed it with his four digit hand, the one that could still feel, and grasped ahold of it. Slowly, he began to turn on the floor to face Cinder and reeled back his arm. Russel let out a sharp yell and prepared to throw the prosthetic at the woman in front of him.

But he never got the chance. Cinder casually lifted a finger, unleashing a powerful blast that struck Russel and sent him flying through the window. Russel let out no sound, he merely fell to his death.

"Like I said," Cinder eyed the hole in the glass. "A nobody."

Continuing her long ascent up to the top of Beacon Tower, Pyrrha remained steadfast and sure of her convictions. But even then, nothing could prepare her for the sudden appearance of the Dragon Grimm. Outside Beacon Tower, the Dragon crashed against the building, sharply cleaving away an entire portion of architecture, and raining debris on top of Pyrrha.

Pyrrha raised her shield, blocking the chunks of wall. The Dragon let out a screech before then flying upward. She lowered her shield and stared out through the enormous hole left in its wake. There, Pyrrha was greeted with the sight of the city from afar. And it pained her to see Vale in such disorder, to see its monumental buildings fallen, to see Amity Coliseum a wreck in the middle of the city.

There was a faint crashing noise, the sound of glass sharply breaking. Pyrrha glanced upward,
finding shards of glass raining down from above and then she saw Russel. Her eyes shot wide open at the sight of the Thrush plummeting downward. She quickly reached out of the gaping hole in the wall to catch the young man, but he was too far and he passed her by.

"Russel!" Pyrrha shouted in horror as the falling boy remained unresponsive. She then activated her semblance of polarity, funneling it through her hand and aimed it at Russel in hopes of magnetizing anything metal on his body. There was a certain measure of danger to her actions, though she'd save Russel from becoming a messy splat on the pavement, she also ran the risk of hurting him. So with the expertise gifted to her through years of training, she magnetized his belt buckle and slowly began to reel him back. Pyrrha grabbed ahold of Russel and placed him gently onto the stairwell. She looked over him, noting his cuts and bruises, his blood stained clothing and his lack of breathing. "Russel?"

The Thrush then began to cough, spewing spittle across his already stained green jacket. "...Where am I...?" He asked weakly as he attempted to sit up.

"Beacon Tower." Pyrrha answered simply as she tried her best to help Russel. "What happened?"

"...Got the crap kicked outta me..." He coughed. "Then some woman in heels showed up..."

"Cinder." Pyrrha said before glancing up towards the top of the stairwell.

Russel just stared at the JNPR girl for a moment, reading her features before recognizing that reluctant look of determination she wore. "No, Pyrrha, don't do it." He shook his head, a look of fear on his face.

"I have to." Pyrrha muttered before continuing up the stairs.

"No you don't, Pyrrha!" He shouted as he struggled to move his body. He threw a hand forward, grabbing a hold of Pyrrha's leg. "It's suicide."

But Pyrrha brushed his attempts to dissuade her aside, simply walking onward up the stairs. "When you can, get back to the others. They should be evacuating soon."

"Pyrrha!" Russel shouted after the Invincible Girl as he watched her continue on up the stairs.

At the top of the tower, in Ozpin's office, Cinder confidently strode towards the window across the room, a smirk on her face. As if sensing her presence, the Dragon climbs up to the top, peers at her through the window, and screeches.

"Shhhh... This is your home now." Cinder spoke in a gentle tone.

The Dragon stared at the woman and uttered a short, quiet screech. Cinder backed away from the window, holding a sinister smile on her face. But then the sound of footsteps caught her ear. Cinder turned to face the office doorway, only to fin Pyrrha's spear flying towards her. Seeing the attack, Cinder casually leaned to her right to dodge with an amused smirk on her face.

Stepping into the office, Pyrrha threw her shield before backing it up herself by racing forward to kick at Cinder. The mastermind of Vale's fall raised her arms up, blocking Pyrrha's shield. She then quickly spun it around, using it to block Pyrrha's incoming kick. With little effort shown, she then pushed forward, knocking Pyrrha backwards. Another smile found its way onto Cinder's face as she tossed the shield aside before producing fire from her palms and jetting into the air.

Pyrrha then called to her spear and shield through her semblance of polarity. The weapons flew to the four time Mistral champ who then stared down the flying woman, ready to fight. Seeing this
display, fiery orange glow began to emit around Cinder's eyes. She swiped her hand through the air, shooting out an arc of fire at Pyrrha. The Invincible dived forward into a roll, avoiding the streams of blaze and continued on undeterred.

A series of fireballs formed in a circle behind Cinder, who continued her onslaught of flame by sending another streak hurtling toward Pyrrha. The Invincible Girl dashed to her side, barely avoiding the attack. Cinder didn't let up even for a second, blasting another stream of fire at Pyrrha. However, anticipating the attack, Pyrrha raised her shield, blocking it. She then, powering through the fire leaping toward Cinder.

A sudden look of surprise flashed across Cinder's face as Pyrrha met her in the air. The Invincible Girl she spun around and slashes Cinder across the arm with her spear, cutting deep into the skin. But the brief victory was cut short as Cinder's fresh wound rapidly healed. Cinder caught ahold of the blade and pulled, turning Pyrrha towards her. She then reeled back her palm before slamming it against Pyrrha's stomach, with fire bursting forth and blasting Pyrrha away.

Pyrrha slammed into a wall, falling to her hands and knees. She simply shrugged off the attack, standing back up and facing Cinder, determination still in her eyes. Cinder propelled herself forward, fire jetting from her hands, and attempts to slam into Pyrrha. But she leaped into the air above Cinder, dodging the attack and then followed through by wrapping her arm around Cinder's. As Cinder slowed to a stop, Pyrrha positioned herself to place her feet onto the wall behind them and pushed off, flipping herself over Cinder. Using this momentum, Pyrrha then sent Cinder flying across the room, smacking into a pillar.

Pushing herself off the floor, Cinder found Pyrrha charging forward, ready to slam her shield into her. Unprepared by the attack, Cinder stumbled backwards. Pyrrha didn't let up, proceeding to hit Cinder's right hand with the blunt end of her spear, then striking Cinder's left hand with the spear's blade. She then spun around, delivering a series of swift slashes across Cinder's chest and legs.

She then spun around to attack again, only for Cinder backflip out of the way and kicking Pyrrha with flames trailing behind her foot. The kick had sent Pyrrha flying through the air, but she remained coherent and quickly reoriented herself. Flipping her spear in her grip, holdding it back, she flung it toward Cinder while firing the gun mechanism. The series of fireballs appeared behind Cinder again, surging power through her body. And with a simple backhand, Cinder slapped the spear away. Seeing this, Pyrrha flung her shield at Cinder once more. But Cinder simply smacked it aside as she'd done to the spear earlier. She idly glanced to side, watching the golden shield skitter across the ruined floor, an amused smile slightly forming. She then returned her attention to Pyrrha, finding The Invincible Girl looking upon her in irritation.

Pyrrha launched herself toward Cinder, throwing her arms around the woman and tackling her to the ground. Charging her attack with aura, upon colliding with the floor, the room shook violently. Before the dust could even settle, Pyrrha held Cinder in a choke hold, desperatley attempting to stab the woman with her spear. But Cinder proved to be adept enough ward the fatal blow off as long as need be. The Dragon Grimm outside let out a furious roar and began to fly away. At the same time Cinder's eyes began to burn orange. She then raised a hand forward against the spear. Once grasping it fully, she tightened her grip and superheated the weapon, burning Pyrrha's hand.

Upon hearing Pyrrha's resulting pained screech, Cinder turned her gaze ahead and smirked while Pyrrha gained a look of fear. Out there in the sky, The Dragon was coming back, poised to strike the building with its mighty wingspan. While Pyrrha focused on the Dragon flying toward the tower, Cinder finally melted the spear's blade, letting the liquid metal ooze to the ground. Just before the Dragon slammed into the roof of Ozpin's office, Cinder elbowed Pyrrha in the gut, causing her to loosen her hold on the woman and allowing Cinder to escape. The room rocked and...
the windows shattered. Pyrrha was sent flying across the room by a mighty gale as the Dragon ran through the building. Giant clock cogs and debris crashed down around the office, and the structure containing the CCT’s transmitter fell to the ground outside.

Pyrrha crawled across the dust covered marble floor, pulling herself toward her shield, while Cinder watched on from where she levitated off the floor. While looking for a way to distract Cinder, Pyrrha noticed Ozpin's collapsed metal desk. Using her polarity, Pyrrha threw the chunks of desk at Cinder, striking the woman and knocking her to the floor. She then quickly grabbed her shield and rolled across the floor. Once poised on her knees she held the shield up, ready to counter anything Cinder threw at her. With a torrent of flame, Cinder erupted the metal desk off of herself, sending it flying out of the now open room. Without a word, she then resumed her place levitating off the ground.

Cinder let loose another stream of flame, causing Pyrrha to roll out of the way. She sent out another stream, forcing Pyrrha to attempt to block. However, the force of the attack sent Pyrrha tumbling backward. The series of fireballs reappeared behind Cinder, surging power throughout her body. She then created a wall of flame behind Pyrrha, boxing her in. With nowhere to run, Pyrrha was forced to attack. She lunged forward, throwing her shield at Cinder, who simply backhanded it away.

She then looks up in surprise to see a multitude of giant cogs floating in the air around her. Using her polarity, Pyrrha directs her shield to knock into Cinder's feet, causing her to spin in midair. With the woman disoriented, Pyrrha called upon a metal cog laying off to the side and slammed it down on Cinder, pinning her to the floor. She calls her shield back to her arm, then brought all remaining cogs and miscellaneous metal objects ranging from copper wires ripped out of the walls to that of fallen steel bars together. With a sharp yell, Pyrrha buried Cinder under the accumulated metal.

Pyrrha let out an exhausted breath as the flames around her died. But just as it seemed she'd bested the woman, Cinder blasted her way out of the metal grave with a powerful burst of fire, shooting shrapnel in all directions. One of the cogs flew toward Pyrrha, who raises her shield to block in vain. The force of the impact slammed her into the remains of a fractured wall, knocking the air out of her.

Cinder emerged from the grave and formed an obsidian bow in her hand. As she raises it up and draws back an obsidian arrow. Pyrrha picked herself up and charged forward. She spun around, gaining as much momentum as she needed and threw her shield at the woman. Cinder, however, released the arrow, which cut through the shield and continued on its path directly into Pyrrha’s ankle. She let out a sharp yell before collapsing in pain. Pyrrha attempted to pull herself to her feet, but the pain was too much. She turned over onto her hands and knees as Cinder moved to stand in front of her.

"It's unfortunate you were promised a power that was never truly yours," Cinder said, kneeling down. She raised a hand against Pyrrha's chin, gently raising it and staring into her eyes. There, she found a tinge of orange surging through her emerald irises. "Take comfort." She smiled. "I will use it in ways you could never have imagined."

Pyrrha pulled away, attempting to raise her hand against Cinder, but the woman dashed away. And Pyrrha just sighed, releasing a shaky breathe and looking at the fracture floor. This was it, she thought to herself, this was how it ended. "Do you believe in destiny?" She asked, looking up to meet Cinder's gaze.

Cinder narrowed her eyes. "Yes." She said, before taking a step back and forming her obsidian bow...
and arrow once more, lowering it at her weakened opponent.

Nearby, Ruby Rose finally reaches the top of the tower, having been propelled to the top by her Partner Weiss. Cinder, however, paid her no mind, it was already too late. Pyrrha just sat there, her eyes closed, accepting the fate. Cinder released the arrow, planting it firmly the center of Pyrrha’s chest. Ruby watched in horror and Pyrrha gasps in pain.

"That's in your aorta artery," Cinder whispered quietly as she approached her fallen foe. "I wouldn't remove that if I were you." She muttered before placing a hand on Pyrrha's head. Pyrrha instantly ceased all movement, her body seizing up and glowing orange. She then broke apart like ashes, scattering to the winds before funneling into the tattoo in the back of Cinder's neck.

All that remained of Pyrrha was her headdress, which Cinder took into hand before tossing it to the floor. With that business concluded, she turned to give Ruby her undivided attention. Instead of an enraged warrior, she found a dismayed fifteen year old girl. Ruby's silver eyes became filled with tears. She clenched her fists, curled her arms to her body, and then suddenly released them to her sides, beginning to levitate slightly off the ground.

Cinder just stared wide eyed at the scene, as did the Dragon as it perched onto the building once more. Brilliant white light shot out from her eyes as Ruby cried out the name of her dear friend. The white light then consumed her, before spreading to the Dragon and Cinder.

A white light streaked the sky over Beacon. All the students outside turned to look up to its source above Beacon Tower. A shockwave then sprang forth, knocking the remaining defenders off their feet and sending the Grimm running backwards.

Cardin picked himself off the ground and reached out to pull Velvet to her feet. "What was that?" Velvet asked, looking to Cardin in concern. They'd already seen enough surprises for one night, the last thing any of them wanted was another crazy Grimm type appearing and parting the heavens.

"look!" Dove shouted pointing upward. All eyes looked up to Beacon Tower, where the Dragon stood screaming. It then began to freeze in place, its cries dying.

"What in the world just happened?" Marie-Anne questioned.

Cardin stared up at the frozen Grimm and then turned to his fellow Huntsmen. "Let's go find out." He said, before running off to the tower.

Velvet exchanged a glance with Coco, who shrugged. "Go on ahead, we can hold down the fort 'til you get back." She said, gesturing to her mighty machine gun. Velvet just nodded, a thankful smile on her face, before taking off after Cardin.

Soon enough, more students came running, following Cardin's example. Danny and Marie-Anne, followed closely by Dove, as well as Bolin, Nebula, Nolan and Flynt sprinted off after the pair in order to provide back up. The bunch of huntsmen ran into the tower's main lobby and were greeted with the sight of the elevator's out of order. They then set their sights on the stairwell and quickly began to ascend.

Fifty flights of stairs would have been child's play to any Huntsman in training. After all, they had their auras. But the group of Huntsmen had been run through the gauntlet, forced to face all kinds of odds and dangers throughout the night. Every step taken felt like a hundred, every flight a thousand. But they powered on through.

But in their ascent up to the top of Beacon Tower, to their surprise, they found one of their own
struggling to climb the stairs. "Russel!" Cardin shouted, recognizing his partner. He then quickly ran to the Thrush's side. "What happened? Where's Mercury?"

"Dead, I hope." Russel spat, his face currently laying in a puddle of his own drool. "What took you so long anyway?"

"Got held up." Cardin said, trying to make light of the situation. He looked over his friend and frowned, noting his fresh injuries. "Any idea what's been going on up top? We saw a flash of light."

"Pyrrha." Russel muttered as Dove came to his aid, helping the Thrush to his feet. "Went off on her own to fight the woman behind all this."

"We'd better get up there, quick." Nebula said, raising her crossbow.

"Agreed." Danny nodded, raising a handgun.

"Let's move!" Cardin shouted before leading the group of Huntsmen up the steps.

"You want me to take you to a ship?" Dove questioned, looking to Russel in concern.

"No." Russel muttered bitterly. "I want to see this through."

"Alright," Dove shrugged before throwing an arm under Russel's legs, taking him by surprise before finding himself being carried bridal style. "But I'm gonna have to fly you up there."

"Eh," He shrugged indifferently before Dove took off, flying after the rest of the group. "Beats walkin'."

Reaching the top of the tower, they didn't know what to expect, what they would find. They stepped into the hall hearing the sounds of frantic heaving. Cautiously, they approached Ozpin's wrecked office and stepped inside. There, they found Ruby unconscious on the floor, and Cinder bloodied and burned, standing over the RWBY leader, about to deliver a killing blow with her obsidian blade.

They didn't need an order to heed the call to action, Nebula and Danny instantly stepped forward, drawing their weapons. Danny pulled the triggers of his pistols, blasting the obsidian blade out of Cinder's hand while Nebula put an arrow through her other hand, preventing her for reaching for her secondary blade. Cinder scowled as she faced the huntsmen, who stood there with equal looks of determination.

"Well then," Cardin stepped forward, shouldering his mace. "Make a move, I dare you."

"Arrogant, you're all so damn arrogant." Cinder spat weakly.

"Least we don't look like road kill." Nolan sneered, gesturing to Cinder's facial scar with his cattle prod.

"Until next time." Cinder smiled. A vibrant orange flash shot forth, blinding the huntsmen. Once they regained their vision, they found the woman gone.

They exchanged unsure looks before Cardin stepped forward and began to approach Ruby. He knelt down and scooped the RWBY leader off the ground as well as recovering Crescent Rose from floor. "Now," The CRDL leader said as he turned back around to face his comrades. "Any one see Pyrrha?"
"Dove." Russel pointed to the center of the room, catching sight of a familiar golden object. Spotting the object as well, Dove flew over before setting Russel down on the ground. The Thrush then leaned over, plucking the headdress off the marble floor and holding it up to the rest of the group.

"...Pyrrha." Velvet placed a hand over her mouth.

"Oh no." Nebula said, as she looked on in defeat.

"What do we do now?" Nolan asked, looking up at the massive Dragon Grimm frozen in place. But not all of the Dragon remained still, it's bright red eyes glowed with activity, staring at the group of Huntsmen.

"Unless anyone brought a bomb? We're done here." Cardin said before turning back the direction they'd arrived from. They all looked to each other, searching for some reason to stay, but they could not, so then they followed Cardin's example and began to depart.

The descent down the stairwell was silent, with all members of the group quietly reflecting on the loss of life and how somber their situation appeared to be. Stepping out of Beacon Tower, the group caught the final Airbus, with the last of the defenders piling in.

"About time you guys showed back up." Octavia greeted them as they entered the ship. She then turned to the front of the cabin and hollered to the pilot. "They're here! Punch it!"

"Consider it punched!" Neptune shouted from the front. The Airbus then took off into the air, soaring through the Vale sky.

Russel propped himself up against one of the viewports, staring out to Beacon Academy as they left it behind, making out the distinct hordes of Grimm running across its grounds. And here he was, with less than what he initially had when he arrived to Beacon. "Where to now?" He asked aloud, unable to take his eyes away from the academy.

"The only place in the city where it's safe, I suppose." Nebula muttered as she took a seat beside the Thrush. She stared at Russel for a moment before her eyes drifted to the headdress in his hands. "Do you really think she's gone?"

He paused for a moment, thinking back to all he knew about Cinder and Mercury. "I don't know." He quietly said as the Airbus converged on its destination.

The Airbus landed on a makeshift landing strip with its occupants pouring out. It was then that Russel and the others were greeted by the sorry sight of the so called 'safe zone'. As far as the eye could see, people from all four kingdoms sat around in defeat in make shift refuge from old cardboard boxes. They could even hear the distinct sounds of sobbing and far off pained wails from a wounded civilian undergoing operation.

A stretcher manned by two medical personnel and overseen by Qrow approached the airbus. The old Huntsman walked up to Cardin and relieved him of the burden of carrying his niece. After placing Ruby onto the stretcher, the orderlies and Qrow walked off, not a single word exchanged between them.

"Can't help but notice the lack of medical attention for the rest of us." Russel muttered as Dove aided him out of the ship.

The CRDL boys walked off, seeking refuge by the side of a nearby building. Setting themselves down, they soon were joined by others such as Team ABRN and NDGO, even Team CFVY. They
It had been three days since Sky had been assigned his mission. And for three days he'd traveled along the sea coast towards his destination. Though his mind lingered elsewhere, back to his friends, back to the school and to the city he'd left behind. He'd packed in a hurry, taken all that he could such as water and rations from the dining hall, as well as a pocket radio. But everything he'd heard since that night has been static.

Sky would be lying if he said he didn't fear for those whom he'd left behind. His life was in Vale, yet, instead of standing with those whom he'd been privileged enough to know and call friend and ally, he'd gone on this merry expedition of his. He could've turned back at any moment, and yet he didn't, because he knew deep in his heart that no matter how much he wanted to go back and help the people of Vale, what he was doing was more important.

So Sky carried on over the hill and reached his destination. He'd finally made it. The town of Venezier was finally within view. The beginning of his journey had reached its end, now came the hard part of actually accomplishing his task.

Leaping down the hill, Sky began to enter the town. But then, suddenly, he felt a sharp force smacking the back of his head, forcing him to the ground. Sky yelped as he was turned over onto his back and found a quartet of men standing over him. Ranging from a burly fellow to an astute thin man and even an action figure personified, it was the fourth member of their group which earned Sky's immediate attention. Standing over Sky wielding a rifle was a man wearing a helmet with horns grafted to the plating and possessed a rotting odor that clung to his duster.

"Mr. Lark, I presume?" The thin man inquired. Sky gave no definitive answer, he was still too caught up in the situation and didn't know what to say. "I'll take that as a yes." The man said before stepping away. "My name is Dr. Kruger. Welcome to Venezier."

In the opening fight scene with Russel, Cardin and Mercury and Emerald, the only reason CR actually does well is because they approached the battle as a team. That was something important with the duo, that even in a fight they've got one eye looking out for the other. That aside, it was full on madness writing the fight scenes for this chapter, but I think I pulled it off.

During the last arc, Mercury read up on Russel's past and had since attempted to get close to him. The implications drawn is that Mercury is regretful for killing his Father, something established in canon but I took a redressed in Interlude: Black. And, since learning of Russel's similar past, he's gone to him searching for someone to tell him that what he did was okay, to validate his claims of his Father and that he was in the right for killing him. But Russel's gone through a lot of shit in the past forty five chapters, so that doesn't go as Mercury planned.

I've also implied Russel's semblance through his headaches throughout the story until now. It
really does have to do with his brain and thinking, as remarked in the chapter above.

When approaching the notion of revealing what Russel's daggers did, I thought it'd be at least somewhat comical if it was someone else who'd figured it out. Originally, it was going to be Cardin who'd recovered one of the daggers off of the Dragon. But I thought it better if it was Velvet due to her semblance and weapon.

And Pyrrha has seemingly died, just like in canon. Yes, send me your hate filled messages, how dare I kill Pyrrha, again. But, if you'll recall, she's alive in an interlude set in the future. So, now we're faced with the question of, how is that possible? Well, stick around for a little bit would you? There's a lot more story left.

And finally, Sky. If you would all kindly look back to the Nebula arc, you would find we've met these four gentlemen before.

Next update will be another interlude and then we'll start up the next Arc. 'Til then, thank you all so much for reading! It's been one hell of a slog through but now we're finally going places!

Until next time! Later days!
Hey there everybody! Welcome back for another Interlude! Today we've got a special interlude, a continuation actually. It's the sequel to the last interlude 'The Night', which had served as the prologue to 'The Fall of Vale'. This serves as the epilogue.

Before we get started, however, I'd like to address the fates of Emerald and Mercury. Throughout the previous arc, we've seen numerous characters get killed off, some in the case of Kevin murdered 'off screen'. But their deaths were definitive, there was a body. And it is no accident the way their apparent demises are described in a similar manner as Pyrrha's. A good rule of thumb when reading this story, unless there's a body, they probably are too dead.

Well, anyways, I think I've taken enough of your time. On with the interlude!

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The Dawn

It was late into the night when The Woman began to stir to the sounds of far off voices. Raising a hand with her semi-conscious faculties, she reached over to her side in order to wake and alert her husband, but instead, she found a still warm vacant space left in his wake. With tired eyes and a curious mind, The Woman sat up in her bed, pushing aside her long brown bangs from her face and looking to the doorway.

Throwing the covers off, she shifted her body and placed her feet to the carpet floor before standing. Tip toeing out of the room, she was careful not to disturb the children even with the feint voices flowing through the hall. She stops momentarily, popping her head through the open doorway of the children's room, finding them all sprawled out, fast asleep after a long day spent running wild throughout the home.

A warm smile graced her features as she stared in wonder after her children. To think they were getting bigger every day, it wouldn't be long until her little bundles of joy would be men and women with families of their own, living their lives far and free as she once did. But she pushed those thoughts aside, those days wouldn't be for quite some time. So she stepped back, closing the door all together and continued onward through the hall after the feint noise.

She walked past a wall of pictures she'd taken, collected and hung over the years. She paused in her steps, catching sight of the images. Even in the dark of night, she could make out the features and distinct appearances of her long time friends, a woman and her giant machine gun, a blind fox and a man who could move mountains. She then looked off along the wall, catching sight of images of herself and her husband in their earlier days, together, with the rest of their friends, posing in front of the capitol building of New Vale. But then the voices grew distinct, the sound of a Pumpkin Pete's cereal commercial, earning The Woman's attention once more.

Stepping into the living room, The Woman couldn't help but frown, her long ears falling slightly at the sight. Seated in the living room sofa was her husband, looking weary as ever as he tried to loose himself to twenty-four hour news cycle.

It didn't take The Man long to realize he had company. He glanced over to his wife, meeting her stare. A silent conversation was held, an acknowledgment of The Man's inability rest, too restless and unsure, plagued by days long past and moments to dreadful to speak of.
So The Woman stepped forward, closing the distance between them and joined her husband on the couch. She placed an arm around his waist and hugged him tight, resting her head against his broad shoulder. She knew The Man very well after their many years of union, she loved him for all he was, imperfections and all. And she would not abandon him ever in his time of need. The Man thanked his wife, leaning over and kissing her forehead before throwing an arm over her to keep her warm in the cold inert home of theirs.

And then they sat there for hours, together in each other's company. Out over the horizon, the sun began to emerge, cascading its mighty rays throughout the land and greeted the couple. The Woman was content, The Man's nightmares were gone, and the night has ended with the coming of the dawn.

The dawn of a brand new day…

____________________________________

Cardin/Velvet.

I don't really have much else to say about this interlude, other than it being a the second part of the interlude prior to this one.

The next story arc, as well as every other story arc afterward has me nervously excited. Because we're past volume 3 now and anything can happen now. And it feels so liberating. If you thought last arc was crazy? Wait until you see what I have planned down the line.

Next Arc: Brand New Day!
Hello there everyone! We're back!

Sorry about the long delay, everything that could have gone wrong, went wrong! Oh joy! But thankfully I'm now in a place where I can write again! So yay!

So, thank you all for your patience! Again, I'm so sorry about the delay, but life gets in the way. Without further do...

All was unmoving inside the darkened hardware store. What was just another ruined building amongst thousands, touched by the ravenous Grimm and their surprise invasion upon the good kingdom of Vale, the store named 'Hooligan's' possessed one unique trait withheld from the rest. Amongst the emptied racks and toppled shelves, beyond the front of windows sprayed across soaked wooden flooring, where the looters of yesterday had all gone, picked apart the store's inners and fled into the dire night. The corroding building left to burden the weight of Atlesian warship debris. Drops of outside rain seeping through the noticeable hole in the ceiling were accompanied by haunting echo of a wounded man's snore.

Deep within the store, the familiar Thrush had taken up residence, laying his bandaged body on a makeshift cot comprised of boxes and old wash cloth rags he'd scrounged up. Sleep did not come easy to Russel, it hardly came to anyone. By far, the world was a master with its sick sense of humor, it was autumn and yet rain poured on through the night and into the early day, bashing against the roof that covered the Thrush's head. But, he'd managed, either due to exhaustion or through persistence, he'd finally found it in himself to slide into the comforting cold slumber for a much needed rest.

However, the moment he was gone, while lost in a soup of dreams, an invading presence made itself known. The sounds of nearby jet engines wrestled for dominance with the beating rain, eventually overpowering it and causing Russel to open his eyes with anger. A tired sigh bounced off the walls as he glared up at the ceiling. It would have been nice to escape to the land of dreams, to find peace and forget, forget that it had only been three days since the fall of Vale.

Russel's thoughts quietly raced as he properly regained consciousness, shrugging off the remnants of his desire to slumber. He sat up in his cot, placing his booted feet to the floor and hanging his head low, starring at his shoddily bandaged hands. Sleep was not the only thing that he missed, having a full set of digits on his left hand would have been nice. But he'd thrown any chance of that away in order to secure his victory against Mercury, if he could even call that a victory.

That earned bitter scowl from the Thrush. Vale was sacked, everyone he knew was either dead or displaced, and here he was, wallowing in his own self-loathing. The world as Russel knew it was gone, all that remained was the remnants of the Kingdom's people and their fractured hopes as well as their loss of innocence. For so long the people of Vale been sheltered, behind both their borders and courageous Huntsmen, never before had the threat of Grimm felt so real and traumatic. No doubt the governing bodies of Atlas, Mistral and Vacuo were scrambling to assess their own
security, committing all their resources to ensuring the very same never happens to their own kingdoms.

Waking to the sound of the jet engine was a reminder of that fact. It had been days since the world had gone dark and the other kingdoms had witnessed Vale succumb. There should have been warships arriving the next morning, relief boats to rescue their trapped touring citizens and airships dropping crates of supplies to feed the starving people below. But no such aid arrived.

The people of Vale and the visiting folk from the other three kingdoms had been trapped within the hollow safe zone. Any far reaching airships had gone down during the initial attack along with the crews that manned them. All contact with the outside world was relayed through the use of barrages ferrying people from the shore to nearby island of Peach. As Russel noted some few days ago, the majority of surviving veteran Huntsmen hitched a ride of the first ride out, taking with them a number of injured, including half of Team RWBY. Russel hadn't seen them since.

Hearing that jet flying overhead should've made Russel leap out of his cot with that stupid grin of his. Instead, he was there frowning in his days old blood soaked clothing. Call him a cynical bastard, but it was difficult to get one's hopes up at the sound of only 'one' ship. If anyone was truly there to aid the people of Vale, there'd be a whole fleet booming overhead.

Russel's eyes wandered to a couple of haphazardly staked boxes in the corner. There he could make out the glint of the golden headdress hidden behind, a reminder of all the souls that couldn't be there today with him and the others wallowing in the rubble of their home. He'd be a damn liar if said he never gave way to half-formed assumptions and shoddy presumptions. But deep down in Russel's heart, he knew for a fact every poor soul who perished that day would be just as disappointed as he was now.

Regardless of his feelings, Russel knew this was worth getting up for. The first arrival since the fall, many were bound to greet it and there would be questions for everyone.

So then he stood, wincing slightly, feeling sore all over. Anyone with medical training were in short supply these days, just as were their tools. The lines outside the makeshift clinic at the heart of the safe zone were the stuff of nightmares, reaching from one corner of the zone to the next in some odd spiral.

He reached out to the stack of boxes, pulling a small hammer off the top with his left hand, quietly pocketing it. He then made his way out of his dwelling, closing the door behind him and locking it with the manager's key he'd 'acquired' from some abattoir-bloke the night prior. He shot a glance over to the counter where once the register rested and now the bloodied hood the bloke had worn now resting idle. So he sauntered his way out the building, passing over the floor of glass and exiting the store, unsure of what the day planned to throw at him.

And so Russel set out, into the rain, heading northward, up to their makeshift airstrip. It was in those brief moments where he'd cursed himself, as the rain crashed against his body, he should have brought with him a cardboard box, something to keep the rain off of him. One wary glance to his worn and bloodied clothing and the Thrush realized the pounding droplets were the best damn shower he'd had in months. The thought of his earned a brief if somewhat resentful smile. You never really did know how well you had it until everything you'd come to know was forcibly ripped from your hands. Attending Beacon was a real step up for Russel, actual beds, three square meals a day, and working plumbing. It sure was nice while it lasted.

Seeking to get out of the rain as quick as possible, Russel opted to take a shortcut, taking a left turn past the Chantry down the newly christened 'Melting Pot'. It was a term of resentment, tossed around as those visiting Vale for the festival were essentially marooned on the eastern side of the
continent. Vacuans were living in shanties, fallen walls propped up on sticks and resigned to the squatting in collapsed structures. Mistralians on the other hand took up closer to the side closest to the ocean, probably because it reminded them of home. Either way, it didn't stop them from taking up refuge in what was once a supermarket. And then there were the Atlesians, the outcasts of the lot, keeping themselves positioned by the farthest end of the Melting Pot, which just so happened to be conspicuously closest to the airstrip.

And then there the people of Vale, Russel's people. Those who lived in the city were evicted from their homes and now they all resided in between the outermost fringes of their kingdom by the shore and nearby forests, but even then, there still wasn't enough room, so now a large portion the populace were relocated here to the Melting Pot. It wasn't a totally new experience for Russel, growing up the way he did, living beside a forest was an all too familiar status quo. But where he was content to live in leaky rundown and sacked buildings, he could tell it was a nightmare for the citizens of Vale and living hell for their 'guests'.

Though Russel had to credit where credit was due, he was honestly surprised that another great war hadn't kicked off the moment warships started shooting up buildings. But since stepping within the unmarked borders of the Melting Pot, the Thrush could feel the tension in the air, heck, it would have made a great roof to keep out the rain. Up ahead, Russel could see a number of Valean citizens, backs to a wall glaring across the road to an equal number of Vacuans.

Standing orders after the Great War was that the four kingdoms were to get along, play nice. But just because you stopped killing each other for king and country doesn't mean you stopped hating the other guys. The truth was, The Melting Pot was a powder keg just ready to go off. And they all knew it.

Russel minded his step, not making eye contact with anyone. But even though he controlled his actions and tread lightly through the Melting Pot, he knew it didn't really matter what he did, it was everyone else that he had to worry about. A lot of people got killed by The White Fang, and the actions of the few became synonymous to the many. The faunus population was scattered throughout, and that muddied everything substantially. The mourning period was almost up and Russel could feel it. Soon, people would start pointing fingers at the other, blaming them for the deaths and destruction. And they'll immediately turn their sights to the faunus.

"Whoa, hey!" A voice erupted off to the side. Russel glanced out of the corner of his eye, and to no surprise, he found a group of battered men and women surrounding some monkey faunus. Russel recognized the monkey boy from his blond scraggly hair and decision to not wear a shirt.

Sun Wukong backed away from the forming mob, hands outstretched defensively. Though his weapons Ruyi Bang and Jingu Bang were within reach, where they rested in his holsters, Sun recognized that even the act of self-defense could be the starting incident to the horrific purge of faunus from Vale. "Can't we talk about this?"

Russel halted his course, standing idle and watched. Even with the people's backs to him, he could tell they wouldn't listen to a faunus, there was just too much blood. It appeared that if Sun valued his life, then he'd take off running. But still, the SSSN leader remained, pleading with the people to calm themselves to think for a moment.

"I understand how you feel, what the White Fang did was unforgivable" Sun spoke, appealing to the mob's humanity. "But I'm not White Fang, I'm just a faunus, not all of us are complete assholes like they are."

But Sun's words fell on deaf ears and the mob continued to close in on the young man. Russel remained where he stood, watching events unfold. And he wasn't alone, out of the corner of his
eye, Russel could see a number of faunus gathering on the opposite end of the street. A few of them wore academy uniforms and appeared to be working up the nerve to step in, not until the first punch was thrown, they knew better to jump the gun. And they weren't alone, some Vacuans were watching on, some with great interest, and a slim few with dread.

Returning his attention to Sun and the mob, Russel could have sworn this would be it. A riot was bound to break out and what remained of the kingdom of Vale would be consumed by their own actions.

"Hold on, a moment of your time, please!" Another voice, one that Russel knew all too well, called out, catching the mob's attention. They turned and saw one Lance Grimsby emerging from one nearby alley. Instantly, the sight of a human gave the mob pause, long enough for Lance to speak on. "My fellow humans, this is a dire time that we find ourselves. But lashing out at the first faunus we see is not the answer!"

A stunned mob looked on, somewhat perplexed that anyone, let alone someone human such as they, would come to a faunus' aid. Seizing the chance Lance delved into soothing tones, calling for unity. "If you want someone to blame, someone to vent your anger and rage, seek not your fellow man or faunus. The White Fang and The Grimm are our enemy. More than ever, we need to stand together."

There was a brief murmur amongst the mob, but seemingly any anger they held had dissipated, replaced by the mournful pit they felt in their guts. These men and women, they were fathers, mothers, shopkeepers and teachers. One look at them now, with all their hate vacant from their eyes, Russel could see the loss, the fear, the regret. These were the people of Vale. The mob turned around and dispersed, heading off on their merry way to whichever hole would shelter them from the rain. With the threat of public lynching past, Sun thanked Lance for his timely intervention. Lance uttered some corny yet hopeful message Russel could only see the likes of Superman saying. And then Sun turned to leave, mentioning something about running late to meet with a cat friend of his.

Russel should have been smiling, just like all the other bleeding hearts who'd watched on in silence. This was proof that they could rebuild, that they could come back from the edge of destruction and stand tall, shoulder to shoulder against Cinder's forces and the White Fang's terrorism. If only it had been someone else, then Russel could have believed it.

Had it been anyone other than Lance who'd intervened, who'd spoken on the platform of unity and appealed to the good old community spirit of his fellow man, then Russel would have breathe a sigh of relief and carried on his way not giving a damn. But that hadn't been the case. In the face of a crumbling kingdom, there were few he hated more than Lance Grimsby.

It wasn't much of a surprise to find Lance running to a faunus' aid, seeing as their first actual meeting was the Team WILL member's confronting him over CRDL's treatment of Velvet. But his sympathy to the Faunus plight ad been called into question, once Russel learned of the man's more dubious motivations surrounding Velvet. Not to mention all of the other dubious acts regarding his intentions with sneaking a keg on campus for an after party and when Russel had stumbled on him spiking some Vacuan girl's drink.

To say the least, Lance Grimsby was not a man Russel could trust at face value.

"You!" Some feminine voice shouted from the Vacuan side of the crowd. Russel glanced to his left and found one Gwen Darcy stepped into the pouring rain, a pissed off look on her face, and an outstretched hand pointing at Lance in an accusing manner. "You're a monster! You're a complete bastard!" She shouted as she trudged through the mud in her dancing shoes until she was face to
As Russel saw it, Lance must’ve been too high off congratulating himself over a job well done and was caught way off guard by the sudden appearance of one of his former would-be victims. His face contorted, eyes widening slightly as Gwen just started screaming at him, prodding his chest by jamming her finger against it.

It took the Team WILL boy a second to regain his motor functions. He turned and shot a pleading look to the crowd, to those citizens of Vale standing by the wayside. "Get this crazy Vacuan chick off me!" He shouted, quickly changing the atmosphere of the situation. No longer was it a one on one quarrel, now it was a bout between kingdoms.

Whatever nationalistic pride Russel felt swell inside he knew better than to act on it, he would not step in to save Lance from righteous retribution. But that didn't stop the others. A number stepped forward, glaring at Gwen and moved in between them, shoving her back and onto the muddy pavement. And Russel cursed under his breath as the Vacuans joined the fray.

Russel kept his stare level, shooting it past the men and women and Beacon students who'd risen to Lance's defense and began to burn his sight against the side of the Grimsby boy's head. As if feeling Russel's stare, Lance answered, turning to meet his gaze. A haunted look crossed Lance's features, this was an all too familiar. Then Russel reached into his pants pocket and drew the hammer, holding against his side and glared. Lance got the message, Gwen's actions as well as Russel's, a reminder. So Lance turned and ran, leaving before the first punch could be thrown.

But that first punch never came. "Settle down!" Nebula shouted, pushing her way through the Vacauns side of the street. She met those Valeans and rose her hands defensively. "Let's not fight today, huh?" She gestured to the wrecked buildings on both sides of the street. "It'd be in poor taste, wouldn't you think?"
"Then keep your bitch on a leash." A man sneered, glaring past Nebula to Gwen. "Fucking foreigners."

Nebula bit her lip, holding back the urge to fight with the man and defend her friend. But for the sake of some semblance of peace, she turned her back along with the rest of those Vacuans who'd stepped up to Gwen's defense.

Russel stood and watched, as Nebula threw an arm around Gwen in an effort to console her. The NDGO dancer was shaking, on the verge of tears with her hands balled up in fists. She cursed and cried out, hating the world and the people in it. She just wanted justice but it seemed impossible.

The presence of Russel's gaze did not go unnoticed and the Thrush caught Nebula's eye. She patted Gwen on the back before leaving her in the capable hands of Octavia. The fiery redhead nodded knowingly and ushered her partner out of the rain and into their makeshift dwelling, a laundry mat which they shared with a number of Shade Academy students.

"Russel?" Nebula called out to the Thrush. Russel followed her gaze as he met her halfway through. No doubt she noted his weary face and the days old blood stained rags he still wore. "You look like hell."

"You're one to talk." He managed a slight smirk as he eyed the young woman standing before him, noting her tired eyes and sluggish posture, not to mention the slight wobble of the knees. "Quite the heated exchange back there, huh?"

"This has been a nightmare." She let out an exhausted sigh. Nebula raised her fully gloved hand
and squeezed the bridge of her nose. "I don't know how long we can keep going like this. There's too much fighting, eventually something will give and we'll just finish what the Grimm started."

Russel glanced to the spot where the mob had cornered Sun just moments ago. "Things do seem pretty bleak." He muttered, if reluctantly. "How're you're people holding up?"

"What food we have won't last a week. And that's with it rationed all the hell up." Nebula frowned as she brushed a soaked mess of her hair off of her face. "Not to mention, aside from that little display of the daily routine here in the Melting Pot, we've got our own squabbles." She gave a nod over her shoulder back to the laundry mat.

Russel peeked past Nebula, through the glass windows of the laundry mat to where the leader of Team PSYK, Panini Delso appeared to be in the middle of a shouting match with the leader of Team BRNZ, Brawnz Ni. Russel had to strain his ears to make out what they were arguing over. From what he gleamed, it was about leadership. It took Russel a second to fully grasp the severity of the Shade Student's predicament. There weren't any teachers amongst them, just students. That didn't bode well about any visiting faculty's fate and it most certainly left a power vacuum amongst the Shade students, one that would need to be filled should their stay prove to be more permanent. And given the lack of notice from any of the other three kingdoms, that seemed to be just the case.

"But things might be looking up." She said, a slight smile forming across her features. Nebula gave a nod further down the way. "All the Atlesians practically stormed out their shanties at the sight. Can you believe it? A SDC Jet?"

"So it is only one?" Russel asked, doing his best not to sound disappointment. But still, his tone betrayed him and he could tell in the dent his words made in Nebula's smile.

"Yeah, only one." Nebula confirmed, crossing her arms over her chest.

They stood there in silence for a brief moment, heads hanging low, just feeling the weight of their reality come crashing down around them. "I'd better see what this about then." Russel muttered as he turned on his heel, setting off to resume his journey to the makeshift landing strip. "Take care of yourself, Nebula." He waved good-bye.

"You too, Russel." She nodded before heading to her dwellings and out of the rain.

It was a bit of a walk after that, and for the most part, the rain drops were Russel's only company. But as he drew closer to his destination, Russel soon found himself amongst the chants of rowdy protest. There was an anger in the air, not too much unlike how it was with the mob and Sun, but there was a sinking feeling of desperation, as if someone held out some piece of hope out on a string and dangled it out in front of the starving masses.

Russel rounded another corner, now he was in the free and open spaces of what was once the coastline beaches, where the tallest nearby building happened to be an SDC logistics building just the type of place for Ironwood and his soldiers had set up shop. And adjacent to that a large flat strip of pavement where one of the latest attempt to update the local transit system was to be built, but now was an airstrip. There were no fences to keep the people out, and yet, as Russel arrived, it appeared to be.

Large masses of Atlesians, consisting of the students from Atlas Academy and the average tourist, seemed to be crowding around the perimeter, fists raised high and demanding to be taken home.

Seeking a better perspective of situation, Russel went around the crowd for elevated position atop some boulder left for décor on the nearby beach. Standing tall, he took in the sight as a whole and
frowned. There was no fence, instead, it was a human wall. Atlesian Soldiers stood shoulder to shoulder in full armor, there arms locked together like chain keeping the people from storming that shiny new SDC jet resting out on the strip.

"Keep them back!" A tall, pale, white haired man in an equally white suit barked as he emerged from the nearby SDC building. It didn't take Russel long to figure the man to be one Jacques Schnee, President of the Schnee Dust Corporation.

Russel just watched as the man just walked through alongside the Atlesian masses, a scowl of contempt gracing features as servants ran beside him, holding umbrellas over him.

Surmise to say there were a number of reasons why someone like Jacques Schnee could have come to Vale, such as to see firsthand the devastation to the once great kingdom, to see how his investment into Vale Branch of the SDC. But, Russel knew better, he was for one reason only. And she happened to be running out after her father.

Weiss pressed forward in the company of two manservants, who, like her father, provided her cover from the pouring rain. The Heiress spared a wary glance to the side, off to the men and women who stood shouting, arms stretched out past the battle worn soldiers. She found herself unable to look away, meeting their desperate stares as she recognized the majority of their number wearing the familiar Atlas Academy uniform.

"Please, take us with you!" A young man wearing a scuffed Atlas Academy uniform cried out, his hand reaching out past the barricade of soldiers to the Schnee's.

"Hold them back! Hold them back!" The commanding officer shouted as he and his men formed a wall, refusing to let a single soul past.

"We want to go home!" Another voice, one belonging to a faunus girl, whose once bright clothing was now stained with grime and blood, shouted. "Please! We don't want to be here anymore!" Neon Katt cried. "We just want to go home!"

"Schnee! Hey, Schnee!" Weiss couldn't help but glance to the side, hearing the familiar voice of one Flynt Coal. The trumpeter stood at the front of the masses, a look of disdain firmly planted onto his features. "You ain't nothing! You hear me?! You ain't nothing!"

There was no denying the injustice of the situation, so all Weiss could do was turn away, hoping the umbrellas the manservants held over her would shield her from the crowd's betrayed stares and angered chants as it did the rain.

"Hurry it up!" Jacques shouted over his shoulder to Weiss, he was already rushing up the gangway. Weiss did as she was told and doubled her speed and off into the awaiting jet she went. And just as she did, the doors shut behind her and the ship began to take off.

A sea of devastation was left in the Schnee's wake as the sped off no doubt back to Atlas. There were sobs, cries of protest, and angered wails.

"You wanna hear a joke?" A voice spoke off to the left of Russel.

Russel didn't even need to look to know who it was, he just kept his stare level and frowned to himself.

"Some guy flew his shiny new jet over the shanty towns of Vale. All so he could bitch to Ironwood about setbacks in productivity and then run off with his daughter, leaving his fellow countrymen behind to die."
"So what's the punchline?" Russel casually asked as the Atlesians began to head back to their downtrodden dwellings over in the Melting Pot.

"Turns out its all fucking real." The speaker cursed, not at all attempting to hide the contempt in his voice.

"Ttch." Russel shook his head. "Not a good joke."

"Really? That would explain why I'm not laughing." The speaker sighed.

Russel sighed and turned to the speaker. "What do you want, Cardin?"

There, standing to his left, wearing full Atlesian soldier armor, stood Cardin, arms crossed over his chest, a saddened expression on his face. "Just wanted to let you know, the offer still stands."

