Game On

by Soulfulbard

Summary

Gamemaster Ruby only wanted to get her players out of their rut and playing something different. What she got was Jaune playing the spooniest of all bards, Pyrrha unleashing her inner psychopath, Ren playing the cleric of a drunken luck god and... what's Nora playing again?

Notes

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See the end of the work for more notes
"And so Glorthoc the Intimidator stumbled back from the barbarian Kalthira's mighty hammer blow, bleeding from the wounds inflicted upon him by the paladin Sir Frain's holy sword and the fighter Meluna's spear. He stumbles back into the traps laid by the kobold rogue Raast, which explode, dealing... roll it, Ren."

Ruby Rose was struggling to sound interested in the final moments of her current D&D campaign mostly because it was the same ending to her last three campaigns. Not only did her gaming friends play the exact same characters, but they also used the same tactics over and over with only tiny variations based on how she tried to counter them.

Five six-sided dice clattered across the table.

"Nineteen." Ren announced.

Ruby didn't bother checking Glorthac the Intimidator's hit points. She just wanted it over.

Because she had a plan for the next campaign. Things would be different. Things would be interesting. Things. Would. Be. Fun.

"Uh... Ruby?" Jaune asked, snapping her out of her reverie.

"Hmm?"

"Ren rolled his damage. Is Glorthac still up? You just sort of froze up with a sadistic grin on your face. You're not going to kill the whole party are you?"

Now that was an idea. Ruby considered it, but she was just too impatient to get her current trainwreck over with. "Nope. That's just enough. The alchemical fire trap goes off and shreds Glorthac's lower body. He collapses to the polished stone floor, his blood mixing with the soot and burning globs of alchemist's fire. The wold-be lord of the Dead Mountain lies in his ruin upon his own throne room floor. The world is safe once again."

"Whoo!" Nora bounced in her seat, doing a little victory dance. "We are awesome! High fives all around!" She leaned across the table, insisting on collecting said high fives from Ren, Jaune, and Pyrrha before stopping at Ruby. She held her hand up, but got no five.

She stared at Ruby, eyes gleaming with the eternal energy only Nora could possess.

Ruby stared back, sighed, then lazily touched her hand to Nora's, earning her a bright smile as the hyperactive girl flounced back into her seat. A sigh heaved from the depths of her weariness, now with guilt added. It wasn't her players' faults; not entirely. If they were in a rut, it was partly because she was in one too. Although no one ever complained, she'd started noticing that her campaigns had started being a bit... same-y and never lasted very long because she got bored of them for that very reason.

"Is... something wrong, Ruby?" Pyrrha was packing up her things, but had paused to give the younger girl a concerned look. Being the Freshman hanging out with a group of Juniors, Ruby was used to being treated with kid gloves by everyone, especially Pyrrha. She'd learned to live with that even if it seriously pissed her off sometimes.

Pinching the bridge of her nose, Ruby almost shook her head, but then changed her mind. Time to
be honest and open with her friends. So instead, she nodded. "Guys... what have you thought of the past couple of games? Be honest?"

"They were fun!" Nora chirped, "I got to go crazy and break stuff like always!"

Jaune raised a confused brow. "I had a good time. It's nice to be the shining hero."

Pyrrha nodded in agreement. "I have no complaints, Ruby."

"But I'm guessing you do." Ren scrutinized Ruby with a keen eye as he neatly filed away Raast's character sheet in his binder of various rogues, thieves, footpads and skill classes from dozens of campaigns.

Another sigh. Ruby sat up straighter. "Okay, look: we're getting in a rut. All our games are basically the same these days. Jaune is always the nearest thing he can get to a Paladin even in Shadowrun and Vampire where that shouldn't even be possible; Pyrrha is always a Lawful Good Dex-fighter; Ren is the rogue and the only one who really even bothers using skills, and Nora..."

Nora grinned proudly, waiting to hear Ruby's assessment of her. Everyone at the table recalled Nora's litany of characters: a barbarian, a physical adept with a mass driver hammer, a fish-Malk who was for some reason heavy into strength and Brawl, and most memorably, a cleric of Thor—specced for melee with a hammer. She somehow managed to be varied and play the same basic character every time.

"...is Nora." Ruby finished with a little cough. She squeaked a little when she noticed the uncomfortable and somehow shamed looks the others (aside from Nora were giving her. "Look, it isn't just you guys. I've gotten... comfortable in my tropes too. Always a quest to stop some bad dude destroying the world, never any real, y'know... back story or personal hooks for your characters to keep you engaged."

"But..." Pyrrha spoke up with some hesitiation, which amused Ruby greatly. Probably the most physically imposing person she knew that wasn't her sister and yet on game nights, Pyrrha seemed to deffer completely and utterly to Ruby's authority as Gamemaster. This pleased her; if only Yang would do that... "Isn't the whole point of an RPG playing what we want?"

Ruby bit her lip. Well she had her there. "Uh, yeah, but are the characters you guys always play the only kind of thing you want to try? Infinite possibilities, here people! Pyrrha, you don't always have to be a goodie-good: haven't you ever wanted to be the bad guy? Jaune, why not let someone else be the hero sometime and be support or a skill monkey? Ren, don't you ever get tired of everyone else crutching on the fact that you're the only one who uses skills? And Nora..."

Looking into those glimmering, mischievous eyes, she knew she had at least one lost cause already. "...You're just going to do whatever you want no matter what, aren't you?"

"Yep!" Nora said with a cheerful grin.

"Right..." Ruby hung her head. "Anyway, I was thinking that starting next week, we start fresh. You know, really shake things up!" She reached into the pile of books lying on the floor by her chair and held one out. "And that's why I bought this: a brand new campaign setting with a tweaked rule set! And oh yes," she drew out the 's' as she pointed at Jaune and Nora, "There's no Paladins and no Barbarians!"

Pyrrha regarded the book with a hint of familiarity. "I think I've heard of this. This is the system that gives mundane combat-based classes techniques to keep them on par with spellcasters isn't it? I
saw a playtest sample online with some really impressive abilities for polearms..."

"No." Ruby said firmly. She got up and leaned across the table to lightly tap her fellow redhead atop the head with the book. "Bad Pyrrha. No polearm users. In fact, I forbid you from playing a melee class at all." She say Ren's lips twitch out of the corner of her eye, "And you: nothing with more than four skill points a level."

"Every class in this system has six or more." Pyrrha said, pouting a little at having her go-to class of choice forbidden to her.

"Then no more than six!" Ruby corrected. "Oh, and backgrounds. I want all of your characters to have a back story that doesn't have something to do with the main bad guy killing their family or something!" She stood tall at the head of the table, back straight as she lifted her book aloft and pointed to the heavens with all due drama. "This game will be new! This game will be different! This game will be AWESOME!"

In her head, a flag bearing a D20 on it dropped down behind her and fireworks went off as a roar of applause crashed over her. In reality, her friends just stared at her until she came down off her power trip, grinning sheepishly. "Um... so is next Friday okay for everyone?"

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About twenty minutes of haggling over schedules and small talk later found Jaune and Pyrrha walking up the street toward Jaune's car. The pair had been next door neighbors since before they could walk, friends for nearly as long, and Pyrrha's parents refused to get her a car, so Jaune was her ride almost everywhere. It was less of a burden than most would think because aside from track and field practice for one and academic team and drama events for the other, they were essentially inseparable.

The night had just the first hints of the approaching chill of autumn and the sky was painted with the dying colors of a sunset that was coming a little bit earlier each day.

"So..." Jaune said, looking a bit perturbed, "What do you think of Ruby's new 'marching orders' for us? Got any ideas for a character yet?"

Pyrrha took the time to zip up the light jacket she was wearing. "I actually think it's a good idea. We have become a bit set in our ways, don't you think?"

He shot her a mildly betrayed look. "Seriously? But I love playing Paladins."

"Maybe you'll like playing something else just this once?" she offered.

"Like what?" he pouted.

Pyrrha shrugged. "I'm not going to tell you what to play... but I will tell you what I'm considering: a sorceress."

"A magic-user? Really?" They'd been gaming since Junior High, before they even knew Ruby and Pyrrha never played any sort of mage class unless that was literally the only choice the system allowed. Even when they were little kids play-acting, any stick she picked up was guaranteed to be a sword or spear, never a wand or staff.

"Ruby did ask us to play against type. She also asked me not to be so nice with this character, so I'm considering an evil sorceress." Pyrrha squared her shoulders upon announcing that, looking quiet pleased with herself.
They had reached Jaune's car, an ancient Mustang from a model year that most high school 'car guys' wouldn't even recognize as one. They certainly wouldn't accept the vehicle that had been handed down from one Arc child to the next as they went off to college with only sporadic tender loving care as one. The paint job was interrupted with alarming regularity by rust, when it started, it did a very good impression of an old man with pneumonia, and the rear of the vehicle was encrusted with five Arc sisters worth of bumper stickers, and decals plus Jaune's 'I Don't Road Rage, I Shift To Crinos', Roll For Initiative, Monkey Boy', and 'My Other Car Is An Epic Mount' additions to that collection.

He paused in the middle of unlocking the passenger door for her to give her an odd look. "Suddenly, my world doesn't make sense any more."

Pyrrha socked him in the shoulder as she opened the door for herself and climbed inside. "It's just one campaign, an it sounds like it will be interesting." She waited until he ran around to the other side and got in to continue, "I was also thinking about a back story and I was wondering: what would you think about our characters knowing one another? Maybe they've had adventures together before?"

The car grunted, groaned and wheezed to life while Jaune gave the idea some thought. "Yeah, that sound cool. Though I don't know if I can come up with a character who would adventure with an evil sorceress."

"We have all weekend to think of something, I suppose." Pyrrha tapped her chin with a single, long finger. "I guess there's nothing I could do to convince you to be evil as well, would it?"

Jaune made a face at her. "I'm going to be going through holy smite withdrawals as it is. You're going to be lucky to get me to not play Lawful Good."

"Too bad," Pyrrha mused, turning to look out the window at the scenery going by, "We could have been a Fantasy Bonnie and Clyde. You know there are guns in this setting, right?"

He let out a dramatic, mock gasp. "A gun-slinging, evil sorceress? I don't even know you any more." They shared a laugh as they headed for home."

"You really don't have to wait for the bus with me." Ren said.

Nora had been sitting on the bench beside him, rocking and bopping along to a little song she was humming. When she heard this, she rounded on him with horror in her eyes. "But Ren, this is a bad part of town!" She gestured around at the well-lit street lined with ranch-style homes with manicured lawns and cute little flower gardens. "What if you run into a gang? What if they kidnap you and drag you back to their base and they say 'join our gang or we'll kill you' and then you join and get tattoos and we never see you again because you've risen through the ranks and become some cartel boss in Mexico?!"

He gave her a deadpan stare. "Nora?"

"Yes?" she drew out the word with a sweet smile.

"That was the movie you Netflix'd Monday night."

"Oh." she calmed down for the space of a breath, "But what if it was a documentary!??"

Ren squeezed his eyes shut. He knew what she was trying to do: convince him to let her drive him
home in her brand new pink minivan. And he would have gladly accepted the ride if not for the fact that it would have taken her miles out of her way. As much as he enjoyed Nora's affection and loyalty, he wasn't about to take advantage of it for his own gain and her detriment.

So instead, he changed the subject. "So... have any idea what you're going to play in Ruby's new campaign?"

She shook her head. "I don't know! It's a new system and there's sooo many options. Also, Ruby was wrong: there is a barbarian, it's just that you have to take Rage feats. But that means you can be a barbarian rogue or wizard or something. Oh my goodness, I could be a wizard who rages to cast her spells!" Then she frowned, "Only Ruby wouldn't like that. We're supposed to be something different. Maybe I could be a bard! Like a really happy bard whose specialty is throwing parties! Did you know there's a god in this setting whose whole thing is getting people drunk and throwing parties? Maybe I can get some kind of magic item that lets me just make decorations and refreshments appear!"

All that was said on one breath, after which Nora had to stop for a gasping inhale... at which point she dropped back onto the bench beside Ren and regarded him with wide eyes. "So what are you going to be playing?"

Ren stroked his chin. "That's a good question. I don't think Ruby knows how, well... screwed we are as a group if I don't play a skilled character. We simply can't trust either Jaune or Pyrrha to do any kind of dirty work and without that. My only real recourse is to play something so utterly powerful and broken that I can carry the whole party on my back by brute force if need be. The new system is still D&D-based, right?"

Nora nodded.

"Cleric it is, then."
“Welp.” Yang Xiao Long said around the last quarter of the burrito she'd crammed into her mouth upon checking her latest text message. She almost choked, swallowed, then tried again. “That's Blake saying she'll be here in a couple of minutes, so I'm out. Have fun playing your game, dorky sister!”

She threw herself off the couch where she'd been using Jaune's lap as a footrest and stretched dramatically. It was as hard to tell that she and Ruby were sisters by looking at them as it was telling they were merely half-sisters from how they interacted, Ruby being a tiny brunette who died the tips of her hair red and Yang being a giant blonde who'd actually been courted by the football team as a left tackle.

Crossing the room, she paused at the large, plush armchair Ruby had claimed to ruffle her kid sister's hair. Then she turned to Pyrrha who had been sitting on the other side of Jaune. “It's not too late to bail on the dice-party, Spear-ah. Me and Blake are meeting up with Weiss to hit the new all-ages dance club in town.”

Pyrrha gave her an affable smile despite the nickname. Yang gave everyone nicknames and 'Spear-ah' wasn't even the worst, based on her top placing in the javelin in track and field where Yang was the queen of the discus and high jump. “No thank you. Give the team my regards though.”

Yang gave her a little shrug that said 'your loss' before pounding up the stairs of the Xiao Long household to get ready for her night on the town. She never seemed to get how it was possible her teammate would rather play make-believe instead of clubbing, but then again she didn't even understand how her best friend, Blake preferred sitting at home reading. But at least Blake responded properly to peer pressure.

After a ten-count, Ruby craned her neck over the high back of her chair to make sure her sister was really gone. As much as she knew her sister's ribbing was good-natured, she hated running games with her big sister in the house. It felt like Yang's mere existence undercut her authority as GM.

Once she was sure the coast was clear, she clapped her hands together while turning to her friends. “Okay, folks, I declare this game session officially started!” She hopped out of her seat and helped the others clear off the debris of their after-school burrito run from the table.

By now, they worked like a well-oiled machine when it came to game prep: Jaune and Pyrrha disappeared into the kitchen to get sodas, fill bowls with chips, dip and salsa, and grab napkins for the inevitable spills. Ren went to the hall closet and retrieved Ruby's dry-erase battle mat and attendant markers, rolling it out across the dining room table. Nora, exhibiting the freakish strength she was known for, picked up the solid oak coffee table from the living room and brought it to the dining room to serve as a sideboard for the snacks so the whole table could be used for the battle mat and other gaming supplies.

After fifteen minutes, they were all seated at their usual places at the table with Ruby at the head and everyone's dice and sheets at the ready.

Ruby grinned as she set up her DM's screen and opened her laptop. A new campaign where everything else would also be new. She was giddy with anticipation. “Alright. The first order of
“Minis!” Nora sang out, leaning over in her seat to rummage in her backpack until she came up with an old plastic pencil box. “New campaign means new minis, new minis for everyone!” She sang and hummed to herself as she opened the box and began pulling out little pewter figurines from where they’d been stored on beds of newspaper.

Nora did everyone’s minis in every game she played in, even if they weren’t played on a battle mat. To argue with her was to invite doom, or at least a sad Nora, so no one argued. The girl had seemingly unlimited amounts of time and a bottomless ‘bitz box’, from which she could produce the exact perfect accessories to glue onto the miniatures to make them look exactly right.

Earlier in the week, she’d hunted down the other three players and wheedled physical descriptions of their new characters so she could work her magic. How she managed to overcome her nil attention span and turn out such beautiful work was a mystery to everyone.

Naturally, she gave Ren his first; a male elf in a chain hauberk. In one hand, he was raising a jug as if about to drink from it while in the other, he wielded a scimitar. Looking closely, they could make out that Nora had painstakingly drawn a silver holy symbol to the God of Luck and Revelry hanging around the character’s neck and down to his breast.

Next, she leaned across the table to hand Pyrrha hers. Ruby hadn’t given any mandates on appearances having to be all that difference, so Pyrrha had kept up her usual trend of playing a human with red hair, though this one had hers cropped short about her ears with a waterfall of bangs partially obscuring both eyes. She wore a black leather bustier with blue highlights and a midnight blue skirt that fell to her knees and which Nora had somehow managed to give the shimmering appearance of silk. Black knee-high boots with metal plates over the toes and shins completed the look as well as a midnight blue half-cape that partially draped over one arm. Her hand was extended to hold a tiny clear marble Nora had applied smudged of superglue to so it appeared to be some sort of magical effect emanating from her hand.

Finally, Nora turned to Jaune and gave him a sharp look. “You were a pain in the butt, you know that?”

“...buh?” Jaune managed.

“It was easy with everyone else: Elf, human, human. But you.... you had to pick a lasconti. What’s a lasconti? I had to look it up, and there’s no art for this new game yet.”

The lascontri were one of the new races in the game they were playing, a kind of were-spider who could shift from human to spider to a hybrid form. Jaune had picked them because he was playing a very complicated build and needed the special abilities that race offered, never thinking of things like what the mini would look like.

“Sorry?”

“You should be.” Nora said, even though she was grinning. “Luckily, I found an ettercap that kind of worked for your spider-man form thing. But it was a girl, so I had to do more work on it than I thought.” Out of the box came three pewter figures because Nora didn’t do things half-way. The first was just a small, brown dire spider figure that had obviously been pried off a larger mini or set piece. Then there was a human in a long, gaudily painted coat, wielding a pair of whips. The figure’s skin had been painted gray as per the racial description in the book, it’s long, black hair tied back in a tail that looked suspiciously like Ren's did in real life. Finally, there was the heavily modified ettercap, a roughly humanoid spider sporting not only a lot of epoxy work on the chest to
erase certain parts of its anatomy, but an extra pair of arms, also wielding whips, and a close approximation of the same coat as the human figure.

Ruby narrowed her eyes at the last figure, then at Jaune. “Four whips?”

He gave her a haughty look. “Lasconti are eligible for multiattack instead of the two-weapon fighting tree.”

“Four. Whips.”

Jaune looked down at his sheet an began to read off. “Bards start with proficiency with Flexible weapons. Extra Technique grants me the technique: Take Them Down, which lets me trip and do damage with a flexible weapon as an attack, Improved Trip grants me a bonus to the trip roll, and my Background feat of Beast Handler means monsters don't get a bonus for multiple legs and are treated as one size smaller when I try and trip or tie them up. Oh, and my third level feat was Mutli-weapon fighting, which give me the MWF stance, and my fifth level feat was Exotic Training: whip, which lets me grab objects with a whip.”

He passed his sheet over to Ruby and grinned. “Basically, nothing gets near me without kissing the floor. Oh, and I also get some spells.”

Ruby took a moment to read over the sheet and wasn't sure whether to be horrified or impressed. She'd told him to play something that wasn't a Paladin and he'd complied... by making the most bizarre build she'd ever seen. A Trip... Bard. Yes, he had spells to heal or bolster his friends, but everything else, from his Performances to his feats were oriented toward ruing the day of anything with legs that came into his radius. He could barely kill anything on his own, but given that nothing near him was ever getting up again, it wouldn't be hard for the others to pick up the slack.

She flipped to the next page and read over the back story It seemed that he and Pyrrha had linked up their characters. An 'aww' wanted to escape her at that, but knew form experience that implying either pair of her players were anything remotely resembling romantic would derail everything for a half-hour of frantic denials and citations of other people they had dated or pursued.

The actual back story was simplistic: they had both come from the same city only to be separated when Jaune's character, Darian Kilackis was recognized to have a great talent in the bardic arts and shipped off the the Bardic College. At the College, Darian had picked up the Second Philosophy, a special bardic goal where they sought out a person to aid in becoming a legendary example of heroism to the world. Years later, they'd met again by chance, far from home and teams up to bring down an evil duke, traveling together for at least a year since then.

Jaune had, however, interlaced the sheet with an index card. Among the group, they used index cards to pass secret notes to the GM. Ruby shot him a look, surprised there were going to be secrets so early on, and read it:

Darian knows that Seriphied is evil and had abandoned his Second Philosophy to instead try and turn her from her dark path and redeem her.

It took an effort not to roll her eyes. She'd heard them talking about Pyrrha taking her advice to heart and playing evil and foresaw Jaune trying to turn that into a redemption story You could take the player out of the Paladin, but you couldn't take the Paladin out of the player.

“O...kay.” she said, passing the sheets back. “Weird, but that works.”
Ren passed his sheet over next. “I hope that's 'different' enough for you, Ruby.” She smirked at him. As calm and easy-going as he appeared, Ren liked to win when it came to gaming and he liked to have a degree of control, which usually meant building a character who was so prepared for everything Batman hung his head in shame. It made her cold little GM heart cackle in delight at the idea of taking him off his game.

Surveying the sheet, she felt her smirk grow. Of course he'd take cleric if he was denied his precious skills. But the system they were using didn't really lend itself to Cleric or Druid supremacy or caster supremacy at all. Given a week to go over the system, she imagined he'd have given up on cleric and taken advantage of the creator's mad-on for bards.

Then her eyes landed on the feat list.

Drunken. Master.

Both eyebrows shot up. The feat system for the game was robust, replacing advanced classes and prestige classes from other systems. Almost anyone could take a 'path' of feats to add what was essentially a new class. Which included the drunken master. She looked over his spells and the rest of the feats. He'd done like Jaune and picked the combat-intensive option for his class: the templar cleric, which made him more of a melee tank. Combined with drunken mastery and the fact that being a cleric of Pandemos, god of luck and revelry gave him access to nigh-infinite cheap liquor...

It was like something Nora would build.

The back story, however was something she could sink her teeth into. Gao Faan had been born into a merchant family whose business practices and strictures would have sent them directly into Lawful Evil if the system they were playing actually had alignments. The worst pressure landed on Gao, the eldest son, who was expected to take the reins eventually.

Instead, he renounced his birthright and ran away to join a Pandemian temple at age twenty. Over the next five years, his family had tried time and time again with varying amounts of subterfuge, violence and harm to his new friends to get him back. Recently, Gao had snapped and decided to put an end to his 'old' family by destroying their business and their reputation. Liquor at the ready, he'd set out on a one-man drunken rampage with his name freely given and his scimitar freely swinging to do just that.

Ruby couldn't help but grin behind her screen. She had the perfect way to work that story into the game. She let Ren see that grin and wonder as she passed the sheet back to him.

“My turn?” Pyrrha asked, politely presenting her sheet.

Aside from Nora, this was the character Ruby had been dreading most. In the kind of terms Yang would use, Pyrrha was worse than Ruby herself in her total lack of teenage rebellion. Even Ruby had swiped some of her Uncle Qrow's booze on occasion, but she doubted Pyrrha even ever snuck out at night to go someplace she shouldn't.

What she thought was evil had to be laughable. Maybe there was 'offer honest criticism without apologizing' feat or something. Ruby was already starting to feel bad for what she expected would be a wholly mockable character as she took the sheets... and discovered another index card.

Her name is not really Seripheid. She is really Zara il Manori, the fifth daughter of the Least House of Chordin. She merely went along with it when Darian acted familiar with her so as to use him to get close to and rob the Duke. She planned to kill him after, but it turns out she likes his company. I can send you her real back story by email if you'd like.
For a moment, Ruby just stared at the card. Then, very slowly, she got out her phone and sent a text to Pyrrha.

Did you talk to Jaune about this?

No, should I have? It's kind of a dark secret. I thought it might be a fun twist.

Well yes, Ruby thought, it certainly would, especially given Jaune's character's secret. She sent a follow-up.

Okay, I guess that works. What would Zara do if the real Seripheid showed up?

I suppose she would have to kill her then, wouldn't she?

Ruby's eyes darted up and took in Pyrrha as she set her phone to the side after that last text. Same placid smile, same general air of serenity. Nothing had changed in the older girl's demeanor and yet Ruby suddenly found it creepy as hell.

Wasn't this the same person who, several months ago, had filibustered the party's plan of action with a heartfelt plea that even if the only people negatively affected would be NPCs, they were still people nonetheless in the context of the game world?

Ruby hoped she hadn't unleashed something dark and horrible and probably worthy of a terrible eighties movie by telling Pyrrha to try playing evil. She hurried along to read the rest of the sheet. It was surprisingly against type even for an evil sorceress: no fire or necromantic spells at all. Instead, he was focused on wind and force with a few feats that synergized with being a sneaky thief-type.

"L-looks good," Ruby said, handing the sheets back.

And then it was time for the main event; the moment they were all holding their breath over. Ruby's eyes met Nora's and she suddenly realized that Nora had very pointedly not revealed her personal mini. Without breaking eye contact, the bubbly girl did so then, proudly lifting her mini from the box.

It was a female warrior in half plate, holding a zweihander out before her in a guard position. The mini gleamed with the metallic finish Nora had applied to every surface of the armor and weapon. It was the kind of things she usually ended up making for Jaune: a knight in shining armor.

Nora grinned at everyone's stunned silence. It was still a melee character, probably focused on strength like she always played, but she'd become associated with playing big, fun, silly bruisers. Of course, she wasn't done blowing their minds yet, especially not Ruby's. With all the pride in the world, she presented her sheet to the diminutive GM.

Ruby felt her eye twitch just reading the very first line.

Lynn Fallon, Human Rogue 5.

A rogue. Nora Valkyrie was playing a rogue in half plate with a huge sword. And as Ruby read over the sheet, a terrible realization was dawning on her. One, the system did nothing to prevent that. Not being proficient with the half plate only meant it didn't grant as much of a bonus to Armor Class, not that it granted any penalties—nothing in the system actual penalized non-proficiency or the like. Two, Nora had done a good job making it a solid build, somehow making her rogue into a tank that could occasionally annihilate enemies with sneak attack damage under the right conditions and had so many skills and special uses of skills it made the kinds of characters Ren
made look like slackers.

Nora had made an effective character.

That wasn't getting someone to play against type, that was convincing the mighty Mississippi to flow east for the day. It was getting cats and dogs to live together. It was total protonic reversal.

Ruby felt herself shiver, wondering if somehow she had broken the Seventh Seal and the apocalypse was about to come down upon them.

It was only then that she noticed the back story, which was only a single sentence:

My character is Ren's character's best friend since forever! :)

Okay, that seemed more like Nora. Crisis averted. Well until Pyrrha started murdering NPCs, Jaune tripped everything and Ren's character got roaring drunk.

This... was going to be a long campaign.

Taking a deep breath, Ruby handed Nora her sheet back. “So that's a thing... what do you guys say we get started?” The others nodded, eager to see what Ruby herself had up her sleeve.

“Great. We start in the late evening. You've all boarded the light passenger airship Bull's Head on its voyage from the city of Rivenport up the coast to Siram Leggate. The sun is just starting to set, casting long shadows in the forest below...”

Chapter End Notes

It took me a long while initially to nail down what everyone would be playing specifically, especially Nora. I will say everyone is playing a basic build of a character I've played myself, though in 3e/4e/Pathfinder, though my homebrew here makes lower level characters more effective overall, so Jaune's trip bard is more powerful than you can build in a D&D edition (though they are still stupidly effective. Summon Swarm + Trips = stupid powerful).

Pyrrha's character is sort of based on Zaheer from Legend of Korra, what with the murderous airbending. I added a Suffocate spell to the list just for her.

Ren's character is impossible to build in any regular D&D because drunken master is usually a Monk PrC and Monks have to be Lawful, which never made sense to me in either direction. Here, I made it so anyone can be a Drunken Master, so Ren is a cleric of drunkness who fights with the power of being drunk. And yes, one option this god gives you is 'Fortify Water', which makes a volume of water touched into cheap booze.

Nora gave me headaches because I love her as a character and knew what she would WANT to play, but wanted to have her still try to obey Ruby's request. So full metal rogue it is. She wasted a ton of money to get no benefit with that armor. I like the idea that Nora interpreted Ruby's request as 'take this seriously this time', and she still can't make a 'normal' character. By the by, I've done a rogue with a bastard sword before in 3e. That's one of my few problems with 4e: rogues were locked into a small set of weapons.
In case anyone is worried, no, Pyrrha is not actually cracked, it's just Ruby being a kid and over-thinking someone playing a really evil character. As to how Jaune takes the twist here... we'll have to wait and see.
“You've all boarded the light passenger airship Bull's Head on its voyage from the city of Rivenport up the coast to Siram Leggate. The sun is just starting to set, casting long shadows in the forest below.” As she narrated, Ruby laid three transparencies out on the battle mat, each detailing a deck level of the airship with each room carefully labeled.

“This is your second evening aboard, with three more to go. Where are your characters right now?”

Ren gave her a level look. “Is there a bar?”

Ruby returned the look in kind, fully prepared to play chicken with Ren and his attempts to play 'Nora-style'. It was only a matter of time before he abandoned it so he could 'win'. “There's one right in the ship's commons there's a human man there acting as bar tender.”

“In that case, Gao will plant himself on a bar stool front and center and order a strong ale.” With that, Ren placed Gao's miniature in the commons, which were on the ship's second level. Nora immediately placed Lynn's mini right next to his.

“Are we the only ones on the ship?” asked Jaune.

There was a beat before Ruby made an eeping sound and dug into her bag, coming up with a zip-lock baggie full of red glass 'dragon tear' tokens. “Sorry, almost forgot: there are twelve other passengers. Let me know if you want to talk to any of them in particular, but for right now, they're just random NPCs. “She hastily arranged tokens on the grid, most of them in the commons with two on the upper deck at the bow, and two more in the rooms. “Aaand, seven crew members.”

Seven more tokens went down, including one for the bartender.

Jaune nodded and placed Darian's human-form mini in the commons. “I'll be in the common room entertaining with my storytelling. Need me to roll my expertise?”

“Not right now.” Ruby said with a shake of her head.

Pyrrha surveyed the map with Seripheid's (really Zara's) mini in hand. “I don't know if Seri would be in their room, or on deck. I don't think she feels like being around people right now...” She mused a moment more, but not further, seeing as the others were waiting for her. Finally, she placed her mini on the stern deck where no one else was.

It took an effort for Ruby not to glare at her. “Okay... Pyrrha, roll me a perception check.”

Nodding, Pyrrha fished her twenty-sided dice out of her felt dice bag. It was a surprisingly heavy die-cast steel piece that was part of a set Jaune gave her for her last birthday. After a quick check to see what her modifier was, she rolled. “Seventeen.”

By the time she said so, Ruby had thrown several dice behind her screen. “Alright. So: you hear something thump against the rear of the ship, above where the giant propellers are pushing the ship through the air. You look down to find a bell-shaped metal contraption attached to the hull. There's a metal ring at the top of it, which trails off down into the woods. As you watch, another shoots up from the tree cover to attached near that one. Then another. Then another until there are five in total!”
“Do I know what those things are?”

“Roll me... Knowledge Engineering or Arcana.”

“I've only got arcana, so...” The steel die came up showing a two. “Eleven?”

“You have no idea what these things are.”

Pyrrha frowned and considered things for a moment before asking, “Can I see what the lines are attached to?”

“Nope.”

“Hmm. Well I'll spend three spell points to cast Speak to Winds and describe them to Ja—Darian.”

Ruby cocked her head quizzically. “Can you target him with that?”

After a short consultation with her player's handbook, Pyrrha nodded. “It's unaffected by line of effect or line of site, just pure range. And if all these transparencies line up, then I'm ten feet above him and twenty feet away; that should be plenty.” After that, she gave a sheepish look and added, “But... he can't reply to me.”

“Say what?” Ren started furiously flipping through his own book.

“I can only make people hear me, not let myself hear them—not until ninth level or with a different spell. I think the Soundcrafting and Telepathic Bond rituals would do that, but I don't exactly have the time for that. Speak to winds is the only thing like this you can cast at combat speed.”

“So are you still doing it?” asked Ruby.

The older redhead nodded. “I'm pretty sure we're about to get attacked, so it's probably best I not be alone when that happens. Plus, I can describe these things to Jaune and he can make an Arcana check to figure out what they are where I failed.”

“Also Lore.” Jaune said, feeling a little smug at his character's vast wealth of knowledge—provided the dice were kind.” Ruby gave him the nod and he grabbed up two d20's from his pile of dice. “White is Arcana and blue is Lore. That's a nineteen and... yes! Twenty-five for Lore!”

Ruby ducked her head behind the DM's screen to hide a smirk. Jaune's panic reactions were always a highlight of the game. “Okay, Jaune, Darian definitely has heard of these. They're called Squid Cups and they're cheap magic devices used on ocean-going hunting ships to latch on to sea creatures and secure them to ships so they can be harpooned. Pirates also like using them as a means of boarding ships.”

The reaction was instantaneous and was entertaining as she'd hoped. “Puh-puh---Pirates?! But we're in the air!” Jaune squeaked animatedly. “Wait, but that means—Sky Pirates! Ruby, I stop what I'm doing, shout that we're about to be boarded, then full run up to the top deck where Seri is.”

“Seri?”

“Pyrrha's character, Seriphied.”

“Oh, right. Ren, Nora, the bard that was just telling stories just lost his damn mind and ran out shouting about being boarded. What are you guys doing?”

Nora all but exploded out of her seat, fist lifted skyward. “We fight the pirates! Charge!” She
immediately grabbed her mini and Rens at the same time and started counting out the number of squares they could move in a full run.

“Can I grab a mug of something alcoholic before I get dragged out?” Ren asked.

“Dex check!” Ruby replied cheerfully. It could have been an easy enough yes or no question, but Ruby was a big fan of randomness. She'd been trying to get someone to play a Chaos Mage for almost two years now. As it turned out, the dice were in Ren's favor and Gao was able to snag a tankard of hard ale before Lynn ushered him out the door.

Scooping up a handful of dice, Ruby shook them just for effect. “You know what time it is, people! Roll for initiative!” Then she threw down the whole mess, making a satisfying sound, only then searching through the jumble for the d20's that represented the enemy initiatives.

It didn't take long to record everyone's initiatives and those of the enemy. Ren would be going first, then Jaune, the bandits (or pirates as Jaune was calling them), Pyrrha, the bandit leader, and finally Nora, who rolled a two for initiative.

“Alright, Ren. What are you doing?”

“We still don't know anything, so I'm following Jaune and readying an action to quaff my ale the second there's an attack.” He looked vaguely dissatisfied, seeing as how, if he'd been playing his usual rogue, he would be getting into position to sneak attack someone instead of holding action.

Ruby nodded. She wasn't ignoring Ren's unhappiness, there just wasn't anything she could do about it at the moment. Hopefully as the story started to come into play with his backstory integrated, he'd warm to the campaign more. “Jaune?”

“Move onto the stern deck next to Seri, then use my standard as a move to shift to almaga form.” He switched out his human-looking mini for the modified ettercap. “Um, yeah, Ren and Nora, your characters probably haven't seen this before, at least not from Darian.”

“Good point, Jaune,” Ruby's voice practically dripped with GM malice. “Ren, Nora, give me either Knowledge: Nature checks or Knowledge: Local. Lasconti wasn't super-common, after all.”

They both rolled. Ren simply nodded that he got it, but Nora...

“Ohmiggosh, what's that!? He just turned into some kind of monster! It was all a trap to lure us away from the others so he can eat us!”

Ruby narrowed her eyes at the bubbly girl. “Natural One?”

“Yes!” Nora grinned as if it were the greatest, most important roll of her life.

“On the bright side, she probably can't kill you in one turn,” Ren deadpanned.

“Shes going to have to wait in line.” Ruby announced now that it was the bandits’ turn. “Pyrrha, Seri sees this first, but the others will soon enough. Rising out of the forest, attached to those lines, you see five giant hang gliders! As they rise up above the level of the deck, you can see that each one is made of some sort of canvas with a wooden frame and metal supports. They each carry three people in leather armor, all attached to the supports with a harness. The ones at the center seem to be steering while the others are aiming crossbows!”

Ruby grinned so wide that the others wondered how the top of her head didn't fall off as she turned her attention to Pyrrha and Jaune. “So obvious sorceress and giant monster guy? What are your
AC's?"

AC being short of 'Armor Class', the target number—derived from their Dexterity, actual armor and protective charms—that was the target number needed to hit them for damage.

"Seventeen."

"Twenty in almaga form. Ha! Come and get me, hang glider pirates!"

The pint-sized GM started rolling attack rolls. And rolling. And rolling.

"Um... Rubes?" Jaune asked tentatively, playing with a corn chip in his mounting tension.

"Yeah?"

"How many attacks are you rolling there?"

The girl gave him an enigmatic smile. "Ten."

"Ten?! Oh man, we are so dead!"

Before he could go into full panic mode for Ruby's amusement, Pyrrha patted him on the shoulder. "Don't worry, Jaune, I'm pretty sure most of them are minions." He gave her a blank look that reminded her that he was the only one at the table who didn't thumb through the GM and Monster books. "You know how in action movies there are always the goons who exist only for the hero to defeat and look impressive doing it? That's what a minion is: they deal less damage and die whenever they take damage so the GM can use a lot of them at once without completely destroying us."

Of course, that was the cue Ruby was waiting for. "Pyrrha, you get hit four times for a total of twelve damage. Jaune, they all manage to miss you. The glider pilots start turning winches on the cross bars, reeling them in closer to the ship."

The blonde grinned. "Oh wow, I really had nothing to worry about, did I?" He looked over at Pyrrha's sheet for Seri and frowned. "Oh, but you... that was like a third of your health in one go. Are you going to want healing on my turn?"

"I would appreciate it, yes." Then she looked to Ruby; "It's my turn now, yes?" Ruby nodded and Pyrrha shuffled the sheets of paper that made up her character sheet to her spells. "Alright then, I'll start my turn by casting Subtle Knife. That puts an invisible blade made of air into my square that I can send out to cut objects and creatures in range. If I use it to slash at the gliders, can I make them fall?"

Taking a quick look at the spell in the book, Ruby had to think on it. "You don't know. The canvas is pretty thick and each cut with Subtle Knife is only 1d4-1, so it'd probably take a lot of cuts. If you have Knowledge: Engineering, or Mechanics, you might be able to pick something vital to attack."

"I have neither of those," Pyrrha didn't try to argue because she knew all her spells ans such were going to hold up the game for everyone else. "What about their harnesses?"

"Leather is hardness 1 with two hit points per inch." Ren supplied helpfully, "So she needs to deal max damage to cut through a one inch strip."

Ruby nodded her thanks to him, then motioned for Nora to pass her the bag of potato chips.
"There's your answer. If you want to hit them, they're AC 15."

Pyrrha picked up the steel d4 from her set. "Subtle Knife hits automatically, so I just need to roll damage and it only takes a minor action to attack an object, so I'll use both my minor and my move slashing harnesses." She rolled, getting a 2 and a 3 respectively.

"You cut apart the harness of one of the crossbowmen and he has just enough time to realize he's slipping before he plummets into the forest below, screaming the whole way!" Ruby declared.

A quiet smile appeared on Pyrrha's face. "Perfect. Now I'll spend my action point to gain another standard action for this round and cast Arc Cannon on the pilot of the nearest glider."

This drew a goofy laugh from her best friend and he grabbed up her sheet to check. "Is that actually what it's called?"

"It is. And it's a pretty good spell too. If I hit, it deals damage to the target, then anyone in contact with him or in contact with the same metal object he is—like the hang glider bar."

Now it was Nora who started cackling. "And the guys holding on to the same bar as him are minions! That's perfect. I'm gonna have to up my kill count to keep up with you this session, Pyrrha!" Everyone who was not Nora felt a sudden swell of pity for the bandits.

Pyrrha managed to hit the glider pilot, who wasn't fazed by the minimal damage her miniature lightning bolt dealt, but his minion gunners both died in showers of sparks, becoming dead weight hanging in their harnesses.

"Hurray, it's my turn!" Nora cried as soon as Ruby resolved the last attack. "None of them are on deck yet?" Ruby shook her head no. "Oh boo. Okay, I draw my pistol and shoot the pilot Pyrrha hit!" She plucked a technicolor pink and white swirl d20 that was almost impossible to read the number on from her huge pile of dice and rolled it on the battle mat.

It came up with her second 2 of the game.

"What?! Bad dice! I did not spend an hour this morning rolling all the ones out just to get twos! I want fifteens or higher!"

"Nora?"

"Yeah, Ruby?" Nora had picked up the die and was taking it to the corner of the room so it could think about what it had done.

"Anything else for your turn?"

"How can I do anything if I can't trust my lucky cotton candy die? Maybe it'll be ready to behave next turn."

Even though they were all used to this type of thing when Nora got on the wrong side of Random Number God, they all still shared a look before Ruby when back up to the top of the initiative to Ren.

He took a sip of soda before taking up his personal favorite d20, a dark green with magenta numbers. "Here we go then. First, as a minor action, I will quaff my ale to activate Drink Like A Fish, Fight Like A Demon. As long as I have had a drink in the last five rounds, I have a +1 to attacks saves and AC and a -1 to all skill rolls. And since they're all still at range, I'm going to use Throw Anything to wing my tankard at the same guy Nora and Pyrrha targeted. Nineteen plus my bonus for being drunk is twenty total. If it hits, that's five damage."
Ruby giggled. "This guy is having a really bad day. He gets electrocuted, shot at, and now a tankard smashes into his face. He's still up though. Jaune, get to it!"

"I'll move up and... pull some of those crossbow bolts out of Seri, I guess. Then I'll cast Soothe the Wounded. Pyrrha, you regain four hit points now and at the start of every turn, you get another four for the next five rounds."

She shot him a warm smile. "Thank you, Jaune."

"No problem... though you're probably going to get shot again this turn..."

"Yep!" Ruby said brightly. "Well, there's more people to shoot now, plus they have other things to do once the pilots wench them up within boarding distance. Let's see... three are dead so..." She rolled dice and scribble don some scratch paper.

"Four of the crossbowmen open fire. Two shoot at Seriphied because she's killed the most of them so far, but both miss. One shoots at Gao and... hits for three damage. The last shoots at Jaune and crits! Take six, Jaune! The other three take out these zip-line looking things and slide down to where the Squid Cups are attached, right above the propellers. The pilots lock up their winches and prepare to board! Pyrrha, what are you doing?"

The older redhead surveyed the battle map a moment before pointing to a glider that still had a full complement of passengers. "Minor action, I'll cut a harness for 3 damage. And another for 2, so that isn't enough."

"Another one screams as he falls screaming," said Ruby, "The other crossbow man gives you a sneer as you fail to cut his harness all the way and makes sure to point his crossbow at you."

"Is that so?"

Everyone paused, Nora with a fistful of chips about to enter her maw. The voice had been Pyrrha's but the cold tone was one they would never associate with her.

She made a visible effort to smile the most plastic, soulless smile anyone at the table had ever seen, then dropped her head forward so her hair was obscuring her eyes. "Then I think this one needs to be made an example of—and all of these enemies learn why I am called the Invisible Death."

She lifted a single slim index finger. "I point directly at his neck, then slowly draw it sideways as I use Subtle Knife to slit his throat."

Silence descended on the table. Nora choked on what she'd been eating.

After a second of this, Pyrrha peeked at them through her hair. "He... is a minion, right? Any damage kills him, so the spells automatic damage works automatically?"

"Yeah, but..." Jaune blinked, "Holy shit, where did that come from?"

"Just playing my character," she shrugged with a grin that her acting had worked so well. Then she turned to Ruby herself and smiled sweetly, holding in a laugh as the girl tried to hide behind her GM's screen. "Can I get an intimidate check for that?"

"Yes?" Came the squeaked reply.

Going by the principle that if you can't see them, they can't see you, Ruby felt a little more safe tucked behind her screen. She'd wanted a more interesting game. And 'interesting' was certainly a word that applied now.
Aww, she's cute when she's terrified.

This moment comes thanks to a 4e game I played where the GM made the terrible choice to go 'old school' with magic missile and make it auto-hit, meaning you could casually murder minions with it off hand with no attack rolls or save. We started calling it the touch of death and making the sound Bart does in that Simpsons episode where he told people he knew the touch of death.
“Ruby?” Pyrrha stood up so she could peer over the top of the GM's screen. She found the youngest member of their group trying desperately to hide behind her own hair. “Are you... scared?” Pyrrha was trying—really trying to keep her voice supportive and kind, but a frightened Ruby was too cute for words and it was taking her all to keep from laughing.

“No?” Ruby squeaked, doing her level best to compose herself. Logically, she knew that it was her own suggestion that had Pyrrha playing a psychopath, and it wasn't that unusual for the others, especially Pyrrha and Nora to act out their characters' actions, but that creepy smile she'd put on was making her skin crawl just remembering it.

Making a show of clearing her throat and brushing the hair out of her eyes, Ruby sat up as straight as she could. “Okay, so that guy dies in an unimaginably horrible way. Nora, you're up.” It was something that she was anxious for Nora of all people to take her turn. After that exchange, Pyrrha decided not to push it by asking for the intimidate check again.

With a mouth full of chips and salsa, Nora snapped a salute to her GM and—if it were at all possible—swallowed dramatically, locking eyes wit Pyrrha with a smirk that said 'challenge accepted'. “I charge... him!” Bringing her index finger down on the mat so hard it made all the minis jump, Nora indicated the pilot who had been hit twice so far.

“...How?” Ren asked for everyone else at the table. The pilot was still on his glider, ten feet from the railing of the ship.

Grinning like a maniac, Nora sat back in her seat, back straight, chin raised as she held up her character sheet and proceeded to give them a dramatic reading, even pretending to adjust invisible glasses along that way. “Ahem: 'Combat Poise. A Rogue Bonus Feat. Prerequisites: trained in Acrobatics. Benefit: You may run or charge while using the Balance usage of Acrobatics. Additionally, you may take 10 on any Acrobatics check.’”

Placing her sheet on the table, she pointed to the line connecting the glider to the ship, looked to Ruby and just smiled.

“That's going to be a DC 20, I don't think you can make that taking ten.” Ruby replied levelly, already knowing what was coming. Taking Ten was something characters could only normally do when there was no penalty for failure; it let them just choose to act as if they had rolled a ten on the dice. Nora's feat let her do it all the time, though Ruby felt it was only fair to tell the player when taking ten wouldn't cut it.

“Okay! Let's do this. Don't fail me this time, Cotton Candy!” She threw the pink die once more, getting a twelve. “Twenty-one!”

Ren let out a sigh of relief. He didn't know what Nora would have done if she got her character killed in the very first session.

“Now the attack!” Once more, the pink die flew, caroming off Jaune's mini and spinning a few times on one point before finally coming to rest on... “Natural Twenty!” Nora roared in victory. Both she and Jaune launched out of their seats and high-fived, singing “Critical hit, how you like
that shit?” accompanied by light, nerdish dancing, which got everyone, even Ren laughing at least a little.

After a second spent rooting around for a d10 for her bastard sword's damage, Nora rolled it for a nine. “Plus two strength, times two for the crit—twenty-two damage! How dead is he?” She asked with a vicious gleam in her eye.

Ruby didn't notice that because she was too busy shaking her head at the absolutely goofy visual she was forced to narrate. “Okay, so Lynn vaults the railing, runs across the line, screaming the whole time, and promptly beheads the pilot.”

“Yes! Now I kick him off the hang glider bar and take over!” Nora declared.

“Do you even have a pilot skill?” Ren asked.

“Rolling untrained!” Nora declared and threw the dice regardless of what Ruby might have ruled. It was a nine.

Ruby grinned evilly. “Congratulations, you are out of control and I get to use the scatter dice.” She picked up a special d6, this one with arrows on each face instead of numbers, and tossed it onto the mat. “You drift one square to the left and hit the glider next to you. Make a reflex save to not fall off, please.”

“Pfft. Rouge, duh.” Nora said, rolling her die at the same time Ruby rolled for the pilot of the other glider. Nora got a thirteen for a total of eighteen and was perfectly safe. The other pilot however...

“I don't believe it. He rolled a three?!” Ruby moaned. “So Nora goes completely out of control, rams another glider, and sends its pilot tumbling into the forest below.”

Ren shook his head and reached out to ruffle Nora's hair. “Only you can turn a flubbed roll into a kill.”

“I am just that amazing.” Nora said, beaming.

Biting back a comment about how precious they looked, Ruby moved right along, “Ren, your turn.”

Ren broke off his praise of Nora, causing the girl to pout as he turned his focus to the game. “So glider 3 had Nora on it. Glider 2 just lost its pilot, has one crossbowman on it, and one gristly corpse hanging in the traces...” Pyrrha ducked her head. “Glider 1 is missing both crossbowmen, glider 4 has just the pilot because the crossbowmen zip-lined down... and glider 5 just has a pilot for the same reason, plus one of the crossbowmen fell, right?”

“Yes.” Ruby replied, popping the 'p'.

“We could really probably do something about those zip-line guys.” He thought a moment, then sighed. “Well I'm supposed to be playing a crazy drunk... Ruby, what kind of check would it be to hang off the rail and slash at those guys or the lines with my falchion?”

“I'm going to say Athletics,” replied Ruby, cracking open a soda.

Ren nodded. “Then I'm going to use a minor to cast Least Divine Favor on myself, granting me a +2 to my next skill check, hang off the rail... That's a non-natural twenty for the check?” Ruby nodded for him to go on. “None of my Technique, Flurry of Blows to make two attacks as a standard action, but add not strength bonus to the attack.”
It was a safe bet, seeing as they were minions, and he did indeed kill two, sending them plunging from the ship.

“What are they doing down there anyway?”

“Do you have Knowledge: Engineering?” Ruby asked slyly. She'd anticipated that none of them would both with Engineering or Mechanics, seeing as they weren't familiar with how much steampunk tech was in the setting.

“Yes.”

“…” Ruby's jaws dropped open. “Say what?”

Ren gave her a smug look. “Cleric gives six skill points, and I have a +2 bonus to Intelligence, but the most important thing is that one of my Elf background feats is Community Raised, which lets me make one roll once per day with a skill I have no ranks in with a +1d6 bonus. So once per day, I do have exactly the skill I need.”

Jaune's eyes widened. “So... you're always prepared for anything then?” Ren nodded. “Oh my god, you're Batman! You made Batman in a steampunk fantasy! How is that not a comic yet?”

Meanwhile, Ruby was glaring at Ren. “I told you not to play a skill monkey, Ren!”

He shrugged. “I only get it once per day and it's a tiny bonus. I probably won't succeed all that often anyway.” To demonstrate, he threw a d6 and a d20. They came up 4 and 18 respectively. He at least had the decency to duck his head. “Twenty-four?”

Ruby gave a little growl, but proceeded with the game. “It looks to you like they're setting charge on the base of the propellers. If they do that, the ship will be dead in the air, floating wherever the wind takes out.”

“What?” Ren goggled. It was actually a very good plan; one Ruby's bad guys didn't usually come up with. They were more the 'kidnap people to sacrifice when the stars align' type. “I shout out to everyone what I see.”

“My turn?” Jaune asked. Ruby nodded. “Okay, First I want a Lore roll about these explosives; how are they set off? Sixteen total?”

“Usually there's a fuse, but there is a way to detonate them remotely: a ritual called Dormant Spark.”

Jaune scowled. “Oh man, I could totally just walk down to them in spider form, but I wouldn't be strong enough to move them. Uh... hold action to try and whip one of the pilots if they try to activate a spell, I guess.”

“Okay, now it's their turn. One crossbowman left, he takes a shot at Ren and hits for three. The pilots all reel the rest of the way up to the railing and leap aboard the ship! One of them is dressed differently than the others, a very nice set of red leather armor bearing the sigil of a rose surrounded by thorns. He's armed with a long sword, and the seconds he lands, he casts Plane of Force in shield form to protect his off side.

Jaune looked to Pyrrha. “Mini-boss?”

“I'm pretty sure, yes.”
Ruby stuck her tongue out at them. “He draws himself up and announces, “I am Vanio Dastang, Fifth Lieutenant of the Queen of Thorns. You all seem like formidable fighters, and as such, my Queen would like to extend to you an invitation to join the Thorn Legion. It is either that, or I extend to you my blade.”

Then she turned her attention to Ren. “Ren, Gao knows this man's name. He's heard it many times before. When your family was in the market for hired goons, this guy was the one they went to. And there's a very, very good chance he'll recognize you.”

The dark-haired boy paused with a soda can half-way to his mouth. This was new. “As in...?” he asked cautiously.

Ruby shrugged, “There's a very good chance he'll knock you out and take Gao back to his family instead of killing him.”

Ren narrowed his eyes. “Like hell.”

“That's the spirit!” Nora piped up. “Come on, Renny, kick his ass!”

With the hook set Ruby said, “The other two pilots take swings at Jaune and... darn your stupid high AC.”

Jaune relaxed into his seat. “High Dex, good armor, plus racial natural armor. Is there anything better?”

Ruby pulled a face at him, but turned to Pyrrha, half fearing what she might pull out next.

“Hmm... I suppose Subtle Knife won't kill him instantly. Arc Cannon won't be all that useful either, or Sound Lance. I guess I'll cast my own Plane of Force in Blade form and attack him with it.” She rolled her die, but it came up only a five, missing entirely.

Jaune looked at her and stifled a laugh.

“What?”

“Are you just going to be surrounded by invisible flying blades?” he asked with a grin.

She returned it. “That was kind of the idea behind 'The Invisible Death'. Next level, I'm going to take a Water spell that lets me conjure ice daggers.” It took her a second to realize her turn wasn't over. “Oh, sorry. As my minor, I'll draw my pistol.”

“Why do you have a gun when you cut people up with air?” Nora asked, cocking her head.

“Because I only have so many spell points. Also, I bought acid bullets.”

Ruby gave a her a flat stare. “Is there anything your character does to people that isn't horrifying?”

“I have that spell where I whisper in people's heads from a distance?”

“You are not helping your case! Nora, go.”

The diminutive girl cracked her knuckles and picked up her d20. “Can I crash my glider right into the talky guy?”

“You'll need to make another piloting roll.” Ruby was torn: on the one hand, she really didn't want her started villain killed by something so ridiculous. On the other, she also didn't want Nora's
character to die in the first session even if there was no way anyone could blame Ruby for it in this case.

Heedless of any risk, Nora threw her die and Random Number God proved once again that he she or it loved reckless players and madwomen with a nineteen. Ruby wondered why she was even worried. “You... whip your glider around and ram Vanio. He gets a Reflex save for half damage and...” She rolled honestly and was relieved to see a fifteen come up. “...makes it! Roll me 3d6.”

“Aw, only seven damage,” Nora pouted. “I guess I'll ready my sword then. Renny's turn!”

Now it was Ren's turn to be torn. The smart thing to do would be to kill the last crossbowman and try to do something about the bomb. But hanging off the side of the railing left Gao incredibly vulnerable to enemies who would do worse than kill him.

Resigned to the fact that he knew what his character would do, Ren heaved a sigh. “I pull myself back from the railing, raise my falchion, and cast Lay Low My Enemies. Every enemy within twenty-five feet of me needs to make a Will save or be sickened for five rounds.” He blinked as he read the next line of the spell. “And they all take my Wisdom modifier in damage. Huh, I guess I didn't have to worry about that minion after all.”

Hiding her smile at Ren finally starting to get into the game, Ruby resumed her narration. “Gao calls on the power of his god and a pulse rolls out from him, causing all the bandits to stagger under divine castigation! You hear a scream as the last guy down by the propellers is so disoriented, he lets go of his safety line and falls to his death! Jaune, your turn!”

A funny expression crossed the blonde boy's face as he looked at the board. “They're all within fifteen feet of me.” he observed.

“...Yeah?” Ruby gave him a suspicious look.

A manic grin split his face and he slid his sheet over to his best friend. “Pyrrha, would you be a dear and tell us all the reach of my whips?”

He completely missed the momentary change in Pyrrha's expression when he asked her to be a 'dear', but snorted at the roll of her eyes she used to cover it up. All the same, she indulged him by picking up the sheet and reading. “I believe that says fifteen feet, Jaune.”

“Fifteen feet!” Jaune echoed as if this was a great revelation. “Thank you very much, Miss Nikos, I believe it is time for many Trip checks.”

“Indeed, Mr.. Arc.” Pyrrha concurred, handing the sheet back.

Jaune grabbed up two dice and held them up. “Then it will be done! First one is going against the mini-boss. White is the attack, blue is the combat maneuver check. And my first whip has a +1 for being masterwork.”

“Don't forget all your penalties for Multi-attack.” Ruby said, doing her best to sound unamused by his antics.

“Done and done.” Jaune threw his first set of dice, the white one coming up as a natural twenty.

“Crit!” Nora crowed and jumped up, ready for a high five.

“... That does nothing because a Trip check doesn't do damage.” Jaune moaned.”
Nora remained posted up for the high five. “But it's still an automatic hit, right? I'm not sitting
down until I get a high five, dang it!”

Ren pinched his nose, then reached up and slapped his hand to hers. Evidently, it was good
enough, as she took her seat and took a long drink of soda.

As this was going on, Ruby was looking at Vanio's opposed check and despairing. It was a natural
1. A slow, grating cry ripped from her throat and she dropped her head to the table. “Oh, this is so
not fair!”

“I think I won,” said Jaune hopefully. “Did I trip him?”

A pair of silver eyes glared at him from over the screen. “Yes,” she said flatly. “You catch his leg
and trip him down.”

“Sweet! Going for the next guy then.”

As if adding insult to injury, Jaune utterly failed to trip either of the generic pilots after humiliating
her main villain for the session. It now came to the bandits' turn and Ruby found herself with only
four of those left.

“Okay, last crossbow guy is going to shoot at Gao because Darian is impossible to hit and...
misses. Of course. First pilot is going to try and charge Lynn. Nora, what's your AC?”

“Eighteen.”

“Then he hits you for nine damage. The other charges Jaune... and misses. The dice hate me today.
Then Vanio...”

Jaune raised his hand. “The second he gets up, I'm going to use my opportunity attack to try and
trip him again.”

He expected more playful annoyance, but what he got instead was a sweet smile under steely eyes.
“good thing he's not standing up yet. Instead, he uses a standard action to complete a precast ritual.
I won't even make any of you roll Spellcraft for this: it's Dormant Spark.”

Her chest puffed out in triumph at the reactions on her player's faces. It only got better when he
added, “The ship rocks as an explosion rips apart its propulsion system.”

Chapter End Notes

And Ruby gets some back for being scared last chapter.

Little Acquisitions Incorporated reference there and an avoided Gotham by Gaslight
one. Also a little more development of the character dynamics here. I can easily see
Nora and Jaune being the dramatic and easily excitable ones who have their own little
routines and Ruby would be someone who really likes to play up the Adversarial GM
thing, but not actually practice it.

Also, we get our first look at Ruby's overall plot. Let's hope they don't just murder
Vanio and ignore the plot hook. But who am I kidding? He's prone next to a rogue.
He's toast.
Ruby couldn't help but cackle. It was only sensible: the players thought they were on top of everything, dominating her encounter and then—BOOM! (literally)--she hit them with a gamechanger. It was totally fair play too since she'd described the whole thing to Ren earlier.

“Acrobatics checks to keep your footing as the deck shakes!” she announced.

“Taking Ten with Combat Poise.” Nora sang. “Twenty-two!” She hopped up from her seat and went over to the coffee table to grab a bag of gummie bears.

Jaune threw his dice with a confident expression thanks to his +10 bonus to the skill. That look vanished when the dice came up a four, giving him a mere fourteen.

“I might as not even roll.” Pyrrha sighed. She was proven correct as a die roll of seven plus her +2 Dexterity meant she only got a nine. “Yeah, so I fall down.”

“Nineteen total.” said Ren.

Ruby rolled for the two standing pilots, then announced. “Ren, Nora and pilot A here are the only ones still up. Everyone else is prone. Pyrrha, your turn.”

The older redhead reviewed her options. Subtle Knife was still running for one more round, Plane of Force was also still active. Neither of them required her to be standing to direct, and she also had a pistol drawn. She'd say this for her new character: it gave her a lot of options when normally she'd just charge and full attack.

“Minor action: I'll try and slash the harness of the last crossbowman. That's two damage not enough, so I'll use my move is a minor and try again for.. three. That should take care of him. Then I'll use my Standard to attack the boss with the Plane of Force.

“Um...”Ren raised a finger, causing Pyrrha to pause with die in hand. She gave him a questioning look. “Maybe you should attack one of the other guys so we can interrogate the boss.”

Nora, who was still on the other side of the table grazing on snacks, popped up between Jaune and Pyrrha, shaking her head violently. “Noooo! The boss is extra tough, so we need to hit him with everything we've got! We can interrogate the mooks!”

“Gotta go with Nora on this one,” Jaune put in. “This Vanio guy is a spellcaster and you always kill the spellcaster first.” After a beat, he craned his head to peer over Nora's and told Pyrrha, “No offense.”

“None taken. Though Ren does have a point: the leader is going to have the best information. Plus, if we kill the other two faster, that means fewer attacks coming at any of us. I'll attack the pilot that charged Darian, Ruby.” As Nora moaned unhappily at her choice, Pyrrha threw her dice, rolling total of twenty-one and dealing eight damage.

Ruby marked down the damage with a nod. “You score a nasty slice across his ribs, but he's still up. Well actually, he's prone, but the important part is he's not dead. Nora?”
“Oh, he is so dead.” Nora zipped back over to her place.

“I thought we were in agreement to kill the caster--”Jaune caught himself, “The evil caster first.”

“Still describing me.” Pyrrha teased in a soto voice, making him groan and bury his head in his arms.

Nora ignored them, far too excited to cause some mayhem. “I stab that guy right in the back with Opportunist’s Gambit! Thirteen to hit.” Opportunist’s Gambit was a rogue-only Technique that served as a means of enabling bonus damage from Sneak Attacks. Sneak Attacks in the new system only added damage when the rogue did something called precision damage while the Opportunist’s Gambit dealt precision damage equal to the rogue’s Intelligence modifier under certain conditions.

“That actually hits since he’s prone.” Ruby informed her. “Roll damage and your Sneak Attack.” Nora obliged and as per her usual, it was overkill. “Yeah... you stab him right through the spine.”

Throwing her hands up like a world champion, Nora squealed with glee. “That’s one bandit who’s not going home to his bandit wife and bandit kids!” The fact that everyone looked at her with raised brows didn’t faze her at all.

“Casting Binding Flame.” Ren said before Ruby could announce his turn. “Vanio needs to make a Will save or be constricted in holy fire. He gets a new save each turn and if he fails, any move or standard action he takes deals untyped damage equal to my Wisdom modifier.” Ruby rolled the save and missed it by two. “Then as a move action, I'll move over beside the pilot who's still standing.”

Ruby blinked. “You know he's going to get an attack of opportunity on you, right?”

Ren nodded, expression unreadable. “Counting on it. If he misses, I get to grab him as a free action.”

Around this time, Ruby was regretting starting the game at fifth level. She was so used to systems being hyper-lethal at low levels, but the new one gave extra stuff at every level. She hadn't been ready for that. She was, however, ready for the twenty she rolled. “Crit! The pilot stabs you with his sword for fourteen damage!”

“Jeez, I'm glad most of those guys died before reaching the ship.” said Jaune, wide-eyed at the kind of damage that kept getting tossed around. “Oh, it's my turn. Getting up first, I guess. That's a move. And tripping the guy that went after Gao. Full attack if necessary.” It only took him two attacks to trip the pilot, then he used the last two to actually whip him across the back, doing a tiny amount of damage.

Then it was the bandits' turn again.

“Okay,” Ruby said, seeing the writing on the wall. “Vanio knows that Darian is just going to trip him if he stands, so instead he reaches into his belt pouch, comes up with a copper coin...”

“Oh crap...” Jaune muttered, having read exactly that spell while lamenting that Ruby wasn't letting him play a sword and shield character for this campaign.

“...and casts Coppergone! Does a sixteen hit your touch AC?” She emphasized ‘touch' because she knew that without armor, feats and natural armor, yes, yes it did. Jaune nodded, allowing her to grin and roll a ten-sided dice for maximum. “The coin is accelerated to bullet speed and goes right through you for fifteen damage!”
Jaune marked off his damage while scowling. “You know, next campaign, I'm making a mage with the metal school spells. Rail guns, rocket jumps and super-swords.”

“I thought about it, going that way,” admitted Pyrrha. “but we were supposed to not do melee tanks and metal mastery seems geared to being a mage knight. So...”

Meanwhile Ruby continued on. “The pilot who crit on Ren takes another swing at him. Nineteen?” Ren shrugged, prepared to take even more damage. “He slashes your shoulder for seven damage.”

“I'm doing pretty badly right now.” Ren said. “God think I'm the healer, I guess, but if you could kill this guy before next turn, I'd appreciate it.”

Hearing this, Pyrrha sucked in a slow breath. Any of her other characters would of course rush in to help someone in danger even if they didn't know them well. Zara on the other hand... well she would see the other pilot being focused on Gao as Gao serving his purpose as a distraction. Plus Vanio had dealt a lot of damage to Darian and Darian was the only person Zara gave even half a damn about. It was a weird feeling playing so cold and self-serving.

Now she knew what it was like to play one of Ren's characters. A tiny smile quirked her lips as she imagined this could partially be called payback for each time a certain kobold or halfling used one of her characters as a meat shield while they looted a treasure room.

“I drop my pistol and draw my dagger first, Ruby. Then I move up to Vanio so if he casts or stands, I get an attack of opportunity. He doesn't get one because he's prone right.” Ruby agreed, so she continued. “Alright, then I make the blade form of the Plane of Force shape into a guillotine and drop it toward his neck. Fifteen to attack and if that hits, nine damage.”

Ruby flinched at the mental image, but not as much as she did from the creepy smile before. “Vanio rolls to the side just in time to only get his shoulder cut open from your guillotine. And yeah, he looks a little worried about the blood-covered woman with a dagger standing over him swinging magical guillotines at him.”

“Should have been worried about me!” Nora bounced in her chair. “Pyrrha's flanking with me now, so Opportunist's Gambit!” After a look fro Ren, she added, “I'm going to knock him out instead of killing him.”

“I was trying to convey the importance of killing the guy who drove me below half hit points.” Ren clarified.

“But I'm not in a flank against him, Ren! Think of the extra damage! Plus, he's the boss and he's got a magic penny shotgun!”

“No, I think we've got him covered. Go save Ren.” Jaune offered.

The hyperactive girl looked down sadly at the battle mat, clearly torn between her loyalties to both fantasy bloodshed and Ren. It took her a full minute to make her choice, flashing Ren a toothy grin. "Okay. I guess I'll save Ren!" As it turned out, her choice didn't matter as she rolled only an eight, failing to hit even with the flanking bonus.

"...or not." She said, poking her fingers together in an attempt to look sheepish. "Sorry."

Ren shook his head and patted her on the shoulder. "That's okay, I'm next and I think I can deal with him on my own. Okay Ruby, I'm going to grab him. My other Drunken Master Feat, C'mere You means he doesn't get an attack of opportunity for me doing it. Eighteen for CMB to grab him in a headlock?"
"Got him." replied Ruby.

"Great. Then I'm going to use a move action to drag him five feet to the railing, then I'll blow my action point to try and throw him over." He tossed his dice and rolled a nineteen naturally. "Unless he rolls amazingly, I think I got him."

One roll later, Ruby couldn't even feel bad about it considering that... "So the cleric, still drunk, grabs the guy who stabbed him in a headlock, then drags him kicking and screaming to the rail and tosses him over the side like a sack of garbage."

"And then there was one." Jaune said, cracking his knuckles. "Time for the interrogation, and guess whose turn it is? I've got the two masterwork whips in my main pair of hands. I'm going to flip them around now so that the whip parts are wrapped around my forearms and then as a minor action, I'm going to activate my spring-loaded short swords." He mimed the action of doing so.

"Then I'm going to step up beside Seri and aim both blades at Vanio's neck." After taking a deep breath, he then put on a deeper voice. "All your men are dead. You're surrounded and divinely cursed if you attempt any action including casting more spells. Yield and tell us of your leader's intentions, or be put to the sword as any bandit should."

"Yeah, that's an Intimidate check." said Ruby.

"Sweet." Jaune grinned. "Eight ranks in the skill, plus four for my Charisma, plus two racial for being in my badass man-spider form, plus two for the Silver Tongue feat. That's plus sixteen before I even roll." He held up the white die with a blazingly confident look in his eyes and rolled it. "Eleven! Twenty-seven to intimidate this bastard!"

Ruby checked her notes. Vanio had a +4 Will save and a +6 Insight skill. It wasn't mathematically possible for him to succeed against that roll on anything but a natural twenty, which would automatically succeed. She rolled anyway and did not get that natural 20.

"Vanio's cold demeanor starts to break as he's reminded of how much hardware and magic are bearing down on him. He soon rallies however and lifts his chin to give you a clear view of his throat. "Do whatever you want, the Queen will be on her way soon enough. Her forces will find this ship floating without propulsion and board it easily. Then she'll kill everyone on board and have her people fix the thing up again. See, she doesn't give a damn about the people or their goods: she wants the ship 'cause she's got big plans."

"What are these plans." Pyrrha joined in the interrogation. "Ruby, I lower the Plane of Force so it's resting on his neck."

"He stiffens up a second, but keeps from freaking out. 'all I know is she's bringing all the bandits in the area under the Banner of the Rose and capturing airships like this one one at a time. Maybe she wants to be an air pirate Queen.'"

Nora raised her hand and waved it in Ruby's direction. "Can I threaten him too?"

"He... really doesn't have any more infor..." 

"I come up behind him and grab his hair to pull his head back. Then I put my sword across his throat! "Tell me where your secret hideout base is!"

There was a pause before Ren spoke up. "That's... actually a really good question."

Ruby was forced to agree. "He gives you general directions."
Meanwhile Pyrrha chewed her lip thoughtfully. "Seri backs off while keeping the Plane of Force in place. Then she'll whisper into Speak to Winds to Darian: I think we need to start thinking about getting off this ship. We're both injured and won't be able to hold off a larger force when it comes. If you turn into your spider form, you can ride on my shoulder and I can jump over the side. I can cast Windride, which lets me fly twenty feet above the ground, so I'll start flying before we impact."

"Um... what about them?"

"We're only hearing Jaune—I mean Darian's side of this, I take it?" asked Ren. When Pyrrha nodded, he asked, "What about who?"

"Seri is going to ignore that and say: If they can turn into something I can carry, they can come, but otherwise, they can find their own way off," Pyrrha said hotly.

Jaune glanced at her for a second before realizing she was just playing her character again. "Okay, this time Darian gets that this is supposed to be private and leans over to actually whisper to Seri: These two fought beside us; we can't just abandon them. Plus, there are the other passengers."

Pyrrha couldn't help but grin at the fact that he was getting into it, even if it was his same old Paladin attitude. "Well there's nothing you or I can do about that besides die and be cheap funerals, now is there?"

"I kind of think there is."

She blinked. What was he talking about.

Jaune took this as his cue to go on. "Well this is a ship that was moving with propellers until a few seconds ago, and you are a wind sorceress, right? You've got to have Conjure Winds as a ritual, yes?"

"Well yes, but I'm not high enough lev... I mean I'm not powerful enough on my own to move a whole airship."

At this, Jaune only smile wider. "That's if you cast it alone. Conjure Winds grants a +2 bonus for every other caster casting it within twenty feet. I know the ritual, so we can create twice as much of a gust as one person. Hey Gao! You seem like the magical type: do you know Conjure Winds?"

Ren checked his sheet. "I do, actually."

"So do I!" Nora added excitedly.

"But... you're a rogue." Pyrrha pointed out, confused.

Nora only grinned and stole a chip from Ren's little pile. "I'm also a Human, and one of the human backgrounds lets you get a ritual book with some basic rituals. Then I spent my leftover gold form starting at fifth level getting rituals I could cast with Ren, so I have all the rituals he has that work like that!"

Jaune sat back, folding his arms. "Then working together, the four of us can save every soul on this ship. What do you guys say?"

"I say that is a great line to go out on for the night!" Ruby said, standing from her seat. "Guys, you were so awesome! I mean you're totally wrecking what I had planned, but still: AWESOME! Did you guys have a good time?"
Naturally, Nora was the first to chime in, giving Ruby a thumbs up. "Yep I got a glider and killed like so many guys, it was amazing!"

"It was quite fun, Ruby. Good job." Pyrrha added.

"Looking forward to seeing what else you've got after hang-gliding sky pirates," said Jaune.

Ren only gave a nod, which was as enthusiastic as he ever showed himself to be.

"So..." Jaune continued, "XP?"

Ruby shrugged. "Sorry, Jaune, but this system doesn't do XP: you level when you accomplish major plot and character goals. But there are a couple of things we need to do before the session is officially over: bonus Action Points. You guys need to vote on an MVP and Best Performance to get a bonus Action Point for the session!"

Chapter End Notes

I just couldn't resist finishing off the session.

Yes, I am aware the game system itself is full of weird little jokes (like all Rogues have a Gambit, and the Drunken Master can perform a drunk toss). In my defense, I've done worse. There's a Rogue tactic called Yoink that lets you use Steal as a move action.

I'm thankful for all the positive response I've gotten to this from gamers: I'm glad you guys are appreciating this and the little shared experiences we all have.

Speaking of experiences, I actually killed a character trying to do what Ren did. He had all these things that triggered when he was missed by an attack (at which point he would wreck their face) and walked into an attack of opportunity hoping to wreck the enemy's face. He got crit on so bad they had to resurrect him out of a bucket.
“I think we can all agree on who both MVP and Best Performance are for tonight,” said Ren. “Nora not only decimated the most dangerous enemies as per usual, but she also managed to get us extra information on our enemy.”

“Yeah, and I don't think any of us are going to sleep well tonight after Darth Pyrrha over here.” Jaune made a show of cringing away from Pyrrha only to get a real (albeit light) punch to the shoulder.

“It wasn't really that scary, was it?” Pyrrha asked, looking suddenly self-conscious.

Nora leap up from her chair, “Are you kidding? It. Was. Awesome! You almost made the GM cry—even I've never done that!”

This earned her a glare from behind the screen. “Did not! I was just... you know, acting.” Liking this line of reasoning, Ruby grasped onto it like a lifeline. “Yeah. It is my duty as GM to roleplay the NPCs and none of you can tell me that there weren't more than a few of those guys that would've been crying home to momma after... all that.”

“Don't think they'll be doing much crying, all splattered across the forest floor, impaled on tree branches, throats slit open...” Nora recounted, “Oh, and that one guy who head I cut off after running up his rope? That was sweet.” After a moment's though, she glanced over at Jaune. “Hey, did you kill anyone this session?”

The blond shrugged. “Darian's really more of a Controller build. Also, in my defense, this was a super-short session. It's like an hour and a half earlier than we usually break.”

“Hmph.” Ruby took down her GM's screen and folded it. “Sorry, but you guys blew through plans A through G and I need time to figure out what happens next.”

“What was supposed to happen?” asked Ren.

Ruby made a sound like ‘snark’. “Well for one, they were supposed to actually board the ship possibly without getting spotted.” She glanced aside and muttered, “Totally shouldn't have asked where each of you were.” As the others started putting their things away, she continued, “After that, it was going to be a room-to-room fight. Like all those guys? You weren't supposed to fight them in one big clump. Those minions are meaner than they look—you know if you can't kill them as a minor action.”

“I'm sorry,” said Pyrrha without really meaning it and it showed.

Ren nodded, satisfied. “Interesting. I look forward to what else you have planned.” Then he looked to the others. “And I have to apologize to the rest of you: I played really poorly today. Half my spells are minor action buffs and I didn't use any of them because I guess I'm still thinking like a rogue. Next session, I promise to bring my A game.”

“So...” Jaune said, looking around the table at his friends and the still burgeoning pile of snacks, “I'm pretty sure we don't have anything better to do... movie night?”
A huge grin appeared on Ruby's face. “Better idea! Bad movie night.”