"I'm no fuckin' shill for the Schnees. And I sure as shit ain't goin' to work for the Military that bombed my damn Kingdom." Russel sent a glare Cardin's way, fixating it on the Atlesian insignia carved into the mass produced armor's chest plate.

A reluctant sigh escaped Cardin's lips as he refused to meet Russel's judgmental stare. "This is the only way we can maintain peace," He said, shaking his head. "the only way we can rebuild, and you know that."

"Not like this, Cardin." Russel shook his head, stepping down from the rock and heading his way back in the direction from where he'd come. "Not like this."

And there you have it! The first installment in the Post-Volume 3 era of The Darkling Thrush!

Russel's down and out, everyone's living atop each other in a metaphorical powder keg and Vale may or may not have been unofficially annexed by Atlas! Yay!

Following the Fall of Vale, I thought it'd be interesting to examine what the aftermath would exactly be like. Communication across the world has been severed, the other kingdoms are shoring up their own borders in an effort to prevent their own kingdoms from falling, so that would leave everyone stranded in Vale. And, I think that's an interesting situation which I hope thanks to prior world building proves to be an interesting enough setting for the rest of the arc.

I believe I mentioned a while ago that I'd be revisiting Lance's character. Yeah, brace yourselves, we're going to be doing that.

And, for fun, for those who'd like to squint this arcs events with say the moment Ruby awakens in Peach, chronologically this arc happens a week before that, so, not in the 6 month Volume 4 time skip just yet.

The next chapter will be out by the end of this week. The Darkling Thrush is back on track baby! WOOOOO!
Heya everyone, welcome back to the next chapter of The Darkling Thrush! Wooo!

For the most part I hope this chapter answers a few questions, as well as makes you ask twice as more. Well then, on with the show?

Dove wasn't a big fan of the cold gloom that came with the rain. Give him a nice blue cloudless sky with maybe a nice calm breeze, and that'd be fine by him. As a kid he'd always enjoyed running outside and playing with friends, but whenever those gloomy clouds arrived, so did the rain and Dove was forced to back in side. And when it was cold he was forced to wear one of those wool jackets, the kind that had the tags to high up so they'd always scratch against the back of your neck. And now, zipping past toppled buildings high above the concrete and shattered streets, Dove found another reason to hate the rain.

Droplets crashed against Dove's face as he sped through the wounded city. The water smeared his armor and drenched his clothing, weighing him down and forcing him to push himself in order to keep his altitude, lest he plummet and find himself snatched up by one of the Grimm that stalked the floor below.

Through squinting eyes Dove measured his course, calculating the weight he'd need to shift in order to make a wide turn around a burnt steel bar protruding outside Beacon Tower. And with a heavy heart, he did his best to pay no mind to the ruined state of the academy he'd called home.

A shy glance upward and Dove could see the Dragon frozen in place, peering out of Ozpin's office and overlooking the once mesmerizing sight of the city of Vale. There was a part of Dove that nagged him to fly upward, take a sharp breath and ram his blade into the Dragon's head. The Grimm that surrounded it, that coddled it, wouldn't be able to stop him, not if he was quick enough. But there too many unknowns that he recognized, such as if his actions had the adverse effect of freeing the Grimm from its frozen state.

Besides, Dove wasn't here to take a shot at the Dragon, no matter how much he wished to. He was here, back in Beacon, on a mission of great importance. To find his partner.

He zipped across campus, drawing the eye of bipedal Grimm that walked the grounds below. But Dove didn't care, he'd be long gone before they could catch up with him. As Dove's destination came into view, the first year student's dormitory, he found himself in the predicament of questioning exactly how he was to enter the building. He set his sights on the roof, hoping to use the door access.

Flying was still a fresh concept to the CRDL boy, but he handled himself as if he'd been flying his whole life. He could spin midair, pull out of a dive at neck breaking speeds and all sorts of other acrobatics. However, there was still the matter of landing that Dove had trouble with. So when Dove arrived at the rooftop, he hit the ground and tumbled forward until he slammed into the door.

Dove groaned as he lay upside-down against the door access. With a grunt, the CRDL boy picked
himself up and dusted himself off. He then reached out for the door, pulling it open and making his descent below.

Arriving on the top floor, Dove made sure to check his surroundings. He could hear the muffled roars and inhuman wails of Grimm within the building. From what he could tell, they were somewhere else within the dormitory, but still he remained cautious, there could be a Beowulf hiding in a closet for all he knew. So Dove began to creep through the hallway, his sword drawn and his index finger resting on the underslung pistol trigger.

Slow and steady he went, checking his corners, peering into open doors left in the wake of the evacuation. Dove peered into one such room, finding it perfectly intact. Almost as if those living in the dorm room were out the moment the attack hit. Upon further inspection, Dove recognized a familiar yellow blouse with an emblem akin to a burning flower printed on it. It was then Dove realized that this room belonged to Team RWBY.

Dove thought about Yang, how she'd been put under house arrest for wounding Mercury in the tournament. As it turned out, by some power beyond Dove's understanding, Mercury had faked the entire incident which turned out to be the first step in destroying Vale. A sigh escaped Dove's lips. If only they'd truly been paying attention during the fight, or if more people believed Yang, maybe they wouldn't be in the mess they were now.

He sighed once more before continuing on his way down the hall before coming to a stop. He turned to his right and drew a dorm key, using it to open the door in front of him. When Dove had set off this morning, he didn't know what he'd be expecting to find. Maybe he'd find Sky's corpse, as time passed, the likelihood of that happening seemed to increase. Or perhaps he'd find some sort of message left behind for him to find, something to give Dove the hope that his friend was still alive.

Dove opened the door and stepped into the CRDL dormitory, finding the place messy as ever. And yet, something was off. He peered to Sky's corner of the room, finding that his teammate's bed was covered in clothes. Dove walked up to the bed and looked it over before turning his sights on the nearby dresser. He reached out and pulled it open, finding it empty.

A feint smile creeped its way across Dove's face. It wasn't much to say if Sky was alive or dead, but it was something. Sky had come back to the dorm. He come for clothing, or for something he'd left in the dresser and run off. Whatever the case, Dove knew now with certainty that Sky had come to retrieve means of survival, which meant he'd intended to live past the night. But where Sky was now was anybody's guess. One thing for sure though, now Dove had proof, he had hope that somewhere out there in the land of Vale, Sky was alive.

With his immediate business concluded, Dove turned to head back down the hall for the flight back to the safe zone. But mid-step, Dove froze. He shook his head and mentally slapped himself. Now was a golden opportunity to retrieve some personal items of his and of others. So Dove turned back around and began to rummage through his belongings, grabbing the secret stash of candy he had buried under his bed. Dove grabbed some clothes and spare gear lying around, rummaged through Cardin's things, finding batteries and a case of magma dust crystals. And finally, Dove emptied out the contents of Russel's nightstand, deciding to take it all with him. He found Russel's duffel bag and tossed what he could into it before kicking open the window and flying off into the gloomy, cold and rainy sky.

There was something off about Atlesian combat armor, as if it were purposely designed to chafe. Cardin had tried loosening the straps that bound the plates together a myriad of times since first donning the stainless steel white and grey mesh, but his efforts proved fruitless as his new set of
gear constricted his upper torso.

It was the following morning of the attack when Ironwood had sought him out, come to Cardin battered and bruised and asked the Huntsman in training for his help. Those who knew Cardin, those who believed they knew him anyway, would have thought the notion of the Winchester answering to some higher authority other than his own quite the comical joke. How could the man who refused to do his own history assignments ever rise to the occasion?

But then again, those who thought such didn't really know Cardin. All they knew were the stories whispered across the halls, that he was nothing more than an unapologetic bigot, nothing beyond a cowardly bully, nor greater than a remorseless thug. But that wasn't him, that wasn't Cardin Winchester.

Cardin's eyes drifted to the corner of the tiny room he now called home, to where what remained of his old family armor lay. His eyes fell upon the image of the Phoenix that shown proudly on the breast plate, even now it proudly flared with a golden shine despite the cracks and battle scars. The Winchester Family crest, cemented into the history books by a lineage of soldiers, architects and generals who'd give every last drop of blood in their body to save their fellow man.

Would an unapologetic bigot ask for forgiveness? Would a cowardly bully charge into the unknown, willing to give his life in service of people he never knew? Would a remorseless thug weep over the souls he could not save? Cardin was many things, son, huntsman, friend, but most of all, he was a Winchester and he always rose to the occasion to keep the world from crashing down. So when Ironwood came asking for volunteers, to help keep the kingdom of Vale from crumbling to pieces, he was the first one in line.

And that brought Cardin to here and now, standing in his cramped makeshift quarters that he shared with five other people, five other Beacon students who'd jumped at the chance to serve their kingdom, even in less than ideal circumstances beneath another flag as he made sure to double check his gear. When he was first presented with the armor, Ironwood himself told him the importance of presentation, to keep the outfit clean and the plates straight, that the armor was a symbol of order in this chaotic world.

But Cardin didn't buy that last bit, deciding that Atlesians just had a thing for tight compact outfits. After another minute, Cardin surrendered, promising that he'd settle the matter the next moment he had free. Now, however, Cardin had to go, lest he run late for his meeting. As he was informed some time earlier when he was asked by the General to attend, the current leaders of Vale and the chief military officers were assembling for a long overdue discussion, one that Cardin was certain would prove to be both lengthy and heated with a variety of shouting matches and threats of war.

Quickly, but without obvious exertion, Cardin crossed the small distance between himself and the door, then head down the hall of the SDC Logistics building, the Atlesian Military's temporary command post.

Down the hall he went, up a flight of stairs. Cardin arrived at his destination, the designated war room and was accosted by a pair of genuine Atlesian soldiers. It must've been quite the shock when Ironwood announced to his stranded troops that they'd be cultivating a militia from Vale's inhabitants. Even more shocking must've been the sight of a Valean wearing the uniform.

After regaining some sense of composure, one soldier held out a hand to stop Cardin in his tracks. "Security check." He muttered as he moved to pat Cardin down. The Winchester obliged, recognizing the need for caution, recalling how easily the Atlesian military had been outsmarted by a man in a bolo hat. "You're clean. Go on right ahead."
Cardin nodded and did just that, pushing open the door and stepping into what was once upon a time a conference room. To say room was dim was an understatement, the lights above, running off of backup power generators, flared weakly, flickering every other second.

And not much to his surprise, the so called 'deliberation' had kicked off early. On one side of a long desk, arched forward in a slouching position, fists planted into the hard wood and spit dripping down his flapping jowls, stood an elderly fellow in his late sixties, dressed in a torn suit stood. His name was Dolm Mayflower, the last living member of Vale's governing council.

To Dolm's right stood Glynda Goodwitch, arms crossed over her chest and an even crosser look on her face. And to Dolm's left stood a trench coat clad figure, wearing a dress shirt, scuffed black tie and black pants. Cardin didn't recognize the man, but from what he gathered from whispers amongst VDP officers he'd had the pleasure of working with over the last four days, he presumed the man to be Heyman Burns, the senior ranking member of the Val Police Department. The trio of Dolm, Goodwitch and Burns were all that remained of Vale's government, if you could call it that anymore.

On the other side of the desk sat General Ironwood, dressed in a freshly pressed white suit. To Ironwood's right sat a young woman Cardin had little chance to speak with since signing up with the Atlesians, but he knew her from her participation in the Vytal Festival, she stood by while Penny dropped rocks on his team. Ciel Soleil was quiet, often had her eye on the time, but Cardin was never sure if that was a nervous tic of hers or if she really did have everything planned to the minute. There was another gentleman, one seated to Ironwood's left. He wore navy whites, had brass bars on the side of his freshly ironed yet tattered jacket, signifying his rank as a corvette captain and he appeared to have recently lost his arm given the way he sat, subconsciously attempting to shift his weight on the absent limb.

While Dolm continued his the long tirade Cardin had walked in on, the Winchester waltzed to Ironwood's side of the room and joined a certain petite bunny eared girl with her back against the wall. "What'd I miss?" Cardin asked quietly as not to interrupt just whatever it was he'd just walked in the middle of.

"The usual." Velvet whispered beneath, keeping her attention forward as she discretely jotted down notes on a paper pad. Ever the journalist, even when wearing poorly fitted Atlesian armor, it was a pleasant sight to say the least, given all the insanity in recent memory.

Cardin turned his attention forward, back to the shouting and quiet listening. It was then that he realized he and Velvet weren't the only second stringers standing idle. Cardin bit his lip and mentally kicked himself over the other bodies that filled the opposite side of the room. Beneath blackened out lights, almost hiding in shadows, stood Jaune, arms folded over his chest in a similar fashion to that of Glynda's and the icy glare he held trained forward to those sitting on the Atlesian side of the conference table.

Jaune, however, was not alone. Cardin glanced to the other corners of that side of the room, and almost as if he were peeling back the darkness itself, he found Nora and Ren standing at the wayside, just as focused on the goings on at the table as Jaune was. Cardin shouldn't have been surprised to find them here, but still he was. It was quite jarring, to think someone like Jaune, who a week ago found himself arguing with his team over team attack names in the middle of tournament fight, now stood imposingly with the most pissed off look on his face Cardin had ever seen.

"This is an illegal occupation!" Dolm shouted at the top of his lungs, slamming a fist on the wooden desk, causing it to shake. "You and your Atlesian dogs have seized the Kingdom of Vale in
a time of crisis, do you know no shame?"

"I wasn't aware we've seized anything." Ironwood said coolly, unfazed by the councilman's behavior. "Nor that our current shared predicament was an 'occupation'. We're stranded here, the same as those Vacuans and Mistralians living in the Melting Pot, it just so happens that we're taking up residence within an Atlesian corporation building."

"Which also just so happens to have positioned between the shore and the airstrip." Heyman spoke up in an accusing tone. "Priming yourselves to have complete control over who comes and goes, just like that Schnee fellow. Is that pissant even going to send help?"

Cardin was surprised by how Ironwood handled himself, to say tensions were high would be an understatement, in fact, he was the only one in the room with any semblance of restraint. "As you are right to remind me, our circumstance is less than ideal and most peculiar. But we're not controlling anything, the people of Vale are free to do as they wish in their own kingdom, to set sail off to Peach as often as they'd like and to take off into the air on whatever airship can still fly."

"Pfft, right." Heyman rolled his eyes. "Then what about the Schnee? With you set up here any Atlesian vessel could just land, we could be looking at an entire invasion force showing up at our doors and you'd just roll on in!"

"Yes, he did show up, to rescue his daughter." Ironwood said, a matter-of-fact. "His arrival caught us all off guard, to be perfectly honest, I find it very concerning that the first ship to arrive in Vale was that of a frightened father trying to save his daughter."

"If you can even call it that." Jaune sneered, catching the attention of all in the room. "He treated her more like property than that of a daughter."

"Need I remind you, that the terms of our 'guests' presence, that they remain silent unless addressed by the members of this discussion?" The wounded Atlesian Captain said, sending a sharp glare in Jaune's direction. The JNR leader simply looked to Glynda, who shared the Captain's icy expression. So the Arc bit his tongue and resigned himself to pout against the darkened wall.

It was Ironwood who spoke first after Jaune's interruption, who cleared his throat before resuming talks. "Yes, well, the manner in which Mr. Schnee arrived was peculiar, that's something I believe we all could agree on. 'He said, in an effort to find some sense of common ground amongst those standing opposite of him. "But, we should be thankful, as before he departed I asked that he relay a message to the rest of the Atlesian council, to send aid quickly."

Cardin quickly exchanged a concerned look with Velvet, both recognized how fragile the peace they currently held was, as well as how terrible the current state of the kingdom was. What Ironwood had said was most certainly intended to be taken as good news, probably something he'd been banking on to help earn the Valean government's trust, but it clearly had the opposite effect, as Cardin noted the twisting of their expressions.

"More Atlesian ships?! Are you out of your mind?!" Glynda practically screamed. "What do you think the people will do when they see more of your corvettes hovering above? They're all traumatized enough as it is James, we'll be seeing riots in the streets, an unrelenting purge!"

"It appears I alone possess any faith in the Valean people, then." Ironwood said, meeting Goodwitch's stare. "The people of Vale have been kicked, knocked down, shot up and exploded a thousand times over, since the first Noble Wars to even the Great War. I don't believe that you'll succumb to baser instincts, especially at the sight of supplies being airdropped into your settlements. Vale is above that, your people persevere in spite of the odds."
And then, to Cardin's surprise, Ironwood glanced over his shoulder and beckoned to the Winchester to come over. He blinked, not sure what to do. It was almost as if Cardin's body was on autopilot as the next thing he knew he was kicking off the wall and strutting towards the table, stopping right behind the General.

"Mr. Winchester," Ironwood addressed him while keeping eye contact with the three individuals standing in front of him. "Why did you join the militia?"

The easy answer for Ironwood's question would have been for Cardin to say because he'd asked him to. But that wasn't the answer Ironwood was looking for, this was a question of Cardin's character, a question of his motivations, as if to ask what would drive a proud Valean to wear Atlesain armor.

The answer was obvious, Cardin needn't ponder more than a moment. "Because Vale and its people need to be protected."

"And to what lengths would a man like you, Mr. Winchester, go to help your fellow countrymen?" Ironwood questioned. "To ensure the kingdom you loved could be reclaimed from the monsters that besieged it?"

Now that question, Cardin could answer in a heartbeat. So with a smirk, he said, "I'd wear the damn Atlesian flag if I had to."

"Ugh." Goodwitch groaned, squeezing the bridge of her nose. "The recruitment of Beacon's brightest is beneath you, James."

"Mr. Winchester, Ms. Scarlatina and all the others who've joined all wish to save their home," Ironwood leaned forward against the desk, folding his hands together on the wood. "And clearly, as you've proven in your reluctance to admit them as proper Huntsmen, the only way to do so is under another form of direction."

"You mean my refusal to turn a blind eye to how ill prepared they all are?" Glynda shot back. "All the forth year students are dead. The majority of third year students are lucky to be maimed. I can't with good conscience ask of my students to fight for their kingdom, knowing fully well they're unprepared for the tolls of war."

"War has already come to Vale, it's already claimed the lives of you people, to not utilize every willing body to combat the threats that endanger Vale will be the doom of us all."

"The only threat to the people of Vale I see is sitting in front of me." Dolm sneered, sparing a glance between Ironwood and then to Cardin. "You claim that siding with these butchers is for the good of Vale, the good of the people, you're fool. I'm not sure you're even an idealist, but I am certain you're a fucking idiot, boy." He glared.

"Enough!" Ironwood shouted, raising his voice for the first time since Dolm had started yapping his mouth. "I won't let you chastise my people, let alone your own. This meeting is over." He said finally.

Dolm gritted his teeth at the sound of the conference room door opening at an audible creek. Outside light shone in and the two Atlesian soldiers standing guard peered in, waiting for the Valean council to depart. The Councilman was the first to depart, murmuring a number of curses, followed closely behind by Heyman. Goodwitch spared a glance Ironwood's way not at all attempting to hide the weariness she felt nor the sadness. After that, JNR followed, and with them gone the room appeared to brighten.
"Thank you for coming, Mr. Winchester, M. Scarlatina." Ironwood said, glancing over his shoulder at the pair, putting on a smile. "I'm sorry if anything Mr. Mayflower said cut deep, I wish these were better times."

"Not even words can break past my semblance, sir." Cardin said, cracking a smile. "Will you be needing us for anything else, General?"

"No, that'll be all." The General said just as Ciel raised up her left arm to him and began tapping on her wristwatch. "Now, if you could, resume your assignments, the rest of us have a lot to discuss in private." He gestured to the door.

"Of course, sir." Velvet said as she and Cardin gave a salute. Without another word, they set off exit, passing the soldiers who shut the door after them. "So, that happened." She said as soon as they were down the hall. "Yup." Cardin nodded in agreement.

"I didn't think things would get so heated, but, then again, I could see their side of the argument." Velvet said, raising a hand and rubbing her neck.

"And yet we're the only ones trying to help." Cardin muttered. "Ms. Goodwitch means well, but when have you seen a senior Huntsman running around?" He asked rhetorically. "Because there aren't any running around, they're all too busy operating in the other towns, in the villages far removed from the capitol. We're the only things keeping the monster out, Velvet."

"I know that," Velvet said, glancing at Cardin from the corner of her eye as they walked about freely. "But I'm saying that I can understand their perspective, after all, Atlesian ships shot at buildings."

"That was Roman Torchwick's doing, not the Atlesians."

"But Torchwick wasn't the one who shoved guns at people and pulled the trigger," Velvet countered. It was then that Cardin frowned deeply, reminded of the Atlesian Knights, how they'd murdered civilians right before his eyes. Picking up on this, Velvet reached out for Cardin's hand, gripping it tightly and looking up at the taller boy in concern. "You okay?"

The memories of that night dissipated and Cardin flashed a reassuring smile. "I'm fine." He said, drawing his thumb over Velvet's knuckle. "How about you?"

Velvet just smiled and stared upward into Cardin's eyes. "Doing good," She spoke quietly, almost longingly just as her gaze deepened. "As long as you are." Her lips pursed.

It was at that moment that Cardin realized just how ill experienced he was when it came to women. Sure, he'd had his school yard crushes and admired a fair few over the years, but aside from a drunken one night stand, he had about nothing to go off of. He felt his heartbeat quicken in its pace, his cheeks now burning and rosy red. But, to his credit, he didn't miss a beat. Cardin leaned down, his free hand drawn and already tenderly caressing Velvet's cheek, and claimed her lips with his own.

Not even a second later, the sound of a man clearing his throat caught their ears. Cardin and Velvet whipped apart, half expecting to find General Ironwood himself standing present. The rules of fraternization with the militia were uncharted territory, the last thing the pair wanted was scolding or some such nonsense. But just as they'd turned to face the wide eyed individual, a look of surprise appeared over their faces.
"Uh, sorry to bother you two." Jaune coughed once more. "But you and I need to talk." He pointed at Cardin.

"You were supposed to be escorted out of the building." Velvet squinted at Jaune. "What are you still doing here?"

"Snuck off, you're security's real lax," Jaune said casually before pointing to a door further down the hall with the words 'Emergency Exit' stamped on it. "Don't worry, I'll be leaving, I promise, but we need to talk."

"About what?" Cardin raised a brow.

"Where's Russel?" Jaune questioned in a serious tone completely alien to the Arc.

Cardin eyed Jaune cautiously, ever since news of Pyrrha's death had reached the JNPR leader, the word had been that he'd been sleeping less and building up his anger, which, given the way he was staring at him, Cardin was poised to believe. "Russel and I aren't exactly talking at the moment." He said, his earlier frown returning. "I don't think he took to kind to the idea of me working with Atlesians."

"That doesn't answer my question." Jaune said, the corners of his eyes now squeezing tightly against each other forming into a fine glare. "Now where is he?"

"I don't know." Cardin shrugged, speaking the honest truth, he really had no idea where Russel was or where he now lived, if he even found shelter. For all Cardin knew, Russel was now a wandering hobo, with the stick and all flung over his shoulder. But the question was so out of left field, Cardin felt a pit form in his stomach, so he decided to ask one of his own. "Why're you looking for him?"

Jaune shrugged. "He's got something that doesn't belong to him." He said cryptically before turning around and heading back the emergency exit, which he promptly kicked open and exited the building.

"...So," Velvet said after a long silence. "See you tonight?" She flashed Cardin a smile.

An eager smile graced Cardin's lips, but soon it vanished, replaced by a grimace. "I've got perimeter duty." He said, sounding apologetic.

"You're a bit late aren't you?" Clover Aves spoke in a playful tone.

"The job was completed on time, I just didn't bother to show up." Russel said as he reached in his back pocket and produced the bloodied hood of The Abbatoir Bloke. With the flick of his wrist, the hood went sailing across the enclosed room, landing on Clover's desk.

Clover Aves wasn't a person Russel would normally associated with, in fact, if it weren't for the Fall, he'd most certainly never had met the woman. A third year Beacon student, Clover would have made a decent Huntsman if she had a sense of responsibility. Word around the upper classmen dorms was that the brown and green haired woman sitting before him was the kind experimented in less than legal extracurricular activities. Nothing was ever proven of course, just like how no one discovered the unassuming visiting Haven students such as Mercury and Emerald were actually terrorists.

But desperate times called for desperate measures, and the last time Russel checked, Kevin was lying dead in his alleyway, he needed information and Clover was the only person he knew who could get him what he needed. Unfortunately, however, since the fall, money had seemed to have
lost its value, and the importance of other goods and or services spiked. Thankfully, Clover had accepted services as form of payment as, frankly, Russel was dirt poor when it came to goods, his only belongings the tattered clothes he now wore, aside from a few other things he'd stashed away for personal reasons.

"McAllister was bad for business, only a fool gets addicted to his own supply. Waking up stripped bare in the melting pot square, should teach him." Clover shook her head as she eyed the bloodied hood she now held in her outstretched hand. "Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him well!"

"It's 'I knew him, Horatio.'" Russel rolled his eyes.

"Really? Well who gives a fuck?" Clover cursed before tossing the hood aside. "Well, you held up your end of the bargain, I'd best hold up mine." A wicked smile graced her features. "But you're going to have to make it worth my while."

Russel just stared at the woman, anger swelling in his chest. He knew it was a risk dealing with these types, he knew she'd pull a fast one on him. "What do you want?" He sighed, throwing his arms up and then letting them fall to rest at his sides.

"That a hammer in your pocket?" Clover leaned forward and pointed to the hammer shaped protrusion against Russel's hip. "I want the hammer." She smiled.

Russel stared at the woman for a minute, unsure of what to do. The hammer was his only weapon, his only means of protection living in a Post-Fall Vale. There was no assurance that if he did part with it Clover wouldn't just turn around and demand something else. But Russel was running out of options, he was forced to play her game and Clover knew it.

With a sigh, Russel produced his hammer and walked across the room, presenting it to Clover. The once and former third year Beacon student shot him a toothy smile and plucked the tool from his hands before placing it under her desk. In the hammer's place, appeared a folder which instead of handing to Russel she dropped on her desk for him to pick up.

"I'd have never of guessed nice little boys like you were into this sort of shit." Clover practically giggled as Russel retrieved the folders contents.

Russel opened the folder and fond his payment, high resolution photos of Cinder turning Pyrrha to ash. "How'd you even get these?"

"Found a camera on a dead guy, probably a tourist who got snatched up by a Nevermore or some shit." Clover shrugged, obviously having previously pondered the origin of the photos herself. "Hey, you wouldn't happen to know what happened to that girl's headdress would you?" She asked, smiling coyly. "That Jaune kid's been asking about it, seems so certain that you might know something."

Russel looked up from the photos and met her questioning eyes. And then that shit eating grin of his appeared. "And with such maimed rites? This doth betoken the corse they follow did with desperate hand fordo its own life: 'twas of some estate. Couch we awhile, and mark."

"Great, you have it fucking memorized." Clover rolled her eyes.

"Wait 'til you hear my Othello." Russel smirked.

"Our business is concluded, get the fuck out." She barked, producing her new hammer and smacking it on her desk like a gavel.
Without a word, Russel left, emerging out of a collapsed building. And then set off to Hooligan's.

It was a quiet evening, even if with all the people living on muddy street corners made it the most claustrophobic thing Russel had ever felt. Whatever tensions had clung to the air on either side of the Melting Pot had seemingly dissipated. It seemed almost fleeting to Russel, to find that everything could so at peace, if he hadn't known any better, he'd have assumed it was business as usual. The calm before the waking storm. So Russel closed his eyes and chose to savor the moment. He took in a sharp breath. Then he let it go.

Whatever brief reprieve, whatever solace he'd found in that quiet moment, Russel felt it slip through his fingers as he hurried through the Melting Pot in hopes of getting back to Hooligan's before dark. As he grew closer to his destination, Russel noticed the amount of people began to shrink. It was to be expected, Hooligan's was right near the edge of the safe zone, where few dared to tread, lest they risk the chance of a Grimm spring past their watch towers and plowing through whoever dared to live nearby.

But, along the way home, Russel past by the last bastion of centralized bodies, the chantry. The chantry would have been packed with the devout even on its worst day, packed with those willing to pray. But lately, it's been jammed packed, a lot more people praying as of late. Russel paid them no mind, just continued on his way. That was when he heard a scream.

Glancing over to the chantry, finding its people rushing out the door and a haunting screech chasing after them. There was a crashing noise, followed by more screams. Then, Russel's eyes widened at the sight of a Creep bursting out of a window. And then Russel found himself kicking himself in the ass, of all the times he could have parted ways with his hammer, he should have fought Clover over it rather than relinquish it. There was a Grimm running amuck and he hadn't a damn thing to stab it with.

Russel could have ran at the Grimm, but he was all too familiar with a Creep's pack mentality, there would no doubt be more close by. That left him without a lot of options, such as engage the beasts unarmed, which was as suicidal as it was stupid, and yet he would be buying the civilian's time to get to shelter or for another Huntsman or an Atlesian soldier to arrive. But there was also the second option that Russel could run and save himself, he wasn't a huntsman, he wasn't an Atlesian soldier, he wasn't obligated to risk his life. And yet he was going to do it anyway.

So he took off, running at the Creep as it attempted to bite at a parishioner. Russel reeled his arm back, intent on driving it down the Creep's throat, with any luck he" manage to choke the blasted thing to death.

But Russel never got the chance, he never even got close. A long sword came swinging down, cleaving the Creep's massive head off the rest of its body. The Grimm dissolved, turning into dust in the wind and standing over the blade now stabbed into the ground was one Lance Grimsby.

"The beast is dead!" Lance shouted to the chantry goers. "My name is Lance Grimsby, Huntsman. And I kill monsters! Rejoice!"

Witnessing the murder of one of the beasts that killed their loved ones and driven them from their homes was enough to entice the crowd. At Lance's beck and call they began to chant, cheers and applause, finally the people had something to celebrate. And Lance just stood there, smiling, waving, being praised.

Russel just stood there, watching as the people began to chant Lance's name. "What the actual fuck is going on?"
When it comes to Dove, I'd think having a semblance that lets you fly would come in handy given the current situation in Vale, he comes and goes as he pleases. So, Dove's just trying to find his friend, the city's gone to hell and that's sort of all he wants to do.

I'd also imagine that after the fall, there'd be a lot of seats left vacant on the ruling council, like something out of The Dark Knight Rises where the mayor gets bombed while watching the football game. The football game in RWBY being the Vytal Festival.

And congrats to those who caught the Heyman Burns character being a mash up of both Joel Heyman and Burnie Bruns, who played those two detectives in Volume 1.

Cardin/Velvet.

Last chapter, during the opening portion, right before Russel left Hooligan's, there was a point where he passed over a bloodied hood he'd taken from some dude. In this chapter its revealed who its from, why he took it and for whom.

Clover Aves, the newest OC to appear in this story because there aren't nearly enough characters in canon for me to work with, really was created out of just wanting to write a character even more of an abrasive ass than Russel, who just doesn't give a damn but is kind of our view point of the city's underworld criminal element now that Roman and Kevin are dead. So, I was fun to write, even stretched some of that Russel 'is actually well-read' aspect of his character.

And Jaune wants something that Russel may or may not currently have. But, I'll talk more about that once that plot point is fully fleshed out.

Anyways, next chapter will be out next week, 'til then later days!
Good Evening, Dear Reader. Welcome back to another chapter of The Darkling Thrush!

I'm sorry that this one's coming out later than expected, I hadn't accounted for a scholastic duty and for this chapter to hit over ten thousand words. But, the problem with my five chapter arc system is that I've gotta fit everything within the chapters I allow myself, its the only way I can keep a schedule on this story.

Anyways, I won't take up any more of your time, I hope you all enjoy this chapter!

Dove awoke from his slumber in a puddle of his own drool on a rather comfy mattress. Snapping to attention, the boy who could fly found himself laying in the familiar surroundings of his Bolt-hole, a mostly intact apartment building a mile within the buffer zone that separated the Grimm infested city of Vale from the Safe Zone.

Truth was that Dove didn't have much of a say in his choice of rest, a glance up above at the hole in the roof was quite evident of that fact. The night prior, Dove had caught the attention of a pair of Nevermore and after a long air battle he'd tumbled and crashed. Thankfully, as it appeared, the Nevermore had thought him dead, obviously having never encountered a man who could at the bare minimum slow his descent, and quickly went about their business letting the Bronzewing boy to catch some much needed rest.

Dove sat up on the bed before leaping off to collect the gear he'd tossed off the night prior. The sky was dull, dark and gloomy, and it could have easily been mistaken for night. But Dove could tell by morning dew scent that polluted the heavens that was not the truth. After dressing and spending a minute to scavenge items ranging from a cheese grater to several articles of clothing belonging to the flat's owner, the CRDL boy set off into the morning air, dead set on returning back to the safe zone, intent on informing his friends the news he had of Sky.

Over the abandoned city blocks he flew, a slight smile appearing on his face. Dove could do this forever, he could soar and float, tell gravity to piss off for a while. But sadly, he knew there were limits to his abilities, such as his semblance ran off his aura, which by the monitor on his wrist shown his reserves were nearly depleted, having wasted the majority on cushioning his fall the night prior. Recognizing time was short, Dove hurried along, reaching his top speed while descending at the same time, lest he suddenly run out of gas and go splat.

With his body close to the ground, Dove was given an up close and personal look of the freshly erected fence that acted as the border to between both the buffer and safe zones as well as the plentiful watchtowers. Upon further examination, he realized not all was well. There appeared to be several Atlesian Soldiers gathering around by what appeared to be a hole in the fence.

"Do you have any idea what the hell happened here, Winchester?" A helmeted officer with Lieutenant's bars on his metal uniform shouted, turning his gaze to one Cardin Winchester.

"I'm not sure, sir." Cardin replied, arms to his back and staring forward past the superior officer.
"You're not sure? A fucking Grimm cut through the fence under your watch is what happened!" The Lieutenant shouted, pointing to the fresh hole carved out of the fence.

"I can assure you, sir, that there was no hole in the fence during my watch." Cardin said calmly, doing his best not to raise his voice. From what Dove could see from his vantage point up in the air, Cardin was doing his best to hold back his tongue. It was quite the alarming accusation, that the CRDL leader had been inattentive in his duties the night prior, and from what he gathered, had allowed a Grimm to invade the Safe Zone, threatening the lives of all those who resided inside.

"Well it didn't show up out of thin air!" The Lieutenant shouted in a vain attempt to scream in Cardin's face. The sight earned a bit of a snicker out of Dove, as the Atlesian Soldier stood somewhere along the lines of five feet tall, while Cardin stood at a staggering six foot and a half.

"And it wasn't there during my watch, sir." Cardin spoke lowly, his patience nearing an end.

"Are you saying that my Private's report is inaccurate, Winchester?" The Lieutenant raised up a clipboard, presenting Cardin a written statement drafted up by the soldier who'd relieved him of duty last night.

Dove could see a weight press down upon Cardin's back, the gravity of his words fully setting in upon himself. Cardin had joined the Milita without consulting the rest of his team, believing it to be the best course of action, that its mission statement to serve and protect the people of Vale was a worthy of his loyalty. But here he was, claiming one of his peers was in fact lying, probably trying to save their own skin than fess up to their own neglectfulness.

"I'm saying, sir, that I did my duty." Cardin said finally.

"Well, we'll have to look into this mess." The Lieutenant snorted. "Until then, since you're claiming to be such the dutiful little soldier, I guess you can shoulder another week of Guard Duty, can't you Winchester?"

Cardin just bit his lip before glancing upward. Noticing Dove floating above for the first time, he nodded at his friend and smiled. "Good to see you, Dove."

"Who the hell you talking to?" The Lieutenant questioned before following Cardin's gaze upward. The Atlesian Soldier's eyes shot wide open in shock, quickly he became a stuttering mess. "T-That m-man's in the air!"

"Quite the astute observation, sir." Cardin said, not missing a beat.

"Everything alright here?" Dove asked in concern for Cardin's wellbeing. He could tell, looking past the CRDL leader's welcoming smile, that the Winchester was weary, no doubt due to those whom he served with. For a moment, Dove floated in wonder, pondering that this must've been a recurrence. He hadn't once stopped to consider that maybe the Atlesians and the Vale Militiamen weren't getting along as well as they'd expected.

"Could going a bit better." Cardin simply shrugged. "It would be best if you just flew home."

"Alright, fine." Dove nodded before taking off in the direction of Hooligan's, but not before leaving Cardin one final good-bye. "You know where to find us when you need us!"

"I know." Cardin muttered to himself, all while the Atlesian soldiers stared, amazed by the boy who could fly.

Over the skies of the Safe Zone Dove flew, earning awestruck looks and hopeful smiles. From the
corner of one eye to the other, Dove could see the glistening sea sparkling off in the distance and the endless tree line of the neighboring forest. But it was the mass of people that caught his eye. Following those gazes that held him in such regard, he found mobs of people seemingly stretching from one end of the Safe Zone to another, all waiting in line for a chance to get something to eat.

Down there amongst the people, the issues were real, compared to the vast and freeness of the open air. It felt as if he was crashing, seeing how poorly the people were doing. The way things were going with the current rationing of supplies, Dove very much doubted that everyone in line would be fed today, just as much as he doubted they all would be fed tomorrow and so on. But here he was, returning from the city in which they'd fled, bringing with him all sorts of random gear for himself.

He felt sick in his stomach, a twisting pool that dipped into his very soul, he knew very well he could help them, dash into the city back and forth, retrieve whatever they needed from canned food to clothes, but there were just so many and he was only one and already running on fumes.

Dove barely made it to Hooligan's, crashing at the doorstep. He let the duffel bag which he'd carried through bouts with Nevermores to his side and with an exhausted breath, he managed to pull himself up off the damp ground and firmly knocked on the door. He then press both his palms to the sidewalk and heaved downward. It honestly felt as if he'd had the wind kicked out of him.

A moment passed, with Dove remaining by the door, he could hear the whispers of nearby onlookers who'd seen him land. If people weren't so stunned by the sight of him flying, they would have surely ganged up and robbed him. Dove wasn't doing himself any favors, appearing so helpless that he now required another's aid to help him inside the shop.

There was the familiar turn of the door's lock which caught Dove's ear. He glanced up, finding Russel pulling it open and lending an outstretched hand for Dove to take.

"Ah, there you are." Russel chuckled.

Dove two accepted Russel's help, being hauled to his feet by the Thrush hobbling into the rundown hardware shop, dragging with them the duffel bag with them before finally setting Dove onto a chair behind the front counter.

"I was starting to get worried." Russel said, earning a look of surprise from Dove. "If you didn't show up in a couple more days, I'd have had to go lookin' for you."

"Wouldn't want to head back to the city, would you?" Dove laughed.

"Not over you, no." Russel smirked. The pair shared a laugh.

"So what's this I've been hearing of Grimm attacking the Safe Zone?" Dove asked as he reached out for the duffel bag. And for the first time he truly felt how heavy it was. Without the supplemental aura that had increased his strength, it felt as if he'd been carrying about fifty tons.

"Meh," Russel shrugged before aiding Dove in lifting the bag onto the counter. "Nothing too crazy, some folks at the Chantry got startled by a Creep. Could've been worse."

"Then why's it got the Atlesian's pants riding high?" Dove raised a brow. Both CRDL boys had fought Creeps before, back then in Oakwood. But those creatures were the lowest of low when it came to Grimm, scavengers that only when starved could be driven to directly attack a settlement.

"Well, could be because Lance is using this as a way to galvanize support from the masses."
Russel muttered bitterly.


"Yup." Russel nodded, gesturing to the duffel bag's zipper, silently asking Dove whether he should open it. "Should've been there, everyone and their mom was chanting his name for killing a Creep. Make's me fucking sick."

"So? What if they're shouting his name? Why's that got to do with the Atlesians?" Dove questioned once more before reaching for the bag's zipper.

"Well, the Atlesian's are having a difficult enough time justifying their military supremacy. Last thing they need is a Huntsman to show them up, tell the masses we don't need them."

"I didn't think things were so bad." Dove frowned.

"The wind's blowing something fierce, I can tell you that much." Russel folded his arms over his chest as he stood in wait for Dove to open the bag. "Just when you thought it couldn't get worse."

"It gets worse." Dove's frown deepened as he opened the bag, revealing the numerous items he'd scavenged from their dorm room back at Beacon and the apartment building he's slept in last night.

"Well, at least there's a bright side to all this," Russel smirked as he reached into the bag, pulling out a clean drab olive hoodie and pair of brown cargo pants. "I can finally get out of these rags."

"Thank god, burn those things when you're done, would you?" Dove began to laugh, pointing at the tattered and bloodied clothes Russel currently wore. "You smell like absolute shit from even here."

"Pfft, nice to see that sense of humor of yours is intact." Russel lightly laughed before setting his change of clothes off to the side. He stood there for a moment, glancing over to Dove, watching as he dug through the bag, working up the nerve to question him about Sky. The last time Russel had seen their teammate was just before the attack, while on their way to Amity they'd been stopped by Ozpin, who'd whisked Sky off for a private discussion but not before leaving Russel with some cutting words.

"A Huntsman can't have baggage, Russel, his own weight, there's just no room for it. He's already got the weight of humanity on his back." Ozpin had said to him, a judgmental look on his face. "No more mistakes."

It just so happened that Ozpin had accosted Russel for his inability to secure any evidence to incriminate Lance, too caught up in fighting Nebula to bother. Russel hadn't had much time to ponder his words. The more he thought of them, the more it began to sound like an ultimatum, and then he thought of Ozpin's judgmental stare, as if he'd disappointed the old man, something that seemed to be a recurrence in Russel life.

"Sky's alive." Dove finally said, cutting through the silence and snapping Russel out of his thoughts. "His things in the dorm, they'd been moved and taken, he's probably out here somewhere, living in a hole like us."

Russel studied Dove for a moment, watching as a hopeful smile began to form. But Russel couldn't push back his own thoughts, his mind taking him to fearful places and uncertainties. "Don't you think we'd have seen him by now then?" He said, causing Dove's smile to vanish. "It was a crazy night, Dove. I hate to say it, but even if he made it back to the dorm, campus got hit hard. Maybe he didn't make it out of Beacon."
"How could you say that?!!" Dove exclaimed, shooting dagger eyes at the Thrush. "Of course Sky made it out!"

"People were getting eaten by Nevermores, mauled by Ursi, trampled by Beowulfs," The Thrush recalled, counting the number of causes of death that had plagued the city of Vale some nights ago. "Atlesian murder robots started to go kill crazy, the stupid stadium crashed into the ground and then there was a fuckin' Dragon, Dove."

"So?! We made it!"

"Yeah, we did," Russel then raised his four fingered hand and poked Dove in the shoulder where he'd been shot when he and a number of others were ambushed by Team STAG in Amity. "But it sure as shit wasn't a walk in the park."

Dove then slapped Russel's hand aside and glared. "Do you see a dead body? No? Me either." He turned away, bringing his attention back to the bag full of goodies he'd salvaged. "I'm not going to give up on Sky. And you shouldn't either."

"Look, Dove, I'm not giving up on Sky." Russel spoke quietly.

"Could have fooled me." Dove scoffed.

"But – now hear me out – I just wouldn't be surprised if he didn't make it." He grimaced at the words that left his mouth. "A lot of good people didn't make it."

That earned a reluctant sigh from Dove, who nodded in agreement at the sentiment. "...Yeah, lost a lot of good people." He slumped back in his seat and recalled the names of those he knew who'd perished during the fall. "Nero, Illiad, Lambert, Naomi, Ulric, Purdy, Ezekiel and even Pyrrha."

Russel's eyes narrowed at the mention of the Spartan's name. He thought back to the photos he'd traded his services for, depicting the Champion's supposed death at the hands of Cinder. A lot of people that Russel knew had died that night, but only one of whom had he considered a friend.

"I'm sorry for snapping at you, Russel." Dove finally spoke after a period of silence. "It's just, I refuse to give up on Sky. Not yet anyways, not when there's a chance he could be out there."

"Yeah, well, no need to apologize." Russel shrugged, understanding his teammate's simple wish to find his partner safe and sound. "You did nothing wrong."

"Oh, before I forget." Dove shot up in his seat, practically leaping to the duffel bag and began to rummage through its contents. After a moment, Dove fished out a small knife with a wooden handle and presented it to the Thrush. "I believe this is yours."

Russel stared, wide eyed, at the familiar object that rested in Dove's hands. It was his Mother's knife. It took the Thrush a second to realize he was already reaching out for the weapon, taking it from the hand that offered and into his own. He drew a thumb over the handle, lightly running it across the name carved into it.

When Russel had left Oakwood to attend Beacon, he'd only taken few possessions, ranging from the few article of clothes he owned to the pair of daggers he'd taken from The Iron Nail. And truth be told, he could've left without any of those things behind just for this simple knife, the knife that once belonged to his Mother.

He looked up from the knife to Dove, unsure what to say. So, rather than stand there gaping like an idiot for the rest of the day, he muttered the typical courtesy. "Thank you."
"Just thought you might want it back, is all." Dove shrugged, before returning his attention to the duffel bag, reaching in and pulling out all sorts of random articles of clothing and kitchen appliances he'd taken from the apartment building.

Then they heard a knock at the door. Both Dove and Russel turned their attention to the front of Hooligan's at the cracked window door and found three obstructed bodies standing outside. The duo exchanged an unsure look, recognizing the knock to be a formality, that whoever was standing outside was not the common looter trying to pick at the bones of Hooligan's, but rather, seeking those within.

"Russel?" A voice the Thrush instantly recognized called into the near run down building. "It's Nebula, we need to talk."

The Thrush caught Dove's questioning glance and held out a hand, silently promising that he'd handle it. Russel then marched to the front of store, a corner of his mouth hiking upward into a smirk. He reached out and claimed a discarded sign left abandoned in the wake of looter's initial onslaught and then finally reached the front door. He pulled it open slightly, not bothering to check and see who it was that accompanied Nebula and threw the sign onto the front of the door before shutting it once more.

"No solicitors." Russel uttered the words on the sign dryly, his smirk evolving into a full toothy grin while Dove snickered in the background.

"But we're not soliciting anything!" An irritated voice, one that Russel didn't recognize, shouted in reply.

"Russel, this is serious, we need to talk." Nebula spoke again, matching her companion's tone.

"Tough crowd." Russel shot a look over his shoulder back to Dove and gestured to the door. "What do you think?"

"Sounds important." Dove muttered as he reached into his stash of sweets that he'd rescued the previous day.

"It is important!" Another voice that neither CRDL boy recognized shouted.

"What do you want to talk about?" Russel questioned.

"You know, I feel rather foolish for talking to a door." Nebula quipped.

"Fine," The Thrush shrugged. "I'm going to open the door, no one shoot me."

"I wouldn't dream of it." That second unknown voice said, followed by what Russel assumed to be a slap. "What the hell was that for?!"