“So... how is the government not instantly overthrown every time they have one of those 'no laws' holidays again?” Jaune wondered aloud. Chewing thoughtfully on a licorice whip.

Sitting with her back propped up against his shoulder so she could sprawl across the rest of the sofa with a bowl of popcorn in her lap, Pyrrha shrugged. “The army probably still has to be on duty. My question is what's keeping someone from driving a semi truck through the side of every bank in town?”

“It's more important to wonder why no one stuck a gun through the mail slot and slaughtered those masked idiots while they frolicked on these people's lawns being 'scary'.” Ren tried to do air quotes, but he had Nora, who was slowly succumbing to a sugar coma hanging over one shoulder as he sat in the recliner.

Ruby, stretched out like a cat on the love seat, shot him a pensive look. “You don't think they're creepy? Look at their masks! They look super-weird.”

“Are you... scared?” Ren asked, confused since she was the one that picked the movie.

“This time, totally not. Those masks are just super creepy. They're like Children of the Burger King or something. If they showed up at my door, I'd set the lawn on fire.”

As if on cue, the front door flew open, prompting Ruby to yip in fear and vault over the back of the love seat, putting it between her and whatever was approaching.

“--are the biggest, dunce I have ever met, Xiao Long! We were there for less than an hour and even for that tiny amount of time, you utterly failed to control yourself.” the voice of Weiss Schnee cut in over the sound of the movie as she, Yang and Yang’s best friend, Blake Belladonna trudged into the house.

Yang had, of all things, a pack of baloney held over one swollen eye, but was still smirking for all she was worth. “Hey, I just wanted to enjoy some tunes, scam some guys out of free drinks and dance. It's not my fault one of the Skittles Patrol decided the guy I was talking to was her boyfriend.”

“They've been going out for a month and you knew it. You just wanted to fight the twins.” Blake said, sounding bored. “Also, 'Skittles Patrol? What?’”

“Duh, their initials are M and M. Get it?”

“Oh my god, I'm completely certain that I just got dumber,” Weiss groused, closing the door behind them. Then and only then did she get a good look at who else was in the room. “Ugh. Arc. Now my evening of hell is truly complete.”

Jaune nearly choked. “Oh come on, that was like a year ago! I said I was sorry.”

“And I said the only apology for your behavior was never coming near me ever again—and yet here you are!”

“You're the one that came here.” Jaune folded his arms petulantly. He was not sorry that he'd had maybe a slight crush on her. He was a more sorry for hounding her for a date for a good part of the semester. He was a lot sorry for blowing most of the money from his summer job renting space on
the scoreboard during Homecoming.

After the very public excoriation he'd received from Weiss over that, he'd cut his losses and did his best to just avoid her. Easier said than done when Weiss was on track and field with Pyrrha and Yang, and in Drama with him. Of course she still insisted he was still after her even long after she'd personally extinguished the torch he'd been carrying for her. Then ran it through a chipper shredder.

Luckily, the exchange woke Nora, who roused with a huge yawn and stretch that caused her to slip off both Ren's shoulder and the back of the recliner, disappearing behind it with a thud. “Aww! Is the movie over? I wanted to see what people did!” She popped up at Ren's left side, leaning on the arm rest. “Just think: a whole day with no laws! We could loot a candy shop and a fireworks store and the zoo and then have the best party ever!”

Yang folded her arms and raised any eyebrow. “Okay, I'll bite: why the zoo?”

“So we can get a sloth, duh.”

The blonde snorted. “I don't even know what I was expecting to hear, but that so wasn't it. I would be so down with swiping a ton of fireworks though.”

“I think I'm getting a migraine from all the stupidity in the room. Yang, I'm going to your kitchen to see if you have any actual ice so you don't get an infection from that luncheon meat.”

As she stormed out, Ruby called, “There's a pack of frozen peas in the freezer door! Dad keeps it around for whenever Yang or Uncle Qrow get into fights!”

Beaming with pride over once more earning the coveted Asskicker's Peas (as so dubbed by her uncle), Yang strutted over to Ruby's love seat and sat down, much to the chagrin of her sister, who was still semi-hiding behind it.

“So Dorky Sister, what gives with the movie night? I thought you guys were playing your dragon game or whatever.”

“We may have ruined her plans beyond recovery for the night.” Pyrrha supplied, swing her legs down off the couch so Blake had somewhere to sit. The quiet girl gave her a gracious nod before sitting at the far end of said sofa.

“Excellent job!” Yang gave Ruby's players a double thumbs up. Then she noticed the movie that was playing. “Oh this one? The bad guys are such amateurs at crime. While they're being stupid and skipping around in people's gardens, somewhere there's a Ferrari dealership that's being left completely unguarded.”

Jaune shrugged, stealing some of Pyrrha's popcorn now that it was within reach. “Eh, it's almost over now. So Rubes, next Friday...”

“Is Halloween!” Yang interrupted in her typical loud fashion. That reminds me: I finally wore Dad down and we are go for a costume party! I'm inviting everyone. It's going to be so beyond awesome it will melt your faces off! Blake even convinced her boy toy Sun to get his band to play here!”

Blake glared at her best friend from across the room. “He is not my 'boy toy'. We... share some of the same interests. That's all.”

A sinister smirk grew on Yang's lips and Blake blanched: she'd stepped right into Yang's trap. “Oh? But you refuse to tell me what those interests are. Maybe they have something to do with why you're nowhere to be found after practice Tuesdays and Thursdays? And how Sun isn't either?
Might these interests include...sucking face!"

“No!” Blake blurted out. “A-and it's none of your business.”

Yang cleared her throat and reached into her shirt, pulling a wallet from her generous cleavage. Flipping it open, she revealed a tin star and a boardwalk kiosk-quality Federal Bureau of Friendship, Best Friend First Class badge. “Sorry, Blakey, but this right here says it is my business.”

“I should never have pointed that make-your-own toy badge kiosk to you,” Blake muttered.

“Hindsight is twenty-twenty.” Yang shrugged. “So anyway: party. I'm not interrupting your game thingy, am I Ruby? 'Cause you guys could always like use the basement or something.”

Crawling over the back of the love seat to plop down next to her big sister, Ruby gave this some thought. “Actually, we weren't going to have game next week anyway. I was planning on trick or treating, but my first high school party? Count me in!”

“Aww, but Ruby, trick-or-treat is like the best part of the holiday!” Jaune complained.

“But so are Halloween parties and I finally get to go to one!” Ruby defended, “Also, I was kind of worried I was too old for it this year anyway.”

Jaune clutched his heart and looked shocked. “Too old?! But you're two years younger than me!”

“Actually, I was meaning to talk to you about that, Jaune...” Pyrrha ventured.

“Oh, not you too.”

“People look at us funny! Last year, someone even asked me how old I was when I had Ruby!”

Jaune faltered under her glare. “I... uh... well she does look young for her age? Also, that guys was drunk. You so do not look old enough to be her mom.”

Pinching the bridge of her nose, Pyrrha shook her head. “I'm going to this party instead, Jaune. And I was hoping you'd go with... uh as well.”

Looking for any help whatsoever, Jaune's eyes finally landed on Nora. “Nora! You'll still got trick-or-treating with me, right?”

Nora looked around at the others, a mild panic seeming to set in. “Ren, what should I do? There's a party and that means dancing and lots of food and maybe bobbing for apples-I. Am. Awesome ate bobbing for apples, but if I don't get trick-or-treating, how am I going to get candy? Think of the candy Ren! No gobstoppers, no malted milk-balls—NO BITE-SIZED SNICKERS! How is it even Halloween without bite-sized snickers?!”

As calm as she was frenetic, Ren tilted his head back to catch her eye. “Nora?”

“Yes?”

“If you really want to go to the party, I'll just buy you some big boxes of candy off the discount counter the day after.”

Hooray!” Nora bellowed, locking Ren in such a furious backward hug that it threatened to pull him up and over the back of the recliner. “Llllllllet's Party!”
“Aww, come on!” Jaune complained, deflating in defeat.

Pyrrha reached over and patted him on his head. “There there. I'll buy you candy too.”

“It's not the same.”

Yang made a face at him. “Really? You're still complaining? Jaune, need I remind you that this is going to be a party with actual girls our age instead of the preteen set you'd be hanging out with. And these girls will be in sex costumes? Including yours truly of course.”

“That's not a requirement is it?” Ruby, Pyrrha and Blake all asked in one voice.

“No, but you suck if you don't.” Yang lifted her chin in umbrage. Then she remembered herself. “Except Ruby. Her costume's going to be a burqa.”

Her little sister smirked. “What? Not even a sexy burqa?”

“I'm starting to regret inviting you already.”

Around this time, Weiss returned with the bag of peas. “Really, Yang? I thought even your puerile mind would at least draw a line at using a holiday for children to put yourself on shameless display.” She tossed the blonde the peas, then looked around, discovering there were no more available seats, and decided to sit on the arm of the love seat next to Ruby. “I mean please, Yang, it's demeaning.”

“Well someone's got a perfect wet blanket costume. And just what are you going as, Weiss Cream?”

“I haven't decided yet, but I can promise you it will be better than whatever tasteless thing you choose.” Not having known Yang as long as the others, she missed the signs and had no idea why the other girl was suddenly grinning and reaching into her wallet.

“Oh really? Care to put your daddy's money where your mouth is?” She pulled out a twenty and slammed it on the table. “Everyone at the party votes for best costume and the winner gets the kitty. Who's in?”

The words were barely out of her mouth before a pink streak flashed across the room and Nora was slapping down forty dollars in tens. “Me and Ren at in! Prepare to be defeated!”

Jaune, still in a funk from earlier took out his own wallet and laid out two fives and a ten. “Please, I'm the best at costumes. None of you can even sew. This guy? A plus in Home Ec.”

“He says as if it's something to be proud of.” Weiss sniped. Yang high-fived her for that.

“You obviously didn't take the class. It's more difficult than it appears.” Pyrrha, who had earned a gentle-lady's C in the same class took out a fifty and made change from Nora's stack. “But I'm in too. It does sound fun.”

Ren, who hadn't had to put any money in had to point out, “You all realize you could have a better costume in general if you just spent the extra twenty dollars on it, right?”

“But where's the fun in that?” asked Yang before turning to give her best friend puppy dog eyes. “Pwease Blake? Have fun with us!”

Blake, who was planning on putting on a pair of dollar store cat ears and calling it good sighed.
“You know what? I'll officiate. Someone needs to keep track of all this money, after all.”

No one seemed to want to argue and even if they did, there was one last slam on the table that got everyone's attention. There was an index card on top of all the bills reading 'IOU $20 – Ruby Rose' with a little sketch of Ruby holding up a twenty dollar bill on it.

“What?” Ruby asked, poking two fingers together. “I kinda spent all my allowance this week and won't have more money until tomorrow.”

Chapter End Notes

So thus ends Session 1. Yes, it was short, but mostly because yeah, they did ruin Ruby's plans.

We also meet Blake and Weiss. Sorry for fans of them, but they're the hardest for me to characterize for different reasons: Weiss because it takes time to build up a jerk with a heart of gold, so just assume in any 'verse I write her in she'll improve with time. Blake... well it's a medium think. In the show, a lot of Blake's characterization comes from her animation. It's hard to convey that in the bouncy, dialogue-heavy style of this fic. I'm going to work harder at that as I really do like Blake and want to use her more here since her role so far in Arc Reaction is so small.

There was a part cut from this where Ren explains that Nora loves sloths because a personality test told her sloths were her spirit animal. This is another Kim Possible reference and by god, if I'm not careful, this could end up being a really weird fusion with that show where all the slice of life stuff matches up, but none of the secret agent stuff gets in.

In case you were wondering, the movie they're watching is the Purge, and Yang is referencing a bit by Christopher Titus.

Also, does anyone else find the way Yang says 'Blakey' in the show to be like the most adorable thing ever? It's just so childish and enthusiastic I just want to hug her.
A yellow and black motorcycle roared into the Beacon High parking lot at way higher than the posted limit, its engine only topped for volume by the “Yaaaaaaahooo!” its driver belted out as she threw it into a one hundred eighty degree drifting stop that had to end up parked perfectly back-first in parking space number 108.

She stomped the kick stand into place as her passenger, hugging her back for dear life, gingerly extracted herself.

“You need to get a car!” Ruby admonished, pulling off her helmet. “Or I need to get a car! One of us: car!”

Yang stepped off her bike and pulled off the helmet, taking extra time to shake out her hair for the benefit of anyone who might be watching. “Well sorry, but my Bumblebee is too cool to trade in for some lame car. And don't get mad at me: It's not my fault Dad had to leave early.”

She waited for Ruby to climb off before lifting the passenger seat up and stowing both their helmets. “Oh, by the way, I know he forgot to give you lunch money, 'cause he totally forgot mine too, but I've got the emergency credit card, so come find me at lunch, okay?”

“Okay.” Ruby sighed, adjusting the strap of her book bag.

Sensing the younger girl's mood, Yang threw an arm around her younger sister. “Something wrong?”

Ruby looked away to hide the look in her eyes. “Just... remembering when we didn't have to buy lunch.”

It took an effort not to sigh on her own. She missed Summer, Ruby's mom, too. Hell, she hated to admit it, but in some ways, she missed Summer more. “I know, Rubes. I know.” Giving the smaller girl a little squeeze, she started them walking toward the side entrance to the school. “Hey, how about after school, we take the emergency credit card and go eat out? Wherever you want and I won't even complain.”

“You really won't complain?” Ruby asked, lured out by the minor miracle of being able to pick a place to eat without Yang's annoying commentary.

“Absolutely no complaining at all. I swear on... on my hair!”

“Even if it's that burger place you hate?”

Yang made a face. “You mean that greasy spoon with that obnoxious jerka... um, I mean yeah, even there.”

Slowly, Ruby nodded. “I'll think about it.”

“Great!” Yang chirped, finally releasing her. “'cause there's Blake and we've kind of got a History project to finish up in the library before second period. You... gonna be okay?”
“Yeah.” Ruby said. And she would. Just like every other time in the past couple of years. She just needed something to take her mind off things.

“Salutations, Ruby and Yang!”

That’d do.

“Whoops, look at the time, gotta go!” Yang announced before scurrying off in Blake's direction.

Ruby shook her head and turned toward where the voice had come from. “Hey, Penny.”

As it turned out, Penny Polendina was sitting cross legged atop Beacon High's Spirit Rock. Said rock was just that: a giant, irregular piece of granite that the Student Council and various team and clubs painted on occasion to show school spirit. It was currently painted orange with a Jack-o-lantern face, which made Penny in her green sweater and brown, ankle-length corduroy shirt look like the stem. She had out her customary tablet computer and stylus, waving to Ruby with the latter.

Penny scooted over the the edge of the rock until her legs were hanging down and leaned over to get a better look at Ruby. “How are you today?”

“Doing good. How about you?” replied Ruby. She and Penny were close largely because they'd both been skipped ahead to be Sophomores at the same time and were thusly the youngest people in their grade. Plus, Ruby noticed she was one of the only people who could grok to Penny's stilted, deliberate way of speaking and socializing. It was like she'd come from another time instead of Canada like she'd said.

Sliding the rest of the way of the rock, Penny landed heavily but without much difficulty. “I'm doing fantastic, thank you! Though I do have a question for you.”

“A question?” Ruby didn't like to admit it, but she knew Penny was smarter than her, so it was usually her asking the questions.

“Indeed! Last night, I received an invitation to a Halloween party from your sister,” her eyes traveled shyly to the ground, “but it's really no secret that Yang doesn't like me very much. Is this a mistake?”

“What? Penny, Yang likes you fine,” Ruby lied—well sort of lied. It wasn't that Yang disliked Penny as she didn't get Penny and things Yang didn't get, she just tried to pretend didn't happen. It took her a year to acknowledge Nora's right to exist. “And you're totally invited. In fact, you know what? We're having a costume contest among our friends: we're all putting in twenty dollars and whoever wins gets the whole thing. Do... you want in?”

If Yang had a problem with her adding Penny to the contest, then she could take it up with Ruby. Penny was her friend and if Ruby got to have fun at her first high school party, then so would Penny.

Really?” Penny asked, sounding absolutely awed, “I've never really taken part in Halloween before. I would love to join the contest!”

Ruby blinked. “You... seriously never did Halloween before.”

“Oh no,” Penny shook her head. “My father believes that going door-to-door begging for unhealthy treats teaches impressionable young minds a very poor lesson, so I wasn't allowed to do it. But he is always encouraging me to socialize more with people near my own age and a party sounds
Ruby grinned broadly. She loved her friends, but it was nice to have someone actually her own age around. Really, she wished she and Penny had more classes together like they had back in Junior High, before they got skipped. Penny was the one who got her into tabletop gaming in the first place, and though she had her own group now that played on Skype, the two often traded ideas.  

"I'm going to make sure we both have the best night ever, Penny! Have any idea for what you want to go as?"

Penny nodded enthusiastically. "Oh, I do! My favorite character ever! Who are you going to be?"

"I've... got a few ideas," Ruby lied. She had nothing and was already regretting losing that twenty dollars, "Just trying to pick the best one."

"Then I will help you, Ruby! What are friends for?"

Ruby ducked her head, mind now racing to actually come up with ideas. "Thanks, Penny."

Meanwhile, back stage of the school's auditorium, Jaune Arc was starting to itch from the suspicious look he was getting as he unlocked the prop room. "What? I told you Miss Appleby gave me permission! Y'know, as long as I stay after school a few days next week to organize the place..."

"That's not why I'm giving you this look."

Jaune finally picked the right key from the giant key ring Ms Appleby had handed him and pulled the door open. After fumbling with the lights, he got them on, revealing something like a very large walk-in closet with two long racks of assorted clothes on either side, bins full of stuff and tables covered with clutter down the center.

"I think I got the raw part of this deal." Jaune said bitterly before turning to his companion. "Alright, so why the suspicion?"

Ren had his arms folded as he scanned Jaune's face for whatever catch or depiction on his face. It was more of a Yang thing to sabotage people to win allegedly friendly bets, but Jaune had his own occasional fits of petulance. "I'm just wondering why you're letting me pillage the prop closet for my costume with you. Why not Pyrrha. In fact, where is she anyway? Don't you drive her to school?"

Rather than answer immediately, Jaune stepped into the prop room and started rifling through a bin full of shoes.

"Yeah, I do. And it was super-awkward this morning, by the way."

"Because...?"

"We kind of had a fight Saturday. I don't even get why, y'know? I offered to make a costume for her in exchange for a cut of the bet—because seriously, whenever she'd done her own costume in the past, it's been either store bought or—and I swear I didn't say this to her—half-assed. And suddenly it's all about how I don't believe she could do a good job on her own—which again, I never said out loud. I mean it is okay that she's not good at everything, right?"
Ren raised and eyebrow, but covered by gravitating to an old frock coat that had been used for Captain Hook in a production of Peter Pan some years earlier. "You didn't say that part out loud, right?"

The blond hung his head. "Maybe."

"And there's your fight. You're the one that told me how competitive she can get. What'd you say they called her in your Pee-Wee soccer league?"

"Red Card." Jaune said, "I'm not even sure they give those normally in Pee-Wee soccer, but she earned them. There's a reason her parents never let her play contact sports again."

Ren took the coat off the rack. It even had a frilly shirt folded over the hanger with it. As long as it fit him, it would be perfect. "So... you abandoned her to... what? Offer me help with my costume in exchange for advice on fixing things with her?" It wouldn't be the first time Jaune had come to him for 'girl problems', albeit not with Pyrrha.

"Pttf. As if. We'll be cool again by tomorrow. It'd take more than some dumb argument about costumes to break us up." He paused, a boot in hand as it dawned on him what he'd said, "You know... not break-up, break-up, since..."

"I know what you meant." Ren mercifully cut him off. If he didn't the babble might go on for hours. "So why am I here."

Jaune tossed the boot aside and took out a pair of sandals, examined them, then tossed them aside too. "Because I need a second pair of eyes to look for what I need in here. Pyrrha's not going to help me now, not with the second bet."

"Second bet?" Ren was in the middle of taking the coat off the hanger.

"Yeah... that's how the fight ended. We kind of bet each other that win or lose the main bet, whichever one of the two of us gets fewer votes has to be the other's salve for a week. Ren: I am not a man who's confident in a lot of things, but I am in my mad Halloween skills. That said... I cannot be Pyrrha's slave for a week! Who knows what horrors she has in store for me!"

Rolling his eyes, Ren let out a long sigh. Competitive streak or no, given their peer group, Pyrrha was the only one among them that could be trusted with that bet—including Jaune. He imagined the blond would have her peeling grapes for him or something equally cartoonish if he won. Morally, he felt it would probably be the right thing to sabotage Jaune here. But... he couldn't bring himself to do that.

"Fine, what is it you need?"

Jaune gave him a relieved grin. "Mostly, I need heeled boots. I can do up most of the rest on my own, but those are going to be the hard part."

"Heeled. Boots?"

"Not my idea, he wears heeled boots. Not high heels, but still there's a definite heel there."

Having not seen the show since he was little, Ren took his word for it with a shrug of his shoulders. "Sure. I'm going to need a cravat and a red hat myself, plus all of Nora's costume: blue shirt and skirt, boots—luckily, she already has the right hair naturally. So yeah, we can help each other out."

"Cool, thanks," replied Jaune, "I'm going to need all the help I can get: Pyrrha's recruited Nora and
Weiss to help her."

At this, Ren paused. "Okay, I get that Nora would help anyone who asked—but Weiss? She's probably going to be as gung-ho about this contest as she is. How'd that happen?"

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Weiss tried to comfort herself with the idea that this would be another means of making Jaune pay for his transgressions. She reminded herself continually that she was helping a friend (and could scout out the competition in the process).

None of that was keeping her skin from crawling, itching, screaming out in protest—at the thought of all the second-hand clothes surrounding her in the thrift shop. Schnees, her parents and sister would have reminded her, did not do secondhand anything. Not cars, not homes, and certainly not clothes. They were already horrified that Weiss had gotten kicked out of the only private school in the city and was attending a public high school, but this? This would make Granny Schnee roll over in her grave.

"What are we doing here?" She asked Pyrrha, who to her horror was rummaging through a rack of nightgowns of all things, "I know you could afford to just buy a costume like I did, so why not do so?" Okay, so she couldn't afford anything nearly as good as what Weiss had bought, but the Nikos family wasn't really bad off.

Pyrrha didn't look up, tearing through the gowns with a purpose. "That wouldn't prove anything, Weiss. I have to at least try to do some of this myself." She was collecting all the white gowns and folding them over her arm as she went.

Undeterred in her complaining, Weiss continued. "Fine, you want to show up Arc for running his mouth. I applaud that. But thrift shop nightgowns? You have no idea where those have been!"

"They wash them before putting them out. And I'm going to wash it before I wear it. What's the big deal."

Weiss just wrinkled her nose.

"Aww, not having fun, Weiss?" A rubber dinosaur puppet was thrust over her shoulder, making her jump. Nora giggled and kept using the puppet to talk. "Cheer up! There's all sorts of cool stuff here! Wanna go look for funny hats?"

"Funny ways to get new and exotic lice, you mean." Weiss cringed away from her.

Nora gave her a dubious look, then looked to Pyrrha, turning the puppet to do the same. "Why did we bring her?"

Finally coming to the end of the nightgown rack, Pyrrha shrugged, tossing a mildly disappointed look Weiss's way. "She said she wanted to help me win my bet with Jaune." She inclined her head in the white-haired girl's direction. "I'm sorry. I didn't think you'd be so uncomfortable here."

Weiss pinched the bridge of her nose. Why did her friends—well Pyrrha, she'd never really spent time with Nora—insist on the guilt trips whenever she started displaying things like dignity or standards? Immediately and preemptively regretting it, she squeezed her eyes shut and said, "What do you need me to do?"

The 'I'm proud of you' look Pyrrha was wearing when she opened her eyes wasn't helping matters one bit. "Thank you, Weiss. Actually, you have a choice: one, I need help picking one of these," she gestured with her armful of nightgowns, "that looks suitably diaphanous without... actually
being see-through or otherwise indecent."

Touching those things was most certainly near the bottom of the list of things Weiss intended to do.

"Or, you can go look through the shoes and find me a good pair of strappy, old-fashioned looking sandals."

And touching shoes that had been on someone else's feet was right below that. "Protecting your modesty wins," she said holding out a hand to take half the gowns.

Nora looked at the puppet, turning its head toward her. "Looks like we're on shoe duty, Littlefoot" and off she went.

Chapter End Notes

I wanted to use the set-up I made for myself to tell a few kinds of stories you don't see much in this fandom or my favorite ship, so I'm taking advantage of having made Jaune and Pyrrha childhood friends and thus infinitely more comfortable messing with each other to put this bet in play. I haven't decided who's going to win because I have funny resolutions for both.

Ms Appleby was the teacher during the Mighty Morphin era of Power Rangers, so yeah, I'm still forging ahead with maybe using this setting and these versions of the characters for my Power Rangers AU. I've also got the idea in my head for a Space Opera/Firefly-esque AU too. These characters just really get my imagination working. I'm willing to bet people will get Pyrrha's costume already, but less so with the others I've referenced. Jaune and Ren's both come from the fact that I knew nothing of RT when I got into the show and mistook who was voicing them for more mainstream VA's. I strongly debated having Penny go as Jenny from My Life as a Teenager Robot, or Aang from Avatar (as they both have a lot to learn before they can save the world).

My personal headcannon for this fic? Penny is somehow still a robot in this AU.
“Goodness, gracious me.”

Blake looked up from her phone despite every ounce of her common sense telling her that paying attention would only encourage her best friend. But honestly, Yang was such a terrible, awful no good, very bad actress that her attempts at acting were always an endless font of entertainment.

“Would you look at this, Blake? I went to the vending machine and it actually gave me two packs of little chocolate donuts! Sadly, it is impossible for me to eat all of them and my lunch in the mere half hour we have!” Yang swooned into her seat, managing to bang her tray on it so hard the conversation at the tables around them temporarily stopped. “Whatever shall I do?”

Perking up, she pretended to see Blake for the first time despite having just acknowledged that she was talking to her. “Oh. Blake! You like little chocolate donuts, right? You can have the extra pack! I know how much you love them after all! Aren't you so glad we're best friends?”

She held out the package of confections like she was the fourth wise person, bringing the gift of sucrose and offered up a hopeful, beaming grin.

Blake gave her a flat stare. “Are you serious right now?”

“What? I just wanted to share my good fortune with my very best friend in the universe.”

“This has something to do with me holding the bet money doesn't it?” Blake took a moment to text a goodbye to the person she'd been playing online with and log out.

Ever the awful actress, Yang gasped loudly. “Oh, perish the thought, Blakey! I know you've got way more integrity than that. I really and truly just happened to get extra donuts.”

“Except the part where you like the ones with powdered sugar and never get the chocolate ones unless you're trying to weasel a few out of me when I get them.” Blake folded her arms and sat back, narrowing her eyes. “The only thing I don't get is what you even expect me to do.”

Yang rolled her eyes dramatically. “All I'm trying to do is give you some stupid donuts. Come on, Blake, you're just being silly.” Another cheesy grin and she reached out to playfully bat Blake's shoulder. “So silly, Blake.”

“What's this dunce doing now?” Weiss arrived, fresh from retrieving her lunch bag. It wasn't school policy to allow students to store their lunches in the cafeteria refrigerator, but then again, the school wasn't exactly subtle in its favoritism especially for the daughter of the city's biggest employer. The Schnee Oil heiress got privileges the football team couldn't swing, which was saying a lot considering how invested the district was in its championship team.

“I think she's trying to bribe me to throw the costume contest in her favor... somehow.”

“I am not!” Yang protested, feigning hurt.

Weiss raised an eyebrow. “Oh, Is it that simple? I thought there was a vote and you were just holding the money. If that's the case, what did she offer you? I'll triple it. No, quintuple.”
“Hey!” Yang shot the white-haired girl a glare. “You can't do that! I had the idea first. Plus, she's my best friend! Get your own!”

Ignoring her completely, Weiss turned her attention fully on Blake. “I will give you...” She took out her purse and checked the billfold. “Two hundred dollars right this moment to ensure I am the victor.”

Yang made a strangled sound. “What?! The kitty's only a hundred and sixty! What sense does it make to pay more to win then you'll get back?!”

“Hmph. It shows what you know, Xiao Long. The prize money means nothing when the prestige of winning the contest is on the line. Let's be honest: our classmates are intimidated by my poise and social standing. Yes, they respect me, but they don't adore me—yet. By winning this contest, I can prove that I am in fact a fun person to be around in addition to being a superior student and athlete.”

“Now wait just a damn minute.” Yang banged her fist on the table. “Between me and Pyrrha, is there anything you're the best at out of the whole team?”

Weiss sniffed and flicked her side ponytail. “I believe you are forgetting who placed first in the long jump last year?”

“The long jump? The long jump? I got a letter for throwing like giant clay boulders and you're bragging about landing ass-first in sand?”

Blake calmly took a bite out of her tuna sandwich and pondered over whether to defuse the situation or not. On the one hand, Weiss was clearly having one of her big-headed moments and it took a troll of Yang's skill to deflate her. On the other, Yang was still smarting from getting a shiner from one of the Malachite sisters earlier in the week and her temper was more hair trigger than normal.

In the end, she decided that in this state, Yang might go too far and cocky or not, Weiss was a friend and didn't deserve a full-powered Yang to the face.

“It's up to an even two-hundred anyway.”

“I will have you—wait. What?” Weiss blinked owlishly at Blake. “How did the pot increase?”

Blake took her time chewing another bite, letting the pair’s curiosity overcome their tempers and pride. “I told Sun about it the other night and he wants in, so that's another twenty.”

“The other night, you say?” Yang asked with a salacious tone. “What other sweet nothings did he mutter to you besides wanting to dress up for you?”

“We're not like that!” Blake said, clearly flustered. “We just talk online, okay?”

“Sure thing, Blakey. I've been there, talking on line, maybe sending a few saucy pictures...”

“Moving on.” Weiss said firmly. “There's one hundred and eighty. Who else put in money, Blake?”

Shaking off her mortification, Blake settled back into her usual cool demeanor. “Oh. Right. Ruby's friend Penny came up to me in fifth period History yesterday and chipped in. I'm honestly kind of curious to see what she goes as. She's a little... weird.”

“Blake, look at our social circle,” said Weiss, “Is it really fair for any of us to call someone 'weird'
when we know Yang, Ruby, Nora and the dolt Pyrrha insists on keeping around?"

“Wait, how am I weird?” Yang demanded.

“One of the costume ideas you texted me the other night was 'sexy mortician'.” Blake supplied with a deadpan expression.

“And let's not forget it was you idea to wager on a costume contest.” Weiss added. “Oh, and then try to bribe the judge.”

Blake rubbed her temples. “For the last time, it's by vote, I'm not the...” the rest of her train of thought was derailed by the sounds of many cash registers going off in her head. It would be wrong to allow those two to try and sway her if she was actually the judge. But she wasn't. And there was no reason to correct them.

“...need to be fair. After all, you're all my friends.”

Weiss gave her a nod and a look that said, 'Ah, I see what you're doing' when she really didn't. “Well of course, Blake. We would never dream of trying to sully your integrity.”

Far less skilled in the art of complete corruption than Weiss, Yang added, “Too true. And if I just happen to leave both these packages of donuts here, that has no bearing on the contest whatsoever.”

Blake managed to keep her face neutral. It was Tuesday. With luck, she could milk this all the way through to Halloween at the end of the week.

Across the cafeteria, the other blonde of their social group was about to pop a blood vessel. He hadn't even bothered getting lunch because he needed all the time he could get cramming for the French test he had coming up next period.

Nora was watching his mounting panic with fascination, sipping soda through a straw as she leaned forward on her elbows. Ren was taking advantage of her distraction to actually eat for once rather than provide her entertainment.

“Why did you let me take French?” Jaune accused the fourth person at their table. Pyrrha gave him a completely innocent look. Whatever argument they'd been having Monday (which had seen her eating with Yang, Blake and Weiss) had blown over, but she was still willing to watch him swing a little by his own petard.

“I seem to recall you telling me that we should take French together because it would be 'a breeze' because your name is French and that means it would come natural to you.”

“You are turning really red, Jauney.” Nora added cheerfully.

Jaune groaned. “It should be natural for me, but... maybe they changed it or something. Who decided what noun is masculine or feminine anyway? Was there a committee or something?” He ran his fingers through his hair. “Oh I'm so going to fail.”

“Hmm,” Pyrrha tapped her lips with her finger. “If only you knew someone in the same class you could have studied with last night.”

“You were still mad at me last night.” he sulked.
“This is why I took Esperanto as my foreign language.” Nora chipped in.

“Nora?”

“Yes, Renny?”

“You're taking Latin.”

“Oh.” She giggled. “Guess that's why I got a C on the last test...”

Jaune slammed his face down in his book. Maybe if he shut the book on his skull hard enough, he'd get a concussion and be excused from the test.

Before he could set his plan in motion, however, he felt the book being dragged out from under his cheek. “Oh, I'm sure you're just not giving yourself enough credit. As usual.” Pyrrha pushed her salad aside and took the book up. “Here, I'll quiz you.”

He looked up and gave her a shy grin. “Mercy.”

“...” She shrugged, “Close enough.”

Apparently, the end of Jaune's suffering was also the end of Nora's interest in his saga. Almost faster than the eye could follow, she had scooted over next to Ren. “So you've got your academic team thingie tonight?”

Ren nodded. “Yeah, the meet against Atlas Academy. Are you planning to come?” He really didn't have to ask. Since she got her minivan, Nora went to every meet they had in the city.

“Yup!” she chirped. “And I finally finished this too!” Reaching into the backpack next to her seat, she came up with a giant craft foam finger in the school colors with the words 'Beacon Academics' stenciled on it. “I was gonna just put 'Go Ren' on it, but Jaune's on the team too and he's a friend, so I thought it'd be unfair to leave him out. But if you want, I could make a pennant just for you. I've got plenty of felt left over from my Ren Faire costume this summer, so it wouldn't even be that hard. But then I'd have the finger in one hand and the pennant in the other and no hands to hold my popcorn. And how are you supposed to watch a sport without popcorn? It's bad enough that they don't have hot dog guys at these things, you know? Actually, I have to bring my own popcorn, and sometimes they get a real attitude about it. And I'm like 'but I bought enough for everyone', and they're like 'we don't allow trash bags full of popcorn, miss'. I really think we should petition the school board to increase funding for refreshments at school sporting events, don't you?”

The words broke over Ren like a wave, but he heard and processed every one of them. Nora bewildered even him. He knew her aunt doted on her, but he was pretty damn sure the old lady didn't have the money to finance all of Nora's stunts and crafting supplies. The trash bag full of popcorn from their meet at Vacuo Memorial High had to have cost her something like fifty bucks and it hadn't been the first time she'd done it either.

He also knew that she totally would petition the school board too. That wasn't something she'd done the first time either. It was a miracle they still let her attend public meetings. And oh yes, guess who would have to hold up her charts when she did.

Better to head this off at the pass.

“How about instead of bringing popcorn, we stop somewhere and eat afterward?”

The light in her eyes was an instant reminder why he was more than happy to deal with the chaos,
the weirdness and having to use the word 'inexplicable' a hundred times a week. The moments of pure and innocent happiness on her face always felt like a major achievement.

“Really? Do I get to pick?”

“Sure thing, Nora.”

“Yes!”

Chapter End Notes

A bit shorter than normal, but it's as long as it needs to be. The JNPR half of this is literally just fluff I had fun writing.

I've decided that GameOn!Nora, being without weaponry and highly acceptable violence like in Remnant, channels most of her energy into craftiness. She makes things. Lots of things. As to how she funds it, I'm actually going to make that a plot. I just like Nora having a lot of props and the idea that she makes them is too perfect to me.

Also Nora went to at least one Ren Faire. I should probably write that.

Yang is, as always, adorable. Like Matt Groening says, the audience loves the slow thinker, or in this place, the unjustly confident. She's not dumb, she just thinks she's awesome at everything, especially the stuff she's not awesome at.

I knew a few people who did track and field and the weird speciation arguments are apparently accurate, almost always about whose specialty is the hardest, most involved, etc. If this is wrong, I'm still going to argue that Yang would MAKE it an argument.

Amusing little note here: I ended up boxing myself in when talking about the Schnee company in the GameOn AU. Mostly, I've already written the first chapters of the Power Rangers fusion this ostensibly leads into and it starts with Schnee Oil, so now it has to be Schnee Oil here so I can be lazy and reuse those chapters later.

Oh, and because several people reviewed and PM'd about it, I was just kidding about GameOn!Penny being a robot.

Was.

Now I am totally serious. I don't know how I'm going to justify it, but she's a robot.
Hallo-WIN 3 – The Party

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Yang answered the door wearing a figure-hugging, low-cut white dress with a big bow around her waist strategically positioned to push up her chest and another in her hair. The one on her waist had a tag on it reading 'From: God, To: Men'.

Jaune gave her a blank look worthy of Blake. “Really?”

“You've got a problem?” Yang challenged.

Before he could really and truly earn a beating, Pyrrha put a hand over his mouth. “He has... issues... with Halloween costumes.”

“And what's wrong with mine?”

Struggling free of Pyrrha's grasp, Jaune started to rant. “I was just expecting... more. Like a lot more! Come on Yang, I knew it was going to be a pun, but you've gotta work for these things! Halloween comes but once a year after all! Why not at least make yourself up like an actual present box.”

“Hey! In case you haven't noticed, the whole point of the costume is puttin' the girls on display,” Yang crossed her arms to make said display more complete. “That's the real gift.” She shot Pyrrha a sly look. “Unless there's a different set you'd rather unwrap.”

“Huh?” Jaune blinked, his rant derailed by confusion. Pyrrha just glared.


Rage turning instantly to embarrassment, Pyrrha dropped her gave to her feet. “Actually, neither one of us knew what the other was wearing tonight. Also, we're not an angel or a demon.”

She was wearing a nightgown-turned toga with a crown of laurels in her hair and cardboard wings on her back. Nora had failed to find her any sandals, but had come up with something better: a pair of cross-trainers with a certain famous swoosh on the sides.

“I'm Nike, Goddess of Victory.” She wrung her hands, fully understanding no one was going to get that. “You know... because my name is Nikos...”

“No idea who that is.” Yang admitted without a shred of remorse.

“Perhaps I should have thought this through a bit better.” Pyrrha admitted.

“Oh come on!” Jaune argued, “I figured it out. She's even got the swooshes!” Then he paused. “And also, how many demons have a big, red bat on their chest?”

His costume did in fact have a red bat icon on the chest and a cowl featuring pointy bat ears. A belt of silver cylinders surrounded an otherwise black bodysuit, tapering down to a pair of boots with oddly pronounced heels. He'd painted his eyelids and the area around his eyes with white phosphorescent paint so a glow came from behind his eye-holes.
Reaching down, he slipped his hands into a pair of loops hanging behind his back and when he raised his arms, the motion unfolded two pieces of folded cloth that fanned out into bat-like wings that stretched between his arms to his waist.

“I'm Batman.”

“Batman has a cape.” Yang deadpanned.

“Batman Beyond.”

“Beyond what?”

“... Just let us in.”

Yang smirked and stepped aside, mentally ticking those two off her list of possible competitors for the contest. As they stepped inside, Pyrrha patted a downcast Jaune on the back. “Don't worry, I still got it. Though, to be fair, the show was on before most of us were born.”

The party was already in full swing already with more than a few people from school hanging around upstairs. The main event, however, was taking place in the basement where most of the furniture had been cleared out and a place had been marked off for Team Sunshyne, Sun's band (the 'Y' apparently made them edgy and not at all girly) to play and some folding card tables had been set up for refreshments.

The pair of newcomers hadn't even made it down the stairs before a blue and orange blur was there to meet them. As usual, the only thing predictable about Nora was that she'd gone all-out with red contacts and veneers over her canines that looked like real vampire fangs. These she wore along with a blue-on-lighter blue pinstriped button-down shirt with a crest on the breast pocket, matching knee-length skirt, knee-high stockings and boots. She had a neatly tied tie around her neck and was lugging around a truly massive replica gun made of PVC pipe in one hand. Her hair, as it turned out, was already perfect for topping off the costume.

“You guys are late!” she admonished, pointing at Jaune specifically with a white-gloved finger. “What did you do this time?”

Pyrrha held up one hand. “Actually it was my fault this time.” she gestured behind her. “Wing trouble.”

“Yeah, she had them on, but then couldn't get in the car, so we had to get them off her, then when we got her, we had to get them back on—it was a whole wing thing.” Jaune supplied. “I've got to say though, I'm impressed. You really made 'em sturdy.”

Beaming from the praise, Pyrrha turned her attention back to Nora. “Did we miss anything.”

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Beaming from the praise, Pyrrha turned her attention back to Nora. “Did we miss anything.”

“Only getting to see the competition!” Nora waved her hands in a panicked fashion. “Weiss spent like, a thousand dollars on her costume! Just look!”

They followed where she was pointing and they found Blake, true to her word, wearing just car ears and normal street clothes... talking to Queen Elizabeth I. A very convincing facsimile of her at least. Weiss had indeed gone all out, from getting a gorgeous period reproduction of a Victorian ball gown complete with jewelry, and having her hair dyed brown and done up in a historically (or at least cinematically) accurate hair style.

It was also plain to see that Blake also happened to be wearing a suspiciously Victorian-looking silver pendant.
“Did... Weiss try and bribe Blake?” Pyrrha wondered aloud, one brow raised. “That is so wrong. Also it doesn't make sense—isn't Blake just holding the money?”

“You would think so.” Nora said, stroking her chin with her free hand. “And yet Weiss is doing it—why didn't we think of doing it?! Ren!”

The young man in question had just been walking up, carrying a freshly acquired cup when her shout made him wince. “I'm right here, you know.”

Nora grinned brilliantly at him. “Ren, we need to bribe Blake to win the contest. Think of something to bribe her with. She's wearing kitty ears, so maybe we could give her an enormous ball of yarn or a big pile of tuna or something!” She paused, visibly switching gears as she did a double-take at her two other friends. “Oh, and Pyrrha and Jaune are here. Do the thing!”

Ren let out a sigh, conveying the fact that he'd been asked to do it many, many times that night. Nonetheless, he acquiesced and drew himself up to his full height. He was wearing the voluminous red frock coat and pirate-style shirt Jaune helped him get along with a matching cravat, red, wide-brimmed hat, and a pair of round, orange-lensed sunglasses. White gloves with arcane symbols and the words 'the bird of Hermes' written on them covered his hands. Like Nora, he was also wearing veneers for fangs, and when he moved, the coat allowed peeks of a pair of replica pistols, one silver, one black metal. He'd also let his hair, normally kept in a neat tail, all the way out so it fell in wild strands that stuck out from under the hat.

He took a deep, guttural breath, and affected a voice that matched it. Placing his non-drink hand heavily on Nora's shoulder, she looked up toward the basement's ceiling. “Ah, Police Girl. It's such a beautiful night. The kind of night that makes me want to drink blood.”

Nora squealed in fangirlish glee to such a pitch that only dogs could hear her and clapped. “I wish I could get him to wear this thing to school!”

“I know that piece of Japanese animation!” a voice interrupted. All four eyes turned to find themselves looking at the Grim Reaper... who was a surprisingly short figure holding a giant scythe with blue LEDs, and had a number of hourglasses on his belt, including one made from a silly straw and modeling clay labeled 'Rincewind'.

He looked back at them through a skull mask and, with a voice obviously altered by a voice-changing apps said, “IT WASN'T ME.” before pointing to his left.

The person he pointed to was wearing an extremely tight jumpsuit in silver-gray. There was a Federation comm badge pinned to their chest and a metal plate with visible circuitry over one eye. Their auburn hair was cropped extremely short on the sides and only just longer than that up top.

It was a remarkable likeness, but no Borg ever looked so unquestionably joyful as she went on to add, “In fact, I watched both series. I quite enjoyed the idea of artificial vampires.”

“Um... who are you?” Nora asked, “Because you look awesome!”

Jaune squinted. “I think that's Ruby's friend, Penny.”

“Correct, Mr. Jaune Arc!” Penny chirped, “but tonight, I'm Seven-Of-Nine form the program Star Trek: Voyager. I would have liked to have gone as Commander Data, but emulating his likeness would have taken time I didn't have this year. Perhaps next year!”

“She is very proud of her costume,” said Death.
“...” Pyrrha leaned closer to the diminutive Reaper, trying to see through the skull mask's eye holes. “Ruby?”

“INDEED. ISN'T THIS TOTALLY COOL? UNCLE QROW HELPED ME MAKE THE SCYTHE AND PENNY HELPED ME FIND HOURGLASSES ONLINE FOR CHEAP!”

Pyrrha could only stare at a moment as the Anthropomorphic Personification of Death chattered away while gesturing wildly in the way only Ruby could was... an interesting experience. “It's a really impressive costume Ruby.”

“THANKS! I REALLY LIKE YOUR ANGEL COSTUME TOO.”

“She's the Goddess of Victory.” Jaune corrected. Then he gently took Pyrrha's arm and pulled her aside. “Excuse us a sec.” Regarding Pyrrha's questioning look, he lowered his voice. “I think we're gonna lose this contest: people don't even know what we're supposed to be.”

Her shoulders slumped. “I have to agree. Every one seems to have brought their 'A' game this year.”

He offered her a small smile. “Hey, it's nothing to be ashamed of. It was a cool idea. Way more original than most people's here.” He nodded in the direction of two upperclassmen girls he knew, Coco Adel and Velvet Scarletina, who (likely Coco's idea) were both dressed as Playboy bunnies, then to another group which consisted of a black-haired girl with amber eyes dressed as the Evil Queen from Snow White, a dark-skinned girl with green-dyed hair who might have been going for Wicked Witch of the West, a dour guy who did not look like he enjoyed being a flying monkey, and a tall guy with red hair dressed a 'Bad'-era Micheal Jackson. “And this was your first real try at making your costume on your own. Pretty good job all told. So what if you don't win the contest, right?”

Returning the smile, Pyrrha cocked her head to the side, regarding him carefully. “True, but I was more worried about you. You love Halloween and all the costumes and things. Plus, I made you blow of trick-or-treating for this. You're not upset?”

He snorted and shrugged. “One: used to failure, Pyr. It's like building up a callus. Last place would have to get the boobie prize of 'covered in pig's blood' to even faze me at this point. Plus, I still get to be freaking Batman. Still the best holiday ever.” Then a thought hit him and he made a face. “Not looking forward to losing our bet though.”

Pyrrha sighed. “I was pretty upset with you when I goaded you into that. How about we change the stakes before the vote.”

“If it means you won't make me wake up at six in the morning and carry your water for you on your morning jogs, I'm all for it. What's the change?”

“Huh. I hadn't even thought of that. I probably would have made you carry my books and peel grapes for me,” she mused, not entirely serious, but then again only just then considering it. “But how about this: whichever of us gets the fewest votes between us owes the other one favor they can't deny to be used at any point in the future.” Sensing some apprehension from him, she amended, “And it can't be humiliating in any way... and can't be transferred to anyone else—it's just between you and me.”


As they shook on it, feedback from the mic got everyone's attention.
Sun Wukong winced at the terrible job Yang had done setting up the sound system. He knew a lot about his namesake, which is why his costume was a bright orange gi with a blue undershirt and moon boots... and a bald cap with little dots painted on the forehead along with massive black eyebrows. His only regret was failing to convince a certain someone to dress up as Android 18.

“Hey guys, I have a request from Blake: No, you can't get in on Yang's costume contest. Please stop asking her or she will be forced to scream. Her words, not mine.” Speaking of, there's a poll up on Blake's Facebook right now where you can vote for who you want to win—including yours truly. You know, the guy whose band is playing here tonight in case you forgot. Wink.”

“Did you just say 'Wink' out loud?” Neptune Vasilias, the guitarist for the band, had slicked back his hair and put on a tuxedo, banking on just that being enough to invoke James Bond.

Sun huffed. “Dude, you don't need to explain the joke.”

“What joke?”

“The one you clearly didn't get.”

Not far away, Blake rolled her eyes. She could tell Sun was hamming it up, possibly for her benefit. Apparently she was a magnet for blonde attention hogs.

“Heeeeey bestest friend of mine!” An arm was slung over her shoulders, drawing her into a side hug. Speak of the Devil and her will try and butter you up for the chance to win two hundred dollars. “bought you some pumpkin fudge from upstairs. Oh, did the voting just start? I had no idea!”

“You were standing right there when Sun mentioned it and you know it.” Weiss was suddenly on Blake's other side. If she were a lesser woman, she would have taken the chance to declare 'we are not amused'. “Face it: it's far too late to try and sway her now. If that's what you can even call your attempts. Letting her borrow your motor cycle and clothes;“

“Motorcycle. All one word.” Yang corrected and was ignored.

“Bringing her pastries, asking your uncle to fix a parking ticket for her? Pathetic.” Weiss lifted her chin as she entered a whole new dimension of haughty. “I got her a better space in the school lot, a 'bottomless cup' card at her favorite cafe, and secured an unlimited subscription for her on--”

“We don't have to go into that.” Blake cut her off. “Look, before you two start tearing each other's eyes out, I'm going to try this one more time: I. Do. Not. Have. Any. Power. Over. The. Vote. All your bribes? They've had no effect on the outcome.”

Yang barked a laugh. “Yeah, we know. You don't want the losers to get mad at you. We get it Blake.”

Nodding sagely, Weiss concurred. “Plausible deniability. When I take over Schnee Oil, there will be a place waiting for you.”

“And thus, any guilt I may have felt? Totally assuaged.” Blake rolled her eyes and took out her phone to check the votes. Before she ever saw the numbers, however, she saw two words that made her eye twitch: Edit Poll.

“...” She stared at the words in disbelief. “You mean I actually could have rigged this stupid contest?” she hissed to herself.
An hour later, the two youngest Sophomores at Beacon High were holding hands and dancing in a circle like little kids playing, each a hundred dollars richer for having tied for first place in the contest.

“You know, I really don't feel bad losing to Penny and Ruby.” Ren commented, sipping his drink as he sat on one end of the couch. Nora had discovered the sweets and apple bobbing upstairs and had crashed completely into a sugar coma partially curled up with her upper torso in his lap. “I can honestly say I wouldn't have been that happy winning.”

Jaune was sharing the other half of the couch with Pyrrha and Yang, the former sobbing loudly and dramatically into the shoulder of the former. “You said it, brother. Though I can't help imagine what I could've bought with that money.”

“How!” Yang's voice was muffled by a face full of Pyrrha's tunic. “How did I lose to my little sister!? In a costume contest! My best friend failed me! My awesome skills failed me! The girls failed me!”

Looking mortified, Pyrrha nervously patted the other girl's back. “Um... at least you came in second? Jaune and I only got one vote each.”

Sniffing, Yang sat up on her own, brushing away tears. “That reminds me: you voted for each other, didn't you?” Neither of them answered, both finding the rest of the room fascinating. “I knew it! I am so disappointed in you both right now!”

“Would it make you feel better to know we both have to pay up?” Jaune asked.


“You said 'whichever of us got the fewest votes between us'. Well we both got the same number—which is also the fewest. So we both have a favor hanging over the other's head.”

At this, Yang instantly perked up. “I will let you borrow my bike for a week if--”

“We already agreed they're non-transferable.” Pyrrha interjected.

Letting out a loud groan, Yang threw herself back on the couch. “Awwww! Worst Halloween Ever.”

“Tell me about it.” Weiss said, wandering over to lean on the back of the couch over Yang. “This costume is extremely uncomfortable and can you believe half the people here have no idea who I'm even supposed to be?”

“Welcome to our world,” said Jaune. He, Pyrrha and Weiss all shared a nod of solidarity.

“Maybe if any of us made references from this decade, people would get it,” muttered a sleepy Nora, snuggling closer to Ren. “But I think everyone'll be much happier when we get back to game next week.”

Chapter End Notes
How close can I get Nora to breaking the fourth wall? This close.

That's it for Hallo-WIN. Like the lady said, we're back for Session 2 next time. I hope people enjoyed this little slice of life arc and the copious amount of nerdish fanservice for... frankly people my age. Sometimes you've just got to surrender to some mindless self-indulgence.

For Reference:
Jaune – Terry McGinnis/Batman Beyond
Pyrrha – Nike, Goddess of Victory
Nora – Seras Victoria (Hellsing)
Ren – Arucard (Hellsing)
Ruby - Death of the Discworld
Yang – God's Gift to Men
Weiss – Queen Elizabeth I
Sun – Krillin (Dragonball Z)

I have learned from this that Weiss and Yang are an amazing comedy duo and Blake is too much fun playing only sane girl. My most sincere apologies to fans of Weiss. I'm pretty sure she comes off as pretty bad so far, but it is so much fun smashing her against Yang over and over. Also, it's both touching and funny watching Ren indulge Nora against his better judgment.

Putting those favors into play for Jaune and Pyrrha was always the plan for this arc. I do love my Checkov's Guns. I'm sure one of them will use theirs for something stupid.
“So there I was,” They had just finished getting the table set up and Ruby was upstairs retrieving a book she’d forgotten, leaving the players to their own devices—in this case, one of Nora’s patented stories. “I’m in the middle of History class and people are just staring and snickering and I’m so confused because why would people be staring at me and snickering? Then Mr. Jones looks at me and asks, ‘Nora, why are you in your underwear?’ and I look down—and I was totally in my underwear!”

Despite knowing better (this was Nora after all), Pyrrha still gave her a skeptical look. “You know, I’ve always seen that in movies and on TV, but I’ve never seen a person actually have that dream.”

“Dream?” Nora asked.

“No, that actually happened,” Ren said from behind the Player's Handbook he was perusing, “Today. In Seventh Period. She had gym right after and... got distracted when she wasn't changing to go back to class.”

“Weren't you embarrassed?”

Nora snorted. “About what? As Yang would say, if you've got it, flaunt it!”

“And that's why she has detention Monday.” Ren added, “I think it's around the time she started striking poses is when Mr. Jones's patience finally ran out.”

“Found it!” Ruby bounded into the room carrying a binder stuffed beyond its limits with notebook paper. “Sorry guys, Dad made my clear my room, so I stuffed everything in my closet, and this baby got caught in the crossfire.” She slammed the book down on the table. “Behold! I and my secret cabal of evil DMs have anticipated twenty-three different ways you guys can go totally off the rails to screw over my plans and prepared contingencies to deal with them!” She planted both hands on the table and leaned forward, staring each person in turn in the eye. “I am so on to you.”

At this, Nora cackled. “Sounds like a personal challenge! Bring it on!” She raised a pair of knitting needles and challenge before going back to whatever it was she was knitting. When Jaune asked earlier, she said it was a tapestry.

“Oh, it will be brung.” Ruby replied menacingly... “Branged... Bought? Whatever! Recap: last time, you were all attacked by the air forces of the Queen of Thorns led by Vanio Dastaang, who used to pal around with Ren's evil family. After a pitched battle, Vanio managed to destroy your airships propellers before being defeated. Everything looked great until Vanio revealed that the Queen of Thorns is on her way with more bandits to capture the ship for her evil plans! Luckily, the bard—who did nothing useful last time--”

“Hey!” Jaune complained, “It's not my fault I didn't know how Spectacles worked.”

Ruby stuck her tongue out, “Totally useless. Until he came up with the bright idea to use the Conjure Winds ritual with all of you casting it to push the ship hopefully to safety. What do you do now?”

Nora started to say something, but Ren surprisingly beat her to the punch. “First order of business
is the most important thing to do every fight: we loot the bodies.”

“Well not the guys we splattered across half the forest.” Nora pointed out. “and the miniboss is alive—I got the location of their base out of him!”

“Oh, the second he's of no use, Seri will perform a coup de grace on him.” Pyrrha announced.

Jaune did a double take. “But he's...”

“Seri's evil. And he's someone who could very much kill her when her guard's down,” Pyrrha reasoned, “So yes: Ruby, the second Nora's done with him, I'm going to stab him with my dagger.”

“He's more of less helpless, so yeah, you bleed him like a stuck pig,” said Ruby.

Pyrrha sat up a little straighter. “Excellent. Now that he can't hear or report back, I have a proposal for the three of you.”

After a beat, Ren asked, “Was that in character?”

“Oh. Right. This is all in character. Ahem: If we take what this man told us as the truth, then a bandit army is on its way to us. We can't fight that many and since we don't know what route they're taking to get to us, we don't know what direction is safe, yes?”

“We are not going to abandon the other passengers,” said Jaune, “I already said no to that.”

Ren nodded. “I wouldn't feel right about that either.”

“Yes, your objections are noted,” Pyrrha dismissed imperiously, “But we do know two bits of information that should dictate our next course of action. One: the one place we know the bandit army will not be is at their base. And two, we know where this base is. A base that is very likely groaning with treasure.” She turned a smile toward Jaune, “And for Darian, there are likely hostages to rescue as well.”

Nora tapped her bottom lip with a knitting needle. “So... what you're saying is that we should totally hijack this airship, double back on the bad guys and sack their base?”

“That's exactly what I'm saying.”

“How do I sign!? Let's do that thing, it sounds awesome!”

“We could just go away from their base. It would keep the people on board safe and we can come back on foot.” Jaune interjected. “Honestly, shouldn't we ask the crew and our fellow passengers whether or not they want to be steered into the mouth of doom?”

Pyrrha raised a finger, still very much in character if her smug expression was anything to go by. “Why should they have any say at all? If this ship moves an inch, it will be thanks to our spellcraft and our mystical reagents. “We could just leave them here for the Queen, after all. Plus, as I said, this is the lowest risk plan of action we have—to say nothing of the rewards.”

“Sorry,” Ren said, giving Jaune a shrug. “We makes some good points. I think you're out-voted.”

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“Yes.” Nora hissed, pumping her fist before launching into song, “Adventure, adventure, we're going on an adventure!” Then she stopped, eyes going wide. “Oh, but like Ren said: loot the bodies first! Search che... where's the Search skill?”

“It's been rolled into Insight now,” explained Ruby. Also, yeah, roll it!” The highest roll as Jaune's
Okay, first of all, you now have three intact wargliders, a crossbow, three short swords, three sets of leather armor, and a total of two hundred gold in various coins. Also, Vanio has really nice armor with a thorned rose on the chest, and a sweet sword of black steel with thorns etched into the blade. He also has an amulet set with a ruby the size of a thumbnail in the center. That last one was really well hidden.”

Jaune picked up his blue dice and bounced it in his palm. “I can do Lore rolls to identify those, right?”

“Lore or Spellcraft,” Ruby agreed, “Roll it.”He easily passed on identifying the armor and sword, but rolled a two for the amulet. “Okay, neither one is magic, but they’re exceptional items—which is pretty much magic in this game, only anti-magic doesn’t shut them down. The armor is Supple Armor: you can sleep in it without any penalties. The sword is an Adamantine longsword. If you attack an object with it, it ignores hardness for damage equal to your Strength modifier.”

“If it helps me break things, I call dibs!” Nora waved her hands.

“And I’m the only other one who uses leather armor.” Pyrrha added. “But let me see if I can Spellcraft that amulet.” She chucked her steal die and easily succeeded. “I’m pretty sure twenty-five gets it.”

Ruby nodded. “You know that the amulet is basically a homing beacon. It would allow someone else to know where it is if they concentrate.”

“So... throw it over the side?” Pyrrha asked the others.

“Yes!” Jaune and Ren said in unison.

“Wait, no!” Nora cut in. “Ruby, do we have enough rope to climb down to the forest?”

By now, Nora was bouncing in her seat. “So I can climb down, find a squirrel or bird or something and tie the homing thing to that, then scare it so it runs away. Then the bad guys will be chasing a squirrel around with an army and it’d be hilarious!”

Ruby considered this, then smirked. “You know what, if you want to go try that, then yes, you can totally find enough rope to climb down tot he forest.

“Then I do that!”

“Nora, you're going to get us a random encounter.” Ren warned.

She rounded on him with a wide grin. “Perfect! Then that's the way it shall be!”

“The plan still works if the amulet's in an owlbear's stomach.” Pyrrha pointed out.

As Nora began to speculate on what the best animal to feed the amulet would be, Jaune turned to Ruby. “Okay, so while she's busy doing that, and I guess Pyrrha and Ren, as the two primary casters get everything together for the ritual, I'll go down and explain things to the captain at least. It'd be kind of awful to just go 'surprise, we're hijacking you to go earn XP.'”

“Come to think of it, I'm shocked no one else came up to see what was going on after the explosion,” said Ren.
“Maybe they're just smarter than PCs,” offered Jaune, “who else is dumb enough to run toward the sounds of explosions and guys falling to their deaths?”

“Touche.”

Ruby opened the binder and rifled through her notes. “Okay, so Jaune, you get down below and there's no one down in the common area. People seem to have locked themselves in their quarters. You eventually find the captain and some of the crew down in the engine room where there's smoke everywhere as they struggle to fight all the fires that go with exploding propellers.”

“Will it help them to use Inspire Competence on them?”

“Couldn't hurt.”

Jaune nodded. “Okay then, I'll use my Tales of a Common Struggle Spectacle to automatically Aid Another as a minor every round and then cast and sustain Inspire Competence. Everyone gets +1 to their rolls and one who looks important each round gets a +2.”

After a few die rolls, Ruby replied with. “You help them keep things from getting worse and in a few minutes, all the fires are at least under control. The captain asks you what happened.”

“I tell him everything: the attack, what Vanio said, and especially the homing amulet,” said Jaune, fidgeting with his spider mini. “Then I lay out the plan Pyrrha came up with. Diplomacy... nineteen?”

“Hmm...” Ruby pondered over what to do with that. The idea of flying toward the bandit camp should bother the captain, but then the possibility of the bandits knowing exactly where the ship was anyway meant the couldn't just try and follow their normal course. Plus, none of the crew were casters, so the only way the ship was going to move would be with the help of the PCs.

Actually, when she really thought of it, that was the core choice even if Jaune didn't notice: do as the PCs said, or sit there and be taken by the Queen of Thorns.

“Okay, so the captain agrees to let you loop around and attack the camp... if you give him your word on your life that that none of his crew or the other passengers will be hurt.”

The others, even Nora, went still. As much as Ruby had promised an all-new campaign, she was going to one of her favorite tropes for dealing with Jaune there: making his Lawful Good characters swear oaths that would come back to bite them in the ass later.

“Don't fall for it,” Ren said, holding up his hands as if he could physically hold Jaune back from the choice. “Remember how Galario, the Hammer of Justice died? When that village you swore to protect was overrun by a shadow and its spawn?”

Pyrrha was quick to join in. “Or when that woman we saved from the Dark Spire and you swore to keep from harm turned out to be an erinyes who entangled us all, nailed Ren to the city wall with her sword and drove you so far into the negatives that Ruby stopped counting?”

Jaune looked to Nora, who had gone back to her knitting. She just shrugged. “What's the worst that could happen?”

“We just got done explaining exactly what the worst is that could happen,” said Pyrrha, getting up to get a drink.

Heaving a sigh, Jaune hung his head. “Okay, I get it, it's a trap. Darian will tell the captain that he
can't promise that, but he will swear that he believes Seripheid when he says this plan is the safest one for all involved given what we can do. Another Diplomacy?"

“Nah,” Ruby said, “he accepts that, but to encourage you to make sure they live through this, he promises you a reward if the ship reaches its port of call safely. And now... Nora. You knot together enough rope to climb down to the trees. How are you going about finding an animal to attach the amulet to?”

Nora gave her a genuinely puzzled look. “I have to look for one? I mean I'm an adventurer who split from the party to wander alone in the woods with no way to call for help. Shouldn't the monsters be lining up to get a shot at me?” Without warning, she turned to give Ren an accusing look. “You promised me random encounters. Why did you lie, Renny? Why did you lie?!”

Before Ren could defend himself, Ruby was rolling dice. “You all heard her, she wants this. I'm not being unfair or a killer DM if she is literally demanding a...” she cut herself off in a snort that quickly became raucous laughter that itself became maniacal.

“I missed something very bad for us, didn't I?” Pyrrha asked Jaune, putting a can of cola in front of him before opening her own sports drink.

“Nora asked for a random encounter, Ruby rolled it and now I'm waiting for an ominous bolt of lightning to strike behind her,” he supplied, cringing away from Ruby.

Abruptly the laughter cut off and Ruby set her eyes on Nora. “So you go down to the forest and start poking around in the dark, just hoping to run into a monster. As luck would have it, you turn the corner and see the following: Before you is a huge beast covered in red-brown, shaggy fur that hangs in matted curtains along its bulky body. A thick tail balances the thing's body as it rears up to tear at tree bark with great, hooked claws, pausing to snake a long tongue into the torn areas from a bear-like snout. Its small ears twitch as it detects your presence. The great beast turns and bellows a challenge as it drops to all fours. Roll for initiative!”

Pyrrha's brow creased in thought. “That description sort of sounds like...”

“Please don't say it out loud,” Ren warned before she could finish. “It's better for everyone if she doesn't know what she's fighting.”

“He's right,” Jaune nodded sagely. “Otherwise, she'd try to capture it.”

Meanwhile, Nora easily beat the monster in initiative, but the byplay hadn't slipped past her.

“Okay, first thing: knowledge nature check, please.”

“Are you even trained?” asked Ruby, ignoring everyone else's reaction.

“Nope! But I can still get basic stuff on a ten, right? Like what it's called?” Without any prompting, she threw her die, getting a 13 and, in turn, grinning at Ruby.

The young GM sighed. “It's a megatherium, a...” she paused as she actually saw Nora's pupils dilate. Her facial expression left Ruby feeling dirty for having seen it.

“That's... that's the super-sized prehistoric sloth! It's a sloth... that you could ride. I saw this special once where one beat up a saber-toothed tiger. This. Is. The. BEST!” Nora shot up from her chair, punching both fists toward the sky. Her knitting tumbled off her lap into a heap on the floor as her eyes blazed with sloth-fire (which until that very moment hadn't been a thing).

With a look of mad glee, she pointed at the GM, who decided now was the time to cower behind
her screen. “Ruby. I am going to... wrap the amulet around my dagger, throw it at this thing, then run. Run really, really fast.”

The recoil from the tension at the table breaking probably destroyed the next town over, and the collective “WHAT?!” that came from the other four friends might just have echoed back in time to inspire the word ‘what’ itself.

Nora cackled. “You guys think I'm gonna try to catch that? It's a CR 10. And the only way to gain the noble sloth as your mount? Is wrestle it into submission—which I can't do right now. So I'mma stab it with the amulet, then later, once we level, either we beat the spell to track the homing thingie out of the Queen of Thorns, or Pyrrha can research it. Plus, I bet it can murder-kill like a hundred bandits when they come looking for it.” She steepled her fingers in a show of avarice and uncontrolled wrath, “And only once it tastes manflesh will it truly be worthy as a mount for me!”

Ruby shivered. “You know what? I'm just going to say that worked so we can stop talking about things tasting 'manflesh'. You guys all get things done and meet up again. So you're really going to fly the hip to the bandit camp?”

“Sounds like,” said Ren.

“Exactly,” said Pyrrha with an air of pride for having the idea.

“Darian doesn't like it, but I'm ready.” Jaune added.

Nora popped up from retrieving her knitting. “Onward! For Justice! For Adventure! For Phat Lewts!”

They were all silenced upon seeing Ruby's slasher smile. “That's right,” she said with a deadpan worthy of her sister's best friend. She opened her binder, revealing more than a dozen colored folders. She flipped through them before reaching one and pulling it out. “Onward: the contingency plan number eighteen.”

She held up the folder, showing the red cover with a piece of masking tape bearing a title written in magic marker: 'Scenario 18: The Party Attacks the Bandit Camp.

“I told you I'd planned for everything.”

“Aw man,” Jaune groaned, “This is for derailing things last time, isn't it?”

Chapter End Notes

I'm constantly delighted at the idea of Ruby, who lives with resident Large Ham, Yang trying to compete with Nora in hamming it up. Also her trying to play the 'evil DM' when the random encounter had Nora set to fight the things she loves most.

Oh yeah, she sort-of quotes Beast Boy from Teen Titans for the 'brung' line.

By the way, when she says secret cabal of Evil DMs, she's not kidding. One of them is Penny. Somewhere else in this setting, Penny has a weekly game with upperclassmen too. I haven't decided who's in her group, but I have decided it's via Skype instead of face-to-face. Maybe Ciel, Flynt and Katt? One day, we will bring these groups together ala Knights of the Dinner Table.
The other Evil DM is someone we've met already. Go crazy with the guesses.

Jaune's habit of getting himself and others killed over honor issues is based on a real player in our group back in the day whose focus on honor constantly had him trusting anyone who managed to look pathetic for half a second.

Very little Ren this time around, but don't fear: next chapter will have both our boys getting to play better than they did last time now that both know the rules better. This just happened to end up a very Nora-heavy episode, mostly because of how the game has played out.

Speaking of, now she's knitting. I actually played with three separate women who independently took up knitting and did so at the table. Yes, there were dice bags, how did you know?
Actually casting the rituals to move the ship turned out to be not problem at all, thanks to Jaune managing a Spellcraft check of over 30 on his own, aided by none of the others rolling under 20. With the help of the ship's crew, they steered the Bull's Head in a long, lazy loop to avoid being spotted by the bandits before making for the camp.

“As we get closer to where Vanio said the base was, I'm climbing to the highest point on the ship and using the Farsight Lens ritual, Ruby.” Pyrrha announced. “I want us to stop far enough from the camp that they don't notice the ship.”

Ruby nodded. “Okay, roll a climb check first, then a Spellcraft to cast the ritual.”

Both were easily passed and Pyrrha was able to tell the others when to end the Conjure Winds rituals so they only had a fifteen minute walk to the bandit camp.

“The camp itself looks like it was set up on top of the remains of a long-abandoned township. The wooden palisade they've erected incorporates parts of the original stone wall while the bandits appear to have at least partially restored a large building in the center. It might be a church or a town hall, but it's two stories tall and made of stone, some ancient and moss-covered, some freshly placed. Give me a Perception check, Pyrrha.”

The steel d20 came up 3. “…” Pyrrha glared at the dice. “9?”

“It appears that the camp is completely abandoned.” Ruby reported with a smirk.

“Good job, Eagle Eye.” Jaune teased, earning himself a flick to he ear from his best friend.

Ruby moved the minis aside and took up the ship map she'd put down before, replacing it with a transparent town map, with several buildings covered up by sticky notes so the players couldn't see what was there until they went inside. “Now. You guys are here, on the south side of the camp. How are you going about getting in?”

“Given the party make-up, it's possible to sneak our way in,” Ren observed, “Gao Is the least stealthy of the group and he's still not bad at it.”

While he was talking, Jaune was staring at the map. “Hey Rubes? What kind of gate is this?” He pointed tot he closest one.

“That's a wooden gate that's raised by a set of wheel and chain mechanisms on the tower next to it.”

“Hmm. Nora, how's Lynn's Climb?” he asked.

“Awesome! She's like a ninja!”

Jaune nodded, gears obviously turning in his head. “Right... Okay, how about this: Darian can turn into a spider and ride on Lynn's shoulder. Lynn can climb the wall and the two of us can stealth-kill whoever is guarding the gate control. Then we open the gate. Gao and Seri can be waiting in the woods in front of the gate. When it stats to open, you can ambush the guards on the outside, while
we go for the ones inside. Sound good?"

The others all agreed.

“While we wait for them to open the gates, I’m going to use one of my cleric's god-specific spells and Fortify Water. It turns one gallon of water into one gallon of weak ale,” Ren consulted his sheet like an accountant looking for missing funds. “As soon as the gate starts to open, I'll take a drink.”

“I'll hold my action to cast Plane of Force in blade mode,” Pyrrha added.

“Okay, so Nora, Climb and Stealth checks, please.” Ruby started rolling Perception for the guards at the gate.

“Nineteen plus twelve is Thirty-one for Stealth!” Nora crowed, only to groan as the second dice came up 8. “Awe, that's only seventeen.”

Ruby kept her face straight as she said, “So with perfect silence, you scramble halfway up the palisade only to side down and land on your butt!”

“Hey, when she's halfway up, can I jump off her and climb the rest of the way up the wall? In spider mode, I have a climb speed of 10.” asked Jaune.

“Sure. While Nora tries and fails, you abandon her to crawl up onto the wall. The top of the wall is sharpened wooden pikes and a drop down to the other side—there's no walkway or anything. You're thirty feet from the gatehouse and you can see two guys sitting on a bench inside the gate wearing boiled leather armor and wielding halberds.”

“Is the door to the gatehouse open?”

“Nope.”

“Then a scuttle over to the door and wait for Nora.... Lynn.”

Ruby nodded and turned back to Nora. “Another Climb check, please.”

Nora almost rolled her pink die before thinking better of it. Instead she reached over and grabbed one of Ren's d20's. “You know the pink one just rolled a nineteen for you, right?” he complained as his dice was filched.

“I know, but I just can't trust it in a clutch anymore!” Nora exclaimed, chucking Ren's die. “Yes! Fifteen plus nine is... Twenty-four!”

“And through the magic of theft, you're up and over,” Ruby replied. “You land on the other side of the palisade without a sound and see the two guards on this side of the gate and a big spider standing by the gate house door.”

Nora actually gave this some thought: she could charge the two guys like she normally would, but if she made sure the gate was opening first, she could get surprise on them, which meant sneak attacks. And she needed those sneak attacks because Pyrrha was ahead of her on body count so far that campaign and that was unacceptable.

“I sneak over to the gatehouse door and listen at it.” She rolled, “fourteen Perception.”

“You hear what sounds like one man shuffling around inside.”
Nora grinned. “Ready, Jauney?”

“Yes. Ruby, going to almaga form.” He replaced his mini with the Man-spider one. “Then I open the door for Nora so she doesn’t have to spend an action on it.”

Ruby rolled again behind the screen. “Okay, Nora, you have a surprise round. The door opens to reveal a dingy, barely lit room with a huge, rusty iron wheel attached to a chain drive in the south wall, a rack for weapons and armor on the north wall, and a man in boiled leather sitting on a stool just inside.

“I murder him!” Nora chirped, rolling Ren's die again. “Nineteen to hit with Opportunist's Gambit. And if that hits... fourteen damage. Wait... does my new sword do anything extra?”

“The Adamantine one?” Ruby asked, “Yeah, since you're level 5, it gives you a +1 to attack and damage. So that's really fifteen damage. He's badly hurt, but not quite dead yet.”

“I'll draw one of my masterwork whips with the mechanical short sword in the handle, pop the sword and take a swing at him.” Jaune said quickly, before Ruby could say the surprise round was over. Will thirteen hit? If it does, that's... four damage.”

Ruby consulted her notes and huffed a bit behind her screen. It would have been nice to have the gatehouse guard get off a cry of alarm, but alas... “Nora slashes this guy's chest open, but he opens his mouth to yell when Jaune slashes his throat, silencing him forever. And you two have the gatehouse.”

“Sweet!” Jaune and Nora high-fived. “Okay, Nora, head around and get ready to charge those guys the second I start opening the gate, okay?”

“Aye-aye, fearless leader!” Nora saluted. “You heard the man, Ruby—Charge!”

“Gonna need initiatives now. You're all going to get a surprise round, but we need to know what order.” Ruby started rolling for the bandits while the others did the same for their characters. “Okay, it's Nora, Jaune, the bandits, Pyrrha and Ren. Nora, get to it; the gate is starting to come up.”

“Charging! Hitting the first one with Opportunist's Gambit.” She rolled a total of nineteen, easily hitting and getting her Sneak Attack. Sixteen damage dropped the bandit in one hit. “Okay, now... Action Point! I get another standard and use Opportunist's Gambit on the other guy!” She hit again, but only did ten damage, leaving her target standing.

“Aw man.” She pouted.

“Sorry. Jaune?” Ruby looked to the blond.

“Can I see the gate from inside the gatehouse?”

“Yup.”

“Then I'll cast Charlatan's Orb on the guy Nora nearly killed. Will—crap—an eleven hit as a touch attack, no armor bonus?” Ruby nodded. Jaune had to do a double take in surprise. “Really? Wow. Okay, so it does damage equal to my CHA modifier plus level. That's nine.”

Ruby reached over and flipped the glass counter representing the guard. “And he's dead.”

“Kill stealer!” Nora shook her fist at Jaune. “That's twice now!”
Choosing to ignore her, Ruby moved on. “Bandits can't act while surprised, so it's Pyrrha's turn.”

Pyrrha nodded. “Okay, I'll cast Plane of Force in shield form instead of the blade. Then I'll walk up to the bandit on the left.”

The pint-sized GM blinked in confusion. “Wait, what? You're just going to walk up to him?”

“Mmm-hmm.” Pyrrha smiled, then gestured to Nora, “Exactly in the right place to set up a flank if Nora charges.”

Nora's eyes sparkled as if she was being given a brand new car. “You're the best, Pyrrha! Thanks!” She picked up her cotton candy pink die and rubbed it between he palms with a sadistic grin. “Is it my turn yet?”

“Nope, it's Ren's.” Ruby held out her hand to the quiet one of the group.

Ren steepled his fingers, observing the board like a seasoned chess player. “Okay, as my minor action, I'm going to Drink Like a Fish, Fight Like a Demon. Then I'll use my Move action as another minor to cast Blessing of Ferocity on Nora. She gets a +1 to attack and damage for the next five turns.

“No. Wait, Ren's the best!” Nora.

“Then I'm going to cast Binding Flames on the remaining bandit. He gets a Will save.”


“Is saying something intimidating a free action?” Ren asked.

“Not in this system. Skills are always a minor unless they say otherwise.” Ruby gave him a sympathetic expression before looking to Nora. “Well, you're up again. Let me guess: charge and Opportunist's Gambit?”

Nora flourished her die. “With my very last Focus Points. Natural nineteen! That's a crit with a longsword!” Instantly, she and Jaune were on their feet, high-fiving and doing their little song as they had last session. Then she rolled damage and Sneak Attack.”

“He's dead,” Ruby declared the second the d8 for the longsword came up 7. “It's already fourteen before you add strength or Sneak. Pyrrha, Seri sees a black sword explode from this guys' chest just before she is just... covered in arterial spray. He actually has time to wonder why you just got spray-painted red before he realizes that's what was keeping him alive and dies.”

“I actually imagine Seripheid's been in this situation many times, so I won't even react.”

Jaune glanced at her out of the corner of his eye. “Every session, this character gets scarier and scarier.”

“Aren't you glad she's on your side?” She beamed at him.

“I like her being beside me a lot better than her being behind me, that's for sure,” he gave a partially nervous laugh before turning his attention to Ruby. “I'm going to cast Suggestion on the last guard. Will save DC... let's see, ten plus my Charisma, that's fourteen, plus half my level rounded down, so 16.”

“We're so close to actually getting in here without the alarm being raised, so I point at him and say, 'you want to be silent because if you make a sound, we will be forced to kill you’.”

“Well that wor—“ Ruby started.

“When it's my turn, I kill him anyway.” Nora said with a feral grin.

Pyrrha raised a hand, “Same. Actually, I go first, so I switch my Plane of Force to razor form and slash at him with it. Aaand I miss.”

Ren sighed. “Well, since everyone else is doing it, I'll draw my falchion and charge to a place where Nora can flank. Twenty total to hit and... ten damage.

“You didn't have to set up a flank, Renny—I'm all out of FP to Sneak Attack with.” Nora said, hanging her head.

Reaching over, Ren gently patted her on the shoulder. “come on, Nora, you can still do a lot of damage. And it's your turn.”

She gave him a nearly-teary eyes look and nodded. “Right! One more kill!” She threw here dice and added up her bonuses. “Woot! Twenty-two! For... seven damage.”

“That's just enough to kill him.” Ruby said, sounding impressed. “You guys actually pulled off sneaking inside without the camp being alerted and the rogue is insanely broken. Well, until she ran out of FP.”

“Speaking of which, time for us to take a short rest.” Ren said. “Nora's running on empty and the rest of us are down Spell Points.” Ruby glared at him, but he only answered with a level, impassive look.

Finally backing down, Ruby sat back. “Alright, so you take a breather. Focus Points all refill totally and the casters regen Spell Points equal to your level, so five plus any bonus regen you might have. I'd say you could use any healing you wanted, but none of you even got scratched in that fight.” She pouted at them, then immediately brightened up. “So, where are you going now?”

“Well the place in the center seems the most obvious,” Pyrrha pointed out. “We should see if we can just get in there without anyone noticing.”

“Aa, but there's probably guys sleeping in these tents and shacks we could kill.” Nora complained.

Jaune shrugged. “There's a couple of huts next to the big place. You and Ren can search those while we're getting those doors open. That way we're close enough to help each other if we run into trouble. Remember Rule 1:Never Split The Party.”

“Still splitting the party.” Ruby warned.

“It's only a double move away, we'll be fine.” Nora assured her.

Ren pinched the bridge of his nose. “I really wish you hadn't said that.”

Nora lightly batted him on the shoulder. “Oh, it's not like I said 'what's the worst that could happen?'.”

“And there it is.” Jaune said, facepalming.

“Still checking out this shack!” Nora said, pointing at one of the shacks in front of the larger
Pyrrha sighed. “Well she does have incredible luck, I'm sure she'll be okay for a couple of minutes. I'll go to the main building and take out my thieves' tools.”

“Stealth checks for everyone. Ren, Jaune, where are your characters going?”

“Twelve.” Pyrrha groaned.

“Same.” Ren added, “And I'm staying with Nora to administer inevitable healing.”

“Eighteen,” said Jaune, “And I'm with Pyrrha. If we can't keep from splitting the party, the buddy system will have to do.”

“Twenty-one!” Nora bounced in her seat. “And I'm bustin' out my thieves' tools too!”

Seeing the writing on the wall, Ruby just sat back and called for an initiative order. Ren rolled a natural twenty and went first, followed by Nora, then Pyrrha, then Jaune. Ren merely announced he was holding to see what Nora was doing. Nora in turn went to the shack and tried the door.

“It is locked. Roll me Mechanics. To get it open,” said Ruby.

Nora blinked owlishly. “Roll what now?”

“Mechanics. That's the skill you need to pick locks.”

“We do?” This time it was Pyrrha asking. “It's not Legerdemain? All the other thief-type skills are Misdirection and Legerdemain.”

Ruby nodded. “You're actually okay, because your Misspent Childhood background lets you treat Mechanics as trained for the purposes of picking locks, but Nora doesn't have that.”

Nora glared and grit her teeth. “Y'know what I do have though? A Cut through anything sword! I'm gonna chop through the lock!” And because Random Number God still loved her or hated everyone around her, she of course rolled max damage.

Not even shocked anymore, Ruby just rolled her eyes. “Lynn cuts through the lock on the door in one slash, the adamantine blade sending out sparks as it demolishes the metal with ease. You open the door to find that this is a store house for the camp's food: bags of grain, wheels of cheese, roots vegetables, and barrels of pickles and salted meats and fish fill the space.

“And out comes my loot sack.” Nora said, avarice dripping from her words. “Renny grab the cheese, it's worth the most. I'm filling up on salt!”

“Salt?” Ren asked.

Jaune raised his hand. “We were going through the equipment list earlier before you got here and salt is ridiculously expensive. Worth the same as gold by weight.”

Ren sighed. “Right. So we're filling burlap bags with salt. Please find something more dignified in the main building.”

“We'll try,” Pyrrha promised. “Since it's my turn now, I'll go up to the door and listen first. Um... oh my, 8 for Perception.”

“You hear your own breathing,” Ruby reported happily.
Pyrrha shrugged. “Okay, so I'll try the door. Is it locked?” Ruby replied in the affirmative. “Seventeen to open it.”

“The lock clicks open and the door swings inward on silent hinges.” Ruby pulled the post-it notes off the central hall of the building, revealing a long hall. “Before you is a hall of smoothed stone with a vaulted ceiling supported by exposed arches and heavy wooden braces. There are doors long the way, two to the left and four to the right. The end of the hall opens into a large space where the man-sized statue of a winged creature with steer-like horns and a sharp, beaked face stands.”

Pyrrha and Jaune shared a look. The latter spoke first. “Animating statue or gargoyle?”

“I imagine a statue. I'm going to try to keep out of its sight line and got to the first door here.” Pyrrha pointed to the first door on the right. Picking up her steel die, she bit her lip. She'd have a couple of bad rolls in a row just recently. She liked to imagine she was due a better one, but she knew better. Squaring her shoulders, she threw the die.

It came up a 2. “...That would be a ten for Stealth.”

From behind the screen came the sound of rolling dice. Ruby peeked over, completely failing to make eye contact with her. “I'm really sorry about this. I really didn't expect you guys to let the sorceress go in first.” She took a deep breath. “Seri hears the sound of stone grinding on stone, cracking and popping as what once looked like solid rock becomes animate and the Guardian Golem becomes active and rolls into initiative... right now. It's going to charge you.”

“I-it's okay,: Jaune said, “you can take the one hit and I can get some healing started.”

Ruby shook her head. “It has Pounce. On a charge, it gets two claws and a bite. I'm gonna be nice and the first claw is a trip. It rolls a nineteen plus...”

“I'm down.” Pyrrha interrupted. “Unless you say a negative number after that, I'm down.”

“Sorry again.” Ruby squeaked. “Claw, bite... those both hit.” Her face actually looked pained. “For thirty-two damage.”

Pyrrha's eyes widened and she checked her sheet in disbelief. “I'm at exactly 0 hit points.”

“At least you're not dead?” Ruby offered.

“Until the golem's next turn, or I try an action, at which point I'm dying.” Pyrrha pointed out. Her shoulders slumped. “It's too bad, I had a lot of ideas for this character.”

Ren got up and leaned over the table, counting out squares under his breath. “I can double move and blow my action point on the turn you die to cast Recovery on you to bring you back... but you'll be at one hit point in front of that thing.”

She waved him off. “It's okay. I mean, it's only the second session; I didn't have time to get that attached to Seripheid.”

“You're not going to have to anyway.” Jaune said suddenly, turning to offer Pyrrha a bright smile. “Don't worry, Pyrrha, Seri's not going to die this time because Darian has it covered.” He looked to Ruby. “My turn?”

“Go for it.” said Ruby, just as curious as the others.

Pyrrha gave her best friend a curious look. “Jaune, I'm pretty sure this is a very powerful monster.
It's okay if you can't…"

“Yeah, Pyrrha can play Lynn's twin sister Quinn and we can flank Sneak Attack all things forever!” Nora chimed in.

Jaune closed his eyes and smirked. “You guys have so much faith in me. Alright Rubes, first I'm going to split my movement and use ten feet to step up behind Pyrrha so I'm outside the door. Now I'm going to blow my Action Point. I have the feat Action Command, which means whenever I use an Action Point, I can either cause an ally that can see me to make a Basic Strike against an enemy they can attack, or reposition them a number of squares equal to my CHA modifier.”

He reached out and picked up Pyrrha's mini, moving her three squares behind him. Turning toward her, he gave Pyrrha a cheeky wink. “Repositioning doesn't draw an attack of opportunity, so he can't do a damn thing about it.”

“Isn't the golem just going to pounce you next turn?” Nora asked.

“Not if he's dead.” Jaune responded immediately. “Ruby, casting Sound Lance.”

Ruby snorted. “That' your badass kill spell? It only does a d8 plus your modifier and level. This thing has more HP than you do. I don't think you thought this through.”

“No aiming at the golem.” Jaune said smugly. “I'm shooting at the braces holding the ceiling up. Sound Lance does sonic damage, which does double damage to objects and ignores hardness.” He rolled his d8. “That's 7 plus 4 for my Charisma, plus 5 for my level. 16 times 2 is...”

“Thirty-two.” Ren and Pyrrha supplied at the same time.

Jaune cocked his head at Ruby. “Is that enough to blow the roof supports?”

Ruby stared at him for a long moment before pulling out another transparency to consult. Then she sighed loudly. “Okay. So you step up, somehow convince an utterly mauled Seri to crawl twenty feet behind you, and then send a sonic boom into the rafters, which give out with a groan. The main beam cracks and collapses, bringing with it the stone tiles from the floor above... and the bed, wardrobe and desk that were on that floor. They hit the golem and crush it beneath them, dealing...”

She rolled some dice. “Forty-one damage! It's still alive with six hit points!”

“But it's prone under the rubble and will take crush damage before it can act next turn.” Ren pointed out.

“I know.” Ruby muttered, glaring at him for having knowledge from the GM's Guide.

Jaune still wasn't done yet. “I've still got movement I can use and that standard action from the Action Point. I'll move back ten feet and drop Soothe the Wounded on Seri. That's four hit points now and four on your turn for the next three turns, Pyr.” He gave her his cheesiest grin. “Told you Darian could save Seri.”

Pyrrha smiled back at him and out of nowhere a flash of inspiration hit her. And at the moment it seemed like a really grand idea too. “My hero.” She said, then leaned over and pecked him on the cheek.

Aaand just as suddenly, it felt like a really bad idea because all the chatter from the others, even Nora's needles clicking just stopped dead. Jaune looked like he'd frozen up completely and she was
quick to grasp at whatever straws she could find to make the awkwardness stop. “Um... that was in-character, of course. Seri to Darian.”

“R-right.” Jaune muttered.

Nora glared at her so hard Pyrrha was afraid she might sprain something. “Wait a minute... isn't Darian a horrible man-spider right now?”

Feeling her natural confidence return, Pyrrha just waved that off. “Maybe Seri likes him like that. All things considered,” And at this, she gave her fellow redhead a wicked look, “Maybe she prefers it.”

“And while I go grab the brain bleach,” Ruby interrupted, “Jaune just set off a sonic boom and collapsed the front room of a house in the middle of the camp. Stealth is now officially off the table as the alarm goes up.”

Chapter End Notes

And there's the scene that inspired this fic. The combination of Jaune getting to show off his tactical prowess in-game and Pyrrha using the game fiction as an excuse to make some romantic overtures were part of the idea the whole time.

Of course, Ruby and Jaune are the only ones that buy the 'in-character excuse for a second, but that itself can and will have repercussions down the road. Good-natured plus socially inept are not good combinations for avoiding hijinxs.

Also, this is a PSA: Never split the party and never let the freaking mage wander into anywhere first. Even if she needs to use the bathroom, you send in the armored dwarf in there first just in case. Of course in this party, the bard is the tank, so what can you expect.

Nora and the adamantine sword is a reference to The Ultimate Skeleton Key, an adamantine dagger that almost every high level character (at least in our games) carried. Since Adamantine ignores hardness, you can use ot it just hack open locks, doors, walls, what have you. This system sort of mitigates it by only ignoring a certain amount of hardness, but Lynn was made by Nora and is therefore beast.

Her stealing trade goods like cheese and salt is a nod to Knights of the Dinner Table.
“Okay, so not an actual alarm yet, but in the darkness, you hear shouts from the handful of guys patrolling the camp. Their shouts wake up others, who immediately start gearing up for battle. What do you do?” She paused dramatically, waiting for the flurry of declared actions.

When none came, she peeked over her screen to see what was the matter.

Pyrrha was just sitting there looking shell-shocked. Ruby couldn't really blame her—even she never got so carried away playing her character that she actually acted out her character's actions. If she wasn't busy running the game, Ruby would have tried to ensure her friend that it wasn't nearly as embarrassing as she thought. That would be a lie, but one of the nice kind of lies like when Yang asked if her favorite skirt made her butt look too big.

Jaune was shuffling through his character sheet, presumably trying to come up with something. Ruby kind of doubted he would: the universe only seemed to portion out so much cool and Jaune usually ended up with a child-sized portion. That had undoubtedly been used up with his little stunt just then.

Ren... well Ruby was getting concerned about Ren. He hadn't been participating as much as he usually did and now it appeared he was so bored that he'd just taken out his tablet and started surfing the web. She was tempted to let him just roll up a rogue or something to get him back in the game. It was actually kind of disturbing being in a game where Jaune was the impressive one and Ren was ineffectual. Like the Twilight Zone crashed into the Outer Limits.

Then there was Nora. She'd gone back to furiously knitting while occasionally shooting a dirty look at Pyrrha for some reason. Ruby thought she'd seen her throw something on the ground earlier, so she leaned to the side to check. Yep, it was one of those little pennants Nora seemed to have made for every occasion. What was written on this one made no sense to Ruby. What the heck was an Arkos?

Just before she decided to try and snap everyone out of it, Ren of all people spoke up. “Just how much flour was in that storehouse, Ruby?”

“What? Um... here's the loot list. Obviously there's too much there for you guys to take it all...” She passed over the index card with the storehouse's contents written on it. Ren took it and examined it with a cold, calculating look in his eyes.

“Allright. I have a plan. Ruby, no one that's not awake is going to get to us anytime soon, right? They have to don armor for one thing. And even to don light armor hastily is six rounds.”

Ruby rubbed the back of her head. In all honesty, she was just going to have them attack. “Right...”

“Perfect.” Ren shot a look at the other side of the table, “And since we're all acting in character at the moment.” Pyrrha looked dutifully ahead, ignoring his jab. Ren turned to Nora. “Lynn, drop the cheese and salt. Grab all the flour you can and dump it in a huge pile in front of the main building. Darian, Seripheid, do either of you think you can manage an expedited casting of Conjure Winds?”

“Expedited what?” Jaune asked.
Pyrrha took the opportunity to talk about literally anything else other than what she'd just done. “ Expedited casting: it's one of the skill usages for Spellcraft. If you take a -10 penalty to your check to cast a ritual, you can reduce it's casting time. You normally need a 10 to cast Conjure Winds in five minutes, so with a 20, you could cast it in two and a half minutes.” She checked her sheet. “And yes, I can do that easily, though I'd only get a very small breeze.”

“I only need enough to get this flour into the air,” Ren assured her. “ Meanwhile, Darian, can you search that... room... you just dropped on that golem for anything useful, hopefully some magical items?”

“On it.” Jaune said, looking to Ruby. “ Casting Detect Magic on the smashed room and...” He rolled his blue twenty-sider, “ eighteen Insight to search the area.”

Ruby consulted her notes. “ You detect magic under the rubble, coming from the body of the golem. There's also something in the ruins of the wardrobe and the desk. Searching, you can rif through the wardrobe and the desk finding... fine clothing and jewelry for a woman worth two hundred gold total, a dagger encrusted with tiny pearls worth forty gold, a magical cloak of red-dyed animal fur with white silk lining, two map cases sealed with wax, and a magical golden ring.”

“Lore on the cloak and ring.” Jaune said automatically. “ Twenty-two and fifteen.”

“The cloak is a Cloak of Magnificence. It grants you a +2 on all Charisma-based rolls and once per day, when making a Charisma-based roll, you can roll twice and take the highest result. It gets better as you level too, obviously. The ring, however doesn't seem that special. It seems to grant the wearer the ability to read a language, but it's not any language you've ever heard of.”

Jaune wrote the whole list down. “ Huh. Well putting on the cloak...”

“Hey! I might want that!” Nora protested.

“You have a sword that just cut right through a lock.” Pyrrha pointed out.

“Oh. Right. Well... Ren might want it.”

Ren gave her a level look. “ With my 12 Charisma?”

“+2 goes a long way to making up for that.” Nora assured.

“I think I'll just take my share of the treasure out of the money.” Ren shrugged. “ Anyway, Ruby, is there anything I can make a torch with around here?”

“There's actually torch sconces in the undamaged part of the main building.”

“Excellent. I'll light that and hand it to Nor... Lynn. When I give the word, I want you to throw this at our enemies, okay?”

Nora's eyes brightened. “ You want me to set someone on fire?!”

He smiled at her. Some people would take her enthusiasm from wanton destruction might have been off-putting to some people, but he'd come to find it kind of adorable. “ Actually, I want to make this happen.” He showed her the tablet. Her normally vibrant turquoise eyes widened, then almost lit up the room with her glee.

“Oh Ren, you're so good to me! And it's not even my birthday!” She almost tackled him off his chair, wrapping him in a crushing hug.
“Should we be afraid?” Jaune asked Pyrrha.

“How. Ren has an idea and Nora is extremely happy. Yes, I believe we should.” Pyrrha surmised. Then she paused to put together what Ren had suggested so far. Flour that he wanted to have blown into the air and a torch. A brief flash of an old Mythbusters episode immediately flashed before her eyes and she quickly whispered her suspicions to Jaune.

The blond groaned and hung his head. “Aw man, I thought I was going to be the one with the cool thing this session.”

By then, Ruby had had enough of being the only one not knowing things. “Okay, that’s it. Someone explain this thing you’re doing?”

With an enigmatic little smile, Ren passed her his tablet, which was open to a Wikipedia page. Ruby’s eyebrows went up as she read the topic:

Dust Explosion.

Then she read further and followed a link to a video of what could be done with non-dairy creamer. She was practically drooling by the end. “S-s-so cool.” she whimpered, a towering inferno made from household good in the proper proportions reflected in her eyes. Then she sat bolt upright. “Dust can do that? Like explode everywhere like ‘pow’?! Why aren't all weapons dust-based? That would be awesome! You could have like... a dust-gun that's so powerful you could use the recoil to fly!”

“It's a little more complicated than that...” Ren reached over and gently retrieved his tablet.

“Whatever. I think I'm going to base my next campaign setting off that idea. Anyway though, that's too cool not to be a thing. You know what? Pyrrha, you don't even have to roll for the ritual, I'm gonna let it happen. Ren, I'm treating this as a maxed out Basic Fireball from the system, So 6d6 plus your level plus Intelligence? Yeah, Intelligence. The bad guys show up and you let 'er rip.”

Ren gathered his dice and shook them triumphantly. The six dice bounced and rolled across the table, rattling to a stop to the shocked silence of all present.

“Wow.” Nora gave a low whistle, “If we were playing Champions that would be an awesome roll—unless you were rolling damage. But we're not, so that's terrible.” Indeed it was: three one's, a pair of two's and a three.

“She's right. That's just awful.” Ruby added. “Like, you probably could have coughed on these guys for more damage. Oh, and they get reflex saves for half damage too.” She happily started rolling saves, delighting just a little bit in the distressed groan from Ren.

Finally, she was done and stood up to her full, completely unimpressive height to preside over her adjudication of the action. So here's what happens: the flour cloud blows out, but what you didn't count on was that there's already a breeze, which spreads the flour out a lot further. So instead of an awesome hellstorm that gets set off when Lynn throws her torch, it's this quick, bright flash that washes over the camp in an instant.”

She started placing counters, twenty of them in all, much to the dismay of the players. Then she grinned. “But here's the good part: even with their saves? Fourteen of these guys are minions. The flash is enough to set their clothes on fire and they go down, trying to roll the flames out, but they're not gonna make it. Of the remainder, five of them look to be either human or half-elf bandits. This lady here,” she tapped a counter, “She's special. Out of the flames and dark of night
strides a figure almost eight feet tall: a minotaur with a pair of curved horns that look like a sideways crescent moon above her head. She's wearing full plate with yellow enamel bearing the same rose and thorns symbol you found on Vanio. As a weapon, she's carrying a huge, bronze battle az—that's on fire.”

Ruby took a moment to clear her throat and take a sip of soda before bellowing, “I am Toaru of the Bronze, fourth Lieutenant of the Queen of Thorns! And I will have your heads!” A roll of the die determined the minotaur's place in that imitation. “She goes right after Nora initiative. So it's now Ren, Nora, Toaru, Pyrrha, Jaune, bandits. Starting at the top, Ren?”

“I'll cast Binding Flame on the minotaur, first of all. Will save, please.”

There was a clatter of dice behind the screen and Ruby grinned. “Made it.”

“Huh. Well I'll move back up to the top of the debris from the room falling in, then cast Blessing of Ferocity on Darian.” He nodded to Jaune. “Do everything you can to keep her prone standing on the debris.”

“Got it. Whips at the ready then.”

“Nora?” Ruby asked.

The energetic girl grinned fiercely. “I'm gonna charge--”

“Hold on.” Pyrrha interrupted. “You can't get a sneak attack on the minotaur this turn, but you have a short bow, right?” Nora nodded. “Then back up to the rest of us and start shooting the other bandits.”

“Why?” Nora pouted, “I wanna kill the big one!”

It didn't take long for Jaune to notice what Pyrrha had and he stepped in to explain for her. “Because everyone out there just took eight damage and all the guards we ran into before had 14 HP. So with your Dex bonus to damage, you can one-shot them almost without trying.”

Pyrrha nodded. “Think of your kill count.”

Indeed, Nora was, and she would be damned if she got behind in the count ever again. “Right! Pulling out my short bow and backing up onto the debris field. Then... fourteen to hit and eight damage.”

“Killed one!” Ruby announced, flicking a random counter off the board. “Now it's Toaru's turn and she's going to charge Ren because he's the one that tried to cover her in flaming chains. As a minotaur, she can charge over difficult terrain, so... twenty-four to hit you, Ren?”

He winced. “Yeah.”

“Take ten slashing and four fire damage.”

“Need healing?” Jaune asked.

“Not yet, just knock her down,” said Ren, marking off the damage.

Jaune nodded and checked his sheet. “Actually, let's get rid of that ax first. Ruby, I'm going to use Disarming Strike with my Masterwork whip. That's an 18 on the check and remember she doesn't get any bonus from size against me.”

“Without her size bonus? Yeah, you got her.” Ruby reported.

“And she takes four damage from my whip. Like. I snapped it across her knuckles to make her drop the ax. And that's my turn.”

“Okay, so the flaming ax is on the ground in the minotaur's square. Pyrrha, your turn.”

Pyrrha looked thoughtfully down at her spell list. She really had nothing that could solve the problem of a big, strong enemy standing right in front of her. In fact, if she cast, the minotaur would get to attack her for it. “Hmm. What action is it to pick something up?”

“Move-Equivalent.” Ren rattled off.

“Great. Then I'm going to pick up her ax and hit her with it.” It was one of the less realistic quirks of a game that openly reveled in its lack of simulationism in the GM's notes, but there were no penalties perse for not being proficient in a given weapon; you just couldn't perform special techniques with them or get the innate attack and damage bonuses from Exceptional or magical versions. Anyone could still just grab, say a flaming ax, and swing it with no numerical penalty, however. So she threw her steel twenty-sider and it came up a fifteen. “Eighteen total.”

“Yeah, no. She's got full plate. The ax goes 'clang', she looks pretty mad at you, but it does nothing.”

Pyrrha shrugged. “I tried.”

“Now the other bandits move up and the three with bows fire—all on Nora. Two hit you for... nine damage total.”

Nora narrowed her eyes. “Oh, they're gonna pay.”

“Not before my turn.” Ren said. “I'm going to take a five-foot step back, then cast Binding Flame again.” This time, Ruby rolled worse and Toura failed her save. “Finally. Now I'll burn two minor actions. Blessing of Health on myself to recover five hit points, then Blessing of Ferocity on Seripheid.”

“My turn!” Nora said as soon as he was done speaking. “I'm gonna shoot one of the guys that hit me. Twenty to hit for ten damage!”

“Another one's dead.” Ruby reported. “Anything else?”

Nora grinned. “You can force potions down someone's throat as a Move action, right?”

The pint-sized GM blinked. None of them had potions last time she'd checked. “Yes?”

“Yes! I'mma pull out my hip flash and force my Dwarf Whiskey down Ren's throat to activate his Drunk Master thingie.”

“That can't possibly work like that.” Ruby grabbed her book and started flipping through it.

“No, it really does,” said Ren, looking far too pleased with himself. “Drink Like a Fish, Fight Like a Demon activates 'whenever I take a drink'. There's no action associated with it, only the action it takes for me to take a drink on my own. So Nora forcing liquor down my throat counts.”

Jaune snorted. “You know, I never expected to hear 'Nora forcing liquor down my throat' in a
positive context.” The girl in question stuck he tongue out a him.

This earned a snort from Ruby too. “Okay, that's fine then. Nora's got Ren all liquored up now. This sounds like the start of one of those stories Uncle Qrow tells that makes Dad tell me to leave the room... It's Toura's turn next and she's real mad at... well all of you. Gonna take the damage from binding Flame, and she punches... hmm, well she wants that ax back so she's going to punch Seri in the face. Twenty-four hit? So close to a crit...”

“Very much.” Pyrrha replied, thankful she'd been keeping track of the hit points she gained back every round thanks to Sooth the Wounded.

“Seven damage, but it's subdual. Do you have more than seven hit points?”

Pyrrha checked her sheet. “Twelve.”

“Then congratulations, you are not unconscious. But she's going to use a minor action to mark you as her favored enemy. Oh, also I screwed up last time, you got before Jaune, so it's your turn now.”

“I'm... going to hit her with the ax again. Ooo, what's the critical range of an ax?”

“Only a natural twenty, sadly.” Jaune replied, taking note of the nineteen she's rolled.

Her shoulder slumped in disappointment. “Oh, well then it's just a twenty-two counting Blessing of Ferocity.”

Ruby blinked. “You actually hit her. Roll me 1d12 plus your strength modifier plus a d6 fire damage.”

“Eleven plus three fire damage.”

“And you actually hurt her. She is officially bloodied between that, the whip and the Binding Flame damage. Anything else?”

“How about a five-foot step back so I don't get punched in the face again?”


“Whips again. Using Bring Them Down. Yes! Natural 20 on the attempt!” He jumped to his feet just in time to intercept the incoming high-five from Nora. “Twenty-seven total! And... 6 damage from the whip!”

Smirking at the little display, Ruby made the sound of a tree falling. “And down the goes. Not dead, obviously, but on the ground.

“I immediately demand her surrender.” Jaune said in a rush. “She's prone, she'd disarmed, bloodied and caught in a binding Flame. 'You know you're beaten! Yield and We'll let you live.'” He looked at Pyrrha. “For real this time. Out of character: I'm taking Leadership next level and it'd be really easy to just poach off the bad guy.”

Pyrrha closed her eyes and shrugged. “I only slit the other Lieutenant's throat because he wasn't of any more use to us. I'm sure this one will be far more cooperative.” She cracked open one eye and looked at Ruby. “Does that give him a circumstance modifier? Can I roll Intimidate to aid?”

“I think he has enough modifiers already.” Ruby giggled. “Roll that Diplomacy, Jaune.”

“Twenty-two.”
“Hmm. Yeah, she's too smart to just let you murder her. Struggling against the binding flames, she puts both hands flat on the ground and says 'I concede. Spare me and I will do whatever you ask.'

“Sweet. First order of business: tell what's left of your men to stand down before Lynn over the kills them all.”

“Aww, don't ruin my fun, Jauney!”

Chapter End Notes

I came up with the dust explosion thing after having them find the storehouse. Once it was in my head, it seemed to just demand being here, especially with Ruby going off on a tangent about a world with Dust as a weapon being a cool campaign setting.

Which it is. I mean let's be clear in case people haven't heard about it, but the objectively best edition of D&D, 4th Edition, had as its default seeing a world where monsters and the forces of evil essentially ruled the world with demihumanity barely hanging on in far-flung settlements—points of light in the darkness. Meanwhile Remnant is a death world where the monsters rule the world while humans and faunus are barely hanging on in far-flung settlements—points of light in the darkness. The only difference is that 4e never got around to statting the Sniper Scythe.

Luckily, I have one that rends matter until it breaks down into a line of plasma capable of cutting a castle in half in the World of Ere Setting, so it evens out. And yes, that's in the books. A castle gets cut in half. Well a fifth of it gets cut off, but honestly.

Anyway, back to the fic, I finally get Ren engaged in the game, so we can officially say the whole gang is on board with Ruby's new campaign now. Also doing a bit more work on building up some Team Sloth moments. Arkos comes naturally to me since they're the kind of characters I naturally write and put together anyway, but Ren... is difficult. Stoic folk aren't something that comes naturally to me, so I'm trying really hard to do right by Ren while still making it so it's clearly Nora that cracks that shell.

And yes, Nora has pennants like that for every occasion. Because she's Nora.
Ruby was silent for a minute, peering over her GM's screen from Jaune to Ren and back, then let out a sigh. “Okay, so Jaune? You swear you're going to take Leadership next level?”

“Yep. That was the plan all along.”

Another sigh, then she started flicking through her copy of the rulebook. After a few minutes, she got back to the group. “Okay. So Toaru agrees to your terms and orders the three surviving bandits to stand down. Jaune, if you want, you can swear them to your service.”

“To the group's service.” Pyrrha cut in. “We don't want them getting ideas if you die or something.”

Jaune made a face. “Was that in character or out?”

“I really need to start doing a voice for her or something don't I? Oh, in character.”

“In that case, I'm not a fan of you making plans involving my death, Seri.”

Pyrrha smirked at him. “Sorry, force of habit: I've been through so many traveling companions in my time.”

“Also not encouraging when you're caked in blood, only a tiny amount of which is your own.”

Jaune nodded to Ruby. “Okay, I have them swear fealty to me and loyalty to my friends. Then I ask Toaru what the main building was first of all.”

“Good question. I hope it's a money bin.” Nora chimed in. “We could go swimming in gold coins like ducks!”

Ruby flipped through her notes. “Toaru says 'Oh, that was going to be the headquarters for the Queens' First lieutenant, Burning Fist Rakshmi. She's the one leading the expedition tonight after a new airship to capture.”

“Wait... this is just the first Lieutenant's place?” Ren asked, having caught that little tidbit. “Then where's the Queen's main base?”

“Toaru actually doesn't know. The bandits are all divided into commands under the five lieutenants: the air corps under Vanio, the home guard under Toaru, the raiders under Gouma the Shadow, the scouts under Yuki the Snow Angel, and the warriors under Burning Fist Rakshmi. Ren, you know the name Yuki because...”

Ren held up a hand, “Let me guess: she's one of Gao's sisters.”

“Yep! Welcome to the magical land of plot relevance!”

Ren in turn looked to the rest of the group. “We should leave before the scouts come back at the very least.”

“Why? We have so many shacks and stuff to loot.” Nora gave him a sad-eyed stare.
“Because I know one of the lieutenants and it wouldn't be pretty if we met. Everyone take the most valuable things you can carry and then let's get back to the ship.”

Ruby grinned at the reaction. “Okay, well Jaune, all the newly captured bandits look to you for instructions.”

The blond blinked. “Um... what he said? Go grab anything that might be useful or valuable: the best armor and weapons you can scavenge, all the coin and plunder you can carry. We're bugging out in fifteen minutes.”

“They get moving. I'll give you the exact amount of and type of loot they bring back, but one of them comes back with a very interesting wineskin. Wanna give me a Lore role, Mr. Leader Man?”

“Happy to, Rubes.” He threw his white die. “Twenty-six.”

“This is a Burning Libation Bottle. It produces one cup of an incredibly potent liquor a day that, when drunk, allows the user to belch up a basic fireball as a mage of their level.” Ruby didn't miss the look Ren was giving her. “Hey, I know it's super-convenient, but Jaune taking the minotaur lady as a cohort meant he also ganked the treasure meant for you.”

The dark-haired boy raised an eyebrow. “I was meant to get a flaming ax?”

“Well you were supposed to use the transfer enchantment ritual to move the flaming property onto your falchion, but clearly that's not gonna happen now.”

Ren responded with a small smile and a nod. “Thanks for looking out for me Ruby.

“Not a problem. And... congratulations, you guys have successfully taken the bandit camp and discovered the power structure they follow. You also defeated your third encounter of the campaign and thus you each gain an action point.” Ruby held for just a second for effect before adding, “And for reaching this milestone in the campaign... well ahead of my schedule... you gain a level. Next week I want to see you all at level 6!”

“Woo!” Nora started jumping up and down. “Sixth level is like the best in this system. You get a normal feat and I get a rogue bonus feat, and a rogue tactic. Since I got my new longsword, I'm thinking I'll pick up a shield and take Sword and Board Style. I always wanted to see what was so cool about using a shield that you two kept doing it.” she was, of course, talking to Jaune and Pyrrha.

“Glad everyone's happy.” Ruby laughed at Nora's antics. “Now all we have to do is vote on MVP and best Actor and we're done. And remember, no one can win the same award twice in a row.”

There wasn't much debate: Between his miraculous save of Pyrrha's character and then ending the camp combat by getting the survivors on their side, Jaune got MVP, while Ren got Best Actor because even if the dice disagreed, everyone felt his plan to set off a dust explosion earned some props.

Once that was done, the four non-residents set out.
It wasn't so much that he wanted to shut her up so much as he couldn't let her go on like that, getting all worked up over nothing. “No Nora, it's just the regular old bus. Nothing special.”

“Then why's it better than riding with me?” she whined.

Ren sighed lightly and reached out to ruffle her hair. He didn't know why, but she seemed to like it. “It's just that... I live way on the other side of town. And I know your Aunt doesn't give you gas money to waste on chauffeuring me around. I'm fine, really.”

To his surprise, her expression was more one of confusion than anything. “Who said my Aunt paid for my gas?”

A number of possibilities hit him at once. He hated to admit it, but he could honestly see Nora stealing things to keep her new toy fueled up. Hell, he could see her prowling the school parking lot with a length of hose, a bucket and a mint. There was really no limit to Nora except the ones her aunt or he himself imposed on her.

“I... uh...” Even more than thinking about it, he really didn't want to suggest it either. Because then she'd get ideas.

Nora batted his arm playfully. “Silly Ren. I have my own money, thank you very much.”

His vaunted stoicism failed him for a crucial moment. “I... how?!?”

She shrugged, prancing out ahead of him and doing a little spin with her arms held out. “Oh... eBay, Etsy, Craigslist... I've been trying to set up my own site with Gumroad, but I'm not very good...”

Even with years of experience, it was hard for him to follow her now. He had to slow down and work to parse through what all those things had in common. “You... sell things?”

Nora just laughed. “You don't think I just make all that stuff for fun do you? Well it is fun, but that just makes the money even better. I do something that's super-fun for a living. You know that tapestry thing I'm knitting? Someone's paying me four hundred dollars for it with their family crest or something on it. And Yang give me ten bucks a pop for pennants for stuff. Oh, and sometimes Coco hires me to do costume stuff for the drama department.”

A thought crossed her mind and she gave him a curious look. “How did you not know that?”

Ren blinked. Had he really just accepted that Nora was able to produce things that cost quite a bit almost on command? Honestly, he hadn't even wondered where her minivan came from. It was Nora; things just happened around her. He felt pretty terrible for never asking.

“I guess it never came up,” he said, defeated.

It didn't take long for Nora to launch into him with a hug bear hug. “No worries! Now you know, and knowing is half the battle!” Letting go of him, she skipped back a step, hands clasped behind her back, looking as sweet and demure as possible for a girl he knew had just spent the last three hours shouting about kill counts. “So... will you let me drive you home now?”

Ren considered this. He'd still technically be leeching off her for a ride. On the other hand, she was so damn earnest... “You know what? Sure. Thank you, Nora.”

“Yay, I'm a sugar momma!”
“What?”

“What? Come on!”

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“So...” the walk to his car had been far too quiet and Jaune's mouth just started running without any intervention from the brain in those situations. “...was that part of the idea from the start? You know, Darian and Seri?”

Pyrrha cringed, having honestly convinced herself things had blown over. “N-not really. I just thought that given who she is and what she does, it's very likely no one has ever done something like that for Seriphied before and what Darian did might have caused her to see him in a different light.”

“Then you're serious about doing this? The whole romance plot thing?”

She directed her attention across the street rather than look at him. “If it makes you uncomfortable, I'd understand. I just thought it might be... fun.”

Jaune Arc was what some would diplomatically call 'socially stupid', but even he didn't miss the tiny lilt of sadness in his best friend's voice. Damned if he understood what it was about, but he noticed it and knew that he'd do anything to make that stop being a thing.

“I didn't say I didn't want to do it—the plot, I mean. Play it out.” He chuckled nervously and rubbed his head through his woolly hat. “The whole point of this campaign is to try new things, right? And I've definitely never had a girlfriend before. Uh... in character I mean.” He slumped a bit. “Or out of character. Wow, that might have been the saddest thing I've ever said: my bug-man character has better luck with the ladies than I do.”

Pyrrha bumped him with her shoulder, something she often did when to break him out of one of his moods. He glanced her way to catch and odd little smile on her face. “First of all: he's an arachnid. Second, he has a very high Charisma.” She looked away again. “And... don't read too much into it. It was just a kiss on the cheek. It's not like I've never kissed you on the cheek before.”

Well, Jaune thought, that was true. At first, she'd done it because there was no easier way to make five-year-old Jaune pitch a fit than to get 'girl-cooties' on him. They'd started out as 'friends' in the sense that they lived next to each other and a parent with kids the same age was as good as any other babysitter. Which is to say he hated her and she lived to torment him.

Things changed though and so did the kisses, which went from a means to mess with him to something she just kind of did when something good happened to one of them. There was a picture in the Arc sitting room of their sixth-grade graduation which Jaune's mother had lovingly captioned in Photoshop as 'The Smooch of Victory'. Because the Xiao Longs weren't the only ones who loved terrible puns.

But, he recalled, that had stopped around freshman year. Specifically when people started looking at a guy and a girl who spent so much time together in a different light and the rumors started flying that they were dating. He totally understood why she'd stop: being romantically linked to him was bad for both her dating prospects and her social status. Sometimes he marveled at the fact that she stayed friends with him at all.

“That's... true.” he replied carefully.

“And if it doesn't turn out to be fun or interesting, we can just stop. After all it's just a game right?”
Pyrrha glanced at him briefly and he had no idea what that expression was. What the hell was going on? It was rare to see Pyrrha not okay and seeing it now was really bothering him.

Not knowing anything else to say, he nodded. “Right.” When the car came into view, he thanked every god he'd ever heard of. He decided now was also the time to change the subject. “By the way... your birthday's in a few weeks. Think you might take pity on me this year and actually tell me what you want?”

For just a second, she flashed him the most grateful look he'd ever seen anyone direct toward him. Then she schooled her expression and it quickly transformed into a mock-imperious mask. “Hmm... no, I think not. You haven't failed me in the birthday department yet, Jaune Arc; I do not expect you will this year either.”

Jaune opened the passenger door for her and heaved a forlorn-but-not-really sigh. “I guess it's another year of panicking and begging everyone for advice again.”

“I suppose it is.” Pyrrha said, giving him a genuine smile as she closed the door behind her.

He took his time coming around to the other side of the car. What was bothering Pyrrha was really bothering him now. She seemed really invested in playing out a romance between Darian and Seri. Almost as invested as he was in playing the hero...

No.

Couldn't be.

He tried to dismiss the idea, but it made too much sense. Could Pyrrha really be trying to play out a romance because she didn't have any in real life? As her best friend, he was well acquainted with the fact that she wasn't seeing anyone. To his knowledge, she'd never really pursued anyone since they were little, and she hadn't accepted a date from a guy since... last year? Right around the time he was going through what they referred to as the Weiss Saga.

As much as it hurt, he knew why too: Him. Even with the rumors of their... involvement... persisting, sweet, loyal Pyrrha still insisted as going to every dance with him as friends whenever he crashed and burned at his attempts to get an actual date. Which meant she never got to go with someone she might actually go with and fed the belief that she was taken.

It was his personal failings that had brought things to this, where she'd actually play out a fantasy romance with him of all people just to fulfill the emotions she craved.

He'd let her, of course. Whatever it took for his best friend.

But he knew that wasn't a real solution. No, the real solution lay in the coming month when Beacon High would be throwing its Winter Formal. He'd have to make absolutely sure Pyrrha got to go to that with a guy she actually liked liked instead of her loser best friend. Which meant, because her nature would never allow her to abandon him, that it was absolutely imperative this time that he find a date. Any date. Even if he had to cha-cha with Cardin-freaking-Winchester.

He finally got into the car, greeted by a tired, smile as Pyrrha made herself comfortable in the passenger seat. That was all it took to make adamant his resolve.

Yep, even that. Anything for her.
Oh Jaune, you sublime, complete idiot.

A word on Leadership: It is the best feat. Ever. Bar none. If you haven't heard of it, Leadership is a D&D 3e/Pathfinder feat that allows you to accrue NPC followers and a cohort who work for you as underlings. As I'm a Charisma-monkey player and Leadership increases with Charisma, I LOVE this feat, especially in the roleplaying opportunities it presents. I felt Jaune, who loves to play the hero, would want to take a crack at doing the King Arthur thing.

The crafty!Nora subplot continues. This was all unplanned from the start, it's just kept growing and growing and I love it, especially the idea that Nora has been sitting on her own small business and no one noticed. Eventually, we're going to meet her aunt too. In canon, they're both orphans, but in the AU, I found it a little hard to believe that both would have absolutely no family. So Nora has an aunt... who will be awesome, I promise.

The idea that Ren is fully aware of what Nora could do and is afraid to even tell her not to because it might give her the idea is sort of kind of inspired by Haruhi Suzumiya. It just amuses me, especially the idea that the whole gang is just kind of accepting of the idea that she might be magic.

And then there are our poor, poor dorks.

I purposefully skipped past the Weiss Saga in this fic so we could skip the part where Jaune is blithely missing Pyrrha's pain in pursuit of his own happiness so we could have something a bit more gentle. Here at least, he's trying to do right by her. He's... just a sublime, complete idiot. The Ur idiot if you will. If you cut him, all the village idiots in the world will flinch ...I've been there. Sigh.

It was fun coming up with some more of the childhood friends backstory. Did you ever have one of those friends that was only your friend because you were the only kids the same age in the neighborhood? I think it's adorable to start them off that way, especially with Pyrrha picking on Jaune.

Can't take credit for Smooch of Victory though, that's a phrase from Tvtropes.
“So... you know the Winter Formal is coming up in a couple of weeks.”

That's how Jaune broke the brief silence as they got out of his car and started across the parking lot.

Pyrrha didn't even bother getting her hopes up, just replying with a noncommittal hum. Instead, she just hoped Jaune was about to go on about who he was going to ask. All she asked of the universe was that it wasn't Weiss again.

“I was thinking about asking that new girl, Cinder.”

The universe was really working for its check this week.

“Cinder Fall?” She made a real effort not sound judgmental, but... “Didn't she get kicked out of her old school for trying to burn it down?” ...regardless of what she felt, she couldn't just sit idly by and let her best friend date an actual dangerous criminal.

“Allegedly,” Jaune said defensively, “She was acquitted. Besides, Buffy burned down her high school and that doesn't mean she was a bad person.”

“Buffy's fictional, Jaune.”

“I know that, I just didn't have a lot of real life examples... you know of real life good arsonists or Cinder doing good stuff. Actually don't know much of anything about her except she made the cheer squad and she plays World of Remnant.” He rubbed the back of his neck.

Pyrrha gave him a sidelong look. She really didn't want to get involved in this, but there were now burning questions in her mind. “Okay... first, if you don't know anything about her, why do you want to ask her out?”

He gave a little chuckle. “Well it goes the other way, right? I know nothing about her, she knows nothing about me. See, I finally figured out my problem: Girls who know me know all my flaws, all my screw-ups, all the... Weiss stuff last year? Nope. Not this time. Clean slate. It's really the only way.”

The way he finished that sentence, the breezy certainty, was the saddest thing she'd heard in a long time. Something in her compelled her to ask, “Or... why not find someone who knows all your flaws and screw-ups, and the Weiss thing... and still likes you. You know, for who you are.”

This time he actually laughed. “Like that's gonna happen.”

At this, Pyrrha felt her eye twitch. All she wanted for a white hot second was to grab him by the shoulders and yell. Like forever. Just on to the heat death of the universe, just yelling. Maybe there would be words, but mostly the yelling. “Okay...” Even she heard her voice waiver as she bit back the first of what would have to be infinite screams. “On to the other question... when you say World of Remnant, you mean...”

Jaune grit his teeth. “The MMO, yes.”
“You pitched a fit when I started playing!” She didn't care that some people looked over at them. Plenty of other people had had this kind of reaction to something Jaune had said in the past, herself included.

He at least had the decency to avert his eyes as they hit the walk up to the front doors. “Maybe...”

“I recall a half hour speech about how computer RPGs were ruining all roleplaying and how I was contributing to the downfall of society.”

“Yeah... well maybe I was a little harsh...”

Pyrrha’s palm met her face. “Oh no.”

“I never really gave it a chance...”

“Here it comes,” she muttered.

“So I thought perhaps...” Jaune scratched his chin with one hand while pulling open one of the doors, letting her go in before him.

Pyrrha sighed. “You want me to help you power level so you can pretend you've been playing for a long time.” He followed her through the doors, giving her a simple, hopeful look. She stopped in the middle of the hall and caught him by the shoulders. “Jaune... you know normally I would do anything for you.”

And it was true. Even if it meant helping him get a date with a girl her liked.

Anything for him.

“I'm sensing a 'but' here,” he didn't even sound that disappointed.

“But,” she nodded, “I'm not going to help you deceive some random girl you don't even like.”

Jaune started to protest, but she cut him off, knowing exactly what he'd say. “No, you don't really like her. You only want to go out with her because she knows nothing about you. And you don't know anything about her. This is just... wrong.”

Releasing him, she turned and headed for her locker, taking a deep breath to calm herself.

“Okay, so you're not wrong,” Jaune had to jog a little to keep up. “But I was just thinking it'd be... you know, nice to actually go on a date to a dance, you know? A-and hey, if I got a date, that'd finally free you up to go with someone you like right?”

Ironically the fact that even while concocting an ill-thought—actually highly immoral—plan, he still thought of her feelings was one of the things she really liked about him. Never mind the fact that if he did get a date, it would ensure she wouldn't be going with someone she liked.

Making a noncommittal noise, Pyrrha started dialing her combination into her locker.

Of course Jaune couldn't leave well enough alone. “So... fingers crossed... if I do get a date... got any prospects?”

Just because she liked him didn't mean she didn't sometimes have the overwhelming urge to strangle him. Maybe it would be best for her to just swallow her fear, take the risk and tell him how she felt.

“Look Jaune, I—WHA!”
She had just enough time after opening her locker to see the huge, teetering pile of paper as it
tipped out her locker before it fell on her, knocking her into Jaune and sending both of them to the
ground. The next thing she knew, she had her best friend's knee in her side and a face full of slips
of paper.

Groaning in concert with Jaune and ignoring the gawking horde of classmates who arrived
immediately to witness whatever the hell just happened, Pyrrha got herself into a sitting position
and started brushing the papers off her person.

It took her a moment to realize there were things printed on what she now recognized as coupons.

A dollar off acne cream.

Buy one get one free young miss training bras.

25% off ultra-absorbant feminine napkins.

Her eye started twitching again around the same time some of the gawkers started reading said
coupons and chortling behind her back.

Luckily (to a certain value of 'luck'), a familiar voice cut in over all the others. “Alright, nothing to
see here, move along people. You have business to attend to. No rubbernecking, you hear!” Nora
pushed through the crowd, followed closely be Ruby. They were both wearing ill-fitting blazer
jackets over their street clothes along with sunglasses. Nora was carrying crime scene tape and
starting to string it around Pyrrha's locker.

The amazing thing was that Pyrrha didn't have to wonder where she got that; Nora had pestered
Ruby's uncle Qrow for a roll of it until he finally relented and tossed her what he had in the trunk of
his patrol car.

Apparently ignoring both Pyrrha and Jaune on the floor, Ruby sidled over to the nearest drift of
coupons and picked up one good for two for one red hair dye. Wearing a very serious look on her
face, she touched the paper to her tongue, then nodded.

“Yep,” she said to no one in particular, “This... this is definitely a prank.”

“You got that from tasting paper?” Jaune asked, sitting up next to Pyrrha.

Ruby shook her head. “Nah, I just did that because TV cops do it all the time with drugs—no idea
why. I figured out it was a prank from that.” She pointed at the still-open door of Pyrrha's locker,
on the inside of which was a sheet of paper baring a chibi image of Yang pulling down here eyelid
and sticking out her tongue above the legend, 'Begun This Prank War Has'.

A shiver ran down Pyrrha's spine. She remembered well the previous year and the war between
Yang and Blake. The war had flown so wildly out of control that the two, plus Weiss, Coco Adel,
and two people Pyrrha didn't even know had been suspended for two days.

“Why me?”

Ruby shrugged. “You're a safe target. Yang can have her fun, but knows you'd never go far enough
to get her in trouble. Or if I'm being honest, we both know your pranks usually barely count as
pranks at all.”

“I've pulled off some good pranks before!” she said defensively, “I... I hid all of Weiss's toiletries
when we went to State last year!”
“For all of five minutes before being overcome with guilt.” Ruby pointed out. Then she got a thoughtful look. “But, if you really want to prove you can fight back, I suppose I could help you out. I mean I have learned the art of pranking from Yang herself and I can get you access to her room.” Upon seeing Pyrrha start to brighten, she added, “But that's putting my neck on the line—Yang will straight up maul me when she finds out I'm helping you. Sooo... I gotta charge you. How's twenty bucks sound?”

Thanks to her parent's continual guilt at having to be out of town so often, Pyrrha had a rather excessive allowance. Twenty dollars was pretty much no object. Still...

“Do you promise not to get anyone suspended or expelled.”

The younger girl took a moment to think. “You're tying my hands but... deal.” She put out a hand to shake.

“Yeeeeeaaah!”

Ruby, Pyrrha and Jaune all took a second to stare at Nora.

“What? Are we not spoofing CSI anymore?”

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Later that day, Jaune found himself in what for anyone else might be a rather skeevy position: loitering outside the girls' locker room. Luckily for him, after many, many odd looks, people now accepted that he was just there waiting for Pyrrha to drive her home.

As per usual, he was leaning against the wall, playing with his phone.

That's why he never saw it coming before a strong hand clamped down on his shoulder and pinned him against said wall.

“Arc.” His eyes flew up from his phone's screen to meet Yang's. Were her eyes glowing red?

“I—uh—wha?” It took him a second to grok to the situation he suddenly found himself in. First, Yang was wearing a towel. A big, fluffy, well-tucked towel, but to a heterosexual teen-aged boy, that wasn't the point. Second (and it spoke to how much of a teen-aged boy Jaune Arc was that this was second), she was green.

Green like Captain Kirk's prom date. From hands to shoulders to hair, she was completely green.

And crushing his shoulder in her grip.

“Where is she?” Yang growled.

Unable to not stare, it took Jaune a second to reply. “Wha—who? Where is who?”

Usually Yang was friendly enough with Jaune. He was friends with her little sister and in a few of her classes, and unless they set off one of her berserk buttons, Yang tended to get on with everyone anyway.

This was not one of those normal circumstances.

“Who do you think! There's only one person you're always with. One person who, if you spent any more time with, it would count as a common law marriage.” She got only a blank stare at that and growled. “Pyrrha. Where's Pyrrha?”
“Why?” Jaune asked dumbly.

Now he was sure her eyes had turned red. “Are you kidding me? Look what she did to my hair!”

Jaune squinted. “Your hair? What about the rest of you?”

“Eh, it's drink mix, it'll wash out—but messing with the hair? I don't care how easy it is to wash out, that's crossing a line. She. Will. Pay.” She held up a bottle of shampoo onto which someone had crudely pasted a label with a chibi image of Pyrrha throwing a peace sign while blowing a raspberry.

“Look Yang, I really kind of doubt Pyrrha would...”

He stopped talking because the part of his brain inherited from an ancestry of small rodents was screaming at him that he was in the presence of a predator and it was time to freeze in place and pray he wasn't noticed.

As it turned out, Yang's vision was not motion-dependent. She just continued staring him down. “And you're going to help.” A cruel smile spread across her face. “Yeah, that's a good idea. You can get me access. If I pull my best pranks off school property, I can't get suspended for them—it's perfect!”

Jaune glared at her. “Whoa. I am not going to sell Pyrrha out like that. Maybe you forgot from like five minutes ago when you pointed it out, but she's my best friend.”

“I'll pay you.”

“Would you do this to Blake if someone paid you?”

“It really depends how much...” she replied thoughtfully.

Jaune glared again, then flicked his gaze back to his phone. After some quick math, he finally said. “Seventy-five bucks.”


“Just as insane as getting into a prank war with Pyrrha,” Jaune pointed out. “You think she's too nice and inept at pranking, but you forgot: you just made this a competition. Do you remember when she played soccer?”

A shadow fell over Yang's face as the memory of weeks of barked shins and bruises washed over her. “Red Card...”

“Yeah. And you haven't seen how savage she gets over even peaceful competitions like science fairs. I've been her partner for those—I'm not even sure how I'm still alive! So yeah, seventy-five dollars will give me enough to get her a kickass present for her birthday that doubles as a peace offering when she wants to hate me for helping you.”

“But I've been saving to get my bike detailed. Mike's Autoshop has a Super-Deluxe package for $125 and my baby deserves pampering.”

Jaune folded his arms. “You could always just concede the prank war.”

“I didn't even...” Yang shook her head. That was never an option. A Xiao Long or Branwen losing a prank war, let alone conceding one? She'd have to move out of the house in shame. She half-
suspected that's why her mom felt she had to leave. “Fine. You've got a deal.”

Unbeknownst to the pair, two sets of eyes were watching the proceedings from a supply closet.

“Why am I here again?” Ren asked, shooting Weiss a glare.

“Because you're the only one currently unaffiliated in this prank war. Ruby and Nora are helping Pyrrha, Jaune is helping Yang and we both know Blake will help Yang too. That leaves you to help me.”

The magenta-eyed young man leaned back against a sink. “And why are you even involved? No one's pranked you.”

“True, but everyone loves watching Yang's prank wars. It's probably a huge reason she's so well-liked. So if I can show Yang up, I can reap some of that popularity for myself!”

Ren rolled his eyes. “I'm still not seeing why I'm supposed to help. With Nora occupied, I can catch up on studying and sleep. It's not like you're—“

“I will pay you handsomely of course.” Whipping out a sheet of paper, Weiss quickly scribbled a number on it.

Looking upon it, Ren suddenly felt that studying and sleeping weren't a priority any longer. “I'm in.”

“Excellent.” Weiss said, steepling her fingers. “Now. First thing's first... come up with a good prank we can pull for me, please.”

Chapter End Notes

One difference between this fic and Arc Reaction or NYSG is that I'm very consciously making Pyrrha the romantic lead over Jaune for this one. For one, I feel it's her turn. For another, having a high school AU of these characters lays bare the psychological issue at the heart of their relationship.

Whether it was intentional or not, Jaune's 'obliviousness' feels to me more like a symptom of his low self esteem. When you're thinking so lowly of oneself, it's hard to accept on a conscious level that someone sees something in you unless it's very directly stated. I know this because I was there in high school, had self esteem that low, and did, in fact miss not one but two girls who had romantic feelings for me. Even the Weiss thing fits because someone with low self esteem will go after someone they know is unattainable feeling that succeeding with give them worth, or that failing on that level won't be as painful.

So Game On! Jaune is in that place and that shuts off any idea of him actively pursuing or even allowing himself to consider Pyrrha might want to be with him right now. Breaking that down becomes the conflict for this subplot for Pyrrha and I think it will play out pretty well.

Someone made a note that a lot of money is changing hands in this group. I suppose, but these are for the most part upper middle class to actually rich kids. Translating the
privilege of Hunters to a more realistic AU has that effect. It should be noted that aside from Weiss, Pyrrha and Nora, the others are usually tapping themselves out to make these bets and such, so it’s not like they have infinite money.
The next morning, Pyrrha was surprised to find that her house wasn't empty when she came downstairs after showering and getting dressed. Her father was at the kitchen table, eating a bowl of oatmeal.

Sidero Nikos was a tall man and cut a dashing figure in his customary charcoal pinstriped suit. His auburn mustache was curled at the ends, which combined with his shaved head, made him look a bit like a circus strong man, belying his gentle and well-spoken nature.

“Good morning, Kopelia mou.” He said with a bright smile, “Sleep well?”

Pyrrha returned the smile, the last dregs of sleep lifting with her mood. “I did, thank you. And the morning is looking up as well—I didn't expect you to be home until the weekend.”

Her father chuckled. “I wasn't going to be, but the senator understands how much time I have to spend away from my family for the job and was more than happy to give me a few extra days off for the anniversary.” He leaned forward and whispered conspiratorially. “I'm using the time to make things extra-special for your mother. It is our twentieth after all.”

“Do you need any help?” Pyrrha asked happily.

Sidero waved he idea away. “No need to trouble yourself. I know you've got things to do, and it's all mostly about making arrangements. Before that though, you like some breakfast? A delivery man stopped by earlier and dropped off some delicious pastries.”

He pointed to a gift basket wrapped in silver foil containing a pile of what appeared to be biscuits, several small jars, and two boxes of tea. Leaning in conspiratorially, “Just between you and me, I ate two before breakfast. Don't tell your mother.”

Pyrrha gave the basket a measuring look before shaking her head. “No thank you. I usually have breakfast with the Arcs, so...”

“Of course. Don't let me keep you. But... do you have plans this evening?”

“Nothing I can't cancel after practice.”

“Excellent. I've been missing having quality time with my little girl. How about we go get some ice cream and go play some Frisbee in the park?”

Pyrrha grinned widely. “I'd really like that, thanks dad!”

He nodded as she started for the door. “Oh, almost forgot.” He reached for a manila folder on the table. “This came through the mail slot this morning. Has your name on it, but no return address—maybe Jaune left it for you?”

“I don't see why he'd leave a letter when he was going to see me in a few hours anyway...” Coming back to the table, she accepted the envelope, looking it over. “No, definitely not Jaune.” Her best friend actually had very neat printing whereas the ‘To Pyrrha’ on the letter was a haphazard scrawl.
Alarms were already ringing in her head. This reeked of Yang and she very much didn't want to drag her father into the blonde brawler's brand of mayhem.

“I-I'll read it on the walk over. See you this afternoon! I can't wait!”

“Have a good day at school!” Sidero called after her as she scooped up her bag and headed out.

“I will!” she replied, tearing open the envelope, careful to point the opening away from her. When nothing exploded or splashed out of it, she pulled out the contents. There were three glossy photos there. The first was of a plush toy pig in army fatigues wearing a blindfold and tied to a chair with a copy of that morning's paper held next to him.

The next was a wide shot of the same, revealing a tall, unmistakably busty figure dressed in all black, wearing a ninja mask with an equally unmistakable mane of blonde hair spilling out the back. She held a toy machine gun to the toy pig's head.

Finally, there was a picture of a piece of paper with cutout letters pasted onto it reading: 'We Have Sargent Oinky. Deliver One Dozen Fresh Donuts And A California Roll To Locker Number 226 By First Bell Or We Will Have Bacon For Breakfast.'

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“I can't believe she would do this!” Pyrrha ranted in the passenger seat of Jaune's car as she balanced the piping hot box of donuts and styrofoam container containing the sushi. “It's too far. Way too far. I don't even know how she got to him.”

Jaune shrank down in his seat... then sat up because he needed to see the road. Yang had asked to borrow the Arcs' spare key to the Nikos house, but he thought she'd use it to get revenge through hair care products or place some sort of humorous booby trap. If he'd known what she was planning, he would have ended their arrangement instantly.

Sargent Oinky had been with Pyrrha longer than he had. It was something her mother won for her at the very first carnival she remembered and might well have been the most precious item she possessed. Not that it was a secret; everyone knew about him and that he had a place of honor on her vanity and why.

He probably should have seen this coming: after her hair was targeted, Yang was clearly going to go for the throat. Clearly, things were way our of control even this early in the game.

Beside him, Pyrrha fumbled around past the boxes in her lap, finally coming up with her phone and texting furiously. “This will not stand,” she announced, eyes blazing, “I'm contacting Ruby right now. Yang needs to learn her boundaries.”

And going far more out of control.

Starting to feel queasy about the whole thing, Jaune pulled into his spot at the school. “I'm sure she'd never go too far. Yang is still our friend and she knows how much Sargent Oinky means to you. Prank or not, she'll take good care of him.”

“I can't be sure until he's back safe and sound,” Pyrrha replied with deadly seriousness.

Jaune patted her on the shoulder. “It's going to be alright, I promise.” She looked over to him with unsure eyes that became more assured as he smiled at her. “Now, do you want me to come around and take those boxes for you so you can get out?”
She took a moment to take a deep breath. “Yes please. Sorry about all this, it's just…”

“You don't have to apologize. I totally get it.” He quickly exited the car and opened her door. As he was taking the boxes off her lap, Pyrrha's phone chimed indicating a new text had come in. “So what's Ruby come up with?”

A savagely satisfied smirk crossed Pyrrha's face. “She says she anticipated this—and she's already got a counter in the works.”

“Should I be afraid?” Jaune asked, backing away from the door so she could get out.

“No, but Yang should be.”

“**I still think we don't look the part without them.**” Yang pouted, adjusting her guerrilla-style beret. She was wearing a black tanktop with an army green tac-vest with dozens of pockets and a set of camo BDUs along with her favorite shades.

Blake, similarly outfitted, sat beside her at their cafeteria table, digging through a silver foil wrapped basket, pulling out jar after jar. Some were jellies or jams, some were marmalade, but then she found what she'd been hoping for: a jar of honey. Then and only then—when she'd cut open one of the dense biscuits also included in the basket and drizzling honey over it, did she reply to Yang.

“I'd rather we look the part of 'not arrested'. Bringing toy machine guns to school? Not a good idea. Did you not learn from our prank war last year?”

“Pfft.” Yang stuck out her tongue. “Oh, this is totally different. For one, I didn't start it this time. For another, despite one surprisingly vicious prank to kick things off, this is Pyrrha we're talking about here. Things aren't going to escalate anything like our epic prank war. And three... what was the point I was trying to make again?”

“That you somehow have the magical power to avoid being arrested or possibly even shot for bringing a realistic toy gun to school?”

Yang blinked. “Oh. Right. See, you're forgetting that my uncle Qrow is on the force. I'm this close to owning the law in this town.”

“It's probably best we still didn't do it anyway because you still don't 'own' the school. Where did you get these again, by the way?”

“The stale English muffin things?”

“I don't think they're stale. Also, I'm pretty sure these aren't English muffins either. More like... I don't know, buttermilk biscuits with raisins in them. But where'd you get them?”

Yang shrugged, “I dunno, delivery guy.”

“Please tell me he delivered the basket to you and you didn't steal them from him or something.”

“That was one time and you promised not to hold it over my head!” Yang ranted.

She might have gone on, but at that moment, the doors to the cafeteria were thrown open to reveal an enraged Pyrrha Nikos. “Yang Xiao Long, you have something that belongs to me!”
Whatever she was about to say, Yang's attention quickly became hyper-focused on her pranking rival. “Oh do I? Copper-Top?” She reached under the table and retrieved an old bird cage in which she'd placed Sargent Oinky. “Do I really?” Then her grin turned serious. “That really depends on whether or not you've got the donuts.”

That seriousness turned to goggling confusion when Ruby stepped out from behind Pyrrha alongside Jaune and Nora. The younger girl smirked cruelly at her sister's reaction. “Oh yes, your donuts. Jaune, please present the donuts.”

The blond gave Ruby and unsure look before opening the box, revealing a dozen freshly made, still warm donuts.

“Oh yeah, come to momma.” Yang was all but drooling as she started around the table.

“Not so fast.” Ruby cut her off by stepping in front of her. “Nora?”

“You got it, boss!” Nora said triumphantly and grabbed a pastry in each hand, cramming them both into her mouth and chewing with animated gusto.

Yang gasped. “No! I performed a kidnapping of a stuffed animal to get those!” She glared at Pyrrha. “This wasn't the deal, Miss Nickels! You'll never see your piggy again!”

“Or will you?” Pyrrha asked, her own smirk matching Ruby's. “Because your sister was ind enough to get me something even more valuable to trade for Mr. Oinky's freedom.” She produced a large shopping bag with what looked like a mailing tube sticking out of the top.

“Oh, bring it on, Ponytail.” Yang folded her arms and straightened her back. “I handed down all my old stuffed animals to Ruby. Unless my bike or Ruby are in there, there's nothing you could have taken that I'd trade for. And after finding out she betrayed me in a prank war of all things, I'm seriously reconsidering Ruby.”

Said Ruby stuck out her tongue. “Oh yeah?” She held out her thumbs and forefingers in front of her like a director framing the shot. “Picture it, Halloween eight years ago.” It took a second for her to do the math, but Yang's eye suddenly twitched. “Before she'd made any of the friends she had now, Yang was stuck taking me trick-or-treating—not that she hated it, because Yang looooved fun costumes back then. For example...”

Behind her, Pyrrha opened the mailer tube and pulled out something like a poster. “Stop!” Yang burst out, waving her hands. “Don't say another word! I give up! Take the pig, just give me that photo before anyone sees it!” Scooping up the cage with Sargent Oinky in it, she thrust it into Ruby's arms.

The younger girl nodded emphatically. “Deal. That poster for Pyrrha's stuffed animal.” She snapped the fingers of her free hand and Nora grabbed both the poster and the cage, returning them to their respective rightful owners. Then she steepled her fingers. “Now, let's negotiate for the other nine Nora put up all over the school before we even arrived.”

All the color drained from Yang's face. “W-where'd... WHERE?!”

Nora gave her a cat smile. “Well the first one is outside the other doors to the cafeteria so it's the first thing everyone will see after—” She didn't get to finish before Yang took off running for the other doors. Throwing them open, her eyes went wide and her jaw fell open.

A quick look at her phone revealed that she had about seven minutes before everyone in school
saw a poster-sized image of a ten-year-old Yang dressed in her homemade Jigglypuff costume.
“Nooooooo!”

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Across the cafeteria, doing her best to hide behind a table, Weiss was fuming.
“How could they not even be acknowledging my prank?!”

Ren, sitting beside her on the floor, rolled his eyes. “Two things. One: didn't you more or less
demand I come up with pranks for you?”

“You were taking too long!” Weiss ranted.

“It's been a day. Actually less than a full day. I just got here—with a list of ideas by the way.” He
spoke in deadpan, his lips forming a thin line. “And as for my second question: in what universe
did you think sending someone a gift basket of scones was a 'prank’?”

Weiss sniffed in annoyance. “Because everyone hates scones of course.” When she met Ren's dull
stare, she flinched, ducked her head and added, “Okay, well I hate scones, so I just assumed
everyone hated scones?” With an anguished sigh, she glared at him. “Let me guess; you love
scones.”

Without warning, someone slapped her on the back while laughing boisterously.

“Ha ha! Silly Weiss, Ren hates almost all forms of baked goods,” Nora explained, still chowing
down on doughnuts.

Shaken from the slap on the back, Weiss did a double take from where Nora had been standing
with the others to where she was now, sitting on the floor between her and Ren. “I.... but...
HOW?!”

The redhead giggled and shrugged. “I dunno.” Then she glared. “What are you two doing sitting
over here? Alone. Together.” She started leaning dangerously close to Weiss.

Luckily, Ren interrupted before things could escalate. “She recruited me to help her play pranks.
And she's really bad at it.”

“How so?” Nora asked, still suspicious.

“She thought sending Yang and Pyrrha gift baskets of scones would be a great prank.”

Nora snorted and started laughing. “Seriously?” Again she slapped Weiss on the back, then handed
her a card. “The classic is sending a lot of pizzas and making them pay for them, but here's one on
the house: call these guys and they'll be so pranked!”

Still laughing, she got to her feet and skipped off back to the group.

Weiss stared at the card for a good, long while before asking, “So you two are...”

“I actually have no idea,” admitted Ren, “I'm just more than happy to just go at her pace for now.
Can you imagine what she'd do if she thought things were moving too fast and panicked?”

A shudder ran down her spine. “Riiiight. Just keep doing what you're doing then.”
This chapter took forever to get out because it was in rewrites forever. I'm not actually a big practical jokes guy, so I ended up burning through the two ideas I had in the first chapter, and then was lost. Plus, I wanted to push some more background slice of life stuff like Pyrrha's father et al.

Speaking of, if you're reading all my RWBY stories, they do make up a sort of multiverse with unifying head canons. Pyrrha's dad in all of them is the diplomat she got her politeness and eagerness to please from and her mother is the 'warrior' (In this case an Olympic trainer) where she gets her physicality and competitiveness from. Other stuff that keeps constant is Jaune's sisters are still the same.

And then a bit of Team Sloth for you guys. This actually sums up why I don't usually feel the need to go very deep with these two because they're basically already there, it's just a matter of making it official. Not saying they're boring because dear god they aren't, but it feels like their story at canon level is almost done and it just doesn't spark my imagination like Jaune and Pyrrha.

Never fear though, I will be developing them and their relationship more.
Yang missed all her classes before lunch.

As it turned out, Nora thought the prank with the photo of her infamous Halloween costume was too good for just the nine Ruby made, and somehow had access to the school's copy center. Armed with the USB thumb drive Ruby used to get the posters printed, she'd run off a bunch of smaller ones and papered the school with them like Yang was running for student body president.

Needless to say, it took Yang a while to take down all the posters and/or wrestle them away from people who had snatched one or two for their own amusement.

Bedraggled, covered in soot and with limp hair, she lurched into the cafeteria. Her breathing was labored, and her eyes were full of hate as she made her way to the lunch table where Ren, Nora, Jaune and especially Pyrrha were sitting.

With the last of her strength, she grabbed Pyrrha's seat and yanked her around to face her (It was a sign of how far at the edge of her rope she was that that wasn't 'yanged her around to face her').

"Okay, Nikos. Explain."

The redhead gave er the most innocent and wide-eyes stare she could muster. “Why Yang, you look horrible! Whatever...” after a beat of actually taking the other girl's appearance in, her expression and tone both morphed into ones of genuine concern. “Wait. You actually look horrible. Are you okay? Why are you covered in soot?"

“They had to be destroyed,” Yang muttered, looking haunted. “Also, in case it ever comes up: the cafeteria uses gas burners and if they don't light, you're supposed to wait before trying to light them again.”

Pyrrha leaned away from Yang, tapping her fingertips lightly together. “Yang, you have to believe me: I never meant for you to get hurt! I'd say I'm sorry, but I never even wanted a prank war—this wouldn't have happened if you hadn't started this.”

It was as if Yang suddenly received a shot of adrenaline. Eyes practically blazing, she rose up to her full height. “Me?! You fired the first shot by turning my precious hair green, Ginger!”

“So are you just not counting that the rest of you was green or...” Jaune started, but he was quickly drowned out by Pyrrha.

“What?! I never did anything like that! You filled my locker with embarrassing coupons!”

Neither one of them noticed when Nora started giggling and took off like a shot out of the cafeteria.

Yang snorted. “Coupons? How is that even a prank?”

“When they're like this.” Jaune reached into his book bag and handed her a handful of them.

While Yang read them over (and was already shaking with laughter), Pyrrha looked back at Jaune. “Why did you keep those?”
He shrugged. “What? I have seven sisters. Surely they need some of that stuff.”

“Oh god, these are hilarious. How many were in your locker?” Yang asked, wiping a tear from her eye.

“You would know better than me.” Pyrrha frowned, folding her arms.

Yang shook her head. “I wish I came up with a prank like this. That's some fourteen carat comedy gold right here.”

“Oh really?”

Everyone looked just in time to find one of the swivel chairs normally used in the main or guidance counselor's office slowly turning around as a slightly winded Nora leaned on a nearby table. The chair swiveled to reveal Ruby, petting a plushie version of the Xiao Long family pet, Zwei. She smiled a gleeful childlike smile that was fairly creepy in context.

“So would you say the mastermind of such a prank would have to be some kind of pranking genius? A mastermind if you will? Especially if she managed to prank you into a prank war with someone else?”

Yang shrugged. “Yeah...” After some begrudging hesitation, she bowed her head. “I guess it's true and I've gotta give credit where credit's due. You're a pranking genius and a mastermind, Pyrrha.”