Russel opened the door fully and was greeted by the sight of Nebula rolling her eyes. "That wasn't necessary." The NDGO leader muttered, glancing to her companion standing to her right.

"He was being an idiot." Panini Delso, the leader of Team PSYK, said as she rubbed one of her hands. "His head's a damn rock." She winced. To Nebula's left stood Brawnz Ni, the leader of Team BRNZ who now cradled the back of his head.

"That doesn't mean you should have hit him." Nebula shook her head in disapproval. She then turned her attention to Russel who stood looking on in amusement. She forced a smile. "Is it alright if we have this discussion in doors?" She nodded her head back at her associates. "I'm afraid they'll
The Thrush then stood aside and gestured for the trio to step inside. One by one, Nebula and the rest of her Shade Academy colleagues entered Hooligan's with Russel shutting the door behind them.

"Sorry for the mess," Russel said as he led the trio over to the counter where Dove sat. Much to his relief, it appeared Dove had already stashed the bag somewhere out of sight as it was no longer laying atop the table. "We don't get that many visitors."

"'No Solicitors'? Really?" Brawnz shot him a questioning look.

"I didn't think there were so many of them left, not with the whole kingdom going to shit the way it did anyways." Russel shrugged as he joined Dove, leaving the Shade crew standing directly across from them on the other side of the counter.

It was a risk letting the trio into the building in the first place, neither Russel nor Dove were in the condition to fight, too tired or having never quite recuperated from injuries. But there was something off between them that The Thrush had picked up almost immediately.

There was a definite power imbalance between the three. Sideways glances and idle glares, forced smiles and exhausted sighs shared amongst them. Russel recalled how two days ago he'd spotted Panini and Brawnz arguing through the laundry mat window back in the Melting Pot. Neither of the three standing in front of them had ever worked together, and from what Russel could tell, they barely tolerated each other.

"Alright," Russel spoke cautiously, placing both hand onto the counter and leaning forward slightly. "What'd you want to talk about?"

"You're the one who suggested this guy," Panini muttered, elbowing Nebula in shoulder, earning a slight glare in return. "Tell him."

"I'm sorry to bring this to your attention, Russel, but we don't know who to turn to." Nebula said, a hint of reluctance to her voice that gave credence to her words.

"About what?" Russel implored.

"We've got around forty-four starving Shade students living in our little laundry mat, the ration lines are miles long," She spoke in a serious manner. "To put it simply we're hoping you could help us get something to eat."

"And how do think we could that?" Dove questioned in between bites from the candy bar from his stash.

"We were hoping you could talk to your Team Leader, Cardin…Winchester," Nebula struggled to utter the CRDL leader's name, earning a sideways glance from both her companions that did not go unnoticed by Russel. "He is your Team Leader, isn't he?"

"He was, yes." Russel muttered, scowling slightly.

"He ran off to join up with the Atlesians." Dove informed as he took another bight out of his candy bar.

"Is there any chance you can speak to him, maybe he can get us someplace to the front of the line?" Nebula asked, doing her best to be diplomatic about the whole situation.
Russel didn't blame the NDGO leader for trying, she had people who were starving, and all she wanted was to provide for them. That made his response a tad bit more difficult to say. "Even if I did, I don't think he's got that kind of pull."

"Why not?" Panini interjected. "He's like their Poster Boy or something?"

"What?" Russel raised a brow at the PSYK leader's words. But The Thrush's question went overlooked as Dove spoke up once more.

"Well actually the Valean Government handles the wide distribution of food, as in the Food Lines." He said, muffled by the mouth full of melting chocolate that stuck between his gums and cheek. "But you're actually asking about the food stores the Atelsians privately possess."

"Wait, no, hold on!" The Thrush interrupted, bringing attention back to Panini's earlier statement. "What's this about Cardin being a 'poster boy'?"

"You mean you guys don't know?" Nebula eyed the pair in genuine surprise.

"Don't know what?" Dove questioned as he set aside his candy bar.

"Cardin, The Winchester, Ironwood was quick to spread word he had one of Vale's heroes on his side."

"...The Fuck does that mean?"

"This has been a complete waste of time." Brawnz shook his head before motioning for the others to depart.

"Whoa, hey, wait, hang on a minute." "We can help you, but it won't be as easy as you initially thought it would be."

"And that would mean?" Nebula asked, willing to hear the Thrush out if it meant her people could eat.

"As Dove noted, there are two food depots, the one that caters to the masses and the one that feeds The Atlesians and The Militia." Russel said, drawing his mother's knife. He measured the dull blade and debated its use, before deeming it fit. He then carved two circles into the counter, one representing the Valean Food Depot and another representing the SDC Logistics building. "What I propose, in order to solve your food problem," He pointed the blade of his knife at the circle representing the SDC building. "Is that we take what you need from The Atlesians."

That earned Russel a number of weary looks. "Are you mad?" Panini asked, shocked that he'd even suggest that.

"This isn't what we're asking for, Russel." Nebula shot the Thrush the kind of look that asked if the man was actually sane or not.

"And what you're asking for is impossible." He retorted. "Now, unless you want to chance waiting in line for a week, this is your only option, other than swearing your allegiance to the Atlesian flag, I mean." He mocked a salute.

The trio of Shade students exchanged looks. Brawnz appeared unsure, what Russel had presented them was the notion of robbing from was now an Atlesian Military instillation, there was no telling what that could set off if they were caught. Panini, on the other hand, appeared more susceptible to the idea and just shrugged. Ultimately, it all came down to Nebula.
Russel studied the NDGO leader as she weighed the options. The Shade students had come to their doorstep in search for a solution to their food problem, and now they appeared to have one. Exactly how far was she willing to go for her people? Would Nebula risk an international incident, her own life maybe? She placed her fingerless gloved hand onto the counter and nodded. "Yeah, yeah, okay. It sounds good, let's do it."

"Before we get started, there's something else we need to discuss." Russel glanced over to Dove. "We'll help you, but we aren't doing this for free." He said, finishing his candy bar and tossing the wrapper aside, not caring where it landed, the whole store was a mess anyhow.

"Why is it never easy?" Nebula murmured under her breathe. "Panini?" She glance over her shoulder and nodded her head towards the CRDL boys.

"Of course." The PSYK leader said before reaching into her khaki shorts and producing a stack of lien. "We managed to scrape together a sum of three hundred lien between us, it's all we have but it's yours."

The CRDL boys exchanged a look. "No offense, but lien won't do." Dove delivered in a deadpan fashion.

"What do you mean?" Panini questioned, while Nebula sighed muttering a curse.

"Unless you haven't noticed the sky just crashed on top of us," Russel jotted a thumb out a nearby window. "No functioning economy means that lien's just plastic and paper with pretty pictures."

"Now, let's be somewhat reasonable, things are sure to pick up again in the near future, think of this as a long term investment, that you do have cash on hand when you need it." Panini said trying to bargain with the Thrush.

"At any moment a Vacuan cruiser could drop out of the air and ferry the lot of you home, and this place will be nothing more than a bad memory." The Thrush began, trying his best not to sound insulted. He really shouldn't have been, under any other circumstances he might've taken the money, but the truth was it was useless, things were different, he'd learned that doing a job for Clover. "But sadly we don't have that luxury. We're talking about the possibility of years living in this stupid hardware store while you might spend only a month more here. So, as my associate has already clearly stated, no, we won't be taking lien."

The trio then huddled together, whispering lowly as they attempted to reach an agreement.

"Can you believe this?" Russel looked to Dove and pointed to the trio across the counter. "We're in the same room, we can hear you." Dove shook his head.

"Shush." Panini popped up from the group huddle and shot a dirty look their way.

After a minute or so, they broke apart and Nebula turned to face the CRDL boys once more. "What do you want?"

"That's a good question, if you'll excuse us for a moment?" Russel said before he and Dove spun around and huddled together. "Alright what do we want?" Russel asked, not at all attempting to whisper. "They're living in a laundry mat, you want a dryer or something?"

"The one in the Melting Pot, right?" He asked Maybe they have a gumball machine."
"I think you've got enough sweets there, Dove." He casually motioned to the wrapper that now littered the floor of Hooligan's.

"Couldn't hurt to have a little more."

"Knock, Knock. Who's there?" He asked rhetorically. "It's Type 2 Diabetes, mate."

"You forgot the part where you go 'Type 2 Diabetes, Mate' who?" Dove said pointedly.

"Nah, it just kicks down the fuckin' door. Kind of rude of it, don't you think?"

"Quite." Dove nodded in agreement. "Well, I don't know, I'd ask for a mattress, but honestly I could just fly one over here."

"Don't like sleeping on boxes, eh?" Russel couldn't help but laugh at their unfortunate downgrade in beds. Just a week ago they'd been sleeping on nice, padded and comfy mattress. Now, they on cots made of boxes and old wash cloth rags they'd salvaged from the broom closet.

"I admit, these are less than ideal times, but I just spent the night on an actual bed." The boy who could fly uttered lowly. "Never again will I sleep on these stupid boxes."

"You could just fly one in."

"Fine. What about weapons?"

"I'd say the cutlery you brought back is sufficient enough." Russel gestured to under the counter where the duffel bag lay, right out of the view of the Shade trio.

"Yeah, but of the two of us, I can't throw for shit."

"Hey! Tweedle Dee, Tweedle Dum!" Brawnz barked angrily, catching the ear of both Russel and Dove.

"We're going to forget you said that." Dove muttered.

"Brawnz, dial it back." Nebula practically ordered.

"Sorry, but, they're driving me nuts. All the rambling, it's just ridiculous." The BRNZ leader said before letting out an exhausted sigh. "Look, I might just have something that might interest you." He said, earning looks of surprise from his companions.

Dove and Russel exchanged a questioning glance. "Like what?" Dove asked.

"I'll be right back." Brawnz said before heading for the door.

Twenty minutes passed by with the four individuals standing in relative silence. However, there was a tenseness to the atmosphere, an undercurrent of uncertainty. From the shocked looks that had briefly appeared on Nebula and Panini, Russel gathered that the pair had relatively no idea just what Brawnz was planning. And from what The Thrush had gathered, the man wasn't exactly the most stable of the group.

"If he shows up with a gun…" Russel spoke carefully.

"Brawnz has never been much of a gun-totter, you've got nothing to worry about." Nebula said, to ease the Thrush's concerns.
"Oh great, he works with knives, that's even worse." Dove remarked.

"Will you two grow some balls? Brawnz isn't going to hurt you." Panini shot the CRDL boys a deathly cold glare. "Not before I do anyways."

"Still a bit sore over the whole 'blowing up your team' stunt, aren't you?" Russel questioned as he spun his pocket knife on the counter by its blade.

"The Vytal tournament was supposed to be my chance to shine," Panini proclaimed, her glare intensifying. "To show the world the glorious might of Vacuo!"

"And now the all the world saw was you falling on your ass." The Thrush quipped.

"You son of a bitch." Panini cursed, slamming a fist onto the counter, cracking it slightly.

"Panini!" Nebula shouted. "Drop it, they're helping us."

"Fine, whatever." She said before flipping the bird at Nebula. "First its Faunus, then Valeans. If only your Great Grandfather could see you now."

"Shut. Up." Nebula spoke lowly, in a threatening manner.

The PSYK leader laughed darkly. "Make me."

"If you two are just about done, your guy is back." Dove muttered, gesturing to the font of Hooligan's. Just as he said, Brawnz pushed open the door, bringing with him what appeared to be a black bowling ball bag.

"Alright, before you say anything, promise not to judge me." He pointed to the assembled group of Shade and Beacon students.

"Pfft, no."

"Ugh, whatever. Here." Brawnz groaned, resigning himself to any flak he'd receive. He then pulled back the zipper on the bag and dumped its contents onto the counter with an audible thump.

"Is that…” Dove asked, staring wide eyed at the ginger haired head that rested on that now rested on the counter. "Penny's head?!"

"What. The. Fuck?" Russel asked, turning to look at Brawnz in disgust.

"Brawnz," Nebula shut her eye and squeezed the bridge of her nose before sighing once more. "Why do you even have this?"

"Because The Atlesians created a synthetic being capable of manifesting an aura." Brawnz pointed at the bodiless head. "I thought it'd be smart to have, hand it over to a techie at Shade or something. Atlas shouldn't be the only ones with this kind of hardware. I'll gladly part with it though, if it means sleeping with a full belly tonight."

Panini's eyes darted back and forth from Brawnz to Penny's head. She raised a hand and caught the BRNZ leader's attention. "…You didn't do anything to it, did you?"

"What? No! Gross!" He exclaimed hysterically. "How could you even say that?!"

"Just curious," Panini shrugged. "Dew said you were had trouble getting it up, thought you might be using it for practice."
"Oh for the love of god, woman, that's depraved even for you!"

"Can we stay on track for one minute, please?!" "Now, will you accept the head as payment or not?"

"But what could we do with it?" Russel wondered aloud, tapping the tip of his chin with his free hand in thought. "I suppose I could bloody it up and put it on a pole out front with the 'No Solicitors' sign."

"This just feels wrong." Dove said as gazed upon Penny's head once more. It was then that the young man realized that her eyes were still open. The boy who could fly physically shook as he found himself staring into the windows into the synthetic's soul. "…Her eyes are still open…"

"If you guys don't want it, I could always take it back." Brawnz shrugged before reaching out over the counter to claim Penny's head.

"No!" Dove shouted before slapping Brawnz's hands away. "You're not taking her damn head dude, its creepy enough you had to begin with. We could give her a proper burial or something."

"So you accept it as payment?" Nebula questioned.

"Yeah, sure, whatever." Dove said in visible disgust. The CRDL boy then cautiously reached out to grab Penny's head, taking hold of it he picked it up and placed it back into the bowling bag and zipped it closed. "I feel like I'm going to barf."

"So, now what? What do we do?" Nebula asked, shifting gears in the conversation.

"Thankfully," Russel began, not missing a beat and pointed to the circle carved into the counter representing the SDC building. "After Mr. Schnee himself showed up on our shore, The Atlesians played their hand. They haven't the man power nor the resources to patrol their building and the perimeter of the Safe Zone at the same time. Not to mention, after last night's Grimm scare, they'll be sure enough to bolster their fence patrols. Lights might be on tonight, but barely anyone will be home."

"To put it plainly, now is the perfect time to break in and make off with as much food you can carry." Russel smirked. "Under the cover of darkness, a small team pierces past their defenses, evades detection and makes it out with the goods. Any questions?"

"It's sounds too easy." Nebula muttered as she raised a hand to rub the back of her neck. "There's got to be more to this plan of yours?"

"Oh, there is. We sure as shit won't be leaving with food in our hands."

"That doesn't make any sense." Panini just shook her head in disapproval. "I can't believe we paid a head for this nonsense."

"Dove here's semblance is that he can fly, "Russel jotted a thumb to his teammate, who smiled and waved at the Shade trio. "It's going to be a little conspicuous seeing a couple of people ferrying bags out the building that's, so Dove here will be flying out with them instead. After that, then the rest of the infiltration makes their way out."

Russel paused for a moment, glancing at the poor representation of the SDC building he'd carved into the counter. He thought of the actual building, thought of its dimensions. They'd have to scour the building in search of the food stores, that could take time, and every second would count if they were to evade detection within the building. It would take more than just Dove and himself to pull
"A team of four is too big, a team of three is too noticeable." He mused. "Yeah, me an Dove can handle this."

"So, when can we expect you?" The NDGO leader said, a low growl emitting from her gut.

"Around dark-ish?" Dove shrugged.

"That's the spirit." Russel smirked at his teammate's initiative. "We move at sundown."

Under the cover of night, the ruling body of Vale, accompanied by an armed escort, made their way to The Atlesian compound and demanded an audience with The General. The unexpected arrival had in effect caught the soldiers standing guard unaware and soon caved to their wishes. Without the means of long range communication through the use of scrolls, a runner was sent to fetch Ironwood from his private quarters. It was safe to say the good General was less than pleased.

"What do you mean 'they're' here?" Ironwood questioned as he retrieved his white jacket from where he'd left it on a coatrack in the corner of the Manager's Office, the place where he'd made his home. "Our next meeting wasn't scheduled until for tomorrow."

"I'm not quite sure, sir. The Valean council say they won't leave until they speak with you, uh, sir." The Runner, a lowly private in stainless white armor, spoke quickly out of breathe from the quick dash from his post to the interior of the SDC building.

"Hm." Ironwood mumbled in thought as he buttoned up his jacket. "Quite conniving of them, to pull this stunt, knowing we'd be ill-prepared to handle their concerns."

"We could always force them to leave, sir." The Runner suggested, in a way attempting to atone for bringing such news to the General's attention.

"We forget that we are guests in this land," Ironwood said, straightening his tie. "No, we won't be running them off. It is their right to complain and our obligation to listen." He turned his gaze onto the Runner. "Alert the guard, escort the council and their people to the meeting room, I'll be there shortly."

The Runner nodded and then was off. The General then finished dressing then followed suit, making his way down the stairs some floors below. A floor below the Atlesian rooming quarters and a floor above the Militia's, Ironwood arrived at the Meeting room where two veterans stood guard and saluted the approaching General.

"At ease, soldiers." Ironwood held out a hand in greeting the pair. "Are the council inside?"

"Yes, sir." One of the soldiers nodded.

"Alright, let's see them." The General gestured to the door. The two soldiers then reached out for one of the two doors that separated the meeting room from the hallway and pulled them open.

With that, Ironwood made the long stride into the lion's den. On one side of the long conference table sat the three council members, Dolm Mayflower, Heyman Burns, and Glynda Goodwitch. And to their backs against the far wall stood the remnants of Team JNPR and one other that he didn't recognize, a dark haired young man who stood with a cocky smirk and predator-like eyes.

It was by the point that he'd taken his seat that Ironwood was now beginning to have second
thoughts. It had been unwise of him to come alone, he could've sent for The Captain or even called upon Ciel. But he knew both were indisposed, seeing to the needs of their people. He could've had a runner fetch Cardin, but he knew doing so would have given the trio sitting in front of him even more ammunition. With a resigned sigh, Ironwood knew he'd have to handle this alone.

"I must admit, I'm a bit surprised, we weren't supposed to meet until morning." Ironwood said, taking the initiative and breaking the metaphorical ice of the conversation.

"Better early than late." Dolm muttered, already visibly seething. "We want your people gone."

"A mass exodus of that size is impossible, as you already know." Ironwood spoke calmly, knowing that only a cool head would prevail against a man like Dolm.

"Then grab a ferry to Peach, I don't give a shit," Dolm spat as he shot an icy glare Ironwood's way. "You and your lot of bastards have taken control of our kingdom!"

"Do you see an Atlesian flag flying high above every building in Vale? Then I don't believe we've taken control of anything." Ironwood shot back. "I understand your concerns, believe me, I do. But we just can't afford to push each other away, for the sake of Vale, we must stand together."

"James, why are you so invested in Vale?" Goodwitch asked, cutting Dolm off from starting another one of his anger fueled rants.

"Because Atlas, Vacuo and Mistral are next." Ironwood spoke deathly serious. A hush fell over the room as all looked upon the General in stunned shock. The proud General of the ivory kingdom had just admitted his home was just as likely to fall as the one he sat in now. "Vale was the first target of attack, we damn well know our enemy won't just stop there."

"Then go home!" Dolm shouted, hot furry resurging through his words. "Pack up your bags and go set up shop secure your own fucking borders!"

"Do you honestly think that matters?" Ironwood shot the councilman a sharp glare, his calm demeanor breaking, the stress filled days finally taking its toll on the man. "Look at Vale, look at how secure it was, an entire military fleet hovering overhead, the best Huntsmen the world had ever seen protecting its borders, and yet it still fell. It's only a matter of time before either of the other kingdoms fall."

"You didn't answer the lady's question." Heyman grunted. "Your concerns re valid, but you could set up shop anywhere, why stay in Vale? What's the point to it all, Ironwood?"

The General sighed. "Because Vale is now the safest place on Remnant."

"The Grimm right outside our doors would beg to differ." Heyman said, not buying Ironwood's answer.

"Vale has fallen, it's no longer a concern. Cinder and her people will be turning their attention to the other kingdoms." "If we are ever going to retaliate, it must be from here."

"Is that why've you've galvanized my students? Why you're perpetuating propaganda through Mr. Winchester?" Goodwitch questioned.

"Glynda, Mr. Winchester is a Huntsman, just as all the others are." "This is what they've trained their entire lives for, to fight for and protect humanity."

"They're too young, too inexperienced, James."
"You know that's true." "You saw the same as the rest of the world as Mr. Winchester stood against Cinder's subordinates, and the rest of them are on par with his skills. The truth is, Glynda, they're more prepared for this than anyone else."

"Is that why you were so quick to recruit this Winchester?" Dolm questioned, eyeing The General darkly. "You hope to install a champion for the people?"

"Now more than ever, people need hope." The General didn't even deny the accusation. "The last images to leave Vale were of Cardin, a Huntsman, defiantly acting against Cinder's cronies."

"And through him, your will over the people of Vale would increase." Dolm glared. "It's a good thing we already have a champion then." He smirked.

"We what?" Both Goodwitch and Heyman asked simultaneously.

"Mr. Grimsby, would you come over here?" The councilman glanced over his shoulder and motioned for the dark haired boy to join them. Strutting past Jaune with a smug smile planted on his face, he joined the Valean Council at the table. "General Ironwood, allow me to introduce to you Lance Grimsby, for the past few days he's been cleaning up after your mistakes."

"My mistakes?"

"Could you believe that people are already at each other's throats? Grimm are busting through your precious fence. Lance here has been going around to the people and solving their issues because he's a damn hero." The councilman patted Lance on the shoulder.

"What the hell are you doing, Dolm?" Glynda questioned sharply.

"I hate to admit it, Glynda, but I do agree with The General in one regard, that it's all hands on deck. Our youthful Huntsmen in training are ready, just ask Lance, he'd bested one of the nasty beasts himself, saved the entire Chantry to boot."

"Could you all just shut up for a minute?" Jaune barked from where he stood at the back of the conference room. All members of the council and Ironwood quickly darted to the Arc with questioning looks. "This is pointless."

"How exactly is this pointless, child?" Dolm inquired, arching a brow upward.

"The people who did this, who killed Pyrrha, who killed thousands are out there right now planning to do the same to the rest of the kingdoms and all we're doing is sitting around and arguing." Jaune shook his head in disgust. "We should be striking back."

"We're hardly in any condition to do so, Mr. Arc." Ironwood sighed, unable to meet Jaune's gaze and neither could Glynda, which did not go unnoticed.

For a moment, the General pondered his words, how he'd mentioned the would-be Fall Maiden Pyrrha Nikos. He hadn't once considered the reason why Glynda, who opposed the use of the underclassmen for service, allowed Team JNPR to accompany her. Now it began to make sense, it was because she felt that she owed them, and deep down so did Ironwood. After all, they'd both played a part in pressuring the Mistral Champion into agreeing to become Amber's successor. Ironwood didn't even attempt to scold the boy for speaking out of turn.

"Right now we are, maybe." Jaune muttered. "How about when your warships show up? How about then?"
"Ah yes, and the matter of your warships." Dolm cut in. "And what guarantee can you give us that these ships of yours are of a mercy mission and not an invading force? When are they even arriving anyways?"

"In three days." The General answered, causing everyone present to freeze in shock. "They'll be arriving in three days."

"...So, three days." Dolm gulped. "Then what? You bunker down on our shores? Perhaps you decide to obliterates the Dragon at beacon by leveling our damn city!"

"We would never do that." Ironwood firmly stated.

"But you already have!" Dolm shouted, spit flying from his open mouth. "Thousands are dead, do you forget so easily?!"

"No," The General's eyes narrowed. "I haven't forgotten."

"So your big plan is to essentially turn Vale into a giant military instillation where you can wage a prolonged shadow war?" Jaune rhetorically asked, now glaring at Ironwood. "We could end this, take the fight to Cinder. It could all end just like that."

"We don't even know where she is, Jaune." Goodwitch spoke up, still unable to meet his gaze.

"Weren't you listening?! She's from Mistral!" He shouted, now physically shouting.

"It could be a misdirection." Heyman mused, recalling the long speech delivered by the mad woman during the Vytal Tournament.

"Yeah, it could be. But it's all we've got." Jaune spoke quietly, now on the verge of tears. "But they deserve something, everyone we lost, they deserve better than what we're giving right now."

"That's real sweet, Jaune, but if you haven't noticed the war is right here in front of us." Lance spoke up and pointed to the General. "Going to drop more Atlesian Knights on us, or what? We'll be ready for you this time."

"Are you threatening me?" The General glared, for the first time fully addressing Lance.

"Am I?" Lance scoffed.

"I will not sit by and allow you to throw around threats so idly," Ironwood stood then turned to the door. "Gaurds!" He shouted. Almost immediately the two Atlesian soldiers standing outside entered the room, guns raised. "Please, escort the Valean Council out the building."

"I'm sure we can manage that ourselves." Dolm gruffly muttered. The councilman then turned then stood and headed for the door, followed closely behind by Lance and Heyman.

"Before I go," Goodwitch caught Ironwood's ear, just as the Guards began to guide JNR out the room. "Is Cardin even aware that you're using him?"

Ironwood sighed, then he gestured for Goodwitch to follow him out the door. "He's bright young man."

"Would he even go along with this if he knew?" She asked as they began to walk down the hall.

"I guess you'd have to ask him yourself."
"You're not afraid that I might?"

"I'm afraid, it won't even matter, Cardin believes in what we're doing. And what we're doing is good. I don't think here's a man alive that could change his min-oof" The General said before running walking into a pair of what appeared to be repairmen dressed in grey overalls, brown shirts and matching beanies that obscured the better part of their faces, carrying with them two bags that appeared to have equipment inside.

"Our apologies, sir." One of the men was quick to salute.

"Its fine, it's fine. As you were." Ironwood said before waving them off.

The two repairmen then sauntered off, leaving Goodwitch slightly perplexed. She hadn't gotten a good look at the pair, but if she didn't know any better, she'd have thought those two looked an awful lot like her former students Russel and Dove. "Was that…?" She pondered aloud.

"Was that who?" Ironwood questioned, causing him to pause.

Goodwitch opened her mouth to answer, but then stopped herself. "Nothing." She smiled, knowing exactly what she would do next. "Nothing to be concerned about."

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"That was close." Dove murmured as they walked past the meeting room. "Could have sworn we were done for back there.

"The night's not over yet." Russel remarked as they continued on their way for the stairs.

Reaching the stairs they continued their search for the food stores, scouring every floor bottom to top. Eventually, after walking past the Atlesian quarters, the armory and the private quarters of the good General, they'd reached their destination at the top floor.

It was quite an awful long out of the way location for the food stores to be, but even Russel recognized the importance of its location. With limited access, the Atlesains in effect controlled who could reach their supplies, mighty handy in the off chance they'd need to defend the building from attackers.

However, things were never easy. As they drew closer to the massive vault turned refrigerator meant to prevent the food stuffs from spoiling, the pair of CRDL boys found a guard standing at attention.

"What do we do?" Dove whispered.

"Follow my lead." Russel shrugged before stepping into the Guard field of vision and waving to him. "Oi, hello there, we're here!"

"Who are you?" The Guard questioned, slightly raising his weapon.

"The Repairmen." Russel simply smiled, content with bluffing his way past the Guard. "Got a call down below that there's a nasty rattling here in fridge. Our supervisor thought it best if we took look at it."

The Guard blinked behind his helmet. "Uh…I think I'm going to need clearance on this…"

"You know what a dying freezer fan sounds like?" Russel intervened, preventing the Guard from grabbing the crude dollar store walkie-talkie attached to his belt. "It sounds like a low 'whirrr'
followed by a 'ting'," He spoke quickly, hoping to confuse the Guard. "It's not to be confused with the 'dings', that's a completely different issue. But right now we're focused on the 'tings', not just one 'ting' but in fact multiple 'tings'. It goes something like ting, ting, ting, ting, ting, ting!"

"I…I beg your pardon, sorry, what?" The Guard said in confusion as Russel began to talk circles around him.

"You hear the 'tings' when you've got a fan failing on us. Can't have that now," Russel rapidly shook his head. "The food will spoil and we'll all starve to death. Or give way to cannibalism. Either or but I'd rather not have to deal with that, how about you?

"I'm…I'm sorry, but what are you-?" The Guard began to protest, only for him to be cut off by Russel.

"The 'tings' the 'tings." Russel exclaimed. "Can't you hear it? Listen." Russel grabbed the Guard by the shoulder then dragged him up to the vault door. He placed his helmeted head against it then drew his pocket knife and lightly tapped the metal. "Can't you hear them? The 'tings'?" He said before shoving the knife back into his pocket.

"I-I can, yeah, yeah." Russel could practically hear the Guard's eyes widening in shock behind that helmet of his.

"Why don't you let us in and we'll get this fixed right on up." The Thrush said, sounding as if he were the Guard's new best friend.

"Yeah, sure, sorry for holding you up." The Guard nodded, quickly turning to the vault door and punching in a code into the keypad. The locks fell over with an audible slamming noise then the door pried open.

"Not a problem, mate." Russel shot the Guard a toothy grin before patting him on the shoulder before stepping inside with Dove following suit. With everything seemingly under control, the Guard returned to his post, muttering something about 'tings'.

"Holy hell, Russel?" Dove muttered in astonishment at their success to bypass the Guard.

"Yup." The Thrush smirked.

"No more 'tings'?" The Guard asked.

'No more 'tings'." Russel assured the man with a smile. "Have a good night."

"Yeah, you too." The Guard waved them off.

The duo then walked to the back of the refrigerated vault and found all manner of canned goods and day-to-day ration bars. Both men opened their bags, dumping out the assortment of junk they'd filled them with to give off the impression that they were carrying actual tools. Then, they set on the task of filling them to the brim with whatever they could grab. They pulled off jugs of water, packets of dehydrated meats, and various cans of beans.

Finally, after spending some five minutes within the vault turned refrigerator, Russel pulled out an icebox he'd stashed in his own and began to fill it, grabbing a six pack of beer that lay to wayside other various items for later consumption. He threw the icebox back into the bag and zipped it up, as did Dove. With their mission complete, they headed for vault door.

"No more 'tings'?" The Guard asked.

"No more 'tings'." Russel assured the man with a smile. "Have a good night."

"Yeah, you too." The Guard waved them off.

The CRDL boys then headed off back to the stairwell, with Russel handing his bag off to Dove.
"See you at the meet." Russel said before taking the stairs downward.

"Don't take too long." Dove laughed before huffing it up to the roof in order to take flight with their stolen goods.

All the way down to the main lobby, Russel couldn't help but suppress a smile. Passing off as a repairman had to have been the stupidest idea he'd ever had and yet it was by far the most successful. If it weren't for the fact he was still within the SDC building he'd be a howling with laughter.

So The Thrush made it out the way he'd originally come: out the back door. With the sea breeze smashing him in face and cold humidity of approaching rain baring down on him, he began to whistle a tune. He practically skipped along the sandy beach in the shadow of the Atlesian compound. In the eye of a storm that was the unfolding of the world he knew, Russel had claimed a little victory for himself, something he could proudly smile at.

And so he headed off, but not before catching sight of something shimmering out in the corner of his eye. Russel turned his head, and much to his confusion, he spotted Lance and a woman in Atlesian gear, the same type he'd seen Cardin wear, the hand-me-downs, dragging what appeared to be a non-functioning Atlesian Knight out of a side exit of the SDC building. It was an odd sight to say the least, and seeing Lance was enough to ruin his good mood. So he paid them no further mind and continued on his way.

Into the Melting Pot he went, waltzing to the meet point right outside the laundry mat where the Shade students resided. And just as they'd planned ahead of time, Dove stood there waiting, both bags of food laying by his feet.

"You drop off ours?" Russel questioned as he reached down for one of the bags.

"Yup." Dove nodded, a cheery smile on his face.

"Alright, let's go." The Thrush nodded to the laundry mat.

They both grabbed a bag and walked forward to their destination. Up above they caught the shine of a sniper scope belonging to one May Zedong, Team BRNZ's resident sniper. Cautiously, they proceeded, at any moment the woman on the roof could drop them, that is if the people of Vacuo were the back stabbing type.

But no fatal blows to cranium came and the CRDL boys reached laundry mat and knocked on the door. "Trick or Treat." Russel greeted as the door flew open.

"Holy crap." The doorman, one Roy Stallion muttered at the sight of the bags. "Guys! They're here!" He shouted back into the room.

"I knew you guys would pull through." Nebula's voice emitted from within the building. Stepping out past Roy, Nebula and her teammate Dew reached out and claimed the bags from the CRDL boys. The NDGO leader then handed her bag off to Roy and pointed back into the laundry mat.

"Alright, take stock then get cooking."

"You got it." Roy nodded before he and Dew stepped back inside.

"You know you guys didn't have to do this. You could have been scumbags, could've left us to starve or what not, but you didn't." Nebula shot Russel a bright, thankful smile.

Maybe it had something to do with the lighting, but there was something he didn't notice there
before, a softness to her features, and yet, there was a quiet, unyielding determination. Whatever it was, Russel didn't even have to force the reciprocating smile as he met her brilliant olive green eyes.

"Eh, don't sweat it." Russel shrugged, as if it were nothing. "You paid a literal head for this."

"Still, thank you." She waved goodbye before stepping back inside, closing the door behind her.

"Well, I guess that's our good deed for the week." Dove mused as he turned on his heel to head back for Hooligan's.

"Yeah," Russel nodded as he watched through the laundry mat window as Nebula strode across the room, helping organize the Shade student's feast. "Our good deed for the week." He muttered before leaving to join Dove on the long walk back to Hooligan's.

"So, wanna crack open a few beers when we get in?" Dove asked, suddenly giddy at the prospect.

"You ain't even old enough to drink." The Thrush smirked and shook his head.

"Neither are you." Dove laughed.

They'd reached the door to Hooligan's when Russel began to fish through the pockets his overalls for his keys. Their backs were to rest of the world when they heard a loud explosion. The CRDL boys turned north to the source, seeing a large fireball shooting upward.

It was all too sudden, they need more information to go on other than by what they saw. But they'd been around the block a while, both from the air and from walking around with boots on the ground. Judging by how far way the explosion was, there was no doubt in either of their minds of the source of the fire. Over yonder across the way, the Valean food depot was up in flames, and any semblance of peace and order along with it.

This has to be one of the more lighthearted chapters I've done in a while. Read into that as you will.

When I originally planned out this arc last year, it in no way involved Russel breaking into an Atlesian compound to steal food. In fact, this story arc was originally supposed to be all about Team CRDL escorting the Shade students back to Vacuo. It's quite surprising how things change over time. And, for the better I think. I just can't justify Russel and company walking in the woods for five chapters.

When writing Russel and Dove, I like to think of it as a older brother-younger brother sibling relationship. I think it works.

The whole 'Penny's Head is in a bag' idea was actually birthed around the time I was writing 'Who Dares Wins', but it wasn't Brawnz who'd have her head. It was a morbid idea that for the most part is played for laughs in the chapter above, but I believe I handled the dark undertones well enough.

There's also a lot going on with all the higher-ups, where they all have a different view of their situation, and I believe that no one is exactly right, and no one is completely wrong either and I think that makes good drama, there is no definite answer and we're going to see moving forward by the end of this arc just how we resolve this mess, and that's exciting.
'Tings'.

So, next chapter should be out by next week, it shouldn't be as long as this one, I hope.

Later days!
The resulting shockwave of the explosion rocked the Safe Zone as the resulting fireball flared upwards, eerily illuminating the night sky. It was at that moment when instinct took over and Cardin leapt down from his watchtower, the ground shaking beneath his feet. He took off into a sprint without pause, dashing off towards the blaze in spite of the protests of his fellow watchmen.

It was treason to abandon his post, but Cardin didn't care, not like there was a cell laying around for them to throw him into. When he'd joined the Militia, Cardin had done so under the pretense to protect innocents. Now, there was danger, the possibility of an out of control blaze. So through frozen mobs of people who stared in wonder and horror, he ran, his legs carrying him towards the explosion as fast they could.

Arriving on the scene, Cardin was greeted by the sight of the burning building that housed the Safe Zone's food stores. He paused and studied the building evaluating if it were possible that anything inside hadn't already burnt to a crisp. Without the food stores inside, it would only be a matter of days before a riot and all the people would be swept up in the resulting chaos. And for a moment, just a moment, Cardin felt a twinge of hope at the sight of something glimmering through a window. Sadly, however, the roof came crashing inward, causing the rest of the building to implode, and shooting burning stacks of lumber in all directions.

Now was his chance, the fire was dispersing outward, maybe he could leap in, perhaps his semblance could take the brunt of the fire while he saved what food he could. But Cardin couldn't dwell on it, not while the fires raged and threatened to spread to the surrounding areas. The options at his disposal were limited, he couldn't simply douse the flames, which would take more resources than he had available. So then he reached behind his back and then drew his mace. The Atlesian military had been very helpful in resupplying the newly minted Militia's weapons, the fresh Magma Dust crystal flared brightly, burning to life at the center of the mace. In order to route the flames, he would fight fire with fire.

He quickly raised his mace then slammed it down, shooting hot magma rippling across the ground around the burning building and smoldering anything in its path. To prevent the fire from spreading, Cardin would simply incinerate its path before it could reach it. He raised his mace again, then began his work in boxing the building in. With all pathways cut off, the fire would only burn itself out.

"What the hell happened here?!!" A voice not too familiar shouted, catching Cardin's ear. The Winchester turned to find a growing crowd and one Lance Grimsby emerging to the forefront, an accusing look on his face.

"There was a fire." Cardin muttered dryly, jotting a thumb over his shoulder to the still burning
"Yeah I can see that." Lance's glare intensified.

Response teams of former Vale PD and Atlesian Military soon arrived, pushing past Cardin and Lance to battle the fires themselves. Buckets of sand and salty water from the nearby beach were used to douse the still raging flames. The dying fire flared in futility as the combined Valean and Atlesian force extinguished its flame, leaving only the charred building, the smoldering food reserves and one other unmistakable object.

"What the fuck is that doing in there?" Lance shouted angrily, pointing into the exposed building at the burnt corpse of an Atlesian Knight resting within. "What did you people do?!" He shouted in Cardin's face.

"We didn't do anything." Cardin shot back, standing his ground as Lance.

"Then explain that!" Lance exclaimed pointing to the Knight once more, this time standing to the side, giving the crowd a good look at the robotic corpse resting within.

"Yeah!" Some voice in the mass mob shouted in agreement. "Why's there a Knight?!"

"I'd bet anything that your damn Knight caused this, isn't that right folks?!" Lance addressed the crowd, earning a number of shouts in agreement. "It wasn't bad enough your damn machines were killing us a week ago, now they're starving us!"

"Let's not jump to any conclusions," Cardin shouted, raising his hands defensively to the crowd. "The Knights have been offline ever since the Flagship was destroyed. There's no way the Knight could have done this!"

"Just like there was no way they couldn't turn their guns on the people of Vale?" Lance said pointedly, raising a hand to prod Cardin in the chest. "What do you say to that, Atlesian Sympathizer?"

"I say we've all been through a lot," Cardin said, smacking Lance's hand aside and turning to the crowd. Lance was only an instigating presence, and the Winchester realized that in order to prevent an angry mob from sprouting, he would need to address them directly. Suffice to say, Cardin wasn't much of a speech guy, more of the type to speak with his fists than with his mouth. But dire times called for desperate measures.

"People of Vale, lend me your ears, please!" He called out, holstering his mace on his back as a show of good faith. The simmering anger of the crowd calmed for a moment as all eyes fell on Cardin. "I know you're angry, I know you're scared. These are dark days and they seem to be growing darker, but what can't start turning on each other." He turned pointed at the Atlesian Knight within the building. "I know what this looks like, as do you. But the Atlesian Military hasn't been in control of the Knights since the attack, they are not at fault."

"Then who is, Cardin?!" Lance shouted, interrupting the Winchester. "If not the Atlesians then please, tell us, who is responsible for burning our food?!"

"No one is!" Cardin exclaimed, not playing into Lance's hands. "People of Vale, we've been blown up, shot at for years! And when times seemed dire, when all hope was lost, we still endured! This isn't an exception!" Cardin motioned to the far off ruined city. "The whole world has thrown its best shot at Vale and we're still here! So please, I ask of you, please, shoulder this one slight just once more, please."
There was a murmuring amongst the gathered crowd, but whatever anger they held seemed to dissipate from their faces, leaving tired, sorrowful looks of men and women who'd endured the greatest attack in the history of Remnant. Without a word, they began to disperse, heading back to wherever they now dwelled, the homes and lives they knew just a far off past.

"This isn't going to last, Cardin." Lance sneered before turning to leave, just as more Atlesain soldiers began to arrive on the scene.

"Drop Dead, Lance." Cardin muttered, turning to head back towards the border of the Safe Zone, recalling that he was still on duty.

It had only been six days since the whole world came crashing down around them and only now did it feel like they were dead in the water. News quickly spread of the Atlesain Knight found in the fire and tensions were at an all-time high. Sooner or later, something was going to give and all Russel could do was watch.

Walking through the Melting Pot in under the cloudy dull morning, the Thrush walked, getting a feel for the goings on around their feebly shanty towns. People talked all the time these days, with the power gone out and the internet gone dead, it was all they really had to keep from going insane.

"A Knight, can you believe it?" Russel eavesdropped from some random woman. "Damn blasted thing burnt down everything."

"I know right, how unlucky could we be?" Another woman said in response. "Atlesians can't just let us be."

"How long until someone does something?" The Thrush eavesdropped from some Haven student as he walked past.

"We're all going to bleeding starve, we're all going to bleeding starve!" He heard someone shouting from across the street.

"I hear Atlesians are arriving in two days, you don't think they'll have food do you?" Some young scrappy looking chap said to an older gentleman.

"Bah! They'll be bloody invading!" The old man shouted in a defeated tone.

"We need to gear up, get ready to seize their building." A man whispered to his companion as they walked past Russel.

"They've got the food and we need it more than they do." The man's companion nodded in agreement.

Russel bitterly bit his lip as he recalled the night before, how after they'd broken into the Atlesian compound and raided their food stores, he'd seen Lance and a helmeted woman making off with a Knight. It couldn't have been a coincidence that a Knight was found at the scene and Lance trotting in just about ready to incite a damn purge. And all Russel could do was mentally curse himself for his own inaction.

If only he'd known, then perhaps Russel could've intervened. But the fact was that he didn't and now the whole Safe Zone was about to blow. The Atlesians were due in two days' time, which meant there was just enough time for something else to go horribly wrong and justify people's demand for blood. People's lives were in jeopardy now because of him and all Russel could do was waltz around a mope about it.
'How utterly pathetic.' He thought to himself before deciding to make one final pass around the Melting Pot. He picked up on the usual chatter of how hopeless the people's situation was, and also some rather inconsequential private conversations.

With his business concluded, Russel began to head out of the Melting Pot. Along the way, however, he found himself walking past the familiar laundry mat where the Shade students now called their home. He thought of the food he'd stolen for them, how given the current shortage of edible goods, those cans of beans were now even more valuable. Hopefully they hadn't gorged themselves and rationed it, he thought to himself as he peered in through one of the windows.

"Not a step closer." A foreign voice called out to the Thrush from above. Glancing upward, Russel spotted one May Zedong at her post atop the laundry mat, sniper rifle in hand and peering through the scope. "Intruders will be shot on sight." She stated simply.

"Too bad our resources are so bad." Russel waved at the BRNZ sniper. "Is your gun even loaded?"

"Take another step and I'll show you." May spoke in a cold detached tone, as if she weren't threatening Russel but rather stating a fact.

"Whoa, hold it May, he's a friendly!" A familiar voice shouted up from the roof. Stepping into view was none other than the NDGO leader herself. "So what brings you back this way, Russel? You didn't bring us any more food now, did you?"

"Don't tell me you crazy kids ate it all already." Russel laughed. "Just in the neighborhood, walking around, nothing on the TV these days."

"That's a shame," Nebula smirked. "Hey, you wouldn't happen to be busy, would you?"

Russel cracked an amused smile. "If I wasn't?"

"I'd ask you for your help with something." Nebula matched the Thrush's grin.

"Well what do you know? My schedule just freed up."

"Well how about that," The NDGO leader chuckled. "I'll meet you down below in the mat for the specifics." She said before turning and stepping out of Russel's view.

Under the watchful eye of May, Russel entered the laundry mat and into the middle of a heated exchange. In the center of the room were none other than Panini and Brawnz, trying to scream each other's ear off while their fellow students stood on either side of the room. As Russel recalled from their previous interactions, there was something akin to a power struggle amongst their ranks. He just never thought it could be this bad.

But things seemed civil enough for the pair of warring Team Leaders to drop their argument and turn to address their unannounced visitor. Soon enough, all eyes were on Russel who waved at the newfound attention. "Howdy." He smirked.

"What the fuck are you doing here, Russel?" Panini questioned, sparing a glare away from Branwz and to the Thrush.

"Regretting I didn't bring popcorn." Russel spoke dryly, earning a few snickers from a number of the audience on Branwz's side of the room. "Oh, don't stop on my account, this is quite fascinating."

"How the hell did you get past May?" Brawnz asked with genuine surprise. "She'd have shot you
dead before you were twenty feet from the door."

"Because I asked her not to," Nebula said, emerging from a backroom, quickly gaining the attention of her fellow students. "Russel needs help with a job, the kind that requires a certain Vacuan touch. And I just so happen to be the only one who doesn't have her head of their ass." She shot a glare at both Brawnz and Panini as she walked past. "Shall we?"

The NDGO leader quickly crossed the room under the scrutiny of not only her peers but also of Russel. The lie didn't go unnoticed, but Russel knew better than to call her out on it while she was making an ass of her contemporaries. Without a word exchanged between them, Nebula walked out the door with Russel following her close behind.

"What was that all about?" The Thrush asked as they walked out onto the streets of The Melting Pot, right out of hearing range of the Shade students.

"Politics." Nebula muttered with disgust as the pair set off down the cluttered and ruined street.

"Was you asking for my 'help' politics?" Russel inquired, not exactly keen on the idea of being used as means to end.

"No, that was me just wanting to get the hell out of there," Nebula jotted a thumb over her shoulder back at the laundry mat that seemed to be getting smaller the further they got away from it. "Day in, day out, every hour, every second, they're at each other's throats. And I can't take it anymore." She let out a tired sigh. "Just need to get away for a bit, that's all."

"Can't be that bad, can it?"

"Turns out it can." The NDGO leader sighed once more. "I'm not sure if it's sexual tension with them living together or that they just disagree on a fundamental level, but it's been driving a wedge in our group. They've been clashing ever since about what we should be doing and what we shouldn't be. It's been the absolute worst."