“Not her, me!” Ruby shouted, flailing in her seat until it started spinning out of control. With some effort, she got it to stop and had to pause to shake her head before continuing. “It was me, Yang! I pranked both you and Pyrrha and made sure Pyrrha brought me on to help her out so I could keep pranking you while safely out of the line of fire—cause you live with me and everything.”

“You mean you set this whole thing up?” both Pyrrha and Yang chorused.

Ruby nodded proudly. Before she was even done, Yang grabbed her up in a hug. “I'm so proud!”

Pyrrha on the other hand was not as happy. “So I had to live with the idea of Yang pranking me hanging over my head, had my favorite childhood toy kidnapped, and ended up being the victim of one of your pranks? Also, you charged me twenty dollars to be your patsy!”

Still being hugged by her now-fawning sister, Ruby managed to shrug. “Sorry! I'll pay you back, I swear! Double even! Besides, it kinda had to be you because I was helping Jaune out!”

That made the older redhead's gaze sweet toward her best friend, who froze like a deer hoping those two oncoming lights belong to a pair of motorcycles. “And how exactly was all this helping Jaune?”

“Clearly I wasn't getting enough 'being thrown under the bus' in my diet.” Jaune muttered.

Ruby, however wasn't done with the bus throwing. “I was in the planning stages with Nora when Jaune came up and asked me if I knew a way I could make some extra money. And I knew Yang’s been saving up to detail her bike and if someone really challenged her when it came to pranks, she'd pay any price to get access just like I told you I could get access to Yang for you. So you see, it kinda had to be you.”

The look Pyrrha was giving him made Jaune want to run, but he knew he wasn't fast enough. “Would you believe it was for a good reason?”
Pyrrha let him swing for a bit, returning her attention to Ruby. “So that's how Yang got into my house, huh?”

Seeing a lifeline to grasp, Ruby took it. “Yes! So you can get revenge on Jaune instead of me!”

“Oh, I think I can do both. Yang, this means that it was Ruby that turned your hair green you know?”


Her vengeance half complete (because she knew it was pointless to get revenge on Nora), Pyrrha turned back to Jaune. “And as for you, I think we're going to have a talk on the way home this evening.”

Jaune shrank back. Angry Pyrrha was rare, but she was fully capable of putting five hours worth of excoriation into their twenty minute ride if need be. And he was not going to get a word in edgewise to tell her what he was buying with that extra cash.

Then again, he really should have known better than giving Yang free reign in anyone's home.

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Weiss watched all this unfold from the usual table she shared with Blake and Yang. Lunch forgotten off to the side, she rested her chin on her folded arms on the table and watched them like an alligator waiting for a peccary to come down to the water's edge for a drink.

The reveal that Ruby was the mastermind hadn't come as that much of a surprise. Since Halloween, Weiss had come to recognize the younger girl's capacity for showing her up at her own game. Not that she was jealous, but it did seem like an affront to the natural order that a Sophomore (and one who had been moved up a grade no less!) was outdoing a Junior like her.

What was outraging her was that her prank, the one that would top even Ruby's switcheroo, was late.

“So why aren't you over there watching the last act of this farce?” she asked Blake, who was sitting beside her, tapping away at her phone.”

The dark-haired girl shrugged. “When it comes to pranks, it's more fun being against Yang than with her. Especially not when she's losing. I helped take down posters—I bailed when she decided she had to burn them. I happen to like my eyebrows.”

“Hmm.” Weiss pondered that for a moment. “Blake? Do you like me?”

This earned her the act of one of those recently-raised eyebrows being raised. “If you mean 'like-like', then sorry: you aren't my type. As for liking you as a friend? I tolerate you about as well as the rest of our friends—which is a pretty huge complement coming from me.” She cocked her head curiously. “What brought that on?”

“Because I didn't exactly have a lot of friends in my old school. At Atlas Prep, most of the other students were the kids of people who worked directly under my father. I sort of figured that's why I was having problems. But now I'm here and the only friends I have are pretty much just the people on the same team as me—people who have no choice but to spend time with me. I'm starting to think the problem is me...”
After a long, awkward pause, Blake sighed and put down her phone. “Weiss... we all like you just fine, okay? Me, Yang, Pyrrha. Even Nora and Ren. And you know Jaune likes you more than he ought to. So there's nothing wrong with you, okay? You have plenty of friends and if you'd just... I don't know, act a little more outgoing instead of sitting back and plotting stupid stunts to get popular... you'd make a lot more.”

Weiss being Weiss, she chose to find the offense before taking the advise. “My plots aren't stupid!”

Someone behind her cleared their throat. Followed by another. “Excuse me. Are you Weiss Schnee?”

Weiss turned to find not one but two full barbershop quartets standing behind her; straw hats, striped shirts, canes and all.

The two leaders of their perspective quartets nodded to one another and each pulled out a pitch pipe, blowing a tune on it.

“Then this is from Miss Yang Xiao Long.”

Weiss stared blankly. “What.”

“And this is from Miss Pyrrha Nikos.”

“What?! Wait, there's been some kind of mistake! I sent these singing telegraph things to them, not from!”

But it was too late. The show had to go on.

“She's a brick. House. She's mighty mighty and she's lettin' it all hang out...”

“She's a very kinky girl, the kind you don't bring home to mother...”

As two barbershop covers of Motown classics started to duel around her, Weiss sank into her chair. How had this happened?

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Lunch was winding down and so was Weiss's double feature private concert. Nora was leaning her chair back and cackling still over what was going on at the other table. “This was even better than I expected! I think tomorrow, I'm going to leave the single CDs of these in her locker!”

“Now, now Nora. The secret to any good pranking is to know when to stop and when it just enough. Calling the singing telegram service and telling them Weiss messed up the to and from lines on the form? That's just the right amount, I think.”

Nora grinned widely. “Well I think it was epic! You really did learn a lot from me, didn't you?”

Ren smiled back. “That I did. And this will teach Weiss to hire me and then not take my suggestions.”

Chapter End Notes
And so end the Prank Wars.

Originally, the ending was a lot more cartoonish and involved Weiss hiring a truck full of whipped cream, but I dialed it back to be a bit more down-to-Earth, plus it gave me a place to put in the twist with Ren and Nora at the end.

Several people guess Ruby was playing this whole thing before this and I'm always happy when people get the clues before the reveal. This was a fair play mystery by the way; I left many clues such as the chibi drawings like Ruby put on her IOU, Yang being surprised that Pyrrha did anything at all to her, and how Yang recruited Jaune with the same words Ruby used to get Pyrrha to recruit her.

I tried to add some more dimensions to Weiss and Blake here, since they're the ones who've gotten the least attention so far. I don't dislike these characters, I just haven't gotten to their stuff yet. Blake's actually got a pretty cool role in this story, it's just not time for it yet.
“Dad?” Ruby rushed from room to room on the upper floors of the Xiao Long home.

“He's not here!” came the voice of her sister, muffled by the fact that she was downstairs. “Office hours at the college!”

“Darn.” Taking a running leap, Ruby mounted the banister and slid down it, using the momentum at the bottom to propel her through the swinging door into the kitchen. She checked under the table, inside the fridge, in the oven, the cookie jar, and the toaster oven. After a moment’s thought, she went back to the cookie jar and pulled out a handful of sugar cookies, starting to nibble on one. “Uncle Qrow!”

“He went back on day shift this week so he's gone ‘til this evening!”

Ruby took a moment to swallow the remains of her second cookie before muttering, “Drat.” Defeated she wandered back through the swinging door into the living room. The top of Yang's signature hair was visible over the back of the sofa.

“What'd you need Dad or Uncle Qrow for, Dorky Sister?” Yang inquired between crunches of the cereal she was eating. “I might be able to help seeing as how I've got nothin’ better to do today.”

Ruby chewed her fifth and final cookie thoughtfully. “Oh, I was just... wait. You don't have something to do on a Friday?” Horror overtook her as a realization hit her. “You're going to be here while I run game?!”

Ignoring the last part, Yang groaned unhappily. “Weiss's dad is hosting a party at the country club and wants the whole family there for photos and Blake's got a mystery date she won't dish to me about, so I'm staying in tonight and bored already.” She shoveled more cereal into her maw before asking, “So. What'd you need again?”

“I was looking for my setting book.” Ruby explained, dusting cookie crumbs off her hands and wandering over to the armchair.

“Oh, you mean this one?” Yang asked, carelessly waving the book in question perilously close to her bowl.

With a horrified squeal, Ruby dove from her chair and across the couch, somehow missing the bowl while snatching up her book. She ended up on her back, legs hanging over the far arm. “Mmm.” She hummed, hugging the book to her chest.

Yang snorted rudely. “Over-dramatic much?”

Ruby glared at her. “There's no telling how much damage you could have done!” rolling over so she was sitting on the couch properly, she started checking the book for damage. “Why were you reading my book anyway?”

“Already told you: bored.” Yang said simply, polishing off the last of her cereal and finishing with a generous burp. “But ya know, I was surprised.”
The younger sister raised a suspicious eyebrow. “How so?”

“I dunno; I thought all your games were just dudes in armor swinging swords with an elf or two mincing around in the background. But there was actually some cool stuff in there, like I read this power where when you hit people, it explodes!” Yang’s eyes blazed with avarice. “Think about it! Punching people with explosions! How cool is that. Suddenly I see why you guys play this stuff.”

Ruby cocked her head. “What, seriously?”

Another snort. “Sure. I just wish there was a real video game where you could pull that off.” She air-boxed a little. “Explosion Boxer 3D. I would buy that Day 1—you know even though I know it'll need a ton of patches, half the features just won't be there even though that's what got people hyped, and all the fun features will be in Day 1 DLC. Even with all that: Day. One.”

“Hmm...” Ruby looked at the book thoughtfully. “You know, Tabletop RPGs are like video games. Only the graphics are your imagination. And we call the patches errata. Maybe you might want your Explosion Boxer character to play in our game? Just this once of course: as a guest star.”

The blonde frowned and bit her lip. “I don't know... I mean on the one hand, Explosion Boxer. On the other, I'm not sure I do all that paperwork you guys call characters.”

“I'll help you,” Ruby replied excitedly. “Ooo! Ooo! And you can add even more cool stuff. Like did you know your character doesn't have to be human?”

“No elves!” Yang shot back immediately, “I don't plan on having a 'mince' stat.”

Ruby made a face at her. “Elves don't mince! And even if they did, that would be their choice and we should respect them.” Then she started turning more pages. “Also, you don't have to be an elf. You can be a dwarf, a minotaur, a halfling, a spider-person, a half dragon, a—”

“How can you play half a dragon? Or half a 'ling'? What the heck is a 'ling' anyway?”

“I... don't even know if you're trying to be funny anymore.” Ruby deadpanned before sighing, defeated in the face of her sister's dull return gaze. “Riiight. Anyway, a half dragon is what happens when a dragon and any of the other races...” Her face reddened as she realized that she'd backed herself into a corner having to explain that sort of thing to her sister. “...g-get together. You know and... have a baby?”

There is really no greater joy to an older sibling than seeing a younger sibling embarrassed by their hand. Yang moved in for the kill. “I hope the dragon's the lady in this situation because ouch.”

“Yaaaaang!” Ruby whined, “be serious! Do you want to play or not because I got a really kick-butt bad guy with your name on it if you're up for it.”

Yang held up her hands in a placating gesture. “Okay fine. I'll do it—but only if we upgrade them to kickass instead of kick-butt.”

“Deal!” Ruby beamed, “Now let me show you what other cool stuff you can do.”

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When the players arrived, they found the game table already set up and a much better-stocked snack table than they were used to. Amid the normal potato and tortilla chips, dip, salsa and cookies, there was a huge bag from the burrito place a few blocks from the Xiao-Long house and a
bowl filled with candy left over from the Halloween party.

“Huh. Wonder what the occasion is that we get this kind of spread?” Jaune mused aloud, already helping himself to a burrito.

The others, far more observant than he was, had stopped to stare instead at the other thing that had been added: there was a second chair next to Ruby's at the head of the table with a folder and a handful of dice set in front of it.

“Well,” Ren started, “I didn't think a game could give you PTSD, but I think I just triggered.”

Pyrrha hugged herself, staring hauntedly at the second seat. “The Paranoia game where Ruby brought in Penny to co-GM as Friend Computer?”

“The very one.”

They didn't talk about it much. The two younger girls could be gleefully vivid with their descriptions of injury and gore and Paranoia was a game where Player characters died. A lot. And Ren's normally helpful cleverness (and massive amounts of metagaming) turned against him there, allowing the Computer numerous opportunities to kill him for being a traitor.

He went through three PCs in one session. In a game where every PC has six clones.

Ren, Pyrrha and even Nora shivered.

“It can't be that bad, guys.” Jaune said, unpacking his things. “Ruby didn't say anything about playing a different game. I'm pretty sure we're all having a lot of fun with the current campaign and it's only two sessions old. It's not like she's going to derail us now for no good reason.”

“Exactly!” Ruby chirped, emerging from the kitchen. “You guys need to have more faith in me. Also, Paranoia was not my fault. Penny's normal group is way more hardcore than... anybody. They're just demand more of the blood and guts stuff and she's used to describing things for them.”

“No way they're more hardcore than us!” Nora protested while handing out minis. “I cut a guy in half last time and Pyrrha's character's still walking around covered in his blood.” She shot a mischievous grin at the pair sitting across from her and Ren, “by the way, that totally means that Jaune's guy has a bloody lipstick mark on his cheek now. Only instead of lipstick, it's some guy's blood!”

Jaune looked down at the salsa-laden burrito he was eating and quietly put it aside.

“Also he's a man-spider right now. I really want to draw this... so I will!” In a flash, Nora had whipped out a sketchbook and was scribbling away.

Ruby blinked, shook her head and turned her attention to the others. “Right. So last time, you guys looped around to the bandit camp and sacked it. We learned a valuable lesson about dust explosions, but also terrible die rolls. Oh, and Jaune broke the main building. You guys also convinced the surviving bandits to side with you and learned some basic information about the generals, but not their ultimate plan. Then you leveled up, so let's take care of that first: what new stuff did everyone get?”

“Oh! Ooo! Me first!” Nora raised her hand, waving it excitedly. Snatching up her character sheet, she cleared her throat dramatically before reading. “For level six, I got a bonus rogue feat, which I used to take Extra Technique to get the Snipe Technique. That gives me an attack that does precision damage at long range—meaning long range sneak attacks!” She pumped her fist
“And for the normal feat for sixth level, I took Cleave. Whenever I drop someone in melee, I get to make a Basic Strike against someone else in melee. Kill count plus plus plus!”

“As if you needed to increase your killing power.” Ruby said, making some notes on her laptop. “Ren?”

“At sixth level I get to choose a spell from my god's portfolio, so I took Fortune's Fool. It make a target save or take a penalty to their die roll equal to my Wisdom modifier. For my feat, I added a new Drunken Master feat: Sway at the Waist. As a minor action, I can burn one turn of drunkness to get a bonus equal to either my Wisdom or Charisma modifier to AC until the end of my next turn. I think there's a certain thematic synergy to the choices.” He sat back in his chair looking pleased.

Jaune was grinning ear to ear upon hearing Ren's choices. “That is so cool. I can totally see you stumbling around the fight, dodging people, then unlucking them.” After a prompting gesture from Ruby, he added, “Oh is it my turn? Cool. So obviously I took Leadership for a sweet minotaur cohort and bandit followers. I also got a new Bardic Spectacle or a Bard Feat this level; I picked the Spectacle: Power Ballad. While I'm singing it, everyone adds a d6 to their first damage roll in a round. Oh, and I got a new spell: Mighty Shout—which is totally Fus Ro Dah.”

“I took that too.” Pyrrha added. “We're going to see who can do the most damage using it creatively. For my second spell, I chose Suffocate. It makes the target save instantly start to suffocate, taking damage every round on top of the normal saves to avoid passing out suffocation comes with as a condition. Then as the Mage feat, I took Aeromancer, which lets me add a push effect to every Air spell I cast by spending more spell points.”

Ruby finished adding her notes. “Cool. So what are you guys doing now?”

“Getting the heck away from the camp before someone comes back.” Jaune said quickly.

“No argument here,” said Pyrrha. “Didn't you get the captain to promise a reward if we got the ship to its destination? Now that we have some treasure to spend, we can use rituals to push the ship there without much trouble.”

Ren nodded. “Agreed. Back to the ship then.”

“And we're ordering Jaune's new henchies to take everything from that storehouse too!” Nora chimed in.

“Can't say no to more treasure—especially if we're going to be casting a bunch of rituals at a hundred gold a shot,” reasoned Ren.

Ruby rubbed her hands together in glee. “Alright then. You bundle up your loot and start the trip back to the ship. It's slower going because you have basically a wagon full of trade goods, weapons and stuff from the camp. As you get closer, give me Perception checks.”

“That's never a good thing.” Ren tossed his d20 and frowned at the result. “Eleven on Perception.”

“Seventeen, surprisingly,” said Pyrrha, raising an eyebrow as Ruby took out her phone and sent a text. A chime sounded from the kitchen. “…what's going on?”

The younger redhead grinned deviously. “Oh nothing.”

“I rolled a two, so five!” Nora announced before going back to her drawing. “Good thing we weren't rolling for something important.” No one bothered to argue with her. No rolls were
important to Nora if they weren't to-hit.

“Twelve.” Jaune said. “I think I'll take this time to point out I'm still in almaga form and have my whips out. The special one also has the short sword extended. You know, just in case obvious combat is obvious.”

Ruby snorted and pulled out her transparencies, laying down the now-familiar upper deck of the ship before laying down dungeon tiles depicting forested terrain around it. “Yup. So obvious. So everyone but Lynn, Nora's character, sees that the ship has actually set down in a clearing about a quarter mile from where you left it. Jaune and Pyrrha—er, Darian and Seri, you both see unfamiliar figures on the deck.”

“Ah crap...” muttered Jaune.

“And Seri also notices three figures up in the trees surrounding the ship and five people one ropes back near the ruined propellers.” As she spoke, Ruby started laying down glass beads: green in the trees, red near the propellers, and ten blue on the hip deck. Then she reached into her pocket and pulled out a pewter mini of a muscular woman in furs and put it on the deck.

Nora gasped, pointing at the mini.

“What?” Ruby asked, bewildered.

“You're using a mini made by someone else?! You cheater!”

“W-what?”

Nora folded her arms and turned her nose up at her. “No, no. I can see it all now. You are seeing another mini maker. You know what hurts the worst? That I'm the last to know.”

“I-I just bought this at the game store!” protested Ruby. “And this was supposed to be a surprise! How can it be a surprise if I asked you to make a mini for it?”

“Words. Nothing but sweet, sweet words that turn to bitter orange wax in my ears.” Nora said, turning away. “Save your excuses.”

Ruby's eyes shimmered with worry. “But... but...”

“Ruby?” Ren said.

“Yeah?”

“It's Nora. Also, she's clearly just pulling your leg because she just quoted Futurama.”

“Am not and did not!” Nora playfully slapped Ren on the shoulder, unable to hold back her grin.

Ruby stuck her tongue out at her. “You suck!”

Nora just smiled back. “So what are we doing? Killing them all? I hope it's killing them all.”

“Actually, if they're fixing the ship, why don't we wait for them to do that?” Pyrrha suggested. “Then we kill them all.”

“Maybe not all,” said Jaune. “I've got like five more slots for followers from Leadership, so leave that many alive. Oh, and leave the one that got a figurine. Maybe she'll be a better cohort than my minotaur.”
“I am not going to be your servant, Jauney-boy!” a voice bellowed from the kitchen. Ruby face-palmed as Yang came charging through the door. “Don't even think about it!”

“Well there goes that surprise.” Ruby glared at her sister.

“Yang? You're playing?” Pyrrha goggled. Aside from Weiss, Yang was the absolute last person she expected to voluntarily play an RPG.

Folding her arms and striking her most confident pose, Yang smirked. “Oh, not only am I playing, but I'm your villain for the evening. Ruby, I order all my guys to attack right now!”

“Um... actually, you don't even know they're there.”

“Oh... then I order all my guys to search for them.”

Chapter End Notes

I've been laughing for a couple of months since people who are reading Not Your Saint George have been clamoring for Yang to show up as a dragonsired while I've had this planned for a long time now.

It actually took a while to settle on how to get the rest of Team RWBY in on gaming. I originally considered having them all come in as a group, but I didn't feel it was in character for them. Weiss wouldn't do it unless forced, Blake wouldn't do it in front of the others without prompting. Yang felt like the only one I could justify spontaneously jump into the game.

While JNPR is playing against type with their characters, Yang at least is playing it straight because... well Yang. Of course she would play for maximum ultraviolence.
“Yang!” Ruby complained, “You don’t know about them so you can't send your guys to search for them.”

The blonde folded her arms. “Like hell I don't know there's someone in the woods—someone landed this big-ass boat in the middle of the woods, right? And you said there were people on board that we captured. If they won't tell us who's in charge then I think a little intimidation's in order.” She cracked her knuckles, then her neck. “So I like... roll dice now and see how much I hurt them 'till they talk?”

“That'd be why they call the skill Intimidate, yeah,” Ruby said, unimpressed. “Roll it just like I explained.”

Yang gave an enthusiastic thumb's up and fished through the pile of dice before she came up with one she thought was right.

“That's a d12,” said Ruby. Yang tried again.

“And that's a d10,” Pyrrha added helpfully. Yang furrowed her eyebrows and... “d4.”

A snarl of anger escaped Yang and it was clear that she was ten seconds to flipping the table. Luckily, Ren stood up leaned across the table and picked up the bright yellow d20 from her pile. “This one. Just roll this one.”

“Oh.” Yang accepted the dice. “Right. I thought this one looked familiar.” She tossed the dice calmly as if she hadn't just been about to go rage-monster on everyone. “Twelve. And that's plus my thing for Intimidate, right?” Ruby nodded. “Then twenty-three because I'm all dragony and crap and that gives me a plus for Intimidate. Do I get more pluses for punching whoever knows about these dorks until they squeal?’

Ruby shrugged. “Twenty-one's good enough anyway. The crew and passengers give up that the group of adventurers that brought them here are off sacking your boss's base in the woods.”

“Right. So I wonder what I ought to do in this situation. Sit on my ass and do repairs on the ship or gather up my dudes and...” Yang produced her aviator sunglasses and put them on. “Listen up, ladies and gentlemen! Our fugitives have been on the run for ninety minutes. Average foot speed over uneven ground barring injuries is 4 miles per hour and that gives us a radius of... six miles. What I want out of each and every one of you is a hard-target search of every gas station, residence, warehouse, farmhouse, henhouse, outhouse and doghouse in that area. Checkpoints go up at fifteen miles. Your fugitives' names are... I have no idea. Go get 'em.”

Once more, Ruby looked utterly unimpressed. “Gas stations? In a fantasy world circa 1860?”

“I'm pretty sure she's referencing The Fugitive,” Jaune said only to get a blank look from the diminutive DM.

“Tommy Lee Jones?” Nora chipped in. When that failed to get a spark of recognition, she leapt out of her seat. “I didn't kill my wife!” Then she turned around as if addressing herself. “I don't care!” And then he jumps down the giant concrete waterfall?” Ruby only blinked. “The one armed man?”
Blink. “Nothing!”

“Looks like we know what we’re watching next movie night,” said Pyrrha with a light laugh. “We can't have the DM not getting our references.”

Scowling that her performance had found an unresponsive audience, Yang folded her arms. “Whatever. My dudes are going to search for them and give a shout when the find something. I want them to especially search over here,” she indicated the point on the map where the PCs' minis were placed. “I've got a feeling about that place.”

“Yang! You can't use in-character knowledge!” Ruby complained.

“I'm not,” Yang replied smugly. “You told me my character had to be a 'real person' with thoughts and feelings of her own. And now she has a feeling about that group of trees over there.

For a long moment, Ruby just stared at Yang, who gave her a smug look right back. Finally, she pinched her nose. ‘Oh for the love of... You know what? Just to get the game moving along, I'm going to allow it. Which of your flunkies are you sending out?’

“Hmm. Well like I said, I'm not helping these guys rebuild their flying ship, so I'm gonna send out my craftsmen and shipwrights.” Yang pointed to the tokens near the ship's damaged propellers.

“You realize they're all minions, right?” Asked Ruby.

“The guys that die in one hit?” Yang asked, already sliding the counters across the map toward the PCs. “That's fine: they'll die for a very good cause: My glory.”

Ruby sighed and decided to address the others. “Okay, so as you're watching, the guys working on the stern climb down and start fanning out in your direction. You've got a couple of rounds before they reach the copse of trees you're hiding in. What do you do.”

“Hide and ready for sneak attack!” Nora all but exploded from having not talked in the past few minutes. “I've got my sword out and I'm ready for stabby!”

“Casting Subtle Knife.” Pyrrha said, taking a sip of her sports drink. “They're minions, so I'll ready an action to slash the throat of the first one who comes into range that Nora doesn't kill.” Yang raised her eyebrow at that, but didn't get a chance to comment before Ren spoke up.

“I'll take a drink from my wine skin to activate Drink Like a Fish, Fight Like a Demon, Then take my Sway At The Waist stance.”

Jaune cracked his knuckles. “Okay, so I've got to give orders to my followers. I guess I'll have the regular bandits hang back to fire short bows and have Toaru ready to charge into flanking with Nora if she needs it. Then Darian is going to ready my whips since all my spells and stuff make too much noise for a party that's hiding.”

“Okay,” said Ruby. “So this is the opposite of both a fair and a challenging fight, so that you kill these guys is a forgone conclusion. The trick here's going to be whether you can keep them from sounding the alarm. Here's how we're going to do this: there's eight guys here. Whenever you kill one, you can roll a Stealth check at a minus five to pick them off silently and without the others noticing. If you fail, I'll tell you which ones notice and they'll sound the alarm on their turn, got it?”

The others nodded. “Great! Roll for initiative!”

A few clattering dice later and Nora was going first, followed by Jaune and his minons, then Pyrrha, then Yang and her minions, then finally Ren.
“Yesssss.” Nora hissed, hopping up to lean over the table. “Okay, I'm going to wait til this guy right here walks past, then I'm going pop up from behind him and cut his head off with my cut-through-anything sword. Then I'll pull his body into the bushes with me.”

“Just roll Stealth and see if any of the others notice.”

“Sure thing boss lady!” Nora saluted before throwing her dice. “Twenty-six! I'm like the Predator only without dreadlocks or that creepy mouth.” Then she started clicking like a Yautja.

Ruby almost snorted her soda. “Okay, that's even good enough to say you managed to knock his head into a pile of moss. Jaune?”

Thanks to Leadership and the NPCs that came with it, Jaune had an extra character sheet for Toaru and an index card for the minion bandits. “Okay, so none of these guys has any stealth at all, so all my guys are holding action. Then Darian will use Bring Them Down on one of these guys, specifically, he's going to wrap his neck and drag him off the path where I'll finish him off with the blade from my mechanical whip. Seventeen good enough?”

Ruby rolled an opposed Perception check and nodded. “You are clear. Though you probably could have strangled him with the whip.”

“Trying to play some level of good here.” Jaune argued, “Strangling is kind of needlessly horrible when I can just stab him short and sweet.”

Pyrrha poked him playfully in the shoulder. “Don't worry, I'll take care of all the horrible deaths for you.” With that, she picked up her dice. “Speaking of which, I'm going to use the Subtle Knife to cut the next one's throat. But not just a slice across the veins, I'm going to cut all the way into his windpipe so he can't make any sound but gurgling, then I'll throw the hem of my cloak over his head as he goes down so no one even hears that.”

“O...kay...” Yang muttered as her teammate threw her metal die. It came up a one.

“Oh, that's not good.” Nora said with a grimace. A second later, her macabre sense kicked in. “I know exactly what happened though: you slit his throat, but the blood goes everywhere. All over you again, all over the trees, the bushes—just everywhere. You drag him into the bushes, but the next guy to come through looks around and it's like a blood tornado touched down around that spot. No way he can't notice it.”

Ruby smirked. “You know what? We're going to go with that because 'blood tornado'. And that means the jig is up guys. Next turn is Yang's and at the start of that, this next guy discovers all the blood and gives a shout that something's over in this direction.

“Sorry guys...” Pyrrha said, shrinking into her seat a bit.

Jaune patted her on the shoulder. “Don't worry about it. That one could have happened to anyone. Usually me, actually.”

A terrible and gleeful light entered Yang's eyes as she picked up a dice. “That means I get to roll to see them right?” Ruby nodded. “Ha! Sixteen! Do I see any of them?”

After a moment of consulting the stealth skill of the PCs, Ruby nodded. “Yup. Jaune.”

“Oh, you're gonna wish you rolled way harder, Spider-boy.” Yang said, shuffling through the note Ruby gave her on how to use her character. “Minor, Move, Standard, right? And a charge is a Move and a Standard at once?” Again, Ruby nodded. “Sweet. Then as a Minor, I'm going to use
Way of the Burning Fist. It says it's a stance—whatever that is—but whenever I deal damage with
an unarmed weapon—and that makes no sense—I deal fire damage equal to my... Wis?"

“Wisdom.” the whole table filled in for her.

“Right. Wisdom modifier. And with the feat Exploding Fist, whenever I roll 15 or higher on an
attack that hits while I’m using that I push my target a number of squares equal to that Wisdom
thing again—because they get exploded across the room by my awesome punches. Jeez, there's a
lot of words just to punch someone with an explosion.”

After taking a breath, Yang continued. “So now I'm charging, but I've got the Gliding Charge feat,
that lets me charge twice my move speed thing as long as I'm higher up than you—which I am
’cause I'm on a boat. So I can totally reach you and my attack is... Twenty-nine with a roll of
seventeen. Does it hit? Please say it does, because your ass is kicked if it does.”

Jaune gulped audibly. “Um... yeah?”

Yang threw her d6 so hard it bounced off the battle mat, his the bowl of pretzels and honey
mustard Nora was eating from, hit Ren's arm, then came to rest on a six. She looked at her sister
plaintively. “Okay, so what do I add?”

Ruby replied automatically, having expected this. “Strength modifier, then your Wisdom mod for
the fire, then plus two for charging.

“Okay, so that's Strength plus four 'cause I'm swole as hell. Wisdom plus two because I'm wise or
something. And two more for fourteen, plus my fist like, explodes and launches you back here.”
Yang grabbed Jaune's mini and shoved it back two squares.

“What level is she again?” Jaune asked, sullenly marking down his damage.

“High enough to be a challenge.” Ruby shrugged. “Anyway, what just happened here is that some
gold-scaled humanoid with wings just leapt off the ship, glided down to Darian and just punched
Darian so hard he exploded and flew back ten feet. Care to tell everyone what you look like,
Yang?”

Having gotten a taste of the old school ultraviolence, Yang was grinning from ear to ear. “Yeah!
I'm a 6'10'' dragon lady with gold scales and perfect blonde hair. I'm wearing a breast plate—D if
you're curious,” she added with a wink to no one in particular, “--and armor... pants...”

“Greaves.” Ruby supplied.

“Yeah, those. No weapons, 'cause I don't need any with these sweet guns I'm showing off.” She
flexed to show off her own muscles, “And my fists are taped up and on fire. Right after I punch
Spidey, I'm all like--” she threw her arms wide, “'come at me bro' to whoever's next.”

Ren sat up a bit straighter, meeting her eye to accept the challenge. “That would me. And we'll
start with Binding Flame. Will save, please.”

“Where's that ag--” before Yang could finish talking, Ruby was already pointing out the number.
“Gah. That little, huh?” She rolled her d20 and scowled. “Twelve's not gonna do it, is it?”

“No,” said Ren, “And now you're wrapped in chains of fire. Whenever you take a non-minor
action, you'll take four damage from them.”

“Ha!” Yang jumped up, triumphant, almost knocking Ruby over. “You just totally wasted your
“Resistant.”

“Whatever. I know four damage isn't going to hurt me.”

Now it was Ren's turn to be triumphant, only instead of jumping up, he merely picked up his soda and sat back, taking a casual sip. “That's true: four fire damage wouldn't get through your Resist 5. However, Binding Flame deals divine damage, meaning your resistance means nothing to me.”

“We'll see about that.” Yang glowered. “Just because it hurts me, doesn't mean it stops me from doing stuff.” She pointed to Pyrrha's mini next to hers, “And I'm right next to your wizard. Even I know robe-wearing nerds are easy to kill in these games.”

“I'm wearing leather, actually,” Pyrrha pointed out. “And also, Seriphied is anything but a nerd.”

Nora nodded emphatically. “Yeah, she's kind of a psycho. Remember the blood tornado just now?”

“And you wouldn't know it, but she's actually covered in bandit blood from last session still,” Jaune chimed in.

Blowing a raspberry, Yang ignored all this. “Yeah yeah. Trying to make her intimidating, I get it.”

“Suit yourself.” Nora shrugged. “I was gonna run up and sneak attack you dead, but now I'm curious what she's gonna do to you. Especially since you hurt Darian...”

This got Yang to raise an eyebrow and look between Jaune and Pyrrha. “Oh really. So knocking Jaune's around pisses you off?:

Averting her eyes, Pyrrha gave a polite cough. “Oh... um, well we decided our characters knew each other before the came. And they've gotten closer since the starts so...”

“She kissed him last session!” Nora sing-songed before lunging across the table to steal the baggie of carrot sticks a now-distract Pyrrha had been eating.

Yang's eyebrows disappeared into her hair. “Oh really?” The look on her face was nothing short of predatory.

“In character!” Pyrrha burst out, turning a shade of red not usually found in nature. “I-it's the whole point of RPGs. You can play as or do anything you want. Um... not that that's what I want, I mean maybe I do but... um...”

“Nora, isn't it your turn?” Jaune said, quickly coming to Pyrrha's rescue.

“Aw, but we were getting to the good part!” Nora whined through a mouthful of carrots.

Thinking quick, Jaune pointed to the remaining minion counters. “But what about your kill count? When my turn comes around, I'm ordering my guys to mop them up and all those kills count as mine. Do you really want to lose to me?”

A look of horror fell over Nora's face as she imagined the unimaginable: Jaune doing better at killing NPCs or monsters than her. “No!” She shrieked and flipped her sheet over to the equipment list. After a moment, she found what she was looking for. “Alchemist's fire! I throw alchemist's fire at those three right there! Burn it all!” She thrust her arms into the air in her excitement, causing Ren to have to dodge off his chair to avoid being smacked in the face.
They die.” Ruby said simply, unwilling to even try to match Nora's verve. “Also, the brush catches fire.” Producing a red marker, she drew a circle around where the counters had been. “It's going to expand five feet in a random direction each round. Jaune, you're up.”

“Bandits are going to work to stop the fire because Yang's fireproof and we're not. What do I even roll for that.”

Ruby flipped through the book a moment, coming up with nothing. “It tells you how to put yourself out, other people out, but not putting out regular fires. Just give me a d20 roll DC 10 and we'll see how many squares they can put out in a turn.”

“Eleven. So one a turn?”

“How about we say they keep it from spreading to make everything more simple?”

Jaune gave a thumb's up. “Works for me. Now Toaru is going to charge the dragon lady. Seventeen to hit?”

There was no reply.

“Yang?”

“What?”

“Does seventeen hit you?”

“How am I supposed to know?” She asked, waving her character sheet round in the air.

“Ruby snatched the papers from her and pointed. “He's trying to roll higher than your AC. This number right here.”

“The nineteen?” Her confusion evaporated back into smugness. “Ha! That means a big N-O! Not a hit. Get that weak stuff outta here!”

Jaune groaned. “Aw man. Well I'm going to cast Sooth the...” he paused, giving Yang an appraising look. Then he checked the board. “No. Actually. I'm still above half hit points. I'm going to cast Constant Mockery on Yang. Will save.”

“Another one?” Yang squawked as she grabbed up her die. “Fine.” It came up a four. “Son of a bitch! Ten?”

Jaune grinned. “Nope,” he took clear pleasure in popping the 'p'. “That means that as long as I sustain this each turn, you take a -4 on all attacks and DCs unless they include me.”

To this, Yang blew a raspberry. “That wasn't a good idea. I already wanted to pound you, now I kind of have to.”

The grin on Jaune's face didn't falter. “Now I move back my full thirty feet. Since you knocked me ten feet, I'm forty feet from you. No race has a move over thirty, so that means you either have to charge or move twice to reach me. Not a problem—except you're under the effect ofBinding Flames. No matter what you do, you take eight damage just reaching me. I mean, you could go after someone else, but is it worth it while I'm calling your face dumb with the power of magic?”

Yang made a face. “Oh, it's so going to be worth it though.”

“Not yet,” Pyrrha interrupted. “It's my turn. Before I go thought, I know you're new to roleplaying,
so I just want to make sure you understand that this is me playing my character, not me being vindictive over things like the prank war or the teasing or anything like that, okay?”

This made Yang frown and look to her little sister. “Why's she giving me a content warning like we're about to watch a horror movie?”

Ruby, seeing what was coming, was making sure her DM's screen was ready for her to hide behind. “You know how you got excited about the Way of the Burning Fist stuff because you could make your character like Azula from Avatar?” Yang nodded, already not liking where this was going.

It was Jaune the continued the explanation, “Imagine if Zaheer had a hot younger sister that thought Airbender philosophy was for chumps.”

“Please, this is Pyrrha we're talking about. It can't be that bad.” Then she smirked. “Although, it's kinda funny you said she was hot because the mini looks just like...”

“Okay, enough chatter it's still my turn!” Pyrrha cut her off in a rush. Taking a deep breath, she continued. “Anyway, as I said, this last part is all in character.” She took a second to collect herself, once more letting her hair fall over her eyes.

“Ooo, it's starting!” Nora pulled out a bag of popcorn and started munching.

When Pyrrha spoke next, it was in the more hard, clipped voice she'd been using for Seri. “You may think it's funny that the man you just injured is trying to fight you with words, but that's just because he's a better person than you or me: he even spared the minotaur because he thinks there's a better way.” She looked, up, locking eyes with Yang with such a fierce gaze that the blonde flinched. “Well that's one of the places where we disagree. He would want to come to some sort of understanding with you. Me on the other hand? I'm just going to reach into your lungs and rip out all the air.”

“Jeez...” Yang muttered.

“Casting Suffocate?” Ruby's voice squeaked from behind the GM screen.

“Yes, please.” Pyrrha said, instantly snapping back to her normal mood.

Yang glanced between her sister and her teammate. “What the... wait: Suffocate? Seriously?”

“We did warn you.” Nora pointed out.

Chapter End Notes

So here is Yang's premier at the gaming table. Sorry if it's a little choppy and explainy here, but she is a noob and would have to have things pointed out to her. She's rough around the edges and not taking things seriously yet, but that's what character development is for.

There used to be a lot more with the group trying to warn Yang about Pyrrha's character. Some of the now-lost lines include 'the member the Manson Family doesn't allow on the Christmas card', and 'If Heath Ledger's Joker was played by Scarlet Johansson'.
I'm sure people are going to be upset about Yang specifically targeting Jaune here, but 1) he was the only one she spotted and 2) in the context of the story, Jaune is sort of a friend of a friend to Yang. He hangs out with her sister and teammate, but at this point, she hasn't had opportunity nor reason to bond with him. Going forward, we'll see how things go, but that's why she's okay being so antagonistic to him. Plus, Yang is antagonistic to everyone canonically (even if in a friendly way, so... It's not like she hates him, it's just that she doesn't know him well.

Next chapter, Yang gets left breathless and the battle continues!
Yang just stared at Pyrrha for a long moment. “You...” she started carefully. Pyrrha gave her her full attention. “...have a spell...that suffocates people.”

“Yes, yes I do.”

“What? Y-you—you can't do that!” Yang rounded on Ruby. “Can she do that? She can't do that can she?”

The diminutive DM shrugged. “She just picked the spell up this level.”

“And,” Jaune said briefly hiding behind Pyrrha to avoid Yang's burning glare, “She could have taken it at first level. Only it's not really that useful against groups of baddies like we've been fighting.”

Once more, Yang consulted her sister. “Level one is low, right?” Ruby nodded. “Lowest there is?” Another nod. “And this game lets you just straight up suffocate people to death at level one? What the hell?” She almost jumped out of her seat as Nora, having circumnavigated Ren, seemingly materialized beside her and threw an arm around her shoulders.

“Oh, it's not that bad, ya big baby!” Nora scolded, holding her tablet with the rules PDF open in front of her. “See? You save of you gain the suffocating condition that also ends on a save. Fail the save and you slow and sicken. Fail it again and you fall asleep. Again unconscious and again— which I don't think Pyrrha's high enough level to hold it for—and you're dead. See? You've got plenty of time to gaps and flop around like a fish before you die!”

Yang narrowed her eyes at the words on the screen. “Save ends, huh? Oh, it's so on. It's my turn, right, Ruby?”

“Are you done, Pyrrha?”

“Actually, I think I'll move my full thirty back to... here.” Pyrrha retreated her mini back in the same direction Jaune had, then moved one space sideways for the last ten feet, keeping a gap between them. “There. Now I'm done.”

“Oh, I get it: you're doing the same thing he did. You think if I have to charge you, I'll take a lot of damage running up to smack you. But you know what? All this nickle and dime crap is really pissing my character off. And you know what?” She stood up so fast she almost knocked her chair over and gestured dramatically, glaring at all of them. “The truth is, I've been fighting with weighted clothes. Ruby, I dramatically whip off my cape and vest. They hit the ground with a huge thump that sounds like they weigh a good thirty pounds.”

Everyone, but especially Ruby did double takes. “What.” Ruby spoke for everyone.

Pouting, Yang folded her arms. “You said I could reflavor all my stuff however I wanted. So this Rage thing is really me tossing off my weighed sparring clothes and buffing out Super Sayan style.” She shuffled through the little pile of index cards Ruby had given her and threw one into the middle of the table for all to see. “This makes it even better. When I do that and flex, the magic that was on my like, explodes into a fire halo around me because—BAM!-- Madness Hero: One per
encounter when you enter the Rage battle stance, end all effects that a save would end that are targeting you.”

She then proceeded to let out a wild karate shout and flex dramatically before making little 'bwoosh' sounds to mimic the fire. “Arrrrgh! Madneeeessssss Heeeeeeeero!”

Ren picked up the index card and scrutinized it during Yang's performance. “What level is she again?”

“Higher than you guys,” Ruby said bluntly.

Nora, on the other hand, was applauding. “That. Was. Awesome! I'm so glad you're in our group now. I mean we're going to still murder this character, taxidermy her, and use her as a really cool masthead on our ship, but you're gonna be so much fun to play with.”

The mention of joining the game long term cut Yang's antics short. “Uh... let's not get ahead of ourselves just yet. With either of those. Still my turn, since Rage lets you use it as a minor and I've got a Move and... uh.. attack? Whatever. There's one lesson about this game I do remember from Ruby's coaching and that's...”

One Hour Earlier...

Ruby stared Yang down with an intensity she normally reserved for baked goods. “Yang. You're gonna screw up today. You'll forget what you roll, who you're supposed to attack and most of the numbers on your character sheet.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence there, sis.”

As if she wasn't listening at all (because she wasn't), Ruby continued, “But that's okay. We all do it our first game. Hack, our first twenty. Jaune still sometimes rolls d10's to attack and when we played Shadowrun, Ren could never calculate his dice pool right.

“But if there is one piece of wisdom I can impart upon you right here and now, my dear, beloved sister, it is this: when in doubt, Geek The Mage.”

“And I have no idea what that means,” Yang admitted, “Since, ya' know, the geek's playing the spider guy and not the mage. So I'm gonna take out the mage instead.”

Ruby face-palmed and hid herself behind her screen in shame.

“So I'mma charge using the Grab technique. That uses the CMB thing, right? Right.” A quick opposed roll later and Yang's character (still unnamed, but assumed by all to be 'Yang', or maybe 'Barb' from the name she had on her fake ID) had grabbed Seriphied in a bear hug. She grinned toothily at Pyrrha. “And next turn? I must break you.” The bad Russian accent sent Nora into another wave of hysteries.

“Think all of your minions are dead, so that makes it my turn,” said Ren. “And I will be moving up behind you and casting Deific Smite. Technically Pyrrha's character is flanking, so I get a plus two, You're in a grab, so that's another plus two for attacking someone in a grab. Does a twenty-one hit you?”
Yang growled. “Yeah. Go ahead, roll your damage.”

“Hmm,” said Ren, “That’s a d6 for my unarmed strike because I have Basic Martial Arts as a feat, plus two for my strength, plus a d6 plus four wisdom in divine damage...take twelve damage.”

“Plus one ’cause you're drunk!” Nora added helpfully.

Ren smiled and nodded to her, making her positively beam at the non-verbal praise. “Right thirteen.”

“Jeez, even drunks hit like trucks in this game,” Yang muttered.

At this, Nora leapt to her feet. “You ain't seen nothin' yet! It's time for the Cut-Through-Anything Sword! The Special All-Purpose Cultural Pig-Sticker, the Nora Blade! And you're flanked, too, so this is it!” She flopped down on a clear spot on the table so that she was looking up at Yang menacingly. “Wash you're neck, 'cause the headsman's coming!”

Looking utterly confused, Yang shied away from the crazed girl.

Ren smirked as he cracked open a can of soda. “You brought this upon yourself with the Dragonball Z reference.”

“Just roll the damn dice,” Yang replied dryly.

Grinning like Mad, Nora did a push-up on the table and got herself to standing, picking up her pink die in the process. “Let's gooooo cotton candy dice!” Such was her enthusiasm that the pink and white die clattered off the table, bounced off the bowl of dip Jaune and Pyrrha were using between them, off Jaune's chest, and finally landed right beside Nora's mini as if she meant to do that.

“Eighteen hits, right?”

“Did you count the flank and the grab?” Ruby asked. Nora nodded. “Sorry, then no. you're one off.”

Nora pouted. “Seriously!? Why must my dice fail so often.” She snatched the die off the table and dropped it into her soda. “You'll drown until you've learned!”

“Aren't yo going to need to roll that?” asked Ren.

“Pfft. It's fine. I bought spares.” Nora opened her dice bag to show at least ten identical pink and white d20s in it. “That wasn't the first Cotton Candy.”

Hiding a chuckle, Ruby turned to Jaune. “Your turn.”

Jaune leaned over the table, taking a brief look at the lay of the land. Almost immediately, he caught on that Pyrrha's odd direction of retreat had actually been a tactical move. She'd forced Yang to chase her, which landed her in exactly the right square: fifteen feet from him. He shot a quick smile to his best friend, then looked to Ruby. “Okay. Move action to move into the Two-Weapon Fighting battle stance. Now I'm going to use the Trip action with my whips twice against Yang.”

He rolled a blue and a white dice. “Okay Yang numbers to beat are... sixteen and twenty. If you fail, you fall prone.”

Yang rolled, added her bonuses, and snarled. “Oh come on. Can I at least pull Pyrrha down with
“Actually, that's a good question,” said Ren, “What does happen when someone in a grab is knocked prone? I don't think any of the D&D clones we've every played had a rule for that.”

“This one does!” Ruby more or less sang from behind her screen. “I read everything about tripping and stuff when Jaune explained his character. If you're tripped while in a grab or grapple, you can choose to try and pull your opponent down with you if they're your size or smaller. They get an edge save—which is basically a Reflex save without modifiers DC 10 plus your strength modifier. Either way, it doesn't end the grab unless they get a natural twenty.”

Yang made a point of making another muscle. “That'd be a four, so fourteen by the way.”

“And that would be a waste of a natural nineteen,” said Pyrrha, shaking her head at the die. “Not even a twenty.”

“I'm doing my best here.” Jaune shrugged.

“I know.”

“Anyway, my minions are trying to put keep the fire from spreading, so on to Toaru. She's going to—heh--bullrush Yang on a charge. Living up to all the minotaur stereotypes, I guess. And with bullrush, I know know you can break up a grab because it's forced movement.” He rolled and managed a twenty-four, only to have Yang roll and eighteen for an even thirty. “...crap.”

“Ha! Victory!” Yang mocked him while throwing the V symbol. “One more turn before squishies, P-money.”

For her part, Pyrrha ignored Yang, searching through her spells known for something she could cast while in a grapple, or in her feats for something she could use to escape the grapple. Disappointingly enough, while air magic had plenty of mobility effects and even a spell that could be used to explicitly escape a grapple or injure the person grappling her, she'd avoided them because they didn't seem evil enough.

She sighed. “I guess I'll just use my move and standard to try and struggle out of the grab then.” Two rolls of her combat maneuver bonus later and Seriphied was still hopelessly trapped by the prone Yang. “I guess I'll quick draw my dagger as a minor in case I live to take another turn.”

“Sweet. So I can just blow an action to do automatic damage, right?” Yang asked, clearly ready for some carnage.

Ruby looked between her and Pyrrha before nodding cautiously. “Yeah. Strength modifier plus level.”

Before Yang could do the mental calculations though, Ren spoke up, masking his expression behind his soda can. “Sure, you could do that, but it'd be kind of boring, don't you think?”

A single golden eyebrow rose. “Say what? I'm not boring and you better not be thinking it.”

Ren shrugged. “I just figured that with that build and that choice of race, you'd be able to do something flash. After an exploding punch, a bear hug just doesn't seem as interesting.” He settled back in his seat and said conversationally to Nora, “Wasn't one of your original ideas a dragonsired who took feats to enhance the free breath weapon they get?”

“Yup!” Nora nodded vigorously. “I was going to be a silver dragon lady with laser breath. If Lynn
dies, I'm gonna play that one.”

Yang's eyes slowly drifted down to her character sheets and the index cards Ruby had supplied. As it turned out, she did indeed have a cone of fire as a breath weapon. It was big enough that she'd be able to hit Pyrrha and Nora's characters and Jaune's minotaur. A feral grin split her face.

“Right! Cone of fire, bitches! Reflex saves!”

“That's be for Seriphied, Lynn and Toaru,” Ruby clarified, “If you pass, you only take half. DC is... 17.”

Surprisingly, it was Jaune who managed to do that math first. “Ten plus Charisma mod plus half...” he muttered before, “She's tenth level?!?”

“You're lucky she wasn't eleventh seeing how wily you guys have been.” The tiny DM lifted her chin, daring any one to disagree after they won their previous encounter by dropping a room on one monster, using a dust explosion to take out part of a bandit camp, and using diplomacy to take over the rest.

“Seventeen exactly.” Pyrrha was the first to roll her save.

“Twenty-three!” Nora crowed, then did a little jig in her seat. “Oh yeah, and I've got Evasion, so I take nothing!”

“Toaru fails.” Jaune flicked his dice, which read five between his hands. “Lucky she's a tank.”

Yang grimaced. “So I only dealt full damage to the sidekick? That blows. One d6 plus my level...” She rolled. “Twelve damage. Oh, but the minotaur catches fire, so there's that.” Yang started to pout, but then caught the sight of her little sister suppressing a giggle. Her eyes narrowed. “What?”

At this, Ruby burst out laughing. “Ren totally played you!”

“Say what?!”

Ruby continued giggling, doing her best to explain. “You could have automatically dealt Pyrrha Strength plus level. That's fourteen damage she couldn't prevent. Then you could have used a move action to stand back up and get rid of your prone penalties; but you spent your action breathing fire that Nora evaded and Pyrrha saved to get only half. Now you're still prone and it's two turns until Nora's turn.”

“I...” Yang looked at Ren, who was impassive but vaguely smug, then at Nora, who was mentally sharpening her knives. “Oh. Crap.” Then she balled up her fists. “Hey, wait a minute: how does she get to dodge a huge sheet of flames?”

“Because I am ninja.” Nora said, doing a few fake karate moves.

“Nicely done, Ren.” Pyrrha said, offering her friend a toast with her glass of water, which he returned with his soda can.

Yang growled. “Well played, but we're not done yet. It's your turn right? Do your worst!”

As calm as ever, Ren spread his hands out in front of him. “Gao will cast one of the other spells he got for being a cleric of Pandemos: Nudge Fate. I can only cast this once per encounter, but it’s very nice. Targeting Lynn.” At this, Nora gave him her full attention, even over the little log cabin she'd started building from dice and carrot sticks. “Nora, on your next roll, you roll twice and I pick
which roll you use. And that's the end of my turn.”

“Sweet!” Nora clapped joyfully. This time I can't miss! Using Opportunist's Gambit and rolling a thirteen or a...” Letting out a squeal of glee, she jumped to her feet. “Natural twenty! Please Renny, let me use that one! I wanna crit. I wanna make me a gold dragon-wing cape!”

“You are not going to wear parts of my character!”

“Can I have the horns to make a necklace?” Pyrrha asked with a chuckle.

“You guys suck.” Yang pouted.

Ren nodded to Nora to take the twenty, prompting her and Jaune to reprise their critical hit song and dance. Then it was one to damage. “d10 for the sword, two for my strength, three precision damage for my intelligence, and 2d6 sneak attack and it all doubles on the crit except the sneak!” She rolled low for her sword's damage, but then eleven for the sneak attack for a total of eighteen damage. “Twenty-five damage total!”

Yang stuck out her tongue. “Nice try, but that only puts me down to...” She looked down at her sheet. Instead of actually tracking damage, she'd just put down a tally mark for each instead. It took her a minute to add them all up, prompting a worried look toward Ruby. “Us... sis? What's it mean if you're at negative four?”

Chapter End Notes

We get the full Yang fight finally. Nora's crit aside, they nickeled and dimed her down because Yang's style pretty much broke their tactics.

The title, of course, is a reference to the fact that it's not really a gaming session until the reference humor comes out.

I had a lot of fun writing the new dynamic Yang brings to the table and integrating her into the group a bit. I really like her playing off Nora and really having no recourse against Ren because she barely knows him. My favorite bit here was 'geek the mage', which is traditional DM advice that boils down to 'cheat because the designers played favorites with mages, so you need to damn near kill them to challenge them'.

Amusingly enough, writing this revealed a flaw in my game design. Grapple originally let you spend a move action to crush, dealing STR + Level damage automatically. Since I'm using 4e's action economy, you could do that twice while you have someone grappled, dealing more damage than any weapon. So thanks to Yang, it's a Standard action now.
“Well...” Ruby sat back in her chair, certainly not trying to open up a few more precious inches between herself and her sister. Nervously, she started poking her index fingers together. “Whether negative four is dead for you or not is kind of complicated...”

Yang gave her a dull stare. “Complicated. Either you're dead or not. What's complicated about that?”

Ruby grabbed up her copy of the rules and started flipping through them. “Because the rules for dying are different depending on if you're a player character or a monster—and if a PC kills you or a monster kills you. See for a PC, going below zero means you're dying and you have to save vs death every turn or lose hit points. Once you're at negative ten plus your Constitution modifier, you die. Buuuut, if a PC kills a monster or NPC, they get to decide whether or not they kill them or capture them when they take them to zero or lower.”

“So... I'm still alive since I'm playing this character, right?” Yang nodded like she meant to get Ruby nodding as well.

But Ruby shook her head. “Not really. You're guest-playing a NPC for me, so technically by the rules Nora gets to decide what happens to you.”

It was as if Nora didn't so much move through the intervening space between herself and Yang as teleported to her side, a wide, creepy smile on her face. “You hear that, Yang? I decide whether you live or die!” An eerie light entered her eyes. “Your fate is mine to command!”

Yang glared at the bubbly redhead. “Yeah yeah, so is it thumbs up or thumbs down Cesar?”

“Hmm.” Nora put a finger to her chin and lapsed into deep thought. “Well Lynn would look more awesome in a dragon wing cloak and Seri could make a sweet Amulet of Defense out of your claws on a string...”

“Oh come on. You're not really gonna mutilate my character. You're the good guys.”

“I'm not,” Pyrrha put in.

The glare moved to her. “Yeah and I'm never going to be okay being alone in the locker room with you ever again because of it. You jeebed all my heebies with that little revenge speech.” After a beat, the glare gave way to a grin. “Seriously though, new respect Miss Goodie Good.”

Jaune snorted and stage whispered to Pyrrha, “Her approval should probably fill you with shame.”

“Oh, it does, but let her have this one,” Pyrrha replied in the same fake whisper.

“Really,” Nora said, calling attention back to her, “I think we both know I would totally do it. There's no alignment in this game so I can do whatever I want and Ruby can't yell at me! Buuuut, before I decide I want to ask you a few questions.”

Yang gave her the same dull look. “We're not going to play Truth or Dare here.”
Nora waved the idea away with a raspberry. “Nah. But you still better answer truthful or Lynn gets to accessorize, deal?”

“Sure. Whatever. Deal.”

Clapping enthusiastically, Nora bolted back to her seat, managing to retrieve a pair of prop glasses and a clipboard from her bag in the process. Grabbing Ren's mechanical pencil from in front of him, she assumed a pose reminiscent of a TV psychiatrist. “Now,” she said in a terrible and offensive German accent, “let us begin. Number One: Did you have fun?”

At this, Yang blinked. “Did I... Well yeah. I only got one good fight until I got killed or whatever you’re going to do to me, but that was surprisingly bad ass.” She chuckled, “especially when you thought you guys had me pinned down and I was all ‘graaah!’ and broke out of it. That was pretty sweet. Also punching Jaune across the room.” Under her breath, she added, “Woulda been more fun if one of you might have warned me that those two were an item now—”

“Only in character.” Pyrrha blurted out too quickly and too loudly.

“Oh hush you.” that came from both Nora and Yang who shared a look, then a devious smile at that.

Nora wrote something on the clipboard (because she didn't have any paper on it). “I was gonna ask if you liked hanging out with us, but I’m thinking ‘yes’. I think we should hang out more. I mean I know me and Renny aren’t on the track team or the ride for someone on the track team, or related to you, but I think it’d be a lot of fun.”

This Yang couldn't deny. “You know what? I totally agree. As awesome as Blake is, it'd be nice to have a partner in crime that’s not always trying to be the voice of reason for once. I bet you and me could hit Junior's place like the fist of an angry god.”

“Yyyyyesss.” Nora practically hissed in glee. “We've gotta do that sometime, it sounds like so much fun, but these guys never wanna go out to clubs and stuff.”

“To be fair,” Jaune said matter-of-factly, “Ruby's too young even for clubs that would let the rest of us in without fake a ID. Plus clubs really aren't Ren or Pyrrha's thing and also I'm me and no self-respecting bouncer in this town is going to let the likes of me in any place even halfway cool. So really it's a wash.”

This time it was Yang who blew a raspberry. “Please. Minor setbacks if you're rolling with us. Even if they're not awed or afraid of me, Weiss has the cash to get us in anywhere.”

“Weiss is the reason every self-respecting bouncer knows not to let me in.”

“Anyway,” Nora interrupted, “We're getting way off track here.”

Ren shook his head and took a sip of his soda. “No kidding. You do realize that taking down Yang's character isn't the end of the combat. There's enemies on the ship.” He gestured to the battlemat. “Also the forest is still on fire.”

Nope. Not what I'm talking about,” Nora scoffed. “I'm talking about my next question and that is: Do you wanna keep playing with us, Yang?”

The question made Yang blink for a second. “What?”

Nora just smiled. “What I'm saying is, there's no point in saving your character for you if you're
not going to play her again. She's a really cool character friend or foe, and you've been super fun to play with, but if Ruby's sure not gonna let us convert this one if she's an NPC, so if I let her live? Oh yeah, she's coming back. And she's hardcore, so it'd be in our best interests to kill her. But if you're coming back to play her, you can join the party and we'd have all sorts of fun together and I can stop depending on the squishy sorceress for a flank buddy.”

“She really isn't all that squishy,” Pyrrha argued. “In fact, she's got more hit points than Lynne because you dumped Constitution.”

“Super-squishy.” Nora stage whispered.

Yang screwed up her face in confused thought. “Well I mean... I had fun playing and it'd probably be a lot more fun if I didn't get ROFL-stomped by the whole group. But come on: you guys play on Friday nights. I'm usually hanging out with Blake and Weiss on Fridays.”

“So invite them! I'm sure Ruby can run a game for seven players!”

“Yeah, I could—wait, seven?” Ruby, formerly caught up in Nora's enthusiasm was cut off by her common sense. “Hold on, that's a whole lot of play—”

“See? She loves the idea. And if you had fun, your friends will totally have fun too.” Nora was all smiles too.

At this, Yang burst out laughing. “Ha! Can you see Blake actually playing fantasy instead of reading it?” She missed her sister's expression changing when she said that and continued on to say, “Or Weiss having fun at anything?”

“Actually, after the whole prank fiasco, I think Weiss would appreciate the invitation at the very least. Frankly, I feel like she could use some escapism.” Ren toyed with his dice, stacking a few d6's.

“Yes!” Nora punched the air. “It'll be perfect! And it's the perfect time! Next Friday is out last game before Thanksgiving and it's a both a Teacher Work Day and the day before Pyrrha's birthday. We were talking about having an all-day game day slash party over at Jaune's place. You guys could come and join the group and everything will be so awesome my face will explode!”

Throwing her arms in the air, Nora fell back into her chair with a wide-eyed expression of joy.

There followed a long silence no one else had the nerve to fill after a patented Nora Valkyrie word avalanche.

Finally, Ruby gathered her bravery and raised a finger. “Um... Nora? Do you remember why all day game day is at Jaune's house? I did tell you, remember?”

Without a thought, Nora nodded. “Yup. You said your dumb sister beat you to asking your dad about having friends over and she's having a sleepover Thursday and then a girl's day with her also-dumb friends the rest of the day, so we've got to play at Jaune’s.”

The next thing to break the silence was the collective sound of everyone but Yang and Nora's palms slapping foreheads.

“Dumb, huh?” Yang asked, looming over Ruby.

“Ah heh-heh. Nora's just not using the right emphasis. I meant dumb as in... slang for 'cool'. You know, like your friends and you are totally def and dumb...er... yo.”
Yang cocked her head, stared, then laughed heartily as she rose from her chair. “You know what? I think having to say that is punishment enough—for everyone.” Now standing at her full height, she folded her arms and made it a point of giving the whole group an appraising look. “So the final answer is ‘not next week, but I’d kinda like to play again’. Then again, go ahead and kill this character. I was thumbing through the book while we were waiting for you guys to show up and I’ve got ideas.”

Languidly, she stretched, watching and relishing the nerves starting to run through her little sister. “Did you know this game’s got guns and magic fighting styles? ‘I’m gonna make like a magic gunslinger or something.’”

“That’s actually an interesting idea,” Pyrrha encouraged, “We really haven’t taken advantage of that aspect of the setting.”

Yang shrugged. “Sounds cool. Anywho, since I’m dead for now, I’m gonna go watch TV. Later guys.”

Before she was even out of the room, Nora was once again in action. “Alright, so I’ve got dibs on the wings.”

Seeing Yang shoot an annoyed glance over her shoulder, Pyrrha smiled to herself and nodded in agreement, “Don’t forget that I want the horns and claws.”

Jaune, having not seen that part, waved his hands between the two redheads. “Okay, seriously? I—as Darian—am not going to stand for you guys making clothes and accessories out of sentient beings. That’s just wrong—way wronger than all the other stuff you guys have done so far.”

“We’ve looted the bodies of all our other enemies,” Pyrrha pointed out, affecting a more languid style of speaking for Seripheid.

“We didn’t cut their armor and weapons off them though!”

At this, Nora popped up to interject, “Yeah, but none of those guys had natural armor and weapons. Plus, don’t say no until you’ve thought about how awesome it would be to have a whip made out of a dragon’s tail.”

“Don’t you try and tempt me with badass weapons. There is literally no justifying this! Mark my words, I am not backing down from this one. There will be no harvesting of the dragon lady on my watch. Right Ren?” Jaune looked to Ren for help, but his friend chose to invoke his reputation of being the strong, silent type by being strong and silent. “Thanks, buddy.”

Pyrrha gave him a thoughtful look, then relented, her expression becoming contrite. “You’re right of course, Darian. It’s just that the way I’ve had to live the last few years, I’ve had to live by the code of ‘waste not want not’.”

“Isn’t that the creed of the Phyrexians from Magic the Gathering?” Ren asked.

“Now you talk?” complained Jaune.

“At least he was correct,” said Pyrrha.

Ren shrugged. “I’m just happy I’m not the only ones who read those novels. They were quite good until the Invasion arc.”

Pyrrha grinned and picked up a couple of index cards. She started writing on them while she
started addressing Jaune in-character again. “Living the way I have, I haven't had the benefits of morality. I've lied, killed and yes even butchered to survive.” She kept her eyes locked on his and reached out, smoothing his shirt at the shoulders as if calming a small, nervous animal. “And before you think poorly of me for it—and here I'll gesture to all the gore I've collected over the past few sessions—remember that you've benefited from what those tactics have taught me.”

With that, she passed on card to Nora and another to Ruby.

For just a moment, Jaune failed to notice the move, having dissolved into a quivering heap of awkwardness at all the attention plus the voice Pyrrha was putting on. “Well I mean just because you've had to... you know... live your life like that up until now doesn't mean y-you have to keep living like that now. I-I mean you're not alone anymore. You've got Gao, and Lynne—who granted is not a good influence, but her heart's in the right place. P-plus you've got m—” His rambling was cut off by the sound of rolling dice from Nora and behind Ruby's GM shield. “Wait. What was that? What just happened?”

Ruby passed Nora a card. “Nothing. But just for fun, why don't you roll me an Insight check?”

“Ins—” Jaune narrowed his eyes at Pyrrha. “Oh you're good. It's going to be impossible to get the action Points for Best Performance in this campaign with you bringing your A-game.” He threw a d20 and sighed at the result. “Thirteen from a natural two. 'm guessing I notice nothing, huh?”

“Nope!” Ruby replied enthusiastically. “So go on with your little speech. Nothing to see here.”

Giving a dramatic sigh, Jaune took a second to recall where he'd left off before launching into it again. “A-as I was saying, you've got me. And as long as I'm around, you're not going to need to throw morality over just to survive. And as for the terrible things you've done up to now? Well I'm also here to wash those away.”

He reached out and pressed his palm to Pyrrha's collar bone, making her blush furiously.

“Ruby? I'm quick-casting the Prestidigitation ritual to clean off all the blood and gore covering her.”

“Okay. The blood and filth that's caked itself onto Seriphied crackles and seems to burn away starting at the point where your hand touches her and expanding across her body, all her clothing and her hair too. It's all pretty dramatic. Which makes sense; you being a bard and all.”

Now it was Pyrrha's turn to be lost in concentration. “Oh. Um... Well that's very sweet of you, Darian. I can't make any promises, but know I do appreciate you trying to be my hero.” There was an awkward second after that where she debated herself, well aware of their friends watching the exchange (especially Nora, who was leaning far over the table taping everything with her phone).

Then again, she'd already gotten away with it before with apparently zero consequences so...

Resisting the urge to take a deep breath, she leaned over and once again kissed Jaune on the cheek. “Thank you.”

The blonde turned as red as an Athas sunset and stammered, “O-of course. Always.”

“Awww!” Nora cooed, once again breaking out the little pennant that inexplicably read 'Arkos'.

“Nora!” Both Jaune and Pyrrha scolded.

Ruby meanwhile had taken advantage of the distraction to pull out her phone behind her DM's
screen and send a text.

'Hey. Just a head's up: We kinda sorta maybe got Yang into gaming. This might be a good or bad thing.'

After a pause, the reply came back reading only one acronym:

'WTF?!

Chapter End Notes

New chapter up! This being mostly the Yang and Nora show because those two are just as fun as Yang and Weiss. This fic has been revealing a lot of awesome character interactions that didn't/haven't been fleshed out in the show. Expect a slice-of-life sometime soon with Yang, Nora and Weiss together because yes.

And of course we're turning up the dial on the Arkos shipping. Pyrrha is getting bolder but leaning on the whole 'this is in-character' thing more. Lucky for her, Jaune can manage to be adorkably romantic in-character. The prestidigitation cleaning/absolution thing is actually a discarded scene from my fantasy series, Runebreaker (Specifically cut from book 3, Path of Destruction), by the way. If you've read the series, it was originally between Kaiel and Brin.

For those of you waiting on this ship to advance, major things are underway coming in the next arc. Trust me, you're gonna love it.

More RPG references here. Athas is the world of the D&D setting Dark Sun, a desert planet destroyed by magic that leeches life from the environment.

'Waste not want not' is specifically given as a Phyrexian creed in the Urza cycle of MtG novels. It's said repeatedly by the renegade Phyrexian newt Xancha. I used it because Xancha and her (well newts don't have a sex, but she identifies as female) love interest Ratepe are another 'Action Girl/Non-action Guy' couple ala Kim and Ron from Kim Possible and of course Pyrrha and Ron. I just had to throw it in.

The argument about looting natural weapons and armor come from the fact that in older versions of D&D there are a number of sapient beings including dragons whose body parts the game just assumes you'll butcher off their corpses for money and power. This is the same game that thinks using poison is inherently evil.

Speaking of the game, you can now see parts of the World of Ere d20 system I'm working on at my new website worldofered20 DOT paradoxomni DOT net. And since more than one person has asked: no they will not be switching to D&D 5e. I don't like 5e for pretty much the exact things it uses as selling points: Advantage/Disadvantage, bounded accuracy, not being 4e. It's just a huge step back from everything I loved about 4e and everything I tolerated about 3.Pathfinder. Also there's no forced movement, Warlords or martial healing, so I see no point in ever playing it.
The treasure chest fanfare from Legend of Zelda woke Pyrrha up from a pleasant dream whose details dissolved upon waking leaving her with a vaguely happy feeling. That feeling soon turned sour as she found herself with the distinct realization that she was wrapped up in a warm burrito of blankets while her phone was on her nightstand in her significantly colder room.

It took her a sleep-hazed moment to remember whose texts she'd assigned that particular sound to. Nora's was a party horn blowing (as per her request), Ren's was a short selection played on a flute, Weiss's was a delicate music box chime, Blake's was the sound of pages being rapidly turned, Yang's was fireworks going off, and Ruby's was a recording of the girl in question shouting 'Yay'.

That left...

Her eyes, previously starting to close so she could go back to sleep, opened again. Her arm shot out of the covers to snatch the phone off the nightstand and drag it under the comfy cavern of covers with her. With some clumsy fumbling, she unlocked the screen to find a text message from Jaune.

'hope this dsnt wke u—'

Too late.

'—bt whn u do wke up, lk out ur wndw.'

For a moment, that question sent a shiver down her spine. Memories of the prank war and several days worth of the threat of Yang's antics looming over her head. Then clearer thoughts prevailed and she remembered that the war was weeks ago. Today was important for another reason: her birthday.

Had Jaune set up a surprise for her outside? She'd thought he'd had his fill of big, flashy displays in the wake of the Weiss Incident and one of her previous birthdays about two years prior when the sound system he set up for her party had become something that necessitated a visit from not only the police but the county electrical utility after it blew out the power to the block.

Considering he was old enough now to be tried as an adult, she wasted no time struggling out of her blanket cocoon and sitting up enough to look out the window next to her bed.

What greeted her was the familiar vista of her front yard with its single sycamore tree and the street that separated her house from a gentle hill leading down to the edge of a forest of young trees. Only now it was under a blanket of fresh, powdery snow, all save for the road, which had been plowed then snowed on again so that it was mostly gray slush.

If there had been school that day, it would have been a snow day anyway.

She blamed the last foggy bits of sleep in her head for the fact that it took far too long to connect the dots and realize that if there was that much snow and slush outside, no one was going to be able to make it to her party. It made her a little sad to think her friends were going to miss her special day (by now it didn't faze her at all that her parents had managed to both be there for her birthday twice since she was ten), but then she could always count on the Arcs.
Remembering her phone, she texted back:

'I guess it's just you, your family and I today. Are your sisters excited?'

Yang always mocked her for typing in complete sentences, but Pyrrha never saw the sense in not taking to time to do something right when one had the time.

Text sent, she retreated back under her blankets. Technically she didn't have to start getting ready until she said she was going to get ready. It was her birthday; she was allowed to be lazy.

Sadly, she only had less than a minute before a new text came in.

'Jst me & dad grrls @ slpovrs. Stl cm ovr 4 mves &fd.'

It actually took her a few minutes to completely decipher that one. She'd known that Jaune's mother was out of town for a teaching conference, but it seemed that the only two of Jaune's seven sisters still living at home had been at sleepovers and were snowed in, leaving just Jaune and his dad at the house. Undeterred, Jaune was still inviting her over for movies and... food, she guessed? It would still be a nice time; she always enjoyed their movie nights. Plus, ever since they were little, Mr. Arc always made her cake and birthday dinner just like for all his own kids. She always insisted on helping even if she wasn't half as proficient in the kitchen as any of the Arcs.

She tapped out her reply.

'That sounds grand. Let me get ready and I'll be over in twenty minutes.'

Jaune responded swiftly with a 'c u thn', leaving Pyrrha fresh out of excuses for staying under the covers. A hot shower managed to take off the chill from having to leave her comfy bed, and woke her up well enough to think clearly; to reminisce about birthdays past.

For as long as she could remember, all her parties had been at the Arc household. The huge family next door was more than happy to host and with eight kids, they had way more experience at the set-up and cleanup than the Nikos family anyway. This would be the first year without any of Jaune's sisters and only the second where one of his parents wouldn't be around.

It would be almost like she was alone with him.

All day.

She paused in the middle of brushing her hair to fight down the blush that was forming.

Academically she understood nothing was going to happen besides some fun, some food and a few gifts, but a girl could dream as long as she didn't didn't take things too far. Which arguably she already had with the whole 'playing characters in a romance' thing, but for once Jaune's social density was working for her instead of against her.

Pushing her brief sojourn into a fantasy world where her present was Jaune with a bow around his neck, she quickly finished grooming and got dressed. Dark green wool leggings under a knee-length, black jean shirt and a black and white checked flannel shirt over an olive-colored tank top; it was cold outside, but she knew it would be a little too warm for her tastes so she made sure she could effectively strip down to something comfortable yet modest.

A little make-up, the same amount she wore to school; just a touch of eyeliner and a dusting of blush, and she headed downstairs.
Stomping into her snow boots, she finished up by pulling on her winter coat. It was... the thing she hated most in her wardrobe. Her mother meant well, and she was an expert in outdoors sports for all seasons, but she seemed to not notice there might be a tiny difference between winter at a training camp on a Swiss mountain and winter in a small city in a temperate enough climate that almost every instance of snow shut the whole place down.

In short, the coat was a hideous red thing with a shiny surface that made her look like an angry Mylar marshmallow. She never had the heart to tell her mother how awful it looked and it felt like a betrayal to her if she went and bought a new one.

So she pulled it on, zipped it up, pulled the head over her head and went out the side door of her house. Long ago, both families decided that walking all the way out to the street and down the sidewalk to get from one house to the other was a sucker's game and so they'd installed a gate in the six-foot slatted fence between their yards.

The snow provided a slight obstacle by blocking the door, but it was nothing a few good kicks with her snow boots couldn't fix. Within a few minutes, Pyrrha was into the adjoining yard and up the stairs to the Arc back deck.

Jaune had left the blinds that normally covered the sliding glass door open and was sitting on the couch in the living room waiting for her, playing something on his phone. At the first tap on the glass he hopped up, laying his phone to the side, and came to open the door.

“Happy Birthday!” He exclaimed, throwing his arms around her heedless of the melting snowflakes and squeaking red fabric of her coat. When they broke apart, he took a step back and announced, “You are officially older than me for the next two months. Can I get you your rocking chair and rheumatism medicine, gran’ma?”

She stuck out her tongue at him while shucking off the coat and boots. There was a slit open trash bag next to the door to put them on so the carpet didn't get wet. “Now, now,” she poke with an imperious tone, “Respect your elders lest my cane find your backside.” Reaching out before he could reach, she ruffled his hair roughly.

He shied away from it, but was laughing as he did. “Hey, watch the hair. I actually spent time on it for your special day, ya know?”

“Really? I couldn't tell,” she teased, knowing full well that the fact that it had been in a slightly less scraggly state that tempted her to muss it up in the first place. It was fun and made him look more like himself.