"Yeesh," He muttered. "I don't know, I just want what's best for my people."

"Yeah, I sort of picked up on that when you asked me to steal food for you guys."

"To be fair, that was your idea, I was hoping you'd be able to talk to your friend for us."

"Yeah, about that," He said as they rounded another corner, bypassing traffic and exiting the Melting pot. "I know my share of Vale history. Violette? You wouldn't happen to be related to 'The' Violette, would you?"

"Guilty as charged, I'm afraid." Nebula said, seeing no point in denying her heritage. "I'm seriously considering changing it one day though."

"Why?" He raised a brow. "Not that it's any of my business, but, why do you want to change it?"

"My whole life I've been told every Violette is destined to lose." Nebula sighed, as she stared out ahead past the broken and battered buildings and to the sandy shore ahead. "Ever since Orion Violette's defeat at the hands of Roman Winchester, my family's been cursed. I thought I was the exception to the rule, excelling at everything from tests to combat, but as evident with the Vytal tournament and how little a difference I made during the Fall, I'm starting to think that maybe they're right."
"-Tch-," Russel sharply inhaled at the word 'destined'. "I doubt a 'loser' could convince the two biggest loudmouths in the lot to go to us, I mean. I can tell from your associates we weren't your first choice."

"You don't have to be a winner either. You were our only option."

"Still," He shrugged as they wandered without direction across the Safe Zone. "You sell yourself short. It's the little things that matter too."

"Heh," She laughed lightly. "Desperate times call for desperate measures, and that includes making nice with the people you're told to hate since childhood."

"You're told to hate Cardin?" Russel asked with genuine surprise.

"Kind of, well, it varies." Nebula said, brushing a stray strand of her indigo colored hair off of her face. "Vacuo has always held a grudge against Vale, I don't doubt for a second that the council back home is laughing their asses off right about now. Roman Winchester halted the Vacuan advance, it was to be our last great push, the one that would win Vacuo the war. But in the end we were forced into the peace talks. So yeah, asking a Winchester for help was kind of like chewing glass."

"That's a mental image I didn't want." Russel winced at the idea and raised a hand to his mouth. "Still, you did what you had to do. Now your guys got enough food to, well, not starve like the rest of us. Best not mention to anyone though, don't want any unwanted visitors with pitchforks."

"No kidding," She lightly laughed. "Yeah, I heard about that. All the food stores are gone, as if things weren't bad enough." Nebula shook her head. "Just out of curiosity, you didn't have anything to do with that, did you?" She eyed the Thrush suspiciously.

"What would make you think that?" Russel asked, meeting her stare.

"I don't know, you did steal food for us."

"Let the record show that I did not start the fire." He mockingly held a hand over his heart. "That soothe your conscience a bit?"

"A bit." Nebula laughed, earning a smile from the Thrush. They were by the shore now, walking along the empty beach. Not too far away was the air strip and beyond that the SDC building. But here, there was no one, just the brilliant blue waves and the dark and weary sky. "There aren't beaches in Vacuo, just sand, lots and lots of sand."

"Yeah, there weren't any ocean wasn't anywhere near where I grew up either." Russel remarked as he took in the endless blue wonder that just disappeared over the horizon.

"Not originally from the city?" She asked, her curiosity piqued once more.

"Nope, grew up on a farm." Russel said, not seeing it as anything special.

"I've been a city girl my whole life, I can't imagine what that must be like." Nebula said, a kind of wonder in her eye.

"It's…" Russel paused for a moment as he thought the words in his head. He debated whether to say something blunt or negative about his time in Oakwood, about his youth. But ultimately, he decided against it, and spared the NDGO leader his life story. "Difficult. It was difficult."
"Did you have any animals?" Nebula asked, earning an odd look from the Thrush.

"You want to know if I had animals?" Russel asked in disbelief, an oddly amused smile forming on his face.

"Glad to see those ears of yours aren't for show." Nebula pointed to her own ears for show. "Now come on, you grew up on a farm, did you have any animals or not?"

"Yeah, I had animals." He finally admitted. "But I sold them off to a neighbor before moving for Beacon."

"You sold them?" Nebula raised a brow at the Thrush's choice of language.

The memories of the night The Iron Nail led the attack on Oakwood's farms, how his Father died alone in his arms in an open field from a heart attack. "...It's a long story."

"Oh." Nebula's eyes widened slightly at the implication. "I'm sorry to hear that."

"Don't be." He waved the notion off. "You got family?"

"A Mom and a Dad." Nebula answered vaguely in an awkward tone, regretting having caught onto Russel's precise use of words. "They're probably worried sick about me."

"That's what parents are supposed to do, right? Be worried about their kids?" Russel found himself saying, sounding unsure.

"Something like that, yeah." Nebula said as she raised a hand to rub her neck.

"Then it sounds like to me that you've got a decent set of parents."

"It was during Pyrrha Nikos' first championship tournament fight," Nebula spoke, feeling a bit nostalgic. "I sat there by the TV with my dad, and I was just absolutely crazy over the idea someone like me could stand there in front of the world." A bright smile appeared on the NDGO leader's face as she recalled the memory. "It was in that moment that I wanted to be a Huntress, I wanted to be just like Pyrrha Nikos, an invincible girl in my own right."

"Pfft." Russel couldn't help but laugh. "I bet that went over well with your folks."

"My Mom was absolutely livid at the idea." Nebula joined in the laughter, smiling brightly in a way that utterly captivated the Thrush's attention. "My Dad, on the other hand, was entirely supportive. How about you?"

"Both my parents were Huntsmen and my Dad pretty much wanted me to be one," He said truthfully. "But, it was ultimately my choice in the end, so you wanna know what I did?" He asked rhetorically. "I decided to be a Huntsman rather than a farmer."

Things grew quiet between them, with Russel silently lamenting over the subject of family while Nebula took in the view of the surrounding forest and nearby ocean which was a welcome change from the sore brown sandy dunes and mountains she'd come to know. "I like Vale," Nebula said, cutting through the silence. "I like the trees and everything, we don't have many trees in Vacuo."

"No offense, but Vacuo sounds like it sucks." The Thrush commented as they began to head back, the nearby sea growing further away with every step.

"It kind of does, yeah." The NDGO leader admitted, smirking slightly. "I'm not sure of your stance
of when it comes to Faunus, but the divide between us and them is greater than it was here in Vale."

"Guess Vacuo beat Vale at something after all." He remarked dryly.

"It just so happened to be the worst thing possible." Nebula released an exasperated sigh. "When I decided to be a Huntress, I bought into the idea of protecting humanity wholeheartedly. I just didn't get the memo at home that Faunus and Humans aren't to be considered in the same boat."

"That why Panini keeps giving you a hard time?" He surmised. "You tried treating Faunus and Humans equally?"

"Yep." She groaned. "We have riots in the Faunus Ghettos all the time these days, one day I think we'll have another Faunus Rights Revolution on our hands."

"Well, if it weren't for The Atlesians rustling everyone's jimmies, people like Panini would be calling for a purge of everyone Faunus."

"What The White Fang's done is unforgivable, but I'm not going to write off all Faunus."

"Then don't." Russel shrugged. "Do what you want, not what someone else tells you to."

"You make it sound so simple."

"It isn't," He said honestly. "But hardly anything is." He said as they arrived back at the laundry mat.

"Thanks for talking with me, I needed this." Nebula thanked the Thrush. "To get away and to just...to just decompress."

"It was my pleasure," He said over his shoulder as he walked away. "Take care of yourself, Nebula."

"You too Russel," She waved back. But Nebula did not immediately turn to enter the Shade student's dwelling, rather, she lingered for a moment, thinking over his words and watching his form disappear through the masses that cluttered the Melting Pot. "You too." She said before returning to the laundry mat, a content smile on her face.

On his way back to Hooligan's, Russel passed by the over bloated Chantry. If there was ever a sign of the times, you'd find it there. He could hear people arguing, shouting in front of the holy place's doors, a number of Valeans cornering a lonely Atlesian student, demanding that he leave the church's grounds. Not even the most holy and divine of places were safe from their bitter feuds. The Thrush paid them no further mind, pushing onward and finally reaching the hardware store which he now called home.

But something was amiss, as Russel stepped to the door, having fished his keys out of his pocket, he found the door to Hooligan's cracked slightly open. There was a rule the two of them had, doors closed at all times, even if anyone could come crashing through a window, Dove and Russel always kept the front door shut. Even if Dove seemed to be more on the shirking side, the Thrush knew he wasn't careless enough to neglect their one rule.

So then, Russel cautiously entered Hooligan's, finding the place even more of a mess than when he'd first found it. Far off to the back of the store, he could hear the feint echoes of shouts. Taking the initiative, the Thrush quietly tip toed through the store as not to alert anyone of his presence. The last thing he needed was a straight up fight, the wounds he'd sustained from The Ursa and
from Mercury still burned all over. Not to mention his lack of weaponry and his abysmal aura supply made his chances even slimmer.

Creeping down aisles, the shouts grew louder and soon they began to feel familiar. Russel's eyes narrowed, recognizing the source as he entered the 'employees only' section of the store, the place where he and Dove had made their home. Turning at a corner, he soon found himself stumbling upon an impromptu interrogation.

"Where is it Dove?!" Jaune shouted at the CRDL boy as his teammates Ren and Nora scoured his living quarters in the Employee Break Room. "Where's Russel keeping it?"

Bound to a chair and sporting a bruising eye, Dove offered the JNPR leader only a curse. "Get bent." He slurred.

"I don't think he's going to be much help." Nora said over her shoulder as she dug up a duffel bag full of clothes and other assorted junk he'd collected from his scavenging in the city. But out in the corner of her eye, something caught the attention of the bombastic young woman. "Well what do we have here?" She said aloud to no one specific.

"You find it, Nora?" Ren asked, pausing his own rummaging in some nearby cabinets.

"Better," Nora shot her longtime friend and partner a toothy grin. Without pause, she produced a bag full of assorted candy and other dainty goodies. "I found his secret stash!" She exclaimed enthusiastically.

"H-Hey!" Dove stammered, wide eyed as Nora paraded his cherished goods in the open. "Drop those, now!"

"What if I don't?" Nora asked, a wicked idea crossing her mind. She then reached into the bag, retrieving an ordinary chocolate bar. She then tore open the wrapper and took one massive bite, earning a horrified shriek from Dove. "You guys want some?" She raised the stash into the air, presenting it to either of her teammates. "Plenty enough to go around."

"Those aren't yours!" Dove shouted frantically as he desperately attempted to break free of his binds.

"You know what, I think I'll have one." Jaune said, before walking over and grabbing a bag of gummies. He pried the packaging open then threw a trio into his mouth. "Mmm, been a while since we had some of these. I think I might just want to eat them all."

"…You animals." Dove practically cried.

"We'll stop, if you tell us where Russel hid it." Nora said before taking another bite out of her chocolate bar, finishing it completely.

"I don't even know what you're looking for!" Dove shouted as he violently thrashed against the rope that bound him to the chair. In the end, his efforts had the adverse effect of tilting onto his side, causing Dove to fall over and land in a rather uncomfortable position. "…ow."

"I don't believe you." Jaune said lowly. He then walked forward, gummies in hand and then crouched beside the fallen CRDL boy. He reached into the bag and drew another of the rainbow colored snacks before tossing it into his mouth. "Where is Pyrrha's headdress?" He asked in between chews.

"He doesn't know." Russel said, catching the JNR trio's attention. They turned down the hall and
spotted the Thrush, fully stepping into Dove's living quarters. "Why is it whenever you want something from us, you always resort to extortion?" Russel asked pointedly, recalling how JNPR and RWBY had once ransacked their dorm room and held his pocket knife hostage for information on Cardin. "It's quite rude of you."

"Russel." Jaune muttered quietly as he met the Thrush's gaze. He then stood up straight and tossed the bag of gummies onto the floor beside Dove, causing the CRDL boy to whimper as a number fell out and onto the dirty floor. No ten second rule would save the poor confectionaries.

"Jaune." Russel took the opportunity to place his hands into his overall pockets, discreetly claiming his knife should he need it.

"I'm going to give you one chance," Jaune uttered quietly as he maintained eye contact with the CRDL boy. "Hand it over. It doesn't belong to you."

"Balls the size of coconuts, now eh?" Russel whistled. "Well, that doesn't matter. It doesn't belong to you either."

As long as Russel had known Jaune, he'd never once thought of the JNPR leader to be a physical threat. And if he were to ask his fellow classmates, he very much believed that would be the popular opinion of the blond knight. Jaune was the everyman who'd somehow lucked his way past the eye of Beacon faculty with his fraudulent transcripts, the poor brawler possessing a mind full of untapped potential, the comical goofball that the likes of Pyrrha loved and adored, the kind of poster boy for altruistic intentions.

To say he was surprised, when Jaune launched forward and clocked him across the jaw, would be a massive understatement. Russel went flying backwards, only to be caught by the color of his shirt before he could hit the ground. The Thrush stared up ward, meeting Jaune's fierce gaze as the blonde knight then with little show force threw him at a nearby wall. Hitting the wall back first, the air was promptly knocked out of his lungs. But there would be no reprieve for the Thrush as once more as the Knight grabbed at him once more and lifted him off of the ground.

"You're a thug, you know that?" Jaune glared. "Cardin, well he changed, he actually felt guilt and remorse. He made amends. And Dove? He was just a follower, a second stringer. But you, Russel, you've always been a terrible person. You're just scum."

"That's a mean thing to say," An empty laugh escaped the Thrush's lips. "Dove's more than just a second stringer."

"Thanks Russel...I think." Dove said from where he lay tied up on the floor.

"I can't believe people like you get to go on living while people like Pyrrha die," Jaune sneered, his eyes now watering. "She didn't deserve any of that, any this. And now some random asshole just owns all that's left of her." The words that left Jaune's mouth cut deep. It was an all too familiar rhetoric, one that had been spoken to Russel since he'd been a child.

A rage swelled within the Thrush's chest, his right hand now firmly grasping the knife in his pocket. But for a moment, he met the Knight's gaze and looked past the anger he held within his narrowed eyes. Russel could see the hurt, the guilt. Now he wasn't even sure if the Knight was talking about him at all, rather, perhaps he was referring to himself.

Jaune was still reeling from Pyrrha's loss, that much was evident given by the sheer lengths he'd go to retrieve a single aspect of her. But this was something else entirely. It left Russel thinking back to Beacon Tower, how Pyrrha alone had saved him from a doomed fall. He recalled how she was
alone, not a single friend or ally at her side.

Given what he knew, Russel made his best educated guess. "You abandoned her, didn't you?" He asked, getting an angered reaction out of the blonde. With both hands busy suspending the Thrush in the air, Jaune made the best out of what he had at his disposal and bash his head forward, effectively head-butting Russel in the nose.

Russel groaned, not expecting the JNR leader to make such a move. It felt like the whole room was now spinning and he could feel a slight stream of blood began to descending from a nostril. "So is that a yes or a no?" He asked as he met the Knight's gaze once more.

Jaune's features twisted into an uncharacteristically mean scowl and the Thrush prepared himself for another head-but. However, no attack came, Jaune simply lowered his head, unable to meet Russel's stare. "I could've stopped her." He choked on pained sobs. Jaune lowered Russel back onto the floor while maintaining his hold. "But she locked me in a rocket locker and launched me to the Safe Zone. She was my partner, my friend, I should've stopped her, and I could've saved her."

A moment passed and Russel could feel the sorrowful eyes of Nora and Ren looking onto them. This was what it was like to lose someone you cared about, this was how you dealt with it. "She was my friend too." Russel said, causing Jaune to look up and meet his gaze once more.

There was a dull, surprised look on Jaune's face, almost as if the notion of some sort of friendship between the Mistral Champion and the lowly CRDL punk was implausible. But Russel could practically see the gears turning in that brain of his, watching as Jaune connected all the dots and reviewed the facts. Then, without a word, Jaune released his hold and stepped away from the Thrush.

"I'm not going to leave without it, you know that right?" The Knight asked.

"Yeah, I know" Russel muttered as he wiped the blood from his face on his ugly mustard colored repairman's shirt. "But I ain't handing it over. What you gonna do now?"

Jaune paused for a moment, pondering what indeed he would do. "I don't know." He said honestly.

"Mr. Arc," A voice called from elsewhere inside the hardware store. "Your twenty minutes are up."

"Mr. Thrush, Mr. Bronzewing, would you two come out here?" The voice that had called away JNR said from down the hall. The pair of CRDL boys exchanged an unsure look, neither were in the best of shape at the moment and there was no telling what their visitor had in store for them. "I would have you know that we have precious little time on our side, so please, would both come out here?"

The pair exchanged another look uncertainty before ultimately deciding to meet their new house guest. Stepping into the main section of Hooligan's, to their surprise, they found another trio of familiar faces. Standing at the front by the main counter was one Professor Glynda Goodwitch, and
flanking her, to Russel's own confusion, stood Danny Matchstick and Marie-Anne Cherri.

"Good Evening." Goodwitch flashed a smile.

"Howdy." Russel waved as he looked to the rest of the store in search of any sign of Jaune and the others. "So you gave them twenty minutes?" He asked, recalling Goodwitch's words.

"Thanks for that, by the way." Dove remarked, as he raised a hand to lightly touch his eye.

"As you've no doubt noted, their still in mourning. But that does not excuse their treatment of you, Mr. Bronzewing. You have my apologies." Goodwitch said, a hint of sincerity in her tone. "But, we have much to discuss."

"Why is it no one visits us just to say 'Hi'?" Russel shook his head before gesturing to the Beacon Professor's company. "So how do you figure into this?" Russel asked, nodding to the pair of 'Dunces'. "If you don't mind us asking?"

"Not at all," Marie-Anne shrugged. "The action's here, what else am I going to do? Go back to Oakwood and grow wheat?" She asked rhetorically, shooting Russel a pointed look.

"And you?" The Thrush turned to Danny.

"Fuck Atlas." The DNCE leader deadpanned. "The whole Kingdom's muted white and full of wanton fuckery."

"You're a class act, Danny." Russel said not skipping a beat. He then turned to Goodwitch with a quizzical look on his face. "I thought you weren't accepting us students as help, what gives?"

"Our situation with The Atlesians has made compromise the only solution to our predicament." Goodwitch answered. "I'm keeping the current roster small, however, taking a few who I know could get the job done."

"I'm certain that if you accepted all of us, we wouldn't be having none of this Militia nonsense." Russel spat with disgust.

"That's actually what we're here to talk about." Danny spoke up.

"Oh boy." Russel groaned.

"As you may be aware, in two days The Atlesain fleet will be arriving on our shores. What unfolds will be an informal occupation, with the Kingdom of Vale and all of our resources directed solely for the effort to strike back against Cinder and her allies." Goodwitch said darkly. "That is, unless we can convince General Ironwood such a course of action would be counterproductive to the safety of not only Vale and its people but to the world of Remnant as a whole."

"Then tell him that bringing his military here would only weaken Atlas, you don't need us to get an audience with the General." Russel folded his arms over his chest as he failed to see how he could possibly change the mind of one General Ironwood.

"Ironwood believes Atlas will fall, with or without his direct intervention. He claims Vale is now our enemy's blind spot, that if there were ever a place to mount a counter attack, this is it. I know he won't listen to me or the rest of the council, but there is another whom he might be willing to lend his ear to." Glynda "We need you to get Cardin to convince Ironwood against occupying Vale."
"Why's everyone so interested in Cardin these days?" He asked, recalling how Nebula and her fellow Shade students had also brought up the CRDL leader as if he were some sort of poster boy.

"You mean you don't know?" The Beacon Professor asked in a way that Russel couldn't discern as genuine.

"Don't give me that shit Goodwitch, I'm not exactly in the mood for games." He glared.

"Aside from being a known descendant of Roman Winchester, with Cinder tapped into the CCT, every device across the four kingdoms witnessed Cardin fight Emerald and Mercury in the service of Vale. Whether he knows it or not he's a public icon that people can rally behind." She informed the duo. "Ironwood recruited Cardin knowing this, he's using him to keep us in line, but perhaps if Cardin were to go against him, then maybe he would reconsider."

"Hold on a minute," Russel held up a hand. "I was there too and nobody's exactly lining up to heed my beck and call."

"Oh, yes, that." Goodwitch gestured to Marie-Anne.

"You're going to love this," Marie-Anne snickered as she produced a functional scroll. She dialed up an image and handed the device over to Russel. Depicted on the screen was an image of Cardin standing to ready to fight Mercury and Emerald, but in the corner of the frame beside the CRDL leader poked Russel's elbow. "Look on the bright side, you've still got your anonymity."

"It's too limiting out in the open anyways, too many people knowing your name and your business can be an awful thing." Glynda said in a knowing tone as Russel passed the scroll back to Marie-Anne. "But I hope you can help us, if not there's no telling how many people would die."

"I don't think The Atlesians would just start slaughtering us, if that's what you're saying." Dove said, now having finished the last of the gummies.

"You must feel it, can't you? We were already at each other's throats, but after last night we're on the brink of all-out war. By the time Ironwood's ships arrive, I doubt there'll be anything left of us."

"I'm certain you and the council could just talk to us, tell us not to kick off any mass killings or storming beaches with bricks and sticks."

"The council supports the idea of physically evicting our guests." "Dolm's even proposed propelling Lance Grimsby to notoriety in any chance to sabotage Cardin's influence on the people. That's why he was present last night, to challenge Cardin."

"That's not the only reason he was there," Russel muttered. "He started the fire."

"You understand the severity of such an accusation, don't you Mr. Thrush?"

"Last night, I may have snuck into the Atlesian camp in the SDC building." Russel admitted, but refrained from mentioning Dove's part in the escapade. "On my way out, I saw Lance and another liberating a Knight. You wanna bet that was the same one found in the fire?"

"This complicates things dramatically."Goodwitch said, bringing a hand to her chin as she mulled over the news. "He wasn't just there to challenge Cardin, he was trying to incite the riot then and there."

"Two birds with one stone." Marie-Anne remarked grimly. "We could go public, denounce Lance as a terrorist."
"Our source wouldn't exactly be credible," Goodwitch gestured to Russel. "As a known associate of Mr. Winchester, Dolm could spin it as slander and us as Atlesian sympathizers to consolidate his power."

"Well I doubt Lance is just going to sit around waiting for The Atlesian fleet to arrive," The Thrush said. "He'll kick something off sooner or later."

"I agree, but moving against him at this point in time would detrimental to our cause, which is a peaceful resolution."

"We can do something though, can't we?" Dove questioned.

"All paths lead to bloodshed," Goodwitch sighed dejectedly. "We've only delayed them, anything could set us off now."

"Unless Cardin's support in Ironwood's leadership wanes." Danny surmised.

"So what do you say, will you speak with him?" Goodwitch asked, all eyes turning to Dove and Russel.

The two exchange a look, then smirked. "Make it worth our while." Russel said, flashing toothy grin.

"I can't believe this." Marie-Anne shook her head in disgust.

"What do you want?" Goodwitch asked unfazed. To her surprise, however, Russel and Dove turned their backs to them and huddled closely, talking amongst themselves.

After a minute of quiet discussion, the CRDL boys turned back around to face Goodwitch and the Dunces. "Two things," Russel held out two fingers. "The first, and this is really important, so pay attention." He smiled. "You're going induct all of us Beacon students as full time Huntsmen."

"Absolutely not." The Professor responded quickly in a strict and firm manner.

"The entire reason why Cardin and half of the student body went on to join Ironwood's militia is because you would let them fight for their kingdom. Believe it or not, Professor, but this is the day they've been waiting for." He glared. "To proudly serve and protect Vale and its people."

She sighed. "I think I can accept the more seasoned students, given a review their field experiences."

"No," He shook his head. "It has to be everyone."

"What you're asking me to do is to throw your peers to their deaths."

"No, I'm asking you to save them." He corrected. "Because whose side do you think they'll be on when shit hits the fan? When everyday citizens who they believe they're protecting are attempting to seize the SDC building? They're already wearing Atlesian flags on their chests, why not go all the way."

"...I see your point. "Goodwitch said with a heavy sigh. "And your second condition?"

"One of ours is missing," Dove said, addressing the Professor. "We need help to find him."

"A lot of people are missing, most are presumed dead." Goodwitch sadly said.
"Yeah, but we've got evidence of our pal Sky being alive, so we'd greatly appreciate your help in find him." Dove said, earning a slight laugh from the Professor.

"You're in luck," Goodwitch smiled. "I might know where he is."

"Where?" Dove implored.

"Only when you succeed will I tell you." Goodwitch said. "With so much on the line, I hope that you do. So, is it a deal?"

"Yeah, it's a deal." They both nodded.

"Thank you." She finally said. With their business concluded, Goodwitch and the pair of Dunces turned to depart, making their way to the door.

"One last thing, if you would be so kind," Russel spoke up, catching Goodwitch and the DNCE duo before they reached the door. "Would you mind escorting Dove to a doctor? He just got ruffed up a bit and needs a look over."

"Whoa, wait what?" Dove exclaimed in surprise. "I've gotta be there, he's my teammate too!"

"Yeah, but you really should get some ice on that." He pointed to the swelling eye.

"I don't think that's wise, Russel." The Professor commented.

"Yeah, you don't even know where to find him!"

"Oh, yeah," Russel scratched his chin. "Do we even know where to find him?" He looked to Dove.

"Last I heard he had watchtower duty." Danny said, earning a thankful wave from the Thrush.

"Come on, I could help!" Dove protested further.

"Yeah, you could. But this is a conversation for two." He muttered before patting Dove on the back and shoving him forward. "A place at the front of the line would be nice."

Begrudgingly, Goodwitch and the DNCE duo dragged Dove off with them, muttering something about whether or not they were wrong to trust the Thrush with such an important task. But the fact of the matter was, who else could they send to speak with the Winchester? The answer was simple: no one.

Finding himself alone in Hooligan's, Russel set off to prepare. To the back of the store he went, to the broom closet where he called home. While scouring for his ice box, he paused his searching and turned his eyes to a pair of boxes in the corner. From behind the set of boxes, he pulled out Pyrrha's bronze headdress. He stared at it for a moment and sighed, thinking about the Spartan who once wore it.

He then glanced to the corner where the photos he'd received from Clover lay, of the Mistral Champion's apparent demise. The frame by frame images depicted Pyrrha turning to brilliant ash, just as Mercury had. Things were not as they seemed, Russel thought to himself as he studied the headdress in his hands. He thought back to Jaune, how he demanded he turn it over to him and how he claimed Russel had no right to possess it. Which was true, that much Russel admitted, he really did have no right. But the Thrush did not claim to own it, in fact, quite the opposite. The truth was, and just sound funny being said aloud, but he was holding it for a friend and was keen to return it one day.
So Russel returned the headdress to its hiding spot then continued to search for the ice box, eventually finding it behind his makeshift cot. He pulled open the lid and smiled at the sight of the six pack inside.

But there was one last thing to do before he would leave. Digging through another set of boxes, Russel retrieved his bloodied clothes and donned them. Walking out of Hooligan's, Russel locked the door behind him and sauntered off with his list of tasks, believing that it would indeed be one hell of a night.

It couldn't be that hard. He just had to talk to a few people, and that he was good at.

But unbeknownst to Russel, something within Hooligan's stirred. Out of nearby shadows appeared Ren, with Jaune and Nora holding onto the JNPR ninja.

"Color me impressed, I thought your semblance could only work on Grimm." Jaune applauded his teammate's power.

"Best not to let everyone know that." Ren couldn't help but smirk.

"Alright, onto business." Jaune said as he and his team opened the broom closet door. The Knight then reached behind the pair of boxes and drew Pyrrha's headdress.

"What now?" Nora asked as both she and Ren looked onto Jaune for direction.

"Now?" Jaune looked to his friends and smiled. "Now we take the fight to Cinder." He said as he turned for the door. "But before that, we gotta make one last stop." He flashed his friends a pearly white smile. "You guy's wanna go to Patch?"

This arc is probably one of my favorites so far. Both from a story and creative stand point, as it went through a total of three spate revised outlines, the first being with CRDL escorting Shade students to Vacuo, the second was actually similar in tone and premise as it is now, but it lacked the intrigue and all Beacon students joined a unified militia. It’s just so fun to see how far this arc has come from when I initially conceived it.

As predicted in a number of the reviews from last chapter, Lance really is scummy enough to burn down the Food Depot himself. But, we'll talk more about him next chapter.

I like the idea of Cardin being this 'first responder' who runs to danger. The idea just stuck around and I think it suits him.

Russel and Nebula, I can safely say I'm the first one to throw that pairing together.

I think I wrote Jaune alright, he's in an emotional state right now as depicted in previous chapters in this arc, and this is really him cutting loose and showing he isn't the push over everyone thought he was by the way he manhandles Russel.

So, next chapter should be out by next week. 'Til then, later days!
Welcome back everyone to the 50TH Chapter! Woooooooh!

When Cardin had abandoned his post the other night, he was certain there'd be some sort of punishment awaiting him, a reprimand or threat of some kind for his disobedience. But no such thing came, in fact, it was quite the opposite. General Ironwood himself met with him and applauded his efforts, citing his quick thinking and tact had not only prevented the spreading of a wildfire but also quelled a possible riot with nothing other than his words.

Up above the ground, atop the recently constructed watchtower, Cardin surveyed the repaired chain link fence that acted as the border of the Safe Zone and that of the buffer area between them and the Grimm infested city of Vale. The CRDL leader thought to himself of his strange fortune as he lazily peered beyond the fence and to the fallen buildings beyond where monsters lurked. The very same day he'd been accused of neglecting his duties as a night watch, he'd also been hailed for abandonment of said duty. It was funny in a strange messed up way that left a bitter taste in the Winchester's mouth.

Things were different now, more complex than they had any right to be. The former Beacon leader thought of Lance, how his former classmate had arrived to challenge him directly in front of a mob of people, to pin the blame of their destroyed food reserves onto the Atlesians. In a time when the only way to overcome their misfortunes was to pull together under a unified banner, it appeared that was the last thing anybody wanted to do.

But even caught up in his own thoughts and musings were not enough to distract the Winchester from his duties. He shot up at attention, his gaze beaming towards the ladder as he felt the rungs rocking against the platform he stood upon. As he recalled from memory he had the entire night shift to himself with no reprieve. It could very well have been Velvet, sparring a moment from her own duties to see him, or a soldier with new orders from Ironwood. But Cardin very much doubted either possibility, he just wasn't that lucky.

A long drawn out sigh emitted from the visitor as they made the long ascent, an inaudible curse murmured beneath their tired breathe. Cardin reached out for his mace as a cautionary measure, but then paused as a familiar green mohawk began to peek above the ladder.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Cardin frowned as Russel hauled himself onto the watchtower platform, bringing with him what appeared to be an ice box.

"Visiting my best friend." The Thrush answered as he took up the chair opposite from his partner.

"I was under the impression we weren't on speaking terms." Cardin admitted cautiously as he watched Russel set the ice box down beside him.

"Because you joined up with the Atlesian Military?" Russel didn't ask, more so he said. The Thrush met his partner's gaze and lightly laughed.
"Because you wanted to shut the rest of the world out." Cardin countered, shifting in his seat to better face his friend.

"Look, I'm not here to argue with you," Russel said as he reached down to remove the container's lid, revealing a six pack resting within. "Just thought I'd share a drink with a friend."

Cardin's eyes shot to the container and its revealed contents. It'd been quite some time since he'd last had a drink, and the temptation was great. But still, he had a job to do and couldn't allow himself to be distracted, lest another fire occur or some troublesome Grimm emerge. "I can't, I'm sorry. I'm on duty." He gestured to the platform they both sat upon and indicated to the fence below.

"Cardin," Russel spoke in an oddly serious tone. The Thrush reached down into the box and pried a pair of cans from their plastic restraints. "By some odd turn of events you, the Great Grandson of one of Vale's greatest military icons, are wearing the flag of a foreign kingdom while sitting in the presence of our ruined city," He presented one of the cans to his friend. "If there were ever an occasion to have a drink, now would be it."

Against his better judgement, Cardin accepted the drink, quietly admitting that the turn of events were indeed strange. "Where did you even get these?" The CRDL leader asked, earning a mischievous grin in response. "You know what, on second thought, I don't want to know." He said before taking one long healthy swig of the drink.

They sat there for some time, quietly sipping out of their drinks. There was a lot that needed to be said between the pair, but neither exactly knew how to approach the conversation that awaited them. It wasn't every day that two friends found themselves on different sides of an argument, but when they did it, often enough they'd stopped being friends altogether. With each passing moment, the feeling of dread piled atop their shoulders, sooner or later one of them would have to say something.

"How's your family?" Russel asked, deciding to start with small talk, whatever it took to prolong the inevitable. "They did get out, didn't they?"

"My Mom and Dad? Yeah, they got out." Cardin answered as he cracked open his second can of beer. "We've got a cottage in Patch. They'll be staying there for the foreseeable future."

"That's good," Russel muttered as he shook the contents of his drink in a stirring motion, staring down into the can as if a fly had landed on it.

"Dove's alright, I take?" Cardin awkwardly asked as he began to work on his second drink.

"Still holding out hope for Sky." Russel scratched the back of his head, not sure where to begin with recent events. Eventually, he settled on the honest answer. "I'm starting to think we might be able to find him, might take a while, but we just found out he at least made it back to Beacon."

"That's great news." The CRDL leader smiled.

"Any progress is better than no progress." Russel shrugged before downing the last of his drink. He then let the aluminum can fall to the floor before crushing it under his foot. "That armor of yours looks uncomfortable." He belched.

"It is," Cardin couldn't help but laugh as he tugged at one of the straps. "For all of Atlas' technological advancements, the one thing they just don't seem is comfortable attire. Would you believe they don't let us personalize?"
"Well, that sure as explains why that Neon chick was decked out in rainbows, probably her only chance to express herself," Russel snorted. "They even offer an explanation or is it just like a cultural thing?"

"I thinks it's supposed to promote solidarity? I don't know." He shrugged before turning to look away from the Thrush. "But you've been okay though? Got at least a roof over your head or something? If you want, I could get you some actual clothes." Cardin pointed to the week old bloodied rags Russel wore.

"I'll have you know that this here is a fashion statement," He tapped his tattered sleeveless sweater. "It just screams character."

"It screams 'help me, I cut myself shaving," Cardin laughed. "Seriously, Willa's working down in the requisitions office, I could ask her to throw something together for you."

Russel paused for a moment, as if actually considering Cardin's offer. There was a slight frown that briefly graced the Thrush's features that vanished just as quickly as it had appeared. He just shook his head and smirked, forcing a laugh. "Yeah, well, if you did get me some hand-me-downs from your Militia pals, let's be honest, it would just have an Atlesian flag on it."

"I'm sorry if my decision seemed rash." Cardin finally said. "But it's our best bet. We can't do this alone anymore."

Russel shook his head and glanced off far to the desolate city out over the horizon. "I'm not saying we take the fight to Cinder alone," He spoke quietly, enough to make Cardin strain to hear. "I'm just saying that having the Atlesian Military for roommates isn't our best course action."

"We need to stand together in unity." Cardin stated firmly.

"No, what we need is stability," The Thrush said as his gaze drifted off towards the dark cloudy. How he wished they would part and the star filled sky would shine through.

"And we could achieve that just as easily, if not greater, together," Cardin countered.

"Atlesian War Ships rained hell down on our city. Atlesian War Robots gunned down our people and their families. And now Atlesian soldiers are acting as our public defenders," Russel spat as he tore himself from the sky to face Cardin once again.

"They were commandeered," Cardin explained, hoping that Russel would see reason. "Roman Torchwick broke out of containment and took control. That's on him, those deaths are on him, the Atlesian Military isn't to blame."

"I know that, you know that, but does the whole bloody world know that?" Russel shot back, a slight undertone of anger to his words. "No, they don't." He stuck out a hand and pointed back over the Safe Zone in the direction of the recently destroyed building in which resided their food stores. "Do you not see how close we came to it last night? For goodness sake Cardin, you were there, you saw those people. If it weren't for you we'd be tearing each other's heads off."

"I'd assume that would mean you'd have more faith in us, in me at the very least," Cardin frowned. "We can handle public relations, it'll just take some time, we're all still reeling from what happened. Our enemies aren't just going to stand back and watch while we dick around, more people are going to die, more kingdoms will fall, and the only way we can prevent that is by working together, here and now."

"You really believe that don't you?" He looked to his friend, a skeptical look on his face.
"General Ironwood's made it clear. He wants to help Vale, he wants to stop Cinder and he sure as hell wants to stop The White Fang. If I'm not mistaken, those sound an awful lot like our own, so why not team up? Why not work together?"

"Pfft." Russel broke out laughing.

"What's so funny?" Cardin asked, confused at what had set off his partner's fit.

"General Ironwood." The Thrush snickered, raising his hands and making air quotes. "You're taking to military life quicker than I thought you would."

"How long did you think it'd take me?" Cardin arched a brow upward.

"Honest?" "I never thought you would."

"You wound me." He placed a hand over his heart, feigning injury.

"Eh, just switch on that semblance of yours and you'll brush it off."

"Anyways, my point? They wanted us divided," Cardin said as he finished his second drink, tossing the empty can to the wayside. "That's what that speech of hers was all about. They tricked Pyrrha into killing Penny, showed off the robotic corpse to the world and started to claim how untrustworthy we all are. This is exactly want they want."

"You say that as if that haven't attained it already." The Thrush muttered, eyeing his drink once more in an odd manner.

Cardin shook his head. "Because they haven't, we're still here, we're still fighting."

"Yeah, we are, we're just fighting each other," Russel said pointedly. "You grossly underestimate the victory of our enemy, Cardin."

"They haven't won yet." The Winchester declared, almost defiantly so.

"Well we sure as shit lost, so who did win?" Russel countered, ever so crass. "Look around Cardin, tell me we aren't divided, look me in the eye and tell me that nothing's changed. Go ahead and lie to me, I don't give a shit, but you can't lie to yourself. You see it, I see it, the whole damn world will be seeing it if we don't do something. Because you know what? Cinder won, we are divided and there's no stopping it now."

Cardin quietly released an exhausted breath. It did seem that no matter what they were bound to do, more obstacles would present themselves. But in spite of it all, Cardin steeled himself and cracked a hopeful smile. "We can turn it around though, Russel."

"Of course we can," Russel said before simply tossing his drink over the side of the platform. "But trying to force us to play nice isn't solving anything, it's making it worse. The more we try to fix things in our current state, the more we're just going to want to kill each other, we've lost too much."

For a moment, Cardin fell silent, his dipping downward at his feet. There wasn't much he could say to that, he couldn't deny it, what Russel said was true, the more they tried to help, the more it just started to feel like they were on a collision course. "I think we've lost a lot too." He said, earning a look from Russel that implored him to elaborate. "Me, you, Dove, Velvet, Jaune and everyone else. I think we've lost more than we want to admit."
"Our entire lives, we've grown up believing Huntsmen could save the whole damn world, but here we are, in the wake of a soul crushing defeat." Cardin sighed and shook his head. He raised a hand to his temple and lightly touched it. "What I saw out there, Russel, I think my days of sound sleep are over."

"You mean you won't be snoring anymore?" Russel began to laugh. "Hallelujah. Turns out all my days of railing against the Chantry have been for naught. There really is a God."

"Oh very funny." Cardin frowned at his partner's laughter. "I'm being serious here."

"So am I." He said, not even missing a beat. "You sound like an old tractor engine, scraping against a chalkboard with auto tune."

"Alright, I'll give you that one," He conceded. "It's just, there are things I can't unsee." He shut his eyes tightly. "I rescued from a family from their burning home and then I watched as they were gunned down by a goddamn Knight. How am I supposed to unsee that? At least now no one will ever go through that again, not like this." Cardin said, opening his eyes and looking to Russel for his answer.

"Fuck," The Thrush cursed. "I can respect that you don't want this to happen to anyone again, but how can you say that knowing our problems? There's too much bad blood and we can't handle it. This is going to blow up in our faces and soon." He shook his head. "We're Huntsmen, we're supposed to protect humanity. Don't you think it's time we started doing that?"

"We were first years, Russel. I'd hardly consider us to be Huntsmen."

"We rode atop a fuckin' Dragon," Russel pointed out into the distance towards Beacon tower. "I think it's safe to say we're more than qualified for this shit."

"Was there ever a part in your life where you didn't swear every five minutes?"

"I think when I was a baby I was restricted 'goo goo ga ga'."

"Smartass." Cardin rolled his eyes. "You think you couldn't just wind down on it? Even just a smidge?"

Russel met Cardin's gaze and glared ever so slightly. "Nobody's ever going to tell me what I can or can't say."

"Is that why you disapprove?" Cardin questioned, reclaiming a little of his bite. "You don't want anyone telling you what to do?"

"You know that's not what this is about." Russel sharply inhaled.

"No, it's about what we're willing to give for our kingdom," "I know what I can give, Russel, but how about you? What are you willing to do to for Vale? What are you willing to do for your kingdom?"

Russel sat there for a moment, pondering just how to respond to the loaded question. "Do you really know what to do for Vale?"

"Yes, I do." Cardin's eyes narrowed.

"You sure? I don't think you do," Russel said, raising a hand and pointing towards Cardin. "It should be easy right? It's black and white, stick together or don't, simple enough, huh? But it ain't
simple, it isn't black and white, shits complicated and it's a goddamn rainbow of bullshit!" He shouted loudly, no doubt being heard by soldiers on other nearby watchtowers, but neither of them cared. "There's no doubt in my mind that you believe in what you're doing, Cardin, you're a good man, the best I know, but the best thing we can do for Vale and its people is to let it heal."

Cardin sat stunned, not sure what to say. He simply reached out for another can of beer and popped it open before a long sip. It felt like an hour past after that, but it couldn't have been more than just a couple minutes. It was kind of hard to tell with power these days, no clocks and no working outlets to charge your scroll. The Winchester finished his drink and tossed it to the wayside, not caring where it would land.

He straightened in his seat and opened his mouth to speak, a question on his mind. "Why do you care, Russel?" He asked, catching the Thrush slightly off guard. "Why are you fighting so hard for this?"

He shrugged indifferently. "But, more importantly, I think the apt question should be, why aren't you?" Russel said before standing from his seat. "I'll be seeing you?"

Cardin quietly sat in thought for a moment, mulling over the question and recognized its true value before nodding, a slight smile replacing the frown that bore its way onto his face. "Of course, you're my best friend."

"Have a good night, Cardin." Russel returned the smile, glad to see there were nothing negative between them.

"Yeah, you too." Cardin waved good bye, watching as Russel began the long descent down the watchtower ladder.

Alone once more, Cardin sat back and resumed his duties, thinking over the debate he and Russel had held. He shook his head in a disbelieving manner, for a while people had called him nothing more than a bully or mongering asshole, it was odd to know that someone actually held a high regard for the Winchester. Glancing back to the ice box, much to his surprise, there still remained done can. Seeing that Russel had just departed with no intent of returning, Cardin helped himself to his fourth and final drink for the night, taking a healthy swig knowing full well what he'd have to do.

With the night fully upon the Atlesian soldiers and Militia enlistees, the SDC building where they'd made their home was on high alert. You'd be a fool to ignore the boiling tensions, many a folk stalked the outer perimeter of the beachfront grounds, as if waiting for a signal to begin a siege. But truth be told, it would take only the slightest little thing to upset the strained peace they'd managed to maintain.

But deep within the makeshift Atlesian compound, not all the soldiers were manned their posts. One Willa Rosa, the leader of the ill-fated and fractured Team WILL, walked through the halls leading to her assigned rooming which she shared with six others, a cramped little closet that barely three of them could fit in. After a long day of cleaning equipment for use by other soldiers and passing out all sorts of materials from her post within the requisitions office, she'd finally reached the end of her shift and made was off to collect her few personal possessions before taking off into the night.

She reached out to her assigned quarter's door, knowing her actions will go unnoticed due to her roommates being scheduled for duty, just as she'd planned. However, once she'd opened the door, to her immense shock, she found the most unlikely of individuals sitting on a cot in wait for the
"Russel?" Willa exclaimed in utter disbelief, quickly shutting the door behind her lest any wandering soldiers in the halls accidentally peek inside and notice the Thrush. "What are you doing here?" She asked, smiling brightly.

"Came to congratulate a friend," Russel spoke in dry manner that somehow managed to put a dent in that smile of hers. "I heard you've got a gig in the requisitions office, must be nice."

"Oh, uh, thank you," Willa said awkwardly. "How'd you get in anyways? How'd no one notice you?"

"I'll have you know I can be very discrete," The young man wearing bloodied rags deadpanned.

"I-uh-don't you think it's kind of a circuitous way to go and congratulate someone?" She jotted a thumb over her shoulder.

"It kind of is, yeah." He nodded, offering nothing more.

"So..." Willa trailed off, before taking a seat opposite of Russel in the confined room. "Now what?"

"I don't know." Russel replied, a tiredness to his words.

"Oh okay, well, thanks again for-uh-dropping by," Willa rubbed one of her arms, visibly uncomfortable by the whole situation. "It's always great to see friends and all, but I think you should be going now, you don't want to get caught do you?"

"I can't go yet," He said, earning a confused and somewhat frightened look from Willa.

"Why not?" She asked quietly.

"Because of that damn pesky Atlesian Knight, the one that was found in the burning building," Russel answered, causing Willa's eyes to widen ever so slightly. "Just prior in the night, I happened to spot Lance and a female associate carrying a Knight out of this very building." He said as looked the WILL leader in the eyes and met her shocked stare. "You wouldn't happen to have access to any decommissioned Knights would you, Willa?"

"How could you say that?" Willa quickly said, hurt in her voice.

"Answer the damn question." Russel glared.

"Russel, listen to yourself," She began in an effort to reason with the Thrush, only for the CRDL boy to cut her off mid-sentence.

"I would but I'm too busy listening to you dance around the question, now answer it," Russel gritted. "Please."

Something changed in Willa's expression, that brief bright smile of hers was gone in an instant, washed away and replaced by an exhausted frown. Her eyes sagged down in sadness. There was a visible hurt, but her injuries weren't physical, she was in mourning. And it had taken all of her strength and courage to hide that fact from prying eyes. "You've got to understand Russel, everything I've done, I've done for Vale."

"I bet," Russel scoffed. "People's lives are on the line and you and your boyfriend are playing
fucking revolutionaries."

"He's not my boyfriend and you know that," Willa snapped, a surge of anger in her voice.

"Then refresh my memory cause it wasn't even a week ago when you told me how disgusted you were to be boarding with the guy?" Russel said, recalling the last time he'd encountered Willa, back on the fairgrounds of the Vytal Festival where she was conducting faux tours of Beacon Academy.

"Because he's all I have left!" Willa shouted, unloading the rage she'd swallowed and held deep within her gut. "Iliad, Lambert, my parents, my siblings, they're all gone! Killed by the White Fang and the Atlesian war machine!"

"Still doesn't mean you had to help him." Russel countered, withholding any trace sympathy.

"You think it was an easy decision?"

"No."

"Then don't you dare judge me." She spat as she stuck out a finger prodded the Thrush in the chest thanks to their confined space.

"You are aware of what he's doing aren't you?" Russel questioned as he smacked her hand away. "How many lives will be lost?"

"This is revenge, this is for every one we've lost!" Willa shouted on the verge of tears.

"And whose blood will be bathing Vale's streets this time? Atlesian Knights? I don't think so, they don't bleed. No it'll to be us, it'll be Vale bleeding out again. And that'll be on you." He said, not once raising his voice.

Willa held herself in an attempt to recompose, to fight back the swelling tears. But it was too late, a stream began to fall down her cheeks and her vision blurred. "Atlas needs to pay." She concluded.

"Cinder needs to pay, The White Fang needs to pay, but you know who doesn't have to? Us. Vale. We've been through enough," Russel muttered quietly. "Now, I'm going to ask you a question and you're going to give me an answer, and for everyone's sake it better be the truth, because at this rate the whole Safe Zone will be up in flames come morning."

Willa raised a hand to dry her eyes. Once her vision cleared she looked to Russel, unsure of his intent. "What do you want to know?" She asked.

The Thrush leaned forward. "Where is Lance?"

On the outskirts of the Safe Zone within the nearby forest leading out of Vale resided a warehouse with the Mayflower family crest broadly stamped onto its side and the word 'Imports' painted on the front. Within the building, amongst a variable number of crates, standing under a dim battery powered lamp and around a wooden table, was none other than Dolm Mayflower and Lance Grimsby.

"It's now or never." Lance declared as he reached out for the table and claiming a grenade belt from amongst what appeared to be blueprints of the SDC logistics building. "This time tomorrow morning, The Atlesians will be driven from our homes and then we can truly get to work."
"What you are doing is a great and noble thing, Mr. Grimsby," The soul surviving member of Vale's council said as he passed on another blade to the former Beacon student, a light blue crystal blade with and elaborately mechanical yet seemingly organic hilt. "You'll go down in history as the man who cleansed Vale from its Atlesian oppressors."

"Relax Grandfather, it's just a job and I'm the man for it," Lance flashed a smile as he took the blade and held it out, as if testing its weight. "This is truly a magnificent sword." Lance said as he swung at the air.

"It's a sword worthy of being held by a champion," Dolm smiled brightly. "If only your Mother could see you now, it would warm her heart."

"You'd best be off, Ms. Goodwitch and Burns will be running frantically without you to steer the boat," Lance said as he sheathed the blade.

"That harpy and the policeman could die in the chaos for all I care, but I concede that they have their uses," Dolm said before grabbing his cane and heading for a nearby door. "Good luck out there."

"There's no such thing as luck, Grandfather," Lance smirked to himself as the door closed behind Dolm with an audible thud. The Grimsby boy then brought himself to review the blueprints provided by his informant from within the Atlesian base once again, double checking the entry points where he could lead an angry through rather than leave anything to chance.

But before Lance could set out, the door in which Dolm had exited opened once more. "More words of wisdom, Grandfather?"

"You're being a tool." Came the voice, distinctly separate from that of Dolm's but one that Lance instantly recognized.

"Russel." Lance quickly spun around and drew his Champion's blade, holding it outwards with one hand.

Walking into the warehouse was none other than the Thrush, both hands firmly placed in his pockets and scowling angrily at the Grimsby boy standing under the light. "Evening." He said, not batting an eye at the blade Lance held.

"I must admit, you've arrived at an inopportune time," Lance said, shooting deathly glare in the Thrush's direction.

"I'm sure you can spare five minutes," Russel said indifferently. "It's been a while since we've last chatted, now seems like a good time to catch up."

"You want to talk? I'm holding you at sword point and you want to talk?" Lance questioned, sounding slightly confused.

"Pretty much, yeah," Russel nodded. "It's been you, hasn't it?"

"You wouldn't be here if you didn't believe it already," Lance said, puffing his chest and glaring back at the Thrush.

"I need to hear you say it," Russel's eyes narrowed. "I need to know why you've been doing this."

"Sounds rather haughty of you to make demands of me." Lance countered coolly, his outstretched arm appearing to never tire.
"You're about to lead hundreds of people to their deaths, the least you can do is tell me why." He countered, drawing his hands from his pockets, revealing himself to be unarmed.

Lance laughed at the sight, it now appeared he had the upper hand in the situation. With a dark glimmer in his eye, he shook his head and spat. "You'd never understand, how could you? You're a racist cunt, Russel. But all you need to know is that I'm saving Vale tonight."

"And what about the people?" The Thrush countered. There was a thunderous clap from outside, followed by a flash of lighting that pierced into the dimly lit warehouse through overhead windows. Another moment and the darkened sky above gave way to rain.

"Some sacrifices need to be made," Lance said as hundreds or droplets crashed against the metal roof, and echoing crackle emitting into the room. "It's a harsh reality, but one we're not unfamiliar with."

"But you won't be the one making the sacrifice, they will."

"Someone needs to be the new shining principle for Huntsmen everywhere, for every Valean that cowers in the dark they will look to me and find hope." Lance smiled at the thought.

"How altruistic of you." Russel said in a sarcastic manner as he rolled his eyes.

"Someone needs to step up, and it seems I'm the only one willing to do so."

"So, all that Faunus equality talk, was that even for real?" Russel questioned, recalling the first time he'd met Lance, how the WILL boy had accosted him for his bullying of Velvet.

"I do believe everyone should be treated equally."

"And yet you're not big on consent, you fuckin' rapist." Russel shot the Grimsby boy a cold look, the memory of his vengeful quest to mess with Lance briefly flashing in his mind's eye and how it had led him to interrupt his drugging of Gwen at the fairgrounds.

"Oh, trust me, she'd have been saying 'yes' by the end of the night," Lance smiled darkly.

"You had Willa cut the fence, you lured a Creep into the Safe Zone."

"No one was in danger, it was a Creep after all, barely threatening, but effective enough to be used to rally support from the disillusioned."

"And then you burnt down the food depot, planting the Knight to kick off your fucked up purge."

"I didn't account for Cardin, that traitors the worst of you all." He shook his head as thunder boomed outside. "Scumbag like him, the great grandson of a hero and all he's done with his life is be nothing more than a thug and a turncoat. I can't wait to meet him on the battlefield so I can strike his ass down myself."

"Well, this has been enlightening." Russel muttered, followed by sharp thunderous clap akin to that of a gunshot. "At least now I know where you stand."

"You know, I'm glad you're here, Russel," Lance said, taking a step forward and grinning cockily. "I've been meaning to pay you back for all those times you fucked with me." He said before reeling back his sword, preparing to strike at the Thrush. "Die, knowing that I'll lead Vale to glory, even if I have to drag it kicking and screaming to get there." He smiled once more.
For a moment, everything seemed to freeze, the Thrush's brain banging violently against his skull as his aura flooded it. He thought back to that day in the forest of Oakwood, right after his Father had killed the Ursa for the first time, how he'd decided that he'd go to combat school to be a Huntsman. But then his mind brought him back to the funeral, then Saint Jack's where he buried his Father, the driving force of his of his early years was gone, he didn't have to be a Huntsman anymore. And yet, he chose to attend Beacon.

The life of a Huntsman, that's what Russel chose, to spend his days doing everything in his power to protect humanity. And now he stood, face to face with a man who threatened the safety and lives of the hurt, the weary and the lost, to fuel his own ego and deluded aspirations. It wasn't even a question about what whether or not Russel hate Lance, the Grimsby boy was everything he despised, a man who would rob one's ability to choose and censor should not conform to his own beliefs.

Russel thought back to the last time he'd spoken with Ozpin, how the Headmaster had told him that a Huntsman could never have baggage, there just wasn't any room for it. In order to protect the people they fought for, they to let go of their own personal issues. So, The Thrush wasn't standing there in the warehouse because he hated Lance, he was there for the thousands of Valeans and the others stranded in Vale.

It hadn't even been an hour since he had parted Cardin's company, but his friend's words clung to him. It was a simple question: What was he willing to do for his kingdom? What was Russel willing to do for its people?

"We'll always be our Father's sons," Mercury's voice echoed within Russel's mind. "Their little killers."

Russel's already depleted aura supply began to recede, his brain slowing and the world around him beginning to speed up. Then, from out of his right bracer, Russel produced his pocket knife.

Lance swung forward aiming to slice Russel apart diagonally. With the distance so little between them, Lance smiled at his assured victory. There was no conceivable way for Russel to escape his deathblow, the sweeping motion ensured that. There was a twinkle in the Grimsby boy's eye, a vision of the future, where he sat behind the desk where Ozpin had once sat, recognized across the land as the foremost authority of the Huntsmen in Vale.

Distracted by his fantasy and sure of his victory, Lance hadn't even realize Russel had closed the distance between them entirely. And then reality sank in, just as Russel's blade pierced his chest. Lance gasped as his strike finished its arc, completely missing Russel as he and his intended target stood face to face.

Just as soon as the blade had cut into Lance, Russel quickly removed it before ramming the knife back into the man once more. He could feel Lance attempting to breakaway, trying to impale Russel with his sword in a desperate swing. But the Thrush elbowed the attack aside. Russel threw a fist forward and clocked his adversary in the jaw stunning slightly and opening him for the onslaught.

It was a flurry of stabs, with blood flying outward and splashing against Russel's already stained clothing. Lance's cries fell on deaf, uninterested ears. A stab to the gut, a slash across the chest and fending off Lance's desperate attempts to force Russel away, the Thrush reached out with his free hand and grabbed the man bay the collar for leverage. There was metallic clang noise, the Grimsby boy's hand had gone limp, his sword fallen to the wayside.

He then stared forward, watching as the light dimmed in Lance's eyes and how they began to roll
into the back of his head. Releasing his grasp, he let the body fall and then finally, he released the breath he held and heaved. He’d been responsible for deaths, but this was the first time he’d intentionally taken.

Straightening his posture, he examined his knife, noting the blood that now stained the wooden handle, how it filled the letters of the name carved into it. Grabbing his rag of a shirt, he wiped it clean. He stared down at Lance and thought to himself, that he’d found the answer to that question. Sparing a glance down to the handle, he ran a thumb over the name, his mother's name. Since day one of his miserable existence, Russel's been taking lives. Now, however, he’d stopped fighting it, stopped running from who he was.

For his kingdom. For its people. Russel accepted a truth.

The adrenaline subsided and Russel held a weary face. He trudged for the door, almost tripping over Lance's discarded sword. He regarded the weapon for a moment, debating to take it for his own but he ultimately decided against it. It didn't fit his style anyways. He then exited the warehouse and found himself bathed by the rain. He stood there for, letting Lance's blood wash away, and only then did he realize that he wasn't alone.

By the nearby tree line, leaning with his back against a tree trunk was none other than Danny a gun in his hand. And on the ground beside the DNCE leader's feet was Dolm, a single gunshot wound in the center of his head.

Danny met Russel's gaze a nodded at his bloodied hand. "It's a messy world we live in," He said, kicking off from the trunk and setting off for the Safe Zone. "This is the least we can do."

Russel watched as Danny vanished into the trees. He looked back to Dolm, who lay dead and thought of the implications. But no matter, the Thrush concluded as he began trek back home to his shitty cot that awaited him. He didn't regret a damn thing.

Sleep came easy to Russel that night. And now he found himself his peace. However, the moment was gone, while lost in a soup of dreams, an invading presence made itself known. The sounds of nearby jet engines boomed and Russel awoke with a sense of déjà vu.

Russel stood from his cot, wincing as a light soreness surged through his body. Which was to be expected, he did sleep on boxes after all. But he pushed ahead, with an anxious look on his face. It appeared the Atlesian fleet had arrived earlier than expected.

Turning to a nearby stack of boxes, he claimed the change of clothes Dove had brought him from his excursion into the city. A green hoodie and brown cargo pants, not much in the way of clothing, but it was what he had. After a few amendments thanks to his pocket knife, and Russel was ready to go.

Standing in his now sleeveless hoodie, Russel spared one final look to the disturbed pair of boxes where he'd hidden Pyrrha's headdress. He didn't know how Jaune had done it, but he knew the Arc had taken it, and one day he'd confront him over it, but that day wasn't today. He walked over to the Employee break room within the hardware store, he found a snoring Dove, oblivious to the ruckus outside.

Russel kicked at Dove's slumbering form, instantly awaking the youngest CRDL member. A startled Dove thrashed about on his brand new mattress, before looking up through sleepy eyes and found Russel unceremoniously gesturing to the jet noises outside. Heading the call, Dove sat up ready to go, having slept in his armor. Without a word, they departed their dwelling and made the
long walk through the Melting Pot.

Up in the sky, much to his surprise, Russel did not find the Atlesian fleet, but instead, he found that of Vacuo's. The flag of three swords flapped against the wind as the ships began to make their descent. All throughout the Melting Pot, Russel could hear the joyful cries of Vacuans stranded during the fall. The Shade students poured out of their laundry mat, running into the streets and dancing. Their kingdom had come for them, it had actually come for them.

Among the gathered students, Russel's gaze shot towards that of Nebula, who smiled brightly while shouting cheers amongst her fellow students. She paused in her revelry briefly, feeling the pair of eyes watching and turned to see the Thrush. She tore herself away from her team and fellow student body and ran towards him, overcome with the excitement and prospect of rescue she leapt at him and snared Russel into a hug.

"We're going home!" Nebula shouted at the top of her lungs. "We're going home!"

"Congrats," Russel said, reciprocating the hug.

"So, this is it." She said as they pulled apart.

"So it seems," He shrugged once more.

"I just want to say, thanks again, for all you've done for us and for me, it means a lot."

"Anytime." He nodded.

"Hey, if you ever find yourself in Vacuo, look me up," She smirked. "I'll buy you a drink."

"See you around Nebula." Russel waved goodbye before both he and Dove continued on their way.

"See you later, Russel." The NDGO leader said before turning to rejoin her fellow students.

"I've come for my people," The Speaker of Chambers, Stagnant Vermilion announced as he took his first steps off the ramp of the Vacuan Heavy Cruiser and onto the sovereign soil of Vale. His only company a squad of Vacuan Huntsmen and his aide Gabriella.

Greeting the Speaker was General Ironwood and what remained of the Valean council, and one tag along in the form of Cardin Winchester, who wore not the armor of Atlesian soldiers, but that of the silver and gold metal plate that bore his family's crest.

"You don't think we were holding them against their will, don't you Vermillion?" General Ironwood questioned playfully.

"Ah, yes, Ironwood," Vermillion sighed. "I see you still have your sense of humor. I take it you and your Atlesians are running the show now?"

Ironwood spared a glance between Goodwitch and Cardin before turning to face the Speaker fully. "I'm afraid not, after a long discussion, Atlas will not occupying Vale."

"Is that so?" Vermillion arched a brow upward, an ambitious twinkle in his eye.

"Don't get ahead of yourself, Vale is far from defenseless." Goodwitch said, taking a step forward.

"And though Atlas will have no Military presence in country, but rest assured, we will be providing Vale whatever it is that they need until they get back on their feet." Ironwood smiled. "You'd best run off now, go and collect your people."
"It was nice seeing you again too, Ironwood," Vermillion spat before turning to leave with his entourage and meet the nearby amassing Vacuans.

"I hope this is for the best," Ironwood said aloud, just as soon as Vermillion was out of earshot.

"It is," Cardin spoke up, smiling proudly at the Atlesian General.

"I'm not sure what brought upon your change of heart, Cardin, but I want to wish you and the rest of Vale good luck in the coming months."

"Not gonna stick around, General? And here I was starting to get used to having you around," Heyman Burns laughed.

"You've made it quite clear, Atlesian occupation isn't the answer, and I have two seats in the Atlesian Council to reclaim. I've got my own house to put back in order."

"Good luck James," Goodwitch waved.

"You too Glynda," The General smiled before he began to walk in the direction of the SDC building.

"Mr. Winchester, a word?" Goodwitch said, catching Cardin's ear.

"Yes ma'am?" The Winchester turned to face the senior Huntress.

"I'm changing the rules," She said as Heyman departed. "We need Huntsmen and I want to deputize every Beacon student, you in?" She looked to Cardin in search of his answer.

"Of course ma'am," Cardin nodded.

"Then, as your first mission as a full-fledged Huntsmen, I ask that you spread the word to your fellow Militiamen."

"It'll be music to their ears, Professor." Cardin smirked before running off in the same direction as the General.

Goodwitch lingered for a moment, looking up at the sky, watching as the sun began to part the dark and dreary clouds. The magnificent blue was shining through, things were finally looking up. "I don't know what you said to Mr. Winchester, but it worked." She said as Russel and Dove appeared from behind.

"Cardin's a good man, he knows what's up, he knows what's down. He just needed a little perspective to get the ball rolling."

"You mean you didn't even tell him he was a pawn?" Goodwitch questioned. "That's a risky gambit, Mr. Thrush."

"Telling him that would have changed the conversation entirely, you'd have diminishing returns from that." He shrugged. "So, we held up our end of the bargain, now yours?"

"Right," Goodwith nodded as Danny and Marie-Anne appeared. "At this moment forward, all Beacon students regardless of their year are deputized as full time Huntsmen. Congratulations, you've graduated early."

"Alright, neat," Dove nodded. "Now, what about Sky?"
"Yes, well, you see I have a mission for you."

"Whoa, what's this? I held up our end of the bargain, no flipping the script now," Russel spoke up, raising his voice slightly.

"I'm not, for you see, your first mission as Huntsmen is to accompany Danny and Marie-Anne here in their search to find Sky." She said, quickly defusing the upset. "Before the Fall, Ozpin had enlisted Sky to look into a certain matter in the town of Venezier. Your mission, head to Venezier, link up with the local Kevin, locate Sky then come home."

"The Local Kevin'?" Russel raised a brow at the wording.

"You've just stepped into a bigger world, good luck gentlemen." Goodwitch said before turning towards the amassed Vacuans, no doubt to lend a hand.

"So...where's Venezier?" Dove asked aloud.

"Beach front territory, and couple hundred miles past Oakwood." Marie-Anne announced. "We're looking at a three day journey by foot, if we run."

"Thankfully, we already have transportation," Danny smirked.

The DNCE duo then led the confused CRDL boys deep into to the local forest. They reached a wide and open plain, coming across what appeared to be an abandoned farm. There, within the stables, they found their mode of transport, four brown horses. Without a word, both Marie-Anne and Danny mounted their steeds and led them out into the plain flat land.

"Hey, Russel," Dove called out to his teammate as he pulled himself onto the horses' saddle. "You grew up on a farm, you ever ride a horse before?"

"...Dove," Russel muttered, finding some offense to the suggestion. "Just because I grew up on a farm doesn't mean I know how to ride a horse." He said before cracking a smile. "But yeah, I do." He laughed before mounting his steed and taking the reins. "Giddy Up."

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Throughout the entire arc, there was this theme of asking yourself what you were willing to do for your people, what were you willing to give? For Cardin and many others, it was joining the Atlesian military. For Nebula, it was biting her pride and turning for help from a Valean. For Glynda it was her allowing her students to fight for their kingdom. And, as seen in this chapter, for his people, Russel gave in, he accepted the worst thing he'd ever been called and embraced it.

Bringing things back to Pyrrha's Headdress. I'm not the only one who finds it odd Jaune gets his new armor forged from her belongings right? That's canon and so we all know what eventually happens to the circlet.

This chapter is also, sort of the culmination of Russel's journey so far.

Lance really was Russel's antithesis, he was everything our protagonist opposed. Throughout The Darkling Thrush, Russel's had a specific code about how he approached things. He's actually really big on freedom of choice and freedom of speech. And those are two things Lance's actions directly opposed, which has put them always on this collision course.
Usually, I'd post an interlude about the day after I finish an arc, but unfortunately I'll be heading out of town tomorrow. And won't be back until Tuesday. So, that interlude will be a couple days late.

Also, spoilers about the next arc? It's a western.

Next Arc: Tears of Venezier!
Welcome back everyone for our 10th Interlude! Wooo! I know I said this would be up Tuesday, but as it turns out, there is in fact internet where I'm currently visiting! Hell Yeah! Wi-Fi!

Yeah, ever since I introduced Lance, I knew there'd be a fatal confrontation between him and Russel. But it was always a question of how. And I think I pulled it off.

Anyways, onto the Interlude!

The Sentinel

Two hundred years before the Great War, Vacuo was a tropical oasis stumbled upon by chance. In the center of a remote desert, the bare sandy dunes provided a glimpse of peace and a life so removed from the natural terrors they'd been indoctrinated to accept. In the deathly desert that spanned thousands of miles, where no Grimm dared to venture, these nomads created paradise and sought to live as they sought fit, without fear and in the light of a hopeful tomorrow.

But such peace never lasts. These settlers, once nomads, who'd spent years wandering lands, never staying in one place for too long, something was bound to give. Tensions rose between purists and those acclimated to the life of comfort. Conflict emerged, The Bloody Sunday, a bar room brawl that slaughtered twenty. And for the first time, a dark atmosphere descended upon the fledging settlement of Vacuo. Armies arose, meeting to cast down the opposition for control of their people's destiny.

That was when the threat of Grimm re-emerged. Through the godless desert the nightmares marched, to stamp out humanity. The people of Vacuo were drowning in their own people's blood, too distracted by their own unresolved issues to face the beasts that threatened all their existence. Dark days followed, the Grimm a blight that swarmed through the coarse sand.

When all seemed lost, a stranger emerged. Sinbad Queen, a drifter, a nomad in his own right, wandering across the desert, his purpose unknown even to this day. As if by accident he'd stumbled upon the conflict. Some, however, would say it was by destiny. Witnessing the peoples' dire days and their final nights, Sinbad could not stand idly by. And into the fray he went.

Across the arduous desert he went. Climbing atop foul mesa and traversing mountains, until finally reaching the top of the highest point in Vacuo. It was said that dust flowed through the air that day, that the sands around them began to levitate. The sieging Grimm abandoned their crusades and turned their attention to Sinbad up atop that mountain peak. A sea of Grimm charged, while all the men and women of Vacuo watched in awe. As the sun fell over the horizon, a mighty green flash engulfed the sky and seared through the land. The dying cries of Grimm fell on deaf ears while the cheers of many rang loud.

It was then that Vacuo was truly born, when the blood feuds and those who fought their wars were all gone. The people turned to this stranger, this man who owed them nothing and yet saved regardless and asked for him to lead them. Sinbad declined, for who was he to decide the paths of many? But before the people could weep, he spurred them, announcing that he would always be watching over them.

Sinbad Queen, The Sentinel of Vacuo, watched over the people up atop that mountain, directly
across from the growing city. This drifter, this nomad, became a savior and a permanent resident, introduced new forms of medicine and teachings from far off lands he'd discovered in his travels. And though unconfirmed, it is believed The Sentinel had discovered the origin of Faunus during this time.

The Sentinel burdened himself with the safety of Vacuo and would act against those who intended to harm its people. Bandits and Grimm, invading pirates seeking buried treasure and even a sinister woman with a dark heart. The Sentinel carried on with this way of life for decades. Sometimes he'd pass the time enriching the people's minds, and others he'd uplift their spirits. He was more than just a shield against the drums of encroaching war, he was Vacuo's hero.

But then, The Sentinel vanished.

The people of Vacuo took notice and marched up to the observatory of their protector. And much to their surprise, they found it empty. What happened to The Sentinel, nobody knows for certain. Some religious zealots professed he'd transcended to serve as a holy angel. Others claim that he'd died fighting in a shadowy war, one that they hadn't even noticed. Some fatalistic few thin that he'd suffered a stroke and fell off the mountain. And then there are those who paused and wondered, maybe he'd simply left for parts unknown, ever the nomad he was.

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Back in Nebula's Arc, there was mention of this historical figure, The Sentinel of Vacuo, whose lost legacy was being sought after by Dr. Kruger. I like going back and playing with the history, I like world building.

\textbf{Anyways, next week: Tears of Venezie!}
Welcome back everybody for the beginning of another story arc! Woo!

In my story bible where I got all the plots and stuff for The Darkling Thrush, I never named The Sentinel, just had his title and everything, so I threw random names and words together when I wrote the chapter that first named him back in the Nebula arc. And I've just been going with it ever since. So I hope that clears up some things.

Anyways, on with the story.

"What's so special about a town called Venezier?" Dove had asked.

A hundred miles north of Oakwood, Russel was familiar with their destination. Though, never actually travelling to it himself, he'd heard the stories and read the old books of the territory from the local library.

Founded some two hundred years prior, Venezier started off as a mining town, where settlers happened to stumble across a Dust deposit. A century later, the mines began to dry. The settlers moved North, following the veins and reached the coast and soon enough the game changed, no longer were they digging for Dust, but setting up a trading post and port. It was a good run for a while then, until the War. After that, as Russel recalled, the town of Venezier was turned into a military outpost, where the Valean military plotted their naval assaults against Mistrailian invaders.

When the war ended, Venezier went through another metamorphosis. Vale no longer needed a standing army after the Treaty, so the town dried up and all military assets were moved to the capitol. The town gained notoriety from its unusually calm seas, where at night, in the dark, the water reflected the overhead sky as if you were sailing through a sea of stars and was now nothing more than a tourist trap.

It wasn't the biggest town within Vale's borders, but it sure wasn't the smallest. Where modern marvels such as the City of Vale eclipsed all others, Venezier was considered to be nothing more than a port used to offload goods for the Eastern villages. But with the recent collapse of the greater city, the once lowly town was now one of the grander settlements around.

Horses galloped across uneven roads leaving dust trails in their wake as four newly minted Huntsmen journeyed to the town ahead, unsure of what awaited them. There was so much uncertainty since Vale's fall, since Cinder and her cabal kicked their teeth in and left them festering like rats, scrounging for resources to keep the lights on.

But out here, under clear open air and a hot yellow sun, riding into town, it didn't feel that way anymore. They had purpose, they had a mission and it was one Russel and Dove were glad to carry out: to locate their missing teammate Sky Lark.
For all their candor and relief to learn that their friend had survived the Fall of Vale, a weight hungover the collective of gathered Huntsmen. Goodwitch had merely explained that Sky had been assigned a mission on Ozpin's orders prior to the attack, other than that she'd left the completely in the dark about the specifics. What he was doing in Venezier was a mystery, and what that mean for them was also a mystery. But that was alright with them, all they needed to know was that he was alive and well.

The four Huntsmen rode their steeds across a dusty plain, skimming the outer edges of the town before finally coming to a rest upon a hill. Dismounting from his horse, Russel walked to the very top of the hill, reaching out and accepting a pair of binoculars from the team's designated leader Danny Matchstick.

Russel had known Danny as long as he'd known Dove and the rest of Team CRDL, first meeting him out in the Emerald Forest in fact. They'd kept things amicable during their days at Beacon, but never truly got to know the other outside of the once and a while game of blackjack. It hadn't been until recent that the Thrush gained a greater understanding for the DNCE leader, but that didn't necessarily make things any better, seeing that they're only commonality was they were both willing to kill a couple of guys before they could plunge what remained of Vale into another war.

But seeing as this was their first mission as full-fledged Huntsmen, Russel was content with having Danny call the shots. At least he knew the guy was handy with a gun.

With the pair of binoculars in his hands, the green haired man stepped up and proceeded to scope out the goings on within the town. Though there was reasonable doubt that Venezier along with the other villages had been unaffected by the collapse in worldwide communication, it was best to be careful lest they run into any unforeseen trouble such as an angry anarchistic mob or run into a horde of Grimm.

"We've got activity," Russel announced, spotting a number of people walking through the town's streets through his pair of binoculars.

"They ain't White Fang are they?" Marie-Anne asked, still atop her horse.

"Negative." Russel said, turning slowly to peer across the town's square, looking over every individual he could spot. "Not a Faunus around in fact."

"Is that odd?" Dove asked, raising a brow.

"When was the last time you visited a place with no Faunus?" Russel questioned as he continued to view the town and its people from afar.

"Oakwood didn't have a Faunus population," Marie-Anne said, recalling her shared youth with Russel, growing up in the backwater town of Oakwood. "Not exactly something to get worked up on."

"Oakwood is rural farmland where retired Huntsmen go to die," The Thrush countered as he continued to scan the area, spotting what appeared to be a local saloon. "This place has a port, they trade goods here. There should be a variety of people walking about."

"A lot can happen in nine days," Danny spoke in a grim knowing tone. "Anyways, we've got a job to do. Anything else you can spot for us, Russel?" The former DNCE leader asked, turning to the Thrush once more.

"I've got eyes on the local watering hole." Russel announced, eyeing the saloon near the center of
Last time I checked, the legal age for drinking was still twenty-one." Marie-Anne pipped up.

"Sure it is, but I bet there's some poor sod down there we can ask for directions to find Sky, or whoever this other 'Kevin' is," Russel said, recalling their secondary objective, to link up with some sort of local informant that Goodwitch had informed them about. For a moment, Russel thought about the Kevin he knew, some strange fellow who appeared to live a double life who provided goods ranging from high power fireworks, the occasional fake I.D. and even the plans to a night club or two. It was a real shame that the son of a gun turned up dead.

"What's the verdict then? Is it safe?" Danny asked, looking to Russel for his own personal assessment of the town.

Russel paused for a moment, thinking the question over as he looked over the town once more. There wasn't very many people walking around, and by the looks of things the ones up and about appeared to be keeping to themselves and that didn't quite sit right with Russel. But for the most part, nobody exactly appeared to be confrontational. "I've got some reservations," He bit his lip, making the call. "But yeah, we shouldn't have any issues."

"Alright then," Danny threw a hand forward and pointed to the town. "We're going in."

Russel mounted his horse without delay, then the four Huntsmen galloped down the hill heading straight into town. The locals, who had seemed complacent with their undisturbed privacy, looked onward, watching them pass on by, staring at the newcomers with quiet anticipation.

Reaching the local saloon, the Huntsmen dismounted from their steeds, grabbing the reins and tying them to a nearby post. Glancing around to their immediate surroundings, the makeshift quartet met the locals' gazes, unsure how to interpret the reception. Just as they prepared to enter the saloon, out of the on looking crowds, a trio of men wearing similar red and brown clothing stepped forward, making their across the square and beaming towards the Huntsmen.

"Who you think they are?" The man leading the trio asked aloud to his cohorts, quickly catching the Huntsmen's attention.

"Look a little lost I think," One of the man's number spoke, chuckling to himself. "Also look a lot like pigs too, heh."

"I thought you said it was clear." Marie-Anne's darted towards Russel, an accusing look on her face.

The Thrush gave an indifferent shrug. "I also said I had reservations." He muttered as he began to size up the approaching trio, assessing whether or not they posed any real threat. But by the looks of the darkened 'B' in the shape of a rooster embroidered onto the front of their shirts, Russel was willing to bet they weren't just some nosy dock workers.

"Hey! Horseback!" The man at the head of the trio shouted towards them while his associates laughed.

"You mean us?" Dove asked dumbly, completely off put by the informality.

"'You mean us?' Do we mean them? Ha!" The leader and his companions shared a laugh as the closed the distance fully. "So what you fellas doing riding on horses, eh?" The leader questioned in a manner akin to an interrogator. "You ain't none of them technophobes are you?"
"Would you believe it was because the bus was out of order?" Danny said, quickly earning the trio's attention, as well as the rest of the team's. The former DNCE leader flashed a smile, one that Russel and the rest of the team recognized as a façade, best to keep things peaceful.

"Out of order? You hear that? They say the bus was out of order?" The leader turned to his companions once again, this time bursting out in a mocking laugh. "Heh, off the beaten track you must be, eh?" He said, his tone quickly turning dark and his expression souring. "But seriously, assuming you wanna keep from getting your legs broken, you'll tell us why you're here."

"Just passing through." Danny said, holding that smile of his in place.

"'Passing through' he says!" The leader of the trio laughed. "Eh, alright, 'keep on passing through' then, yes? But if you start some shit, we'll fuck you up."

"Wouldn't dream of starting anything." Danny continued to smile.

"You trying to be funny?!" The man to the leader's left shouted and drew a blade. He took a step forward towards Danny and raised the knife towards him. "I'll cut that fuckin' smile off your face!"

By the time the knife was drawn, Russel and the rest of the team were racing to draw their own weapons, aiming to back up Danny. Reaching into his left pocket, the Thrush produced his pocket knife and prepared to leap forward and intercept the knife wielding man, only to stop at the sight of Danny holding a gun to the man's forehead. The trio of red and black clad men froze as one of their number found themselves staring down the sights of one of Danny's handguns. With another swift blink and you'll miss it motion, the DNCE leader drew his other sidearm and leveled it at the other pair of men.

The DNCE leader gave a look over his shoulders to his makeshift team and nodded to their drawn weapons. Understanding that their designated leader had the situation under control, Russel, along with Dove and Marie-Anne holstered their weapons and watched with anticipation at how Danny planned to deal with the men.

"I don't think we're the type of people you'd like to start any shit with." Danny said, looking past his weapon and staring into the knife wielding man's eyes.

If Danny had shot the man then and there, Russel wouldn't have been surprised. He knew the lengths the DNCE leader was willing to go, if these men were even possible of further hindering their mission, he knew Danny wouldn't hesitate. But Danny kept his cool and shoved the man back with the front of his gun.

"I think it would be best if you three ran off." Danny spoke in a cold almost detached tone, still maintaining eye contact with the man he'd first pulled the gun on. Without a word, the trio of men ran, sprinting as fast as their legs could carry them. "Pleasant bunch of people living here." Danny muttered dryly before turning and walking for the saloon.

"'We shouldn't have any issues', he said," Marie-Anne echoed Russel's prior assessment of the town before following after Danny into the saloon.

"Oh piss off." Russel muttered before joining his fellow Huntsmen.

Stepping into the saloon, Russel was greeted by the distinct aroma of sawdust and smoke. The establishment was dimly lit with the only true source of light coming from the sun piercing through the windows. There were several tables at the center of the room, but it appeared they'd all been taken by men and women all wearing similar black and red outfits as the trio of men who'd just
confronted them outside and along the walls were a number of quaint little booths large enough to fit four and no more.

Far off to the side in one of the corners of the room, Russel could spot a helmeted fellow. Given the current lighting, the Thrush couldn't quite make out the individual lurking in the darkness, but he could make out the distinct form of horns that adorned his helmet, one appearing cracked and another intact. The figure sitting alone glanced up and unlike the others who reveled with drink, he stared through cold lenses at the quartet like a predator waiting for its prey to slip up and make a fatal mistake.

"Dove?" Danny looked to the youngest of their team. "Be a pal and grab us a booth, would you?" He nodded off over to the side away from the prying eyes of nearby patrons. Dove gave nod and splintered off from the rest as they approached the bartender behind the counter.

"Afternoon." Russel gave a wave to the Barkeep, getting the man's attention.

The Bartender, an older man somewhere in his mid-seventies squinted at the sight of Russel, Danny and Marie-Anne, almost doing a double take. "You three look a little young to be drinking."

"Not here to buy a round," Danny spoke up as Marie-Anne fetched a wallet with the Valean council's seal from her pocket, handing it off to her fellow DNCE teammate. "In the business of purchasing information." Danny smiled as he retrieved a twenty lien note, placing it firmly onto the counter.

The Bartender stared at the note for a moment, then looked from one Huntsman to another before cautiously taking the currency and dragging it to his side of the counter. "What kind of information?" He asked.

"Whereabouts." Russel stated, earning an odd look from the Barkeep.

"You three are too young to be Huntsmen…You're not one of them Bounty Hunter types, are you?" The Bartender asked, looking to all three of the Huntsmen.

"Does it matter?" Marie-Anne questioned.

The Bartender looked at the lien note again. "I guess it doesn't." He shrugged. "Who you looking for?"

"A friend of mine," Russel spoke up once more, taking point on the conversation. "Goes by the name Sky Lark, silverfish blue hair, may or may not be carrying a huge ass halberd."

A thoughtful look graced the Bartender's features as the man fell silent, attempting to recall anyone matching the description Russel had given. "I can't say I've seen such an individual 'round these parts." He said, frowning slightly.

"You sure about that?" Russel raised a brow.

"Sadly, I am." The Bartender sighed as he watched Russel drag the twenty lien out of view and discretely handing it off to Danny.

"Fine, we're looking for someone else also," Danny said, taking the currency note from Russel and placing it back onto the table, piquing the Bartender's interest once more. "We don't have a description for him, but we've got a name."

"And that would be?" The Bartender asked as he reached out for the note.
"Kevin." Danny uttered Goodwitch's informant's name.

However, the once hungry look on the Bartender's face dissipated, turning to one of fear. "I-I-I," The old man stuttered incoherently before finally regaining his ability to form words. "I'm afraid I don't know anybody by that name." He withdrew his hand from the twenty, almost taking a step back away from the counter as well.

"That a fact?" Russel's inquired as he watched the old man trip over himself behind the counter. In an instant the man had gone from willing informant to frightened child, all at the mention of a name.

"Yes," The Bartender stated, his eyes darting away from the trio present at the counter and look off to the room full of black and red clothed men and women behind them. "That's a fact."

"You sure about that?" Russel leaned forward, catching the Bartender's eye.

"I don't know a Kevin."

"Really?" The Thrush scoffed. "I think you're lying. I think you do know Kevin."

"I said I don't know a Kevin!" The bartender shouted at the top of his lungs. He then aimed to begin berating the trio about civility and manners, the kind they clearly did not possess, but before he could lash out in anger, he froze in place at the realization that now all eyes within the saloon were now aimed at the bar and the lowly Barkeep.

The jollity and reveling of the men and women had been replaced by a cold and eerie silence that mildly disturbed the Huntsmen. They looked to the Bartender for an explanation, but found the old man slinking off to the side of the bar, under the scrutiny of his patrons.

"Rather heated up in here today, huh Bartender?" A voice called out from the front of the saloon. Stepping through the doorway was blonde haired man wearing a white sleeveless shirt, putting his muscular arms out on display for all to see. He wore blue jeans dirty from the daily grind and most peculiar, he wore a pair of goggles that adorned the top of his head. "Everything alright?" He said, turning his attention to the trio.

Out of the corner of Russel's eyes, he could see the Barkeep quake as he attempted to go unnoticed by the Sheriff. There was a fearful look that graced the old man's features, one spoke volumes of the lawman in this town. The longer the Thrush spent in this town, the more he became unsettled by it. Averting his gaze back to the goggle wearing man, he opened his mouth to speak. "Can we help you?" He asked, his voice low though doing his best to keep things civil.

"No, the question is, how can I help you?" The man said as he made his way to the counter. "The name's Brussels, I'm Sheriff of these parts and I can't help but notice a couple of strangers making a scene in my town." He puffed out his chest a jabbed a thumb against it. "Just got word three of my guys got into an altercation and their lives were threatened, can't have that goin' on here."

It was a reflexive move, for Russel to turn his gaze ever so slightly out to the corner of his eye at Danny. He thought back to how he'd beaten the rest of them to drawing their weapons and handled the situation with the three men, no doubt the incident the Sheriff referred to. But, when in doubt, deny, deny, deny.

"Altercation, this is the first I've heard of any altercation," Russel said, playing dumb. The Thrush then turned to Danny and pointed to Brussels. "You got any idea what this man's talking about?"

"I haven't the faintest of ideas." Danny shrugged.
"You got an idea what this guy's talking about?" Russel glanced over to Marie-Anne.

"Not a damn clue." Marie-Anne shook her head.

The Thrush then turned to the quivering Bartender who was now failing to hide behind his counter. "Hey, Barkeep, you got any idea of what the Sheriff's talking about?" He asked, earning a fearful shake of the Bartender's head in response.

"Heh, smartass." Brussel's scoffed in an approving manner before taking to lean against the counter and tapped on the decades old wood. "Hit me, Bartender." He said, not even looking to the Barkeep. The Bartender shakily ducked behind the counter, pulling out a black bottle of whiskey and pouring the Sheriff a shot before ducking behind the counter once again, leaving the bottle for Brussels to take.

"So what brings you fellas all the way to Venezier?" Brussels asked before downing the shot in one go. "And don't play dumb on this one either, I know you ain't local." He said, directing his attention towards Russel.

Russel exchanged a glance with Danny, who gave him an approving nod to run point on the Sheriff's question. "Just lookin' for someone." Russel spoke truthfully, though yielding any more pertinent details.

Though they were still within the Kingdom of Vale, they were strangers in a strange land, and people have already threatened them. With the safety of the team and their mission in mind, Russel had more than enough incentive to not trust the supposed lawman standing in front of him. The less Brussels knew the better.

"Isn't everyone?" The Sheriff, Brussels, turned to Marie-Anne and winked. Marie-Anne's eyes widened slightly before her features shifted into a scowl. "Whoa now, no need to start a ruckus," He held his hands out defensively. "Just being polite is all."

"Yeah, sure," Marie-Anne rolled her eyes.

"So you say you're looking for someone?" Brussels raised a brow.

"What's it to you?" Russel questioned, his eyes narrowing slightly. All he had to do was spare a glance the Barkeep's way to know the man addressing them wasn't some noble saint. Revealing any information to the man of their mission could ultimately hinder them.

"I'm the law here, I'm supposed to help people and such," The Sheriff laughed as he met Russel's gaze. "You just don't pull anymore shit in my town and we'll be nice and dandy. You comprehend?"

Though Russel sought what was best for his team, this wasn't his call to make. So he remained silent as Danny took over with a begrudging nod of acceptance. "Sounds fair."

"Now who's this fella you're lookin' for?" The Sheriff inquired.

"A man named Kevin." THE DNCE leader said.

"Kevin? Oh, I know Kevin. In fact we all do." He gave a curt nod to the Bartender and smiled. "You can find our dear Kevin out by 'The Fields', it's a nice plot of land and such, just head a little bit East of here. You can't miss it."

"Much appreciated." Danny thanked the Sheriff. "Best be on your way then." Pushing off from the
side of the counter, the trio of Huntsmen hurried off towards the exit, waving over to Dove and signaling the CRDL boy to join them.

"Now remember, don't go starting any shit." The Sheriff said, catching their ears one last time, echoing the trio of men from earlier.

"Oh you know it," Russel smirked over his shoulder before joining the rest of his team and exiting the saloon.

Walking back outside, Russel and the others grabbed their horses and set off, only sparing one last glance back to the saloon, thinking back to how the Bartender had been so easily frightened by the presence of the Sheriff.

"I don't like this place." The Thrush declared aloud, earning agreeing nods from his teammates. "Something just feels off."

With the Huntsmen gone, out in the back of the room in his secluded booth, the helmeted man stood and made the long stride through the silent bar and reaching Brussels. The Sheriff nodded to the man and turned to look at the doorway in which the quartet had left. "They're going to be trouble, aren't they?" Brussels spoke aloud before pouring himself another shot.

"Hrn." The Helmeted man grunted and turned a turned his sights towards the Bartender.

The Barkeep gulped, paling as he felt the man's gaze. "I-I didn't tell them anything." The old man said.

"We know." Brussels said before passing the bottle of whiskey across the counter to the Helmeted man. "Still, you shouldn't have lost your nerve. Coyote."

The Helmeted man, Coyote, then grabbed ahold of the bottle and raised it slightly, as if measuring its weight. Then, without warning, he whipped it around before slamming it across the Bartender's face, breaking on contact. The sheer force behind the strike then flung the bartender into the wall behind him. A sickening crack of bones was echoed throughout the quiet room as all eyes were still fixated on the front. The old Bartender collapsed onto the floor, crimson beginning to pool out of his mouth.

"You were a shitty Bartender anyways," The Sheriff remarked as his helmeted associate tossed what remained of the bottle over his shoulder. Brussels then turned and pointed at the nearest patron, gesturing to the bar counter. "Hey, you," He called out to the patron. "You're the new Bartender. Have fun."

"Woo!" The patron exclaimed before running up from his seat to the bar. "Drinks on the house!" He shouted, earning a series of cheers from his once and former fellow patrons. As other similarly dressed men and women began to rush to the bar, The Sheriff and Coyote departed.

Welcome to Venezier.

'Tears of Venezier' was planned to be the seventh story arc, occurring right after 'Downtime', but instead I swapped it out for the Nebula arc. Originally, Russel was to travel to Venezier immediately after the Memoria Night Club incident for something completely unrelated to the current plot, but would encounter familiar characters such as Brussels and Coyote.
Speaking of Brussels and Coyote, the last time we saw these guys it was as a cameo at the very end of 'The Fall of Vale', and before that during the Nebula arc. So, for a refresher, I recommend at least reading the very last chapter of the Nebula arc, might clue you guys back in on what their deal is.

Anyways, next chapter will be out next week, I'm hoping to get 2 more chapters out by then, hopefully. Anyways, later days!
Hello everybody, welcome back to another exciting chapter of The Darkling Thrush!

This chapter is coming late, sorry about that, stuff happens to me. But I hope this more than makes up for that fact!

Anyways, on with the chapter!

Traveling across town onward to their destination, a place called 'The Fields' by the local Sheriff, Russel and his team were afforded the luxury of sightseeing. Venezier through the years had evolved into a tourist trap, there was bound to be something worth seeing. But the further along they went on their way, the newly formed team found nothing distinct t enough to warrant their attention.

In fact, if anything, they were the attraction worth seeing. As they strode through empty streets, the local towns people who loitered outside of businesses and homes, watching them in silence. Wherever they went, it was the same, people would stop whatever they were doing and just watch them pass by. To say the least, Russel and the rest of his team found it quite unsettling.

"Almost like they'd never seen a horse before." Marie-Anne scoffed as they hurried along, not wishing to linger.

Though the Huntsmen's choice of transportation was indeed odd given the times, Russel very much doubted that was the cause of the people's interest. The Thrush looked off to the side and met the people's stares. It was then that he found something there, within their eyes, something that weighed down their faces, the silent pain of despair.

Russel thought back to when they'd initially entered the town, how the trio of men in red and black had confronted them, demanding to know why it was they'd come to Venzier and how they'd threatened the Huntsmen. Then Russel thought of the Sheriff, how his sudden appearance had frightened the Bartender. The Sheriff the echoed the trio of men's words, demanding that they don't cause trouble.

He thought of their words, how they'd been so fixated on the trouble they would bring to this town. But now, now that Russel had really looked at the townsfolk and seen their troubled faces, he was beginning to think that the Sheriff wasn't so much worried about those he was charged to protect, more so that he was afraid for something else entirely. Now, whatever that was, was the real question.

"I think this is it." Dove spoke aloud, catching Russel's ear.