“You suck,” he pouted, making a show of stomping back to the couch.

Pyrrha followed him, all smiles, playing along. “Oh come on, don't be like that. Besides, I get a pass because it's my special day, right?” When he dropped down onto the couch, she did the same, sinking easily into the cushions.

“Yeah, I guess so.” Jaune said, after falling silent just long enough to make her second guess whether he was actually upset or not. He straightened up and gestured around at the lack of decorations. “I know it's not exactly a party, but we can still have fun. We can play whatever games you want, watch whatever movies you want, and Dad says that even though we can't get to the grocery store, we have all the stuff we need to make your cake and,” he drew out the world, a wild spark in his eye she recognized from every time he was trying to be dramatic for a big reveal.

The actual quality of what was revealed was a mixed bag, but Pyrrha had high hopes because it
involved Arcs and cooking and nothing bad could come of it. So she found herself leaning forward, already excited no matter what dish he was going to name.

Jaune's easy smile grew brighter at seeing her excitement, “...your favorite: his famous chili.”

And that right there already made this a great birthday as far as Pyrrha was concerned. Leon Arc had been a firefighter up until a few years ago when an injury in the line of duty took him out of action. Yes, firefighters and chili was a stereotype, but Leon's chili had won awards citywide; a perfect blend of meat and spices that didn't try too hard at being the hottest thing on the planet, just to taste good. Jaune knew what he was saying when he said it was her favorite food.

It was like she was a kid again how eager she was upon hearing that. Her eyes shone with anticipation. “Really?”

“Yep.” Jaune said with a grin. “which is why we're gonna have to start work on your cake early. Wanna start with that?”

Pyrrha held her hand to her mouth to suppress a giggle. It never really licked with him that she genuinely enjoyed cooking—or rather helping to cook—where he thought of it as a chore (which it was for the Arc children; they had a rotating cooking schedule). “That actually sounds wonderful. Let's get to it.”

As little was it made sense to Jaune that Pyrrha could be so happy doing such a mundane task, he wasn't going to question what she wanted to do on her birthday, so he bounced off the couch and offered her a hand up with a poorly sketched courtly bow. It was another thing he couldn't figure out about his best friend, but he'd noticed that that always made her smile just a little, so he did it now. With the plans for a party scuttled, he wanted to do everything he could to make it a great day.

It was only after he'd helped get her to her feet that he remembered what he considered the most important thing.

“Oh right! I almost forgot!” He went over to the gigantic cabinet of tapes, DVDs, and games next to the entertainment system and opened the lower compartment where the writhing snake's nest of AV cables lived and retrieved a box from it.

He would never admit it, but it had taken him the better part of an hour to wrap it so it looked absolutely perfect including repeatedly trying and failing at the trick of running the ribbon along the edge of a pair of scissors to make it pretty and curly. Eventually he'd gotten it looking just right and adorned it with a card he'd printed out with a promo image from Heavenly Sword, a game whose protagonist he always enjoyed teasing Pyrrha for heavily resembling.

The card earned him a quick glare, but not a lengthy one as Pyrrha carefully opened the wrapping. Jaune's mother always commented that the fact that she didn't rip into it with maximum ferocity was one of the only ways one could tell Pyrrha wasn't one of their children.

Because she was taking an excruciatingly long time to get to the present (because he wanted nothing more than to tear through that paper with maximum ferocity), Jaune started rambling to fill the silence. “So um... I had this all picked out back in September, but was starting to worry I wasn't going to have enough saved up for it until Ruby came to me with her little plan. Y'know, the prank war deal? That's the only reason I agreed to any of that: because I really wanted to get this for you. I swear I had no idea that Sgt Oinky was gonna get in the crossfire. If I had...”

Of course by then, Pyrrha had gotten the box open and had pulled out her gift. It was an ankle-
length wool duster; a handsome shade of brown with shiny bronze buttons at the closure, cuffs, and along the pockets. It came with a detachable hood with black fur lining, a wide belt with a bronze buckle bearing the emblem of a javelin on it and a leather mantle that would reach her elbows. It came with a pair of elbow-length leather gloves, and a hammered metal broach with the same javelin emblem.

“Jaune...” she said in hushed tones, truly awestruck at the gift.

He was too far into his babbling to hear, however. “The broach and belt buckle are Nora's present to you by the way. She copied the emblem you asked her to design for your tabbard in World of Remnant. I guess I should give her credit for part of the coat too: she pointed me in the direction of this woman she knows through Etsy and got me hooked up with a pretty good discount. I-I hope you like it. I mean you complained about the coat you mom got you last year, and you really liked the steampunk stuff from the setting book Ruby's running her game out of so I looked for something kinda steampunk that you could also wear around, y'know, non-nerds....”

“It's wonderful, Jaune. You never cease to disappoint. Carefully putting the coat back down in the box, she pulled him into a hug. “Thank you. Really.”

Jaune gladly returned the embrace. “Of course, Pyr. Anything for you. You know that.” He gave her a squeeze, then added, “Now how about we get started on that cake. What do you say to a Seven-Up cake with... caramel butter cream frosting?”

Pyrrha smiled into his shoulder. “I say this might just end up being my favorite birthday so far.”

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Across town, Qrow Branwen was just waking up and wondering why he was having his hangover on the couch instead of in his bed.

He'd just come off the last double shift in a week of doubles and had been passed over again for his reinstatement to Detective because of his 'attitude' just that... well technically it had been morning when the new reached him.

Attitude.

Where the hell did those out of touch, wide-assed, desk apes know about attitude. They hadn't been out there on the streets dealing with real people with real problems with absolutely no real support from on high in years if at all. And half the new young bucks on the force were a bunch of vengeful pricks who thought they were Clint Eastwood or Liam Neeson from Take, always growling and barking orders at civilians with plenty of threats and none of the listening.

And he was supposed to show them the ropes and turn them into good cops without dishing out copious slaps across the back of the head and write-ups to IA? Yeah, he knew where they could shove their attitude.

Tai wondered why he drank. It was to build up a heavy enough bladder to piss away the stupid.

Of course maybe he didn't deserve to be a detective if he couldn't figure out how he, with the years of drunken stumbling experience he had, hadn't managed to at least get to his own bed.

Because God loved mocking him, that question was answered by a high, squealing laugh coming through the ceiling above him and boring directly into his left temple.

One bloodshot eye opened wide with panic. He'd known about this weeks in advance.
More giggling and then a shriek. Oh god, they were waking up. They were waking up and they were going to be loud and hyped up over the snow the whole damn day.

He'd known that too—well except the bit about the snow. That's why he'd made reservations at a motel. Reservations he'd been too roaring drunk last night to remember to use. Some cabbie or Uber driver out there probably got a big tip and a big earful about intra-force politics last night.

From above there were sounds of bare feet pounding around on the floor. One set reached the stairs and paused.

Oh no.

He tensed, girding himself for impact while praying it was anyone but the one he guessed it was because the others had some sense when it came to how to treat a man with a hangover.

“Uncle Qrow!”

Damn.

Pound, pound, pound when the feet on the stairs and thus screamed the thousand angry monkeys in his skull.

Then the sound stopped and he knew Ruby was airborne. She landed right on his gut, making everything swirling around in there to make a run for he exit he barely stopped. His niece-by-marriage's face came into view, beaming with the contemptible energy of a morning person.

Alright, it wasn't so contemptible when it was Ruby. Hell, he loved the kid, but it was too damn early and she was being too damn loud right now.

“It snowed last night! It snowed and Yang's friends are here and we're all going outside to enjoy it.” She bounced up and down in her excitement and he almost threw up again. “So how about you, Uncle Qrow? Do you wanna build a snowman?”

Yeah, Tai had warned him that he'd regret taking her to see that movie all five times she wanted to go.

This was going to be the worst day ever.

Chapter End Notes

Yeah, here it goes Arkos fans. I promise you that this is the storyline you've been waiting for and also the one where you're going to want to throw things at me over before it's through. It's also the one where a pay off a lot of little things I set up earlier: Nora's Etsy account, World of Remnant being a game Pyrrha plays but Jaune doesn't and Jaune participating in the prank war being the start of it but certainly not the only Chekov's gun I'll be firing this arc.

We also finally meet Qrow, and as people have speculated, he's been busted down from Detective. I felt like this arc needed something for the people who either don't like Arkos or don't like romance in general, so here's a RWBY-based B story with Qrow and Zwei tossed in for good measure.
Lots of geek references here, some more obvious than others. Feel free to try and find them all!

I'm not sure if I've mentioned this in Game On, but I have a site where I'm putting up the SRD (System Reference Document. Read: Free Rules) for the rules Ruby and company are using. It's at worldofered20 DOT paradoxomni DOT net.
When it all came down to it, Pyrrha blamed Yang in part for her situation with Jaune.

The two friends had gotten along just fine for over a decade until the blonde bruiser decided to do what would have been admittedly the right thing and warned Pyrrha that her 'boyfriend' had been trying to flirt with Weiss.

Even when Pyrrha denied that they were together, Yang remained skeptical. She pointed out that the pair were virtually inseparable, how they went to every dance and even dance slow, how Pyrrha wasn't hesitant doling out the pecks on the cheek, and of course how they're default resting position seemed to be 'against each other'.

A red-faced Pyrrha tried to explain it all away, but then Yang hit her with the question that both stunned her into silence and changed everything: if they weren't dating, why weren't they? After all, they clearly liked each other a great deal and weren't the least bit uncomfortable with at least the most chaste forms of intimacy. Plus, considering how much time they spent off doing something just the two of them, what they had was nearly indistinguishable from dating anyway.

What stopped Pyrrha's denials in their tracks was the fact that once presented with the idea of dating Jaune, it really appealed to her. It was as if she'd been presented with an amazing meal she hadn't even known was on the menu.

Of course, she continued to deny the whole thing to Yang, but later when she rode home with Jaune, she couldn't help but look at him in a whole new light. Unfortunately, she started looking at their relationship as a whole in a new light as well.

Maybe they hadn't become a couple because Jaune didn't want to get closer to her. After all, she was right there, and yet there was had been, flirting with Weiss. So she backed off. No more kisses on the cheek, no more slow songs at the dances (unless he asked first—he was actually quite good and she wasn't going to turn that down if it was offered), and never, ever bringing up her feelings with Jaune.

Some days keeping those feelings in check was harder than others.

Today was one of those days, but she was beyond caring.

The Seven-Up cake had come out perfect, so the only thing to do once it cooled was to completely ruin its aesthetic potential armed with caramel butter cream died red (Pyrrha's favorite color) and generously dolloped into piping bags. They'd started out trying to do roses, then any kind of flower, then trying to write messages and finally, they were playing something not unlike the Tron light-cycle fight with icing.

It was all but impossible to tell how they were doing seeing as they were now just squirting red on top of red, but they were having fun nonetheless. Noticing they were both running low on icing (which was about an inch thick on top of the cake by now), Pyrrha decided that cheating was the better part of valor and bumped Jaune's arm with her own.

Predictably, Jaune's unique combination of clumsiness, bad luck and accidental comedic timing saw to it that the bag slipped out of his hands, he grabbed for it, and squeezed icing directly into
his own face.

“Gah!” he yelped in surprise.

“I'm sorry,” Pyrrha said through a fit of giggles and moved quickly to grab a dish towel to help him clean up.

“Somehow, I think you're not actually all that sorry.” Jaune said with fake petulance as he submitted to being scrubbed with the wet dish rag.

Still unable to hold in her laughter, Pyrrha tried to deny it but couldn't; not fully. “In my defense, I couldn't have predicted this would happen.” She dabbed at his face with the towel, feeling her face heat up when she suddenly realized she was stroking his cheek—albeit with a piece of cloth interposing between them.

A deep, basso laugh came from the other end of the counter. “Don't believe her, son; she's more clever than she likes to let on.”

Leon Arc was standing at the wall oven, one pot holder-clad hand holding the cover of a pot sitting in said oven while the other was stirring the contents with a long, wood handled spoon. He was a few inches taller than his son and broad at the chest and shoulder besides. In his early retirement, he'd let his blonde hair grow down past his shoulders and kept a very short beard and mustache. He wore a white t-shirt and jeans under a bright red BCFD apron.

Evidently not satisfied with what he was tasting, he covered the pot again, closed the oven, and turned up the heat. “Chili's going to be another hour at least,” he announced. His blue eyes twinkled with merriment as he turned to face the pair of teens and saw the mess of the cake between them.

“Well, I suppose it's better than things were when you two were little. Otherwise There'd be flour everywhere and Jaune would be covered in raw egg instead of frosting.

Pyrrha took one last swipe at a bit of frosting on the side of Jaune's nose and cast a fond look at the cake. “The cake looks just perfect to me. We had a lot of fun making it together and it shows.”

Swiping a dollop of frosting off the side of it with his finger, Jaune took a taste and grinned. “And it tastes great too.”

“It's got everything a proper birthday cake should have then.” Pyrrha agreed.

Leon laughed again and crossed the not inconsiderable length of the Arcs' kitchen. His limp, the injury that had ended his career as a firefighter, was pronounced but didn't seem to cause him pain. As he'd been saying for years now; three people were alive because he'd taken the risk that ended in that spiral fracture—that was more than a fair trade to him.

“Well if the birthday girl is happy with it, I don't think I'll argue.” With a pair of huge paw-like hands, he ruffled both teens' hair. Pyrrha smiled through the waterfall of red hair now covering her face. With Leon and Muriel Arc in her life, she never wanted for the affection her parents often weren’t around to deliver in person.

Oh, she knew her parents loved her and they didn't hesitate to show it when they were around... well it hadn't taken her long to realize that she hadn't exactly been planned and neither of her parents wanted to postpone their busy, far-reaching lives to raise a daughter. They made plans to retire almost every other year, she suspected her mother and father were like sharks that way: if they stopped moving, they'd die.
A lot of kids would resent that, feel unloved and abandoned. But then most kids didn't have the Arc Clan next door with open arms.

Once he decided the kids' hair was mussed enough, Leon took a step back, putting his fists on his hips. “So. Are you going to cut the cake first, or do you want to wait for dinner to be ready?”

“Hmm, let me think…” Pyrrha touched a finger to her chin, striking a the pose of one who might actually have to consider after an hour of being tantalized by by the delicious scent of baked goods, then another fifteen minutes playing around with more frosting than could be healthy for the entire track and field team let alone three people.

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It hadn't even been a contest, although after two pieces, and a feeling in her mouth lie she'd just frenched the Marshmallow Man, she had to admit they probably went a little too crazy on the frosting.

That, of course, was what the extra butter, extra salt popcorn was for.

Somewhere, she was sure, her mother was shouting about bad nutrition and not understanding why.

Not that Pyrrha cared too much at the moment. She was at he far end of the couch, legs propped up on the coffee table. Her arm rested along the back of the couch to make room for Jaune, who was sitting with his back against her, his legs up on the couch. They were passing said popcorn and a two liter of Mountain Dew Code Red between them while watching Helen Mirren mowing bad guys down with a minigun.

Life was pretty good, Pyrrha thought while also wondering how it was she'd never seen this movie before between Jaune and Ruby's love of comic book movies and Yang's passion for action.

Jaune shivered for probably the third time in the past forty-five minutes, and this time seemed to be the last straw, as she felt the pressure against her side lessen. Sure enough, Jaune flipped his legs off the couch and sat up. “You know what? It's actually cold in here. Can you remember the last time it actually got cold in this house?”

It had been some time, she had to admit. Beacon City's climate was mild, with the temperature rarely getting that far below zero, and even when it did, the house was modern enough that keeping the thermostat steady was usually enough to keep the place at a reasonable temperature.

Still, like the snow, it had happened once or twice in their lifetimes. In fact, she did remember the last time. A fond smile crossed Pyrrha's face. “We were eleven, I believe. It was the night of the BCFD Firemen's Ball and Blanche was babysitting.”

When the last two words in one of their stories were 'was babysitting', there was a ninety-percent chance the preceding words was the name of the eldest Arc sister Blanche, now working in LA was a public relations liaison for some internet start-up.

“We were all watching TV down here and had to huddle together under this old afghan.” She gently patted the ancient, crocheted blanket that usually served as a decoration hung over the back of the couch. It had been made by Jaune's grandmother's mother back when the family still lived in France. Pyrrha suspected the woman hadn't been all there because in blocky crochet fashion, it depicted of all things a giant scorpion seemingly being exalted by black shapes that looked like ravens, wolves, boars and bears along the border.

How herself and all the Arc children for generations hadn't been scarred for life by that thing was
anyone's guess.

As if to demonstrate his family line's immunity to primal terror, Jaune looked back at the afghan with approval. “Well Miss Nikos, I think that's just the thing we need right now.” With that, he snatched it off the back of the couch and with a tiny bit of difficulty, threw it over the both of them.

Back when they were eleven, Pyrrha had been preoccupied with the fact that the thing was surely cursed, but today, she was thinking more about how close Jaune was now sitting to her. Screwing up her bravery, she slipped her arm down off the back of the sofa and draped it around him, ever so gently pulling him closer.

He complied with the silent request without complaint, pulling the blanket closer around them. He smiled, not even giving pause to the proximity of their faces. “Just like old times, huh?”

There was nothing for it but to just smile back at him. This was just how they were. Well, not exactly this; this was new and exciting and she was wondering if somehow it was turning out that her seventeenth birthday was the day her mutant power of luck manipulation had chosen to manifest. Or mind control. Or maybe just lucid dreaming.

Then she realized she'd just been smiling at him an inordinately long amount of time and lamely covered with, “Yes. Just like old times.”

If he’d thought that strange, Jaune just nodded and returned his attention to the movie. Thing might have gone on like that if he hadn't started fidgeting in his seat a few minutes later; and action that almost shoved her off the couch.

“Jaune?” she asked, causing him to stop for a second.

“Hmm?” Having known him for almost her entire life, she could tell that was the 'hmm' of a Jaune trying to hide something.

“Are you... okay?” Her voice broke as her mind raced. Was he getting weirded out with how close they were? That didn't seem likely; he was the one that pulled the blanket over them in the first place. Plus he'd never seen physical contact with her as anything but normal anyhow—just a week ago, he'd fallen asleep with his head on her chest while they were lying on her bed trying to study French. If he hadn't seen anything sexual in that, it was possible that he wouldn't in anything short of actual sex.

And so her mind had landed there. She tried so hard not to let her mind wander in that direction and yet here she was. Why was it that in the shows and movies they watch it was always the guy who had to stop thinking perverted thoughts and the girl got away just fine? Was it not normal for a girl to think that way? Maybe that was her problem.

Of course she couldn't remember thinking thoughts like that before meeting Yang.

So what if she'd met Yang well before puberty, she was going to blame her for this too, damn it.

There was no telling where her thoughts might have spiraled if the next words out of Jaune's mouth hadn't pierced right through them.

“Hey Pyrrha? So the Winter Formal is coming up soon...”

Qrow leaned against the picket fence that enclosed the Xiao Long front lawn, watching
impassively as his nieces feverishly packed snow onto what was already an eight-foot base for their snowman. Considering they'd only gotten two inches of snow at best, this meant that the front yard was now barren to the grass and they were now pillaging the back yard, the sidewalk and the street for the second level of their snow titan.

Reaching into his coat, he pulled out a bottle—not booze this time but aspirin—and swallowed two down without water before recapping it.

As he watched, Blake returned from the back yard with a bucket, hiking it up to the base and dumping it on top. Then, she reached into the bottom of the bucket and scooped out the slush at the bottom an palmed it, hiding it just before Yang or Ruby could notice.

He smirked, fully prepared for the carnage to break out. Then he looked over at his 'partner' in chaperoning, who was perched primly on a patio chair she'd dragged over, drinking a mug of cocoa.

“Alright Princess, what's the deal? Why aren't you over there having fun with your friends?”

Weiss didn't look up, keeping her focus on her drink. “Fun? That's not fun, that's just juvenile. Playing in the snow is something you do in Junior High, not as Juniors in High School.”

“Well those Juniors and the little Sophomore over there seem to be having a grand old time. And seein' as they seem ta be your only friends, I don't see what you've got ta lose by bein' 'juvenile'.” Maybe if the sunlight reflecting off the snow wasn't making his head pound like Yang on some jackass who mouthed off to her, he'd feel bad about hitting below the belt while verbally sparring with an adolescent girl.

Or if she wasn't a Schnee. That family counted among the many things they passed down from generation to generation a certain quality he liked to call 'punchability'.

Weiss screwed up her face and sneered at him in much the same way he'd seen her sister and cousins do while waiting for a lawyer to come rescue them from justice over everything from parking tickets to drunk in public to assault. “I'll have you know that I have many friends.”

“Which is why you're always here with these ones even though you bitch an' moan about Yang all the damn time, right?”

The sneer disappeared, replaced swiftly by an impassive expression. “It isn't all the time and... it's just how we are, okay? We snipe, we argue—but we're still friends...” She glanced over to Yang and Ruby who were laughing together and Blake, who was biding her time for the perfect moment to strike with her slush ball.

“Right?”

The word came out weak, questioning—dare he say it... afraid? It lacked any of the traditional Schnee pomposity he'd come to know and loath. Here was just another girl who just wanted some friends. It was enough to make Qrow feel just a little guilty but at the same time, he was seeing something else that annoyed the hell out of him in its place.

Narrowing his eyes, he turned to face her fully, squinting down at her with the same mighty glare he reserved for perps. “You know somethin' Princess? You kinda remind me of my sister.”

Whatever Weiss had been feeling, she came up short here. Raven Branwen was not something one brought up with Yang without either being Ruby or well out of punching or charging range. She stammered—actually stammered. “Y-yang's mother?”
“The very same.” Qrow confirmed. “Back when we all were kids, she was like you: too good for the teenaged shit we all enjoyed, but still pissed off about not being included. Sound familiar?”

Weiss fidgeted with her cup. “I'm not upset. I just wish we could do something a little more dignified than pick fights at clubs, play like little kids, or watch movies with a higher budget for squibs then writers.”

“Well,” Qrow pushed off the fence and bent down to grab two handfuls of snow. “Maybe if you did stuff they liked without bitchin', then maybe they'd be up for something you like sometime.”

Not liking a snowball-armed Qrow one bit, Weiss was on her guard. “What are you doing?”

Qrow smirked, bouncing one snowball in his palm. “The best I can to make sure whatever white-haired privilege-beast you spawn in the future doesn't have to go through what Yang's had to.”

With that, he tossed on ball underhand at Weiss's chest. She shrieked, dropped her mug and caught the ball of cold. Too late, she looked up to see Qrow midway through throwing the second snowball.

Blake was just winding up to throw her slush at Yang when Qrow's throw nailed her in the back of the head. She whirled around with surprising speed, but Qrow was faster, already back at the fence, looking at Weiss with mock shock.

It took less time than it took Blake's slush ball to hit her for Weiss to realize what Qrow had done and she was thinking some very undignified words about the man.

**RWBY**

Pyrrha felt like the universe had just glitched around her. Time seemed to skip around and stand still at the same time. Was this really going to happen? She turned to look as Jaune and found him staring straight ahead with an odd look on his face. She dared not say anything lest she make him change his mind.

For his part, Jaune took a few deep breaths before saying, “I... I really, really tried to get a date to it. Really tried. I even asked Cinder even though you pointed out how bad an idea that was.”

A sigh escaped Pyrrha's lips as some tension released. So that was it. He was going to ask if they could go as friends as per usual. She'd be disappointed if not for understanding just how much of a long shot her earlier hopes had been. And in any event, they always had fun even if it wasn't exactly what Pyrrha wanted. IT would have been nice if he hadn't asked on her birthday, but...

“So I know we usually go as friends, but... I think this year I'm just not going to go.”

Wait. What?

Pyrrha almost choked. “What? Why? Don't we always have a nice time together?”

“W-well yeah.” Jaune was starting to panic at her reaction. “But we're Juniors now, right? Only one more year left in school after this. I thought maybe we'd both want to go with someone we wanted to be... with-with? Is that a thing? It feels like a Nora-ism...”

That last part didn't really register because the bombshell had already been dropped. Sure she'd been sure he didn't like here in that way this whole time, but actually hearing him say point blank that she wasn't the person he wanted to go to the Winter Formal or any other dances with hurt more than she ever imagined it would.
Sure, she knew this day was coming, that one day she'd have to let go of her crush but not so soon. Not now.

Not noticing that his best friend had been rendered speechless, Jaune continued to ramble, “And since that's not really in the cards for me, I figured I had a duty as your best friend to make sure it was for you.” He held his hand up to ward off an argument that wasn't forthcoming, “And yeah, I know you don't want to go if I don't go because you're like the most amazing girl ever like that and don't want to me to have to face my loser-dom, but I've got the solution to that too.”

He brightened a little at this because really, he felt this was the most clever solution ever. “So... remember Halloween? We each won one demand from the other that they can't refuse. I'm calling mine in.” He turned to her, not really seeing her thanks to how focused he was on his task. “Pyrrha Nikos: I demand that you go to the Winter Formal with a guy you want to be there with. As in a guy you actually like... in that way. Or at least would like to date.” He'd written it down so the terms were airtight.

Ducking his head, he gave a little shrug. “I've got no doubt you'll get him. I mean you're you: all you've got to do is ask, right?”

If he listened really closely, he would have heard something snap inside his best friend.

It wasn't even the express rejection anymore, she was just realizing, it was that somehow, some way he didn't even see her was a possibility. Not even on the menu. She'd never even had a chance because... because... well she had no damn idea, but there it was now wasn't it. Even worse, she couldn't even be upset with him because it wasn't like he could control how he felt.

So there was nothing she could do, nothing she could have done and all the hope she'd had for any of this was turning out to have been a futile, laughable waste. Oh, and just for fun, the soul-rending revelation had to hit her head on like a goddamn truck on her birthday?! After everything had started so amazingly, so perfect?

The combination of stresses, of the ups and downs, of the howling void of despair that that was coming over her was too much.

“Pyrrha?” Jaune asked, concerned and confused because he really had no idea what he'd done.

She shucked the blanket off her and stood abruptly, almost causing him to topple over for her absence. She couldn't look at him; she would say or do something she regretted if she did—maybe even burst into tears. “I-I need to get some air,” she declared.

Then to Jaune's utter confusion, walked to the sliding door, opened it, and stepped out onto the deck with neither a coat nor shoes.

Chapter End Notes

Unleash the Raaage!

There's one more chapter in this arc folks, so keep calm and have some faith. I very purposefully stayed out of Jaune's POV here, so don't hate him as much as he might seem to deserve.
One thing I love about this ship from a writer's standpoint is that they're both just awkward enough to require a catalyst but not a contrived one, and since that's the kind of thing that can really shape a relationship, it creates this amazing little space where you can really dig in and explore their relationship at all levels and moments purely within the bounds of their personalities. It's something I like to do with my original works, but since I hate going OOC in fan fiction few decent ships grant that opportunity.

I also wanted to avoid the old romance trope of a misunderstanding leading to anger and dividing the couple until the climax. That isn't what this is. Regardless of what's happening right now, these two still care for each other. Pyrrha is just running away from her problems after having her emotions frazzled. We'll see how things pan out soon.

On to the other storyline, we have Weiss getting some more How To Friend lessons, this time from Qrow. Plus some more world expansion: Raven is a moody loner in this world too. And Winter has an arrest record. Who woulda thought?

Also, name check: Muriel is the Celtic word for sea or sky. So even in a modern AU, still following the color rule. Aaaand that's not her name across the little multiverse I've concocted just like how Blanche is Blanche and Leon is still Leon here and in Arc Reaction.

References: Jaune and Pyrrha are watching Red, and the Punchability Index is something my friends and I came up with to describe characters with smug or petulant expressions.

And on a final note, this fic is now novel length. As are the other two RWBY ones. Remember, I started these in February of last year. That's three novels in Fanfic alone. A writerer is me.

Next chapter, Some Day In Snow Part 3, AKA Author's Saving Throw.
Jaune Arc was used to screwing up, used to failing. By now, it was as if he'd built up an emotional callus leaving him capable of shrugging things off with incredible resiliency and with just a bit of encouragement, lowering his head and soldiering on to try, try again.

In the last two weeks, he'd been rejected sixty-eight times for a date to the Winter Formal and that wasn't counting the polite refusals, those girls who already had dates, and the handful of girls who bluntly stated they didn't want Pyrrha to gut them and hang them from her javelin as a warning.

He hadn't let it get him down though, even when Cinder put on a quite elaborate show with a selfie of herself and a photo of him taken with her phone. She'd swiped back and forth between them, instructing him 'look at me, now look at you. Now back to me, then back to you. Is something gelling in your brain yet?'.

No, he'd weathered that storm with a little nod acknowledging that he understood he wasn't good enough—then immediately asked Emerald, who had been standing with her when he approached. At least Emerald, who he'd gotten to know a little doing stage tech stuff in drama class was nice enough to keep Mercury from stomping his head. Who knew those two were dating? It always seemed like they hated one another.

So yes, he was normally unaffected by failure. Countless sports tryouts, social crash landings and attempts at resisting the whims and demands of his sisters stood as testament to that. But there was one place where he couldn't handle it at all: disappointing his best friend.

In fact, it was one of his biggest fears. More times than he could stomach admitting, Pyrrha had to spend an inordinate amount of time assuring him they were still friends and whatever stupid thing he'd done wasn't that big a deal in her eyes.

This time he'd seen that look in her eyes; one that was almost entirely foreign to them. It was a look of defeat so terrible it had snuffed her fighting spirit. The spark wasn't just gone in them, they seemed flat... void. It was all he needed to see to know that this time she would not be reassuring him; that this time he'd succeeded in hurting her in a way she couldn't just bounce back from.

His confusion turned to primal terror and revulsion. Pyrrha Nikos was his best friend, the person whose hurts he was meant to soothe, whose problems he was supposed to help fix, whose happiness was in part his responsibility. Now, in trying to fix one of those problems he'd done something—he didn't know what, but he was the only one in the room when her mood went from content to hollow—that was the exact opposite of that.

The paralysis of fear and shame that briefly gripped him disintegrated. His best friend was upset and he had to put a stop to that. He had to do something—anything.

Anything for her.

He struggled free of the afghan and stood from the couch ready to brave the cold to find Pyrrha and bring her back. The only thing stopping him was a strong hand that clamped down on his shoulder firmly but without too much force.

Leon Arc met his son's eyes and gave him a sad shake of his head. "You don't want to be the one
that goes out there right now, son.”

Not normally one to raise his voice to his parents, Jaune didn't even think twice this time. “Pyrrha's out there in the cold right now! She's upset and... and,” he was starting to breath hard, panicking, “She needs me!”

It took massive reserves of discipline not to comment on his son's choice of words. He really wished he'd been right and those two could resolve what had been transpiring between them the last few years without his or his wife's interference. What he feared right now though was Jaune going out in the snow and inadvertently delivering the finishing blow to what was left of Pyrrha's restraint.

Armed with twelve years of ammunition, things could be said that could never be taken back then and such a precious, special friendship as those two had would be lost.

Oddly, he imagined that was only the next-to-worst case scenario. The worst would have been Melaine Nikos deciding take things into her own hands and have one of her infamous talks with the kids. For all her good points, the woman had the social graces of a bull fired out of a cannon into a Ming vase warehouse. Also the bull was on fire.

Everyone in both families knew by now that her explanation of the birds and the bees to her daughter went into lurid enough detail that Pyrrha temporarily went into denial about her own conception.

So things weren't at their worst. Just damn close.

Leon let out a sympathetic sigh for his only son's predicament, but shook his head once again. “Not right now. Trust me on that.”

“But she's out there and—” Jaune started to repeat only to have Leon talk over him.

“I'm going to go talk to her,” he assured, “And meanwhile, I want you to go check on the chili.”

Jaune looked at him as if his head had just split open to reveal a thousand snakes. “The chili?! Dad —”

“Go check on the chili and think about what just happened, son. Don't think about it from your perspective, but from Pyrrha's. Try—really try and imagine why she reacted the way she did.” He paused to let that sink in, watching his son's horror-stricken face soften into earnest thoughtfulness. The next part, he wasn't sure if it was too on-the-nose, but he felt Jaune might not reflect on it if not prompted. “That, and think about what Pyrrha really means to you.”

As this Jaune blinked. “What do you mean? She's my best friend.”

“Not what she is to you, what she means to you. There's a difference. Now go think on it.” Giving a gentle prod in the direction of the kitchen, he sent Jaune off for a bit of meditation. Then grabbing up one last important thing, went out into the snow himself.

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It hadn't taken Pyrrha long to realize she'd made a poor choice. Halfway down the stairs of the deck to be precise. It was then that her will to stomp through the snow in already-damp socks gave out and she found herself sitting on the steps.

Another poor choice, she had to admit, but she couldn't very well go back inside after that. She
didn't know what to do: not in the immediate present, not in the future.

That sounded melodramatic even to her, but it was true. What she needed was someone to talk to, but her options were severely limited. Jaune was the person she would normally discuss her problems with, but he was the problem, so that was no help. Yang would make the whole thing into a joke, Weiss hated Jaune and wouldn't be neutral, Blake wouldn't want to get involved in the drama, and Nora... well Nora was quite possibly more aggressively in favor of their relationship than she was. Ren was an option, but telling Ren meant things would eventually reach Nora no matter how hard her tried to keep her confidence. Finally there was Ruby, who was probably too young to understand.

She hung her head and shivered. And people called Jaune socially well-adjusted. As bad as things got for him, he'd never run out into the snow to mope in freezing wet socks and leggings.

Above and behind her, the sliding door opened and closed. It was a shock to her how long it had taken Jaune to come after her, really. A tiny, bitter part of her muttered that she shouldn't be surprised; it wasn't as if he cared for her after all.

Mentally, she gutted that part of her and hung it from an imaginary javelin as a warning to other. Jaune was her best friend—that hadn't changed just because he didn't feel for her the way she wanted, that he hadn't even considered it. Every moment of fun they'd had together, every time they stood by one another, helped one another: those hadn't gone away and nor had the sentiment behind them. They loved each other.

It wasn't just romantic.

All the same, she dearly wished he hadn't come after her. If he obliviously kicked at the hornet's nest that was her emotional state right now, the resultant explosion would blow a new crater in this little blue planet.

Footsteps crunched in the snow on the deck. They sounded too heavy and uneven to be Jaune's, but she couldn't be sure without looking up—which she really didn't feel like doing. Presently, they proceeded down the stairs before stopping.

Something settled around her; the coat Jaune had given her for her birthday.

"I'm sorry you had to go through all this." Leon said, patting her on both shoulders before taking a seat on the stair just above hers. Pyrrha leaned into the contact wordlessly, so Leon gave her a quick side hug before leaning down so he was in her peripheral vision.

"He did want to come out her for you. Even yelled at me a little. He's never done that for his own sake, you know?" She nodded, still not feeling like talking, but glad someone was there to lend some sympathy. The coat helped too; Jaune had went through a lot of work and expense, even risking her own wrath to make sure she got it. Just having it on dispelled any doubts she had about their friendship.

Leon picked up a handful of snow and started tossing it from hand to hand; a nervous tic both Arc men shared: they couldn't keep still when a situation got serious. "I couldn't help but overhear what Jaune said to you. And seeing as we're here right now, I can guess at what you heard." He winged the snowball high of across the yard where it hit the side of the barbecue pit. "What's more? I can pretty much promise you that those two things, taken with what he actually meant are three entirely different things."

At this, Pyrrha couldn't remain silent. "You don't have to do this Mr. Arc." She pulled away from
him and curled further into herself. “Jaune just doesn't like me the way I like him. It's on me to get
over it is all. I suppose I just need time...”

She expected at least a little surprise at her admission that she like-liked her son, but all she heard
was more of an annoyed grunt. When she glanced at him, she caught him looking skyward as if for
divine guidance. None seemed forthcoming, so he said, “You now what's the most interesting thing
about the two of you to me? How ever since you two stopped hating each other for being a gross
boy and an icky girl respectively, you've been self-regulating. Whenever you got into fights, you
made up almost before we ever heard of it. I guess that's why we all just let this little dance you
two've been doing around each other these past few years without interfering. We thought you two
were just like this magical type of connected where you would just work things out on your own.
But, I mean you're still human teenagers after all.”

Pyrrha puzzled over what he was saying and shook her head. “But we are working it out. I'm
working it out at least. It's my problem after all.”

“Yeah, no it isn't.” Leon suddenly stood up, holding out a hand in offer to help her up as well.
“Come on, let's go.”

“Go where?”

“Back into the house. Look, I could give you all these canned speeches about how girls mature
faster than boys, maybe an anecdote about how I was in high school, talk about what it's like to be
a kid with the self confidence of a dish rag... but it's better you heard it from someone else besides
me. Plus, you need to come out from the cold.”

Pyrrha had to admit one thing: the confusion she was feeling was better than what she had been
feeling. Hesitantly, she took Mr. Arc's hand and let him hoist her to her feet. Together, they made
their way back up to the sliding door.

There, Leon put his hand on the handle before pausing. “You still have a change of clothes here,
right?” Pyrrha nodded. More than one actually and Jaune had the same next door. It was just easier
that way sometimes. “Good. Go get those wet clothes changed, then come back down to the living
room and... just wait.”

“Just wait?”

“Trust me,” Leon said, pulling the door open and ushering her inside.

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By the time Leon entered the kitchen, Jaune looked like the very image of suffering. He was sitting
on a bar stool pulled up the the counter, his head in his folded arms, staring across the countertop
at the window. The second the door opened, he leapt up.

“Dad? Is?”

Leon raised a hand to calm him down. “I talked to her. Hopefully, she'll be joining us later.”

“So... she's okay?”

“At the moment, it's more like she's less not okay. Whether things get better is up to you. Did you
think about what happened earlier?”

Jaune slumped, leaning back against the counter. “I... I've thought about it, but I still don't
understand. I mean now that I think about it, I did put myself down while explaining things and Pyrrha hates when I do that. But she'd never get that upset over it.” He groaned. “The thing is, I thought this arrangement would make her happy.”

“Why do you think that would make her happy?”

At that, Jaune shrugged. “Because since the end of Junior High, I've ended up going with her as friends to every dance. She'd never had a chance to just take a real date, you know? Last time I suggested she just go without me, she insisted she wasn't going to abandon me, so the plan was I'd get a date so she wouldn't feel guilty. Only I'm... me and that didn't happen. But as it turns out we still had those favors from the Halloween party and I thought it'd be the perfect way to make sure she got to take a guy she liked to the dance and wouldn't feel guilty since I'm the one that pushed her into it.” He shook his head. “Except it didn't work out that way.”

“And you have no idea why?” Leon pressed.

“None!” Jaune said, strained. “I mean it's like the second I said it would be nice if she could actually go with someone she actually wanted to be with, everything went wrong.” He frowned. “You don't think she thought I was being ungrateful about all the times she's gone with me as friends do you? Because I didn't want her to think that—I mean I lo... liked every moment of that.”

He tried not to think about all those dances. Nothing good of that.

Fortunately or not, his father didn't seem to catch on to that. “I see. Except that's not what you said to her, son.”

“Huh?”

“I was in here when you started talking about it. You know how sound carries through that door,” he jerked a thumb toward the door out to the living room. “What you actually said to her was that you thought maybe both of you might want to go with someone you wanted to be with.”

Jaune chewed on that a moment before asking, “Okay, but what does... What Do you think she's upset because I said I didn't want to be with her? But that would mean...” His expression hardened. “Dad. No. We're not going here again.”

Leon folded his arms and closed his eyes. “Do you have any other explanations?”

“How about one from somewhere in reality?! I've told you a thousand times it's not like that between us. And please don't even let her hear that kind of talk. It'd... it'd be a disaster!” He started rubbing his temples. Then panic entered his expression again. “Wait, you didn't say anything like that to her when you went out there did you?!”

“I can honestly say I didn't.”

“Thank god.” Jaune sank into one of the chairs at the kitchen table. “Dad, you don't get it. Like, you have no idea how lucky I am that someone like Pyrrha is still even just my friend. She's smart and athletic and fun and... and beautiful! She's the best thing in my life that's not a blood relative. And all I am is an albatross around her neck.

“Guys don't ask her out because everyone thinks we're dating. She can't hang out with the other track girls because of the stupid stuff I did trying to impress Weiss meaning Weiss won't let me anywhere near her and Pyrrha's too loyal to just ditch me. Hell, she's half as popular as she should be because she spends so much time with such a loser. And she never bats an eye at any of it, Dad. Not once has she complained about it or even brought it up. It's like it doesn't matter to her.
“And maybe I'm selfish, but I'm doing every thing I can to make sure she doesn't decide I'm not worth the trouble anymore.”

Leon held his breath as the words spilled out. The boy was so much like he was at that age despite his best efforts to praise and encourage him whenever possible. It also confirmed what he'd feared: Jaune couldn't recognize what was right in front of him because he was so wrapped up in his own bottomed-out self worth that he couldn't recognize it for what it was.

Unaware of his father's thoughts, or of any other ears hearing his entire rant, Jaune pressed on. “So please don't bring that kind of thing up again, Dad.” He leaned forward in the chair, hands on his knees. “I mean, it's not like I never thought about it. A couple of years ago I thought maybe we might get there, but that's when the rumors started and it clearly made Pyrrha pull away.”

He used two fingers to massage the bridge of his nose. “I've been trying to get over that, but it's just gotten harder—especially for the past couple weeks. We've been playing this new campaign of Ruby's and she wanted our character to be... together. Kind of sealed it that she really just sees me as this... undifferentiated dude-blob she can just have safe pretend relationships with, you know? The kind of relationships she can't have because of me?” He clamped his eyes tightly shut. “Is it wrong I'm kind of okay just being that dude-blob if it means getting that kind of attention from her—uh, not that that's the only reason. I mean if she feels she needs that kind of thing, I'd do it even if it didn't feel... nice. I'd really do anything for her.”

Okay, so somehow Jaune was worse than Leon was in high school. He wasn't aware that was possible while still being technically sentient. He decided to go with the direct approach. “An it never occurred to you that maybe she wanted to play your characters that way because it was you she was playing it out with?”

Jaune breathed out a sigh that was more like a steam jet being let off. “Can we please, please, please not do this?” He stood up from the chair, shaking his head violently. “I think I need to go to my room for a while...”

Leon remained where he was. “Before you go, can I ask you one more thing?”

Jaune paused at the door. He wanted to leave. He needed to be alone and breath and maybe scream into a pillow or something. It was a full time job keeping all that stuff inside without his dad chipping away at that dam. But it was his father and he respected and loved the man too much to just storm out while he was just trying to help. “Yeah?”

“How long did it take you to come up with the wording on that favor?”

His father wasn't normally cryptic with his advice, so Jaune had to think war too long about what he'd just been asked. “Huh?”

“Well,” Leon said, eyes still closed, “It was pretty specifically worded. I was wondering how and why you did it like that.”

Jaune shrugged, “Because Pyrrha would still find some way out of it if I didn't. So I made sure she could only pick someone she liked... you know in that way.”

“You could have just said anyone but you.”

“Because then she'd have gone with Ren and had Nora invite me and we'd be back to square one. I wanted her to get to go with someone she really wanted to go with.” The last words came out weak. All this talk was starting to erode his resolve on that front: he really didn't want to see her at the
dance with someone else. He'd still go through with it, but he was secretly counting himself lucky that he hadn't gotten a date because at least now he could stay home and not see.

Leon scratched the light beard stubbling his jaw. ‘But you never actually excluded yourself, I notice.’

Jaune sighed and grabbed put his hand on the door. “I did as good as, Dad.”

“I’m just saying: that’s really not your call.” Leon called as Jaune pushed the swinging door open and stepped through into the living room.

A pair of red-laced green eyes stopped him from going one step further more effectively than a brick wall.

Fight or flight reflexes failed instantly, settling on 'freeze'. He felt like the world was shattering around him. Somewhere apparently far away from him, his jaw worked as his mouth decided now was the time to talk despite not having anything intelligent to say.

“The... I... what I mean is...” his arms got into it too, trying to gesture and point in every direction without a target. Finally a sentence fell into place. “Sound carries through that door,” he said, eloquently repeating the fact that had damned him.

There were tears in those eyes—an improvement from the hollow quality they’d taken on earlier, but he still wanted to kick himself for those too.

“I know.” Pyrrha said, taking the last few steps that separated them and throwing her arms around him.

He reciprocated instantly, folding his arms around her and letting her rest her forehead on his shoulder. “I still don't...” he drew in a shuddering breath because he felt her tears starting to soak through his thin shirt, “I'm not sure how, but I'm so sorry I made you feel bad, Pyrrha. I only meant to do something to make you happy, I swear.”

Now his own tears were stinging his eyes. “A-and as for that other stuff...”

As if in a panic, Pyrrha suddenly straightened up, very nearly hitting her head on his jaw, and held him at arm's length. “Jaune, I'm sorry too. I actually thought I was protecting our friendship when I... pulled away.” Seeing the disbelief in his eyes, she took a deep breath and silently thanked Mr. Arc for arming her with what she needed to convince him.

“But now that I know that was wrong... Jaune Arc, I'm using my one favor. I demand you take me to the Winter Formal.” She gently squeezed his shoulders as his eyes widened with shock and confusion. After years of knowing him, she saw a protest coming and cut it off. “Not as friends. After all, I still have to honor your demand that I go with a guy I actually like 'in that way'. “ Her cheeks burned as she added, “Or at least that I'd like to date.”

Jaune just gawked for a few second, trying to come up with something to say but failing. Eventually, he managed to nod vigorously. Then he pulled her back into an embrace, months of fear and tension finally leaving his body. “O-of course,” he said, “Anything for you.” As he buried his head in her hair, he smiled his customary goofy smile and said, “How is it that on your birthday you end up giving me the best gift of all?”

Pyrrha hummed contentedly. “I would say this gift is mutual, wouldn't you?” then she pulled back enough to let him see a mischievous smile, “Plus it is a really nice coat, so I still came out on top.”
Of course a LOT of people caught the 'loophole' in Jaune's logic, but even if you see the end coming, its the journey that matters. We also pay off the 'Anything for her/you' runner, which is an homage to Castle's romantic runner 'Always'.

I chose not to give them their first kiss here because there's still more story to tell before we get to that or the 'I love you's.' I feel that a lot of romance stories stack these moments on top of each other, which is fine, but limits storytelling. It's part of why many romance subplots sort of burn out after the 'will they won't they' stage: no sense of pacing after the fact. These two still have more to do in learning what the real differences are between friends and dating.

Now if you'll excuse me, I have to clear out all the smoke from all these Chekov's Guns I just fired before my next story.

Speaking of, I'm playing with a few new ideas for my next fic once NYSG and Arc Reaction end. I actually have a ton of ideas that I'll probably be putting first chapters into a single fic called Arkos: Myriad Ways, but I have one big one that I think might be better suited to an original fic, but it's been heavily inspired by the characters, so I wanted to float it:

It would be called Chemical Soldier and would feature Qrow as a former master alchemist-turned fantasy world superhero the Chemical Soldier. After failing to stop an assassination attempt that nearly kills the Queen, he retires and disappears into anonymity. His secret is known only to the Queen (whose survival now depends on a device he built to breath for her), his apprentice Jaune, and the crown Princess Pyrrha. When a new breed of criminal capable of countering the kingdom's magical defenses appears on the scene, Pyrrha enlists Juane for a special purpose: teach her the secrets Qrow has taught him in order to make her into the new Chemical Soldier.

The problem is, Jaune isn't the best fighter and Pyrrha is not the best alchemy user, and Qrow quickly gets word of what they're doing, deciding to take over the operation with his own brand of drunk and grumpy.

This would be a lot more comedic than my other fantasy-action offerings, but also there'd be some more Not Your Saint George-style departures from the canon characters, so I'm on the fence on whether or not to write it as fic.

Anyway, that's a thing. Next chapter, was conclude Some Day In Snow mostly with RWBY and Qrow. Until then!
Weiss didn't even have time to curse Qrow's name before she had to abandon her spot by the fence just ahead of a fusillade of snowballs. There wasn't much cover in the Xiao-Long front yard; a couple of small cherry trees that weren't actually wide enough to protect here and... oh yes, the giant mound of snow that was supposed to be the base of a giant snowman.

Left with no other choice besides get pelted by snow, she vaulted over the top and rolled across its broad top to shelter on the other side.

Rolling hadn't been the best choice, as the cold and wet were already seeping through her stylish coat and trickling icily down into the tops of her boots by the time she landed. She had no regrets over this, however as an iceball struck the fence behind her with a crunch that promised to have been painful. Yang played for keeps in all things.

Then something else came over the top of her defensive barrier. Swaddled in a red and black checkered wool long coat, dark red ski pants, and a Santa hat just a little too big for her, Ruby plopped own face-first in the snow. She shivered just a second before popping up again. Snow clumps tumbled off her as she held up a mitten-encased hand in a friendly wave accompanying a big, friendly grin.

Later Weiss would insist that the sound that came out of her mouth wasn't a squeak but rather a dignified sound of surprise. Everyone else would point out that Weiss couldn't even describe what that would sound like. She did, however have the wherewithal to dig a gloved hand into the mound of snow beside her and clumsily try to make a snowball with which to defend herself.

“Hey!” Ruby threw up both hands. “I'm on your side!”

Weiss paused, all but her hands which compulsively were trying to even out the wad of snow in her hands into a proper sphere worthy of being called a 'ball'. That her gloves were meant to look good and never, ever touch snow (or any objects more unruly than credit cards) wasn't helping. “What? Why?”

'Never trust kindness you don't know the price of—you probably can't afford it'. That's what her father would say. After all, he'd taught her and her siblings that no one honestly did anything out of the bottom of their heart.

And she probably would have kept believing that if she hadn't decided to get herself kicked out of enough private school after private school until she landed at Beacon High and joined the track and field team. The most any of them expected of her was her companionship.

Sure Blake could come off as cold and sometimes used the others to distract Yang long enough for her to get some peace and quiet. And Pyrrha's insistence on keeping tall dork and scraggly around with her could get annoying. And of course Yang was Yang: loud, pushy and obnoxious. Somehow they all clicked though and Weiss had to admit that she was more comfortable with them than any of the circling sharks that called themselves her friends at her old school.

She had no guilt whatsoever over what she'd had to arrange in order to make she was kicked out of that place and blacklisted from every other private school in the city. When one's father had
dealings with or had actively and unfairly competed with the parents of everyone around you, that environment was more than a little hostile.

Unaware of Weiss's thoughts, Ruby just smiled. “Three reason's really.” To illustrate, she held up her hand, seemingly unaware that her mittens made the 'three' she was trying to hold up into one. “One: three against one's no fun. Two: you look like you've never been in a snowball fight in your life, so it's my duty to teach you. And Three: it's not really a snowball fight if me and my sister are on the same side.” She shot the white-haired girl puppy-dog eyes, “I know we aren't really friends... or talk all that much... but you hate one of my best friends, so we've got that connection. That's a start, right?” The longer she talked, the faster she talked and it was starting to fascinate Weiss how she was actually able to understand every word.

“...Right.” Weiss said when the words finally stopped. Bringing up Jaune wasn't helping her mood. The whole thing had been mortally embarrassing for her and despite everyone involved pretending it wasn't an issue, she knew it had strained her relationship with Pyrrha. When you only had three people you could even tentatively call your friends, you couldn't afford to have one of them pissed at you because their crush had a crush on you and because you openly disdained said crush, who was also their best friend.

Real people were way too complicated.

“Great!” Ruby chirped, starting to dig into the snow mound with her mittened hands, making sloppy snowballs at a rapid pace while also burrowing into the mound itself to form a snow fort. “Now let's get crackin! For glory! For victory!” She took a snowball in each hand and stood, primed to throw both.

Paf.

A snowball immediately smacked her in the face.

“For vengeance!” She let fly and the great snowball war was on. Weiss joined in, hoping at first to pay Qrow back for getting her in this situation in the first place. The older man however, had disappeared in the initial confusion, so she was stuck fighting to defend herself from Yang and Blake—then to retaliate against all the taunts and teasing Yang was sending her way.

The battle raged on for the better part of an hour until all four girls were too cold, soaked and worn out to continue. They dragged themselves back indoors to find a big thermos of hot chocolate, four mugs and a suspiciously half-empty bag of marshmallows on the coffee table and a stack of towels and fluffy robes still warm from the dryer folded on the couch.

They took turns going upstairs to grab a hot shower and change. As the guests, Weiss and Blake got first dibs and so were ended up back in the living room while the sisters tended to their post snow war needs.

“So,” Blake spoke over the rim of a steaming mug of cocoa, “Even though Yang's uncle pushed you into it, I'm going to count this as taking my advice and actually reaching out to make friends.”

Weiss's eyes widened. “You knew?!”

That earned her a shrug. “I know you well enough that throwing a random snowball at my head isn't your style. But it got you to join in, so I figured I'd just go with it.”

“You sneak!” Weiss screeched. “I was perfectly happy where I was—dry and relatively warm with my dignity intact.” Despite the strident tone, there wasn't that much in the way of actual anger in
her voice, just disbelief.

Blake rolled her eyes and sipped her drink. “You're the one who came to me worried about your ability to make friends. Would you rather have your dignity or a good time that netted you plus one friend. Ruby seemed to really get on with you.”

Unwilling to fully admit that she'd had fun playing at combat with the younger girl, Weiss just huffed and shrunk in on herself. “Well she's certainly full of energy. And in a less obnoxious manner than Yang.”

“Aw, she's learning.” Blake's lips twitched into a grief smile before resetting to her standard neutral.

Even more annoyed, Weiss turned her face away from the other girl. “Why do you care so much anyway?”

“Because I'm your friend, dummy.” Blake said in a complete deadpan. “Friends care about each other. And... well I know how it feels. Back in junior high, I hung out with a bunch of people who, as it turns out, were not my friends. After that became clear... well I felt a lot like you seed you felt; like there was something wrong with me. I'm not the most outgoing person either. Lucky for me, I've got two dumb blondes that drag me into things when I'd rather just sit in a rut and I'm all the better for it.” For a moment, the mask of indifference Blake commonly wore slipped and Weiss could see the absolute fondness shining through in her expression. “Consider this me paying it forward. Now you have you own Daughter of Xiao-Long to drag you into things. Not luck on another Wukong though—Sun's parents took one look at what they'd unleash on the world and decided to stop.”

There wasn't any helping it, Weiss laughed at that. She didn't know Sun that well, but she did know his reputation as a good-natured troublemaker.

Blake bowed her head in acknowledgment of her own joke, then after a moment of hesitation: “Speaking of which... Sun's having a... 'function' Sunday night with a bunch of friends from his school. I'm invited and it's always the more the merrier, but it's not the kind of thing our group would be into except Pyrrha and she's got her own group for it...”

Something in Weiss went on guard and her mouth acted faster than the rest of her. “You're not asking me to attend some weird sex thing are you? Because the rumors about Winter are absolutely not true and even if they were, there's no reason to believe I would—”

“Whoa.” Blake held up a hand to stop her from going farther. “That is absolutely not what I'm talking about. Why would you even... huh, now that I think about it, it did kind of sound that way, huh?”

“It wouldn't be the first time someone suggested that sort of thing,” Weiss said ruefully. The children of the wealthy elite could be weird.

“That's... never mind.” Blake shook her head to banish any unwanted images that might be forming in there. “It's not like that. It's... well it's a gaming group, like the one Pyrrha plays with Ruby and the others? Sun wants to run a one shot in the same setting Sunday.”

The old Schnee haughtiness rose to the surface unbidden and Weiss shot the other girl an imperious look. “And what makes you think I'd be interested in something as childish as playing make believe?”
Blake had been expecting this and countered smoothly. “I don't know? Maybe the way you were interested in something as childish as a prank war and a snowball fight? Because it's a safe environment to make some more friends?” Then she shrugged indifferently. “Or just because it's fun to be a ninja or wizard or swashbuckler or something else cool for a couple hours out of normal boring everyday life?”

She was making good points and Weiss wasn't liking that because now she was really curious. When Blake read that in her body language, she closed in for the kill.

“Besides, Yang managed to try it and even liked it—Ruby told me so. And if Yang can manage to at least give something a try...”

“Well I'm certainly more open-minded than that dolt to say the least,” Weiss said automatically. “Where, what time and should I bring anything?”

Blake allowed herself to smile openly if only to make it clear to the heiress that she was happy she'd accepted the invitation. “I'll text you the address, around four, and you can't go wrong with a pizza. We should probably get together tomorrow and talk about what you want to play.”

They lapsed into idle conversation thereafter while Blake announced she would text Sun about having someone new at the table.

RWBYRWBYRWBY

Ruby lay stretched out on her bed on top of a towel amid the last bits of slowly melting snow she'd shaken out of her hair. Yang, of course, had beaten her to the shower and was monopolizing it with her lengthy hair care rituals.

She'd just picked up her phone to text Penny and see if she wanted to do something over the weekend when it vibrated on its own, indicating she was getting a text. Tapping the screen, she smiled at what she read.

After actually successfully pulling her group out of its rut and then managing to run a session that even her geekaphobic sister enjoyed, she's started feeling cocky and ambitious. Wheels had started turning within wheels and she'd turned to her fellow Evil DMs to make her grand plan a reality.

Blake had now succeeded in the hard part. God knew how because Ruby hadn't come up with a way to broach the subject at all over the course of the sleepover. Save for the added wrinkle of it now being up to Sun to run a game to impress Weiss, things were going as planned. Penny was already hard at work on her end designing one of her infamous mega dungeons too.

It would be big. It would be awesome. It would... probably not be something they could actually do before Christmas break.

But whenever she managed to get it off the ground, it would be so awesome.

RWBYRWBYRWBY

The thermostat had been turned up so that there was no more need of the possibly cursed afghan. Ladyhawke was playing on the big screen. Two empty bowls of chili were on the coffee table.

That last one was probably not conducive to an atmosphere of romance in hindsight, but then neither of them expected that atmosphere to exist when they started the day. Not that they had any regrets—Leon Arc's cooking was just that good.
Jaune and Pyrrha lounged on the sofa, the former with one arm wrapped snugly around the latter's shoulders as she curled up at his side. They were picture of contentment as they watched the film and just enjoyed finally being together in a way they'd both hoped for but never anticipated.

However, there were a few things left unresolved. Leave it to the socially stupid (or rather more socially stupid) of the pair to interrupt the moment with a question.

"Can I ask a dumb question?" Jaune asked.

"Hmm?" Pyrrha asked, more than used to 'dumb' questions popping into her best friend's head.

Jaune squirmed a bit uncomfortably, though he refused to relinquish his hold on her to do so.

"Well... it's just that I've never had a girlfriend before who didn't turn out to be a sociopath on the internet trying to hack my online accounts to steal my rare hats. So I was wondering like... what do we do now?" He hemmed and hawed a bit before clarifying:

"We've been together but not... together-together for years is what I mean. We've been on more things that you could call dates in everything but name together than most real couples. You've already been kinda kissing me for a couple of weeks now. So I guess what I'm asking is... what changes now?"

The answer didn't come so quickly. Pyrrha had been wondering the same thing, though for her part, she'd been willing to ignore that question until it left her no choice. Yang had been right all those months ago: they'd been essentially unofficially going out for more than a year. Even if they hadn't declared their intentions, their actions with each other had always been just shy of intimate. So yeah, what now?

A little voice in the back of her head had a suggestion that made her go red in the face immediately. She was not going to suggest that.

Yet.

When he didn't prompt her, she took it as leave to give the matter some real thought, eventually arriving at what she hoped was a satisfactory response. “First of all,” she pulled away from him a tiny bit so she could bring their faces closer together. It gave her a little thrill to hear his breath hitch when he felt the heat of her breath on his cheek.

Temptation drew her toward his lips, but she didn't want their first real kiss to simply serve as proof that they were more than just friends, so she settled for pressing her lips against his cheek, lingering there before slowly pulling away. “First of all, we don't have to pretend those are for an imaginary spider man any more.” Then she gave him a playful poke in the side. “Of undifferentiated dude-blobs.”

Jaune laughed and leaned in. He wanted to kiss her. A real kiss. The kind where in the movies the music swelled and the camera rotated around them. There were so many dreams and heretofore forbidden fantasies he'd had about this wonderful girl that he almost felt dizzy thinking about how he was finally with her. But her was mindful of the fact that she'd avoided lip-to-lip contact and wasn't willing to push her farther than she wanted to go. They had time after all. So he planted a quick succession of kisses of his own along her cheek to her jawline. “Or crazy sorceresses?”

“I suppose.” Pyrrha slip her arms around him and nestled herself against his chest. “I wouldn't worry too much about what chances though. We know how we feel now. Everything else will come, I think. But it would be nice to go on a first official date though. How about lunch tomorrow?”
“We were already going to have lunch together tomorrow.”

“Then we're ahead of the curb.”

Chapter End Notes

AN: You know, as much as I adore Jaune and Pyrrha, I have to constantly say how much I love just writing Weiss. I don't really have so much of a connection with her to make her a main character, but she's a ton of fun as a side character, which is why she's the one who ended up growing a subplot when this was meant to have a Blake subplot.

Writing this fic and Arc Reaction have given me a new appreciation of the dynamic between Team RWBY (Which is the one problem I had with Volume 4 besides Tyrian's existence: except for Nora and Ren and Blake and Sun, all the fun character dynamics are missing—it's a far, far better written season than Vol 3 at least) and the way I set Ruby up as more of a friend to JNPR gave me an opportunity explore how these people would mesh together from a new angle.

And here we go with the Evil DMs. A lot of people guessed both Blake and Sun and they were right, though Blake is 'retired' for now. We'll get to why soon enough.

Finally, we get to Jaune and Pyrrha asking the question that 1) too few friends to lovers stories don't have the character consider and 2) I feel a lot of real such couples have had to deal with. Just because the couple is together doesn't mean the story is over. It's just the beginning.

Next arc we will NOT be rejoining Ruby's game but watching Sun's.

Just to get the complaints out of the way, the players won't all be from Team SSSN. I don't know enough about Scarlet and sage to do much with them, so I'm replacing them with characters I do want to write: Torchwick and Emerald. I really, really wanted to have Cinder as a DM at some point, but for plot reasons far in the future, she can't. Boo. She's still into something nerdy though, don't worry. Nerd AU means Ned AU.

So: Blake, Weiss, Neptune, Torchwick and Emerald: place your bets on who plays what.

One more thing before I go, I'm getting ready to launch an Indie Go Go campaign for the game featured in this series: World of Ere: A Dungeonpunk Fantasy RPG – 'Start a Hero, Become a Legend'. Watch my website (on my profile) for the moment it starts.
Weiss really hoped her face would stop burning. And that Blake would stop smirking at her for it.

It was her alleged friend's fault anyway. She should have warned her that Sun would answer the door shirtless—or mostly shirtless. That was not a thing normal people did! It wasn't even summer, it was late fall to the point that it might as well have been winter. There were even scattered patches of snow left as testament to that!

Now she was struggling not to take note of the highly defined abs peeking through his white cotton button down which wasn't in any way buttoned down.

Sun, either used to this level of surreptitious ogling or not noticing, just grinned brightly at the pair and stepped aside with a dramatic bow. “Ladies, welcome to Casa de Wukong come on in, make yourself at home.”

“Hey Sun,” Blake said with an easy smile Weiss was not used to seeing from the normally aloof girl, “Are we the first one's here?”

“Nah.” Sun gave a shrug as the two girls stepped through the door and into the kitchen. The room was fairly large, but cramped thanks in no small part to a big chest freezer against one wall, an extra-large island counter, and the various and sundry cooking appliances of the 'As Seen on TV' variety that littered almost every surface. “Neptune's downstairs getting the terrain off the table from Mordheim last night.”

Evidently, he was taking notice of Weiss's expressions, as he saw her puzzled expression at the unknown word. “Oh, that's a minis game me and the band play. Sort of like roleplaying but you're running an army instead of a character.”

“Right.” Weiss managed. She'd spent the previous day in Blake's company getting a wealth of foreign concepts drilled into her head and she did not need to learn that there weren't just different RPGs out there, but a whole ecosystem of nerdish things people did for entertainment.

Taking that in stride, Sun closed the door and gestured toward the refrigerator. “You guys want a drink before we head down? We've got a couple different kinds of soda, juice, my mom's awful experimental smoothies if you like chia seeds and summer squash...”

“Sodas are good.” Blake said, cutting off more description of Sun's mom's 'experiments' because she knew how far and how bad they could go. The woman wasn't even a health nut, just born with more curiosity than common sense. It made Blake wonder how she ended up being a CPA rather than a scientist. “Weiss?”

Six-pack passed through the Schnee heiress's mind looking for something to connect to. “...Yes. Soda is fine. Perfectly fine.” The words couldn't have held more tension if they were supporting a bridge. She directed a sharp look at Blake as their host make his way over to the fridge and got their drinks.

Leaning over, Blake whispered “Just wait,” she said in a teasing tone she had to have learned from Yang.
As much as Weiss wanted to ask what the hell that meant, Sun was already back holding a number of bottles in his arms. Tilting his head to read the labels, he declared, “So okay; we've got orange, ginger ale and turkey gravy—oh damn it, Dad!” He tried to shift the bottles in his grasp so as to position the offender into a place where he could dump it on the counter but failed. “Ah screw it, we'll just this one to Torchy. Can't let a good practical joke go to waste, eh?”

With that, he motioned with his head for them to follow him and Blake set off, leaving Weiss to bring up the rear. Not even five minutes in and she was yet to be convinced that she belonged there. There had been doubts the day before, but they were mounting with all the jargon, the cluttered house and the very idea of gravy flavored soda joke or not.

But, she reminded herself, she’d had the same misgivings about public school in general, about participating in sports, and every one of the people she now counted as her friends. Things weren't inferior or wrong here, they were just different. She could handle different. She had to handle different if she wanted to interact with people like a normal human being rather than this strange species called a Schnee.

So she squared her shoulders and marched after Blake through a door just off the kitchen leading into a stairway.

The Wukong basement was... interesting. If Weiss had to describe it as anything, she'd say 'patchwork order'. Nothing matched, but everything was in its place. It was a finished basement sectioned off into at least three rooms: the main room, one Weiss spied through an open door which contained a washer and dryer, and another beyond and arch where a desk and bookcases could be seen.

The main room had a pool table as the very first thing that greeted people when they exited the stairs. Beyond that was a cluster of variable seating ranging from a leather love seat, a well worn plush couch, a paisley recliner, and three chairs from three different dinette sets clustered around a long, low table. There was a big screen television behind the three chairs, flanked by a set of heavy duty shelves filled with boxes upon colorful boxes that upon closer inspection revealed themselves to be board games.

Having not known there even were board games beyond monopoly and chess, she was so preoccupied with that she almost missed the other occupant of the room. And that was pretty amazing because he had blue hair. Not old lady blue either. Vibrant cotton candy blue. It was a good dye job too because she spied neither hide nor hair (heh) of any roots showing.

“Hey Neptune this is Weiss the friend Blake told us about,” Sun said, finally managing to set the bottles down at the edge of the table.

The young man, Neptune, was in the middle of putting little plastic slabs covered in plastic trees and boulders into a box, but paused to regard Weiss for a moment. “Queen Elizabeth from the Halloween party, right?” He asked with far too much pride in recalling that.

Weiss wracked her brain, trying to remember him. The hair turned out to be a godsend. “Yes. And you were... well you wore a tuxedo very sharply if I recall correctly.”

“Actually, I was James Bond. MI6 Agent 007.” He did a terrible impression of Sean Connery while bowing. “On Her Majesty's Secret Service, Your Majesty.” Giving her a playful smirk, he took the box in his hands over to an open space on the shelf to put it away.

Sun rolled his eyes at his friend's attempted flirtation and plopped himself down in the arm chair. “So, ladies; what're we playing?”
“After a lot of discussion yesterday, I think we’ve come up with something pretty solid.” Blake sat down on the love seat and pulled a folder of paper character sheets out of her shoulder bag. “Just to make things simpler, I'm playing Weiss's character's bodyguard. I'm a miare rogue with feats from the Shadowstep path—the one that lets you teleport around in dim light.”

A snort escaped Sun.

“Shut up,” Blake ordered, deadpan.

That only made him grin bigger. “Hey, I'm not the one who plays a catgirl at every opportunity.”

“It works for the character: claw attacks count as light blades and I'm specializing in that,” Blake insisted. “Besides, the miare aren't 'cat people', they're a mix of a lot of animals.”

“But mostly cats,” Sun replied before taking mercy on Blake an turning toward Weiss. “And what're you playing?”

Weiss swol with pride and lifted her chin. “I am playing... and angel,” she announced.

“Hailene.” Blake corrected.

“They have wings, they're angels,” Weiss replied haughtily.

“See what I have to work with?” Blake asked. “Anyway, she's a mage on the cryomancer path with Eldritch Warrior because she wants to hit things too. The back story is that she's the daughter of a merchant family who's read far, far too many adventure stories and I'm a mercenary hired to keep her from dying.”

“Sounds like we have a newbie in our midst,” a voice called from the top of the stairs. The owner of said voice descended into view with an arrogant smirk and swagger. He wore a black silk shirt with white slacks and dress shoes. His red hair was more carefully groomed than anyone else's in the room, even Weiss's. “Never thought you'd be the one doing the hand-holding, Belladonna.”

Before Blake could give her reply, Sun had a more pressing question. “How the hell did you get in here?”

“Just take one guess,” Torchwick said blandly as he cleared the archway to the stairs, revealing two young women. One had mint-dyed hair and dark skin. Dressed in a cream-colored sun dress and a green jacket, her lip was curled in amusement as she sidled past him.

“I figured we were invited anyway and it wasn't like your locks were even the lest bit serious,” Emerald Sustrai declared, easily crawling over the back of the couch to bounce down on the side closest to Sun's seat. “Don't worry, I locked back up once I got in.”

The other woman was a girl—or at least looked a good deal young than anyone else in the room. Half of her brown hair was dyed pink and she was dressed with similar expense as Torchwick with a white silk shirt, tan pants and prim little riding boots. All of her focus was on her phone as she absently lounged in the archway.

Sun shot Emerald a glare, but knew she felt no shame, so didn't take it any farther. Instead, he chose to make introductions. “Weiss, these are Emerald, Roman, and Roman's little sister Neopolitan.” He raised an eyebrow to Torchwick. “Is she actually going to play this time?”

“What? You don't like her sparkling conversation skills?” Torchwick asked, rounding the table to take one of the chairs. He kicked it around to face the other direction and say on it backward.
Meanwhile Neo was slowly drifting from the arc to the couch, eyes never leaving her screen. “But actually, yeah, I convinced her not to just sit there and look like a creepy Victorian doll for once.” He pulled out his own smart phone and after some tapping, he held it out for Sun to read.

Taking the phone, Sun scanned over the information. “So you're a human bard—not surprise there, Mr. Peacock. A dueling cane? Seriously?”

“It was a legitimate form of self defense back in the day,” Torchwick defended. “Plus, it's not all I have: I've got a three-shot rifle too. Specced for the Bard Knack 'Valorous', so I can fight frontline my good man.”

“O...okay.” Sun rolled his eyes and continued to scroll through the character sheets. “And Neo is... a halfling combatant? Really?”

At the mention of her name, Neo glanced up, but Roman spoke for her. “It's all she ever plays online: tiny little women whose shtick is nickle and diming people to death. Don't ask me why she doesn't play a rogue, but she's usually pretty badass.” He smirked in his sister's direction before adding, “But we'll see how she is actually playing face to face instead of on a message board now won't we?”

Neo sniffed and tossed her head at the taunt before returning to her phone.

Sun watched Neo for a moment on the off chance that she might have something to say before giving up and turning to Emerald. “How about you, Em? I'm betting rogue.”

A lazy smile spread across the green-haired girl's face. “Trying something new this time: cleric of Dey, Goddess of Doing What Must Be Done. Which is like a rogue with a divine mandate if you read the flavor text. Halfling, by the way, so we've got two shorties in the party.” She posted up for a high five and, without looking, Neo slapped her palm.

Then she frowned and looked at Weiss, “Kind of surprised to see you here. Sure you're up for playing a mage as your first character? They're pretty complicated.” Unlike Sun and his other players besides Blake, she went to school with Weiss even if she only knew her by reputation and in passing.

Weiss could tell that the other woman wasn't trying to provoke her, but her pride made her back straighten anyway. “It's just a matter of picking the right spell for the situation. I am fully capable of that, thank you very much.”

The reaction was not one she'd expected. Emerald just stared at her with a wry 'are you kidding me?' expression. “You're the one that's gonna get frustrated. Just remember I tried to help and take it out on Roman or Sun when you finally snap.” Done with Blake, she seemed to finally notice Neptune. “I didn't hear what Blake's playing, but there's cat people and rogues in this, so that's a given just like how Roman just has to play unusually beautiful men. That leaves you, blue boy. What're you playing?”

A casual look from Sun to Neptune to Roman has Weiss thinking what this group would even consider 'unusually beautiful' for a man. It was like Emerald and Blake had built a strategic handsome reserve. Between Sun's abs and Neptune's smile and Roman's fashion sense, they had the makings to Frankenstein up a perfect man.

Unaware he was being mentally harvested for his best features, Neptune sat down next to Roman and picked up a backpack from beside his seat, coming up with a sheaf of papers like the one from Blake's folder. At the top of it was a few detailed black-and-white drawing of a winged figure in
heavy armor wielding a shield with a sunburst motif on it and a trident.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” Neptune announced dramatically, “Paolo Hydennepoura, which means Cloudcutter. He's a hailene templar cleric of Hessa.”

Roman gave the drawing a low whistle. “Nice. But how do you fly in heavy armor like that?”

“So many feats,” Sun groaned. “Considering you guys and your usual antics, I'm just going to go ahead and guess Blake and Weiss are the only ones that even pretended to make competent characters.”

“Pfft.” Emerald blew a raspberry. “Who cares if our numbers are high if we still manage to get the job done? Besides, it's a one shot—it'd actually be funny if this ended with our bodies getting stacked up like cordwood. Then again, it's you running this and not Blake.”

Blake huffed. “I said I was sorry about that, okay? It was the designers fault in the first place. Why would you make a level 1 ghoul that deadly?”

“Anyway,” Sun interrupted, “Em's right and this is a one shot to test the new system Ruby suggested to me.”


“Oh sure,” said Sun, “She part of the League of Evil GMs. That's what the guy at the game shop calls us anyway. Mostly we just trade ideas online and stuff, but yeah, I know her. Penny too.”

Weiss absorbed this new information slowly. They lived in a sizable city, but it seemed that the geek scene was small enough to fit in, well Yang's house for a Halloween party. She wondered who else knew who. “Huh,” was the best she could do.

Again, Sun nodded. “So. New player, new system, let's get started.” He consulted a pile of handwritten notes before reading, “In a world where airships are common, there are some places where travel by land is still the better choice thanks to airborne predators, sky pirates and the like. For that, there are caravans, hire coaches both steam and horse-powered, and in the nation of Novrom, in the Allied Principalities of Abravas, Cincoun, and Hapsearin, they've decided on a novel means of transporting precious ore from the Cincoun mines down through the hills of Abravas, and to the ports in Hapsearin: the steam locomotive. Over the past ten years, the railway in the region has grown, expanding to multiple towns and also taking on passengers. For your own reasons, you find yourselves aboard a passenger train bound for the port town of Neadia from the mountains.”

At this point, Neptune seemed to remember something and reached under the table to retrieve a roll of plastic material that he unrolled to reveal a battle map with a 'grid' of hexagons instead of squares. There was already a diagram of a train and some surrounding forest drawn on it.

“Thanks man,” Sun gave his best friend a nod before continuing. “The train has four cars: the engine up front here, two passenger cars and this last car is a cargo hauler Anyone that's checked notes that the door leading from the rear passenger car to this one is locked.”

“Not for long it's not.” Emerald said, looking pleased.