The Thrush snapped to attention, having lost himself in his thoughts. He hadn't even realized they're trek had taken them to the edge of the town once more. With the sea to their North and the mountain line dead ahead, Russel and his team found themselves face to face with a long stretch of open land, filled with hills and the makings of stone walls that had fallen into disrepair. If they
were to consider anything to be titled 'The Fields', this most certainly would be their best bet.

But as far as the Huntsmen could tell, there was no sign the man they sought, in fact, it appeared as though there wasn't a living thing around at all. Venturing forward proved to be their only option, as their scope was limited by the surrounding hills. Past dry barren land they went, over atop a plentiful of hills until the town behind them was no longer within view.

As more time passed by, the less certain of The Sheriff's directions they became. They paused atop another hill and noticed the sun beginning to descend, soon enough night would befall them. If they doubled back into town, they would be able to grab a room at the local Inn. They could always resume their search tomorrow.

But just as they began to turn back, something caught Russel's eye. Out of the corner of his eye and edging right out from behind another hill, the thrush could make out what appeared to be a smokestack. They quickly descended down the hill then rode around, bypassing the other, and found a quiet little hut, the first sign of someone living out on The Fields.

There was no guarantee that the hut belonged to the man they sought, but it was their only lead, so the Huntsmen opted to investigate the dwelling. They tugged on their reins, calling for their horses to stop in their tracks. One by one they dismounted their steeds and approached the wide open plain. They tied the reins of their horses to a lowly stump in the ground then headed for the lone hut.

Reaching the front door, they did the polite thing and knocked. "Hello?" Dove asked aloud as he gently knocked on the dried out wooden door. "Anyone in there?"

"You call that knocking?" Marie-Anne shot Dove a disbelieving look. "This is knocking." She said, before pushing the CRDL boy aside and banging her fist on the door. "Hey Kevin, you in there?!" She then reeled back her hand and banged on the door once more, this time however, Marie-Anne's hand burst through the wood, causing a large portion of the sun dried door to crumple.

"I guess we're breaking and entering." Russel remarked, smirking slightly as he observed Marie-Anne struggle to remove her hand. "Seeing as your hands already in there, why not just unlock the door for us?"

"Oh shut it, Russel." Marie-Anne said, sparing a glare at her fellow Oakwood native. She then returned her attention to the door, but then, instead of resuming her attempts to separate herself from the door, Marie-Anne leaned inward causing Russel's smirk to grow even wider. The DNCE member struggled and cursed, attempting to find the door's lock.

"Need some help there?" Danny raised a curious brow as they found themselves waiting on Marie-Anne.

"Why don't we just save time and knock the door down, eh?" Marie-Anne grunted as she pushed her entire arm through the hole in the door, attempting to get a better angle on the lock.

"Because that would be impolite." Dove said as he played look out, keeping an eye to their backs lest they get jumped by some roaming Grimm or worse. "How would you like it if you found your door down busted down?"

"Pissed off." Marie-Anne grunted as she continued to struggle, blindly searching the door. "Exactly how I feel right now."

"Sure you don't need any help?" Russel snickered.
"I said shut it Russel!" Marie-Anne jerked backwards in order to shout at the Thrush. However, in doing so, the DNCE girl ripped apart another section of the door.

"Look at what you did." Russel gestured to the ruined door, earning a spiteful glare from his peer.

"Of for the love of Monty," Danny let out an exhausted sigh. "Just break down the whole door then why don't you?"

"With pleasure." Marie-Anne said as she maintained her glare at Russel. Without a word, she drew her sword from its hip sheath and slashed forward, cutting a large portion of the door off its hinges and causing it to fall back into the hut. The chunk of door collapsed onto the ground, soon followed by another that had given way seemingly by itself, leaving only the handle and enough wood to support it.

"You know what we should've done instead of hacking the door down?" Russel said aloud, earning a cautious glance from Marie-Anne. The Thrush then took a step forward, approaching the knob he reached out and turned it. Unceremoniously, he pulled it from the res to the house with ease.

"You mean to tell me I spent all that time trying to unlock an already open door?!!" Marie-Anne shouted in dismay.

"To be fair, you'd still be wrong." Russel said, raising the door handle for all to see. "It doesn't even have a lock." He gestured to the lack of a key hole before tossing the handle over to Marie-Anne.

The DNCE girl caught the door knob in her hands and glared down at it. "Oh for fucks sake." She sneered before tossing it over her shoulder.

"Can we just go inside now?" Dove called over his shoulder to his team. "It's getting dark."

"Not afraid of the dark, are you Dove?" Danny raised a brow at the CRDL boy.

"No," The flight capable boy said as he kept his eyes trained on the surrounding area. "Just the monsters lurking in it."

Without further delay, the team entered the hut. It was a small building on the outside, but for some reason it seemed to be larger on the inside. There were tables and desks scattered around what could be considered to be the living room and appeared to be gathering dust. Upon further inspection, given the gathered dust layer, it appeared that there used to be large machinery that once lay there.

Ventured further within the hut, finding drawers in the kitchen lazily opened and their contents missing. The longer they searched the hut, the more it appeared as though someone had come by and looted the place. After searching the majority of the hut, the team focused their attention on one remaining door, which given by the lay out of the hut, they assumed to be the living quarters.

"You want me to open this one?" Russel looked to Marie-Anne and smirked.

"Drop Dead, Russel." Marie-Anne spoke icily, glaring daggers at the Thrush.

With a laugh, Russel reached for the door and pushed it open and took a step inside. Instantly, he was smacked by a deathly odor. The Thrush gagged, as if he'd just been punched in the gut. "Ugh, what the-" He struggled to find the words as he stumbled into the room.

Too caught up over the foul stench that filled. Russel tripped over something blocking the pathway into the room and fell face first onto the wood. First there was the sound of Russel smacking
against the wood, followed closely by sound of Marie-Anne's laughter.

"Ha, ha, very funny." Russel muttered as he pulled himself off the floor. He then shot a curious look back towards whatever it was that stumbled him. The Thrush didn't know what he would find, but the last thing he expected to find was a dead body.

"Oh, crap." Dove's mouth fell open as he and the pair of DNCEs entered the room.

"What are the odds this guy's Kevin?" Marie-Anne asked, sounding quite disappointed that their search ended with them all cluttered around a dead body.

Russel walked around the room, looking for anything to help identify the man. The first place to look would be to search the body, but he very much doubted he'd find anything with the name 'Kevin' on it. Instead, he thought back to the Kevin he knew back in Vale, how the man lived dual lives, one as a strange supplier of illegal goods down some alley and the other a middle class suburbanite.

Sorting through the nearby closet, Russel found his answer to whether or not the man was Kevin. Pulling the closet door open, the Thrush found a small machine with a half done fake I.D. resting within. "Yeah, that's him." He sighed.

"Poor bastard." Marie-Anne said as she knelt down beside 'Kevin' and pointed to a pair of bullet holes in the back of his head. "He didn't even see it coming." She shook her head.

"How long you think he's been dead?" Dove questioned as he held his nose, choosing to breathe through his mouth than deal with the foul odor that filled the room.

"I'd give it three weeks," Danny said as she joined Marie-Anne on the floor beside Kevin. He pointed to the man's decaying dried up face and the maggots that writhed under its skin. "But given the environment in which it was left, out in the middle of a hot ass desert in a box without air condition, I'm inclined to give it the benefit of the doubt and say it's only been a week."

"You some sort of dead-body-oligist, Danny?" Russel raised a brow at the team leader's quick assessment.

"Something like that." Danny shrugged as she and Marie-Anne stood from the floor. "Well, turns out our man on the inside's been dead a good long while. There goes our leads."

"You think The Sheriff knew about this?" Marie-Anne asked.

"I'd be surprised if he didn't." Russel remarked bitterly. "You guys notice how odd this town's been? Not exactly the most approachable of people."

"This has been a wash." Danny sneered before heading out the door.

Seeing as their lead to finding Sky was literally a dead end, Russel and the remainder of his team followed Danny out the door. With disappointed and weary sighs, the team mounted their horses and began to head on back. Though they faced a substantial setback, they would not give up on Sky, rather, they would resume their search in the morning.

Russel held his head high, watching the sun begin it's descent over the horizon. Hues of orange cascaded across the land as the long shadows of the horses and their riders extended for what must have been miles. Across the hills which they'd already traveled they went, the morbid sight of the deceased Kevin ever present in his mind during the hour long ride back to town.
Given how they'd found the hut and the majority of valuables missing, Russel could have simply left well enough alone and assumed that it had been a burglary gone wrong. But that match up, not with how they found the body. Whoever it was that killed Kevin, they'd gotten the drop on him in his own bedroom. With that, coupled with the distance of the town and its people, Russel couldn't help but feel like there was more going on than he would like.

Along the way, over another hill they went, as if they were chasing the sun, the darkness of night began to crowd around them. But there was another source of light that beamed through the darkening sky. Over his shoulder, Russel looked and to their back he found far off across the desolate land he spotted a low burning light out in the distance, closer towards the mountains of the old Venezier. With these darn hills all strewn the land he couldn't be too sure, but from what he could make out, Russel could speculate the light to be a camp fire.

Investigating the source of light should've been a priority, after all there was no harm in checking, and maybe it was Sky living on the outskirts of town just as Kevin had. But it was getting dark, that was when Grimm would come out to hunt. And really, after the last two weeks, dealing with Grimm was the last thing any of them wanted.

Night had fallen when the team arrived back into town. It was eerie in a way, to pass through the town in the dark, the people kept their distance and the nearby ocean was unordinary, unlike the sea off the sea by Beacon which Russel had become accustomed to during his stay.

The Thrush thought back to his first night back at the academy, how he'd slept in the auditorium alongside every other initiate. It'd been so loud, everybody engaging in conversation, especially when the lights went out, his fellow aspiring students continued to talk, believing that their hushed tones and low whispers would go unnoticed. But here in the middle of town, the only sound that filled Russel's ears were the sounds of his horse's hooves smacking the dirt road.

The second night, after the excursion into the Emerald Forest, that had been when Russel had heard the nearby sea, listening to the waves thrash against the Cliffside, from open window of the CRDL dorm room. It was then he realized how this town unsettled him. They were so close to the shore and yet he couldn't hear it, not even amongst the deathly quiet townsfolk who kept their distance and minded themselves, he could not hear the ocean. There was no thrashing, just the eerie stillness for which the town of Venezier was famed for.

Arriving at a nearby Inn at the center of the town, Russel and his team took to business. Using the funds in which they were granted by Goodwitch before setting off on their mission, they acquired feed for their steeds and booked rooms for three nights.

The Old Innkeeper was quiet as Russel approached, the team's purse in hand. She didn't once make eye contact, purposely avoiding his gaze. The Thrush held back the urge to question the woman, as it was they weren't the only ones present within the Inn. An idle glance to the corner and Russel found another one of those men in red and black clothing, the embroidered yellow letter 'B' in the form of a rooster's head brightly shining in contrast with his dark attire.

Russel watched the man, and the man watched back, a simple tilt of hat in regard for the Thrush as he leaned back against a nearby wall looking something akin to a sentry standing at his post. Or, as Russel thought darkly, like a jailor keeping his prisoners in check.

Without a word exchanged to either the man in the corner or the Innkeeper, Russel paid for their next couple night and grabbed their room keys. Without delay he signaled his team and they head up to check out their temporary digs.

They split up, two to a room. The dunces went to one room, the CRDL boys to the other, it made
things simpler that way. Russel grabbed his room key and opened the door. A soon as she did, he could practically hear Dove swoon. Stepping into the room they found actual beds. A nice change of pace since they as well as rest of Vale had been reduced to sleeping on the rubble of their sacked city.

"Oh man I've missed this." Dove contently sighed as he reclined on one of the two beds within their shared room.

"This your first time roughing it?" Russel asked as he strutted across the room, making his way to the window. As it happened to be, here on the fourth floor of the Inn, Russel found their room had prime view of the surrounding coast.

"I've been camping before." Dove said as he kicked off his boots, giving his sock covered toes a good flex, earning soft cracks. "But you'd find pitching a tent to be quite different from sleeping in a ruined hardware store."

"Tell you what, next time we're back in Vale we'll put it to a vote where we stay." Russel said as he stared out the window, off to the nearby ocean. The Thrush could see no waves. The water was still, completely unmoving. But that was not that he could see, the water itself frozen in place acted as an appropriately, mirroring the sky above. Mimicking the sky above, the ocean was a sea of stars. "Quite the view." Russel admired.

"Put it to a vote? Dove raised a brow at his teammate's words. "Not exactly a vote if there's only two of us." He said, a dower look befalling the youngest of the CRDL boys.

Russel glanced over his shoulder, tearing his eyes from the starlight sight and turned to face Dove fully. "We're going to find him." He said definitively.

"Well, yeah, I know. Just hope when we do he's not like Kevin." Dove sighed.

Russel frowned at the thought. The idea of adding Sky’s name to the thousands already dead made him feel ill. So the Thrush pushed past it, resolving remain hopeful for their friend.

"You think thy got anything decent to eat downstairs?" Russel asked changing the subject, while at the same time gesturing to his gut. It had been a while since they had a cooked meal.

Dove gasped, realizing they were no longer living amongst rats and could actually find something worth eating. "You think they got sundaes?" He shot the Thrush a hopeful look.

"Why the hell not?" Russel smirked. "Come on," He said, pushing himself away from the windows and heading towards the door. "Let's see if the others want get out and about."

Hopping off the bed, Dove followed Russel out the door. The pair of CRDL boys made their way down the hall, reaching the Dunces' room. He then promptly knocked on the door. There was a murmur behind the door followed by frantic muted voices. Russel raised a brow as he heard the tossing of sheets. Not two seconds later the door budged open ever so slightly with a disheveled looking Marie-Anne peering outward.

"Oh, hey Russel," An out of breathe Marie-Anne managed to greet with a smile, sticking her head outward while the remainder of her body was obscured by the door. "How are you?"

"Uh…good, I guess," Russel squinted at his fellow Oakwood native with suspicion. He then jotted a thumb down the hall to the stairs. "Dove and I are getting something to eat, you and Danny want in on this?"
"No, no I don't think so." Marie-Anne quickly shook her head, stray strands of her dull dyed hair loosely falling to cover her face. "I think we're going to stay in. Need all our rest if we're going to continue our search tomorrow."

Russel blinked as Marie-Anne drew a bare arm to wipe the loose strands of hair away from her face. Cocking his head to the left, Russel peered past Marie-Anne through the cracked open door and into the room. It was there Thrush made out the distinct clothing of both Danny and Marie-Anne lying on the floor.

Marie-Anne appeared flush as Russel arched a brow upward in surprise. "You mean to tell me it takes you five minutes to open an already unlocked door, but it takes less than one to get to hankey pankey?"

"Oh drop dead, Russel." Marie-Anne glared before retracting her head back through the doorway and firmly shutting the door in Russel's face.

"So they ready to go or what?" Dove asked, appearing behind the Thrush.

"I don't believe so, no." Russel shook his head before heading for the stairs.

Down flights the duo went before finally stepping into the lobby. To Russel's interest, the darkly dressed man from earlier was nowhere to be seen, as was the Innkeeper. It was then that the Thrush swore that the next time the opportunity should present itself he would ask someone just why they dressed up like that.

Russel and Dove walked across the street, under the light of the few lamp posts within the town square. Passing by the Sheriff's office, as well as the local saloon, they found themselves a diner and stepped inside.

There was much going on within the diner, just a pair of those darkly dressed men sitting of fin the corner and a few normal civilians for patrons while the workers hustled to churn out chow for their small clientele. Though they had their pick of the lot, from booths to tables, Russel and Dove opted for a pair of stools by the counter.

"Evening." Russel said, waving to a waitress.

The Waitress simply nodded in acknowledgement but said nothing. While the Waitress walked off to deliver plates of food to the two darkly dressed men in the corner, Russel and Dove busied themselves with the minutia of finding something decent to eat in the menu.

"They got any sundaes, Dove?" Russel questioned as he flipped through the multi-page menu.

"As far as I can tell? Nope." Dove frowned in disappointment as he read through the desert section. "Though, they do have ice cream floats."

"Not necessarily a loss then?" The Thrush glanced away from his menu.

"Could be better," Dove shrugged. "But could be a helluva lot worse."

"True." Russel admitted before setting his menu down, having already chosen his meal. While waiting for the Waitress to return, the Thrush took to sightseeing, examining the layout of the diner.

The diner itself has full with character, old mementos of the past hung like ornaments, levitating off the ground, suspended by wire. There was a boats steering wheel as well as several pick axes
that just floated there. The red and white checker painted walls were adorned with photographs. It was a visual storybook that told the history of both the diner and that of Venezier.

Russel followed the photos, from images of early settlers in their mining days, to that of some eighty years prior when the old military ship yard was still in operation. Bright smiles littered the frames of black and white to that full color. Trailing the photos to the present, Russel found men dressed up in ten gallon hats wearing Sheriff stars, posing around the very same counter he now sat at.

As Russel continued to view the photos, it appeared he'd stumbled across the birth of a tradition. Familiar faces began to appear more frequently, mixed in with fresh faces belonging to the diner's staff. Russel could practically see them age before his very eyes. And soon Russel found himself coming to the end of the photos. The Waitress herself began to appear closer towards the end.

But there was something that puzzled Russel. As he reached the end, he'd seen faces appear and disappear, and yet, he'd never once seen the Sheriff who'd greeted him and his team in the saloon earlier in the afternoon.

While the pair of CRDL boys continued to wait for their order to be filled, a familiar figure found his way into the diner. The Waitress, who was making her way back from delivering the plates of food to the men in the corner, had to catch herself before she could let out a surprised shriek.

Having caught sight of the Waitress' surprised expression from the corner of his eye, Russel looked over his shoulder and found Sheriff Brussels making the long stride over to the counter.

"This seat taken?" The Sheriff not so much asked as he was already planting his rear down in the seat.

"Howdy to you too, Sheriff," Russel said, eyeing Brussels cautiously.

"So, how're you boys doing this night? You find your guy?" Brussels asked, causing both Dove and Russel to exchange an unsure look.

"You know," Russel said, leaning back in his seat. "It was the strangest thing, how we went out there just like you said, and what we found was a dead man."

"Kevin's dead?" The Sheriff dramatically gasped. "What a shame, what a shame."

"So you're telling us you really did have no clue he was dead?" Russel spoke quietly, meeting the Sheriff's haughty gaze.

"You trying to say something, boy?" Brussel's glared, giving one of his muscular biceps a good flex.

"Kevin's hut was ransacked, probably been dead for over a week. Isn't it the Sheriff's job to take care of his people?" Russel said, unfazed by the subtle threat. "Then again, for a Sheriff you don't really seem to care. Everybody seems to be afraid of you."

Russel gave a nod to the Waitress, who took opportunity to flee back to the kitchen.

"Well, now that I've mention it," The Thrush continued, pointing to the photos mounted on the wall. "How long have you been a Sheriff anyways? Can't be more than a year."

"Heh, got a regular amateur detective here," The Sheriff bit his lip and shook his head. "You know,
"You think we're Huntsmen?" Dove questioned as one of the four men splintered off from the group, beginning to creep up on the CRDL boys from behind.

"Think? Shucks, I know you are." The Sheriff laughed. "Good rule of thumb? Huntsmen always travel in teams of four. And given the state of the world right now? I'd bet the people up in Vale must be real desperate for man power to let you little shits run around playing Hero."

"Can't help but notice you didn't deny any involvement in Kevin's death." Russel glared.

"What's there to deny? Not like you can do anything about it." Brussels smirked.

"We can stop you." Dove threatened.

"Stop me?" The Sheriff continued to laugh. "Shit, you can't even stop him." He pointed past Dove. Suddenly, a large head reached out and grabbed a hold of the back of Dove's head. Caught completely by surprise, Dove was slammed face first against the cover. Russel quickly reached out and claimed the nearest piece of silverware he could grab and aimed to spin around and stab at Dove's attacker.

Unfortunately, Russel soon found himself being elbowed in the face Brussels. The Sheriff put all of his weight into the strike and successfully knocked the Thrush out of his stool and landing on his back against the floor.

Dove flailed around as he attempted to fight off his attacker, only for him to be plucked out of his seat and tossed into the air. Before the CRDL boy could even activate his semblance, his attacker quickly caught him by the leg and slammed him face first into a nearby table, breaking through the wood with plates and silverware scattering across the diner.

Russel groaned as he attempted to get back to his feet. But The Sheriff refused to give the Thrush the chance. Jumping out of his seat, Brussels approached Russel and lifted his boot above his head. The Sheriff then curb stomped Russel, earning a pained wail in response. The Thrush rolled over onto his side and spat up blood that began to fill his mouth, having cut the inside of his cheek against his teeth. But The Sheriff proved to be relentless, unleashing a barrage of kicks to his exposed back, proceeding to knock the wind out of him.

Dove struggled to his feet, attempting to overcome how disoriented he felt. The blows to the head did him no good. But his attacker gave him no reprieve. His attacker reached out and grabbed him by the throat before hauling Dove off the ground. Dove kicked and punched, doing all he could to break his attackers grasp, even attempting to whip out his sword. But his attacker simply smacked aside Dove's weapon and suspended him in the air.

Meeting his attacker at eye level, Dove's eyes widened in horror at the sight as well as the stench. The man holding him off the ground wore a heavily modified Great War era Atlesian helmet, with a pair of mix matched horns seemingly spot welded to the to. The cold unfeeling visor that hid away the man's eyes was crooked and fixed to make like a permanent glare. All while the helmet's faceplate appeared to be covered end to end with rotting flesh that hung and sagged disproportionately.

Dove didn't know whether he wanted to scream or vomit. Before he could decide on either option,
the helmeted man head-butted the CRDL boy, knocking him out and letting him fall to the floor once more.

"Where's that tough guy shit now, huh?" Brussels taunted as he continued to kick at Russel.

The Thrush let out a cry before rolling over, to stab at the Sheriff with the piece of silverware he'd managed to grab. Russel furiously stabbed at Brussel's shins, only to find out too late he'd instead of a knife or even a fork, he'd grabbed a spoon. Glancing upward, Russel found the Sheriff shooting him an irritated look. Brussels the soundly kicked Russel across the jaw, knocking him on his back once more.

"Brussels, Coyote, I think our guests have had enough," A gentlemanly voice spoke in a refined yet commanding tone, causing both Brussels and Coyote to cease their onslaught on the CRDL boys.

"These two are Huntsmen, Doctor." Brussels pointed down to Russel's barely conscious form.

Russel glanced upward through blurry eyes to find the man who'd ordered their attackers to stop. It was then his gaze took him to a man surrounded by the leader of the trio of red and black dressed men who'd antagonized Russel and his team earlier in the afternoon and a burly fellow. The man stood wearing white dressed pants, an equally white under shirt and tie with a khaki vest. From what Russel could tell through his disoriented vision, the man giving the orders looked to have walked out of an archeologist magazine.

"I understand that, I also understand they won't be the last Huntsmen that wind up in our town." The man in white said in a scolding manner. "Thi complication, however, we'll need to accelerate our time table, but for now, I want you to stash them somewhere safe. You never know when you need a hostage."

"Yes sir," Brussels nodded before looking over his shoulder to the pair of red and black dressed men sitting at the booth in the corner. "You two," He shouted, pointing to the pair of men. "Take these boys to lockup."

Without a word the two men leapt out of their booths, leaving behind their warm meals and doing as they were commanded. "And what of the others, Dr. Kruger?" Brussels inquired as he fixed the pair of goggles that adorned his head. "There's still two more of them."

"Don't worry, we'll deal with them in time." The man in white, gave a nod to his burly companion, who nodded in kind. "But for the time being, however," Dr. Kruger watched on as Dove and Russel were dragged away. "Everything is fine."

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So. Yeah. That happened.

I don't have much in the way of notes this time, can't say anything without giving away any potential spoilers for the rest of the arc.

It's been a while since we've seen these characters, their last appearance being in the Nebula arc. But this chapter sees the return of Dr. Kruger. And all I can say about the next couple chapters is, shit will go down.

I'll try to get another chapter out this week, it all very much depends on my current schedule. 'Til then, I hope you all enjoyed this chapter.
Hello there everyone! Welcome back for another chapter of The Darkilng Thrush! Yay!

Over the past week I've gone back and reexamined the planned storylines. Primarily my decision to limit myself to OC type villains. So I'm rescinding that. Now, what exactly does that mean? It means expect to see Salem and her Cabal showing up within the story at some point.

Without further ado, on with the story!

So far things were going as well as he'd expected, Russel sarcastically mused as the pair of red and black clothed men, with the embroidered letter 'B' roosters on their chests, unceremoniously dumped both himself and Dove in a cell with in the Sheriff's office. With an audible thump he hit the damp old wooden floor, followed by a pained moan.

It hurt to move, in fact it hurt to breathe, something the Thrush did a lot of. It sort of felt like a rib had snapped and was poking into his lungs. But seeing as he was coughing up profuse amounts of blood, it seemed to be a safe bet that wasn't the case. Then again, Russel barely knew squat about anatomy, save for the few images of the human body he'd seen in a book some years back in Oakwood's library.

The Thrush couldn't help but scoff at the thought of his home town. He couldn't help it as his thoughts raced back to the first mission overseen by Professor Port. He thought of how Marlowe and The White Fang lieutenant The Iron Nail had conspired to fool them into departing believing themselves heroes and none the wiser of their secret dealing in stealing the captive Grimm beneath the local academy.

Russel scoffed at the memory, his wary eyes glancing up off the floor to the barred door, as the men shut it with a cold metal clang. It was not lost on Russel that if he had simply played dumb and hadn't raised his suspicions to the Sheriff, he wouldn't be laying inside of the cell, but it just couldn't be helped. Thinking back to those events in Oakwood, he couldn't help but compare it to his recent events. The Sheriff, Brussels as he called himself, had pulled the same trick that Marlowe had and he sure as hell wasn't going to let that slide.

But then again, perhaps he should have, Russel mused as he fought against his own aching body to sit up. Turning his head sharply, he managed to catch sight of the men as they walked back down the hall. Though confined within this cell, the Thrush was already formulating a means of escape. Signaling out which one of the guards possessed the keys to their door was paramount. Sadly, however, Russel wasn't quick enough, down the hall their jailors went out of view of the Thrush's watchful gaze.

"Well this blows." Russel muttered before feeling a drop of liquid splash against his forehead. Already conscious of the damp floor, it didn't surprise him in the slightest of the source. However, when Russel raised his hand to wipe away what he presumed to be a drop of water, removing his hand from head, he found a familiar crimson staining his palm.
Russel looked up instantly. There, nailed to the ceiling and savagely beaten, was an elderly man dressed in severely cut lawman garb. His jaw hung open and loose, his eyes openly staring out to nothingness with a multitude of lacerations covering his body. It didn't take too long for Russel to recognize the man, him being one of the Sheriffs and Deputies picture on the diner's wall. Still, that only further put off the Thrush. "The fuck is wrong with this town?" He wondered aloud as he continued to stare upward at the deceased lawman.

"I wouldn't go blaming the town for the wickedness of few," A voice suddenly spoke up, catching Russel off-guard.

The Huntsman quickly spun around, turning to the cell beside his own. Through their bars he could make out the appearance of an older man wearing a tan shirt and blue jeans. His hair was long and dark, tied up into a pony tail. His face was neutral and his brown eyes were staring back through the cage, back to Russel.

"Who're you?" Russel asked cautiously.

"No, I believe the question is, who are you?" The man questioned, his voice quiet and a quizzical air to his words.

"Yeah, we just got our assess kicked by a bunch of guys for letting that spill, you first." Russel shot back.

"Well, given by your surprise of the state of Venezier's law enforcement, I'd say you aren't local. And, given the fact they're bothering locking you up instead of putting two in the back of your head, or treating you like our fine government officials," the man gestured up to the lawman nailed up above in his own cell and then to the one in Russel and Dove's. "That would mean you must be important."

"Quite the astute observation." Russel muttered, sounding unfazed by the man's deduction.

"You wouldn't happen to be descendants of the King of Vale, would you?" The man questioned, motioning from Russel to Dove and back.

"Not the last I checked, no." The Thrush shrugged.

"Huntsmen then." The man concluded.

Russel nodded, seeing no point in further denying the man the truth, not like he wouldn't have found out later on the next time one of the jailors would come back around, probably bringing Danny and Marie-Anne along to join them.

"So if we're here because we're important, what does that make you?" Russel asked, recalling how the man, Dr. Kruger, had addressed The Sheriff, deeming them valuable as hostages. Given the fact the law around the town was currently ceiling ornaments, it appeared that the only people their captors bothered imprisoning served some purpose in the long run of whatever scheme they were working towards.

"I played the guessing game, so shall you." The man said, a light smile appearing on his face.

With a sigh, Russel complied. "Well, obviously our captors have little regard for authority." He said, giving a nod upward. "You're no lawman, nor do you seem to be the type to hold office, not scummy enough for that."

"I'll take that as a compliment." The man shrugged.
"Our red and black dressed pals are keeping me and my buddy around for leverage, but that's not why you're here. Otherwise they'd have dragged you out of your cell the moment we walked into town." Russel said, rationalizing why The Sheriff or any of these other similarly dressed cretins had bothered attempting to send them on their way.

But seeing as the man in the cell was not a hostage that meant that he was here for another reason. The only reason they aren't dead was because they were of some use to the Sheriff and his gaggle of cronies, which meant so was the man. "No, they need you because you've got skills they don't have, something practical."

"Pretty solid reasoning so far, but can you stick the landing?"

"Well, let's see." Russel scratched his chin and put his brain to work. "You're an asset, someone our supposed 'Sheriff' can't do without. A valued resource, but not an intelligence resource, not something they explicitly depend on, otherwise they'd keep you attached to their hip at all times. No, you'd have to provide a service of some kind, that's why they keep you here." With the facts placed out before the Thrush, he reached his conclusion. "You're a doctor aren't you?"

The man smirked. "My name is Redhorse, Redhorse Iron-Knife. I ran the local clinic before these bastards gaffed me up and tossed me in here."

"Russel. Russel Thrush, Huntsman." Russel said, unable to help himself from smiling, feeling a small twinge of pride in his own ability to deduce the man's, Redhorse, occupation.

"Pleased to make your acquaintance, Russel." Redhorse smiled, seemingly happy to meet a friendly face. "But, if you don't mind my saying, you boys seem a little young to be Huntsmen."

"Beggars can't be choosers these days. Sadly Huntsmen are in short supply these days." Russel sadly admitted.

A nearby groan soon caught Russel's ear. Glancing downward, the Thrush found Dove beginning to regain consciousness. "Dove?" He questioned before kneeling down beside his teammate. "You alright?"

Dove's eyes shot open, looking from Russel to the barred cell they resided in before finally settling on the sight that hung above them. "...There's a man on the ceiling." Dove muttered, suddenly looking a tad squeamish.

"Yep." Russel nodded.

"I hate this place." Dove said before clutching his body. "Did you see the guy that attacked us? Looked like a goddamn freak of nature." Dove shook his head "He was wearing flesh! Who does that?"

"So, how you feel?" Russel asked as Dove began to settle.

"This beats the time I leapt off that cliff by a mile." Dove groaned as he rolled up into a ball and held his battered body. "I feel like absolute crap."

"...E-yup." Russel muttered, the taste of copper still staining the inside of his mouth. "Right up with you there buddy." Helping Dove onto his feet wasn't an easy task. By far the flight capable CRDL boy had gotten the worst of the beating, entire chunks of wood from the tables he'd been tossed through clung stabbed into his armor and entire sections of his body swelled purple and red.

"As a trained physician, I'd say you're friend there may have internal bleeding." Redhorse
"Who's this guy?" Dove looked to Russel for an explanation.

"Another poor sod trapped in this miserable town." Russel said, earning a dissatisfied look from Redhorse.

"Venezier isn't a bad place, just a bunch of bad men running things for the time being." The doctor released a long drawn out sigh. "It's not supposed to be like this."

"Yeah, we've read the brochures." Dove laughed weakly, still clutching onto himself with one arm while Russel helped him to his feet. "By the way, is that whole 'sea of stars' thing actually real? Or is that just something to catch the attention of would-be tourists?"

"It's the absolute truth." Redhorse said, his smile quickly returning. "The best damn sight you'll ever see. And if we get out of this, I'll give you the tour myself."

"Might just take you up on that offer." Dove nodded before raising his hand to the swelling purple and red part of his body. Within an instant, both his hand and the swelling section of his body began to glow, his aura setting to work on healing his battered body.

"Amazing." Redhorse said awe of the as he bore witness the miracle that was aura.

"Never seen too many Huntsmen at work before, have you Redhorse?" Russel said, shooting the doctor an amused look.

"No, never." Redhorse said as he watched Dove recover from in what would have taken weeks in mere minutes. "Unreal." He said in utter disbelief.

With a content sigh, Dove removed his hand from his side. No longer was it purple and red, the swelling was gone completely. Though aura had its limitations as far as missing limbs and destroyed brain cells were concerned, internal bleeding and broken bones were within the realm of its power.

"So, how we getting out of here?" Dove asked, looking better for ware than he did just moment earlier.

"There's more of you though, right? They can get us out of this, can't they?" Redhorse asked, looking from Russel to Dove.

"Not a big fan of these guys are you?" Russel said, raising a brow.

"They're a real couple of twits and pisseants, bunch of little devils pretending to be people with black hearts." Redhorse spoke coldly. "They've butchered people, good men and women that I knew for years. You're goddamn right I'm not a fan of these guys."

"You think the others will come looking for us?" Dove asked, turning to Russel.

The Thrush thought about their odds. Recalling what Dr. Kruger and the rest of his cronies had discussed while they were being dragged out of the diner, Russel was certain the rest of their team would be joining them soon enough. Aside from that, it was a foolish thought to place the chance of escape solely on the possibility that another would come to your rescue. Ultimately, their escape would have to be through their own doing.

"I'm not waiting on them," Russel declared, turning to face the cell door. "We're getting out of
"Way ahead of you." Dove said before reeling back his fist and slugging Russel across the jaw.

Caught completely by surprise by the assault made by his own friend, Russel was powerless to stand against the blow and flew against the cell door, striking it and falling onto the damp wooden floor once. It took a moment for Russel to process these events, his mind racing to comprehend what could possibly move Dove to attack him. But, ultimately, Russel fell into old habits.

"What the Fuck Dove?!!" He shouted at the top of his lungs, glaring intensely up at his teammate while he cradled both his jaw and the side of his head.

"Oh no!" Dove shouted, attempting to project his voice down the hall. "Guards! My friend has fallen! He needs help!"

"Why the fuck did you punch me?" Russel questioned harshly, maintaining his angered glare towards Dove.

"Shhh," Dove quickly raised an index finger to his lips and gestured for Russel to remain silent. "Just play dead, okay? I saw this in a movie once." Russel looked incredulously at Dove, before turning to Redhorse, who merely simply shrugged. "Seriously man, you want to get out of here or not?" He said quietly as a series of footsteps echoed from down the hall.

With a sigh, Russel resigned himself with the role he'd been given. He shut his eyes and laid still, playing dead.

"What's with all the shouting?" he red and black dressed guard asked as he arrived at Dove and Russel's cell.

"He's dying!" Dove quickly exclaimed, pointing down at the seemingly unconscious form of Russel. "You need to help him!"

"No I don't." The guard delivered dryly, followed by a quiet funt noise from back down the hall. Dove froze for a moment, never having thought of the possibility of the guard declining to open the cell door. "But your boss is going to be so furious if he dies under your watch." Dove quickly said, hoping to still salvage his escape attempt. But the guard remained passive, indifferent to the idea of facing his superior's wrath. "...Well?" Dove implored.

"Well what?" The guard questioned rudely. "Am I supposed to be shocked? To open the door and run in? You'll just hit me on the head and escape. Look, your pall isn't even dying, he's fine." He gave a slight nod to Russel.

"Perhaps I should take a look, seeing as I am a doctor." Redhorse proposed, doing his best to contribute to their escape attempt.

"Oh sit your ass back down Redhorse, nobody's cell is getting opened, you hear me?" The guard said, before being followed by another funt noise.

The guard's head then exploded before Dove's eyes, cascading the cell with blood and bone. Russel groaned, feeling the man's brains rain down over him, dreading every second of this so called escape attempt.

"None of you two's semblance would happen to be exploding people's heads would it?" Redhorse asked from the safety of his own cell.
"No, and neither are ours." A familiar voice said, causing Russel to sit up and glance out the cell and down the wall. Briskly walking to the holding area of the Sheriff's office was none other than Marie-Anne and Danny, the latter of whom held a silenced pistol in his hand.

"Holy crap Danny." Dove muttered, his eyes still fixed on the guards dead body that slumped against the cell door. "You killed a man."

"Correction, I killed two." Danny said as he approached the body, reaching down and grabbing the ring of keys attached to its belt. "This man and his associate manning the front desk. But I wouldn't get misty eyed about this lot, I don't think they're very nice. He said, giving a nod to the interior of the cells and to the bodies that hung onto the ceiling.

"They were going after you guys after they'd caught us at the diner, how'd you escape?" Russel asked, unfazed by Danny's nonchalant attitude over dispatching the guards. After all, this wasn't the first time he'd found the DNCE leader standing over a dead body.

"A couple minutes after you dropped by our room, we decided to go out and grab some drinks."

"A couple minutes after?" Russel asked, arching a brow upward. "Well shit Danny, you know they've got pills for that right?"

"No, it's nothing like that, I assure you." The DNCE leader quickly said, his features turning a shade reader at the implication. "Though your concern is appreciated."

"Yeah, you sort of killed the mood," Marie-Anne said, glaring past the bars and at Russel. "Never do that again you piece of shit."

"You know, considering me showing up and interrupting your between the sheets fun time lead you to come and bust us out of jail, I'd think this would be considered a positive reinforcement, meaning I should do that more often."

"Do you want to get out of here or not?" Danny asked, raising the ring of keys.

"Yes please, very much so." Dove chimed in.

With that, Danny soundly flipped through the multitude of keys on the ring, eventually finding the corresponding key for the door and unlocked it, freeing the Huntsmen. "Alright, lets go." The designated team leader said, motioning for the group to follow his lead back down the hall.

"You forgetting someone?" Russel said, jotting a thumb over his shoulder to Redhorse, who sat quietly in his own cell.

"I'd very much appreciate it." The doctor said.

"He'll only slow us down." Danny argued.

"Hey, Redhorse," Russel called over to the imprisoned physician. "You now any sweet hiding places where we could lay low for a while?"

"Now that you mention it, I do know of just the property where we could hide out for a moment." Redhorse said, a smiler appearing on his face once more. "It's even beach front."

"You wouldn't happen to know anywhere else we can run to evade the rest of the goon squad, do you?" Russel asked, turning to Danny. Though hesitant, the DNCE leader relented and accepted bringing Redhorse along. Another flip through the ring of keys and the doctor was freed. And with
Along the edge of town, down by the shore they found themselves, led there by Redhorse under the pretense of finding shelter from the red and black dressed goons that no doubt hunted for them in the night. The sea was calm, unnaturally quiet. So used to the tossing and thrashing of the waves back at Beacon, Russel and the rest of the team couldn't help but find the sight somewhat unsettling.

Despite their reservations against the unmoving sea, it was the sight that it bore that appealed to them. The entire open sea reflected the sky above. So far out away from the town, here in the darkness they could see it all. Both the overhead sky, filled with far out stars and the shattered moon, mirrored below against the sea.

"Imagine taking a boat out in that." Redhorse said aloud as he led them to a nearby cabin built out of reach from the nearby sea.

"Don't you think it's bad to build a house this close to the ocean?" Russel commented as they reached the cabin.

"It would be if there was a tide." Redhorse said as he approached the front door. The local doctor then reached above the doorway, grabbing a hidden key off the top before finally unlocking the door. "And for all the years I've lived here, there's never been a tide."

"How long have you lived here?" Dove asked as Redhorse opened the door, motioning for them to enter.

One by one they entered the cabin, with the physician closing it behind them. "Born and raised in Venezier. So all my life."

"Nice digs." Russel complemented as he took in the interior of the cabin, finding a nice living area with a wide window view of the nearby sea. "This place yours."

"No," Redhorse sadly sighed as he pocketed the cabin key and walked past a picture mounted on the wall of a man with antlers protruding from the sides of his head posing on a boat at sea. "It belonged to dear friend of mine."

"I can't imagine having to live in one place all my life." Marie-Anne muttered, wincing at the idea of probably being stuck in Oakwood. "You never aspired to go and see what else the world had to offer?" She questioned, turning her gaze to Redhorse as the others made themselves comfortable in the cabin's living room. "I can't say I can find the upside of being stuck here."

"Well, Venezier's had its highs and its lows." Redhorse admitted. "But it's always been the people that made things bearable. Seeing new faces turn up for tourism and the importation and exportation of goods from over at Atlas. But sadly, ever since the SDC has practically cornered the dust market, we haven't had much in that way of visitors. For the most part, Tourisms the only thing that's been keeping my home alive. And tourism's been a bust for the last couple weeks."

"Can't say I'm surprised, a worldwide communications blackout would do that." Russel muttered as he found himself staring out a nearby window that faced the ocean. The sight of all those stars, both up and down was completely mesmerizing. "How is it there's no tide?"

"Your guess is as good as ours." Redhorse shrugged as he stepped into the kitchen, fetching plate of pastries from the cuboards and putting a pot onto the kennel. "Initially, we thought it had something to do with the moon. But then, a couple years back, we got a specialist from Mistral to
try and figure things out. He told us it defied all preconceived notions of science and had squat to
do with the moon."

"And you paid how much for this guy to tell you that?" Russel turned his head away from the
window, arching a brow upward as he peered into the kitchen toward Redhorse.

"Yeah, we got screwed on the whole deal." The physician shrugged. "Anyways, Venezier can't
survive like this, the people here need the tourism to continue. And these bastards aren't helping
either."

"Who are they anyways?" Danny asked as Marie-Anne joined him at the sofa. "The people dressed
in red and black."

"Yeah, and The Sheriff and the doctor guy. Who're they?" Dove questioned as he busied himself

"Well, I can tell you about the oddly dressed fellas, but my knowledge of the latter two is limited
solely to my personal experience." Redhorse said as the pot began to whistle. Switching off the
kennel, he retrieved the pot and began to pour its contents into five cups already filled with coffee
mix.

"So, what are we dealing with?" Russel questioned.

"The men and women dressed in red in black? They call themselves The Blimey Cocks." Redhorse
said, dreading the words that left his mouth.

For a moment, the team of Huntsmen fell silent, each one possessing a disbelieving look on their
faces. "...But why though?" Dove questioned as Redhorse entered the living room, bringing with
him the five cups of coffee on a tray, along with them cream and sugar as well as the plate of
snacks.

"They're all locals, a relatively small percentage of Venezier's population, but now they're the law
around these parts. Birthed during the backlash following the Faunus Rights Revolution, where the
Blimey Cocks were one of the many traditionalist groups that sprang up." Redhorse muttered as he
began to disperse the mugs amongst the Huntsmen.

"'Traditionalist'?" Danny raised a brow at the word. "That would mean there's some sort of religious
context to their madness."

"No, they aren't people of faith, well, they don't believe in god or anything." The doctor shook his
head before taking a sip out of his mug, relishing in the caffeine he'd no doubt been denied in his
time stuck behind a cell. "They're an offshoot of the Ministry of Nihilism, where instead of
believing that nothing matters, they revel in the rationalization that all they're actions are ultimately
pointless, therefore they could do whatever they want without consequence."

"So, after the Faunus Revolution, I assume they didn't exactly take to the idea of treating Faunus as
equals." Russel concluded. "I also can't help but notice we haven't seen any Faunus since we've
been here."

"That would be the Blimey y Cocks' handy work." Redhorse said bitterly. "For the longest time
they would begrudgingly go along with authority, but three weeks ago they initiated a purge,
enabled by a man named Dr. Kruger. The real Sheriff and his deputies were the first to go, then
those who held office, next were the Faunus."

"They killed them all?!" An alarmed Dove shouted with a mouthful of cake, earning a pair of odd
glances from his teammates. "What?" He questioned in a defensive manner. "I never got dinner."
"No, not all of them." Redhorse shook his head. "Last I knew, they rounded up the survivors and marched them out into the fields, down to old Venezier to reopen the mines."

"Why would they do that?" Marie-Anne said before taking a health sip out of her mug.

"Well, I'm not too sure." Redhorse shrugged. "Everyone they brought me to fix up only told me that they were being forced to dig down an old dust mine that had gone dry."

"So, what do The Blimey Cocks want down there?" Marie-Anne asked.

"Not The Blimey Cocks, no, this is the work of one man." The doctor shook his head.

"Dr. Kruger." Russel muttered, earning an affirming nod from Redhorse.

"Three weeks ago, that's when The Blimey Cocks took over. But before that, almost a month before that, this man, Dr. Kruger came into town, bringing with him a trio of mercenaries. One of whom now has usurped the position of Sheriff, as you already know." Redhorse curtly nodded to both Russel and Dove, who beckoned him to continue his tale.

"There was nothing exceptionally odd about Kruger, we just assumed he was another tourist. But then he started asking all sorts of odd questions about the town's history and spouting anti-faunus hate speech." Redhorse shook his head at the memory. "It really caught on with The Blimey Cocks, not so much with the Sheriff's department. But after the second week, he disappeared. We all thought he must've taken off. It turned out though that he and the Blimey Cocks had reached an agreement, that if he'd help them take back the town from us 'Faunus Lovers', then they'd help him reopen the mine."

"Four people took over the entire town?" Dove said, his mouth hanging open in awe.

"Afraid so," Redhorse nodded grimly. "But, now that you're all here, I'm hoping you can change that. You Huntsmen can save Venezier and give it back to the people."

"It isn't an accident that we're here Redhorse, we were sent here on a mission." "One of our friends went missing, he was supposed to have come here about two weeks ago."

"Oh," Redhorse made no attempt to hide his disappointment. "Your friend could be dead. As you already know they only keep around those who they have a use for."

"I refuse to believe that." Dove shook his head in a defiant manner.

"If you know anything, anything that can help us find him, we'll do our best to see Venezier liberated." Danny said, meeting Redhorses stare.

The physician sighed, looking uncomfortable as if he'd been caught between a rock and a hard place. "I can't promise that this bit of information will lead you to your friend, but it's worth a shot." Redhorse shook his head. "A week ago, they brought me a Faunus girl who'd broken her leg down in the mine. She told me fallen asleep while working machinery because they'd rescheduled her work shift in order to accommodate fresh arrivals."

"Could be Sky." Marie-Anne suggested, sounding hopeful.

"It's our only lead." Danny nodded. "Anything else you can tell us about this mining operation of theirs?"

"Not much else, I've been stuck in a cell for the past couple weeks." Redhorse apologized.
"And you said the mine was in old Venezier, correct?" Russel asked, earning a nod from the doctor. The four Huntsmen then shared a collective glance towards one another, already knowing their next course of action.

All while the team of Huntsmen marched through the barren portion of land on the outskirts of Venezier dubbed 'The Field', the newly quartet couldn't help but feel a sense of foreboding as they continued towards their destination.

Perhaps it was simply fatigue that had dulled their nerves. It had been a long enough day, and it hadn't been since morning that they had a decent meal. Maybe it was the walk itself that struck the team, how they couldn't retrieve their steeds from local Inn without rousing suspicions and being forced to traverse the miles long distance. Or maybe it was the idea of them infiltrating Dr. Kruger and the Blimey Cocks' mining operation to find Sky that weighed heavily on their minds.

There were too many unknowns to consider. For starters, they didn't know their enemies total strength. Venezier wasn't as big as a city, but that last population total had them somewhere around a thousand. Aside from Dr. Kruger and the trio of men that he supposedly brought along, there was still no telling just how many people comprised The Blimey Cocks.

Then there was the fact that if they were to find Sky, there was no telling if they could leave with him. For all they knew he was probably apart chain gang. To liberate him would mean to liberate everyone. It would be utter chaos if they made it that far, not to mention they'd then be putting the captive Faunus miners in danger. That just present a whole slew of problems.

"So, when we get Sky, then what?" Marie-Anne asked aloud, directing her question forward to the their designated team leader. "We really going to stick around and help sort out this problem?"

"Why wouldn't we?" Dove questioned, raised a brow at the DNCE member's wording.

"Just saying, there's no way the five of us can do this on our own." She shrugged. "I think our best bet would be to return to what's left of Vale and get help for another."

"You mean abandon these people to further subjugation while we go home." Russel quickly said, earning a slight glare from his fellow Oakwood native.

"What's it matter to you, Russel?" She spoke coldly.

"Of all people, Marie-Anne, you should know where I stand on the idea of people dictating how other people live." Russel said, matching Marie-Anne with a glare of his own.

"We can't just abandon these people. You guys saw what they did to those men in those cells, imagine how it must be for these miners." Dove shivered, recalling the sight of the Sheriff and his deputies strung up on the ceiling.

"Agreed." Russel stated firmly.

"I don't like it either," Danny finally said, earning the trio's attention. "But let's be realistic. There's only four of us, and Sky won't be much help if they've had him wearing himself down digging for them. Our only course of action would be to return with a force capable of liberating the town."

"And what of the people, Danny?" Russel questioned. "We're already stretched too thin, that's why Goodwitch sent us here. How long then until we can return in force, hm? A month? A year? What of the people then?"
With saddened face, the DNCE leader sighed. "They'll just have to make do."

The conversation died then, the mood for talk overstaying its welcome. The Huntsmen continued on towards their destination in complete silence. The hours passed and the night and its stars trailing behind them as dawn approached.

Yellow rays and hues of orange cascaded across the land once more. The Huntsmen, thought tired, continued their pace, feeling the sun's warmth wash over them as they finally reached their objective.

Perching themselves atop a hill, the team of Huntsmen found themselves staring down at what had once been the town of Venezier. Few buildings of the old town remained, the old wood turned dust and washed away with the wind. Entire camps of tents littered the area, with Faunus men and women trudging through shackles on their way into a hole against the nearby mountain.

Sentries were posted in every direction, those men and women who wore the red and black clothing and the rooster shaped 'B' broches belonging to members of The Blimey Cocks standing at attention, armed with old weapons that seemingly hadn't been used since the days of The Great War. But still, a weapon was weapon, the threat was real and ever present. Should any of the miners try anything, these guards would be more than happy to deal with them.

"Move your assess!" Down below, a heavy set burly man, Pepper, whom Russel and Dove had witnessed accompany Dr. Kruger and The Sheriff Brussels back at the diner, shouted at the captive miners. "The slower you are the longer we'll be here! Now move it!" The man jabbed the end of his machine gun against one of the miners.

The Faunus grunted as he was hit by the rifle. Visibly seething, the man turned his eye towards Pepper and let out a shout before lunging towards him, intent on tearing him apart with the pick axe he possessed. The man didn't get far, two sentries already had pegged, as did Pepper. The early morning air was soon filled with the violence of gunshots, and what remained of the man hitting the ground with a light thud.

Though the Huntsmen found the sight horrific, so did everyone else. With the sentries eyes directed towards the commotion, the team slipped into the camp undetected. The team then split up into pairs, with Danny and Marie-Anne going one way, Russel and Dove going the other.

"Don't get caught." Russel said as he and Dove departed, turning their attention towards what they presumed to be the miner's tents.

Bypassing a pair of Sentires, too caught up in trying to determine the source of gunshots than minding their posts, the CRDL duo ducked into the nearest tent, one large enough to seemingly house twenty people. It was then that Russel and Dove found themselves face to face with a stockpile of dynamite and various other assorted weaponry.

"Whoa." Dove said, his mouth hanging slightly open at the sight.

"Whoa, indeed." Russel muttered, realizing that they weren't within the vicinity of the miner's quarters, rather, they were no doubt within the limits of 'The Blimey Cocks' tents. The Thrush then turned his gaze from the stash of explosives to the arsenal of weapons, instantly recognizing one of the swords amongst the bunch. The Thrush then gently nudged his teammate with his elbow then pointed to the blade. "That one yours?" He smirked.

"Oh sweet." Dove instantly brightened, quickly dashing over to retrieve his sword, which had been confiscated the moment after the duo were assaulted in the diner.
Russel then approached the stash of weapons, looking them over, from blade to gun. A number of them appeared archaic, lacking the dual purpose of today's weaponry. It then occurred to the Thrush how outgunned he truly was. Though he possessed his Mother's knife, which he kept hidden within his bracer, it was only a knife and the people they were dealing with were armed with machine guns.

So, without ceremony, Russel reached out and claimed a lone dagger from the lot of swords. He weighed the blade in his hands, giving it a good swing to get a feel for it. Satisfied, he reached out and grabbed a weapons belt on a nearby table and tied it against his waist before finally hooking the dagger to it.

But the Thrush didn't stop there. He then turned his eye to the stash of guns. Though he had little experience, save for the brief time he came into possession of Marlowe's pistol and the Inn Keeper's handgun that Cardin had confiscated, as well as the ill-fated time he'd picked up a discarded Atlisian rifle to take aim at some White Fang, Russel possessed absolutely zero experience when it came to guns. But given the circumstances, and the very real possibility of being caught in the crosshairs of an automated rifle, he at least wanted the chance to shoot back.

So Russel reached out and claimed the only gun amongst the bunch that he could use with one hand, an Uzi. He grabbed two spare magazines and threw them onto his shiny new weapons belt before raising the gun and looking down the sights. "Is it supposed to feel heavy?" He asked, glancing over to Dove, who for the past minute had been standing watch while Russel had his pick of the lot.

"Yeah," Dove muttered, his demeanor darkening slightly. "Glad you recognized that."

"Alright," Russel nodded as he clipped the Uzi to his belt. He then reached out to the pile of dynamite and grabbed a pair of sticks. "Exit plan." He said to Dove before grabbing a box of matches left haphazardly to the side.

"Can't wait to see how we pull this one off." Dove muttered before the duo exited the tent to continue their search for their missing teammate.

Down a row of tents they went, evading the watchful eye of sentries. But then the sharp familiar sound of screaming caught their ears. A sudden fear shot down both Russel and Dove's spines, each wondering whether it was one of their own who was now screaming bloody murder.

They hurried down the row to find the source of the screaming. Along the way, they bypassed another pair of sentries, but something was amiss, they didn't seem the least bit bothered by the screaming, almost as if they were used to it. But they paid it no mind and continued onward, eventually reaching the source of the blood curdling screams, a lone tent similar to the one they'd just left.

Russel pried the tent's flaps open ever so slight allowing the pair to peer inside. Both CRDL boys' eyes then shot wide open at the horror inside. There within the tent, was a pile of Faunus corpses, all of whom appeared to be missing the very features that dubbed them so. There was also another still living male porcupine Faunus stretched out on a rack. But the man wasn't alone, towering over him with his back to the tent's entrance was Coyote.

The helmeted Coyote raised a meat cleaver then chopped down on the man, cleaving off another series of his quills, drawing entire streams of blood. Coyote worked silence, much to the CRDL boys horror as the man continued to scream. And with one final swing of his meat cleaver, the man fell dead silent and Coyote resumed collecting his quills.
Russel then closed the tent's flap, the pair backing away from the tent ever so slightly. There was nothing they could do now. So they continued onward, doing their best to keep finding Sky at the forefront of their minds.

Down past another series of tents they went, avoiding another pair of sentries, they happened upon a nearby conversation, instantly recognizing one of the voices belonging to that of Dr. Kruger. They slowed their pace, coming up alongside another tent and listened.

"We're so close, I can feel it." Dr. Kruger said from within the tent. "I must go now, much to oversee. Until again, Mr. Lark." He said, earning the CRDL boys' attention.

Quickly, Russel and Dove ducked away as Dr. Kruger exited the tent. Once the coast was clear, they stepped out from their hiding spot and cautiously slipped into the tent. Inside the tent they found a plethora of tables littered with old artifacts with the Vacuan flag etched into them resting atop crates labeled with a fancy 'W', as well as writing in different languages that neither could decipher. But it was neither of these things that held the duos attention, rather, it was the familiar figure standing at the far end of the tent. There stood Sky Lark, their friend and teammate, quietly looking down a journal.

"Sky." Dove spoke quietly, causing the halberd using CRDL boy to turn and look over his shoulder.

A look of surprise graced Sky's features, before turning to one of joy. "Guys!" He exclaimed, throwing his hands up into the air. "What're you guys doing here?" Sky asked, turning his back to the desk in order to fully face his fellow CRDL teammates.

"What are we doing here?" Russel raised a brow, noticing how calm Sky appeared to be. "We're here to rescue you."

"Rescue me?" Sky said, sounding quite surprised. "But I don't need to be rescued."

"Are you not aware of the slavery going on around here? Or the mass killings?" Dove asked, pointing his hand down the direction they'd come from. "You didn't hit your head on anything did you?"

"No, believe me, I feel fine." Sky said, placing a hand behind his back. "Better than fine even. We're on the verge of probably the most significant discovery known to man since dust itself." He said in an excited tone, gesturing to the surrounding pieces and texts with his free hand.

"Sky, I don't think you're thinking clearly." Russel said, taking a step forward. "What these people are doing is inhumane. People are dead, others are in shackles, and an entire town is being subjugated." He took another step forward. "We need to leave. Now." Sky sighed and shook his head. "I'm sorry, I can't do that." He said before turning his attention past the pair of CRDL boys. "And seems neither can you."

Russel and Dove then turned their attention to their backs. At the tents entrance stood Dr. Kruger, flanked by the very same trio of men who'd greeted the team of Huntsmen when they'd initially arrived into town, as well as Pepper and Coyote. And on the ground, on their knees with guns to their heads was none other than Danny and Marie-Anne.

"Hello there," Dr. Kruger smiled at Russel and Dove. "So these are the friends you've been going on about, Mr. Lark?" His smile grew wider.

"Yes," Sky said, as he drew a gun off the desk behind him, aiming it at both Russel and Dove.
"Yes they are."

How's that for a plot twist?

So, yeah, a lot of crap goes down in this. But I guess I can finally talk about Dove and Sky now.

When I started this story, I never envisioned it going past five chapters. But then it did. And for the earlier days of writing The Darkling Thrush, I didn't think I'd spend anytime developing Dove and Sky as characters, rather focusing on Russel and Cardin and their dynamic. It's actually very evident during the 'Who Dares Wins' arc where I sidelined the characters. But that all changed during 'Downtime', when I realized how much this story has grown. I'm basically playing catch up in terms of Dove and Sky's character development. And this arc is sure to change all of that.

Anyways, the next two chapters...oh my god...the next two chapters are going to be soooo goddamn long...

I'm going to try and get the next one out by the end of next week but my time these days is being increasingly limited.

'Til then, later days!
I'd like to apologize for how long it took to crank this chapter out. But this semester has just taken its toll on me. So, thank you all for your patience.

Anyways, more notes below, I hope you enjoy the chapter!

"What the hell, Sky?" Dove spoke quietly, visibly hurt by the turn of events.

Standing within the confines of a large tent, surrounded by artifacts older than Russel could properly discern, with the men who'd subjugated the entire town of Venezier and its people standing before them, both the Thrush and his colleagues were faced with a terrible revelation. When both CRDL boys had set out to this town, they did so in hopes of finding their missing friend, only to now have that very same man siding with the people who'd practically enslaved an entire town.

Russel wasn't a stranger to betrayal, Hegemony Marlowe had seen to that. But that didn't change a thing; it didn't dull the shock, numb the twist of the knife. The sight of Sky pointing a gun at both himself and Dove just left him feeling bitter.

"...Sky," Dove addressed his partner once more, the hurt look on his face deepening. "What's going on here man?"

"Like I said earlier, we're on the verge of the most significant discovery of the century." Sky said, a slight smile appearing on his face.

"And that justifies what you and these people are doing?" Dove turned and pointed to Kruger and his men, who soundly kept Danny and Marie-Anne pinned in place with the guns they pressed against their heads. "They're murders, Sky, what they've done to people, it's grossly inhumane."

"Yes," Sky nodded. "I've noticed." With a sigh, Sky set the gun aside and gestured to Kruger at opposite side of the tent. "Doctor, would you please help me explain to my friends what it is that we're doing here?"

"It would go against everything I believe if I were to not. At the end of the day, if nothing, I am and educator." The good doctor straightened his shirt as he took a step forward and slowly approached Dove and Russel. "Best to keep things civil, hm? I don't we've been properly introduced." He said extending a hand to the pair of CRDL boys. "I am Dr. Augustus Kruger. Ecologist."

Both Russel and Dove glanced at extended hand and then past the man back to Marie-Anne and Danny. Though the man before them had dressed it their current predicament with the formality, their situation remained the same. Should they make wrong move there would be nothing to stop Kruger's men from killing the pair of dunces. As it appeared, their best course of action would be to play along, for their sakes and the CRDL boys' own. However, that very much wasn't Russel's
"Thrush. Russel Thrush." A smug smile graced Russel's features as he reached out, accepting the handshake. The Thrush then tightly squeezed his hand around Kruger's, earning a slight look of surprise from the man. Though it appeared Kruger had full control, with his men to his back and their guns aimed at the rest of Russel's team, the Ecologist had no direct power over the Thrush.

"Yes, civil." Kruger's eyes narrowed at Russel as he quickly withdrew his hand from the Thrush's grasp, wincing slightly as he cradled it. "Though I am beginning to doubt you're capable of such a feet."

"Russel, you're hardly in the position to be an ass, now at least try to be nice. And Doctor, please, pay him no mind." Sky said, quickly setting Kruger to ease and piquing Russel's interest. The Thrush then glanced over his shoulder, back to Sky and found the Lark, returning his attention to a journal on his desk.

With a content nod, Kruger continued, though he kept his gaze fixed on the Thrush standing before him. "You must be wondering why it is that we've come here?" He rhetorically asked. "Well, if you were to open your eyes for just a moment, you'd see exactly what has been in front of not only yourself, but also the thousands of people who've lived in Venezier."

"You mean other than the bunch of assholes standing right in front of us?" Russel delivered dryly.

"Russel, you're doing no one any favors acting like this." Sky said as he turned to face the gathered lot of people once more as he scribbled down onto the journal.

"He's not doing anyone any favors?" Dove shot his one-time partner an incredulous work. "Look around at who you're siding with Sky!" He shouted as he pointed to Kruger and his men, specifically to Coyote. "For goodness sake man they butcher people!"

"I'd hardly call them people." Kruger stuck his nose in the air. "Over the last century society at large has been expected to treat Faunus the same as we would treat ourselves. But I refuse to hold myself under the same light as one of those animals. That's why we're here, me and my men, we've come here to Venezier to answer one of life's greatest mysteries: the origin of Faunus."

"And yet you're here, digging down an old abandoned mine in an old abandoned town." Russel glared.

"You still fail to open your mind to the obvious," Kruger shook his head, clicking his teeth together in a disappointed manner.

"Russel, I'm your friend, I've always respected your intelligence," Sky chimed in, as he flipped through the pages of the journal in his hand, proceeding to scribble down another note. "Now please, quit playing dumb and acknowledge the truth before you."

Russel cast his gaze from Kruger to Sky and shot the man a contemptuous look, finding it somewhat insulting that he was attempting to appeal to whatever part of him still considered them friends. But then he paused and centered his thoughts on Sky's words. His scornful glare softened and he turned to the myriad of artifacts strewn about the tent on atop the boxes with the fancy 'W's.

There, Russel found adorning each and every artifact the image of three separate swords aimed downward. It took the Thrush more than a moment to surmise why the image felt so familiar. The swords depicted on the artifacts were the same that the kingdom of Vacuo flew on their flags.

"Surprising isn't it?" Kruger laughed, catching the room's ear as Russel connected the dots. "What
are Vacuan artifacts doing all the way out here in Vale?"

"I have a sneaking suspicion you're going to tell us, aren't you?" Dove sneered.

"Have you two ever heard of 'The Sentinel of Vacuo'?' Kruger questioned, earning only silence in response. Sighing, the good doctor continued regardless of the two Huntsmen's cooperation. "The Sentinel of Vacuo is an old folk hero, he alone managed to unite the nomadic people, ushering in Vacuo's golden age. He was a nomad, a scholar, and a teacher who collected vast sums of knowledge throughout his journeys for his own personal study, including which we believe to be the origin of Faunus."

"But then, after a lengthy tenure spent watching over the growing kingdom, he disappeared, never to be seen again. The knowledge he'd gathered throughout his years lost forever…until now." Sky said, earning the room's attention. "We believe this is where The Sentinel disappeared to. We believe this is where he's keeping all the knowledge he'd amassed."

Hearing this, Russel couldn't help but scoff at the notion. "Just because you found some old pots in the ground, doesn't mean you've found The Sentinel."

"That's where you're wrong, Russel." Sky smirked as he marked his place in the journal, bending one of the pages ever so slightly then shutting it closed. He then raised the book, presenting it for both Dove and Russel to see. "Dr. Kruger is not the first person to come looking for The Sentinel's amassed knowledge, there have been others."

"Some years ago a team of Vacuan Huntsmen had journeyed to Vale, believing they had uncovered The Sentinel's last known location. Only two came back, and neither disclosed what they'd found. Until me and my men…" Kruger paused as both Pepper and Coyote cocked their weapons. "…persuaded them."

Having picked up on the double meaning to Kruger's words, Russel simply glared. "For an 'Ecologist', you sure seem to have a lot of blood on your hands."

"No matter, what's done is done, and for the good of humanity as a whole. As now we are just days away from finding The Sentinel's vault." Kruger said as his smile grew wider.

"My goodness," Russel shook his head as he placed a hand on the Uzi attached to his belt. "You're such fucking tool."

Kruger paused, looking upon Russel incredulously. "I beg your pardon?"

"Didn't catch that bit, eh?" The Thrush scoffed before elbowing his fellow CRDL teammate. "Tell him what I said Dove."

"He says you're a fucking tool." Dove quickly blurted out in disgust for the men standing before the pair.

"Let's get one thing straight here, Dr. Feelgood, you're an asshole." Russel spoke harshly cold, unlike he'd ever been known to before. "But even then that's giving you too much credit. Because you're not even here because you've managed to connect the dots, or found the road map to The Sentinel, you took it from people. All your progress is built off the backs of others. You've achieved nothing." Hearing these words leave the Thrush's mouth, the good doctor couldn't help but pause and take a step back.

"How dare you!" Kruger shot back, his patience with Russel clearly having run thin.
"And let me guess, that's also why you recruited Sky, right?" Russel jotted a thumb over his shoulder back to blue haired CRDL boy. "He's not only the son of two of the world's leading archeologists. He's a damn good one himself. The Scrolls of Nevermore right? Yeah, he told me about that too. So please, elaborate how you're so close to finding something other people found years before you did. Go on, talk mad shit about how good at reading other people's work you are."

Kruger leaned forward until he was only inches apart from the Thrush, giving him a good look at his now fuming features. "I'll have you skinned alive for that." He threatened.

"I don't doubt that for a second." Russel smirked, noting how close the good doctor now was to his person. He'd played the game, done the dance of words and bided his time, now was the time to strike.

Without warning, Russel thrusted his head forward, bashing it against Kruger. The good doctor must not have much combat training, or perhaps he even lacked an aura, the strike would have dazed most, but for him it had Kruger falling backwards. That proved to work against Russel as now he found himself racing against a collapsing body. The second Kruger hits the floor is the very moment the men standing opposite of him unleash hell.

So Russel quickly shot a hand forward to grasp Kruger by his dress shirt, while his free hand rushed to draw the Uzi attached to his belt. One fluid motion and he'd claimed his human shield. He pulled Kruger back to his feet and spun him around so that he'd face the men. He maintained his hold on the doctor, throwing his left arm around his neck, then he jammed the end of the Uzi against his back.

"Holy shit Russel." Sky muttered as the one sided hostage situation was flipped on its head. The gathered Blimey Cocks and Kruger's mercenaries maintained their focus, their hands still on their weapons, each one hesitant to take a shot lest they hurt the doctor.

"Dove," Russel glanced to his fellow CRDL teammate, finding the boy who could fly having drawn his weapon and aiming at the walking slaughterhouse of a man Coyote. Having caught Dove's attention, the Thrush nodded backwards to their former teammate. "Be a pal and relieve Sky of that journal would you?"

"No Sky don't!" Kruger shouted in protest, only for Russel to press the gun further against his back, earning a surprised yelp.

Dove did as he was told, spinning around and turning his sword on his partner. Dove drew in a long breath before sighing as he wordlessly extended his hand to the man he'd for a time considered a friend, now it pained him to consider him an adversary. Sky met his partner's eyes and frowned. He glanced down to the journal in his hands and nodded. He then reached out and placed it in Dove's outstretched palm.

"Maybe, but if you read it, you'd see things differently." Sky muttered, turning to meet Russel's own stare. And for a moment, the calm collected visage of his features dissipated, looking akin to a pleading desperation. But the Thrush paid it no further mind, turning his attention back to the group of armed individuals standing across from himself.

Dove simply shook his head with disgust, his weapon still trained on the amateur archeologist.. "We've been called many things, Sky, 'bullies', 'thugs', but we're not mass murderers. No words in a book will change that." With that said, Dove returned to Russel's side and turning his weapon back on Coyote as the standoff continued.
"What do you hope to accomplish with that?" Kruger sneered as he eyed the journal in Dove's hands.

"Not much," Russel muttered, speaking the utmost truth. The journal itself mattered little to the Thrush, its significance to Kruger and his men was what truly mattered. "Keeping it out of your hands though sounds pretty good."

"You sound so certain." Kruger laughed, earning a confused look from both CRDL boys. "Coyote, deal with them." He laughed once more.

Both Dove and Russel turned their gazes back to the mercenaries and assortment of Blimey Cocks, and to their surprise, the most menacing of the bunch had vanished from his place amongst the group. Russel raised a brow and opened his mouth to voice his confusion, only to for crudely bandaged gloved fist to strike him from the right, sending him spinning and knocking him away from Kruger.

Dove spun around, finding Coyote towering to their side. The abattoir man extended a hand to the fallen doctor, who'd gladly taken it. With little obvious effort, Coyote pulled to Kruger to his feet. With the good doctor out of the line of fire, all hell began to break loose. A number of the Blimey Cocks began to open fire, causing Dove to jump behind a crate for cover and Sky to jump to the floor.

Stunned only momentarily, Russel recomposed himself and drew his Uzi once more. Momentarily recalling his lack of experience guns, the Thrush pushed aside his doubts and opened fire. He'd chosen the Uzi because of his lack of skill, he lacked precision, but faced with a mob of gunmen and a hail of bullets, the last thing he needed was to be precise. He just needed to shoot, he was bound to hit something.

"Watch it will you!" Marie-Anne shouted over the gunfire, causing Russel to pause. They still had both DNCE members as hostages. That just complicated everything.

Faced with the possibility of accidentally hitting either Marie-Anne or Danny, Russel held off on the urge to let loose with his newly acquired Uzi and opted to move for cover. Crawling on the ground, Russel made his way to a stack of those boxes labeled with fancy 'W's. But before he could reach it, he felt the same worn bandaged glove hand snare his ankle and pull him back.

Russel didn't need to even look to know who it was. He grimaced, quickly attaching the Uzi back to his belt then reaching for the dagger. He then spun around, prepared to stab at Coyote's hand, only to find himself impaling his dagger into solid ground. A puzzled look graced Russel's face as Coyote had vanished. He then felt another brick fist strike him from the side, knocking Russel into the line of fire.

He got to his feet, the hail of gunfire whipping past him. Russel saw Dove who beckoned for the Thrush to join him behind the crate where he hid. He took a step and began to run, only to feel a sharp pain dig into his chest. It hurt, unlike anything he'd ever felt. And then he felt it again, that sharp pain that burrowed through his leg.

Russel lost his footing and fell back onto the ground. He raised a hand to his chest, right to the epicenter of the pain and pressed hard, feeling the damp warmth of his drab hoodie. He raised his hand to his face and stared at a familiar crimson. Russel could hear Dove shouting to him, but it just seemed so unreal. Part of his brain was screaming for him to run, to keep moving, and yet he couldn't, not because of the searing pain he felt in his chest and leg, but the shock. He just couldn't move.
"Russel!" Marie-Anne shouted as she watched the Thrush take another hit, knocking home back onto the ground. "Dove get him out of here!" She shouted to the CRDL boy hiding behind the crate. The Oakwood native then jumped upward, throwing all her weight forward and tackled the man holding a gun to her head. Danny followed Marie-Anne's example and tackled his gunman. But the DNCE leader didn't stop there. He then threw himself forward, knocking over a pair of men in front of him.

Noticing the commotion amongst the Blimey Cocks, Dove took the chance and sprinted for Russel. In one swift movement, Dove threw his sword at the far wall of the tent, cutting through it and creating an opening, he stuffed the journal into his pants, not enough time to attempt forcing the damn thing into one of his pockets and then he scooped up Russel. Without warning, Dove took off flying, jetting off the ground and through the opening and reclaiming his sword on the way out.

A part of Dove wanted to pause and look back at their faces, knowing they'd all be slack jawed at the sight of a man flying. But he had more pressing matters to attend to. In his arms, Russel clutched his chest, his hands covered in his own blood, a pained expression on his face.

The next few moments were crucial, every second counted, there was no time for second guessing, Dove had to commit to a plan of action. He couldn't worry about Danny or Marie-Anne, he couldn't think about Sky's betrayal, he had to get Russel help and soon. Turning his gaze back to Venezier, Dove shot across the sky as fast as he could, faster even, faster than he'd ever gone before.

Russel was coherent, conscious of everything happening around him as he clutched his chest. It burned all around his wounds, he could feel his aura attempting to repair the damage. Russel had long ago come to terms with the fact his aura simply wasn't the strongest, there were few blows he could withstand and could sustain his semblance for only a short amount of time. It also didn't help that the rounds were still lodged inside his body.

He could feel the air around him crash against him as Dove raced off at top speed. He knew what the fellow CRDL boy planned just by the way they appeared to be flying back towards Venezier. But the trip was long, as they already knew. Even traversing the distance by horseback was tedious. And Russel felt every ounce of pain the whole way back into town.

A top speed Dove reached the town in a grueling thirty minutes. The entire trip an endurance test. The flight capable Huntsman felt like he'd been running for hours, as if he hadn't slept in days. Along the coast he flew, before arriving at a familiar cove. Dove landed at the front door of the cabin, he raised a fist and smacked beat against the door.

"Redhorse! It's us! Open the door! Please!" Dove shouted, hoping the recently freed physician would answer his call.

The locks behind the door turned with an audible 'click'. Cracking open only slightly, Redhorse verified the identity of his visitors. What he saw at his doorstep earned as gasp from the older man, the sight of the bloodied Russel and the exhausted form of Dove. The doctor threw the door open and ushered the pair inside before shutting the door behind them.

"Set him up on kitchen counter." Redhorse ordered, keeping his voice calm, knowing fully well the last thing the pair of huntsmen needed was a panic.

Dove did as he was told, laying Russel down on the counter. The Thrush inhaled sharply as his back made contact with the tile counter top.
"He's been shot." Dove muttered as he collapsed onto the wooden floor.

"I can tell." Redhorse said as he quickly went to work scrounging up makeshift medical equipment. "I thought aura was supposed to heal wounds."

"...yeah...so did I..." Russel muttered as he stared up at the wooden ceiling.

"I apologize, but I have few options here." He said as he pulled a pair of tongs from a drawer and the sewing kit above the fridge.

"...ugh..." Russel grunted weekly as he watched Redhorse gather equipment from the kitchen. The doctor then approached the Thrush and handed him large glass bottle of rum. The Thrush looked to the doctor, who frowned apologetically. No doubt had they possessed actually facilities Redhorse would have provided a proper form of anesthesia. Sadly, that just wasn't the case. Understanding, Russel took a healthy swig from the bottle before handing it back to the physician.

Redhorse then poured the alcoholic beverage over his wounds, earning a pained cry from Russel. The physician then drew a freshly cleaned blade from the kitchen sink. "The tongs are too big, I'll need to make an incision." He muttered before raising both tongs and knife. "I won't lie to you, this is going to hurt."

Russel couldn't even find it in himself to offer a retort, he just felt the man cut him open and dig. He couldn't tell anymore if he'd screamed, things began to get too fuzzy. His vision began to blur, the ceiling above taking on grainy properties as the room spun. He could hear Redhorse at his side, cursing profusely while Dove was laid out on the floor below, too tired to offer any assistance.

The doctor strained as he dug the tongs into Russel's chest before steadily removing the cooking utensil. With a wet pop noise, he withdrew the tongs the hurriedly placed a hand atop the wound and applied all his weight onto the Thrush.

By now Russel should've been out cold, even bled out, but he still hung in there even as one of his ribs gave way against the pressure. If he wasn't already shouting at the top of his lungs, he sure was now. The next thing he knew Redhorse was stitching him back up, cursing the entire time.

Russel should have been ecstatic, it appeared to be over. But then he remembered he'd been shot three times. Two more times Redhorse cut him open, two more times he dug through him and removed the pair of slugs embedded in his body. Twice more he was stitched together and then finally left on the counter, left still and unmoving to feel the gravity of his pain. The aches, the fractured ribs, the holes torn into his flesh.

"I've done all I can." Redhorse announced as he stepped away, taking a heart swig out of the bottle of rum. "Now lets hope that aura of yours can pull its weight."

"...not too confident in your abilities doc...?" Russel spoke weakly, turning to find the local doctor standing to the side, propped against a wall, his hands covered in the Thrush's blood.

"I never had to fix someone up like that before." Redhorse shook his head, visibly shaken by the surgery. The physician then finished the bottle in one final go before tossing it to the wayside.

"...for what it's worth...?" Russel caught the man's eye. "...I think you did great..." He muttered, earning a smile from the older man. The Thrush then attempted to sit up, only to burst into a coughing fit, hacking up blood all over is already stained hoodie. "...oh fuck..."

"As your doctor, I recommend bed rest." Redhorse said pointedly.
Russel struggled to respond, already too out of it. Knowing full well such a thing was impossible given their current circumstance. Marie-Anne and Danny were captured and the rest of Venezier was under occupation. Not to mention they'd just stolen their journal. In spite of his light headedness and poor excuse of an aura, Russel continued to mull over their options. They'd stolen something of great value from the enemy, which meant they'd be wanting it back thus opening the door to another predicament.

Turning his head against the counter, the laid out Huntsman glanced downward to the wooden floor to where Dove rested. The flight capable CRDL boy looked winded, his clothing and armor drenched in his own sweat, looking as if he'd been put through a triathlon. And that wasn't exactly far from the truth. The man had flown the entire way over.

Centering his thoughts on Dove's semblance, Russel was given pause. Dove had flown straight to Venezier against the backdrop of a clear blue sky, literally anyone could've seen them. Realizing this, the Thrush hurriedly called out to Dove.

"...Dove...you still with me man...?" The Thrush spoke as he peered at his friend through puffy red eyes. The CRDL boy gave a half nod. "...we weren't followed were we...?" He asked.

But before the exhausted Dove could form an answer, the loud booming of car engines caught the trio's ears. Against his better judgement, and much to Redhorse's protest, Russel threw himself off the counter, landing weakly on his feet. The Thrush winced in pain as he moved to shift his weight to his left leg in order to compensate for his wounded one. However, it was only a waste of effort, Russel was disoriented, and he'd lost too much blood. He was already falling over.

Dove shot off the ground, quickly catching Russel before he could collapse. The flight worthy CRDL boy set his comrade down, lowering gently on the nearby sofa. The sound of cars drew nearer with every passing moment, a sudden sharp feeling of dread descending upon the gathered trio. None of them were in the exact kind of shape to fight. It would be a slaughter for sure.

Outside the cabin, they could hear the cars reach a stop by the sandy beach, right beyond the cove and jagged rocks lining the still water shore. They could hear the engines die and the car doors open, the thunderous clap of dry desert boots sinking against the damp grains of sand.

"We know you're in there, come on out!" The faux Sheriff, Brussels, boomed loudly. "You're either coming out, or we're going in there. You're choice! Either way, we're getting what's ours!"

"Getting what's ours', could this guy sound even more like a jackass?" Dove wondered aloud in an annoyed tone. He then turned his attention to Redhorse, who quietly stood in the back of the kitchen, looking unsure of himself and the assembled group's chances of survival before finally bringing his gaze back to Russel's wounded form. "So...what's our plan?"

It absolutely bewildered Russel, how Dove looked to him as if he knew just how to save the trio from their awaiting death. Neither of them were leader material, that was made clear the day of initiation, when they were passed over for the role of team leader. Dove was inexperienced, capable of acting on a whim such as flying away, but it seemed unlikely that he could spirit any of them away in his tired state. Redhorse was a civilian, a doctor who'd been put through hell under Kruger's occupation of the town, and given by his fearful shaking, he'd have little to offer in the way of an escape plan.

So it fell to Russel to think of some sort of strategy that would prolong their lives, even if it were for only a few brief minutes. The fresh wounds ached, the throbbing of his chest, the brief lightheadedness a reminder of how close he already was to death's door and how unlikely he was to perform at his peak. But wounded as he was, Russel knew that was no excuse, no proper
justification to lie down and let the men outside storm into the cabin and kill them all.

The Thrush sharply inhaled, that pitiful aura of his working overtime to mend his body and brace his mind. There were a thousand ways this could end poorly, and he thought of all of them. Should they run, they'll die. Should they fight, they'll die. The extremes of their situation, ever so bleak. So, the Thrush mused in his pained state, perhaps he'd try something he was good at.

Russel turned and met Dove's stare. "...You trust me, right?"

"Yes." Dove said without hesitation.

The Thrush nodded. "Still got that journal?" Dove smirked, reached into his pants and produced said journal. The Thrush then reached into his own pocket, producing the box of matches they'd procured from the Blimey Cocks camp back in Old Venezier, then handed it off to Dove.

Dove looked at the matches and nodded knowingly. He then helped Russel to his feet, aiding the Thrush to the cabin door. Once Dove had propped Russel against the door, the Thrush silently pointed to the window facing the front of the cabin. The boy who could fly then took his position, ready to do his part.

Russel glanced back to the kitchen and caught Redhorse's eye. It was the role of the Huntsman to protect humanity, it was his job to protect this town and its people; that included the doctor. So Russel put on a brave face, cracked one of his smirks, all just to reassure the man that they had everything under control. However, that couldn't be further from the truth, they were horribly outnumbered, grossly outgunned, and terrifyingly outgunned. But that didn't mean it wasn't worth a shot. He then reached out for the handle, the last vestiges of doubt and fear washing away, and cracked the door open ever so slightly, only to announce his intention to the men outside. "Alright, I'm coming out! Hold your fire!"

"You look like shit, Russel Thrush." Brussels muttered, adding emphasis to Russel's name as the mercenary and his cadre of Blimey Cocks trained their rifles at the Huntsman. "We'll be taking the journal now."

The smirk that Russel had forced onto his face turned genuine, even slightly amused, as familiar feeling of contempt surging through him. His eyes narrowed, centering on Brussel's and the Sheriff's badge that adorned his chest. Russel had always had issues with authority. "Heh...that's cute." His voice carried against the quiet and still ocean. "You actually think you're in control of the situation. Dove, educate the man." He averted the men's gazes to the window, where Dove raised the journal into the view, followed by an ignited match.

Brussels cocked his gun. "You even think about burning that and we'll gun your assess down!"

Russel scoffed at the threat. "Leave. Or we burn it. Before you can 'gun our assess down'."

"We still have your friends." Brussels countered.

"Then drop them off at our door. Unharmed. Or we burn your goddamn journal." Russel's voice boomed as he held himself in the doorway, doing his best to keep himself from falling over.

"Go fuck yourself, kid." The faux Sheriff sneered defiantly.

"This isn't a negotiation." Russel held himself steady. "You need the journal. And we can cook smores off of it. Now give us back our friends."

"Oh look who grew a spine, you think you've got this all worked out, don't you?" Brussels laughed
in a mocking tone. "Well I'll just let you in on a secret, tough guy, we can find Sentinel's library without it! All that thing does is save us time and resources. Now, you either delay us, or you don't. Now hand it over."

"Give us our friends back." Russel shrugged, completely indifferent to the case the Sheriff had presented him.

The faux Sheriff threw up a hand and gestured to the men who'd followed him as well as the vacant cars that they'd rode in on. "Does it look like I got your goddamn friends?"

The Thrush jotted a thumb in the direction of Old Venezier. "Then go get them."

"Pfft." Brussels shook his head. "Can't believe I'm having this conversation."

Russel had played this game before and was willing to risk their lives on the sheer fact that he was good t pissing people off. It was time to double down. "Take the journal back inside Dove, do what you will."

"What the fuck you think you're doing now?" Brussels exclaimed as Dove whisked the journal out of view.

"I don't know, I think I'm talking out of my ass while my friend there is doing who knows what to that journal." "Perhaps he's even burning it. You'd never know."

Brussels glared. "You wouldn't dare."

"Wouldn't I?" Russel grinned ear to ear. "Look at me, shot three times, patched up by kitchen appliances and forced to play musical chairs in word form with a scumbag wall of meat who thinks wearing goggles on his head makes him look refined or some shit. To sum it all up I'm having a really bad day. If that journal's burning, I might satisfaction out of this after all. But you'll never know, would you?"

The faux Sheriff's expression softened, betraying a look of confusion. "What the hell are you on about?"

"If a tree falls, and nobody's around, does it make a sound?" The Thrush wondered aloud. "Is the journal burning, Brussels? Has it already burned? Or is it fine and dandy? Ask yourself that. Did you just fuck up and impede Kruger? All because you thought you could strong arm us? Or maybe you've got nothing to be worried about, all you have to do is give us back our friends. So what's it goin' to be?"

The mercenary glared at the Thrush and held his gaze for a good long while. Russel watched as the man shifted the gun in his hands, no doubt he aimed to simply gum him down where he stood, then test his luck with Dove. But the deathblows didn't come, the faux Sheriff remained where he stood and lowered his weapon.

"Town square. Sundown." Brussels said as he turned his back to Russel. "Bring you're the journal. No debate, no further negotiation. Shake us around and we kill your pals."

Without any further exchange of words, Russel watched as Brussels and his men loaded back into their trucks, watching as they departed no doubt back to Old Venezier to relay their bargain with Kruger. But even after they'd gone, even with the dust kicked up by their tires had long settled, Russel remained vigilant, propped up against the door way, not taking any chances with this wily bunch of sadist. For all he knew they'd just driven out of view and set to return on foot and catch them unaware.
But it wasn't any of the Blimey Cocks who'd caught Russel unaware, but Dove himself. The outstretched hand belonging to his teammate and friend grabbed a hold of the Thrush's shoulder, startling the wounded Huntsman and causing him to fall over. Dove, himself too drained from his earlier exertions, lacked the reflex to catch Russel, allowing the man to hit the porch face first.

"Well, that went well." Dove quietly remarked as he set to helping Russel back onto his feet.

"You really think they'll hold up their side of the bargain?" Redhorse's voice emanated from within the cabin. The local physician having left his spot from the kitchen and made his way to the front of the beachfront property.

"Oh, they're gonna try and screw us over the first chance they get." Russel muttered bitterly as Dove and Redhorse helped him into the home, setting the Thrush down in the living room. "Any chance I could get something to drink?"

"Sorry, we'd used up the last of the alcohol." Redhorse frowned, looking apologetic.

He rolled his eyes. "...Great."

"So what do we do?" Redhorse asked.

It was all a numbers game. There were three of them against a hundred of them. It was dire odds, but perhaps they could turn the tide in their favor. After all, surely not everyone in the town was content with the new regime. "Redhorse," He called out to the local doctor. "Is there any chance we can get the rest of the townsfolk to help?"

"I don't know, I can't say for certain." Redhorse shook his head. "You must understand, these past weeks have been terrible. Those who sided against the Blimey Cocks, they were hung or cut down alongside the Faunus."

"They're afraid, I get that, but we need help." Russel all but pleaded.

"I'm sorry," The physician's head hung low. "I don't think anyone will come to our aid."

"So we're screwed then?" Dove questioned aloud.

"Not yet." He turned his gaze back to Dove and lazily gestured to the journal in his hands. "Flip to the marked page, would you?"

Dove squinted at his fellow Huntsman, as if he'd gone mad. "I don't think some whack job lines scribbled in a book is going to help us, Russel."

"I'm playing a hunch that we're not as alone as we think we are. Now turn page damn it."

Begrudgingly, Dove did as he was told and flipped through the journal, reaching the current marked page. Gazing upon the plain white paper, he found a message written in black ink. "...This doesn't make any sense." Dove spoke aloud as he looked to Russel in confusion. He spun the journal around for both Russel and Redhorse to see. There it read, 'Help. Undercover'. "But he joined them…"

"Your friend must've been playing the long con." Redhorse deduced.

"Sky was sent here on a mission." Russel reasoned, recalling the story Goodwitch had told them of how Sky had come to be in Venezier.
"Yeah, I get that..." Dove trailed off before shooting a worried glance Russel's way. "But what exactly is his mission?"

"-And so I told them, Town Square at Sundown." Brussels said, finishing his tale of his standoff with the Huntsmen.

"It's a good trade, that journal is irreplaceable, after all." Sky quietly remarked as he stood at the back of the tent where Kruger and his mercenaries, along with the Blimey Cocks' leader had gathered. He crossed his arms over his chest and twirled a pen in one hand.

"Of course you'd say that, they're your former pals huh?" The burly Pepper sneered. "You practically gave them the journal! Whose side are you even on?!"

"Russel would have shot Kruger if I hadn't." Sky countered coolly, not at all fazed by Pepper's accusation.

"You don't know that. Coyote would've gotten to him before that could happen." The stout mercenary gestured to the silent slaughterhouse of a man who stalked in the corner of the room. The son of the Remnant's leading archeologists scoffed as he stuffed his pen into his back pocket. "It's so reassuring to know how easily it is for you to gamble with your employer's life." He smirked as the realization hit Pepper like a brick wall.

"Oh you little snot, I'd beat the shit out of you right now!" Pepper shouted, lifting up his sleeves and raising his fists.

"But you won't, will you?" Sky taunted, leaning forward off against the table and meeting the man face to face. "Idle threats. Get the program, you're a hired gun, I'm an archeologist. You break people's legs, I find the Sentinel's cache. Know your role." He spoke coldly.

"Enough with this petty squabble." Kruger spoke up, causing both Pepper and Sky to snap to attention. "Sky's efforts ensured my survival in a tense situation."

"Thank you, Doctor." Sky nodded.

"But the fact remains, you did hand them the journal." Kruger's tone quickly changed, a small tinge of contempt coating his words. "I can't say we can trust you to play a part in the transaction. You shall remain here at camp, continue our work, while we deal with your former comrades. Understood?" The good doctor instructed, earning an understanding nod from the once and former Beacon student.

"Yes, Doctor." He nodded once more.

"Good. Now be gone, there's work to be done elsewhere and I will see my property returned." Kruger said, turning his back to Sky as he and his men gather around another table to prepare. "I will see my property returned."

Sky nodded then turned to depart, leaving both Kruger and his mercenaries to deal with the tedious preparations for two wounded Huntsmen. Typically, this would be the part where Sky would shuffle back to his research tent, where he'd mull over the artifacts they'd recovered and categorize their importance. Instead, Sky made a detour.

Down past the old decayed saloon he went, past the abandoned brothel and the withered mines where the Faunus slaved, Sky went and entered the temporary stables where they kept the
disenfranchised. Past the disinterested Blimey Cock sentries he traveled further to the back, where he found two beaten and bloodied Huntsmen.

"You're a goddamn disgrace." Marie-Anne spoke as she looked through a black eye, up to Sky with an icy gaze.

"And you're tied up with rope. Not exactly in a position of moral authority are you?" Sky remarked rhetorically as he walked past the Oakwood native, strutting towards Danny.

"You're supposed to be a Huntsman. Doesn't that mean anything to you?" Danny muttered, staring dagger eyes at Sky.

"Last I checked, I was still a student, hardly a full-fledged Huntsman." Sky cited.

"You're deflecting the argument." Danny's glare intensified.

"And you still don't get it." Sky spoke coldly before reeling back his arm and punching down at Danny across his face under the watchful eyes of the nearby sentries. He then leaned down and pulled Danny close to his person. "Never let an opportunity pass you by." He muttered before shoving him back down.

Danny fell back and Sky turned to leave as the sentries moved to haul the downed Huntsman. But despite the bloody nose he now sported, Danny held a content face. He now held the tool to his and Marie-Anne's inevitable escape in the form of the pen he'd received from Sky.

The oh so important journal is the McGuffin that Kruger and his men had stolen from the Faunus Ghetto back in the Nebula arc. So overall it was nice to tie that back into the story.

Russel's inferior aura is brought to the forefront of this chapter, as well as the topic of semblances in Dove's case. It's odd how in RWBY only a select few ever go on to be Huntsmen, and foreseeably less people possess an aura, given Jaune's case some people just don't know about it. I like to think its a cultural thing in Remnant, where only true Huntsmen and Warrior are born when they manifest their aura, usually through tests of hardship or trauma like how it was for Ren in the show and here for Russel. Of course that social taboo is going out of style, seeing how Pyrrha unlocks Jaune's aura for him, and in the context of this story, even Russel suggests back in the first arc that they simply unlock everyone's auras rather than risk certain death at the hand of a trapped Grimm.