Sun rolled his eyes. “Yeah, I figured. Everyone grab a mini and place yourself where you'd be in the train.” He retrieved a plastic tub full of figurines and handed it first to Emerald, who rummaged through and passed it on.
In the end, Emerald's character was represented by a plastic Ewok toy with a tatty green cloak, Neo's by an actual halfling with a dagger, Roman's by a ringmaster in full regalia complete with whip and tophat, Neptune by a merfolk with a trident, Blake's with a female ninja, and finally Weiss by an elf sorceress with a fireball in her palm.

Inevitably, Emerald's Ewok was in the second passenger car next to the locked door along with Blake and Weiss's characters. Neo haphazardly placed her mini in the engineering compartment, while Roman and Neptune arranged themselves in the first car.

Once they were to everyone's satisfaction, Sun gave an approving nod. “You've been traveling a couple of hours and aside from the two engineers and three guards you saw board the last car, there's no one else aboard.”

“Five dollars says the track gets blocked by bandits.” Torchwick whipped out his wallet and extracted a bill.

“I'll see your five and say we derail somehow.” Emerald chipped in, though she didn't produce any money to back that up.

Sun glared at both of them. “Seriously?”

“Just earning a little cash from an obvious trope, buddy,” Torchwick said with a noncommittal shrug.

“So what do I get when neither of those happens?” Sun challenged.

“Nothing, you're the DM. You can just make whatever you want up anyway.”

While they argued, Blake leaned over and whispered to Weiss, “Do you have ten dollars I can borrow?”

“Ten—why?” Weiss hissed back. Borrowing money from her with no intention of paying it back before Weiss threw a tantrum was more of a Yang thing.

“If it had been any of the others, Weiss might have balked. Yang would blow it on drinks or food or some stupid tchotchke, Pyrrha rarely borrowed money, but when she did it would be for some softhearted in fiscally unfeasible reason. Blake, however was even more pragmatic than Weiss herself, so if she wanted to borrow money, it was for a solid reason.

Very well, but I only brought twenties or higher.” Weiss opened her purse and fished out a bill, passing it to Blake.

“You won't be disappointed,” Blake said before slapping the bill down on the table in an uncharacteristic show of force that cut off the three-way argument between Torchwick, Emerald and Sun. “Weiss and I both bet on runaway train,” she announced.

Torchwick laughed. “Oh please. He's got terrain already drawn on the map and everything. It's not going to be a runaway train. For the same reason, we're not going to be derailed because again, the train is drawn on the tracks. Q. E. D.: we're about to be stopped by something on the tracks.”

“How about we just play the game and see what happens. Perception checks for everyone but Neo. Neo...” he scribbled on a sheet of notebook paper, balled it up and tossed it to her, landing it
perfectly on the screen of her phone.

She opened it and started reading. At first, her expression read as uninterested. That is until she was halfway done and her eyes widened and she started hastily writing her reply.

Sun couldn't help but chuckle at her reaction.

“Can I pick the lock on the door to the cargo compartment?” Emerald asked.

“Well, you can start,” said Sun. “But just as you get done making sure the other two can't see what you're up to...” He caught the note Neo tossed back to him, read it, then laughed out loud. “Alright then. Just as you're about to pick the lock, the train suddenly accelerates. Roman, Neptune, the door to the engineering compartment is kicked open to reveal a blood-covered halfling dragging one of the engineers who has a flowing wound in his chest. Take it away, Neo.”

The tiny girl took a deep breath before shouting loud enough that her voice echoed off the basement walls. “Someone show both the engineers through the window! This thing is out of control unless someone can heal this guy!”

While everyone else cringed at the volume of her voice, Blake merely stared down Emerald and Torchwick. “Our money, please?”

Chapter End Notes

This chapter is out in record time thanks to mrwizard70 via P/atreon! If anyone else would like to make sure their favorite among my current fics (even old ones like TPR, MiM and Azure Renaissance) is the next one I'll post, PM me!

So there's a lot of stuff to talk about here. Going on order, let's start with the fact that Sun's mom is, in fact 'curious as a monkey' and his dad is a practical jokester. The turkey gravy soda is a real thing produced as a gag gift by Jones Soda.

Mordheim is an actual minis wargame my friends used to play. I never played minis games because I didn't have room to play or store them.

Blake's ghoul problem is a reference to the 'Ghoul Surprise', a rather infamous story that came from the D&D 5e playtest where a single ghoul, which should be a reasonable but not hard challenge for a group of four level 1 characters (CR1) proved capable of wiping the floor with them with little effort. They didn't really fix this in the final game. Challenge Ratings in 5e are a cruel joke.

As for the characters, I decided to bring Neo in after a long bout of considerations over whether to make her mute or not. I felt like having her just communicate via passed notes and such would be tedious, so I decided since there's no actual proof whether she's mute or just quiet in canon, I just did what I felt and went with the fakeout we got here.

Like in Arc Reaction, my interpretation of Neo and Torchwick's relationship is more familial than most people's. In this one they're actual adopted siblings where Roman pretty much did all the raising of her himself.
Emerald hasn't had much focus in my little multiverse, so this is her first major role so far. I like Emerald, but I have this nagging feeling there's so much more to her we don't know. I tried to keep up her frenemy style relationship with Torchwick here and extend it to Sun and Neptune as well. For some reason, I've decided she likes Neptune better than the other two.

Torchwick is awesome. He's another one I love to write and he's just getting started. Everyone pretty much called he'd be a bard, but oddly everyone wanted him to be useless. Considering my personal preferences for characters, styles and classes... that couldn't happen. And yes, the dueling cane is in the actual game. There's an advanced proficiency for it that makes it a trip and grapple weapon.

Sun and Neptune had a moment that ended up on the cutting room floor where Sun scolded Neptune for creeping on Weiss while she was new to the table. I got rid of that both because he didn't come on super strong anyway, and even if he was, Weiss can handle herself.

Speaking of, Weiss ended up pushed to the side a bit here to introduce the others, but rest assured, this is still her arc and it's going to be her interactions with the others that will be the focus of Monkeyshines. Just needed to establish the group dynamic and relationships.

Next chapter, it's off to the races as the group tries to stop a runaway train, Weiss and Emerald learn to never split the party, and evil fey koalas?! First the super-weasel in NYSG and now this? Yeah, my setting is weird.
“Okay. So let me get this straight.” Neptune stood up and leaned over the table, looking at the drawing of the train as if it was going to give him some insight into what was going on. “So someone shot the engineer from outside the train and now it's stuck going at speed down the tracks?”

“Yup.” replied Sun.

“But everything’ll be fine as long as we heal this one engineer?”

“That's about the long and short of it, yes.” Sun crossed his hands behind his head and leaned back, smiling.

Neptune narrowed his eyes. “And you designed this session knowing I'd be playing a cleric. In fact, we've got two clerics and a bard, so there's healing to spare—like way more than enough to make this little problem completely trivial.”

Sun only nodded.

Roman made a rude noise. “Let's stop wasting time here. I'm going to use—”

“If you heal that man, I will throw your bard out of this train.” Neptune snapped.

“Same.” Emerald chimed in.

Roman rolled his eyes. “Oh please. He is obvious pushing your buttons to make you paranoid. We heal the engineer, he stops the train, then we can go kill whoever shot him. Simple.”

“Or we heal him, he stops the train and we get mobbed by the ambushers waiting for us to do just that,” argued Emerald.

The line of discussion gave Neptune pause. “Hold on. Maybe we should see what's ahead of us on the tracks. I mean, going out of control is fine as long as there's no sharp turn and the bridge isn't out.”

Weiss turned to Blake. “I thought this game was about actually doing something, not just arguing with one another.”

Hiding her mortification at her group's show of dysfunction behind her favorite mask of neutrality. “That's just how they are. Don't let that stop you from doing what you want though. Just let Sun know what you intend to do and he'll tell you what happens.”

“Hmm.” Weiss frowned, pondering the many option before her and what the other had been arguing about. “Well the attack came from outside and any danger to us is going to be outside. We have very little information and won't find any in here, so the logical step is to go outside. Luckily, I can fly, so Sun can I open a window and fly out?”

Delighted that someone was actually doing something, Sun ignored the continuing argument between Roman, Neptune and Emerald. “The windows in the train cars don't really open. You
could force open the doors or break a window to get out though.”

“What would I need to do to force the doors open?”

After a quick check of his notes, Sun came back with, “That'd be a Strength check DC 15.”

Weiss checked her sheet. Her Strength modifier was -1. She looked to Blake. “So I would need to roll...”

“Sixteen.” Blake replied, consulting her own sheet.

“Then that's out,” Weiss reasoned. “Now, I do have a collapsible baton on my sheet because Blake said I still needed a weapon even though I use spells. Can I smash the window with that?”

“Without even rolling,” said Sun. You swing once to extend the baton, then one more time to break the windows. The second passenger compartment is now filled with wind whipping in at about fifty miles an hour.”

Weiss nodded approvingly. “Excellent. Then I fly out and up to have a look around.”

“Got it,” replied Sun. “I'll tell you want you see in a second. Emerald, still wanting to pick the lock on the rear compartment?”

Breaking off her death glare at Roman and perked up at the mention of committing some B&E. “You know it. And I'm guessing the crazy lady smashing the window was more than a good enough distraction to keep Blake from noticing me.”

“Yeah, I'm not even going to argue,” Blake said, “With his charge flying out the window my character's not really thinking about anything else besides how fired he's going to be.”

“Wait. He?” Neptune asked.

Blake shrugged. “I get bored playing a girl sometimes. Besides, Alhaen here is based on Nightcrawler.”

“You could have been Nocturne.”

“No one wants to be Nocturne. Besides, I also played a guy so you wouldn't hit on me in character —it never gets not creepy you know.”

Neptune feigned shock. “Hey! I just play my character. They just all happen to be dashing rakes.”

Blake gave him a deadpan stare. “Just keep your rake out of my lawn this session.”

“And mine,” Roman piped up. “I won't be responsible for anything that happens to your character if he tries anything with Meribeth.”

Sun raised an eyebrow. “You're cross-playing too?”

Roman grabbed an unopened soda off the table and sat back. “Inspiration just hit me. I figured it was time to branch out, but I'd be damned if I was going to forego the mechanical benefits of being human or not be a bard, so the choice was clear.”

Yeah, yeah you're a special snowflake,” Emerald cut him off before he could say anything else. “I got a seventeen on Mechanics to open the lock, Sun.”
“Doesn’t quite do it, Em. From what you can tell, this is a new and very good lock they put on this thing. Blake, you doing anything?"

“Depends. What time of day is it, are we in a canyon or something, and how well lit is the train car?”

Unphased by the battery of questions, Sun improvised quickly. “It’s around two in the evening. You’re traveling through the mountains, so the train passes through the shadows on and off as you go, and the train car is well lit by magelights in the wall sconces. What’s the play?”

Blake smirked. “Since I’m the responsible one, I don’t think I’ll engage in willful destruction of property like some people—”

“Hey!” Weiss protested.

Ignoring her, Blake continued. “I’ll take off my coat and throw it over the light over here in the corner.” She pointed to the spot. “Does that at least lower the light level to dim?”

“Sure. Using your Step of Flickering Shadows?”

“Right. I’m going to wait until the train goes through a shadow, then teleport to the roof of the train.”

“Nice.” Sun beamed. “You’re going to take a minute before you can do that, so let’s see if Team Suck and Fail in the front compartment have any idea what they’re gonna do.”

Neptune glared at him for the jab. “Whatever. I guess I’ll heal the engineer with Blessing of Protection. That gives him five hit points and a bonus on his next Fortitude save if he needs it. Is he up?”

“Five?” Roman asked, having just popped open the top on his soda. “That’s all? Why do Clerics suck so bad at healing in this?” He was about to take a sip when his cellphone buzzed. Setting the soda aside, he checked it, then did a double take at Neo. “Did you just text me from two feet away?”

Engrossed in her own phone, Neo shrugged.

“The worst thing that happened to her communication skills was her getting an unlimited data plan, I swear,” he muttered. “Anyway, she says the healing is low because it’s a minor action at range as opposed to the mage spell that requires a touch and is a standard action. I guess it makes sense.”

“Right. Well five points is enough to save the engineer and he gasps as he comes to. ‘What happened?, he asked, looking around wild-eyed.”

“‘Well you nearly died for one,’” said Roman. “‘For another, the other guy did die and now the train's out of control. So how about you go take care of that for us. Chop-chop, train monkey.’”

Sun snorted. “He looks at Meribeth like a cow looks at an oncoming train and says, ‘Miss you are a massive dick do you know that?’”

Grabbing his soda and leaning back, Roman smirked. “I don’t hear a train being brought back under control.” Looking especially smug, he took a long swig. Then a horrified expression crossed his face and he blanched. “What the hell is this?!”

At this, Sun exploded into uproarious laughter. “Oh my god, I’ve been waiting forever for you to
finally drink that! What's the matter, Roman? Not a fan of turkey gravy soda?” The others soon joined in laughing as well as Roman stewed and tried not to throw up.

“You'll pay for this, Wukong,” he said between dry heaves.

“Take that as revenge for the poor NPC you were a jackass to,” Sun mocked, as the last guffaws of his laughter shook him. Then he cleared his throat and got back to business. “Despite his newfound hatred for Meribeth, the engineer still doesn't want to die in a train crash, so he gets up and heads toward the engineering compartment. About that time though, you all hear the sound of shattering glass from the other passenger compartment. Aaand back to Weiss.”

The young woman in question sniffed indignantly. “It's about time. You mean to tell me that all happened in the same period of time?”

“Yes. If we were in combat, we'd have rolled for initiative and taken turns all going technically at the same time. Speaking of which, roll for initiative.”

“What?!”

“You heard me. As you fly out of the window, you hear--” and it was hear that Sun made a an adorable gurgling growl and chattered off some nonsense syllables in a voice that might have been appropriate for a small animal in a Saturday morning cartoon. “--and something flies at your face. At first blush, it looks like.. this.”

He showed Weiss his cell phone, which was currently displaying a picture of a koala. “Well mostly like this. Only its fur is matted with thin vines with glossy leaves, there are insect wings sprouting from its back, and oh yeah, it's got six legs instead of four. And it's carrying a crud stone cleaver on a long wooden pole.”

Weiss opened her mouth to try and say something, but nothing came out. She paused, swallowed, then tried again. “I'm going to say this one more time: What?!!”

“Don't blame me, it's an official monster,” Sun said. “Here, let me read it: Indigenous to the green moon Azelia, the Kaiyupei are semi-intelligent creatures with a strict hierarchical society ruled by a queen similar to naked mole rats. They live in colonies formed from dead trees where they cultivate mushrooms and farm giant insects. They are also highly territorial especially in defense of their queen.”

At this Weiss was not impressed. “Hive-minded koala bugs. What sort of dolt wrote this?!?!” she demanded.

“I'll send the email to you so you can send your complaints,” Sun said through laughter. “Now roll for initiative, because this one's coming at you with murder in his beady little teddy bear eyes. In fact, as it flies toward you, you can see more than a dozen of them; some in the air, some clinging to the last train car with extra-large claws, trying to rip the walls open.”

“So they're after something in that car,” Emerald reasoned. “That means I need to get in there before they do. Can I roll into initiative too?”

Sun nodded. “Actually, everyone roll in.” Everyone did so with Emerald actually getting the highest followed by Blake, Neo, Sun's monsters, Roman, Weiss and finally Neptune. “Alright Em, you're up.”

The green-haired girl grinned and bounced her d20, a dark green one with red numbers that was nearly impossible to read, in her palm. “Okay, let's do this. Come on baby, mama needs whatever
these mutant stuffies are after.” After some close scrutiny by both her and Sun, her total result came out to twenty-two.

“You got it this time. You open the door to find a packed car with lots of tarp-covered crates, but the car is divided in half by a big sheet of canvas with snaps up the middle. Now that you're in the car, let me check your Passive Perception score...” Sun went through his notes on the characters and found the line where he'd written Emerald's character's Perception skill bonus plus 10, representing her ability to sense things without special focus. “Okay. You hear muffled shouts, metal being torn and gunshots from beyond the tarp.”

“Ooo,” Emerald said, rubbing her hands together. “Sounds like a distraction. I'm going to stealth up to canvas and open it.” She rolled and immediately cursed. “Fourteen the stealth. Lousy dice.”

Sun rolled one d20, winced, then rolled another along with a d8, then winced again. “Sorry about this, but one of the guards had a readied action to shoot anything that entered and he spotted you coming through the flap. So he shoots you... and crits. Take eighteen damage.”

Among the sound of everyone else letting out a sympathetic groan, Emerald cursed again. “Holy shit, a some rando guard knocked off half my hit points?!”

“Guns crit time three,” Sun explained. “You've still got a minor action. Wanna cast Blessing of Health on yourself?”

“Yeah I would if I had taken it. We have a bard and another cleric—I didn't think we'd need it.”

“Good thing you left them behind to go steal things.” Blake chided.

Emerald grit her teeth, but took it because she knew the single most important rule of roleplaying. “I know, I know. Never split the party.”

“What's that?” Weiss asked.

“The thing you just did,” Roman said, having recovered from his soda. “Running off on your own usually means you're going to suffer. Maybe die. Especially when everyone put themselves as far from the two healers as possible.”

“...Oh.”

“Blake, you're up.” Sun reminded. “Just because it would hose you otherwise, the train passes through a shadow just as your turn comes up.”

“Great,” said Blake. “Using my Step to get to the roof of this car then.”

“Okay. You appear on the roof and get smacked in the back by fast-moving wind. Not enough to knock you off, but the roof counts as difficulty terrain. You see Weiss above you with a Kaiyupei in her face and more attacking the rear of the cargo car.”

Pressing her lips together, Blake considered her next move. It would have been nice to get into the thick of things on the other car, but her character wouldn't abandon Weiss's no matter how much action he (and his player) craved. Giving a little despondent sigh she picked up her dice. “I'll quick-draw my three-shot pistol and just use a ranged Basic Strike to shoot the thing attacking Weiss. Sixteen to hit and if it hits, seven damage.”

“You hit it and definitely piss it off. It breaks off from Weiss and is now coming for you. Neo?”
Heaving a sigh as if he was asking her for money, Neo set her phone aside and stood up so she could see the board. After a second, he huffed and gave Sun an exasperated look.

“Oh, sorry.” He grabbed up a marker and started drawing K’s and G’s on and around the train car. “K’s are Kaiyupei, G’s are the guards in the cargo car.”

Neo nodded her approval, then started counting squares. After a few different routes failed to meet her expectations, one did and she moved her mini to the second passenger car, then out the window Weiss had broken and onto the roof. Sun started to protest, but she rolled a d20 and it came up 15. With her Acrobatics bonus, it was more than enough to let her swing up to the roof. Then she flopped back into her seat and picked her phone back up.

“Eventful turn,” Roman said dryly, to which his phone buzzed again. Checking it, he glared at her. “You know, adopted or not, she's your mother too.”

Meanwhile Sun started rolling dice. “Okay guys, first off the Kaiyupei soldier attacks Blake with his pole-balver. He hits for five damage. Next, the Kaiyupei workers tear at the sides of the train, setting off the guards’ ready actions. Two get shot in the face as they break through and die, falling off. Four more break through and four of the other soldiers move closer to the holes. Two other soldiers fly up, one more going for Blake and the last one going for Weiss, but they aren't fast enough to reach either of you this turn.

“Oh, and the train moves under you, Weiss. You're now over the cargo car. Roman, you're on deck.”

“Can I see through the open doors into the compartment where these little monsters are getting in?”

“Not with that big sheet of the canvas in the way.”

Roman bit his lip. “Damn it. I guess I'll double move into the cargo compartment behind Emerald.”

“And then heal me, right?” she demanded.

“Sorry kid, not this turn,” Roman said, actually sounding apologetic. “Out of actions.”

“Crap.”

“Weiss, go for it,” said Sun.

“Right.” Weiss had been looking over her sheet and the neat stack of index cards Blake had made for her since her last turn. “Since I'm a cryomancer, I suppose it would be silly to still call this a 'Basic Fireball', so let's call it a Chilling Sphere instead. I will be aiming...” she had to stand up to reach the diagram of the train and point out a square on the side situated in the midst of a number of Kaiyupei. “...here of course.”

Emerald raised an eyebrow. “You know you aren't going to catch the one attacking you in that, right?”

“I know. But he's slower than I am from what I've seen, so I can out-fly him. This way, I reduce or weaken the greatest number of threats to the greatest number of my allies—assuming you and Roman are my allies, I suppose. And the guards.”

“Actually?” Sun said, looking over the map. “The guards are minions, so if this guy here fails his
save, you're going to straight up murder him.”

“... oh. That's unfortunate,” Weiss said, looking conflicted.

Roman scoffed. “Eh, it's just an NPC. Plus, his friend shot Emerald, so it's vengeance.”

“For a slightly less sociopathic justification, there's no way your character knows he's there,” Blake interjected. “She might not even see the hole there where the effect could go through.”

After a moment's thought, Weiss nodded. “I'll accept that. So one d6. That's... 1 plus my level for five, plus my charisma modifier, that's nine total cold damage.”

Sun rolled a couple of die, then declared the result. “Okay. So the workers all die, freezing to death. Two of the soldiers take damage and the guard... oh yeah, he's dead.”

“Sorry.” Weiss mumbled.

“Oh don't be like that.” Roman shook his head. “Like I said, it's just an NPC.”

“Still someone who has friends with guns,” Weiss countered. “And probably an employer who won't appreciate you killing their hired help. Oh, and possibly family who might vow revenge. Just because I've never played one of these games before doesn't mean I don't read, you dolt.”

At the head of the table, Sun made a show of writing on his notes. “...family who swears revenge. Great idea, Weiss!”

She sniffed. “Alright, perhaps there are some things I need to learn. Like not giving him ideas.”

Chapter End Notes

Finally getting a chance to dig a bit more into these characters' play styles and characterization. I especially like playing up Emerald's mercenary nature and the overall group's genre-saviness. I worked hard to make their dynamic different from Ruby's group; more friendly antagonism and lone-wolf behavior if only to make the group distinct from JNPR-R's teamwork.

It also amuses me to no end that Weiss's 'wand' is a collapsible knee-cappin' baton.

Nocturne, for those of you who don't follow comics, is the alternate dimension daughter Kurt Wagner, the X-man known in the Munich circus as the Amazing Nightcrawler. She was a long-standing member of the Exiles, an excellent series about a team hopping dimensions to fix the multiverse, later on the British team Excalibur, and finally now part of comic book limbo because no one uses good characters but everyone uses Cyclops because it's tradition. She's actually my favorite Exile next to Blink, but it was fun to poke fun at the red-headed stepchild nature of the secondary X-teams.

So the Kaiyupei. They're a joke that got serious. The whole idea started with Jim Butcher and his series Codex Alera. The story goes that he and another author were having an argument over whether good writing could save even a very stupid concept. His challenge was to mix the Lost Roman Legion legend with Pokemon and from that, he created an amazing Fantasy series.
My friend then gave me a similar challenge: make an interesting monster using the Japanese monster the tsukumogami (an object that has been cared for then abandoned over 100 years, becoming a monster—often an umbrella for some reason) and Kewpie dolls, an old fashioned 'cute' doll usually given out at carnivals back in the day.

I came up with the idea of a shipment of the things becoming tsukumogamis and forming a hivemind. Then I took it another step and made them even cuter by making them koalas. Intelligent, tool-using koalas. When porting them to World of Ere, I made them fey and added wings. And as a finishing move, I though of the fact that koalas only live and eat eucalyptus trees and that... well you're see next chapter. If you know anything about eucalyptus, you know where this is going.

Finally, I understand a lot of people aren't happy with me switching over to an almost entirely different cast for this arc and there's still two more chapters of this, so let me give you assurances we'll be back to JNPR-R soon. In fact, next arc is the Winter Formal and will deal with the girls helping Pyrrha make sure the dance is the perfect first date.

Until then my friends, next chapter Weiss continues to split the party, Neptune plays the knight in shining armor, and true to his obvious inspiration, Roman applies some of the old school ultraviolence.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

After jotting down a few notes based on Weiss's faux pas, Sun looked to his best friend. “You're up, Neptune.”

“Finally.” Neptune rubbed his hands in glee. “Looks like the ladies in the rear car need some help. Templar Paolo is coming to protect you, Damsels.”

Emerald glared at him. “Oh you did not just...” she started, but Neptune talked over her.

“Okay, so double move into the cargo car... her next to Em and use my minor to drop Blessing of Health on her. Heal five and you get a +4 on your next Fort save.”

As she changed the hit point total on her sheet, Emerald made a face at him. “Don't think this makes up for the Damsel crack.”

Neptune smirked at her. “No? Well how about this? Action Point,” he sang out. “And as my shiny new standard action, I'm casting Shine Forth the Light on the blade of my halberd. It casts bright light for four squares around me and any enemy that starts its turn in the light or moves into it takes two divine damage. Bye-bye minions!”

“Well luckily the tarp's still there, so my minions aren't cooked y—”

“My turn. First thing I do is throw the tarp aside,” declared Emerald. “Is that even an action?”

Sun's head dropped dramatically between his shoulders and he made a show of gritting his teeth. “No... it's a free action.” Then he snapped back as if nothing ever happened. “Now you get a good look at the area back here. There's something about five feet tall and covered in—you guessed it—another tarp back here. Surrounding it are six guards—or rather four because one appears to be frozen in a sheet of ice near a hole in the wall and another is on the ground with his throat torn out, a Kaiyupei standing on his chest. Four Kaiyupei have gotten inside so far: two workers and two soldiers. The workers are the minions. The light reaches to... here.” He marked off four squares from Sun, which covered a worker and a soldier as well as three of the surviving guards.

“I'll go with casting Minor Divine Curse on the soldier that's not in the light. Getting as many as these little assholes taking ongoing damage is a good idea, I think. Then as a move, I'll move to the big tarp-covered thing and... can I pull the tarp off?”

“Yes you can,” Sun sounded far too happy. “And when you do, you find a cage of cold iron bars and inside is a Kaiyupei that's twice the size of the others with thick branches growing out of its back covered in leaves instead of the thin vines the others have. The second the fresh air hits it, the leaves explode into flames and the creature takes a deep breath as if it's been stifled for a long time.

Emerald sat back under the glare she was getting the Neptune and Roman. “Just just made things then times worse, didn't I?”

“Considering we're about to be lit on fire? Yeah just a little,” Roman said dryly. “My only compensation is that you'll die first and I'll get to watch.”

“Am I the only one concerned that the big bad monster we're fighting is a flaming koala bear?!”
Weiss ranted. “I mean seriously? Evil koalas?” Blake smirked and pulled out her phone tapping away before showing Weiss a webpage. Weiss took one look and her eyes nearly crossed. “Owl be —OWL BEAR?! Why would anyone make that?!”

Neptune grinned at her. “The best part? It can't fly and isn't stealthy. In fact it gets nothing from being part owl.”

“What is with this game!?” Weiss ranted, putting her head down on the table.

Roman couldn't help himself, putting up his hand like a student and waving it around at Blake. “Oh, oh! Can I tell her about Flail Snails? And Grell? And the rest of the thirty year tradition of stupid D&D monsters?”

“Like the Gelatinous cube? Evolved for millions of years to survive in a graph-paper based environment?” Neptune chipped in.

“Alright, someone needs to show her the Order of the Stick comics now,” Emerald said. Neo gave her a sharp nod, and after a few taps, slid her phone across the table to Weiss, who bemusedly picked it up.

“How are these stick figures?”

Emerald and Neo both rolled their eyes, the former saying, “Just read it. They're funny no matter what kind of art it is.”

Obligingly, Weiss started reading, having to zoom in a lot thanks to Neo's tiny phone screen. It struck her again just how deep the culture behind playing tabletop games went—and how much joy they seemed to take in the weirdness of their hobby.

Meanwhile, Sun was sitting back, shaking his head. Looking to Blake he said, “This derail? All you.”

“It was worth it,” she replied with a shrug, “How often do you get to introduce a newbie to the owlbear?” Then she picked up her dice. “My turn?” Sun nodded. “Well, the train's moved on past Weiss and I can't fly. Did it also move on past the koala that attacked me?”

“Nope. He landed in front of you.”

“Then I'm going to holster my pistol and quick draw my shortsword. Now I'm going to use my Flurry of Blows technique to make two attacks against the little guy. Fifteen and Eighteen for the attacks and if they hit, eight and ten damage.”

Sun took a marker and X'd off the K next to Blake. “Slice and dice. You turn that adorable bastard into chunks suitable for kebabs or maybe a nice fey stew.”

“Good. Now I'll jump to the last car. How's it looking over there?”

“Not good. There are six surviving workers clinging to the outside of the car where Weiss blasted the others away, plus two soldiers trying to get in. Two workers notice you and growl. Gonna use an action point?”

Blake shook her head. “No. That's my turn.”

No one had to prompt Neo to take her turn. Without her phone, she was especially attentive and ready to get down to the dirty business of offing daemonic teddy bears. She counted hexes a few
times before deciding on her path, then pointed to a hex surrounded on four sides by workers. A nasty expression crossed her face as she pointed at one and declared. Making a melee Basic Strike against this one.”

Sun blinked. “Really? You could use an actual Technique here. What's your weapon anyway?” He only just then realized he hadn't bothered looking over her sheet because he wasn't used to Roman's little sister actually participating.

Neo smirked. “Greatsword,” she said proudly.

Right in cue, Roman started cackling. “Yup. She took Esoteric Weapon style to let her wield a full-sized one too. Oh, and it's her combatant Weapon of Choice.”

“And Reaper.” Neo added shaking a d20 in her fist. “If I drop a minion with a Basic Strike, I can make another Basic Strike. So...” She rolled and the natural result was enough to hit, so she rolled again. This time she hit if she counted her bonus. The next two when down on the natural roll.”

“God damn.” Sun said. “You just tore through four guys in one turn.”

“Not done.” Neo cut him off. “I’ve also go Into the Breech, so I can adjust into one of their squares and that means I can attack this one too.” Again her dice flew, and again the minion died, and again Neo adjusted into its square, putting her in range of a soldier, who she hit for eleven damage, nearly killing it. “Now I'm done.”

Sun looked at Roman, who shrugged. “Told you she was good.”

“Right. Okay, so it's the monsters and the train. The train moves on, leaving Weiss behind.” The only reply he got to that was an acknowledging hum as Weiss had gone back and started reading OoTS from the start on Neo's phone. “And we've lost Weiss. Good to know. God help us when she discovers DM of the Rings, Goblins or Friendship is Dragons.

“Anyway, Kaiyupei on the attack. The soldier you hit Neo, attacks you with its cleaver and deals eight damage. One of the surviving workers charges you to and... misses because workers suck. The other worker charges Blake and hits for four. The other soldier squeezes into the hole in the car.”

Neptune clapped thunderously, making everyone else start, but making Weiss shriek and almost drop Neo's phone. He gave her a sheepish look as a glare that would make a Beholder jealous was brought to bear on him. “Uh... I was going to say that he just moved into my light and took two damage.”

“Yes. That was worth nearly making my heart leap out of my throat,” Weiss said, maintaining the glare.

“Sorry? Forgot you weren't used to us.”

“Don't let it happen again.”

That got a snort from Sun. “Oh, it's totally going to happen again. Anyway, at the start of its turn, this worker who killed the guard dies in a flare of holy light and this soldier also takes damage before it attacks Emerald for getting to close to its queen. And... I guess a seven isn't going to hit you. Wow, natural 2.”

Emerald merely folded her arms and made it a point to relax in her seat.
“The worker inside attacks a guard and kills him because it's seen what happens to anything inside the light. The last soldier tries to break the lock on the queen's cage and fails. Now for the queen. Emerald? I swear I'm not picking on you, but you're right there. The queen looks right at you, the embers of her burning branches swirl and... reflex save.”

No longer relaxed, Emerald sat up and rolled a d20. “Yeah, I'm sure it's not just because I owe you for the pizza last week. Fifteen for Reflex.”

“Just made it,” said Sun. “You take three fire damage, from the Kaiyupei Queen's Arsonist Tree ability as burning leaves that fly past you, but you are not set on fire like Roman predicted.”

“Wait a minute. Arsonist Tree?” Neptune asked, then started laughing. “I finally got it! Wow, the guy who made these things is such a dork.”

Roused once more from her reading Weiss glanced up at him. “So are you going to just sit there laughing like a dolt, or are you going to explain to the rest of us what's so funny?”

Freezing at the little rant, Neptune blinked. “Why am I suddenly your favorite to pick on.”

“I don't know, but I'm enjoying it,” Roman said, finally picking up a soda that wasn't savory flavored.

Realizing what she was doing, Weiss ducked her head. “Sorry. I'm just used to yelling at Yang. Things like that just roll off her back so...”

Neptune waved her off. “It's fine. Just making sure I wasn't accidentally pissing you off.”

“Everything pisses her off, so it's not like you'll stand out.” Blake said, playing around with her index cards.

“Hey!” Weiss protested.

“Anyway, the joke is that Eucalyptus trees secrete chemicals that encourage fires and grow tall to encourage lightning strikes because they're fire resistant and other trees aren't. They're literal arsonist trees. And what's the only food koala's eat?”

The rest of the table fell into stunned silence that was eventually broken by Emerald. “So now that we're all dumber from being exposed to this monster idea and the depths of dorkness the designer is dredging, whose turn is it now?”

“Yo.” said Roman. “So it's fair to guess that the big fiery one is the queen, right?” Sun nodded, “And the others are trying to get at her?” Another nod. “Ah. Well then we're going to have to teach them a lesson by example.”

He rubbed his hands together, a look of manic glee on his face. “Alright my faithful droogs, stand back while I blow her fuzzy little head off. Okay Sun, I'm using my Full Round Action to use Snipe against her. Before I roll, I'm going to burn two spell points to use my resonant weapon feat to add a d6 to damage. My attack roll is a total of twenty.”

“Hit her. Roll damage.”

“Gladly. Snipe is 2d6 plus twice my Intelligence modifier in precision damage and resonant weapons adds 1d6 so... looks like the lucky number today is twenty total damage. Does that kill her?”
Sun scratched off hit points in his notes, then shook his head. “Not yet.”


“Okay,” Sun said after a moment’s thought. “You shoot at her through the bars, but only manage to hit her with a ricochet. It does make her turn toward you, at which point you hit her square in the face with a sonic pulse that—exactly as you said—blows her furry little head off. Emerald is now covered in fey brain—and that is because you owe me money—and the remaining Kaiyupei take up an unearthly howl as their hive-mind is shattered. Congratulations, Roman: you’ve now made the remainder of the hive berserk!”

“Ha! Welcome to my world!” Emerald mocked.

“Weiss, you hear all the Kaiyupei still on the train go completely apeshit. What do you do?” Sun asked, clearly enjoying it as the other players including the normally unflappable Blake sat up and took notice. None of them were familiar with these monsters and until just now, they'd just been taking them to be joke monsters. Now, they couldn't be sure and they were getting worried.

All except Weiss, who didn't know the be worried and was just trying to succeed. “How far has the train gone past me?” she asked, “Can I land somewhere on it, or is it going to be the rest of my turn catching up?”

“You can reach the very end of the last car as a move action.”

“Good. I'll do that then I'll cast Agony Beam on the one that Neo was fighting. My attack is—oh! Isn't rolling a twenty special?”

“That'd be a crit,” said Neptune. “Double damage.”

Emerald cracked a smile. “Can I say how much I love this game that we have an angel woman shooting a torture laser at a teddy bear to save a four-foot tall woman wielding a six-foot sword? And Mercury wonders why I make time every week for this.”

Everyone laughed at that, and when he recovered, Sun marked off the Kaiyupei. “Doesn't get tortured for long though, 'cause unless it's possible for you to only do four damage, he is so very dead. That leaves...” he looked over the map and shook his head. “Two soldiers inside; one that had just come through the hole and the one that was trying to free the queen. There's also a worker in there and two other works outside. Neptune, you're up.”

“Welp, I've got a fresh round to spare, so let's use one of my big, full round action spells. I slam my glowing halberd into the floor and call out,” Reaching skyward for dramatic effect, he bellowed, “I summon Hessa's power to Lay Low My Enemies! Fort saves all around for the fur-balls. If they fail, they're sickened and have to save each round to try and end it.”

Sun rolls accordingly and snerked at the result. “The soldiers both fail, but the freaking one hit point worker got a nineteen. And he's the only living one of these that's killed anything. MVP for this guy. Back to the top of the order, Emerald?”

“Hold on. You forgot to make that one take damage from my curse on its turn. Three damage from my Wisdom mod.”

“Oh. Right.” Sun scribbled down the new hit point total. “Done and done.”

Emerald nodded approvingly. “Alright then, since my other attack spell also makes them sickened,
I'm going to draw my kukri and use Deific Smite on the little bugger.” She threw her dice and it came up... “Ha! Eighteen! That's a crit with a kukri as long as a Twenty-two hits.”

“That's a crit then. You guys rolled way too good for these guys. What's the damage.”

At this, Emerald made a face. “What doubles when you crit again?”

“Twice your max weapon damage whatever ability mod you add to it and and non-elemental damage bonuses.” Neo, still bereft of her phone, decided to help her fellow halfling with the damage calculation. “The smite damage is divine, so that doesn't double. So twice your weapon, twice your—Dex? Do you have Weapon Flourish? No? Then Twice Strength.”

“So twice jack and shit. Got it.”

“And twice damage bonuses. Got any weapon feats?”

“Again: Jack and shit. Suddenly this crit's not so exciting. Twice max weapon... eight. Nothing for strength. One d6 plus Wis for the smite... five. Thirteen damage. Please say that kills him.”

Sun shook his head. “Sorry; he started at twenty-two, he's only taken five and berserking grants them 3 DR vs weapon damage. He's still got seven hit points.”

“Son of a bitch! Thanks for making them stronger, by the way, Roman!”

“I do live to serve,” He mocked, “By they way, they probably want to kill you most because you've got a little queen brain on you.”

Blake rolled her eyes as Emerald mock-lunged for Roman, causing him the flinch and almost spill his soda. “My turn?” Sun nodded. “I think what Alhaen would do right now is move to defend Weiss, but the minions are in the way, so I'm going to charge one and use my Passing Attack feat to attack the other.” She threw both dice at once and... “Okay. So Emerald getting good luck for once took up all the luck. That would be a natural 2 and a natural 3. Don't even think a total of ten would hit a minion, will it?”

“Not even a little. Neo?”

The younger girl gave Blake a smirk that earned her Blake's patented death glare as she moved her character up between the two minions. “Basic Strike.” She said pointing to her first victim... And promptly rolling a natural 1. “SON OF A BITCH!”

“Like I said,” Sun was all grins now, “the minions are MVPs this time. Oh, and remember how they berserked? They deal double damage on a hit now—oh and guess whose turn it is? Mine. Wash your necks, my--” he made sure to make eye contact with Roman, “droogies, and wait for the axe!”

Chapter End Notes

One more chapter to go in this arc and I'm really falling in love with writing this group. Some day: spin-off. You know, the same some day where this leads into my Power Rangers: Aura Force fic. Yeah, that's still the plan. Actually the new plan is for this fic to spawn its own AU where these characters get the ranger powers so I can keep playing with this set-up as a want too.
Anyway, a ton of references this chapter.

I've forgotten to mention before that Neptune's character is named after Paolo from Friends, a character who in turn granted his name to the TV Tropes Trope of a character who is dating the main character's love interest and will have to be removed later. TV Tropes got rid of the name when they decided to stop being fun, but I've kept it alive on my writing blog.

Neptune, Blake and Roman are the only ones in this group who bothered to name their characters. I've often found myself there at con games.

Yes, owlbears exist and introducing newbies to the concept is one of the great joys of tabletop gaming. And no, the owl part means nothing. They can't fly, they don't have superior hearing and eyesight and they are not silent. The owlbear is the creation of that other D&D staple: the cocaine wizard—the term we use for whoever keeps making up all the stupid monsters from D&D.

Speaking of stupid monsters: grell. Grell are the worst monsters because they're flying brains with parrot brains jammed in the front and tentacles... and the designers are desperate to make people take them seriously. I hate pretty much all attempts to rip off Lovecraft to start with (and I don't even like Lovecraft: I don't believe in nihilism) and these guys are the bottom of that barrel.

Order of the Stick, DM of the Rings, Goblins and Friendship is Dragons are actual webcomics and if you like D&D style games, you should check them out. Rich of OoTS and Thunt of Goblins are actually acquaintances of mine and I actually helped them both find their audiences. I also have friends who are Hugo and Oscar nominees. The moral of the story is, if you want success in writing, know me but don't actually be me. No ill will though; they're very talented and deserve everything they've gotten.

Roman is, of course, channeling Alex from A Clockwork Orange, his obvious visual inspiration from the show.

And finally, Sun's 'wash your necks and wait for the axe' is a reference to an Inu Yasha villain whose name I've forgotten. But I still use that line all the time.

No one commented, but all the subtitles for the Monkeyshines arc are plays on ABC's old TGIF Friday night sitcom line-up: Boy Meets World, Step by Step, and Hangin' With Mr. Cooper. Because I can.

Next chapter, we wrap up this arc with Sun's plot hook for a larger campaign and Weiss's thoughts on the whole affair.
“Wait!” The other's chatter, Sun's gloating and even Neo's cursing stopped as everyone looked toward the source of that single word: Weiss Schnee.

For just a moment, the weight of all that attention actually left her speechless and a tiny bit self conscious. Then her upbringing reasserted itself and she straightened her spine and cleared her throat, turning her gaze on Neo. “Why didn't you reroll that?”

Neo raised a questioning eyebrow.

“Your character's a halfling, right?” She tapped on her phone until the proper page of the game's PDF was displayed. “See right here? Favored of Pandemos: Once per day you can make one roll you make or someone makes against you a natural one or a natural twenty. So you can make the one you just rolled a twenty.”

After a beat, Neo blinked and muttered something that might have been thanks before looking expectantly at Sun.

He rolled his eyes. “Yeah, yeah. That works. So you crit kill this minion and now Reaper lets you attack the other.” Neo rolled and easily hit the other minion, taking it down. Looking smug, she sat back, arms crossed and gave Weiss a nod.

Roman of course, couldn't let this go without comment. “You forgot you were playing a halfling, didn't you?” Neo sent him a baleful glare. “You did, didn't you! So much for all your expertis— ow!” Roman yelped from a sharp kick to the shin.

“Okay, so there's no more Kaiyupei outside now. There's two soldiers and a worker on the inside. Start of their turn, the soldiers take damage from Neptune's spell. That drives this one to one hit point. He's going to attack Emerald and... hit for nine damage.”

“We need to talk about how I'm the one soaking all the damage around here.” Emerald grumbled.

“Oh, it's not just you,” Sun assured her. “Roman, the other soldier looks from you to your gun to the rifle dropped by the dead guard next to him. He saw you kill his queen and glares at you. Berserk doesn't make 'em less smart, so he drops his cleaver, picks up the rifle and shoot you. That's thirteen damage.”

This broke Emerald out of her annoyance over being damaged so much. She let out a full belly laugh and almost fell out of her seat. “Okay. Neptune? You have to draw that. A koala shooting Roman with a rifle. That's the image of the session right there.”

Neptune clearly agreed, as he too was reduced to gales of laughter. “Can't argue with that!” He reached into his bag and came up with a sketchpad and a handful of colored pencils, setting to work immediately.

Even Roman couldn't fully commit to his indignation, just shaking his head.

Sun was grinning from ear to ear. “The minion moves around to the last guard and tries to claw him and missed. The guard shoots back and takes him out. Roman, you may retaliate when ready.”
“Retaliate nothing. It's a flying teddy bear who can act as a sniper. Is there a way to tame this thing and make it my partner in crime?”

“Maybe it you hadn't gunned down its queen, but it's pretty attached to seeing you not live anymore.”

Roman shrugged. “Oh well. Too bad for him. I was going to get him a little eye patch and bandanna, maybe teach him to smoke cigars. I'm gonna walk up to him here...” he moved his mini to a square adjacent to the soldier. “And then shoot the one attacking Em.”

“Huh?” Emerald blinked at him. “Since when do you actually play nice with the team?”

He made a noncommittal noise in his throat. “Whatever. You were having a hard time of it tonight. That, or yours only has one hit point while we don't know how many mine has. So this way, we'll get rid of an enemy for sure as long as I hit. Speaking of which...” He rolled his dice and smirked. “Bang. Oh, and since the little cub next to me has a ranged weapon in hand, he doesn't get an attack of opportunity. However, that was my third shot, so I'll drop it and use my minor to draw my sword cane. If he tries to attack, I get an AoO on him.”

“Clever,” said Sun. “Weiss?”

“Weiss?”

“Hmm.” Weiss leaned over the board, considering the situation and her place. “Are the holes they tore in the train big enough for me to go through?”

“Sorry, but no,” said Sun, “The Kaiyupei are Small, so they don't need to make hole big enough for someone your size. Plus, y'know, your wings.”

Weiss nodded slowly. “Alright, then can I see through the hole to the last monster?”

“Yes. My Cryomancer spell: Icicle Lancet. It says 'a howling void opens above your head that disgorges lances of ice at your enemies'. It lets me make a ranged attack as a minor action to try and spear him with ice, so I'll try one...” she rolled and only got a five. “That's probably not going to hit so I'll take my Move as a minor and try again. Seventeen total and I'm sure he's unaware of me. Six plus four Charisma—ten damage.”

Sun took a moment to check his notes and smiled. “Roman, as you're standing there, a spear of ice comes through one of the holes in the wall and goes right through the Kaiyupei's gut from the side. He wobbles, lets out a crooning groan, then straightens up, ready for more. Nice attack, Weiss, but not enough to end him.”

Once again, Neptune clapped, but it didn't shock anyone this time. He only took a moment to be disappointed at this before going on to say what he'd intended to. “No worries guys. This combat ends right here.” He took his mini and slid it into the square next to Roman's. “Charging to here and... fifteen on the attack.”

“Is that with the charge bonus?” Sun asked.

“Yeah.”

“Then you just missed his AC. Sorry, combat's going on a little longer, unless you wanna blow an Action Point.”

“Eh, I like to save those. Go for it, Emerald.”
The girl with the mint-colored hair steeple her fingers as she perused her spell list. “Hmm. Let's see... Huh. Looks like Dey says it's my duty to stab the crap out of Ruxpin Dundee over here. So I'm going to walk over to here and cast Deific Smite. That's a natural roll of a 19, which is a crit for my dagger too! For a grand total of...”

“He's only got four hit points left,” Sun pointed out.

“Shh.” She held a finger to her lips and gave him a look that dare him to say another word. “Mama's adding epic damage. Four for dagger, two for strength. That's doubled to twelve. Plus six for the smite and three for my Wisdom. That's twenty-one damage. I split that little shit from groin to sternum and pull out his innards.”

Roman let out a fake wail. “My sidekick!”

“There there,” Emerald said, making a face at him, “We'll get him stuffed or something. I did make space for the stuffing after all.” Leaning forward, she looked to Sun. “Okay, so with koala guts still on my knife, I'm going to storm over to the last guard. Is he the one that shot me, by the way?”

“You know what? Yes. Because it's way more fun that way.”

“Good, so as I talk, I shake the knife so he gets spattered. 'Alright, jackass. What's the deal with you guys keeping a flaming fairy koala bear in a cage and getting all your dudes killed? And you better not say it's a secret or you'd rather die than tell me because I've got a direct line to my goddess. I guarantee you won't die no matter what I do to you—got that?”

By this time, she's leaned across the entire table to get right in Sun's face. The red contacts she wore made her look demonic enough without the light of madness behind them. Sun, however was used to this and merely said, “That'd be an Intimidate check. With a hefty bonus.”

Emerald grinned. “Sweet.” dropping back into her seat, she picked up her d20 and rolled a thirteen. “That's a twenty total before bonuses.”

“Yeah, he's filling his pants,” said Sun. “I-it's for King Fayronn of the Mecardia Kingdom. He paid to have the Kaiyupei queen captured so he could capture her hive.”

“That worked super-well for you, by the way,” Neptune said with a roll of his eyes.

“I noticed, the guard grinds out. 'We had a non-detection spell on the cage, but it was dispelled shortly after the train left the last station. I have no idea how they reached us this quickly though.”

Roman scratched his head. “Come to think of it, none of these guys had a gun or the coordination to snipe two engineers through the window of a moving train. And I doubt they have the ability to disenchant spells either. Looks like someone was helping these little wankers.”

“Dun-Dun-Duuuuun!” That came from Sun, Neptune and Blake all on cue. Neo and Weiss looked at them, confused while Emerald just shook her head and face-palmed.

“And that's where we'll pick up if you guys decide we want to make this a campaign. What'd you guys think?”

Emerald shrugged. “It's pretty much high power D&D and as long as I can steal shit and hurt people, I'm good. Might change my spells up for a campaign though. Maybe a whole new character, I don't know.”

Sitting back, Roman crossed his legs. “I didn't even get to scratch the surface of Maribeth in this.
I'm in if everyone else is.” His phone chimed and, after checking it, he added, “Neo wants to do some respecking, but she's in too.”

“Oh, Paolo is so in.” Neptune flashed a double thumbs up.

That left Blake and Weiss. Blake shrugged. “You know I'm up for any kind of fantasy gaming as long as we don't repeat the Lamentations of the Flame Princess incident.”

“It's not my fault you guys aren't hard core enough for my DMing style,” Roman sniffed haughtily.

“Hey, I liked it,” Emerald pointed out. “Then again, I'm not the one who had to have a foot amputated. Or had a character go crazy and eat their own arm meat. Or exploded into a hail of meat. And even I could have done without that part of the module with the kids...”

Roman held up his hands to stop her comments. “Okay, enough damning me with faint praise.”

“Anyway,” Blake continued, “I might have to play a different character than Alhaen if Weiss isn't going to be in the group.

Now the full force of everyone's stares were on Weiss. She shrank back a bit, before composing herself. “Well I would be lying if I said I didn't have fun. However, if I'm going to be doing this regularly I'm going to need some concessions.”

“You know this is a gaming group and not a business meeting, right Snow White?” Roman demanded.

Weiss waved his comment away. “No, I understand, however I am in a most delicate position. Meaning I have my father for a father and Yang Xiao Long as a friend.” There were a few winces and looks of sympathy from the peanut gallery. “So first of all I'd appreciate the discretion that keeps people from knowing about Blake's hobby.”

“Not unreasonable,” said Emerald. “After all, we are kind of the closeted gamer group. Most people don't know about my gaming either.”

Roman let out an annoyed groan. “God, you people are trapped in the eighties or something. Don't you get that we're living in the Age of the Geek? Magic the Gathering is on ESPN, the last President collected Spider-Man comics, the top ten grossing movies of all time is full of Superheroes and Lord of the Rings, and the some of the most popular TV shows on right now are a sit-com about a bunch of nerds, a zombie apocalypse drama based on a comic book, and what is basically the televised version of my Lamentations of the Flame Princess game. The only place being geeky isn't cool right now is in stuff written by old men who talk about how things were in the good old days before 'the rap music'. You've got nothing to worry about.”

Weiss frowned, deep in thought. “I... actually have no idea what most of that is—like what's an Espin?--but anyway, I have plenty to worry about and I'd just like a bit of friendly cooperation, okay?”

“Sure, whatever.” Roman rolled his eyes.

“I do know what he's talking about and I still think he somehow goes to a different school than us instead of Sun and Neptune,” said Emerald.

Once again rolling his eyes, Roman sighed. “It's all a matter of confidence.”

“Anyway,” Blake drew the group back to the point. “No one's going to 'out' you as a gamer if you
don't want anyone to know. If you want it to be a secret, it'll be safe with us.” She could have stopped there, but she couldn't help herself. “But... and I say this as her best friends mind you... Yang might surprise you.”

“And that's why you've told her all about where you disappear to on Sundays, Tuesdays and alternate Wednesdays.” Weiss gave her a patented Schnee glare.

Blake's silence said everything Weiss needed. “So we're agreed on concession one. Excellent. Now as for my second and final concession: I don't want to continue borrowing Blake's dice like a beggar, so I'll require a set of my own.”

There was silence at that, broken only when Emerald managed to lock eyes with Weiss and state simply. “You're rich. 'Daddy Owns the Mayor' rich. Dice are less than ten bucks.”

At this, Weiss sat up straight, looking imperious. “Sorry, but my father always says to insist on getting everything you can in a negotiation and remain firm. I'm actually being incredibly generous; I could have demanded a hard copy of the game rules and the paper version of that stick comic.”

Silence reigned once again and after it went far past the point of awkwardness, Weiss started to fidget. Considering how literally nothing else her father had told her or wanted for her seemed to turn out well for her, why did she expect it to go well this time.

She was dealing with people not business executives. People who she was supposed to be making friends with. Who Blake, one of her very few friends had vouched for her with. And here she went again screwing things up by... well being a Schnee.

“Look...” she started. “Forget all that. I was being a dolt and this isn't a negotiation. To be honest, I really would like to play with you guys again... if you'll have me after that.”

Roman snerked. “You think saying stupid things is enough to get you kicked out? If that was true, we wouldn't have Neptune.”

“Hey!”

“So? That added absolutely nothing to the conversation.”

“And even demanding we give you stuff, you're not half the asshole Roman is,” Emerald pointed out. “Plus with you and Neo, we've finally shifted the ratio of women to men in the right direction.”

Still shooting a death glare at Roman, Neptune picked up the Crown Royal bag he kept his dice in. “And if you're really all that bothered about bumming dice? Don't be. Most of us have been in the hobby long enough to have a couple of pounds of dice. As in I literally bought a pound of dice online this summer. Only ten bucks—good deal.”

Randomly extracting a handful, he started picking some out. “D6's for Shadowrun and HERO, D10's for White Wolf. D8's—that reminds me, we should try Cortex sometime. They've got a game for that show, Leverage. FATE die... you don't need that right now... And a couple of D4’s, a D12 you'll never use... and of course a couple of twenty-siders. Here ya go.”

As it happened, he'd picked out dice that were either white or blue in varying shares. These he slid across the table to Weiss, who stared dumbly at them for a second.

At length, she managed, “Um... thank you, but I thought the game was over for this week.”
“No, I meant you could keep them. That was the concession you wanted, right?” Neptune gave her a winning smile that made her suddenly decide to look anywhere but directly at him. Damn Blake and her harem of unusually beautiful men.

“Oh. Then thank you very much.” She picked up the dice and looked at them curiously. What was the 12-sided one for anyway. “And um... I suppose it's only fair that I make a concession of my own: I will take care of all the snacks and such from here on out.”

“And she now officially has more value to the group than Roman.” Emerald remarked languidly, causing everyone but a certain ginger provocateur to laugh.

Once everything had died down, Sun stood up and proclaimed, “Alright guys. Then it sounds like we've got a new Sunday game. I'll hit you guys up in Skype this week to see what changes you want to make to your characters or if you want to start new ones. Great game, everyone.”

With Sun's wrap-up as a distraction, Blake found time to send a text to Ruby telling her things were going well on her end.

Chapter End Notes

An thus ends the Monkeyshines Arc. I'm thrilled that so many people were positive about taking this little detour into another gaming group and let me stretch my wings with Nerd-versing a few of my favorite side characters. I'm particularly happy with Emerald an Roman. I loved the tiny bit of interaction we got out of these two.

So many references this time. Two to the excellent heist TV show Leverage (written by pulp writing master class in human form, John Rogers), first with Roman calling it 'The Age of the Geek' like Hardison and then to the excellent Leverage Cortex System game.

Roman also mentioned Big Bang Theory, Walking Dead, and Game of Thrones. Ironically, I only like one of those shows and it's probably the one you don't like. One of the great things about living in the Age of the Geek is that we don't have to support every geeky thing out there. Back in the 90's I knew Batman and Robin was going to be garbage, but went to see it to support superhero movies anyway. Nowadays I'm happy to report I have not and will not see Man of Steel, BVS or Suicide Squad ever because they are terrible and I don't have to anymore. Same with all things zombies and also anything grimdark.

So hooray!

Speaking of grimdark: Lamentations of the Flame Princess. It's an old school D&D retroclone that's basically advertised as being so grimdark that Warhammer 40k recommended it see a therapist and also a massive character meat grinder. A lot of people seem to like it, but it's not for me.

Neptune also has the official dice bag of college: a Crown Royale bag. Because seriously, those are the best dice bags. And he namedrops a bunch of game systems including HERO, the absolute best system if you are okay with all the math forever. The second best is 4e D&D. Fight me.
Roman's intention to make a pet of the Kaiyupei is based on the fact that my group had a tendency of making pets or allies of everything they came in contact with that could possibly be negotiated with. They never made anything smoke a cigar, but it may yet happen.

Speaking of gaming groups, my new group here for a HERO game includes a character with the Disad: Unusually Beautiful Man, which is where Weiss's line about Blake's 'harem' came from. Whenever he succeeds at anything, we chalk it up to 'Well he is an unusually beautiful man'.

Next chapter, we enter the Winter Formal arc with more Arkos. Pyrrha wants to keep Jaune from stressing out over making their dates perfect—so she takes it upon herself to make sure everything goes perfectly by asking for her friends to help make it so. So yeah, she's basically asking for it here.
“This was not part of the plan I envisioned.” Weiss was saying as the track girls plus Ruby and Nora passed through the doors of a store called The Wizard's Tower.

“Hey, I'm the one that came up with it,” Yang pointed out, then muttered, “Though I wasn't expecting this either.”

The plan had been a simple one: since they'd missed Pyrrha's birthday, they were going to kidnap her after school and have a girls' night where they'd pile into Nora's van, go out to dinner, then go over to Blake's to watch movies. Almost immediately that plan had hit an obstacle. An obstacle named Ruby Rose and a gift certificate to the Wizard's Tower.

Naturally, Pyrrha wanted to spend that immediately and thus, they found themselves at the city's largest outlet for all things geeky. While the specialty stores might have had more extensive variety in their stocks, the Tower had a little bit of everything; from tabletop games to models to video games, and even supplies for cosplay and Dagohir.

“So,” Ruby says, almost as excited as she'd be if she had her own gift certificate to spend. “Got an idea what you wanna get Pyrrha?” Her silver eyes flicked from aisle to aisle. She already had dozens of ideas of her own.

Pyrrha hummed thoughtfully before starting off toward the tabletop games section. “I was thinking I could get a new game we could all play when we hang out or when not everyone can make it to game.”

“I like the way you think!” Ruby chirped, scampering after her. “Ooo, I think they have the last Sentinels of the Multiverse expansion!”

The left Yang, Weiss, Blake and a paralyzed-by-all-the-choices Nora standing by the door.

Weiss huffed and rubbed her knuckles against her temples. “Is there somewhere non-embarrassing where we can sit until there' done?”

“For once, I'm with you, Icy Weiss-y,” Yang chimed in, “Don't wanna get any nerd on us.”

This cause Nora to snap out of her trance and round on her, pointing an accusatory finger. “Hey! You said you had fun when you played with us the other week!”

Even thought she already knew about it from Ruby, Blake feigned dull surprise. “Playing what, Yang?” For all her vaunted reputation for having a strong poker face, Blake was finding it almost impossible not to smile as Yang fidgeted and Weiss cast a curious eye in the blonde's direction.

“Um... well you see...” Yang poked her fingers together lie Ruby tended to do when she couldn't think of a way out of a situation. Sometimes it was easy to tell that they were sisters, looks be damned. “We were playing cards,” she said after an obvious fit of inspiration struck her. “Yeah, that's right. Cards. Five Card Stud, Texas Hold 'Em and... er... Old Maid—wait, not that, the one old maids play... Bridge! That's it, Bridge!”

She was shooting Nora a pleading look that begged her to go along with it. Said looked was
completely ignored in favor of Nora's righteous indignation on behalf of her hobby. “No we weren't! We were roleplaying. In Ruby's campaign, remember? You were a dragon-lady and we hacked you up for magic reagents and a snazzy cloak!”

Yang winced, then her expression hardened as she decided it would be best to try and argue with Nora. However, Weiss cut her off. “Were you now?” The heiress leaned in and despite having to look up to her towering friend, still managed to give the impression that she was looking down her nose at her. “And you say you had fun?”

“Fine!” Yang jammed her hands into the pockets of her jeans. “I played and I had a good time, okay? I even said I might come back and play some other time. I was stranded for the night and was bored, okay?” She stared down at Weiss, looking defiant. “What of it?”

Weiss of course didn't back down. “Oh, I'm just observing that if any of the rest of us played in one of those games, you would never stop mocking us for it. You certainly give Pyrrha a hard enough time for it.”

“I give everyone a hard time for everything. It's part of why I'm so lovable. At least Pyrrha understands that. Right Pyrrha?” She shouted across the store to where the other two of their group were pouring over boxes and boxes of games.

“Actually, I wouldn't mind if you stopped!” Pyrrha called back.

Pouting, Yang folded her arms. “No one appreciates me.” She bounced back immediately though. “Anyway, what do you care? You wanna make fun of me for playing or something? You already yell at me more than Dad does for stuff.”

Weiss folded her arms too. “Whatever. I was just establishing that you would have to be a huge hypocrite if you gave me a hard time if I, for example, attended just such a game last night.”

Yang had basically been nodding along until that last part. “Wait. What?”

“That's r-right,” Weiss tried to cover the fact that her voice cracked in saying it by nonchalantly examining her nails. “I was invited to try out a session and I did. Truth be told, I quite enjoyed it and may join that particular group's long-term game.”

This was met with a blank stare from Yang that lasted far too longer before the blonde burst out laughing with her trademark boisterousness. “Oh man. You're totally having me on, aren't you?”

By this time, Blake couldn't help it. She was actually proud and more than a little impressed with what Weiss was doing. Despite having learned that Yang had played and apparently liked a roleplaying game, she hadn't been prepared to out herself to her best friend. But, if image-conscious Weiss was going to do it...

“Actually, she's not. I was there with her. Actually, I invited her; they're my usual gaming group.”

And just like that, the laughter stopped. “What? Blakey, no! Why didn't you tell me?”

“Um, because you're you? It took you three whole days to quit cracking jokes when I tripped up the stairs. I figured you'd be insufferable for months if you decided I was a 'dork' like your sister.”

“But I'm also your best friend!” Yang argued, putting a hand to her chest for maximum melodrama. “Plus, I already think you're a dork for reading all the time; what's the difference?”

Blake blinked. “Huh. You've got a point there.” Then she shook her head. “Wait, no. I already put
up with that kind of crap for reading a lot. I'm completely justified in not wanting more of the same.”

“I see.” Yang hung her head, painstakingly well cared for locks falling all around her face. Her voice was devoid of all her usual verve. “Didn't know I was such a shitty friend…”

“Oh come on.” Blake sighed and bumped Yang with her shoulder. “If you were just some jerk who gave us a hard time, we wouldn't be hanging around with you. You're also the one that actually gets us to go out and try new things, and the one that mother hens all over us if we're hurt or sick or just feeling down. And you're fun to be with, okay? Even the puns. Sometimes. You just go overboard is all.”

Yang peeked out at her from under her hair. “Really?” The glimmer of mischief in her eyes told Blake she'd fallen into Yang's trap all too late. Seconds later, she was in a headlock. “Com'ere! You too Weiss!” Yang soon had one of them under either arm and faced a dilemma.

“Ah crap, how am I supposed to give noogies if both my arms are full?”

“I can help!” Nora appeared before her and dutifully started rubbing her knuckles into the scalps of Yang's captives. She only managed to do it a second before she was snatched away from them by the collar by tall blonde woman in her forties.

“For the life of me, I will never understand why or even how you require this instruction every time you enter this establishment, Miss Valkyrie but there is to be no roughhousing here.” Her appearance screamed 'strict librarian', what with her hair pulled back in a tight bun and a set of glasses perched on the end of her nose.

Nora went limp, forcing the woman to strain to hold her upright, looking every bit an over-sized kitten. “Yes Ms. Goodwitch.” she mewed, even though she looked amused.

Looking past her, Ms. Goodwitch set her death glare on Yang. “That goes for you as well...”

“Xiao Long.” A new voice joined in as an older man—clearly over fifty with gray hair and glasses but of indeterminate age beyond that—approached, leaning casually on an ornate cane while at the same time sipping from an over-sized coffee mug. “Yang, I believe it was. She's dropped young Ruby off here several times.” He inclined his head to the three young women not currently being restrained by Goodwitch. “Welcome to the Wizard's Tower.” He made eye contact with Blake. “And welcome back.”

Now that she had no reason to hide it, Blake nodded back. “Thanks, Mr. Ozpin.” She cast a glance aside to her two neophyte gamer friends. “I think we'll start with the dice.”

“But I already have dice.” Weiss reached into her purse and came out with the handful Neptune had given her.

Ozpin failed to completely stifle a chuckle. “Oh newbies are so adorable. Can you ever remember a time, Glynda?” he asked Goodwitch, “A time when you still thought there was such a thing as 'enough dice'?”

A little under an hour later, the group once more piled into Nora's pink van and were off once again. Each of them had a bag from the Wizard's Tower now.

Blake had offered to buy dice for the two newbies, but Weiss stepped in once she noticed the glass
case with the 'special' dice. So now the heiress was in possession of a polyhedral set of platinum plated dice; the most expensive in the store and had bought Blake a set carved from onyx with a silver inlay, and Yang a set with gold plating with vibrant orange numbers and a sunburst symbol in place of the the highest number on each die.

Nora had just cashed out a month's worth of Etsy orders and put it directly back into mostly supplies to make more stuff: modeling clay, model paint, assorted minis bitz, fabric, and craft wire as well as a Dagohir boffer sword and the boxed set of an anime called 'When Supernatural Battles Became Commonplace'.

Using the gift certificate Ruby (and Yang, though she had just footed half the money and let Ruby beg her to decide what to buy) gave her, Pyrrha had bought a board game called Small World and an ancient, dogeared copy of Kobolds Ate My Baby from the clearance bin.

And not to be left out, Ruby had spent two weeks of allowance to buy the last supplement for the Sentinels of the Multiverse card game and a book from the roleplaying system called Pathfinder called 'Misfit Monsters Redeemed'. She was currently sitting in seat behind Nora, reading it with a massive grin on her face while Weiss, seated behind her, read over his shoulder with a mix of disgust and horror on her own face.

“Okay, so that happened,” Yang said from the front seat. She turned around so she was hanging over the back of the seat, looking at Pyrrha. “So P-rawr-” she did a clawing motion to accompany the latest nickname, “where do you wanna have dinner? This is Weiss's present to you, so money is no object. Well it is an object, but it's one Weiss sleeps on a big pile of.”

Upon hearing this, Ruby's eyes widened and she whipped around so fast that she almost knocked Weiss off the back of her seat. “Really? You sleep on a pile of money? Like a dragon? Wow, being rich is so cool!”

“I... what?!” Weiss sputtered. “No, you dolt! Haven't you been Yang's sister long enough to know when she's making a dumb joke? A hint: her mouth was moving when she said it!”

“But you could sleep on money if you wanted to, right?”

At this point Weiss just stared at Ruby until the younger girl started feeling awkward. Slowly, very slowly Ruby turned back around and opened her book again. Satisfied with herself, Weiss resumed reading again, wondering why there were so many monsters that looked like other things. “Why it it called a Wolf in Sheep's clothing when it's a tree stump with a rabbit?” she wondered aloud.

Yang just started laughing until she almost slipped back down the seat. “Anyway,” she continued, returning her focus to Pyrrha. “So, Carfagna's good? I know you said it's your favorite, but with the black credit card coming out, now's your chance to go a little more upscale.”

Pyrrha had been flipping through the instructions for her new game, and after a short moment of hemming and hawing, she finally admitted, “Actually I think it would be a nice change of pace if you don't mind, Weiss. It's just that... well we just went to Carfagna's Saturday.”

“Is Mr. Arc okay?” Blake, who was in the seat between Pyrrha and Ruby cocked her head, concerned. “I mean he's made your birthday dinner every year since I've known you.”

“Oh no,” said Pyrrha, “He made dinner like always Friday—it was wonderful. It's just that... well Jaune thought it'd be nice to be a little more fancy for our first...” by the time she got that far, she'd turned red to the tips of her ears.
The car went silent at that, save for Nora, who was humming Wolf In Sheep's Clothing by Set It Off because of what Weiss had said.

“Your first...” Ruby prompted, not making the connection everyone else but Nora had.

“Seriously?” Weiss asked, “Obviously she means their first date.” Having said it out loud, she froze, eyes widening as she quickly turned to Blake. “Hold on. Is it December yet?”

“No for two days.” Blake said with a shrug.

“Then who had that they would get together by November?”

“Ha!” Nora bellowed from the front seat. “Pay me, bitches!” There was a beat and then in a screeching of tires, the van pulled over and came to a dead stop on the side of the road with enough force to make Yang finally slip out of her seat, smacking her head on the headrest.

Struggling out of her seat belt, Nora rounded on Pyrrha. “Hold the phone! You finally officially got together with Jaune-y and you didn't tell me?! But I thought I was your best girl friend! I'm the only one you even admitted to that you liked him! Why is the plucky sidekick gal pal always the last to know?” There were actual tears in her eyes.

“N-Nora,” Pyrrha forced out, having no idea what to do with this. “I just didn't know how to bring it up. To anyone, not just you! I never wanted to make you cry!”

Blinking back tears, Nora sniffed. “Oh, I'm not crying because of that. I'm crying because I'm so happy for you!” She lunged over the seat to envelope her friend in a huge hug. Feeling much if not more the same awkwardness Weiss had managed to instill in Ruby with a stare, Pyrrha tentatively patted the girl on the back.

Then a realization hit her. “You all... had a pool going on about this?!”

Yang, having recovered from her meeting with the headrest, rolled her eyes. “Hello? Have you met us? Were you not at the Halloween party where we bet on costumes? We have pools and bets for everything. I'm just surprised it took you this long just to club him over the head and drag him back to your cave. Bet or no bet, I would’ve gotten involved a long time ago if these characters hadn't made me promise not to 'interfere with your love life'. Just for the record: if you ever feel the need to interfere with mine, you have my permission.”

“Point taken?” Pyrrha replied as Nora released her.

“I don't even care who won the pool,” said Weiss, sinking back into her seat. “My long, national nightmare is over. Pyrrha, I will give you a thousand dollars to never break up with Arc. Lord knows he'll never break up with you.”

The nervous noise that escaped from Pyrrha made all thoughts of relaxation leave the heiress's body. “What was that about? If you've only been together for a weekend, things can't possibly be going wrong, even with Arc involved.”

“Can you please stop insulting him?” Pyrrha snapped, “He hasn't 'bothered' you for more than half a year now. I should hope you at least have enough respect for me to stop by now.”

“Well that was new and wildly out of character—even if I happen to agree,” said Blake. “What's wrong, Pyrrha?”

The redhead studied her hands in her lap as she took a deep breath and collected her thoughts.
“Everything is going nicely. More than nicely. It's just that... I'm worried about Jaune. I would rather not discuss the whole circumstances of how we got together but I finally learned a little about why we hadn't and... I'm worried that Jaune is going to do every thing he can to make sure everything we do, every date, ever little moment is perfect.”

“And... that's a bad thing?” Ruby asked, bewildered.

Blake patted Pyrrha on the shoulder. “It is if he starts obsessing over it. And we know Jaune: he just might if left to his own devices.”

Pyrrha nodded. “That's it exactly. And he's not going to believe me if I tell him I don't want 'perfect', I just want what we've already got but more... and that already sounds kind of insulting as I'm saying it.” She hunched in her seat. “I just don't want him driving himself insane over... us? You know? I've waited so long for there to be an us, I certainly don't want it to hurt him. And he's done so much for me anyway, I want to make sure there's equal give and take on my end.”

“Wow, you put a lot of thought into this over just one weekend.” Yang observed.

“Oh hush,” Weiss admonished. “This is obviously really important to her.”

Yang rolled her eyes again. “Well duh. All I'm saying is the solutions kinda obvious isn't it?”

“Of course!” Nora chirped, having returned to her seat and started buckling up again. “Um... what's the solution then?”

The blonde gave the whole van a cheeky grin. “Well the problem is Jaune being all self-conscious and aggravatingly... Jaune about the whole thing. Going all control freak and micromanaging himself into an ulcer. Am I right?”

“So I'm the only one who gets excoriated for insulting him?” Weiss complained.

“Oh hush,” Blake said, throwing he words back at her.

“Anyway,” Yang continued. “The answer is clear: take the power out of his hand and let him see that things can go well without going bonkers over every little thing.” She looked to Pyrrha. “You two are going to the Winter Formal Friday, right?”

Pyrrha nodded.

“Cool. Then tell him not to worry, that you're going to take care of everything. And by 'you' I mean 'us'. After tonight—because I'll be damned if I let drama eat you make-up birthday party—we are going to plan a perfectly imperfect night for the two of you. But for now... Nora, my good woman!”

“Yes, fearless leader?”

“Onward to the fanciest steak house in the city! We have partying to do!”

“Yes, ma'am!”

And the pink van sped on.
This one took some time to develop. I usually know exactly how the next arc will go before the current one wraps up, but this one was difficult. I wanted to keep the whole cast in it while also doing more Arkos romance. Around the time I was struck with the idea of Love Potion Nora Nine, I was thinking about other tropes I wanted to pull apart and as it turns out, there's a LOT of terrible love tropes.

Case in point: The Perfect Date, aka 'Watch The Very Concept Of Love Destroy One Person's Self Worth As A Human Being'. I'm honestly coming to the horrifying epiphany that my profession just plain antagonistic toward love. Love Potions, Will They Won't They Plots, Twilight, Dan Didio... there is not depth of depraved anti-love writers won't plumb and then call it romantic.

So yeah, I'm kinda taking a stand and trying to reconstruct romance a little. Whether I'm good at it or not it completely up for debate.

But I am bringing the nerdy. Can't argue that one after this chapter. Yes, everything they bought at real things. Mostly real things I own or know people who own them and which I heartily endorse. Especially Kobolds Ate My Baby. They might pay that in this fic at some point.

I'm not sure if you can buy Sentinels of the Multiverse at a brick and mortar store, but you can get it online. It's an awesome superhero card game where you and your friends play superheroes fighting villains in comic book locations.

Small World is a quirky little fantasy board game that's like Risk with trolls and dwarves, but more cute and fun; it was featured on Wil Wheaton's show, Tabletop if you want to see it in action.

Nora getting a Dagohir boffer is a nod to Solara Golsun's fic College Battle Games—about the group as college students who participate in the SCA-like Dagohir mock battles, which kind of inspired this fic. And this fic has in turn kind of inspired Dyde21's Let's Just Live!, which is about the gang being in a drumline program. I dont' remember if I've said I here before, but it's an honor and a joy to be part of this little microgenre of Arkos-centered AUs where everyone is into a traditionally geeky passion.

Oh yeah, and Oz and Glynda are in this now too. I honestly planned to introduce them earlier but could never get them to the game store. Introducing them is an important part of doing the Power Rangers story I've been talking about. Speaking of, some people have been worried that I'm going to plunge Game On into a Power Rangers story. That's not going to happen.

How it's going to happen is that when I do the Power Ranger story, it will be an AU of this one. An AU of an AU. Yup, that's a thing.

Finally, it's actually happening now. The Indie Go Go for World of Ere RPG is live an accepting pledges. Everyone that contributes gets a the playtest Alpha when it's done plus the first Rune Breaker novel and for more you can get the Beta and Complete versions and for more, you can get all the supplements and even a physical copy. Just got to Indie Go Go DOT com and search for World of Ere RPG.

Next chapter, the plan gets set into motion not without a hitch by design. But will all the hitches be intended?
“Are you actually pouting?” Yang couldn't help but smirk up at Weiss from her place sitting on the floor in front of the Xiao Long family sofa where the Schnee heiress was, indeed pouting.

“I am not pouting,” Weiss pouted. “I'm just still trying to make sense of this... this.” She gestured broadly at their surroundings. Pyrrha, being the girl of the hour, had gotten claim to the good recliner while Weiss and Ruby were sharing the couch with Yang leaning against it with her legs stretched out and Nora was sprawled across the 'less-good' arm chair. Blake leaned on the side of the couch near Yang, reading a book. No one knew where she'd gotten it.

Around them was a ruin of junk food; bags of chips, popcorn and pizza boxes alongside a sheet cake Nora had bought because she insisted it wasn't a birthday celebration without cake. Also Yang had broken out some of Qrow's leftover Chinese takeout.

“Is this because we were still hungry after the steakhouse? Lighten up, Weiss: the portions in that fancy-pants place were tiny!”

“Alsfo,” Nora chipped in through a fistful of popcorn, “Weref grow-ig, actif girlf!”

“That was 'we're growing, active girls', by the way,” Pyrrha translated, nursing the slice of cake Nora had forced on her. She was just eating it to be polite; it wasn't very good cake seeing as how Nora piked it up from the first store that sold cake they passed on the way back from dinner. “And she is right we're teenagers and athletes: we burn a lot of calories.”

Ruby nodded and squirmed about on the couch trying to get comfortable. She ended up laying with her legs up on the arm, looking at Weiss upside down. “Uncle Qrow says that teenagers are black holes with teeth and hormones. But that's usually when Yang's stealing his food... like now.”

“It's not the food!” Weiss squawked, her arms flailing at the air in frustration. She collected herself immediately after that outburst, but not by much. “I was talking about the movies. Isn't there supposed to be some sort of theme?”

Yang craned her head to also look at Weiss upside down. The skewed perspectives were starting to make the highly orderly and regimented young woman twitch just a little. “Do you get all your knowledge about how other people act from old TV shows?”

“No,” Weiss denied, turning red in the face. To cover, she leaned off the couch and snatched up the rental cases. “It's just that these don't go together: The Princess Bride? Eight-Legged Freaks? Tremors 2? Why two when we're not watching the first one?!”

“Because the second one's the best one.” Pyrrha, Ruby and Nora all said automatically.

If looks could kill, Weiss's glare would have set them all on fire. “It's not how things are done!” she moaned.

“Yeah it is,” Ruby offered, “it's like how there's really no point of watching the first few Fast and Furiouses... eses...eeses? Fast and Furious movies more than once just to get to the ones where the world's more or less turned into a fantasy RPG with car-based magic.”
“You start at one because that's... wait what?” Weiss's borderline OCD was no match for Ruby's ultimate power of the nonsequitor.

“Oh yeah,” Ruby nodded sagely. “We were talking about it last week at lunch: Fast and Furious past the third one is really just Harry Potter but instead of wands letting you do anything, it's cars. You can do impossible drifts, haul bank vaults around like a water skier against all physics...”

“...have perfect timing,” Pyrrha added.

“...ramp pretty much everything!” Nora chimed in.

“...as long as you car hard enough. And Vin Diesel cars the hardest of anyone.” Ruby finished, looking incredibly proud. “Oh, and also the Italian Job is in the same car-niverse.”

Weiss just stared at the three of them unblinking. “This must be what going mad feels like...”

“Nice Firefly reference!” Ruby flipped over on her stomach and posted up for a high five.

“What now?” Weiss asked, still unblinking.

Blake peeked at her from over the arm of the couch. “No, this is what going nerd feels like. And if it helps, the theme is 'Pyrrha's favorite movies.. that Yang won't complain all the way through. We had this argument at the video store while you were in shock over Yang and Ruby not having Netflix.”

“It's not that expensive!” Weiss said, unable to help herself. “Why would anyone rent movies instead?”

Amber eyes rolled in their sockets. “One day I'm going to explain privilege to you and we're going to have to hospitalize you.” She smirked and shook her head, snapping her book shut before hoisting herself up to sit on the arm of the couch. “But today is not the day. In the interest of keeping your blood vessels from popping: Hey listen everyone a distraction!”

Predictably to the point that she cringed internally, all eyes went to Blake. “So I've been thinking and I think I have a pretty good starting point for what to do about your 'imperfect' date with Jaune, Pyrrha.”

The redhead's expression brightened and she sat up a bit straighter. “Oh, do tell. I've been wracking my brain without much to show for it, I'm afraid.”

“Well for starters, I was thinking we can't really tinker with something Jaune comes up with. Too stressful for him, too unpredictable for us. The major point here is to show him it's okay not to be perfect. And what better way than to have the person he already thinks is perfect screw up? Pyrrha, you're going to tell him you're taking care of all the arrangements the night of the dance. All he has to do is show up looking nice with flowers. This gives us maximum control to make sure things are a beautiful disaster.”

***

Friday

Pyrrha answered the door to find Jaune awkwardly waiting at the door for her.

He'd made a valiant effort to tame his hair but ultimately failed as the simple act of walking next door was enough for his wilder locks to wrestle their way back into their more accustomed state. Aside from that, he'd cleaned up nicely in the same way he usually did for dances: dressed in a
charcoal-colored suit and matching shirt with a gold tie. The wool overcoat he wore, a hand-me-down from his father, had aged in a way that made it look distinguished rather than ratty.

Seeing him standing there looking nervous just to be spending time with her both flattered Pyrrha and hardened her resolve to go through with the girls' plan to take some of the edge off for him. The last things she wanted was for her best friend—her boyfriend now—to be uncomfortable around her. She wanted to have the ease they'd always had around each other to remain intact above all else.

To that end, she gave him an easy smile and motioned for him to come in. “Have trouble finding the place?” she asked with a light laugh once it was clear he was beyond words at the moment.

That wasn't entirely attributable to nerves. While she was completely on board with her friends 'failing forward' (as Ruby put it) her date, one thing Pyrrha refused to do was look unattractive to Jaune. If anything, she'd decided to go all out with an ankle length black dress slit to mid-thigh on one side with a vibrant orange, red and gold phoenix embroidered up the opposite side, its wings wrapping around her body in such a way as to enhance her bust.

It took a few seconds for Jaune to tear his eyes away to reply, but the joke seemed to do its job in distracting him from his thoughts. A small laugh escaped him as he reached up and scrubbed a hand through his hair, mussing it even more, much to Pyrrha's delight. “I got lost a few times, but my phone's GPS saved me.” A flash of memory lit his eyes. “Oh! I got you these.” He held up a small bouquet of orchids. “I owe Mr. Collins at the florist down the street a couple of days running the register, but I hope you like them.”

“Pyrrha accepted them happily. “Thank you, Jaune. They're lovely. It means a lot that you remembered my favorite flower.”

He shrugged, a small smile tugging at his lips. “How could I not? Especially since you took care of everything else. Thanks for that by the way.” Jaune lowered his head, looking sheepish.

Taking care to set the bouquet on an end table, Pyrrha stepped forward and cupped his cheek with one hand. “You never have to thank me for that kind of thing. You know that, Jaune.” Feeling bold from the proximity, she leaned in and rested her forehead against his. “Us being together hasn't changed how things work between us, okay? At least I hope not.”

They never really discussed it, but Pyrrha was the one that usually paid their way. Not to say the Arcs were in financial trouble, but even with Leon's generous pension and the fact that Muriel taught in one of the rare school districts that actually spent their tax money on paying teachers instead of school board members and tax cuts for Weiss's father, the fact remained that they had eight kids that needed food, clothing, entertainment, healthcare and tuition. Even with the older sisters out of the house, it still meant that none of the Arc children was rolling in expendable income.

And no matter how much old fashioned 'the man should be the provider' obligation Jaune may have felt, reality and Pyrrha's status as the only child of a couple who made good livings said different.

Leaving all that unsaid, Pyrrha continued, doing her best not to notice how she could feel Jaune's breath tickling her lips in the position she'd put them in. “The only thing that's changed between us is this, okay? The fact that we can...” she was starting to lose her nerve now and with it steam. “...can be like this. No more hiding how we feel right?”

It was right then that she made what could have been a critical mistake: she glanced up and made
eye contact with Jaune. My but he was close. So close that it would only take the slightest movement for their lips to make contact.

“Right,” they both more breathed the agreement than spoke the word.

Pyrrha felt a shiver up her spine as Jaune slowly—possibly instinctively—started to tilt his head to close that tiny distance. The hand on his cheek slipped down along his neck to his shoulder and her other reached up to grasp his upper arm.

It was only when she felt his own grip settle on her waist did she snap out of the spell and made her remember that there was something important riding on them actually going on their date rather than the energetic make-out session she found herself hoping this was going to turn into.

At the last moment, she moved her head just enough that her lips met Jaune's jawline instead of his lips. Of course, in that impulsive moment she'd gauged his distance wrong and ended up delivering a gesture that reminded her uncomfortably of her great aunt who insisted that a proper Greek greeting wasn't complete without a sloppy wet kiss on either kiss.

Desperately wanting to make it clear that that wasn't on purpose, she followed that up with another quick kiss, then came in even closer to say in his ear, “Just be patient a little longer, okay?”

A beat later she realized how teasing she sounded saying that and blushed, taking a full step back. Jaune was in a similarly flustered state, which was a little heartening. “W-we need to get going,” she covered none too smoothly, “We've got a reservation after all.”

It took a few swallows before Jaune's throat stopped being too dry for him to talk. “Y-yeah. Almost forgot.”

The pair locked gazes again and if possible went even redder.

“I'll get my coat.” Pyrrha's voice sounded unnaturally shrill to her ears as she went over to the closet in the foyer to get her new coat and her purse.

RWBY RWBY RWBY

“This is terrible.”

“I know, but we trusted Yang with the provisions and we all knew that she has no taste when it comes to coffee.” Weiss was sitting in Nora's van, frowning into a cup of coffee made from woefully burnt beans. It was bad enough that she wasn't even complaining about being wedged in between Ruby and Blake in the second row of seats while Nora and Yang took up the front.

All of them were dressed for the dance, though Nora had put blacking under her eyes as if that was going to disguise her better.

“I know, right? And danishes? These are not stakeout snacks. You're supposed to have donuts. Everyone knows that.” Ruby was cramming one said danish into her maw even as she said it. “Even if they are moist and delicious.”

Yang turned around to glare at them. “Hey, you wanna complain, get your own.”

Grimacing at her first experimental sip of the coffee, Blake spoke up. “Actually, I'm curious now how you managed to find coffee this bad.”

A grunt came from the front seat as Yang turned herself back around. “I made it myself, okay? The
danishes were expensive enough and I'm tapped right now.”

Ruby narrowed her eyes. “Wait a minute... there's no coffee in the house but Uncle Qrow's. You tried to grind and brew Uncle Qrow's coffee beans? You have no idea how to do that.”

“Which is abundantly clear,” Weiss agreed, holding up her cup.

“Shut up everyone! We've got friends to stalk.”

Nora growled a little. “That's not what's terrible! It's because you made my beloved Slothmobile not-pink!” She hugged the steering wheel, rubbing it consolingly. “It's okay baby, I still love you even if you've been ruined forever!”

“Oh for god's sake,” Weiss muttered. “I didn't have your van repainted, it's a vinyl wrap; you can rip it off at anyt--” she was interrupted by the sound of the driver's side door opening and was forced to lunge across the car to grab the girl by the shoulder. “not now! After we're done...” she sighed. “...stalking our friends. We can't do that in a highly recognized pink van.”

“Is it really stalking both of them if Pyrrha knows we're doing it?” asked Blake.

Yang obstinately sipped her coffee, trying to ignore how objectively awful it tasted. Her eyes were fixed on the Nikos house door. “They've been in there a really long time. Wonder what's going on in there?” Mischief played in her expression. “Hey, wouldn't it be awesome and save us a lot of time if they just skipped the dance and decided to just snog all evening?”

“Ha. As if. It's going to be months before those two work up the nerve to even come close.” Weiss shook her head. At that exact moment, the door opened and the pair stepped out. “See? They were probably just making awkward small talk this whole time.”

After Pyrrha locked the door, Jaune offer her his arm and she linked her with his. The two then proceeded down the walk to where he was parked. With Jaune facing the other direction, Pyrrha flashed a thumb's up at where she knew the van would be.

“Aww, they are so cute together!” Nora squealed, her earlier complaints forgotten. After a beat, she reached over any opened the glove compartment, taking out a bundle of pennants which she passed around.

Okay,” said Ruby, examining the pennant she'd been handed, “I've seen you with these more than once. What the heck's an 'Arkos'?”


“And I'm sure I am actually dumber from finding that out,” said Weiss.

“Oh, I've got names for every possible combination of our friends,” Nora said sagely. She pointed at Yang and Blake in turn. “Bumblebee because Yang's hair's kinda yellow-blonde and Blake's is black.”

Yang raised an eyebrow. “That's my motorcycle's name.”

“Even better!” Nora then pointed to Ruby and Blake. “Ladybug! Because Ruby's hair's got those red tips a—”
“Are these all hair-based?” Blake asked.

“Nah. Like Weiss and Ruby would be White Rose because Weiss’s name means white and Ruby's last name is Rose and Weiss and Blake would be Checkmate because black and white and they’re both all smart like chess players.”

Weiss massaged the bridge of her nose. “You actually just sit around all day imagining what you'd call any of us if we ever got together?”

“Not all day. And sometimes I think of what the babies would be like.”

“I'm going to regret this in just a few seconds, but... you do realize that we're all girls and would have to adopt if that were to happen. Also I obviously can't speak for everyone, but I'm not a lesbian.”

Yang smirked. “Never know until you try Weiss-cream.” For effect, she waggled her eyebrows at the heiress.

“Since when does your actual orientation matter in fanfiction?” Nora asked with a laugh.

Yang's smirk faded as she processed what Nora just said. “Wait. You write fanfiction of us?”

Nora chuckled nervously. “Um... of course not. That would be weird for me to write stories about my friends going on adventures and falling in love and keeping it on a secret blog. Who would do that, not me! Certainly... not...”

Assuming Nora was messing with her (or at least she hoped), Yang decided to retaliate. “Say Nora? You said you had names for every combination, right?” Nora nodded, “So what's the name for if me and Ren got together.”

“There is none!” Nora blurted out. “I mean there's no point in making one, 'cause Ren's with me. Okay, not with me. But you know what I mean...”

“No I don't.” Yang countered.

Nora was starting to get red in the face. “Well we're going to the dance together. Or I'm meeting him at the dance at least.”

“Jaune and Pyrrha go every year and they only just got together,” Blake pointed out, not wanting to be left out of the good-natured ribbing.

“I-I um...” Nora cringed and started the car. “This game isn't fun anymore. Let's go stalking!”

Chapter End Notes

I understand that a lot of people come to this fic for the gaming segments, and some just plain don't like the high school parts, but I personally find a lot of value and fun in writing these parts. They let me play around more with actual characterization and interaction than the gaming sessions really allow as well as let me pull in other characters. So they're not going away. Sorry if you don't like that, but this is how I relax and have fun, not something I'm being paid for or anything.
As for this actual chapter, I originally planned to do a Leverage-style series of flashbacks to show the date in progress and the girls setting things up, but I decided to keep them more active in things instead.

Ruby mentions 'fail forward' here. This is a game design terms for having things set up so that even if a player fails at something like tracking, something happens to still move the plot along regardless, the player just isn't rewarded.

I don't have a lot to say this chapter. I feel like it speaks largely for itself, even the references. It was really fun doing the Jaune and Pyrrha scene; I'm sure more than one person shouted at their monitor. But your patience will be rewarded. Have I ever lied to you before?

Has anyone seen the anime God Eater? It's sort of if RWBY had a consistently dark tone from the start, what with the death world ruled by dark monsters with bone masks fighting teenagers with specialized weapons. More blood, more poorly portrayed PTSD, more authorities making objectively stupid decisions in the face of annihilation from out of context threats. I'm not overly fond of it because of that dark tone, the character and their interactions aren't anything near as charming, and the action is considerably below the par of RWBY Vols 1-3, (it's about even with 4) but for those that like that kind of thing, I figured I'd bring it up.

In case you were curious, the next All The Myriad Ways pilot I'll be putting out is currently untitled but is going to be a crossover with my Descendants superhero series. Like an actual crossover not an AU. Teams RWBY and JNPR chase a Grimm swarm through a portal to the Descendants Universe and team up with the heroes there.

Finally, the Indie Go Go is still going on if you want to help make the game played in Game On a reality and get in on the ground floor of the playtest. It's been extended for one more month, but that's still not much time!

Next chapter, the date begins as the girls do their best to make Jaune and Pyrrha's pre-dance dinner 'fail forward'. But with this group, you just know it won't go smoothly.
“Polaris?” Jaune looked at the restaurant with a tiny bit of awe and a lot of trepidation. “Isn't this the place celebrities eat when they come to Vale?”

“I thought tonight called for something a bit special, so I cashed in a favor with Weiss,” said Pyrrha, allowing him to open the car door for her and help her out. “I've been here once when one of my mother's clients was in town and invited the family to dinner. They have a lovely view of the park.”

The park across from Polaris, Everfall Park, was one of the city's largest and most well maintained. It was one of the favorites of their group during the summer in fact. Polaris had been constructed on a rise so that the dining room was elevated enough to provide said view.

“Swank.” Jaune stopped short and blinked. “Did I actually just say that?”

Pyrrha laughed gently. “Yes, yes you did. Sometimes I'm sure you were born in the wrong decade.”

“What decade is 'swank' from anyway? The twenties? The fifties?”

She tapped a finger on her lips. “I don't really know. Just that it's not this one.”

By then, they'd reached the entrance where the maitre'd was waiting at a podium. He was a strapping man with a truly epic chin, wearing a red jacket, white shirt and black tie. The second he spotted them, Jaune could swear he saw the man smirk in anticipation of giving them a hard time.

Pyrrha didn't seem to notice as she strolled up to the man with her usual bright and airy smile. “Hello, I have a reservation under Nikos?”

“Of course,” he glanced at Jaune, that smirk growing even more as he seemed to rub in the fact that it was Pyrrha who was making arrangements.

Jaune knew it was stupid. After all, he'd never blinked an eye when Pyrrha his friend paid for things. So what difference did it make when Pyrrha his girlfriend made reservations? He didn't have a ready, logical answer for that. It just didn't sit quite well with his pride. Even then, he'd been able to just deal until the smug maitre'd started picking at him.

After tapping away a bit at his keyboard, the magnificently-be-chinned man stopped, eyebrows rising. “Here we go: Pie-rah Nikos, right?”

“'Pee-rah,'” she corrected, “but yes. That's me.”

The maitre'd nodded. “Well we do have your reservation here but there's a tiny little problem.” He paused unnecessarily, seemingly just to give Pyrrha enough time to look at him askance. “You see, we here at Polaris have to deal with the fact that we are one of the exclusive eateries in the Metropolitan area. At any moment, a celebrity, sports star, politician or other superior form of humanity apart from the normal masses might drop by and require a table immediately. For that reason, we have a strict policy that reservations must be reconfirmed at least two hours prior on the day of.”
Pyrrha had been following along, looking somewhat annoyed and disgusted at the man's frankness while still trying to keep a polite expression right up until that last part. “Well I... wait: what? But I had a reservation.”

“Yes. Yes you did,” the maitre'd agreed. “And then you lost that reservation because you didn't confirm it.”

“But what's the point of a reservation that doesn't actually hold the table for you?” Jaune put in.

“It does old the reservation for you,” the maitre'd pointed out, “as long as you confirm it two hours before the time of the reservation.”

Pyrrha sighed, “I didn't even make the reservation, a friend of mine did. Weiss Schnee?” She didn't like using her friend's powerful name, but figured it was fair game seeing as Weiss really was the one who made the reservation.

The man nodded. “Yes, it does say that here. It doesn't look like she reconfirmed the reservation either.”

“Wait, wait, wait,” Jaune cut in again. “So did some random famous person show up and take our table?”

“No, of course not,” chuckled the maitre'd.

“Then... our table is in there right now,” Jaune reasoned aloud, “Empty. Not making you any money at all.” The other man nodded. Jaune waited for his point to set in. When none did, he gestured that something should be gelling. When still nothing happened, he finally burst out with, “Come on! We're here and willing to pay money while you're refusing to accept our money just in case some imaginary celebrity time travels here to take our table five minutes ago.”

He cut off with a little yelp when the larger man leaned in, looming over him with his manly, manly chin jutting out. “I notice you keep mentioning 'we' and 'our', when I'm pretty sure it's her alone paying your way. So you wanna keep running your mouth and reminding her of that?”

Leaning away from him, Jaune tried his best to glare at the older man. “Okay, you've got a point. But it's still not fair. Pyrrha went to a lot of trouble, okay? It's like... our first major date and she was trying to do something special and you're screwing it up, okay?”

“No fair?” The man laughed boisterously, “Kid, let me tell you what's not fair: coming all the way out to California to be a star and ending up the door monkey for stuck up whiner-babies trying to look trendy be paying way too much for tiny little meals. But I sucked it up like you're gonna need to.

“Not fair?” The man laughed boisterously, “Kid, let me tell you what's not fair: coming all the way out to California to be a star and ending up the door monkey for stuck up whiner-babies trying to look trendy be paying way too much for tiny little meals. But I sucked it up like you're gonna need to.

“What think I want to be here? I could be making pictures. Not those sappy flicks either. Maybe some good old horror comedy. And I'd be a god at it too. People would call me...”

“The Chin?” Jaune covered his mouth with both hands. That had just slipped out.

It seemed as it the temperature around them dropped ten degrees as the maitre'd's eyes narrowed with murderous intensity. “That's the second time today some young punk took a shot at my chin.” On big hand came up to stroke said chin. “I'll have you know that this here sandwich shelf has character. Plus, I got my chin from my mom's side of the family--” out of nowhere, he produced a wallet with a photo that looked suspiciously like himself wearing a brown bouffant wig and granny glasses. “--see?”
Jaune tried to look anywhere but the picture. “She's uh... a handsome woman.”

“Damn straight, string bean. So if you're making fun of the chin, you're making fun of my mama.” He folded his arms in a clear 'come get some' pose. Pyrrha had been about to come to Jaune's defense when he fixed her with that same tough guy stare. “Well? Are you making fun of my mama?”

“No sir,” both teens said as one.

The maitre'd nodded his approval. “Good.”

“But about the reservation...” Jaune squeaked.

“SCRAM!”

“Um... nice meeting you.” Pyrrha similarly squeaked as she grabbed her boyfriend's arm. “Let's go Jaune.”

Despite being obviously no match for either the unusually manful maitre'd or his athletic girlfriend, Jaune's odd sense of justice refused to allow him to let go. “But really it's not right...”

Pyrrha let go of his arm and closed her hand around his. “It's alright Jaune. Really.”

“But you had to call in a favor for this,” Jaune argued. “You wanted it to be special and that big, dumb gorilla can just say 'no' and ruin the whole thing? You deserve better than that!”

His mention of things being ruined started wheels turning in Pyrrha's head. “Nothing's ruined Jaune. Something just didn't go as planned,” she said gently. Then she inclined her head to the park. “How about we go for a walk until it's time to head for the dance. We haven't been to this park in months—it would be nice don't you think?”

One last protest died on Jaune's thought as he finally focused forward. The lights were on along the paths and around the various fixtures in the park. It must have been breathtaking from the windows of Polaris, but that didn't mean it wasn't a pleasant image from ground level too.

“Yeah,” he agreed, giving Pyrrha's hand a squeeze. “But aren't you hungry?”

Pyrrha hummed a moment in thought. “A bit, but there'll be refreshments at the dance... and we can stop at a diner or something on the way home.” Then a bolt from the blue struck her, reminding her of one of the reasons they and their friends frequented this particular park, which was only convenient for Ren to get to most of the time. “Or... do you remember what's on the other side of the park?”

A slow grin spread across Jaune's face as her words jogged his memory. “You mean Witchy Witch's Sandwich truck? You think they're still open? It's past six.”

“Only one way to find out!” Pyrrha took a moment to kick off her heels and pick them up before they both took off at a jog, hand in hand. As they went, she reminded her to text a thank you to Weiss. She'd been wondering why her wealthy friend had insisted on getting them reservations at Polaris when the plan had been to 'ruin' the date, but now it was clear: loosing the reservations had been a stroke of genius.

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“Where are they? The reservation was for six o'clock sharp.” Weiss Schnee was looking... well not
like herself. Wearing a midnight blue cocktail dress that draped her in elegant folds, she also had a wig on that replaced her long, platinum blonde locks with a short, spiky black style no one would ever associate with any Schnee—not even Winter during her goth phase.

“Maybe they're stuck in traffic. We did need to do some pretty fancy driving to get here ahead of them.” Yang Xiao Long was rocking a slick black leather jacket, designer jeans, and a white blouse under a wild, feathered rock star style that was blonde with obvious black roots. It had taken a lot to convince her to put a wig on over her own coif, but once she was decked out, she'd started reveling in the new look.

Blake, who was in her own, stark white cocktail dress made up of simple lines with a wig of blonde sausage curls flicked her gaze between Weiss and Yang. “So... are we not going to discuss how Nora had these ready for us?”

“Maybe they changed their minds and went somewhere else?” offered Ruby. She'd brought the entire box of danishes into the restaurant with her and had been slowly stuffing her face with them the whole time until that moment. Her outfit was an all-black blouse with matching leggings and what could only be called a black cape with crimson lining.

“Pfft,” Yang made a rude noise. “Yeah, like Pyrrha of all people is going to call an audible. No, it's probably that shifty door guy that gave us a hard time coming in.”

“No one?” Blake asked, “Really? Because I get her having disguises after we made the plan, but these all fit perfectly. How did she know all our sizes.”

Shooting a glare at Yang, Weiss huffed in annoyance. “He wasn't giving us a hard time until you picked a fight with him by making comments about his chin!”

“Did you see that thing? You could land planes on it!” Yang complained. “I'm only human; I can't resist temptation that strong!”

“So we're not talking about this then? Seriously?” Blake asked, flabbergasted.

Nora, dressed in a female tailored tuxedo with tails and top hat along with a monocle and a wig that... looked like her normal hair except being a shade or two darker in color... put her arm around Blake and crushed her into a quick side hug. “Oh like you never spent a lazy weekend using pictures your friends put online and known stuff like your heights to figure out their measurements.”

“...No. No I haven't.”

“Really? Then how will you be ready if we ever need you to make disguises for us?”

“I don't just sit around expecting—wait you made these? All of these?”

Nora grinned. “I'm pretty handy with a needle, yeah.”

Meanwhile, Yang and Weiss continued bickering. “Honestly,” Weiss was groaning with annoyance, “what made you think was a good idea to randomly antagonize the man? He would have been well within his rights to deny us service completely! Do you not realize how exclusive Polaris is? They have so many celebrity drop ins that you have to recon...” her voice went small. “Oh my... Pyrrha's going to kill me.”

“Pfft,” Ruby waved her off. “Pyrrha's like the nicest person ever. She'd never kill you.”
“Aww,” Yang patted Ruby on the head, “Someone's too young to remember when I was on the same peewee soccer league with her.” She winked to the others. “It's where I learned to love fighting, cause it happened do much.”

Ruby remained reticent. “Maybe a long time ago, but that was then and this is now.” She looked to Weiss, “what'd you do anyway?”

The heiress looked sufficiently sheepish as she poked her fingers together. “I might have forgotten to reconfirm their reservation... which might be the reason they haven't shown up. Because they can't get in.”

Everyone else but Nora almost fell over in shock at the admission.

Ruby cringed. “Oh yeah, she's going to skin you and use you for a super-pale rug.” Weiss whined and shrank into herself a little.

“Heh.” Yang leaned back. “On the other hand, mission accomplished for ruining their date. Though Is was so looking forward to all the crap I was going to pull on them.” She reached into the bag sitting next to her seat and started pulling items out of it. “Dribble glass for Jaune, whoopie cushion for Pyrrha, couple of drops of this stuff you're supposed to put on your kid's thumb to keep your kid from sucking it for both, annd a fake credit card that's guaranteed to be rejected for dessert.”

Blake glanced up from where she'd become engrossed in a discussion about cosplaying with Nora. “I’m not even sure anymore. Yang, were you just using this whole plan as an excuse to pull pranks on Pyrrha and Jaune?”

The blonde smirked. “Maaaybe. Look: we all know that what she actually needs to do is talk to him and what he actually needs to do is accept that she doesn't think he's inadequate. The hair-brained scheme? Probably wouldn't have worked anyway, so we might as well have fun with it.”

For a moment, Blake stared at her. “At what point in this whole thing did you take my role as naysayer?”

“Probably when Weiss started joining in the zaniness and Nora became essential to a plan instead of a random force of nature we have to plan around,” Yang said simply.

“Was that an option? I totally would have rather done that!” Nora complained.

Ruby looked around the table with bright, curious eyes. “So... what did everyone else have planned for this?”

Still a bit distracted at vivid thoughts of what Pyrrha might do to her considering how frightening she'd been when merely upset about her putting Jaune down, Weiss murmured: “Well I bribed the chefs to get creative in not doing their meals right, and the waiter to be as rude and unhelpful as possible.”

“That's actually pretty good,” Yang said, giving a thumbs up.

“I was going to spike Jaune's drink!” Nora offered.

“That's... actually illegal.” said Blake. “but expected. Which is why I was just going to assume that the five of us just being here trying to be both clever and incognito at the same time was going end in epic disaster on it's own.”

The older girl reached over and ruffled the younger's hair. “And that's why you make an excellent DM, grasshopper.”

At this, Yang blinked. “Wait. You knew that Blake played your weird game and never told me?”

Ruby made a rude noise. “Duh. Who do you think taught me to DM?”

Yang groaned out her annoyance. “Ah jeez, really?” Then she immediately shifted gears. “Oh well, I guess this is a bust then. Let's order up some grub and just agree that this wasn't going to work anyway.”

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“I think this worked out pretty well.” Jaune and Pyrrha were sitting leaning against one another on the edge of the park fountain eating the cheese steaks they'd gotten from Witchy Witch's food truck. The surrounding trees blocked just enough light pollution to give them a pretty view of the night sky.

“Indeed,” said Pyrrha. Jaune couldn't see it, but she was wearing a knowing smile. “In fact, I'm rather glad we couldn't get that reservation. As much as Weiss insisted it would make our first date special, I don't think that sort of thing suits us. At least for me, this is much nicer than some place that doesn't even want to take our money?”

Jaune glanced over at her fondly. “You really feel that way?”

She switched her sandwich from one hand to the other and patted him lightly on the chest. “You've known me almost our whole lives. The closest I get to liking anything fancy is Carfagna's. I don't need anything flashy or showy for things to be special.” With a twinge of uncertainty, she then asked, “What about you?”

Wrapping his free arm around her, he smiled up at the sky. “You've know me the same amount of time. I'm a simple guy. And to be honest? I'm really glad to hear you say that. I really want to make you happy and going to a place where even the guy out front is that stuck up? It wouldn't have been my idea of a good time anyway.”

Reminding herself to text her thanks to Weiss and the others, Pyrrha leaned into him more. “So, finish our sandwiches and head for the dance? What'd really make me even happier tonight is having our first dance as a couple.”

“That'd really make me happy too.”

Chapter End Notes

It's so fluffy I could die!

The maitre'd scene is an homage to Spider-Man 2 where Bruce 'The Chin' Campbell plays an usher who is having just a little too much fun giving Peter Parker a hard time.

The 'twist' here comes from the fact that originally all the girls were going to train wreck their own sabotages into each other and things were going to end up going
perfectly until something ends up going wrong completely on accident. The problem was that I couldn't get all the sabotages to line up just right to counter one another—OR they made the girls look too mean. For example, one of Yang's pranks was going to injure the waiter Weiss bribed.

Plus in the end I figured this would drive the point home better that just doing the things they enjoyed doing together just with the improved intimacy was better than trying to overdo it.

Blake was my personal MVP this chapter where Nora usually is when she's unleashed. Just the idea of her being the only one focusing on the absurdity and then getting utterly sidetracked by geekry amuses me. That and giving her that little bonding moment with Ruby. I'm working on building the bonds between Ruby and the other girls—especially the two that don't get much (or any) interaction with her in canon: Blake and Pyrrha.

There is an actual Witchy Witch sandwich truck. I discovered it last week. Try the cheesesteak.

Special Snowflakes is almost over. Next chapter is the dance itself where the girls get to strut their stuff and Jaune and Pyrrha finally get that dance.

And for those of you hankering for the game chapters, here's something to look forward to: Substitute DM Penny.
By the time the girls got to the dance, it was in full swing. The decorating committee had done a great job of making the place a proper setting for a winter formal. The walls and ceiling of the school gym were covered in black paper and decorated to look like a night sky with a few projectors displaying images of glittering silver snowflakes drifting down from the sky on top of it. All the tables around the dance floor were covered with white tablecloths so they looked like snow mounds, and here and there were artificial trees covered in flocking so as to look like they were weighed down with drifting snow.

Yang uncorked a mighty belch in appreciation of the beauty.

“Honestly, every time I think it's impossible for you to be more a frightful boor, you find a new way to sink further,” Weiss admonished, though she was sticking extra close to the blonde bruiser tonight.


Yang slapped her on the back, making her stumble. “And we thank you for your generosity. And if you ever need something from me, maybe someone giving you a hard time and in need of a good beating? I'm your girl, okay?”

Having her own personal thug appealed to Weiss on a certain... Schnee... level, but she wasn't going to admit that in front of the others. Instead, he waved it off. “Never you mind. What's the point of having money like mine if I can't treat my friends once in a while, right?” That wasn't rhetorical, Weiss was actually asking, specifically to Blake.

For her part, Blake only gave an approving nod. She didn't know how or why she'd ended up as Weiss Schnee's morality leash, but now that she had the responsibility, she felt an obligation to the community to do a good job.

“I don't know who you are or what you did with Weiss,” Yang said, not noticing the exchange, “But you can stick around. Question though: why are you still in your 'stalkin' disguise?”

Indeed, Weiss was still in the blue dress and wig Nora had put her in.

Before Weiss could do something foolish like, say... save her dignity, Ruby leapt in with a more truthful (and mortifying) answer. “Oh, that's 'cause she's still scared of Pyrrha after the restaurant thing. I figured Pyrrha can't stay mad for long, so if Weiss can just avoid her tonight, this'll all blow over instead of the night ending with Weiss hanging from the flagpole by her underpants.”

“The dance has already started and we're already talking underpants? Way better than the parties our school throws already!” Sun Wukong approached the group wearing a cheeky grin. He was wearing a sport coat and slacks along with a button down shirt with the top buttons undone to show off his chest.
Neptune followed along in a slick black suit with ocean blue pinstripes. He'd slicked his hair back and was wearing shades. “Ladies,” He said making double finger gun to go with a grin, “Thanks for the invite.”

“I figured now that the geek cat is out of the dice bag, it might be nice if all my friends got to hang out together, said Blake.

“Sure, and that's the only reason you invited me,” Sun said smugly.

“Yep.” Blake replied, popping the 'p'. Sun's shoulders slumped a bit before Blake strode past him, grabbing his arm as she did. “Hanging out can include a couple of dances, y'know?” She managed to keep her tone even and her expression neutral except for a tiny smirk as she dragged him away.

Neptune watch them go, but once it was just him and the girls along, his smooth veneer rapidly started to break down. He craned his neck to look past them, then glanced around before nervously asking, “So... did Weiss not come? I was kind of hoping she'd be here.”

“Are you kidd—” Yang started, but was cut off by a hand clamping down tightly on her elbow. Ruby opened her mouth only to find a hand over it. Weiss shot them both murderous glares before smiling politely at Neptune. “Sorry, she had a prior engagement. But if you're looking for a dance partner, I'm free. My name is Schwartz Regen.”

“Um... okay. Sure.” Neptune said after some hesitation, then added, “Maybe you'd like to hit the refreshment table first? Or mingle? There's lots of mingling we can do. I don't know a lot of people here, so you could introduce me?” He was looking all over the place now. “Damn it, Sun, you are the worst wingman ever.”

Yang, Ruby and Weiss exchanged confused expressions; the former two being ones asking 'I don't know which of you two is weirder right now'. Weiss, however was already hip deep in making concessions for the night. “I... of course I can! Let's go.”

As the two headed off further into the dance, Nora wandered up between Ruby and Yang. “That was weird, right? I know weird and that was super-weird, right?”

“What that was,” Yang said slowly and with care, “was comedy gold! Can you imagine if Neps there falls for 'Schwartz'? Or what'll happen when he realizes Weiss is pretending to be someone else?”

Ruby was watching more with worry than amusement. “The better question is—did anyone else notice she had that name ready?”

Both she and Yang braced for Nora to say something about how she totally did that, but the voice that replied to Ruby's question was that of a different redhead. “It's likely something she learned from her sister.” The sisters turned to find Penny standing behind them. Ruby's fellow overachiever was wearing a green overall-style dress over a black blouse.

“Say what now?” asked Yang.

“Oh, it's just that when she was in high school, Winter Schnee often went by the alias Autumn Regen. Regen being German for 'Rain' in the same way that Schnee is German for 'Snow', I believe the name is both a play on her own name and a reference to a song by Lake of Tears.”

Yang snorted. “Little Miss Proper's sister was an emo? Oh my god, I'm going to get so much mileage out of that! Where'd you even hear it?”
“Oh, most high school yearbooks are online now,” Penny said, completely omitting why she might be perusing online yearbooks for classes of people she had no connection to. “Anyway, I would suspect that Weiss already had a similar alias ready—especially considering what she did to get kicked out of Atlas Prep.”

Ruby’s eyes widened. “She got kicked out of her old school? That’s terrible!”

“That’s unbelievable is what it is!” said Yang. “We’re talking about Weiss here. Weiss who got mad because I burped just now.”

“Unbelievable yes, but I suspect it was on purpose,” said Penny, “Similar to her short stints at Shade Girls’ Academy and the Haven Finishing School, both of which saw her expelled within two weeks.”

“What did she do?” Ruby asked with a mix of curiosity and awe.

At this point, Nora butted in, having spend the intervening time scanning the room for Ren. “Oh! I bet she filled the teacher's lounge with weasels! Angry, starving blood-crazy weasels! Or filled then school swimming pool with pancakes! Oh my goodness, can you imaging eating a swimming pool filled with pancakes?” With that, she whipped out her cell phone and opened the calculator app. “How much syrup would you need for that? And butter?”

“Fifty-eight point three seven gallons of maple syrup or Fifty-two gallons of molasses,” Penny said offhand, “And twenty-one pounds of butter or margarine to ensure full coverage. As to what Weiss did, juvenile records are sealed. I could break into them, but that would be both illegal and a breech of privacy.”

“As opposed to literally everything you just said,” Yang muttered ruefully.

“I was only repeating publicly available information,” Penny defended.

“Oh never mind,” Ruby finally said. “Let’s go have fun, Penny!” With that, she grabbed her friend’s arm and forged onward to the refreshment table.

That left Yang noticing that she'd been left all alone—well except Nora. What an odd turn of events. She glanced over to Nora, who was now looking up the prices of bulk syrup. “So... where's your boy, Copper-top?”

Nora blushed. “Oh, Ren's not my boy. I mean he's great and fun to be with and handsome, but he's not 'mine' ya know? He's just a boy. That I know. And am best friends with.”

“Now if that doesn't sound familiar...”

“Anyway, I don't know. Ren's foster mom was supposed to drive him over. Maybe she's running late? Or maybe he's not feeling well and also he broke his phone, which would be the only reason he wouldn't call me to say he couldn't make it.” Her eyes widened in horror. “Unless he's dead! He got in an accident on the way here, or a meteor hit his house, or some kind of nightmare creature that feed son negative emotion ate him! Oh my gosh, maybe he got written out of the story in a tragic way to give me motivation because the writer is lazy and can't think of better ways to motivate me!”

Just as she reached crescendo, a pair of hand rested on her shoulders, holding her still and slowly calming her. “Or maybe he was in the restroom when you got here,” Ren suggested, slowly turning Nora around.
Now her eyes were wide with joy as she hurled herself into him, throwing her arms around him. “Renny! You're not dead!”

Her best friend of many years hugged her back, then tips back the top hat she was still wearing to look her in the eye. “Still alive, Nora. You're not going to be rid of me that easily. Ready to have some fun? I hear they've left the ice swan foolishly unguarded.” Usually the one thing keeping Nora from going all-out, Ren usually indulged her on special occasions.

Nora beamed and poked him in the nose with her index finger. “Boop.” That was all that needed to be said before the two headed off to do god-knows-what to an unsuspecting ice swan.

“What a revoltin' development,” Yang said as she realized that everyone but her was now having fun. Most of them with boys. She glanced up, suddenly fancying that Nora's fourth wall antics might be on to something. After all, how else would she end up dateless on dance night? You know, aside from the fact that she'd blown off every guy that asked her that week because she was planning her pranks on Jaune and Pyrrha.

“Hey! Whoever's up there? How about setting me up with a guy too?”

“Did I hear you were looking for a guy? Well baby, how about the guy?” Yang looked to find the school's top running back and soccer star, Mercury Black waggling his eyebrows at her while his ostensible date, Emerald glared a hole in the back of his skull.

Yang split her own glare between him and the ceiling before grabbing Mercury by the face and pushing him away. Then she stomped into the party proper muttering, “Cheeky bastard…”

Jaune had never been 'fashionably late' to anything in his life. He was that nerd that showed up to everything on time or even ten minutes early. Since he was usually her ride, Pyrrha also rarely arrived anything but one time.

Tonight, however, they'd just plain lost track of time as they sat on the fountain just talking, eating and enjoying each other's company. It was hard to explain what had changed after a lifetime of friendship, but a barrier somewhere have been overcome, a limit broken and they suddenly found themselves just more... free with each other.

Which was how they ended up an hour late to the dance.

“Wow, they did a really good job,” Jaune said, looking around. “I can hardly tell this is the place of my suffering.”

Pyrrha nudged him for the crack, but nodded in agreement. “It's lovely isn't it?”

After another short moment of appreciation, Jaune turned to her. “So? Ready for that dance?” He stepped a little away from her, still holding her hand so he was holding it up in preparation to launch into a step.

She giggled at his stab at suave and brought his hand up to place a chaste kiss on the knuckles. “I am, but just a moment. I really should talk to Weiss about what happened... before I get to distracted.” Mention of distraction brought up memories of what happened back at her house and she blushed, which made Jaune blush as he recalled as well.

“O-okay. I'll go and see if I can find Ren and Nora. Meet me over by the punch bowl?”
“That sounds like a wonderful plan.” Pyrrha practically glided away from him. She didn't want to leave, but she really had to regroup with the girls and pick their brains over how she should proceed. Just because she knew how she wanted to didn't mean it was a good idea.

Before long, she spotted her primary quarry in the strangest of situations...

“You know what? We should find the people who were on the decorating committee and tell them what a good job they did. That sounds like a good idea, right?” Pyrrha recognized the speaker as a friend of Blake's named Neptune. He was clearly nervous and trying to hide it as he spoke to Weiss. Only Weiss was inexplicably in a black wig and holding herself in an stiff attempt at looking casual—which was slowly disintegrating under the weight of trademark Weiss irritation.

As Pyrrha approached the two, the dam finally broke.

“You know what?” Weiss asked, “Enough. We've gotten refreshments, made uncomfortable small talk with every person here, read every trophy in the trophy case—at any point at this dance are we going to dance?!”

Neptune cringed. “Um... I...” he sighed, shoulders slumping. “Okay, you have to promise me you won't tell anyone about this—especially not Weiss, okay?”

A single red eyebrow rose as Pyrrha processed this new information. One, Weiss was pretending to be someone else. Two, apparently a simple wig was enough to totally fool Neptune. One of Blake's dry joke ran through her head: 'Darth Sidius can't possibly be Senator Palpatine. Palapatine doesn't even wear a hood!'

Weiss waffled under the question long enough for Neptune to take silence as agreement. “Look... the truth is I try to put on a cool front, but... I'm not. I'm pretty much just a geek. I play tabletop games, I'm scared stupid of going in water and worst of all? I can't dance. Sorry to drag you all around stalling, Noir. Coming to a dance of all places was just a bad idea on my part.”

After a moment of awkward silence in which Weiss seemed to have no idea how to react, Pyrrha decided to interrupt and take mercy. “Hello, Noir. Might I borrow you for a moment?”

“What—ah!” Weiss tensed, looking as if she was about to hide between Neptune.

Now even more confused, Pyrrha frowned. “Um... is everything okay?”

It was Weiss's turn to be confused seeing as she was experiencing very little of the wrath she'd been dreading. “Isn't that my line? I mean I am so sorry I forgot to confirm your reservation this evening. There was just so much going on with getting Nora's van covered in vinyl, ensuring my bribes had been paid, making arrangements to have us bailed out if Yang went too far...”

“What are you talking about?” asked Pyrrha. “You didn't do that on purpose?”

Weiss looked at her cautiously. “You're not angry over it?”

Pyrrha practically glowed, “Of course not! It was exactly what we needed. I mean I was a little worried when Jaune wanted to argue with the maitre'd, but then we went for a walk in the park, ate at one of our favorite places...” she sighed dreamily, “And just watched the stars and talked.”

“Then that was entirely to plan.” Weiss was so clearly lying that Pyrrha couldn't help but roll her eyes. “I'm glad things went well though.” Then her eyes narrowed. “Wait. Where's Jaune now?”

“He's here. I'm going to meet up with him again once I'm done saying thank you.”
A long moment passed as Weiss tried to wait out Pyrrha's own brain figuring out what she'd just said wrong. When it didn't, Weiss face-palmed herself so hard that her wig went askew. “Pyrrha? How long have you been waiting to actually be with Jaune as a couple?”

“More than a year now,” Pyrrha asked, giving her an odd look.

“And we've spent a week making sure this night went exactly the way you wanted for the two of you.”

“Right, and that's why I'm here thanking you.”

Weiss's eyebrow twitched. “You know, I expect this of Yang, or Ruby but you're too smart for this Pyrrha. This? This is not the time to be polite. We did all this for you to have this special night with that dol... with Jaune. Go have that special night instead of wasting time thanking me!”

As she talked, her hand gestures became more exaggerated until finally she threw both hands up... and knocked her wig clean off her head.

She froze, horror etched on her face.

Being no stranger to awkward situations, Pyrrha could feel the palpable awkwardness rolling off Weiss and Neptune. Suddenly not being there seemed like a great idea. “Um... you know you make an excellent point.” She wasn't lying; if not for Weiss's own mortification, she would have been supremely embarrassed of herself. “I'm... I'm going to go find him right now. Have a good night.”

Weiss wanted to call out after her for help, but knew it wouldn't do anything to help. Turning stiffly to Neptune, she tried plastering on her best plastic smile. “So. You made a big confession; I suppose I should make one of my own...”

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It didn't take long for Pyrrha to find Jaune and for the young couple to take the dance floor. They'd danced plenty of time before when they went as friends, but this time things were different in ways neither of them could entirely give voice to.

About an hour in, as a slow song played, their eyes met and they found themselves leaning into one another.


“Hmm?” his eyes were heavily lidded as her breathed in the scent of her perfume.

“Remember what I said about being patient?”

He nodded. “Yeah?”

“You don't have to be anymore.” With that, she closed the last few centimeters of space between them and pressed her lips to his.

It wasn't a kiss for the legends. They were young and thoroughly inexperienced; one who got their idea of what kissing was meant to be like from movies, the other from dog-eared romance novels that populated their home in great numbers thanks to having so many sisters. No spark, no sudden epiphany of passion that turned them into passionate experts in the sacred art of lip-craft.

But in that moment none of that mattered. What mattered was that they were experiencing their
first kiss together; a new first shared between two people who had seen each other through so many before. Someone they really and truly cared about. And they were forging a new, more intimate connection.

And that was all they needed.

Chapter End Notes

Finally.

As a lot of you might expect, I have a few words on romance writing to put here. As you can probably tell, I'm not really 'about' purple prose when it comes to romance. I find a lot of traditional romance writing to be too self-indulgent in that the author runs their mouth about how perfect everything is instead of showing what the moment means to the actual characters. It gets to feel like the moment is for the narrator and not the actual people we're meant to be investing in.

Sure, I admit the whole of Special Snowflakes was hamfisted on that point, but my interpretation is that Jaune is just the kind of person who would miss that point. And Pyrrha sort of misses that point too here when she just has to go thank Weiss out of politeness. Which again I'll admit is kind of weird since in this AU she's not a celebrity, so I'm not quite sure why she's compulsively polite here. But then that's like one of the things I love most about her, so I'll keep it.

I'm... not sure where the Weiss sub-plot came from. I just wanted to carry over her being scared of Pyrrha and had this idea off to the side with a pin in it that Weiss would at some point go 'undercover' to see what people think of her. If you didn't like this part, I won't argue with you.

'So Fell Autumn Rain' is a real song by the real band Lake of Tears. They also did Raistlin and the Rose, which is a song I love. Also, I did mention Winter's goth phase earlier.

Penny kind of stole Nora's shtick here. I want her and Nora to team up at some point.

And then there's Yang. I don't know why I love an annoyed Yang who can't punch her problems so much, but I do. I really, really do. I think this was the first time we've actually seen Mercury in this fic. I don't like Mercury beyond his being an excuse for Emerald to talk, but I'm not going to do anything seriously terrible to him beyond not including him in the games.

Speaking of...

Next chapter, we get back to gaming with Ruby's group! When illness strikes, Ruby calls in a substitute to DM in her stead and who better to do that than everyone's favorite robot: Penny! That's right, Penny will be taking the reigns of the group next week along with a very special guest player! And it's not Yang this time. Find out who next time on... Game On!
“I'm kind of surprised you went for Burger Bazzar,” Jaune said, handing Pyrrha a slightly translucent paper bag from the back of his car before extracting his own Styrofoam containers. “Compared to my sushi, I think this might be the first time since you used to scam me into trading my Oreos for your carrot sticks that I'm actually eating healthier than you.”

Pyrrha gladly took her bag as well as the backpack full of her gaming supplies. “I know I should still be keeping in shape in the off season but... all day game day only comes a few times a year and a little indulgence won't hurt.” She bumped him a little with her hip while he was still shoulders deep in the car, “But I am proud of you for going back to sushi after what happened last summer.”

From the depths of the car, Jaune paused to sigh. “Ah, Discount Don's Sushi Symposium. Turns out three California rolls for ten dollars really is a deal I can—and should have—turned down.”

Finishing gathering his own stuff, Jaune shouldered the car door closed. Then he sidled up to her and after a few false starts (mostly because his backpack straps were slipping rather than nerves), put an arm around her shoulder. “You are not wrong about the all day game day though: Especially with this campaign. This session's gonna be so awesome—Ruby's been working so hard on it I hardly saw her at school this week. Just the emails she sent me mostly.”

That comment made Pyrrha pause in thought. “Come to think of it, I haven't seen her at all this week. Which is odd, because she's usually very loud and excited when a break is coming up.”

It was the first Sunday after the start of Christmas break, and Ruby had spent the week before running short sessions by email for all her players about what they did on the airship on the way to the next town with an eye toward hitting the ground running for the big day. She'd done such a good job communicating in fact that...

Jaune blinked. “Oh. Oh man. Now that I think about it, I haven't seen Rubes in person since Tuesday.”

“Oh good, it wasn't just us!” Having known her for years, Jaune and Pyrrha barely even started at Nora seeming to suddenly appearing behind them with Ren in tow. She was loaded down with three sizable bakery boxes and beaming as usual. “Wonder what she's up to disappearing like that. Oh my gosh, if we've only been talking to her through email and chat the past week how can we be sure it's really her we've been talking to?”

“So... someone ran four separate mini-adventures to keep up a charade of being Ruby because...” Nora was the only one of the four who still hadn't learned their lesson about being sarcastic with Nora.

Nora zipped over to his side opposite Pyrrha and stage whispered, “So they can take over the game! Think about it: this has been our most fun game ever so far—probably the most fun game going on in the city right now! Have you heard the rumors about the League of Evil DMs that hang out in the minis room of the Wizard's tower sometime? I'm pretty sure Blake is one and there's others! Probably that Cinder chick and Miss Goodwitch. I bet they're plotting to steal the game from Ruby!”
Both Jaune and Pyrrha looked back at Ren for his usual commentary only to find the young man shrugging. “I honestly have nothing to add to that. Game thieves. Evil DMs. What can I even say at this point?”

That got him Nora's undivided (for however brief) attention. She lagged behind to stare him down. “Don't think I'm not on to you, Renny. You're part of the suspects list too. I remember when you DM'd and how do we know you're not secretly evil?”

Shifting the bags he was carrying to one hand, Ren put a hand on top of her head affectionately. “Nora?”

“Yes, Renny?”

“I'm not evil.”

“Are you sure?” She asked sweetly.

He gave her head a rub. “Yeah, pretty sure.”

Somehow, she managed to wrestle the three huge boxes into one arm and gave him a huge side hug. “Okay. You're not evil then. And you're still gonna be my favorite DM ever.”

The game group had been around in some form long before Ruby joined, and even almost a full year before Jaune and Pyrrha met them. Ren and Nora met at their grief counseling group shortly after losing their parents and Nora had glommed onto quiet, bookish Ren, eventually convincing him to learn and run Dungeons and Dragons for her because she thought the books looked cool. Until Ruby came along, Ren had been DM if only because he was the only one who knew how barring a couple of Jaune-initiated disasters and an impressive cake-walk of a oneshot GURPS game run by Pyrrha.

Nora had never run a game and luckily for the others, she didn't seem to want to, being content to run roughshod over everyone else's.

All the same, Ren returned the side hug as the four friends headed up the walk to the Xiao-Long house. “In any event, no one is going to take Ruby's game, Nora. I'm sure she's been scarce all week because she was spending every spare moment of time working on today's game.”

“No, uh!” Nora argued. “I bet you anything! I bet... if you win, I'll drive you anywhere you want for a week—just like Jaune does for Pyrrha!”

“He doesn't—”

“Yeah, I kind do.” Jaune shrugged. “It's not like you ask for rides to places I wasn't going anyway. Except like the sporting goods store, or the health food market. But then, you end up helping carry the weekly half ton of groceries Mom sends me out to get, so it's not like you're not pulling your weight.”

By the time Jaune stopped rambling, Ren had had time to think things through and make up his mind. “Alright, Nora, and if you win, next time your aunt had a bowling night, I'll come over and cook you whatever you want for dinner.”

Turquoise eyes flashed with covetous glee. “Really? Even if I want pancakes?”

“If you want, I'll make you a full course breakfast with all the trimmings for dinner.”
“Okay, but how about each course is pancakes and all the trimmings? Also pancakes. Oh, and some bacon.”

“Pigs on an endless raft, got it.” Ren said with a small smirk. “But that's not going to happen because no one is...”

While they'd been talking, Pyrrha had rang the doorbell, and at that moment, the door opened to reveal not Ruby or Yang, but Blake, holding Ruby's copy of the game book. “Morning.” she said in her mildly bored way, waving slightly with the book. “Come on in; we just finished getting the table set up.”

“I knew it! Pancakes for me!” Nora crowed.

Ren remained skeptical, however. “Hold on. Just because Blake's here doesn't mean she's taking over Ruby's game.” He trailed behind the others as they trooped into the house.

The table had indeed been set up with a hex map rolled out. Instead of Ruby's transparencies, however, the hexes were covered with meticulously placed terrain tiles and Taiyang's big screen TV had been brought up from his basement man cave to take pride of place at one side of the table. Also, inexplicably, a cellphone was hanging by a wire from the ceiling fan.

The usual folding table that served was a sideboard was also standing ready with several two liters of soda, a bottle of orange juice and a couple of store-bought fruit trays and a cheese platter.

“I'm just hear to guest star because Yang's not going to be able to play,” Blake said dryly. “I'm not going to take over the game from Ruby.”

Ren didn't quite puff out his chest with pride over solving the mystery. But he certainly felt like doing so.

For about five seconds before Ruby's best friend Penny appeared from the kitchen carrying a stack of plastic cups. She smiled widely—a little too widely to be a comforting expression—and said, “Salutations friends of Ruby! And by extension second-degree friends of mine! I'll be taking over the game from Ruby today!”

“Yes! Pancake time!” Nora pumped her fist.

Jaune most certainly did not hide behind Pyrrha even if he felt it would be totally justified after the time Penny ran Paranoia for them. Now, he was... just standing behind his girlfriend. In support. While crouching slightly. An steering her by the shoulders to keep her between him and Penny.

Pyrrha in turn but on her best polite smile to hide her worry, remembering the same game.

The biggest victim of Penny's rendition of Friend Computer, Ren, froze stock still. “Y-you're running the game? Should I start generating a new character right now?”

Still smiling, Penny put her hand on the side of her head in a way she much had seen anime characters do when they're feeling embarrassed and apologetic. “No. Ruby says that you all aren't accustomed to the style of play my friends online prefer, so I've been prohibited from actively trying to kill your characters—though the dice will fall where they may—but luckily, I've been granted free reign to emotionally torment them with their dark secrets. So this should be a fun game!”

The others stood frozen for a long moment, absorbing the idea that Penny had just been unleashed upon their poor characters. Surprisingly it was Jaune (totally not finding courage from having
Pyrrha in the interceding space between himself and Penny) who asked the question they were all thinking.

“Um... so you're pinch DMing for Ruby in her own house... why?”

Penny looked actually embarrassed this time. “Oh! I almost forgot!” She started to point at the TV, thought better of it, and grabbed the remote off the table and turned the big screen on. It showed an overhead view of the hex grid, no doubt delivered from the phone.

Then Penny managed to bring up the picture-in-picture to reveal Ruby, apparently in her pajamas and in bed with a bed tray over her lap. “Yay! The light's finally on!” Ruby cheered, then started coughing.

As if summoned, Yang, wearing a mask over her face appeared on screen with a glass of water and a box of tissues. “Hey, I let you do this because you promised you wouldn't strain yourself. No lay back—hold on, let me fluff your pillow.”

While Yang was trying to forcibly her her comfortable, Ruby just ignored her. “Hi guys! So as you probably guessed, I'm sick. But I totally didn't want to cancel all-day game day, so Penny's up to bat for me, okay? And I get to watch!”

Yang leaned back into frame ahead of Ruby. “And I have to keep her from making herself worse, so sorry Nora, can't play today. Luckily, I was able to get a substitute Yang too. I've instructed Blake on how to act just like me so it'll be like I was right there.”

“So now you'll know why when I belch and scratch myself,” Blake quipped, taking the food bags from the others to put in the fridge.

“Hey!” Yang barked, “I'm paying you good money to deliver a premium Yang experience and I expect you to deliver!”

Blake raised an eyebrow at the TV. “You aren't paying me anything. I'm here because it sounds like fun.” A small smile quirked her lips. “Also the character Ruby wants me to play is amazing. I think I'm going to like this whole 'playing against type' thing.”

Somehow, Nora had set down her boxes and appeared at her side in the time it took her to blink. “Ooo. What're you playing?”

“Gunslinger halfling who is also something of a mad scientist. Ruby's nothing if not creative.”

Nora's eyes shimmered with unshed tears of joy. “So. Awesome.”

After a bit more small talk, the group took their seats around the table, more than ready to get down to some serious gaming. Penny sat at the head of the table while Ruby looked on from the big screen as her friend started recapping the week's mini adventures.

“Alright gang,” Penny said with the cadence of an old fashioned radio announcer. “When last we left our intrepid band, they had defeated another of the Queen of Thorns' lackeys. Darian, the ever-charismatic lasconti bard used that charisma to convince the Queen's engineers who were trying to repair the ship to side with the party and finish the repairs over the course of a night, allowing the ship to continue on its way to the nearest town.

“Meanwhile, the dark sorceress Seriphied interrogated one of the surviving bandits mostly to find out what you already know: the Queen of Thorns is a bandit leader with a plan to hijack as many airships as possible to turn them into an air pirate fleet with herself as the Pirate Queen. You don't
know where her main base is, but you now know that the airships are being refitted for war at a place call Eiridia Valley, though you have no idea where that is.

“Gao on the other hand got a vision in his sleep of his entire family caught up in a giant web of rose vines that was also choking out a beautiful jungle land. He communed with Pandemos and got a sign of a golden duck and a coin on its edge. He then started questioning Darian's new former bandit followers about his family to find that they are major financial backers of the Queen of Thorns, running operations from the City of Frizae in the Taunaunan state of Cado.

“And finally, Lynn got bored waiting for the ship to be fixed, and unable to find Gao, decided to leave the ship and go hunting. While checking for loot in the hole the bandits dumped their trash down, she discovered it was actually the collapsed stair of a small tomb complex that was home to a nest skitter-lurks, bug monsters who dropped on her from the ceiling. After a fierce battle, she discovered a sarcophagus of a dead tribal leader and his Mastercraft Razor Edge hand ax as well as a stone tablet describing his pilgrimage to a place where he earned a blessing of strength.

“We now return to the adventure with the airship limping to the safety of a large town on the Taunaun/Novrom Border called Arnham's Dell. The captain, though perturbed by the delay is thankful for the repairs and protection and gives each of you twenty gold as you leave. You are now at the bottom of the airship docking tower facing the main street of Arnham's Dell. What do you do?”

Pyrrha immediately spoke up. “Well I'm glad that's over. Now that we're rid of the bandits, we can go our separate ways and never see each other again. Let's go, Darian.”

The others blinked. Nora looked horrified and betrayed. “Pyrrha! You know you never split the party—you'll die! And why would you want to? We're awesome.”

Smiling a bit at how everyone just seemed to take whatever she said as sincere, she shook her head. “I'm just playing Seripheid. She still doesn't trust the rest of you and is trying to get out of working as a team any longer than she thinks she has to.”

It took slightly longer than it should have for that to sink on before Nora nodded knowingly. “Gotcha. In that case I grab your sleeve before you can turn around. ‘Hey, you can't leave yet, we haven't defeated all the bandits yet?”

Pyrrha shrugged. “So what? They aren't our problem anymore. We—and anyone else with some sense—can just leave the region. Let the ones who choose to stay to deal with it.”

“It's not a distant problem for everyone,” Ren spoke up. “I have reason to believe that my family is largely implicated in this 'Queen of Thorns's' rise to power—if she isn't a member of the family in the first place. I'm not going to let my blood ruin this part of the world, so I'm going to do whatever I can to stop this.”

“And I'm going to help him!” Nora nodded emphatically.

Pyrrha managed to keep her face as emotionless as Blake's usually was. “Well good for you. We'll be sure to visit your graves if we ever come back this way. Come on Darian.”

“You know what I'm going to say, right?” Jaune asked, trying to hide a smirk.

“That I'm absolutely right and you want to live?”

Jaune snorted at her absolutely deadpan response, taking a moment to collect himself. “A lot of people on the airship would have died without us. If we just leave, a lot more people are going to
die. You know I can't just stand by while that happens, and I know you've been through a lot... but the Seri I grew up with would agree.” He turned fully to face Pyrrha and gave her a serious, soulful look that made her swallow hard. “Is there any of that girl left?”

After a few seconds of them holding one another's gaze, Ruby interrupted. “Ew! You guys aren't gonna start kissing at the table again, are you? Don't make me set a new table rule!”

Going stark red, Pyrrha ducked her head. “That was just really deep immersion roleplaying!” Then she cleared her throat. “Um, Seripheid looks away, scowling and doesn't answer for a second.”

“Oh come on, Seri!” Nora said, bouncing in her seat. “Even you don't care about the random folks, what about your friends? You wouldn't leave Darian to die, now would you?”

Now it was Pyrrha trying to keep a straight face. “Okay, so Seri looks from you to Darian and thinks for way too long for anyone with a healthy mind. She looks actually bothered by the question until she finally says, 'Until last night? I probably would have. I enjoyed his company—more than I have anyone in a long time, but if my surviving meant abandoning him, I wouldn't have hesitated.”

“But now...” Jaune said, trying to sound as nervous as Darian would be.

“Please don't make me say. You saved my life yesterday at great personal risk and extraordinary selflessness.” she was blushing in real life as surely as she imagined her character was. “Can we just say I owe you and not analyze it?”

“I can say that, but I won't believe it,” Jaune said, but Nora—as Lynn—wasn't about to let go.

“Hey, it's not like we haven't saved you too. Remember how I opened that guy's jugular all over you when he was going to stab you?”

Pyrrha couldn't hold back a laugh. “Yes, but I could have handled him myself.”

Nora shook her head. “You're not getting out of this that easily. The point is, whether you want us to not, we're your friends and we should stick together! Also, think of all the loots we can get from taking down a giant organization of bandits! Oh, and if we go to the place I learned about, I bet you can get some terrifying eldritch lore or phenomenal cosmic power.”

“I do like phenomenal cosmic power,” Pyrrha said, stroking her chin as if she had a sinister goatee.

“Just remember the itty, bitty living space.” Jaune quipped.

“All the better to keep her itsy, bitsy spider!” Yang said from the television. Everyone had to laugh at that.

Eventually, they all calmed down and Pyrrha nodded. “Alright, I suppose there would be some benefit to helping deal with these bandits.”

At this point, Penny nodded to Blake, who shocked everyone by affecting a gravely voice. “So you're the one who save the airship from the Queen's bandits, eh?” She also dropped her usual impassive mask that grin at the reaction as Penny started narrating.

“You all turn to see a halfling woman who, despite halflings not normally showing their age until they're near the end of their natural lifespan, has been exposed to so many chemicals, plus weeks on end in the sun with no protection looks like her skin is made of pale leather. She is wearing a smoked monocle over one eye, a knee-length brown leather coat, canvas trousers, a cotton shirt, a
 holster holding two big revolvers, and a bandoleer holding tubes of colorful liquid.”

Then Blake took over. “She's in the middle of lighting a pipe with a wooden match, taking a moment to blow it out. “No one's going after the Queen without me. But I'm willing to partner up s' long as you can hold your own and stay out of my way when I go for the kill shot.”

“And who are you to just insert yourself into our conversation?” Pyrrha demanded. “Seri starts to conjure the subtle knife.”

“Quick drawing one of my revolvers and aiming at her,” Blake informed Penny. “I'm sure you're proud of your tricks and all, mage, but let me tell you something about the Vengeful Twins here—my guns. I don't deal in normal rounds. Make m' own. What's pointing at your gut right now? It won't just make a hole, it's made to stop inside your gut, count to ten—then explode in a fire hot enough to forge a knife over what's left of your ribs. So how about you just settle down and mind your elders?”

Nora leaned over to Ren and whispered conspiratorially, “I like her!”

“This is going to get bad super-quick, isn't it?” Jaune asked. “Okay, Darian is going to get between these two. Hold on there. We're totally willing to hear you out. What've you got against the bandits?”

“That's private.” Blake did a worthy job trying to squint like Clint Eastwood. “What matters is what I can do to help in the hunt. “I know where her big camps are, her tactics, the structure of her gang. With me on your side, you can bring it all crashing down on her and reap the rewards from her corpse.”

Ren raised an eyebrow. “Out of character: you're a former general of the Queen aren't you?”

“I have no idea what you're talking about.”

“I mean it's so obvious. Who else would know the inner workings of the gang?”

Before Blake could protest, Ruby gave a weary sigh. “Don't even bother, Blake. It's so hard to keep a secret with Ren in the group.” Then she did her best to fix Ren with a glare—though she was glaring at, presumably his image on her laptop and not the camera, so she ended up glaring off to the side of everyone. “But remember: No metagaming. Gao doesn't know what you know.”

“Message received,” Ren said, holding up his hands. “In any effect, stranger, how about a name if we're going to be working together?”

Still giving her squint, Blake nodded. “Sounds like we have an accord. The name's Ambewyse Everlee. You can call me Everlee. Come on: the Queen's got ears in the towns up and down the main road in these parts. I've got a room at the Duck of Luck Inn. Let's head there so we can compare notes and plan.”

“Duck of Luck?” Ren asked.

Penny nodded. “Oh yes. As Everlee brings leads you to the next street over, you see a sign on the inn with a duck in a bathtub taking a bath in gold coins. And just before you go inside, Pyrrha? You see through the window a woman who looks very familiar mostly because she looks very much like you: long red hair, fair complexion, about the same facial and nose shape. Her eyes are slightly less round than your own, and she's at least four inches shorter, but you could see being confused for her... because you've already been confused for Seripheid Donnar before, now haven't you?”
Chapter End Notes

Penny goes right for the throat and we're only on the first chapter.

A lot of you were champing at the bit for the next session, and here it is.

Let's see, little things to point out... well every member of the party got a plot hook linked to their play style: Ren got a city adventure likely with a lot of politics and the need for clever tactics, Pyrrha got a base assault with lots of direct combat, and Nora got an old fashioned hack and slash dungeon crawl. Jaune didn't get one because he totally failed to pick up on the plot hook Ruby was offering. Because Jaune is dense even in character.

Blake's 'Clint Eastwood as a female halfling' is a character a friend once played, only she used dual daggers and not guns. The idea is that Blake's 'play out of character' character is kind of a ridiculous character Yang would totally play.

Penny was kind of quiet this chapter mostly because she didn't want to interrupt the roleplaying. She'll be more on later.

Now, this session is going to be extra long: six chapters instead of four and I'd like your input: should the group follow Ren, Nora or Pyrrha's adventure hook, or derail entirely into wandering around town getting into non-plot trouble that spirals into player-generated plot? Let me know in PM or reviews!

Also, I'm almost ready to playtest the World of Ere d20 system the group is playing here and to do it, I'm thinking of running a game on Roll 20 and Skype. It has to be Thursday nights 7:30 – 11 or 12 because of my work. If you're interested in taking part, PM me!

And finally, Volume 5 is on the way so I hear. I'm going to watch if only because Volume 4 was so... lost in terms of following from Volume 3, I decided I needed to give Rooster Teeth a mulligan. I won't really be giving commentary on it, just observing and deducting points for every Tyrian scene. Here's hoping things at least get back on track and the plot actually moves forward—and most importantly we get some interesting dialog ala Vols 1-3—and of course no more characters are pointlessly wasted for cheap drama. Or barring that, that Blake's Mom takes over the whole show solving mysteries with Nora as her sidekick.

No, seriously: someone write that fic.
Whatever anyone might have said about Penny's methodology of revealing out of character knowledge to all the players, her timing was amazing. Pyrrha had been relaxing after successfully navigating that tricky line between staying with the party like she wanted while doing what her character would do. Nora had just shoved a handful of chips into her mouth. And Jaune had just taken a drink of soda.

The spit take was really inevitable even if no one expected it to be quite so spectacular.

But Nora managed to spew chewed corn chips all the way across the table, hitting Jaune, Pyrrha and Penny.

Penny didn't even flinch, just quickly grabbing a napkin to wipe the mess away.

Pyrrha grabbed her character sheet and blocked most of what was aimed at her with the back of it.

Jaune however didn't notice at all, because he'd just snorted soda up into his nose and was wincing furiously from it.

All hell broke lose for the others. Nora demanding what was going on, Ruby stuck between horror and hilarity, Yang asking what was such a big deal, Blake wincing in sympathy, and Ren just quietly facepalming.

Ignoring all that, Pyrrha patted Jaune's back and handed him a napkin. “Are you okay?”

He took the napkin and blew his nose furiously, trying to clear out the stinging carbonation there. For a second he looked back at her, then glanced away. “I'm fine,” he said flatly.

That struck Pyrrha as surely as a slap, intensified by the sudden guilt she was feeling having come up with the whole false identity thing without telling him. “Jane, I'm sorry. I—”

“I'm fine. Don't worry about it.” He crumpled the napkin in his hands, crushing it smaller and smaller as he focused on nothing in particular.

Before she could press him farther, Nora was in her face, having sprinted around the table. “What did you do!? Say it ain't so, Pyrrha! Say it ain't so!”

Suddenly put on the spot, Pyrrha shrank back from all the gazes aimed at her—all the gazes except the one she wanted to meet. “Um... well Ruby said we should play differently than we normally do. I kind of took it as the freedom to try things I'd never done before. Everyone expects me to be the same kind of person in game as out, but sometimes I don't want to play myself or play like myself.”

Her eyes flicked to Nora and Ren. “You guys always have so much fun passing notes and having dark secrets. I've always wanted to do it too, so this time I made up a dark secret and passed it to Ruby. I was so excited to have a secret that I sort of forgot that there were... other things I was doing with this character.”

“Like using her as an excuse to snog Jaune?” Nora asked brightly.
Pyrrha went bright red, made worse by Yang going 'Oooo!' in the background. “Yes?” she squeaked. A quick glance in Jaune's direction confirmed that even that admission hadn't done anything to move him. So she decided to give him some space without their friends pesterling them. “Um... maybe we should get back to the game?”

The Nora and Yang might have argued, but Penny spoke over them. “That's an excellent point. What are you doing with this information then?”

It took a second for Pyrrha to realize that she was supposed to be continuing the game. “Oh. Um... I guess I'll look to the others and say, “Wait. Why should we go to the inn she's telling us to go to. We don't know this halfling. And somehow she managed to be waiting for us when we landed with knowledge of exactly who—well not me—but the rest of you wanted to go after? If we're going to do anything beside quietly killing her and stuffing her corpse in a trash bin, then we should at least do it on neutral ground.”

Blake had been watching the whole scene with quite concern and decided to join in to keep up the relative distraction. “Putting me down would mean losing at least two of your own. But if you wanna meet somewhere else, you'll get no quarrel with me.”

“Actually,” Ren shot Pyrrha and apologetic look, “I believe we were meant to come here. Pandemos may have given me a vision of this place.”

“Then we can come back later,” Pyrrha said, not having to fake the distress in her voice. “Just not at a time of some random stranger's choosing.”

Nora, of course was just happy to be playing again and skipped back to her seat. “You two were random strangers yesterday. Strangers are just party members you haven't met yet, right Jaune? I mean Darian? What do you think?”

She was rewarded with a deer in the headlights look at lasted a few seconds before Jaune remembered himself. “Actually, Py—Seri has a point. No offense, Everlee, but this all ready does seem a little too convenient. Maybe we should go somewhere else. At least for the night.” He very visibly screwed up his courage and gave Pyrrha a pointed look. It was brief, but pronounced. “We can come back to the Duck tomorrow morning.”

Pyrrha raised any eyebrow, wondering why he was stalling what was going to be a highly awkward scene for her if he was so mad he couldn't look her in the eye for more than a split second.

“Well, as leader of the party, I break all ties, so we're going to the Duck.” Nora declared. The got everyone's mind off the situation brewing. “Whoa, whoa, whoa.” Jaune said. “I'm usually the leader.”

“Duh. When you're a paladin. When there's a paladin in the group, you've gotta do what they say or else they lose their powers or something.”

“That's not actually how it works...” Ruby muttered before coughing.

“Is the fact that I've proven I can and would kill most of you without a second thought give me some sort of leverage in the leader department?” Pyrrha pointed out.

Jaune raised his hand. “Um, why can't I still be leader. Bards and paladins are both charisma classes. Perfect for the party face.”

“So are sorceresses,” said Pyrrha.
Snorting, Nora shook her head and reached over the gently pat Jaune. “Silly. Bards can't be leaders.”

“They're literally typed as leaders in Fourth Edition,” argued Jaune.

“Pfft. Fourth Edition isn't D&D. It's like a way better game, but it's not D&D. No idea why: there's dungeons, there's dragons, all the other stuff... But the internet says so and the angriest, howliest nerds online can't be wrong right?”

It was then that Ren finally stepped in. “Before we have that argument again—or someone points out that we're not technically playing D&D here in the first place—I'd like to point out that Clerics are Charisma-based in this system too, plus I have the wisdom and power of a god backing me, so Gao should be in charge.”

“Even the drunk is ahead of me now?!”

“Hey. I get drunk for the Lord.” Ren quipped.

Pyrrha sighed. “I can solve this. Let's vote on it.”

“I vote for me!” Nora said immediately.

“Myself, because it's the obvious choice.” Ren folded his arms in a rare moment of pride.

Also displaying pride, Pyrrha sat back primly and announced, “And I vote of Jaune. Not being tied to all the rules and roleplay restrictions of a 3e paladin will only make him a better leader.” She offered him a smile.