Russel's aura is faulty and unreliable, unable to stand against the minimum amount of damage, and even incapable of sustaining a semblance except for brief stretches of time. And that's despite the fact that it manifested on its own. But in the show, Jaune is noted by Pyrrha to have a surplus of aura. And his was unlocked for him. So there's also those factors to think about. It may be genetic, but the aura is supposed to be an extension of one's soul...which should speak volumes about the characters portrayed in this story.

I like portraying Sky as the person who can stand against even the most imposing of individuals, even if we didn't see too much of that in this chapter. He's a good Archeologist, that runs in his family's blood. But he's an even better Huntsman.

Last chapter we saw the introduction of this character, Redhorse, and he's really the only meaningful character the cast has met in Venezier. To that end he's supposed to represent
the face of the town, to be their connection to it. To know that this is a town they can still save, a town that wants to be saved and that they themselves want to save.

Anyways, that's pretty much it. I'll probably have much more to write about in the next chapter's authors notes. I hope you enjoyed this chapter! Until next time! Later Days!
LV: Tears of Venezier: Conclusion

Where has the time gone?

It's been over six months since I last updated. My excuse? Been busy. College and all that, transferring and exams that sort of thing needed my undivided attention. But I finally had a few days to sit down and work on this and its been a long time coming. I'm sorry I left you all hanging.

Before we continue I'd like to make some announcements.

After posting this chapter and the following interlude I want to change how I do things. I want a schedule, I want to be consistently updating this story but I know I can't do that, not with how things are for me. So, I'm going to be doing things differently.

I won't update this story until after I've completed an entire arc.

That way I'll have five chapters and a complete story to release and I won't be leaving anyone on a cliffhanger like last time. The updates won't be daily however, I'm looking more of a Monday/Friday update schedule. But, I guess we'll just see how things go from here.

Than you all for your patience. I'm glad to be back writing.

As usual notes about the material will be down below.

LV

Tears of Venezier: Conclusion

An amused smile wormed its way onto Sky's face. The halberd bearing young man found himself walking down the horrid shanty tents where Kruger and his men had kept the faunus populace chained, all the while the recollection of events leading up to now played in his head.

It hadn't even been a year since he'd run away from his life, leaving the world of his Mother and Father, their archeological escapades and their unaccepting disposition, for a life serving the greater good of humanity as one of Vale's Huntsmen.

He'd arrived armed with aura and semblance, gained from the perils of navigating trap filled tombs and combating the ancient Grimm that dwell within sacred lost temples. There Sky had met men and women who'd inspired him to give everything he could to the salvation of mankind. It also didn't hurt that he'd uncovered a cloak and dagger cabal dedicated towards the protection of humanity. So when he'd been asked to join, how could he possibly refuse?

During the chaos of the attack during the Vytal Tournament, Sky had been in discussion with Ozpin, it was then that'd he'd received this assignment, to come here to Venezier and retrieve something so world shattering it threatened to plunge the world into another Great War.

It hadn't been a month since Sky had found himself in Kruger's employ. The dear doctor had recognized him due to his notoriety and quickly added him to his excavating team. Since then Sky
had positioned himself as a key member of Kruger's camp, aiding them in their goal of uncovering the Sentinel's storehouse, but all the while keeping them from their goal.

Kruger may have been world renown in his area of expertise as an ecologist, but by no means was he known for his knowledge of the old languages and their glyph like structure, something akin to the standard script of pre-expansion societies. Fooling Kruger had been easy, all Sky had to do was lead him in circles, forever keeping him from goal.

However, even then Sky knew he couldn't keep his efforts up forever, not with the doctor and his mercenaries growing impatient and the many lives that they'd dragged through hell to accomplish this task.

Thankfully, aid had finally arrived. Though it wasn't in the form of experienced Huntsmen such as Ms. Goodwitch or the veteran Huntsman Qrow Branwen, but rather in the form of Sky's own peers, which didn't exactly bode well for the current state of Vale. But beggars couldn't choosers, it was now or never.

For less than a month Sky had sat in wait for the perfect opportunity to pull the rug out from under Kruger, mentally mapping the patrol layout of the camp and discreetly procuring the means to liberate the captured faunus from their bonds. So with Kruger and the majority of the Blimey Cocks converging on his friends, he could now safely begin his spring his breakout.

Through the shanty tents he went, behind the backs of the few remaining guards, Sky unshackled the men and women, who then gathered up their arms and proceeded to wrought just vengeance upon their oppressors. Without a word Sky continued on his way as the faunus turned their attention towards Venezier and began to march. He was unsure if they'd succeed in besting Kruger, or even if they could arrive in time to aid the others in their struggle, despite the steps he'd taken to provide Russel and the others every advantage he could, he remained uncertain of their ultimate fate. Though he was worried, Sky could not afford to waste his precious time growing gray hairs, he had a mission to complete.

Alone in the empty camp, Sky made his way down the old dried up and abandoned mine of Old Venezier. He walked deeper into the hole, descending into the darkness. Then, when he'd reached a dead end, he activated his semblance. Sky's eyes turned pure white and the faux wall and its hidden mechanisms became clear. So then he reached for his halberd and cut away at the ancient locks and then the rock began to pull apart, revealing the entrance to the much sought after mythical storehouse of The Sentinel of Vacuo.

The Lark boy then glanced upward to the foreboding entrance, noting the series of glyphs. Sky was not only armed with semblance and steel, but also with knowledge. Knowledge he'd gleamed from his upbringing surrounded with ancient texts and an infinite amount of free time. Perpendicular glyphs flowered and made threatening claims of immediate and painful demises. But the glyphs overhead with their slight sags and vibrant patterns spoke of the truth that lay beyond and through them the means to safely journey through this maze of death.

Confidant in his own abilities, the Lark reminded himself that failure was not an option. At any moment more of Kruger's enlisted men would rear their heads and pursue, and so too will the good doctor himself. He would need to be quick. However, he lamented this fact, as soon as he'd stepped through the threshold the maze of infinite death peered down on him. Sky knew he could not rush through this conundrum, that any mistake on his part could prove to be his final, and so he took his time, dancing through the deathtraps and their endless imagination, all the while inching his way to his goal: that which reside within the Sentinel's storehouse.
Never in all his years of living did Russel suspect he'd find himself in such dire circumstances. Growing up he'd always been told to expect the worst from the likes of Grimm, the ravenous monsters that plagued humanity, but here in a town called Venezier, he fought no blood thirsty beasts but that of his fellow man. Cut off from reaching out to anyone back in Vale due to the worldwide communications blackout, the murderous regime that lay claim to the town now closes in for the kill. Facing foes too numerous to count and with friends captured and used for leverage. The whole situation looked bleak as the one thing keeping the likes of Dr. Kruger and the Blimey Cocks from raining hell down upon Russel and his motley band was a simple journal too precious to see destroyed.

"Heh." An amused, blood stained smirk appeared on the Thrush's face.

"Hm?" Dove perked up, turning away from the work on his exposed sword to face his teammate. Confused by the levity, he couldn't help but ask, "What's up?"

All traces of amusement dissipated in an instance as Russel was pulled from his thoughts. He turned to Dove and spoke joylessly. "Just realized something funny. I've been fighting people more than I've been fighting Grimm."

The flight capable CRDL boy frowned at his colleague. "How's that even remotely funny?"

"I dunno." He shrugged. "Just seemed so."

"You sign up to fight the monsters, then all you do is wind up fighting your own people." Dove glanced back down to his sword laid out in its individual components on the floor. From the individual blade, to the hilt, to the underslung pistol mechanism to the grip, it was all there presented for Dove to tinker with. "If anything, that just sounds sad." He reached out for the pistol and proceeded to exercise the dust round from the chamber.

"I didn't say I wasn't fighting monsters." Russel remarked as he himself returned to his own preparations.

Before the Thrush lay the few tools available to him. On the floor was the Uzi he'd obtained from the Blimey Cocks camp, and beside that were the few precious ammunition he carried for it. Then there were two sticks of dynamite he'd also procured, as well as the lighter to light them and the journal should he deem it necessary. Aside from those, he had the dagger he'd also taken. There was nothing aesthetically enticing about the dagger, it was plain, it bore no obvious modifications and its blade was hardly sharp, useful only when it came to stabbing a man. He could forget about cleaving anyone, especially anyone with an aura, the blade would very likely shatter on contact. And lastly, he had his pocket knife.

So that was it. That was all the Thrush had to work with. And there were over a hundred Blimey Cocks to deal with, not to mention Kruger's mercenaries. By now all delusions of a peaceful resolution were gone from his mind, he just had to look to his wounds for proof. Not to mention he highly doubted that they'd be allowed to leave Venezier, should the exchange go down without a hitch.

Odds were Kruger would levy Danny and Marie-Anne, threaten to kill them on the spot, probably will off one to show he's serious until they hand over the journal. From there, they'll either be taken captive and made to work alongside the captured faunus doing whatever it is the good doctor is having them do out in Old Venezier. That is, unless, they aren't killed after the trade, or if they even make it to the town square. For all Russel knew there could be some sniper down the beach watching the cabin or a group of them up the road to ready jump them.
Then he took one last look at the tools at his disposal and weighed them against the forces that he opposed. With a long drawn out sigh Russel concluded: people will die.

There was no room for doubt that Kruger would not keep his word, not when he had every advantage. Not when Russel and his colleagues posed such a threat to exposing his crimes to the outside world. Confrontation was going to happen regardless of whatever action Russel took and people would die, whether it be himself or Dove, or Danny and Marie-Anne, or Redhorse or any other civilian caught in the crossfire. People were going to die.

So he reached out and plucked his knife off the floor, holding it out as if weighing it in his hand. It had never felt so heavy. He thought back to a few nights ago, back to that night in the outskirts of Vale, within the limits of the safe zone. In that warehouse where he'd murdered Lance Grimsby.

By now he was no stranger to death, nor was any other citizen of his fair kingdom, but to say he had left the experience unscathed would be a flat out lie. Truth be told, Russel was disturbed by the confrontation. But what unnerved him so was not the killing of Lance, he'd come to terms with that prior to the incident, resolving the Grimsby boy to be a monster that threatened the safety of all those who continued to live in the shadow of the city's fall. No, what disturbed Russel so was just how easy it had been to end the boy's life.

In another life where, in another time where Vale had not fallen, where CRDL and RWBY along with JNPR and CFVY had gone on to graduate and become full-fledged Huntsmen on their own terms, Russel would have been begrudgingly forced to call Lance a comrade in arms in their daily war against the beast of Grimm. But now, Lance was just another victim, another name marked down on an ever growing list of lives taken by the Thrush since birth, and that was fine by him, he wouldn't be alone for too much longer.

"You don't have to do this, you know." Redhorse said, pulling the two wounded Huntsmen's attention from their work as they prepared for their inevitable confrontation in town square. "You could go any moment now and leave, leave this town and get help, not for this town or its people but for yourselves. I'm a good doctor, I've patched you boys up, but you need professionals with equipment, not kitchen utensils." He gestured to the blood stained household appliances resting by the wayside. "You're bloody messes, unfit for the job. I'm a man of medicine, I can't within good conscience allow you two to walk out there to your deaths."

Russel could not deny the truth in the doctor's words, they were rookies, weathered by the fall of their kingdom and their wounds still fresh. What they needed was rest, what they needed was three more years of combat school training, what they needed to do was reach out for help back in Vale. But none of that was possible. The meeting was within hours, Beacon was in ruins and with the world wide communication blackout there just was no way to contact Goodwitch or anyone else back at the Safe Zone.

By all means, Russel just wanted to lie down and sleep, to shut his eyes and drift off for a whole day, let his body heal and his mind mend. But no doubt did the people of Venezier desire that as well, to sleep peacefully without the threat of a roving band of nihilistic mass murderers dictating their daily lives, that the Faunus can free themselves from their bonds and go home, forget their terrible treatment and attempt to start anew.

This was beyond what Russel wanted. This was about evil men taking control and forcing their will upon the unwilling through intimidation and force and that the only people able to do anything about it were the people in hiding away in this beachside cabin.

"No, but we do." Russel spoke quietly, his eyes returning to the knife in his hand and drawing a thumb over the name carved into its wooden handle. "We're Huntsmen, this is what we do."
"I can't just stand around and let you do this," Redhorse said firmly.

"Then leave," Russel glanced back at the man, the very same who very well saved his life just hours earlier. "I'm not asking you to fight or even to help, this is our job and you've done enough. We've got a town to save and I don't need this negativity. So go."

Redhorse opened his mouth to argue, but then he stopped himself. His shoulders fell and he sighed. "I just don't want anyone else to die." He said, looking so haggard by the horrors he'd witnessed under Blimey Cocks occupation.

Russel just stared at the man and shook his head before turning his attention back to his weapons. Without a word, Redhorse turned his back to the duo and solemnly trudged off elsewhere.

"So, what are we going to do?" Dove asked breaking the tense silence, turning to his teammate with an expectant gaze. "We do have a plan, right?"

Russel frowned, he frowned and then he did what he was best at. He poured into that head of his and he thought things through before that frown was replaced with one of his trademark smirks. "Yeah, yeah, I've got a plan."

The sun was setting over Venezier.

What few townsfolk remained stood at attention, unsure of what exactly was about to go down, but the air electric and something felt was about to give. Ever since their takeover, the oppressed people have stood in fear for their lives, doing all that they could to keep out of sight from the now ruling mob of fanatical nihilists. But now, now the good people of Venezier stood in wait, eyeing up the assembling party in the center of town.

Town Square was buzzing with still life. On the side opposite of the coast, Dr. Kruger waited, flanked by his mercenaries, the stout Pepper, the gruesome Coyote and the faux Sheriff Brussels. Danny Matchstick and Marie-Anne Cherri were present at the forefront of the assembled mob, guns trained at the back of their heads as they continued to serve as bargaining chips in a game the Doctor and his men were certain they'd already won. The jeeps that flanked them were of similar make filled to the brim with Blimey Cocks, all the while a number of their members positioned themselves on vantage points atop rooftops, armed to the teeth with rifles and various other firearms. Not one of them said a word, opting to wait in silence for their opposing party to meet them, all the while sure of themselves exactly how this would go down.

When the sun had finally set, that was then Russel appeared. The dying light to his back, he walked without a care, fearing not the sights of the men positioned on rooftops, nor did he quiver before the sheer number his opposition had mounted.

"That's right, all eyes on me." Russel muttered under his breath as he reached the center of town.

"Mr. Thrush." Kruger greeted the Huntsman, crossing his arms over his freshly pressed vest and casting a contemptuous glare towards the young man. "I would like my journal now."

But Kruger's words fell on deaf ears, as Russel's attention was elsewhere, glancing past the man and past his foot soldiers, to Danny and Marie-Anne, who only stared back as men kept guns to the backs of their heads.

Then Russel turned his eyes to another familiar face. There, standing beside Kruger's mercenaries was the man who'd first greeted Russel and his cohorts when they'd first entered town and again when they'd infiltrated the camp back in Old Venezier. He hadn't realized it then, but now Russel
understood the man's importance. He held seniority, leadership amongst this gaggle of fuckwits.

Kruger cleared his throat. "You've wasted enough of my time, the journal now. Or I have my men kill them."

Russel turned his attention to Kruger and stared the man in the eyes. "Release them first," he said before pointing upward, "or my friend there burns your journal."

Raising a brow, Kruger and his immediate subordinates looked upward and there they found Dove, hundreds of feet off the ground and out of range from the men's guns, holding the sought after journal in one hand, a match in the other. Though Kruger had seen it with his own eyes hours earlier, the sight of Dove just floating there defying all reason and preconceived notions of gravity baffled him.

But Kruger was not the only one to turn their attention upward to Dove, so too did the Blimey Cocks' senior. With nominal gangland leader's attention diverted elsewhere, of course the rest of the followers would be interested and followed in succession until all eyes were looking up at the boy who could fly.

Russel could only snort in amusement at the sight, so many slack jawed faces, so many utterly stunned at the sight of Dove using his semblance. Now, however, in this brief window time, Russel reminded himself of a comment Redhorse had made, when he'd witnessed Dove's aura kick his recovery into overtime. The physician had been so baffled by the sight and claimed to have never seen such a sight in person. The words had clung to the back of the Thrush's mind, nagging away at him, but now, he finally understood why.

The Blimey Cocks weren't just some roving bandit clan pillaging a poor defenseless town. This was their home, they'd grown up here, never took to kind with the Faunus population and at the first chance they'd been given to change things to suite their preference they'd jumped for it. They'd slaughtered neighbors, subjugated strangers and killed kin, all in the name of their ideology. But they were residents of Venezier, and the whole time they'd been here not once did Redhorse, the long-time local doctor, witness an aura in action.

But just because Redhorse had never seen an aura amongst the town's folk before didn't mean no one had one. Russel himself had grown up in a rural town where the old farts who drank their problems away at the local pub had a life time ago been seasoned Huntsmen. Not to mention this was a town famous for the tourism, all walks of life just appeared here and any aura wielder could be assimilated. But the Blimey Cocks weren't the kind to accept outsiders, given how they'd been so confrontational in their first meeting despite not knowing they were Huntsmen, so Russel doubted they had any sense of inclusivity.

So Russel turned his attention back to the Blimey Cocks' senior. He then, out from under his bracer, he produced his knife. "Hey, you." Russel called out for the man's attention. Once the Senior was looking at him, Russel raised his knife and spoke aloud. "I'm gonna throw this at your face."

Before Kruger could even comment on the Thrush's actions, the knife had left his hand and the blade impaling the man's forehead. The Senior fell over without so much as a sound, with some of the Blimey Cocks number gasping at the act and some others completely unaware at what had transpired.

Now as Russel was well aware, auras were a fickle thing. Supposedly they were the manifestation of one's soul given physical form, your own personal shield in which you could derive power in the form of semblances and bolster your physical prowess. But auras didn't automatically protect you
from any blow, if you had it covering your body every day of the week, you wouldn't be able to feel the wind in your face, the softness of one's pillow as lay down for the night. You needed to be attentive in your use of aura, knowing how to control it and where to apply it, such as on one's forehead if you were being told someone was going to chuck a knife at you. But even with the forewarning, the knife still cut through the Senior's skull and he now lay dead as proof.

The Senior didn't have an aura, Russel concluded, now what were the odds the rest of the Blimey Cocks didn't have auras either?

"Now what was the point to that?" Kruger questioned, surprisingly taking the murder of one of his subordinates better than Russel would have thought.

All Russel could do was smirk as all eyes fell back to him and away from Dove. It was no longer the boy in the air that concerned them, rather, it was the one who drew first blood and got away with it. But that was alright, that was fine with Russel, they were doing everything he wanted them to do.

This was always going to end in bloodshed, there was never going to be another option. That was a heavy realization and one that Russel did not find comfort in. But, if he was to find any solace in his decisions, it was that the next few minutes would be on his terms. It seemed so scary, pants wetting levels of anxiety scary, to believe you would be facing over a hundred people for the fate of one town. But that wasn't the reality of the situation. Only Kruger and his mercenaries posed any real threat.

Without warning, Dove pocketed the journal. Following earlier instructions, he lit both sticks of dynamite and then dropped them over the mob of Blimey Cocks.

What unfolded was utter chaos. Two sticks of dynamite, two explosions, had they been lucky that would have dealt with a quarter of the Blimey Cocks. What Russel hadn't counted on was Dove's aim, who'd dropped one of the sticks on one of the parked jeeps. Fiery metal debris shot forth striking all manner of Blimey Cocks, ripping through the immediate few and then embedding into unfortunate others.

While Russel would have liked to just watch the chaos unfold as the Blimey Cocks started to disperse, it was easy acting tough when you've seemingly got the whole deck stacked in your favor but when things start turning into one big cluster fuck you start seeing self-preservation kick in and the ants go running, but time was of the essence and he needed to free Danny and Marie-Anne immediately.

But before the explosions, Danny produced from his mouth a key from his shackles and freed both Marie-Anne and himself from his bonds. With the distraction created by the ensuing chaos, they overpowered their guards and confiscated their weapons. Gun fire rang out as Danny turned his guns on the Blimey Cocks and Marie-Anne's fire sword soon found itself being thrust into men's chests.

And then there was Dove, who'd begun swooping out of the air, grabbing the men positioned on rooftops. He'd quickly ascend before releasing his hold and sending them plummeting to the ground below. Russel wanted to comment on the act, swearing it was something he'd seen a Nevermore do during the Fall. But, given the circumstances, just about anything went.

So then, as all the Blimey Cocks scattered, Russel began to draw his uzi and take aim on the real threats to the town of Venezier. But Dr. Kruger had chosen his mercenaries wisely, Brussels was already upon the Thrush. Out of the crowd, the faux sheriff sprinted forth and grabbed Russel by the neck and choke slammed him onto the ground. But Brussels didn't stop there, he ran Russel
through the dirt road, leaving a skid mark in his wake.

Russel could hear the Sheriff laughing, mocking him as he continued to drag him through town. He tried to fend off, to cause him to lose his hold, but he just couldn't mount the effort. He was utterly powerless to prevent Brussels from ripping him off the ground and then throwing him across the square.

The Thrush ragdolled, kicking up dirt in his wake before coming to a stop. He struggled to pick himself off the ground, only to feel a pair of hand reach out and carefully grab him by the arms in aid. Russel looked up, his eyes widening at the sight of Redhorse helping him to his feet.

"You shouldn't be here." Russel said.

"I'm a doctor, you're my patient," Redhorse smirked. "I can't within good conscience let you do this alone." He said before turning to face Brussels. "We've had enough of you and yours, turning our town into your own carnival horror show. It ends today!" Redhorse shouted, earning a hearty cheer from some on lookers. Soon, more towns folk were cheering, some even stepping off from the sides and then joining Redhorse and Russel's side.

"Suit yourself." Brussels sneered before rushing towards Russel and the townies. The faux Sheriff swatted the townies and grabbed ahold of Redhorse, tossing them man aside. Russel called out for the doctor, only to get steamrolled by Brussels.

Brussels tore into the Thrush, not bothering with any weapon, rather opting to use his bare hands to, staining his knuckles with Russel's blood. Midway through his assault, the most precarious thing occurred.

The very ground they all stood on began to shake.

All combat ceased, all scurrying Blimey Cocks froze in their feet, and Dr. Kruger could only stare as a huge beam of blue light shot out of the ground from Old Venezier and pierced the heavens above.

"...No..." Dr. Kruger spoke breathlessly. "...He found it. He found it and he opened it." He said as his brows began to furrow in anger. "He opened it without me."

But the night was young and there were still surprises to be had, as the ground ceased to quake and in its place the presence of a hundred footsteps became known. In the direction of Old Venezier, with their backs to the blaring beam of blue light, the Faunus marched onto the town.

With a cry, the Faunus raised their weapons, guns taken from their imprisoners or the tools they'd used when forced to excavate the mine. They then charged into the crowd of Blimey Cocks and joined with the Huntsmen and Townies in their conflict.

Russel didn't even need to guess at what happened. If anything, the recent turn of events stoked his pride, he really was one hell of a distraction. All he needed to do was just make Kruger turn his back on Sky and the Lark had managed to turn the tide in their favor.

Unfortunately, Russel couldn't savor the moment, as Brussels pulled him into the air before spinning him, gaining momentum then with all his might threw him.

Russel crashed through the Saloon window without so much as a sound, rolling up into a ball upon impact and minimizing his chances of landing on shards of glass. Though his body ached and wailed, he knew he couldn't just lay down, not with Brussels focused on him. If he was going to beat the mercenary, then he was going to need to act and quickly. However, just as he'd gotten back
onto his feet, Russel felt a pair of hands roughly grab at his back and spin him around.

"You're a real piece of work, you know that Russel?" Brussels said before delivering an aura infused punch across Russel's chin, sending the Thrush flying backwards and slamming through a table. "Show up talkin' all tough and shit, but you ain't tough, you ain't shit." He spat. "You came to my town, came here and started wrecking my shit. I had a good thing going here, paid to keep everyone in check, even got to head my own private army of hicks." The faux sheriff candidly spoke as he made his way across the vacant watering hole, to the downed Thrush. "But then along comes some runt punk who thinks he can play 'Huntsman', play 'Hero'. But even after all the shit he's pull it ain't amounted to squat."

Brussels reached down once again, grabbing the wounded Russel and then proceeded to raise him off the ground. "As soon as I'm done here fuckin' you up, ah'll head back out there and sort this mess out. Ah'll kill my way through your pals, then the Faunus, and finally ah'll cut through these ingrate shit townies that just couldn't sit back and let me have my fun After that? Well, then I guess ah'll just collect my check."

"Eyes up here, asshole." Russel defiantly spat up blood on his enemy. He then grabbed for his still holstered uzi and then turned its barrel towards Brussel's gut before pulling the trigger. The point blank bullets ripped through Brussel's aura and tore into his abdomen, causing the man to falter backwards in recoil as well as release Russel from his grasp.

Both men collapsed onto the ground, Brussel's landing on his back while Russel fell flat on his face.

Of the two, however, it was Russel who found his footing. He took a step forward and heaved, glaring at the man before him. "F-fuck you." Brussels cursed as he desperately tried to keep his guts from spilling out of holes that wrought his body. But despite the nature of the wound, the man's aura was already attempting to repair the damage. Soon, Brussel's would be back on his feet and he'd make good on his threats. That was something Russel could not allow.

Staggering forward, Russel closed the distance between himself and Brussels. He fully drew his uzi, swapping out the magazine for a fresh one and then he took aim at his wounded opponent. He held down on the trigger, fought the recoil to keep it steady, until the weapon didn't fire anymore.

With the last of his ammunition dried up, Russel tossed the uzi at what now resembled hamburger meat and made his way back out to the town square turned battleground. He sauntered through the fighting, making his way back to the center, past the flying bullets and cleaving pick axes, until he happened upon the Senior's body. He pressed a foot against the body and kicked it over so his face was turned upward to the sky. He the leaned down and drew his knife from his head, taking the blade and then wiping the blood on the man's clothes.

"Coyote, we need to go!" Dr. Kruger shouted to his mercenary, pointing back to Old Venezier just as the blue beam of light dissipated.

The walking slaughterhouse indulged his employer, dropping the now fresh Faunus carcass in his hands and then proceeding to escort Kruger to an awaiting jeep. But their actions did not go unnoticed, as Danny Matchstick had kept an eye out for the doctor the entire time.

"Russel!" Danny shouted amongst the ensuing melee gaining the Thrush's ear. The Huntsman leader turned his guns towards the stout mercenary Pepper, who busied himself with gutting a Faunus. "Kruger's booking it back to Sky, we'll handle this, pursue him and help Sky with whatever the hell is going on with that beam of light!"
All Russel could do was raise a weary arm in acknowledgement as Danny laid into Pepper until the man collapsed. He pushed his way past the brawling townsfolk and leapt over fallen fighters and made his way to where they had stashed their horses from earlier. But, much to Russel's dismay, he found their steeds lying on the ground dead, no doubt killed in retribution.

So, with their initial transportation gone, Russel resolved to acquire another means. Racing through the brawl, Russel made it to one of the parked Blimey Cocks jeeps and much to his relief, found the keys in the ignition. He could only suspect that the driver had been one of the initial few killed when Dove dropped the dynamite or that he now was in the thick of things with the battle, but Russel couldn't deal with uncertainties, what he needed to do was give chase and thankfully he now had the ability to do so.

It had been a while since he'd driven anything, the last thing with wheels he'd been behind the wheel of was his farms tractor. But he was sure there was some overlap. So then he threw the jeep into reverse and slammed his foot down on the gas. He jerked forward as the jeep began to speed backwards without so much as a warm up.

And so Russel sped out through the desert hills, chasing after Kruger via the dust kicked up by his own vehicle. The jeep Russel rode in ramped off hills, landing violently but continued onward. Though Kruger had the lead on him, in time Russel encounter him, after all he was heading after whatever had caused that beam of light, he'd have to get out the car sometime.

But as Russel reached Old Venezier, he found his earlier assumption to be incorrect. Kruger's vehicle did not stop, rather it continued speeding and ran down the old abandoned mine shaft. With a grunt, Russel continued pursuit.

The mine proved to be a tight squeeze, as soon as he drove down the darkened passage, the rear view mirrors were ripped off the side of his car. The carbon fiber material that comprised the exterior make-up of the jeep scraped against the rocky walls of the mine, echoing for what seemed to be for miles.

Soon, after passing what appeared to be an entrance way, all natural light ceased to enter mine. Acting quickly, Russel switched on the headlights brightening his path and revealing a sharp turn ahead. Reacting, Russel made the complete 180 degree turn, facing him back in the direction towards Venezier. He then found the hood of Kruger's jeep flying towards him and slamming against his hood.

Russel just raised a brow at the action, no doubt they'd been aware of his pursuit of them, but surely would have mounted some more final solution other than throwing their hood at him. But then Russel spared a glance at the roof of his own jeep, noting that it wasn't a convertible, and that both his own and Kruger's jeep were the same model, which left him puzzled as to how they'd removed it in the first place.

The answer to Russel's unasked question came in the form of a stone blade carving through the top of his car. The Huntsman ducked his head, saving himself from an unfortunate beheading. As he lost the roof of his jeep another blade sprang forth, chopping down at him and another slashed at his tires. Russel shook forward as all four of his tires popped.

Silently, Russel cursed himself for blindly into a death trap. Supposedly, if anything Sky had told him had been true, this was to be the secret storehouse of The Sentinel of Vacuo, of course there'd be traps.

The front windshield glass washed over Russel as stone tipped arrows rained over his vehicle. By now, Russel had taken to covering his head under the dashboard, saving himself from certain
death.

But he could not hide forever, he was in a moving vehicle and he needed to see where he was going, lest he run afoul of another sharp turn. So he poked his head over the steering wheel and saw that he was entering some sort of chasm and the distinct scent of sea water hung tightly to the walls.

With more questions than answers, Russel found himself dodging death yet again, this time in the form of a parked jeep. He threw on the breaks as soon as the vehicle came into view, but it was already too late. Russel's jeep collided with the parked one, sending his car flipping into the air.

Acting quickly, Russel reached over to the passenger side seat and laid himself across both seats and wrapped his arms and legs in their seatbelts. The jeep slammed against rock, skidding and then tumbling over until it came to a rest on its side.

Groaning, the Thrush fell out of the jeep and clutched his left shoulder while his arm hung dead. He screamed out in pain as he attempted to pop the bone back into its socket, but it just wasn't taking. So Russel tried again, then again and then again until his arm was back in place. He kicked at the ground, writhed in pain, and spat a slew of curses, all the one's he'd known and even invented new ones to express the discomfort that he felt.

But he worked at it, until he heard the 'pop'. He gave his arm a test, rolling it around and seeing how far he could push it. But it wasn't good as new, he'd just set a dislocated shoulder, that had consequences all its own. He was at another disadvantage and just when he needed to be at the top of his game.

Looking back to his jeep, Russel turned his attention to the one he'd hit. Kruger's jeep was in just as bad a shape as his was, having also run the gauntlet. But the good doctor was nowhere to be seen. So he'd parked his car and set off on foot, now the only question was why? So then Russel turned back around and felt like a fool.

Staring down at the Thrush was an entry way and above that was a familiar emblem. Adorning the rocky wall was the Vacuo flag, or rather, the three swords the made up the popularized image of the Vacuan flag. The questions continued to mount and he would forever be without answers if he remained here. Resolving to see things through, Russel entered the passage way.

It felt cold, which was unlike anything he'd come to expect. Being deep within the rock without any obvious signs of ventilation, Russel had expected air to be in short supply, and yet it was plentiful and it smelled like the sea. He wasn't sure if they were close to Venezier, close to the ocean, under the ocean even, but what he was certain of was he still had a job to do.

So Russel drew his dagger and held it in his right arm readying himself. He stepped through another threshold and out of the dark chasm he was enveloped by shimmering moonlight. And what welcomed him was a mile wide sight, a dome made of pink coral housing a hundred empty shelves, with the still waters of Venezier defying all reason and logic by refusing to seep through the pores and fill the interior, the waveless content with coexisting with this space with the only exception of a small stream surrounding a pedestal in the center.

"Where is it, Sky? I know you have it!" Up ahead, Russel could hear Kruger shout. Peering through the shimmering darkness he could make out three figures, two standing imposingly and one in defiance. "Where is the knowledge?!

"You came here to rob the Sentinel, but you never once considered that maybe he didn't have what you were seeking." Sky said with smile, before Coyote's fist hammered against him, knocking him
down onto the water.

"Search him, he has to have it on him." Kruger ordered.

Coyote loomed over Sky and fought against the thrashing Lark. "You won't find anything on me. Face it Kruger, you're efforts have been for naught."

"Then what was the point for building this? Building all of this?" The good doctor gestured to the immense storehouse, to the hundred shelves and to the pedestal surrounded by sea water. "If not to harbor his accumulated knowledge, why would the Sentinel create this storehouse, what was the pint to it all?" He continued to shout.

You know, don't you?" He glared down at Sky. "You Larks and your ways. You knew the whole time how to get in here, didn't you? You must have seen something in the journal, something I overlooked! You know what this is for don't you?!"

"If you were so smart, then why don't you figure it out?" Kruger spun around, finding Russel standing there, his dagger already drawn.

"You." Kruger addressed Russel venomously. He then gestured to Coyote and pointed to the Huntsman. "Deal with him."

Coyote headed his employers command, leaving Sky and stalking towards Russel. The already imposing abattoir's grim and gritty visage was amplified by the distorted light shining through from up above. Bathed in shadow and enlightened by light, restricted by nothing and enable by everything, Coyote resembled no man and put demons to shame. He held no weapon, raising only his grisly two dried blood covered hands and closed the distance between himself and the Huntsman with an alarming speed.

Russel met the challenge and thrust his dagger forward. But Coyote was no longer in front of him. As if he'd blinked out of existence before his very eyes, Russel was taken by surprise when he'd struck him from the side, his left side to be exact.

Sent flying by the sheer amount of force behind the punch, Russel crashed through a stack of shelves, causing a domino effect. Forcing old and rotten wood off of himself, he was once more caught unaware as Coyote appeared before him as if out of thin air and continued to brutalize the Huntsman.

"Now, why'll they're busy," Kruger turned his attention back to Sky. "I believe you owe me an explanation."

Sky snorted. "You were a fool to believe that the Sentinel would store such information here. You missed all the tell-tale signs, blinded by your crusade you ignored everything that stared you in the face."

"Then what is this? What am I not seeing?!" Kruger knelt down beside Sky and screamed in his face. "Tell me!"

A light scoff escaped Sky's lips. The Lark simply nodded to the pedestal.

Kruger stood and then delivered a quick kick to Sky's gut, causing the young man to recoil in pain. The good doctor then turned his attention to the pedestal and approached it. He noted the runes that adorned the rock, symbols from another dead language he hadn't bothered to learn.

He peered at the pedestal and its bowl like surface, how it was filled to the brim with water that
streamed leaked out and made four separate streams that ran along the floor. That's when he saw it, something sparkling in the water.

Rising, Sky found himself standing and cracked a smile at the sight. "That's what this was all about."

"What is it?" Kruger asked, a sudden swelling of anxiety in his chest as for the first time in a very long time the good doctor was faced with an absolute unknown.

Sky's smile widened. "Why don't you take a look for yourself," he goaded. "Aren't you supposed to be a world class ecologist or something?"

Kruger turned his head and met Sky's eye. He let out a 'hmph' and then placed his hand in the water, reaching in and pulling out the object that had caught his eye. What he removed from the water was a green dust jewel in the shape of a thin letter 'C' and it was absolutely beautiful. The good doctor was hardly in the position to give a date to the object, but given the curvature and his own knowledge of the Sentinel head wager it to be nearly a thousand years old, crafted during the dark ages when man wandered the world of Remnant as nomads.

But then a noise caught Kruger's attention. He quickly spun around, expecting to find Sky attempting to capitalize on the situation, but the Lark remained where he stood, that smile of his still plastered on his face. It was only when he recognized the sound to be the distinctive bubbling did he turn back to the pedestal's bowl.

The water in the bowl was now overflowing. A strange heat radiated from it as the bubbles ran in streams. The ground began to shake and then they heard a loud slam. Kruger's eyes darted back to the coral dome's entrance, back to the shadowy chasm from whence they'd came, and found their exit blocked by a fallen stone.

"Oh come one, Dr. Kruger," Sky couldn't help but laugh. "of course there was going to be another trap. Haven't you ever seen Indiana Jones?"

"You knew?" Kruger raised a disbelieving brow as whatever force that held the water around them at bay finally gave way and the sea outside began to flood.

"The entire time." Sky said before charging forward at the good doctor without fear as he had nothing to lose and everything to gain.

As the very same time, Russel found himself at the end of his rope and Coyote's hand around his throat. Suspended in the air all Russel could do was struggle as the walking slaughterhouse of a man began to apply pressure against his throat.

Any moment now, his neck snap like a twig and that would be the end of him. But Russel had come too far, he'd been through so much and persevered he was not going to let it end now.

So then he produced his pocket knife out from his bracer and began furiously stabbing at Coyote's hand. But the blade just couldn't cut through the man's aura, he couldn't make a dent at all.

But the end would not arrive just yet for Russel Thrush, as the waters gave way and came slamming down upon both men. Caught by the surprise force, Coyote released his hold of Russel and was swept away. The Huntsman, however, was given no reprieve. Air was now suddenly in short supply as he found himself being carried off into the brewing whirlpool.

Sky and Kruger struggled against each other even as the water came down around them. But neither of them cared, hate radiated between them as they fought for control of the Dust Jewel. It
could have gone on for as long as it would have taken for the water to fill the dome, but their struggle was cut short as Coyote, carried by a wave of water, struck through the pair and slammed into the pedestal, breaking it from its foundation and being washed away with it.

Kruger, thrown into disarray by the oncoming water, was left open for Sky to make another attempt to snatch the jewel. So then Sky rushed him while shoulder deep in water and seized the jewel. The good doctor cried out and flurry curses before the Lark kicked off of him with aura infused feet, launching him like a bullet through the water and towards Russel while alsodooming Kruger to the current of the growing whirlpool.

The good doctor's final words fell on deaf uncaring ears as Sky slammed into Russel, and carried him through the water and out of the dome through the coral's many pores.

It was all a blur for Russel, the salty sea water stung his eyes like crazy and then there was the sheer isolation he felt as he'd been smothered by the ocean itself. But then he could breathe again, he could in the cool Venezier night air as both he and Sky washed up on the beach. But more importantly, Russel could hear again and he could hear waves.

Coughing up water, Russel looked up from the sandy beach, to Sky and then to the ocean. And for the first time since he'd arrived in Venezier, for the first time since the very first coastal settlement, there waves.

The water thrashed about in an indiscrimination fashion. The water that had once been a perfect mirror to the sky above was now in utter ruin, as whatever made it so had been removed.

"What the hell happened?" Russel turned to Sky in search of answers. "It shouldn't be like this."

"This is what happened." Sky said, raising the Dust Jewel for the Thrush to see. "This is the reason I came here."

Russel looked at the jewel, but he did not find remarkable in the slightest. "All of this was for that?" A look of disgust crossed his features. "All of this death and for what? Some fucking trinket?"

"I don't think you understand what this is, Russel. It's a key." He gestured to the jewel.

"And it opens…?"

"Well, I honestly don't know," Sky aimed the jewel to the thrashing sea. "But despite its nature, it had the power to calm the sea, to throw it out of motion with the moon. Do you not understand the power that it wields? Why we had to come take it before it could fall into Kruger's hands. It's not just a key it's a weapon!"

"All I know is there's a lot of dead men and women littering the streets of this town," Russel picked himself off the ground and dusted the sand off his pants. "You understand what it means if we take that thing from this town right?" He looked Sky dead in the eye as the waves cut across the beach and violently slammed into Redhorse's cabin. "It'll kill this town for good."

"You're being dramatic, Russel." Sky waved off the Huntsman's concerns and aimed to shove the jewel in his pocket, only to have his arm caught by Russel's.

"Think for goddamn minute, we're robbing this town of the one thing it had going for them, the only reason anyone would come to this place and without it it'll shrivel up and die!" Russel was screaming now.
"What do you want from me? I can't just leave this behind, not what I went through to get it." Sky frowned.

"That's not what a Huntsman sounds like," Russel glared. "In fact I'd wager you sound a lot like Kruger."

"He stole his work, made a name for himself off the backs of others and killing and maiming whoever got in his way," Sky shot back. "Don't you dare compare me to that disgrace."

"Then show me why I shouldn't." Russel released his grasp of Sky's arm. "We're Huntsmen Sky, we work in service of people, and we don't doom them."

Sky lowered his head, suddenly finding the tips of his water logged boots far more interesting. "How fucked up does the world have to be for you to be the voice of reason, Russel?" He said as the ghost of a smile crossed his features.

"Pretty wretched, isn't it?" Russel snorted as Sky turned to face the ocean.

Sky nodded. "You've made your point." He said before turning to the ocean. He infused his aura into his arm and then gave it a throw, launching the green Dust Jewel far out into the ocean. The moment it came into contact with the sea, the waves calmed and the stillness returned.

Following the action, it was Russel who'd cut into the silence that had fallen over them. "Hey, Sky?"

"Yes?"

"Satisfy my curiosity. But what is the Sentinel's emblem? Why was it carved into that wall?"

"Because it's not The Sentinel's personal emblem, it's a coat of arms." The Lark answered quietly.

"Okay, but who's?"

Sky paused for a brief second then shrugged. "I don't know." He then gestured for the path leading from the beach back into town. "Come on, we'd better see how things have gone in town."

Russel simply stared after Sky, not buying his answer for even a second. "Sure you don't." He mutter under his breath before following under the obliterated moon's glow.

Out from the still water of the ocean, a hulking figure emerged. Coyote stepped out from the water and in his arms he held the pedestal. He ran a hand over the runes and nodded in content with his prize, with Kruger lost he would have to seek payment elsewhere and surely this would fetch quite the sum. Lastly he looked the way that Russel and Sky had gone, but rather than risk further confrontation, he turned and walked off in the opposite direction.

By the time the fighting had stopped, over a hundred dead men and women lay in the streets of Venezier. And yet, it didn't seem so bleak, not when the majority of the fallen wore embroidered letter 'B's.

Well, that's what Russel thought as he made his way through the fresh battleground in approach to a makeshift clinic.

"Redhorse!" Russel called out to the local physician, catching him at the tail end of patching up a Faunus' wound.
"Now remember, don't over exert yourself now, you've done good kid." Redhorse said patting the Faunus on the his back.

"Thank you, Redhorse." The Faunus shot him an appreciative smile before slinking away to a group of awaiting townsfolk.

"Russel!" Redhorse spun around and smiled brightly. "I'm pleased to see that you made it."

"Hmph, yeah I guess I did. But I had in control," The Thrush laughed as another injured townie walked up to be seen. "But, I see I wasn't the only one taking unnecessary risks out there."

"I couldn't just sit on my ass forever waiting for a rookie like you to pull off a miracle." Redhorse smirked and nodded to the liberated town. "And a miracle it was."

"I didn't have much to do with the Faunus, nor did I rally the towns folk, that was all you." Russel shrugged.

"Yeah, but you're the one who stood up to the Blimey Cocks when no else would. So, from not only myself, but also from the rest of the people of Venezier, thank you." He said, extending his hand to Russel.

The Thrush just stared at him for a moment, before finally cracking a smirk and shaking the physician's hand. "Need any help? I'm sure you can use a couple of hands rebuilding the place."

"No, you've done enough for us." Redhorse smiled. "We'll take care of it, this our town, we'll see to it."

"Okay, alright. I should probably get going anyways, it's a long sojourn back to Vale." The Thrush said, turning to leave.

"Hey, Russel." Redhorse called out to the Huntsman, causing him to freeze in place. "I'm proud to call you a Huntsman. Keep up the good work."

"Aw shucks Redhorse, keep sweet talking me like that and I might not want to leave this place." He called out from over his shoulder.

"Oh get out of here already you crazy kid." Redhorse laughed and waved good-bye. "That's kid's a Huntsman." The doctor smiled in approval.

"Sky!" Dove shouted as he ran up to greet the CRDL boy.

"Hey Dove, I-" Sky began to greet his CRDL partner only to be socked across the face for the second time that day. "What was that for?!"

"We were worried sick about you! You didn't leave a message or anything! We thought you were dead dude!"

"Yeah, sorry about that." Sky sheepishly grinned. "Think you guys could forgive me?"

"Eh, I see why not."

"I trust things wrapped up nicely on your end?" Danny asked in a knowing tone.

"I'll explain everything when we get back, but, for the most part, yeah I think things wrapped up for the better."
"Glad to hear."

"So, we have transportation?" Russel asked as he rejoined his team.

The horn of one of the Blimey Cocks jeeps answered. The Huntsman spun around to find Marie-Anne pulling up and coming to a full stop in front of them. "Hey, slow pokes, you coming or what?" Marie-Anne honked the horn again.

"Shotgun." Danny beat the others to the punch.

"You better not play anything stupid on the radio." Dove quipped before following after him.

"The world's fallen into disarray, I'm sure the only thing on air is stupid." Sky remarked before making his case for why he shouldn't sit in the middle. And all the while Russel laughed.

It was going to be a long trip home.

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I think I've mentioned before about my own understandings of the mechanisms of aura and their perceived nature in a social environment. The world of Remnant is not filled to the brim with aura users or else there'd be far more people in combat school. Jaune has gone on record to be oblivious to aura so there are people who just don't know about it. Those gifted with aura are capable of inhuman feats and are essentially gods amongst men. So we kind of see in this chapter the idea that anyone with an aura can dwarf a small army, albeit its through surprise and hardly considered an army at all. But I think this just further validates the inherit competitive nature of the Vytal Tournament and the sociopolitical dynamics of Remnant about who can produce the better huntsman and all that jazz. Much to explore later on.

I was a bit torn about how I wanted to end this chapter, you can only imagine the many rewrites. This could've ended on a much downer note with alternatively Redhorse dying and Sky keeping the Dust Jewel and in a sense killing the town. Redhorse has been our only real townie with any impact on the plot and shaped Russel's perspective on the matter, had he been killed off he probably would've been fine with Sky keeping the jewel. But that just didn't sit well with me so I rewrote it. Got to even include a nice farewell at the end, we don't get that often enough.

I know, I know, I shouldn't be including other sources of media nor should I be referencing them. But the entire time I was writing the scene in The Sentinel's Storehouse the opening scene to Raiders of the Lost Ark just kept running in my head. 'So when does the boulder show up'? That kind of stuff.

That's all I've got for notes so far. So, I guess now's as good a time to inform you all what the next arc will be about. Picking up six months later, a little before the start of Volume 4, following Russel and company as they deal with an external threat.

**Next Arc: Days Gone By**

See you then.
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!