It started to work too, with Jaune returning the smile, but then he seemed to snap out of it and dropped his gaze. A second later, he realized that that left him staring at her breasts, and so returned to looking at the table. Her won smile faltered at that and she too decided that table was very interesting.

“Um... right. So that means Jaune's... I mean Darian's the tiebreaker then and we're going somewhere else.” She looked over at Penny. “Is there somewhere else nearby?”

“Why yes,” Penny said with the celerity and certainty of someone who just might have memorized every street and shop of the fictional city. “After asking around, you are directed to a slightly more expensive inn called the Third Law. For five gold per person, you can rent enough rooms to sleep everyone and plot in private.”

Ren rubbed his hands together and leaned forward. “Excellent. So once we're in the room, I'll talk first: defeat this Queen of Thorns is to cut off her financial backing. As it turns out, my family is heavily tied to her—if we go to my home town, we can do just that.”

“Wait!” Nora waved her hands wildly. “Remember? I mentioned that map to phat loots to Seri. It's a straight up dungeon crawl and we can get more treasure and levels going there first! Grind first, then play the main quests, that's what I always say!”

No one, not even Penny, bothered to call Nora out for metagaming. They weren't entirely if Nora got the concept of in game and out of game in the first place. And so, Pyrrha just took her turn providing information after her. “Well I managed to... extract,” at this she did an irreverent little hand gesture to convey just how little torture bothered her character, “the location of the Queen’s ship yard. It sounds like a very difficult fight.”
“Oh, that's gonna be the boss battle!” Nora crowed. “Awesome. So if I got the grind, Ren got the political stuff, and you got the endgame...”

All eyes were suddenly on Jaune. He had once again become lost in thought, finding himself torn back to reality by seven gazes all focused on him. “Um...” Somehow his brain managed to deliver the last five minutes of conversation to him just a moment too late. “Oh. Plot hooks. Everyone got... “ He turned to the TV, annoyed. “Wait, Ruby, why didn't I get a plot hook?”

“Ohmigosh, Jaune I tried and tried and tried! Three days of emails and you kept asking crew members about their home towns and families and stuff why the captain was trying to tell you about the village that disappeared. I wanted to cry, you were being so oblivious!”

Jaune glanced aside to Pyrrha and gave her a little grin that confused her even more as to what his mood actually was. “Heh... I do that sometimes. So I guess Darian's got nothin.” He looked to Blake. “How about you, Everlee? We've put our cards on the table, what can you tell us about the Queen?”

This got Blake smirking as she settled back into character. “Well now, that's the meat of it isn't it? Now maybe some of your suspicions are true: I was part of a bandit crew operating up near the Tresolm. The Queen rolled in with her own, bigger crew and declared herself in charge. Anyone who didn't fall in, just fell. Friends of mine. Family. I took the coward's way and ran with her a few months before lighting out on my own.”

She ran that Eastwood squint over everyone assembled, not even sparing Ruby and Yang. “For me, this isn't about doing good or money or power. For me? This is revenge. I want the Queen to lose everything before I put an explosive bullet in her gut, then she'll feel the round ticking down to the second it explodes.”

Entrances, Nora leaned over to Ren. “I think she might be more evil than Pyrrha.”

“That's... dark,” said Jaune. “And intense. Look, I appreciate that the enemy of my enemy is my friend, but I'm noticing a whole... explosion motif... going on with your weapons. The only way I'll work with you is if you promise to limit collateral damage.”

“And that she stops threatening me,” Pyrrha added airily.

Jaune nodded. “And that you stop threatening Seripheid. Partly because she's my oldest and closest friend,” he hit those words with unnecessary emphasis, “And partly because she will straight up murder you. Like you think you can kill people in a gruesome way, but she can just rip the air out of your lungs. It's not pretty. I couldn't eat for days after the last time she used it.”

Trying to hold in a laugh and keep looking serious, Blake raised an eyebrow. “She's the one who threatened me first; trying to cast that air knife spell.”

“I threaten everyone!” Pyrrha defended. “It's one of the things people love about me.”

“Actually, I think we've all really rather you stop doing that,” said Ren. “I imagine that's something that will eventually put us on the wrong end of someone even more capable of killing us all then you are.”

In response, Pyrrha gave him a look that might have set his shirt on fire if she actually meant it. “Hmm.” Blake mused, scrutinizing Pyrrha's expression, “You know you remind me of someone. Only the Queen favors vitae magic rather than vin. She strangles people with rose thorns instead of pulling the air out of them.”
The two women kept eye contact for a little too long for everyone else's comfort before Pyrrha primly tossed her hair, "Then we'll have to see who the superior villainess is, then won't we?" She affected a yawn. "Now is there anything else? Because we've had a very long trip and I'm quite tired."

Blake gave her the squint. "I'm going to be keeping an eye on you."

"Great. You do that. And suddenly I'm feeling even more tired." Pyrrha held the bored tone for a brief second before self consciousness set in. "Um, Blake? Am I being—"

"No this is perfect. An in-character animosity is great for RP. Keep it going." Blake nodded emphatically.

Pyrrha dipped her head and continued. "So I'm going to bed. Penny, Seri is going to go to her room for the night." She looked down at her phone, contemplating whether it would make things worse if she sent another note to the DM.

As it turned out, Penny was in the middle of texting herself. A quick look around the table found Ren trying to hide his tablet in his lap as he read Penny's note. He might have gotten away with it if Nora wasn't reading over his shoulder.

It took a second, but Penny finally shifted her attention back to Pyrrha. "Okay. On that note, I forgot to ask about sleeping—"

"Lynn and Gao are in the same room!" Nora interrupted happily.

Jaune was instantly brimming with his trademark awkwardness, but soldiered through to add, "I guess Darian and Seri are too..."

"Actually..." Pyrrha didn't have to finish her thought to bring all side discussion to a screeching halt.

To her surprise (and an odd mix of embarrassment, delight, and shame), Jaune was taking a sip of soda again. "Ahh! Twice in one night?!” he sputtered, then realized why he had snorted carbonated pain into his sinuses. "Wait, what?"

She really wasn't trying to play coy, but in hindsight, Pyrrha would admit that her doe-eyed ingénue expression might have given that expression. That was mostly to keep herself from squeeing at his reaction to their characters not sharing a room. "I didn't think it would bother you."

Her best friend and recent beau turned red, realizing what he'd just done. "I... well I just kind of expected... Seri's not exactly subtle. About anything. So you know..."

"What he means is she's you without inhibitions, so why isn't she taking advantage of the opportunity to make use of six arms and no waiting?"

Ruby gave Yang an odd look. "Um Yang? Pyrrha wouldn't kill anyone if she lost her inhibitions."

"You never played soccer with her!” Yang snapped, getting a far away look in her eye. Memories of cleats and slide tackles flashed before her eyes. "The horror..." she murmured, "... the horror."

"Right. So we broke my best friend. Anyway, I have my own room and I'm not adverse to skipping to the next morning."

"Actually..." Pyrrha couldn't help but grin a little at seeing the table freeze once again. It was like
they were expecting something epic every time she did something at this point. She chided herself to stop before she got to like it. “... there's a reason Seri got a separate room. In the interest of not keeping more—”

Penny's phone buzzed and a quick look around the table reveal Ren to be pouring over a rule book, Nora to be knitting, Ruby trying to snap a traumatized Yang out of it and... Jaune trying and failing to conceal his phone before her gaze fell on him. He froze, shrugged, then put his phone on the table face down.

“...secrets, I'm just going to put this out there: Seri's sneaking out around 1am to go kill that lookalike at the Lucky Duck.”

Penny glanced down at her phone:

P3N-E: Quick Perception check, please?

TheLotus: 13

KnightLite007: 21

EmpressAwesome: 8 boo

P3N-E has removed EmpressAwesome and TheLotus from the conversation

P3N-E: Okay, you both notice that Seri is a little shaken up by something she sees as you reach the inn.

----

TheLotus: I don't trust Seri to not try something against Everlee tonight, so I'm going to post a watch.

----

KnightLite007: I'm worried about what got Seri so shook up and why she wants to be alone. I'm going to go talk to her after everyone's asleep.

“Excellent. Let's play it out then.” She said without even a hint of ulterior motive.

Chapter End Notes

I know a lot of people expected the fallout with Jaune to be immediate, but trust me, it's better this way. And I've kept things off his perspective again on purpose. My expectation is that you will be pleasantly surprised as there are a number of layers to how Jaune is reacting right now and none of them is the going to be the one you probably think it is.

The other reason for that is that I do want to dig in on the others, especially Everlee since Blake is only guesting... for now.

The idea that Pyrrha and Blake would like playing off each other just happened while I was writing it and I actually kind of want to weave that more into the story now that
it's there. A little vitriolic best buds action RP style.

As much as I adore Penny, it did kind of hurt having her play dirty here. No one else had a chance to spot the real Seri, she told everyone else what Pyrrha alone should know, and she didn't try to defuse things when it was clear some of her players were uncomfortable.

But she's a robot who usually only runs games online, what're you gonna do?

Yang is always fun. I do love messing with her and promise she won't always be the butt-monkey, but god it's amazing to play with.

The party leader argument is based in part on an in-character argument I once had that ended with me (as a bard) threatening to make the other person sexually attracted to fire. 3E Bards can do that. Modify memory. Look it up.

Yes, I took a swing at 4e haters. It's a superior system. Fight me.

And speaking with game, the World of Ere d20 playtest is happily underway.

Three players (plus one on the way) have discovered that their caravan is playing host to a very unusual and in-demand book, fighting goblins, a drake and a horde of monstrous frankensteined animals to protect it and its owner. Last session, they fended off the most terrible foe: capitalism as a shadowy figure offered them an exorbitant sum to steal the book for them. They then heroically recruited teenagers with attitude to protect the book and the girl as they struck off to find answers among the Kilicog goblins.

The players are all readers of this very fic and an awesome group of guys. At some point we're going to start streaming and I'll let all of you know when that happens.

Until then, stay awesome folks!
It wasn’t as if Pyrrha trusted Penny’s genial smile. The only role-players who trusted a smiling DM were the ones who hadn’t finished their first game after all. On the other hand though, she’d already declared her attentions and couldn’t think of an in-character reason to back out. That left with one direction: forward.

“Okay, so I’m going to try to sneak out as quietly as I can. Stealth check?”

Penny nodded. “Please.”

“Eighteen.” It wasn’t hard to notice Ren and Jaune were texting something, but again, she had nothing to act on.

“Okay, so you make it out of your room and out of the Third Law without seeming to wake anyone. Perception check, please?” The result was only twelve and made Penny smile more. “Are you going straight to the Lucky Duck then?”

Hesitating a bit, Pyrrha nodded. “Sure, but I'm going around to the back door.”

Penny didn't make any attempt to hide it as she texted furiously back to Ren and Jaune.

Nodding with satisfaction after a rapid-fire back and forth, Ren cleared his throat with enough drama to make Nora proud. “As you approach the back door of the Lucky Duck, Gao steps out of the shadows, blocking the way back up the alley. ‘I thought you didn’t want to spend the night here?’”

Pyrrha took a long moment to think on how to respond to that. “Perhaps I wanted to see what kind of trap our new 'friend' had waiting for us.”

“Gao takes a sip from his flask and says 'I might have believed that if you didn't suddenly come up with the idea that Everlee couldn't be trusted after looking in the window here and getting shaken up. So what has you so bothered about this place? I'm not passing judgment; I had a vision of this place and your worries might be part of it.'”

Taking time to look over at Jaune, Pyrrha found him still texting with Penny, looking annoyed and frustrated as he cross-referenced something on his character sheet. Though she wondered what was going on there, she was in the middle of a scene, so she left him to his devices.

“'This is a personal matter. Go back to the inn and leave me alone before you mysteriously go missing.' At this point, she's going to gesture like she's about to cast subtle knife.”

“Is this really how you want to do things?” Ren said that part with a smirk, but then shot her an apologetic look. “Sometimes I wonder how Darian's managed traveling with you this long.”

Pyrrha raised an eyebrow. Ren didn't usually play his characters this confrontational. Then again, he didn't play them this drunk, so maybe she was over-analyzing. “Darian knows to keep out of things that have nothing to do with him. And as for how I do things; this is how I have to do things. Now leave me alone.”
“How would you explain my 'mysterious disappearance'?” "Ren asked, “At this, he gets really serious and thoughtful—then takes another swig.”

“Why are you disappearing?” Jaune had finally managed to arrive on the scene, putting his phone aside. “Darian shows up at the mouth of the alley. ‘Seri, what's going on? Is everything okay?’

Pyrrha couldn't help but marvel at the innocent puppy-about-to-be-kicked expression he'd put on. “And that's pretty much the last straw for Seri. Penny, I'm banging on the door to the inn, then leaving. Is there any other end to the alley?”

“Yes there is, but before you get very far away, the door opens because someone was just about to take the garbage out. A woman a few inches shorter than Seri with the same red hair and a very similar face is standing there holding a big wooden bucket of kitchen slops.”

While Jaune seemed to take a moment to gather himself, Ren took the lead in the situation. “Is this what you were hiding then? That you had a good twin?”

“Hiding?” Jaune asked as Darian. “Seri, what's going on here? Who is this?”

With a bright smile, Penny dug in. “The woman with the slop bucket pauses and squints into the darkness. 'How did you know... Darian? Is that you? Gods above it's been ten years!' Then she looks at the woman walking away from her. 'And who is this?''

“No one.” Pyrrha said vehemently.

“Oh, this is getting good!” Nora had managed to produce a bag of popcorn from somewhere and offered it to Ruby and Yang on the screen. When they didn't (and couldn't) take any, she shrugged and tipped about a quarter of the bag into her mouth at once, chewing with vigor.

Realizing that now he had to do something, Jaune looked to Ren for help and received only a helpless shrug. “You know, I'm not too happy about ending up put on a spot like this. And that's out of character.”

Pyrrha winced and ducked her head. “I'm sorry. Like I said, I wasn't thinking.”

“Oh you can do better than that,” Yang piped up, “Way better.”

“Yang, it's just a game,” Ruby pointed out.

“Right, but you know, still mad a little mad about getting blindsided,” said Jaune. He frowned a little at Pyrrha's expression when he said that and hastily added, “But not like seething. We—ya know what? We'll talk. But not like a 'we've got to talk' kind of talk. Oh jeez, I'm bad at this. I think I'm just going to opt for the nice, safe levels of awkward between my imaginary guy's childhood friend and psychotic kind-of-girlfriend.”

Pyrrha looked ashamed and gave him a tiny wave. “Promise I'll make it up to you?”

“Wooooo!” Yang cat-called.

Ignoring her, Jaune sat up and took a deep breath before saying, “Okay, so Darius is frozen to the spot for a second. The fact that there's another woman who looks like Seripheid all grown up, answers to her name, and also recognizes him? Yeah, he's not stupid, he can put two and two together.” Another deep breath. “But he knows what the right thing to do here is so he gives a quick bow to the real Seripheid and says, 'We have... well a lot of catching up to do, but I have something I need to do'. Can I catch up to Seri?”
Instead of replying, Penny looked to Pyrrha. “That depends: are you moving your full speed?”

“Probably not; Seripheid is too proud to let people see her run.” Penny then just nodded to Jaune.

“Okay then, so Darian jogs up behind—uh--fake Seri—and puts his hand on her shoulder. ‘Wait.’”

“Leave me alone. You have what you want now. For real this time.”

“I think you're misunderstanding something. When I met you, I was just happy to see a familiar face from home. Seri was a good friend... but I didn't 'want' her. Whatever this is we've got... that's new. It's between us, okay?”

While Pyrrha visibly relaxed at the fact that he was playing along, her voice was hard as she spoke for Seri. “Why are you even pretending to care? I'm not the person you've been traveling with these past months—at least not the parts you actually liked. I'm exactly what everyone says: a murderous psychopath with no morals and no emotion. You can just forget about me and try to have what it looked like we had with her.”

Blake nodded appreciatively. “You know, I got the impression that you guys were mostly just a hack and slash group from Ruby's stories, but there's some real pathos going on here.”

“Hey! They hacked and slashed my character apart!” Yang bawled.

“Speaking of,” Ren said, “Penny, I'm going to go up to the... well the real Seripheid. 'Sorry to just drop in and disrupt your night, miss, but I'm a friend if Darian's. I'm called Gao, a dice priest. Pleased to meet you.”

“Pleased to meet you too!” Penny replied cheerfully. “She takes the slops to one of the gutters and starts emptying it. 'Can you tell me what you and Darian are doing here? And ho that woman was? She looked upset...and quite a bit like me.'”

“Gao takes a sip from his drink and nods toward where those two got off to. ‘That would be... the sorceress in our group. She's been traveling with Darian since before our group came together. I honestly can't tell you why she chose to knock on the door here, but I know that I was drawn here by a bit of divine providence. Do you happen to know anything about a bandit warlord they call the Queen of Thorns?’

If Penny's grin could get bigger, her face wouldn't have been able to contain it. “Actually, she's sort of the reason I ended up here. I was traveling with a caravan that was at a township that ended up being attacked by some of her bandits. The place was mostly wiped out; only a few of us managed to survive and get here. From what I heard, they made a camp there for a few months before moving on.”

Ren stroked his chin. “So what you're saying is that there's a good chance that there might be things they left behind there.”

“I suppose you could say that, but a place that's seen that much death? I'd put gold against silver it's full of undead and restless spirits by now.”

Jaune glance over at them. “Did Ren just steal my plot hook?”

“Had to go somewhere,” Ruby said with a shrug. “I didn't slave over a hot zombie encounter for nothing.”

“Hot zombies?” Nora asked, “Is it gonna be like Twilight only with more brain eating then? Oh! Or
Ruby’s eyes practically sparked as she sat up in bed. “That would be cool. Yang! My binder! Quickly!” In the throes of her excitement, she broke down in a coughing fit.

Yang was at her side at once, rubbing her back and offering a glass. “No binder. Just orange juice.”

Once he finished laughing, Jaune rubbed the back of his head and focused his attention back on Pyrrha. “So uh... as Darian was going to say... Look, you're not perfect. Maybe you're a little scary at times, and utterly terrifying at others. But a complete monster wouldn't be acting like this now. They wouldn't recognize what they've done is wrong, they wouldn't just let ‘what they wanted’ go, and they wouldn't have went off on that dragon lady just for knocking me around like you did if there wasn't some kind of genuine care. And if you can care about some bumbling bard, I think there's definite potential for goodness there.

“And that potential for goodness plus your bravery, your beauty, your intelligence, your lust for adventure, your absolute ferocity when you really care... those all add up to someone I definitely want to get to know. Y’know, if you'll let me.”

Blake was resting her chin on her fists. “You know, if everyone knew he was such a sweet talker, Pyrrha, I think you would have had some seriously stiff competition.”

“Yeah, it only works when I'm playing a role: gaming, drama class, writing stuff. Outside of that, my feet are so far in my mouth I've got toenails in my stomach. Hell, I've been mulling over how I justify Darian picking Seri—or fake Seri—all game at this point.” Jaune shrugged helplessly.

“Maybe you guys should 'roleplay' away from the table then. Wink.” Yang looked absurdly proud at the fact that she's just said 'wink' out loud. This only got worse when the couple at the table turned bright red.

Jaune cleared his throat nervously. “Um so... maybe we can at least start with what I should call you now?”

Pyrrha thought for a long moment. It seemed to her—and she might be wrong—that Jaune was willing to play along with her whole dark secret now that it was revealed. The least she could do was make the whole debacle worth it by adding to the narrative. “I've spent a very long time not being the person I was born as. So maybe for now you could still call me Seri? I've sort of started to enjoy it when you call me that.”

“It might be a little awkward having a conversation with Seri my childhood friend, but sure. I can do that.”

“Penny, can I excuse myself from the real Seripheid for now?” Ren asked. Penny nodded and he turned his attention to the couple across from him. “At the risk of making a scene here: what's going on here? This whole scenario is an uncharacteristic shade of madness than I'm used to from you.”

Jaune exchange looks with Pyrrha before saying, “Let's just say it's a personal matter between us. I swear on my reputation as a bard that it isn't something that will effect us taking this fight to the Queen of Thorns. We'll deal with it together; on our own; without interfering with you or Lynn or even Everlee.”

“I'm going to hold you to that. There is a reason, after all, why Lynn and I haven't teamed up with anyone before despite there being strength in numbers. In the meantime, Darian, your old friend
back there has some interesting stories to tell about her run-in with the Queen of Thorns' forces. I got the basics, but no one draws the stories out of people like a bard.”

“Right. Let's get back to that. As soon as I come up with an explanation to this that won't make us sound like lunatics,” said Jaune. He rubbed his face and gave a pleading look to the table at large. “Someone help me out here; I'm totally tapped out on improv right now.”

That was the half an excuse Nora needed to raise her hand. “Ooo! Ooo! Tell her our Seri is her long lost twin and you brought her here so the could reunite and then Pyrrha can have two characters and the other Seri could be a Combatant because we don't have one of those yet. And there could be a crazy complex love triangle where evil Seri would be all tsundere, but the good one would be a total moe-blob even though she's wields an awesome hammer in combat!”

She gave the TV puppy dog eyes. “Please Ruby can we do that? Please please please?”

“I'm going to plead against on the grounds that moe is terrible,” Blake said, also raising her hand. Ruby looked scandalized. “For shame Blake. Moe is life!”

“Is this one of those things I feel like I should google but I'll seriously regret it when—and I do mean when—I do?” asked Yang.

“Yes!” “No!” came the respective replied from Blake and Ruby.

“Does anyone have any suggestions that don't involve me playing two characters at once?” pleaded Pyrrha.

All the while Penny had been watching the discussion with an air of dissonant serenity. At last, she finally spoke. “Actually, you won't have to make anything up just yet because a scream tears through the night air, coming from the upper floor of the Lucky Duck. That scream is cut off in a strangled gurgle and moments later, it's followed by a piercing animal howl.”

“That ain't good,” said Jaune.

“Certainly seems like it,” Ren agreed.

Pyrrha threw a quick smile to Blake. “I told you it would haven been a bad idea to sleep her tonight.”

“Penny, exactly how far away is the Third Law from here? It doesn't seem like a good idea—or very fun for Blake and Nora—to have this encounter without them.”

“I certainly agree!” Penny nodded. “Can I get Perception checks for Lynn and Everlee?”

Nora had started looking a little put out at her twin Seris idea not being used, but the prospect of combat perked her right up. “You said howl, right? Is it a werewolf?”

“I'm not going to reveal what the encounter is until it's been encountered.” Penny said politely but firmly.

“Aww,” whined Nora. “But I wanna fight a werewolf so maybe I can get bitten and turn into a werewolf. Then I can bite everyone else and we could all be werewolves.”

“Don't you lose feats if you become an afflicted werewolf?” asked Ren, careful to let Nora get the the conclusion he wanted her to reach on her own.
After a quick look at her character sheet, Nora went into a mild panic. “Oh no! I'd lose my thing where I can run while balancing like a magical girl—or my precious bastard sword proficiency! Penny, please we can't fight a werewolf!”

“I got a non-natural twenty by the way.” Blake interjected blandly.

This was more than enough the invoke Nora's swingshift attention span. “Oh. Right. Eighteen!”

“Then you are both awakened by the scream in time to hear the howl.” said Penny. “The Lucky Duck is twenty squares from you if you go out your windows. Everyone: initiative please!”

Chapter End Notes

I knew ahead of time that if I was going to have Penny out Seri, one whole chapter of this arc would have to be dedicated to the fallout of that choice.

Some people, I suspect, expected Jaune to go off about this. Realistically though, it is just a game and it's clear no malice was involved. So it's more an issue of Pyrrha just put him on the spot than any kind of betrayal. There's going to be consequences for this, but nothing too harsh. Even if they're teens, they're not children or characters being written like ultra moody children.

Knowing that probably seven out of ten writers both amateur and professional would have turned this into a major argument is how I'm able to surprise you if you were in fact surprised by this turn.

That said, seeing as how this chapter by necessity had to be Jaune and Pyrrha heavy, I had to do more than a little work getting the other characters in on the action. I had a long conversation with another writer about how I'm relatively weak in writing Ren, so I focused a little more on him here.

Nora's two-character plan is one I played with having actually happen sort of as a 'punishment' for Pyrrha here.

Speaking of things I pondered way too long on: Jaune's reasoning for why he would pick Pyrrha's character over the real Seri has been in my head for-freaking-ever, trying to make it believable. That's part of why I had Jaune actually distracted from the game trying to think up a reason of its own. My salvation came in the fact that I never said Darian's previous relationship with Seri was anything romantic. The idea that Pyrrha's character's differences from Seri and that she initiated the relationship became the core of the reasoning.

Since no one noticed last time: the inn the group stayed at is called the Third Law for the Three Laws of Robotics coined by Issac Asimov, one of the architects of modern science fiction. Another nod to the idea that Penny is somehow still a robot in this AU.

An update on the playtest game: Our heroes have defeated the first antagonist of the adventure path and are slowly gathering information that the book they've been protecting might be linked to a god that no longer seems to exist in the world.

They've also befriended a spirit beast silk worm who spits silk that bursts into flames.
It proved to be useful as they and the young thieves' guild leader they've taken under their wing assaulted a formerly abandoned town to take the goods there from the bandits that set up shop there. Currently they're considering helping rebuild the town with the help of a former resident (and trash ogre) who had teamed up with the bandits for survival.

It's a fun campaign so far and we're really whipping the system into shape. The first podcast of it should be available in a few days.

Finally, the next piece I'll be writing will once again be Shattered Stars thanks to the generosity of Galven.

Until then, stay awesome folks!
It was not the best initiative line-up the group could have rolled. That much was evident because Nora was in mock tears, crying out to the heavens.

“Why have you forsaken us, Random Number God?! Not only are the monsters going first but the bard is the first of us to go? And I'm last?!” She started bawling again and buried her face against Ren's shoulder, immediately soaking his shirt sleeve.

“I'm starting to think you still don't have full faith in me here,” Jaune groused.

Nora sniffed, looking at him reproachfully past Ren's arm. “It's not you, it's your support class. You and Ren going first ahead of the heavy hitters—it's a disaster!”

Meanwhile, Penny was drawing out the battlemap and it in and of itself was a thing to behold.

Ruby put a lot of work into her overlays and transparencies, laying them out days in advance with stencils and a straight edge as well as using commercial dungeon tiles and others she printed off the internet. Penny on the other hand was drawing gridline by gridline freehand with such exacting precision such that it looked like the blueprint-like results were being produced by a dot-matrix printer.

It was done in minutes, good enough to be in an actual adventure book.

“There,” she declared, capping her dry erase marker. Digging into the tackle box at her side, she came up with two all-black werewolf minis and placed them in the second floor of the inn. “If everyone can place their minis, we can begin. The Duck is here, so Lynn and Everlee can start here and here respectively, and here's the alley where Darian, Gao and the two Seriphieds are.”

Everyone arranged themselves as asked (with Ren having to place Nora's while she recovered from the tragedy.

Once that was done, Penny moved the wolves around, leaving one in the room where they started while the other entered the room across the hall. Then she looked at Jaune expectantly. It took him several frankly embarrassing seconds to notice.

“Oh. Sorry. Um... is the door Seri the original came out of locked?” Penny shook her head, so he started counting squares going from the door to the stairs from the inn's back rooms up to the werewolf-infested upper hall. “I'm going to stop right here and try to peek and see what's up here.”

“Very good. What you see is no ordinary werewolf. It's pitch black and its body looks like a skin-tight suit of shadows clinging to a humanoid body, flaring out where it forms clawed hands and a lupine head. Its red eyes seem to leave crimson after-images as it moves purposefully to tear at the door in front of it.”

“That's... not a normal werewolf,” Ren observed.

Jaune nodded, looking mildly freaked out. “You can say that again. I just used two moves; can I roll a Knowledge to identify this thing, Penny?”
The substitute DM nodded emphatically. “Knowledge Arcana will do just fine.”

“Arcana,” Jaune held up a blue d20. “And Bardic Lore.” He held up his yellow one, then rolled both. His Bardic Lore was higher, a natural 18 plus one for intelligence and five for his level for a total of 24.

Penny ducked her head and smiled in a way that reminded him of an old kindergarten teacher of his used to when he remembered to put his toys away. “Very good. You recall from your readings back at the Bardic College a mystical disease called The Grimm. While the last reported outbreak was seventy years ago, there is very good documentation: it's spread through bites and scratches and rapidly incubates with the fear and pain of the victim, transforming them into a ravening monster under the sway of the disease.

“What you see now is one of the more common strained called a Beowulf. They're relatively weak when not encountered in packs—which is why they're working so hard to make a pack.”

Jaune gave her a blank look. “So they're like innocent people turned into monsters? That's messed up. Is there a cure?”

“You don't know that,” Penny said with a shrug, then immediately looked to Ren. “And it's Gao's turn now.”

The man in question nodded. “Okay, so I'll move up onto the stairs with Jaune, leaving enough space for Pyrrha to move past us on her turn. Then as a minor action, I'll drop a Blessing of Protection of Jaune.” He spoke with totally efficiency, having planned his turn while Penny was expositing. “And the brings us to Blake's turn.”

Blake spent her turn to use a full run to hop down from the window and move to the Duck of Luck. She stopped just outside the inn in front of the window to the room where the attack had started.

Then it was Pyrrha's turn, but before she could announce her action, Penny interrupted by handing her one of her own D20s; a green chrome one with florescent pink numbers alongside a generic female miniature and small stack of index cards. “Here you go. I think Nora's idea was actually really nifty, so how about you play the real Seriphied this combat?”

“Um... okay?” Pyrrha replied dumbly, accepting the cards. She looked them over and her confusion melted into one of amusement. Arching one eyebrow she gave Penny a look that asked 'really?'.

The substitute DM smiled back. “Don't blame me. Ruby had her statted out when I got here.”

That elicited a squeal of glee from the television, followed by coughing. As Yang tried desperately to get her to sit back, Ruby just started babbling happily. “I've been waiting so long for this! You have no idea. Ever since I saw the Unusual Weapon Wielder feat, I had to make this character.”

Ruby's enthusiasm was infectious and even knowing the extra work running another character entailed, Pyrrha took a seconds to consider the possibilities and smiled. “Okay. So do I roll her into initiative or...”

“Just do their actions back-to-back,” Penny waved her off. “It's easier that way on you and it keep you from monopolizing too much time per round.”

Pyrrha nodded and got to her mission. “Alright then. Seripheid—I'll call the new character I'm playing Seriphied and the original one I've been playing Seri—so Seripheid will go to...” she placed the generic mini in the inn's kitchen. “... and grab her weapon.”
A snort escaped Yang as she looked to her little sister. “You didn't.”

“I so did.” Ruby said, proudly puffing out her chest. “I've wanted to build this character since I saw Tangled and I finally got my half an excuse. My only regret is that I didn't get to play her.”

Having finally grokked to what was going on, Jaune cracked a grin and caught Pyrrha's eye.

“Weapon Proficiency: Frying Pan?”

“Advanced Weapon Proficiency Frying Pan.” Pyrrha grinned. “It's basically a one-handed mace and she's a full on Combatant with the feats to match. Needless to say, this will be a fun fight.” Returning to her turns, she then used the rest of Seriphied's movement to get to the bottom of the stairs. “And then Seri is going to come up the stairs and stand at the top next to Darian. As my minor, I'll draw my pistol. Now it's--”

“My turn!” Nora burst out with a cheer. She pointed dramatically at the map. “Penny, I'm jumping to this roof across from my window.” Before Penny could reply, her cotton-candy pink d20 was in motion, giving her a total of 24 on her jump check. “That's enough right?” Penny could only nod as Nora counted out her jump movement to pace herself on the roof of the adjacent building.

“Good. Now I'm running across to here and jumping again—I can do that when using the run action, right?”

Penny cocked her head, thinking a moment. “Jumping is a move action, and Running is two... I suppose I'll allow It though because it's cinematic—Rule 3 of the DM's section of the game.”

“Sweet!” Nora pumped her fist.

“However, Penny cut her off, “If your aim is to jump to this roof, it might be difficult for you to get down into the rooms.”

An angelic smile came to Nora's lips and everyone was instantly on full alert. “That's fine. Because I'm going to jump through the window here. How much damage do I take?”

Without stopping to think, Penny rolled a d6. “Four damage, and you land in a room already ravaged by the attack. The bed is torn up, items are knocked over, but you see no blood. You do however see one of the beowolves just about to leave—at least it was before you crashed through the window.”

Jaune sighed. “So you just got yourself injured, stuck in a room with a contagious monster and separated from the party?”

In response, Nora rubbed her hands together deviously. “I've got him right where I want him. Go ahead and take your turn.”

“Just so you all know: once we TPK, my next character's gonna be a mage with nothing but the psychic powers to prevent just this situation.”

“No worries!” Penny replied brightly, “I'm under strict orders from Ruby not to try for a total party kill.”

There was a burst of coughing from the TV followed by Ruby shushing her loudly. “They're not supposed to know that! They're meant to live in fear!”

“I promise we're always going to live in fear while Nora's on the job,” Jaune assure her, receiving a cheerful thumbs up from the lady in question. “Anyway, it's not my turn yet, it's the monsters.”
Nora gave him a thoroughly annoyed look. “Why did you have to go and tell her? I was helping you! Also me because I'm so getting attacked in a second.”

“That you are!” Penny sounded far too happy as she let the dice fly. “The shadowy lupine beast lunges for you, but its jaw gnash on air as a fifteen won't hit you. Meanwhile, the one in the hall…” She rolled another die behind her DM's screen. “It realizes the door it's trying to open is locked, fails to break it down in one hit, then breaks it with the second. You hear a man and a woman screaming inside. Now it's your turn, Jaune.”

“Oh that's no fair putting innocents in danger when Jaune is involved,” Ren said, shaking his head.

Ruby puffed out her chest. “Which is why I told her to do it.”

Beside her, Yang smirked. “Why am I not surprised you have a hero complex?”

“Why does everyone keep saying that like it's a bad thing?” Jaune groused.

“Well I for one think it's a very noble quality,” Pyrrha said, patting him on the shoulder. Then she smirked playfully, “When it isn't putting us at a massive disadvantage like that time you broke our ambush just because you had to free the slaves in the enemy wagons first.”

Jaune huffed with mock betrayal before getting on with it. “I think this calls for me actually using some real magic for once instead of tripping. Casting figment distraction. The wolves get a Will save and a shining knight in full plate wielding sword and shield appears at the other end of the hallway.”

After two quick die rolls, Penny announced, “They both fail. The one in the hall turns toward the figment, ears laid back and snarling.”

“Perfect. That's the standard. As my move, I'm going to try to sneak behind him and into the room he just broke into so I can interpose between him and those people. You're up Ren.”

Ren gave the board a critical eye. “And... are no point did you tell me or the female Humanoid Typhoon on the stairs with me that these are innocent people infected by something?”

“I…” Jaune's face fell. “Oh crap. And I'm sneaking so I can't tell you now.”

“Let's just hope we don't end up doing something we regret before you have a chance. In the meantime, I'm going to take a swig from my magic gourd to activate Drink Like a Fish, Fight Like a Demon. Then I'll step into the hall, step back here to make room for others to come in, then cast Way of Binding. Will save DC is 15.”

Penny rolled behind her screen and nodded. “It's caught in your burning chains. It doesn't know the spell came from you though, so it's still focused on the figment. Blake?”

“Time to un-split the party, I guess. I'm going to use one of my adhesive ropes to climb up to the window Nora crashed through and once I'm up there on the windowsill, I'm going to shoot the wolf in the room with her using one of my timed charge bullets. Does a 21 hit?”

“Yes it does. Please roll your damage.”

“9 damage, but in three turns, if it doesn't get a heal check to dig the round out, it will explode, dealing automatic critical fire and slashing damage. And just as a note, I'm still on the windowsill, not in the room because if that thing tries to attack me? I'm not staying around.”
Now it came to Pyrrha and her two characters. She took her time, especially as she pondered the new character sheet. At length, she finally spoke. “Okay, so Seriphied is going to come up the stairs, see the deadly wolf monsters and go to protect her guests because she doesn't know that engaging them is a terrible idea.”

This earned her a pair of narrowed eyes from across the table from Nora. “Hey! You're not trying to kill her off are you? That's not fair, Pyrrha—you can't just go off and suicide your character. That goes double in battle when we could really use the extra muscle to make up for that awful initiative.”

Making a placating gesture, Pyrrha just smiled at Nora. “Don't worry, I'm not trying to get her killed. Penny, I'm using Flurry of Blows.” She rolled twice. One totaled 15 and the other 21 for one hit. “So the feat makes it so the frying pan counts as a heavy mace, so that's 1d8...5, plus 4 for strength plus my level, which is 5. So 14 damage. Now I'm using an action point and then using Knockabout on him too.”

She threw the dice and it came up...

“20!” Nora was on her feet instantly. “Way to go Good Twin!” Then, as per tradition, she and Jaune celebrated with their critical hit song and high five.

Meanwhile, Pyrrha rolled her damage. “That's sixteen, times two for the crit. That's 32 damage and then Knockabout pushes him one square and I'll then back up beside Gao.”

Penny's eyes glittered as the moved the monster's mini. “So what everyone else sees is Seriphied charging up the stairs. She swings once with her frying pan, misses, then connects with a second strike, then lets loose with a crushing blow that sends ti stumbling back five feet before she falls back in a defensive stance. The wolf went from full health to totally reeling.”

“Nicely done,” Jaune grinned, patting her on the shoulder.

“Oh, don't thank me yet,” she replied with a devious little smile. “Seri doesn't know... and probably wouldn't care... that they're innocent people. So all she really sees is a danger that needs to be removed. Therefore... I'm casting Suffocate.”

Jaune gave her an exaggerated glare. “Really?”

“Would you rather I Mighty Shout him into a wall and crush him to death? It's only 1d6 + 4 damage. Plus Blake shot the other one with a grenade that's going to explode inside them.”

The glare dissolved into a dorky snort. “Point. On the up side? I'll get the guilt the crap out of all of you once Darian finds a cure.”

“Aww,” Pyrrha have him a side hug, going so far as to rest her head on his shoulder so they were cheek to cheek. “It's cute you think Seri's capable of guilt.”

He returned the hug and pressed a quick kiss to her temple. “Oh don't worry. Next level I'll take Baleful Pathos and I can make everyone guilty.”

“Well it's a moot point because the Grimm passed its Fortitude save. Do you have anything else you can do with Seri's turn, Pyrrha?”

“I could spend an action point and try again,” Pyrrha thought aloud, looking over her character sheet. “But no, I think I might have a better use for them. I'm done.”
No one else dared speak because Nora was practically vibrating in her seat in anticipation almost before the words were out of Pyrrha's mouth, Nora was in motion. She leapt from her chair to rise to her full (if diminutive height). “Finally! It's time for Lynn to save the day once again!”

Ren raised an eyebrow. “I'm still trying to figure out how you're going to get sneak attack in this situation.”

That earned him a huge grin that, were he anyone else but himself—who had spent years with Nora—would have struck true terror into his heart. “Silly Ren; I can't get sneak attack right now. That wasn't the plan.” She raise her pink d20 like Boromir scrutinizing the One Ring. After a moment in which everyone else started to feel a tiny bit uncomfortable, she pointed to the substitute DM. “Penny! I'm going to seduce this beowulf!”

Once again, her timing was impeccable.

Pyrrha did a double take, ending up clonking her head into Jaune's in the process. The pair yelped and rubbed their temples. Meanwhile, Yang had been on the process of trying to force Ruby to eat some soup by spoon-feeding it to her, ending up getting distracted to the point that the spoon found her sister's nose instead of her mouth.

“What?!” Everyone chorused.

Managing to speak of the others, a horrified-looking Penny stuttered. “T-that does not computer. Not at all!”

Folding her arms, Nora met them all with a smirk of pride. “Bet you guys didn't think I even remembered to take an expertise, huh?” After a beat, she shrugged. “Well I didn't. I totally forgot until we reached level five and saw that I was supposed to either get another one or upgrade; so I took one and now Lynn's a Master at Seduction.”

On the TV, Ruby blew her nose to clear it of noodles. “I know I'm going to regret this... but why seduction?”

Nora's eyes drift from Pyrrha and Jaune to Ren, then to the dice on the table in front of her. “Um... because I thought it'd be funny? Anyway, I've got a +12 to the roll, so let's see if I can bring back Team Jacob!”

Chapter End Notes

So I got sick at the start of this month, then got put on a shitty schedule at work that made recovering in a reasonable amount of time nearly impossible. I've missed a whole month of writing both fan and professional to it and I am not happy.

In any even, I'm back and trying to get things on track again starting here.

Everyone was so keen on making Pyrrha play two characters that I had to do it and love the idea that Ruby would have planned for this eventuality. The frying pan thing is because... well hasn't everyone wanted to beat their enemies with cookware from time to time? Especially since it shows up in so many videogames and, of course, Tangled.
I feel like I made a real mistake splitting the party earlier because it separated Blake and Nora for a turn and I'm still playing catchup in getting Blake into the plot.

Still with Jaune and Pyrrha, I really wanted to show that even with the relationship upgrade, they're still best friends and can comfortably give each other crap on occasion. And now we see Nora is taking a cue from Pyrrha. I'm sure this will end well.

As I said before, we're going to tick with this game longer than usual to have fun with Penny and Blake, but also remember we're going to go back to slice of life eventually, so please don't complain when we do. We're getting 6-8 chapters of game here.

Finally, when suffering through sickness and corporate incompetence, I've come up with a lot of new ideas for All the Myriad Ways stories. Here's a few pitches (and hey, feel free to take these as prompts if you want. We can always use more Arkos):

Escaflowne-style story where Jaune is the secret pilot of the old techno-magical mecha Crocea Mors protecting the refugees of a fallen kingdom with Pyrrha and the newly minted Queen-in-Exile with RWBY as pilots for modern mass-produced mechs and Nora and Ren playing the Allen Sezar role.

Failing magic student Jaune tries to cast a familiar summoning spell for extra credit—and ends up contracting with Hell General Pyrrha. Now he's stuck dealing not only with the consequences at school, but the convoluted bureaucracy and politics of a Hell that wants one of its Five Great Generals back.

Mortal-maker. Jaune's Semblance is revealed and it comes in the form of being able to temporarily disable Aura, Dust and even Magic powers—at the cost of doing the same to himself.

Just something to chew on until next time with Not Your Saint George.
Triumphant Failure

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Penny could have stopped it.

She could have ruled that the Beowulf was mindless, or that Nora wasn't another Beowulf and thus wasn't someone the creature could be seduced by. Using the existing rules for Expertise, she could have ruled that Nora had to just add the Expertise bonus to a Diplomacy roll and thus had a huge penalty because the Beowulf was hostile.

Oh yes, she could have stopped things right there.

But she didn't.

Why? Because Penny's normal life was highly regimented. Her father wasn't especially strict, but he made sure she stuck to the program when it came to school and extracurricular activities. So when it came to Gamemastering, she didn't always slavishly adhere to the rules (partly because the rules specifically said she could). Instead, she ran games by her own personal prime directive which could be summed up in three words: For the Drama.

She looked to Nora, who was sitting there with her arms crossed, looking defiant, and nodded. “Very well then. Roll for it.”


“That's because I'm not gonna take the chance that I might have to RP a romance between you and some weird monster... again.”

“That gibbering mouther was my soulmate!” Nora shot back defensively. Then her expression grew milder. “So... are we sure you're okay with me rolling this, Penny? Could be all sorts of freaky stuff happening...”

Penny simply nodded while everyone else cringed. “Go right ahead. We will let the dice fall where they may.”

“Right.” Nora grabbed up her dice. “I'm rolling then.”

“Great!” Penny chirped.

“Rolling my seduction.”

“Mhmm.” Penny leaned in.

Nora stifled a groan before throwing her die. Penny did the same behind her screen for the Beowulf's opposing Insight check.

Everyone held their breath and for a moment, the only sound that could be heard was that of rolling dice. The tension was so thick that is had at least Damage Reduction 5 vs being cut with a knife.

And then the cotton candy pink came to a halt and there was a collective sigh of relief: it had come up 3.
Everyone was so caught up in their celebrations over not having Nora snogging a nightmare wolf-symbiote, they didn't notice that the ginger powerhouse herself was slumping in her chair looking quite pleased with her failure.

That relief with both unfounded and short-lived.

“So is that it for your turn?” Penny asked, cheery as ever. Nora nodded. “Excellent! Then we will go back to the top of the initiative, and the Beowulf—who is utterly confused about what you just did—lunges for you with its slavering jaws! Twenty-one to hit?”

Nora's eyes widened as she suddenly remembered why the Beowolves were a threat. “Yes?” It came out as a squeak.

“Take...” More rolling dice. “Ten damage and please give me a fortitude save!”

Once more the pink die rolled and came up eight. Nora did some panicked math out loud. “Eight and half my level, that's three, plus Strength, that's three. Fourteen?” She gave Penny hopeful puppy-dog eyes.

Penny didn't betray how she felt about the result one way or another, just nodded and smiled in her usual, cheerful way. “Failed by one. The monster's jaws clamp onto your forearm as you try to defend yourself and its teeth sink into your flesh. While you manage to shake free of it, it leaves behind a dark film around the wound that squirms and pulses. You are now infected with the Grimm.”

There was a solemn moment that passed between the group at the table. One of their own was now under an effect that they didn't know how to cure and which could spread to the rest of their characters if they were unlucky. And the original threats were still on the board.

Speaking of, Penny reached out and tapped the other Beowolf's mini. “And this one is going to charge Seripheid.”

“Attack of opportunity!” Jaune and Ren said at the same time. Ren inclined his head to his best male friend. “It's moving through your threatened square first, so you first.”

Jaune grinned and tossed his d20 in his palm. “Okay, so I'll let it pass through the first square and into the next so Ren gets his attack too, then let's go for the Trip. That's... a total of twenty vs CMB. No. Wait 22 since when it's in this square, Ren is flanking it for me. Does it go down?”

After just a moment of checking the monster's stat-block, Penny nodded. “You catch it by the leg as it passes, sending it crashing to the ground.”

This made Jaune grin an evil grin. “And that triggers my Ground and Pound feat. It get a melee Simple Strike on him. Smacking him with the handle of my whip. Will a sixteen hit while he's prone?” Penny nodded, so he rolled damage. “Six damage. Not much, but we're not trying to kill them anyway.”

“And this is me reminding you that you still haven't had a chance to tell the rest of us that,” Ren chided as he rolled his attack. “Hmm. Five plus my attack bonus of six is eleven. That's not going to hit, is it?” Getting the expected answer, he inclined his head of Jaune again. “Your turn. Make it good.”

“Don't I always?” Jaune asked with a nervous grin. “Okay, first order of business: as a minor action, I'm going to roll Knowledge: Arcana and my Bardic Lore to see if I can figure out a cure for Grimm...ness. Blue die is arcana, yellow is bardic lore.”
As he raised his hand to roll, Nora blurted out, “No pressure!” He glanced at her as second then started again, only to be interrupted again. “It's just that I really like playing Lynn and it would totally suck if I had to make a new character so soon into the campaign.”

“I know how important it is, Nora. If it fails, I've got an Action point to burn on it.”

There was a long pause as Nora blinked. “Action point? Action point! I could have re-rolled my failed save!”

“One of us really should have thought to remind her of that earlier...” Ruby said, looking a little guilty. That mask of guilty quickly fell away as she perked up to add, “Oh well. Now your fate's in Jaune's hands now.”

The aforementioned blonde made a face at Nora. “I'm going to choose to ignore that distressed sound you just made.”

“Carry on!” She said in a sugary-sweet voice that cracked nonetheless.

Jaune nodded back with a bit of a grin and threw his dice. The arcana roll came up eighteen, and after spinning an unnecessarily dramatic number of times, the Bardic Lore roll came up... Also eighteen. Given his bonuses, they both came out to twenty-six.

Ren raised his hand. “I'd like to point out that two eighteens at once is even less likely than a natural 20. For what that's worth.”

For her part, Penny just nodded. “That's enough to beat the DC anyway. Jaune, Darian remembers reading some accounts of these creatures. They're not physical creatures, but instead spiritual parasites. While you don't have enough power on your own to destroy them without killing the host, you think you can come up with a bardic ritual to seal them temporarily: maybe a few days at a time at most. To do it, You'll need to spend four spell points and a Standard Action.”

Before he could immediately agree, Penny cut him off again. “However, I have to warn you: every time you cast it, there's a chance you'll get infected too.”

“Not a save, either!” Ruby said happily. “A straight five percent chance. Roll a dice and if it comes up one, you fail. No rerolls, not take backs. And it goes up by one every time you use it. That'll teach you to avoid my plot hooks!”

There was a beat before Jaune made a face and shrugged. “Did you really think that would keep me from doing this, Rubes?”

“I thought you might have to think about it a second,” Ruby pointed out. “There's three infected, it only lasts three days a pop and at most, you've only got twenty times to do it before you go all wolf on everyone.”

Again, Jaune as nonplussed. “Yeah, but if I don't, Nora's gonna lose her character. Plus, not doing this isn't in character for Darian. So yeah, Penny. Standard action and four SP.”

Penny nodded. “Alright: you hum over the fallen Beowolf and you feel a mystical resonance. The creature writhes on the ground, the black flesh covering it twisting and subliming into dark smoke. Beneath it... well you can't be sure what her skin tone used to be, but the woman revealed is deathly pale with her veins showing black through her skin. She's dressed in a sleeping shift and breathing shallowly, unconscious.”

“Um... I'm guessing that's not natural,” Jaune said, grimacing. “but hey, she's alive. I guess that's
my turn—oh wait! Talking as a free action, I explain very loudly what's going on except for the part about me possibly turning. So hopefully Blake's next action isn't to shoot that other wolf in the brain pan.”

Blake gave him a bland look. “I'm actually still going to kill it. One: Everlee wants to reduce the chance of infection. Two: she doesn't know Darian enough to accept what he says sight unseen. And Three: out of character, one less person dependent on you means you have less of a chance turning.”

“Seriously?” Jaune asked, aghast.

Ren made an expansive gesture. “I think it's the right play. She's got good reasons in and out of character, and Everlee isn't in a position to see that you can suppress this thing in the first place. Plus, she's right: an NPC's life isn't worth your character.”

Beside him, Nora nodded vigorously. “Plus, if you turn into a monster, there's no one to keep Lynn from going too! We'd lose two PCs—more if we bite the others!”

“That'd pretty much be the end of the campaign, wouldn't it?” Jaune reasoned.

Pyrrha patted his arm. “Look at it this way: Darian still did—and is doing—the right thing. This is all on Everlee. And I've already done so much worse with Seripheid.”

“Plus it means Everlee gets to make another good impression on the group,” Blake added with a Cheshire smile. “Penny, I’m using Snipe with a regular bullet. Attack roll totals... Twenty-two.”

“Hit.”

“Nice. So that's 2 weapon dice—2d6. And twice my Dexterity modifier as precision damage. That's 8. And since I did precision damage, I get 2d6 sneak attack damage. That's 4d6+8. 27 damage. With the nine I did last turn, it's taken thirty-six damage. Is it dead? Because I'll action point it if I have to.”

Penny inclined her head. “You're going to have to go ahead and action point. It's still up, but it's at the reeling condition—very nearly dead.”

Shrugging, Blake went ahead. “So be it. Action point. I'll use just a Basic Strike to shoot it again.” She grimaced at her next roll. “Is a seventeen enough to hit though?” The grimace turned to an expression of relief a moment later when Penny consulted her notes and nodded.

“1d6 plus my Dex modifier... seven damage. Please tell me that's enough.”

Penny only kept her in suspense for a few seconds before announcing, “Just barely. You last shot drops the Beowulf. It collapses to the floor and the black substance on its body seems to boil away, leaving a man in his night clothes lying there, bleeding out.”

“And in two more turns, he's going to explode,” added Ruby.

“I think I’ve got some competition playing the token evil teammate,” noted Pyrrha.

Blake smirked. “At least we're going for different kinds of evil. Everlee's more of a cold, calculating hard ass while from what I hear, Seri is just a complete monster.”

“Oh, absolutely. It should be interesting,” said Pyrrha graciously. Then she pondered the characters' places on the table. “Hmm. Are we even still in initiative anymore Penny?”
The substitute DM took note of how there were no more threats on the board and shook her head. “No. In fact, I think it's a good time for a break. Would anyone like to order a pizza with me?” She looked unnecessarily hopeful at this.

“Right here!” Nora said, raising her hand with abundant enthusiasm. “Let's get a Hawaiian!”

“I have no idea what that is, but yes; I will definitely try it,” said Penny.

Ren gave Nora a sideways glance. “Nora, you have a foot long meatball sub in the refrigerator. We bought it on the way over.”

She lightly swatted him on the shoulder. “Oh Ren. So silly. I'll need that when I get hungry later.”

Watching those two interact, Jaune cleared his throat rather loudly and awkwardly. “Speaking of food, I'm going to go grab ours. Hey Ren, mind giving me a hand?”

“For two bags?”

Jaune shot him a pointed glance. “Well it was a really complicated order. I might need help keeping it straight.”

Ren raised an eyebrow. Sometimes his best male friend could be what could be charitably called 'socially stupid', but there was no way he needed help knowing he should microwave the hamburgers and not cook the sushi in any way. Something more was going on.

“Um... sure.” He got up and followed Jaune out of the room.

“So...” Yang said on the screen. “They're going to have the guy version of girl-talk, right?”

“Yes.”

“Most likely.”

“Oh yeah.”

“Indubitably!” Penny looked around at the confusion on most of their faces. “I mean yes?”

Blake, who was the only other one present who had ever heard that word, let it slide. “If I wasn't afraid it would result in us getting another pool going, I'd bet it's because Jaune has no idea what to do with Pyrrha playing two Seris.”

A mischievous glint entered Yang's eyes. “Maybe he's asking for advice on where to buy condoms.” She's planned it perfectly—timing it so Pyrrha was taking a drink just as she dropped that bomb, triggering a delightful spit take where water even came out of her redheaded friend's nose, leaving her coughing.

“Yang!” Both Pyrrha and Ruby scolded.

The blonde snickered at their distress. “Oh come on you two. This is Jaune. I'm obviously joking. He's probably asking for his notes from history or something. Not everything's about you, ya know?” She stuck her tongue out for good measure.

“We should go listen at the door to find out!” Nora said cheerfully.

As she got up to do just that, both Blake an Pyrrha moved to intercept her.
“Nora, we are not going to invade their privacy,” admonished Pyrrha.

“Besides,” added Blake, “It’s not like it has anything to do with you anyway.”

Ren folded his arms and leaned lazily against the kitchen island as Jaune took food bags out of the refrigerator. “So. What were you being oh so subtle in wanting to talk to me about?”

His best male friend set about taking the cold toppings from Pyrrha’s hamburgers so they wouldn't be ruined when he microwaved them. Glancing up, he adopted a serious, caring expression one might see on a guidance counselor or rehab nurse.

“So... you and Nora...”

Ren huffed and pushed off the island, starting to pace the linoleum floor. “Jaune, I am happy for you and Pyrrha. I really am and I'm routing for the two of you. That said: we've talked about this. Until Nora makes a move, I'm not making any of my own.”

A squawk of indignation escaped Jaune. “Really? Were you not at the same table as me a couple of minutes ago?” All he go as a reply was a blank stare. “Oh come on! Think about it—why would Nora take Seduction as an Expertise?”

“This is Nora we're talking about,” Ren pointed out, “Going gonzo in every way imaginable is how she has fun. I'll also point out that she used it on a random monster, not my character.” He sighed, “I think you're just reading too much into this because of the whole Pyrrha/Seri situation.”

Jaune scoffed, popping the hamburgers into the microwave. “Yeah. Because where do you think she got the idea? If there's a second place for people Nora idolizes besides you an Deadpool, it's Pyrrha. She saw it worked for her, so now she's trying it in her own Nora way.”

For just a moment, Ren opened his mouth to argue only to stop, his shoulders slumping. “Do you really think so?”

“Totally.”

“But are you sure?”

“As sure as anyone can be when it comes to Nora.”

“So no real certainty.” Ren pulled up a stool and sat down at the counter with a groan. “What am I going to do?”

Jaune raised an eyebrow. “Finally confess to your best friend and make her your girlfriend? Not seeing the issue.”

Fixing Jaune with an annoyed look, Ren groaned again. “It really never occurred to you when you and Pyrrha go together, did it? About how things change when you become a couple? How, if you break up, you risk loosing someone that's been a massive part of your life for so long?”

“Not really?” Jaune replied, feeling suddenly unsure about a lot of things, “I mean me and Pyr, we've been friends since we were little kids. If we don't work out like... as a couple, we'll just go back to being friends, probably.”

“Probably,” Ren muttered. “I don't think I can risk it, Jaune. We haven't been together as long as
you two, but for a while there, we were all each other had. You've been over to my house, Jaune—my foster family doesn't really count as a 'family'. Friends aside, Nora and her 'aunt' are still almost all I've got. If things go bad..."

At this point, Jaune came up and clapped his friend on the back. “Hey. Don't talk like that. I know it sounds like we're teasing half the time, but you two are basically the best couple we know already. All you're really going to do is make it official.”

When Ren didn't reply, Jaune took the time to sigh on his own. “Look: I'm not the smartest guy when it comes to this. It took almost breaking Pyrrha's heart for me to figure things out. Can you honestly say you want to wait until the same happens with Nora before you get the kick in the head needed to do the right thing?”

Not waiting for an answer, he went back to the microwave to finish getting the food ready.

Chapter End Notes

The rumors of my death have been highly exaggerated.

It's just the my job, like probably most work done for corporations, is a highly effective motivation drain. I get home and just barely have the will to make dinner and keep The Descendants afloat, much less work on Rune Breaker, the RPG I'm working on, and of course the fanfics. Oh, and a commission I'm late on.

But I'm still here, still doing my best. Can't make promises on update times, but they will happen.
Session 4 Pt 6: Not So Random Encounters

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

“Men have returned!” Jaune declared, making his voice deep, loud and dramatic. He was carrying a sushi container in one hand and the burgers in the other. “We hunt the mighty mammoth.”

Ren followed him through the kitchen door, Nora's reheated meatball sub and his own Italian classic. “Or refrigerated fast food.”

Jaune ignored him. “Travel many leagues for many moons.”

“About six feet and ten minutes.” Ren passed Nora her sandwich and sat his own down before heading over to where the drinks were. From the assortment set out, he selected two root beers – two caffeine-free root beers – before returning to his seat, passing one to Nora.

“We were victorious!” Jaune continued, taking a seat next to Pyrrha and sliding her food to her. “Cook meat with fire. Slay towering oak to eat fish with non-fish sticks.”

Unwrapping his sub, Ren smirked. “That would be microwaved some hamburgers and raided the drawers for chopsticks.”

Jaune interrupted his act to pull a face at Ren before putting on a stern expression and nodding toward Pyrrha's meal. “Me good provider though. Remember remove lettuce, pickle and tomato before microwave so no get mooshy and gross.”

For her part, Pyrrha rewarded him with a quick kiss and a smile. “A hunter without peer and a master chef as well. I'm so lucky.”

“Now that's a keeper,” Yang mused. “P-Money, if you can get him to do that trick where you put the fries in the oven so they get crispy again, you never let him go.”

“He had me at being the only other one here who uses chopsticks for something other to give themselves walrus tusks,” Blake teased. “Speaking of which, did I ever tell you guys about the time Yang got a splinter up her nose?”

The blonde huffed, “And this suddenly stopped being fun. So, uh, pizza's gonna take like twenty minutes. You guys gonna get back to your game?”

Ruby cleared her throat. “You could go down there and play with them, you know?” She held up her bowl. “See? Soup's all done. And I even feel a little better.” A her luck would have it, she picked that moment to sneeze. It wasn't just one sneeze either, but a dozen or so rapid-fire kitten sneezes that caused her to drop her bowl.

In a blink, Yang was there with a box of tissues. “Really? All better you say?”

The younger sister glared. “Never said all better,” she said stubbornly. Yang just smirked, arms crossed.

“Yang is right, however,” Penny piped up from the head of the table, “We should get back to the game. Just as a refresher: You just defeated two Beowulf-infected people. Darian managed to suppress the infection in one while Everlee shot and killed the other—after it bit and infected
Lynn.”

A spark of dark glee entered her eyes as she continued. “And as we return, the clockwork bullet's
countdown finally reaches zero and it explodes. The dull thump of the explosive is muffled by the
crack of ribs and sternum as, with only a small bullet wound to exit through his chest bursts open in
a hail of bloody gobbets of viscera.”

“Ruby, I thought you had an agreement concerning the level of gore,” Ren said, cringing a bit.

Penny stopped immediately. “Oh. I'm sorry, Ren. After hearing Ruby describe some of your
previous sessions—including one in which Lynn and Seripheid were—and here I will quote Ruby--
'covered in so much blood, it was like an anime character got a paper cut'--I assumed this
description would be appropriate.”

At this Ren tipped his head, admitting he understood where she was coming from. “There's
something to be said for delivery. You're very... matter of fact when describing gory. It's
uncomfortably like hearing the Terminator telling you how he's going to kill you.”

“Very well, I will limit my descriptions of gory violence.” She looked back to Ruby on the screen.
“Have you considered using the X-card, Ruby? Mr. Ozpin has required I always use them when
running games at the Wizard's Tower after my Call of Cthulu game resulted in a very high carpet
cleaning bill.”

“We only just started having new players like last game,” Ruby said, “And I'm usually pretty
tame.”

Blake smirked. “But your first new player was Yang. She's the reason X-cards exist.”

“I feel like I'm being insulted, but I don't quite know why...” the blonde bruiser said grumpily.

“Basically it's a formal way for someone at the table to say 'can we not' when it comes to
something that makes them uncomfortable without having to make a big 'thing' out of it.” said
Blake.

Yang chuckled fondly. “Yeah, I would totally give those things a work out.”

“In any event,” Penny cut in, “the noise of the fight and the explosion attract the attention of other
patrons of the inn. People are starting to come out of their rooms to see what's happening—and
finding everyone but Lynn and Everlee standing around Darian holding an unconscious woman.”

“Somehow I don't think 'this isn't what it looks like' is gonna cut it,” said Jaune. “I...”

“Before you can offer any explanation, there's a heavy tromping of boots coming up the stairs and
a heavyset but muscular man with a neatly trimmed black beard. Seripheid—the real Seripheid—
recognizes him as the owner of the inn. 'What's going on here?' he demands only to then spot Darian
and the woman. 'Gods be merciful! What's going on here?!”

Jaune, Blake and Ren all started to say something, but Penny continued. “From one of the doors, a
man in a nice coat and trousers with a long, lean face and mustache shouts, ‘They attacked her! I
saw the whole thing. That poor woman and her husband in their room!’

“How did...” Nora started, indignant.

“We're being framed.” Blake said, with a suspicious glare. “Everyone run for it!”
Nora squawked. “What?! Is that the guy who set this up with the infectious monsters and stuff?”

Brimming with righteous fury, she snatched up her dice. “I'll murderlize him! Roll for initiative, monkey boy!”

“Nora,” Jaune help up a placating hand, “The guards will be here any minute and if we get into a fight with the guards, we'll either end up in jail, kicked out of the city or mobbed with guardsmen until someone crits and we die.” He turned to Penny. “I'm going to grab the woman, toss her over my shoulder and book it back down the stairs.”

“Um—and this is in character... as Seri, not Seripheid,” Pyrrha piped up with an amused little smirk, “Why are we taking her with us?”

“I agree, she's dead weight,” added Blake.

At this, Jaune gave a snort. “Great. Two token evil teammates. Anyway, Darian says, 'She's just a victim in all this. We need to cure her just as much as we do Lynn. Plus, it seems like she was infected to get at us, so she's our responsibility.”

“Also, if we leave her here and she reverts, we end up with a whole inn full of infected monsters.”

“So we leave her, but also leave this place forever.” Pyrrha suggested. “Everybody wins.”

Meanwhile, Nora's angry would not be assuaged. “Can I bite the guy that just ratted us out? Would that infect him?”

“Not the time,” said Blake. “Penny, can I grab Lynn and pull her out the window with me?”

Penny gave a thoughtful look. “Well, Ruby said that this group has a no football tackles rule, so I can't just let you attack and grab her...”

'No football tackles' was a popular rule against attacking fellow players even if the attack was non-lethal. It had become increasingly necessary as Jaune played more and more paladins, Ren played more and more thieves and Nora occasionally got bored.

“It's okay,” Nora chirped, “I'm not gonna fight getting out of here. It's just that Lynn's. So. Mad.” She looked to the table as a whole. “Just promise we'll kill this horse-faced guy later, okay?” She got a chorus of agreement and nods at this. “Good. Let's go.”

Satisfied that she had permission, Blake continued. “Okay then. No time to climb we're just going to jump the one story. DC 15 to reduce damage for jumping down, right?” Penny nodded and both Blake and Nora rolled. The results were 19 and 26 respectively.

“Alright, two of you are now outside on the street,” declared Penny. “Just to be clear, is everyone running? You all get a surprise round for reacting as soon as things turned against you.”

Jaune nodded. “I've got the woman and I'm running flat you. Four times speed. Letting my other spells drop.”

Penny nodded and looked to Pyrrha. “You've got two characters to decide for. What are they doing?”

“Hmm,” Pyrrha looked at the table thoughtfully. “Seriphied really isn't implicated in this yet. She could just pretend to have been up here because of the commotion. But... is she really that kind of person? I never planned on ever actually playing the real Seriphied.”
All this time, Ren had been surveying the scene with a thoughtful expression on his face. “Actually, Pyrrha, don’t worry about it. I have an idea that should prove very useful.” Reaching across the table, he placed a finger atop his mini, sliding it past the Seriphied mini on its way to the stairs. “Talking’s still a free action, so Penny, as I pass Seriphied, I whisper ‘If you still care to help us, stay here. Find out everything you can about that guy.’ And then I’m away.”

“Nicely done,” said Blake. “We're all out now, right?” Penny nodded. “Good. All of you, follow me!” She scooped up her d20 and rolled. The moment she saw the result, her face fell. “Oh. Um... so that’s a natural one for Knowledge: Local to find a place to lay low.”

Something dangerous flashed in Penny's eyes. “Natural 1?”

“Penny,” Ruby chided from the TV screen. “Be nice.”

The predatory gleam faded and Penny waved it off cheerfully. “Right. No critical failures in this game. But, all of you get out into the alley behind the inn. Someone upstairs is shouting for the watch, and... well you all have nowhere to go.”

“Back to our inn?” Pyrrha suggested.

“They saw us,” Blake pointed out. “They'll give the guards our descriptions.”

Jaune rubbed his chin, looking from each of his friends and then to Penny and Ruby. “Actually... not Everlee or Lynn. You two were in the room and no one saw you. We... we can use this. But for right now, talking might be a free action, but we're not going to be able to stay here long. Please tell me some of those grenades are smoke.”

Blake nodded. “Of course, but what's the point of giving us cover if we don't have a place to go?”

“Bardic Knowledge,” Ren piped up. “Jaune, you get to roll Bardic Knowledge alongside any Knowledge check and it doesn't matter if you're trained or not.” At some point, he'd picked up his phone and was flicking through the rule book. “See if you know where there's a temple to Dey.”

He noted a few askance looks from Jaune and Nora, who hadn't bothered reading all the setting information.

Luckily for him, Pyrrha took over the explanation for him. “She's the goddess of duty and pragmatism... and also criminals. They hide fugitives all the time. If we get to one of her temples, they'll give us a place where we can lay low. And... now that I think of it, Penny, can I make an untrained check to know where one is as well? Knowing where to hide after a crime is pretty much her thing.”

Penny nodded. “Go right ahead. But remember, you only have so long before the watch arrives and finds you.” One blue and one white dice rolled for Jaune, granting him a 15 total. Pyrrha on the other hand, rolled 19. “Okay. Well Seri has in fact made it a point to have located places to lie low as soon as you arrived. She knows where the Deyic temple is; a little over halfway across town.”

“Then here's a plan,” Jaune said, having put everything together in his mind's eye. “Everlee, fill the street outside the inn with smoke. You and Lynn should go back to our inn and get our stuff. The rest of us are going to make for the temple. We'll meet up there and think of our next move.”

“So...” Blake said, looking to Penny. “Time cut?”

Everyone agreed to this course of action and to their surprise, Penny allowed them to carry off their escape at only the cost of two of Everlee's smoke grenades. In fact, she called for a short break while she convened upstairs with Ruby. It seemed that for all their planning, they hadn't expected
the party to visit the Deyic temple.

Food was eaten, small talk was made and then Penny returned, passing a handful of index cards to Pyrrha and Blake. As the two young women read, she dove into the set dressing.

“The temple of Dey is a simple affair: a cinderblock longhouse adjacent to the warehouse district. There is a small, walled off bazar attached to it on the north end, and other decorative walls adorned with carvings of the gray hand icon of Dey on them, blocking sight from the street to the various entrances. There are no windows. Written above the main entrance are the words 'To those their due which needs no eye to witness, no reward but in the doing. Find now solace. Find now comfort. Find now absolution.'”

An amused smile had grown on Pyrrha's face from reading the notes passed to her and it only grew bigger hearing the legend above the door. “I can see why Seri likes this place.”

“I can see why a lot of people would like this place,” agreed Ren. “Or be really concerned about anyone that comes here often.”

“Assassins, con artists, murderers. Seri’s home.” Pyrrha chuckled.

Penny continued. “As you pass through the doors, you feel yourself moving through an invisible barrier. Soothing energy crackles over your bodies it doesn't heal you, but you magically know that any damage you do in here will be non-lethal and any dead effects you generate fail.

“Inside, a short set of stone steps go down into a long stone hall. In the middle are two rows of tables, each big enough for six people to sit comfortable. They each have an iron lantern on them lit with a dim magelight. A handful of people are here; scattered among the tables or sacked out on bedrolls between the pillars off to the side. At the far end of the room is an altar carved in the shape of a huge hand. A heap of coins and trinkets sit before it. At the table nearest to the altar, there's a cluster of people. The one at the head of the table spots you and stands up.

“He is tall and well dressed in a long white leather coat with black embellishments. A black bowler hat sits jauntily atop his head and he wields a cane with panache. 'Well look who finally found their way this far west. Not sure if I'm happy to see you or not after what you pulled last time, Red.' his expression sours though when he sees Everlee. 'And I see you found worse company than yourself to our safe little hideaway.'”

Everyone else was looking back and forth between Pyrrha and Blake with a variety of 'what did you do' expressions.

Penny, however, kept it up. “At the man's subtle direction, a number of people around you at the tables draw weapons and start to stand up, but they aren't attacking just yet.”

Blake and Pyrrha shared a look and by unspoken consensus, Pyrrha took point. “Well, well, well. Greco Blaise; I'm going to be honest—I'm shocked you survived. Good for you.”

Affecting the attitude and demeanor she'd seen around school from Roman Torchwick (one that both she and Ruby agreed was perfect for a charismatic gangster type), Penny slumped languidly back in her seat. “Not helping your case, Red. Now we're in Dey's house and you won't die... but that doesn't mean being shanked doesn't hurt, ya know?”

Blithely, Pyrrha let loose a short laugh. “Are you really anxious to see if the same applies to third degree burns over the majority of your body?” She cocked her head and gave a musing expression. “And we both know Dey's protection doesn't extend to your... very fine hat.” Then she tossed a
glance in Blake's direction. “But I am interested in hearing how you think she's worse than me. I've found her to be delightful.”

“Everlee glares back at Seri and takes over,” said Blake. “Oh, I know why. But you ought to know... Greco was it? That whatever you've heard, things have changed. The game's not about muscling you out, it's gotten a lot more dangerous. Ever heard of Arthur Watts? He's here, in town. I saw him at an inn tonight. And towns he shows up in? They don't last long.”

Confusion ran wild among the others who looked between each other, then at Blake and Penny.

Every one except Nora of course. Instead, she hopped out of her seat and began a victory dance. “I knew it! She was a bad guy!”

At this, everyone paused.

“Well... yeah,” said Jaune.

“We knew that,” added Ren.

Pyrrha nodded in agreement. “That part was pretty obvious.”

For her part, Blake definitely did not pout.

Nora's victory dance slowed until she was standing dumbfounded at the table. “Huh? Then why was every one all 'shock' and 'ooh' then?”

“Nora...” Ren started, “Did you miss the part about this Watts killing towns?”

She shrugged. “Well duh. We're us and we're in a town. PCs plus town equals doomed. This place might as well be wearing a red shirt unless we decide it's going to be out base of operations.” Then her eyes lit up. “Ooh, so that's the plot. We get to fight this Watts guy and his army of Klyntar/Wolf hybrids!”

At this point, Jaune raised his hand. “Actually, if we do this right, we won't have to fight?” He waved off the disappointed expression from Nora. “Wait, you'll like this. Hey Blake, when Everlee says she saw Watts tonight... was that the guy that accused us?”

Blake brandished one of the index cards she'd been given. “Yeah, why?”

Jaune's confidence grew visibly. “So I'm guessing this is usually the way he does his 'town destroying' thing: infects people with something awful, then let nature take its course. Well, he doesn't want to get infected himself right? So he'll have a cure or a vaccine or something on him in case one of his monsters bites him.” He nodded to himself as his resolve solidified. “Not only that, but we need to find out why he framed us. Plus, well we promised Nora we'd kill him.”

He might have expected the others to rally around his choice, but instead, Penny picked up the dice.

Ren cleared his throat. “Right after we keep this room full of scum and villainy from kicking our asses. You do have a plan for that, right?”

“Right. That. Um...”

Chapter End Notes
I have returned!

Sorry for being away for so long, but I have been hard at work forging the tabletop roleplaying game from this very fic into something fun and playable. With the help of the playtesters who started out as commenters right here, the time have finally came to Kickstart said game. If you're interested in playing the same game as the gang are, check our Worldofere DOT com for more information.

But this isn't all about shameless plugs. No, this is about my return to writing now that life isn't beating me to death anymore. Look for more of both my original fiction and the fics I left unfinished last year coming in the new year!

Fun fact: I almost forgot Roman was a character in this universe and had him just be Roman in-game as well. None of Salem's crew (Cinder's clique doesn't count) except maybe Salem herself is though, so they're fair game for minions of the Queen of Thorns.

End Notes

Welcome to the new fic. This won't be updated nearly as often as Arc Reaction, but the idea got into my head while I was doing concept for that Power Rangers fusion I was considering. You know how the rangers in the Mighty Morphin' Era were all about martial arts and the youth center and stuff? Well inspired by Solora Goldsun's fic College Battle Games, I was going to have them be gamers in their off time.

Long story short, I gave way too much thought to the characters they would be playing and the campaign and so decided to just tell the story of that campaign and the school year around it.

As to the characters: I'm not even shying away from it at this point and flat out playing Pyrrha and Jaune as Kim and Ron from Kim Possible, playing round with some dynamics to fit their characters (Jaune is the one with the loving family, Pyrrha is the essential latch-key kid, for example). No apologies because to be completely honest, I even thought Jaune was voiced by Wil Freidle when I first happened upon RWBY. Yes, there will be Arkos, not even going to play it coy.

Ren and Nora... well I can't tell you because Nora's character choice plays so much into it. Believe me, Team Sloth will be far more equitably portrayed here vs in Arc Reaction.

And then there's Ruby. I love Ruby trying to take charge and getting overly excited. I'm trying to structure the campaign the way I think Ruby would approach the material (and an act of mindless self indulgence, I'm having her use my setting and attempt at a fantasy heartbreaker) instead of how I would.

As for the fic, I'm expecting this t not be as popular because it's going to be very gamer oriented. I'm going to be very impressed if people get all the little references and stuff here. But hey, having fun with this is part of the point. Also, Jaune has the car I had in high school, old man wheeze and all.
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!